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Václav Táborský on the track of everydayness

The name of Václav Táborský is linked to progressive documentaries from the 1960s and the cinema verité method applied with a distinctive style on the reality of socialist Czechoslovakia. We can also see it in dozens weekly newsreels^[1] and short films with pre-fabricated purpose-built content which aren't usually included in his retrospectives and paper about his work. I believe, however, that both planes of his work don't need to be separated or overlooked. They can be perceived in a mutual dialogue which to a certain extent defines a whole period of Czech non-fiction cinema. And that's where my paper is heading. I picked several Táborský's films connected by themes characteristic for the period of their origin – the ordinary life in Czechoslovakia in the second half of the 1950s and early 1960s.

One of the lines we can follow is Táborský's work with contact sound and the resulting experiments with public surveys. The first ones date back to the 1950s. In the context of remaining Czechoslovak production, they seemed rather unusual. Survey is also Táborský's last Czechoslovak film *History and the 8* (Dějiny na 8, 1968) in which actor Miloš Kopecký asks random people on the street about their opinions on cleverly updated events from Czech history. Another tool used by Táborský to explore the everyday reality was concealed camera. Active interventions to the footage taken by the concealed camera came later in the editing room where the director and the editor deconstruct the space and time continuity of the footage and use various associations to find another context – whether it's in the hustle and bustle of the *Wenceslas Square* (Václavské náměstí, 1961), at a crowded campsite in *Holiday* (Dovolená, 1963) or at a construction site in *Mud-covered City* (1963).

While tracing the genesis of Táborský's documentary methods, we can make our first stop in 1955. On the initiative of British pianist Leonardo Cassini, Táborský and

cinematographer Josef Čepelák made a 30-minute-long documentary about the Prague Spring Festival for British television. Period materials list it as *Festival in Prague* (Festival v Praze) but the film wasn't made in a Czech version and the Czech title is not accurate. The official English title is *Festival Time in Prague* and is more fitting as the festival became an opportunity to make a film presenting a representative example of life in Prague to a foreign audience. The author of the story and the narrator was the aforementioned Cassini. The film begins with footage of Prague in winter and its British atmosphere is enhanced by the Christmas Carol Good King Wenceslas. Prague is slowly waking up in time for a new festival season in which it will host, in addition to the international music festival, a mass gymnastics event – the First National Spartakiad. In the film's prologue followed by footage from both events, Cassini conducts two brief interviews. For the first one, he visits the home of an "ordinary Prague family". A couple and their son sit at the table, occupied with some chores, and just happen to answer questions in English regarding their profession and housing situation and whether they plan on attending the festival or the Spartakiad. In the second interview, Cassini talked with Emil Zátopek at the Strahov Stadium. It comes across more genuinely when Zátopek, caught in the middle of his training session, tries to remember English words to describe his current fitness and give recommendation to young athletes.

The scheme of *Festival Time in Prague* was designed for foreign audience and presents a rather exaggerated depiction of everydayness. With the coming end of the decade and the declared completion of the building of Socialism, there was a rise in the official political demand for films showing the ideal of the new life in Czechoslovakia in a way acceptable by the domestic audience. The Krátky Film Studios made films recounting the successes of the post-war development and promoting the opportunities offered by the social system. One of the films, filmed close to Czechoslovakia's Western border, was also *An Autumn Sunday* (Jedné podzimní neděle, 1959) written and directed by Táborský in collaboration with cinematographer Bohumil Vích. In villages near the town of Tachov, they filmed new and reconstructed houses and cultural facilities and their surroundings with parked cars, but also some places still waiting for reconstruction. This conventional model of "on paper today, built tomorrow," is accompanied by short interviews with the residents. Even though their answers seem a bit unnatural and unlike in *Festival*, in which Cassini asks the

questions live, they respond to questions asked by Richard Honzovič as if “from above”, the respondents add an unusually disconcerted tone to the promotion of life near the border.

Táborský's *Fifteenth Prespring* (Patnácté předjaří, 1960), filmed with cinematographer Oldřich Payer in Central Bohemia, has a model retrospective format. It avoids dialogue entirely and uses an observational method and montage. Thanks to this approach, seemingly random snippets of new Lidice; a dam construction; Řež, where atoms are split; and Příbram and its new community centre create a compact idyllic portrait of the life of young people in Central Bohemia. Other directors made its equivalents in other regions, for instance *Five Pilsners* (Pět plzeňských, 1960) by Pavel Hobl, *Over in Vysočina* (Tam na Vysočině, 1960) by Jindřich Ferenc and many more. *Fifteenth Prespring* was screened as a part of the accompanying programme of the Czechoslovakia Exhibit 1960 in the Julius Fučík Park of Culture and Leisure^[3]. It was supposed to “show a wide and coherent picture of our country and the perspective of coming years – work and culture in the epoch of an advanced socialist society.”^[4]

After his conservative contribution to the beginning of a new historical epoch, Táborský returned to more shapeable topics such humans and their work in *Tinkers* (Dráteníci, 1961) about railroad workers and *Hours Behind the Wheel* (Hodiny za volantem, 1962) about the drivers of Tatra 111 in a sand quarry near Veltrusy. From the concealed camera footage of the Prague hustle and bustle commented by Karel Höger, Táborský made a slightly ironic feuilleton *Wenceslas Square* (Václavské náměstí, 1961). At the same time, however, Táborský focused also on the more intimate space of the modern human. In his staged documentary *Two Tables Between Us* (Dva stoly mezi námi, 1961), he explored the issue of wrecked marriages. Its thematic follow up was *They Wait Every Sunday* (Čekají každou neděli, 1962) about abandoned children in children's homes. In this case, Táborský didn't prepare a script and together with cinematographer Jiří Pipka, they filmed at the Stránov Chateau which served as a children's home. The same topic was explored by other filmmakers at the same time. Rudolf Adler visited the children's home in Klánovice and made *What Will the Day be like* (Jaký bude den, 1962) and Kurt Goldberger joined forces with child psychologist Zdeněk Matějček and made an essential film about deprivation as a consequence of institutional care *Children Without Love* (Děti bez lásky, 1963).

Táborský's increasing inclination towards naturalness while filming was backed by certain ideological obligations. In the beginning of the 1960s, Táborský and Jiří and František Papoušek founded the creative group Time in the Studio of Documentary Films. In November 1961, they loosely formulated its rules abundant with terms "truth" and "truthfulness." "The viewer cannot recognize the person introduced to him in the documentary film as an academic named Kvašňák as his barber or the next-door neighbour. [...] If someone can't tell I'm lying, it doesn't mean that what I'm saying becomes the truth." [5] Even though it wasn't a manifest which would ruffle Czechoslovak film production, [6] the declaration illustrates a period context in which the filmmakers perceived their work. In September 1962, the *Kino* magazine announced that Václav Táborský is filming a satirical film magazine titled *Traces* (Stopy). The programme was supposed to focus on topics such as inefficient work management, defective work and wasting. [7] It can be said that Táborský entered his most famous creative period with a task to find a balance between the authenticity of a news report and the engagement of satire.

"The year 1963 was probably the busiest in my filmmaking life," [8] reminisces Táborský the year usually mentioned in his portraits and profiles as the year he found his trademark style and the year that marked the most important chapter of his work which was sadly ended by the events of August 1968. Concealed camera and associate montage had become such distinctive methods that for instance *Holiday* and *The Inn* (Hostinec, 1963) had no commentary and dialogues. In *Holiday*, they are replaced by an expressive score by Ferdinand Havlík and in *The Inn*, the smooth montage of authentic pub songs with excerpts of classical music. In 1963, Táborský made two "muddy" films; as apparent from the title, *Muddy Steps* (Zabláčené stopy, 1963) were a part of his satirical magazine. The film's laconic description characterised is a documentary "about the strengths and shortcomings of collective farming and state-owned farms", [9] Táborský himself described it as a "depressive film about socialist agriculture." [10] But the film doesn't portray the countryside as a place where one farms, but much like in *On an Autumn Sunday*, rather a place where one lives or has to live. Already from the film's impressive opening sequence in which the camera circles a derelict small-town square accompanied by the pre-war hit *Chaloupky pod horami*, it's apparent that living in the countryside isn't easy. With a little effort, we can identify the depicted ruins as today's heritage site in Úterý near

Pilsen. ^[11] Táborský and Vích returned to Western Bohemia to critically evaluate the development of recent years. “We won’t let ourselves be carried away by superficial satire,” claims the voice of Richard Honzovič and Václav Táborský himself interviews several people. One of the responses describing what a mobile shop sells is rather alarming: “They don’t sell much food. It’s mostly, wine, rum and liquor.” Optimistic interviews with the management of national farms in Frymburk and Hošťka towards the end undermine the film’s sceptical tone but cannot mask the dismal footage of neglected countryside.

The second of Táborský’s 1963 “muddy” documentaries is *Mud-covered City* (Zablácené město, an internationally acclaimed film which won the St. Mark’s Lion in Venice. Footage taken by cinematographer Eduard Sigrot at a housing estate construction site seem to be linked together. The associations between them are so convincing that Táborský and editor Josef Pejsar took the liberty of combining footage from housing estates in Malešice and Petřiny. Táborský already used this illusion of one location in *The Inn* filmed by cinematographer Vladimír Skalský and edited by Marie Křížková.

The footage of people trudging through the construction site *Mud-covered City*, accompanied by music by Ferdinand Havlík, is certainly the source of many humorous moments but its also fascinating how obstinately people move to this bleak environment and how flexibly they can adapt. They carry a second pair of shoes with them and the construction site inspires children to play all sorts of games. A question arises, whether this film depicts more authentic enthusiasm from “socialism-building achievements” than the film which tried to inspire it few years earlier. ^[12]

The period I covered was specific by its “maturing society” rhetoric but also by opening previously undesirable topics, focus on society-wide debates about living standards, housing and negative phenomena previously linked to the old system but gradually acknowledge by a socialist society. Václav Táborský was a genuine inquirer and observer a belonged to filmmaker responding to this thematic revival.

Notes:

[1] According to Táborský's recollection, he filmed 220 newsreels between 1955–196. Václav Táborský, *Paměti točomana aneb Veselé historky českého filmaře doma i v cizině*. Prague: HAK 2000, p. 67.

[2] See for instance Jiří Havelka, *Československé krátké filmy 1945–1970*. Prague: Československý filmový ústav 1977, p. 131.

[3] Anon., „Výstava ČSR 1960“. *Práce*, 1. 7. 1960, p. 6.

[4] Exhibition to commemorate the 15th anniversary of the liberation of Czechoslovakia by the Red Army. Prague: (publishing house not listed) 1960, p. 15.

[5] Antonín Navrátil cites the founding charter of the Čas creative group from November 1961. *Cesty k pravdě či lži. 70 let československého dokumentárního filmu*. Prague: Akademie múzických umění 2022, p. 221.

[6] Comp. Antonín Navrátil, Občanská, morální a tvůrčí renesance dokumentárního filmu. In: *Filmový sborník historický 4. Česká a slovenská kinematografie 60. let*. Prague: Národní filmový archiv 1993, p. 24; Jana Hádková, Mýtus cinéma-véřitě v českém dokumentu první půle 60. let. In: *Filmový sborník historický 4. Česká a slovenská kinematografie 60. let*. Prague: Národní filmový archiv 1993, p. 33.

[7] M. [Miroslav] Dusil, Film je na stopě. *Kino* 17, 1962, no. 19, p. 2.

[8] Táborský, *Paměti točomana*, p. 77.

[9] Jiří Havelka, *Čs. filmové hospodářství 1961–1965*. Prague: Československý filmový ústav 1975, p. 522.

[10] Táborský, *Paměti točomana*, p. 225.

[11] See the Heritage Catalogue of the National Heritage Institute. Úterý, quoted. 20th October 2023, <https://pamatkovykatalog.cz/pravni-ochrana/utery-84483>.

[12] Comp. an interview with Václav Táborský in *Kino* magazine: E. [Eva] Šmídová, Stopy vedly do města, a to bylo zablácené. *Kino* 18, 1963, no. 14, p. 3.