MARTIN ŠRAJER / 10. 9. 2024

Karel Kachyňa

Czech film director and screenwriter Ladislav Helge considered him the best narrator of Czech cinema. Other colleagues appreciated his professionalism and commitment. It was thanks to his commitment, among other things, that Karel Kachyňa was able to shoot at least one film a year from the time he finished his studies until his death, without no breaks, either voluntary or enforced. To paraphrase the title of one of Kachyňa's lesser-known works, the secret of this great narrator of Czech cinema may have been his "ordinary" dedication to his craft, to which he devoted more time than to anything else, even according to his loved ones.

Born on 1 May 1924 in Vyškov, South Moravia, Kachyňa liked nature from an early age. Perhaps that is why he repeatedly chose topics set in the country (*The Nun's Night* [Noc nevěsty]), in the open countryside (*Vertigo* [Závrať]) or in the deep forest (*A Carriage Going to Vienna* [Kočár do Vídně]). At least he did so in the days when he had the relative freedom to choose what he would film. Perhaps owing to his humble rural background, Kachyňa did not consider himself a thinker. Even after the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, he was not found to be the main culprit when it came to several of his politically controversial works.

From the artistic point of view, though, he never again reached the same level as in the days of his collaboration with Jan Procházka, whose scripts allowed Kachyňa to develop his artistic perception of nature and sense of metaphors in pictures.

These predispositions led to his decision during the Protectorate era, when the universities were closed by the German occupiers, to study at the School of Applied Arts in Zlín, where he focused on figurative painting. Kachyňa later often used his talent for drawing and composition to create pictorial backgrounds with the drawing of scenes into individual shots, i.e. essentially storyboards. The use of short focal length lenses would become a significant part of Kachyňa's films, one of his

hallmarks.

In the last year of WWII, Kachyňa and his brother were deployed in Germany. It was probably his war experience that compelled him join the Communist Party in 1946. In that same year, President Edvard Beneš's decree established the Film and TV School of Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU), where Kachyňa enrolled and became one of its first graduates. Together with his colleague and friend Vojtěch Jasný, he studied camera and photography. Thanks to the intercession of Elmar Klos, they were both hired by the Studio of Documentary Films in Prague and then to Czechoslovak Army Film.

In their early work, Kachyňa and Jasný, both convinced communists, devoted themselves to the propaganda-favoured themes of the countryside, agriculture, and the defence of the state borders against intruders. They graduated with *It Is Not Always Cloudy* (Není stále zamračeno, 1949), a staged documentary with a typical socialism-building theme. The film follows a collective effort to create a state farm in the borderlands and to fulfil the assigned plan. Jaroslav Kučera, another talented classmate of Jasný and Kachyňa, took pictures of the imaginative illustrations for the agitation slogans.

The young filmmakers received the State Prize for this film and immediately found themselves in the limelight of the regime. The documentary was followed by a reportage from the Prague Student Congress, *For a Joyful Life* (Za život radostný, 1950); a look inside the Letov factory in Letňany, called *They Know What to Do* (Věděli si rady, 1950); and a regime-favouring documentary called *Extraordinary Years* (Neobyčejná léta, 1952), celebrating cooperatives and deploying perhaps the entire range of features of socialist realism. In 1952 they were both sent to China as representatives of the Army Film to capture (on colour film!) the journey of Vít Nejedlý's Army Art Ensemble as well as the Asian world power before the Cultural Revolution (see, for example, the film *People of a Single Heart* [Lidé jednoho srdce, 1953]).

The journey to China took them across the Soviet Union where the two passionate party members saw for the first time what it was really like to live in a country that was meant to serve as an example for Czechoslovakia. For Jasný in particular, the

encounter with poverty and permanent state surveillance was strongly disillusioning. Nevertheless, both continued to make films appreciated by the communist regime even after their return. *The Lost Track* (Ztracená stopa, 1955) is a story of a border guard who, together with his dog that is shot at the time, captures a border intruder. It was made in 1953 but was only released three years later.

The first film by Kachyňa and Jasný to be screened in Czechoslovak cinemas was the spy story *This Will All Be Over Tonight* (Dnes večer všechno skončí, 1955), again set in a military environment. The polarity of good and evil remains unambiguous. On the right side, there are border soldiers, and on the wrong side, foreign spies.

In 1956, Jasný left Army Film, which also marked the end of his collaboration with Kachyňa, who would work for the Czechoslovak Army Film studio for two more years.

At the end of the 1950s, Czechoslovak cinema saw the emergence of several non-schematic films that placed more emphasis on image and form. Alongside Helge, Kadár and Klos, the leading representatives of this so-called “Ur Wave“, there was Kachyňa, a filmmaker who always paid great attention to the visual concept. He made his first film of this new, more civilian type at Barrandov for the Novotný-Kubala creative group, which had transferred to the Barrandov Film Studio from Army Film and as per the production plan, had to make a military-themed film once a year.

Despite the fact that the drama *At That Time, at Christmas…*(Tenkrát o vánocích, 1958) about a Czechoslovak battalion defending a Slovak village in the foothills of the mountains in the penultimate year of the war is still politically tinged, compared to Kachyňa’s previous socialist films we can see a clear shift in the depiction of the characters. He is suddenly more interested in the fate of individual soldiers than in the heroic slogans and gestures. Moreover, these are no poster heroes, but true personalities with real outlines. With its baroque imagery, *At That Time, at Christmas…* also differs from other, formally “greyer” films from the military milieu.

Another of Kachyňa’s above-average genre films was *Smugglers of Death* (Král Šumavy, 1959), which aligned with the efforts of the ministries of defence and interior to showcase in a favourable light the role of border guards in ensuring that no intruders crossed state lines. The assumption that the suspenseful concept would increase the film’s appeal proved to be correct. Over four million tickets were sold for

the regime-approved alternative to Western “genre films”. The technically flawless frontier thriller became the highest-grossing film of 1960.

Smugglers of Death was also among the films for which Kachyňa – together with cinematographer Josef Illík, his FAMU classmate – created a complete visual solution in advance owing to the unusual image compositions. The use of different focal distances, and unusual angles and movements, together strengthen the impact and help convey the characters’ psyches and ideological stances. Low angle shots and shots composed to remind the viewer of social realist paintings also contribute to the glorification of the selfless border guards.

After *The Slinger* (Práče, 1960), a film about an orphan freed from a concentration camp, Kachyňa made *Fetters* (Pouta, 1961), an adaptation of Jan Procházka’s psychological novel *Pity* (Lítost). Thus began his collaboration with Procházka, who would go on to write the scripts for all of Kachyňa’s subsequent films from the 1960s.

According to Kachyňa’s recollections, they understood each other both as men and as professionals. They both came from Moravia, were marked by the war, and had similar views of people and the world. They also both began their careers as orthodox communists and, like many other intellectuals of their generation, gradually came to seek a critical revision of the old dogmas in the post-Stalinist period.

Kachyňa saw *Trials and Tribulations* (Trápení, 1961), a film about a young, lonely girl caring for an injured horse, as the beginning of a new phase of his work. With this film, based on Procházka’s script, he redirected his attention from external action to the inner world of the characters. The other two parts of their trilogy about adolescence, *Vertigo* and *The High Wall* (Vysoká zeď), were conceived in the same way – as emotional stories following the tradition of Czech lyricism. They show the world of children and adolescents without idealization, in captivating wide-angle compositions with striking visual symbols (a mining tower, a wall).

Kachyňa did not set himself apart from the New Wave with his work “manifesto” – his films about the bitter awakening from illusions were in line with the mood of the era. On the other hand, he represented an older, and in some ways perhaps more pragmatic generation and followed his own path as a technically proficient implementer of topics fabricated by others, not as an auteur filmmaker. Accordingly,

Procházka's authority was not limited to the delivery of the literary scripts. Kachyňa consulted with him on the selection of actors, about which he took great care, as well as of other professionals, such as cameramen. It was therefore a collective work from the very beginning.

A sceptical yet humanistic view of man is also inherent in *Hope* (Naděje, 1963), a tragic story of a love affair between an alcoholic and a prostitute, starring Hana Hegerová and Rudolf Hrušínský. The subsequent films of Kachyňa and Procházka, however, showed a shift from the exploration of inner worlds and relationships between people to the exploration of the relationship between man and the history that he is subjected to. To reflect the society-wide mental development from faith to doubt, they expanded their scope to include a broader social and historical context.

They joined other filmmakers of the 1960s who undogmatically revised the manipulated image of our history. Gradually, they focused on the occupation and the end of the war (*Long Live the Republic!* [Ať žije republika], *A Carriage Going to Vienna*), post-war collectivisation (*The Nun's Night*), and the 1950s Stalinist purges (*A Ridiculous Gentleman* [Směšný pán], *The Ear* [Ucho]).

Produced in cooperation with the Ministry of National Defence and Czechoslovak Army Film, the epic war film *Long Live the Republic!* follows the end of WWII in a Moravian village through the ideologically immaculate eyes of 12-year-old Olin.

Jaromír Šofr's subjective camera, characterized by overexposed images and striking contrasts in light, warns us that we are watching distorted memories, not a faithful reconstruction. The feverish flow of both real and dream images is not a celebration of liberation, though. On the contrary, the myth of national heroism is being challenged here. According to Kachyňa's recollections, President Novotný liked the film despite this disillusionment. Reportedly, he even defended it, since the Soviet ambassador thought that it is an anti-Soviet work.

With similar relentlessness, Procházka and Kachyňa portrayed the actions of partisans blinded by war in *A Carriage Going to Vienna* (1966). This ingeniously constructed psychological thriller, which is again given a gloomy atmosphere by Josef Illik's cinematography, is largely without dialogue. But the view of the post-war settlement was so bleak this time that the scenario did not initially gain the approval

of the Main Administration of Press Supervision. The film was completed and realized only with the intercession of President Novotný, Procházka's influential friend, who however did not accept the finished film.

Marking Procházka's first clash with the authorities, the film was eventually released, but several scenes had to be changed or removed, and much of the press coverage was negative. Today, the heavy atmosphere is seen as one of the strengths of *A Carriage Going to Vienna*. The complex female character is also praised since it is a rare phenomenon in New Wave films, which usually foreground men who are flawed and doubting. Iva Janžurová's unforgettable Krista is both a victim and an avenger.

Another strong female figure looking for determination to rebel appears in *The Nun's Night* (1967). This raw rural ballad, once again owing its artistic qualities to Illík, looks at the era of collectivisation as a period when the old order disappeared but people were suspicious of the new one. Therefore, there is a clash between two fanaticisms, a religious one and a political one. The former is represented by Jana Brejchová for whom the character of the former nun was among her most rewarding dramatic roles. The dark, one-sided view of history deepened the conflict between Procházka and the Party.

In addition to his thought-provoking works, which include the intimate hospital drama *A Ridiculous Gentleman* (1969) about the effects of the political trials of the 1950s, and the non-idyllic rural "romance" *Christmas with Elizabeth* [Vánoce s Alžbětou, 1968]), Procházka also wrote a light comedy, *Our Crazy Family* [Naše bláznivá rodina, 1968]). It was originally to be directed by Jan Valášek, but he died during the finalization. The film was completed by Kachyňa, for whom it would be one of the few comedies in his otherwise quite serious list of works.

In the spring of 1969 Kachyňa, exasperated with the developments in the country, demonstratively resigned from the Party. He assumed a ban would come for him. Still, he was determined to film one more hastily created script. *The Ear* (1969) had been written by Procházka within a few weeks. He projected onto it his anxiety about the constant state surveillance and the regime's bullying. As usual, Kachyňa thought out the arrangements of the scenes (assisted by Ester Krumbachová) and the filming could begin.

The intimate expressionist thriller about the mentality of a totalitarian society was completed in 1969 (the first service copy bears the date 29 December 1969), although it was originally planned for the following year.

The protagonists of the film are the First Deputy Minister and his wife, who have returned late at night to their Prague villa from a government reception. They straight away have an intense feeling that something is wrong, that someone is watching and listening. They become prisoners of their own conscience and of the cramped, candle-lit rooms. Our view of them is often obstructed by walls or furniture. The way they are framed and lit leaves them no leeway. Their privacy does not belong to them; they do not know if they are still part of the system or if they have already been excluded from it by an order from above.

Jan Procházka was expelled from the Party in February 1970. This was followed by a ban on any official work and strict surveillance by the State Security (the secret police force), which, combined with the writer's failing health, led to his early death. Even though Kachyňa made *The Ear*, *The Nun's Night* and *A Carriage Going to Vienna*, signed the *Two Thousand Words* manifesto calling for reform of the Communist Party, and as a teacher sponsored Vlastimil Venclík's banned student film *The Uninvited Guest* (Nezvaný host, 1969), no punishment awaited him. He was free to continue filming undisturbed. It is one of the unsolved mysteries of Czech film history.

"Kachyňa's position is also one of the mysteries. Despite the fact that he shot 'the most shameful anti-Socialist and anti-Soviet pamphlet,' despite the fact that the Russians have still not forgotten his *A Carriage Going to Vienna*, despite the fact that he was an intimate friend of Jan Procházka, he was allowed to film in the spring and, to his own astonishment, Toman has now offered him another job," wrote Pavel Juráček in his diary.

One possible answer to the question of why Kachyňa was not silenced is provided by the extraordinary success of his next film *Jumping over Puddles Again* (Už zase skáču přes kaluže, 1970).

Although the adaptation of Alan Marshall's novel was based on Procházka's script, covered by Ota Hofman in the credits, its positive reception both in Czechoslovakia and abroad served the new management of the nationalised cinema as a powerful

argument against fears that after the personnel purges at Barrandov Studio, the quality of the films would decline. It would be counterproductive to get rid of Kachyňa, who, as a filmmaker with a bravura mastery of his craft, represented an insurance policy of quality. All he had to do was distance himself from Procházka in the press and accept the narrative that he had been duped by the politically engaged writer.

Procházka, however, continued to draw attention to himself by his absence. Kachyňa's films from the 1970s, when he was no longer free to choose his subjects, did not reach the quality of *A Carriage Going to Vienna* or *The Nun's Night*. With a few exceptions, such as the political drama about the Slovak National Uprising called *Hot Winter* (Horká zima, 1973), Kachyňa managed to find a compromise between what he wanted to do and what he was allowed to do, and to avoid ostentatious bows to power.

To remain outside the controversial field of topics, he made either poetic films about children or historical ones. The two thematic levels merged in his films *The Train to Heaven Station* (Vlak do stanice Nebe, 1972), *Love* (Láska, 1973), and *The Girl Robinson* (Robinsonka, 1974) based on a teenage romance novel by Marie Majerová. In the 1970s and 1980s, Kachyňa generally preferred time-tested literary works.

For example, *Pauline* (Pavlínka, 1974) was based on a true story about the tragic death of a 16-year-old girl during the suppression of a workers' strike, as described by Alfréd Technik in his novel *The Ugly Village* (Škaredá dědina, 1975), a socially critical drama set during the economic crisis, based on a short story by Petr Jilemnický.

In 1978, Kachyňa made two films on the same budget, the summer comedy *Meeting in July* (Setkání v červenci) about a love affair between a teacher and a student, which began his long collaboration with cinematographer Jan Čuřík, and *Waiting for the Rain* (Čekání na déšť), a probe into the world of a lonely teenage girl.He often returned to the events of the war and continued to confront his young heroes with the cruelty of the world (*The Little Sugar House* [Cukrová bouda, 1980], *To the Knowledge of Your Beloved* [Oznamuje se láskám vašim, 1988]).

Karel Kachyňa was one of the busiest Barrandov directors during the normalisation period. The efficiency of his work, but also less emphasis on visual sophistication and the willingness to accept ready-made subjects that suited his creative nature (he interfered less with the literary preparations than when collaborating with Procházka) enabled him to make a total of 22 feature films in two decades.

It was rarely a complete artistic fiasco, though. With his flair for dramaturgy, his focused direction of the actors, his perfect command of the filmmaking craft, and his emphasis on authenticity, Kachyňa was always able to more or less cover up the shortcomings of the subject matter. Even the collage-like psychological drama *Death of a Fly* (Smrt mouchy, 1976) about a young man suffering from a phobia of flies due to a childhood trauma, failed, in the words of Jaromír Blažejovský, "in a strange, irritative way."

Love between the Raindrops (Lásky mezi kapkami deště, 1979), a lyrical depiction of life on the Prague periphery during the First Czechoslovak Republic, is often called a highlights of Kachyňa's works, along with a pair of tragicomic doctor stories inspired by one literary work by Adolf Branald: *Watch Out, the Doctor Is on His Round!* (Pozor, vizita!, 1981) and *The Nurses* (Sestřičky, 1983).

Alena Mihulová, who was discovered by Kachyňa for the latter doctor film, became the life partner of the then 41-old director during shooting and appeared in four more of his films. Similarly, Kachyňa offered the first major acting opportunity to Vladimír Dlouhý, Lukáš Vaculík, and Ondřej Vetchý.

Kachyňa, like other filmmakers, did not decide to take a more critical stance on the conditions of the era until the second half of the 1980s, when he shot two films from the present. In *A Good Light* (Dobré světlo, 1986), a nude photographer encounters a narrow-minded, small-town morality. In the communal satire *...And What Now, Gentlemen?* (Kam pánové, kam jdete?, 1987), an individual in mid-life crisis clashes with state bureaucracy. Kachyňa's work commitment was not slowed down by the Velvet Revolution, anticipated by the perestroika films.

In 1990, Kachyňa became a professor at FAMU. Besides teaching, though, he continued to be a busy director. Twice he made use of the estate of Jan Procházka. In addition to the taciturn rural ballad *The Cow* (Kráva, 1993), the director's late

masterpiece with its narrative austerity, he made the hospital drama *St. Nicholas Is in Town* (Městem chodí Mikuláš, 1992), for which Kachyňa and Procházka had written the script already in the 1960s. He also returned to the civil tone of films from the 1960s in *Fanny* (Fany, 1995), a realistic psychological portrait of a complicated relationship between two sisters, played by Jiřina Bohdalová and Jiřina Jirásková.

The culmination of Kachyňa's impressive filmography could have been a film version of Bohumil Hrabal's *I Served the King of England* (Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále). He tried for a long time to get the rights to make it into a film. However, director Jiří Menzel sought to do the same, and was ultimately more successful, releasing his last Hrabal adaptation in 2006, two years after Karel Kachyňa's death.

The director of more than 50 feature and television films, several documentaries and TV series, winner of many awards and the most elaborate narrator of Czech cinema, died on 12 March 2004 in Říčany.

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