

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 24. 10. 2022

The Joke

Milan Kundera started writing his first novel in the early 1960s. Finished in December 1965, *The Joke* was approved by censors and published in the spring of 1967.

Addressing a taboo topic, about the disruption of the collectivized rural areas and political oppression in the 1950s, the book quickly sold out. A total of 117, 1000 books were published in two reprints. Western readers showed great interest as well. Against the backdrop of the Prague Spring, a year after the book was published, it was awarded the Union of Czechoslovak Writers Award and made into a film.

Kundera had some objections to a previous adaptation of his work – the tragicomedy *Nobody Gets the Last Laugh* (Nikdo se nebude smát). That's why from the beginning he worked on *The Joke* together with director Jaromil Jireš, the author of the emotional drama *The Cry* (Křik, 1963), who for years had been looking for a suitable next project. In the meantime, he only made the short *The Log Cabin* (Srub, 1966), the medium-length film *Romance* for the Hrabalesque composition *Pearls of the Deep* (Perličky na dně, 1965) and two documentaries. The film *White Birches in the Autumn* (Bílé břízy na podzim), which he had adapted together with Arnošt Lustig during his military service, was rejected. The historical screenplay *Sky-Blue Rapids* (Azurové peřeje) that he had made with Karel Michal was not executed either.

After the lyrical, cinéma vérité *The Cry*, Jireš wanted to try something else. With Kundera's polyphonic contemplation of human powerlessness in the context of history, he could make – instead of an intimate individual story – a drama involving social criticism not unlike, for instance, Antonín Máša's *Looking Back* (Ohlédnutí, 1968) or Evald Schorm's *Courage for Every Day* (Každý den odvahu, 1965).

Jireš probably chose the story also because of his growing interest in South-East Moravia, where in 1967 he made his short film *King Game* (Hra na krále), capturing the Ride of the Kings, a Moravian-Slovak festival, in Vlčnov. He was in touch with Vlčnov

residents when executing *The Joke* as well, and he again turned his attention to them in 1969 in his documentaries *Grandpa* (Dědáček) and *Vincenc Moštek's and Šimon Pešl's Journey from Vlčnov to Prague in the year of our Lord 1969* (Cesta do Prahy Vincence Moštky a Šimona Pešly z Vlčnova l. p. 1969). The protagonist of *The Joke* comes from the same part of Moravia as well.

Jireš and Kundera were writing the screenplay while the novel itself was still being censored. The literary basis for the film hit that wall as well. The authorities were assessing the screenplay in April 1967. However, it was only approved for production in the following year, after the previous inspection structures had broken up. A similar fate befell *Case for the New Hangman* (Případ pro začínajícího kata, 1969) by Pavel Juráček, who described the complications with the approval of his and Jireš's screenplays in his diaries from the time.

While the novel *The Joke* has four different narrators, the film only has one main protagonist: Ludvík Jahn. During the Stalinist era, in jest he had sent a postcard to his girlfriend, a classmate, saying, „Optimism is the opium of mankind! A healthy spirit stinks of stupidity. Long live Trotsky!” However, she handed it over to the university officials. As punishment, Jahn was expelled from the Party and from the university and sentenced to do six years on a work brigade especially for enemies of the Republic.

The main part of the drama takes place several years later, with Ludvík still experiencing an inner crisis and unable to live in the present because of his past. He is a captive of his memories, old grievances, and disappointments, which keep interfering in his present due to the close connection of the different time lines. Ludvík encounters the old situations and their participants on the street, in his dreams or when looking in the mirror, constantly haunted by his past. When he happens to meet Helena, the wife of the former classmate responsible for the destruction of his career, he decides to seduce her to get revenge for his lost youth.

Even though the film only switches between different time lines, and not also narrators like the novel, Ludvík meets the different characters, and their confrontation gives rise to one of the central ideas of the novel: everyone has their own truth, lives in their own lies, opportunistically adapting them to survive and

succeed in the given circumstances.

Jireš's drama does not form a coherent system either, being rather a series of associated fragments edited by Jireš's former fellow student Josef Valušiak, proving his talent in a feature film for the first time. Images and sounds are layered over each other rather than linearly placed one after the other. Expressing the subjectivity of human perception, the merging of time lines and the inability to anchor in the present moment is reflected by the camera as well, sometimes taking over Ludvík's perspective.

Kundera was satisfied with the balanced composition and rhythm of the film, accentuating the tragic rather than the ironic layer of the novel and convincingly evoking the feelings of depression and defeat. According to him, Jireš managed to cast great actors, create an impressive atmosphere, and give the film a distinct rhythm, masterfully alternating emotions. Jan Žalman said that the author of *The Cry* had outdone himself. In his anthology *Silenced Film* (Umlčený film), he writes: "With *The Joke*, all speculation about Jireš's artistic viability has lost any justification."

Temporarily interrupting the shooting in Uherské Hradiště and Vlčnov in August 1968, the Warsaw Pact invasion suggested that the future of the film would not be an easy one. Because of his opinions, Kundera was high on the list of people whose public activities were no longer desirable. At the beginning of 1970, the novel *The Joke* was withdrawn from the market and libraries together with Kundera's other books.

Jireš's film was not among the most criticized works of the Czechoslovak New Wave, his further screening being even considered for a while; however, in the end, it had to be removed from the distribution list as well. Attempts to critically deal with the socialist past or present were no longer desirable.

The Joke (Czechoslovakia, 1968), director: Jaromil Jireš, screenplay: Milan Kundera, Jaromil Jireš, director of photography: Jan Čuřík, music: Zdeněk Pololáník, cast: Josef Somr, Jana Dítětová, Luděk Munzar, Jaroslava Obermaierová, Evald Schorm, Milan Švrčina, Miloš Rejchrt, Věra Křesadlová, Jaromír Hanzlík et al. Filmové studio Barrandov, 79 min.

References and recommended reading:

Jiří Cieslar, Žert. *Reflex* 16, 2005, No. 27, pp. 64–67.

Milan Kundera, Žert. Brno: Atlantis 2008.

Antonín J. Liehm, *Ostře sledované filmy*. Praha: NFA 2001.

Stanislava Přádná, Zdena Škapová, Jiří Cieslar, *Démanty všednosti. Český a slovenský film 60. let*. Praha: Pražská scéna 2002.

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Jan Žalman, *Umlčený film*. Praha: KMa 2008.