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THE SECOND GENERATION: Czechoslovakia, 1956-1962

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Late in April 1956, at the Second Congress of Czechoslovak Writers, the poet František Hrubín characterized the situation of Czech literature by using Mallarmé's metaphor of a swan frozen in ice. At the same time, the periodical of the Czechoslovak Writer's Union published a discussion by philosophers Karel Kosík and Ivan Sviták on the relationship between ideology and politics, exploding the basic canons of Stalinism. The literary press simultaneously published the most critical and the most nonconformist speeches presented at the Congress. Almost two years after comparable developments had occurred, not only in Hungary and Poland, but also in the Soviet Union, the thaw had commenced in Czechoslovakia as well. There was a reason for the delay. The mood among the intelligentsia in Czechoslovakia was similar to that elsewhere, intellectuals spoke of the same problems. But what was missing was a deep national resentment of the Russians; Czechoslovak communism was traditionally more Stalinist, and in addition the economic situation was far better there than elsewhere in Eastern Europe. Czechoslovakia had entered the postwar era indisputably richer, and thus the crises remained limited – for the present at least – to the cultural sphere.

INITIAL THAW

Before the films that would be the fruit of the changed situation appeared in Czechoslovakia, the political thaw was ending in Poland and the Hungarian revolution had been crushed. Paradoxically, the sole support of Czechoslovak film's subsequent effort to break open the door to Europe was the hesitant but still advancing thaw in the Soviet Union.

The films of the initial thaw were above all the work of the “second generation,” the ones who shot their first features after 1945. To many of them Khrushchev's speech at the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party was not a shock, but a confirmation of the rightness of the road on which they had embarked. They believed that the strength of a society comes from such public “self-criticism,” and they started with great moral elan to try to eliminate “deformations,” be they in public life or in art.

The leading figures of this brief period were Vojtěch Jasný, Ladislav Helge, Zbyněk Brynych, Ján Kadár, and Elmar Klos.

Jasný's *September Nights* (*Zářijové noci* – 1956) was based on a play by Pavel Kohout, one of the most talented and influential of the young Stalinist poets who later played an exceptional role in the development of Czech culture and society. The film was the first open attack on functionary dogmatism, insensitivity, pettyness, and despotism;

its target was, of all things, the army. As to form, Jasný avoided the crude realism of *The Clouds Will Roll Away* and cameraman Jaroslav Kučera was still only hesitantly examining the landscape beyond the limits of convention; but the film was a breakthrough in the thematic sphere.

Jasný's next film, *Desire* (*Touha* – 1958) was the first real *auteur* film in Czech cinema. Jasný himself wrote the four-part screenplay for the film, in which four periods of human life are framed by the seasons of the year, and then surrendered himself to lyrical meditation through the lens of Kučera's camera. Basic human problems took the place of political or historical facts. Lyricism in the best Rovenský tradition replaced descriptive realism, and the contemporaneity of the third story for the first time demonstrated that bitter flavor of personal destiny, measured by the times, that gradually became characteristic not only for Jasný, but for Czechoslovak film in general.

As a young film enthusiast, Ladislav Helge (b. 1927) began by helping Jindřich Brichta build a unique film museum in Prague. Later, he worked as Krejčík's assistant and eventually made his debut, *School for Fathers* (*Škola otců* – 1957). Helge, along with his permanent scriptwriter, author Ivan Kříž, was always a true socialist moralist. The hero of *School for Fathers*, a village teacher, wages a struggle against everyday practices in the name of proclaimed ideals – and loses. That was something entirely new, even as compared to *September Nights*. No longer a pacifying end, but rather an appeal to continue a struggle that does not end on the screen.

Helge's next film, *Great Solitude* (*Velká samota* – 1959) was more concise in form and its attitude was tougher. It told a story of a young party enthusiast who brings a foundering cooperative farm to a degree of prosperity by using dictatorial methods, but in so doing loses the affection and the confidence of the people. By then, however, it was already 1959 and the thaw was ending. Helge had to redo the end at the last moment to give it a sort of false optimism, and an effort to award the film the critics' prize ended in scandal.

Zbyněk Brynych (b. 1927), who was to become much better known internationally than Helge, was not a graduate of the Prague Film Academy either, but rather had come up through the ranks of the film industry. His very first film, *A Local Romance* (*Žižkovská romance* – 1957), brought him laurels abroad, and they kept coming in as the years passed. The heroes of his first effort bore a strong resemblance to the heroes of Hungary's best films of the fifties: their romance took place in the grey streets, among the dingy tenements of the Prague workers' suburbs. In fact, “dingy realism” was the term later used by official critics of the film. But it was just this sense of reality that became the heritage for the period that followed. Brynych tried somewhat to stay on this ground in his multi-part film, *Five out of a Million* (*Pět z miliónu* – 1958), but in *Skid* (*Smyk* – 1959), his next film, he adopted an eclectic style that concealed the old pattern.

WEISS, KREJČÍK AND THE OTHERS

Some members of the previous generation joined the new movement. After his attempt to speak out on racism and the gypsy question in *My Friend the Gypsy* (*Můj přítel Fabian* – 1954), which was distorted by the work of the censors, Weiss turned to psychological realism and made one of his best – if not his very best – films, *Wolf Trap* (*Vlčí jáma* – 1957). The film was an adaptation of a popular novel set in the twenties, and presented an accurate portrait of a provincial petit-bourgeois marital triangle. But at the same time, it indicated that Weiss had departed from the direct commitment and documentarism of his youth and had become a director of psychological films that were carried primarily by the performances of the actors.

Krejčík devoted the first half of the fifties to vain attempts to breathe life into the period films. Eventually, in 1959, he completed *Awakening* (*Probuzení* – 1959), another in a series of films on disturbed youth, and a film badly damaged by the censors.

Miloš Makovec (b. 1919) first arrived at making feature films, via documentary film, at the time of the most profound schematism. As late as 1957, he made the film that was to remain identified with his name in Czech film, *Three Men Missing* (*Ztraceni*). It shows an entirely different kind of history than was depicted in Vávra's *Hussite Trilogy* or in the biographical films of the first half of the fifties. It told of one of the infamous wars of the mid-eighteenth century, which was part of Czech history only because it had been waged on Czech soil, and because the casualties were Czech recruits. These were represented by three nameless soldiers, malingerers, torn away from their army in an alien countryside, where they die to defend the lives of an unknown farm family. In a situation not of their own making in which they took on a responsibility that was not their own, the three found an opportunity to become men. The assistant director on this film was Věra Chytilová. But Makovec's ideas were not central to Czech film development, and once again he found himself on the periphery of Czech cinema. His contemporary, Miroslav Hubáček, who had made a promising debut in 1950, tried his hand again with *The Plain Old Maid* (*Ošklivá slečna* – 1959), but he found no official support at all.

The relaxation of ideological censorship did make possible a differentiation of genre in general production. Mysteries and spy stories appeared – the best of them was Karel Kachyňa's second independent film, *Smugglers of Death* (*Král Šumavy* – 1959) – and there was even a successful comedy of the type René Clair did in Hollywood, *Out of Reach of the Devil* (*Kam čert nemůže* – 1959), directed by Zdeněk Podskalský (b. 1923).

More interesting was Ivo Novák's (b. 1918) contemporary comedy, *Puppies* (*Štěňata* – 1957). The story of a young couple and their in-laws violated all the canons of scriptwriting, based as it was entirely on finely drawn situations. The author of the script and the assistant director was Miloš Forman.

SLOVAKIA AFTER 1956

Slovak cinema also brought forth its first ripe fruit during that period: the film *Forty four* (*Štyridsaťštyri* – 1957), directed by Palo Bielik. With a strong feeling for detail and a sense of the tragic, Bielik used a real incident to create a powerful film about a suppressed revolt of Slovak soldiers during World War One.

In terms of production facilities, Slovak cinema had been on its own since early in the fifties, but most films – 21 in all during the decade following 1947 – were still made by Czech directors, for whom Slovakia was mainly a land of natural beauty and folklore. These aspects of Slovakia were also used as criteria for assessing the work of Slovak directors – e.g., Medved, Lettrich, Žáček. Efforts to measure up to these criteria weakened such better Slovak films as *Untilled Fields* (*Pole neorané* – 1953), directed by Vlado Bahna (b. 1914). In time Kadar's work was also found lacking in folkloric character. It was not until a new generation, trained in the Prague Film Academy and imbued with an entirely Slovak vision, came to the fore that a beginning was finally made. It started with *Song of the Grey Dove* (*Pieseň o sivom holubovi*), directed in 1960 by Stanislav Barabáš (b. 1924) a tragic and lyric vision of war seen through children's eyes.

MAGIC LANTERN

Another success of this period was *Magic Lantern*. Born on the periphery of Czechoslovak cinema, its extraordinary success at the Brussels EXPO 58 reminded the world of the existence of Czechoslovak culture. Alfred Radok, the creator of *Magic Lantern*, joined the heritage of the Czech theatrical avant-garde with film, surrounded himself with a number of talented young people (e.g., Miloš Forman, Vladimír Svítáček, Jan Roháč), and in collaboration with that genius of stage design, Josef Svoboda, created a new type of film theater for which a great future was prophesied. But the second program of *Magic Lantern* – which was to transform a temporary exhibition into a permanent artistic institution – fell victim to the new “cold wave.” Radok and his collaborators were forced out of *Magic Lantern*, and, after an unsuccessful attempt to make use of its principles for a hybrid version of Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann* under the direction of opera director Václav Kašlík, it became nothing but a tourist attraction.

THE CONFERENCE AT BANSKÁ BYSTRICA

The immediate pretext for the neo-Stalinist counteroffensive – sealed by a conference convened in Banská Bystrica in early 1959 – was found in three films: *Three Wishes* (*Tri přání* – 1958), *Hic sunt leones* (*Zde jsou lvi* – 1958), and the medium-length *The End of the Soothsayer* (*Konec jasnovidec* – 1958).

The creators of *Three Wishes*, Ján Kadar and Elmar Klos, made their first film together in 1952, beginning a noteworthy collaboration that lasted almost 20 years. That first film was called *Kidnapped* (*Únos*), and was on the surface a typical product of its time: a group of people unwilling to accept the post-1948 regime hijacks a

Czechoslovak plane to Munich. The American intelligence service puts forward all possible effort to keep the rest of the passengers from returning home. But for the most part, they resist the temptation and remain true to their homeland and its new system. In spite of the predictability of the plot the film was interesting for its language and the low-key approach to a highly propagandistic topic, which differed significantly from cold-war esthetic conventions.

Klos and Kadár's next film was *Music from Mars* (*Hudba z Marsu* – 1955), in color, the first real attempt at a musical satirical comedy, which implied that the sources of evil are to be found all the way at the top; it encountered overt and pointed rejection. As a result, Kadár and Klos moved to a less controversial theme, and did *House at the Terminus* (*Dům na konečném*). In 1956, this film was primarily attractive for its poetic realism. It concerned itself with lives of ordinary people, the tenants of one apartment building, and avoided all ideology.

The second generation – and Kadár was indisputably a member of it – was a generation of moralists. Another member was playwright Vratislav Blažek, author of the successful stage play, *Three Wishes*. A young man, head of a family, unable to find an apartment in a Prague plagued by a housing shortage, does a kindness to an old man. It turns out that he is a sort of magic godfather, who promises to fulfill three wishes as a reward. The young man finds himself embarked on a meteoric career. But when his best friend is tossed out of his job for justly and openly criticizing evil doings, the old man can no longer be of any help. The three wishes have been exhausted. Of course, if the hero is willing to relinquish what he has gained through his three wishes, the old man would be willing to help. The question of what decision the hero will make is left open. The film of the same name, filmed by Kadár and Klos in 1958, showed what the stage version had concealed: the mechanism of social corruption, cowardice, and hypocrisy that the old man takes advantage of to fulfill the wishes. And so the concluding question in the film was different from the one posed on the stage: if you truly begin to fight a situation that is destroying honest people, you have to count on losing the advantages that this situation brought to you. Are you really willing to do it? That was a crucial question in the period of the first reckoning around 1956. But it was also the period following the “events” in Poland and Hungary, when so many people wanted what they had said just yesterday to be forgotten as soon as possible. The Spectator understood the film, and reacted the only way he knew how: the film was banned, and did not get to movie screens until 1963. Its criticism was toothless by then, and its film language outdated.

The film *Three Wishes* became the cornerstone of the case made against Czechoslovak cinema at the conference convened in February 1959 in Banská Bystrica in Slovakia. The second film to come under fire was *Hic sunt leones*, another work by Krška, with a script by the young writer Oldřich Danek (b. 1927). After the rehabilitation of *Silvery Wind*, Krška felt that perhaps this was the end of his torture, and he made his own story into what was apparently his best film: a man is on an operating table, gravely wounded; a group of surgeons tries to bring the man back to

life. The flashback shows that he is an exceptionally talented engineer who was being crushed by the wheels of the bureaucracy and in vain sought the help of those around him. In a condition of nervous collapse, he fell victim to an accident that brought him to the operating table. In its conclusion, the film declared: they are all doing what they can to save him, but who moved a finger to help him when it would have been so much easier? The wound inflicted at the Banská Bystrica conference, where the film was violently attacked, was one from which Krška never recovered as an artist. He went on teaching at the Film Academy, where his most faithful pupils included Jan Němec, he wrote scripts, he went on shooting until his last breath, but he never made another significant film.

Many believed that *The End of the Soothsayer* would be what Vladimír Svitáček (b. 1921) needed to demonstrate his talent. The short satiric feature seemed almost timid, the allegory comparatively conventional: the soothsayer's business prospered beautifully as long as he offered his services on a private basis; once it was incorporated in the system of state services, the institution began to fail. But at home, behind the door to his own apartment, the soothsayer offers a handful of the select his services as before. The film was so well-made, however, and the acting so excellent that its impact literally bowled the Spectator over. It was banned too, though released later in 1963, and Svitáček never directed another independent film.

Attacks were also made on Brynych's “falsely comprehended neorealism,” on Helge's “moral indignation,” on Jasný's “formalism,” and, in general, on “themes taken almost exclusively from private life.” This new interruption of artistic development dealt a particularly heavy blow to the second postwar generation. But it only postponed the appearance of the third generation, and did not succeed in stopping it entirely.

The efforts of the second generation in this period brought back to film a personal viewpoint, a sense of the times, and a direct commitment. But it was just this reawakening that led to the most violent of conflicts with the establishment. When the axe fell on these efforts in 1959 in Banská Bystrica, new paths were sought.

INSPIRED BY THE WAR

The first postwar films in Eastern Europe sought their inspiration for the most part from wartime experiences and the Nazi occupation. Nor had this theme lost its power by the second half of the fifties, when it played an important role in the evolution of Polish, Soviet, and Yugoslav cinema. In addition, it gradually became a safe refuge in moments of repression for cinema as a whole as well as for individual film-makers. The distinctions in these stories were precise: good was white and ultimately victorious, evil was black and safely vanquished, and the audience's identification with the “good guys” was ensured. These war films resembled westerns, even in their abundance of action. But there was a third dimension of wartime subject matter, one that came to the forefront in the difficult period at the end of the fifties and in the early sixties. The occupation and the war were used as a package to

smuggle in contemporary themes: films about the recent past became a disguise for contemporary commitments.

After Banská Bystrica, this path brought the greatest success in Czechoslovakia. What ensued was an interim period of uncertainty and void, what had been permitted yesterday was banned. There was no going backward, either. At that point, Weiss made his internationally successful film, *Romeo, Juliet, and the Darkness*, shown in the United States under the title *Sweet Light in the Dark Window* (*Romeo, Julie a tma* – 1959). The story of the Czech Anne Frank and her youthful Romeo was a condemnation of indifference toward force and terrorism.

No less successful was Krejčík's *A Higher Principle* (*Vyšší princip* – 1960), about an old Latin professor who stands up in support of his students at the height of Nazi terrorism, embodying the heroic ideals of antiquity.

Vojtěch Jasný also did an unconventional job of the story of human solidarity, *I Survived Certain Death* (*Přežil jsem svou smrt* – 1960), in which the hero, a prisoner in a concentration camp, sings *Ave Maria* at the moment of his execution – probably the first time in years the hymn had been sung in a film made in this part of the world.

Weiss's next film, *The Coward* (*Zbabělec* – 1961), originated in the same spirit, as did Krejčík's *Midnight Mass* (*Poľnočná omša* – 1961) shot in Slovakia, and Helge's *White Clouds* (*Bílá oblaka* – 1962). This series also includes Barabáš's *Song of the Grey Dove* – as mentioned earlier, the first significant effort of an independent Slovak cinematography – and *The Boxer and Death* (*Boxer a smrt* – 1962) by another Slovak director, Peter Solan (b. 1929), elaborating with an unconventionality and a surprising maturity on a conflict between two types of strength in a concentration camp.

Inspired by these films, Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos returned to work after two years of enforced silence, making their best film up until that time, *Death Is Called Engelchen* (*Smrt si říká Engelchen* – 1963), based on the novel by Ladislav Mňačko. Here again war is also a pretext for a moral message with its roots in the present. The Polish and Yugoslav influence is clearly apparent. It is no longer a question of the “good guys” and the “bad guys” but of war itself, war as an evil, destroying moral values on all sides and scarring the victors as profoundly as the vanquished. The style also underwent a radical change, the camera freely altering both time and narration; documentary reconstruction, sheer lyricism and philosophical meditation coexisted side by side in a new unity of style.

Transport from Paradise (*Transport z ráje* – 1962), directed by Zbyněk Brynych on the basis of short stories by Arnošt Lustig, also exemplified this discovery of style. Brynych, together with cameraman Jaroslav Čuřík, advanced from neorealistic rawness through lyricism to a sort of expressionistic documentarism. *Transport from Paradise* finally brought to the screen what Radok had intended in his *Distant Journey*: a reconstruction of one of the visits of the International Red Cross Commission to the Jewish ghettos. After the departure of the commission, the Nazis call for a mass deportation to the gas chambers. For some this is a signal to revolt, and the cry

“Never again like sheep!” sounds loud and clear from the screen as a message for the present and the future.

VLÁČIL

In the past, the problem of film form and rhetoric had never been a social or political one in Eastern Europe. What made it become one was the campaign against the avant-garde, the canonization of socialist realism, and the Zhdanov line. Thus, one by one, every advance, every experiment, as well as any mere attempt to establish contact with native or European artistic tradition of the twentieth century, was considered to be an expression of opposition and rebellion – and in effect, really was. After the 1958 neo-Stalinist attack, the area of form became another refuge from which it was possible to wage war on the past. The major protagonist here was František Vláčil (b. 1924). After working for some years in animated film, Vláčil entered the army, where, during his tour of duty, he made two visually noteworthy short films, *Glass Clouds* (*Skleněná oblaka* – 1958) and *Pursuit* (*Pronásledování* – 1959). In 1960, he made his first feature film, *The White Dove* (*Bílá holubice*), about a sick boy who holds a dove captive. The entire story is concentrated on the small area inside and outside the window beside which the child lives. Vláčil's visual poem on freedom met with considerable international success, but its pioneering significance remained, for the most part, unrecognized.

Vláčil's next film confirmed the fact that his debut had been no exception. *The Devil's Trap* (*Ďáblůva past* – 1961), to some extent inspired in its style by Bergman's films, told the story of religious intolerance in Bohemia at the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and anticipated the interest in history – which was not to remain limited to Vláčil – as another window to the present.

35 FICTION FILMS A YEAR

Comedy and mystery accounted for two other interesting films – Jasný's humorously ironic view of religious feeling in a Czech village, *Pilgrimage to the Virgin Mary* (*Procesi k panence* – 1961), and the documentaristically treated spy film, *Department Five* (*Páté oddělení*), directed by Jindřich Polák (b. 1925).

The area of films for and about children also became a momentary refuge or a departure point for future talents. Karel Kachyňa began his collaboration with author Jan Procházka, which lasted for 10 years and produced several interesting results. The first of them was *Přebald* (*Trápení* – 1961), a paraphrase of Lamorisse's *Crim Blanc*, striving to reply to the melancholy sorrow of the French model of lyricism, aiming at conciliation and harmony. Václav Gajer (b. 1923) called attention to himself more for the subject matter of his film *Rabbits in the Tall Grass* (*Králičí ve vysoké trávě* – 1961) than for its form. It told of a youth forced to suicide by two conflicting educational influences, one Christian and one atheistic. In the final version of the film, tragedy had to give way to a more conciliatory ending. In his *Guilt of Vladimír Olmer* (*Vina Vladimíra Olmera* – 1956) – as well as in his later films – Gajer inclined toward

controversial themes, but he never developed them far enough, and there was always – even cinematically – a feeling of a promise not fulfilled.

In Slovakia, Štefan Uher (b. 1930), a graduate of the Prague Film Academy, made his debut with the unconventional children's film *Form 9A (My z deviatej A* – 1961). He was soon to play an exemplary role in Czechoslovak cinema.

The second half of the fifties also witnessed the revival of the old glory of Czech cameramen. Aside from those of the middle generation – Rudolf Stahl, the Slovak Karol Krška, Jaromír Holpuch, Rudolf Milič, Vladimír Novotný, and above all Josef Illík – new names began to appear, soon to become well known throughout Europe: Jan Čuřík, Jaroslav Kučera, and Jan Kališ were the first, later to be joined by Jan Němeček, Bedřich Bařka, Miroslav Ondříček and Slovaks Stanislav Szomolanyi and Igor Luther.

In the late fifties and early sixties most of these young men were still shooting school films at the Prague Film Academy where a new generation was completing its training. Their professors were the most experienced directors of the older generation, a luxury characteristic of the Eastern European film schools that no film school in the West could afford. But the slogan “Opportunity for Youth” sounded from the Soviet Union, and so one of their graduation projects, *A Loaf of Bread (Sousto* – 1960), a short film by Jan Němec (b. 1936) was accepted for distribution. It was followed by *Hall of Lost Footsteps (Sál ztravených kroků* – 1961) by Jaromil Jireš (b. 1935). The theme of the Jireš's film was still a traditional one, filled with reminiscences of the Nazi occupation, but the language and the viewpoint were entirely new, reflecting the previously neglected sources of twentieth-century imagination. The new theme sounded louder with Vera Chytilová (b. 1929) and her graduation project *Ceiling (Strop* – 1961).

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