

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 31. 5. 2023

# Smugglers of Death

In the campaign against revisionism which started in the middle of 1957, the conservative course in Czechoslovakia was tightened. In the film industry, the situation escalated by a verbal attack of the party leaders on selected filmmakers at the Banská Bystrica Film Festival in February and March 1959. The production of a representative title of the new ideological direction, *Smugglers of Death* (Kráľ Šumavy, 1959), started shortly after that.

The film suited the efforts of the Ministries of Defence and Interior to create a favourable portrayal of the Border Patrol guarding the Czechoslovak borders in the 1950s, making sure there were no illegitimate border crossings. The story is actually set in 1948, when the borders weren't guarded by the Border Patrol, but rather by relevant units of the National Security Corps.<sup>[1]</sup> But as period reports from the production mentioned, the thrilling drama was supposed to show the resolve of all previous and present border guards to defend our country against intruders.

It was also presumed that the film's genre would increase its attractiveness. The representatives of Czechoslovak Film started to take into account the preferences of Czech audiences and wanted to present an ideologically suitable alternative to western "genre films." Modern socialist cinema, as represented by *Smugglers of Death*, a prototypical film of a completed cultural revolution, was supposed be promoting the party and its ideas and at the same time be attractive to viewers. While the propaganda effects of the film cannot be properly measured, the interest of the viewers was evidenced by more than four million sold tickets. To no surprise, the film was the most successful title of 1960.

The author of the synopsis was writer and editor of the *Czechoslovak Soldier* (Československý voják) magazine Rudolf Kalčík. The selection of the theme wasn't surprising as Kalčík himself served in the Border Patrol in Šumava. Furthermore, his

ideologically conscious synopsis responded to new requirements imposed on artistic production. He offered his text to the Barrandov Film Studios in June 1957, a time when the criticism of revisionist tendencies was gaining momentum.

As the management of Czechoslovak Film heeded warnings from the party, it started preferring substantiating themes. *Smugglers of Death* also fulfilled the political requirements with its attractive genre. Kalčík situated his tendentious story to Šumava in 1948, where several men heroically guard their socialist homeland from dangerous Western agents and smugglers, just as the titular mythical character, smuggling illegal refugees to Germany through unpredictable swamps.<sup>[2]</sup> But Kalčík wasn't the first one to exploit the dramatic potential of foreign countries.

After the events of February 1948, the borderlands proved ideal as a location of socialism-building novels. After the violent expulsion of Germans, it was necessary to stabilise local industry and agriculture and repopulate the desolate villages. In literature of this type, the danger was often personified by German-speaking characters. Similar motifs can be found in films such as *Border Village* (1948) by Jiří Krejčík and *The Lost Track* (1955) depicting the Border Patrol and their loyal dogs.<sup>[3]</sup>

The second title was made by Karel Kachyňa who was chosen as the appropriate candidate to direct *Smugglers of Death*. With his film *At that Time, At Christmas...* (Tenkrát o Vánocích, 1958), Kachyňa contributed to the rehabilitation of adventure films and he saw himself as a creator of hard-boiled "manly" films, as evidenced by one of his answers in an interview conducted during the shooting of *Smugglers of Death*: "Essentially, I like films about real people, real men. I don't like intimate stories. I am satisfied with making films with military themes and themes such as this one."<sup>[4]</sup>

Together with Kalčík and František A. Dvořák, Kachyňa expanded the synopsis into a script which was approved without major reservations. The production started in April 1959. As the film's cinematographer, Kachyňa chose his collaborator from the Army Film Josef Illík. Due to unusual compositions using various focal lengths and unexpected angles and movements, Kachyňa and Illík designed and discussed a complete visual layout of the film in advance. Their ambition was to achieve artistically impressive shots designed not only to amaze the viewers, but also to affect them

ideologically and express the psychology of the film's characters.<sup>[5]</sup>

The cinematography also enhances the heroic image of the film's heroes embodying courage and selflessness. Radovan Lukavský as NSC Lieutenant Václav Kota and Jiří Vala as Constable Karel Zeman, two exemplary representatives of good and manly heroes, are often shot from below in scenes modelled after socially-realistic art.

The filmmakers were allowed to shoot at the military proving ground Dobrá voda. For the purpose of the shoot, army explosive ordnance disposal specialists created an artificial swamp – they set off explosive charges and diverted water from the Prášily brook to the craters. The army also provided the crew with props and other material for free. Despite the treacherousness of the Šumava exteriors (Hartmanice, Prášily, Kvilda), the shooting itself went smoothly and the film was completed in the autumn of 1959. Its copy was approved by the management of nationalised film industry without any reservations and Kachyňa and Illík received a bonus for exemplary work.

In addition to an excellent reception by audiences, the film also received favourable reviews. They praised the exemplary socialist hero and mentioned a successful combination of ideology and attractive genre.<sup>[6]</sup> Jaroslav Boček thought it was an “honest and good start of Czech socialist adventure film.”<sup>[7]</sup>

While Kalčík's novelisation of the script written for Naše vojsko magazine helped to keep the film in general awareness, this impressive example of the Barrandov Studios production capabilities wasn't able to make a breakthrough abroad. At the last minute, the film was sent to the San Francisco Film Festival, but it attracted attention only in the Eastern Bloc countries, mainly GDR and USSR, where the sub-genre of border film already established a tradition.

The stylistically elaborate visuals of the film pointing out the artificiality of representation, seems to contradict the proclaimed endeavours to achieve a realistic expression. In order to achieve this expression, the shooting took place in rough swampy terrain. The film itself thus finds itself on the border. Between genuineness (and subjectivity) of the new wave which was about to appear in Czech cinema, and a stereotypical black-and-white perspective with clearly defined spheres of light and shadow; good and evil.

But the conformity to period ideological schemes doesn't change the fact that *Smugglers of Death* is an artistically extraordinary title. It's, in fact, both: a captivating, atmospheric and technically excellent thriller as well as a problematic glorification of the repressive bodies of the Communist regime helping to shape the image of enemies of the state.

During the period of normalisation, two films set in the borderlands tried to follow the success of Kachyňa's film, *The Black Wolf* (Černý vlk, 1971) by Kachyňa's assistant Stanislav Černý, and *Rough Life at Planina* (Drsná Planina, 1979) by Jaroslav Soukup. The story of the real King of Šumava, a real smuggler escaping evading capture for many years, was reconstructed in the novel *Návrat Krále Šumavy* (The Return of the King of Šumava) which was adapted by David Ondříček into a three-episode-series *The King of Šumava: The Phantom of the Dark Land* (Král Šumavy: Fantom temného kraje). But the times and ideology have changes and the former villain threatening socialist order became a good guy facing evil Communists.

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**Smugglers of Death** (Král Šumavy, Czechoslovakia, 1959), director: Karel Kachyňa, screenplay: František A. Dvořák, Karel Kachyňa, Rudolf Kalčík, director of photography: Josef Illík, music: Miloš Vacek, cast: Radovan Lukavský, Jiří Vala, Jiřina Švorcová, Jaroslav Marvan, Stanislav Remunda, Miloslav Holub, Jiří Holý, Ilja Prachař, Eva Jiroušková et al. Film Studios Barrandov, 89 min.

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## Notes:

[1] It wasn't until 1950 that the Border Patrol of NCS was aided by the army. The Border Patrol was charged with full protection of the borders with a law passed in June 1951.

[2] According to the socialist popular culture, the legendary King of Šumava was the Sudeten German Kilián "Franz" Nowotný. The novel *Návrat Krále Šumavy* (2012) works with a version that it was, in fact, Josef Hasil, originally a member of the Border Patrol. Another possible candidate was gamekeeper Jan Zíka.

[3] Shortly after *Smugglers of Death*, cinemas screened the anthology diptych *No Entrance* (Vstup zakázán, 1959) by František Vlácil and Milan Vošmik set also in the

borderlands.

[4] Oldřich Adamec, Na močálech se natáčí smrt. Karel Kachyňa vypráví o svém novém filmu „Král Šumavy“. *Kino* 14, 1959, no. 12 (11<sup>th</sup> June), p. 184.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Jiří Hrbas, Nový Kachyňův film. *Film a doba*, 1960, no. 2, pp. 131–133.

[7] Jaroslav Boček, Král Šumavy. *Kultura* 4, 1960, no. 1 (7<sup>th</sup> January), p. 4