

A milestone of Czech writing about films

Petr Gajdošík's monography dedicated to František Vláčil, published by Miloš Fryš in his publishing house Camera obscura in Příbram, was first introduced in a selection of bookshops last year just before Christmas. It amazes at first sight with its volume of nearly 900 pages, not to mention the voluminous and thoughtfully conceived photographic material, which eventually didn't make it to the book because of the startling attitude of the heir of the copyright. The damage is particularly grave for Vláčil, who got his nickname of the "poet of the silver screen" mainly for his original directing signature, consisting in great part of the visual quality of the image, a separate theme in itself, symbolic and emotionally impressive. Where there could be excerpts from his mythical screenplays, in which the visibly talented Vláčil made sketches of shots or even whole scenes, or comparisons of those sketches with the final form of the films, photo documentation of their making, or selected items from his estate, there are no more than eight photographs accompanying the text. With the exception of two minor ones from behind the scenes, these are full-page portraits of Vláčil, documenting the constants and the transformations of his face from his boyhood until old age, inviting the reader to examine with a questioning look the adding wrinkles, carved by his complicated and in many ways bitter fate.

In this optics, the portraits are closely related to one of the three levels on which it is possible to read Gajdošík's book. First of all, it is an account of a drama lived by an artist to the bone, whose obsession with work, along with significant pressure he put on himself as well as his co-workers, constantly drove him into stressful situations and even conflicts: the ones he had with his co-workers, or those fuelled by the atmosphere of the era, or eventually the conflict he got into with himself. The pages of the book progressively bring Vláčil back to life as a human being who is able to generate incredible strength and energy when fulfilling his film visions, but whose fragile soul suffered hardship and withered away under the weight of pressures that came from the outside. Gajdošík doesn't take recourse to excessive psychological analyses, he is very restrained and moderate in depicting the director's private life, yet it is possible to gather from the text, without it being put explicitly, that



↳ Petr Gajdošík: *František Vláčil. Life and work* (František Vláčil. Život a dílo). Příbram, Svata Hora: Camera obscura 2018, 875 p. ISBN 978-80-903678-9-0.

Vláčil was going through episodes of depression and desolating loneliness and that it was both his strain from work and mainly the bleak twenty years of political normalization, setting in when Vláčil was at the peak of his creative energy, that greatly contributed to the breakdown of his marriage, the estrangement from his sons and his sinking into alcohol addiction.

At this point, the book shifts from a powerful personal story to another important level of Gajdošík's text. This second level allows the author, who is mainly interested in the circumstances under which Vláčil's position changed in the Barrandov studios, and the specifics of how the realizations of his films went, to use a large amount of thoroughly verified and documented facts and conclusive testimonies to compose an extensive treatise about the functioning of the state sponsored film studio during more than three decades (1956–1989). The normalization era occupies more than three hundred pages filled with a detailed account of totalitarian practices, party directives and all kinds of "measures", based on which directors, writers and workers of other film professions were almost systematically prevented from doing their jobs. The text also implies that incompetence and despotism of those in charge played an important part in wasting all that creative potential. One can unreservedly nod to Martin Šrajer, stating in his review of Gajdošík's book that the production practice in Barrandov during the normalization era "has never been examined in detail in a publication until now, except for the *Kinematografie zapomnění* by Štěpán Hulík, and especially not with use of concrete examples."⁰¹ But the depiction of the conditions in the Barrandov studios is not always so gloomy. The book section entitled "Barrandov", with years specified in the brackets (1956–1970), offers a somewhat more favourable image, especially when talking about the late 1960s. There's no talk of complete creative freedom, as often related by false myths of the "golden sixties" still today: even then, the authorities in power exercised ideological control, the film production process was submitted to a multi-level approval procedure, and after that, there were still obstacles on the film's way to distribution. Vláčil's projects from that decade did not essentially encounter such hindrances, but in his detailed description of their creation, Gajdošík still compiles a long list of complications that made practically any stage of the filmmaking difficult for the director, especially when making the generally challenging *Marketa Lazarova* (*Marketa Lazarová*, 1967). And yet, the reader cannot lose the impression that people were closer to each other while working, that they shared common ideals, and that the "handmade" production benefited the work at least as much as advanced technologies do today. The author's accounts of the dealings during the approval sessions over the first and second part of *Marketa Lazarova* inspires outright nostalgia: the then ideological-artistic counsels expressed their appreciation in such a way, one would think the members were rather poets spiritually kindred with Vláčil than ideological controllers and censors.⁰²

⁰¹ Martin Šrajer, „František Vláčil. Život a dílo“. Filmový přehled, 6. 3. 2019. Available online: <<http://www.filmovyprehled.cz/cs/revue/detail/frantisek-vlacil-zivot-a-dilo>> (cit. 6 May 2019)

⁰² Gajdošík uses the favourable assessments of the screenplay for *Marketa Lazarova*, written by Ladislav Fikar, Břetislav Pojark, Josef Träger, Karel Kraus and Ota Hofman, and quotes the latter on page 152 as follows: "What a pale and languid impression civilisation makes compared to the robust characters of this story, who have blood and presentiment, and anger, and passion, and revenge. Until they perish. No, until they are crushed. Until they crush themselves. I cannot analyse my own feelings. (...) There are mountains that you can never ascend, but you can watch and admire them from a distance. For me, that is the case of this film ballad. It would be ridiculous to delude myself that I am able to write a dramaturgical analysis. I read humbly and I will be a humble spectator."

The conditions in which Vláčil made films for four decades are of course inseparably connected with his work, but on its third level of reading, Gajdošík's book reconstructs in a focused and complex manner how much effort and exhausting work, regardless the pressure from the outside, was invested in each of Vláčil's projects, whether they were eventually finished or not.

The way the author outlined his book confirms the viability of the traditional scientific method, which is based on arranging the examined works by chronological order of their origins. The text is divided into five sections defined systematically by a given time stretch. The first two (shorter) parts deal with Vláčil's studies and his "coming of age" with respect to his next course. The second part, however, is already closed by a chapter entitled "Glass clouds" ("Skleněná oblaka") after a mid-length film made in 1958, when Vláčil was still working for the Czechoslovakia's Army Film studio (ČAF). In this film, Vláčil's inclination towards idiosyncratic poetic stylization of the film form was clearly manifested for the first time. From that point onward, all chapters are named after each of his projects (both finished and unrealized) as a rule. Step by step, it is possible to follow Vláčil's approach to his themes as well as the progressive formation of his specific directing style, put into work in its top form in his films of the late 1960s. Such a structure also allows to organize an unusual summa of source material and information in an orderly manner, in order to provide the convenience of easy orientation in the text, serving well both the reader and the future Vláčil scholars. In this respect, it is also worthwhile to notice and appreciate the two-hundred-page documentation at the end of the publication, as well as the body of annotations containing 2500 items, conveniently distributed as footnotes throughout the text.

Gajdošík, led by his resolution to set up a detailed account of "how the phenomenon that everybody knows in its final form was originally brought about",⁰³ takes a uniform approach in all his chapters: he captures the development of a film from the first drafts to the work on screenplays and its versions, if there were any, from the director's demands on finding suitable locations and cast, to his purely creative work with cinematographers, editors, designers, sound engineers, composers, etc., to the progress of day-to-day work during shooting (including difficulties caused by weather and production bumps in the road), while literally every director's step is documented with a searched out archive or a bibliographical fact. When possible, Gajdošík compares the information he got with his collected material, develops on it further, and gives it more precision. He confronts the creative intents, as described, with the forms they were given in the final works. The chapters are concluded with data about the distribution and audience reception for each of Vláčil's films, and most importantly with extensive summaries of critical response in both local and international press. Where there were certain later reinterpretations or attempts of reassessment, Gajdošík never omits to mention them, as it is the case of *The White Dove* (*Holubice*, 1960) or *Marketa Lazarova*. And if, on occasion, he finds the critical conclusions of the time to be incomplete or disputable, but still unrevised, he takes the task himself. This is mainly the case of *Smoke on the Potato Fields* (*Dým bramborové natě*, 1976), *Concert at the End of Summer* (*Koncert na konci léta*, 1979) and a few medium length films from the 1970s, for which he looked out relevant material to document his arguments with delicacy and knowledge, inviting the reader to see these films from

⁰³ „Přečíst Vláčila (Ondřej Koupil's interview with Petr Gajdošík about his unfinished book *František Vláčil: Život a dílo*)“. Revue Souvislosti 28, 2017, no. 4, p. 42–52.

a new perspective. His opinions are all the more convincing for being free of any hint of imposition, giving the reader mere incentives to go beyond commonplace assertions and give the film another thought. In other places in the book, he gets critical, quotes reviews with relevant objections, and makes his own thorough analyses of apparent artistic shortcomings and of the causes for the director's uneven performance. The oscillating quality of Vláčil's films starts with the normalization era, when he wore himself off when working on screenplays only for them to be repeatedly rejected, and when instead of making something of his own, he was forced to work on subjects that he struggled to connect with. And all that in a hostile climate, when the Barrandov studios treated him almost as an unwelcome filmmaker.

It was to be expected that his opus magnum, *Marketa Lazarova*, would take the most space (90 pages) in the book, as it should as a summary of Vláčil's refined stylistic methods, and a sovereign proof of the depth of his thought. It was less expectable that the same scope of pages would be dedicated to the chapter Interlude (Mezidobí, 1970–1975), concentrating on Vláčil's shorter films and vain attempts to turn into a film some of the surprising amount of subject matters he had been working on to varying extent (the list of these entries in Vláčil's filmography still goes on in the following chapter). The research the author carried out in the Barrandov archives, in the department of written archives of the National Film Archive (NFA) and in Vláčil's estate, as well as the copious spectrum of secondary literature (specialized studies, publications, reviews and interviews both in magazines and in diaries, memoirs, letters, etc.) and other sources, is very revealing, and so are his meticulous descriptions of Vláčil's works such as *The Legend of the Silver Fir* (*Pověst o stříbrné jedli*, 1973) *Sirius* (*Sirius*, 1974), or his poetic documentaries about Prague, all more or less missed out by the then critical reviews. Even there, Gajdošík meets the same high standards and provides complete, broadly based explanations and a body information, a great amount of which is not mentioned in any commonly available sources about Vláčil.

František Vláčil couldn't have got a more knowledgeable and conscientious author than Petr Gajdošík. An author who grew and cultivated his admiration for the Master for over three decades. The eight-year period dedicated to material collection and writing is mostly reminiscent of bygone scholars and their characteristic enthusiasm and devotion to their subject matters. While working on the monography, Gajdošík became an ideal combination of keen interest, defined by a certain emotional quality, and a rational distance of a historian and an archivist (the fields of his professional occupation), accustomed to classify and assess endlessly the material he collects and studies. On the one side, he delights in pedantic documentation of the least of details (like the fact that the protagonist's dog in *Shadows of a Hot Summer* [*Stíny horkého léta*, 1977] was Daisy, a dog of breeder Georg Pokrovský, and that Vláčil used her also in *Sirius*: see more in note 1757), as if to spice up the text, on the other, he curtails the laboriously gained material without regret, and reduces it to only a few particular details that he puts precisely in the required place. Gajdošík must have spent countless hours by preparing for interviews with contemporary witnesses and former Vláčil's co-workers, by travelling to meet them and subsequently, by processing of what he found out, but not once did he give in to the temptation to take from their testimonies anything more than a handful of facts that he considered essential. It is well illustrated by the fact that out of twenty-two name index mentions of Theodor Pištěk, the costume and artistic designer for many of Vláčil's films, only two refer to the author's interview with him, and those are footnotes (!). The annotations also contain a great number of short, profession-focused biographies of those who in any way participated in making Vláčil's films, regardless of their position.

Gajdošík's monography entitled *František Vláčil*, furnished with a simple subheading *Life and work*, dedicated to one of the most significant personalities of Czech cinema, stands out among other works of local filmographic literature as a monument beyond comparison.⁰⁴ Its structure is positivistic, but the author's research method is at the same time analytical and synthetizing; the completeness and complexity of collected facts allow to conclude that it is hardly possible to do better in this respect. It is certain that the book will be appreciated mainly by scholars and experts in Vláčil's work, but it can be without hesitation recommended to broad public interested in the filmmaker, as well. The author indeed succeeded to write his book in an absorbing manner, to use the above-mentioned summa of facts to enrich it and not encumber it, and to give his research a touch of an intriguing adventure and joy of learning.

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04 Thanks to the endeavour of its publisher Miloš Fryš, all published reviews of and comments on the book are available at <http://www.cameraobscura.wz.cz/vlacil/index.html>. Gajdošík himself appreciated Fryš's approach to himself and his work as follows: „Miloš as a publisher contributed greatly to the book. I really don't know who else would be willing to wait for years for an ever-expanding manuscript and to publish a substantially technical book of such magnitude. “