JAKUB EGERMAJER / 4. 12. 2020

Coach to Troubles

“Looking back at the Czechoslovakian ‘New Wave’ of the 1990s, Karel Kachyňa was usually not one of the most appreciated directors of the era. It was as if he stood outside the main stream gathering great awards…”[1] These are the opening words of Jiří P. Kříž’s article written in March 1990 when *Coach to Vienna* (Kočár do Vídně, 1966) was re-released. The film, directed by Kachyňa and written by Jan Procházka, received mixed reactions already when screened for the first time at the Karlovy Vary Festival in 1966. Despite having been problematic from the start, *Coach to Vienna* faced the biggest troubles during the so-called Normalization era when banned, along with many other 1960s films. Still, its position among all the banned films remained somewhat unique. Even though it was awarded a prize at the Festival, it was not received well altogether, not even by those critics who were not members of the communist media elite, so to speak. The provocative story of a country girl and a teenage German/Austrian “Little Soldier” was just part of the problem.

Krista and Little Soldier’s fathers

Karel Kachyňa (1924–2004) and Jan Procházka (1929–1971) had a lot in common: they were of the same generation, both came from Moravia, worked together on 13 feature films (1961–1970), and underwent a similar development facing the regime after the 1948 Czechoslovak coup d’état. Having started their careers as true-blue communists, they later followed in the footsteps of many their generation’s intellectuals in gradually trying to revise the surviving dogmas of the post-Stalin era. Their development, both as people and as artists, can be seen as the personification of the social development in Czechoslovakia from 1953–1968. For the purpose of this article, we should summarize Procházka’s development at the very least.

Jan Procházka entered the Communist Party already in 1947 and then became a Youth Union official (organizing holiday jobs abroad for unskilled workers). Nevertheless,

his communist rising star was stopped by his doubts regarding the Rudolf Slánský trial. He remained a Party member but did not raise in rank within the Youth Union until 1958. In the mid-1950s, he became a journalist and a writer, and soon found himself drawn to film. In 1961, he was the chief script editor of his own creative group within Barrandov Studio, collaborating with the producer Erich Švabík. Even though his articles written during the late Stalinist era were rather conforming to the journalism of the time (*The Youth Brigades Working Abroad*; *A New Stage of Public Housing*), he started working for *Literární noviny* (Literature Newspaper), a soon-to-be essential reform newspaper in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, in 1960. Before long, his work in the film industry proved he was a liberal. Nonetheless, the Barrandov script editor did not give up on his political career. In 1962 he was a candidate for the Central Committee of the Communist Party, and a year later he became a member of the Ideological Board of the Central Committee, one of the country's main censorship bodies.[2] He was also famous for his friendship with President Antonín Novotný whom he only abandoned during the Prague Spring (along with almost everybody else).

What Kachyňa and his script writer had in common was a disillusion with Stalinism as well as the courage to open uncomfortable topics – as shown in the second half of the 1960s. At the same time, Procházka's position within the Party provided them with protection of a sort, similarly to the extremely close relationship with President Novotný. Yet Procházka's political prominence, combined with his many artistic successes, could have been a source of envy for his colleagues and of enmity for some critics. The script editor's former political position was also why he faced a much worse fate than many similarly problematic but politically passive film-makers after Normalization began – a fate resulting in his premature death.

Revision, minimalism and troubles

Long Live the Republic! (Ať žije republika!, 1965) by Kachyňa and Procházka, an adaptation of Procházka's novella, was an official film celebrating the 20th anniversary of the liberation of Czechoslovakia. It was generously financed by Československý film and made not by one, but by two creative groups (Procházka–Švabík and Šmída–Fikar). The ambitious project paid off; despite some reproofs for its length, the film was embraced by viewers (including the critics of the Party) and awarded prizes at the Mar del Plata and San Sebastian festivals.[3] At the

same time, though, *The Republic* became a herald of historical revision further exercised to a much greater extent in *Coach to Vienna*, *The Nun's Night*, and *The Ear*.

The story of a Moravian village liberation told through the eyes of a child (similarly to the previous films by Kachyňa and Procházka) disrupted the officially promoted, heroic depiction of the end of the war due to the unfavourable portrait of Czechs' behaviour in those days. In this case, the demystifying depiction was still received enthusiastically. It was even appraised by Jan Kliment, the notorious critic of the newspaper *Rudé právo* (Red Justice). On the other hand, the renowned critic A. J. Liehm liked the concept of the film but rebuked its makers for their megalomania. "Way too often, it would make you long for scissors, for better self-discipline and self-control… The authors give nothing a miss, nothing at all; they have decided to show us everything they can do in a truly thorough way,"[4] he wrote in *Literární noviny*. Vladimír Bystrov was even sharper, especially with Procházka, talking about "the gluttony of his talent."[5]

Already before *Long Live the Republic!*was screened in cinemas, Švabík and Procházka's group started working on yet another of the duo's projects, also set at the end of the war, which was far less ambitious from a production standpoint but even more unorthodox from a historical revisionist point of view. The "film short story" with the working title *Coach* was submitted by Procházka on July 1, 1965[6] and the group immediately praised it and entered into the contract for script writing with the author and Kachyňa.[7] The script was slightly delayed; the duo came back with it on August 16, 1965.[8]

Right after the technical version was ready, the film went to production, departing from the final product only in small details;[9] still, let me sum up the story briefly, just to be sure. The hang the husband of Krista, a village girl, for a small theft. After the burial, two German soldiers who know nothing about the husband visit Krista, ordering her to join them in their wagon and take them to the border. Krista deliberately leads them around the never-ending forest in circles, planning to avenge her husband by killing the two soldiers (the teenage "Little Soldier" and his wounded older comrade). Setting off as a typical wartime melodrama (even though Krista's potential victims are not in the slightest responsible for her grief), the story starts to get complicated. After the wounded older soldier dies, Krista and the Little Soldier

end up in each other's arms despite her plans. The ending is that of an absolute tragedy – the couple is discovered by a partisan gang, the Little Soldier is tortured and shot, and Krista is raped.[10]

There is no need to explain why the principle of such a story alone would be controversial and problematic for the regime. The cult of the resistance movement (though only of the communist one, of course) was one of the most important pillars of the real socialist ideology.

In relation to the war films of the 1950s and 1960s, Jan Sedmidubský mentions "the rules that set up the boundaries for the Czech film-makers. Partisans, Soviet soldiers, German soldiers, Czech civilians, German civilians, Sudeten German civilians (or soldiers), Czech saboteurs, Western or German saboteurs – even 15 years after the war, all these characters were to have a certain function, play a certain role in the stories. One could say that their coordinates were given with next to no space for deviation."[11]

Naturally, depictions of wartime in films started to move away from the established clichés. *I Survived Certain Death* (Přežil jsem svou smrt, 1960) by Vojtěch Jasný, *And the Fifth Rider Is Fear* (...a pátý jezdec je Strach, 1964) by Brynych, and other films offered a more sensitive portrait of the individuals' conflict with Nazism. *The Assassination* (Atentát, 1964) by Sequens broke one of the taboos by referring to the resistance movement abroad (in the West). And, finally, the films by Kadár and Klos – *Death Is Called Engelchen* (Smrt si říká Engelchen, 1963) and *The Shop on Main Street* (Obchod na korze, 1965) – disrupted the black-and-white view of the war, similarly to the above-mentioned *Long Live the Republic!*.Most of these films portrayed their German characters in a more convincing way as well.

Yet the "Coach" script, soon to be changed to *Coach to Vienna*, not only disrupted the norms of the war films but also added certain story – and character-related minimalism. In the microcosm of the never-ending forest, the partisans are depicted not only as "problematic" but truly negative, and the viewers must despise them. On the other hand, one cannot but feel sorry for the Little Soldier. One of the reasons behind that is definitely that the role of the terrified teenager in the German uniform was played by Jaromír Hanzlík, a fairly well known actor at the time and a soon to be

idol of many girls.[12] Sedmidubský's accurate commentary claims that *Coach* "not only oversteps and disrupts" the established schemes of the Czechoslovakian war film but also "ignores them."[13]

The shooting of the film, later called *Coach to Vienna*, took place between October 5, 1965, and the end of February 1966, with only one break in December due to heavy snow as the production report says. The report also says that there were practically no problems with making the film, despite certain hitches – in addition to the December snow, the finalization had to be paused when Kachyňa travelled to Mar del Plata for the *Long Live the Republic!* screening, and it was also not easy to find suitable German dubbing artists. Yet out of the budget of 1,854,000 CSK, more than 400,000 CSK was not spent, and the production was quicker than expected.[14]

But the idyllic depiction written by the producer Kučera says nothing about the political supervision over the film-making process, of course. Barrandov Studio started working on *Coach* before the script was approved by the Ideological Board of the Central Committee. A report from February 1966 reads that the film was marked as a problematic one already in October 1965.[15] The Department of Arts pointed out the problematic ending. According to Daniela Havránková, the shooting was suspended due to a ban on the grounds of the story being unacceptable (as mentioned above, Kučera claims the suspension was due to snow).[16]

The February report says, though, that there were three versions of the ending and it was pending decision approval. The end was much less raw in the film than in the script, then. Krista's rape was faded-out and her shouting "You pigs!" at the partisans was deleted. Similarly, the Little Soldier does not beg for mercy in the film with the words: "Ich bin nicht... Ich bin Österreicher, aus Wien!", which was supposed to be answered by the partisans: "You're all Vienna, Österreich!" Instead of that, the Austrian only cries he is innocent.[17] The report by the Department of Arts supplies an interesting context to this change with the Chief Administration for Print Supervision's statement that the ending would "cause an undesirable reaction, especially in Austria."[18] Hard to tell whether these worries were legitimate (and that was why the "Österreich" was not mentioned) or rather a substitute reproach to justify the request for a more docile ending without having to openly admit the true reason – the not very flattering depiction of the partisans.

Daniela Havránková also says that the production was resumed only after President Novotný personally intervened. The finalized film was then screened for the Central Committee Board. Allegedly, there was a long silence after that until the President's terse remark: "This will not go well with the nation." [19] In July 1966, the film was finally approved for public screening by Alois Poledňák.[20] The polemics that had started even before the opening night soon confirmed Novotný's words.

The polemics

The 13 days of the Fifteenth Film Festival in Karlovy Vary culminated with the award ceremony on June 19, 1966. It must have come as a surprise that *Coach to Vienna* was among the awarded films – and not just in any category, but among the main awards (the third place). The British commentator Dilys Powell described the hostility of the present film experts in her article published in *The Sunday Times* five days after the festival. She tried to find an explanation for this hatred of a quite good film and noticed it was the very first film from a communist country to look at partisans in a more critical way. She claimed that nobody there was willing to admit that this was the main reason for the unfriendly reaction.

On October 14, less than a month before the official first night, an article about *Coach* was published in Gottwald's *Naše pravda* (Our truth) newspaper with two short explications by the director and the script writer. Procházka's words are especially interesting since he denies that the revision of history was his primary goal:

"What Kachyňa and I wanted to say with the film is that war is the greatest load of crap in the world. All the people in the story have a truth of their own, in accordance with the logic of war. The logic of war is not the same as the logic of peace, and cannot be judged after 20 years…"[21]

On November 10, the dreaded critic Jan Kliment published his review in *Rudé právo*. Among other things, he wrote: "According to him [Procházka], it is a film about war. Of course it is. It is supposed to be a film going against the conventions. But against which ones? Against those simplifying, telling us that whoever is dressed in the Hitler uniform is an enemy? It is also supposed to be a film going against the thin-skinned nationalists. There will never be enough fight against bourgeois nationalism. But that would require the authors to prove that the partisans at the end of the film are

chauvinists like that; the way they are depicted in the film, we know too little about them to either understand them or judge them."[22]

One could have hardly hoped that Kliment would review the film positively. The critic used the anti-socialist mood of it as an excuse to attack what the communist regime called "bourgeois nationalism." On the other hand, he pointed out the already mentioned important thing, even though maybe unwittingly: we get to know too little about the characters throughout the story. This minimalism was the main factor of misunderstanding the film's message, not only by Kliment but also by most critics at the time. Kliment also proved this both by his subsequent appraisal of *Death Is Called Engelchen* and by his comment that "it would still be nice to know what the Little Soldier had been doing on the battlefront and in the war itself before we got to meet him..."[23]

He also posed the question repeated by more liberal critics – whether the film "is not just turning around the simple (but easy-to-understand in those times) dialectic of the good partisans and the bad Germans..."[24] Other pro-regime critics simplified the film to an even greater extent, writing about its fashionability, existentialist pattern, and fragmentariness. František J. Kolár blamed the author for making the main protagonist a women who was nothing more than "an animal with no thinking, no opinion, and no ideology of its own."[25] In the Normalization era, Kliment also joined those denouncing the film in a primitive way, calling it a poor ideological caricature and "one of the most revolting films in which [the authors] shed a bad light on their own people – the partisans. By doing that, they went to meet Western propaganda halfway, claiming that excesses occurred on both sides during the war."[26]

Even those critics who were not pro-regime did not approve of the film. An anonymous reviewer in the Slovakian daily *Práca* (Work) saw the failure in Kachyňa's film in "the forced and fabricated springboard of the situation, which is not believable whatsoever in the context of the serious topic."[27] Jozef Bobok from the Slovakian newspaper *Pravda* (Truth) also talked about the film being over-fabricated, reproaching the minimalism which made it impossible for the viewer to identify with the characters.[28]

Possibly the best account of similar rebukes was written by Miloš Fiala in his article *Deziluze?* (Disillusion?) published in *Film a doba* (Film and the Times) in 1967. Apart from the overly stylized nature of the film, he criticized the forced anti-schematic story, which tried to disprove the established illusions by simply offering the opposite – disillusion.[29] Similarly, A. J. Liehm talked about "a schematism upside down." According to him, the film could not work solely for the fact that everything preceding the ride through the forest was only explained in the opening caption – "should [the viewer] be ground by the cruel mill of the 'emotional re-education' and reappear with stronger respect towards his own humanity and its autonomous value, they would have to go through the existential crisis along with the protagonists from the very beginning, through all the horrors and harshness."[30]

Vladimír Remeš from Pilsen in the newspaper *Pravda* (Truth) objected to the "naïve argumentation of mere viewers", condemning the film based solely on the portrayal of the partisans, but at the same time he listed his reasons why *Coach* "is not a good film." First and foremost, he wrote about how impossible it was to empathize with the story, the starting point of which is introduced with nothing more than a caption, along with how inaccessible the film is since "the inner life of the protagonist can only be judged by their gestures and facial expressions." In his opinion, the forced anti-schematism rendered the partisan scene a farce and not a tragedy.[31]

The debate about the schematism turned upside down dominated the critical discussion of *Coach to Vienna* throughout the first weeks after the film was screened. Once again in this context (similarly to the review by Kliment), *Death Is Called Engelchen* was appraised for its revision of history "on the axis from reality to an anecdote."[32] The review by Miroslav Stoniš from Ostrava in the newspaper *Naše svoboda* (Our Freedom), titled *Coach to Troubles*, remained practically unnoticed. Even though Stoniš criticized the film, he also speculated as to why other critics perceived it so negatively, mainly about the tendency of the Czech critics not to trust authors who "work and publish a lot." In other words, he insinuated a certain personal bias of the critics towards Procházka.[33]

Quite to the contrary, reviews abroad were almost all positive. The most interesting review was written by the Polish critic Czesław Michalski, who said that the Czechs, burdened by their historical experience, did not understand the film since they only

related it to WWII and its depiction in Czech films. He claimed that “Kachyňa a Procházka in fact created a synthesis of all the wars known to mankind. And it is in this synthetic truth where the power of the film lies.”[34]

Coach rediscovered

After forty years, Jan Sedmidubský sees the message of *Coach* in “the pure humanity, the love of humans, the endeavour to overcome hatred and the ‘an eye for an eye’ principle.” He does not understand “how Czech critics of the era could have been so exceptionally deaf to the Christian message of the film, which was one of the first Czech ones ignoring all the rules (too ostensibly, maybe – and that was what bothered everybody) by showing an individual’s hopelessness in the darkness of hatred, anger, strong emotions, anxiety about one’s conscience, and fear of death.” [35]

Several possible answers come to mind. One was unwittingly proposed by Jan Kliment when he asked “whether the still turbulent era is suitable for such a humanly open confession.”[36] This certainly does not mean accusing Liehm, Fiala and others of being “bourgeois nationalists.” Yet it seems understandable that the war was still too raw in the mid-1960s even for the most competent Czech critics to see *Coach* as a film with a timeless message and not just a revision of the war experience.

The second possible answer is also clear from some of the reviews – the hostility to Jan Procházka, based either on his productivity or his open political inclinations. The New Wave films, appraised by the critics, only talk about politics if necessary – and even then, they do so only in metaphors. In comparison, Kachyňa and Procházka’s films from 1965–1970 are very specific and appellative. They are parables, but unlike for example in *The Party and the Guests* (O slavnosti a hostech, 1966), there is nothing metaphorical in them.[37] It could have been Procházka’s rather high position within the Party that allowed Kachyňa and him to avoid allegories – but, at the same time, it might have been a sticking point for the critics of the era.

After the Soviet invasion, *Coach* slowly disappeared from screens. It was supposed to be shown at a showcase of Czechoslovakian films in Sorrento in August 1969. But the new Barrandov Studio management intervened, the film was taken off the programme, and only screened only for journalists upon an agreement with the Italians. In his paper for a Union of Dramatic Artists seminary in April 1972, Zdeněk Míka talked

about *Coach* as the film that "was supposed to make German soldiers appear human and to disparage partisans by depicting them as vulgar elements."[38] After that, no other interpretation was possible under President Husák. In 1973, the film was "definitively withdrawn from distribution", which means it was put into the notional "safe."[39] When re-shown after the Velvet Revolution, it seemed nobody remembered the rebukes that accompanied its previous screenings. Along with other "banned" films, *Coach* became one of the most admired works of the Czech film industry.

In a text written but not published during the Normalization era, Jan Žalman says in relation to the film: "This was the fate of the story which hid the message of understanding and love under the shell of hatred, and which could express, almost without words, the most generous thing that gives meaning to the human coexistence. At least this is how *Coach to Vienna* appears through the lens of all those years... Which does not mean that this is how it was understood and interpreted in the very beginning."[40] One can only speculate how the years since have helped the film and to what extent its position has been influenced by its previous "banned" status and by the run-down State Security member Jan Procházka's tragic death, which seemed to have compensated for his former prominent position.

Notes:

[1] Jiří P. Kříž, Lidé na cestě k nepochopení. *Lidové noviny*, 7/10/1990, p. 4.

[2] Daniela Havránková, *Revize minulosti ve filmech Jana Procházky (diploma thesis)*. Praha: Univerzita Karlova 2012, p. 9–10.

[3] D. Havránková, ibid, p. 44.

[4] A. J. Liehm, Ten dvanáctiletý Olin..., *Literární noviny* 14, 1965, no. 46, p. 4.

[5] Vladimír Bystrov, Procházka s Kachyňom v hemžení na náměstí, *Film a divadlo* 9, 1965, no. 23, p. 8–9.

[6] Smlouva o dílo, Korespondence_a_autorske_smlouvy, Praha, 1/7/1965. Archiv–Barrandov Studio as, f. 5B, k. SCE.

[7] Smlouva o dílo, Korespondence_a_autorske_smlouvy, Praha, 1/7/1965. Archiv–Barrandov Studio as, f. 5B, k. SCE.

[8] Smlouvy–Výplaty, Korespondence_a_autorske_smlouvy, Praha, 16/8/1965. Archiv–Barrandov Studio as, f. 5B, k. SCE.

[9] After the film entered distribution, Procházka's *Coach to Vienna* was also published as a novella of the same name.

[10] Both in the literary script and in the novella, the village woman's sad fate is completed with flashbacks from her unhappy marriage, the stillbirth of her child, and rebukes from the people around her aimed at her inability to give birth to a healthy child.

[11] Jan Sedmidubský, Obraz sudetských Němců a sudetoněmecká otázka v českém hraném filmu 1945–1969 (diploma thesis). Praha: Univerzita Karlova 2006, p. 149.

[12] As Hanzlík was only a third-year student at the time, Erich Švabík had to promise they would provide him with tutoring so that he would not fail his school-leaving exam.

See Dopis E. Švabíka (v.r.) Josefu Havlínovi, vedoucímu III. odd. ÚV KSČ (do vlastních rukou), Korespondence_a_autorske_smlouvy, Praha, 23/9/1965. Archiv–Barrandov Studio as, f. 5B, k. SCE.

[13] J. Sedmidubský, ibid, p. 150.

[14] Film „Vůz", „Kočár do Vídně", č. f. 15047. Výrobní zpráva, Korespondence_a_autorske_smlouvy, Praha, 11/5/1966. Archiv–Barrandov Studio as, f. 5B, k. SCE.

[15] Zpráva HSTD Sekretariátu ÚV KSČ, Praha, February 1966. Národní filmový archiv (NFA) – Oddělení písemných archiválií (OPA), f. VJ, k. 6.

[16] D. Havránková, ibid, p. 67.

[17] Jan Procházka: Kočár do Vídně. Vůz. Literární scénář. J. Procházka. K. Kachyňa. Literarni_scenar, Praha, August 1965. Archiv–Barrandov Studio as.

[18] Zpráva HSTD Sekretariátu ÚV KSČ, Praha, February 1966. Národní filmový archiv (NFA) – Oddělení písemných archiválií (OPA), f. VJ, k. 6.

[19] D. Havránková, ibid, p. 67.

[20] Zápis z porady ÚŘ ČSF, Praha, February 1966. Národní filmový archiv (NFA) – Oddělení písemných archiválií (OPA), f. EB, k. 7.

[21] Anon., Kočár do Vídně. Příběh o mladé ženě, které oběsili muže. *Naše pravda*, 14/10/1966, p. 13.

[22] Jan Kliment, Kočár do Vídně. *Rudé právo – Kulturní tvorba*, 10/11/1966, p. 13.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25] František J. Kolár, Listy z deníku. *Život strany* 1, 1967, no. 1, p. 57.

[26] Jan Kliment, Čekáme – nikoliv na Godota. Splatí filmaři dluh květnu 1945?. *Film a doba* 19, 1973, no. 5, p. 230.

[27] Anon., Koč do Viedne. *Práca*, 11/11/1966, p. 9.

[28] Jozef Bobok, Kočiar trochu precenený. *Pravda*, 7/11/1966, p. 12.

[29] Miloš Fiala, Deziluze? *Film a doba* 13, 1967, no. 1, pp. 30–34.

[30] A. J. Liehm, Kolem mezinárodních úspěchů... *Literární noviny* 15, 1966, no. 43, p. 8.

[31] Vladimír Remeš, Je Kočár do Vídně dobrý film?. *Pravda* (Plzeň), 20/11/1966, p. 13.

[32] A. J. Liehm, ibid.

[33] Miroslav Stoniš, Kočár z nesnází. *Naše svoboda* (Ostrava), 25/12/1966.

[34] Czesław Michalski, Kočár do Vídně a česká kritika. *Film a doba* 13, 1967, no. 3, pp. 162-163.

[35] J. Sedmidubský, ibid, p. 150.

[36] J. Kliment, *Kočár do Vídně.*

[37] As for allegories in the New Wave films, see: Zdeněk Hudec, Alegorismus ve filmech české nové vlny. *Cinepur* 11, 2002, no. 3, pp. 20–23.

[38] 1972 Zpráva místopředsedy Svazu českých dramatických umělců v Plzni 12.4. Národní filmový archiv (NFA), f. Fondy institucí, k. 11.

[39] Filmy pozastavené a vyřazené 1973, Praha, 6/9/1973. Národní filmový archiv (NFA) – Oddělení písemných archiválií (OPA), f. EB, k. 2.

[40] Jan Žalman, *Umlčený film*. Praha: Levné knihy 2008. p. 230.