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Barrandov Baroque: The Tenacious Artistry of Juraj Herz

Slovak-born filmmaker Juraj Herz could easily have ended up as Czechoslovak cinema's great 'might-have-been', forever denied the status he deserved. Though he began his film career in the 1960s, a decade widely acknowledged as the most favorable and thus the richest in Czech and Slovak film history, Herz spent much of that era on the fringes of its key developments, at arm's length from the internationally prestigious New Wave. When he broke into feature production in the second half of the 1960s, the results were promising but not fully realized, the victim in part of compromises enforced by the Barrandov apparatus. *The Cremator* (*Spalovač mrtvol*, 1968) – Herz's third feature and his breakthrough as a powerful, assured, and original film artist – coincided with the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, which brought in its wake a ruthless refreezing of cinematic culture that could have either destroyed his fledgling career or doomed it to mediocrity.

As it happens, though, Herz forged one of the most consistently successful careers (artistically and commercially speaking) in the Czech and Slovak cinema of the 1970s and 80s, proving one of the brightest sparks amid what was often a dull, dispiriting climate for national cinema. Essential to his success was the approach Herz took to the authorities at Prague's Barrandov studios, a mix of defiance and adaptability, provocation and pragmatism. It would be easy to argue that Herz accomplished what he did in spite of normalization-era Barrandov, with which he undoubtedly had his difficulties: censorious cuts and temporary directing bans were routine, and, ever-anxious to keep working, Herz was compelled several times to seek opportunities elsewhere, say in television or at Slovakia's Koliba studios. But any assessment of Herz's *oeuvre* – most of which, before 1989, was indeed produced at Barrandov – must note, too, that the relationship between studio and even such a seemingly

‘intransigent’ director as Herz was one of mutual advantage as well as antagonism, and that the aims of both not only clashed but also sometimes coincided.

Herz at Barrandov in the 1960s: From Apprenticeship to Mastery

By circumstance if not by design, Juraj Herz’s career often seems closer to the model of the classic Hollywood studio director than to that of the European auteur, and this is true of his very origins as a filmmaker. Where most of Herz’s contemporaries in the Czechoslovak New Wave had been educated at the celebrated Prague film school FAMU (in common with other formally trained film movements of the 1960s and 70s), Herz’s cinematic apprenticeship was more traditional and hands-on. Trained already in photography and puppetry, Herz was refused a place at FAMU by a state unwilling to support him through a third educational institution, and he made his way into film through acting work at the Semafor theatre (Herz and Kopaněnová 1967, 377). He made his screen acting debut in *Every Good Crown* (*Každá koruna dobrá*, 1961) for director Zbyněk Brynych, who then employed the enthusiastic novice as an assistant. Herz then became an assistant director for Brynych and later for Ján Kádár and Elmar Klos, involving himself in many aspects of film production while continuing to act in small roles. Thus, to a greater extent perhaps than for most New Wave directors, Barrandov provided a formative environment for Herz: as he would later write, ‘Brynych and Kádár were my professors’ (Herz and Drbohlav 2015, 145).

Helped by Kádár, who vouched for Herz to the director of Barrandov, Herz ‘graduated’ to directing his own films in 1965, with *The Junk Shop* (*Sběrné surovosti*). Herz made this short film after being invited (by Jaromil Jireš) to contribute to the anthology film *Pearls of the Deep* (*Perličky na dně*, 1965), a kind of New Wave manifesto comprising adaptations of Bohumil Hrabal’s stories by the era’s up-and-coming filmmakers. But the film

was never shown as part of *Pearls of the Deep*, being one of two contributions that were excised entirely from the final anthology due to excessive overall length. Notwithstanding that Herz, by his own account, was the one who volunteered to cut his film, this excision typifies Herz's relation to the New Wave – affiliated but always apart. In the same way, as one of the most vivid and indeed 'Hrabalian' contributions to *Pearls of the Deep*, *The Junk Shop* both equals the New Wave on the latter's own terms and displays what would later become recognizable individual traits. Though Barrandov director Vlastimil Harnach mildly rebuked the film for the 'ugliness' of its cast, Herz actually honours Hrabal's appreciation for the beauties and the minor miracles found in waste, decrepitude, and the grubby corners of everyday life. This is conveyed in images that anticipate the baroque, uncanny, and macabre profusions of Herz's mature work – a risqué erotic fantasy, a strange mechanical musical contraption with dancing cats, the vaguely alarming sight of religious statues 'decapitated' and sawn into pieces.

Herz's feature debut was *The Sign of Cancer* (*Znamení Raka*, 1966), adapted from a novel by Hana Bělohradská. A hospital murder mystery that is also a barbed portrait of misdemeanours among the medical staff, this debut already signals Herz's interest in genre material and reminds us of one tentative, often-overlooked tendency in Czech cinema in this period: the effort, in the wake of 1960s liberalisation, to foster a native popular cinema along 'Western', genre-based lines. Writing of the film as a positive example of that trend, Antonín J. Liehm, in a 1967 article, describes *The Sign of Cancer* as one of the few 'popular films' (*divácké filmy*) of this era that did not bring 'shame' to Czech cinema (Liehm 1967, 423). In an early sign that Herz wished to hold true too to the more lurid elements of genre, and thereby test the boundaries of local screen acceptability, the film included scenes of sex, rape, and masturbation that an industry approval committee ordered to be removed (though when

Italy-based producer Moris Ergas, interested in distributing the film, conversely insisted on re-adding the sexual material, Herz chose to re-shoot it in Rome).

The official cuts to *The Sign of Cancer* may have left the film basically unharmed, but for Herz it was similar interference that essentially ruined his second feature, *The Limping Devil* (*Kulhavý ďábel*, 1968). In this musical comic fantasy, a demon, played by Herz, strives to lure an innocently romantic young man into promiscuity and vice by whisking him through a variety of historical scenarios in a manner strangely reminiscent of Stanley Donen's virtually contemporaneous Peter Cook-Dudley Moore vehicle *Bedazzled* (1967). For Herz himself, the fact that Barrandov's director and the film's production group vetoed him from actually showing the vice around which the story revolves all but negated the project. He would later claim that he made the film under compulsion, explaining that, given the way a director at Barrandov was ultimately an employee, he was compelled to follow his superiors' orders (Herz and Drbohlav 2015, 170). Studio interventions aside, this highly whimsical film is enjoyable if undeniably slight. This slapstick-tinged film indicates the path that Herz first wanted to take, as a comic actor-director playing a recurring character à la Tati's Monsieur Hulot, but the diabolical theme, though played for laughs here, also gives us a glimmer of Herz's later horror work (Herz and Kopaněnová 1967, 376; Šimera and Kříž 2014, 27).

Herz took a bold new direction in his next film, *The Cremator*, adapted from Ladislav Fuks's novel. *The Cremator* is perhaps Herz's defining film, and it remained his own favourite of his works. Not coincidentally, Herz has also indicated that this was the only film (at least during the communist period) over which he enjoyed complete creative control. *The Cremator* is a product of the liberalized and emboldened climate of its era. By this point the film industry itself had undergone significant liberalization and decentralization, with production now organized into individual 'creative units' that enjoyed a large degree of 'intellectual and organizational autonomy' (Szczepanik 2015, 83). The 1960s film units were

permitted to ‘establish their own “ideological-artistic boards”’, on which many ‘revisionist writers’ sat, rather than being subject to a ‘central advisory board’ (Szczepanik 2015, 83). *The Cremator* was made within the ‘famed’ unit run by Jiří Šebor and Vladimír Bor, which was strongly associated with the New Wave and known for supporting young directors (Szczepanik 2012, 301) As Herz later wrote, ‘The group gave me an absolutely free hand to do whatever I wanted.’ (Herz and Drbohlav 2015, 180). Another possible advantage of working for this group was that – as Václav Šašek, then a dramaturge at the group, has contended – it tended not to attract censorship measures from outside, being less given to ‘scandalous’ content than other groups (Šašek in Skupa 2016, 130). In any case, in a clear reflection of Dubček-era reformism, censorship was officially abolished at Barrandov on the 24 March 1968.

The Cremator could doubtless not have been made in the few years before or after 1968. The story of crematorium owner Karl Kopfrkingl, an ascetic crank and seemingly model humanitarian who becomes an enthusiastic Nazi collaborator and murderer, is a plunge into the psychotic inferno that drags the viewer helplessly down with it. The film’s atmosphere of derangement is as pervasive as Rudolf Hrušínský’s inescapable Kopfrkingl, ever-present onscreen and unceasingly holding forth in his even, purring intonation. Herz and cinematographer Stanislav Milota approximate Kopfrkingl’s interior world in the ‘formalism’ of the distorted fisheye shots and in artful segues from scene to scene that mimic the seamless descent of the character’s interior. It is in this film that Herz, propelled by Fuks’s own dark imagination, also first fully indulges his feel for the macabre and for the uncanny confusions between the living and the dead, the animate and inanimate. Such confusion is boldly exploited in a gruesome carnival set-piece in which Herz has real actors play performing automata, but it is also subtly present in Kopfrkingl’s compulsive attentions to the living and the dead alike, his habit of stroking and combing his living family members

as well as the dead bodies in his crematorium (are the living like inanimate objects to be handled and arranged? Or are the dead rather like living beings still fit to be groomed and fondled?)

Added to these provocations are the film's political implications, with Kopfrkingl's conformism and his highly ironized calls to adopt a healthful and positive attitude easily readable as a satire on the world of communism. The film's shooting actually straddled the 1968 invasion, a turn of events that inspired Herz to add a new and blatantly politicized ending. This would have featured a beaming Kopfrkingl who has returned to Czechoslovakia 'with the Russian army', no less at home in the deadened climate that followed the invasion than he was amid real dead and lifeless beings (Herz and Drbohlav 2015, 192-193). According to Herz, the director of Barrandov took fright at the new ending and ordered its removal (Herz and Drbohlav 2015, 194). After a release of several weeks the film was withdrawn from domestic distribution entirely, though it did spend longer on the international festival circuit, picking up (among other awards) the prize for best film award at the Sitges festival in 1972.

While still making *The Cremator* Herz had begun work on another daring project, an adaptation of Alfred Jarry's 1902 novel *Supermale (Le Surmâle, roman moderne)*, for Pavel Juráček and Jaroslav Kučera's production group. Dubbed a 'crazy comedy drawing material from sexual themes', this project, according to Herz, made it to the production plan in 1969 but was cancelled at the insistence of Harnach, who claimed the resulting film would be 'pornography' (Herz and Drbohlav 2015, 196).¹ A planned adaptation of another novel, *Of Mice and Mooshaber (Myši Natálie Mooshabrové, published 1970)*, went the same way. Herz recalls that at this time nobody at Barrandov was interested in his making anything at all, with the success of *The Cremator* even working to his institutional detriment (Herz and Drbohlav 2015, 196). His response was to turn to television, first making *Kitten (Kočka)* for

Czech television, and then, when the latter film was itself banned, taking up an invitation from Slovak television to direct a Maupassant adaptation, which resulted in the excellent and popular *Sweet Games of Last Summer* (*Sladké hry minulého léta*, 1969). Herz would repeat this strategy of leaving Barrandov for alternative institutions during the 1970s, a decade marked by further great difficulties and challenges at the studio as well as by some of his most celebrated Barrandov-produced works.

Herz at Barrandov in the 1970s: Greetings from a Distant Time

Through 1969-1970, as part of the process of ‘normalization’ that followed the invasion, Barrandov underwent a thorough reorganization intended to halt the supposed excesses, deviations and ‘anti-socialist’ elements of the 1960s cinema, and to restore a rigorous level of ideological control under politically loyal (if not necessarily professionally competent) administrators. Mass screenings of Barrandov employees were held to investigate their political allegiance, resulting in countless expulsions from the Party and the studio. Towards the end of 1969, leading positions began to be replaced and the studio was basically re-centralized, with the creative units dissolved and replaced by separate dramaturgical and production groups, a system that severed previously established relations between the different professional spheres of filmmaking (Szczepanik 2016, 104; Gruntorád 2018, 15). Production was essentially now made subservient to the decisions of Barrandov’s newly appointed central dramaturge, Ludvík Toman. A notoriously ‘autocratic’ and doctrinaire figure, reputedly protected by powerful connections (even, according to some, with the KGB), Toman emerges here as the key antagonist in the struggles of Herz and many others to get their films made (Hulík 2011, 175).

Among filmmakers of his stature who had made bold, banned work in the 1960s, Herz's career was somewhat exceptional in this difficult decade. He was able to return to making films at Barrandov at the beginning of the 1970s, in contrast, say, to Chytilová or Juráček (who was fired from the studio in 1971). Neither did he have to submit to the kind of 'Faustian deal' (in Štěpán Hulík's phrase) into which Jireš and Menzel were compelled by the studio, in which the return to filmmaking was conditional on a display of political loyalty, whether through the making of an assigned piece of quasi-propaganda or also, as in Menzel's case, through the humiliating 'admission' of past political errors (Hulík 2011, 190). Herz possibly benefitted from the fact that he did not have a film as politically overt and sensitive as Menzel's *Skylarks on a String* (*Skřivánci na niti*, 1969) to his name; nor, apparently, did he express direct criticism of the Soviet occupation, such as Juráček was punished for. Moreover, the powerful Toman, determined to crush the legacy of the 1960s, focused his ideological ire on the New Wave particularly, and thus Herz's very separateness from that movement might actually have proven an advantage.

By his own account, though, Herz did begin the 1970s in disappointment. Clearly determined to continue in the macabre mold established by *The Cremator*, to the extent of planning to adapt every one of Fuks's new novels, Herz proposed two successive Fuks projects to the 'tough' new Barrandov administration, but both were rejected (Herz and Drbohlav 2015, 210). Compensation, however, came from dramaturge and screenwriter Václav Šašek, who invited Herz to read a script he had adapted from Jaroslav Havlíček's 1935 novel *Oil Lamps* (*Petrolejové lampy*). No matter the specifics of Herz's intended path, the 1971 film he made of *Oil Lamps* remained true to the course set by *The Cremator*, and so, to an even greater extent, did its follow-up, the Alexander Grin adaptation *Morgiana* (1972), though this was yet another project proposed to Herz by a writer-dramaturge (Vladimír Bor).

Oil Lamps and *Morgiana* are virtually unique among Czech films of the early 1970s. As Hulík has written, ‘they remain [...] quite untouched by the normalisation that was then fully operative’, and, amongst the other domestic films of their era, they appear like a ‘greeting from some very distant and long lost time’ (Hulík 2011, 202). Both stories are of course literally set in the past – a fact Herz has said he consciously embraced as a means to avoid dealing with the politicized present (Herz and Košuličová 2002). Set in an ornate turn-of-the-century environment that Herz would make a repeated haunt, these stories, though undoubtedly less provocative than *The Cremator*, are similarly steeped in an atmosphere of morbidity and decadence.

Oil Lamps is the morose tale of Štěpa (played by Iva Janžurová), a tender and spirited woman at odds with her conservative provincial backdrop and seemingly doomed to unfulfilled spinsterhood. Štěpa marries her cousin Pavel, a wastrel ex-soldier who turns out to have contracted syphilis, and the film charts their loveless, sexless marriage as accompanied by Pavel’s harrowing mental and physical deterioration – arrestingly incarnated by Petr Čepek as another Herzian anti-hero on a downward spiral. *Morgiana* is an even more striking work, a Gothic melodrama with the lurid and uncanny air of a horror film [Fig. 1]. Iva Janžurová appears as twin protagonists who are fairy-tale opposites of one another – the virtuous Klára, fair-haired and often shown in white lace outfits, and her scheming and murderous sister Viktoria, a witch-like apparition in jet-black wig, dark finery and garish make-up. *Morgiana* is a baroque work of saturated colours and lurching camera moves – the latter embodying the viewpoint of omnipresent cat Morgiana, who seems to serve as a kind of adjudicator or even a mysterious influence over the action.

Barrandov’s new regime did make its presence felt through prohibitive interventions into both projects. In the case of *Oil Lamps*, Herz was ordered to remove from the film’s script a planned opening scene showing a group of officers leaving a brothel, which served to

indicate how Pavel had contracted syphilis. But the changes required of *Morgiana* were more fundamental and, for Herz, more damaging. In a deviation from Grin's original story, Herz had intended to close the film with the revelation that Viktoria, the 'evil' sister, did not exist but had only been imagined by the heavily schizophrenic Klára (Herz and Drbohlav 2015, 222). According to Herz, this ending was attacked by Toman personally, on the grounds that schizophrenia was 'a bourgeois illness and Czechoslovak cinema will not make anything about it' (Herz and Drbohlav 2015, 223). The removal of this final revelation soured Herz on the whole project. He shot the revised script without interest, treating the project merely as a technical exercise – 'a piano lesson, to stop myself from forgetting how to play' (Herz in Hulík 2011, 359). Despite Herz's understandable aggrievement about the lost twist in the tale, the idea of psychological duality, if not schizophrenia, arguably remains implicit anyway in the finished film, thanks to Janžurová's dual casting, the use of mirrors as a key visual motif, and an overall dream-like atmosphere that sustains 'psychological' interpretations. This is another way in which *Morgiana* achieved the near-impossible by importing the subversive qualities of 1960s cinema into the hostile context of the 1970s.

Herz recalls his experiences of an authorisation screening for *Morgiana* – attended, as was usual, by Barrandov dramaturges, representatives of the Party Central Committee and the Ministry of Culture, among other 'potentates' – and notes that the gathered officials saw 'only the worst' in the finished film. After the screening Toman announced to Herz that he was banned from directing at Barrandov since he had produced a 'sodomasochistic film' (Herz and Drbohlav 2015, 233-234). Compelled once again to look for work elsewhere, the ever-enterprising director returned to the theatre, directing opera and drama, and then produced two television films: *Butterfly's Touch* (*Dotek motýla*, 1972), made for the Krátký film studio, is a mystery with something of the romantic, baroque flavour of *Oil Lamps* and

Morgiana; and *Wandering Engelbert* (*Toulavý Engelbert*, 1973), for Czech television, is a pop musical set in mediaeval times.

Herz's reputation was redeemed at Barrandov, ironically enough, by a visiting delegation from the Soviet studio Mosfilm, who had been informed of a film adapted from a Russian writer – *Morgiana* – and had then seen and enjoyed Herz's film (Herz in Hulík 2011, 359-360). The director was now approached by Barrandov's central director Miloslav Fáběra and told that his ban would be lifted, on condition that he make a film set in 'a blue-collar environment' (Herz in Hulík 2011, 360). (In a later version of these events from Herz's autobiography, it was writer Miloš Macourek who approached him and Jiří Purš, the head of Československý film, who lifted the ban and set the condition (Herz and Drbohlav 2015, 256).) At this point Herz could easily have succumbed to the kind of pro-regime, socialist-realist cinema he was resolved to avoid, but *Girls of Porcelain* (*Holky z porcelánu*, 1974), though hardly vintage or typical Herz, is a light factory-set comedy distinguished by lively musical sequences and the charm of its cast (which includes Dagmar Havlová (Veškrnová) in her debut role).

Re-established at Barrandov, Herz continued with two more fairly anonymous works: *A Girl Fit for Killing* (*Holka na zabiti*, 1975) is a mix of crime mystery, comedy and drama, its only recognisably 'Herzian' touches perhaps the slightly giallo-esque scenes of a black-gloved but otherwise unseen killer, and *Day for My Love* (*Den pro mou lásku*, 1976), a tragic and sentimental though tastefully directed story about the death of a young child. These titles may hold a relatively undistinguished place in Herz's filmography, but they all proved successful with domestic audiences. *Girls of Porcelain* was seen by 817,000 viewers in the year of its release, and *A Girl Fit for Killing* by 423,000 (for comparison, Štěpán Hulík notes that other Czech crime or detective films of the 1970s and 1980s generally received between 150,000 and 200,000 viewers) (Hulík 2011, 203).

Hulík explains that it was Herz's very capacity to make films that were 'attractive to viewers', in spite of his not being a strictly 'commercial' director, that interested 'the normalisers' (Hulík 2011, 203). This may well have provided Herz a certain protection, ensuring that throughout his various struggles with Barrandov his relationship with the studio was never truly severed (at least not until he voluntarily chose to break it upon emigrating). Being able to make popular films was especially desirable given the increasing decline in cinema attendance in Czechoslovakia during the 1970s (Gruntorád 2018, 16). Archival data gathered by Tomáš Gruntorád even shows that, for all the preoccupation with ideological issues, popularity with viewers was an explicit concern of the Barrandov leadership from the outset of normalization. A draft of the studio's dramaturgical plan for 1971 argues for the necessity of renewing 'the rich diversity of genres in our films' and of focusing predominantly on 'so-called viewers' films', as this was a way of winning viewers' 'trust' (BSA in Gruntorád 2018, 16). Moreover, as Gruntorád notes, the necessity of producing better 'entertainment' films was not only a matter of interesting (and influencing) the domestic viewer but also of making internationally attractive products that could bring all the benefits of export sales (Gruntorád 2018, 17). It probably did not go unnoticed that Herz's films were relatively successful in the West and that they continued winning prizes and plaudits at a time of low international status for Czechoslovak film (*Oil Lamps*, for instance, was the last Czechoslovak film to compete at Cannes, and *Morgiana* and the later fairy-tale films all won awards at American or West European festivals). Herz was thus as much an asset to the studio as a thorn in its side.

Yet Herz's successes in this period did not free him from the familiar pressures, and he recalls hearing intimations, after the release of *Day for My Love*, that 'even Herz should now finally make a political film' (Herz and Drbohlav 2015, 274). Desperately casting around for some alternative, non-political project, Herz found 'salvation' in the writer and

dramaturge Ota Hofman, who headed a dramaturgical group devoted to children's films and who offered Herz the chance to direct a film of *Beauty and the Beast* (based on a theatrical version of the story by František Hrubín). Ironically it is at this point, when ducking some enforced propaganda project and finding sanctuary in a children's fairy-tale, that Herz made a full-blooded return to macabre form.

Beauty and the Beast (*Panna a netvor*, 1978) was a huge investment by the standards of the time [Fig. 2]. Set designer Vladimír Labský – one of a team of regular collaborators that had established itself around Herz on his previous film – used the studio's biggest soundstage to create an enormous, multi-purpose construction that comprised the entire set of the Beast's castle and extended to the insertion of real trees and an artificial swamp (Šimera and Kříž 2014, 28). Treated by the press at the time as 'something exceptional for Barrandov conditions', these 'monumental' sets took a whole three months to build, 'instead of the usual one' (Šimera and Kříž 2014, 28). In view of these expenses, the studio decided to economize by insisting that Herz make another film using the same sets. A second fairy-tale project, *The Ninth Heart* (*Deváté srdce*), happened to be at hand, and thus Herz shot both this and *Beauty and the Beast* concurrently, happy that he could use the inevitable waiting time on one project to work on another (Herz and Drbohlav 2015, 276).

In this somewhat fortuitous manner, then, Herz produced two of his best films in 1978. *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Ninth Heart* are dark, baroque fantasies that tend to be appreciated more as horror films than as fairy tales – a genre in which Herz admitted he had little interest. To that extent they are a case of 'secret' generic (and institutional?) subversion, with Herz taking the officially popular and acceptable form of the fairy story and remaking it in the rather less acceptable image of the horror genre. *Beauty and the Beast* comes the closest of the two films to horror techniques and aesthetics. With its images frequently drowned in darkness, its color palette muted and its soundtrack heavy with Gothic organ, the

film's prevalent mood is eerie, ominous and oppressive. Herz creates suspense in the classic manner with predatory point-of-view shots and by delaying and building up the appearance of the 'monster'. It is significant in fact that Herz changed the film's title from *zvíře* (meaning 'beast' or 'animal') to *netvor* ('monster'), an indication of what might be considered his desire to 'estrangle' the given story, restoring a sense of fear and strangeness that has been dulled by the tale's familiarity. His key masterstroke in that respect was the decision to transform the Beast itself from the familiar leonine or mammalian figure into a menacing crow-headed creature. This central change of imagery adds to the surrealist flavour that Rudolf Šimera and Michal Kříž have discerned throughout the film, most obviously evoking the bird-human hybrids that preoccupied Max Ernst. Herz further extends the marriage of horror and surrealism by using a modern surrealist painter, Josef Vylet'al, whose sombre, spectral and dream-like images illustrate the film's credits and appear in the Beast's castle. The credits are a signal that the film belongs to the same 'psychological' territory as *Morgiana* or *The Cremator*, with the Beast constantly tormented by an externalised inner voice.

The Ninth Heart, which unlike *Beauty and the Beast* was not derived from a classic fairy-tale, adheres more to the formula of the Czechoslovak fairy-tale films of the time. It contains a suitably 'proletarian' hero in its young itinerant protagonist, who gets involved first with a group of travelling players and then with an enchanted princess whom he undertakes to cure. In other ways though the film contains even more daring sequences of horror. The long middle section of the film involves a Dantean boat journey to a land of the dead ruled over by the evil magician Count Aldobrandini, who has developed an elixir of life using human hearts. The sequence boasts a morbidly beautiful candlelit ball of the living dead and climaxes with the count's graphic physical decomposition once his powers are defeated and his immortality reversed. Aided by striking effects and props by Jan Švankmajer

(a friend of Herz and former classmate in puppetry), Herz penetrates to that kernel of horror that is an essential if often-submerged feature of the classic fairy-tale tradition, and these scenes contain a dark power that withstands the cuts Herz was obliged to make at the script assessment stage, which concerned the depiction of ‘revived corpses’ and the ‘surgically naturalistic’ manner detailing how the hearts were extracted (Gruntorád 2018, 54).

Herz recounts another negative official screening for the finished versions of these films, after which he was angrily told that he had ‘tricked’ the studio by promising fairy stories but actually delivering horror films. Unlike with *Morgiana*, though, the disapproval did not this time translate into any ban or penalty – a consequence, in Herz’s view, of the more relaxed climate that began to prevail at Barrandov at the end of the 1970s. Indeed Herz closed the decade with another daring work of a quite different nature, the realist family drama *Fragile Relationships* (*Křehké vztahy*, 1979), which to Herz’s surprise was accepted and left untouched by Barrandov despite featuring a ‘hippie’ protagonist and several sex scenes (Herz and Drbohlav 2015, 296-297).

Herz at Barrandov in the 1980s: Unpackaged Provocations

At the start of the 1980s the Barrandov studio underwent a second, ‘long prepared’ reorganisation in response to declining audience figures, stagnated production, low working morale and an unhealthy climate of self-censorship and excessive caution (Gruntorád 2018, 15). This overhaul was in some ways a reversal of the centralizing and authoritarian measures of the previous decade, with the authoritarian figure of Toman removed from his post in August 1981 and a system of six dramaturgical-production groups established (in place of the former split between dramaturgy, or script development, and the production process) the

following year (Gruntorád 2018, 16). Keen to take advantage of this trend towards greater liberalisation, Herz undertook two of his most provocative projects in the 1980s.

Following an excursion into the crime caper with his mafia comedy *Bulldogs and Cherries* (*Buldoci a třešně*, 1981), Herz embarked on his plan to make a ‘real’ horror film, one without any of the deceptive packaging of his 1970s ‘fairy tale’ films. The result was *The Ferat Vampire* (*Upír z Feratu*, 1982), a story with both horror and sci-fi elements about a racing car believed to run on human blood [Fig. 3]. This was a project that had been around since the mid-1960s, long predating Herz’s involvement, and had been developed by the sci-fi and fantasy writer Josef Nesvadba. The project survived, in different manifestations, through the normalization era, when it integrated well into the ongoing concern to foster a more entertainment-oriented, genre-based cinema.

Though it seems the Barrandov leadership, including Toman himself, were enthusiastic about the project, Gruntorád reveals throughout the development process a degree of confusion and discrepancy as to the project’s conception and significance. For Toman, for instance, the value of the story lay in its critique of the destructive automobile-mania of the rich capitalist world, as well as in the fact that this critique was being delivered in an entertaining and potentially popular form (while avoiding being a ‘typical horror film’, as he noted in his assessment of an earlier version of the script). But for Herz, once attached to the project, what mattered was strengthening the story’s horror aspects, and not its capacity for social critique.

This pre-production history might serve on the one hand to illustrate the struggles of the maverick or independent-minded director, at odds with the aims of the studio apparatus. But it also reveals the ‘productive’ as well as ‘destructive’ contributions of the studio in Herz’s case, the extent to which its leaders and dramaturges cultivated appropriate projects, as propelled by a shared orientation to ‘popular’ and (in this case) fantastical material,

whatever the studio's ultimate political motivations. It reveals the supportive role played by dramaturges and well-placed writers, including Miloš Macourek, who also favoured turning the story into a flat-out horror film and recommended Herz as the one capable of doing this. It even suggests the regard in which Herz was held by Toman himself, for it was that fearful and soon-to-be-deposed central dramaturge who decided to appoint Herz to the film in place of a previously assigned director, with the commendation that Herz was a filmmaker 'well-proven in his professionalism, originality and talent' (Toman in Gruntorád 2018, 46).

The final 'literary' script of *The Ferat Vampire*, based on an earlier draft by Jan Fleischer that Herz (working with Nesvadba) supplemented with more overt horror and sexual material, entered Barrandov's dramaturgical-production plan with the enthusiastic blessings of Toman, 'convinced of the above-average outcome of any film based on this script' (Gruntorád 2018, 48). But this outcome proved a shock to the studio's functionaries, and cuts were demanded to the completed film. Most regrettable to Herz was the cutting of the 'greater part' of a dream sequence, a scene of almost Cronenbergian horror in which the insides of the vampiric car are revealed to display an organic interior, with a pulsating heart and veins. This 'trick' sequence was again the work of Jan Švankmajer, who had achieved the grisly effect with real cow innards. In the version of the scene that we see, we get only a brief glimpse of the organic gristle inside the car, and yet the sequence retains some of its outrageousness and its icky appeal. It preserves a sense of the uncanny melding of organic matter and machine, as the car's metal surfaces turn disturbingly soft and permeable, and it still climaxes with the spewing of blood that drenches Jiří Menzel's protagonist Dr. Marek.

Blood appears in another scene that proved 'problematic', a sex scene between Marek and the sister of the mysteriously deceased (or is she?) racing driver Luisa Tomášová in which they inadvertently cover themselves in blood from smashed medical jars. Herz recalls that this scene had to be shortened, and yet it is perhaps more remarkable that it was

permitted at all, its blood-smearing nude bodies a none-too-subtle expression of the connections between sex and death and a twist on the deathly eroticism inherent to vampire mythology. In spite of the imposed cuts and the film's parodic elements (with Herz himself appearing at one point as a vampire in a vintage movie pastiche), Herz mostly achieved his aims in producing what was at that point the most overt horror 'vehicle' of his career.

Herz's next project, again at Barrandov, was *Magpie in the Hand* (*Straka v hrsti*, 1983), his boldest and most defiant work. This project originated with a script by a 'forbidden' writer, Antonín Přidal, that was passed on to Herz by Evald Schorm (Herz and Košuličová 2002; Herz and Drbohlav 2015, 322). Adapted from 'the oldest Czech travelling play', the script was essentially a mediaeval fairy tale, and Herz, now bored with fairy tales, decided to experiment by transplanting 'the Middle Ages into the future' (Herz and Drbohlav 2015, 312). He got the project accepted at Barrandov under the cover of a fairy-tale film while writing his own script 'on the quiet' (Herz and Drbohlav 2015, 313). A scandal broke out when photos of intertwined nude male and extras were sent to the state security and ultimately reached the desk of Czechoslovak president Gustáv Husák. Herz was then rebuked by the Barrandov leadership for producing a work of 'pornography', 'which even comrade Husák has seen', and the film was banned outright (Herz and Drbohlav 2015, 324). It is unsurprising that the administration was shocked by the film, which, with its bleak setting, garish steampunk aesthetics and oblique, jumbled narrative, adds up to the most experimental of Herz's films, if hardly the best.

Herz could have definitively burnt his bridges with *Magpie in the Hand*, but remarkably – following his recourse to the Slovak film industry and the making of *Sweet Worries* (*Sladké starosti*, 1984), a gentle comedy – he succeeded in returning to Barrandov and to the helm of the 'most expensive' and 'politically most important' film project of the year (Herz and Drbohlav 2015, 334). This was a film about Jožka Jabůrková, a communist

journalist and Prague councilor who had died in the Ravensbrück concentration camp. Passionately interested in the project since first reading about it, Herz naturally asserted his right to direct the film on the basis of his own experience the Ravensbrück camp as a child. Herz recounts having a 'free hand' while preparing the film, with the bizarre exception that he was not allowed 'to cast Jewish women' as concentration camp inmates or even to have anyone in the film 'speak about Jews'. The 'Barrandov leadership insisted' that he focus only on 'how communists suffered' in the camps (Herz and Drbohlav 2015, 342).

Herz did strive to avoid any of the stridently pro-communist elements that were in the original script (by Jaromíra Kolářová), and yet in some ways the resulting film, ultimately called *The Night Overtook Me* (*Zastihla mě noc*, 1985), was one of his most 'orthodox' films, dramatically if not politically speaking. Emphasizing the selfless benevolence of its protagonist as she suffers in the camp, with flashbacks that detail the earlier torments of an illegitimate and loveless childhood, the film is a rather one-dimensional portrait of a boundless and veritably saintly idealism, a heartstring-tugging melodrama that lacks the redeeming artifice of *Morgiana*. On the other hand the film is uncompromising in its harsh camp sequences and striking in its at times surreal and expressionistic imagery, with effective use of color tinting, distorted space and Herz's signature device of using the same performers in different roles (Herz and Drbohlav 2015, 345).

In a complete reversal of his previous Barrandov experience, *The Night Overtook Me* was well-received by the studio leadership and officialdom in general, winning the state Klement Gottwald award and the personal commendation of Gustáv Husák (though Herz states that the award was dedicated collectively to the film's key talents and not to him individually, to avoid the embarrassment of awarding a non-Party member (Herz and Drbohlav 2015, 349-250). Yet by now Herz had already decided to leave Czechoslovakia, and with added irony used his Gottwald award prize money to fund his departure.

Upon emigrating to the German Federal Republic in 1987, Herz essentially closed the chapter on his career as a director in a communist film industry. Though for the next 20 years of his life he would continue producing films and series for the Czech film and television industry, and would ultimately return to the new Czech Republic at the turn of the millennium, he would never produce anything else for Barrandov. The studio's post-communist transformation was perhaps more absolute a barrier for him than any of the former leaders' explicit bans.

...

In summing up Herz's relationship with Barrandov, we must weigh the obvious difficulties he faced with censorship and prohibitive intervention against the cuts and bans he endured in other sectors of communist-era media. Herz himself noted that Czechoslovakia's television industry, for instance, suffered from an even tighter ideological stranglehold than film, directly supervised as it was by the Party's Central Committee (Herz in Hulík 2011, 369). On the other hand, considered precisely as typical of a communist, state-funded film industry, the Barrandov of old brought the advantages of regular employment (though often at the price of political obedience) and of stable and relatively generous funding. The dramaturgical system seems also to have helped foster proximity to a network of writers who proved supportive and sympathetic to Herz (as was the case with Bor, Šašek, Hofman and Macourek).

Herz himself may have felt that the normalized film industry essentially derailed his directorial career, assigning him to projects that his heart was not in or ensuring that those films he did value did not turn out as intended. Yet while at times he was clearly compelled to make the best of assignments that he would not have chosen in other circumstances (as with, say, *Girls of Porcelain*), in other cases the projects generated within the Barrandov

system did prove conducive to his talents. Unlike many of his most talented peers, Herz was interested from the outset in making popular, genre-based films, and Barrandov's own orientation to the latter thus meant that Herz's talents were in many ways attuned to the projects available. In fact some of his best and most apparently characteristic work arose out of projects that he did not originate, that were already in development or that must have seemed like second-best or compromise options (as with *Oil Lamps*, *Morgiana*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Ninth Heart* and *The Ferat Vampire*).

None of these comments should be seen as minimizing the real repression and pervasive ideological interference of which the Barrandov system, especially during the 1970s, was an obvious representative. Nor should we wish to underestimate Herz's achievement in both functioning within that system and pushing against its limits, all the while avoiding the egregious conformism or humiliating capitulation to which others succumbed. As suggested before, Herz can be compared with those classic Hollywood and B-movie directors who helped give rise to the auteur theory, 'studio' directors who (under very different institutional conditions of course) were able to turn the material they were assigned into audacious and personal art. Herz may have been upset to see his work 'mutilated', as he once put it, but –to continue in the apt terms of the macabre – he never sold his soul.

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¹ An alternative account suggests that Herz and his co-writer Miloš Macourek actually submitted the script of this project, translated as *Nadsamec*, for assessment in March 1970, and thus after Barrandov's reorganisation in the early normalization era (and after Harnach had been replaced as director). According to this account, Herz and Macourek resubmitted the script in 1973 with a politically shrewd caption added, claiming that this was a critique of the 'Western, bourgeois concept of sex'. Again though the project was rejected. (See Gruntorád 2018, 23, n.150)