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Don't Believe in Monuments: Jiří Weiss's *Justice for Selvin* (1968)

Though Jiří Weiss is a recognised and celebrated name among Czech directors of the 1950s and '60s, his 1968 television film *Justice for Selvin* (Spravedlnost pro Selvina) has undeservedly fallen through the cracks of critical appreciation. A cool, semi-stylised satire about idealism, politics and the mass media, this film shows a more arch and comic side to a filmmaker better-known for his tragic and empathetic dramas.[1] If not among the director's greatest works, *Justice for Selvin* is a fascinating oddity and an arrestingly cynical take on its tumultuous era.

A co-production between Czechoslovak Television Prague (Československá televize Praha) and the West German broadcaster Senders-Freie, this was the last film Weiss made with any Czechoslovak financial participation. The 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion soon forced him to leave his home country – the second politically impelled emigration of his life[2] – and he would ultimately settle in the United States, where he taught film at university. Of the few films he made after *Justice for Selvin*, his next three projects were television dramas funded entirely by West Germany, while his final film *Martha and I* (Marta a já/Martha et moi, 1991), made after a long break from filmmaking, was a story set and shot in Prague, featuring numerous Czech and Slovak cast and crew members, but produced by Germany, France, Italy and Austria.

As he tells it in a 1968 on-set feature from the journal *Květy*, Weiss was approached by the chief dramaturge[3] of the West German broadcaster, who proposed making a film based on a work by the Austrian-Czech writer Friedrich Torberg, presumably the novel *Hier bin ich, mein Vater*, about a Jewish student turned Gestapo spy. Rejecting this choice of material because he felt that 'an anti-Nazi film for German television'

should be made by Germans, not 'a Czechoslovak', he opted instead for a story by Karel Čapek – a Czech writer who was surely familiar enough to German audiences.[4]

Čapek's source story, 'The Selvin Case' ['Případ Selvinův'], comes from the 1929 collection *Tales from One Pocket* (Povídky z jedné kapsy). The well-loved tales featured herein, as with those of their companion volume *Tales from the Other Pocket* (Povídky z druhé kapsy), are stories of eccentric or mysterious crime cases, tales marked by the great writer's ironic humour, his interest in 'the foibles of human nature', and his acceptance of life in its messiness, unpredictability and resistance to scientific strategy.[5] 'The Selvin Case' is no exception: Leonard Uden, a famous poet, tells the story of what he considers 'his greatest success', which begins with a visit from an elderly woman, the mother of one Frank Selvin, who has been accused of murdering his Aunt Sofie, but who, his mother swears, is innocent. Feeling sorry for the 'broken-hearted' mother, Uden takes up Selvin's cause, and, in doing so, gains international celebrity as a fighter against injustice, a 'Knight of Truth'. Selvin is acquitted, but, some time later, he comes to see Uden and confesses that he actually did commit the murder, before begging the poet for money.

'The Selvin Case' was inspired by several real-life travesties of justice, all antisemitically motivated, that gave rise to public campaigns. The most famous of these is the Dreyfus affair in France, which prompted Émile Zola's open letter to French President Félix Faure, *J'Accuse...!* (1898). Another case was that of the American Leo Frank, who, in Georgia in the 1910s, was wrongly convicted of rape and murder and then lynched by white supremacists. It has been suggested that the first name of Frank Selvin is a reference to this case. Closer to home was the Hilsner affair that unfolded in Polná, Bohemia at the turn of the century, in which Leopold Hilsner, an itinerant Jewish man, was sentenced for the murder of two young women. Hilsner was even accused of murdering the women for ritual purposes, making this not merely a grotesque miscarriage of justice but a case of modern blood libel. One other notable fact about the Hilsner affair is the involvement of future Czechoslovak president Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, then a professor at Prague's Charles University. Masaryk wrote pamphlets and articles attacking the grossly flawed proceedings against Hilsner as well as the climate of antisemitic superstition underpinning the affair.

In Čapek's story, the renowned and seemingly virtuous Uden has clear models in both Zola, the crusading, socially conscious litterateur, and the revered Masaryk, who, similarly to Uden, gained international recognition from the case.[6] The actually-guilty Selvin, of course, is a radical twist on the real-life objects of injustice, most specifically Hilsner. One story has it that, years after the affair, Hilsner, who had been released from prison following a pardon from Austrian emperor Charles I, requested an audience with the now-President Masaryk but was rebuffed – an incident mirrored in the fictional Selvin's requests of financial assistance from Uden.[7] According to Weiss, the story's premise is an expansion of a provocative 'thought experiment' that Čapek supposedly once put to Masaryk during one of the regular intellectual gatherings (known as the 'Friday Circle' (Pátečníci)) that the writer would host: what would the President have done had Hilsner later confessed his guilt?[8] The transformation of a case of real injustice, discrimination, and ethnically motivated slander into the basis of this relatively blithe piece of fiction may seem somewhat distasteful, even if Čapek's story has 'serious', even moral purposes of its own: notably, the risks of committing to a cause, the conflict between glory and integrity, and the possible deceptiveness of a high reputation.[9] For Weiss, the core message of Čapek's story is that 'statues are hollow inside'.[10]

Weiss wrote the film's script together with Zdeněk Bláha. In the role of Uden he cast the celebrated and prolific Rudolf Hrušínský, who had created memorable roles in two previous Weiss films: as the frustrated, voyeuristic tax auditor Kurka in the simmering, noirish *90 Degrees in the Shade* (*Třicet jedna ve stínu*, 1965), and as František Pokorný, the romantic patsy turned avenger, in *Murder Czech Style*. In the grander but also troubled role of Uden, Hrušínský brings the necessary gravitas and unease, along with his natural screen magnetism. As Weiss tells it, Hrušínský was initially reluctant to do the film, so the director used the persuasive power of money, ensuring that the West German broadcaster pay his Czech star in West German marks. The film's second lead, German actor Klaus Schwarzkopf, was a disappointment to Weiss, but he cuts an appropriately pitiful and grating figure in the role of Selvin. Schwarzkopf is a lone German face in a cast of Czech actors, including Jiřina Šejbalová as Selvin's mother, Míla Myslíková as Uden's wife, and the intense, off-kilter presence of Josef Kemr as the notary who safeguards Uden's legacy. Distinguished actors Radoslav Brzobohatý, Josef Somr and Václav Lohniský also

appear in small roles. The film was shot by the accomplished cinematographer Jan Čuřík (a regular collaborator with director Zbyněk Brynych) and scored – with an effective, mock-tragic orchestral theme – by the legendary Zdeněk Liška. The production was based entirely at Prague's Barrandov Studios.

As for the film's fictional location, this is, Weiss claimed, neither Czechoslovakia nor Germany. This unnamed, unidentified, hypothetical environment helps edge the film towards parable or fairy-tale and away from Weiss's more customary realism. A flirtation with New Wave-style modernism, present elsewhere in Weiss's 1960s work, can be seen in the film's restricted colour palette, which mixes soft, earthy tones with recurring combinations of black and white (cinematographer Čuřík later worked with a similar colour arrangement, to yet more striking effect, on Jaromil Jireš's late New Wave classic *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* (*Valerie a týden divů*, 1970)). As we shall see, the dominance of black and white refers back to the core symbolic motif of Uden's ever-present black-and-white striped scarf – and also, perhaps, to the key satirical target of the mass media, otherwise invoked in the monochrome imagery of still photographs and newsreel footage.

As a jaded fairy tale set in twentieth-century nowhere, this is a story with a moral – four morals, in fact, according to Weiss: 'when a good deed is done, there's always a personal interest involved'; 'we must always inspect a person to whom we do good, there may be a catch here'; 'when a monument is built to someone, we need to shed a proper light on him'; and lastly, 'truth is like a naked woman, who is probably acceptable at 10 in the evening amid cosy décor, but at 10 in the morning in Wenceslas Square is totally out of place'.^[11] We might add that Weiss's moral commentary is more explicitly aimed at the societal or systemic repression of truth, and is more in-depth a study of manipulation, whether of individuals or of facts, than was Čapek's story.

While the film preserves the story's basic narrative thread and main characters (a respected poet campaigns for a seemingly falsely accused man after an appeal from the man's mother, achieves international fame, and is then essentially blackmailed by the man after the latter admits to him his real guilt), there are changes to both the detail and framing of the story that serve these shifts of meaning or emphasis. In Čapek's tale, Uden is a figure more in control of his actions and his story, while in

Weiss's film he is manipulated throughout. Here, before the blackmailing by Selvin himself that provides the narrative's dramatic crux, Uden is subject to the brazen manipulation of Selvin's mother. While in Čapek's story we are told he feels genuinely sorry for the poor woman who comes to his office to beg for her son, in the film he is forced to swear he will help Selvin when the mother threatens to commit suicide, and then literally prompted into his first act of public campaigning when she turns up, somewhat improbably, as he is delivering a poetry reading for television.

Though the film's Uden does later respond to his agonising situation with a bold and decisive action – he tries to murder the bothersome Selvin by alcohol poisoning – this only leads to Uden's own death, after which he suffers a final and everlasting manipulation, losing the chance to tell his own story his way, i.e. truthfully. Čapek's version ends with the still-alive Uden, who has been narrating his story to an unseen audience, insisting (albeit with some irony) that his future obituarists keep the myth of the Selvin case intact, omitting the inconvenient facts of Selvin's guilt and Uden's successful dispatching of him (accomplished here with a ticket to America rather than a murder). There is no suggestion that Uden's request will not be fulfilled. In the film, by contrast, the written testimony by Uden that has provided the film's voiceover narration is finally suppressed by the zealous state notary, who – faced with the frenzied desires of both Selvin and Uden's wife to reveal the truth – locks the testimony away and swallows the key. The film ends with the unveiling of a statue of Uden – presumably a hollow one.

This changed ending helps make Weiss's film a darker, harsher work than Čapek's story, as well as a more satirically suggestive one. The fact that the final falsification of the Selvin case is enacted not by Uden himself but by a state notary in a coldly institutional environment, and that the final scene is one of great pomp convened around the ultimate state tribute of the sanctifying statue, focuses Čapek's wry comedy of human foibles more directly on established systems of power. The power indicated here remains unspecified, though the critique of falsification has obvious enough relevance for state communism. This commentary on truth derives from Čapek, but Weiss adds an entirely new layer of satire on the dubious passions of the crowd. Central to this is Uden's aforementioned black-and-white striped scarf, which quickly becomes a pervasive, near-fetish-like symbol of adherence to his cause, being adopted by all his supporters and associates, from students to state functionaries,

and finally by Selvin himself. The scarf's ubiquity, which lends a parodically religious dimension to the 'movement' Uden inspires, again suggests a critique of communist or other dictatorial systems and their demagogic practices, namely the use of symbols or visual tokens as rallying and unifying elements.

Interestingly, though, the first to publically embrace Uden's campaign are student demonstrators, together with robed young religious figures – in other words, the forces of rebellion, opposition, and unofficial civil society. Selvin's cause continues to be identified as a particular concern of youthful protestors during the sequence where Uden tours the world to promote his campaign. Incorporating footage of real mass demonstrations and parades, the sequence tells us that, during Uden's time in Paris, 'students formed the core' of the pro-Selvin demonstrators. In Tokyo, where 'the poet was welcomed by the young', 'several provocateurs' even 'misused' the campaign 'for action against the government'. There is no direct reference to the contemporaneous events of the Prague Spring, but it would not be hard to discern here a comment on the liberal reformism that shook up Czechoslovakia's communist system. Student protest certainly played a role in fomenting this short-lived period of liberalisation, as did the words of prominent artists and intellectuals – of whom Uden appears to be a not-very-flattering representation. In showing how idealism or noble principles can be misdirected, Weiss may have been casting a cynical eye on what was unfolding in his home country at the time (the on-set report from *Květy*, dated March 1968, indicates that the film was at least shot before the invasion happened, which means Weiss's cynicism was uninformed by hindsight). This is consistent with the perspective Weiss explicitly offers in his memoir, where he notes how he watched, 'with unease, the unrealistic politics into which former communist intellectuals pushed the weak Alexander Dubček'.^[12] Thus, just as Čapek's story was a provocative challenge to the liberal humanism embodied in Masaryk, Weiss's film may be a rejoinder to the liberalising idealism represented by Dubček.

Another aspect Weiss adds to the original is the film's insistent and acidic representation of the mass media. Weiss crowds the film with scenes of TV production and news broadcasting; he integrates real documentary footage (as discussed above) and punctuates the action with posed photographic stills of Uden. In the striking scene mentioned earlier where Selvin's mother visits Uden during a recital of his poems for television, she starts feeding him his lines from behind the camera, thus

stepping into the role of director, and he obediently responds. It is as though adopting the role of media practitioner confers immediate, almost magical power – a suggestion of how forcefully, how seemingly effortlessly, the media becomes a means of manipulation. Meanwhile, the histrionic poses of the photographic portraits of Unden inserted throughout the action allude to the media's role in constructing public identities. Roland Barthes, in his foundational work of media critique *Mythologies*, noted how the beard and shorn hair of the Abbé Pierre were clearly legible signifiers of 'apostleship and poverty'.^[13] In a similar way, the pointed finger or grave expression of the photographed Unden turn him into the capitalised Fighter for Justice and Knight of Truth.

Justice for Selvin apparently met a positive response when broadcast (at least as we know from the German response). Weiss himself, however, would later be critical of the film, recalling the fact that he had apparently made it in retreat from another, more 'difficult' project, and declaring it a case of opportunism or calculation that yielded deservedly weak results (he recounts fellow director Jiří Menzel telling him that while he liked his other work, he should not have made *Selvin*).^[14] Yet, whatever Weiss's reasons for making the film, *Justice for Selvin* is an accomplished and, in its own way, daring work with a striking message. If this was a work of calculation, it was clearly not calculated to appeal to either side in the real-life drama of Czechoslovakia in 1968.

Notes:

[1] Weiss's career was in fact quite a diverse one. Even excluding his early years making documentaries, his output includes the children's film *Punta and the Four-Leaf Clover* (Punťa a čtyřlístek, 1955), the fantasy film *The Golden Fern* (Zlaté kapradí, 1963) and a dark, narratively playful comedy, *Murder Czech Style* (Vražda po našem, 1966). This last film is the closest in tone to *Selvin*, which it immediately precedes, though the character study at its heart offers a degree of involvement that the later film lacks.

[2] After the Nazis occupied the Czech lands, the Jewish Weiss fled Prague and found exile in England, where he re-established his film career and made important documentaries as part of the Allied war effort.

[3] A feature of the West and East German (as well as Czechoslovak) film and television industries, dramaturges were essentially script editors, but with a larger degree of supervisory power and creative input than that term may suggest. See Rosemary Stott, 'The State-Owned Cinema Industry and Its Audience', in Seán Allan and Sebastian Heiduschke (eds), *Re-Imagining DEFA: East German Cinema in Its National and Transnational Contexts*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn 2016, p.25.

[4] Weiss, in Vladimír Bystrov, 'Natáčí Jiří Weiss', *Květy*, vol.18, no.11, 16 March 1968, p.54.

[5] Bohuslava R. Bradbrook, *Karel Čapek: In Pursuit of Truth, Tolerance, and Trust*. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press 1998, p.135.

[6] Tomas Sniegon, *Vanished History: The Holocaust in Czech and Slovak Historical Culture*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn 2017, p.95.

[7] Meier Lamed and Miloš Pojar, 'Hilsner Case'. In: Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum (eds), *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 9. Detroit: Macmillan Reference 2007, p.120.

[8] Jiří Weiss, *Bílý mercedes*. Prague: Victoria Publishing 1995, pp.192-193.

[9] For a historically based drama that deals directly with the Hilsner affair, see Viktor Polesný's 2016 film *Murder in Polna (Zločin v Polné)*.

[10] 'Natáčí Jiří Weiss', p.54.

[11] Ibid., p.55.

[12] *Bílý mercedes*, p.194.

[13] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*. New York: Noonday Press, 1972, trans. Annette Lavers, p.48.

[14] *Bílý mercedes*, pp.193-194.