

MILOŠ KAMENÍK / 24. 4. 2020

The clever part is beyond our ego. Interview with Karel Vachek

Karel Vachek was born in 1940 in Tišnov. He graduated from the Film and TV School of Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU) in Prague with *Moravian Hellas* (Moravská Hellas, 1963) and in 1968 made his first feature documentary, *Elective Affinities* (Spříznění volbou; awarded at the Oberhausen festival), showing backstage politics during the Prague Spring. Not having been allowed to shoot during the normalization era, he emigrated in 1979 and came back in 1984. He only shot his second film after the Velvet Revolution. In 1992–2002, “The Small Capitalist” tetralogy by Vachek was premièred in cinemas, consisting of *New Hyperion or Liberty, Equality, Brotherhood* (Nový Hyperion aneb Volnost, rovnost, bratrství, 1992), *What Is to Be Done? A Journey from Prague to Český Krumlov, or How I Formed a New Government* (Co dělat? Cesta z Prahy do Českého Krumlova aneb Jak jsem sestavoval novou vládu, 1996), *Bohemia Docta or The Labyrinth of the World and the Lust-house of the Heart (A Divine Comedy)* (Bohemia docta aneb Labyrint světa a lusthauz srdce /Božská komedie/, 2000) and *Who Will Watch the Watchman? Dalibor, or the Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Kdo bude hlídat hlídače? Dalibor aneb Klíč k Chaloupce strýčka Toma, 2002). Similarly to his latter works – *Záviš, the Prince of Pornofolk Under the Influence of Griffith’s Intolerance and Tati’s Mr. Hulot’s Holiday or The Foundation and Doom of Czechoslovakia (1918–1992)* (Záviš, kníže pornofolku pod vlivem Griffithovy Intolerance a Tatiho Prázdnin pana Hulota aneb Vznik a zánik Československa 1918–1992, 2006) and *Obscurantist and His Lineage or The Pyramids’ Tearful Valleys* (Tmář a jeho rod aneb Slzavé údolí pyramid, 2011) – Vachek tries to capture the noteworthy thoughts of figures of arts, politics, philosophy, science and other areas, in a form lying at the intersection between an essay and a poem, within

the time frame of several hours. He has been teaching at FAMU's Department of Documentary Film since the mid-1990s and was the Head of the Department from 2002 to 2019. He has no less than two generations of young Czech documentary filmmakers claiming allegiance to his educational influence. He summed up his thoughts in his book *A Theory of Matter* (Teorie hmoty 2004), and in 2008 Martin Švoma published his monography *Karel Vachek etc.* In October 2019, the Ji.hlava IDFF screened his new film *Communism and the Net or The End of Representative Democracy* (Komunismus a síť aneb Konec zastupitelské demokracie, 2019) which has been in distribution since November 6. The international première took place at the Rotterdam IFF in January 2020.

Your latest film *Communism and the Net or The End of Representative Democracy* is five and a half hours long, and you worked on it for five years, three years out of which you spent editing it. It is a work of dozens of motifs, thoughts, and sequences both from archives and borrowed, all of them interwoven and multi-layered. How can you tell that a film is done when working like this?

A film is done when there is nothing left to be told in a more precise way. When working on it, you add newer and newer motifs because it is a world of a novel. You turn around the fates of many people, creating an opinion which then “hovers” above the film. The viewers do not follow the film itself but rather their own thoughts occurring to them during watching. I spent three years editing in here with three ladies. Mmes. Papírníková and Všecková can push through what is on their minds. Then there is Mrs. Pařezová – with her I can tell when something is wrong. We sat here six hours a day, six days a week, Saturdays included. You start watching what is done and go on until you get an idea what to do next. During all this, a new material comes in and you watch it without knowing where you would put it. You are basically searching for the way the film should be, and perceiving it as a living organism; you can see that its head is slightly askew or one arm too long, and you improve and improve so that it really works for the viewers. After all, I explain it in the film itself that I have been seeking to find a spiritual balance that would suggest to the audience members that there may be something beyond their ego. After the screenings, people told me they felt like floating. They were not, of course, but their state of mind was different. I found out about the existence of this state of mind

when I bought Dante's *Divine Comedy* as a young boy. After reading some books you feel like having blue smoke inside your head. That sounds stupid. But it basically tells you that the thing is bigger than you.

It works for me. Just like with your previous works. When I am watching your films, my head gets full of thoughts and contexts that I would have had without that film – even though the particular thoughts cannot be heard in the film. To what extent is all of this deliberate in your work?

There is no “self” participating in my work; there are other sources every being in the world has available from the inside. I sound stupid saying things like that, but that is how it works. The “self” is a combination of information and feelings, when you live through those influences and do not dissolve them, you enhance the “self” in the viewers as well. This is what for example Herzog, Kieślowski and Tarkovskij do – what is important for them is for the two to love each other, for the weather to be raining, and for the trees to be whispering. They create many emotional states from which egos are built and you cannot hear yourself. I can't do that. I try to dissolve that with laughter, I call it the inner laughter. It does not mean that you must hoot with it. Some authors can do that, for example Jacques Tati in his *Monsieur Hulot* films. It can also be found in Artaud, Blake, Dante, even in Cervantes and Hašek. Some authors know this exists, but they play with it in a magical way. For example, Herman Hesse, that is terrible; he's like Herzog and the others. It's a really funny work.

Have you ever shot someone only to realize later that it wasn't good?

No. Either you have the person in it, or you don't, and then you must tell yourself that this is what it was supposed to be. I try to make all the people in my films distinctive and memorable, to connect with the audience through an important thought. For example, the original script of *Communism* (editor's note: an extract was published in *Analogon* No. 77; it was supposed to be a staged film with many actors) which I did not use in the end is about 160 pages long, and we have not raised enough money for it. I would have needed several times more money in millions of Czech crowns than we had to shoot with that many actors and all the sceneries. But having written it, I kind of sorted all the topics in the film. And it was also a good practice for me to spend the time when we had no money to shoot writing (editor's note: the previous film by

Karel Vachek, *Obscurantist and His Lineage or The Pyramids' Tearful Valleys*, was finished in 2011). I write, I paint; I do these sorts of things just to keep my brain running.

You already tried to make a staged film – in vain – in the 1960s. What would be the advantage in making a completely staged piece of work?

In a staged film, the actor shares with you a fixed idea that has been prepared beforehand. Without actors, you search for these ideas in living people, waiting for them to come up with something. I can devise a scene and give it a literary form so that it becomes a theatre play – because all staged films are a kind of theatre. The only difference is that the microphone is very near. But this new film is not a play; once again it proves that you can't build anything in a night, but you can shovel lots of gravel. That may be my approach. You shovel the gravel of existence in the right way, keep what remains in the sieve, and put it all together. Which means you go back to the literary work – you put the words together so that a deep context emerges.

In the film you claim that in the art of sculpture, it is the volume that is important and not the concept or the surface. Can this be applied to cinematography as well?

The volume is the most essential thing in a sculpture – there is a surface as well, but it is not that important. Some sculptors only create on the surface, they consider it the main thing. The worst thing is when a sculpture remains a concept, when there is no volume and no surface, just something along the lines of a literary joke. For example, when they dress this statue at the National Theatre in various costumes. That is quite terrible. But a sculpture is not a joke – and a film is not a joke. Once again, it is the volume that matters. Something that cannot be seen, the inner balance. It means that you feel good with it all the time and that it is not just comical. I try to be funny, but I am not comical.

You mean comedy as a prevailing form?

Well, rather trying to be clever. Take the good soldier Švejk, for example: he's neither clever, nor stupid, he's not ugly, he's nothing! That can also be peaceful.

Talking about Švejk: can you think of any other similar figure in Czech literature or film?

Švejk is the most brilliant modern Czech novel. There's nothing better. But, for example, Vladislav Vančura's film *Marijka the Unfaithful* (*Marijka nevěrnice*, 1934) is also brilliant, better than his literary works. But many people cannot see that; there was even a Czech critic condemning it as an anti-Semitic film. It is definitely not an anti-Semitic film, and first and foremost, it is the dictionary for all the Czechoslovak New Wave. I noticed that during my studies. I may have not needed to see the French and the Americans, in fact! We are still not able to appreciate it enough. Yet it all fits together even with the music by Bohuslav Martinů. I find it more interesting than any other music he wrote, actually.

In your new film, you use parts of all your previous works. How did you decide what to put into *Communism*? Have you been searching for a new context, or was the idea to remember certain people?

I originally thought that I would watch all of them and choose the scenes. Then I decided against it, but when editing some scenes in *Communism*, I just suddenly saw an addendum in one of my older works. I couldn't believe it. There was no long decision-making process. It reminded me of painting – you have just used blue and simply know that the next colour to be used is red, so you go and use it, that's it.

So it is intuitive?

I don't like the word "intuition." It sounds like anticipating what is to come. But you are not anticipating anything because that "self" of yours is not anticipating anything. You're not the clever one – the clever part is beyond our ego.

Is that the gnostic approach you talk about in the film?

Truly clever people have never thought that it is their doing.

Is that God's doing, then?

There might be a word for it. Even God, for all I know. What is God, anyway? God is everything we don't know, but it is not what the churches engage in. Everything we

don't know is part of the reality. And nobody knows how big this reality is yet – just that it takes loads of work and that the reality tells itself what's supposed to come now in the deepest reality of itself. Something works mechanically; there are these causes and effects influencing it; something only happens after there is a contact with the essence, out of the deep conscience. Komenský uses a beautiful term: “the depth of safety.” Everything is safe in there unless you fall out of it.

How can one get to be like that?

That's what I would like to know myself. My wife was born that way, or happened to be that way. My sister got to it thanks to some intellectual work she did, and my brother had many qualities that just fell into his lap. And I am the stupid one who actually goes and shares it with the world. I am not as capable as they are, but I still got my share out of all of that.

Is that what you try to capture in your films?

I am some kind of a world emissary – how many painters know my brother, for example? How many men of letters study my sister? Not to mention my wife! So, I impose myself into the cultural context and try to draw them in as well.

How do you choose your locations and get in touch with your protagonists? For example in *Bohemia Docta*, you shot with Milan Knížák at a cemetery...

Knížák is a little light in the darkness. Those who can be “deeper” must protect their abilities in some way so that it actually could enter that reality of ours. Such was the case with Karel Gott's brilliant timbre as well. Most of his songs were kitsch, with the exception of those by Šlitr, but people understood that he is a deeper person thanks to his voice. Despite the fact that he lived his life in a very not-deep way, maybe even in defiance of the common sense.

Did he protect his talent by being on good terms with the communists and later with our current president, Zeman?

Well, that's horrible. The truth is, though, that it is not entirely possible to deal with these people. I wanted to shoot with him once, but a short phone call was enough for me to understand that it would not be possible.

Why?

Because he didn't know what he's doing. He behaved in a way so that his timbre could be heard in the Czech Republic, and that was it; he knew nothing else about anything else.

And how do you choose your locations?

You can guess on your own. When making *Záviš, the Prince of Pornofolk*, I wanted to shoot a polar bear in the zoo. Since my little son and I had started visiting it, the bear had been pacing to and fro. We go there to have look, the soundman opens the newspaper and says: "Hey, the bear died last night!" and that's when I knew we were on the right path. We then shot how they tighten its skin. If you behave in a certain way, you receive these signals that you're on the right path, and then you try to understand what you did. For example, I have a great cameraman, Karel Slach. I tell him what to do it, but he always does it differently. It's terrible, but I always try to read into his work. Most of the time it turns out that it is much more intelligent than what I wanted from him. He is a deep person.

To what extent do you arrange the scene? Just whether you are going for a static scene or a dynamic one?

I set up the static scenes on my own, doing the composition, but once the camera starts moving, he always does that.

You often leave "mistakes" in the frames. For example, when the cameraman stumbles or falls down...

It was a good decision of him that he had fallen – I held the camera for him in the right direction so that he could get up and continue. We always behave in the right way, always. The "system of filmmakers" would force me to stop everything and start once again, but I really don't care. I care about Karel and his fall and my own behaviour from that moment on.

So, you do not think about the aesthetics much in advance?

In painting you do gestures. My brother was great in that. Just a brush stroke, no overthinking. You do what you're supposed to do. Other painters think about their compositions and do a precise technical work. So, that is possible as well as we can see in Mondrian, for example.

You are the first type of person?

I am both, actually. The truth is, though, that I am more of the person who tends to think about everything than the one who can do many things of their own accord. This is what sets me apart from my siblings. I need to go through everything in advance; then I can behave like somebody who does not need to think about anything. Maybe I even had to write the *Communism* script so that I could leave it closed throughout the whole shooting. When I get into the "space" of the emerging film defined in advance, I do what I am supposed to. The basics of my filmmaking can be found in *Moravian Hellas* – I have been doing everything the same since then. I go somewhere, look for crazy, striking and strange things, and then try to organize those into some thoughts. These thoughts are usually social; I move towards lessening the world miseries. I also try to capture the space of the gnosis to the best extent possible, and I point out those who knew about it. That is why I mention all the book titles in *Communism*, from Shakespeare to Goethe and Tolstoy. Doing that, I want to show what I'm talking about. Laozi said: "The real Tao is not a Tao at all." One cannot tell how these things work. They simply appear; some people can manage them, others strive for it their whole life and fail. But their disappointment should not make them stop thinking about how to get out of the cause-and-effect system. Life hurts, and we need to play in a way that would change the chain of causes and effects, make it less terrible. You can be Isaac Newton, for example – you tell people, this is how gravitation works, and bring them a huge relief.

I find it interesting that when you talk about significant people, you also mention Clint Eastwood and Sylvester Stallone. I assume it is not for their roles and stories.

They embody the so-called stars; they move and speak in a way that makes them shine. You notice them, remember them. Stallone is similar to Oldřich Nový or Vladimír Pucholt in Forman's films.

And why not Arnold Schwarzenegger, for instance?

Because he doesn't have it in himself. There are classical actors like Rudolf Hrušínský, but those are people I do not consider interesting.

Even Laurence Olivier, for example?

Even Olivier. He played with Marilyn Monroe, who drove him crazy because he couldn't understand her doings. Monroe was a true star. Olivier was just a big actor. Those can psychologically portray their characters but do not understand the inner light. This is what Zdenka Baldová and Jana Rybářová could do in their films.

You mention children books such as *Ferdý the Ant* and *Heidi* but also books by Jaroslav Foglar in the film. Why him?

Those are also those beautiful people who can work with the inner things. Foglar could be a pederast! But no, instead he wrote about boys as the ideal of youth in an absolutely gorgeous way. That's a miracle. He was old when I shot *Bohemia Docta* with him, but he was still amazing.

What effect did his books have on you as a child?

I ran with trains inspired by one book of his (editor's note: *The Port is Calling*), but I was not that successful in it. Ferda the Ant and Bug Butterfingers, Ondřej Sekora's characters, are also brilliant – he captured the human order in them. Bug Butterfingers is crazy. He puts a piece of paper on the ground, lets bugs run across it all night, and then he has a building built in accordance with their stomping. Ferda the Ant makes a coach for Gwendolyn and it works! It's like talking about the rational and the irrational. About gnosis entering the rational world and its fight with it. Ferda would be a typical "Nazi" without Bug Butterfingers, but with him he's whole. We can't appreciate our wonderful culture enough. We also have Skupa's Spejbl and Hurvínek, that's the same thing. Hurvínek spoils his father's rules, the causes and the effects, enters into them and disperses them.

Could that also be the case of Věra Chytilová's film *The Inheritance* (Dědictví)? Of Polívka starring as Bohouš, who inherits money after the revolution and can throw everybody around him off with his simple existence, similarly to Švejk?

A little bit, but I wouldn't go that far because when Chytilová talks about the incoming capitalism, she doesn't mention the outgoing socialism.

I don't understand.

She doesn't finish the thought. At that time, we should have maintained our social relationships without this huge capital, without all those people like Babiš.

But she makes fun of it, doesn't she?

She does but does not say the essential things. She doesn't say that it's wrong, only that it's a little bit wrong. But since we're talking about her, I admire one scene in her last film (editor's note: *Pleasant Moments* /Hezké chvíle bez záruky/) about women confiding in a psychiatrist. The film is annoying, but there is one of the final moments when one of the clients tells the doctor that she was on a boat on the Vltava river and somebody raped her and that she was afraid the president would see her from the Prague Castle. That's perfect.

What's the biggest malady of today's art?

True artists are very rare. To be thorough, we have these filmmakers: Luchino Visconti, Jacques Tati, Charles Chaplin, D. W. Griffith, and also Robert Flaherty. Then there is the sphere of films about that "magical" film art but without humour, i.e. without dissolving the emotions; the magic is wrong. I respect that but am not interested in it. For example, the only interesting thing about Fellini is his wife, the actress Giulietta Masina. She does shine! I don't like Bergman even though I believed for many years that he's really good. There's only a little quality in every kind of art. In music, there's Bedřich Smetana, then a weaker version in Antonín Dvořák's music, and then Robert Kurka, nobody else. But those magical things come in tons, that's for example Janáček or Foerster. I do not let those to myself. These "magical" authors often get more attention than those inner ones, but there's nothing we can do about it.

How did you and Karel Slach come up with the idea to use the wide-angle lens, that characteristic convex image you employ so often?

Everybody makes films in the given dimensions, with the given focal point, but we don't. We want to slightly distort the image so that the space is not boring so much. People can enjoy the distortions as a bonus. We don't want the space in the films to be realistic; this enhances what's told and what happens in the film.

Your last film is quite a long one, but it is no problem to go through it in one evening. I believe it's thanks to your work with the rhythm that is present there in several levels. It's co-determined by camera moves and speech edits when the utterances pervade each other, but you also use loud drums or clapping hands.

You described it well, but the main thing is that it must be funny all the time. The viewers would not last that long if not laughing permanently. Each frame must be a shock, you must be surprised; but each frame is also a funny punchline for the previous one. The film starts with this huge picture in the Strahov Library. My granddaughter in a costume runs into the room and I shout at her: "Don't stare!" simply because I thought something must happen, finally. And when I need to put an end to something abruptly, I bang the drum and a new story starts immediately. You kick the film up into the air at the beginning and then box throughout it to keep it there. It means that you must create suspense; in other words, to say important thoughts in an outrageous way to keep waking people up and to maintain a simple yet deep foundations. My newest film is essentially about a network that could eliminate representatives from the political system. People could directly influence what is going to happen. And not by voting for representatives who would actually represent mainly themselves once again because they want to keep the position. They spoil everything with that. They lead you to wars and other things. Just imagine German mothers agreeing on building some concentration camps and then letting foreign armies drop bombs on Germany. What normal person would think of buying a horse worth a quarter million for a child? None, that's the answer. But a capital representative can do that. People think that gathering property is one of our most important activities, but what'd be really important would be to put this property in places where there is someone who could devise something significant. But you don't put the money there because you need to gather it. You just give away a little bit to look good.

What is your idea of cumulating property in the future?

A painter needs colours and brushes. An IT expert needs loads of electronic devices. Everybody needs something different, at various cost, and you're supposed to give it to them. That's the system.

How to protect oneself from blighters?

How to protect oneself from atomic bombs? It's complicated. Firstly, people must learn in their own places of living, deciding about building a road, a bridge, a bypass. They can vote about that without a mayor.

The advantage of a small village is that everybody knows everybody.

The Internet allows you to meet people and various experts who could help you in the decision-making process. I don't think it's unrealistic. It won't be in fifty years, but I believe it will happen. We don't go around the world calling people "Your-Well-Born" and performing corvée labour for our feudal lords anymore – this we have been able to eliminate, even though there are still morons going on and on about blue blood. We have achieved certain things, representative democracy and parliament, and the next step will be about bringing democracy closer to people.

How would that work? People have been looking for the ideal system since the ancient times, as described for example by Plato in his *Republic*.

Plato wanted to educate an elite that would then rule. I spent half of my life working as a labourer and know that I met more interesting people in the factory than among those so-called educated ones. I think people are generally quite smart and decent and capable of making the right choice most of the time. As I say in the film: Zeman got elected and Schwarzenberg lost because people could not vote for a Prince of the Empire; that would go against the idea of a republic.

You do not talk about Václav Havel much. What is your opinion on him in the political and cultural context?

I would say there were two Havels. The one with the first wife who looked after public things, and the one with the second wife. There was an important situation after the revolution: Havel went to Dubček to tell him that he's not going to be president, and Dubček cried. I would cry too, from not knowing what's about to happen. I really

despise the fact that we have once again become the society of the poor and the rich. I also don't like that we're talking about revolution when none happened in fact. Gorbachev and Reagan agreed that the secret services would arrange for our revolution to happen as the last one and in a very cautious way. It's quite funny. I suppose they were afraid of what the Czechs could think of once again. That's how I see it, even though people tell me it's a conspiracy theory. But I don't think so; Zifčák, the StB agent, pretended he's dead on the Národní třída line; he was a dummy, and somebody must've given him this instruction. I think the secret services took care that the revolution would happen.

Isn't the Velvet Revolution a great example of how to do it, though? Compared to Romania, for example, where there were lots of blood and executions.

I am happy about it as well, I was demonstrating because I knew the more people would be there the quicker it would happen. But the revolution did not come from the people but from Gorbachev, supplied with weapons by Reagan. He destroyed the Russian economy to the extent that they had to make some changes – and we were one of the nations they left to go free. When our communists asked whether they're supposed to intervene, the USSR ones said no. One fighter plane would be enough; there would be no Letná demonstration. We must appreciate those who did it and stop pretending to be revolutionists. I think that's how they perceive Gorbachev in Russia. That's why they hate him so much. You must also take into account the foul trick played on him by our neighbours in the West. They promised, for example, that the NATO army would not enter the GDR, but they did it anyway. He helped them to make a change and they deliberately removed him, saying: "We won," and you cannot say that to Russians. Russians saw Mongols, Napoleon, Hitler, and are under the false impression that the bigger Russia is, the easier it'd be for them to get rid of an enemy.

What would you like to do now when the film is done?

There is a book of my older texts, scripts that were not made into films, in preparation. I have this temptation to go through my older films and make a literary extract of the thoughts in them, but I am not sure I'll have enough energy. I was afraid I would not finish the film, my physical state was that bad.

When did you fall in love with pipe smoking?

I smoked my first pipe when I was 18 years old, as a freshman, in the Hradební Hall residence. That was in 1958. I got dizzy and fell on the floor – I actually fainted! Since then, I've been smoking daily, throughout the whole day. I used to think that the human mind needs some excitement, that the neurons work faster and the brain reactions are quicker when you use nicotine! But I've had three cancers, so... A friend studying dramaturgy inspired me. I loved watching him pipe smoking. Then he got expelled because he fell in love with this girl and was not able to present any work at school; he was not able to do anything. See how dangerous love can be?