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Martin Blažíček: Amateur film is not a monolith

The curator Martin Blažíček focuses on both independent and art amateur films in 1980s Czechoslovakia. During his research, he has been instrumental in making available works by Jan SágI, Čaroděj Oz, Pigi, Pablo de Sax and other Czech underground filmmakers. At the Ji.hlava IDFF 2019, he presented two programmes, introducing forgotten independent documentaries by Ivan Tatíček and experimental films by Miloš Šejn.

You have concentrated both on Jan SágI and Čaroděj Oz, and on Ivan Tatíček and Miloš Šejn in your research. Is there any connection between the two pairs?

In principle, both these projects map the part of the 1970s and 1980s film industry that used to be slightly disregarded. Our knowledge of films outside the state monopoly and of film distribution during the era of normalization and late socialism is weak. Not only do we not know the films themselves, we also do not know how and where they were screened and what institutions were connected to them. The only exception can be found in some amateur film festivals with documentations and, sometimes, even archives of their own. What connects the four filmmakers is therefore mainly the fact that they are not mainstream and are more or less unknown. Moreover, this is the era when experimental film was thriving abroad, and even though the term was not used in our country at all, Miloš Šejn's work is definitely part of this context. I like searching for "other cinematography", and we can talk about the meaning of the word "other" here and about why and how these films should have a name of their own, distinguishing them from Polish, Hungarian and Austrian films.

Based on what did you choose the filmmakers?

If I do not know the films at all in advance, I choose mainly based on my research, recommendations... Sometimes there is a passing remark about the film in the literature, sometimes the film is available in bad quality, sometimes something surprising comes up that nobody has ever been interested in revitalizing, rewatching, in analysing whether it is interesting and what could be done with it in the future. Or in how to archive it. But to be honest, I can never be sure what the film is going to look like. Sometimes we receive a stack of boxes full of films that have no clear start, no clear end and no name. In the next step, we must inspect them, perform elementary repairs of the material, and identify their authors – only then is it possible to name them. Then, and only then, we do the scanning and sound reconstruction. So, as for your question, based on what do we chose the films, I must say there is a preliminary research telling us whether the author is significant for the period, even though this “significance” is rather disputable. It is not the case that we would know the films in advance and go after a certain gem. And because the films have not been screened in years, one of the results of our works is a new premiere of a digital copy after forty years.

Why do you find Ivan Tatíček significant as a filmmaker?

I remember watching *About Nothing Else* (O ničem jiném) on a VHS tape at the Faculty of Arts in maybe 1998, and then I watched it again only in maybe 2015. The special quality of Tatíček’s films as I remember it can be described as light-hearted, spontaneous or authentic. It was this experience that brought me back to it. I borrowed a screener of the film on a VHS tape in such a bad state that I could not tell whether the film was black-and-white or colour. Later, it turned out that the blame was on the film itself – the colours of the material are very specific. Thanks to this, I found out that I would be interested in watching other films by Tatíček as well.

In your text about the film underground, you mention that the underground and the amateur film industry were two separate groups of a sort, with many underground filmmakers despising the amateur ones. What are the main differences here?

In principle, the main thing is that these terms are only coined retrospectively. At the time when the films emerged, the connotations of the terms “underground”,

“experimental” and “amateur film” were slightly different. The amateur film industry is not a monolithic segment, not a just a group of home videos and of amateurs shooting under film clubs and industrial companies; these were semi-professionals, in fact. They made films on their holidays, aimed at making documentaries and staged films, and shot videos covering concrete mixing, among other things. Other amateurs did not like this environment but took part in some amateur film festivals, the only platform for sharing their works with the public since there was basically no other option for them. The truth is that even though these groups could have met at the festivals, they did not engage with each other. Filmmakers such as Tatíček, Dražan, Hvižd’ or Tomáš Vorel worked on their own and presented their works at the festivals, such as Brněnská 16 (Brno 16) or Mladá kamera (Young Camera) in Uničov; they had a world of their own. Then there were specialized amateur film festivals for films about mountain climbing, engineering and so on and so forth, but that would be a whole new chapter. The amateur film is not a monolith; there are many nuances and layers that one must understand. Also, there are many authors who get insulted when called amateurs and, at the same time, there are many authors proudly calling themselves the same thing. At the time, it was not a diversified term here, not like in the 1960s American New Hollywood. It was rather a general *status quo*; these were mainly independent filmmakers working on their films at home, but what were they supposed to do with them when finished during the normalization era?

The underground was not able to come to terms with the fact that the organization of the amateur film festivals was good and that they were official. They were attended by members of the supervisory bodies of the Party; the content of the films was checked; there were limits one could not go beyond. The limits were applied to music, topics, narration, formal aspects, all this included for example under the umbrella term “a socialist man.” Many have talked about how the underground group did not want to undergo this selection mechanism, did not even want to try it. In their eyes, it was a kind of a Party meeting which they despised. They refused to join the world of the organized amateurs but then had a very limited number of common platforms to choose from. That is why they found their own ways of presenting their films.

When you worked on making the films, such as those by Čaroděj Oz, available you encountered various troubles with sound and sound mix, for example that the sound was on separate magnetophone tapes and there were many notes on

how to screen it. Was it a huge difference compared to the work you did on Ivan Tatíček's films? Do you encounter other problems when digitalizing his films?

The difference is not that huge, but generally speaking, 8mm films are problematic because there is no standard for them. Since it is an amateur format, there is no standardization we know from common films where the number of frames per second is given and where there are sound norms such as stereo or Dolby. In amateur films, each director can use parameters of their own. We deal with technical difficulties arising from the fact the Super-8 had separate picture and sound. Some of them had a great solution – they shot films without sound. On the other hand, there are Čaroděj's films, which are very sound-creative, so to speak, when it comes to the technical difficulties. He enclosed technical instructions telling us where to go faster or slower and where to use which track from the magnetophone. We simulated the instruction on a computer together with the director, just as he would have done it with a projector. By digitalizing it, we create one fixed version, but the artistic content remains untouched, of course.

To what extent can the author interfere in the process of digitalization?

The authors can and do interfere; they have to since there are things we do not know. For example: I am working on a film right now the author of which does not remember certain things, and I am facing a difficult decision because it is rather unclear and there is no documentation.

How important is it for you to find out the originally intended way of screening?

The first thing here is the choice of a medium. A video is different from an 8mm film, of course. We try to create an "authentic" digitalized version. It is not always possible in the full extent, though, for many reasons. The framerate, the gradation differs – Super-8 is about 18 fps, video 24 or 25 fps. Or the frame size – Super-8 is usually screened on 2-metre diagonal screens, but in cinemas, the diagonal suddenly increases to seven metres or even more. The film is then different, in fact. When it gets three-times bigger, strange things happen with its time that were not there originally. It is as if you have CinemaScope or any other huge spectacle and watch it on your mobile phone, the effect is slightly different. There is a dogma of maintaining the authenticity of the original medium when screening – including the intensity of

black, gradation, contrast, speed and editing; no changes are possible. Even if something looks like a mistake, it remains in the film. When the sound tape is not found, the film is screened without it, with no replacement. When a frame is lost, it remains lost. The authors do not interfere with that; they cannot edit or change the film in any way. Usually we come to an agreement about the process almost immediately; I have never encountered an author I would have to dissuade from interfering with his film in this sense.

What do the viewers say about the conversion? For example, now with Ivan Tatíček in Jihlava?

They have no comparison, of course, so they just watch the digitalized version. They can never see the 8mm film. When revitalizing older films, one can choose from various strategies. The golden rule says that the only existing original cannot be distributed. It would be like distributing a negative. A copy must be made, but the question is whether you use the chemical or the electronic approach. The films can also be copied on another Super-8, but for this format, the mechanism is not very reliable, and the result would be much worse than the original as for colour intensity and presentation and all other aspects. Copying a Super-8 is financially demanding, and there are not many places allowing screening of this format. The viewers have no idea about all of that; they are presented with the digital result. This is the way the film is. Media to develop and to convert the old into the new while preserving the key attributes is a common approach. Nobody would ask this question if we screened a VHS tape or a DVD. Yet the changes are huge for these formats as well when converting them into the DCP.

Do people ask about that in the discussions?

I do not believe they even think about it. Not many people are experienced in film screening, and those who are understand the necessity of all of this. We can make the screen smaller or create a new screening environment, but I would say it is crucial to meet the standard conditions of contemporary cinemas. The entropy of possibilities is vast, though. You can do anything. You can recreate the original screening, create a yellowish picture as if screened from a projector with a bulb; you can do many things adding to a seemingly even more authentic experience, but we have never done

it with such simulation in mind.

How was the Jihlava workshop received?

It is always received well. The audience in Jihlava is very open to various kinds of films. Even to 1980s films that were only screened three times at the time, to a completely different audience. Despite that, I believe they tell us something important about the atmosphere of the era. At the very least, they include many techniques that were rather progressive at the time even in the context of the official documentaries, such as hand-held camera, the way the takes are done, the way lenses are used. Something that was not done in common documentaries, and when it was done in TV films, it was a tragedy. In this aspect, the amateur films of the early 1980s are much better than many films created both for the film industry and for TV at the time. I believe it is in this sense that they speak to the contemporary audience as well, not just as an imprint or a symptom of the era but also as a unique film language that had no analogy anywhere else.

Are there any other 1980s amateur film directors left to be documented?

There are many of them; I think that, theoretically, there are dozens of interesting films out there. We have a list of the films that we know were shot but have not found yet. Then there are films we have found but have not had the time and money to revitalize. The list is very long, and it is rather about priorities – what is important to do now and what can wait. But that is nothing extraordinary. I would say it is a global phenomenon to have a part of the cinematography that is not archived. And it will never be.