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**'The Films We  
Are Ashamed of':  
Czech Crazy Comedy  
of the 1970s  
and 1980s**



## THE INEVITABLE 'LOSTNESS' OF SMALL NATIONAL CINEMAS

The cinemas of small nations, which have typically remained peripheral to the main cultural triumphs of big film industries, have managed to enter the 'great' General History of Cinema only through a couple of carefully selected works and movements that are exceptional in their internal development. As a result, many important works, directors and periods (even though they might be central to the national context) remain 'lost', unknown to foreign viewers and readers. The whole notion of 'concise histories' of cinema can logically be comprised only of the history of milestones and emblems. However, there is another form of 'lostness': the premeditated silence enveloping whole periods of national cinemas that are not only ignored abroad within the canonical history of the great 'art works' of international cinema, but are also only mentioned with embarrassment and quickly discounted within the domestic context. In the Czech, or more precisely Czechoslovak, cinema,<sup>1</sup> the period that is doubly lost in this sense, and probably stands out as the 'most lost' period in the history of Czech cinema, is the mainstream production during the years of 'normalisation' – the 1970s and most of the 1980s. This is the real dark continent of Czech(oslovak) cinema, usually perceived as an intellectual, moral and aesthetic wasteland that came into being after the ideas and ideals of the Prague Spring (mirrored in the filmic achievements of the New Wave) had been crushed by Soviet tanks.

The 'normalisation period' highly favoured 'ideologically neutral' films, especially comedies.<sup>2</sup> The most emblematic of these, usually referred to in Czech imprecisely as *bláznivé komedie* ('crazy comedies'),<sup>3</sup> are today often looked down upon as the epitome of escapism and ideologically complicit mass entertainment, and are occasionally considered only as debased and stillborn attempts at parody and satire.<sup>4</sup> It is precisely this comedic production that I want to concentrate on in this text, analysing these 'crazy comedies' as essentially a sub-genre remarkable for its hybridity and cross-breeding of stylistic and generic features. Basically, I want

to show that these comedies are more 'hybrid' than 'crazy' and look for the reasons for this formal anomaly.

Unsurprisingly, there has not been, so far, a significant academic attempt to research the mainstream cinema of the normalisation times, either in terms of thematic and stylistic analysis, or concerning the presence of ideology in the films of the period.<sup>5</sup> This is not startling

1 It has been pointed out on several occasions that it is very often difficult to retroactively distinguish between Czech and Slovak projects within the period of the centralised Czechoslovak film industry. The absurdity of the present dividing of 'Czechoslovak cinema' from the 1950s on into two separate traditions for political reasons is also commented on by Jordanova 2005.

2 Comedies became the emblematic genre of the period, although the range of film production was actually significantly broader—for example, the authors of the recent, brief, and in many respects limited, overview of Czech film history pertinently entitled *The Panorama of Czech Cinema (Panorama českého filmu, 2000)* stress the presence of the following genres during the period of normalisation from the 1970s to 1980s: 1) comedies (with further sub-genres of musical comedy, 'bitter' comedies, and communal satire); 2) detective films; 3) historical films (with the significant sub-genre of World War II films); 4) psychological cinema; 5) youth films; 6) socially critical works. Their list also includes generically unspecified works by prominent directors, designated as 'classics'. The normalisation period was also, paradoxically, one of the most prolific times in Czech cinema, with around 200 films made every *pětiletka* (5-year 'planning cycle'). See the chapter 'Hraný film v období normalizace (1970–1989)' ('Czech fiction film in the period of normalisation (1970–1989)') in Ptáček 2000: 158–163.

3 As I will try to illustrate below, particularly in the construction of 'gags' and in acting style, these films are notably different from the 'crazy comedies' as we know them from Western cinema.

4 These comedies are mostly juxtaposed with the 'great tradition' of the New Wave, as the 1970s are traditionally considered New Wave's graveyard, the time when all artistic creativity came to a halt (or, as some histories state—the period when the 'great Men' of the New Wave fled the country and 'took culture with them'—see, for example, Stoecker 1999: 155). Often these films are considered the 'perverse oozing of the perverse times' (an expression recently used in personal conversation by my colleague Stanislava Prádná, a New Wave specialist).

5 *Iluminace*, the only Czech academic film journal, dedicated a special issue to the topic of normalisation in 1997. However, this issue contains only reprints of (nevertheless very important) historical materials, interviews with authors working at the time, and one broad historical outline. There is no attempt at a thematic, stylistic or ideological analysis of the films themselves and, significantly, no interest in mainstream cinema (see *Iluminace*, Vol. 9 (1)). Even more indicative is the collection of texts published in 2006 to accompany a local film festival that focused on normalisation cinema (see Hadravová, Martinek 2006). The collection of essays does not include a single text that directly addressed the film production of the time, although there is one piece that analyses the normalisation television sagas scripted by Jaroslav Dietl.

if we recognise that the time and material still remain morally and politically sensitive, as most of the authors of hybrid comedies fall into the category of film-makers who were 'politically convinced'. These film-makers were allowed to work and even had their films supported with abundant resources, while other authors saw their work halted, films shelved, and careers ruined in the period of 'deep cultural decay undeniably connected with the profound moral and civic depression of the people' (Lukeš 1997: 66). Furthermore, the enormous box-office success of most of the normalisation comedies is often judged as proof of the culpability and complicity of their authors with the regime (and also reveals the painful truth that spectators quite easily fell for the 'official' entertainment). The mainstream production of the 1970s and 1980 thus remains 'the cinema we feel ashamed of'—the 'we' here meaning intellectuals, film historians and critics (and not so much common spectators, with whom the genre has remained popular to the present).<sup>6</sup>

The conditions of its production put the genre of hybrid comedy in a position that was, from the start, far from innocuous. It is this latent complicity and interconnectedness with the political situation that interests me here. But what I have chosen to pursue is not an ideological analysis. Instead, I aim to more broadly consider the genre in the light of, and as a continuation and redevelopment of, certain stylistic and generic undercurrents that had been present in Czech cinema and culture since much earlier periods. I hope to show how certain narrative and stylistic strategies used in this genre reflect not only the conditions of the times, but also various cultural tendencies and intellectual turbulences present in Czech (or Czechoslovak) culture dating back to its modern 'invention' during the Revival period in the first half of the 19th century.<sup>7</sup>

#### HOW 'CRAZY' ARE THE CRAZY NORMALISATION COMEDIES?

The cultural politics of the normalisation period was supported by a twisted and perverse semantics. The terms used by the authorities to

rationalise their political decisions described the current political purges as a 'consolidation', a return to 'normality', or the 'correction of earlier mistakes and deformations'. This terminology reinforced their goal of, as they presented it, centralisation and ideological stabilisation. This linguistic subterfuge was merely a cover-up for the inescapable escalation of censorship, film shelving, control over distribution, coercion of authors to join 'the party line', and ostracising of uncooperative artists. This period also returned Czechoslovak cinema to a situation of political, cultural, and geographic 'containment', isolated from the development of 'Western' cinema and culture.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, the style of the hybrid comedies does not reflect many 'normal' or 'consolidated' features—ironically, they celebrate chaos, implausibility and the loss of stable spatial and temporal reference. Not coincidentally, they are habitually constructed on the basis of science fiction and the archetypal supra-genre of Czech culture, the fairy-tale.<sup>9</sup> This is one of the reasons why I believe that a symptomatic reading of the hybrid comedy is possible—the genre is both too elaborate and too paradoxical to be merely rejected as escapist entertainment and read only as the work of politically conformist authors profiting from the re-establishment of communist rule. At the same time, it is in no way my aim to reassess the hybrid cinema of the 1970s and 1980s as subversive or politically progressive. These films did, in fact, completely fulfil their purpose of providing undemanding distraction to the masses, while at the same time becoming easily marketable goods internationally, to the benefit of the totalitarian regime.<sup>10</sup> What I want to accentuate here is how certain stylistic and generic breaks and deviations from norms common to this type of cinema may be understood as absorptions of the specific conditions of the time and as echoes of certain features that have existed and gained prominence throughout the history of the Czech striving for cultural identity.

Although the hybrid 'crazy' comedy is most often associated with the 1970s, its traditions can be traced back to the 1960s. Furthermore, the genre's popularity with the public already at the high point of the New Wave

period defies attempts to characterise it as essentially an idiosyncratic and eccentric product of normalisation (as is the usual practice). The 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s 'merely' offered favourable conditions for its boom and later paved the way for its transformation within the medium of television, and for the creation of 'hybrid' television series for children.

Historically speaking, comedy appears as the most typical genre in Czech cinema, at least in the period after the arrival of sound. The sound era also gave rise to the representative 'chatty' or 'garrulous' comedies, as Czech humour is typically not physical, but verbal.<sup>11</sup> In many cases, this verbal humour is also connected to the 'political sphere', whereby the political message is often communicated within the framework of surreal, fantastic, or supernatural circumstances. This is one of the reasons why Czech comedy seems rather difficult to translate for foreign viewers. In one effort to deal with this 'distance' and problem of reading, Charles Eidsvik attempts to 'translate' the comedies of the 1960s for Western audiences.<sup>12</sup> He claims that watching East European comedy may be unsettling, as it is difficult to identify the comic protagonist and the cultural conventions that signal when to laugh. He connects this difficult translation to the necessary politicisation of the genre and to the logic of comic conventions that evolved among people 'keeping their sense of humour' under socialism (Eidsvik 1991: 91).<sup>13</sup> For him, the comedies of the 1960s are notable for a coalesced 'mock-realist' comic style<sup>14</sup> that is dominant in the whole East European region, in which the comic effect is created through allusion to the everyday world of viewers, which

6 This popularity may also be evidenced by the present-day 'marketability' of the films from the 1970s and 1980s. They are often published as DVD bonuses in the popular press and sell very well, a phenomenon that is then frequently criticised in the 'serious' press. For many cinephiles the main sign of the 'decadence of the times' is the reality that most of the 'gems' of the New Wave have not been published on DVD in the Czech Republic, whereas most of the 'normalisation garbage' is now available in new DVD editions (and paradoxically often with English subtitles).

7 The grounding of Czech culture in the Revival period (the early 19th century) or even further back to the Hussite period (the early 15th century) seems far removed from the logic of an abrupt historical break that creates a 'new socialist society'. Yet, paradoxically, the communist representatives constantly referred to these periods as 'great democratic

milestones', organically progressing to the communist future. (This teleological view was articulated in particular by the communist ideologue Zdeněk Nejedlý in his paper 'Communists, the heirs of the great traditions of the Czech nation' ('Komunisté, dědici velikých tradic českého národa'), presented in 1946.)

8 Czechoslovak cinema and culture for most of the 19th and 20th centuries was defined by a condition of 'containment', isolation or marginality. One of the major aspects of this containment during the totalitarian regime was the divorce from Western culture and inclination towards the Soviet sphere of influence. One of the first decisions of the new political leadership of the Czech Film organisation in 1969 was to re-establish close cooperation with the Eastern Bloc and 'restore' close contacts with the USSR and its socialist satellites. (In official documentation this is referred to as 'correcting the deformations established in 1968 and 1969'; see Edice 1997.)

9 Andrew Horton repeatedly stresses the importance of the fairy-tale in Czech culture: 'Perhaps the biggest reason for [Zelman's] success, though, is the importance of the fairy-tale (or *pohádka*, as it is known) as a genre in the Czech Republic. The Czechs take their fairy-tales far more seriously than most and fairy-tales are a far more prominent part of children's reading than in Western Europe. This carries over into film....' (Horton 1998; see also Horton 1999.)

10 The hybrid films became quite profitable and desirable goods for export to most of the world. (Václav Vorlíček mentions that he personally saw spectators from South America to Bombay to Volgograd enjoy the films; see Kopaněva 1976: 212.) The films were rather quickly spotted and 'scouted' by the German film industry as possible niches for co-productions. Although we must here set aside the most famous co-production with East Germany, Vorlíček's fairy-tale *Three Wishes for Cinderella* (*Tri oříšky pro Popelku*, 1973), co-produced with DEFA (Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft), as too classical for the current discussion, we can find a plethora of hybrid projects among the TV fairy-tale/fantasy/sci-fi series co-produced during the 1970s and 1980s with Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR), such as the 'modern fairy-tale' *Pan Tau* series starting in 1970, *Arabela* (1979/1980), *Flying Čestmír* (*Létající Čestmír*, 1984), and *Hamster in a Nightshirt* (*Keček v noční košili*, 1987), the surreal time travel extravaganza *The Visitors* (*Návštěvníci*, 1983), made with the participation of Jan Svankmajer for special effects, or my personal favourite example of bizarreness, *Bambinot* (1984), set in a genetic research institute.

11 It is not a coincidence that the epitome of Czech humour is the verbose Švejk.

12 Eidsvik develops his claims with a firm belief in a 'regional sense of humor', asserting that there are no identifiable comedies in 'the usual American sense' in East European cinema (see Eidsvik 1991).

13 According to Eidsvik, the official sombre and puritanical façade of socialism is replaced in these comedies by only vaguely concealed malice and scepticism, as the stance of the authors is one of irreverence and levity. This type of humour is 'ignited by an appreciation of the ridiculousness inherent in futile plans and hopes' and the transition from socialist and Marxist visions to capitalist projects does not make them less ridiculous (Eidsvik 1991: 103).

14 Eidsvik claims that the 'standard pose of the comic filmmaker is that of a recorder of ordinary behavior; the result, for the lack of a better phrase, could be called "mock realism".' (Eidsvik 1991: 92.) 'In such realities, what is normally taken for humor is serious and seriousness itself is comic.' (Eidsvik 1991: 103.)

allows them 'to react in terms of an imagined (and incongruous) world suggested by the film' (Eidsvik 1991: 93). For Eidsvik, this constellation gave rise to the 'comedy of futility', in which 'cacophony rules'.

Yet, this cacophony or lack of formal consistency may have its origin elsewhere—in the 'tradition of the hybrid genres' in Czech culture, where comedy is more often tragicomic, drama has comical or lyrical undertones to it, and where we find no pure genre films, such as melodrama, horror films, gangster films etc. This hybridity was, to a great extent, caused by the plethora of cultural influences absorbed throughout history, the changes in political climate, and the transformations of the social function of cinema, a medium that was always striving to incorporate foreign impulses, often experimenting, adopting and translating both avant-garde and traditional forms<sup>15</sup> into the Czech tradition. But there were other processes present in Czech (oslovak) culture from modernity on that added a specific twist to the strategies of hybridisation, connected to the aberrant situation of cultural isolation and the negotiation of the forms and meanings that this condition created. I will address these processes in the last section of this paper.

According to Eidsvik's approach, East European comedies also tend to be 'deadpan and sly spin-offs of "ordinary" realism' (Eidsvik 1991: 92). Although Eidsvik's claims may be too generalised and over-simplified, the disturbed relationship to reality is one of the emblematic traits of Czech cinema. The realist sense of the Czech 'crazy comedy' is especially noticeable, particularly in the style of acting. There is no exaggerated grimacing and the acting is toned down to a rather low-key performance. The secret of crazy comedy, according to its most prolific authors, is to capture 'real' reactions to absurd stimuli and focus on 'realistic' situations created by them (Vorlíček, quoted in Kopaněva 1976: 208–209). The story is thus built upon situations and the characters do not experience substantial internal development. They are not psychologically scrutinised, deep personages who deal with traumas, depressions and crises. There is nothing latent about them; they have clear outlines and are painted in

'primal colours'. The characters remain discreet in acting and natural in most ridiculous situations. There is also no place for cranks, quibbling, physical gags or comic gestures on the path to attaining the 'realistic staging of absurdity' and 'comedy without clowning' (Vorlíček and Macourek, quoted in Kopaněva 1976: 209). As we will see, the hybrid comedies also depend on a bizarre combination of realistic settings combined with futuristic props and plots. They are typically formed as a cut-and-paste amalgam of aesthetic tropes, generic and formal models, and disorienting spatial and temporal references, combined to excess, with no predetermined rules.

The hybrid film may be, therefore, formed as a mixture of conversation comedy and other generic elements, for example sci-fi motifs (e.g. *Man in Outer Space (Muž z prvního století, 1961)*, *I Killed Einstein, Gentlemen (Zabil jsem Einsteina, pánové, 1970)*, and *You Are a Widow, Sir (Pane, vy jste vdova, 1970)*), sometimes turning into time-travel films (*Tomorrow I Wake Up and Scald Myself with Tea (Zítřa vstanu a opařím se čajem, 1977)*, which combines the theme of time travel with war film motifs). Other common generic elements in the mix include comic books (*Who Wants to Kill Jessie? (Kdo chce zabít Jessii?, 1966)*), Westerns (*Lemonade Joe or The Horse Opera (Limonádový Joe aneb Koňská opera, 1964)*), spy films (*The End of Agent W4C (Konec agenta W4C prostřednictvím psa pana Foustky, 1967)*), mafia black comedies (*Four Murders are Enough, Honey (Čtyři vraždy stačí, drahoušku, 1970)*), horror films (*The Mysterious Castle in the Carpathians (Tajemství hradu v Karpatech, 1981)*, which starts as a classical horror film (in its paraphrasing of Nosferatu), then turns more into a 'techno-horror', while also being an opera film and an ethnographic study), or 'adult' fairy-tales (*How to Drown Dr. M. or The End of the Water Spirits in Bohemia (Jak utopit doktora Mráčka aneb Konec vodníků v Čechách, 1974)*; and *Saxana, The Girl on the Broomstick (Dívka na koštěti, 1972)*), to name only the most popular and well known examples.

All of these films are sometimes read as parodies, satires or pastiches. Yet I believe that

they, in fact, surpass the contours of this approach, achieving instead a new hybrid form that is beyond both parody and satire and has only a certain degree of pastiche, and only for very specific purposes. On the basic level, both parody and satire require considerable knowledge of the original form, both for the spectators and, even more importantly, for the authors. This was not the case with many of the 'poached' genres that were used in hybrid comedies.<sup>16</sup> Unsurprisingly, the two most prolific authors of hybrid films and series, Václav Vorlíček and Miloš Macourek, openly expressed their resistance to readings of their comedies as parodies, this being 'too easy' an approach (see Kopaněva 1976).<sup>17</sup> Their films do not include any ridicule or condemnation of the original material; the film-makers did not use it with polemical or critical distance. Their relationship to the source forms was, for the most part, neutral; they employed them as pieces of their own jigsaw constructions. Their extravaganzas are bricolages, connecting several genres and styles by means of a playful 'gadgetry'.

For a more specific example, let's look at one of the first very popular and openly hybrid projects, dating from 1966: *Who Wants to Kill Jessie?* by Vorlíček and Macourek. *Jessie* exploits several basic themes of hybrid comedy. There are sci-fi motifs, as the film is set in the near future, but more importantly, it is a socialist future that looks very much like the present reality as the spectators knew it. The story presents a married scientist couple, who both work in research institutes. The woman, Prof. Beránková, is a world famous 'somnologist', studying dream control (her aim is to relieve her subjects of disturbing dreams and implant in them pleasant sensations). Her husband researches (although with significantly less success) more 'practical' things: heavy weight lifting cranes for use in factories.

Beránková and her team develop a vaccine that instantly eliminates disturbing dreams, and she injects it into her husband when he is having a nightmare inspired by the comic book he read before they went to sleep. However, the resulting side effect of the vaccine is that the characters from the dreams materialise in the real world and start to act of their own free will.

The materialised characters in this case, or the 'mirages' as they call them in the film, are three personages taken from Western comic books: Superman, a voluptuous female scientist clad in miniskirt (who, by chance, has invented anti-gravitation gloves) and a Western gunman. The topic of the scientific manipulation of dreams adds a socially critical edge to the film, yet the main theme remains the confrontation between fantasy and reality. Fantasy is ultimately embraced and welcomed as a refuge, not from reality in general, but from a reality deprived of dreams. At the end of the film, Beránek unsurprisingly exchanges his wife for the sexy mirage scientist and stays with her in the real world. Beránková, on the other hand, chases her superman-lover into the dream realm.

Thus, we have a combination of a science-fiction film and comedy, inspired by various comic book sources (and with a witty twist, since Superman is the bad guy, i.e. the villain of the film, together with Beránková the dream-controller). Fantasy, the combinations of spaces and times detached from logic, rationalism and linearity usually also have an effect on the settings of hybrid comedies. Very often they present a very 'anomalous', troubled chronotope, which reflects the strife between isolation and openness, provincialism and cosmopolitanism, belief in the future and fear of the present.

The setting of the hybrid comedy typically blurs its temporal and spatial coordinates: it habitually takes place either in complete timelessness or in a near future that still resembles the present. In *Jessie*, the setting is very realistic for the time, with only the scientific inventions

15 This may become even more complicated when we realise that, in the specific context of political and cultural containment, what defines mainstream and what defines counter-culture may be very paradoxical. For example, during normalisation, Western popular culture could be read as a progressive counter-culture threatening the 'official culture'.

16 Vorlíček himself admits in interviews that when he made *The End of Agent WAC*, a variation of a Bond movie, he had seen only one of the four already existing Bond films, and did not even study this one very much. Furthermore, the majority of Czech spectators had never seen any Bond films at the time.

17 Macourek claims here: 'I hate parody and even more satire... this is so cheap and easy. You can parody anything just through subtle exaggeration.' (Kopaněva 1976: 207.)

belonging to the future. In *Tomorrow I Wake Up and Scald Myself with Tea*, although the city looks like present-day Prague, the plot revolves around a travel company specialising in time travel, mainly selling trips to ancient Egypt and the time of the dinosaurs. The story also features a group of Nazis who want to use the company to reverse the flow of history by delivering a neutron bomb to the Führer. *You Are a Widow, Sir* brings us to a place that looks like a present city, but is in fact a 'retro' view of a class society—the Czech(oslovakia) of the film is a monarchy with a king who has a personal astrologer. Yet this country also has advanced military and medical research, even innovative neurosurgery that allows brain transplants. *The End of Agent W4C* claims, by means of an inter-title, to take us to an 'unspecified city' full of agents and mafiosi, yet we clearly see the well-known present-day skyline of Prague in the background. When the chronotope in these films is further complicated by the theme of time travel, they may take us to places or times that appear similar or even the same, but are revealed to be significantly and uncannily different.

So these are clearly imaginary places, dream spaces and time loops built upon the realistic environment of Czech actuality. This imaginary 'present' also has the power to deny the antipodal character of the West/East relationship (as presented and opposed by the political geography of the time). Most of the films openly negate the Cold War state of isolation and flavour the 'socialist' setting with Western implants and motifs. The situation defined by cultural containment and the normalisation ('purging') of socialist culture is contradicted through a strange mixture of Eastern and Western features and motifs, predominantly employing Western 'implants/transplants'.

As some of the motifs, characters, objects or settings obviously stem from Western genres that were not well known in the Czechoslovakia of the time (since Western movies typically did not enter into official distribution), some of the films served as awry 'introductions' to Western iconology. However, this iconology is usually domesticated in a quite bizarre fashion and appropriated with a commonly cynical translation and a cultural colonisation of Western icons.

For example, in *The End of Agent W4C*, an East European Bond film, the glamorous spy world is made awkward, and ultimately it is the Czech common man, not even a real spy, who triumphs in a situation where all the foreign super-agents fail. Western culture thus becomes a point of reference, giving an ambivalent twist to the 'Western imperialism' proclaimed by the political representatives of the time.

The West and the East are also ironically connected through the caricatured belief in the wonders of the 'scientific and technical revolution' (shared across the Eastern bloc<sup>18</sup> but also mirrored in the West). The typical setting of a hybrid comedy is a research institute (note the two institutes in *Jessie*, the rejuvenating institute in *What Would You Say to Some Spinach?* (*Což takhle dát si špenát?*, 1977) or the Bond-reminiscent gadgetry inventor scene in *W4C*). The invented apparatuses are often too effective and expeditious. The extreme case of a 'too effective apparatus' is the intricate swimming pool widget that kills all the secrete service agents with the power of 200,000 volts in *W4C*. Also, the inventions usually have absurd side effects (e.g. the dream manifestation in *Jessie* or the accelerated process of rejuvenation in *What Would You Say to Some Spinach?*). Sometimes they merge with time machines or media apparatuses, for example, most of the story in *Tomorrow I Wake up and Scald Myself with Tea* unfolds in the offices of the time travel company, *Jessie* uses a TV-like interface for controlling dreams, and *The Mysterious Castle in the Carpathians* is full of apparatuses and machines that fuse the human body with technology.

These apparatuses are very often extensions of the human body, invented to perfect it, discipline it or even replace it if the organic can no longer survive. As genres and styles are fragmented and grafted one to the other(s) in the hybrid comedy, so the image of the body in these films becomes the site of fragmentation, destruction and technological rebirth. As Vorlíček stated, 'the mystique of the genre lies in making the spectators believe in the possibility that one brain can be transplanted in three bodies' (Vorlíček, quoted in Kopaněva 1976: 209). The body in the hybrid films is the site of hybridity itself—it undergoes transformations, crosses

gender and class boundaries, and ceases to be a site of knowledge or a locus of identity, thus having significant consequences for identity and gender politics.

In most cases, the body becomes 'disciplined' and merges with the apparatus. The female body in particular often becomes a sort of 'bachelor machine' and the ultimate object of 'technological' desire.<sup>19</sup> In *The Mysterious Castle in the Carpathians*, the female body as the ultimate object of desire is literally constructed as an inhuman apparatus, both a mechanical reconstruction of the diva, with her flickering image and voice captured as a projection. Interestingly, this mechanisation and fragmentation of the (preferably female) body does not leave much space for typical stereotyping. On the contrary, it reflects and reveals it. Thus the motif of brains wandering from male to female bodies in *You Are a Widow, Sir* is not used for the expected gags playing on gender difference; instead, the body here becomes primarily a mere 'receptacle' for a persona. Paradoxically, although the characters in hybrid films are rather fixed and do not develop during the narrative, the sexual objects themselves are relatively subjectivised (e.g. the sex-bomb may at the same time be a scientist in *Jessie* and, in *You Are a Widow, Sir*, the stunning female body may in fact have the genial brain of an unattractive male astrologer and the admired theatre diva may at the same time be the king's smart confidant and friend, in an asexual sense).

#### THE COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL CONTEXT OF CONTAINMENT AND SELF-HYBRIDISATION

How are the hybrid comedies of the 1970s, considered at the time one of the lowest genres (and often contrasted with the pure and high visual tradition of the New Wave), connected to the specificity of Czech culture and cinema? In spite of the disconnection between the lost and the privileged, I'm not suggesting that this cinema is 'lost' in the psychoanalytical sense, i.e. that what has been lost determines significantly the identity of what remains. On the contrary, in this case I believe what is lost or deliberately

forgotten may belong to the core of identity and specificity of Czech cinema. Some of the features typical for this genre—the stylistic and generic impurity and hybridity, premeditated excess, and creative dilettantism and provincialism—play a very important role throughout the history of Czech cinema. Thus, in conclusion, I want to offer the hypothesis that the hybrid cinema is more typically 'Czech' than the more cosmopolitan and 'pure' production of the privileged New Wave, or the films of the unique pre-World War II cosmopolitan authors, such as Gustav Machatý.

If we risk making a generalising statement, we can say that there are two main determinants shaping the face of modern Czech culture and cinema. Abrupt political changes and cultural turns created drastic ruptures in the development of Czech cinema, which may consequently be seen as constantly in search of continuity, cultural identity and stylistic specificity.<sup>20</sup> Several political regimes and totally divergent cultural contexts shaped political and cultural expression during the 20th century, with every new regime having different cultural expectations and needs. The development of Czech art, and particularly cinema, during the 20th century was defined by radical politically and socially determined breaks, with almost every second decade developing its forms of cultural production anew. Large national cinemas have their own natural development, inner structure and system: in Czech cinematography, one finds fissures, turns and returns, breaks with foreign influences, and adaptations to political changes.

This is the context in which we must judge the question of stylistic and generic anomalies in Czech film, as symptoms of the absorption of impulses present in the broader cultural and

18 Note that the USSR was at that time referred to as the land where 'tomorrow already means yesterday', i.e. a country characterised by scientific progress.

19 For the classical reading of representations of the female body as a 'bachelor machine' and 'male invention' see Penley 1989.

20 I have outlined this claim in my essay 'The construction of normality: The lineage of male characters in contemporary Czech cinema' (Hanáková 2005).

political milieu. The style and form of cinema is never disconnected from the society that produces it and, as Czech film and literary theoretician Vratislav Effenberger claimed in the 1960s, 'the development of film style can be read as revealing a social and psychological image of man (or people) as if on the reverse side of official history.' (Effenberger 1996: 175.) In his view, film style and official history function as underpinnings for each other, determining and defining each other significantly.

The second determinant of Czech film is connected to the generally acknowledged fact that the Czech cultural tradition derives from a popular, democratic legacy, and is thus disconnected from any notion of exclusiveness, elitism and sophistication. Focusing on the fact that the Czech nation entered modern history as probably the only European state with no aristocratic elite, as a nation built up from below, historians claim that this had significant consequences for the self-definition of Czech culture. Film historian Jaroslav Boček believed that this plebeian anchoring caused a cult of mediocrity, a disrespect for form and order, both in Czech art and society.<sup>21</sup> The disrespect of 'purity' in form and style may also be understood as having opened the door to the hybridisation and contamination of Czech cinema.

The power of these popular origins and this cultural democratisation only intensifies in cinema, as there is no single, sustained tradition of Czech cinema, its historical basis having been shaped more as a series of breaks and attempts to bridge gaps. Still, we can detect here an underlying framework of popular tradition and the relative permanence of hybrid, and stylistically 'patchwork', Frankenstein-like works. Yet this motif must be analysed further. Scholars writing on East and Central European cinema have recently started to accentuate the framework of post-colonialism and analyse the cinema of the region as a result of cultural colonisation.<sup>22</sup> In the Czechoslovak context, we can actually speak of serial colonisation, starting with the German colonisation in the 17th century, through the Nazi control during the war, and up to the inclusion into the Soviet sphere of influence after 1948. I believe the colonial situation proves to be very relevant as a model that

can be further expanded and explored for the analysis of modern Czech culture.

The relevance of the term 'hybridisation' with regard to Czech culture is apparent, although we should define it further. I do not refer here to cultural hybridisation in the sense of a mixing of cultures; what I want to stress is a specific sort of *self-hybridisation* and *self-colonisation*, used as a strategy to deal with the political and cultural isolation and containment of the region. From this perspective, the mixture of cultural forms, and the creation of new formats and generic structures appear as a strategic experiment, very remarkable when compared to what 'mainstream cinema' usually stands for, a strategy to deal with seclusion and forced separation from the surrounding world. Self-hybridisation might be seen as a very productive tactic within the history of Czech literature and film.

Important work on the specific nature of Czech culture has been done by the Czech semiotician Vladimír Macura, who has focused particularly on the formation of the 'national myths' of 'Czech-ness' during the period of National Revival in the first half of the 19th century (Macura 1995). It can be claimed that certain cultural strategies and practices still present in Czech culture can be traced back to and their roots connected with the re-creation and reinvention of the Czech tradition, past and future, during the time of the Revival. Macura's extensive studies of this period especially focus on the strategies of mythologisation and re-creation ('imagining')<sup>23</sup> of Czech-ness and connect them to the 'Czech question', i.e. the copious historical discussions about the meaning and character of Czech historical development.<sup>24</sup> The Revivalist culture here appears as a specific cultural type, which is simultaneously constructed and disturbed. The Czech situation at the dawn of its modern history is characterised by

the shattered continuity of the Czech cultural development, the breakdown of the national social structure, the Czech language being pushed out from the most important functions of intra-cultural communication, and the creation of modern

Czech culture inside other culture—linguistically German, this creation appears not as a continuing culture, but as a founding culture. (Macura 1995: 6–7.)

Macura considers the basic units of the Revivalist culture to be ideograms and sees the Revival as a 'period of an accelerated development'. These periods, characteristic especially of smaller nations surviving on the margins of the cultures of big empires, are typical in their considerable stylistic impurity or hybridity: 'The usual stylistic typologies, successful in periodising the big cultures with their continuous, undisturbed development, fail in attempts to apply them to small cultures with complicated progress,' as they are typified by the transience and diversity of phenomena.<sup>25</sup> Cultures of accelerated progress, according to Macura, are distinguishable by their syncretism, the valorisation of dilettantism (i.e. the search for renaissance authors capable of filling gaps and creating works in all areas of culture), and by accentuation of phenomena from the cultural periphery.

What brings us back from the Revival to normalisation is the analogical break in continuity and the shared feeling of spatial and 'mental' circumscription, the awareness of being severed from the surrounding world but, at the same time, connected to a feeling of self-sufficiency in the 'world-inclosing' closure and fullness, almost plenitude.<sup>26</sup> The two periods of seclusion remain significantly different: during the Revival, the seclusion from the surrounding world was seen as necessary for the re-creation of the nation and was made progressive through the values of Czech-ness, whereas the cultural isolation during the totalitarian regime was of a different political order, since it was imposed from above. Yet, in many respects these eras share common features. The hybridisation is, in both cases, a tactical gesture, both highlighting and negating the necessary relational character of the Czech culture and its correlation to other cultures. Macura claims that the translation or transposition of foreign culture into patriotic soil during the Revival constituted a 'political act' of devouring the foreignness, engulfing it, appropriating it through 'cultural aggressiveness' (Macura 1995: 74). The Revivalist

culture strived to create reality in and out of the re-created language. In this process, originality paradoxically did not lie in the original, appropriated culture. On the contrary, it was the new, hybrid, translated and parasitical form that was perceived as authentic.

The act of consuming and nationalising foreignness through translational parasitism can also be recognised in the hybrid film. This is not a form of hybridisation aimed at achieving the quality of other cinemas and cultures, but a parasitical translation and amalgamation in order to construct a form that is paradoxically self-contained and non-derivative. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, we may also relate this strategy to the importance of play and mystification in the process of the creation of Czech culture, which offered the Revivalists the unique opportunity to build Czech culture 'virtually', not only outside of time and space, but also independent of the rather frustrating reality (see Macura 1995: 104). The specific role of mystification within Czech culture forms the theme of several recent films (see for example

21 He reminds us that even the first president of Czechoslovakia, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, despite all his belief in the nation, maintained that the Czechs had never known how to rule or obey. F. X. Šalda, a major Czech literary critic of the first half of the 20th century, supported this allegation—he repeatedly stated that Czechs had never known the value of form and style in art and had never respected it, because they had never cultivated the forms of social life (Boček 1968: 143–144). For the typology of Czech 'democratic' or 'plebeian' characters see Jedlička 1992: 10.

22 See especially the work of Robert Stam (e.g. Stam, Shohat 2003).

23 See the concept of nation as 'imagined community' in Anderson 1991.

24 For more information on the history of the Czech question, see Havelka 2001.

25 Macura describes these cultures in the following manner: 'The popular fluctuating of categories is brought forth necessarily by the inner stylistic haziness of the revivalist cultures; it is caused by their need to compensate for current artistic development, as if 'at once'. The syncretism we find here, even though it is probably the necessary accompanying effect of any 'culture with accelerated development' (i.e. of revivalist type), and thus typical of it, is primarily a syncretism turned outwards, the syncretism of the outer impulses.' (Macura 1995: 14.)

26 This is very often connected to the metaphor of the little garden (*zahrádka*) applied to the Czech lands. This metaphor may be found both in the cultural production of the Revival and today (Macura 1995: 28).

the most famous one, *Czech Dream* (*Český sen*) from 2004).

Thus, from this perspective, the 'dark decades' after the New Wave, traditionally and generally considered a barren time of creative impotence, crippled by severe censorship, are linked to traditions that have formed the very framework of Czech cultural identity. The format of the 'hybrid comedy' may seem escapist and apolitical, yet, on the stylistic and generic level, its parasitical, self-contained and self-hybridised structure may provide a greater reflection of the political choices in the Czech cultural production of the time than might be evident in a superficial reading.

## FILMS

- Arabela*, dir. Václav Vorlíček.  
Czechoslovakia, West Germany,  
1979/1980
- Bambinot*, dir. Jaroslav Dudek.  
Czechoslovakia, West Germany, 1984
- Czech Dream* (*Český sen*),  
dir. Vit Klusák, Filip Remunda.  
Czech Republic, 2004
- The End of Agent W4C (Konec  
agenta W4C prostřednictvím psa  
pana Foustky)*, dir. Václav Vorlíček.  
Czechoslovakia, 1967
- Flying Čestmír (Létající Čestmír)*,  
dir. Václav Vorlíček. Czechoslovakia,  
West Germany, 1984
- Four Murders are Enough, Honey  
(Čtyři vraždy stačí, drahoušku)*,  
dir. Oldřich Lipský. Czechoslovakia,  
1970
- Hamster in a Nightshirt (Křeček v  
noční košili)*, dir. Václav Vorlíček.  
Czechoslovakia, West Germany, 1987
- How to Drown Dr. M. or The End of  
the Water Spirits in Bohemia (Jak  
utopit doktora Mráčka aneb Konec  
vodníků v Čechách)*, dir. Václav  
Vorlíček. Czechoslovakia, 1974
- I Killed Einstein, Gentlemen (Zabil  
jsem Einsteina, pánové)*, dir. Oldřich  
Lipský. Czechoslovakia, 1970
- Lemonade Joe or The Horse  
Opera (Limonádový Joe aneb  
Koňská opera)*, dir. Oldřich Lipský.  
Czechoslovakia, 1964
- Man in Outer Space (Muž z  
prvního století)*, dir. Oldřich Lipský.  
Czechoslovakia, 1961
- The Mysterious Castle in the  
Carpathians (Tajemství hradu v  
Karpatech)*, dir. Oldřich Lipský.  
Czechoslovakia, 1981
- Pan Tau*, dir. Jindřich Polák.  
Czechoslovakia, West Germany,  
1970–1978
- Saxana, The Girl on the Broomstick  
(Dívka na koštěti)*, dir. Václav Vorlíček.  
Czechoslovakia, 1972
- Three Wishes for Cinderella (Tři oříšky  
pro Popelku)*, dir. Václav Vorlíček.  
Czechoslovakia, East Germany, 1973
- Tomorrow I Wake Up and Scald  
Myself with Tea (Zítřa vstanu a  
opařím se čajem)*, dir. Jindřich Polák.  
Czechoslovakia, 1977

*The Visitors (Návštěvníci)*, dir. Jindřich Polák. Czechoslovakia, West Germany, 1983

*What Would You Say to Some Spinach? (Což takhle dát si špenát?)*, dir. Václav Vorlíček. Czechoslovakia, 1977

*Who Wants to Kill Jessie? (Kdo chce zabít Jessii?)*, dir. Václav Vorlíček. Czechoslovakia, 1966

*You are a Widow, Sir (Pane, vy jste vdova)*, dir. Václav Vorlíček. Czechoslovakia, 1970

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