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“You are doing a great job, but the people are not happy.” Criticism of socialism in newsreels before the Velvet Revolution

Terms like film news or weekly newsreels probably do not mean anything to today’s younger viewers anymore. It is likely, however, that if we were to ask older people of their parents’ and grandparents’ generation, these phrases would evoke only a blurry memory of something vague, surrounded by a halo of ridiculous impropriety that we today associate with some elements of the past socio-political order. It would be too simplistic, though, to equate these precursors – and later increasingly obsolete contemporaries – of television news with memories of banana queues and to project onto them a strong association with the totalitarian period of our recent history. Although it is true that socialism significantly marked and compromised it, the history of this particular film form is not only longer, but mainly more complicated.

Film news, newsreels, weekly newsreels, TV journals, time frames etc… What to imagine under these essentially interchangeable terms? In this strange zone encapsulating different borderline forms, where is the line that defines what is – or what still is – film news? As unnecessary as such contemplations may seem in relation to the topic of this article, the shape of the film news and its transformations is crucial to the realisation that weekly newsreels were more than just an annoying interlude before the start of a film in the cinema, during which, according to the words of the contemporary witnesses, everyone went outside for a smoke rather than having to wait it out in the darkness of the auditorium. The propagandistic role was

not the only one in the approximately 70-year history of Czechoslovak film news. Although the collective memory says the exact opposite, film journals were also a significant means of socio-political criticism.

The ideological level of the weekly news and its importance cannot be denied. In order to fully understand how this distinctive entity at the borderland of journalism and cinema became a powerful propaganda tool, it is first necessary to define it as such and briefly review its history. Mapping its growing role in the totalitarian indoctrination of opinion in the public space will help us understand how the film weeklies eventually became a symbol of the subversion and diversionism of its creators for a short period of time before it disappeared a year after the Velvet Revolution.

The birth of two media

As I have already mentioned, in film news, journalism is intertwined with cinema. The former is met by the content aspect, i.e. the handling and the mediation of information, the latter by the formal form that the information takes through audiovisual means. Apart from being a separate genre in both fields, it can also be thought of as a medium in its own right. The forefather of media studies, Marshall McLuhan, argues that each medium contains a different medium, a condition film news fully meets – it contains newspapers and film, which, with the advent of sound, has been swallowed up by radio.[1] It is the only information medium that is characterized by collective perception of the message presented and by its sharing.[2]

According to McLuhan, the message of any medium is a change of scale or pace within human affairs.[3] Even the first primitive films of early cinematographers were able to convey to their astonished viewers banal, yet fascinating scenes and situations in their vividness and plasticity. From the comfort of the cinema, it was suddenly possible to see events from the other side of the planet. With its documentary concept, the new invention was able to inform about the world around, overcoming space-time barriers. Along with film as such, another medium is born – news film as another channel for the transmission of information.

From moving postcards to the first weekly news

As the superficiality of cinema began to fade and it ventured into more ambitious realms, the precursors of the film news also began to establish themselves. As early as 1902, Léon Gaumont, the founder of the company that still bears his name, came up with the idea of combining the various "time frames"[4] into a coherent and regular programme. By grouping individual shots, he created the first newsreel, with other companies following his suit.[5] The individual spots became more and more sophisticated, but the designation "weekly" must have been taken with a certain benevolence, because these programmes lacked an important element – a concept. We still cannot speak of a programming unit that would link the various coverages into a coherent, functional whole. It was more of a cluster of random short films, which even then started to cause annoyance among viewers who came to the cinema for a completely different viewing.

Domestic stagnation

Similarly to the Lumière brothers, whose example he followed, architect Jan Kříženecký was not only the founder of domestic cinema, but also of film news. His unchanging style, however, would soon be exhausted in the predatory, new art-industrial form; Czech cinema as a whole was lagging behind its global competitors. In the 1910s, however, there were some efforts at development. In 1911 Antonín Pech founded the first professional production company Kinofa, which achieved several successes in the field of film news. *St. John's Currents* (Svatojánské proudy, 1912) received the first prize, the Grand Gold Exhibition Medal in the film category, at the 1st International Photography and Film Exhibition in Vienna. *The Sixth All-Sokol Meeting in Prague* (Šestý slet všesokolský v Praze, 1912) was the first film of Czech provenance to be shown abroad. The company Illusion, under the brand name *Prague News* (Pražské aktuality, 1913-1914), informed about events in the capital city with a surprising swiftness.[6] However, these were still experiments that did not last long.

The First World War further delayed the development. The access to new markets after the end of the war was exploited by big producers from abroad, who were opening branches and even creating localized editions of weekly news with extra domestic news. The lack of financial and technical resources and the absence of an institutional framework and legislation lead to further lagging behind within the domestic production. Therefore, until the second half of the 1930s, numerous weekly

news appeared and disappeared, characterized by irregular periodicity and poor quality.[7] The only exception was *Electajournal* (Elektajournal) that was produced since 1925 by Karel Pečený's company of the same name and established the tradition of a national periodical[8], which, with the exception of one week, was produced continuously until 1990.

Age-old propaganda

The one week-long blackout occurred immediately after the end of the Second World War and the Prague uprising. The weekly news was published at the price of many concessions to the occupiers even during the Protectorate period. However, investors had been aware of the possibilities to use (and even abuse) film news for personal interests much earlier. In the 1920s, various associations and groups basically paid for advertising in the form of reports that covered unimportant, sometimes obscure events of a regional nature – political party congresses, events of professional associations, strikes, and even beauty contests.[9]

At other times, the creators resorted to a certain servility voluntarily. In the first decade of the young democratic republic's existence, in the spirit of patriotic sentiment, the celebrations of 28 October were widely reported about. The focus of interest, however, was the figure of President Masaryk, whom the filmmakers accompanied with almost tabloid obsession at almost every step in both his professional and private life. In his seminal work *Paths to Truth or Lies* (Cesty k pravdě či lži), the historian and documentary filmmaker Antonín Navrátil considers this tendency propagandistic, but it is necessary to bear in mind his own allegiance to communist historiography which sought to suppress the Masaryk-related democratic myth. Nevertheless, the fascination with the figure of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk and his frequent appearance in contemporary journals were evident.[10]

Weekly news looking towards tomorrow

The penetration of ideology and servility into the post-war weekly news was gradual and initially motivated by a general desire for social flourishing. The creators took full advantage of the acquired freedom and tried to mobilize the citizens, especially those who were not interested in public affairs.[11] The political aspect grew stronger, starting with the promotion of the National Front as a whole and moving towards the

exclusive support for the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and its ideals. *"[O]ur weekly news faces challenges that are unparalleled almost anywhere else in the world. (...) It is necessary to create weekly news that is not an image, an imprint of a time that has already passed, but which draws impulses for the future from the present. Creative weekly news, weekly news looking towards tomorrow,"* said Jan Kučera about the new role of the film news.[12]

Causing disinterest and reluctance on the part of the audience, the weight of propaganda was increasingly striking and mirrored the development the Czechoslovak socialist establishment was undergoing during its forty-year existence. In the period of rigid Stalinism of the 1950s, conscious amateurs from the ranks of the party who had replaced experienced professionals during the purges following the 1948 Czechoslovak coup d'état, even did not hesitate to include the Soviet weekly news *News of the Day* (Novosti Dnia) directly in the main weekly news programme *The Week in Film* (Týden ve filmu).[13] The advent of television in 1953 did not at first threaten the position of film news as the dominant medium in the mass media system. Due to technical limitations, television did not broadcast live until 1956, and the management was happy to include not only radio news but also weekly news from the cinemas. Its own daily news programme, called *Television News and Curiosities* (Televizní aktuality a zajímavosti) was not broadcast regularly until 1 January 1957.[14]

It was then a significant blow to the film news, even though the creators were not aware of it at the time. The schematic and phrasal nature persisted until the second half of the 1960s when the more liberal social tendencies and trends of the world documentary filmmaking started reflecting in the industry. Having begun to understand the dominance of television news, the creators of weekly newspapers started moving away from current affairs towards "opinion pieces" and short documentary formats. In 1964, the first two monthly news, *Radar* (Radar) and *Reflector* (Reflektor), appeared.[15]

Normalization groping in the dark

By the early 1970s, however, film news was falling further and further behind the television news. The presentation of news with a delay of days or even weeks seemed like an anachronism, and viewers hardly appreciated receiving the same information

which was already presented to them at the time when it was hot news, only that now it was approached with more formal care and it was shown on the big screen. Weekly news around the world were therefore faced with the choice of either closing down or undergoing a major transformation. While in Western countries their authors opted for the former solution, in countries under the influence of the Soviet Union weekly news continued because of their inherent integration into the structure of the media and propaganda means. Weekly news were most successful in third world countries, though, where television coverage was absent or insufficient.[16]

Since 1970, two periodicals, *Československý filmový týdeník* (Czechoslovak Film Weekly) and *Svět ve filmu* (World in Film), were available in normalized Czechoslovakia. After his arrival in the autumn of 1969, the new director of the Short Film studios (Krátký film), Kamil Pixa, came up with a new concept for the structure of film coverage, according to which *Czechoslovak Film Weekly* was supposed to be the official chronicle of the most important events, while *World in Film* was supposed to focus on foreign policy. However, there was still a lack of firm dramaturgical guidance – the creators compiled their weekly news according to their own intentions, and there was a lack of foreign material as well. *World in Film* was therefore replaced by *Filmový zpravodaj* (Film Bulletin) in 1972 and, like the whole of society, film news was normalised – its production began to be subject to the notorious annual plans and the Communist Party Central Committee along with the Mass Media Department were invited to have a say in the process.[17]

The specialized monthly news, not long ago seen as a way to make weekly news competitive with television, were ceasing to be produced altogether. [18] With 1978, the clip-based weekly news disappeared and were replaced by the so-called mono-topics – journalistic-like formats that dealt with only one idea. It was a harbinger of the inevitable transformation of film news into “film journalism.” They were no longer just about the audiovisual conveyance of certain information in a relatively short time, but about providing a broader context, deeper analysis and the creator’s own opinion.

A new beginning – the beginning of the end

At the beginning of the 1980s, the situation appeared harmonious. The film news managed to keep modern appearance by engaging young creators, and at the same

time to maintain good relations with the ruling establishment, the annual contributor of 10 million Czechoslovak crowns.[19] News of an official nature were complemented by current and timeless topics, as well as by custom films. Nevertheless, in the first half of the eighth decade, a number of proposals for a new conception of film news emerged that would firmly establish its position in the media system. Some ideas recurred across the proposals: targeting young audience, more flexible distribution, a move towards "magazine editions."[20]

It was these magazines that the Short Film studio began to focus more on with the new director Lubomír Jakeš. The format was similar to the monothematic one of the past and focused on a specific area of interest. To this end, the studio established cooperation with television, radio and the popular magazines *Mladý svět* (Young world) and *Dikobraz* (Porcupine). Between 1986 and 1987, five different magazine programmes focusing on film and technology appeared.[21] Audiences loved documentaries and cultural releases that were not afraid to highlight the existence of unofficial culture. The normalization era was slowly replaced by perestroika, which also reflected in the choice of the topic – the filmmakers pointed to environmental protection or, via regular social documentary film news, to health prevention. In 1988 there was a growing appeal to the contemporary shortcomings – the issues of minorities or the need to reform education. Voices emerged supporting small private business as well as the cultural and sports underground.[22]

The revolutionary year of 1989

Although the audience response had been positive, the industry continued to struggle with the problem of irrelevance. The turnaround time was up to six weeks in the case of *Czechoslovak Film Weekly* and even three months in the case of *Film Bulletin*. There were few copies, and some of them were even released in black and white due to the lack of funds. A radical reform of film journalism was imminent.

In June 1988, after two years of discussions, the final version of the *Draft of the New Concept of Film Journalism in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic* was drawn up. It was a joint project of the Short Film Documentary Studio, Slovak Film Production, which produced its own weekly news, and the Central Film Rental Fund (Ústřední půjčovna filmů) as a distributor. A month later, the concept was approved by the

national management of Czechoslovak Film (Československý film). It was to be introduced the next year.

The preamble to the new concept of film news set out clear objectives for the reform:

1. *"to improve the ideological-propagandistic scope of the film periodical;*
2. *to make the content and form more attractive and to approach the viewer with means of expression that correspond to the current aesthetic sensibility and the current aesthetic level of other audiovisual media;*
3. *bring economic savings."*[23]

The first item in particular was important as a whole. In order to be effective, propaganda must target young people and work on this demographic group. Just as today, the socialist youth was the biggest part of the audience in the cinemas – weekly news had all the more reason to target effectively as a means of propaganda and not to provoke boredom and disaffection in the audience.

A simple glance at the annual lists of all the short films produced each year in Short Film Studios can testify to the success of making the content of the magazines more appealing to this age group. Let us have a look at the first three issues of the *Czechoslovak Film Weekly* in 1988:

- 1988/1 – *The Hottest Ecological Topics of Our Days*
- 1988/2 – *Fifth Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia*
- 1988/3 – *Gustáv Husák's 75th Birthday*

And now let us try the same with the 1989 edition when *Film Bulletin* replaced *Czechoslovak Film Weekly* as the official periodical news:

- 1989/1 – *Život je jen náhoda (Life is just a coincidence)*
- 1989/2 – *Film and book: on the cinematic forms of literary works*
- 1989/3 – *Filmový spike 1/89*

The change is evident even with this small sample. Looking more closely at the 1989 edition, we can find not only that the representation of hitherto neglected topics increased significantly, but also that the degree of criticality increased as well.

Science and technology magazines criticized the unsatisfactory conditions in Czechoslovakia, such as delayed development, poor funding, and isolation from the international scene. Magazines oriented on social issues, on the other hand, focused on construction and housing policy, and ecological magazines on the attitude of mankind towards nature, generally in socialist countries – in the issue called *Man's greatest enemy is man* (*Film Bulletin* 1989/8), for example, a commentary described the depicted natural problems as *"a warning to all those who would like to command the wind and rain, who short-sightedly and selfishly use nature only for their immediate benefit."* The use of the well-known communist slogan ("commanding the wind and rain") was certainly not accidental.

The most used means of defining oneself against the socialist establishment and the social problems associated with it were the cultural weeklies, themselves the biggest group of the film news production towards the end of its existence. In addition to criticism, they also played the important role of giving space to the regime's unpaid artists who found themselves outside the official, i.e. approved, culture. For example, *Untrodden Paths* (*Film Bulletin* 1989/15) focused entirely on the phenomenon of unofficial exhibitions in which artists tried to follow up the broken continuity of Czech art. The regime was openly attacked not only by the non-conformist creators to whom the weekly news was dedicated (*"According to a simple screening key: he lived in the 1960s, the 1960s don't exist, so I don't exist either. At first I thought it was personal, but then I found out it was according to this inveterate screening thinking."*), but also the filmmakers themselves. In the final montage, they used provocative juxtapositions of music, image and commentary to mock the sculptures in Prague housing estates created in the spirit of socialist realism – for example, when they showed a woman sweeping garbage under one of them and accompanied it with the words *"The viewer will always be attracted only to real art."*

The most daring creators (and performers) were those of *Types of Humour* (*Film Bulletin* 1989/47), which tells the story of five young directors who decided to make satirical films. Among other things, Jan Svěrák praises the creative freedom and the fact that filmmakers can make fun of serious social problems in their films. As he starts to list them, a tram passes by and the microphone picks up its rumble instead of the speaker, making Svěrák's words inaudible. In another passage, we watch scenes from Tomáš Vorel's film *The Prague Five* (Pražská 5), a parody on

constructionist films from the times of the most rigid socialism. Vorel glosses them by saying that humour does not actually exist.

The authors of the film news did not shy away from abstract and typically communal, yet surprisingly sharp and clearly addressed criticism of the social order, as evidenced, for example, by the issue called *How We Are* (*Film Bulletin* 1989/31). People in the poll polemize the poor availability of information due to the political climate, while the commentary mentions the need for tolerance of other people's views and of dialogue. When asked whether the advertisements correspond to the actual situation in the shops, one of the interviewed citizens addresses the politicians with a sentence from the title of this article. The final scene shows propaganda slogans in public space accompanied by commentary: *"Empty phrases and content-free slogans? Yes, when they shift responsibility for solving a problem from specific persons to anonymous people. A man's personal responsibility is determined by the degree of participation in governance."*

The deep-seated assumption that the newsreels were propagandistic and criticized everything that contradicted the 'official' is therefore proving to be wrong. Of the 59 issues analysed from the year of 1989, 25 were critical in some way, with the criticism aiming at the dominant ideology, directed against imperialism and capitalism, and at the ideology itself and its nature. The numbers are clear – while there were only five pro-regime weeklies inveighing against the West, there were four times as many criticizing the shortcomings of the current socio-political establishment. In this light, not only did film news in 1989 practically not serve the interests of the state, but on the contrary, it gave considerable space to the opposition. It, paradoxically, became strongly pro-government only in 1990, when the democratic ethos was strongly manifested in it.

Summary

A cursory look at the weekly news from the turning year of 1989 described above proves that the assumption of their ideological burden mentioned in the introduction is far from correct. The television journals began to reform in the second half of the 1980s, mainly because of the alarming lack of interest of the audience and the increasing embarrassment that resulted from their mere existence. With the beginning

of 1989 came a long-delayed and well-thought-out new concept that led to a real revival of the industry. Film news is finally becoming the modern channel that shows the real world around it and is attractive to viewers.

However, the loosening of conditions due to regime "fatigue" resulted not only in the transformation of the weeklies, but also in the Velvet Revolution. The weekly news survived the fall of socialism and a brief, but extremely strange period followed during which, despite the freedom of speech, doubts still simmered beneath the surface as to whether the film news-reporting was not a relic. In November 1990, its era was ended by the effects of the privatisation of the film industry – the subsequent lack of funding was a threat that had haunted film-news creators for a long time.

An interesting side effect of the sudden creative freedom, which led to open criticism of the former regime and the celebration of the democratic ideals, was the occasional drawing back near the edge of propaganda. Weekly news again became a platform for informing the public about events on the political scene – compare, for example, the aforementioned medallion for the jubilee of Gustáv Husák with the portrait of President Václav Havel (*Filmová kronika* /Film Chronicle/ 1990/1). Both were published in the presidents' honour on the occasion of their election. And just as we once watched *Comrade Husák in Algiers* (*Czechoslovak Film Weekly* 1986/42), we could now watch Havel's journeys abroad – his *Journeys to Democracy* (*Film Chronicle* 1990/4).

Czechoslovak film coverage in 1989 was activist and committed, but not necessarily to the benefit of the ruling establishment. Politically or ideologically uncoloured weeklies were in the minority. Despite the proclamations about the need to lighten the news and the long-standing efforts to make it more attractive, it still tended to be political. As I have tried to describe in this article, however, instead of party congresses, socialist slogans and Stakhanovite enthusiasm, it oriented towards perestroika scepticism and admiration for capitalism, born out of fatigue and disillusionment after twenty years of normalisation under the supervision of the occupying armies.

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Notes:

[1] Marshall McLuhan, *Jak rozumět médiím: Extenze člověka*. Praha: Mladá fronta 2011, p. 66.

[2] Martin Lokšík, Filmový žurnál jako součást československé meziválečné žurnalistiky. In: Jana Čeňková – Jan Cebe (eds.), *Meziválečná česká a slovenská žurnalistika (1918–1938)*. Praha: Univerzita Karlova, Nakladatelství Karolinum 2019, p. 259.

[3] Marshall McLuhan, c. d., p. 20–21.

[4] The so-called time frames, in other words recent events, are a rather problematic term. In the era before regularly published film news, contemporary sources referred to early documentary-reportage films that depicted selected current, attractive events and were products of the fascination with the new medium. The term was also used after World War II. According to Jan Kučera, time-frames have an immediate relationship to the present and their *time-frameness* or *recentness* is determined not only by their subject matter, but also by their style, production technique, and distribution. The recentness is linked to temporariness – a time-frame film ceases to be a film when the defining circumstances pass. While Kučera associates the time-frames with documentaries, news coverages and weekly news, he points out that it can also be a feature film. See František Gürtler (ed.), *Malý filmový slovník*. Praha: Československé filmové nakladatelství 1949, p. 338.

5] Antonín Navrátil, *Cesty k pravdě či lži*: *70 let československého dokumentárního filmu*. Praha, Nakladatelství AMU 2002, p. 69.

[6] Ibid, p. 23.

[7] Ibid, p. 71–72.

[8] Before the nationalisation of cinema in August 1945 there were other entities involved in the field of film reporting, of course. After that, their production was transferred to various studios under the state film monopoly, before settling down in the Short Film studios (Krátký film) following the initial turbulences. Other studios, such as Army Film (Armádní film), made isolated attempts of their own which never lasted long.

[9] Antonín Navrátil, c. d., p. 28–29.

[10] Ondřej Černý, *Československé filmové zpravodajství v průsečíku společenských změn (1989–1990).* Praha: Charles University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism, Department of Journalism, 2023 (diploma thesis), p. 20.

[11] Antonín Navrátil, c. d., p. 145–147.

[12] Jan Kučera, O úkolech filmového týdeníku. *Filmová práce* 2, 1946, no. 18, p. 2.

[13] Jiří Havelka, *Kronika našeho filmu*. Praha: Filmový ústav 1967, p. 64.

[14] Barbara Köpplová et al. *Dějiny českých médií v datech: Rozhlas, televize, mediální právo*. Praha: Karolinum 2003, p. 203.

[15] Antonín Navrátil, c. d., p. 255-256.

[16] Jan Slabý, *Konec filmových týdeníků v Čechách*. Praha: Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, Faculty of Film and Television, Department of Documentary Filmmaking 1993 (postgraduate thesis), p. 11.

[17] Alois Humplík. *K současné problematice filmového zpravodajství*. Praha: Charles University in Prague, Faculty of Journalism 1987 (diploma thesis), p. 17–23.

[18] Josef Spal, *Specializovaná periodika Studia dokumentárních filmů v letech 1945–1970*. Praha: Charles University in Prague, Faculty of Journalism 1986 (diploma thesis), p. 44.

[19] Jan Slabý, c. d., p. 15.

[20] Alois Humplík, c. d., p. 49.

[21] Jan Slabý, *Konec filmových týdeníků v Čechách*..., p. 15–16.

[22] Ibid, p. 36-38.

[23] Ibid, p. 17.