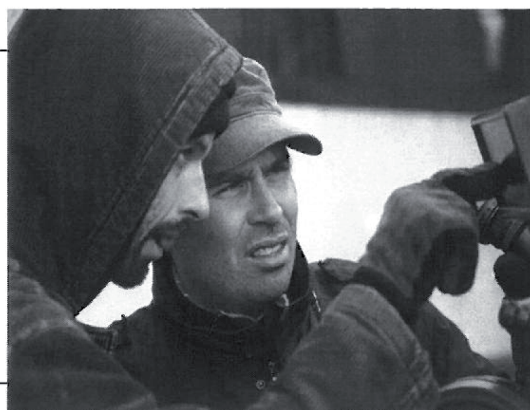


LETTERS, SILENCE AND NOISE



In 1988 Václav Kadrnka (b. 1973) and his mother moved to Great Britain to join his father, who had defected from Communist Czechoslovakia a year earlier. He returned in 1992, to study at Zlín VOŠF (Film School) and at FAMU in Prague. His full-length low-budget debut EIGHTY LETTERS was given its world première at the Berlinale 2011 in the Forum section. "The deliberate absence of 'typical' period realia shifts the story telling to a more general level, to an abstract existential drama. The minimalist, austere, subtly wrought intimate film ventures onto the territory of a spiritual message, bound up with the feelings of nostalgia and longing shared by the divided family. The film makes use of an original, interrupted rhythm of storytelling, combined with alternations of 'endless' waiting and movement..." (Filmový přehled 5/2011).

How would you characterise your school works and which of them do you think are the most interesting?

They are basic five-finger exercises in different styles, first attempts – in short, school films. I don't mean by this to devalue them in some way, on the contrary. Critics often use the phrase "It's just a school exercise" to label something as naïve, immature and stupid. I don't see it that way at all. An error in a part can sometimes create a persuasive value in the impression given by the whole. It's in these school experiments, often inconsistent and inspired by foreign prototypes, that the germ of one's own film voice unfolds.

I've always tried to tell the story by purely film means and not to rely too much on a classic narrative scenario. Most of my student films have little spoken word; they try to work primarily with film language, free from literary and theatrical influences. Maybe that's something that links them, otherwise I can't think of anything. I don't even want to compare them or elevate one of them above another.

Jiří Soukup is a well-known Czech scriptwriter. How did you work together?

I met Jiří Soukup while I was studying at FAMU, where I used to attend his workshop. I always respected his work, it's firm and distinctive. His approach to scriptwriting is very unusual, in fact film begins to interest him where it ceases to be film, where it overcomes the formal barrier even of the author himself, which for me is the most difficult because I need to have things under control. That's not possible with Jiří Soukup. He would say something like: "You think you know everything? That having things under control means truthfulness?" Difficult to describe, but it's an experience.

It was important to me not to betray the authenticity of my mother's letters and of my own memories. We knew we didn't want to create artificial plots or fictional characters. That would mean inventing something, lying in favour of "storytelling" and we didn't want to do that. We rejected the view from above which sets up a narrative landscape so that it can be guaranteed to function. We said to ourselves, "Let's come and tell this story from the point of view of someone who is walking through that landscape."

But the mere staging of these letters, however firm they are in their values, however life-inspiring, does not make a film. The bare fact does not in itself bring truth. Jiří worked for two years on those letters, he covered reams of paper, made a file of them and saturated them with my memories. With the designer Zdeněk Eliáš I gave a filmic and visual framework to all of that. I grasped that the way to adapt the letters was the way of strict reduction. That's how the idea of taking a single day came up, and from the mass of voices outside the picture, only fragments remained. The whole of that thorough reduction of facts created a subjective landscape. I felt very uncomfortable during all of that, I was being stripped naked all the time. Jiří gave me the courage and at the same time invested more general meanings into the script.

What led you to the selected visual processes? For example, right away the first shot composes the left and right side of the picture in an interesting way. The choice of colour, of composition is fundamental, and the work with the sound – the accent given by its arrangement underneath the titles.

I try to find film signs (I'm using the word "signs" deliberately because I work with sounds just as much as images) which cannot be subjected to one single unambiguous interpretation. The key is to rely on what film can do, and get rid of literary, theatrical and psychoanalytical influences to concentrate purely on film language. I try to insert these signs into the film emotionally so that they don't operate literally, but rather as subliminal signals. It doesn't always work... I'm trying in this way to describe the method of our work just outwardly. I don't want to explain these signs. It's up to the audience to absorb their effect. It's important to feel, not to understand.

One of the other shots – with the alarm clock and the letters – is original too. At the same time a "head in a wig" is representing your mother, which is very effective. In this way the absence of your mother and the passing of time is implied simultaneously... Was that already there in the script?

Yes, as I said already, mother's letters and my memory became the main source for our work.

Above all, I believe that human memory preserves details and therefore the film language of EIGHTY LETTERS is very much founded on detail, both pictorial and aural. Through that, I've tried to evoke the emotion I remember.

We used to call this the prints of memory. At the same time we wanted the shots to have a more general meaning. I can't forget the morning which begins the film. I was thirteen, my father had defected and my mother had gone to the "big city" to put in our application to emigrate to England. I woke up and my heart skipped a beat. I was terribly afraid of that loneliness, the fact that one day the inevitable moment would come when I would lose my parents. Maybe that's the moment one grows up, that awareness of eternity.

The whole picture of the boy's morning is subliminally imbued with that feeling. That's how it stands in the script.

What significance do you ascribe to the relationship between the picture and the sound?

The sound is more fundamental for me than the picture, I always think about it in advance. I'm glad that certain things in the film could be expressed only through sound. Often it's enough to have some noise for the audience to sense what is happening, they don't have to see it in detail in the picture. I think that sound is more inventive, it has much greater potential when it comes to drawing a person in. It's physical, an inner perception, unlike that from the picture, which is external and analytical. For me, the dramaturgy of sound is the basic element of the creative process, and of all the phases of the production of the film I like this work the most.

The Catalan film CARACREMADA, which won an award in the festival Crossing Europe in 2011 (where your EIGHTY LETTERS was also shown) – would you say one can see some connections here? I'm not thinking of the level of content so much as the unconventional methods of expression.

Unfortunately I didn't see that film.

What inspired your opening scene – running after your mother and leaving together on the bus?

My fear of being left alone as a boy.

The text of the letter and its reading off screen is underpinned here by a view of the passing landscape – woods and fields...

I wouldn't want to analyse these scenes in any way, the film would lose its effect. Only perhaps that, after the introductory scene saturated with some kind of elementary fear, there comes a certain calming down, the boy is again, for a while, "under care". That is projected into the inner voice of his mother who describes the course of that morning in a letter to his father. Even though at the end of the film Vašek is ashamed of his agitation and doesn't want his father to know about it, deep in his soul he wants nothing else. He relies on the fact that his mother will share it with his father, and that actually calms him down.

That care – for me that is a very personal motif, and I can recall it strongly from childhood. Such a play at being grown up, taking on a new role, which at that time automatically meant laying down the old one, and, at the same time, the awareness that that parental care – those quiet secret looks, the "forbidden" sentences in letters when a child is analysed and his special qualities and character traits are identified, the guessing at what he'll grow into, everything that always happens and doesn't end – for me it's an awareness of love.

In the office, when the mother leaves the boy at reception,

there is a montage of shots of the surroundings and of the boy, closing his eyes, and inputs into the action ("That's my grandson, and that's my son," says the doorman). Doors opening and closing, staircases – could one speak about Kafkaesque moments here?

We weren't thinking of Kafka at all, his name was never even mentioned in connection with LETTERS. And insofar as a Kafkaesque mood can be felt, then it's purely from the atmosphere built on the basis of my inner perception of that time; this feeling that an unfathomable system exists which decides our fate and is essentially absurd. That is the subjective feeling of a person crossing a landscape that goes beyond him. Bureaucracy from the perspective of the child, the closing of doors, footsteps that approach and recede, snatches of conversation, fleeting contacts... The sensitive perception of the surrounding world can link this scene with Kafka. Hypersensitivity... and utter fear.

Waiting at the doctor's – a man who is peeling eggs – the significance of the shells and later a view of a map – in its way it all adds to it. The man then wraps the bits of shell in his handkerchief and stuffs it in his pocket. What inspired this scene?

To some extent Virginia Woolf's story, "An Unwritten Novel". But I want to say again, I don't want to explain something or look for the key to understanding it. That's not my role.

Nevertheless, one more related question, concerning the origin of the medical report written on the old typewriter which is intended as part of the application to emigrate.

That's inspired by a real archetype and a precisely observed feature of that time. That impression of absurdity arises from its subsequent transformation, slowing down and quietening. The system of that time was so sick and slow, founded on passivity, that every person who wanted to be active was immediately suppressed, obstructed and adapted "to the norm".

Only as time moved on, active people were needed, something simply had to happen, time couldn't grind to a halt. That's what I remember so powerfully, and it holds true today, that both my parents were very active, they wanted to change, to improve themselves. Their whole life they sought for space which would enable them to do this. And it wasn't there in normalised Czechoslovakia. Then in that scene, thanks to a bribe to the doctor, she gets where she needs to be, because she wants to act, to move.

In fact, after months of dealing with it, she knew more about that bureaucratic system than the officials who represented it. In the end they themselves were asking my mother what they had to write in the application. That's Kafkaesque too, these authorised persons – just empty bodies that have created a feeding-trough for themselves within the system. But in spite of the fact that she had everything perfectly worked out, had overcome it and prepared it, the system didn't grant her request. They all said unanimously "They'll turn you down" but who "they" were no one could ever tell us.

The presentation of the application to emigrate, the officials endlessly leafing through it – and in the end a stamp missing – try to characterise that dramaturgically.

That long leafing through papers which are supposed to define a person, dealing with which became a gigantic effort and held so much hypocrisy, and all that is ended by an official with the words: "You need another stamp here," threatening that we'll miss the deadline. The boy runs to get it. Then he rests it in the palm of his hand as though to say: "So now it depends on this thing, whether I'll join my beloved father". It



would take just the slightest breath of wind – and everything would have to begin again from the beginning...

Your mother's long phone call, and then suddenly a cat steps into the action, learning English – cat, out – they're other dimensions of the action. Including long travelling shots by the camera following photographs, supported by organ music, and people who walk past.

You're talking about the picture called "Foreign apartment" in the script. Mother and son find themselves in a certain timelessness, imprisoned between two worlds. Between the one they are leaving and the one that awaits them and where Father is waiting. In the film there are scenes which point to this. Objects, which project themselves somewhere into the future, speak with the language of this new world towards which everything is heading, but at the same time something or other substantial here is laid aside. We depict these eloquently with the picture in the park, culminating with the boy's worn out shoes in the rubbish bin. I don't know what else to add. The whole of that scene with the photograph of Father's class and the children on a walk means goodbye for me.

Could you characterise the remaining part of the film ending with the forty-third letter from the total number of eighty letters sent?

That's connected with the reduction I mentioned. We can tell by the number of the letter and the title of the film that the authorities turned down my mother's application and everything will have to begin again. The title of the film is simultaneously a time line. It really did last for eighty letters before we saw Father again.

From the point of view of interpretation, can we consider your statement in the press kit: "I wanted to capture a bit of silence



within the contemporary cult of ugliness, noise and tawdry effects" as fundamental?

I don't know what else to add. We live in a time when audio-visual culture is going through an enormous devaluation. Many films conceal an ordinary effect under the guise of authenticity. Violence in the broadest sense of the word is presented as a spectacle, moreover so explicitly and graphically that it shocks the audience but at the same time loses its impact. Film should create mystery.

What do you think of Czech film at the present time, if we compare it with foreign film?

We don't produce feature films which would be more personal in nature, which would have a strong opinion, be unafraid to risk rejection. Czech film lacks originality, it doesn't know whether it wants to belong to the audience or the author, or better both, but in the end neither one nor the other. We are a small country and a minority culture so it's pointless to try to apply the principles of the big commercial cinematographic industries, that always ends badly. The strength of Czech film should be in its exclusivity. That's why I think it's necessary to support creative projects.

Individuality is still perceived here as elitism or selfishness. Everything has to be approved and insured in advance, and film projects are supported on that basis. When someone wants to try something different it's automatically ruled out and he has to look for his own path... In spite of everything I feel that Czech film is ready for growth. I think it is already apparent that something is happening.

Prepared by
STANISLAV ULVER