

Pospíšil, Tomáš

Spies, bombers, liberators and lovers : images of Americans in Czech film

Brno studies in English. 2005, vol. 31, iss. 1, pp. [147]-154

ISBN 80-210-3928-0

ISSN 1211-1791

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/104209>

Access Date: 27. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

TOMÁŠ POSPÍŠIL

SPIES, BOMBERS, LIBERATORS AND LOVERS: IMAGES OF AMERICANS IN CZECH FILM

An attempt to locate representations of Americans in the body of Czech cinema production represents a challenge. Citizens of this important country have been seriously underrepresented on Czech screens, not only in the past, but – which is even more striking – also in recent times when strong new transatlantic ties were forged, economic and cultural exchange started to flourish and the Czech Republic became a new NATO member. With an annual production of approximately ten feature films, well over one hundred features have been made since 1990. However, only five of them include a main American character.

A possible reason behind this unlikely omission is that the figure of the foreigner has traditionally been occupied by a different representative of otherness – the German. In this manner films have merely followed an age-old practice of Czech national self-definition through negation. This obvious strategy has been widely utilized to deal with uneasy questions of one's identity in the face of the considerable cultural interrelatedness of both nations and their long shared histories.¹ The American as a representative of otherness thus faced a mighty competitor even during the Cold War when the United States became the communist world's most important adversary. When Americans did finally appear, it was hardly surprising to find them cast in the roles of spies, enemy soldiers, agitators, etc.

In this article I will focus predominantly on the period of the 1990s when strict ideological control of movie production ceased to exist and censorship – along with authors' self-censorship – for the most part disappeared. However, for reasons of comparison, I will also comment on a film from the Stalinist 1950s. This will help me to demonstrate the ideological reversal in the Czech filmmakers' approach to Americans and monitor their miraculous transformation from spies and aggressive militarists, plotting to eliminate the peaceful existence and spectacular accomplishments of Soviet style socialism, to thoughtful human beings, capable of remorse, empathy, and – most typically – falling in love with an attractive Czech woman.

Únos (The Hijacking), Jan Kadar, Elmar Klos (1952)

Perhaps the best possible example of an American spy can be found in the 1970s film *Tichý Američan v Praze* (The Quiet American in Prague; Josef Mach, Štěpán Skalský, 1977). This film – based on a very unsurprising set of polarities – was made at the time of the most severe “normalization” (in the newspeak of the day “normalization” meant the ruthless reestablishment of the dominance of the purged communist party after the Soviet invasion of 1968) and is currently unavailable: today’s video stores no longer carry this kind of material and even Czech television, desperate to recycle whatever it can in its vain attempts to rival the commercial TV stations, has not quite dared rerun such content in the new political climate.

To illustrate the same issues let us therefore return to a quarter of a century earlier and the depths of the 1950s. The political thriller *Únos* (The Hijacking) makes a strong point about the quality of the observation of human rights in 50s Czechoslovakia. When an ex-RAF man, now working for Czech Airlines, hijacks a plane to a United States military base in West Germany, most of the passengers – representing practically all walks of life – choose not to stay in the free world. Instead, they insist on being returned behind the barbed wire of the Iron Curtain as soon as possible. This decision mars the plans of the American authorities who attempt to use the wholesale defection for propaganda purposes: a diplomatic battle is raging at the United Nations where Czechoslovakia is being charged for its alleged human rights violations. The possible decision of the passengers to defect from their country could be used as a strong argument against it at the green table.

The only exception to the collective decision to return is represented – quite significantly – by a jazz musician: he is the only renegade to join the treacherous group of plotters; everybody else (a soldier, a worker, a scholar, a boxer, a film star, a mother with child, a communist secretary, and an engineer) remains singularly unimpressed by the dubious temptations of capitalism and American culture. To illustrate its nature the filmmakers decide to make use of the traditional blemish of United States’ reputation: racism. While the group is detained at the airforce base they are entertained by the local jazz orchestra and theatre group. Thus they witness a slapstick minstrel show performance to which all of them – save for the jazz player – react with utter contempt. In a hilarious moment, while the show is going on, the detained passengers, acting on the advice of the secretary, start eating secret documents lest they fall into the hands of the American authorities. The papers in question are the plans for a state of the art steelworks that the engineer was taking to the Ministry of Industry in Prague.

When seduction fails, intimidation and open repression are employed. At a climactic moment of the film the Czechoslovak hostages are rounded up and put up against the wall. While they are being searched, they start defiantly humming a melody. As the camera pans from face to face, it becomes clear that the melody is that of the Internationale. The obvious use of one of the great scenes of Casa-

blanca (a movie that has been premiered in the Czech Republic only recently) indicates that the filmmakers had privileged access to relatively recent Hollywood film production, some 50 years prior to their fellow-citizens. Likewise one is once again reminded that successful scenes can be repeatedly recycled in the service of whatever ideological commission.

A very skillful connection is made between the traditional enemies (Germans) and the more recent ones (Americans). While the engineer is being taken away from the group to be offered a job at a German tank factory, in front of the heavy weaponry he sees regiments of marching German soldiers. "They are our friends now", the American commander assures him, indicating that together they might attempt to regain the Sudetenland that had been made German-free only a couple of years before. Moreover, the engineer, whose wife died in a World War II air raid, finds out it was the very American commander, who had dropped the fatal bomb. The only somewhat more likeable American is the hostages' interpreter, a Czech-American with a working-class background. Thus at least some glimpse of hope can be discerned for members of this hostile nation. Yet even this moderate person closes ranks with his upper class commanders at the end and ends up as an enemy: not thoroughly evil but rather manipulated against his own class interest, we are told. In the strictly bi-polar world of the Cold War there was no place for conciliatory middle men.

Naturally, the determination of the Czechoslovak everymen and women prevails. Much to the dismay of the officials of the State Department one hostage escapes and notifies the Czechoslovak consulate in Munich, and with the help of the local left-wing press, the news is spread throughout the world. Thus the charges at the United Nations are dropped and those who brought them are openly ridiculed (by no one else but the Soviet representative!). The movie ends with the triumphant return of the hostages and a massive celebration of socialism and its peaceful heavy industries.

As strange as it might seem, the personalities in charge of this work, the directors Jan Kadar and Elmar Klos, continued to make movies and in 1965 became the first Czechoslovak directors to receive an Academy Award for the best foreign feature, the wonderfully humane holocaust story *Obchod na korze* (The Shop on Main Street).

***Knoflíkáři* (The Buttoners), Petr Zelenka (1997)**

It does not come as a surprise that after the collapse of communism the image of the American soldier has undergone a significant revision. With Czech membership of NATO slowly becoming a reality, a new species arrives on Czech screens: the American soldier full of feeling, empathy and remorse.

The Buttoners by Petr Zelenka owes a lot to the cinema of the independent US filmmaker Jim Jarmusch. Similarly to Jarmusch's *Mystery Train* Zelenka examines different, yet mutually intertwined, stories occurring at the same time;

substantial parts of the movie take place in a cab, thus reminding us of Jarmusch's collection of taxi episodes *Night on Earth*. Zelenka's postmodern feature, which could also bear the title *A Night in Prague*, is a playful meditation on tragic ironies of fate, modernity, the atomic bomb; and also on the therapeutic qualities of the American way of swearing (which supposedly allows for a better release of one's negative feeling than, say, Japanese). Zelenka populates the screen with an array of quite bizarre characters and creates an imaginary world where ordinary laws of probability or cause and effect do not quite apply. In a key episode – that evinces a touch of magic realism or, perhaps, postmodern pastiche – the American pilot who dropped the bomb on Hiroshima appears live on air in an alternative Prague radio station to confess what he had done and to seek absolution from the listeners:

I'd like to apologize for what I did. I believe people are responsible for their actions and it bothers me that I killed so many people – even if they were Japs – and if anybody thinks **he or she**² can forgive me then please call me here at the radio.

Symptomatically for this ironic film, he receives the much-desired telephone call from a shocked psychotherapist who has just killed two people in a road accident.

Mňága – Happy End, Petr Zelenka (1996)

This independently produced feature by “Petr Zelenka and his friends” is a cinematic reflection on the impact of newly arrived capitalism, particularly in the world of the media. This mockumentary uses the popular Czech band Mňága a Žďorp to poke fun at the current state of Czech and international show-business. Zelenka particularly ridicules the tendency to produce “managerial” bands – such as the Backstreet Boys or their Czech permutation Lunetic – according to the previously defined demands of the market. First we encounter a British producer who has the necessary know-how that actually predetermines the band's style and public profile, down to the appearance of the individual players. He uses a computer program called “The Band-Maker” which already contains a virtual band along with the songs. Only then are matching personalities sought, trained how to play their instruments, perform, handle the media, etc.

Things get funnier still when the original production company is taken over by a giant international fruit corporation. The company, run by an American CEO, forces the musicians to eat fruit on a daily basis, perform in fruit costumes, appear in fruit commercials, etc. When the exhausted and disgusted players refuse to go on (they fake mental illness or simply run away), another band gets hired instead to impersonate the original one. Needless to say, the audience does not even notice. Thus the original players form their own independent band – Happy

End – and continue playing, this time around without the pressure, without the promotion, without the crowds, just for the fun of it.

The CEO's character – whose most poignant statement in the debate with the original band's leader is the inevitable assertion of authority "you fuck with me, I'll fuck with you!" – cannot be regarded as a representation of a fully-fledged, fully-developed American humanity. Rather than offering us the image of a complex person "made in the USA", the filmmakers resort to a rather clichéd notion of the American as a ruthless and graceless entrepreneur – a shorthand solution obviously prompted by the determinations of the film's genre of social satire.

Nahota na prodej (Nudity for Sale), Vít Olmer (1993)

As the title of this feature suggests, the major themes of this imitation of an American buddy-thriller are prostitution and organized crime, both highly topical issues in the raw world of Czech capitalism in the early 1990s. The film also attempts to comment critically on the rise of a new power elite, sinister figures who have made their fortunes in the fluid and rather chaotic transition from a state controlled to market economy. Throughout the rather formulaic narrative we follow the attempts of a young investigative journalist Egon and his world-weary friend (who happens to be an ex-cop, now working as a private-eye) to eliminate a Romani prostitution ring and uncover its ties with the new white big time gangsters. The American connection is the third member of the team: Nancy is a student who comes to Prague to study recent developments in Czech journalism. This constellation enables the filmmakers to construct a whole number of contrasts and polarities: Czech skepticism and cynicism vs. American idealism, Czech macho attitudes vs. American feminism, Czech racism vs. American sympathy for the underdog and belief in Affirmative Action, Czech disastrous eating and drinking habits vs. the American middle-class obsession with health food. When the "politically incorrect" Egon instructs Nancy about the high crime rates of the local Romani population, echoing a very common Czech attitude, she reminds him about the necessity of special treatment of socially disadvantaged racial groups; when he attempts to keep her out of their dangerous nightly investigations, she accuses him of being a "male chauvinist pig". As the three friends relax halfway through the film, the two Czechs find it remarkably amusing that back home Nancy's dog has a psychiatrist and Nancy brushes her pet's teeth on a daily basis.

Yet matters turn out fine in the end. Stripping the outer cynical shell of the Czech males, one discovers that they are quite idealistic, too (risking their lives, jobs and reputation for the sake of virtually enslaved women), and that Nancy's American-style feminism (by definition suspect in the Czech lands) does not extend as far as turning down Egon's erotic attention: we knew all along that this plucky – if somewhat naïve girl – was all right!

Thus a strong Czech-American bond is established: forged in the heat of the night among bloodthirsty, knife-wielding gypsies (and their gun-waving white

allies), crowned in bed with the seal of love. “I’ll come back” whispers Nancy to the suddenly saddened Egon in the airport lobby upon her departure. The most beautiful Barbie doll she promises to bring back to the little Romani girl who had been rescued from her family, will be her contribution to the solution of the Czech Gypsy problem.

Vůně vanilky (The Scent of Vanilla), Jiří Strach (2002)
Návrat ztraceného ráje (Paradise Regained), Vojtěch Jasný (1999)

For the rest of the article let us remain in the pleasing realm of transatlantic romance since both the *Scent of Vanilla* and *Paradise Regained* are centered on a Czech – American love affair. Despite the different outcome of both liaisons there are several significant parallels. In both features we encounter a young attractive Czech female dating a young handsome American male who, in due time, expresses the inevitable marriage proposal. Yet soon we find out that their relationships cannot be consummated, due to some unresolved problems on the part of the heroine. Then the protagonists reach a blissful moment of reconciliation, harmony and physical love only to arrive at the crucial moment of decision. The United States in both films functions in its well-established role of the Promised Land where people get “a second chance”. Only in this mythical space can powerful age-old curses of Central Europe be broken and people gain the opportunity to live happily ever after.

The cinematic construction of Czech femininity appears equally traditional: as though to illustrate the Czech saying that “love passes through the stomach” both heroines are excellent cooks and first-rate managers of the household. The levels of intimacy achieved while preparing food are hardly matched by those when the couples actually make love. Although both women have seen the world and speak good English, they live in the countryside and their major asset – in addition to their attractive appearance – is precisely their domesticity.

The Scent of Vanilla, set in western Bohemia in the last days of World War II, focuses on the troublesome fate of Annie, who lives with her conservative and intolerant brother-in-law and his totally unbearable mother on a remote farm. She is forced to do so, because she is raising her sister’s orphaned children. Her happiest years so far have been those of her apprenticeship in London, which she has had to leave because of her sister’s early death. Her dream is to open her own soda shop in the nearby town. When the American troops arrive, she starts interpreting for them and soon falls in love with a handsome army scout named Stanley. Yet, Annie cannot sever the ties binding her to her existence in the old world. When her brother in law displays some semblance of elementary humanity, she makes the unhappy choice to stay and keep raising her sister’s children.

Paradise Regained is the work of Vojtěch Jasný, one of the great personalities of Czech cinema of the 1960s. The movie is a loose sequel to his masterpiece *Všichni dobří rodáci (All the Good Countrymen, 1968)*, which dealt – in unique

poetic terms – with the collectivization of the Czech (or more precisely Moravian) village at the end of the 1940s and which was banned soon after the Soviet invasion in 1968. In a parallel subplot of the movie *Jasný*, an exile himself, examines the issue of living away from one's country and trying to reconnect with the regained community of his youth.

In the film *Jasný* presents his alter-ego, an ageing Czech filmmaker now teaching film in New York City, who returns home to revisit his native Moravian village. Soon he is followed by his photographer Adam. This Adamic American has fallen in love with an attractive young widow nicknamed *Pampeliška* (Dandelion) who visited the filmmaker in New York City. The fleeting one-night stand Adam and Dandelion experience during her brief stay develops into a serious emotional attachment on his part. Yet we find out that Dandelion cannot agree to marry him, precisely because she loves him, too. The reason behind this paradoxical attitude is a curse on the female lineage of her family: in the first film (i.e. *All the Good Countrymen*) *Jasný* showed the tragic fates of four male characters who became attached to her mother, the local “merry widow”, and paid for it with their lives. With Dandelion's husband dead as well, the current count is five. The innocent American is thus faced with the decision whether to risk life for the sake of this mysterious Czech beauty. In the end he decides to go for it since “six is his lucky number” and he can enlist the mythical power of the United States on his side. It is only there that one can hope to break this dark spell and finally consummate the relationship.

The empty, pristine American beach, where the three generations of characters (i.e. the filmmaker and his wife, Adam and Dandelion, her son & his dog) are engaged in play in the final moments of the film, then becomes the closest one can get to paradise on Earth. Yet there is another paradise, one that can no longer be reached. As the sun sinks toward the sea and as the aerial shots of the American landscape merge into those of the garden-like Moravia, we realize that the paradise one is truly longing for has already passed. It can only be regained in our memories.

Conclusion

In the realm of mainstream film production it is a rare occurrence for a film to rise beyond the mere perpetuation of popular clichés about oneself or the other. More often than not the construction of characters' identities as national subjects (or as gendered subjects) is based on a mere repetition of many a time-tested notion. Even at a time of major political changes when allegiances are switched and official enemies suddenly turn into allies, one set of myths is comfortably exchanged for another, polarities are reversed, and the same old story is told all over again. In this magical sleight of hand an aggressive American soldier becomes a beloved liberator and a bomber killing innocent people in the wartime city of Ostrava yields to a thoughtful bomber ready to confess and seek absolution for what he has done.

As I have tried to demonstrate, for all their accomplishments and (sometimes accidental) charms, the Czech films featuring American characters cannot aspire to attain the rare status of being able to transcend the traditional commercial film's limitations. Between the extreme poles of enemies and lovers one finds only entertaining caricatures that more or less reflect mainstream opinions and attitudes. Czech viewers have yet to wait for a film that would offer a more nuanced, multifaceted representation of what it is to be American. For the time being, such representation is elsewhere.

Endnotes

- ¹ The most typical method was that of gross stereotyping of Germans along very predictable ideological lines; particularly in the period following the German occupation the traditional Czech resentments received a powerful new impulse. It was only in the more open intellectual and political climate of the sixties that several feature films – such as *Kočár do Vídně* (*Carriage to Vienna*, 1966) or *Adelheid* (1969) were made that challenged this practice and in place of the seductive (as well as reductive) nationalist polarities of black and white created a world with considerable shades of gray (Voráč, 2001).
- ² The postmodern treatment of time enters the script even on the level of language: notice the gender neutral use of the personal pronouns.

Works Cited

Films

- Adelheid* (1969). Dir. František Vlácil.
Knoflíkáři (1997). Dir. Petr Zelenka.
Kočár do Vídně (1966). Dir. Karel Kachyňa.
Mňága – Happy End (1996). Dir. Petr Zelenka.
Mystery Train (1989). Dir. Jim Jarmush.
Nahota na prodej (1993). Dir. Vít Olmer.
Návrat ztraceného ráje (1999). Dir. Vojtěch Jasný.
Night on Earth (1991). Dir. Jim Jarmush.
Obchod na korze (1965). Dir. Jan Kadar, Elmar Klos.
Tichý Američan v Praze (1977). Dir. Josef Mach, Štěpán Skalský.
Únos (1952). Dir. Jan Kadar, Elmar Klos.
Všichni dobří rodáci (1968). Dir. Vojtěch Jasný.
Vůně vanilky (2002). Dir. Jiří Strach.

Voráč, Jiří (2001). “Český film ve znamení nové vlny”. In Koschmal, Nekula, Rogall, eds. *Češi a Němci, dějiny – kultura – politika*. Praha and Litomyšl: Paseka, 2001: 198–202.