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A Business like Any Other: Czech Cinema since the Velvet Revolution

On 24 May 2006, the Czech and Slovak promotion stand at the Cannes Film Festival was shut down in protest at the rejection of the Law to support the Czech film industry. The Film Law, which had originally been passed by the Chamber of Deputies on 14 May, was subsequently vetoed by the current president, Václav Klaus, on the grounds that he objected to levying a tax of 2-3% on cinema tickets, home video sales, and commercial television in order to support “a business like any other.” But, when the Chamber of Deputies came to review the vote on 23 May to consider overriding the President’s veto, the Minister of Culture, Vítězslav Jandák, introduced the discussion by stating his opinion that, after the wrangling of the previous five months, he couldn’t care less whether it passed or not. In the ten minutes before the vote, 21 ministers of the ruling Social Democratic party left the chamber after turning off their voting machines (Strnad; <http://www.praguepost.com/P03/2006/Art/0601/opin1.php>).

I had hoped—indeed had assumed—that I would be beginning this article with news that the Law was in operation. Almost every country in the European Union, including its new “Eastern members,” now has a more generous system of support in place. For a country of only ten million, this failure to enact the Film Law seemed like an act of cultural vandalism. The general explanation for the government’s *volte-face* seems to be that, fearing adverse coverage by the private television media in the lead up to the parliamentary elections on 2 and 3 June, it was looking for a way out of making the commitment. The constitution does not allow for the Law to be resurrected. However, a meeting at the Karlovy Vary Film Festival in July promised new approaches. The elections had led to a virtual stalemate, and both of the main political parties, the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and the Social Democratic party (CSSD), promised to increase financial input into the state fund for

supporting the film industry and to introduce long term measures for continuing this support. President Klaus also lent a more attentive ear. Predictably, the ODS failed to include any funding in its draft budget and, in any case at the time of writing, had failed to establish a viable government. It remains to be seen if any of these measures come to fruition.

In a way, these events aptly summarise the conditions under which Czech filmmakers have worked since the fall of communism in 1989 and the privatisation of the industry in 1993. Most films begin with a credit indicating they have been supported by the Czech State Fund for the Support of Czech Cinematography. Technically, the fund allows for a direct state input, but this has never been activated. In fact, its funds are generated from the sale of films from the Communist era, which are then allocated by an advisory committee. The fund acts something like a “seal of approval,” which sometimes enables producers to raise money from other sources.

For much of the period since 1989, the support of the publicly funded Česka televize (Czech Television) has been vital, both as a single producer and co-producer of feature films. This has not always pleased filmmakers since Czech Television retains the rights to these films, and the funding levels and essential “style” of the films usually reflects their ultimate destination—the television screen.

The End of the State Industry

The film industry in Czechoslovakia had been nationalised in 1945—that is, three years before the Communist coup of 1948—as part of the Beneš decrees. On his return from exile in England, President Beneš had determined that there should be strong elements of socialism in the resurrected democracy and the film industry was nationalised along with a number of other key industries. It is well to remember that this nationalisation, while linked to a socialist impulse, cannot be equated with the Communist takeover. Its intention was to

protect the industry and allow for the production of films that were not solely determined by the demands of the marketplace.

After the Communist takeover of 1948, nationalisation, of course, took on an explicitly political role, particularly in the 1950s, when the thematic and aesthetic requirements of Socialist Realism were routinely imposed. Implicit in Socialist Realism was the view that the system must never be criticised and that, at least morally, it should be seen to triumph and lead to a better life. When criticism became permitted in the 1960s, it was still assumed to be “constructive” (that is, aimed at the perfection of the system rather than its overthrow). Arguably, it was only in 1968-69, with films such as *The Joke* (*Žert*; dir. Jaromil Jireš, 1968) and *All My Good Countrymen* (*Všichni dobří rodáci*; dir. Vojtěch Jasný, 1968), both banned after the Soviet invasion and suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968, and *The Ear* (*Ucho*; dir. Karel Kachyňa, 1969) and *Skylarks on a String* (*Skřivánci na niti*; dir. Jiří Menzel, 1969), neither released until 1990, that the full truth could be told.

At the risk of committing heresy, it is worth drawing parallels between the state industry and Hollywood. After all, routine plots with predictably optimistic conclusions have not been the sole preserve of Socialist Realism. Feature films that deal directly with politics are rare within Western commercial cinema and do not often offer criticism of a system for which, to adopt Margaret Thatcher’s dictum, “there is no alternative.”

One of the advantages of the nationalised industry was the fact that, when political control weakened, it could end up criticising the system, allowing for a degree of creative freedom that was impossible under a commercial framework. This is what happened when the Czechoslovak New Wave (1963-69) appeared on the scene, attracting wide international attention and helping to spearhead the reform movement leading to the reform communism of the Prague Spring in 1968. Also, as the novelist Josef Škvorecký once put it, “aesthetic common sense” gnawed at the roots of the system from the very beginning (54).

After the Soviet invasion suppressed the prospects for reform, 170,000 people left the country and artistic expression was subjected to rigorous control. Condemned as negative, decadent, and anti-socialist, over 100 feature films were banned, many directors were blacklisted, and the industry returned to conformity. Apart from a number of Socialist Realist-style propaganda epics—particularly in the early years of normalization—the industry between 1970 and 1989 largely devoted itself to innocuous entertainment and generalised humanist statements. While entertainment films were rarely absent from Czech production, the 1980s saw much more of an attempt to court audiences with Hollywood-style genre films and broad comedies. A new school of “permitted” social criticism also began to emerge. In the late 1980s, directors such as Zdeněk Tyc (*An Orphan Called Vojtěch* [*Vojtěch řečený sirotek*], 1989) and Irena Pavlásková (*The Time of the Servants* [*Čas sluhů*], 1989) appeared to be set to challenge the status quo.

With the benefit of hindsight (and 17 years of capitalism), this period may come to seem less barren than it first appeared. After all, Menzel made his two Hrabal adaptations—*Cutting it Short* (*Postřižiny*, 1980) and *Snowdrop Celebration* (*Slavnosti sněženek*, 1983)—and Věra Chytilová still criticised the system in films such as *Prefab Story* (*Panelstory*, 1979) and *Calamity* (*Kalamita*, 1981), although it was something of a lone struggle.

What directors clearly hoped was that, with the fall of Communism in 1989, the freedoms of the 1960s might reappear. Jan Svěrák’s Academy award nominated *The Elementary School* (*Obecná škola*, 1991), Jan Němec’s iconoclastic *The Flames of Royal Love* (*V žáru královské lásky*, 1990), and Jiří Menzel’s adaptation of Václav Havel’s *The Beggar’s Opera* (*Žebrácká opera*, 1991)—all products of the nationalised system—suggested the course that things might have taken. However, this was not to be and the Barrandov Studios were sold off in a process that one director characterised as “robbery.” Directors were made redundant and 1,500 technicians lost their jobs. Another director noted that not

even the Nazi occupation or the height of Stalinism had led to such a catastrophic drop in production, which after 1990 dropped by around two thirds.

Yet despite various attempts to sell them, the Barrandov Studios still exist, and are flourishing and expanding. But very few Czech films are made there. It is, instead, the center for films such as *Mission: Impossible* (Brian de Palma, 1996), *Oliver Twist* (Roman Polański, 2005), *The Brothers Grimm* (Terry Gilliam, 2005), and *Casino Royale* (Martin Campbell, 2006)—in other words, the Studios are a base for US, Anglo-American, and international productions. Interestingly, when the Barrandov Studios were built in the 1930s, they had been intended to attract international production—so perhaps one shouldn't complain too much. Furthermore, a number of recent productions have gained credit as Czech co-productions, although this is little more than acknowledgment of the provision of services.

Alongside the Barrandov Studios, the Prague Studios have come into existence, together with a whole range of facilities designed to support the international audio-visual industry. From this “business” perspective, the story of the Czech film industry under capitalism has been a success. The attraction has, of course, been low production costs combined with advanced technical know-how. At the same time, Barrandov has recently shown more interest in the domestic industry through its script development fund.

However, if one is to consider Czech cinema as part of a national culture—films made in the Czech language for a Czech audience—the story has been somewhat different: lack of government support, small budgets, and smaller salaries have been the order of the day. In terms of cultural impact, the cinema since 1989 has experienced nothing like the success enjoyed by the New Wave in the 1960s. Yet, it should also be recognised that much of the success at that time was also achieved on low budgets, much of it was restricted to the worlds

of film festivals and film societies, and few of the films were converted into major commercial successes on the international market.

If we look at critical successes since 1989, there have been some significant achievements. Jan Svěrák's *Kolya* (*Kolja*, 1996) won the Oscar for Best Foreign Film in 1997, and three other Czech films have been Oscar nominated—Svěrák's *The Elementary School*, Jan Hřebejk's *Divided We Fall* (*Musíme si pomáhat*, 2000), and Ondřej Trojan's *Želary* (2003). However, the Hollywood Foreign Film Oscar has increasingly gone to films with a commercial potential and, unlike the 1960s, Czech films have fared less well at the major European festivals (Cannes, Berlin, Venice). Smaller festivals have more often “discovered” Czech films, with awards going to Petr Zelenka's *Buttoners* (*Knoflíkáři*, 1997) and Bohdan Slama's *Wild Bees* (*Divoké včely*, 2001) at Rotterdam, and to Alice Nellis' *Some Secrets* (*Výlet*, 2002) and Slama's *Something Like Happiness* (*Šťěstí*, 2005) at San Sebastian. Older directors such as Menzel, Chytilová, and Němec have also won awards, but they have not, in the main, been major ones.

If one looks at the domestic market, however, there have been some extraordinary successes, with around five Czech films in the top ten on an almost regular basis. Few European countries achieve this and it provides fairly conclusive evidence of a domestic demand for Czech films. Of course, they do not necessarily represent the best of what Czech film has to offer, but they do include many critical successes as well.

When critics complain about Czech cinema, it is principally because of its unrealised potential, the talent that is clearly there and undeveloped, the failure of critical success to convert into commercial success, and the commercial compromises that most directors clearly feel necessary to continue working. In a somewhat contradictory article in the English language version of *The New Presence*, Dominik Jůn suggests that the fault may lie with FAMU (the Prague Film School), suggesting that there may be an over-preoccupation

with the promotion of “art.” However, since there are very few Czech films that now come into the category of “art cinema” and since the article also criticises cinema for being “too commercial,” it is difficult to find much logic in the argument (9-10).

It is worth recalling that Czech cinema was predominantly commercial between the wars and its current state can be considered a return to those conditions. However, audiences and production are smaller, and they are subject to the greater dependence on manipulation that is characteristic of contemporary capitalism. Broadly speaking, Czech filmmakers can be divided into those who succeed on market terms without any attempt to achieve “quality”; those who make commercial films with a certain level of intelligence and aesthetic integrity; and those who produce *auteur* cinema and/or films where what is said matters more than box office returns. Documentary and animation are, of course, virtually unable to succeed in the cinema marketplace and are largely confined to television, which means a need for enlightened subsidy.

The Death of the Czech New Wave

As I observed in *The Czechoslovak New Wave*, the Czech and Slovak New Waves of the 1960s did not “bounce back” after 1989. A number of that generation died during the 1980s (Pavel Juráček, Evald Schorm) and others were to follow in the 1990s (Zdenek Sirovy, Ester Krumbachova, Jaromil Jireš, and Antonın Maša), together with important older directors such as František Vlacil and Karel Kachyňa. While Jan Nemec returned from exile in the USA, others such as Miloš Forman, Ivan Passer, and Vojtech Jasny opted to remain abroad. A number of directors, such as Jan Schmidt and Drahomıra Vihanova, have made one or two films—notably the underrated *Rebounds* (*Vracenky*; dir. Schmidt, 1990) and *The Fortress* (*Pevnost*; dir. Vihanova, 1994)—but have failed to sustain a feature film career on a

permanent basis. Much the same can be said of the most internationally known members of this generation—Menzel, Chytilová, and Němec—who have experienced similar difficulties.

Menzel's case is instructive since, aside from Miloš Forman, he was the best known of all Czech directors. After his Oscar-winning adaptation of Bohumil Hrabal's novella *Closely Watched Trains* (*Ostře sledované vlaky*, 1966), he followed up with other successes such as *Capricious Summer* (*Rozmarné léto*, 1967), *Cutting it Short*, and the Oscar-nominated *My Sweet Little Village* (*Vesničko má středisková*, 1985). When his striking adaptation of Hrabal's *Skylarks on a String* was finally released after a 20-year ban, it won the Golden Bear at Berlin in 1990.

That same year he adapted his stage production of Havel's *The Beggar's Opera* into a film and, in 1993, he made one of the first post-1989 co-productions with *The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin* (*Život a neobyčejná dobrodružství vojáka Ivana Čonkina*), adapted from the classic Russian novel by Vladimir Voinovich and featuring Russian actors. It was not a success and as a result Menzel has subsequently concentrated on theatrical productions. In fact, *Chonkin* is very faithful to Voinovich's original, which was considered a kind of Russian equivalent to Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier Švejk* (*Dobrý voják Švejk*). Those critics who considered an anti-Soviet comedy to be out of date or dismissed it as a "hayseed comedy" might just as well have been describing Voinovich's novel. Presumably, Czechs did not like films featuring Russians, while Russians probably did not appreciate being made fun of by Czechs. Perhaps it was the wrong film at the wrong time. At any rate, Menzel was to make no more feature films in the next ten years.

Yet, while Menzel was disillusioned by *Chonkin*'s failure, there were also other reasons for his silence. His screenwriter on both *My Sweet Little Village* and *Chonkin* was Zdeněk Svěrák, who subsequently began a successful partnership with his son, Jan Svěrák (*Kolya* and *Dark Blue World* [*Tmavomodrý svět*], 2001), both made with Portobello Pictures,

the British co-producer of *Chonkin*. Menzel was also planning to make a film adaptation of Hrabal's novel *I Served the King of England*. After protracted legal disputes and the sale of the rights behind Menzel's back, the project finally returned to him in 2005, and is currently scheduled to premiere in a version based on his own script. While Menzel's lack of films could be construed as a failure to adapt to the needs of the marketplace, it is no doubt also the case that with theater beckoning, there was a creative option that might avoid the endless stress, frustration, and effort involved in setting up a major film production.

Věra Chytilová, however, has never stopped making films, although they are virtually all documentaries. She has made four features: *Inheritance* (*Dědictví aneb Kurvohošigutntag*, 1992), *Traps* (*Pasti, pasti, pastičky*, 1998), *Expulsion from Paradise* (*Vyhnání z ráje*, 2001), and *Pleasant Moments* (*Hezké chvílky*, 2006). None can be considered a complete success although all are original, socially critical, and very different. *Inheritance*, which was a commercial success, told the post-Communist story of a poor peasant who inherits a fortune. When Boleslav Polívka, who plays the main part, turned to the audience at the end of the film threatening to "buy you all," it presented a somewhat rare comment on the new political and economic realities.

In *Traps*, she produced one of the first feature films to bite the hand of capitalism. The film moves from the pornography of contemporary advertising to the casual rape of a woman hitchhiker by two men. The girl, Lenka, invites them back to her house where she drugs them and exacts an unexpected revenge: a veterinary surgeon by profession, she proceeds to castrate them. But this is only the beginning of Chytilová's "feminist black comedy." The two men preserve their testicles in pots in the hope of medical miracles and decide on revenge. The fact that one of them is a government minister adds to the film's political edge as all three protagonists attempt to face their social and professional roles within the wider structures of power and influence.

Expulsion from Paradise concerns a film director who is shooting a film on a nudist beach. While he hopes to create “an artistic work, an experimental metaphor about Adam and Eve,” his Russian producer wants an erotic film and his screenwriter wants a positive take on reality. Although the film contains some striking and grotesque images and interesting ideas, the script is loosely constructed and Chytilová allows her actors (Boleslav Polívka and Milan Šteindler) rather too much freedom. It found favor neither with Czech nor international critics.

In her most recent film, *Pleasant Moments*, Chytilová tells the story of a female psychiatrist and her clients. However, the psychiatrist is not an all-knowing professional dealing with the problems of others. Chytilová opts for an almost seamless connection amongst her characters, all equally dysfunctional and equally unhappy. It is a black comedy that is at the same time aggressive, with Martin Štrba’s untypical cinematography effecting a restless movement that keeps the audience permanently on edge.

Her most impressive “post-revolutionary film” is the two-part documentary, *Flights and Falls (Vzlety a pády, 2000)*, an investigation of three Czech photographers from the 1930s to the present. In her early years as a model, Chytilová had been married to Karel Ludwig, a photographer who specialised in Hollywood-style portraits of female actors and she here provides a fascinating journey into a hidden culture in which she herself had participated. In her recent *Searching for Ester (Pátrání po Ester, 2005)*, reviewed in this issue, she presents a penetrating study of her former colleague, Ester Krumbachová.

Although Jan Němec has managed to make five films since 1989, it has not been with any easy sense of progression. Having spent the period 1973-89 in exile, he returned in late 1989 to make his first feature film in 15 years. *The Flames of Royal Love* was a long planned adaptation of Ladislav Klíma’s 1928 novel, *The Sufferings of Prince Sternenhoch (Utrpení knížete Sternenhocha)*. Written in a state of “intoxication,” the novel tells the story of the

passionate relationship between a prince and his sexually voracious wife. After locking her in a dungeon and killing her, he is haunted by her ghost or reincarnation. Němec updated the story to 1992 with Prague as a small kingdom ruled over by a rock musician. The film was a critical failure although initially successful with audiences. Many, of course, were shocked by its blood and sexuality—although these were central elements of the original novel. A mixture of horror, love story, and comedy, its verbal vulgarity and flamboyance also offended on other levels. Nonetheless, as Eva Zaoralová suggests, it was the most interesting film of the year (132).

He had even less success with *Code Name Ruby* (*Jméno kódu Rubín*, 1997), which received little promotion. A boy and a girl develop a relationship as a result of which “divine and cosmic powers are released.” Němec has described the basic theme of the film as “...the mystery of alchemy, enriched and filled with parallel levels” (http://www.ce-review.org/01/17/kinoeye17_nemec.html).

The commercial failure of these two films meant that Němec’s visions were no longer marketable and with *Late Night Talks with Mother* (*Noční hovory s matkou*, 2001), effectively the work of one man and a camera, he returned to a genuinely independent status—that is, he was no longer dependent on the commercial system. Constructed as a dialog with his dead mother, it combines haunting and evocative images of his journey to her graveside with material from his life—his marriages to the writer/director/designer Ester Krumbachová and to the singer Marta Kubišová; his filming of the Soviet invasion in 1968; and a compelling montage of his exile in California. A counterpart to Kafka’s “Letter to the Father,” it echoes the visual power of his earlier films, providing real evidence of a talent that had for too long been contained.

His next film, *Landscape of my Heart* (*Krajina mého srdce*, 2004), was equally subjective and records his experiences when he underwent a serious heart operation. It

focuses pretty much on his feelings, together with wider reflections on medical, emotional, and existential implications. While it does not achieve as much as *Late Night Talks with Mother* (perhaps because its ingredients are less diverting), its portrayal of fantasies, thoughts, and images are recognisable to anyone who has undergone similar experiences. Since then he has, of course, made *Toyen* (2005)—reviewed in this issue—in which he used similar techniques to evoke the inner lives and sources of inspiration of the artists Toyen and Heisler.

Other figures from the 1960s who negotiated the changes in the film industry are Jan Švankmajer and Juraj Jakubisko. Švankmajer, whose animated films have achieved a worldwide reputation, made his first short film in 1964, but only really attracted international attention with a retrospective of his work held at Annecy in 1983. Since then he has made five feature films, all of them co-produced, four with West European countries. The first of his features, *Alice (Něco z Alenky)*, 1987), inspired by Lewis Carroll, was technically a Swiss production.

All of his subsequent films have been based on long term projects and are, in a sense, products outside of time. *Faust (Lekce Faust)*, 1994) dates back to his early staging of the Czech folk puppet play and his work on Emil Radok's short puppet film *Faust (Johannes doctor Faust)*, 1958). Using what he terms a “variety montage,” he mixes the plays of Goethe, Marlowe, and Grabbe together with puppet traditions and Gounod's opera, setting his principal narrative in contemporary Prague. In both *Alice* and *Faust*, Švankmajer creates impossible worlds in which his heroine (Alice) and hero (Faust) appear as both actor and puppet. In *Alice*, all the characters with the exception of Alice are puppets, but in *Faust* there is a much greater presence of the world of the everyday. In his subsequent three films, he depends much more on work with live actors—with animation and puppetry playing much smaller roles.

In *Conspirators of Pleasure* (*Spiklenci slasti*, 1996), a number of fetishists obsessively create the objects of their desires: two neighbors make straw puppets of each other, which they subject to sadistic humiliation and then “murder”; a police chief seeks sexual gratification with the help of objects fashioned from kitchen implements; an electronics fetishist makes a masturbation machine; and a post-woman sniffs balls of bread through a rubber tube. In *Little Otik* (*Otesánek*, 2000), inspired by the Czech fairy tale, he tells the story of a childless couple who discover a tree root that resembles a child. The wish is father to reality and, since they treat the root as a real baby, it grows, develops a voracious appetite, and devours everything in sight. The monster-child is seen mainly in fragments, as mouth or hands, rarely as anything resembling a complete entity. The theme, like *Conspirators of Pleasure*, is that of desire, of something that can never be achieved and seems to lead inevitably to destruction. Finally, in *Lunacy* (*Šílení*, 2005)—discussed by David Sorfa in this issue—he was inspired by themes from the Marquis de Sade and Edgar Allan Poe. The story of Jean Berlot, who is taken by a figure known as the Marquis to a private asylum where the inmates have imprisoned the warders, again probes the realities of human motivation and of institutional power.

Although his films use known actors, Švankmajer does not court popular success and does not seek to “please” his audience; his intention is to disturb and subvert, to aim beneath the surface of things. As he once put it, he has not experienced any crisis in subject matter since the fall of Communism: “The ulcer of Stalinism would never have appeared if the whole of civilization itself had not been diseased...” (Hames, “Interview” 118). Despite his international appeal (a minority one), it is unlikely that he would have been able to work so regularly without having created his own private studio. He was never, of course, associated with the New Wave.

Juraj Jakubisko is a Slovak director, one of the leading directors of the Slovak wave of the late 1960s (along with Dušan Hanák and Elo Havetta). He was barely able to establish his reputation at that time, with his major films banned, unreleased, or uncompleted. After the split of Czechoslovakia into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993, he opted to move to Prague, where he made *An Ambiguous Report on the End of the World* (*Nejasná zpráva o konci světa*, 1997) and is currently completing the English-language *Bathory*, the “true story” of Erzsébet Báthory (primarily a Slovak production).

In *An Ambiguous Report on the End of the World*, which he also scripted, Jakubisko presented what was, in many ways, a summation of his earlier folk-inspired work. Taking Nostradamus as his starting point, he tells an allegorical story about a village on the edge of the world. Drawing on childhood memories, the film is a powerful ballad, laced with atmospheric photography and with an impressive musical score. It was well received by the American trade papers, as well as at the Montreal and Vancouver festivals, and was even hailed as “a work of genius” in the Czech Republic (Kříž). Despite this, it is a film of which the international viewing public is largely unaware, providing further evidence that a film has to pass through the right channels and past the right critics if it is to make its way in the international market.

The Velvet Generation

The term “Velvet Generation” was adopted to describe a season of new Czech cinema held in London in 2000 and it seems to have stuck. The commercial success of directors such as Jan Svěrák and Jan Hřebejk, and the critical success of Saša Gedeon, Petr Zelenka, and Alice Nellis suggested that a new generation was finding its feet. Yet it is possible to argue that there has been a continuous supply of talented new directors since 1989. A selection of some of the better known, together with their debut films, would include: Irena Pavlásková

(*The Time of the Servants*, 1989), Zdeněk Tyc (*Vojtěch Called Orphan*, 1989), Jan Svěrák (*The Elementary School*, 1991), Jan Hřebejk (*The Jackal Years*, aka *Big Beat* [Šakalí léta], 1993), Jaroslav Brabec (*Horror Story* [Krvavý roman], 1993), Vladimír Michálek (*Amerika*, 1994), Saša Gedeon (*Indian Summer* [Indiánské léto], 1995), Petr Václav (*Marian*, 1996), Petr Zelenka (*Mňága-Happy End*, 1996), David Ondříček (*Whisper* [Šeptej], 1996), Ivan Vojnár (*The Way Through the Bleak Woods* [Cesta pustým lesem], 1997), Roman Vávra (*In the Rye* [Co chytneš z žitě], 1998), Pavel Marek (*Dead Beetle* [Mrtvej Brouk], 1998), Alice Nellis (*Eeny Meeny* [Ene bene], 1999), Bohdan Slama (*Wild Bees*, 2001), Michaela Pavlátová (*Faithless Games* [Nevěrné hry], 2003), Vladimír Morávek (*Bored in Brno* [Nuda v Brně], 2003), Tomáš Hejtnanek (*Sentiment*, 2003), Marek Najbrt (*Champions* [Mistři], 2004), Filip Remunda and Vít Klusák (*Czech Dream* [Česky sen], 2004), Maria Procházková (*Shark in the Head* [Žralok v hlavě], 2005), and Dan Wlodarczyk (*The Indian and the Nurse* [Indián a sestřička], 2006).

Several of these directors established their names with later films—*Kolya* (Svěrák), *Cosy Dens* (*Pelíšky*; dir. Hřebejk), *Return of the Idiot* (*Návrat idiota*; dir. Gedeon), *Buttoners* (Zelenka), *Loners* (*Samotáři*; dir. Ondříček), *Something Like Happiness* (*Šťěstí*; dir. Slama). But what is perhaps more striking is the fact that many of these directors have not been able to go beyond making a couple of features. Only a minority of directors—Svěrák, Hřebejk, Michálek, and perhaps, Ondříček—have been able to make films with sufficient regularity to be said to have had a career in cinema. Even in Hřebejk's case, there was a gap of six years between his first and his second films. The general picture seems to be that a director can reasonably expect to make one low budget feature every five years. This would contrast with around one film every two years in the 1960s. Other than those making purely commercial films, this is also the situation with older directors.

In many cases, television or theater provide work for these directors, but it can hardly be described as a situation in which they enjoy creative freedom or the opportunity to build a body of continuous work. Both Svěrák and Hřebejk have relied on experienced screenwriters—Zdeněk Svěrák and Petr Jarchovský respectively. Aside from a high degree of professionalism, they can also be relied upon to maintain a level of intelligence while also appealing to audiences. Although many of these directors are friends, it is not really possible to talk about a “wave”—they have produced individual films under different circumstances. What unites them is the culture and society to which they refer. But there is little doubt that, within the overall context of post-Communist cinema, they constitute a significant group.

Svěrák and Hřebejk

Jan Svěrák is probably the most internationally acclaimed director of the new generation. He won the student Academy Award in 1989 with his spoof documentary *The Oil Gobblers (Ropáci)* and gained an Oscar nomination with his first feature, *The Elementary School*. He then won an Oscar for *Kolya*, which became an international success and one of the most widely seen Czech films ever.

Based on Zdeněk Svěrák’s script about his own early childhood, *The Elementary School* was set in the early post-war period, when democracy returned and Communism was yet to be established. It follows the adventures of 10 year-old Eda and his friend, Tonda, and centers on a charismatic teacher who claims to have fought in the Slovak resistance. While the film focuses on the children’s experience, it also includes adults talking about the occupation, attitudes toward the post-Munich capitulation to the Germans, and post-war prospects for democracy. The teacher, who talks about the martyrdom of Jan Hus and his own heroic exploits during the war, turns out to be a fraud, but argues that he was trying to provide the boys with a role model. By comparison, Eda’s father, Souček (played by Zdeněk

Svěrák) represents reality—a heroism of the everyday. His contribution to the war effort had been listening to the short wave radio and, on one occasion, hiding a man. But, when he is faced with real situations—firing an abandoned bazooka, risking his life at the power station in a thunderstorm—he is up to the task.

Souček represents the average Czech, who hopes for a new democratic world and who did his best in a war that was all but lost following the allied betrayal at Munich. While the film is rooted in memories of the past, they are filtered through nostalgia and are full of key signifiers of the Czech democratic tradition: Hus, the countryside of Bohemia, the music of Dvořák. The desire to create what the Svěráks described as “a healing film” was understandable in the aftermath of the Velvet Revolution.

If *The Elementary School* provides an essentially positive ideology laced with an ironic commentary on heroism, the same could be said of the Svěráks’ subsequent collaborations, *Kolya* and *Dark Blue World*. *Kolya* deals with the final years of normalization culminating in the Velvet Revolution of 1989, while *Dark Blue World* deals with Czech pilots fighting for the British RAF during the Second World War. Both can be seen as “positive” attempts to recreate the past and employ genre strategies designed to attract a wide audience.

Kolya succeeded in doing this on a world-wide basis. The story of a middle-aged musician and confirmed bachelor, and his relationship with a charming small boy is a formula that has been successful in the past. In their observation and timing, the Svěráks do not make a single misstep. Louka (Zdeněk Svěrák) is an out-of-work classical musician banned from performing. This is neither because he is an overt dissident nor because of his brother’s emigration; it is due to his somewhat cavalier approach to reporting on contacts with foreigners or émigrés. He agrees to marry a Russian woman for money and, when she

flees to Germany, finds himself looking after her son. The film focuses on the affection that grows between them—a relationship that must end when the Communist period does.

Like Souček in *The Elementary School*, Louka can also be said to represent the ordinary Czech and is sceptical about Communism (he listens to the Voice of America, “forgets” to put up flags celebrating the latest Communist anniversary, and joins the “resistance” after it ends). His background is made clear from the statuettes and busts of Masaryk, Beneš, and Štefánik (the founders of Czechoslovakia) in his mother’s house. At the end of the film, he is reinstated in the Czech Philharmonic and takes part in a celebratory performance of Smetana’s *My Country (Ma Vlast)* under the statue of Jan Hus in the Old Town Square in Prague. The film’s saving grace is that it is not just a sentimental story, but is also laced with irony and criticism. It is easy to see why its attempt to please the world has earned it the derogatory nickname of *Coca-Kolya*, but it is extremely well made and, by Anglo-American standards, provides some sophisticated nuances.

Dark Blue World, the most successful film at the Czech box office since the fall of Communism, has a much less sophisticated structure. It attempts to reach a younger audience, its heroes are young, the love story is simple, and the aerobatics are exciting. It focuses principally on the relationship between the older František (Ondřej Vetchý) and the younger Karel (Kryštof Hádek), and is more than ready to draw on the conventions of the World War Two flying film. Its semi-nostalgic view of the past is again leavened with a critical edge and contrasted with the time when Czech RAF pilots were imprisoned upon their return to their homeland. As David Sorfa points out in his review of the film in this issue of *KinoKultura*, the story is framed by a post-war one in which František is a prisoner at the Mírov camp. After returning home he also discovers that his girlfriend has married someone else and is raising their child as her husband’s. But the two contrasting elements sit uneasily by comparison with the constant strands of irony in *The Elementary School* and *Kolya*.

Svěrák, of course, has not been solely concerned with this immersion in the past. Although his collaboration with his father has already made the broadest impact, his other two films, *Akumulátor 1* (1994) and *The Ride* (*Jízda*, 1995) seem closer to his own generation. *Akumulátor 1* is a spirited science fiction film based on the notion that television sets can suck the energy from people's bodies. It won acclaim at a wide range of science fiction festivals and features some excellent special effects. By contrast, the low budget *The Ride* focuses on the story of two young men who buy a car and take to the roads of Southern Bohemia. An obvious homage to *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969), its simple framework provides an opportunity for some neat observations, not least on the essential vulnerability of his fashionably cynical and alienated heroes.

The other director to combine both critical and commercial success is Jan Hřebejk. While Svěrák is more concerned with sophisticated visual effects and is arguably more "filmic" in his approach, Hřebejk works primarily with a large group of actors and relies much more on the kinds of interplay familiar from television or theater. His actors often appear to be enjoying themselves and there is little doubt that this has contributed to the domestic success of his films.

Hřebejk has worked with Petr Jarchovský as the scriptwriter on all his films. While three of the films (*Big Beat*, *Cosy Dens*, *Pupendo*) were based on stories or motifs adapted from the work of Petr Šabach, the others have been original screenplays. Like the Svěráks, Hřebejk and Jarchovský have focussed on history: *Divided We Fall* is set during the Nazi occupation; *Cosy Dens* is set the year before the Prague Spring; and *Pupendo* during the years of normalization.

Of the three, the Oscar-nominated *Divided We Fall* is probably the best and raises the most issues. It takes on the complex issues of Czech, Jewish, and Sudeten German relations during the occupation through the story of three men who had been friends before the war—

the Czech Josef Čížek, the Sudeten German Horst Prohaska, and the Jewish David Wiener. In the pre-credit and credit sequences, the Jewish family is first expelled from their home and then sent to the Terezín (Theresienstadt) transport camp. When Wiener escapes and returns to his former neighborhood, Josef and his wife Marie agree to hide David in a secret room until the end of the war. The film's principal plot device, then, hinges on the fact that Marie becomes pregnant by David. This is not, however, the result of a war-time love affair: Josef is sterile, he and his wife want children, and, in order to avoid having to share their flat with a Nazi bureaucrat and protect David's hiding place, they have to have a child. The situation allows for complex ironies—Prohaska, who is a collaborator, tries to help Josef, and ends up delivering the Jewish baby; Josef, who helps David, is thought to be a collaborator; David, the fugitive, fathers a child, who becomes a symbol of hope in the film's final scenes; and the man who tries to sound the alarm when David reappears ends up participating in the Prague Uprising. The Germans, while remaining racist, are also human and endure their own suffering. Perhaps one of the film's most unusual elements is the way in which it shows the revenge exacted on Germans during the Prague Uprising of 1945.

Unlike the Czech war films of the 1950s and 1960s, it did not draw on the experience of the filmmakers. At a press conference, Jarchovský noted that he had asked the novelist Josef Škvorecký, who lived through the war and has based many of his novels on it, if his script premise was plausible. Škvorecký agreed that it was. In fact, other Czech films have touched on similar subjects—for example, Jiří Weiss' *Romeo, Juliet, and Darkness* (*Romeo, Julie a tma*, 1960), Zbyněk Brynych's *...and the Fifth Horseman is Fear* (*...a pátý jezdeck je Strach*, 1964), and Jan Němec's *Toyen* (2005).

With *Cosy Dens* (1999) and *Pupendo* (2003), Hřebejk addressed themes close to the hearts of his audience—surviving Communism. In the first of these, set during the lead-up to and implementation of the Prague Spring, he examines two families, one communist and one

anti-communist, who live almost side by side in the same apartment block. One family is headed by Šebek, a military officer and committed communist who is in charge of the army canteen; the other by Kraus, a former resistance fighter whose brother fought in the RAF. Both men are locked into a sterile and frozen form of politics that seems irrelevant to the everyday human concerns of their wives and children. Dedicated to those “whose friends and parents left” after the 1968 Soviet suppression of the Prague Spring, the film is based on a selection of humorous anecdotes and stories—a kind of popular memory—seen mainly from the perspectives of the children. Although the film is not directly concerned with politics, it is surprising how little the atmosphere and debates of the time are reflected in it.

While *Cosy Dens* attracted international attention, *Pupendo* did not. It was, however, a big success at the national box office. One of the few films to touch on the subject of dissidence, it presents a portrait of the 1980s through the story of a discredited and unemployed sculptor, Bedřich Mára. He is no dissident or avant-garde artist; instead, he is merely someone (like Louka in *Kolya*) who has fallen foul of the regime. His “difficulties” are contrasted with the “success” of his conformist ex-lover, Magda, and her husband, Mila Břečka, who have decided to remain communists. On the initiative of an unemployed art historian, Alois Fábera, Magda is persuaded to bring Mára back into the limelight by encouraging him to sculpt “a minor Soviet liberator.” All seems to be going well until the Voice of America intervenes with a reading of an article by Fábera praising their attempts to subvert the system. The Břečkas find that they cannot get passports for their annual holiday in Yugoslavia and both families end up at Hungary’s Lake Balaton in the off season. There is one small triumph—a West German commission to sculpt a bust of Kafka. But any profits can be taxed, observes a union boss. One unintended irony was that the real sculptor who provided Mára’s works actually lost his job under capitalism—but that is another story.

In *Cosy Dens* and *Pupendo*, both communists and non-communists are caught in the same traps and ultimately share the same fates. While the two films have been criticised for inaccuracies or for ignoring the true realities of the times, both are concerned with the everyday experience of those who endured the regime rather than fight against it—or, perhaps, fought against it in minor or Švejkian ways.

As I have argued elsewhere, the heroes of Svěrák's and Hřebejk's films are small men caught up in impossible situations, with alternatives presented as "slightly hidden ironies and contradictions" ("Ironies" 148). While the films can stimulate interaction and debate, there is no direct consideration of key political events such as the Prague Spring or the "dissident" Charter 77. For most people, perhaps, these were experienced as exceptional rather than everyday events.

In one sense, the basic premise of the Oscar-winning *A Shop on the High Street* (*Obchod na korze*; dir. Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos, 1965)—a rather Chaplin-esque carpenter and his bittersweet relationship with an old Jewish woman—is no more schematic than that of *Kolya*. Yet that film is considered a major statement on both the Holocaust and on the Second World War. The difference, one feels, is that it was not made with an eye on the international box office; its success was a by-product of its quality. The problem with Svěrák's and Hřebejk's films is that both directors begin with the idea that they are making an entertaining and marketable product, and, as a consequence, despite their undoubted professionalism and intelligence—authenticity must come second. The decisive films about the communist experience were, in fact, made in the 1960s, and it is unlikely that they will be superseded.

Up and Down (*Horem pádem*, 2004) was the first film by the team of Jarchovský and Hřebejk to confront contemporary realities, and was received with a good deal of commercial and critical approval at home, together with a good critical response on its US release. A

black comedy, it interweaves the stories of two families. The first couple is working class. Unable to conceive, Miluška wants a baby, but is unable to adopt because of her husband's criminal record (as a football hooligan). They end up buying an abandoned Indian baby that has been separated from its mother in the confusing aftermath of illegal immigration. After 20 years in Australia, Martin (played by Petr Forman) returns home to visit his father, Otakar Horecký, a university professor, and his mother, Věra, who have now divorced. Otakar now lives with Martin's former girlfriend, together with their 18-year-old daughter.

The stories connect and relate with the kinds of ironies familiar from Jarchovský's and Hřebejk's earlier films, and they deal with a whole range of post-communist issues—illegal immigration, racism, xenophobia, football hooliganism, economic restitution, the behavior of the Roma, extortionate taxi drivers, generational conflicts, divorce, problems of age and emigration. As Horecký tells his students: "Migration, immigration, emigration... you all know at least one family that fits these categories." However, while the film makes some sharp points, it remains a comedy and an entertainment vehicle; its actors are familiar and amusing. As a commentary on contemporary society, its artifice is also apparent and its messages a little too constructed. Films like Martin Šulík's *City of the Sun* (*Sluneční stat*, 2005) or Najbrt's *Champions* are more to the point, although they achieved much smaller audiences. Slama's *Something like Happiness* is also much sharper, using popular actors like Polívka, Pavel Liška, and Anna Geislerová in a controlled manner.

Zelenka, Gedeon, Nellis, and Slama

Petr Zelenka, Saša Gedeon, Alice Nellis, and Bohdan Slama have, as far as I know, no connections. However, there is little doubt that film festivals have selected them as directors with something to say—and indeed, all of them have scripted their own films. As Alice Nellis, is the subject of a major article in this collection, I will not discuss her work here.

Petr Zelenka, like Hřebejk, graduated from FAMU in the late 1980s. They worked together on a number of FAMU films, including *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex and Were Afraid to Experience* (*Co všechno chcete vědět o sexu a bojíte se to prožít*, 1988), written by Zelenka and directed by Hřebejk. After working in television, Zelenka made his first feature film with *Mňága-Happy End* (1996), which was quite openly inspired by Rob Reiner's *This is Spinal Tap* (1984). It's the story of a group of musicians who become members of a fabricated group. According to its publicity material, "it starts with a real imitation band and ends up with a false genuine band." It was picked up for release in both Germany and the Netherlands.

But it was *Buttoners*, winner of the Golden Tiger award at the Rotterdam festival, that attracted the widest attention. One of the most original of post-1989 Czech films, it consists of six interlinking stories. The first takes place immediately before the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima while the rest take place in the Czech Republic 50 years later on the anniversary of that day. On the surface, the themes of the film are merely eccentric: the Japanese learn how to say "fucking weather," we meet a couple who can only make love when they are in a taxi, a man has an original way of removing studs from upholstery while sitting down, another seeks fulfilment by lying between railway tracks and spitting at trains. Zelenka's concern with life's absurdities links to the bad weather at Kokura that led to the US plane being re-routed to Hiroshima. But Zelenka's reflections on cause and effect, responsibility and forgiveness, take him far beyond the eccentric to provide an original, imaginative, and challenging work.

His script for David Ondříček's highly successful *Loners* (2000), written while he was filming *Buttoners*, has some obvious parallels and thematic links. Here again are concerns with coincidence, language, radio, the generation gap, a car crash, and the private face of the medical profession. The film links the lives of seven temporarily unattached loners in a

rolling sequence of episodes executed with great verve and humor. We see the Czechs partly through the eyes of an outsider (played by the Macedonian actress, Labina Mitevska) who observes that the reason Czechs are so nasty to each other is because “they have such a horrible language.”

While none of Zelenka’s subsequent films have enjoyed the same international success, neither *Year of the Devil* (*Rok d’ábla*, 2002) nor *Wrong Side Up* (*Příběhy obyčejného šílenství*, 2005) proved to be disappointments. *Year of the Devil* is an extension of the concept of *Mňága-Happy End*. The legendary underground singer Jaromír Nohavica plays himself in a film about a singer and recovering alcoholic who goes on tour with the folk-rock band Čechomor. The film begins with an account of spontaneous human combustion, moves to a center for recovering alcoholics, and examines the case of a man who gives up speaking. But we are soon caught up in a mystificatory experience that recalls Zelenka’s first feature. The casual nature of this third film, credited like the earlier ones to “Petr Zelenka and his friends,” disguises an unobtrusive sophistication. From a discussion of male undergarments to astral presences, Zelenka’s humor is relentlessly deadpan.

Wrong Side Up is based on Zelenka’s successful stage play *Tales of Common Insanity*. Lost in a dead end job as an airport dispatch worker, Petr’s girlfriend has left him for someone with more elevated prospects. However, it appears that he may be the only sane person in the bizarre but undoubtedly normal world that surrounds him. His father, who used to provide the commentaries for Communist-era newsreels, disconcerted by the new realities, finds himself exploiting his former persona for artistic performances, while his mother works obsessively collecting second-hand clothes to alleviate the effects of war and catastrophe. Petr’s boss has a sexual preference for shop window mannequins and Petr is soon supplementing his income as a paid observer to his neighbors’ more intimate moments.

Saša Gedeon has completed only two features, less for economic reasons than the fact that he works slowly, immersing himself in his subject matter and working to a carefully conceived storyboard. *Indian Summer* (1995) marked the arrival of a promising new talent. It told the story of a teenage girl who spends the summer with her cousin in a small town, where the only excitement is a weekly dance. Its observation, mixed with lyricism, recalls the spirit of the New Wave. Although it received the Czech critics' prize as best Czech film and a number of international awards, it was *Return of the Idiot* (1999) that marked Gedeon's real international critical breakthrough.

The film is set in a small provincial town where people's lives follow a "normal" and mundane progression. František (Pavel Liška), a character inspired by Dostoevskii's *The Idiot*, has been newly released from a mental hospital. His detached attitude and simple morality seem to bring the instability of relationships to the surface. While the settings recall the early films of Miloš Forman, particularly *Black Peter* (*Černý Petr*, 1964) and *A Blonde in Love* (*Lásky jedné plavovlásky*, 1965), Gedeon is similar above all in his respect for his characters. Expressive but low key, his slightly melancholic film examines the meanings between words and actions, and lingers on the quality of its emotions.

Another film dealing with relationships within a small community is Bohdan Slama's *Wild Bees*. A comedy set in a Moravian village, it centers on an 18 year-old youth named Kája, who lives with his grandmother and a philosophising father, and who secretly admires the salesgirl Božka. As in *Return of the Idiot*, an outside visitor stimulates developments in the village's stagnant relationships. It is a scarcely flattering picture and its multi-character portrait has the stamp of authenticity. The film also (unusually) reflects a world of unemployment and poverty somehow sustained by an inbuilt sense of humor. But, as Christina Stojanova observes "...although everyone seems to be on the move to somewhere exciting, nothing really ever happens, gets accomplished, or is resolved" (218).

With *Something like Happiness* (2005), Slama enjoyed even greater success. Set in a rundown area of Northern Bohemia, where nature has been affected by acid rain, the film examines the intertwining lives of three families. Monika lives with her parents in an apartment block, has a Czech boyfriend in the US, and plans to emigrate. Toník lives in relative poverty with his aunt on the family's rundown farm. Dáša also lives on the block together with her two small children. Monika works in a supermarket, her father is out of work, and her mother works shifts. While no one utters any laments for the past, there appears to be precious little personal or economic satisfaction in the present. Yet Monika and Toník, former childhood friends, are decent people and, when Dáša suffers a breakdown and is confined to a psychiatric ward, they look after her children. Slama's script and direction provide a deeply felt insight into his characters and hold up a sharp mirror to a society where, as Monika's US-based boyfriend puts it, he could never live again, where people have a special talent for ruining their lives.

It's not possible to do justice to the full range of talent to have emerged in the 1990s. Petr Václav is another director with only two features to his name. His first film *Marian* (1996) was primarily a social analysis of the life of a Roma boy raised in an orphanage, whose position in society leads inexorably, via segregated education, to a life of crime and his eventual suicide in an institution. A controversial subject clearly not destined for box office success, it was also made with considerable sensitivity and visual flair. It was one of the last films worked on by Ester Krumbachová and was also considerably enhanced by the evocative photography of Štěpán Kučera (son of cinematographer Jaroslav Kučera and Věra Chytilová). *Parallel Worlds* (*Paralelní světy*, 2001) was quite different. A collaboration with the French novelist, Marie Desplechin, it examines the last stages in the relationship between a successful architect and his insecure and emotionally demanding wife. An extremely clever film that foregrounds the unspoken fears and unacknowledged links

between individuals, its themes inevitably recall Antonioni. Its integration of story, acting, image, and rhythm asserts a hypnotic power that recalls French cinema and, like *Marian*, it is quite unlike other Czech films.

Another striking debut was Marek Najbrt's *Champions* (2004), an extremely dark take on contemporary society seen through the nation's obsession with ice hockey. The celebrated defeat of the Soviet Union in the 1969 World championships, the year after the suppression of the Prague Spring, has of course entered the realms of myth. Here, however, there are no heroes. Set in a desolate village on the Czech-German border, a representative bunch of misfits gathers in a pub to watch the championships on television. Fuelled by the prophetic visions of an alcoholic, the self-obsessed fans—the owner of a failed pub; Jarda, a bigoted invalid; the neurotic Pavel; Josef (who hopes his father wasn't a Roma); and the bus driver who provides their only link with the outside world—follow a much less successful course than the national team. Najbrt's bleak portrait of a world of alcoholism, debt, bigotry, racism, and infidelity trails far behind dreams of national glory and bears little resemblance to the fantasies of the new consumerism. A clever and multi-levelled film, it provides a sharp antidote to the reconciliatory charms of conventional Czech comedy.

Other films to provide a distinctive take on contemporary life include David Ondříček's debut film *Whisper* (*Šeptej*, 1996), a film about contemporary youth culture that soon acquired cult status and looked forward to his later success with *Loners*. Pavel Marek's *Dead Beetle* (*Mrtvej brouk*, 1998) and Benjamin Tuček's *Girly* (*Děvčatko*, 2002), while not totally successful, are also worth noting, as is Šulík's *City of the Sun*, which, began as a Slovak project, but subsequently announced itself polemically as a "Czecho-Slovak" film.

Šulík's film is set in the North Eastern industrial town of Ostrava, an area of high unemployment. Four friends decide to go into business for themselves after they are laid off following the privatisation of their factory. The characters of the men, both Czechs and

Slovaks, are strongly drawn, but their camaraderie and friendship are soon threatened by a society in which masculine roles are changing and traditional moral values are weakening. Echoing the work of British director Ken Loach, it is one of the first Czech or Slovak films to confront directly the issue of unemployment. At the same time, it preserves a genuine humanity and a quirky and ironic humor.

Off the Track

While *auteur* cinema was not a major element of Czech cinema even in the 1960s—with most directors maintaining a strong awareness of their audience—there have been a number of offbeat films produced that deserve to be better known. First amongst these are the films of Ivan Vojnár, who has now completed three feature length films.

Scripted by Ivan Arsenjev, *The Way through the Bleak Woods* (1997) was filmed in black-and-white cinemascope and makes striking use of landscape. Set just before the outbreak of the First World War, it tells the story of a dentist who leaves Vienna to practice in a small and remote community in the Šumava forest. Initially dispassionate, he is gradually drawn into the lives and conflicts of the community. It is the most strikingly visual film to have been produced since 1989 and recalls a wholly different way of making films. Its visual style is based on the qualities of old photographs—as Vojnár puts it, “the photographic picture as revived memoir.” His images—shining windows in remote cottages, muffled figures moving against the snow—stem, he believes, from a collective unconscious. Whatever the explanation, the elliptical narrative and the foregrounding of image (Jaromír Kačer) and music (Irena and Vojtěch Havel) make this an unusual film for the 1990s. A work of melancholic beauty, it offers an opportunity for contemplation and interaction rare in contemporary cinema.

In *Forest Walkers* (*Lesní chodci*, 2003), set unfashionably against the landscape of the northern industrial city of Ústí nad Labem, he tells the story of two male outsiders, Rufus and Čerčil, who, during the Communist period, become travellers and “forest walkers.” The film examines their relationships with two people who join them in their wanderings and also with their children, Little Rufus and Greta, who begin to reflect the problems of their parents. The film becomes more involving as it progresses with its juxtaposed stories. Its poetic quotations and reflections on Czech identity, and the triumph of the exceptional over the everyday, are perhaps a little too elliptical to take in at a single viewing. Andrew James Horton (<http://www.kinoeye.org/03/06/horton06.php>) argues that the film “... deserves credit for its originality in successfully combining sensitive character observation, film poetics, and philosophical study...” and could perhaps be interpreted as a metaphor on the position of small countries on the edge of the European Union.

The photography of Jaromír Kačer was also a distinctive feature of Tomáš Hejtmánek’s feature debut *Sentiment* (2003). The film is basically a tribute to František Vlácil (who died in 1999), the director of the unorthodox historical epic *Marketa Lazarová* (1966), which, in a 1998 poll of Czech critics was voted the best Czech feature film ever made. Before Vlácil’s death, Hejtmánek had recorded a number of interviews with him that he was unable to complete or turn into film. Here they are re-enacted with the help of actor Jiří Kodet, who gives a virtuoso performance in his speaking of Vlácil’s words, a performance that is almost entirely in close-up. The film adopts the unusual strategy of combining this with revisiting the locations where Vlácil shot *Marketa Lazarová*, *Valley of the Bees* (*Údolí včel*, 1967), and *Adelheid* (1969). Extracts from the soundtracks of these films are sometimes used with new images of the locations filmed in striking black-and-white. These play well against the images of the director (as acted by Kodet) in his old

age—a portrait of sometimes bitter isolation—and informative about his last years rather than his sources of inspiration.

The fact that a film of this sort was made about a major director indicates something unique about Czech film culture, particularly when one remembers that significant films have also been made about Pavel Juráček (Šulík's *The Key to Determining Dwarfs or the Last Voyage of Lemuel Gulliver* [*Klíč k určování trpaslíků aneb poslední cesta Lemuela Gullivera*], 2002), Věra Chytilová (Jasmina Blažević's *Věra*, 2003), and Ester Krumbachová (Chytilová's *Searching for Ester*, 2005)—reviewed in this issue. While *Věra* and *In Search of Ester* are very good documentaries, Šulík's film is also an important creative achievement and is worth discussing further.

Based on the diaries of Pavel Juráček, which were published the following year, it strongly re-evokes the period of the 1960s and early 1970s when Juráček was one of the leading writer-directors of the Czech New Wave. Before directing his own films, Juráček had worked with Jindřich Polák (*Ikaria XB-1*, also known as *Voyage to the End of the Universe* [*Ikaria XB-1*], 1963), Karel Zeman (*The Jester's Tale* [*Bláznova kronika*], 1964), and Jan Schmidt (*The End of August at the Hotel Ozone* [*Konec srpna v hotelu Ozón*], 1966). His most significant achievement was probably his adaptation of the third book of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* as *A Case for the Young Hangman* (*Případ pro začínajícího kata*, 1969), and much of *The Key to Determining Dwarfs* refers to the preparations for this film. Juráček died in 1989 (before the Velvet Revolution), his career effectively terminated by his refusal to collaborate with the regime favored by the occupiers. Basically a mockumentary, Šulík's film features Juráček's son, Marek, in the role of his father, constructing a film from the diaries, complete with specially filmed home movies and genuine archive footage. It provides a compelling portrait of the psychological milieu of the post-invasion period. The use of music by the late Luboš Fišer is strongly evocative, as is the photography, here very

much attuned to the look and feel of the black-and-white films of the period. Like Jakubisko, Šulík is a Slovak director but works in both countries.

We should also recognise the importance of independent and avant-garde film, which has barely surfaced in the commercial or festival context. *Dead Forest and Other Bullshit* (*Mrtvý les a jiný bulšit*), released as a feature in 2000, was a compilation of short films made by Pavel Marek in the late 1980s. Working with his friend, Roman Včelák as director of photography, he produced a range of idiosyncratic and surrealist-inspired films, notably *The Dead Forest*, the frightening tale of a fanatic mushroom picker and his strange end. The avant-garde has also reasserted itself through the films of artists such as Martin Blažíček, Martin Čihák, Jan Daňhel, and Petr Marek. The spirit of Jan Švankmajer can certainly be detected in Pavel Marek's films (he also appeared in Švankmajer's *Food* [*Jídlo*, 1992] and *Faust*). Daňhel has also worked with Švankmajer.

Documentary and Animation

From an international perspective, Czech documentary remains virtually unknown save for the specialist world of documentary festivals. This is the fate of documentary films everywhere, particularly where their subjects derive from local problems and interests. In her interview with Christina Stojanova in this issue, Helena Třeštíkova refers to the 1960s as a golden age of Czech documentary even though, like other important documentary schools, it remained virtually unknown abroad. Having said that, films by Václav Taborský and Jan Špáta did make their way into international distribution. Some significant work was produced even under normalization, and it is reassuring that documentaries have continued to find a market through television. In terms of production, numbers fell from a peak of 610 in 1990 to 250 in 1996, and were around 400 in 2004. Despite experiencing some periods of

crisis, Czech documentary film has maintained its high standards, marking a significant interaction with its television audience.

It is particularly gratifying to have a substantial coverage of documentary film in this issue of *KinoKultura*, with its articles on Karel Vachek, Helena Třeštková, and *Czech Dream*. While many older directors have continued to make a significant contribution, the medium- to full length feature documentary has come to attract increased attention. Although there are many approaches, the interactive approach favored by Vachek seems to have had a direct influence on a number of films, including Jan Gogola Jr.'s *Nonstop* (1998), a discussion of truth and meaning set against the background of a motorway service station; Martin Mareček's *Dust Games* (*Hry prachu*, 2002), focussing on rival sides in the demonstrations against the World Bank and IMF meetings in Prague in 2000, and *Source* (*Zdroj*, 2005), a powerful analysis of the political, social, and economic realities behind the construction of the BP oil pipeline in Azerbaijan.

Three other directors should be mentioned: Jana Ševčíková, Miroslav Janek, and Břetislav Rychlík. Ševčíková's *Piemule* (1984, released 1992), *Jakub* (1992), and *The Old Believers* (*Starověrci*, 2001) are remarkable works by any standard, examining the lives of isolated communities in Central Europe—Czech, Ruthenian, and Russian—with extraordinary empathy and sensitivity. Miroslav Janek, who worked as a cameraman and editor in the US (he edited Godfrey Reggio's *Powaqqatsi*, 1988) has won a number of awards with films such as *The Unseen* (*Nespatřené*, 1996), *Hamsa, I Am* (*Hamsa, já jsem*, 1999), *Vierka* (2005), and *Kha-chee-pae* (*Chačipe*, 2005). The subjects comprise a study of sight-impaired children and their relationship with the world through photography, the world of blind musicians, the training of a talented Roma singer, and the use of film cameras by children in a childrens' home.

In 2000, Janek worked together with Roman Vávra and Vít Janeček on the feature-length *Battle for Life* (*Bitva o život*). It traced life in the village of Bystré over a 12 month period. The title refers to a war game in which the participants re-enact the Battle for Janov, in which partisans confront the Germans alongside Russians, Americans, and the local fire brigade. While the directors originally planned to base their film on the Battle for Life, they soon found that this was but one of a multiplicity of stories in which there was no distinction between reality and carnival. The characters are given space to reflect more than the perspectives of their observers (that is, the filmmakers). Perhaps its unique quality lies in the way in which its material also becomes a celebration and an entertainment.

Břetislav Rychlík's work should be mentioned with reference to his film *One Year* (*Jeden rok*, 1999), a study of a year in the life of people living in the mountains on the Moravian-Slovakian border, and its companion piece, *God's Stone Quarry* (*Kamenolom Boží*, 2005), where he applied the same approach to those living against the industrial landscape of Northern Bohemia.

Czech Dream, of course, is a unique phenomenon—to the best of my knowledge, the only Czech documentary to attract real international attention. By filming and analysing the promotion of their fake hypermarket, Vít Klusák and Filip Remunda not only created a provocation that exploited the public but, more importantly, they exposed the values, the delusions, manipulations, and the logic of a consumer society that grinds on from day to day with its assumptions somehow immune to challenge.

If documentary is alive and well, the position of Czech animation is much more fragile. Czech cinema has enjoyed a worldwide reputation for animation since the 1950s, when the work of Jiří Trnka and Karel Zeman established the industry and its international position. Despite the ongoing work of Jan Švankmajer, in which live action plays an increasingly important role, animation has been under threat. The most important puppet filmmaker of the

1980s, Jiří Barta (*The Pied Piper* [*Krysař*], 1986), has failed to find funding to develop his work on *The Golem* (*Golem*) and there have been no genuine feature-length projects since the fall of Communism. Important new directors have emerged—Michaela Pavlátová (*Repeat* [*Repete*], 1995; *Carnival of the Animals* [*Karneval zvířat*], 2005) and Aurel Klimt (*The Fall* [*Pad*], 1999). The marketing of animation has increasingly taken the form of promoting omnibus or multi-episodic features. The first of these was *The Magnificent Six* (*Šest statečných*, 2000), in which six Czech and Slovak animators showcased their talents. Next was Jan Werich's *Fimfárum* (*Fimfárum Jana Wericha*, 2003), in which new and old adaptations of Werich's stories were combined under one heading. This was followed by *Fimfárum 2* (2006), a second selection, this time of all new versions. Aurel Klimt, the most distinctive talent of his generation, was involved in all three of these projects and it was significant that, after the rejection of the Film Law, he should have spoken of emigrating. Czech production fell from a total of 140 films in 1990 to 50 in 1996, and the situation was described as critical in the Ministry of Culture's report of 1997. Production, however, had risen again to 90 films by 2002.

Conclusion

Despite my somewhat gloomy reference to the death of the Czech New Wave, one would have to conclude that some of its directors are still active and innovative. Similarly, many of the talented directors of the Velvet Generation have managed to confirm the promise of their first films. Innovation has occurred in both feature and documentary film and in animation. Czech cinema has also had more than its share of commercial success in the domestic market. By the standards of many small national cinemas, this would count as a success.

Czech cinema, however, has experienced a system of producing feature films regularly since the early 1920s, together with a significant aesthetic history, particularly in the 1960s. By these criteria, it has not been able to replicate past successes, especially when it comes to international recognition. Many of the best films have been produced on shoestring budgets and, despite their originality, this often shows when compared with films from Western Europe. The absence of funds not only reduces the capacity to compete internationally but also the opportunity to develop the talents that undoubtedly exist (Ministry of Culture 24).¹

The talents of Czech craftsmen and technicians have been well demonstrated on a wide range of expensive international productions and co-productions, and both Svěrák and Hřebejk have shown an ability to compete in the international marketplace. Other directors could also achieve this with appropriate funding, support, and promotion. What remains disturbing, however, is the failure of Czech films to gain recognition at major European festivals. The fact that East-Central Europe no longer achieves the regular recognition that it once did suggests, one feels, that the “wall in the head” still exists.

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¹ According to the Ministry of Culture's report for 2004, the financial breakdown of the Czech audio-visual industry was comprised of 75% foreign commissions (including commercials), 20% domestic commercials, and 5% production of Czech films (24.).