

Petr BUBENÍČEK, *Subversive Adaptations. Czech Literature on Screen behind the Iron Curtain*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, ISBN 978-3-319-40960-3, 224 p.

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Building upon a tradition of more than a century, the study of cinematic adaptations is constantly seeking the most adequate methodology. Drawing from theoretical movements as diverse as structuralism and literary sociology, its aim is to surpass merely comparing and contrasting different contents, focusing instead on the ability of transmedial dynamics to reinvest the pre-text with meaning. Petr Bubeníček's *Subversive Adaptations* contributes to the same development of a deeper understanding of the transformative potential of adaptations, as the chosen area of research – oblique political critique in Czech cinematography during the most turbulent years of communism – allows for the exploration of various subversive methods and artistic techniques. The productions of the 60s New Wave in particular are both aesthetically challenging and born out of the closer collaboration between writers and directors, the driving force for polyphony, freedom of expression, and dissent. Granted, a strong starting point would be the multi-layered structure of cinematography itself, in which language, acting, sound, and image combined have the power to evoke multiple signals for multiple meanings. However, it was modern European cinema that began relying on technical instruments meant to offer a visual equivalent of *the unfilmable*: abstraction, subjectivity, and reflexivity (as identified by András Bálint Kovács in his 2007 *Screening modernism: European art cinema 1950–1980*). These were no longer the prerogative of literature, and one of the symptoms of cinematic liberalisation in Czechoslovakia – as well as of its artistic maturity – was the recourse to already developed western trends.

Bubeníček's study is a remarkable historian's project, as his introduction focuses on offering a nuanced overview of social thought between 1948 and 1969. His method of choice is sociological, refuting stereotypical historiography and its focus on power structures, approaching instead the slow, intricate evolution of the collective mind. It is a methodological direction most suited for his theoretical pursuits, as

subversive artistic mechanisms and their public reception could not be comprehended without a prior understanding of propaganda techniques and *their* own success on the ideological market. Showing exactly how the Czechs were steered into believing in capitalism's defeat and in the moral, equalitarian mission of communism, while also discussing the strong nationalist ambitions that made the Soviet alliance seem acceptable, Bubeníček offers a much-needed conceptual frame for the phenomena he later addresses. His condensed review of recent studies on daily life under communism (including the misleading education of children, their ability to somehow maintain traditions and reactivate them in the 1960s or the problem of ethnic assimilation) is also strikingly similar in tone and depth to Hannah Arendt's analyses of totalitarianism, based on her intention to first retrieve the psychological and social factors that facilitated its occurrence and only then proceed with economic or legislative considerations. Bubeníček specifically chooses to explain the sense of continuity in art throughout the interwar period, the Nazi occupation, and the communist regime: the avant-garde remained a pervasive reformative force even in the anti-modernist post-war years; the film industry, as well, was an institution with constant production, be it free and democratic during the First Republic or centralised throughout the totalitarian years. Czechoslovakia's cultural liberalisation, with its climax in the Prague Spring, appears to owe a substantial debt to the important role of cinematography for a party concerned with its people's convictions, along with a quantitative issue, as not enough productions were accepted by censorship.

It may be argued that adaptations simply represented the preferred cinematographic option of the 1950s and 1960s, but Bubeníček's research rationale relates more to the creative potential of filmic adaptations rather than to their frequency on the artistic market. Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* states that there is subversive power in the genre itself, as it enables us to alter perception, much as personal growth allows our stories to remain relevant in a whirlwind of modern metamorphoses. Her theory can be easily linked to Bubeníček's demonstration of dynamic creation and reception in literature-based cinematography, but also to Deleuze's famous *movement-images* from *Cinema I*. While Hutcheon refers to the identity project of human beings, Deleuze notices the initial phenomenon of imitation that allows the filmic project to take shape: a mirror quickly becomes dynamic and corrects flawed human perception of movement

(localisation and measurement in abstract time) by replacing it with the inherent movement of intermediate film images. Although Deleuze refers to the origins of cinema in reality and human perception while Bubeníček's book tackles text-based imitations and reader-perception, the latter's subversion theories derive from the same logic of creative, self-altering adaptations of a pre-existent referent.

Thus, Bubeníček is perfectly aware of the methodological traps he needs to avoid and strives in particular to surpass the usual dichotomy used in adaptation studies – culture and form – specifically because transgressive art functions in the realm between the two, as a negotiation process. He claims structuralist influences, which can enrich the perception of the text's semantic structure, as well as phenomenological ones, citing Málek and Ingarden's conclusions on the non-predetermined nature of so-called *original texts*. He rejects the limitations of a theory keen on the receptive subject, but oblivious to the dialogue between the text and its pre-text, just as he distances himself from intertextual logic, which tends to place adaptation studies in the category of intertextuality, neutralising the possibility to combine formal analysis and cultural contextualisation. Nevertheless, these are all used as stepping stones:

The formalist measures of structuralism are, in themselves, insufficient for understanding the interplay between media and their functions within cultural communication. Immanent analyses of text have exhausted their potential, and instead of an aesthetic approach, thinking about literature and film as a social practice has emerged (15).

Marxist discourse (where any sign entering the text is already imbued with cultural and political significance) is added to the assemblage, along with Continental Intermedial Studies, with their endeavour to analyse temporality in different media, from poetry to film, until a methodological conclusion is reached: adaptations will be looked at as *energeias*, dynamic projects, dependent on the socioeconomic context that produces them, as well as on the collaborative forces of equally creative agents (screenwriter, camera operator, director, and actor). From here on, Bubeníček begins the process of disassembling various subversive methods. Instead of rushing to the more transparent political satires of the time, he gives extensive attention to less overt ways of diverting from the ideological canon.

Achieved by other national literatures as a result of postmodernist relativism and the prevalence of a metatextual, self-critical consciousness, the so-called *poetry of the every-day* rose to prominence in Czech subversive cinema as a form of freedom from oppression and revisionist art. Building scenes pervaded by the incomprehensible and the absurd, filmmakers offered oblique comments on the nature of reality in a totalitarian, disillusioned environment. This was also cinematography's way of exhibiting authenticity, a feat enhanced by the direct emotional impact of visual art as opposed to literature. *Pearls of the Deep*, the 1956 series based on the writings of Bohumil Hrabal and directed by Věra Chytilová, Němec, Evald Schorm, Jireš, and Menzel is one such example of this naturalistic, yet mundane and minute representation of life, whose political connotations lie buried deep underneath the strata of one character's common story. From creating ambiguity to hiring amateur actors, the techniques employed by the filmmakers are viewed by Bubeníček through the lens of anti-typification, one of the most subtle ways of subverting the norm.

The political connotations of the apolitical represent, in fact, one of the most discussed lines of flight (in the Deleuzian sense) from the established mindframe of an authoritarian regime. Less easily recognised than imaginary allegories or coded references to the historical present, this last resort of artistic expression was also one of the most eloquent. Peter Hames's *Czech and Slovak Cinema* (2009) is only one instance of criticism that highlights the force of *normality* exhibited on film. He mentions another Hrabal adaptation, *Cutting it Short* (1980) by Menzel, which, despite not belonging to Bubeníček's chronological area of study, is based on a much older and previously censored piece of literature: Hrabal's novella about childhood. Humour, poetry, and serene beauty set the stage for this nostalgic rendition of unspectacular normality. The term itself is, however, double-edged: while Hrabal's idea of a *normal* existence can be understood in praise of spontaneity and freedom, the regime's *normalisation* referred precisely to the twenty years that plagued Czechoslovakia after the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion, being strongly linked to the communist essentialist notion of what the norm should be.

However, it is not only this descent into everyday life that affirms humanity's power to resist theory and ideology, reinventing its unconstructed way of being. Bubeníček's second chapter focuses on Václav Krška's 1954 *Silvery Wind*, a film produced amid censorship, a silver lining in an age rife with ideological cinematic

works. This adaptation of a modernist novel by Fráňa Šrámek is singled out as a Bildungsroman preoccupied with uncertainty, maturity, and loss – an apparently non-political aesthetic performance. Uneventfulness is immensely misleading, though, as Călin-Andrei Mihăilescu notices in his 2011 *On Spying and Reading*. Citing Walter Benjamin, he shows that totalitarian violence always tries to reach a slowed-down historical pace (the end of history, the great revolution demands nothing but pure contemplation) and thus replaces *induction* with *deduction*: “As applied hindsight cleaning, policing fathoms that, to keep up with the utopian pure deduction, it must slow down historical changes’ violence” (Mihăilescu 46). In other words, any commentary or work of art that produces its own conclusions – being born out of unmediated reality, instead of dogma – defies the canon and threatens its stability. Mihăilescu goes a step forward in equating subversion with Pierce’s logic of *abduction* (formulating predictions, with no warranty of a successful outcome – researching and exploring). This detectivistic method of experiencing the world is identified by Bubeníček in *Silvery Wind*, more exactly in the personal growth of a character that never renounces individuality or, for that matter, marginality, as he maintains his sceptical view of prescribed heterosexual relationships and values male friendship.

Adapting children’s stories to convey more worrying messages is another unlikely strategy seen by Bubeníček, however, as a promising use of baroque inversions of meaning. The third chapter in its entirety revolves around the duplicity of a carnival setting, reinforcing the tried and tested conclusion according to which humour constitutes the best subterfuge of any auctorial deconstructive plan. Karel Zeman built on the universe of Jules Verne in producing two fantastic films. *The Fabulous World of Jules Verne* (1958) deals with the threat of nuclear weapons, but replaces the political socialist interpretation of this real possibility with an ahistorical meditation on personal responsibility and the perils of unsupervised technology. *The Stolen Airship* (1966) in turn depicts state corruption and media distortions, while undermining the serious tone with its parodic imagery. Bubeníček is therefore observant of any fracture of the official discourse.

Much like *Gulliver’s Travels*, devised to be a critique of European society and to exhibit Swift’s contempt for human nature, Pavel Juráček’s *Case for a Rookie Hangman* (1969), modelled on the literary classic, is built on the coordinates of 1960’s Czechoslovakia and boasts its absurdity by severing all logical ties and sliding

towards complete chaos. This occurred after the dissolution of censorship and is thus used as an example of how young directors looked back on Stalinist communism in both wonder and apprehension. Bubeníček chooses to explore the limits of his target-period precisely in order to dissect the small-paced changes in perception from one generation to the next, but also to analyse these films as retrospectives on a very distinct historical moment. The position on the filmmaker's chronological path becomes of utmost importance in a study devoted to adaptations, that is, to the resilience of themes and motifs throughout decades and even centuries, as well as to their modernisation or rebranding. Of course, the absurd insertions would not only survive, but also remain the most powerful element of these adaptations: after all, it was the rising aesthetic and philosophical category of the century. It was also the one most feared by censorship, as the absurd became synonymous with the deviant, the bold escapism from a singular order and logic, the abandonment of the great political narrative. In *On the Origins of Totalitarianism* (1948), Hannah Arendt writes:

Totalitarian politics – far from being simply anti-Semitic or racist or imperialist or communist – use and abuse their own ideological and political elements until the basis of factual reality, from which the ideologies originally derived their strength and their propaganda values – the reality of class struggle, for instance, or the interest conflicts between Jews and their neighbours – have all but disappeared (xviii).

If reality is defined by multiplicity and by different stories with different agents, the regime that Czech cinematography needed to evade was one of univocal narratives, meaning that absurdity or fantasy were paradoxically close to humanity.

This is well explained by Bubeníček in one of his most remarkable chapters, centred on filming the unfilmable. In writing about the New Wave's new modes of expression, he investigates František Vlášil's *Marketa Lazarová*, the reimagining of a Vladislav Vančura novel, dense in metatextual divagations, with a self-reflexive author that produces questions on style, as well as Otakar Vávra's reworking of František Hrubín's poem *Romance for Flugelhorn*. Both productions implied translating techniques and qualities specific to language and language alone: reviving a narrator who is very present through words, but not actions, on the one hand, and creating lyricism through image, colour, and sounds, on the other. Bubeníček's intuition is that this apparently gratuitous, autonomous art defies the text-centred

system of propaganda, as the language of music or metatextuality is simply too far away from the codes of censorship, too alien to be easily judged. This aesthetic heresy becomes the revolution of the 1960s. If, back in the Stalinist years, art needed to be rooted in and to directly impact the social and political scene of the moment, the liberalisation of filmic expression brought about the weakening of Marx's political sub-structure. Bubeníček discusses the *agitating influence* of pure aestheticism on the public and notices how opposite artistic impulses of the twentieth century somehow led to the same effect: awakening an audience. Indeed, were one to look back on Futurism's violent theatrical shows and their anarchist agenda (described in Claire Bishop's 2012 *Artificial Hells*), the spectrum of mentally transformative art would be revealed to be quite impressive.

Although the book aims to expose hidden layers of meaning alongside the mechanisms that made subversion possible, at no time does Bubeníček allow his analysis to become an authoritative decoding protocol. On the contrary, it is the dialogic, ambiguous nature of insurrectionist art that allows it to thrive and at the same time to speak to audiences removed from the respective sociocultural context. "I am interested in the ways that a work of art functions at the intersection of reception, culture, ideology, politics, and creativity" (12), he writes, before continuing to tackle phenomena like unwitting subversion or historically charged filmic masterpieces. Indeed, Bubeníček proves that there is irony in the totalitarian economy of art, as the considerable efforts of party members and censors seemed to be partially delegitimised by the possible readings of some of their preferred propaganda material. The rigid structure imposed by Socialist Realism (clearly polarised heroes and villains, a great number of self-sacrificial decisions in the name of an impersonal ideal, the victory of the oppressed) made the artistic results so devoid of credibility and solemnity that the very simplicity of style and its monolithic morality facilitated humorous, parodic or at least suspicious interpretations. A lack of quality entailed a lack of authority. As for the classical literary and historical sources, these functioned as the best disguise for political critique.

As Bubeníček's contextualising introduction shows, the nationalist issue had been central to all political upheavals of the previous decades in Czechoslovakia: tension between ethnic minorities, a fear of losing linguistic and cultural identity under Nazi occupation, and the consequent openness towards Soviet integration are well-known traits of twentieth century mentality. Thus, the communist canon

welcomed national myths such as the story of Jan Huss's religious revolution. Vávra, one of the directors condoned by the censors, created an entire trilogy exploiting this landmark of social anarchism. However, Bubeníček draws a very fine line between these concessions to the party politics and Vávra's artistic creed, which made him an aesthetic professional and an indispensable model for the New Wave generation. Peter Hames (2009) even questions the political correctness of these historical adaptations, arguing that a nationalist agenda was somehow at odds with communism's internationalist scope.

Bubeníček's final chapter is devoted to Jaromil Jireš's adaptation of a controversial Milan Kundera novel, *The Joke*. With a screenplay written in 1967 and a filming period stretching to 1969, the production was not only an open critique of the all-devouring political machine which destroys the individual, but also a cultural event amid international turmoil. In his analysis, Bubeníček is interested in the transition from a four-voice narrative to a more homogenous, character-centred on-screen perspective. He cuts into various scenes, interpreting the ironically political symbols infecting the protagonist's life and commenting on camera movements and their ability to build meaning into the story. The chapter also contains numerous critical references in order to give a nuanced account of the reception received by both the novel and the film. His questions – Why did so many critics perceive the story as a testimony of impending memory, of the impossibility to forget? Is this hermeneutical direction motivated by textual arguments or by the historical context of the readers? – draw parallels between close-reading and a cultural understanding of transmedial phenomena.

Bubeníček's entire volume is, indeed, structured this way. Its great merit lies in the broad, well-documented historical overview it proposes, combined with the masterly interpretation of both literary and cinematic techniques. Not only is such a study necessary in the era of transmedial culture, when there is nothing more productive and acutely relevant than various methods expressing the same sensibility, but it also proves the resilience of art's emancipatory function: overtly dissident or intentionally absurd, purely aesthetic or fundamentally political, the films selected by Bubeníček reveal a constant subversion of historiography, dogma, and artistic prescriptions – a landscape which will by all means remain vital to investigate for as long as free expression endures.