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Vít Olmer

Romantic idol actor of the 1960s who has gone through a number of transformations: his restless smartness turned him into film director, resistant to normalisation, and after 1989 he experienced the role of berated commercial producer.

Timelessly interesting man who just turned 75 (born on 19 June 1942 in Prague) has been recently overshadowed by a picture of a rancorous sceptic, indeed a picture largely attributable to Vít Olmer himself. Enemy of tabloid repeatedly providing food for it himself; citizen striving to launch his political career through much discredited political party called “Věci veřejné” (Public Affairs); director insulting film reviewers who, themselves, have been feeling insulted by his film for nearly 25 years; novelist and blogger writing texts that criticise vices, set mirrors and describe his own, successfully operated, 12-kg liver, yet those texts feature flashes of cultivation, erudition, observation gift and a sense of humour.

Should *Bony a klid II* (Bony and Peace II, 2014) be the last title of post-1989 filmography loaded with conscious commercialization connected to (conscious or unconscious?) decline in style, the “real” Olmer has to be found somewhere else. Obviously, he can be found in the straight “transparent” blue-eyed view of handsome Sanin in *Jarní vody* (Spring Waters, 1968) as well as in the surprised expression of ironic Mr. Hnyk, character played by actor Zdeněk Svěrák in *Jako jed* (As Good As Poison, 1985), directed by Olmer. Indeed, even students of Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (FAMU) are familiar with these moments of “realness” in which the external image virtually merges with Olmer’s thoughts and feelings, as the latter used to teach there at the department of Direction, together with other renown colleagues – Věra Chytilová and Jan Němec.

Most probably, Olmer would have left much deeper and more concentrated imprint in the Czechoslovak movie, had he not felt limited by all kind of totalities: firstly, his

attractive appearance that drove him to the roles of much adored idol – even under socialist cinematography that put an end to film stars. Secondly, the period of normalisation, overlapping with Olmer's debut as film director career, mutilated at the very beginning by a long-term ban to work in the Barrandov Film Studios. Later on though he profiled himself as author director with a sense of criticism and understanding of the genre, namely in the films as follows: *Jako jed, Antonyho šance* (Antony's Chance, 1986), *Co je vám, doktore?* (What's Up, Doc?, 1984) and *Bony a klid* (Bony and peace, 1987). And thirdly, Olmer struggled with the totality of post-1989 "independent" period. In fact, Olmer, who at that time just turned 50, started the period with his first "non-nationalised" feature film *Tankový prapor* (Tank Battalion, 1991), though later on he yielded to the pressure of "wild capitalism" and got down to commercialization, having committed a number of artistic suicides, as movie community sees it. Indeed, these even cast shadow on some interesting films produced for the Czech Television.

As a result of cruel attacks of film reviewers and his inability to find the right script and producer, he got stuck in "bitterness described by psychiatrist prof. C. G. Jung, often dangerous to his surroundings" – state of negativistic breakdown to which he is naturally inclined, missing the lucky nature of Zdeněk Troška (and the volume of sales of the latter). Nevertheless, comparably with Troška, author of popular Czech comedy *Kameňák* (The Good One), Olmer is also one of few Czech directors marking long-term presence in genre film, i.e. trying to formulate the possibilities of Czech populism.

"I have not changed at all – I am impulsive, affected by manic depression, marked by social changes though never giving up old wrestler," says Olmer. In fact, this can be seen as just another "picture of oneself". After all, a personality never giving up without fight and not always succeeding has undoubtedly its place in the modern history of Czechoslovak film.

Lover outside the new wave

Most probably, seen from a psychologist's point of view, Olmer's life-long desire to be accepted could be connected to his mum's death when he was eight. Furthermore, if a newborn's destiny was to be affected by temporary mood in society, we would have to get even deeper: on 18 June 1942, Czech parachutists died fighting against the Nazis

who outnumbered them, in Ss. Cyril and Methodius Cathedral, and, not far away from this place, in U Apolináře Hospital, Vít Olmer was born the very next morning, on 19 June. Later on, he thought that his father – member of the Sokol movement – was in touch with the resistance movement. Originally bank officer, Mr. Olmer was then for political reasons moved to the position of officer in a sugar factory in Český Brod. After 1948 he even considered emigration, as his son did twenty years later, after August 1968.

Mr. Olmer raised his son alone and put all his energy to supporting his son's interest in art. He passed on him his passion for books and inclination to literature (he wrote poetry and the Theatre of Anna Sedláčková even staged his symbolic play in verse called *Nocí poraněn* (Hurt by Night). He encouraged his son to amateur theatre: indeed, his gifted son developed his acting skills during his studies at Jan Neruda high school in Prague Malá Strana. Furthermore, he supported Vít when the latter was not admitted to the Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts (DAMU) and was a trainee in Regional Theatre of Employed in the town of Most.

Finally admitted to DAMU, Vít Olmer graduated in 1965, though having found out to be more interested in direction than in acting. He took his first year at FAMU as distant studies and he paid for it himself. In fact, he had been admitted to FAMU thanks to Elmar Klos who took him to his class. In 1960, Olmer entered the world of to-be actors, but at the same time he also had his first professional experience with the film: indeed, having just turned 18, he was selected by Václav Krška to play in *Osení* (The Immature Grain, 1961): an optimistic temporary film. Olmer took the role of Lojza Zaccpal, light-minded coach driver employed in the cooperative who takes care of the farm and his brothers and sisters after their mother's death, growing thus to become responsible, influenced by the "right" woman (Zuzana Fišárková). In 1962, František Vlášil cast Olmer in the role of Jan Spálený, young miller, in a romantic historical drama *Ďáblova past* (The Devil's Trap, 1961). In the same year, Oldřich Lipský assigned him to portray a man of the future – engineer Petr, in satirist sci-fi called *Muž z prvního století* (The Man from the First Century, 1961).

Olmer used his acting skills also in front of the recruiting commission striving to be given so called "blue book". Asked to show naked in front of the commission, he was successful in pretending uncontrollable desire to use the arm was entrusted against

people with military rank.

With his attractive appearance that he used for example also in *Zlaté kapradí* (The Golden Fern, 1963) film by Jiří Weiss, where he took the romantic role of furious young countryman called Jura, he was obviously predestined to play the role of lovers, roles he soon learnt to hate ("There is nothing worse than playing the role of lovers."). Rather off this route, he portrayed a depressed wheel chaired youngster, for whom the main character falls in love in *Vysoká zed'* (The High Wall, 1963), film scripted by Jan Procházka and directed by Karel Kachyňa. (In addition, Olmer could also be seen in a wartime film *Ať žije republika* (Long Live the Republic, 1965) and in *Maratón* (The Marathon, 1968), similar in genre and based on Procházka's screenplay).

New, more civil period of the Czechoslovak film was reflected in Olmer's filmography also through a student movie *Třináct minut* (Thirteen Minutes, 1964): a story about a young boy who bets in a pub to hold a pint of beer in a stretched hand for the time indicated. Nevertheless, Olmer stood aside of the Czechoslovak new wave generation, having made no imprint in key films made during this period. Olmer actor, and later on also Olmer director, inclined towards genre cinematography, which was of little interest for the new wave authors.

In parallel with new wave artistic invasion, other movies were produced, creating extremely high quality against the temporary situation background. Filmmakers involved in their production include Eva Sadková, script writer of *5 milionů svědků* (Five Million Witnesses, 1965), a detective story in which Olmer portrayed Mr. Číž, TV assistant, drunken young intellectual studying FAMU yet already striving to become director which would provide him with money and fame. The role involved fair amount of autobiographical irony. Olmer played it in *Dýmky* (The Pipes, 1966), an Austrian-Czech short-story play which marks a rather bizarre side-work in Vojtěch Jasný's filmography. Another major "English" role portrayed by Olmer was Allan Pinkerton, heroic reporter, in a successful parody based on a pulp novel *Fantom Morrisvillu* (The Phantom of Morrisville, 1966), realized by Bořivoj Zeman.

In the 1960s, Olmer worked with a number of high-quality, mainly older-generation directors and observed their work with actors – which would help him a lot later, as

director. Ambitions of this young actor increased his frustration. Theatre acting might have suited him better, but it was of little appeal to him (even despite his role in Čapek's *Ze života hmyzu* (Pictures from the Insects' Life) directed by Miroslav Macháček in the National Theatre). Therefore, in 1964 he was keen to take the role of the first officer on Soviet submarine lost in the US waters in *The Russians are Coming! The Russians are Coming!* (1966) directed by Norman Jewison. However, neither he, nor Rudolf Hrušínský, who was to play the captain, did not receive official permission to travel to the US on business.

Olmer had to wait for his "dollar" cast until 1968, when he portrayed a German soldier in wartime epic film *The Bridge at Remagen* (1969). He remembers how shooting a battlepiece in Davle, Prague, confused Soviet soldiers who arrived on 21 August to liberate Czechoslovakia from counter-revolutionaries.

Olmer's attractiveness for international film producers was confirmed in French-Czech film *Těch několik dnů...* (A Matter of Days, 1968) reflecting August 1968 tumultuous events. Though he was, once again, cast in the role of a lover – Czech university professor, Mr. Kučera, with whom a French tourist falls in love.

Activities of Olmer actor in the 1960s culminated – and ended – with his main role, wonderful and demanding, in *Jarní vody* by Václav Krška. In this nostalgic and stylish film based on Ivan Sergeyevich Turgenev's novel, Olmer played the part of sensitive and quick-tempered Sanin, destroying his future with his beloved girl because of another, a more pragmatic woman.

Narration parts of elderly Sanin might be seen as foreshadowing Olmer's deliberate adieu to his romantic role of lovers. However, he was to experience unexpectedly dramatic fate.

We cannot say what Olmer actor would have aimed for, had it not been for normalisation: indeed, it was at the very beginning of that period that he was told by Ludvík Toman, new chief dramaturge of the Barrandov Film Studio, that he could no longer work in the Studio, neither as actor, nor as director. Olmer, having graduated from FAMU'S Film and TV Direction Department, already started to turn his attention from acting towards direction, focusing on his feature film debut. However, his opposition to the new public order was clearly seen not only from his starring in *Těch*

několik dnů..., but also through his direction of a student document called *Občané s erbem* (Citizens with a Coat of Arms, 1966) in which he discussed Czech nobility descendants, topic tabooized by the regime.

Hurt by Night

Already during his direction studies at FAMU, Olmer started to turn out as an author of interest. He shot *Dívka* (Girl, 1966) portraying his first wife Heda Škrdlantová who preferred medicine to her career of actress, or *Dva šálky kávy* (Two Cups of Coffee, 1967): using hidden camera, he got into the first “socialist” dating agency in Prague. In 1966 Olmer graduated with *Houslista* (Violinist), mini-film about a young man who, during a concert, is recalling his military training experiences shared with his friend, now first violinist. False and snobbish love of the main hero was played by Jana Šulcová, Pavel Landovský made great performance as a half-witted brass hat who is “soo fond of culture”.

To comply with the Barrandov Studios directive on involving young graduates in film production, Olmer was supposed to become one of seven promising debutants four years later (besides Ester Krumbachová, Jaroslav Papoušek, Drahomíra Vihanová and another “actor-director” – Jan Kačer).[1] While for some of them their first film was also their last one, others continued with direction activities to become members of the lost “normalisation generation”.

It turned out that Olmer worked far too long on his ambitious debut, film adaptation of *Tovaryšstvo Ježíšovo* (Society of Jesus) by writer Jiří Šotola. The story from the period of recatolization following after the Battle of White Mountain, which reflected comparative features with temporary situation in Czechoslovakia, might have been originally approved in the Barrandov Studios in 1969, but after on it was suspended as too expensive. It is highly probable that there was no desire and courage to produce it, with the prospect of expected uncertainties and taking into account violent removal of Jan Procházka as head of Procházka-Šebík dramaturge group.[2] (Indeed, Jan Procházka remained close to Olmer – in fact it was him who protected the banned author with his name as scriptwriter of *Páni kluci* (Boys Will be Boys, 1975), children’s comedy based on M. Twain’s novel: even the film director, Věra Plívová-Šimková, was not aware of this fact.)

For this reason, it was not a spectacular historical drama that would mark Olmer's debut, but rather an ostentatious psychological story about a 23-year old volatile girl called Veronika (Valerie Chmelová), who receives well-deserved moral lesson from a photographer she falls for. Prepared under the supervision of Olmer's professor at FAMU, Elmar Klos, the film *Takže ahoj* (So Bye-Bye, 1970) clearly followed the true new wave "cinéma vérité" style (including the cast of non-actors). Though having received high attendance, it came too late: normalisers labeled it as artistic failure and Olmer was to be prevented from independent direction work for the rest of the decade.

In the first decade of normalisation, Olmer, similarly as Ladislav Helge or Zdenek Sirový, was exiled: being moved to the field of dubbing to direct Czech versions of Russian, Bulgarian or East German films. Occasionally, he took small roles in interesting films, such as *Holka na zabití* (A Girl Fit to be Killed, 1975), *Kulový blesk* (Ball Lightning, 1978), *Krakonoš a lyžníci* (The Krakonos and the Skiers, 1980).

Eventually though, and partly also because of his adherence to the much hated Communist party, he was provided with a new chance outside the Barrandov Studios, as a number of other colleagues of his were. The Gottwaldov Film Studio, established in the period, was a venue for films production, such as *Sonáta pro zrzku* (Sonata for a Red-Haired Girl, 1980), *Skleněný dům* (The Glass House, 1981) and *Stav ztroskotání* (State of Shipwreck, 1983). Featuring impressive cultivation, understanding mainly for young heroines and sensitively cast by young actors (Stanislava Coufalová, Michaela Kudláčková, Filip Renč, Michal Suchánek...), these "children" films were popular with audience, and praised by film reviewers as well as specialized festival juries. Conforming to the "temporary teenager films" trend, they started to be used as a means of expressing views on the period in prudent, yet fresh manner, as did Karel Smyczek or Vladimír Drha. In 1987, Olmer completed his "children" films repertoire with *Páni Edisoni* (Sirs Edisons, 1987), though at that time it was already overshadowed with more important titles of his.

Finally, in 1983 Olmer was "pardoned", i.e. allowed to go back to the Barrandov Studio; in fact two years earlier he tried to impose himself there as a scriptwriter of Czechoslovak legionary drama *Noční jezdci* (Night Riders), though he was presented just as author of the storyline together with Marta Kadlečíková.

While Olmer actor conformed to the communist regime (in particular in his main role in Czech-Georgian biographical movie *Písně by neměly umírat* (Songs Should not Die, 1983), Olmer director was finally given the possibility to tackle the “grown-ups” topics. His politically-engaged spy drama on members of Czechoslovak counter-intelligence *Druhý tah pěšcem* (The Second Move of the Pawn, 1984) was largely counterbalanced with other works, clearly outclassing the 1980s average. Bitter comedy *Co je vám, doktore?* (What’s Up, Doc) based on Antonín Máša’s story and Zdeněk Svěrák’s script presents idealistic dentist Mr. Burda from Prague who, in an attempt to revolt against current situation, “escapes” to the countryside, accompanied by his new, younger partner. The appeal of the film was not just because of the scenario prepared by Mr. Svěrák, one of the most prominent domestic scriptwriters in the last decades, which was justified by the following Olmer’s work, very successful tragicomedy *Jako jed* (As Good As Poison): while Mr. Svěrák portrayed “just” the main hero, it was Jiří Just who wrote the scenario of this story about a construction authority employee whose revolt (this time not successful, though) against ordinary life-style is triggered by his passion for a pretty Slovak colleague. And the film was based on a book by Karel Zídek, one of literary works that provided Olmer solid ground and support during his whole career as film director.

Olmer needed just little time to profile himself as an interesting film-maker capable of addressing his audience with smart and authorial stories as well as modern expressions featuring visual dynamism. These qualities are found even in his drama *Antonyho šance* (Antony’s Chance). Highly appreciated at its time, though a bit forgotten today, the film based on Rudolf Ráž’s script provides a truly uncompromising picture of hopeless life under socialist regime. Its main hero, portrayed by Luboš Veselý, tries to live a “normal” life, yet, as many other Olmer’s heroes, fails, his potentially idealistic efforts colliding with the reality represented by the people around him.

Antonyho šance clearly reflected – as did a number of other films in the second half of the 1980s – the ambiance of “perestroika”. To conform to the standards of that time, heroes’ failures were not attributed to the lack of freedom under the communist regime, yet their stories depicting the 1980s Czechoslovakia were taken as clear social criticism by their audience.

The same is true for a crime *Bony a klid* (Bony and Peace, 1987), made in cooperation with Radek John, reporting-experienced scriptwriter, favourite with director Karel Smyczek. The story of a naive young man Martin (Jan Potměšil) who, having moved to a big city, gets in trouble due to his new friends, illicit moneychangers, strikes the right balance between Olmer's interest in crime genre and the needs on social and documentary level. With thorough examinations (even among criminals themselves), the film was intended to be authentic and it would probably have got in troubles with censorship: yet its journey to cinema screens was facilitated by "real-life" changers who stole it before its premiere to sell it illegally on videotapes. Therefore, even most convinced comrades considered it nonsense to ban a film "already seen by every other in the country". Its sequel, made by Olmer in 2014, marked no significant film event.

Outcast in the Gold-digging Period

The revolution year of 1989 brought Olmer satisfaction: he could work for the Czech Television (Oscar Wilde adaptation of *The Canterville Ghost*; *Ježek z kiosku* /Hedgehog from the Kiosk/ – a story of a girl dreaming to become famous; comedy *Čeled' brouků finančníků* /Family of Beetles Moneymen/). At the time of the Velvet revolution, then 47-year old Olmer was working on *Ta naše písnička česká II* (That Czech Song of Ours II, 1990): its screenplay was prepared in cooperation with Radek John. It should definitely not be associated with the 1967 musical revue bearing the same title *Ta naše písnička česká*; indeed, this 1990 tragic comedy tells a story of Jan Rošetský (Jan Hartl), talented violinist who ended up working in a boiler house after 1968, to be allowed to appear in public from time to time only depending on malevolent willfulness of Karel (Bronislav Poloczek), head of music agency. With a relief that there is no longer censorship imposed, the film openly criticised specific vices in socialist Pragoconcert. Released in December 1990, it was nevertheless somewhat lost among other "open" pieces.

Olmer was offered direction of *Obecná škola* (The Elementary School, 1991), nostalgic tragicomedy; indeed, it was while working on *Jako jed* when he himself inspired Zdeněk Svěrák to write the screenplay to this film. Nevertheless, having decided to put on screen Josef Škvorecký's novel *Tankový prapor* (The Tank Battalion), he left *Obecná škola* to Jan Svěrák, Zdeněk Svěrák's son, for whom it was a very successful debut.

The script for *Tankový prapor*, tragicomedy situated in the 1950s when obligatory military service was a fight for human dignity and even for life, was prepared in cooperation with Radek John. Episodes in free sequence are connected through soldier Danny Smiřický, portrayed by Lukáš Vaculík. Hero's love, pretty Janinka, was staged by Olmer's second wife, actress and movie costumes artist Simona Chytrová. The first post-1945 feature film outside state monopoly was produced by Bontonfilm, public limited company, and it was extraordinarily well received by the public. Furthermore, it was also the last time Olmer was also supported by film reviewers. Followed *Nahota na prodej* (Nakedness to Sell, 1993), prepared in cooperation with another investigative journalist, Josef Klíma. It was made on private production company, Heureka Production, order, which stated: "no serious art but rather lots of blood and action".

The story about finding information on kidnapped girls forced by a Roma gang to prostitution ranges among first frank attempts of the Czechs to produce Western-style crime (in fact the attempts have continued until these days, twenty five years later, with various producers putting in much vigour yet without really promising results). Klíma and Olmer created a team consisting of Lukáš Vaculík as investigative journalist, Jiří Krampol as a fierce yet tired private detective, and Kája Třísková as boldly naive Czech-origin American, that would be most probably successful with audience even today. It was very well accepted, when released, even though film reviewers turned away from Olmer. The dispute between film reviewers and Olmer, rejecting to feel ashamed for his commercial work, lasts already 25 years.

Olmer would get back to crime genre in 1998 with sitcom *Policajti z předměstí* (Police from the Suburbs) produced for Czech commercial TV station TV Nova.

In line with the temporary "boorish" comedy genre he produced *Ještě větší blbec, než jsme doufali* (Even Bigger Idiot than We Had Hoped, 1994), in cooperation with Petr Markov and Luděk Sobota. The latter, famous comedian, portrayed the main role of cunningly naive Vitoušek Dolejš, targeted by accomplices of a powerful moneychanger who are trying, in vain, to rob him. The film direction was originally to be entrusted to Zdenek Sirový, Olmer took it over, clearly aware of the fact that his work would not be based on high quality script as in case of another temporary comedy on restitutions *Dědictví, aneb Kurvahošihgutentag* (The Inheritance or Fuckoffguysgoodday, 1992),

directed by Věra Chytilová. Indeed, this time the outcome was not enjoyable even for the audience.

Olmer continued in the commercial vein with film double inspired by Vladimír Páral's piquant novel: *Playgirls* and *Playgirls 2*, launched in 1995. Rumour had it that "Olmer was preparing pornography", and, consequently, a number of reputed actors turned away from the formerly "reliable" director. Titillating stories from a posh erotic salon in Prague stigmatised Olmer as despised producer. The truth is that the director, more successful to resist to the 1980s ideological pressures than to post-1989 economical pressures, would have preferred to produce film adaptation of Vladimír Páral's *Kniha rozkoší, smíchu a radosti* (Book of Pleasures, Laugh and Joy). (In 2011 he managed to produce another story about an aging writer and a young woman *Vůně kávy* (The Smell of Coffee), but for the Czech Television and without Vladimír Páral, starring Lukáš Vaculík and Simona Chytrová.)

"My films were like Božena Němcová's fairy tales compared to our current production," Olmer defended himself, stating that preferably he wants to make bitter comedies similar to *Jako jed*. Furthermore, the director, having become cynic, believes that in the gold-digger era it was not possible to come to "wholesale butcher" with film adaptation of Franz Werfel's *Geheimnis eines Menschen*.

In 2002, his filmography would extend with adaptation of his own short stories from "the married life" written for Czech mutation of the Playboy, called *Waterloo po česku* (Czech-style Waterloo), starring Jiří Krampol. This time, he did not ask private producers (involving František Vondráček, owner of a company producing plastic pipes) but instead he turned to the Czech Television. In fact, Olmer's professional success from the last decades is connected with the Czech Television, despite his varied, tumultuous relations with this public broadcasting institution. Olmer's films produced by the Czech TV include *Tuláci* (Wanderers, 2001), nostalgic story situated in post-war Prague neighbourhood Karlín, starring Vojtěch Kotek as adolescent hero; *Modrý kámen* (Blue Stone, 2004), Roma woman and Turkish immigrant story; or *Hledání Jana Wericha* (Searching for Jan Werich, 2011) completing material prepared by Olmer in 1977 for Slovak programme *Račte vstúpiť* (Just Come in, Please).

For years ago Olmer surprised with harsh TV drama *Lehká jako dech* (As Light As Breath), story of two classmates obsessed with slimness.

Indeed, the Czech Television enhances Olmer's professional credit, while transplantation of cirrhosis-struck liver he underwent in 2007 granted him chance for a new life. And this new life he dedicates, with energy and full bile strength, also to journalist formats (including blog posting). Olmer's most recent output is a collection of columns, articles and short stories *Nač se bát Frankensteinů aneb Moje cesta k transplantaci* (Why to be Afraid of Frankensteins or My Journey to Transplantation), published in 2007 by Mladá Fronta publishing house. This is his defense of his negativistic attitudes: "As long as I get angry, I am alive. Otherwise I would be a living corpse."

Notes:

[1] Skupa, Lukáš, *Vadí – nevadí. Česká filmová cenzura v 60. letech*. Prague: National Film Archive, 2016, pp. 166-67.

[2] In view of Štěpán Hulík, had Olmer and Šotola handed over the script maybe a year earlier, there would have been money available from cooperation of dramaturge groups, as it had been before in case of Marketa Lazarová. Hulík, Štěpán, *Kinematografie zapomnění. Počátky normalizace ve filmovém studiu Barrandov* (1968–1973), Prague: Academia, 2011, p. 52.