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Five faces of sadness: Czech short films

Journalists usually base their opinions on the condition of the Czech film production on feature-length live action films they see in cinematic distribution. Less attention is paid to documentaries and shorts by students or fresh film school graduates are left out completely. And yet, these are the very works that help the Czech filmmaking industry win acclaim at international festivals.

One of the reasons why there has not been any continuous reflection on short films could be the inertia of some film journalists who only pay attention to sufficiently PR-promoted films they are shown at journalist screenings. They do not venture to spot and point out any new aspiring creators.

All that happens notwithstanding the fact that graduation projects of the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (usually referred to as FAMU) are available to public (although it takes a great amount of patience and love for multi-level labyrinths), and that one can also get a very good overview of the up and coming talents at the FAMU Fest every year, even if its scope is logically limited to the works of FAMU students.

Sadly, not even cinemas show any significant interest in shorts, as they are unwilling to postpone the pleasure of their audiences any longer by squeezing a pre-film in between the lengthy ads and a main film of about 2-hour runtime, although it was once customary. It’s therefore not very easy for the broader (and outside Prague) audiences to get to see those films. Hence the weak motivation to write about something only few had the chance to see; especially in the times of online journalism, where the number of clicks, not the quality or originality of the content, is the deal-maker.

There are shorts published on the dafilms.cz website, but very selectively, and most of the times only based on their previous awards performance (such as a Czech Lion Award nomination or a screening at the Annecy festival). The Czech Film Center website also offers access to collections of relevant shorts from each year, but it only grants access to journalists and professionals. The only way left to see shorts are festivals.

Student films are regularly put on the programme of the Karlovy Vary International Festival (this year, it was the case of several highly appraised animated films that would deserve an analysis of their own: *Daughter* [Dcera]*, Apart* [Spolu sami]*, The Kite* [Pouštět draka]…). Shorts are also treated with special care by the Summer Film School. Besides having four blocks of student films on the programme, it offered a 4-hour marathon of student works, parallely broadcasted by the Czech Television network. The Summer Film School also presented Tomasz Wiński's *George The Dog, Refugee* (Jiří pes uprchlík*)* individually, a film made after the director's FAMU graduation without any support from the State Fund of Cinematography, who found the film's subject too thorny.

Wiński's *étude* on a non-standard relationship constellation is one of the five outstanding titles on the festival's programme that will be dealt with in more details here. All of them show extraordinary directing talents and bring a promise of growing truthfulness in Czech filmmaking. We also recommend to pay more attention to other Czech shorts, presented at the Film Summer School programme or elsewhere. It is an effective remedy to the grief from the declining Czech film productions, an emotion sprouting mostly from a vague sense of decadence rather than actual audience experience.

When looking beyond the offer of traditional cinema distribution, we find out that there are great films being made in the Czech Republic. And not just a few of them.

Mt. Human (Člověk Kilimandžáro, directed by Jan Hecht, 2018)

Jan Hecht's short premiered in the European Student Films competition section at the *Premiers plans d'Angers* festival. Czech fans of unorthodox distribution had the

chance to see the film as a part of the *First World Problems* (Problémy prvního světa) short story tetraptych.

The protagonist of the comedy drama (Lenka Vlasáková) is a head paediatrician in a regional hospital. She decided to celebrate her 40th birthday by handing in her resignation and by a complete change of direction both in her career and her life. She wants to start working in Germany. She feels unfulfilled in her job which leaves her with „no time and no money“, and her marriage as well. Her husband (Martin Finger), also a doctor, shows little understanding for her decision. He remains in his job out of fear and caution, despite of his awareness of the unsatisfactory working conditions in the hospital that fail to provide both decent conditions for the staff and appropriate care for the patients. Unlike his wife, he doesn't want to change anything.

Both partners have a conversation over a cigarette in the hospital complex (in front of a wire mesh fence reminiscent of a cage), talking in a sarcastic tone with an ever-present reserved coldness, disrupted only by colleagues passing by, wearing plush animal costumes they had put on to cheer up their little patients. Hecht manages to use such moments to liven up the wearying day-to-day stereotype and to brighten up with natural humour the oppressive emptiness and rigidity of the story. A textbook example of building up an atmosphere of absurdity comes up in the second half of the film, when the story moves from the hospital to the doctor's home. Paradoxically, she can't stop working there either because of her son's blocked back (and her husband's ongoing unwillingness and/or incompetence to cooperate). At the same time, at home she faces a new wave of indifference to her feelings, thoughts and passions.

The following series of events deepens the woman's sense of being useless and out-of-place and ends in a bittersweet moment when she receives a record with songs by Karel Zich. This present forces her one more time to give up and to put on a mask of kindness. It is also a link the first and the second part. Hecht founds his storytelling on repetitions and variations of some of the situations. It allows him to move towards a certain objective or a final transformation. The absence of a significant turn in the story is an expression of both the unchangeability of Czech healthcare system, pushing burnt-out doctors out to search for a job abroad, and the existential

helplessness about life itself.

The film is discrete in its form, using long shots and close-ups to emphasise the performance of Lenka Vlasáková, whose face is able express great weariness or deep disappointment even without words. The way how the two adult actors work together well and use just the right amount of curtness in their dialogues helps the well observed situations look authentic, both at home and in the workplace. *Mt. Human* stands out among other Czech (tragi)comedies because it depicts convincingly its characters and their background environments. A handful of simple anecdotes are able to express more general problems, relevant as much for an individual as for the society as a whole. We believe that these are the very same qualities to be found in Hecht's upcoming feature-length debut Tree (Strom) where, instead of facing the heathcare system, this time, the individual will be fighting bureaucracy.

One Hundred and Twenty-Eight Thousand (Sto dvacet osm tisíc, directed by Ondřej Erban, 2018)

The 15-minute drama by Ondřej Erban was screened this year in the Cannes festival's section Cinéfondation, dedicated to films by up and coming film school students. The film was also shortlisted for the BAFTA Student Film Awards. Dealing with the issues of housing and debt collecting, it is a fresh addition to the small family of films about the failing social policy in the Czech Republic, where up to 2 million people are facing enforcement of a money judgement (the others include the fiction *Road* (Cesta) and documentaries *Don't Take My Life* (Exekuce) and *The Limits of Work* (Hranice práce).

Based on the advice of his tutors' at FAMU, Erban decided his assignment should take the perspective of the bailiffs instead of the people whose privacy they invade. This perspective is shown from the very first shot, taken on a hand camera by one of two men on their way to a woman who owes rent worth the sum stated in the film title.

Erban avoids distress exploitation by not showing the experience of the procedure's victim, a single mother, whose personal property is being seized. In order to communicate with due urgency the experience of the encounter, unpleasant for everyone involved, he uses balanced acting performances along with a convincing

depiction of the procedure itself.

We get aware of the imbalance of power as soon as the bailiffs enter the woman's home, ignoring her request to take their shoes off. The law leaves the young mother, trying to convince the men that a mistake was made and that she in fact doesn't owe anything to anyone, with no defense against the situation. All she can do is to watch helplessly while the two intruders cold-bloodedly trespass her private space and garnish her property with yellow labels. Still, she is sympathetic enough to offer one of the men coffee, allowing mutual understanding to gradually grow.

Although the transformation and the awakening of one of the characters, when he puts his professional aloofness away and replaces it with sympathy, happens in an improbably short time, unless we hold fiction up to the same standards as documentaries, we must admit that dramaturgically speaking, *One Hundred And Twenty Eight Thousand* is an unexpectedly concise piece of work.

Raising expectations (by such statements as „*I can jump off of the balcony*„), skillfully built-up suspension (going from a minor disagreements to a big fight and a physical attack), shifting between a professional and unprofessional footage to dynamize the story – all that contributes to the story's development and helps to keep the audience's attention. Instead of reinforcing the sense of vanity, the final turn allows for somewhat more productive faith in the possibility of change, as long as people step out of their shells and try to listen to others.

Thanks to the intimate footage showing actors up close on a hand camera, we get the first hand experience of the bailiff's oppressive interference with someone else's life. The camera doesn't split its attention among several parallel actions, it consistently remains in one place and never shows a shot one too many. This conciseness strengthens the impression that the procedure is going on in real time right in front of our own eyes. For the record, Erban actually drew inspiration from alerady mentioned Andra Culková's *Don't Take My Life* from the *Czech Journal* (Český žurnál) series, which comes to one of its most intense moments when the director took footage of bailiffs intervening in her own home.

But as we already mentioned, *One Hundred Twenty Eight Thousand* is not a documentary; it's an attempt to convey an experience in its raw state. To complain

about the film not being lifelike enough or demanding of it to offer generalizations about people dealing with debt collectors would mean to misunderstand the creator's intention. He doesn't discuss the causes of debt, he doesn't try to find out to what extent debtors themselves are to blame for the situation and to what extent it's due to rules badly set. Above all, it raises the audience's perceptiveness to the problems of „the others", otherwise painfully absent in Czech debates about social matters.

Sugar and Salt (Cukr a sůl, directed by Adam Martinec, 2018)

Director Adam Martinec considers Ivan Passer's *Intimate Lighting* (Intimní osvětlení) as one of the best moments of Czech cinema. This personal preference of his is apparent in his sober twenty-minute study, and it's definitely not a bad influence. The film, picked by the San Sebastian film festival for competition in the student category, was made with the winning screenplay in the Film Accelerator Project, designed by the Czech Television network to promote works of film school students. Smoothly, with a slowness that is soothing and saddening at the same time, the film captures a reunion of four men in their fifties, who find their past more fulfilling than their future prospects.

To create a real-life look, Martinec casted his own father and uncles in the film and let experienced professional Leoš Noha help them with the rhythm, following the example of Forman's *Loves of a Blonde* (Lásky jedné plavovlásky), where Forman had the legendary Vladimír Menšík coach the non-professional actors on set. The fact that the film was made in the cast's natural habitat, near Martinec's hometown Krnov, probably also helped the natural impression the protagonists make.

The men reminiscence about their departed friend, they discuss who should kill the lamb they are about to roast, they argue about how old is the tree they decided to cut down to make a camp fire. Drobek, the active one, complains that had he taken up biking earlier, he could have become the European champion. Time is going by, alcohol is running out and the willingness to put aside the mask of a tough guy and to confide one's troubles to someone is increasing.

The growing understanding among the protagonists also translates in the way they are taken on camera. First, the footage of each of them is separated with a cut. Martinec doesn't use settling shots in which he would show the set as a whole to give us a clearer notion of the spatial relations between characters. We only get to see all four friends together in one large frame when Dalibor (Leoš Noha) explains matter-of-factly why he cannot drink (the audience, unlike the other characters, is already given a hint in a previous scene where he swallows some medicine).

While the first shot of men lying down against a tree sets a relaxed atmosphere of *The Land of Cockaigne*, the famous painting by Pieter Bruegel, this initial idyllic image is gradually complicated by dark undertones and a strengthening fatalistic shade. The recurring motive of failing forces, unfulfilled potential and the inevitable end is treated with pleasant matter-of-factness, without a hint of sentimentality. The protagonists never lose sight of the fact that life can have many flavours. Even if at times you completely lose appetite for it.

The society expects men to perpetually pretend they cannot suffer any harm. But to avoid death with big talk would mean to betray one's own essence and to disconnect from others. As *Salt and Sugar* shows with exceptional ease, we connect with others the most through mortality, common to all, making us all equal.

Besides being a source of sadness, knowing that we will die also allows us to tear down emotional barriers and to strengthen the sense of sympathy and mutuality. It's good that there are films to remind us of that.

The Night of the Agama (Noc s agamou, directed by Tomáš Janáček, 2018)

At last year's FAMU Fest, Tomáš Janáček was awarded the prize for the best live action film. Similarly to Ondřej Erban and Jan Hecht, he focused on a woman who doesn't yield to an unfavourable life situation. The atmosphere drama from contemporary Prague makes a compact whole out of two stories that Janáček saw and heard when working as a night receptionist, and starts off as a thriller. Disturbing music, a cold night, a young single mother with a seven-year old daughter. As more layers are progressively uncovered and the dominant storytelling principle is

introduced (replacing the classical character development through overcoming obstacles), it dawns on us that things and people are not what they seem to be.

The woman makes her living as a prostitute and at the moment she is trying to find a way for her and her daughter to spend the night. At least this night. About tomorrow, they'll see. She approaches and seduces a man in the street, one who seems lost, but has a place to stay and generally appears not to be at home in this world just like her, still trying to find his place in it. His shyness and helplessness towards the woman's seduction also implies that she has nothing to fear from him.

Given the presence of the daughter, the following interaction of the couple in the man's home doesn't bear a resemblance to a standard encounter between a prostitute and a client, either. The resulting pseudo-family constellation makes the adults switch between many different roles, out of consideration for the child. It also creates a stimulating tension between their pretended and authentical interest in each other; between what is and what could be. Until the end of the film, we are held in uncertainty about how authentic some of their behaviour is, or whether the protagonists want to help each other, or rather „*make things nice*" for themselves (as the man puts it).

Instead of a thriller or a social drama, suggested by its first minutes, the film comes close to an emotional double portrait of people lost in the ever more impersonal city; people who need each other out of diverse, progressively revealed reasons (which make us change our opinion of them all the time). Janáček does not criticize or judge the emotional emptiness of the relationship based on a transaction, instead, he genuinely examines it with empathy, using nuanced acting performances where every shift in intonation and each gesture matters a lot.

However, he does analyze the systemic shortcomings contributing to the feminization of poverty, even though implicitly, by pointing out how existing social order puts the woman in a more precarious situation, making her to overcome tougher obstacles and act more ruthlessly. Just like in Janáček's previous *The Knight's Lexicon* (Rytířský lexikon), the woman is unsurprisingly the mature one in the pair, regardless of the great insecurity that she apparently carries with her. It is also significant that the man gets on better with the daughter, who shares his passion for cocoa, a drink that

he makes for himself when feeling sad and failing to fall asleep. In his stagnation, he resembles the motionless agama lazing around in the warmth of his terrarium (and he too „*is shy and hates strangers*„).

Despite being in a less comfortable situation, the woman, unlike the man, has a direction to follow. The clearest demonstration of that is given in the energic last shot, when the woman's portrait is completed with a new layer of the musical motive, showing that, after all, she was able to adapt better to the city life and to sail through it with more confidence. Janáček is aware of the importance of duration, his works excellently with pauses, silences and waits, keeping the expectations up and capturing the cautiousness of the characters at the same time. The story ends with quite a dynamic scene, the first one to take place outside in the daylight, resulting in an extraordinarily strong cathartic effect which makes the film reverberate long after it ends.

George The Dog, Refugee (Jiří pes uprchlík, directed by Tomasz Wiński, 2019)

Tomasz Wiński's 30-minute film, provocatively examining where the sense of superiority can take us, was awarded the best screenplay award at the Huesca international film festival. The intimate psychological study with traits of a cruelly black comedy is based on a real story the author was told by a friend who had met a man assuming the role of a dog in Berlin.

After the opening dialogue, reminiscent of the first scenes of Chytilová's *Daisies* (Sedmikrásky), Anička and Eliška (impersonated by Jenovéfa Boková and Eliška Křenková, who both show admirable willingness to step out of the comfort zone), two bored, mostly emotionally inert friends, order the services of a man with the very same inclination as the man from Berlin. Their „dog" is played by Petr Vančura, whose assiduity equals that of his female counterparts. The story of their encounter and their living together is told retrospectively, in fragments spaced with pauses similar to winking. However, Anička's subjective voice-over comments are in contrast with the perspective-neutral, mostly static shots that create an atmosphere of a chilling clinical study.

Domesticating and training a human dog starts off as a good joke, but shortly, in line with the results of the famous Stanford prison experiment, it grows into ever more aggressive abuse of power and display of dominance. Petr's willingness to assume the role of a slave leads Eliška to stop seeing him not only as human, but later even as a living, thinking and feeling creature who deserves a decent life, regardless of whether he identifies himself as a dog, or a man. Like his mother, who rejected him (making him a refugee), she stops accepting him not only as a human, but also as whatever he decided to become.

As Jiří's freedom keeps shrinking, the space left for the actors by the camera shrinks too. Most of the film takes place in the confined interiors of a deceivingly homely apartment. Besides that, there are two exterior scenes out in the nature, but only the first one, shot as a whole, grants the characters a certain amount of freedom. In the second one, when the actors are shot from more up close, their options seem to be more limited.

The shift in the situation is also shown by placing the characters in certain parts of the mise-en-scène. Jiří is either not visible at all (unless he cringes under the table, licking his mistresses' feet), either stays in the background or the bottom part of the frame. Every time he steps out of his „commanded" space, the balance is disrupted and in comes the question of who is the master, who is the dog, and who is the human. The series of polaroid photos showing Jiří in disgraceful positions is reminiscent of the infamous photos of inmate abuse by American troops at the Iraqi Abu Ghraib prison in a gloomy parallel with the deranged behaviour of the young, otherwise healthy women, who are unable of normal relationships.

Wiński doesn't take a sociological or psychological perspective when examining how pleasure can be taken from a sense of absolute control, he is more interested in each protagonist's particular motives. A slightly exaggerated starting point situation, evoquing a bad dream, serves him to highlight the usual relationship patterns. Some people actually think of total subordinance and obedience on their partner's side as a proof of love, and similarly to Anička and Eliška, they miss how unhealthy such a disproportionate relationship, profitable only to one of the two parties, really is.

Just like the rest of the above-mentioned short films, this provocative, darkly comical history of a non-standard cohabitation points out something that is commonplace in our lives and the lives of people around us, although we fail or refuse to see it. In other words, Wiński's short film, like those of Hecht, Erban, Martinec and Janáček, and unlike Czech feature-length productions, doesn't offer the audience a simple escape from reality; it uses a variety of ways, and not always comfortable ones, to open the audience's eyes.