

MARTIN PLEŠTIL / 15. 4. 2024

The poetics of František Vlášil's documentary films

During his studies in Brno, František Vlášil was employed at the Studio of Animated and Puppet Film, where he worked as colourist, contourist, phase animator and animator. He further developed his artistic talent and improved his style by studying aesthetics and art history. When the Studio closed in 1949 and most employees moved to Prague to the Bratři v triku studio, Vlášil stayed in Brno and found employment at the Studio of Popular Science Films (SPVNF). Due to the absence of relevant materials and a lack of preserved films, we cannot identify all the animated films that Vlášil worked on, but using the four films he directed for SPVNF, we can put together a clear image of the roots of his lyrically refined film language known from his feature live-action films.

Tear down, warn, celebrate!

Before directing his first film for the Studio, Vlášil worked as a dramaturge and production assistant. The first film he directed was *Drug No. 2357* (Lék 2357, 1950). Written by Vladimír Sís, the film records the development of a new pharmacological cure and its animal testing procedure. Vlášil then directed two films about electricity, one of which he helped to write. *Electricity Management* (Hospodaření s elektřinou, 1950) includes a moralistic message, encouraging the conservation electricity at home and at work, and offers a solution for factories to adapt to their high consumption rates. The film was commissioned by the Czechoslovak Energy Works. Most of the film's running time follows its protagonist trying to convince his colleagues to change the production process. The protagonist's relentless work continues in his own home as he passionately tries to educate his father, who wastes energy using a convector heater. The film's fictitious plot is interspersed with illustrative factory footage, explanatory notes, graphs and the voice of the film's

narrator recounting interesting facts, explaining problems related to an overloaded factory and laconically commenting on the characters' actions.

Vláčil's artistic sense of composition can already be identified in this film. He makes use of depth and alternates long shots with framing changes and static shots, presenting individual and collective strength. The closing sequence, in which the factory workers decide on new methods in order to increase effectivity, is amplified by dramatic contrasting lighting emphasising the importance of the moment. The workers stand in the darkened factory, their shadowy faces expressing hesitation but also resolve. When they vote to make the changes, the lighting is softer to represent a brighter future and their resolution, alongside the strength of a crowd when the camera cruises next to the endless masses of determined workers.

Vláčil also works with editing dynamics in concert with escalating music. He alternates footage of an overloaded factory with a waking city putting an increasingly big strain on the power grid. Vlácil uses a dynamic montage working with the aesthetics of the overheating machines and increasingly dramatic music to depict the danger of overloading the power plant to the point where it cannot operate. He effectively uses an alternating rhythm and, through images, editing and music, Vlácil achieves tension and magnitude without dialogue – methods typical of his later work. Despite a clearly didactic message, he managed to enrich the morality with a pure film language, thus achieving a stronger effect. He managed to accurately depict the rousing content, underlining it with stylistic devices.

Industrial Accidents by Electricity (Úrazy elektřinou v průmyslu, 1950), on the other hand, serves as a warning and has a deterrent purpose. The film was commissioned by the Czechoslovak Labour Institute, which supplied Vlácil with the topic and subsequently interfered with the script. The protagonist is an impartial narrator, and the director adjusts the scenes to the narration. We cannot hear the voices of the people on the screen, and the film evokes the reading of a security manual. The film's opening scene depicts a monumentally shot power plant and electric lines. By using a distorted camera angle, the electric current is shown as a useful force – but one that can become dangerous when not used carefully. The film goes on to show a variety of cases when workers disregard safety protocols while working with electric current, whether it powers a machine, a socket or a lamp. The images are accompanied by an

ironic commentary mocking the careless workers. Vlášil creates sharp contrasts by alternating deterrent examples with illustrative examples of good practice.

The film also includes stop-motion sequences and non-diegetic titles used to describe how electric current works and explain the causes of malfunctions. Unlike the previous film, this one is more stylistically restrained (not only due to the absence of a narrative). On the other hand, Vlášil utilises its cautionary structure with precision and, with regards to other similar films, shows a refined artistic and compositional sense. He can also adapt to unfavourable location conditions. He uses static images and chooses detailed shots to turn industrial machinery into photogenic objects. In both films about electricity, he combines the world of men and machines, giving them equal space and portraying their inseparable coexistence in the modern world.

Vlášil's fourth and final film made for the Brno studio was *Thermal Revolution* (Tepelná revoluce, 1951) in which he celebrates technological advancement and focuses on machines. The film is centred around a city and factories; shots of individuals are very scarce. With regards to stylistic elements, the film is a supreme synthesis of everything Vlášil introduced to popular science film. With many aspects, it resembles the Soviet Montage Theory, in particular the work of Dziga Vertov. However, it still retains an explanatory commentary and animated sequences used to explain the advantages of the new method of thermal combustion. The score is diverse and connected to the poetry of machine movement. The emphasis on capturing the perfection of machinery and mechanics is another element that stylistically links *Thermal Revolution* to Vertov's work. Vlášil was able to adopt this approach because the film wasn't an external commission, and he was able to make it with a relative artistic freedom.

While the film has an educational tone, we can still see the strength of the imagery itself, which often serves for purely aesthetic pleasure. The editing is inventive and has two main purposes. Vlášil alternates the shots based on compositional resemblance and isn't afraid to subsequently link them with a vertical camera movement. The first function is purely aesthetic and strengthens the scene continuity. The second once again relies on the strength of contrasts when Vlášil alternates footage of old chimneys with high pollution and low effectivity with modern

chimneys of the future. They are shot from below to emphasise their magnificence, while the technological relics are shown from above and occupy less space in the frame, thus decreasing their visual impact.

At the end of the film, Vláčil uses footage of the sky, which would become typical of his later work. The last minutes foreshadow his typical live-action poetics but still adhere to documentary content. The director shows workers constructing a new building that will bring further thermal advancement. Thanks to a well-thought-out composition, Vláčil doesn't slip into schematic campaigning. The three analysed films show partial signs of developing poetics, but every time in a different manner. Vláčil worked on several more scripts in the Brno studio, but in 1951 he was unexpectedly drafted into the army, ending his first creative period.

The imagination and poetics of army film

Vláčil was assigned to the newly restructured Czechoslovak Army Film. He expected to stay in Prague for only a couple of months, but eventually worked for the studio for eight years. In CAF, he held three official positions. As a fresh lieutenant, he began as a director; as a captain, he worked as the lead director of the instructional training group; and, at the end, he was a civil employee. Despite having extensive filmmaking experience acquired in Brno, his interest in film was still more theoretical. Vláčil later described the years spent with CAF as his "journeyman years," when he learned the most about filmmaking. That is undoubtedly true, but with regards to the examined popular science films, it is safe to say that he came to the army studio as an artist with a distinctive style and a sense of film language. When we look closely at some of his films from the army period – he worked in different capacities on more than thirty films – we can trace clear parallels and some elements he used already in his work in Brno.

One of his first directorial works for CAF, titled *Flying Without Vision With the OSP System* (Létání bez vidu podle systému OSP, 1953), is an inspiring example of how to enrich a film with stimulating stylistics and imagination under the didactically constricted conditions of an instructional film. The film opens with a relatively epic live-action black-and-white sequence. In rain and fog, we observe air traffic controllers trying to navigate a plane for landing. Vláčil combines footage from the

cramped booth with depictions of raging nature and a plane blown around in the sky. He uses detailed shots and works cleverly with out-of-picture space. In the catastrophic finale when the plane crashes, we see only the controllers' console. The previous static composition is shattered by chaotic camera movement simulating confusion and the crash along with its commotion. Vláčil avoids explicit depiction of the crash and keeps his attention on the powerlessness of the controllers. The sequence symbolically ends with a broken antenna.

After a moment, we find out that the sequence comes from a film screened to a class of future controllers and pilots. The rest of the film is shot on colour film stock. The camera moves away from the projection screen and reveals a lecture room. The viewers immediately feel like they belong to the group. We listen to the lecture about safe flight navigation in bad weather. The lecturer is a point of contact, the centre of the camera's focus. His position within the frame emphasises authority and leadership qualities. An inconspicuous, yet significant detail comes when he hangs an illustrative picture of a runway on the board. The camera once again leaves the lecture room and dives into the illustration, in which Vláčil uses stop motion animation for explanatory notes and geometrical lines. In the following scene, we return to the lecture room, but the animated titles on the illustrative picture remain. The film brings a certain form of playfulness and introduces elements functioning outside of the framework of a pragmatic message purely thanks to film language. Seemingly non-diegetic elements become diegetic elements.

Vláčil seals the deal with a long sequence when the trainees stand around an instructional console and watch a miniature landscape where the lecturer shows the flight path. The director zooms in on the miniature and once again switches to stop motion animation. He shows a plane model and uses visual effects to portray radio waves. He then moves to dynamically cut sequences when he shows the discussed topic in reality. He puts emphasis on details of flight instruments, which he combines with footage of airplanes in the sky or from the cockpit. Vláčil sticks to the template but uses it in a new and distinct manner. He also works with what we know from his previous work: animated sequences, a combination of external explication and illustrative images, aesthetically finetuned composition and contrasts. He shows how not to do things in order to subsequently show the proper way. These are all techniques he mastered while working for the Brno studio.

Flying Without Vision With the OSP System is an instructional and staged title, but Vlášil's next film, *Crew on the Peak* (*Posádka na štítě*, 1956), which he made as a civilian employee, is a report filmed in colour. It follows the crew of a weather station working under extreme conditions in an observatory atop the Lomnický Peak in the High Tatras. Vlášil focuses on their everyday life in a tiny cabin. Once again, he uses contrasts of open and monumentally indomitable mountains – but in this case, not for didactic, instructional, descriptive and ideological purposes. He uses the contrasts to point out human smallness in the natural world to which we can only look on in awe and monitor its power. Thanks to rich exteriors, Vlášil had a chance to let the images speak for themselves and modify the commentary accordingly. It describes the activities of the crew and explains their work, but the parallel footage isn't illustrative. The commentary praises the crew's hard work, but the images aren't centred around them, and the film's main focus becomes the landscape.

Vlášil also avoids detailed depiction of technology. He focuses on the towering mountains slashing through the clouds into the sky. From sunny weather to freezing night to an unstoppable snowstorm. The importance and aesthetic unattainability of nature in the closing minutes is underlined by contrast shots with people and the chaos of an overcrowded city that couldn't exist and function without nature. *Crew on the Peak* is, incidentally, the aesthetic peak of Vlášil's film reports and strongly resembles his most famous film from the army period – a fictitious poetic film titled *Clouds of Glass* (*Skleněná oblaka*, 1958), a purely visual poem. The fact that he was allowed to make this film explains Vlášil's position in the CAF structure. For the first time, he had a chance to truly open himself. The development of his poetics in the army film was closely linked to his positions within the organisation.

Another film made by Vlášil for the CAF is *Farewell to Klement Gottwald* (*Vzpomínka*, 1953), which depicts places where Czechoslovak president Klement Gottwald lived and worked. The film isn't a celebrative tribute but rather a melancholy poem. As a commission for Svazarm (Union for Cooperation with the Army), Vlášil filmed two titles at international shooting sports competition in Beijing – *Shooting Competition in Beijing* (*Střelecké závody v Pekingu*, 1956) and *Our Sport Shooters in China* (*Naši sportovní střelci v Číně*, 1956). The latter title is composed of footage unused in the first title. In 1958, Vlášil moved to Barrandov and began his most important artistic period, during which he established himself as a supreme poet of the big screen. In

his lyrical films, he utilised all the acquired stylistic methods. Thanks to the films from this period, we can find and identify its traces in his early films. Vlášil returned to the world of documentary filmmaking once again, but it was under very different circumstances.

Happiest creative period

After *Adelheid* (1969), Vlášil fell from the grace of Barrandov's management and even though he wasn't fired, he wasn't allowed to work (dramaturges eventually declined all his submitted projects). He found asylum in the Krátký film studio, where he was "loaned" by Barrandov and where he worked under Kamil Pixa, who employed filmmakers who had fallen into disfavour of the Communist regime. Between 1972 and 1976, he made two mid-length live-action films and three short documentaries focusing on art and his beloved architecture. Later in life, he remembered this period as the happiest of his career. In the documentary portrait *In the Web of Time* (*V síti času*, 1989), made by his cinematographer František Uldrich, he says that his work is based mainly on music and architecture. In the documentaries he made for Krátký film, where he wasn't restrained by the need to tell a story, he could transfer the synthesis of his two favourite worlds to the big screen in the purest form. Vlášil gained artistic freedom and for the first time was able to make documentaries without prescribed ideological templates.

His first Krátký film title, *A City in White* (*Město v bílém*, 1972), is a town symphony, although it's conceptually and stylistically different from urban films of the 1920s. The film begins with a shot of a boat breaking the river ice and joining the infrastructure of Prague. Without any score, Vlášil captures modern socialist architecture. He uses camera slides simulating driving through housing estates. After the camera enters a tunnel, it reappears in a Romanesque interior. It opens up a gate to a different world and through footage of stone sculptures and a decaying church building takes us back to the roots. With an almost old-fashioned approach, Vlášil portrays the beauty of snow-covered Prague and adds music by his preferred composer, Zdeněk Liška.

In addition to aesthetic beauty, he adds other layers. Once again, he uses contrasts, this time between old and cold architecture and carefully constructed Gothic and

Baroque architecture. He's interested mainly in the life of the city's old town and a link between two different civilisations. The unifying theme is the life of people in the city left to us by our ancestors. Vlácil captures workers reconstructing a bridge, and also a jazz concert taking place in a church. One of the film's sequences alternates the faces of people and sculptures. Just like in *Marketa Lazarová* (1967), Vlácil uses the mesmerising snow as a main artistic element, this time in colour. At the same time, however, he avoids kitsch postcard compositions.

In his subsequent film *The Promenades in Karlovy Vary* (Karlovarské promenády, 1972), he concentrates on the general atmosphere of the spa town and human work – from cleaning ladies to glassworkers – and uses smooth sound transitions. The sound in generally holds the film together, whether it is with noises or traditional music. Vlácil portrays Karlovy Vary from a more general perspective and even uses some ironic humour, which he last used in *Industrial Accidents by Electricity*. The last film of his documentary triptych for Krátký film is *Art Nouveau's Prague* (Prahou secesní, 1975). During the making of this documentary, he was already working in parallel on his mid-length live action war drama *Sirius* (1974). During research, he returned to his student years and frequented galleries and museums.

In the resulting documentary, Vlácil demonstrates all stylistic methods. He often changes focal points, varies the depth of field, and changes static images into camera slides. He avoids rigid shots and presents static works of art and architecture in an unrestrained way as they are still stimulating and impressive. He supplements montages with ornamental portrayal of plants used for inspiration in Art Nouveau. Unlike his other films, there are barely any human elements. Spoken word by Luděk Munzar and Rudolf Hrušínský can also be listed among the film's artistic elements as their commentary isn't didactic and descriptive, it's more like poetry. Vlácil combines noises with rich scores. While captures the atmosphere of the titular artistic style, his goal isn't praising specific artworks and authors. He transforms the essence of an essay to film. *Art Nouveau's Prague* is considered one the most valuable documentaries of Czech cinema. It was screened at dozens of festivals and won many awards.

The poet's epilogue

After his stint in Krátký film, František Vlášil returned to Barrandov, where he again made live-action films until the late 1980s. The somewhat saddened and melancholy epilogue of his filmmaking career is a short portrait titled *The Prague Odysseus* (Pražský Odysseus, 1989) about art, namely the work of painter Jan Bauch. Vlášil again explores art history and, based on the painter's memories, carefully combines many themes. However, the film was released after the Velvet Revolution, when audiences were thirsty for something completely different, and so Vlášil's final film ended up ignored not only by audiences but also by journalists.

In the context of his filmography, Vlášil's documentary films are less prominent, but all the more impressive and resourceful. With regards to his poetics, we cannot draw a thick line between his fiction and documentary films. Many artistic elements are present in the constricted formats of instructional films and documentaries and we can clearly identify Vlášil's film language. Whatever theme he was assigned or chose, thanks to deep interest and research, he was able to adjust his film language to it and approach it conceptually. That's where his work is unique. And thanks to the inconspicuous documentary treasures, we can often learn more about his style and work than from his praised films rightfully classified as some of the best films Czech filmmaking has ever produced.

Literature:

Petr Gajdošík, *František Vlášil: Život a dílo*. Příbram: Camera obscura 2018.

Lucie Česálková (ed.), *Film – náš pomocník: studie o (ne)užitečnosti českého krátkého filmu 50. let*. Prague: Národní filmový archiv 2015.

Václav Šmidrkal, *Armáda a stříbrné plátno: československý armádní film 1951–1999*. Prague: Naše vojsko 2009.

Alice Lovejoy, *Experimentální dílna. Československá armádní kinematografie od 20. do konce 60. let*. Prague: Národní filmový archiv 2021.