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Allied by Election

Thanks to the decrease in the pressure applied by the ruling Communist party, the Czech culture, non-fiction films including, blossomed in the 1960s. It became easier for documentarists to explore and openly address themes which were formerly taboos. In *Fates* (*Osudy*, 1964) Jaroslav Šikl showed how repressions during the era of the cult of personality affected the lives of three various people. Radúz Činčera's *Fog* (*MLha*, 1966) took us into the backstage of Theatre Na Zábřadlí and revealed the absurdity of the social system. In *Citizens with a Crest* (*Občané s erbem*, 1966), Vít Olmer focused on Czech noblemen who were practically erased from the general discourse after the 1948 Czechoslovak coup d'état.

A breakthrough came in 1968 with the end of the censoring process. Šikl's and Olmer's documentaries which were kept locked away were now allowed to be screened in cinemas. Jan Němec made a film about the student protests at the Strahov Dormitory titled *The Strahov Demonstration* (*Strahovské události*, 1968). Jaromil Jireš started working on his *Tribunal* (*Tribunál*, 1969) observing the activity of the artistic committee deciding whether to authorise an Emil Filla exhibition. Jan Špáta, who usually avoided political themes, travelled to the countryside to make his poetic documentary *Unploughed Balks* (*Nezorané meze*, 1968) in which he interviewed farmers persecuted by the regime for refusing to enter agricultural cooperatives and take part in the collectivisation of the countryside. Karel Vachek finished his first feature film.

The Tišnov native first drew attention to himself with his FAMU graduation film *Moravian Hellas* (*Moravská Hellas*, 1963). With an ironic (and self-deprecating) detached view, the film observes traditional folklore festivities in the town of Strážnice. This 30-minute-long combination of a stylised report and essay was (rightfully) interpreted as a mockery of authorities and the pathos and hollowness of a pseudo-folk culture. The film was awarded a Special Jury Mention at the IFF Karlovy

Vary, but shortly after that, it was banned and the director along with the film's cinematographer Jozef Ort-Šnep were blacklisted.

The fate of *Moravian Hellas* was to be sealed by President Antonín Novotný himself who became one of the protagonists of a film Vachek made after a five-year-long hiatus. In it, the nonconformist documentarist ironically recorded the end of Novotný's era and the election of his successor. Shortly after the change of conditions in 1968, Vachek introduced a project titled *Allied by Election* (Spříznění volbou, 1968) to Krátký Film Praha. In reaction to the rise of reformist powers, Vachek agreed with the head dramaturge of the Studio of Documentary Film Václav Borovička to film the then political goings-on.

"It was clear he wasn't making a journal, an objective description, but rather using a "keyhole" approach." [1] reminisced Borovička later. The 85-minute-long film whose title was inspired by J. W. Goethe's novel of the same name (and was supposed to refer to the changes in "political marriages") indeed offered a different perspective on the ruling elite than the Czechoslovak audiences were used to from the news. Much like Robert Drew in his ground-breaking film *Primary* (1960) and other western documentarists inspired by him, also Vachek chose a veristic style.

Such high degree of verism when a documentarist becomes the fabled "fly on the wall" wouldn't be possible without the latest technical equipment available at the time: a contact sound recording on a Nagra tape recorder, a light mobile 16 mm Eclair camera with a variable focal length, a sensitive film stock suitable for poor lighting. Six hours and twenty minutes of recorded synchronous footage was subsequently edited and copied to a 35 mm film stock for screening in cinemas.

The documentary was filmed from 14th to 30th March 1968 when the election of the President of the Czechoslovak Republic was held at the Prague Castle. Vachek and his crew filmed the debating politicians at plazas, in corridors and public forums as well as behind closed doors where the public didn't have any access. In fragments from deliberations, meetings, and ceremonial acts, we see individual candidates and other key figures of the Prague Spring such as Alexandr Dubček, Ludvík Svoboda, Josef Smrkovský, Čestmír Císař, Oldřich Černík, Ota Šik, Eduard Goldstücker and Gustáv Husák. These influential men excitedly talk about a big renewal process and

ponder over democracy, humanism, and economic issues. The film culminates with the election of Ludvík Svoboda.

In the tradition of “direct cinema,” there is no commentary and music in the film. Orientation in the film is made easier by brief captions introducing some speakers, places, and providing additional information (Novotný’s abdication). In his authorial explication, Vachek described his method with the following words: “A drama, in which we don’t interfere [...], we will observe and from a close distance record both audio and video so we won’t have to comment or lyrically disguise the absence of facts later: record in real proportions – focus on the non-official speeches of the representants in the middle of an event whose official nature is given by its political character.”^[2]

More than grand words, gestures, and factual connections, Vachek was interested in informal aspects of the behind-the-scenes scheming, the atmosphere in rooms, relations between politicians, and their personalities. On one hand, individual protagonists are filmed in the context of the events, so the attention isn’t focused exclusively on them, on the other hand, the camera zooms on objects, people and parts of faces and bodies, takes them out of context and strips them of their original symbolic meaning.

Vachek capitalises on the fact that (unlike their American counterparts) the party officials weren’t used to pretend, and media image wasn’t a concept they would knowingly work with. By catching them off guard – thanks to the nature of the improvised shoot without long preparation preceding it – he shows their real colours and takes them off their pedestals. They may be deciding the future of the country, but they’re comical and simply humanly awkward. Vachek doesn’t achieve the effect of inappropriateness only by capturing private conversations but also by putting side by side situations, statements and details which are banal and noble; low and high.

Drawing attention to the presence of the camera which helps to shape some situations paradoxically contributed to the authenticity of the footage. Several times in the film, we see the crew and hear the discussions of the filmmakers with the politicians who sometimes point out the presence of the camera or cautiously ask sound engineer Zbyněk Mader “Did you catch this?” The relaxedness of these

conversations and the very fact they could have been filmed is a testimony to the changes in the system and the social climate. The powerful stopped being unreachable and untouchable. In another scene, the camera films a microphone placed near a keyhole secretly recording a conversation in another room. The compositions aren't flawless, the footage is sometimes chaotic due to rapid changes. Vachek doesn't use these "flaws" just to demask the politicians' struggle for power but also the filming process itself and thus disrupts the illusion of objectivity which was for a long time attributed to documentaries.

The optimistic sentiment present in the film didn't last long. When Jiřina Skalská started editing this "recording of hope, deceit and hints of compromises"[3], Czechoslovakia was invaded by the Warsaw Pact armies. The editing process was finished in autumn and *Allied by Election* appeared in cinemas on 8th November 1968, at a time when everything was different. The report on shifts in high politics became a tragicomic testimony of unfulfilled ideals, a nostalgic look back on what could have been. In 1968, the film won the Czech Film and Television Union Award and in March 1969 it was included in the Czechoslovak collection for the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen, but then it disappeared from the cinemas for 20 years.

Vachek's "rough, unembellished but all the more persuasive documentary about democratic revolution in Czechoslovak socialism"[4] may be the most famous, but not the only film recounting the events of 1968 in Czechoslovakia. Many film crews captured the invasion itself.

The recorded footage can be seen in *Oratorio for Prague* (Oratorium pro Prahu, 1968), *Seven Days to Remember* (1990) and *Confusion 68* (Zmatek 68, 1990). In his *Ten Points* (Deset bodů, 1969), Milan Maryška captured a three-day-long occupation strike of university students in November 1968.

In 1990, *Allied by Election* won the Goldem Camera at the IFF Berlin. In the early 1990s, Vachek, just like other proscribed artists, was rehabilitated, returned from exile and was able to continue with his penetrating reflections of Czech political and social situation.

Notes:

[1] Quote by Martin Švom, *Karel Vachek etc.* Praha: Akademie múzických umění 2008, p. 61.

[2] Spříznění volbou. *Filmové informace* 19, 1968, no. 43 (23rd October), p. 12.

[3] Peter Hames, *Československá nová vlna*. Praha: Levné knihy 2008, p. 260.

[4] Josef Škvorecký, *Nejdražší umění a jiné eseje o filmu*. Praha: Books and Cards 2010, p. 153.