

Film / Photography

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From Communism to Consumerism

The current situation of the film scene in the Czech Republic.

Vera Chytilova was one of the first people to insist immediately after the velvet revolution in Prague that state institutions in the area of film should not be relieved of their responsibility. It was not by chance that she, who had provoked the Party bureaucracy and patriarchy in the sixties with cheeky films such as *Sedmikrasky* and was consequently banned from working in this field and from travelling abroad in the 1970s, should make such a demand. She recognized at an early stage that the fine new, free market economy also had its own special interests that could obstruct and prevent a number of things. It took years before she was understood.

"New film companies sprang up like mushrooms after a warm shower – and died away just as quickly", says Jana erník, manager of the Prague Czech Film Center (which has existed since September 2002), about the situation at the beginning of the 1990s.

In 1991 twenty-eight feature films were produced, in the following year only eight, the average now is fifteen. At the same time production costs for a feature film have exploded from 160,000 US Dollars (1989) to 650,000 US Dollars.

Although in comparison to other countries directors in the Czech Republic cannot complain about a lack of public interest, the habits of daily life and the use of leisure time have changed considerably. The Czechs love their cinema in much the same way as the French love theirs but there will probably never again be a total audience of 4.5 million people for a film, like there was in the 1980s for Jiří Menzel's *My Sweet Little Village*.

One of the most recent major successes Jan Hřebejk's *Pelisky* reached a total viewer figure of 400,000 in only three months. This is remarkable in a country with a population of ten million. In Austria, a country with only a slightly smaller population, many home-produced films attract no more than 5,000 viewers.

As is the case with ORF (Austrian Broadcasting Service) the influence of inexpert television editors is making itself felt. An advertising slogan of the state Czech television goes as follows: "Sure, films can be also made without us, but no one will see them." This is nothing less than a dangerous threat, reminiscent of dark times.

Whereby a kind of nervously anticipatory obedience and a self-censoring way of thinking aimed primarily at pleasing are already far too widely spread. *Pelisky* shows the era of Communism in a friendly, nostalgic light that could not hurt anybody. And Jan Sverák's *Kolya*, awarded the Oscar in 1996 for the best foreign language film, mixes romantic picture postcard images of Prague with lethargic TV acting to get by as many people as possible with eyes half shut.

Želary by Ondrej Trojan (2003), which also received funding from Austrian sources, is a similar case: the Nazi era, a female Prague resistance fighter flees to a rural idyll only to fall in love with a crude, lonely farmer. A comforting, pat on the shoulder type of film, much like Austrian Franz Antel's Bockerer series: evil Germans, evil Russians, all the Czechs are likeable and combat everything that is evil. A sort of ideal world.

Things might not seem nearly so bad if a Czech had not recently told me bitter joke: "What is the difference between the Czech resistance to the Nazis and a film about it? – The film lasts half an hour longer."

But in addition to these successful populist films, traditional kitschy fairy tale films and the (fewer and fewer) phantastical animation films, there is also something else, a different kind people, such as Sasa Gedeon (The Return of the Idiot) and Petr Želenka (The Year of the Devil), who, in the finest tradition of the cinema d´auteur film their personal obsessions in a radically single-minded way.

A fine challenge – and one appreciated by the public – made to those (far too numerous) colleagues who have devoted themselves to a "safe" kind of cinema. Nevertheless, a lot of water will most likely have to flow down the River Vlatava before someone dares to make the first self-critical film about the nation's past. At least a vague start could be discerned this year with the documentary The Czech Dream. Two young film students hang posters throughout Prague announcing the opening of a new supermarket. Thousands come to the opening on a field outside the city only to find nothing more than a gigantic poster. An angry and witty comment on the rapid transition from Communism to consumerism. A start.