

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 16. 6. 2021

# Getting on in the World

The influence of *Citizen Kane* (1941) reached far beyond the United States. In Czechoslovakia, Orson Welles's famous film inspired Karel Steklý to make *Getting on in the World*. Both films are retrospectively narrated and stylistically embellished stories of the rise and fall of a media mogul who in the name of increasing readership abandons his moral principles, loses the favour of his loved ones and ruins his health. Both films also criticise egoism and the ruthless pursuit of success and expose capitalism as a system that is in principle amoral.

Steklý started working as a screenwriter in 1933. After the events of May 1945, he directed his debut film *Breach* (Průlom, 1945), depicting the fight of a group of miners striving to form a production collective. Most of his subsequent films are also characterised by strong political tendencies and outspoken designation of those who were at that time considered class enemies. In *Strike* (Siréna, 1946), an adaptation of a novel by Marie Majerová, Steklý depicted the formation of the first workers' unions. The film won the Grand Prize at the 1947 Venice Film Festival. A year later, working with the same colleagues (e.g. composer E.F. Burian and cinematographer Jaroslav Tuzar), he adapted a story by Jan Morávek into *Getting on in the World*.

The film, presented by the period press as a "testimony of a press tycoon", begins when its protagonist has almost entirely exhausted his moral and physical strength. Karel Kubát (Ladislav Boháč) is undergoing a medical examination. Thanks to x-ray photographs, we can literally look inside him at the start of the film. Throughout the rest of the film, another technical device is used to lay bare his privacy – a film camera. The camera is not a mute observer, but rather a narrator with its own voice and opinions. In the manner of State Security agents, the camera blatantly violates Kubát's privacy, comments on his inner processes and passes judgement. In this respect, it differs from the journalist from *Citizen Kane* who mostly neutrally gathered facts while reconstructing the life story of the film's titular character.

Kubát's private and career peripeties are not presented in a comprehensive form. His upcoming 50<sup>th</sup> birthday makes him reminisce and recapitulate. His portrayal is put together by means of a series of retrospective scenes exploring various chapters of his life. In the first one, taking place in 1918, he fights for his country on the Italian Front. He reads a poem about workers and thinks about home. About his father, a miner, and his mother, a washerwoman. In following flashbacks, he moves further and further away from his homeland – presented as a land of the working class – as well as his proletarian roots.

After the war, Kubát starts working for a printing company named Globus. He gradually works his way to the top and becomes its director. But during his chase for scoops, he loses his love and friends and remains alone in his big office, surrounded only by inanimate objects. Statues and other purposeless symbols of status. He tries to fill up the emptiness by listening to the radio. Although Kubát followed the motto “possessions give people independence” while climbing the company ladder, he becomes overshadowed and imprisoned by various objects in the film's deep-delving scenes from the present. Just like Charles Foster Kane.

While scenes depicting the lonely tycoon Kubát are brightened up by layered mise-en-scène, the lively activity in the newsroom is captured by lateral camera movements. Scenes from the printing works have also a different visual dynamic, with their urgency enhanced by faster cuts and a focus on details. At the rotary printing press, Kubát meets a group of emaciated workers whose requirements he “solves” with a handful of banknotes. The entire plot is composed of encounters with various stylistically differentiated sub-worlds. People representing different (and more proper) classes point out Kubát's individualism and the fact that he was led astray.

At the end, the decrepit tycoon Kubát, who is disappointed in himself, realises the pointlessness of everything he did. But according to the period news, it would have been a mistake to think that “people like Kubát regret their actions”.<sup>[1]</sup> Steklý's portrait of a greedy capitalist, a representative of a world which was supposed to be surpassed and eliminated by communism, was perceived as too forgiving, arousing sympathy and compassion instead of unequivocal condemnation. The film's cinematography and its appeals to viewers, disrupting its fictional spacetime, were not deemed as a sufficient element of distance by the critics.

Some reviews therefore tried to explain the film and offer its optimal interpretation: “In *Getting on in the World*, Karel Steklý wanted to reveal the immorality and aimlessness of capitalist business before the Second World War. [...] Using the example of Karel Kubát, he wanted to show that the capitalist greed was in itself inhuman and anti-human.”<sup>[2]</sup> Another review says that *Getting on in the World* lays down “a single valid principle”, which is that “press – just like film and radio – cannot serve as instrument of propaganda for private exploitation”.<sup>[3]</sup>

The question whether the press can serve as an instrument of propaganda for something else, for instance a hateful fight against capitalist imperialism, wasn't answered. In any case, Steklý's film is a schematic product of its time which – given the conspicuousness of its theses – hardly convinces anyone today that capitalism is bad. But with its formal craftiness, it stands out from other films of that period and unlike other agitational films made after the 1948 Communist Takeover, it can arouse interest in cinephiles.

**Getting on in the World** (*Kariéra*, Czechoslovakia 1948), director: Karel Steklý, screenplay: Karel Steklý, director of photography: Jaroslav Tuzar, music: E. F. Burian, cast: Ladislav Boháč, Marie Vášová, Eduard Linkers, Stanislav Langer, Jiřina Petrovická, Marie Rosůlková, Jarmila Kurandová, Dana Medřická and many more. Československý státní film, 108 min.

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#### Notes:

[1] Brněnské filmové premiéry. *Rovnost*, no. 250 (24<sup>th</sup> October), 1948, p. 5.

[2] j. k., *Kariéra*. *Svět v obrazech*, no. 45 (6<sup>th</sup> November), 1948, p. 18.

[3] bž, Film a skutečnost. *Svět práce*, no. 43 (28<sup>th</sup> October 10), 1948, p. 2