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Carl Junghans

Carl Junghans is known mainly for the “swan song of silent film”, *Takový je život* (Such is Life), which was shot in Czechoslovakia in 1929. His life constitutes more than that, however: associations with the totalitarian regimes in Nazi Germany and Communist Russia, the interest of secret services of several superpowers at once, and a love affair that became the subject of a novel by Vladimir Nabokov.

Carl Junghans was born in Dresden on 7 October 1897 into a tailor's family. He attended a lyceum and, after World War I broke out, volunteered for the army in 1916. During his military training, he was injured and discharged. After graduating from a music and acting course, he worked as an actor at the Freiberg Municipal Theatre and then as a scriptwriter in Dresden's Albert-Theatre and Berlin's Neuen Theatre am Zoo. In the second half of the 1920s, he made a living as a journalist, writing film reviews for a variety of Berlin newspapers. In addition to this, he edited the titles of foreign films and helped mediate the sale of numerous Czechoslovak films to Germany.

At that time, Junghans met Sonia Slonim, who was 11 years his junior, an aspiring actress and Vladimir Nabokov's niece. Their love affair was a public secret, but they never married. The relationship and age difference between the two lovers influenced Nabokov's literary works: first the 1928 poem *Lilith* and then the 1932 novel *Invitation to a Beheading* about a 17-year-old actress who destroys the life of a respected middle-aged critic. A year after the book was published, Slonim emigrated with the Nabokovs to France and cut ties with Junghans for a time.

Junghans was an ardent and active communist already at the time he was working in Berlin. He joined the Communist Party of Germany, wrote leftist texts and read revolutionary poems in public. In 1928, he also shot several documentaries about the communist movement, *Lenin and the Soviet Union* for Prometheus Film, which was

established to produce and promote “proletariat films”. He also submitted to the company’s management the script for the feature film *Pradlena* (*The Laundrymaid*) about a woman who succumbs to poverty and her despotic husband. Although the story fits the mould of the German socially critical dramas of the time, the studio’s management believed it lacked revolutionary spirit. The producers demanded that a mass street demonstration be included in the film, but Junghans refused [the scene later appeared in a similar film that was supported by Prometheus: Jutzi’s Mutter Krausens Fahrt ins Glück (Mother Krause’s Journey to Happiness)]. For the commercial company, *The Laundrymaid* was too heavy and leftist. Junghans thus failed to bring his project to fruition in Berlin, although an excerpt from the screenplay appeared in the magazine *Film-Kurier*; he, therefore, turned to his Czech friends for help.

In the end, he found support from the actor Theodor Pištěk, who arranged for *Pradlena* to be filmed in the Na Kavalírce studio in Prague and obtained funding through several loans, which he repaid until 1941. Junghans fashioned his story in an artistic style that drew to a great extent from the Soviet montage school. The effect was later characterized as follows by the young Alexander Hackenschmied in his review for *Studio* magazine: “The Russian film editing style, based rather on the associations of immediate visual impressions than on detailed logical sequences made it possible to create the random atmosphere of the scenes undisturbed by the lack of schematic lucidity and clear local and historical orientation of the plot as we have been accustomed to from American films.” [1]

The film was shown in Berlin in March 1930 under the name Takový je život (*Such is Life*) and received an enthusiastic reception from both audiences and critics. However, with the onset of the ever more popular sound films, it quickly disappeared. It was screened two months later in Prague in secondary cinemas and completely withdrawn from programmes after a week. Copies of the film were destroyed and the film only existed in the memories of a few individuals who were fortunate to see it. This is how the film is mentioned in studies of film history produced in Czechoslovakia and abroad in the 1930s. It was only after World War II that a lost copy of the film was discovered, and so we can admire Junghans’ effort to this day.

After *Takový je život*, Junghans planned to shoot a comedy in Prague based on Jan Nepomuk Štěpánek's play *Čech a Němec* (The Czech and The German). He was to work with literary historian Miloslav Novotný. The project never took off, however, and Junghans ended looking for work in Germany. There he contributed directorially to the film *Fliehende Schatten* (*Prchající stíny*, 1932), where the exterior shots were filmed with cameraman Hans Schneeberg in Africa. At the same time, he tried finding a distributor for *Takový je život*. Russian filmmakers headed by S. M. Eisenstein helped him sell the film to the Soviet Union and arranged for it to be screened in Moscow. Although the transaction ended up being unsuccessful, Junghans did, however, receive an offer from the Soviet production company Mežrabpomfilm to do his next project in Russia. The German director intended to film Ilya Erenburg's novel *Life of the Automobile* (1929), but at the behest of Mežrabpomfilm, he looked to Afro-American writer Langston Hugh's work about racial discrimination in the USA. However, because of delays in the approval process, this project was also never completed and the disappointed Junghans travelled to Czechoslovakia to attempt to fulfil his vision of an ideal sound motion picture.

In an interview for Peroutka's magazine *Přítomnost*, he specified his vision at the time: "My next film will be entitled *Eroica*. The main theme will again focus on a mother, but it will make use of the new possibilities provided by audio technology. No one has yet used sound in a creative way; it has only ever been reproduced. Sound only becomes an artistic element, however, if it is intentionally formed; when dramatic effect is reached by slowing down or speed up filming, if 32 frames per second are used in one instance and then 16 frames per minute in another. Increasing or decreasing the normal range of the voice is a first-rate means for describing emotion and character." [2]

Instead of the mentioned social drama, however, Junghans decided in Czechoslovakia to film different material. Karel Moláček, then the head of Starfilm, gave him the opportunity to film the first Czechoslovakian and Yugoslavian coproduction according to the screenplay for *Ztracený syn* (*Lost Son*) by architect Václav Dryák about life in a fishing village on the Dalmatian coast. The technical script, now stored in the collections of the National Film Archives, was drawn up by Junghans himself, and filming could begin in Summer 1933. Junghans and cameraman Jaroslav Blažek departed for Split, in which town and its surroundings they acquired the natural

exterior shots and records of certain local customs. After returning to Prague, the project, now renamed ...a život jde dál... (...And Life Goes On...) was put on hold for financial reasons. When the Yugoslav partner, Pesvetni Film, complained and the Czechoslovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs intervened with a promise to provide financial support did a newly established company, Praha-Paříž, join the project and the project could be revived. In Summer 1934, more exterior shots were filled on the Yugoslav coast, this time with cameraman Jan Stallich. However, a conflict arose between the producers and Carl Junghans, who withdrew from the project and never returned to it. The film was completed at Barrandov Studios by Czech director Václav Kubásek (Czech version) and Austrian director F. W. Kraemer (German, French and Serbo-Croatian versions).

The jilted Junghans then took the risk and tied his further professional career to the German film industry, despite its ever-closer association with the Nazi regime. He began teaching film theory at Albert Reimann's private school, but he began to be particularly active in filmmaking. He wrote screenplays for the commercial films *Krach im Hinterhaus* (1935) based Maximilian Böttcher's play and *Durch die Wüste* (1936) based on Karel May's novel. His other efforts were then tied directly to Nazi propaganda, no matter how hard Junghans later tried to distance himself from them. First, he accepted an offer from the Reich Ministry of Enlightenment and Propaganda to take part in a documentary film about the Winter Olympiad in Garmisch-Partenkirchen entitled *Jugend der Welt* (*Youth of the World*, 1936). Junghans wrote the screenplay and began pre-filming. He then withdrew from directing it – allegedly because of Lena Riefenstahl's excessive involvement – and ended up being just the editor. The film went on to win numerous awards at the Cannes film festival. He was then commissioned to film a documentary about the Spanish Civil War from footage obtained by German cameramen. The film *Die Geißel der Welt* (*The Scourge of the World*, 1936) was found to be too pro-communist and was banned immediately. A revamped version entitled *Helden in Spanien* (*Heroes in Spain*, 1939) was not released until three years later.

Not even Junghan's other documentary, *Jahre der Entscheidung* (*Years of Decisions*), about the rise the NSDAP to power, matched Reich Ministry of Propaganda Goebbels' visions. Junghans was thus removed from the project, and a new edited version containing sequences of the occupation of Czechoslovakia was not released until

1939. In the meantime, Junghans worked on two other films: the propaganda documentary *Die große Zeit* (*The Great Time*, 1938) about the building of the Nazi empire and a film based on Hans Fallada's novel *Altes Herz geht auf die Reise* (*An Old Heart Goes A-Journeying*, 1938). During its filming, however, Junghans did not stick to the censored version of the script, which was the main reason why the film was banned after it was completed.

Not wanting to undergo further conflicts with the government, Junghans escaped to France via Switzerland in 1939. In France, he was contacted by the French secret service, which suspected him of being a spy for Germany. Junghans was given permission to stay in Paris under the condition that he would be shot should he ever leave the city. According to some testimonies, he was offered to become an informant against German immigrants, an offer which he allegedly accepted.

During his stay in Paris, he rekindled his relationship with Sonia Slonim. After the German army occupied France, both escaped to the United States via Casablanca and Lisbon. Junghans was immediately detained upon his arrival in the USA and was interned for a year on Ellis Island. After his release, he lived in New York for several months before deciding to move with Sonia to California with the intention of working in Hollywood. When the USA entered the war, however, Junghans was arrested again, and although he was not found guilty of any crime, his stigma of "Nazi filmmaker" made it impossible for him to find any engagements in Hollywood. He, therefore, made a living as a gardener for Bertold Brecht and other German immigrants who had settled in California. He later founded a photo studio specialising in colour photography. In America, he only filmed three short documentaries: *Sand Paintings* (1947), *Monuments of the Past* (1947) and *River Goddesses* (1952).

In 1963, Carl Junghans returned to Europe. His forays into direction were rare [the documentary *Kärnten in vier Jahreszeiten* (*Carinthia in Four Seasons*), 1971], and instead appeared in juries at numerous festivals. His film *Altes Herz geht auf die Reise*, which had been banned by the Nazis, premiered in German theatres in 1971. Carl Junghans died on 8 November 1984 in Munich.

Footnotes:

[1] Hackenschmied, Alexander, *Takový je život (Such is Life)*. In: *Studio*, Vol. 2, 1930, p. 158.

[2] Rádl, Otto, *Návrat ze Sovětů (Return from the Soviets)*. In: *Přítomnost*, 17 May 1933.