Ivan Klimeš

National Cinema in a Transnational Context

A Central European Experience

In tackling the questions of transnationality in relation to the film industry, the Central and Central-East European context offers a model pattern: it virtually swarms with diverse national film industries, some hatched as a result of natural processes and others less so, with a dense and intricate web of interactions having evolved there in different parts of the 20th century — as well as involving nations whose political borders have kept continuously changing (including some which have even ceased to exist at different points of time). On the whole, what we have here is a dynamic space with a powerful dramatic charge, one that is ever fickle, and therefore provides an ideal ground for those wishing to use this perennially fluid environment when contemplating the concept of "national cinema", focusing on its overlap with the phenomenon of transnationality.

While we tend to use the term "national cinema" with total ease, (indeed even on a day-to-day basis, handling it as though it were free from any trace of semantic ambiguity), it is in fact a concept whose content happens to be far from stabilized, as well as one which, evidently, entails different internal accents and external outlines in different parts of the world. When speaking of "national cinemas", we usually have in mind cinematic activities carried out in other countries — France, Italy, Sweden, Brazil, and so on. But then, if and when we shift our focus onto, say, our home territory in its historical dimension, i.e., a context for which we have developed a higher degree of understanding and discrimination, we instantly come to realize that the criteria based on territorial boundaries are insufficient, that they cease to work, that when projected back into the past they fail to capture certain relevant features of the local film scene. Naturally enough, the same problem will arise when we turn to cinemas of many other multiethnic nations (such as Austria-Hungary, the former Soviet Union, the former Yugoslavia, or Spain), though by no means all of them (perhaps most transparently, this rule does not apply to the US or Canada). Consequently, raising the point with the maximum degree of schematicism, one would ask, "What exactly is it that defines a national cinema?" Is it a state, or a nation in the ethnic sense of the word? What "volume" of cinematic activities grouped under one roof would it be supposed to involve? And moreover, what would determine that volume, in

terms of setting its boundaries, and contrariwise, what would reach beyond its limits? For its part, American cinema was, in its seminal stages, propped up by economic immigrants coming mostly from Eastern Europe, whereas the wave of new Europeans arriving in Hollywood during the 1920s were enrolled by Hollywood talent-scouts who criss-crossed Europe in search of acquisitions — and in the 1930s followed a new influx of Jewish asylum-seekers from Germany. Viewing this in an outline, we observe a state of tension between the stability of a national environment on the one hand, and its fluidity induced by a permanent process of migration — either natural, stimulated by search for a brave new world offering greater job opportunities, or enforced by circumstances, political or economic, of a given historical moment — on the other.

Let's first look at the concept of "national cinema", viewing it from the angle of what determines its borders, and thereby also what defines it. There are many good reasons to wish for the answer to be the state. After all, the state's inclusion in the very concept of "national cinema" is unquestionable, and its involvement in national cinema is indeed formative. It is the state which determines the legal framework of developments in the field in a given locality, which shapes the industrial environment — either in a positive sense, or negatively (by way of either stimulation, or restriction, respectively). States have used, and continue to use censorship with a view to regulating film distribution policies, and in more than a few cases also regulating the rates of representation of products of individual foreign countries on their home markets, as well as having a final say in determining the actual form in which a given film can be shown to their "national" audiences. States have used the medium of film in the interests of their own promotion on the international scene, which greatly contributes to overlaps between the principles of political statehood and ethnic nationality for non-domestic audiences. Under totalitarian regimes, the state decided about who would be authorized to work in the medium and under what conditions, as well as about what was or was not allowed to be turned to film. In several European countries, their governments even enforced state-monopoly policies, for decades usurping ownership of the film industry for themselves. Beyond that, it is of course also self-evident that each state is to some extent a "climatically" self-enclosed environment whose inhabitants share with greater than standard intensity and heightened perceptiveness their local cinematic developments in all their forms, starting from local film production and distribution offer, to the local star system, down to the level of the influential reflection of all this in the local media. Thus the cohesive factors controlled by the state are indeed many, and they carry essential import.

All that said, any attempt at linking a national cinema production in an orthodox way with the state machine which "hosts" it, proves to be difficult, if not in fact downright impossible. Let's just look at the hauntingly unstable map of 20th century Central and Eastern Europe, where so many states have experienced multiple and radical shifts of their national borders. In particular, if one accepts the undoubtedly-justified modern-day criterion of incorporating within the concept of "national cinema" film audiences as well, the immediate result will be an equation where "national cinema = cinema of a given state", in all its intractability and lack of general validity. To be sure, in terms of history it would imply a process where, say, Czech cinema before 1918 would be transformed to Austrian or Austro-Hungarian before 1918, to Czechoslovak between 1918 and 1938, to Czecho-Slovak

during the second republic, to Bohemian-Moravian under the Nazi protectorate, and back to Czechoslovak until 1992; and only starting from the year 1993 — with the *de facto* inception of the national state named the Czech Republic — would one be able to heave a sigh of relief and stop wondering about the identity of "Czech cinema" (the question remains as to how long this situation is going to last). Of course, the Poles would hardly fare better, as the inception of their cinema, too, would be set only at the point of the restoration of Polish statehood by the Treaty of Trianon in 1920—that is, a quarter-century after the discovery of cinematography and two decades into a bustling film life on the territory of the former and future Polish state. After all, the Polish example is particularly eloquent, as the local cinematic scene developed most dynamically in Warsaw, which was then still annexed to Russia. And accordingly, the Warsaw film production of the time figures in filmographic catalogues dating from the Soviet times. Other potential centres of the film industry began to crop up in Poznań (after the second partition of Poland in 1793 belonging to Prussia, and after the unification of Germany in 1871 part of the German Empire), Kraków (after the third partition of Poland in 1795 taken by Austria, and after the disintegration of Austria-Hungary in 1918 part of the renewed Poland), as well as in Łódź (after the partitions of Poland annexed to Russia), and also in Lwów (after the first partition of Poland in 1772 part of Austria, after the disintegration of Austria-Hungary part of Ukraine and Soviet Russia, and since 1991 part of the new independent Ukrainian state). Once it was integrated into the Soviet Russia with its centrally governed film industry, Lwów's own domestic industry ceased to further develop its status as a centre of cinematic production, as Ukraine's film industry came to be concentrated in Kiev.[1)]

The above hyperbole makes it obvious that the concept of "national cinema" would seem to relate to:

1) A territorially stable environment (i.e., one sharing not only the same centres of film industry but for instance also a continual community of regional audience),
2) A territory which may yet need not necessarily be defined solely by the framework of state borders existing at a given time.

Consequently then, there must be yet another factor or principle at play here besides the institution of the state, which makes it necessary to take a closer look at the possible meaning of the attribute "national" in the compound notion "national cinema".

Trying to relate cinema, as a comprehensive entity comprising apart from an institutional base and a production/distribution network also, (for instance, a relatively stable reception environment), to a "nation," one ought to attempt a more specific definition thereof. In truth, it would be really hard to find another similarly widely used concept which would have accumulated, historically as well as regionally, so many generic variations of context. In the light of the current discourse in the field of historical studies, our dream of a semantic unification of the concept of "national cinema" appears to be quite fatally illu-

1) Małgorzata Hendrykowska, *Śladami tamtych cieni. Film w kulturze polskiej przełomu stuleci 1895–1914* (Poznań: Oficyna Wydawnicza Book Service, 1993); Zbygniew Wyszyński, *Filmowy Kraków 1876–1991* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1975). (Incidentally, neither of these authors offers a detailed treatment of the issue of partitions of Poland between Germany, Austria and Russia).

sory. For, to be sure, this concept retains its consistency and transparency only when applied to countries where the principles of nationhood and statehood are interchangeable, i.e., to established state (political) nations such as the US, UK, France, Italy and others where the respective nations have been historically shaped along the lines of the principle of citizenship — which by no means implies an automatic disqualification of other aspects — for instance that of language. On the other hand, in countries inhabited by nations formed along the lines of the ethnic and language principle (sometimes also referred to as "cultural" nations), "national cinema" often happens to be separated to some extent from the state institution, in the sense of existing within yet another framework apart from that of the state. This specific framework is determined by the nature of the local collective identity and its status in the modern-age historical development of the given locality. The problem we are dealing here with is that of how to approach the concept of "national cinema" without diminishing our perceptiveness vis-a-vis those parallel frameworks, to prevent the opening of an unbridgeable gap between a view from the outside and a view from the inside.

At the time of mounting waves of national movements in the 19th century emerged the belief that every nation had the right to their own state. "Every nation is called upon, and therefore entitled, to establish a state... As many are the nations that make up humanity, so many states should make up the world. Each nation should be assigned a state. Each state should assume a national character." This was the idea, formulated by the Heidelberg professor of state and international law, Johann Caspar Blutschli (1808–1880).[2] This is a concept which, understandably enough, failed to assert itself as a generally valid principle, and nor it ever could. The national states which came into existence in the aftermath of the First World War were not ethnically uniform entities, and consequently once again did not make it possible to draw a simple equation between the principles of statehood and nationhood. In countries inhabited by more than one language-related ethnic nations, attempts were made to substitute the ethnic and linguistic national identity by a state identity. Thus for instance, in the multiethnic Danube monarchy, which had ultimately failed to politically withstand that process of the making of modern-time nations, the 19th century witnessed aspirations to face up to these national movements by the enforcement of a collective identity based on the principle of the Austrian, or Austro-Hungarian state, that is, by superimposing over the said national movements the concept of an Austrian state nation — but these endeavors were abortive. Collective identity cannot be dictated from above, it cannot be the result of an official campaign; rather, it takes shape in the course of long-term historical processes. Therefore, the Emperor Francis Joseph I, in announcing to the population of his empire, after the Sarajevo assassination of the successor to the throne, the country's entry into war with Serbia, which would spill over into the first worldwide

2) Hagen Schulze, *Stát a národ v evropských dějinách* (Praha: Argo, 2003), pp. 211–212. For more on the issue of national movements, e.g.: Miroslav Hroch, *V národním zájmu. Požadavky a cíle evropských národních hnutí devatenáctého století ve srovnávací perspektivě* (Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 1999); Arnošt Gellner, *Národy a nacionalismus* (Praha: Hříbal, 1993); Ernest Gellner, *Nacionalismus* (Brno: CDK, 2003); Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Národy a nacionalismus od roku 1780. Program, mýtus, realita* (Brno: CDK, 2000); Miloš Řezník, *Formování moderního národa: (evropské „dlouhé" 19. století)* (Praha: Triton, 2003); Miroslav Hroch (ed.), *Pohledy na národ a nacionalismus. Čítanka textů* (Praha: Sociologické nakladatelství, 2003).

conflagration, opened his speech with the address, "To my peoples!" (An meine Völker!), and in his well-known manifesto wished to "spare my peoples from harrowing sacrifices and burdens of war."[3]

Not even in the Czechoslovak Republic did the established linguistic pattern attest to any sort of a spontaneous convergence between the Czech and Czechoslovak principles, notwithstanding a situation where they witness their status having suddenly shifted from that of an ethnic minority to that of a majority installed in power, beyond which they also further consolidated their status with the use of a political thesis that could hardly have been undersigned by a serious historian, namely that stipulating the existence of a Czechoslovak nation comprised of two tribes, the Czechs and the Slovaks. The ethnic-linguistic-cultural grounding for the nation was still enhanced with the obtainment of independence in 1918, and from then on, various fields of discourse, including that related to cinema, came to witness a long-lasting oscillation between the use of the two attributes (Czech, and Czechoslovak), which would be employed more or less arbitrarily. From the very inception of the existence of the Czechoslovak state, all talk was primarily about "Czech cinema," with references to "Czechoslovak cinema" being less common in specialized literature (where the term was largely relegated to texts dealing with economic aspects of the film industry), or in more formal/official contexts, as even the words alone — Czechoslovakia, Czechoslovak — were actually purpose-made linguistic neologisms with no support in previous cultural tradition.[4] Similarly, cultural circles in Slovakia in the 1930s engaged in a debate on the need of a "Slovak cinema" (not "Czechoslovak"). These circumstances on the plane of language clearly attest to the local authentic and spontaneous ethno-linguistic approach to the notion of national cinema, which was understood quite unequivocally as part of the national culture of each individual ethnic group. In short, the culturally derived concept of national cinema proved more relevant than the platform embodied by the institution of the state, desired though the latter may have been.

Given this, in dealing with the concept of "national cinema" we should give up all unifying ambitions, and rather acknowledge that its status happens to be very much like that of the concept of "nation" itself: that is, it takes on different connotations in different times and different parts of the world. This, in turn, also implies that there simply must exist several types of national cinemas derived from historically different types of relationship be-

3) "To my peoples! It has been my most ardent wish to be able to devote the years of life which, by the grace of God, are yet given to me, to the workings of peace, and to spare my peoples from the harrowing sacrifices and burdens of war [...] I count upon my peoples who have even in the most tempestuous of times always remained united and loyal, gathering together around my throne, ever willing to offer the heaviest sacrifices for the sake of the honour, greatness, and power of the fatherland." *Sborník dokumentů k vnitřnímu vývoji v českých zemích za 1. světové války 1914–1918. Svazek 1. Rok 1914* (Praha: Státní ústřední archiv, 1993), doc. no. 6, pp. 29–30. (Manifesto of the Emperor Francis Joseph to the peoples of Austria-Hungary, concerning the declaration of war to Serbia, 28 July, 1914). The form of address in this case related to both parts of the Austro-Hungarian commonwealth, as it concerned the armed forces. Austria-Hungary as a whole had only a common foreign policy, currency, and the military, with all other affairs (including e.g. education, as well as indeed, the film industry) were administered separately by Austria (Cisleithania), and Hungary (Transleithania).

4) A magazine published by the film distributors association launched in December 1918 under the masthead *Československý film* (Czechoslovak Film), in 1921 switching to the laconic *Film*.

tween nation and state, or different variants of collective identity. Thus we can distinguish between at least two basic types of national cinemas, namely:

a) state-national cinema; and
b) ethno-linguistic national cinema.

Exemplifying the former type, i.e. cinema pertinent to state-nations, are the national film industries of the United States, France, Britain and the like, that is, states where owing to a number of various factors (including: early collapse of the estates system, assertion of principles of civic equality and sovereign execution of power by the civic community, faster pace of social modernization, etc.),[5] the collective identity was shaped along the lines of the civic principle. Characteristic examples falling within the latter bracket can be found for instance in Central, Southeastern and Eastern Europe, regions comprised of different ethnic minorities settled in different state entities without enjoying access to execution of state power there, yet, each nurturing its own ambition to statehood as the ultimate ideal and political goal, a pursuit in which they eventually prevailed.

Let's illustrate the distinction between these two types of nations — and national cinemas — with the examples of the United States, and Slovakia. For its part, the US is, (if viewed from the perspective of the ruling elites), a country formed by immigration, a case therefore where the state was indeed the sole conceivable platform for the shaping of some sort of collective identity (following the social disqualification of the heterogeneous community of the Native American population). The American "melting pot" has therefore fundamentally differed from the "melting pots" of Central, Eastern or Southeastern Europe, which witnessed throughout the 20th century (and still not many years ago in the Balkans or in the Baltic countries) processes involving the constitution or re-constitution of national states structured along linguistic and ethnic lines. To be sure, the resonance in cinema of the specific historical forces, which shaped American society has been thoroughly essential. The American film industry has always been exceptionally open and forthcoming to the influx of immigrants. Even more than that in fact — it has virtually sustained by them, and continues to do so. After all, it is they who made Hollywood.

On the other hand, national film industries built along ethnic and linguistic lines are usually more insular, more explicitly nation-oriented and anti-cosmopolitan, relating to domestic film production as to a visiting card of the cultural standard attained by a given ethno-linguistic nation. Those countries' film industries are in the hands of the individual dominant ethnic groups, which regard their development or constitution as both a cultural and a political task. This can be very convincingly documented by the case of Slovakia. At the time of the first republic, the Czechoslovak film industry was concentrated in the Czech lands, whereas Slovakia, having only a sparse network of cinemas, faced much more difficult conditions in its pursuit of an autonomous film production. Although a number of local film distributors did exist — albeit mostly short-lived and often operating as branches of Czech companies — in Slovakia in the 1920s and 30s,[6] the actual film

5) M. Řezník, *Formování moderního národa: (evropské „dlouhé" 19. století)*, pp. 83–86.

6) Václav Macek and Jelena Paštéková, *Dejiny slovenského filmu.* (Martin: Osveta, 1997,), p. 38. In 1923, Slovak authorities recorded the existence in Slovakia of eight local distributors. Ibid, p. 67.

production, lacking both even rudimentary technical infrastructure and skilled personnel (let alone capital) remained limited to one-off projects which added virtually nothing to the process of establishing a film industry in the region until the late 1930s. Notwithstanding that, by the 1930s, the absence of a "Slovak cinema" was already reflected as an outstanding issue; in other words, it was taken for granted that an emancipated nation aspiring to statehood ought to have its own film production, and that unless the Slovak "film circles" were not in a position to achieve that goal by standard business procedures, the task was to be shouldered by the national state government. There, the Czechoslovak state was ruled out as the general provisions enforced within it were set equally for all parties, whereas the Slovak part was clearly in the need of more than a standard infusion. A solution came into view during the second republic, after Slovakia´s declaration of autonomy. In late 1938 the Slovak government took a crucial step (in the fields of cinema licensing and film censorship) whereby Slovakia emancipated itself from the Czech lands, and shortly after its ensuing establishment, the independent Slovak state took care of the rest: as early as June 1939, the Slovak government charged the Ministry of the Economy with setting up a joint-stock company with a 51 percent share of state ownership. This company, which itself produced the Slovak film newsreel, was then granted by the government a monopoly position on the film distribution, import and export market.[7] At that point, the newly established national state took the further development of what was by then already a regular domestic film industry — the Slovak cinema — under its aegis, thereby becoming the patron of a national (in the ethno-linguistic sense of the term) cinema which would subsequently continue to develop autonomously — on all levels, including the institutional one — even after the reconstitution of Czechoslovakia.

What such nationalist, ethnically based enclosure of the domestic film culture opened up was notably a migration of labor force, as well as the audience's fresh acquaintance with international productions, which contributed significantly to cultural interaction, and influenced the aesthetic ideal and social customs of the time. There, one should perhaps cite two examples of a similar process drawn from the Czech context: namely, a boom of the boy-scouts movement and its parallel, alternative offshoot known locally as "tramping", which has been going on ever since the 1910s to this day, inspired by the civilization of the American West and more often than not introduced through the consumption of pulp fiction and American films; plus, an overwhelming triumph of jazz (from the 1930s onwards) and rock (since the 1960s, of Anglo-Saxon provenance) music, entailing a fatal impact on the Czech pop-music scene. Elsewhere, one might as well bring up an example from Britain, concerning a different aspect: In the mid-1920s, the British government noted that the influx of American films to Britain and the former British colonies resulted in a shift in the local populations' patterns of consumption, leading to a marked drop in the sales of British products. This led to the adoption of the film act of 1927, regulating the imports of American films to Britain.

Likewise falling within the category of activities opening up a national context in the domain of cinema were various forms of co-production which began to develop in Czech-

7) See Law No. 17 of January 18, 1940. Jiří Havelka, *Filmové hospodářství v zemích českých a na Slovensku 1939 až 1945* (Praha: Čs. filmové nakladatelství, 1946), p. 150.

oslovakia after the introduction of talking pictures, involving the production of foreign-language versions of Czech films, and which took in most particularly partners from Germany, and to a lesser extent, Austria. Beyond that, the Czech scene produced a generation of internationally respected film-makers who also established themselves outside the country, mostly in Germany and Austria (as did, for example, film director Karel Anton who came from a Prague Czech-German family, or actress Anna Ondráková who, as Anny Ondra, worked her way up to become one of the Weimar Republic's top film stars). Another variant of this migratory trend involved the taking up of commissions from different European countries, exemplified most eloquently by the likes of film-maker Karel Lamač, major star of the Third Reich German cinema Lída Baarová, or cameramen including Václav Vích or Otto Heller, both protagonists of what was known as the Czech school of film photography. The Czech film press regularly covered their international exploits, and more than a few of their films featured in the local distribution networks.

In contrast, only a handful of individuals left this country for Hollywood, most of whom failed to score a breakthrough there. The one exception, symptomatic, albeit known only to specialists, was Antonín Vaverka. An operetta singer and stage actor with an extensive career covering the whole Central and Southern Europe to his credit, after the collapse of Austria Hungary, at 52 years of age, he decided to set sail and try his luck in America. And he did make it: he managed to get noticed in Hollywood, and what more, the Czechoslovak actor was handpicked by the Austrian director Erich von Stroheim for the part of the Austrian Emperor Francis Joseph I, in the film MERRY-GO-ROUND (premiered in 1923). He proved such a success that Universal made him an offer of a permanent contract.[8] The cases of such escapes and contacts were more than a few, though what remains relevant is the actual extent of their influence on the public opinion of the then nationally aroused society.

Thus, with national film industries constituted along linguistic and ethnic lines, one can clearly observe the setting of a different central axis — namely, one that does not rely on a political central pivot but rather on a cultural one, and that is not contingent primarily on the institution of state, but rather on the phenomenon of a national/ethnic community. This naturally entails various complications pertinent notably to the cinematic activities of ethnic minorities, and to the cultural integration thereof into the context of the national cinema of the dominant ethnic group. The reason for this is simple: owing to their historical rivalries, neither of the parties involved is seriously interested in achieving such integration. The purity of ethnic roots proves to be a more relevant factor, as in multiethnic states individual nations defined along linguistic and ethnic lines usually tend to set themselves in opposition to one another with a view to preserving their specific identities. Thus the Slovaks did not intend to see their future film production being labeled either Czech or Czechoslovak, just as the Czechs in their turn had previously, in Austria-Hungary, not conceived of their own nascent production as being Austrian. After all, the Viennese film circles then paid no heed at all to the phenomenon of Czech films whose impact was more often than not geographically limited to Prague. Accordingly, regular end-of-

8) Antonín Vaverka's unpublished memoir, *Mé vzpomínky od zlaté Prahy po americké hvězdy*, written in the 1930s, is reposited in manuscript form in the National Film Archive in Prague.

the-year press summaries covering the Austrian film production would lack any mention of Czech films, even though for instance the Prague company ASUM did its utmost, including regular and costly advertising campaigns, in quest of an inroad onto the Viennese market (it even kept its appointed business agent there, one Paul Österreicher), so in fact Vienna was not entirely ignorant of goings-on in the provinces; it only just let the Czech film production lie behind the gates of Austrian cinema — the film industry of the dominant ethnic group.

For anyone wishing to exemplify the potential entanglements between and within various ethnically and linguistically determined national cinemas, the situation in the Czech lands indeed represent a genuine hot spot to focus on. Their three-million-strong ethnic German minority was naturally by no means passive as regarded cinematic activity. In the times of the Habsburg monarchy, it was the German parts of northern Bohemia that witnessed the most vigorous development of film enterprise on an industrial scale, primarily in the sphere of film distribution with a broader Central European perspective. For instance, *Wolframfilm*, a firm owned by film distributor Paul Wolfram, from Ústí nad Labem (Ger. Aussig), was — as documented by its ongoing massive advertising campaign in the Viennese film press — was continually present on the Viennese market, apart from which it also opened a branch office in Dresden. Elsewhere, in the person of Ernst Hollmann, a cinema proprietor from Jablonec nad Nisou (Gablonz), the "Section Böhmen" had a capable organizer enjoying considerable respect even in the Viennese cinematic circles. He could have even become president of the Imperial Association of Cinema Proprietors in Austria, had he not turned the offer down for purely practical reasons. For his part, the founder of the first permanent cinema in Brno, Dominik Morgenstern, began to publish in 1907 the magazine *Anzeiger für die gesamte Kinematographen-Industrie.* Along with the Düsseldorf *Kinematograph*, the Berlin *Die Lichtbild-Bühne*, and the Vienna *Kinematographische Rundschau*, it ranks among the earliest German-language film magazines. The legendary representative of the Viennese film industry, Count Alexander Kolowrat, launched his production under the trademark Sascha-Filmfabrik, on his estate at Přimda. When, in 1912, he resettled to Vienna, a group of his employees split away from Sascha-Filmfabrik to pursue their own film production in Liberec (Ger. Reichenberg).

The collapse of the Habsburg empire and the ensuing foundation of the Czechoslovak state did little in terms of paralyzing the development of the Bohemian German film industry (i.e., the film industry managed by ethnic Germans settled in the country), perhaps apart from the fact that it soon ceased to produce feature films, whereas the production of other types of films continued unabated. The country´s ethnic Germans then ran several hundred cinema houses in Czechoslovakia, as well as being active in the field of distribution. As early as 1921 they established their own film exchange in Ústí nad Labem, published several film magazines, and conducted a bustling community life. From the outset, they were incomparably more dynamic in their cinematic activities than Slovaks. And yet, to this day Czech film historiography has not mustered the grit to take a close look at this sum of activities — which in its entirety doubtless does meet the requisites posed on the content of the general concept of "cinematography" — as at a specific category of national cinema, namely, that of the *deutschböhmisches Kino.* Nor, for that matter, have Czech film historians even posed themselves the question of doing so. In the existing portrayal of the

development of cinema in the Czech lands, the phenomenon of Bohemian German cinema is still left drifting, as though it were lacking identity, viewed as being somehow strangely diluted in the Czech element, while the same historians have readily acknowledged an autonomous national status for Slovak cinema from its very inception. What an imbalance of vision!

After the declaration of independent Czechoslovakia in 1918, the local Germans found themselves living in a new state, and in the position of a minority, which was to them a thoroughly new experience — and the Czechs certainly did not prove excessively willing to make that experience easier for them. To be sure, Czech and Slovak politicians decided to conceive Czechoslovakia along the lines of a national state, however untenable this construction was ultimately proven to be in the long run, a policy whose principal vehicle enforced towards the minorities came to be language, or more specifically, the "Czechoslovak" language decreed by the Language Act as the official state means of communication assigned invariable priority over all other languages. In the practical world of cinema operations, this brought German cinemas within the country's border regions into difficult situations, as the authorities used their prerogatives of power and insisted that the law should be duly applied to film projections as well. As a result of this, Sudeten German cinema operators introduced a practice resembling a bizarre anticipation of the multi-screen system (locally known as *polyekran*), where the main screen, showing a film with German captions, was supplemented by another, smaller one, with a parallel showing of the same film with captions in the official state language. The whole thing was in fact totally needless, since ethnic Czechs living in the Sudeten regions were fluent German speakers, and were moreover offered by the German cinema proprietors, naturally eager to do good business, special Czech-language-only projections. In Slovakia, the system even produced a class of smart alecks among cinema owners who zealously followed the rules down to the last letter, by first projecting only the whole set of captions in the official state language (i.e., literally in the first place), and then proceeded by letting the film run uninterrupted, with foreign-language captions.[9] Of course, the whole policy had nothing to do with removing the language barrier; rather, it was meant to demonstrate the authority of the national state in a transnational environment.[10]

In the case of cinema / cinemas in the Czech lands, therefore, what we see is a peculiar mixture of the language-ethnic model with the land-based model, even though definitely no parallel can be drawn here with the phenomenon of land patriotism. The ambiguous status of the Bohemian German cinema is likewise evident from the existence of films with errant identity, i.e. ones which no one seems to be claiming to be their own. These include among others a series of film comedies featuring the character of Uncle Kokl (Onkel Kokl-Serie, or alternatively, Onkel Cocl-Serie), which was launched in 1912 by the company Sascha-Filmfabrik. However, the crew engaged in its shooting soon went their own way, moving to Liberec (Reichenberg) where they carried on making the series under the brand name Reichenberger Filmwerkstätte. In the most recent filmographic title is-

9) Jiří Hora, *Filmové právo* (Praha: Právnické knihkupectví a nakladatelství V. Linhart, 1937), p. 233.

10) Ivan Klimeš, 'Kinematografie a jazyková politika meziválečného Československa,' in Ivan Klimeš and Jan Wiendl (eds.), *Kultura a totalita I. Národ* (Praha: Filozofická fakulta UK, 2013), (in print).

sued by the National Film Archives, *Český hraný film I, 1898–1918* (1995), these films are omitted. They proved no less of a riddle to our Austrian colleagues from Filmarchiv Austria who conducted filmographic research covering the period of Austrian cinema until 1918, albeit limited to the territory of postwar Austria, wherefore these particular films stayed out of their scholarly focus as well.[11)]

Another special case is represented by Protectorate-era films from the production of Prag-Film. They, too, are missing from the catalogue, *Český hraný film II, 1930–1945* (1998), where they would have deserved at least a separate section. Indeed, the Czech scene has from the beginning largely ignored this production, keeping it out of its focus as an alien body, for decades on end reflecting it without any hesitation as Greater German production with which the Czech Protectorate-era film-making (not mentioning participation by individual film directors, cameramen, actors, composers, sound engineers, editors, and Barrandov studios´ technical crews!) had nothing in common. The untiring and thorough documenter of the economics of cinema, Jiří Havelka, in his postwar volume devoted to the years 1939–1945, did not make a single mention about Prag-Film:

> *Greater German Production.* From 1939, when all our studios gradually came into the hands of the Germans, a considerable number of films were produced here which, however, cannot be counted as domestic production.[12)]

Consequently, he amalgamated without distinction the Prag-Film production with that of Greater German companies turned out in Prague studios, within the same brackets (arriving at the number of 80). There, the ethno-linguistic criterion ruled supreme. However, Havelka's "political" approach, understandable from the perspective of its time, set the standard for the rest of the century, and the fact that still at its end it was not supplanted by a historically substantiated view, is genuinely disturbing. Prag-Film was a daughter-company of the Greater German concern, Ufa. It was operating under Protectorate jurisdiction, and was in the strictest sense of the term a standard economic subject of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Its production therefore *was* part of the Protectorate cinema, albeit enjoying a special status, similarly as was the production of the Prague branch office of Ufa dating from 1933–1940, which, unlike the former, has never been contested as such by film historians.

---

11) Filmarchiv Austria eventually solved the problem in a truly generous manner, by publishing a book plus DVD containing all the surviving films and fragments made by the team in question who produced their films between 1912 and 1917 at Přimda and in Liberec, and from 1919–1926 in Vienna. Günter Kren and Nicolaus Wostry (eds.), *Cocl & Seff. Die österreichischen Serienkomiker der Stummfilmzeit* (Vienna: Filmarchiv Austria, 2010). Incidentally, it would, by no means, be without an interest to publish a catalogue of both feature and nonfiction films covering the entire Cisleithania (Austrian parts of Austria-Hungary), thus providing a survey of those productions that would not be dissected according to the over-complex and occasionally even confusing nation- and land-centered criteria. This would most probably offer an entirely new picture of cinematic activities in the Empire, and would bring down to size in a productive manner the ossified tradition of separate — and to some degree, ahistorical — reflection of the various national cinemas in Central Europe.

12) J. Havelka, *Filmové hospodářství v zemích českých a na Slovensku 1939 až 1945*, p. 29.

The phenomenon of national cinema in Central Europe thus sets a number of themes in relief. It continues to echo the legacy of the 19th century with its concept of linguistically and ethnically defined national communities singling themselves out in confrontation with other such communities, notably in reference to tensions between the Germanic and Slavonic nations of the region. Running counter to this spontaneously trend which has been receiving robust support from the press as well as from the art and culture scene, is a growing awareness of the import of the massive industrial development experienced by the Czech lands, which was the common doing of both Germans and Czechs alike, and which continued unabated all through the interwar period. It brought along a multitude of business and creative contacts with the rest of the world. In fact, the example of the interwar avant-garde movement, whose character was quite unequivocally cosmopolitan, can serve as a proof of the virtual impossibility of developing a national cinema that would have defined itself as a clean-cut self-enclosed ethnic environment. The most serious mistake would be for us to let ourselves be driven by some sort of definition-bound purism, imposing on the concept ever more sharply delineated boundaries, and in the process letting fall under the table anything that we might consider to stand in the way of our carving out the proper definition.

Doc. PhDr. Ivan Klimeš (1957) studied music and theater studies at Charles University in Prague, after graduation he worked in the Czechoslovak Film Institute first as an editor, then as a researcher. Currently he is the head of the Department of Film Studies, Charles University, and works at the Research Department of the National film Archive.
(*Address*: ivan.klimes@nfa.cz)

Films Cited:
Merry-go-round (Erich von Stroheim, 1923).

SUMMARY

National Cinema in Transnational Context

A Central European Experience

Ivan Klimeš

This study focuses on the birth of national cinema in the region of Central Europe, which is multinational in character and, from a historical perspective, particularly unstable. The Czech lands alone belonged, over the course of the fifty years of existence of cinema, progressively to four states, each time with different borders. The author consequently distinguishes the phenomenon of national cinema from the institution of the state and places an emphasis on a stable territory with stable audiences defined by a shared cultural-historical identity. The concept of a cultural nation, however, (as opposed to a political nation) does not solve the problem altogether. This can be demonstrated with the still unclear position of film activities of Sudeten Germans and, for example, German production of Prag-Film from the era of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, which continues to be ignored by Czech film historiography.

It is the multiple alterations in state borders which, particularly after the First World War, dramatically influenced the fate of the regional centres of the emerging film industry. A number of these centres vanished (Lviv), some became important (Prague). This nationalistically ethnic grip on Czech film culture was opened up by, in particular, the migration of the workforce and viewers' experience with foreign productions, which contributed to the intermingling of cultures and influenced both the aesthetic ideal of the era, as well as social habits. Among those activities in the field of cinema which opened up the national environment, were co-production relations, developed in Czechoslovakia after the arrival of sound film in the production of language versions of Czech films. These relations were most intense with Germany and also partially with Austria.

The phenomenon of national cinema in Central Europe consequently exposes a number of themes. It still reflects the 19th century with its concept of national communities based on language and ethnicity defining itself confrontationally against other communities, primarily on the basis of tensions between the German and Slavic nations. However, this spontaneously experienced trend, intensively bolstered by the journalistic and artistic culture, met with the increasing significance of the industrial expansion of the Czech lands, in which both Germans and Czechs participated together and which continued in the interwar period. This entailed vital business and creative contacts with the world as after all, the example of the interwar avant-garde, which was clearly cosmopolitan in nature, demonstrates that a national cinema as a purely enclosed ethnic environment will be incapable of development.

Translated by Jan Hanzlík.