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## ABSTRACT

Jiří Brdečka is a reference in the world of animation. Along with Jiří Trnka and Břetislav Pojar, his name shines in the gallery of the best Czech animators ever. This article analyses his main films and provides information of this unique artist. Today, ignorance, lack of film copies, lack of a unique visual style that remained in the audience's memory have made of Jiří Brdečka, for the young generations, a deserted genius. "Deserted" is a transitory state. "Genius" is permanent. Inescapably, a genius is rediscovered. Let's just be patient.

Keywords: *animation, Czech animation, history of animation*

## RESUMO

Jiří Brdečka é uma referência no mundo da animação. Juntamente com Jiří Trnka e Břetislav Pojar, seu nome brilha na galeria dos melhores animadores checos. Este artigo analisa seus filmes principais e fornece informações deste artista único. Hoje, o desconhecimento de seus filmes, além da falta de cópias, produz uma lacuna em relação ao seu estilo visual único, memória de uma audiência restrita, fazendo com que Jiří Brdečka seja, para as gerações mais jovens, um gênio deserto. "Deserto" é um estado transitório. "Gênio" é permanente. Inevitavelmente, um gênio é redescoberto. Paciência, paciência.

Palavras-chave: *cinema de animação, animação tcheca, história da animação*

# A Director of Animated Films

The Grand Prix of the 1963 Annecy Festival went to *Špatně namalovaná slepice* (aka *Gallina Vogelbird-ae*; in English *The Grotesque Chicken*). There and then the international animation star Jiří Brdečka was born<sup>1</sup>.

That daring hymn to free thinking, which moreover was coming from the then oppressive Prague, hit the audience and the critics<sup>2</sup>. Along with Jiří Trnka and Břetislav Pojar, Jiří Brdečka became a master of Czech animation. Along with ten/twelve more directors, he became a master of world animation.

In the same 1963 *Rozum a cit* (Reason and Emotion) was screened this side of the Iron Curtain, and the quality of the auteur was confirmed. *Slůvce M* (The Letter M), *Do lesíčka na čekanou* (Let's Go Hunting in the Woods), *Proč se usmíváš, Mona Lisa?* (Why Do You Smile, Mona Lisa?), *Metamorfeus* (id.), *Láááaska* (Looooove) – among many others – followed, and

until his death Brdečka never descended from the podium occupied by the greatest animators of the world.

Nobody among us was unaware he was famous, in his country, as a script-writer, a writer, a painter, a film critic; but nobody either ever doubted that his best artistic tool was animated film directing. His directing was so smooth, iron-fisted and natural, his timing so perfect, his messages so clear, the feelings he evoked so subtle and so vibrating, that we could think of an animation director lent to other arts, not the opposite. Were we wrong, were we right, who knows.

As a person, he was kind and humble (which is not synonymous with modest), generous with his time to younger conversation partners. To this writer he would talk in his soft and well-pronounced French, with simple sentences each of whom was a pre-

scious lesson. Once he would comment on the issue of the time, the Vietnam War: "They bombed a school named after René Descartes!" said he, shocked. To an enlightened man, violence against the philosopher of the clear and distinct ideas was intolerable.

To this writer, 29 years his junior, he was a paragon. If the reader will detect some emotion in these or in the following lines, this is the reason<sup>3</sup>.

### **Now for some facts**

Jiří Brdečka had gained experience in animation by providing ideas for the short *Hochzeit im Korallenmeer* (Wedding in the Coral Sea) in the early 1940s. He was working in the specialized department of the infamous Prag-Film, a big Nazi company that produced audio-visual propaganda of any kind – with one exception: animated films. In that time, every inch of what today we would call mass-communication depended on Joseph Goebbels, and – as strange as it may seem – in Joseph Goebbels' vision animation had a specific goal that went beyond telling the audience how good the Nazi were and how bad were their enemies. Animation was for world prestige: Germans would match and surpass Walt Disney on his very ground, using his very recipes.

*Hochzeit im Korallenmeer* was an imitation of an American short; and if it was better than *Verwitterte Melodie*<sup>4</sup> or *Armer Hansi*<sup>5</sup>, it was because the Prague animators were better, and the nominal director Hans Möllendorff was a kindly chap who barely had seen a film camera in his life, and understood that to let them go their way was his cup of tea.

### **Fade-in, fade-out.**

Year 1948. Once the national independence had returned, those animators had started a new production company and had called themselves Bratři v Triku. After some script-writing and under the auspices of Jiří Trnka, in that 1948 Jiří Brdečka was entrusted to direct *Vzducholoď a láska*: possibly his masterpiece and (although nobody realized it) a revolutionary work<sup>6</sup>.

The round American drawing style inherited through the German rule was still used in the studio, although not by everybody. Unceasingly curious Brdečka had discovered the paintings and drawings of Kamil Lhóták.<sup>7</sup> Already totally able to handle the technique, he hired him and chose a completely different approach.

Sharp lines around bi-dimensional characters and objects; flat, non-shaded colours; hues on hues, a “scandal” for the classic school<sup>8</sup>. He even used limited animation here and there, and narrative condensations (when the officer needs a horse, the latter suddenly appears from nothing).

Limited animation and two-dimensional design would become, in the following decade(s) and all over the world, the young frontier of quality entertainment animation. The American UPA, with its advance guard *Gerald McBoing Boing* (1951) would be the artistic insurrectional army that defeated rubbery and volumetric Disneyism; nevertheless, Brdečka and Lhóták deserve to be acknowledged as the ones who applied most of UPA’s inventions three years in advance.

The high quality of *Vzducholoď a láska* doesn’t lie in its design only. The director lavishes details that enrich the images and the story. For instance: the female protagonist weeps, and the following frame contains a little fountain, to suggest the continuation of the gushing water and the ensuing sadness; the theme of the airship is introduced by three experimenting pioneers of the flight, showed in the background as a secondary action; the shining diamond of the engagement ring remains opaque when it lies on the ground, refused by the young woman.

No less inventive, but less original, is the second half of the film, which basically is a “wild chase” in the Harold Lloyd/Buster Keaton tradition, with the predictable happy ending.

Just the happy ending is a crucial point in Brdečka’s vision of the world. Long live good people, shame on bad people: *Vzducholoď a láska* conveys the common-man moral stand. But it will be one of Brdečka’s few happy endings, no less made-up than the fable it is part of.

The director’s overall work displays the wisdom of a man without naïveté, who has seen much in his life and has gone through many experiences; and is bitterly aware that very seldom on Earth good people win and bad people lose. His films go from humour to elegy, to satire, to horror, to the simple pleasure of telling a story; he anyway displays a constant inclination toward constructiveness and civilization, but a firm dislike for illusions and sentimentality. Or better, “Sentimentality and Kitsch appealed to him if they were at the same time poetic or absurd. He was a master of the ‘small format’, focusing on incisive and trivial details”<sup>9</sup>.

This standpoint can’t but recall another great Mittel-European film auteur, Ernst Lubitsch. Let’s exaggerate: we can compare the distinctive, refined stylistic “touch” we have already described with the famous “Lubitsch touch”. Eventually and actually, we could christen Jiří Brdečka the Ernst Lubitsch of animation.

In the memoirs we have already mentioned in a note, Gene Deitch writes: “Another side of his character was morbidity, and many of his animated films featured funeral scenes, usually staged in 19th century or even medieval settings”. The word “morbid” is defined by the *Longman Webster English College Dictionary* as “abnormally susceptible to, or characterized by, gloomy or unwholesome feelings”.

This writer couldn’t disagree more. Let’s repeat: Jiří Brdečka displays a constant inclination toward constructiveness and civilization. There is nothing unwholesome in his art. Morbidity is an ambiguous frame of mind, while his whole work is a pleading for unambiguous behaviour, for clear and distinct ideas.

Pathos dominates the delicate and tragic *Do lesička na čekanou*. Sarcasm dominates the cyni-

cal *Láááska*. Irony dominates *Proč se usmíváš, Mono Liso?* and *Jak se moudrý Aristoteles* (Wise Aristotle Gets Still Wiser) and *Třináctá komnata prince Měděnce* (The Thirteenth Chamber of Prince Měděnec).

In no case he revels in the enjoyment of evil or death. *Metamorfeus*, despite all his Latin verse and Pompeii frescoes, is again a hymn to liberty, and sung the year after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

It is true that *Pomsta*<sup>10</sup> (Vengeance) is a horror film – and an excellent film.

A poet (romantic cliché: slim, blond, long-haired, shy) dwells in the apartment below a sorcerer (romantic cliché: devilish smile, pointed beard, mephistophelic appearance) and is in love with a young lady (romantic cliché: slim, nice breasts, wide hat, long skirt). The curtain rises. The poet is reading his verse to the girl. A swordsman challenging alone a group of enemies crosses the scene, and then returns after having killed them all. His virility attracts the woman, and he gets rid of the poet ridiculing him with his foil. To take his revenge, the vanquished one buys witchcraft from the sorcerer: his right hand will be magic. The curtain rises. The magic hand kills the swordsman, but the poet is arrested for murder. The curtain rises. The poet is hung. But now the second vengeance takes place. The magic hand abandons the dead body, creeps like a reptile until the sorcerer's flat, finds him, and strangles him. Then it slides to the fireplace, where the blazes transform it in an autumn leaf, which the wind takes away. After a random flight, the leaf alights next to a pair of woman's shoes at the foot of a bed. We guess they are the beloved girl's shoes. The camera tracks out: close to the former one, there is a pair of man's boots.

Jan Klusák contributed with unobtrusive background music. Seldom have the notes commented the action, and when they have done so, they have done so with ironic touches of flute or xylophone.

Apart the opening scenes, where the imagination of artist Miroslav Štěpánek goes wild inventing Halloween-like monsters, the whole film is a Belle Époque light comedy, staged and narrated with grace, where the sorcerer is a ludicrous "heavy" grimacing on a bizarre rocking chair, and the spectator feels sorry for the girl's frivolity more than for men's dying and being hung. In the end, horror told without horror.

In festivals' conversations, only one flaw was unanimously acknowledged to Jiří Brdečka: too much culture. Too many hidden quotations, mannered settings, opening/closing titles written in refined calligraphy. Actually, two films suffer from an excess of erudition: *Rozum a cit* (1962) and *Metamorfeus* (1969).

*Rozum a cit* (1962) openly had ambitions. The large screen of Cinemascope (a novelty and a rarity, in that time) was filled with the beautiful drawings and colours of Zdeněk Seydl; the orchestral composition of Jan Bedřich was magniloquent; in the middle of a thick list of names, the credits emphasized Ladislav Fialka, the choreographer. The story is rather simple. A black-dressed 18th century gentleman is walking in the countryside, and stumbles on a rock that... shouldn't have been there. Hence the magic of the rational man: he transforms the environment into the geometric, angular, black & white kingdom of logic. But a Harlequin appears, and while the rational man sleeps he creates the colourful, moving, and untidy kingdom of emotion. So untidy as to be quickly

out of hand. The moral to draw, from fifteen minutes of luxury, is that the wisest approach is to combine the two things<sup>11</sup>.

A musical, a ballet, a philosophical tale, a colours' play: *Rozum a cit* is many films pasted – but not blended – into one. If Reason and Emotion are the contrasting ideas/characters, their contrast is too weak to create an interesting drama. Choreography should have been at the service of the story, while the ballet that concludes the film is ostensibly useless<sup>12</sup>.

*Metamorphesus* was made in co-production with Corona Cinematografica from Rome, under the supervision of Italian screenwriter Max Massimino-Garniér. Max adored Jiří Brdečka. He would delight in anything Brdečka would imagine, and overstate it. Since the mother of invention is limitation, the film resulted confused and self-indulgent<sup>13</sup>. The first section is elegantly painted, but animated through fade-ins/fade-outs, a process that can easily become a way out to use when no idea exists of what motion the characters should have. The last section is a moving praise to art against violence and brutishness, but violence is symbolized both by tanks shooting and a volcano erupting. The two symbols are not synonymous. Art can't stop geothermal energy...

*Slůvce M*<sup>14</sup> (1964) is inspired by a Bohemian late-Gothic song about the blossoming and happily fulfilled passion of two young lovers. This unsophisticated story, wrote the director himself<sup>15</sup>, "stresses the fundamental idea that love is eternal. The monogram of the beloved has not changed in essence whether it was carved centuries ago, or today. Jiří Brdečka did not choose the ancient love song only for its musical and verbal attraction, but because he wanted to show the idea of love as a whole, its changing as well as its eternal features".

Jaroslav Doubrava animated with due sobriety the pastel drawings of Ludmila Jiřincová and her assistant Rudolf Holan, and despite some maudlin details the film is serene and optimist.

Jaroslav Doubrava animated with the same sobriety the beautiful drawings of František Braun in *Do lesíčka na čekanou*. This is the specular version of the former film, although the message is the same. Another folk song, about a hunter who, by misunderstanding, kills his fiancée and then, dejected, commits suicide. The two souls leave the corpses, and the two red wounds on their hearts become red flowers in a meadow. Once again, love is immortal.

Among their many ties, these two films share the stylistic choice to look like a series of illustrations, with minimal motion.

Yet, they are animated films. The choice is uncommon but not rare, and it's to the animation director a challenge comparable to the Kammerspiel for the live-action director. Ingmar Bergman made great – and greatly filmic – Kammerspiele, Jiří Brdečka made great – and greatly filmic – motionless animations.

To the common Czech filmgoer, the name of Jiří Brdečka doesn't remind animated films, but the immensely popular *Limonádový Joe* (Lemonade Joe).

This witty parody of the Wild West genre, hinged on a teetotaler hero who blames alcohol for triggering violence in Frontierland, was published in instalments on the weekly "Ahoj" between 1943 and 1944; had a successful theatrical adaptation in 1944 at the Větrník Theatre; and was published as a book in 1946.

Although both the book and the play were so strong as to be still around in the third millennium, the real hit was the live-action film *Limonádový Joe aneb Koňská opera* (1964), which became, within the boundaries of Czechoslovakia, a real cult. *Oldřich Lipský's* direction was rather mediocre, while Brdečka's screenplay and dialogues were whimsical and sprightly. The quality of the film was rightfully laid to him<sup>16</sup>.

The question arises spontaneous: how many cow boys, American Indians, horses, stagecoaches are in the animated work of this Frontierland specialist?

Actually the answer takes us to Jiří Trnka. His *Arie prairie* (Air of the Prairie, 1949) depends almost entirely on Lemonade Joe, on Brdečka's parodist script, and on his musical inclinations (one of the songs of 1949 reappears in the 1964 film). Once in a while, the screenwriter who always scrupulously adapted his creativity to Trnka's one took over.

We could continue, but at the cost of boring the reader.

Today, ignorance, lack of film copies, lack of a unique visual style that remained in the audience's memory<sup>17</sup> have made of Jiří Brdečka, for the young generations, a deserted genius.

"Deserted" is a transitory state. "Genius" is permanent. Inescapably, a genius is rediscovered. Let's just be patient.

## NOTAS

<sup>1</sup> Actually, he had been in the business for twenty years already. So late a “discovery” was due to the historical panorama. In the 1950s and 1960s the only way to view a film was to sit in a movie theatre and watch the screen. The Cold War was at its peak, so works from the Communist countries seldom made it to France, Great Britain, Italy et cetera. The only international festival of animation was held in Annecy, then a silent little town on the namesake and extremely beautiful lake. In the whole world, the connoisseurs of animation were some hundreds, led by the French film critic André Martin. For the rest of mankind, animation was just synonymous with Walt Disney. (In 2014, auteur animation is scattered all around the globe, with hundreds of festivals. Tiny elites can make big revolutions).

<sup>2</sup> Plot: at school, the drawing exercise consists in copying a hen. The dreamy and imaginative pupil draws it his way, a way the teacher hates. In the night, the “badly-drawn” hen comes to life. The famous ornithologist Vogelbird captures it, reaching the apex of the glory for having discovered an unknown species: the (in Latin) Gallina Vogelbirdae. But a new strange drawing of the child comes to life, too...

<sup>3</sup> These are personal recollections. His intimate friends and collaborators may have different and diverse viewpoints. Here are, for instance, some excerpts from the portrait written by Prague-based American animator Gene Deitch.

*As a person directing films in the Bratři v triku studio, he was like no other. He was the only one who was always called “Mister” by all members of the staff. [...] Brdečka lived as if he were a 19th century European. He did not even know how to drive a car. When he needed to be in the studio to screen his film rushes or talk to his assistant director or animators, a car would be sent to pick him up, and later to drive him home. [...] From what I’ve written above, you might think that he was a kind of fop or snob. He wasn’t. He was a lot of things. He had layers. As with his closest friend, Jiří Trnka, he was able to leverage his creative clout to his own advantage. He managed to float above communism without putting his soul totally in hock. (<http://genedeitchcredits.com/roll-the-credits/44-jiri-brdecka/>)*

<sup>4</sup> Directed in Berlin by Hans Fischerkoesen, 1943.

<sup>5</sup> Directed in Berlin by Frank Leberecht, 1943.

<sup>6</sup> Plot: an ugly and stiff officer is going to marry a girl who loves somebody else: a young inventor specialized in flying vehicles. On her way to the wedding she is... angled by the newly constructed airship of her lover. Furious, the non-husband runs after them, shoots at them, but eventually sinks in a pond.

<sup>7</sup> A member of avant-garde Group 42, Kamil Lhóták (1912-1990) was one of the best Czech painters of the 20th century.

<sup>8</sup> At the beginning of the film the redhead girl, in despair because forced to marry a horrible officer, plays the piano in the background of an equally red wall. The same “scandalous” choice will be adopted in 1953 by Bobe Cannon in UPA’s *Gerald McBoing Boing Symphony*: red-dressed Gerald is framed in front of a red wall.

<sup>9</sup> Tereza Brdečková, *Svět Jiřího Brdečky* (The World of Jiří Brdečka), catalogue of the exhibition *Svět Jiřího Brdečky a jeho přátel* (The World of Jiří Brdečka and His Friends), Millennium gallery, Prague, January-February 2008.

<sup>10</sup> From *La main enchantée*, a short story of Romantic French writer Gérard de Nerval (1808-1855).

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly enough, the stylistic idea of the two opposite worlds was politically so pregnant as to inspire two films like Raoul Servais’ *Chromophobia* (1966) and George Dunning’s *Yellow Submarine* (1968).

<sup>12</sup> Jiří Brdečka himself sharply analysed this film in the essay “The Storyteller’s Approach”, in *Visual Scripting*, edited by John Halas et al, Hastings House, New York 1976, pp. 45-51. Here is an extensive quotation.



Jiří Trnka and I were working on the script of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* [Sen noci Svatojánské, 1959] and we came to the wedding feast which takes place in Theseus' Palace Gardens. An idea formed in my mind: an image of a formal, highly ornamental French park, which Puck transforms by magic into free and natural landscape. I suggested this effect to Trnka, but for some reason he rejected it and the idea stayed in reserve. What should be done with it? I felt that in that magic there was a baroque element which fascinated me, because for some time I had wanted to make a film which would evoke the splendours of baroque theatricality with its fairies, perspective decor, scenic wonders and ballets. Having found this, I was on the way, but I still needed a story. Though the idea originated from the realm of folklore as the old Beauty and the Beast theme does, with its evocative magic and setting the magical metamorphosis of the park which fascinated me could have the metamorphosis aspects of the park as pure narrative. In searching for it, I found an 18th century ideal for my scheme; reacting to Rationalism at this period gave birth to Romanticism, and the parks and chateaux, "laced with French corsets", acquired a new neighbour, the English Park, where nature was breathing freely and where gardeners' shears were prohibited. Both these parks along with their owners seemed to represent two aspects of human nature, Reason and Emotion. Here, then, I found the premise and key to the story: *Rozum a cit* symbolised by two gardeners and their conflict and conciliation, followed by a combined effort to fuse their differences harmoniously. From then on the script was quite easy to write.

Naturally, this new vision dictated several changes. As I had chosen a pantomime-ballet form, music became an important aspect, and therefore the symbols of *Rozum a cit* changed from gardeners to musicians and, in the final version, to dancers.

I do not think it important that *Rozum a cit*, despite its high technical standard, did not live up to my expectations. I will give my reasons later. The film's shortcomings were due, to a certain extent, to the writing. [...]

From time to time I brood over those unsuccessful films of mine which had promising scripts. The reasons for failure vary. The more subtle they are the more interesting. A good example is *Rozum a cit* which I have already talked about, and from which I and the studio expected so much.

It was an allegory, about the conflict between Reason (a serious trumpeter) and Feeling (a frivolous Piccolo player). Each tried to inflict his ideas on the other and then ended making it up and collaborating.

The illustrators did their best, colours were radiant, the music thundered, and the result? An honourable wreck, a wreck nevertheless. When I see *Rozum a cit* today, after a ten year interval, I see the mistakes as clearly as the palm of my hand. I realize I wrote the script very conscientiously, but in a stilted way. In writing it, I used reason and not emotion. The main cause of its failure, however, was the choice of the designer who, despite his excellence, had the wrong style for this film. Zdeněk Seydl uses abstract forms or, in other words, has a non-naturalistic style. He is a purely decorative artist who distorts realism with constant stylization, resembling an abstract ornament foreshadowing psychedelic art by ten or fifteen years. I think this description is enough to explain the reasons for our incompatibility in working on a theme which, after all, had Nature as its core.

<sup>13</sup> Using Pompeii frescoes as stylistic basis, the film narrates the story of Eurydice rescued from Hades and then lost forever by Orpheus, and the assault on him by the Maenads. In the myth, Orpheus is killed; here, his artist's voice defeats violence, and so it always will, in a neverending balance between Good and Evil.

<sup>14</sup> "M" in *Slůvce M* stands for "love". In Old Czech language love is "milost".

<sup>15</sup> Typed and probably unpublished text provided by Tereza Brdečková.

<sup>16</sup> Sergio Leone's *Per un pugno di dollari* (A Fistful of Dollars) was screened in the same year 1964, Bruno Bozzetto's *West and Soda* in 1965. In a few months the moribund American Wild West genre would experience its European, parodist rebirth by means of three authors who acted unknown one to the other.