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The Canaries of Tarantino's Mines: The Czechs and the Generational Films of the 1990s

It happened in the mid-1990s: despite most people's expectations, *Pulp Fiction* (1994), the second film by Quentin Tarantino, won the main competition of the Cannes Film Festival and was then enthusiastically received by audiences and critics around the world. According to some, this was the beginning of a new, "post-Tarantino"^[1] era of the independent film, but the truth is it no longer concerned just independent film. The public space was then co-created by a new generation whose influence can be seen even today. It was at that time when various alternative lifestyles became more and more popular, the influence of social minorities grew, and previously marginal phenomena began to move closer to the mainstream.^[2] When films such as *Pulp Fiction*, *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994) as well as two years later *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996) became extraordinary cases of films at once popular and with cult status, they proved these social changes. They showed that even thematically provocative Anglophone "entertainment" productions with genre basics could be artistically progressive and intellectually stimulating. Their impact was illustrated by a number of rapidly emerging "related" works, such as the controversial *The Doom Generation* (Gregg Araki, 1995), the story-film *Acid House* (Paul McGuigan, 1998), and the Australian film *Idiot Box* (David Caesar, 1996) about slackers who decide to pull off a "professional" bank robbery.

The connection between these films and their examples is sometimes obvious, such as with the first two films mentioned above,^[3] but with films like *Idiot Box*, the affiliation to the described phenomenon is indirect, and therefore questionable. To begin with,

let us mention at least a few characteristic features that unite the aforementioned films; the search for the basic contours of the amorphous group they form will be the subject of the entire article, though. All the films are associated with young people – especially with Generations X and Y – who starred in them, formed their widest (loudest) audience, and at the same time participated in their creation (Tarantino was slightly over thirty when he finished *Pulp Fiction*). Although the films dealt with their values (think of the opening monologue from *Trainspotting*), they usually did so metaphorically and were usually not informal but rather genre works set in a socially marginal environment – the underworld, where crime and related phenomena were rampant. With their cynical nature, often enriched with a lot of black humour, they outraged the more conservative part of the audience, while their innovative approach to film language entertained their fans. The impact of these films was not insignificant even in the Czech Republic.

Shock therapy

In retrospect, it is not hard to guess how these films won over (not only) young Czech viewers.^[4] Firstly, they represented the kind of Anglophone production that was carefully suppressed from official distribution during communism. The only films available had been for example *Kramer vs. Kramer* (Robert Benton, 1979) and *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (Steven Spielberg, 1982), either social-critical dramas for adults, or fantasy films for the whole family, altogether completely “harmless” to anyone/anything.^[5] Secondly, it was a contemporary phenomenon – a young person could finally feel that they were living in the present and that the rest of society was aware of their existence and voice. The power and popularity of these films, in addition to their boldly chosen themes, was often enhanced by a radically (post)modern style that defied conventions – the narrative of these films was fragmented into episodes, flashbacks and fragments; the camera captured obscure events from skewed angles; and the colour tinting was a symptom both of the altered state of consciousness of the characters and the new experience of the audience with the film medium. Thanks to this, today’s thirty- and forty-somethings identify this group of films as formative.^[6] They were introduced to the films by Czech cinema distributors at a time when the internet connection was not a common household feature.

Many of these non-conformist films were brought to the Czech Republic by Intersonic (*Trainspotting*, *Twin Town* [Kevin Allen, 1997], *Gummo* [Harmony Korine, 1997]); according to Ondřej Šír, the owners had purely commercial intentions and did not have any concept in mind when selecting the films.^[7] By contrast, a certain strategy can be traced in the case of Atlantis Entertainment, founded by entrepreneurs David Matouš and Klara Kučerová. As part of their strategy, there was an effort to fill the gap in the contemporary film market and to take up the socially meritorious position of a mediator of artistically ambitious (art) films.^[8] However, if we look carefully at Atlantis' offer, we can see that the focus of its interest was primarily on a specific "kind" of art films, as evidenced by Matouš's statement: "We strive to distribute films that are atypical [and] that includes films that are close to the most extreme poles."^[9] Already their first distribution effort, *Elisa* (dir. by Jean Becker, 1995) about Maria, a teenage (anti-)heroine who sets out to murder her alcoholic father and ends up having an almost incestuous relationship with him, outlined the path Atlantis was to pursue. Other films with racy plots or scandalous reputations followed, such as the drama *Leaving Las Vegas* (Mike Figgis, 1995), nominated for Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay and Best Director, *Crash* (David Cronenberg, 1996), and two parts of the so-called "Teen Apocalypse Trilogy" ^[10] by Gregg Araki.

The promotion strategy of highlighting the scandalous potential of a particular film seems to have been applied by Matouš and Kučerová quite deliberately and repeatedly. The title of Araki's film *The Doom Generation* was translated vulgarly as *Zkurvená generace* (The Fucked Generation), and his next film *Nowhere* (1997) then as *Zkurvená nuda* (Fucking Boredom). In the press, Matouš warned of the controversy that *Crash* had caused in the world and recommended cinemas not to sell tickets to people under the age of 21, despite the fact that the highest possible age limit for films is 18 in the Czech Republic. It was not difficult to outrage the Czech public, which had been restrained by state socialism for forty-odd years. Due to the censorship of the previous years, many radical artworks of the previous decades were only then reaching the Czech public – for example, *Last Tango in Paris* (Ultimo tango a Parigi, Bernardo Bertolucci, 1972), *Salò, or The 120 Days of Sodom* (Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma, Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1975), and the Japanese-French film *In the Realm of the Senses* (Ai no corrida, Nagisa Oshima, 1976) – and, for the first time, the audience witnessed a mass exodus from ongoing screenings.^[11]

In connection with the release of *Crash*, a discussion arose at the Ministry of Culture about the possibilities of a more effective way of controlling similar works,^[12] a reversal from the earlier tendency of post-revolutionary governments to reject various kinds of regulation in an attempt to distance themselves from the restrictive approach applied by the communists.^[13] Matouš and Kučerová could nevertheless be sure of their position; there was no real danger to them. Quite to the contrary, from the commercial point of view, they could have been pleased that their films attracted a young audience and thus had one more clearly defined target audience than the Association of Czech Film Clubs (AČFK), in addition to intellectuals. The fact that young viewers were interested in *The Fucked Generation* was not only reported in newspapers but also by Zdeno Kubina on the pages of the *Filmový přehled* magazine.^[14] Its affiliation to films by David Lynch, Quentin Tarantino and Oliver Stone started a chain of related works, which was later joined by other films such as Doug Liman's *Go* (1999). The connection of these films to young audiences was confirmed by Sunfilm when they categorised *Acid House* as a "satirical generational tragicomedy" in its distribution list.

Exploitation and Czech generational films

Shock was therefore not only a reaction by audiences to the previously unheard of, but also a tool in the hands of distributors and a means of expression for creators. In the field of communication with the public, a shock or a scandal is linked to the tabloid media, whose existence and practices were de facto conditioned by the demise of the pre-revolutionary state structure. Firstly, because their basic mental setup corresponds to the desire to draw attention to themselves required by the competitive nature of the free market, and secondly, because they slightly open the curtains of one-way communicated information and could offer a (true at best) alternative to it – i.e., something completely inappropriate for a totalitarian state. In the field of cinema, this practice corresponds to activities by creators and marketers of exploitation films, whose interest in socially relevant topics masks their commercial intention to turn them into attractive/controversial, easily communicable entertainment. Jiří Flígl finds early examples of Czech film exploitation in the perestroika-era films *Bony and klid* (*Bony a klid*, Vít Olmer, 1987) and *Why?* (*Proč?*, Karel Smyczek, 1987); it was only after the Velvet Revolution that all the previous

inhibitions disappeared and exploitative tendencies permeated most of the “profit-oriented stream” of the Czech cinema, though.[15]

However, there is little intersection between the exploitation films and the works this paper examines, as the films contained within this group were generally not intended as future hits/cult films, and they sought to rewrite the structures of genres, not simply to imitate them. Out of the films Flígl mentions, the intersection can be found in three by Wiktor Grodecki focusing on the life of contemporary youth on the periphery of society: *Not Angels But Angels* (Andělé nejsou andělé, 1994), *Body Without Soul* (Tělo bez duše, 1996), and *Mandragora* (Mandragora, 1997). The first two documentaries about the lives of teenage gay prostitutes who fall into the clutches of both pimps and drugs in Prague served as a starting point for the feature film *Mandragora*. Grodecki presented his work as socially engaged education, and as such it was appreciated by former President Václav Havel.[16] Similarly, most reviewers were of the opinion that Grodecki managed not to lapse into disgusting naturalism,[17] and Flígl believes that the films’ tabloid nature is mitigated by the precise formal grasp.[18] Nevertheless, the word “danger” was very often mentioned in the press in connection with the films, and especially with *Mandragora*. Partly for the what they evoked and left in the viewer – some were reluctant to believe that what Grodecki was showing was actually taking place somewhere in Prague – and partly in relation to the filmmaker himself, as he was allegedly threatened by certain interest groups who tried to prevent his films from being screened in cinemas.[19]

Grodecki did not document only one criminal phenomenon; he provided a rather complex testimony about the transformation of Czech society and its values in the 1990s. There can be no doubt about the hastiness of this process, however “velvety” the actual seizure of power was in 1989. After the revolution, previously concealed social problems surfaced, and their frequency intensified. Many taboos inherited from the Austro-Hungarian monarchy fell, and the sense of threat from their sudden loss could not be subdued by the influence of church organizations in the predominantly atheistic Czech Republic, unlike in neighbouring Poland or Slovakia.[20] In order for society to gradually recover from the shock, it was first necessary to realize that “late capitalist society cannot be adopted with only its tinsel,”[21] which, according to Radovan Holub, is what *Mandragora* proves. That this was not merely a manifestation of the exploitative or self-sanctioning movement of the early capitalist

society but part of a worldwide phenomenon is supported by the following statement: “*Mandragora* fits right in with the new wave of cinema, which arouses revulsion and disgust yet is successful everywhere in the Western world.”[22] As its representatives, the author mentioned the films *Kids* (1995) by Larry Clark and *Henry Fool* (1997) by Hal Hartley.

To be clear, the quotation was intended as a statement of fact, not a condemnation, but this “new cinematic wave” was not only successful in the West, as we already know. Even the then beginning (27-year-old) director David Ondříček claimed that in addition to the crime film *True Romance* (1993)[23], he liked Hartley’s works, and as for his taste he also added: “I have to admit that lately I have become a bit bored with European cinema; it seems that this new American wave is much more daring and maybe even more European than the European film itself.”[24] The epicentre of progressive filmmaking has moved from the Old World to the New one. While Grodecki succeeded in stirring up social discussion, Ondříček observed the behaviour of the youngest generation through a completely different prism during the filming of his first work *Whisper* (Šeptej, 1996). He decided to “document” the lifestyle of well-to-do twenty-somethings with a feature film aimed at a group of viewers of approximately the same age – teenagers. It is characteristic of Czech cinema tradition that he did not create a genre film[25] or its variations imitating the style of his foreign models, but a lazy “love story”[26] full of groping in the dark and striving for authenticity of the shown places, situations, and conversations between the characters.

Thanks to the thematization of “a lifestyle associated with modern music, drugs and sexual differences”,[27] *Whisper* was categorized as a contemporary film offering a statement of the generation. It premièred in Czech cinemas (coincidentally) in the same month as *Trainspotting*, which led some publicists[28] to categorize both films as about the so-called third drug generation and to compare them.[29] We could ponder whether *Whisper* was as effective as foreign films when it came to the use of embellishing formal techniques, and whether, similarly to Grodecki’s work, it harmed the representation of homosexuality in the Czech public space,[30] but the undeniable fact is that it was successful with the audience. With more than 70,000 viewers, it became the second-most visited Czech film of 1996 after *Kolya* (Kolja, Jan Svěrák, 1996), which was undoubtedly due to its appeal to the right audience.[31] As a result, *Whisper* was labelled a generational film and compared to the more genre-

oriented films *The Ride* (Jízda, 1994) by Jan Svěrák and *Indian Summer* (Indiánské léto, 1995) by Saša Gedeon, which, however, recalled the poetics of the Czech rather than the “American” New Wave. What all of these films had in common were their young authors and improvisational aspects of their production – Ondříček described his debut film as a “semi-professionally made home video.”^[32]

The canary of Tarantino’s mine

Grodecki, Ondříček and other Czech artists were as “remotely related” to the new phenomenon in their works as the aforementioned *Idiot Box*. But the direct influence of Quentin Tarantino’s cult of personality quickly began to penetrate beyond the English-speaking territories: in the Danish film *Bleeder* (Bleeder, Nicolas Winding Refn, 1999), there is a video store employee who could be easily mistaken for a young Tarantino; the German cult (and the only known) film by Thomas Jahn, *Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door* (Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door, 1997), is a loving pastiche of the post-Tarantino world of genre films, from start to finish. Viktor Tauš was the first canary to take in the scent of the new filmmaking generation in the Czech Republic and to follow it when making his own film. Although the title of his debut film – *Canary* (Kanárek, 1999) – refers to a Kurt Vonnegut quote, the opening sequence in the café, where a group of friends chat about their favourite directors (including Tarantino and Ridley Scott), is reminiscent of the first scene of *Reservoir Dogs* (1992). There were five years separating the première of *Canary* from the first screenings of *Pulp Fiction*, which is why Tauš’s film already kept a certain distance and related more to the fandom associated with the famous director than to the director himself. While the degree of self-reflection fluctuated considerably, in its most precious moments *Canary* (unintentionally?) captured exactly where Tarantino’s legacy lied.

A significant manifestation of this is the specific mode of film reception that Tarantino popularized as a method of his film education: the repeated, maximally focused viewing of films – ideally scene by scene, frame by frame –, made possible by the invention of video players. As a result, fanatical viewers memorized entire passages of their favourite films, similarly to the heroes of *Canary*, one of whom quotes the biblical passage Ezekiel 25:17 made famous by *Pulp Fiction*. Filmmakers began to repeat phrases, ideas and whole schemes and even pointed it out in the spirit of postmodernism. Tauš’s detachment, however, is evident in the way he slightly

ironizes these quotes in *Canary*, for example in the scene in which the starting filmmaker Viktor, played by Tauš himself, locks himself in the boot of a car as he tries to imitate Tarantino's trademark trunk shot. *Canary* is actually about the realisation that it is impossible to "make films like Tarantino" (in the Czech milieu), and at the same time, it is the director's self-therapeutic last look back after the phase of his life in which he was addicted to heroin, a drug whose presence in the film can again be perceived as a reminder of the spirit of the times.

The detailed study of films on videotapes also had another significant consequence – viewers became more receptive to narrative images and learned en masse to understand even more complex narrative constructions (as in *Pulp Fiction*). The fact that *Canary* fits into this line of films can be seen at the very end, showing a staging of the filming of its first scene. It turns out that throughout the whole film, we have witnessed the results of the work of the filmmakers' characters, who have retained the first names of the protagonists, which means that in reality *Canary* is a snake biting its own tail, an endlessly mirrored reflection. All this fits seamlessly into the box of the new experience with the film medium, the experience that we defined in the introduction in terms of the aesthetic parameters but that was also inherently shaped by the development of technology. Vladimír Michálek demonstrated the new quality of the film image a year later with yet another story about drug addiction, *Angel Exit* (Anděl Exit, 2000), shot with a digital camera. The greater availability of both filmmaking equipment and individual films was what led many to believe that anyone could become a self-taught filmmaker like Tarantino. However, an extremely unsuccessful attempt to transfer Tarantino's poetics to the Czech Republic, called *Born Into Shit* (Po hlavě do prdele, 2006), convinced both viewers and critics that the opposite remains true.

Going to the cinema? At one's own risk!

It is clear that the group of films postulated in the introduction is disparate and highly divergent. The various films included in this group point us to different themes of the time of their creation – at least in the Czech environment; however, their common denominator could be the theme of drugs and drug addiction. I do not consider it essential to look for any hierarchy among the members of this group, as was suggested in the introduction, nor to find out who was influenced by whom/what.

The important thing is to recognize that every era has its own (relatively narrow) range of films, ideas, products, from which everyone who lives in it inevitably draws inspiration. The 1990s saw a radical shift in technological (who can make films and how) and sociological (how films can be watched) terms. At the same time, as a result of the complex changes, young people began to assert themselves in the public space, and with them came a certain kind of progressive film culture. Its status, however, did not emerge purely from the bottom; its creation involved distributors who promoted the films in a certain way, as well as the media which branded them as generational statements.

In the Czech Republic, the potential to shock which these films carried was enhanced by the limited experience of the domestic audience. On the one hand, this led to their popularity; on the other, it led to the valuable experience of going to the cinema “at one’s own risk”, without the supervision of the apparatus of power, and at the same time, it helped to define what the forming society would consider acceptable (in the field of culture).^[33] The idea was to discover all the dimensions of the acquired freedom, to learn how to work with the medium under the newly set rules (from today’s perspective, it is striking how open are the confessions Grodecki captured in his *Body Without Soul*). It is no coincidence that these films are nowadays perceived as free-spirited works bearing the hallmark of rebellion (see the satirical TV show *Czech Soda* [Česká soda, Fero Fenič, 1998]). The question remains whether the thesis on the limitation of potential resources from the previous paragraph is still valid. Whether even today’s production will be perceived in the future as authentically capturing the world at the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century. And also, whether the emerging generation, whose attention is fragmented between the possibilities offered by new media, will have their generational films.

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Notes:

[1] Štefan Uhrík, Jana Cielová, Nezávislý film (2. část), *Cinema* 8, 1998, no. 3, p. 73.

[2] One such “phenomenon” and example of an alternative lifestyle is the nowadays quite common work from home. For more details, see Dana Polan, *Pulp Fiction*. Praha: Casablanca 2007, pp. 50–56.

[3] In *The Doom Generation*, Rose McGowan wears the same hairstyle as Uma Thurman in *Pulp Fiction*. The screenplay for *Acid House* was written by Irvine Welsh, the author of the *Trainspotting* screenplay, based on his own short stories.

[4] *Pulp Fiction*, *Natural Born Killers* and *Trainspotting* were among the top 100 most viewed films of the year in which they were released in Czech cinemas.

[5] Especially to socialism, of course. For more details, see Luděk Havel, *Hollywood a normalizace. Distribuce amerických filmů v Československu 1970–1989*. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2008.

[6] See comments on the films *The Doom Generation* and *Idiot Box* at www.csfd.cz.

[7] Ondřej Šír, *Distribuční strategie*. Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2010.

[8] Aleš Danielis, Česká filmová distribuce po roce 1989. *Illuminace* 19, 2007, no. 1 (65), p. 74.

[9] Ivan Matějka, Divák má právo vědět, jaký film na něho čeká. *Hospodářské noviny* 46, 2002, no. 21 (30/01), p. 10.

[10] The so-called Teen Apocalypse Trilogy includes the following films: *Totally F***ed Up* (1993), *The Doom Generation* and *Nowhere* (1997).

[11] Mirka Spáčilová, Snímek Crash přinutil ministerstvo kultury jednat. *MF 8*, 1997, no. 21 (25/01), p. 18.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Bára Šichanová (interviewing Adéla Gjuričová), Ľadra na igelitkách i v politice. Erotika 90. let vznikala živelně, bez kritičnosti a vkusu. Available at: <https://wave.rozhlas.cz/nadra-na-igelitkach-i-v-politice-erotika-90-let-vznikala-zivelne-bez-kriticnosti-8302773> [pub. 22/09/2020, cited 13/05/2021]

[14] Zdeno Kubina, Zkurvená generace. *Filmový přehled*, 1996, no. 6, p. 35.

[15] Jiří Flígl, New Yorku a Libni zdaleka se vyhni. Exploatační tendence v české porevoluční kinematografii. *Cinepur* 17 (19), 2010, no. 68, pp. 4–7.

[16] Mirka Spáčilová, Grodecki chystá film o rasismu v nás. *MF 10*, 1999, no. 137 (14/06), p. 16.

[17] Jaroslav Sedláček, Mandragora. *Cinepur* 7, 1997, no. 10, p. 57.

[18] Flígl, ibid.

[19] Radovan Holub, Kdo prošel peklem. *Reflex* 4, 1997, no. 44 (27/10), p. 120.

[20] Šichanová, ibid.

[21] Holub, ibid.

[22] Radovan Holub, Hnusný přivandrovalec: film o světě ďáblů, sviní a podrazáků. *Reflex* 7, 1997, no. 43 (24/10), p. 54.

[23] Based on a screenplay by Quentin Tarantino and directed by Tony Scott.

[24] David Ondříček, Jana Bílková, -prostě skvělý. *Kinorevue* 6, 1996, no. 6, p. 27.

[25] A year earlier, Filip Renč saw for himself how difficult it is to set a film with a genre plot in the Czech environment when shooting his *War of Colours* (Válka barev, 1995), also aimed at a young audience.

[26] Ondříček, Bílková, *ibid.*

[27] mb, Pozvánka do kina. *Region – Krnovské noviny* 5, 1996, no. 49 (03/12), p. 5.

[28] Mirka Spáčilová, Ondříčkův debut je z vlny generačních filmů. *MF* 7, 1996, no. 231 (02/10), p. 18.

[29] “This drug generation is characterised by good financial security, high social integration and spending their leisure time freely, which makes it difficult for the others to notice.” in Vladimír Kasl, *Kriminalita mládeže ve vztahu k drogové problematice a jiným závislostem*. Praha: Univerzita Karlova, 2012.

[30] see Kamil Fila, Jak filmy zteplaly. *Finmag* 2020, no. 4 (13/08), pp. 30–33.

[31] Andrej Halada, *Český film devadesátých let*. Praha: Lidové noviny. 1997, p. 106.

[32] As stated in the commentary on the film on the DVD released by SONY BMG MUSIC ENTERTAINMENT (CZECH REPUBLIC) s.r.o. 2008, © Negativ, 1996.

[33] Just as, for example, in election campaigns, as political scientist Miloš Gregor points out – see Vít Svoboda (interviewing Miloš Gregor), První svobodné volby byly amatérské a euforické. Havel byl první influencer, říká politolog Gregor. Available at: <https://wave.rozhlas.cz/prvni-svobodne-volby-byly-amaterske-a-euforicke-havel-byl-prvni-influencer-rika-8076911#player=on> [pub. 20/09/2019, cited 13/05/2021]