

TOMÁŠ GRUNTORÁD / 22. 11. 2019

Zombie, Vampire and Psychopath: On the History of Shelved Czech Normalisation Horrors

In my thesis *Czech-style Horrors* from last year, I recounted the stories from production of both filmed and shelved horror film projects produced during the era of normalisation in the Barrandov Film Studios (BFS).^[1] I tackled the issue of the corpus of films that can or cannot be classified as horror films produced in the explored period by using a discursive method of genre classification: for my purpose, a horror film was any film explicitly labelled as such by the members of the normalisation and distribution community. Apart from such “verifiable” horrors, I have also discovered several shelved projects whose horror identity can be speculated about. Nowhere in the period production and distribution discourse, or anything else for that matter, can be found the word “horror” in connection to them. However, their ties to a complex of horror film conventions are clear – especially when the films put monstrous characters in the context of serious stories aiming to arouse terror and fear. The problematic nature of discovering speculative horrors lies, however, in the incompleteness of sources. The remains of individual projects are often limited only to scripts and genre-defining specifications cannot be found. In *Czech-style Horrors*, as my thesis, I focused on verifiable horrors, i.e. films with enough documentation. On the other hand, the lack of sources and rigorousness of discursive approach prevented speculative horror films from becoming known to the public. This article aims to right the wrong and introduce three shelved normalisation projects with zombies, a vampire and murdering psychopaths.

The dichotomy of verifiable and speculative horror films takes us back to the eternal “empiricist’s dilemma”: should we make our own criteria for classification of films into genre categories or resort to the usual cultural consensus defining how individual genres should look like?[2] While *Czech-style Horrors* respected the period defining discourse and chose the first option, this article will choose the second one. It will resort to the usual definition stating that a horror film is defined by the efforts of its authors to arouse emotions of terror, fear and tension by means of putting their heroes in conflict with supernatural or human monsters.[3] Our trio of shelved subjects fits into the definition, regardless the fact that it creates a category of films labelled as horror films in retrospect and separately from the genre labelling practice of the normalisation production environment.

Zombi (1970)

In 1970, within Vojtěch Cach’s dramaturgical group, Jiří Mareš, the long-term head of the BFS lectorate and expert on genre fiction[4], developed a “fantastic tale from the Nazi occupation”[5] inspired by the conventions of early American zombie horror films. American films such as *White Zombie* (1932) by Victor Halperin and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) by Jacques Tourneur are considered as films defining the sub-genre of zombie horror. In these films, the titular monsters are ritually reanimated and the whole phenomenon is put into the setting of indigenous cultures from the West Indies. In his synopsis submitted to the dramaturgy on 7th July 1970[6], Mareš builds upon this mythology. His main hero is doctor Kout– an initiate in the magical reanimation rituals and a secret member of the anti-Nazi resistance looking for a way to “preserve human material” at the end of the war. At nights, he drives through a darkened city to the cemetery and to the tune of dogs’ howling, he exhumes bodies that he reanimates and sends to fight the enemy. Suspicious Gestapo follows Kaut and forces him to bring a prisoner tortured to death back to life. But the Gestapo fails to discover the wizard’s secrets. The whole story is recounted in the 1960s by Kout’s son-in-law, doctor Michal, who meets the reanimated prisoner.[7] In this story, the walking dead are not portrayed as a swarm of aggressive mindless creatures whose numbers grow with eating the living,[8] but rather a tactically controlled weapon of war. The monstrosity manifests itself in the raw portrayal of the Nazi brutality. The normalisation dramaturgy accepted Mareš’s story and he developed it into a film synopsis. In it, the revived doctor Michal wakes up at an infirmary and

starts searching for his saviour, doctor Kout. In this version, he plays a role of a genre guide explaining the Czechoslovak audiences the origins and characteristics of zombies and the conventions of the sub-genre.^[9] Kout collaborates with a Haitian named Jacmel and together they poison exposed resistance fighters to make the Gestapo think they're dead. After they are buried, they exhume them and bring them back to life. When the Germans destroy Kout's laboratory and kill Michal, Jacmel takes his body to Haiti and revives him so he can learn the reanimation technique and carry on in doctor Kout's work.^[10] The film version of the story introduced imperfectly reanimated mindless zombies that become subjects of easy manipulation and kill without a thought. This violent version "digressed significantly from the original story that the dramaturgy was interested in,"^[11] and the project was put to a halt and subsequently shelved.^[12]

The normalisation period required the Barrandov production to be varied and its dramaturgical groups looked for horror stories. But in order for projects to succeed at higher approval levels beginning with the Head Dramaturge Ludvík Toman, the genre intentions had to explore a "serious" social theme and reflect the idyllic reality of socialist life. But what Mareš wrote was a historical story defying the period materialism whose only politically exposed element was an implicit comparison of the revived dead to a cheap labour force created and exploited by capitalism.^[13] As much as Mareš was politically reliable, his story may have come across as an unintended parable of the early normalisation situation.

Kresba smrti (1981)

Jan Neruda wrote a short vampire story named *Vampyr* in which a mysterious Greek artist nicknamed Vampyr secretly makes portraits of girls who shortly after that die.^[14] In 1989, a middle-length television film *Vampyre* (*Vampýr*) was based on this story.^[15] During the 1980s, also the Barrandov dramaturgy twice tried to adapt Neruda's story. But to no avail. About their efforts from 1986-1987, when Vladimír Körner was developing the project in the dramaturgical group Profil focusing on video projects, we know only that their dramaturgical intention was considered for a year before it was abandoned.^[16] Also another literary script inspired by Neruda's story *Kresba smrti* by Pavel Hanuš from 1981 remained shelved. This project was registered by the dramaturgical group of Vladimír Kalina as one of "other scripts" planned for

future development.^[17] However, the fact that *Kresba smrti* was made into a literary script – the last phase of literary-dramaturgical preparation – confirms the interest of Barrandov management in horror stories. Before a literary script was commissioned, the project had to secure the approval of the head dramaturge who evaluated not only the technical, economical and “ideologically-artistic” feasibility of the projects, but also their contribution to widening the genre spectrum of the production. In the phase of developed literary script, the entire development process was evaluated by evaluators and higher management (BFS director, deputies of the director of Czechoslovak Film) who often preferred ideological objectives to artistic.

With *Kresba smrti*, the problem may have been that the story was set in 1858 and thus cut off from preferred themes from the socialist present. Its main protagonist was a wandering killer who escaped from a forced labour camp, robber and sexually covetous young man named Vilém. He is obsessed with a girl whom he tries to win and is willing to kill anyone standing in his way. He is not an exemplary socialist hero and a mention of his patriotic activities in the revolutionary year of 1848 could hardly save his reputation. The script continuously builds a morbid, Spartan atmosphere of the 19th century. People are robbed and murdered on sight, use expressive language and indulge in sexual perversions.

Apart from a hypnotic stare, Vilém has a talent which enables him to revive the dead by portraying them. He revives a young girl called Zita with whose body lying on a bier he falls in love during a necrophiliac scene. He is commissioned to portray Zita but during their time spent together, he hypnotises and abuses her. When her father discovers their twisted relationship and chases Vilém away, Vilém starts to communicate with a supernatural power manifesting itself by sudden changes in weather and paranormal occurrences. Vilém gains an opposite vampiric power to suck the life out of people with his portraits and he starts killing anyone he doesn't like. But face to face with a journalist who is pursuing him, he confusedly portrays himself and dies by his own hand.^[18] Hanuš's (and Neruda's) antihero is a peculiar type of vampire – with classical vampires, he only shares the ability to suck life and a sexually undertoned desire to control and dominate.

The script reveals the author's efforts to create a horror story: selected scenes are accompanied by an anxious score and the tension is intensified by scare scenes.

Paranormal occurrences connected to the presence of Vilém's "benefactor" at first seem as allocations but later their nature is revealed. Unlike films such as *Ferat Vampire* (Upír z Feratu, 1981) and *Wolf's Hole* (Vlčí bouda, 1986) made thanks to the willingness to create hybrids between horrors and sci-fi films, *Kresba smrti* explores a non-hybrid, pure horror theme with almost no ties to political themes and connections to the socialist present.

Hrobař (1988–1990)

This genre hybrid – a thriller with horror elements – was being developed by screenwriters Martin Bezouška and Dušan Kukal. It was the story of psychopathic doctor Bach who was writing a thesis about "side effects of intravenously applied medicinal drugs" As a womaniser and ambitious scientific experimenter, Bach induces the symptoms of a hypoglycemic coma in his wife Marta. After she is rushed to the hospital, he continues to experiment on her. The story utilises the thriller convention of absent or incompetent police, so the victims of terror must fight a more powerful aggressor by themselves. By means of suggestive horror scenes and situations, the authors intensify chase scenes in which Bach pursues Marta as well as his previous wife Jana who discovered his intentions. They take the readers to a ghostly desolate winter city, boiler rooms and autopsy rooms where the women pursued by the maniac must blend in with the dead and their surroundings. The chase finished with the triumph of evil: Bach manages to kill Marta during an operation without raising any suspicion. He defends his thesis and returns to fear-paralyzed Jana whom no one believes.^[20]

Bezouška and Kukal started to work on this project within Jan Vild's dramaturgical group for director Milan Cieslar in November 1988.^[21] „By then we were expecting that we would be able make a horror film,” explains Bezouška his confidence in a revival of horror films in more relaxed times.^[22] The film story was written during autumn 1989^[23] , but the literary script that the authors together with Viktor Malát had to submit by 30th June 1990^[24], wasn't finished – the revolution brought other opportunities to the authors and they decided to shelve *Hrobař*.^[25] But unlike *Zombi* and *Kresba smrti*, *Hrobař* probably had a chance to be developed as doctor Bach fulfilled the criteria of a real human monster and operated in a real socialist environment.

The case of *Hrobař* points to hidden continuities in the history of Czech genre films – it is not the only project with elements of horror film that Bezouška and Kukal initiated. During the 1980s, they tried to adapt Miloslav Švandrlík's anthology book *Dracula's Brother-in-Law* (*Draculův švagr*),^[26] but their work on the scripts was so irregular that it was concluded in 1996 by a TV series of the same name.^[27] As none of Bezouška's and Kukal's horror films were made during normalisation, their ambitions to develop the genre have become less visible for film historians.

Conclusion

Normalisation cinema purposefully aimed to divert horror themes from fantastic to realistic: to create a clear connection to socialist reality, to relativize the supernatural by subjectivising the perception of the characters, to portray monsters as psychically deranged anti-socialist elements and scientifically inexplicable outer enemies. Zombies and vampires as fantastic scientifically uncorroborated creatures were put at the opposite end of the period toleration spectrum than psychopaths and theoretically allowable aliens. The tool for enhancing realism of horror films was their genre hybridisation that characterises the majority of developed normalisation horror films set in a dominant sci-fi, fairy-tale, comic and psychologically-dramatic framework. Authors of pure horror films, on the other hand, had to overcome obstacles due to their adherence to the traditional fantastic mode of this genre.^[28] An interpretation arises, that speculative horror films *Zombi* and *Kresba smrti* were shelved because of their inseparable bond to the fantastic mode of horror that defied socialist realism and enabled the employment of subversive elements or subversive interpretations. Bezouška and Kukal's *Hrobař* was on the contrary developed as a genre hybrid as if the authors knew the easiest possible way to produce a horror film in normalisation-era Czechoslovakia.

Notes:

[1] Gruntorád, Tomáš (2018): *Czech-style horrors. Hybrid Genre Tradition in the Cinema of Normalisation Period (1969–1989)* [Master thesis]. Brno: Masaryk University.

[2] Tudor, Andrew (1974): *Theories of Film*. New York: Viking Press, p. 138–139.

[3] Comp. E.g. Mocná, Dagmar – Peterka, Josef a kol. (2004): Horror. In: *Encyklopedie literárních žánrů*. Praha – Litomyšl: Paseka, p. 253–258.

[4] For example Barrandov screenwriter and dramaturge Martin Bezouška remembers Mareš as a source of information about classical genre literature, see Martin Bezouška's interview with the author (Praha, 25th October 2017). The awareness about horror as a genre that „has a liking in purity“ and plausibility is clear from Mareš's negative lecturer's evaluations of the scripts of Czech sci-fi horrors *Ferat Vampire* (Upír z Feratt, Juraj Herz, 1981) and *Wolf's Hole* (Vlčí boud, Věra Chytilová, 1986), see Gruntorád, Tomáš: c. d., p. 51–52 and 59–60.

[5] Barrandov Studio a.s., archive (BSA), Barrandov history fund (BH), 1971, D27b (Correspondence B), Correspondence with heads of DGs, *Proposition of Vojtěch Cach's Dramaturgical Group for Write-off of Literary Works from 22nd December 1970*, p. 5.

[6] BSA, collection: Scripts and production document (SCE), film: *Zombi*, *Proposal to pay the remuneration from 7th July 1970*.

[7] BSA, sb. SCE, film: *Zombi*, *Synopsis*, July 1970.

[8] With this concept, George A. Romero innovated the zombie genre in his debut *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) where the living dead embody conservative, xenophobic, anti-individualistic and consumer „values.“

[9] “Sometimes, the dead cannot be fully resurrected. The imperfection manifests itself in particular in the psychic sphere. The imperfect zombie has no sense of responsibility, cannot distinguish between good and evil, acts strangely – in short, it is inferior. Only a few chosen ones manage to achieve perfection in this field. The zombie's life than continues naturally, the body ages and subsequently dies again.” See BSA, coll. SCE, film: *Zombi*, *Film story*, not dated, p. 33. A similar didactic lecture about the characteristics of vampires for audiences who supposedly wouldn't have a deeper genre knowledge was inserted into *Ferat Vampire* where professor Kaplan lectures doctor Marek by means of a commented screening of an archive film, see Gruntorád, Tomáš, p. 49.

[10] BSA, coll. SCE, film: *Zombi*, *Film story*, not dated.

[11] BSA, f. BH, 1972, D20 (Dramaturgical groups), *Report on the activities of Vojtěch Cach's dramaturgical group in September and October 1970*, p. 8.

[12] BSA, f. BH, 1971, D27b (Correspondence B), Correspondence with heads of DG, *Proposition of Vojtěch Cach's Dramaturgical Group for Write-off of Literary Works from 22nd December 1970*, p. 5.

[13] "The dead crawl from their graves and sell themselves to work at plantations."
See BSA, coll. SCE, film: *Zombi*, *Film Story*, not date, p. 32.

[14] Neruda, Jan (1871): *Vampyr*. In *Různí lidé: cestovní epizody*. In Prague: Grégr a Ferd. Dattel, p. 21–26.

[15] *Vampýr* (Jaroslav Hanuš, Czechoslovakia, 1989). Author of the script is Josef Holoubek.

[16] BSA, f. BH, 1986, A1 (Dramaturgy), *Report on the activity of DG Profil in May 1986*; BSA, f. BH, 1987, C13 (Dramaturgy), *Report on the activity of DG Profil in May 1987*

[17] *Draft of dramaturgical plan for 1982–1986*. Praha: Barrandov Film Studios, May 1981, p. 6.

[18] BSA, coll. SCE, film: *Kresba smrti: Literary script Kresba smrti*, 1981.

[19] On production history of *Wolf's Hole* as a path from purely genre form to hybrid form see Gruntorád, Tomáš, p. 57–69.

[20] BSA, coll. SCE, film: *Hrobař*, *Film story* (not dated).

[21] BSA, coll. SCE, film: *Hrobař*, *Agreement of Martina Bezoušky and Dušana Kukala on the split of their remuneration from 10th November 1988*.

[22] Martin Bezouška interviewed by the author (Prague, 25th October 2017).

[23] BSA, f. BH, 1989, A7 (Dramaturgy), *Report on the activity of 6th TS for September and October 1989*.

[24] BSA, coll. SCE, film: Hrobař, *Contract for work from 4th April 1990*.

[25] Martin Bezouška interviewed by the author (Prague, 25th October 2017).

[26] Švandrlík, Miloslav (1970): *Draculův švagr*. Praha: Novinář.

[27] For production history of *Dracula's brother-in-law*, see Gruntorád, Tomáš, p. 24–25.

[28] Gruntorád, Tomáš, p. 69–71.