

Czech Film Between Directives and Directors

Petr Szczepanik, *Továrna Barrandov: Svět filmařů a politická moc 1945–1970*
(Praha: NFA 2016)

Petr Szczepanik's study *Továrna Barrandov: Svět filmařů a politická moc 1945–1970* is an exhaustively researched, densely detailed, and yet highly readable study of the Czech film industry in the tumultuous, often-traumatic quarter-century that followed World War Two. Focusing on the titular studio, then the institutional heart of Czech cinema and the largest film studio in the former Czechoslovakia (and across the region), Szczepanik charts various key shifts in the industry: nationalisation and centralisation in the immediate post-war period; the harsh administrative controls and political-aesthetic orthodoxies of the high-Stalinist era; the gradual loosening of production beginning around the mid-1950s onwards and culminating in the famed "New Wave" of the 1960s; and the hard-line re-centralisation that followed in the wake of Czechoslovakia's Warsaw Pact invasion.

Though the trajectory of Szczepanik's account and his historical cut-off point of 1970 may suggest otherwise, this study does not re-chart the relatively well-trodden territory of privileging the New Wave in its "miraculous" emergence and tragic demise. The author gives more attention to "popular" cinema than to New Wave "art" films, as indicated by the book's illustrations, rare archival images featuring the likes of comedy master Oldřich Lipský at work. In fact, Szczepanik's ultimate concern is not with individual film works but with the work of filmmaking itself — the norms and habits of creative, technical, and administrative practice, the formal and informal groupings that comprised the Czech film industry, the institutions and political agencies that shaped, hampered, and also benefitted the production of films. But this same approach helps precisely to explain, in a carefully supported, non-simplistic, and multi-faceted manner, how the apparent "miracle" of the New Wave developed from an industry seemingly bound to the stifling directive and the watchful ideologue.

Crucial to the book's self-declared "revisionist" perspective on "the relationship between film and politics" is its adoption of Pierre Bourdieu's dual concepts of heteronomous and autonomous power — that is, the interventions and pressures that enter a field of activity (including a cultural sphere like film) from an external agency, such as commerce or political power, versus the values and imperatives internal to that field. Framing his study around these concepts, Szczepanik reveals the first 25 years of post-war Czech film as essentially a series of shifts and negotiations between the "heteronomous" demands of authoritarian communist power and the inherent, aesthetic concerns of filmmaking (with the rival system of cultural power and prestige that tended to arise from these). With a nuanced eye and exceptional richness of detail, Szczepanik undermines the standard, reflexive account of communist-era film industries as rigid, top-down systems of scrupulously enforced commands, and shows

how, even at the keenest moments of Stalinist repression, the ground-level practices of film development and production might escape the directives from on high. A more complex picture emerges of an industry in which the so-called “film jungle” — one critic’s disapproving term for an earlier, pre-nationalised hubbub of organic alignments, hierarchies and rivalries — persisted with and exceeded the organisational structures that arose to contain it. Yet Szczepanik also qualifies the no less standard notion of the genius of the individual filmmaker, opening up a hitherto under-explored but often crucially determining realm of formal and informal professional relationships.

If the book’s wide institutional scope might itself have risked losing the reader in a jungle of detail, Szczepanik ably guides us through his study’s complexities. The book begins with a wider perspective on Barrandov’s production system and then progressively narrows its focus, moving onto specific areas of production like script development and to questions of authorship and genre. This means that, by the time the reader comes to the final chapter, on comedy production, he or she feels grounded enough in the apparatus and terminology of Czech communist-era filmmaking to grasp well how the specific genre study illuminates wider trends of liberalisation and shifting relationships between administration and production — the “top” and “bottom” of the film industry.

The book is neatly organised into three parts — “Produkční systém”, “Produkční kultura” and “Produkční estetika” — and in the first of these Szczepanik examines the specificities of “the state-socialist mode” of film production. He problematises the idea that Eastern Bloc states like Czechoslovakia simply remodelled their film industries along Soviet lines, and instead reveals “a hybrid of local, regional and global models”. A case in point is the highly contextually specific practice of “dramaturgy”, an inheritance not from the Soviets but from the Nazi Protectorate (and with longer roots in this region of Europe). Though most closely analogous, in Western terms, to script development or script editing, dramaturgy encompassed a much wider range of functions, being responsible to greater or lesser degree for determining thematic or narrative directions in Czech film. Szczepanik reveals how dramaturges occupied an ambiguous role in their mediation between officials and filmmakers, entrusted with applying official “cultural politics to film practice” and yet also functioning as protectors, defenders, even intellectually inclined accomplices of bold film artists. Szczepanik charges, with justification, that the auteurist focus of previous studies has effaced the role of dramaturges in fostering a “subversive” new cinema.

The author also pays painstaking attention here to another distinctive feature of state-socialist cinema: the division of production into separate filmmaking units (variously known as “production groups”, “creative groups”, and so on). Szczepanik reads in the shifting form and role of these groups the film industry’s push and pull between centralisation and decentralisation, rigidity and relaxation. Tellingly, after 1962 the groups grew increasingly autonomous, functioning as de facto “producers” (despite the elimination of such quintessentially capitalist figures), establishing their own “intellectual-artistic boards” and providing further institutional groundwork for the development of distinctive “authorial styles”. The book’s first part concludes with highly detailed coverage of the specific ways film crews were assembled and organised; of provisions for the hiring of actors; and of the status of women within the industry, who, despite communist proclamations of gender equality, were usually relegated to lower-level roles; and of pay conditions.

The book’s second section concerns production culture — the “lived reality” of the filmmaking community as it operated through, and in spite of, the “organisational hierarchy”. Szczepanik gives a striking, early illustration of the resilient life of the “film jungle” in narrating how post-war centralisation was accompanied by the attempted imposition of a factory model of film production, the recon-

ception of film as heavy industry. This process had even been physically prepared for in the geographical shift of the heart of the film industry from central Prague to the suburb of Barrandov. Charting the struggle between “coffeehouse and factory” (“*kavárna*” and “*továrna*”), as film creatives sought to retain their erstwhile metropolitan life and informal working habits, Szczepanik highlights a conflict definitive of both his specific object of study and perhaps of film industries in general — the tension between the necessarily chaotic (if professionally rigorous) world of creative production and the institutional discipline of any large industrial concern.

Discussing the period of greatest control, between 1948 and 1951, Szczepanik uncovers complexities and odd ironies in what is easily portrayed as a time of straightforward, Manichean political orthodoxies at the expense of everything else. Yet Szczepanik highlights the fractious, contradictory role that generational differences tended to play, revealing how certain figures previously active in Czechoslovakia’s capitalist and Protectorate film industries, far from being denounced and excluded, sometimes gained important roles in Stalinist-era cinema and even attracted admiration for their professional capabilities and producer-style nous. An older generation of filmmakers established in the pre-war years, including that prolific twentieth-century survivor Otakar Vávra, even succeeded in routing a so-called “second centre” of “left deviationists” who were bent on a highly ideologised cinema of “construction films”. The older filmmakers’ opposition, it seems, ultimately revolved around their commitment to traditional standards of cinematic craft and professionalism.

In an enterprising and fruitful twist on the usual preoccupation with the higher echelons of Communist authority, Szczepanik examines the activities of Communist functionaries within film organisations themselves, the “lower level of the Party apparatus” as it participated in the “lived reality of filmmakers”. He gives fascinating detail on how the egalitarian tenets of communism conflicted with the “autonomous” hierarchies of celebrity. One account of an altercation between actor Jan Pivec and a studio chauffeur ends with the internal Party organisations putting the star in his place (“the Republic will survive” without him, it is declared) and insisting that the driver’s role is the “more useful” for the industry.

The second section’s final chapter, dealing with the so-called “literary screenplay” and the role of screenwriters, is one of the most eye-opening, demonstrating as it does how aesthetic conceptualisations, institutional practices and authoritarian political imperatives dovetailed together in the early communist period. Szczepanik persuasively shows how the literary scenario, a fully elaborated but non-technical form of screenplay, emerged out of concerns with ideological monitoring, being easier for industry assessors to read than technical screenplays. The conceptualisation of film as a “literary” medium suited an over-vigilant political culture that could better scrutinise and control a film’s content at screenplay stage than during production. Correspondingly, claims for film’s status as a visual art arose and entrenched themselves only as control ceded to liberalisation. It is beyond the book’s own scope, but these insights offer rich potential for further analysis comparing the formal impact of these contrasting literary and visual models on concrete texts. What seems consistent through the hard-line and liberal periods of communist-era film is the marginal and precarious role of professional screenwriters, whose contributions were overshadowed by the eminent litterateurs invited to originate screenplays and, later, by directors too. Szczepanik’s account of the young screenwriters chasing assignments and eking out a living is surprising, and unexpectedly evocative of more contemporary career insecurities.

The final section, on production aesthetics, is divided into two highly focused chapters. The first espouses the idea of “industrial authorship”, qualifying the traditional notion of director as author in

a way that acts as both broad theoretical intervention and exploration of the under-examined role played by the personnel of the various production groups. Utilising the highly engaging case study of the groups led by Bohumil Šmída and Karel Feix, two film veterans who were also keen professional rivals, Szczepanik shows how, from the mid-1950s, production groups began to differentiate themselves and establish specific identities and generic territories. Through the excellent close analysis of this chapter, Szczepanik builds a sophisticated conceptualisation of authorship defined by “the work of the work”, derived from specific professional conditions and practices. He is careful not to turn facilitators like Feix or Šmída into alternative “artist” figures, rather pointing out their own artistic under-achievement and lack of any personal dramatic vision. In regard to Szczepanik’s interrogation of concepts of film authorship, here and throughout the book, it might have been interesting to address more explicitly how far the “auteurist” status of the director was discursively constructed by film institutions in the periods covered. What were the specific discourses of authorship that circulated, say, in the 1960s, and how were these influenced by, or distinct from, international constructions of the “auteur”?

The book’s last section closes with “Comedy and the Politics of Laughter”. If this chapter seems more squarely focused on the more familiar concerns of genre analysis and textual reading, Szczepanik’s account of the post-war development of what is undoubtedly Czech cinema’s most defining genre allows him again to reveal the negotiation of institutionally imposed norms, the shifts between administrative control and creative practice. While at one level this section is an enlightening account of a comedy tradition that triumphs with the remarkable trend of 1960s parodies like Lipský and Jiří Brdečka’s *Lemonade Joe* (*Limonádový Joe aneb Koňská opera*, 1964), Szczepanik’s larger aim is to place such films in the context of a wider institutional discussion of Western-style film genres. As cinema’s most inherently “subversive” and intransigent genre, comedy is also a means to explore the limits of film as political “service”. The Czech parody film provided a cautious way for filmmakers (and audiences) to express their appreciation of Western genres, as well as a convenient springboard for so-called “pure laughter” — the sign of a shift from an earlier, administratively imposed idea of politicised and “satirical” comedy to humour for its own sake. Of course, a film like *Lemonade Joe* has its own dimension of nominal “service”, with its satire of American capitalism. This aspect may indeed have essentially been an alibi for the film’s commitment to “pure” comic fun, though (in the present writer’s opinion) *Joe*’s satire is witty and exhilarating, and perhaps not so easy to separate from the integrity of its humour. Szczepanik nonetheless captures the peculiarities of the Czech parody or “crazy comedy” cycle, pinpointing the features that have made the films objects of fascination and cult fandom among non-Czech viewers and scholars (including myself). Yet Szczepanik provides a privileged and invaluable perspective in explaining, through his coverage of institutional and discursive contexts, why these oddly distanced and non-specific genre parodies took the form they did.

As can be seen from the diverse areas covered above, Szczepanik’s analysis moves nimbly and expertly between wide historical narrative, illuminating anecdote and, in the last chapter especially, textual analysis, and he marshals an impressive array of statistical data, archival material, and textual sources, extending to diaries from the likes of 1960s writer-director Pavel Juráček. The often highly complex organisational structures and systemic shifts he describes are conveniently mapped out in a series of diagrams and timelines. One of the most impressive aspects of the study is the way Szczepanik integrates the insights of international film scholarship (around production culture, film authorship, or Thomas Schatz’s well-known dictum of “the genius of the system”), insights generally developed in relation to Hollywood’s commercial cinema, and manages to adapt them to the specificities of Czech (and more generally Eastern European) state-socialist cinema. The result is a study that helps

to qualify, revise, and extend wider principles of film theory by reference to the unique, scrupulously detailed, often contradictory realities of a film industry caught between new rules and old habits, political and professional imperatives, control and liberalisation.

Jonathan Owen