

Projekty

**Cinema for the State, Cinema by the State:
Czechoslovak Army Film, 1945–1994**

Précis

My dissertation explores cultural politics in communist Czechoslovakia through the history and productions of Československý armádní film (Czechoslovak Army Film; hereafter ČAF), a military propaganda- and training film studio, in the years 1945 to 1992. This investigation is, on one level, institutional: how did ČAF integrate the characteristics and demands of a military organization with those of a film studio? On another level, it is political: who made creative decisions in the unit, and how was this manifested in the subject, form, and ideology of Army films? Finally, it is aesthetic: I will examine ČAF's relationship to Czechoslovak and world film cultures, as well as the web of aesthetic influences that the unit's films reflect. In addition to illuminating the theoretical and practical dimensions of the relationship between cinema, the military, and the state, I hope that by reintegrating ČAF and its productions into the historiography of Czechoslovak cinema, my dissertation will represent an initial step toward a broader scholarly reconsideration of the locations and genesis of art cinema in communist East Central Europe.

Project Description

From its inauguration in 1918 to its dissolution in 1994, Czechoslovak (and, later, Czech) military film both trained soldiers and served as propaganda for civilian and military populations. In the post-1945 period with which my dissertation is concerned (that is, after the postwar nationalization of Czechoslovak film), the military's film unit – after its reorganization in 1952, formally renamed Czechoslovak Army Film – produced training films under the direction of the Army's Správa bojové přípravy (Administration for Battle Readiness), and propaganda films under the Hlavní politická správa (Main Political Administration). Additionally, the unit co-produced films with other cinematic institutions (among them, Československý státní film, Československá televize, and the film units of other Warsaw Pact militaries), and worked on a contract basis for state and military institutions such as the Výbor pro cestovní ruch (Tourism Board) and the Vojenský zeměpisný ústav (Military Geographic Institute).

While my dissertation will consider the extensive range of films made by ČAF in this period, I will focus, on one hand, on productions of the Main Political Administration, and, on the other hand, on the aesthetic and structural means by which ČAF engaged, politically and spatially, with state and regional borders. Within the productions of the Main Political Administration, I am particularly interested, first, in nonfiction films. Among the productions I will focus on are a series of documentaries produced by the unit in the late 1960s, including *LES* (FOREST, 1969), a short by director Ivan Balada that documents Jan Palach's funeral procession with lyrical black-and-white handheld camerawork. Many of these films were produced, in the words of ČAF's chief, "mimo plán" (outside of the yearly production plan), a concept that invites refle-

ction on the intersection of documentary discourses of contingency and spontaneity with those of the planned economy of socialism.

Second, I am interested in productions by individuals better known for their work in Czechoslovak art or popular film who, particularly in the years leading up to the unit's "normalization" in 1971, were employed by ČAF either as career members of the unit or as part of their required military service. In the 1950s, these include Vojtěch Jasný, Karel Kachyňa, and František Vlácil; in the 1960s, Jaromil Jireš, Jiří Menzel, Pavel Juráček and Jan Schmidt. Military work by these filmmakers displays many of the same aesthetic and thematic concerns that mark their non-military work, suggesting that we might conceive of ČAF not as a parallel institution to Czechoslovak art cinema, but in fact as intimately intertwined with it. Furthermore, the production histories of some of the best-known ČAF productions (for instance, *KONEC SRPNA V HOTELU OZON* /THE END OF AUGUST AT THE HOTEL OZONE, dir. Jan Schmidt, 1967/; see footnote) indicate that routine institutional and pragmatic concerns were central to the production of art cinema, which is typically perceived as belonging to the realm of the non-routine and non-institutional.¹⁾

If ČAF offers a novel perspective on the intertwining of art and military film cultures in communist Czechoslovakia, it also presents a productive framework through which to examine communist-era East Central European cinema's geopolitical dimensions; the ways in which films, their exhibition and distribution, helped define and reinforce state and regional borders. Throughout its history (dating to before the communist period), Czechoslovak military film was engaged, both literally and rhetorically, in the project of mapping the boundaries of the state, as well as of the region and ideological community in which it was situated. In the postwar period, the former, literal notion of mapping is visible in films such as those in the *Vojenská geografie* (Military Geography) cycle. Rhetorical approaches to mapping the state, conversely, are at work in films such as Vladimír Sís's *MODRÝ DEN* (BLUE DAY, 1953), which employs aerial photography as a means of envisioning the landscape of post-1948 Czechoslovakia, and in Vojtěch Jasný and Karel Kachyňa's *LIDÉ JEDNOHO SRDCE* (PEOPLE OF ONE HEART, 1953), which figures a cultural exchange between the Chinese and Czechoslovak armies as a means of depicting the expanding global "space" of communism in the early 1950s. If films such as these envisioned or defined the borders and location of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, institutional aspects of ČAF and its productions – such as film exchanges, co-productions, and festivals between Warsaw Pact and other socialist militaries – performed similar tasks. Here, my dissertation will link film distribution and spectatorship to ideas of defense by arguing that the common viewing of films within defense alliances was intended to reinforce regional military objectives and cultures.

The chapters of my dissertation will roughly follow the chronological and conceptual axes outlined above. Chapter One will establish the theoretical groundwork for my discussion of cinema, the state, and the military, and outline the pre-1945 history of Czechoslovak military film. Chapter Two will extend this discussion of geopolitics by exploring shifting concepts of the state and the region in Army films of the early 1950s, a period during which, I will argue, military films attempted to conceptually and physically "construct" Czechoslovakia as communist;

1) As director Jan Schmidt describes it in an interview with Radovan Holub, despite the fact that its script was criticized by the Ministerstvo národní obrany (Ministry of National Defense), the Army produced the film simply to prevent Jan Procházka's creative team at Barrandov, who had made a counter-offer of production, from doing so. Furthermore, the fact that the film was a military production permitted the filmmakers to shoot in abandoned border zones, heightening its spare aesthetic and sense of desolation. (Holub, Radovan, "An Interview with Director Jan Schmidt," trans. Miloš Stehlík, liner notes for Facets DVD release.)

and the 1970s and 1980s, when, in the wake of 1968, the reinforcement of the border and of the Warsaw Pact region grew in significance. Chapter Three will address the tension between concepts of “planning” and documentary discourses in Army non-fiction productions, primarily in the 1960s (see above). Chapter Four will examine ČAF’s communist period as a whole and attempt to re-historicize postwar Czechoslovak cinema from the perspective of the state or institutional cinema that the unit’s productions represent.

Relationship to the Field

While “official” cinema of East Central Europe has, in recent years, featured prominently in documentary films addressing the history of communism (often as unattributed “found” footage; for instance, in Dušan Hanák’s *PAPIEROVÉ HLAVY* (PAPER HEADS) and Peter Kerekes’s *POMOCNÍCI* (HELPERS) /Slovakia, 1995 and 2004, respectively/), the topic has less frequently been explored in depth by film scholars. My project is nevertheless informed by recent scholarship addressing other forms of cultural production in late socialism. Among others, historian Paulina Bren’s study of television in “normalized” Czechoslovakia is particularly important to my argument that official cultural productions under state socialism were often the result of a complex negotiation of political, artistic, and pragmatic influences.²⁾ My work is also in dialogue with recent scholarship on East Central European cinemas – particularly work by Dina Iordanova and Aniko Imre – that shifts the field’s previous focus on the nation to an interrogation of the ways in which cinema functioned (and continues to function) as a regional system.³⁾

Scholarship on the relationship between cinema and the state is also central to this project’s concerns. In her *Visions of a New Land: Soviet Film from the Revolution to the Second World War*, for instance, Emma Widdis addresses the spatial politics of cinema in early Soviet Russia, with an emphasis on the mutual dependency of physical and ideological mapping in state-building.⁴⁾ Although it is concerned with contemporary geopolitics, Philip Rosen’s theoretical consideration of the cinema and the state, “Border Times and Geopolitical Frames,” acknowledges the centrality of violence to the existence and enforcement of state borders and thereby troubles the notion of media as, effectively, “borderless.”⁵⁾ Violence is, of course, an important aspect of scholarship on the military and cinema, of which perhaps the best-known example is Paul Virilio’s *War and Cinema*.⁶⁾ While Virilio’s study, which emphasizes the dovetailing of military and cinematic discourses of perception and vision, is largely focused on cinema’s role in

2) Paulina Bren, “Envisioning a ‘Socialist Way of Life:’ Ideology and Contradiction in Czechoslovakia, 1969–1989.” In: *A Decade of Transformation: IWM Junior Visiting Fellows Conferences, Vol. 8* (Vienna 1999) and *Closely Watched Screens: Ideology and Everyday Life in Czechoslovakia after the Prague Spring, 1968–1989*. Diss., New York Univ., 2002.

3) Aniko Imre (ed.), *East European Cinemas*. New York : Routledge 2005; Dina Iordanova, *Cinema of the Other Europe: The Industry and Artistry of East Central European Film*. New York : Wallflower 2003. See also Peter Hames (ed.), *The Cinema of Central Europe*. New York : Wallflower 2004; Katie Trumppener, “DEFA: Moving Germany into Eastern Europe.” In: Barton Byg and Betheny Moore (eds.), *Moving Images of East Germany: Past and Future of DEFA Film*. Harry and Helen Gray Humanities Program Ser. 12. (Washington DC: American Institute for Contemporary German Studies and Johns Hopkins UP), pp. 85–104.

4) Emma Widdis, *Visions of a New Land: Soviet Film from the Revolution to the Second World War*. New Haven : Yale University Press 2003.

5) Philip Rosen, Border Times and Geopolitical Frames. *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 15, 2006, No. 2 (Fall), pp. 2–19.

6) Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema*. New York : Verso 1989.

battle, my dissertation aims to explore the ways in which these discourses interact in times of peace, during which defensive tactics and the reinforcement of the border are central to military operations.

Sources and Research

At the core of my research, which I began in September of 2007 with the support of a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad fellowship, is formal analysis of Army productions held at the Národní filmový archiv (National Film Archive) and at the archive of ČAF at AVIS (Agentura vojenských informací a služeb; the Agency for Military Information and Services) and analysis of documents pertaining to ČAF and the Main Political Administration at the Vojenský ústřední archiv (Central Military Archive) in Prague. By examining films alongside documents such as official letters, reports, organizational statements, and scripts, I intend to interrogate the relationship between ČAF's institutional structure and the aesthetics of the films it produced. I will supplement this with research into the politics of cinema in communist Czechoslovakia more broadly at, first, the Národní archiv (National Archives) in Prague, and, should the files become available, in the archive of Czechoslovak State Film at the National Film Archive. Interviews with filmmakers who served in the unit as both career officers and as part of their military service will help illustrate conscripts' everyday experience within ČAF and the possibilities for personal expression in the organization. Finally, collections of popular and art films at FAMU and the National Film Archive will help broaden my understanding of the art and popular cinema culture that surrounded ČAF and its productions.

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