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Overrated and overlooked. The critical reception of Czechoslovak cinema in Poland in the 1950s and 1960s based on Karel Kachyňa's *Smugglers of Death*¹

Zarys treści: Wprowadzony do dystrybucji w polskich kinach w 1960 r. film Karela Kachyňa *Przez zieloną granicę* krytycy potraktowali jako czołowe dokonanie kinematografii czechosłowackiej. Skupiali się jednak na walorach rozrywkowych i rzemieślniczych dzieła (traktując je jako udany film gatunkowy z ambicjami), zupełnie zaś pomijali milczeniem jego genezę i zawartość ideologiczną oraz wydźwięk polityczny. *Przez zieloną granicę* stało się na przełomie lat pięćdziesiątych i sześćdziesiątych – obok m.in. *Romea, Julii i ciemności* Jiříego Weissa oraz *Diabelskiego wynalazku* Karela Zemana – jednym z najwyższej ocenianych oraz najobszerniej omawianych w polskiej prasie filmów czechosłowackich. W tym samym czasie jednak polska krytyka (zaskakująco nisko oceniając np. *Tu są lwy* Václava Krški czy *Przystanek na peryferiach* Jána Kadára i Elmara Klosa) przegapiła lub zbagatelizowała znaczenie „odwilżowych” filmów Pierwszej Fali, które w końcu lat pięćdziesiątych zrywały w Czechosłowacji z socrealistycznym schematyzmem oraz próbowały nowego języka i współczesnej tematyki.

Abstract: Kachyňa's *Smugglers of Death*, first screened in Polish cinemas in 1960, was considered by critics as one of the top achievements of Czechoslovak film-making. Their focus, however, was on the entertainment and technical aspects of the work (treating it as a successful, ambitious genre film), glossing over its genesis, ideological content and political message. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, *Smugglers of Death*, along with such pictures as *Romeo, Juliet and Darkness* by Jiří Weiss and *Invention for Destruction* by Karel Zeman, became one of the most highly rated and most extensively discussed Czechoslovak films in the Polish press. Yet in the meantime, Polish film critics (who gave surprisingly low ratings to *Hic Sunt Leones* by Václav Krška and *At the Terminus* by Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos) overlooked or downplayed the importance of the “thaw-era” pictures produced by the Czechoslovak First Wave, which burst the socialist realism straitjacket and experimented with new language and contemporary topics in the late 1950s.

¹ This article is a partly modified and expanded version of a text published in the book *Král Šumavy. Komunistický thriller*, ed. P. Kopalet al., Praha, 2019.

Słowa kluczowe: recepcja krytyczna filmów w Polsce, *Przez zieloną granicę* (*Král Šumavy*), Karel Kachyňa, Pierwsza Fala w kinie czechosłowackim, polska krytyka filmowa, dystrybucja filmów w Polsce, kino gatunków

Keywords: critical reception of films in Poland, *Smugglers of Death* (*Král Šumavy*), Karel Kachyňa, First Wave in Czechoslovak cinema, Polish film criticism, distribution of films in Poland, genre cinema.

Panorama Północy, one of the era's most popular illustrated weeklies, somewhat pompously claimed in its 4 September 1960 issue that "there has never been such a programme of Polish cinemas as we are going to have this September, the traditional opening of the season."² That month, several prominent Western films were to be premiered: among them *Hiroshima, My Love* by Alain Resnais [*Hiroshima, mon amour*, 1959], *Seven Samurai* by Akira Kurosawa [*Shichinin no samurai*, 1954], *Grand Illusion* by Jean Renoir [*La grande illusion*, 1937], *Room at the Top* by Jack Clayton [1959], and the first Polish blockbuster, *Knights of the Teutonic Order* [*Krzyżacy*] by Aleksander Ford, which later became the top-grossing film in the history of Polish cinema distribution.³ The September premieres also included one Czechoslovak title, the *Smugglers of Death*. Directed one year earlier by Karel Kachyňa and originally titled *Král Šumavy* (lit. *King of Šumava*), the film was released for distribution by the Film Rental Centre [*Centrala Wynajmu Filmów*, CWF] under the Polish title *Przez zieloną granicę* (lit. *Across the Green Border*).

1960 holds a special place in the history of Polish cinema, as it ended the late 1950s era of liberating film distribution from extreme ideological and bureaucratic oppression, and from its critical state with regard to quantity and quality, both of which were at its lowest between 1949 and 1954. Later (that is from the early 1960s until the first symptoms of the collapse of communism that appeared in the mid-1980s), cinema distribution of films in Poland stabilised, relying on premieres of about 190–200 titles on average annually, imported and screened based on a 50:50 rule (which means that one half was meant to consist of films produced in Poland and other communist countries, the other half from the capitalist bloc). However, in 1960, which is central to this study, as many as 225 films were shown for the first time, which was the largest number per annum in the entire history of cinema distribution in Poland's communist era.⁴ Among them, Soviet works were most numerous (53 titles, or almost one in four, 23%), followed by films

² L. Bukowiecki, "Panorama Północy przedstawia program specjalny p.t.: 'Takiego miesiąca jeszcze w Polsce nie było,'" *Panorama Północy*, no. 36 of 4 September 1960, p. 16.

³ With a total of 31 million viewers, including 5 million by the end of 1960 (*Mały rocznik filmowy 1985*, Warszawa, 1986, p. 71; M. Hendrykowska, *Kronika kinematografii polskiej 1895–1997*, Poznań, 1999, p. 228).

⁴ Figures on the distribution of films in Polish cinemas are my own research published at the www.NaEkranachPRL.pl website (accessed: 27 December 2018).

from France (37 or 16%), the USA (23 or 10%), Poland (20, almost 9%), Britain (16 or 7%) and Czechoslovakia (15, or over 6%).⁵

Smugglers of Death was only the second time Polish viewers had had the opportunity to watch a work by Kachyňa, after *It Will All Be Over Tonight* [Polish title: *Nocne spotkania*] signed by the director together with Vojtěch Jasný (*Dnes večer všechno skončí*, 1954). Another film of his, *Stress of Youth* (*Trápení*, 1961; known in Polish as *Zmartwienia*), did not appear in Polish cinemas until 1963 (a late date considering Kachyňa's pace of work at the time, producing at least one picture per year). In subsequent years, his films were imported fairly regularly, though selectively, omitting several of his most important works (among those were *Coach to Vienna* [*Kočár do Vídně*, 1966], *A Ridiculous Gentleman* [*Směšný pán*, 1969] and *The Nun's Night* [*Noc nevěsty*, 1967]).

Smugglers of Death was rated as an over-14 picture,⁶ suitable for young people finishing primary school, as was the case with such films as Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon* (1952) and *Ballad of a Soldier* by Grigoriy Chukhrai (*Баллада о солдате*, 1959), which were shown at roughly the same time.⁷ It should also be noted that distributing Kachyňa's film involved an event which was probably unprecedented in the history of cinema promotion in communist Poland. By way of exception, CWF did not commission a poster design from a Polish graphic artist but adapted the original Czech poster (with Polish translations of texts as the only modifications) created for *King of Šumava* by Jaroslav Milde. Years later, it appears impossible to sort out the motives underlying this decision. Was it because the picture (as is often the case today) was sold bundled together with promotional materials? Were the distributors in a hurry to bring *Smugglers of Death* to the screen? Or perhaps some Polish artist failed to meet the deadline or CWF expectations? Nor can it be ruled out that Milde's design was chosen because of its high artistic value. Whatever the reason, this turn of events was quite remarkable, because

⁵ The first purchased post-war Czechoslovak film, *Men Without Wings* (*Muži bez křídel*) by František Čáp, premiered in Poland in September 1947. Since that time and until 1989, a total of 539 feature-length Czechoslovak pictures (fiction, documentary and animated films), or 13 per year on average, were shown in Polish cinemas, accounting for 8% of all premiered titles.

⁶ In Poland, films were at the time classified using one of the five basic rating categories: over 7, 12, 14, 16 or 18 years of age (with additional categories, such as over 9 or 10 years, that were introduced on occasion).

⁷ For comparison, films deemed suitable for younger viewers included the Czechoslovak *The Treasure of Bird Island* by Karel Zeman (*Poklad Ptáčího ostrova*, 1952), classified as over 7, and *Of Things Supernatural* by Jiří Krejčík, Jaroslav Mach and Miloš Makovec (*O věcech nadpřirozených*, 1958), classified as over 12 (similar to, for example, *The Knights of the Teutonic Order*), while only older audiences were allowed to watch *The Forger* by Vladimír Borský (*Padělek*, 1957) and *A 105-Percent Alibi* by Vladimír Čech (*105% alibi*, 1959), classified as over 16 (similar to, for example, Resnais' *Hiroshima*, *My Love* and *Wild Strawberries* [*Smultronstället*, 1957] by Ingmar Bergman), and *At the Terminus* by Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos (*Tam na konečné*, 1957) and *Escape from the Shadows* by Jiří Sequens (*Útěk ze stínu*, 1958), classified as over 18 (similar to, for example *Some Like it Hot* [1959] by Billy Wilder or *Le diable au corps* [1947] by Claude Autant-Lara).

when Kachyňa's film entered Poland's cinemas, the "Polish poster school" was in its heyday, produced eminent works and had consistently garnered international recognition and awards since the late 1940s. At that time Czechoslovak films also enjoyed their share of great posters, displaying the creative talents of the best and most famous Polish artists such as Roman Cieślewicz, Franciszek Starowieyski, Jan Lenica, Maciej Hibner, Jan Młodożeniec, Wojciech Zamecznik and Wiktor Górka.⁸

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In this article, I would like to track the reception of *Smugglers of Death* in the Polish press (film and general cultural magazines, popular weeklies, dailies, etc.) and the fairly rare book publications which took account of the film. I am interested in how Kachyňa's work was received by film critics, historians of cinema, columnists and other journalists, primarily at the time when it first appeared on Polish screens, but also later and up to the present day. To capture the most essential indicators and specific nature of the critical reception of *Smugglers of Death*, which (spoiler alert!) can be briefly summarised as overlooking the ideological content of the film but focusing on its technical and entertainment merits instead, it appears necessary to sketch a general reference for how other achievements of Czechoslovak film-making were received and conceptualised in Poland at that time. Reconstructing the reception of Kachyňa's film while considering its wider context may allow us a glimpse into the state of Polish film criticism in the 1960s – its inclinations, reception modes, prophetic intuitions and anachronistic *idées fixes*. Such criticism in the late 1950s and early 1960s resulted in, among other things, overrating the importance and artistic value of *Smugglers of Death* and focusing attention on individual, "safe" works "glorified" by film festival awards, while underrating, or even overlooking altogether, the novel First Wave works which awoke Czechoslovak cinema from its slumber as it attempted to break free of the socialist realism mould by thematic and formal explorations (anticipating the future New Wave), which was deemed "unbecoming" and, as a consequence, unfairly maligned.

The first notice about Kachyňa's film in the Polish press was published by *Wiadomości Filmowe*, a news and advertising magazine published by CWF, in the issue of 13 March 1960. The regular column that announced titles recently purchased for distribution in Polish cinemas contained a brief teaser of *Smugglers of Death*, describing it as depicting, among other things, the "dramatic adventures of Czech border guards."⁹ Although this may lead to a conclusion that the Polish

⁸ Cf. <http://gapla.fn.org.pl/> – posters for, among other publications, *Citizen Brych* (*Občan Brych*, Otakar Vávra, 1958), *Grandpa Automobile* (*Dědeček automobil*, Alfréd Radok, 1956), *Invention for Destruction* (*Vynález zkázy*, Karel Zeman, 1958), *School for Fathers* (*Škola otců*, Ladislav Helge, 1957), *Hic Sunt Leones* (*Zde jsou lvi*, Václav Krška, 1958), *Lost People* (*Ztracenci*, Miloš Makovec, 1956), *The Silver Wind* (*Stříbrný vítr*, Václav Krška, 1954), etc.

⁹ "Filmy nowo zakupione. Król przemytników," *Wiadomości Filmowe*, no. 11 of 13 March 1960, p. 2.

version of the title was settled upon very early, perhaps immediately after the purchase, two months later the popular *Ekran* weekly (1 May issue) referred to the film as *King of Šumava*.¹⁰ The notice was found in a back-page column, in the regular place used by the editors to alert readers of selected top, award-winning, debated or popular films, mostly those coming to the screen at that time. The notice text is rather peculiar: besides information about awards won by *King of Šumava* at the Czechoslovak Films Festival in Plzeň, it contains a detailed synopsis of the plot, even revealing the ending. It was a huge blunder for a title that was still waiting to be screened, especially one advertised as a “thriller” and “adventure,” as those who had read the notice in *Ekran* could justifiably feel aggrieved at being deprived of the pleasure of following the plot twists.

The premiere of *Smugglers of Death* itself was announced in the 7 August issue of *Wiadomości Filmowe*, within a longer text illustrated by stills and containing

¹⁰ (y), “Król Szumawy,” *Ekran*, 1960, no. 18, p. 16. Additional confusion was caused by the fact that Rudolf Kalčík’s novel based on the screenplay (which was co-written by Kalčík) and published in Czechoslovakia in 1960 was published in Poland, translated by Emilia Witwicka, under the title *Król Szumawy (King of Šumava)* (Wydawnictwo Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej, Warszawa, 1962). Titles of films imported to Poland from capitalist countries were usually translated word-for-word (although there were exceptions; for example, *Some Like it Hot* was renamed *Pół żartem, pół serio* (lit. *Halfway in Jest*), *Tiger Bay* by J. Lee Thompson (1959) became *Nieletni świadek* (lit. *A Teenage Witness*), etc., while films produced in socialist countries were oftentimes distributed under titles that had nothing in common with the original ones. This practice of free, “creative” translation was particularly applied to works brought from Czechoslovakia: I estimate that between 1948 and 1973, Polish titles greatly diverged from the originals for at least 20% of Czechoslovak films shown in Polish cinemas. As for *King of Šumava*, one can understand the intentions of the distributor, who came up quite cleverly with the *Across the Green Border* title to avoid mentioning the mountain range Šumava which could not necessarily mean anything to the Polish viewer. Similarly, to avoid specific personal names or terms related to Czech and Slovak history and culture, the original *Dům na Ořechovce* [Vladislav Delong, 1959] was renamed to *Dom w dzielnicy willowej* (lit. *A Suburban Villa*), *Žižkovská romance* [Zbyněk Brynych, 1958] to *Romans na przedmieściu* (lit. *Suburban Romance*), and *Objev na Štrapaté hůrce* [Karel Steklý, 1962] to *W pogoni za meteoritem* (lit. *Chasing a Meteorite*), etc. In addition, for some of the films, one may guess that the reason for replacing original titles with divergent Polish translations was the marketing intentions of the distributor, who wanted to increase the chances that the picture would prove a hit. Thus, for example, *Smyk* (Zbyněk Brynych, 1960) could become *Dwie twarze agenta “K”* (lit. *Two Faces of Agent K.*), *Kudy kam?* (Vladimír Borský, 1956) – *Mężowie na przeszkoleniu* (lit. *Husbands in Training*), and *Konec cesty* (Miroslav Cikán, 1959) – *Ukryte skarby* (lit. *Hidden Treasures*), etc. The considerable majority of these “revamped” Polish titles can, however, hardly be explained on substantive, linguistic or marketing grounds: for instance, one can see no reason for changing *Škola otců* for *Osamotniony* (lit. *Standing Alone*), *Pán si neželal nič* (Peter Solan, 1970) for *Czym mogę służyć?* (lit. *How Can I Help You?*) and the sophisticated *Čtyři vraždy stačí, drahoušku* (Oldřich Lipský, 1970) for such all-too-revealing title as *Trup w każdej szafie* (lit. *Skeleton in Every Closet*), etc. Only swapping the highly cultured *Ecce homo Homolka* (Jaroslav Papoušek, 1969) for the mundane *Straszne skutki awarii telewizora* (lit. *The Terrible Consequences of a TV Set Failure*) appears accounted for by an urban tale: apparently, the surname of the protagonist family was too similar to the erstwhile first secretary of Poland’s communist party Władysław Gomułka.

a description and summary of the film, information on the producers and a tentative assessment.¹¹ A short pre-premiere notice was also published in the *Film* weekly of 28 August, in the regular “Idziemy do kina” column where filmographic details and notes about all titles coming to the screen were listed,¹² as well as in the *Panorama Północy* photostory mentioned earlier.¹³

Immediately after the premiere, Polish film magazines, cultural weeklies and newspapers printed a total of six texts discussing *Smugglers of Death*, the longest of which were published in:

- a) the *Film* weekly – a review by Janusz Skwara in the 18 September issue,¹⁴
- b) the nationwide *Trybuna Ludu* (the Polish Workers’ United Party daily) – a review by Jerzy Jurczyński,¹⁵
- c) the regional Kraków newspaper *Dziennik Polski* – a review by Władysław Cybulski in his weekly “Zapiski kinomana” column.¹⁶

The other three are (1) a review by Jerzy Eljasiak, printed in September in the nationwide *Sztandar Młodych* daily (the mouthpiece of the Union of Socialist Youth);¹⁷ (2) a brief, one-line review co-written by Jerzy Płażewski and Zbigniew Pitera and published on 8 September in their regular “Na ekranach” column in the *Przegląd Kulturalny* weekly¹⁸; (3) and finally, on 23 October, a short notice in the Catholic social and cultural *Tygodnik Powszechny* weekly.¹⁹

This modest number of texts was enough to make *Smugglers of Death* one of the Czechoslovak films most often discussed in the Polish press of 1960. Other productions from the same country which came into the cinemas in 1960 and late 1959 and enjoyed similar attention of journalists included *At the Terminus* (with, among others, four extensive reviews in *Film*, *Ekran*, the Kraków *Życie Literackie* weekly and *Dziennik Polski*), *Citizen Brych* (with, among others, four reviews in *Film*, *Ekran*, *Przekrój* and the *Słowo Ludu* newspaper published in Kielce), and *A 105-Percent Alibi* (with, among others, three reviews in *Przekrój*, *Dziennik Polski* and the *Argumenty* weekly). On the other hand, as regards Czechoslovak films not included in the current programme of Polish cinemas (i.e. new pictures that had not yet been purchased), the title most often and most widely mentioned in 1960 was *Romeo, Juliet and Darkness* (*Romeo, Julie a tma*, Jiří Weiss, 1959), buoyed by its success at the San Sebastián Film Festival. Weiss’ film, conceived as a major event, was discussed not only in the film press but also in numerous

¹¹ (ś), “Przez zieloną granicę,” *Wiadomości Filmowe*, 1960, no. 32, pp. 10–11.

¹² “Idziemy do kina,” *Film*, 1960, no. 35, p. 15.

¹³ L. Bukowiecki, op. cit.

¹⁴ J. Skwara, “Za wcześniej na rezygnację,” *Film*, 1960, no. 38, p. 4.

¹⁵ (J. Jur.) [J. Jurczyński], “Sensacja w dobrym gatunku,” *Trybuna Ludu*, 1960, no. 261, p. 4.

¹⁶ W. Cybulski, “Zapiski kinomana. ‘Przez zieloną granicę,’” *Dziennik Polski*, 1960, no. 228, p. 4.

¹⁷ WIDZ [J. Eljasiak], “Różne filmy. ‘Przez zieloną granicę,’” *Sztandar Młodych*, 1960, no. 218, p. 6.

¹⁸ j.p., z.p. [J. Płażewski, Z. Pitera], “Na ekranach,” *Przegląd Kulturalny*, 1960, no. 37, p. 7.

¹⁹ “Przeczytaj, zanim zobaczysz. ‘Przez zieloną granicę,’” *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 1960, no. 43, p. 6.

social and cultural magazines and newspapers. In addition, mostly in the context of news from festivals, considerable space was devoted to such titles as *A Higher Principle* (*Vyšší princip*, Jiří Krejčík, 1960), *Skid* (*Smyk*, Zbyněk Brynych, 1960), or *I Survived My Own Death* (*Přežil jsem svou smrt*, Vojtěch Jasný, 1960), shown in Polish cinemas the following year. Journalists also continued to follow the output of Jiří Trnka, who has been a regular feature of Czechoslovak cinema since the late 1940s. In press stills, the main stage was (next to French, American and Soviet stars) occupied by the “Czech BB,” Jana Brejchová.

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The attitude of Polish critics towards Czechoslovak films at that time – and at least until the mid-1960s – was quite equivocal, as accurately summarised in 1962 by Bolesław Michałek: “Let us be frank: the Czechoslovak film was not passionately received by film critics. It is rarely mentioned, and the issues it deals with are more often acknowledged than discussed. Czechoslovak film-making is often written about from two perspectives, both equally trivial and true. The first is that it is very technically advanced. It has at its disposal well-furnished, spacious ateliers and a skilled staff of directors, operators, set designers and tried actors. [...] Despite all these workshop and technical advantages, however, Czechoslovak films are for the most part charged with being drab, disinterested, devoid of soul, passion and emotions; not engaging in contests, not discovering new lands, not exploring, just calmly existing.”²⁰

When the first achievements of Poland’s southern neighbours reached Polish screens in the late 1940s, the critics “did not yet accurately know how to categorise [them],” what to compare them to, or how to evaluate “their general level and style.”²¹ Soon, however, in the first half of the 1950s, they became more familiar with them and, vigilant to stay in line with the ruling communist party, stressed as a matter of principle that screenplays of Czechoslovak films “are not yet fully mature ideologically and artistically, and much remains to be done in this area.”²² Polish journalists reproached Czechoslovak film-makers: “some of their films, though well-acted and directed [...] have not yet managed to sweep away *petit bourgeois* traditions.”²³ Even typically lighter titles, “conspicuous in their careful and high-level technical design, good shots and excellent acting,” were not free of “the schemes of bourgeois comedy, mechanically transposed into another environment and set against another political and social background.”²⁴

²⁰ B. Michałek, “Co się zmienia w filmie czechosłowackim? Korespondencja własna,” *Film*, 1962, no. 18, p. 12–13.

²¹ L. Dagmar, “Przeczenie. Pujmanova – Vavra – Tanska,” *Film*, 1948, no. 20, p. 7.

²² J. Toeplitz, “Dwa filmy czechosłowackie,” *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, 1951, no. 2, p. 53.

²³ J. Jurata, “Krok naprzód w repertuarze naszych kin,” *Film*, 1950, no. 1, p. 8.

²⁴ I. Merz, *O filmie czechosłowackim*, Warszawa, 1954, pp. 27–28.

In the 1950s, Polish criticism acclaimed Czechoslovak cinema for its sense of observation and the ability to show real people in real social environments (but “real to a degree only, not in a complete and dialectic manner”²⁵), yet on occasion discredited it, stating that “although everything in it is [...] more than probable, little is true. [...] a picture with no artistic visage, speaking about social issues and passionate feelings in a pseudo-truthful way.”²⁶ Columnists also noted the technical efficiency, impeccable technique and good acting of Czechoslovak films, while simultaneously complaining that they might have been “obviously richer in brilliance, wit and poetry than [their] authors and performers could manage” (because “it is easy to imagine how films of that kind would be cooked up by the French, for example”).²⁷ Furthermore, contemporary critics generally charged the Czechoslovak cinema with a “propensity to record facts without investigating their ideological essence”²⁸ and “contenting itself with superficial, skin-deep observations, a fragmentary view of reality,”²⁹ all of which tended to trivialise works which “given the increased competition between socialist film-makers and contemporary world cinema” appeared “outdated” and “obsolete,”³⁰ as well as more or less directly scorned the “over-the-hill ‘little neorealism’”³¹ and lack of “grand” themes and its moral, ideological and philosophical generalisations. The products of Czechoslovak film-making were succinctly summarised as “fine, but not artistically innovative.”³²

A slow change in Polish views of films from beyond the southern border took place in the late 1950s.³³ It was these years that saw the development and consolidation of key categories and ideas on which the reception and interpretation of Czechoslovak film-making output in the New Wave era was focused and which would persist in the Polish reception of Czechoslovak films until the present day, ideas such as everyday affairs of ordinary people, warmth and lyricism, freshness, authentic and intense observation, discovering the present, not very sophisticated humour, etc.

In 1958, Polish cinemas screened *School for Fathers* (Polish title: *Osamotniony*), which was considered the first work of the so-called New Wave³⁴ (or, alternatively,

²⁵ J. Toeplitz, op. cit., p. 48.

²⁶ B. Węsierski, “Nasze recenzje. Czarne korytarze,” *Film*, 1954, no. 36, p. 10.

²⁷ A. Przewłocka, “Na ekranach. Alena się kłania,” *Film*, 1958, no. 11, p. 6.

²⁸ L. Rubach, “Mały partyzant,” *Film*, 1952, no. 22, p. 6–7.

²⁹ I. Merz, op. cit., p. 38.

³⁰ J. Płazewski, “Przewrotny Makovec. Straceńcy,” *Film*, 1958, no. 23, p. 6.

³¹ As noted later by J. Skwara (“Za wcześniej...”).

³² H.P., “Ostatni Mohikanin... patriarchy,” *Film*, 1948, no. 21, p. 6.

³³ The following reflections on the attitude of Polish criticism towards Czechoslovak films between 1958 and 1962 are a slightly amended and expanded version of my article published at the www.NaEkranachPRL.pl website: K. Szymański, “Jak ‘Dziewięciu gniewnych ludzi’ z tygodnika ‘Film’ oceniali filmy czechosłowackie. Przyczynek do dziejów recepcji kina czechosłowackiego w Polsce w latach 1958–1973,” *Na Ekranach PRL*, <http://naekranachprl.pl/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/200.pdf>, pp. 19–21 (accessed: 20 December 2018).

³⁴ P. Hames, *The Czechoslovak New Wave*, London–New York, 2005, p. 40 (Polish edition: *Czechosłowacka Nowa Fala*, transl. J. Burzyńska et al., Gdańsk, 2009, p. 61).

films produced by the “Generation of 1956”), followed by other pictures subscribing to that trend, including *Puppies* (*Štěňata*, Ivo Novák, 1957; in Polish: *Podlotki*), also in 1958, *Desire* (*Touha*, Vojtěch Jasný, 1958; in Polish: *Tęsknota*) and, in 1959, *Hic Sunt Leones* (*Tu są lwy*) and *At the Terminus* (*Przystanek na peryferiach*); and, finally, in 1960, *Five Out of a Million* (*Pět z milionu*, Zbyněk Brynych, 1958; in Polish: *Co tydzień niedziela*). It must be admitted that Polish reviewers rapidly and sensitively noted the symptoms of “a flurry of creativity from our southern neighbours”³⁵ that followed “years of falsifying and varnishing of reality,”³⁶ “exuberantly shaking off the crisis which affected Czech film-making for several years [where the artists] [...] set a course right at modernity”³⁷ and “abandoning the rosy and ultra-optimistic view of reality while accepting the negative side of life, looking for artistic truth.”³⁸ Generally, however, Polish critics tended to treat all the titles mentioned above separately from each other, not perceiving them as clearly symptomatic of a wider trend of post-thaw changes taking place in Czechoslovak film-making. Even if columnists noticed a new tone and fresh themes in Czechoslovak cinema, they generally ascribed them to a “socialist new wave” that was to include mainly Soviet productions such as *The Cranes Are Flying* by Mikhail Kalatozov [*Летят журавли*, 1957], *Splendid Days* (or: *Serge*) by Georgiy Daneliya and Igor Talankin [*Серёжа*, 1960], but also Hungarian, Polish, East German and Czechoslovak films that broke with the schematic scenarios of the “cult of personality” era and opposed socialist realism dogmas.³⁹

The most striking fact in these circumstances is that from among the then pearls of Czechoslovak film-making it was not *School for Fathers*, *Hic Sunt Leones*, *At the Terminus* or *Puppies* that were the most highly rated and acclaimed by Polish film critics. Among the titles just mentioned as examples of New Wave cinema, only *Desire* met with greater interest and sparked glowing, though cautious, reviews.⁴⁰ On the other hand, Czechoslovak films that garnered the greatest applause and almost universal acclaim in the late 1950s and early 1960s were *Invention for Destruction* and *Romeo, Juliet and Darkness*. The latter was, as mentioned above, widely discussed in the Polish press in an exalted and admiring manner. For example: “Weiss’ film meets to some degree society’s demand for art that believes in humankind [...] in its courage and solidarity [...] in a word, humanist and

³⁵ A. Jackiewicz, “Cannes 1959. Telefonem od naszego specjalnego wysłannika,” *Film*, 1959, no. 21, p. 12.

³⁶ Ł., “Osamotniony,” *Wiadomości Filmowe*, 1958, no. 35, p. 12.

³⁷ W.Ś., “Podlotki,” *Wiadomości Filmowe*, 1958, no. 47, p. 10.

³⁸ M. Derkuczewska, “W stronę ojców. Osamotniony,” *Film*, 1958, no. 46, p. 5.

³⁹ Cf. e.g. K. Dębnicki, “Socjalistyczna ‘nowa fala,’” *Film*, 1960, no. 3, pp. 10–11.

⁴⁰ For example: “The young director [...] did not avoid falling into the trap of ‘small form’ and did not sustain a uniform mood of poetic narration, as Lamorisse managed to do in his *Red Balloon*” (S. Ozimek, “Okrucy poezji. Tęsknota,” *Film*, 1959, no. 50, p. 5) or “where [...] the film resorts to [...] the poetics of a traditional film fairy tale [...] its lyricism vanishes” (A. Jackiewicz, “Cannes 59. O XII Międzynarodowym Festiwalu w Cannes,” *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, 1959, no. 2, p. 33).

moral art,⁴¹ or “the picture [...] breaks with the conventions of bourgeois film (a fact worthy of mention as far as Czechoslovak film-making is concerned) [...] thanks to an excellent [...] set of innovative techniques.”⁴² On the other hand, *Invention for Destruction* was received in Poland as an unquestioned masterpiece and a milestone of cinematic art, almost on a par with the achievements of Sergei Eisenstein and Orson Welles. Zeman’s film literally “electrified”⁴³ Polish critics, who dubbed it an “an artistic sensation,”⁴⁴ “a formal experiment resulting in [...] truly sparkling artistic fun,”⁴⁵ and “one of the greatest and at the same time most peculiar works in the history of film-making.”⁴⁶

On other Czechoslovak films (perhaps with the exception of Weiss’ *Wolf Trap* [*Vlčí jáma*, 1957; Polish: *Wilcza jama*]), the Polish press in these years spoke, except for isolated voices, rather critically. Thus, for example, *At the Terminus* was summarised as “a test of patience for the viewer”⁴⁷ and a work “with an uneven mood, whose dramaturgy was rife with vacillation and whose philosophy was false [...], [straddling the fence] between truth and avoidance, between the courage of analysis and the weakness of synthesis,” although “not cast in a mould [...], formally interesting and with good acting”⁴⁸; as a picture whose “conflicts [...] appear fanciful,”⁴⁹ and “its world [...] is untrue, although its circumstances are all but authentic.”⁵⁰ Finally, it was described as a work whose authors “believe more in melodrama, psychological trivialities and moralising than observation”⁵¹ and display a propensity for didacticism, patronisation and psychological schematism.⁵² *School for Fathers*, in turn, was lambasted by a critic for its “numerous mistakes and weaknesses,” especially its “didacticism with the inevitable first-grade moral lesson at the end [...] [while] there is no room for first-graders in the cinematic arts.”⁵³ *Hic Sunt Leones* was panned by critics for, among other things, squandering an “interesting conundrum” due to “psychological primitivism, naive commentary and weak dramaturgy whose highlight is lighting and putting out cigarettes.”⁵⁴

⁴¹ K. Dębnicki, “Zamiast ‘Po kinie’. Potrzeba delikatności uczuć,” *Film*, 1960, no. 34, p. 3.

⁴² A. Ledóchowski, “Sprawa ludzkiego szczęścia,” *Ekran*, 1961, no. 21, p. 6.

⁴³ B. Michałek, “Brukselski dziennik,” *Film*, 1958, no. 25, pp. 12–13.

⁴⁴ “Zapraszamy na polskie ekrany,” *Ekran*, 1958, no. 28, pp. 8–9.

⁴⁵ A. Helman, “Celuloidowa maska życia. II FFF Warszawa 1959,” *Ekran*, 1959, no. 18, p. 7.

⁴⁶ T. Kowalski, “Diabelski wynalazek,” *Film*, 1958, no. 35, p. 8.

⁴⁷ W. Cybulski, “Zapiski kinomana. ‘Przystanek na peryferiach,’” *Dziennik Polski*, 1960, no. 15, p. 4.

⁴⁸ K. Dębnicki, “Sprawy trochę znikąd,” *Film*, 1960, no. 8, p. 4.

⁴⁹ “Idziemy do kina,” *Film*, 1960, no. 4, p. 3.

⁵⁰ W. Leśniewski, “W kinie. ‘Przystanek na peryferiach’ – Kadára i Klosa,” *Życie Literackie*, 1960, no. 6, p. 8.

⁵¹ j.p., z.p. [J. Płażewski, Z. Pitera], “Niebawem na ekranach,” *Przegląd Kulturalny*, 1960, no. 3, p. 6.

⁵² W. Cybulski, “Zapiski kinomana. ‘Przystanek...’”

⁵³ A. Kumor, “Elementarz z barwną okładką,” *Ekran*, 1958, no. 39, p. 6.

⁵⁴ “Recenzjyki – Tu są lwy,” *Film*, 1959, no. 10, p. 5. Some critics were, however, able to perceive the advantages and the sufficient “slice of veracity in contemporary matters” shown by Krška’s film – cf. j.p., z.p. [J. Płażewski, Z. Pitera], “W lutym na ekranach,” *Przegląd Kulturalny*, 1959, no. 6, p. 7.

All in all, the attitude of Polish critics towards the achievements of Czechoslovak film-making in the late 1950s and early 1960 can be summarised as follows: Czechoslovak films were appreciated for tackling “minor” affairs of ordinary people,⁵⁵ painting deep psychological portraits of characters and the ability to “reveal the conflicts and dramas simmering underneath the veil of ordinary reality,”⁵⁶ supported with a keen sense of observation and social realism, as well as warmth, lyricism and peculiar humour. Polish critics noted the technical efficiency and impeccable technique, good acting, and “agility and inventiveness,”⁵⁷ but at the same time often downplayed Czechoslovak films as “too easy to watch”⁵⁸ and saddled with “sluggish thinking.”⁵⁹ Czechoslovak cinema was reproached for its “decrepit style,”⁶⁰ remaining “usually cold, artificial, rather naively didactic,”⁶¹ “full of naivety”⁶² and “cheesy [...], unnecessarily moralistic in places.”⁶³

The Polish press noted the changes taking place in Czechoslovak film-making, even speaking about its “renaissance,” but immediately qualified that this meant “a renaissance [...] not venturing beyond the traditional canon.”⁶⁴ The critics followed new tendencies in Czechoslovak cinema with attention and sympathy but voiced their disappointment with every new title, saying, for example, that “instead of a breakthrough work, the Czechs again displayed their fine techniques, of which we indeed never had the slightest doubt,”⁶⁵ or that “this is another ambitious film whose creators ran out of energy.”⁶⁶ For this reason, the most typical and frequent adjectives used at that time in texts about Czechoslovak cinema include words such as “a cultured effort,”⁶⁷ “solidly produced, but without flair,”⁶⁸ “so-so,”⁶⁹ “well made,”⁷⁰ etc.

It was in such times and circumstances that *Smugglers of Death* came to the screen in Poland.

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⁵⁵ Cf. e.g. ad. ha., “Pięte koło u wozu,” *Wiadomości Filmowe*, 1960, no. 7, p. 14.

⁵⁶ (Ł), “Uciezka przed cieniem,” *Wiadomości Filmowe*, 1960, no. 29, pp. 8–9.

⁵⁷ Al-Ka, “W kinie TV. Przybrana córka,” *Ekran*, 1961, no. 40, p. 15.

⁵⁸ J. Skwara, “Za wcześniej...”

⁵⁹ B. Michałek, “VII Festiwal Festiwali Filmowych,” *Film*, 1964, no. 3, p. 7.

⁶⁰ L. Armatys, “Notatnik wenecki 1961. XXII MRR w Wenecji,” *Ekran*, 1961, no. 39, p. 11.

⁶¹ B. Michałek, “Co się zmienia...”

⁶² “Idziemy do kina,” *Film*, 1960, no. 25, p. 3.

⁶³ W. Cybulski, “Zapiski kinomana. ‘Srebrny wiatr,’” *Dziennik Polski*, 1958, no. 164, p. 3.

⁶⁴ j.b., “W salonie Złotego Lwa,” *Film*, 1958, no. 38, p. 13.

⁶⁵ K. Dębowski, “Effeł na ekranie,” *Ekran*, 1958, no. 21, p. 12.

⁶⁶ S.H.M., “Z naszych ekranów. ‘W rozterce,’” *Słowo Ludu. Magazyn Niedzielny*, 1960, no. 43, p. 11.

⁶⁷ T. Kowalski, “Wenecja 61. Od naszego specjalnego wysłannika,” *Film*, 1961, no. 37, p. 13.

⁶⁸ J. Peltz, “Karlový Vary po raz XIII. Od naszego specjalnego wysłannika,” *Film*, 1962, no. 26, p. 12–13.

⁶⁹ Aleksandra [L. Kydryński], “Listy o filmie,” *Przekrój*, 1958, no. 680, p. 13.

⁷⁰ “Idziemy do kina,” *Film*, 1961, no. 15, p. 15.

A succinct but competent reflection of the preferences and priorities of Polish film critics were the scores awarded to films coming to the big screen announced in the regular column of the *Film* weekly that was entitled “Dziewięciu gniewnych ludzi” (“Nine Angry Men”).⁷¹ Let us see, therefore, how the Czechoslovak films cited above were valued there. As it turns out, *Invention for Destruction* not only received a high average score of 5.6 points, ranking among “eminent” works,⁷² but, moreover, thanks to that note, became the best-rated Czechoslovak film in the entire history of the first stage (between 1958–1973) when the “Nine Angry Men” was a regular feature of the weekly. The film was thus ranked ahead of such New Wave gems as *Something Different* (*O něčem jiném*, Věra Chytilová, 1963; Polish: *O czymś innym*) and *Black Peter* (*Černý Petr*, Miloš Forman, 1963; Polish: *Czarny Piotruś*), with average scores of 5.4, as well as of *Loves of a Blonde* (*Lásky jedné plavovlásky*, Miloš Forman, 1965; Polish: *Miłość blondynki*) and *Closely Observed Trains* (*Ostře sledované vlaky*, Jiří Menzel, 1966; Polish: *Pociągi pod specjalnym nadzorem*), which scored 5.0 each. Likewise, *Romeo, Juliet and the Darkness* received a relatively high average score of 4.8 (i.e. a nearly “very good” film), similar to, for example, *Diamonds of the Night* (*Démanty noci*, Jan Němec, 1964; Polish: *Diamenty nocy*) and *Intimate Lighting* (*Intimní osvětlení*, Ivan Passer, 1965; Polish: *Intymne oświetlenie*). In contrast, other Czechoslovak films screened in Poland between 1958 and 1960 that were rated highly by the “Angry Men” also included *School for Fathers* (average score 4.5, but watched only by two of the nine critics), *Desire* (average score 4.4) and *Wolf Trap* (4.0). No other title that can be classified as belonging to the renascent Czechoslovak cinema in the late 1950s and the New Wave had resonated so well with or been rated equally highly by Polish critics. *Awakening* (*Probuzení*, Jiří Krejčík, 1959; Polish: *Przebudzenie*) scored an average of 3.4; *At the Terminus*, 3.2; and *Hic Sunt Leones*, a middling 3.0. All these works were therefore considered by Polish critics as, at best, little more than “average.” Similar or greater admiration was shown at that time for such admittedly second-rate films as *Of Things Supernatural* (Polish: *Nieziemskie historie*, which the “angry men” rated at 3.8 on average); the animated *Creation of the World* (*Stvoření světa*, Eduard Hofman, 1957; Polish: *Stworzenie świata*, which was rated at 3.7); the children’s film *Games and Dreams* (*Hry a sny*, Milan Vošmik, 1958; Polish: *Marzenia i zabawy* – 3.5); the criminal story *A 105-Percent Alibi* (3.4); and *Summer* (*Léto*, K.M. Walló, 1948 – 3.0).

⁷¹ The “nine angry men” rated films according to a six-point scale: a score of 6 meant an “excellent/superb” picture; 5, “very good”; 4, “good”; 3, “average/debatable”; 2, “poor”; and 1, “disastrous”. In the year when *Smugglers of Death* premiered, the “nine” were composed of the following film critics: Leon Bukowiecki, Stanisław Grzelecki, Zygmunt Kałużyński, Tadeusz Kowalski, Bolesław Michalek, Zbigniew Pitera, Jerzy Płazewski, Jerzy Toeplitz and Aleksander Jackiewicz (for more see K. Szymański, “Jak ‘Dziewięciu...’”).

⁷² The same average score of 5.6 was given by the “angry men” to, for example, 8½ by Federico Fellini (*Otto e mezzo*, 1963), *The Naked Island* by Kaneto Shindō (*Hadaka no shima*, 1960) and *October* by Sergei Eisenstein (*Октябрь*, 1928).

Smugglers of Death was the “winner” in its category, rated the highest among Czechoslovak titles coming to Polish cinemas in 1960 with an average of 3.8 points, identical to the aforesaid *Of Things Supernatural*.⁷³ Kachyňa’s work was viewed by five out of the nine “angry” critics: Leon Bukowiecki considered the film “very good” and gave it a high score of 5, Tadeusz Kowalski and Zbigniew Pitera settled for a score of 4, rating it “good,” while Zygmunt Kałużyński and Stanisław Grzelecki, with a mere 3 points, called it “average.”⁷⁴

In this way, *Smugglers of Death* ranked 13th out of the 190 Czechoslovak films reviewed by the “Nine Angry Men” column between 1958 and 1970, together with such titles as *I Survived My Own Death; The Sunshine in a Net* (*Slnko v sieti*, Štefan Uher, 1962; Polish: *Słońce w sieci*); *The Stolen Airship* (*Ukradená vzducholoď*, Karel Zeman, 1966; Polish: *Skradziony balon*); Kachyňa’s *Stress of Youth* (Polish: *Zmartwienia*); and *No Laughing Matter* (*Nikdo se nebude smát*, Hynek Bočan, 1965; Polish: *Nikt się śmiać nie będzie*).⁷⁵ The film’s score was higher than the scores earned by such leading achievements of Czechoslovak film-making as *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* (*Valerie a týden divů*, Jaromil Jireš, 1970; Polish: *Waleria i tydzień cudów*) and *The Fifth Horseman Is Fear (...a pátý jezdec je Strach*, Zbyněk Brynych, 1964; Polish: *Piąty jeździec Apokalipsy*), both of which were scored 3.7 by the “Angry Men.” Other such films include *Saddled With Five Girls* (*Pět holek na krku*, Evald Schorm, 1967; Polish: *Intrygantki*) and *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (*Návrat ztraceného syna*, Evald Schorm, 1966; Polish: *Powrót syna marnotrawnego*) with 3.5 points; *Adrift* (*Touha zvaná Anada*, Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos, 1969; Polish: *Pożądanie zwane Anada*); and *Oil Lamps* (*Petrolejové lampy*, Juraj Herz, 1971; Polish: *Lampy naftowe*) with 3.3 points; as well as the already mentioned *Hic Sunt Leones* or *The Silver Wind* with 3.0 points; *Midnight Mass* (*Polnočná omša*, Jiří Krejčík, 1962; Polish: *Dzwony na pasterkę*) with 2.5 points; *I, the Distressing God* (*Já truchlivý Bůh*, Antonín Kachlík, 1969; Polish: *Teoria uwodzenia*) with 2.3 points, etc.

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The previous and, as I already mentioned, first film of Kachyňa to have been shown on Polish screens, titled *It Will All Be Over Tonight* (Polish: *Nocne spotkanie*), was not received favourably. Critics wrote that it demonstrated the important “issue of keeping alert in the army through a naive, uninteresting, shoddy

⁷³ For comparison, among all titles premiered in 1960, the highest scores given by the “angry men” were for *Wild Strawberries* (average 5.9) and *Seven Samurai* (5.5).

⁷⁴ “Dziewięciu gniewnych ludzi,” *Film*, 1960, no. 38, p. 3.

⁷⁵ On the other hand, among global film blockbusters an average score on par with the *Smugglers of Death* was awarded by the “angry men” to, for example, *The Paradine Case* by Alfred Hitchcock (1947), *Senso* by Luchino Visconti (1954), *The Guns of Navarone* by J. Lee Thompson (1961), *Tora! Tora! Tora!* by Richard Fleischer, the fourth and fifth parts of *Liberation* by Yuri Ozerov (*Освобождение*, 1969–1970), etc.

romance.”⁷⁶ On the other hand, *Smugglers of Death*, though with some important qualifications, enjoyed an unquestionably much better reception overall. Whereas in the Poland of 1955, *It Will All Be Over Tonight* was still viewed in the context of “attempts of imperialist intelligence services” that were foiled by the comrades of the Czechoslovak Army and the perfidious games of “bankrupt Western espionage agencies” using “stale, poor man’s vamps” (note that the reviews contained a surprising melange of ideological perspectives, genre analysis and references to pre-war films starring Greta Garbo and Marlena Dietrich),⁷⁷ in 1960 *Smugglers of Death* was already perceived and discussed mainly as “only” an “attractive,”⁷⁸ “cleverly directed”⁷⁹ piece of entertainment depicting “dramatic adventures”⁸⁰ “in an espionage setting.”⁸¹ Basically, *Smugglers of Death* was considered as typical of the adventure and thriller genre⁸² and described as “an adventure film,”⁸³ “a thriller,”⁸⁴ or “adventure and thrill picture.”⁸⁵

The critics noted that Kachyňa’s work was based on “authentic events” that took place in the winter of 1948⁸⁶ and stressed that it contained a “meticulous” depiction of the first post-war years.⁸⁷ Somewhat inconsistently, they wrote that “the plot unfolds in a small border village used as a base for smuggling trips,”⁸⁸ that the film is “the story of a guard post lost among the swamps,”⁸⁹ and that it successfully “depicts the hard, devoted life of border guards in a small town.”⁹⁰ In a brief, military style, the journalists emphasised that it was “a very difficult border section,”⁹¹ where “a meagre border guard company battles a gang of smugglers and spies,”⁹² and that their service involved “extreme responsibility and danger.”⁹³

However, all these phrases mentioning “border areas,” “foreign countries,” “battles of border guard troops,” “gangs of smugglers,” “spies,” “responsibility” and “danger” are succinct and enigmatic. It appears as if there was no need to

⁷⁶ Z. Pitera, “Nasze recenzje. Nocne spotkania,” *Film*, 1955, no. 51–52, p. 20.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ L. Bukowiecki, op. cit.

⁷⁹ “Idziemy do kina,” *Film*, 1960, no. 35, p. 3.

⁸⁰ “Filmy nowozakupione...”

⁸¹ Al-Ka, “Nowe zakupy filmowe,” *Ekran*, 1960, no. 21, p. 2.

⁸² “Przeczytaj, zanim...”

⁸³ L. Bukowiecki, op. cit.

⁸⁴ “Idziemy do kina,” *Film*, 1960, no. 35, p. 3; (ś), “Przez zieloną...”; “Przeczytaj, zanim...”

⁸⁵ “Idziemy do kina,” *Film*, 1960, no. 35, p. 3; L. Bukowiecki, op. cit.; W. Cybulski, “Zapiski kinomana. ‘Przez zieloną...’”; (ś), “Przez zieloną...”

⁸⁶ (y), “Król Szumawy.”

⁸⁷ J. Skwara, “Za wcześniej...”

⁸⁸ “Idziemy do kina,” *Film*, 1960, no. 35, p. 3.

⁸⁹ WIDZ, op. cit.

⁹⁰ W. Cybulski, “Zapiski kinomana. ‘Przez zieloną...’”

⁹¹ (y), “Król Szumawy.”

⁹² “Przeczytaj, zanim...”

⁹³ (J. Jur.), op. cit.

explain to Polish readers precisely what foreign country was being referred to and what the smuggling and espionage was about. Only two texts contain some fragmentary details: a review in *Tygodnik Powszechny* specifically suggested that the plot of the film is set “at the Czechoslovak–West German border in 1948,”⁹⁴ while Skwara’s review in *Film* mentions one of the film’s subplots, a dilemma faced by the protagonist, who must choose between staying in Czechoslovakia and fleeing to West Germany with her smuggling husband.⁹⁵

Thus, the Polish critical reception of *Smugglers of Death* is enveloped in a certain mystery and definite shift in emphasis. Kachyňa’s work, which, according to Jan Lukeš,⁹⁶ should be classified as belonging to a wave of films which in the late 1950s and 1960s (following the Banská Bystrica affair⁹⁷) revived the mood of suspicions, obsession with espionage and ideological confrontation with the West,⁹⁸ was discussed in Poland mostly in genre terms, almost without mentioning its ideological sense and origin. According to Polish reviewers, *Smugglers of Death* satisfied “the still felt dearth of so-called average, mass films which would be communicable and simple and afford everyone pleasant entertainment without sacrificing artistic values.”⁹⁹ In light of these opinions, the success of Kachyňa’s film was no surprise, because the film contained “all features that for years have been unfailingly requisite for attracting large groups of cinema lovers”; namely, a small border village surrounded by swamps, gangs of smugglers, border guards and a romance plot.¹⁰⁰ In a word, the picture was advertised in Poland as a “top-notch thriller,”¹⁰¹ or, with some exaggeration, as “the best and most attractive adventure film produced in Czechoslovakia.”¹⁰²

⁹⁴ “Przeczytaj, zanim...”

⁹⁵ J. Skwara, “Za wcześniej...”

⁹⁶ J. Lukeš, *Diagnózy času. Český a slovenský poválečný film (1945–2012)*, Praha, 2013, p. 96.

⁹⁷ At a conference following the 1st Festival of Czechoslovak Films in Banská Bystrica (22–28 February 1959) the then minister of education and culture František Kahuda severely criticised the liberalising tendencies of Czechoslovak cinema in 1957 and 1958, manifest in abandoning the socialist realism framework and a critical discussion of contemporary topics. The party brought out the guns mostly against four films (which were consequently shelved): *Three Wishes (Tři přání)* by Kadar and Klos, *Hic Sunt Leones* by Krška, *The Star Travels South (Hvězda jede na jih)* by Oldřich Lipski and the medium-length *The End of the Fortune-Teller (Konec jasnovidce)* by Vladimír Svitáček and Ján Roháč. The Banská Bystrica conference was followed by a wave of organisational and personal repressions, with one team of artists disbanded, several employees dismissed from the Barrandov film studio and others sent for “resocialisation” courses; Kadar and Klos were slapped with a two-year creative ban, Krška was pressured to retire, etc. The party thus suppressed the first symptoms of the thaw and restored order in film-making, halting the decentralisation and liberalisation tendencies for two years. The ice started to break again only when the New Wave surged in the early 1960s.

⁹⁸ J. Lukeš, op. cit., s. 96.

⁹⁹ WIDZ, op. cit.

¹⁰⁰ (š), “Przez zieloną...”

¹⁰¹ (J. Jur.), op. cit.

¹⁰² L. Bukowiecki, op. cit.

It should be noted here that Polish film critics engaged in a perennial struggle to promote valuable domestic entertainment cinema and efficiently produced genre films, especially on contemporary topics. The Czechoslovak achievements in this respect were viewed with envy, and complaints that “the Czech manage to do what we don’t” resurfaced almost with every premiered comedy, thriller or children’s film produced by Poland’s southern neighbours. Still in the 1950s, Irena Merz showed appreciation for Czech film-makers who “did not abandon thrillers” and “successfully depicted some flagrant symptoms of ongoing class struggle in their unjustly condemned – I do not hesitate to use that label – crime films.”¹⁰³ Likewise, in times when films not just such as *Smugglers of Death*, but also *A 105-Percent Alibi*, *The Fifth Division* (*Páté oddělení*, Jindřich Polák, 1960; Polish: *Piąty wydział*) or *Theresa* (*Tereza*, Pavel Blumenfeld, 1961; Polish: *Teresa prowadzi śledztwo*) graced Polish screens, reviewers compared paltry domestic achievements in entertainment cinema (“the Polish skeleton in a closet”¹⁰⁴) with the successes enjoyed by Czechoslovak directors. Among other things, they wrote that it was indeed noticeable that “Czechoslovak film producers specialise in genres much in demand by the mass audience, which we are sorely lacking” (i.e. in children’s and crime films¹⁰⁵) and that “we are only making our first larger-scale attempts in this area,”¹⁰⁶ while the Czechs “with admirable perseverance and scorn for death systematically produce [...] crime films, some good, some less so – but films all the same.”¹⁰⁷ It was stressed that “Czech film-makers have had a respectable tradition of producing crime films,”¹⁰⁸ “have specialised in these matters for a long time,”¹⁰⁹ and “are more adept and efficient in producing crime films than we are.”¹¹⁰ What was especially admired in Poland was that “the Czechs set their cameras on the present and [...] aim to suffuse all film genres – crime, social drama, comedy or melodrama – with it.”¹¹¹ Such views and – there’s no denying it – resentments also affected, rightly or wrongly, the manner in which *Smugglers of Death* was received in Poland as an example of an “ambitious” thriller.

As an aside, it is worth noting a certain interesting and symptomatic difference: while *Smugglers of Death* was successful and acclaimed in Czechoslovakia, becoming a “cult film” both for the generation growing up in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and for their successors,¹¹² in Poland no title from the same era, shot

¹⁰³ I. Merz, op. cit., p. 30.

¹⁰⁴ A. Horoszczyk, “Alibi nie wystarczy. O czechosłowackim ‘kryminale,’” *Ekran*, 1962, no. 30, p. 6.

¹⁰⁵ L. Pijanowski, “Nowe filmy czechosłowackie,” *Nowa Kultura*, 1961, no. 47, p. 8.

¹⁰⁶ W. Cybulski, “Zapiski kinomana. ‘Piąty wydział,’” *Dziennik Polski*, 1963, no. 11, p. 6.

¹⁰⁷ A. Horoszczyk, “Alibi nie wystarczy.”

¹⁰⁸ “105% alibi,” *Wiadomości Filmowe*, 1960, no. 28, pp. 8–9.

¹⁰⁹ j.p. [J. Płażewski], “Na ekranach,” *Przegląd Kulturalny*, 1963, no. 2, p. 9.

¹¹⁰ j.p., z.p. [J. Płażewski, Z. Pitera], “Na ekranach,” *Przegląd Kulturalny*, 1962, no. 32, p. 9.

¹¹¹ W. Cybulski, “Zapiski kinomana. ‘Przez zieloną...’”

¹¹² Kachyňa’s film was a smash hit in Czechoslovak cinemas: between the premiere on 25 December 1959 and the end of June 1960 it had an audience of 2,779,000 (K. Morava, “Je možné zastavit

in similar conditions and containing a mix of ideology and entertainment similar to Kachyňa's work (such as *Shadow* [*Cień*] by Jerzy Kawalerowicz, 1956, or *The Depot of the Dead* [*Baza ludzi umarłych*] by Czesław Petelski, 1958), resounded as vividly and persistently, or enjoyed a similar cult status.

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Polish critics generally assessed *Smugglers of Death* as “an interesting film attracting the viewer's interest.”¹¹³ The theme of the picture (which, they wrote, “undoubtedly had some charm in it”¹¹⁴) appeared to them similar to such communist-era “adventure films” as the Polish *Devil's Ravine* (*Czarci żleb*, Aldo Vergano and Tadeusz Kański, 1949)¹¹⁵ or the Soviet *A Fortress in the Mountains* (*Zacmaba v zopax*, Konstantin Yudin, 1953; Polish: *Strażnica w górach*).¹¹⁶ In turn, according to the reviewers, the film's mood was “set in the French manner,”¹¹⁷ and the austere scenery and appearances of post-war years recalled *Story of G.I. Joe* by William A. Wellman (1945) or “certain Soviet titles.”¹¹⁸

In reviews, the value of Kachyňa's work was ascribed mainly to four factors: “the thrills, a mysterious mood, the solid work of the director and the skill of the cameraman.”¹¹⁹ The critics wrote that “the suspenseful plot unfolds artfully [...] [and that] the viewer leaves the cinema with the pleasant awareness of being treated well.”¹²⁰ The general assessment was that “as far as the plot is concerned, the attempt was successful, and the film does create some suspense”¹²¹ and evokes emotional

pokles návštěvnosti kin?,” *Film a Doba*, 1962, no. 4, p. 198), which grew to 4,100,916 by the end of 1995 (V. Březina, *Lexikon českého filmu. 2000 filmů 1930–1996*, Praha, 1996, p. 188). The cult status of *Smugglers of Death*, both during the communist era and after its collapse, is acknowledged by P. Bednařík, “Strážci hranic ve filmu,” *Literární Noviny* of 29 May 2013, <http://literarky.cz/kultura/film/14908-straci-hranic-vefilmu> (accessed: 20 December 2018) and also proven by existing traditions of trekking in the footsteps of the King of Šumava (cf. ak, “Král Šumavy se vrací,” *KAM po česku* of 2 November 2014, <https://www.kampocesku.cz/clanek/15697/kral-sumavy-se-vraci> (accessed: 20 December 2018); “Po stopách krále Šumavy,” *Cestujeme Šumavou*, <http://www.cestujemesumavou.cz/po-stopach-krale-sumavy> (accessed: 20 December 2018), etc. On the other hand, when the film was broadcast again on Czech TV after the Velvet Revolution, for example, under the title *A harmless detective flick or the apology of communism?*, it met with protests and hot debates, almost as violent and universal as those attending the screening of the infamous pro-regime series *Thirty Cases of Major Zeman* (*30 případů majora Zemana*, dir. Jiří Sequens, 1974) – cf. J. Kohoutek, *Veřejná polemika o uvedení seriálu Třicet případů majora Zemana v České televizi po roce 1989 (diskurzivní analýza českého celostátního tisku)*. (*Magisterská diplomová práce*), Brno, 2011, pp. 56–58.

¹¹³ (J. Jur.), op. cit.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ j.p., z.p., “Na ekranach,” *Przegląd Kulturalny*, 1960; (J. Jur.), op. cit.

¹¹⁶ (J. Jur.), op. cit.

¹¹⁷ J. Skwara, “Za wcześniej...”

¹¹⁸ W. Cybulski, “Zapiski kinomana. ‘Przez zieloną...’”

¹¹⁹ (J. Jur.), op. cit.

¹²⁰ WIDZ, op. cit.

¹²¹ W. Cybulski, “Zapiski kinomana. ‘Przez zieloną...’”

reactions from the audience, because the director and cameraman “masterly utilise the border swamp scenery, expertly combining all the thrilling tricks of gunfight poetics.”¹²² All of this was summarised by a statement that, as for the adventures and thrills, “the picture could well serve as a prime example of the genre.”¹²³

In addition, critics were mostly unanimous in pointing out that Kachyňa’s work suggestively “recreates the mood of mystery and depicts the hard, devoted life of border guards in a small town,”¹²⁴ “especially as the very scenery in which the events unfold (night, fog, swamps) provides a suitable setting.”¹²⁵ “The mood of terror and mystery [...] [was] skilfully produced [...], [and] the image of the first post-war years is frugal and meticulous, as if patiently chiselled out.”¹²⁶

In the Polish press, *Smugglers of Death* was also presented as the work of a “young and ambitious”¹²⁷ and “proficient”¹²⁸ director, as a picture in which “we see not only a glimpse of life, but also feel the hand of an artist who is able to give the right sense to every detail.”¹²⁹ The critics wrote, for example, that Kachyňa, “skilfully merging more and more thrilling plots, keeps on revealing new details to us that combine into a logical whole”¹³⁰ and that this “proves that he has mastered the film-making craft well.”¹³¹ The director was praised for “solid work” and a “high standard of art [...] often exceeding [...] the ‘good enough’ mediocrity.”¹³²

The other co-creator of the film, whose work was as much discussed by Polish critics as the director’s skills, was the cameraman, Josef Illík, “a man of considerable inventiveness.”¹³³ In this respect, however, reviewers were usually limited to general observations that “the film is shot well,”¹³⁴ that the work’s special value lies in “original shots,”¹³⁵ or that “the cameraman’s splendid work stands out.”¹³⁶ Some, however, tried to go into greater detail about their impressions and produce more than a trivial assessment, writing, for example, that “the mysterious mood is even more immersive thanks to the shooting [...] The night-time scenes, taking place in swamps, in rain or fog, are particularly interesting and reveal a highly skilled cameraman,”¹³⁷ or “well-considered camera settings, beautifully combined

¹²² j.p., z.p., “Na ekranach”, *Przegląd Kulturalny*, 1960.

¹²³ “Przeczytaj, zanim...”

¹²⁴ W. Cybulski, “Zapiski kinomana. ‘Przez zieloną...’”

¹²⁵ „Przeczytaj, zanim...”

¹²⁶ J. Skwara, “Za wcześniej...”

¹²⁷ L. Bukowiecki, op. cit.

¹²⁸ W. Cybulski, “Zapiski kinomana. ‘Przez zieloną...’”

¹²⁹ J. Skwara, “Za wcześniej...”

¹³⁰ (J. Jur.), op. cit.

¹³¹ (ś), “Przez zieloną...”

¹³² WIDZ, op. cit.

¹³³ W. Cybulski, “Zapiski kinomana. ‘Przez zieloną...’”

¹³⁴ “Idziemy do kina,” *Film*, 1960, no. 35, p. 15.

¹³⁵ (ś), “Przez zieloną...”

¹³⁶ L. Bukowiecki, op. cit.

¹³⁷ (J. Jur.), op. cit.

frames, the ability to use chiaroscuro that works best at night [...] are the hallmarks of a real cameraman.”¹³⁸

Eventually, after those more or less detailed technical remarks, critics could make an appeal: “remember the names of Kachyňa and Illík – we will certainly be hearing them again.”¹³⁹ On the other hand, other aspects of filming work in *Smugglers of Death* were mostly disregarded in Polish film criticism. We can find only two, rather off-hand (but favourable) opinions concerning the actors, which, however, can hardly be defined as particularly revelatory: “the acting [is] up to good, reliable standards,”¹⁴⁰ and “the actors [...] convincingly portray their roles of ‘ordinary’ people facing uncommon circumstances.”¹⁴¹

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The reviewers cited the advantages of *Smugglers of Death* mentioned above, but ultimately were not uniformly positive in praising the film. Most voiced disappointment because of a squandered “opportunity to produce an ambitious thriller.”¹⁴² While some noted the strengths of Kachyňa’s work, others also observed “greater, unfortunately unfulfilled expectations”¹⁴³ and the frustrated “ambitions of producing a thriller with greater intellectual value.”¹⁴⁴ The critics stated that “it is a pity to waste all these opportunities provided by the subject and so smoothly glossed over in the film,”¹⁴⁵ but varied in discovering the reason for this lack of fulfilment. Some thought that the picture would have been good “if it kept strictly to adventures and thrills,” because “tacking on a first-sight love motif between a guard newly arrived at the post and the wife of the local ‘king of smugglers’ complicated and fractured the tragic conflict as a whole, saddling it with the weight of cheap melodrama.”¹⁴⁶ Others, on the contrary, asserted that “going beyond a mere thriller” was necessary.¹⁴⁷

The charges against the film were mostly that the “tragedy of fate,” “tragedy of choice [...] had no colour in it,”¹⁴⁸ and that the “the love tragedy thread, introduced with a fanfare, peters out as scenes pass by [...] and the planned lyricism gives way to sentimentalism, which moreover ‘fashionably’ stands out against the stark military background.”¹⁴⁹ In addition, critics observed that although “it is obvious

¹³⁸ (ś), “Przez zieloną...”

¹³⁹ W. Cybulski, “Zapiski kinomana. ‘Przez zieloną...’”

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ (J. Jur.), op. cit.

¹⁴² J. Skwara, “Za wcześniej...”

¹⁴³ W. Cybulski, “Zapiski kinomana. ‘Przez zieloną...’”

¹⁴⁴ J. Skwara, “Za wcześniej...”; see also: “Zapiski kinomana. ‘Przez zieloną...’”; WIDZ, op. cit.

¹⁴⁵ J. Skwara, “Za wcześniej...”

¹⁴⁶ “Przeczytaj, zanim...”

¹⁴⁷ J. Skwara, “Za wcześniej...”

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ W. Cybulski, “Zapiski kinomana. ‘Przez zieloną...’”

that the producers made an effort [...] to give the characters more psychological depth,¹⁵⁰ “the attempts to distinguish [them] [...] are reduced to simplified traits (one likes to write letters, another plays the saxophone...)”¹⁵¹

As already noted, most reviews rated the “solid work” of the director and cameraman favourably, but two reviewers voiced essentially critical reservations. Skwara asserted, among other things, that “more than psychology, the director’s interests lean towards the over-the-hill ‘little neorealism’: living in a border guard post in small town. And then there’s the inevitable tribute towards the cheap conventions of a thriller: the aura of terror and mystery surrounding the elusive ‘King of Šumava.’”¹⁵² Władysław Cybulski, in turn, considered that set against the border scenery and the reality of military life, “the unexpected [...] artistry of certain takes and the grim poetry of exterior shots may have aimed too high, and at times even appear pretentious.”¹⁵³

Eventually, *Smugglers of Death* was received by the Polish press as “an otherwise successful picture,”¹⁵⁴ that “though well-intentioned [...] does not propose anything new. It is merely a recapitulation of certain explorations, a gesture of resignation.”¹⁵⁵ Kachyňa’s work was therefore summarised as “in general, an interesting second-rank picture”¹⁵⁶ which “can actually pass for an achievement compared to other local productions.”¹⁵⁷ In a word: “Tension, emotions – but routine.”¹⁵⁸ But others wrote: “after all, it is decidedly too early for resignation,”¹⁵⁹ because “the viewer feels that he is entitled to expect more from such gifted film-makers in the future.”¹⁶⁰

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Such was the reception of *Smugglers of Death* in 1960, immediately after the film premiered on Polish screens. In later years, when titles such as *Vertigo* (*Závrať*, 1962; Polish: *Spojrzenie z okna*), *The High Wall* (*Vysoká zeď*, 1964; Polish: *Za białym murem*) or *Long Live the Republic!* (*Ať žije republika*, 1965; Polish: *Ja, Julinka i koniec wojny*) and, still later, the New Wave films reached cinemas, the position and reception of Czechoslovak film-making changed abruptly, and both *Smugglers of Death* and other early output of Kachyňa were completely forgotten. It would be more fitting to say, however, that since that time the director’s achievements in

¹⁵⁰ “Przeczytaj, zanim...”

¹⁵¹ W. Cybulski, “Zapiski kinomana. ‘Przez zieloną...’”

¹⁵² J. Skwara, “Za wcześniej...”

¹⁵³ W. Cybulski, “Zapiski kinomana. ‘Przez zieloną...’”

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ J. Skwara, “Za wcześniej...”

¹⁵⁶ W. Cybulski, “Zapiski kinomana. ‘Przez zieloną...’”

¹⁵⁷ “Przeczytaj, zanim...”

¹⁵⁸ j.p., z.p., “Na ekranach,” *Przegląd Kulturalny*, 1960.

¹⁵⁹ J. Skwara, “Za wcześniej...”

¹⁶⁰ W. Cybulski, “Zapiski kinomana. ‘Przez zieloną...’”

the 1950s were ignored in reviews and kept under wraps almost without exception.

In the 1960s, 1970s and subsequent decades up to the present, Kachyňa's work has been treated essentially as if it began with entering into a partnership with screenwriter Jan Procházka and shooting *Stress of Youth*.¹⁶¹ *Smugglers of Death* and other 1950s works were mentioned in texts only in passing, especially in comprehensive guidebooks on Czechoslovak cinema or in biographical and filmography notes. Basically, in the 1960s, and particularly in the 1970s, after the Prague Spring was suppressed, no one attempted (or was allowed) to discuss *Coach to Vienna (Wóz do Wiednia)*¹⁶² or *The Nun's Night (Noc panny młodej)*. Kachyňa was then written about in Poland as a leading "lyricist of the screen who [...] observes the world through the eyes of children, the most sensitive of all beings."¹⁶³ He was regarded not merely as an artist who owed his mastery and greatest successes ("equally at home and abroad") to children's and teenage films,¹⁶⁴ but also as a "director ranking among the world's most eminent specialists in this area."¹⁶⁵ Thus, the "normalised" Kachyňa was seen in Poland mostly as the author of "a series of beautifully composed, credible portraits of child psychology,"¹⁶⁶ and successful films that "subtly revealed the world of child feelings,"¹⁶⁷ inspired by "the experiences of children on the threshold of puberty."¹⁶⁸ The director's signature features, according to Polish critics, were his "intimate realism and poetry"¹⁶⁹ and "a certain kind of touching simplicity."¹⁷⁰

I mentioned earlier that in 1960 the manner of perceiving and presenting *Smugglers of Death* in the Polish press suggested that the ideological sense of this film was too "rough" and too steeped in socialist realism for these times,

¹⁶¹ Cf. e.g. J. Skwara, "Ballada o zakochanej dziewczynie," *Film*, 1964, no. 37, p. 5; pel [J. Peltz], "Filmy, o których się mówi. Wóz do Wiednia," *Film*, 1966, no. 35, p. 3; B. Michałek, "Ojciec, koń i dwie armie," *Film*, 1966, no. 44, p. 5; R. Marszałek, "Nauka chodzenia," *Film*, 1969, no. 26, p. 5; L. Pijanowski, "Filmy, które widzieliśmy. Nie jesteśmy śmieszni," *Kino*, 1970, no. 2, pp. 56–57, etc. A peculiar – and symptomatic of the selection processes I described earlier – choice of Kachyňa's best works (*Long Live the Republic!* and *Death of the Beautiful Deer (Smrt krásných srnců*, 1986) was made by *Gazeta Wyborcza* in an obituary following the director's death: T. Grabiński, "Zmarł Karel Kachyna," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2004, no. 62, p. 10.

¹⁶² For more about the specific nature of the Polish reception of *Coach to Vienna*, see my article "Psychologiczny balecik w konkretnym układzie sił. O polskiej recepcji 'Wozu do Wiednia' Karela Kachyni," *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, 2018, no. 101–102, pp. 275–299.

¹⁶³ B. Zagroba, "Fantazja scenograficzna," *Film*, 1978, no. 14, p. 8.

¹⁶⁴ See, for example, H. Smolińska, "Lipcowe spotkanie," *Filmowy Serwis Prasowy*, 1979, no. 14, p. 8; hs [H. Smolińska], "Dobre oświetlenie," *Filmowy Serwis Prasowy*, 1987, no. 14, pp. 7–10; J. Skwara, "Filmy, które widzieliśmy. Kłopoty wieku dojrzewania," *Kino*, 1984, no. 3, pp. 46–47.

¹⁶⁵ H. Tronowicz, *Film czechosłowacki w Polsce*, Warszawa, 1984, p. 224.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, s. 228.

¹⁶⁷ A. Korzycka, "Latem," *Film*, 1979, no. 36, p. 8.

¹⁶⁸ H. Tronowicz, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

¹⁶⁹ J. Skwara, "Ballada o..."

¹⁷⁰ A. Korzycka, *op. cit.*

still marked with the thaw of 1956, and had to be camouflaged or downplayed as something shameful (and accordingly the picture was advertised mainly as an adventure film or thriller). Throughout the 1960s, Polish criticism continued to further this tendency to deny the “uncomfortable” propaganda and ideological threads, but with respect to Kachyňa’s entire early output.

On the other hand, the process of reducing Kachyňa’s creations to an intimate, moving and poetic children’s and youth cinema (clearly noticeable since the early 1970s) was a reflection of some deeper tendencies in the Polish reception of Czechoslovak cinema and culture (as well as events occurring in that country in general) that date back to the second half of the 1960s, and especially to the period following the suppression of the Prague Spring. Just as contemporary texts infantilised and trivialised Kachyňa’s film achievements and creative personality, so was Czechoslovak cinema in general analysed without paying much heed to social and political contexts and increasingly written off with routine phrases, superficial opinions or completely ignored (primarily by ceasing to mention the New Wave phenomenon). And, just like the qualities noticed in Kachyňa’s works were mostly modesty, discretion, tactfulness,¹⁷¹ lack of sentimentalism and so on, the reception of Czechoslovak films by the press likewise focused primarily on their moral or purely aesthetic aspects (to the exclusion of social and political ones), while critical texts used Aesopian language and resorted to trivialisation, minimisation or decontextualization.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, *Smugglers of Death* was recalled as an entry in two book publications. In his *Nowy film czechosłowacki* monograph aimed at the general reader and published in 1968 in the popular *Biblioteka X Muzy* series, Janusz Skwara devoted a few sentences to that title while discussing Kachyňa’s early works. He mentioned the film as “having [...] a military theme” and listed its “main issues”: “responsibility to the fatherland, discipline, tragedy of choice.”¹⁷² He also, symptomatically, gave a brief assessment of *Smugglers of Death* (which was favourable as regards film technique but somewhat disapproved of the author’s message): “The narrative is sleek and descriptive, the shooting brief and discontinuous, taking care to depict a clear sequence of events. No comments about the author, and no attempt to define his look at the world. They are embedded in the very course of the plot, didactic moralising and rough sketches of the characters.”¹⁷³

In turn, in 1974 Alicja Helman referred to *Smugglers of Death* in her theoretical and historical introduction to one of the volumes of the popular film genre lexicon series titled *Filmy sensacyjne*. In the text, she discussed, among other things, the “custom espionage film model” proposed by “socialist film-makers after World War Two” and described its evolution, from the “attractive” [sic] pictures from

¹⁷¹ E. Dolińska, “Długie, gorące lato,” *Film*, 1980, no. 2, p. 8.

¹⁷² J. Skwara, *Nowy film czechosłowacki*, Warszawa, 1968, p. 32.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 32–33.

the early 1950s to the “more modern” treatment of spy stories in the 1960s by exposing “both the entertainment value of the thrilling subject” and the deeper “ideological and artistic” take on the related issues.¹⁷⁴ Helman also noted that “for a long time, the espionage film genre was most often and most successfully attempted by Czechoslovak film-makers,” and that producing such works “often involved individuals whose names later became known and important for the art of film.” In this context, she mentioned Kachyňa (beside Brynych and Polák, but without going into greater detail) and two works of his: *It Will All Be Over Tonight* and *Smugglers of Death*.¹⁷⁵

In later years, *Smugglers of Death* was mentioned in Poland only in reference works on filmography. In his *Film czechosłowacki w Polsce*, published in 1984 for the needs of cinema distribution, Henryk Tronowicz mentioned the title as a “successful thriller.”¹⁷⁶ In turn, *Filmowy Serwis Prasowy* described it in 1987 as an “adventure film.”¹⁷⁷ Similarly, in the early twenty-first century, *Smugglers of Death* was noted as a “successful crime film” in Kachyňa’s entry in the *Encyklopedia kina* edited by Tadeusz Lubelski.¹⁷⁸ In 2011, on the other hand, Jadwiga Hučková mentioned the work in her second volume of *Historia kina* with a very brief and modernised summary: “visually interesting and suspenseful but hypocritical story of heroic border guards battling imperialist agents.”¹⁷⁹

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In this way, Kachyňa’s picture established itself in Polish film literature as a classic of Czech cinema, but its reception fell victim to historical circumstances, which made it subject to an interpretative framework that, despite some modifications, has remained unchanged for more than fifty years. Its characteristics and assessment were dominated by two overlapping perspectives that are as revealing as they are mystifying. On the one hand, the reception of *Smugglers of Death* is pigeonholed and evaluated according to the framework already established in the 1960s, as a result of which the film is considered as an efficiently produced thriller with high artistic value and considerable entertainment potential. On the other hand, this is countered by the contemporary assessment of the ideology and propaganda aspects of the film that between the Polish premiere and the end of the communist era could not have been directly discussed and are now viewed in unquestionably negative terms (which is, incidentally, in line with the prescribed standards of “political correctness”).

¹⁷⁴ A. Helman, *Filmy sensacyjne*, Warszawa, 1974, pp. 18–19.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁷⁶ H. Tronowicz, *op. cit.*, pp. 243 and 228.

¹⁷⁷ *hs.*, “Dobre oświetlenie.”

¹⁷⁸ BK [B. Kosecka], “Kachyňa Karel,” in: *Encyklopedia kina*, ed. T. Lubelski, Kraków, 2003, p. 467.

¹⁷⁹ J. Hučková, “Czechosłowacja,” in: *Historia kina. Tom 2: Kino klasyczne*, ed. T. Lubelski, I. Sowińska, R. Syska, Kraków, 2011, p. 1059.

As is usually the case, however, and as I have tried to demonstrate, the Polish mode of reception of *Smugglers of Death* and its historical variability tell us more about Poland, its culture, and the social and cultural policies adopted by the state than they do about Kachyňa's film itself. How *Smugglers of Death* was received and presented in the Polish press was characteristically conditioned by shifting the interpretative focus and ignoring some of the film's content. Polish criticism downplayed or even totally ignored the social and political dimension of the film, discussing Kachyňa's work mostly in terms of its genre and "artisanship," most notably as an example of a successful action/adventure film and quality entertainment. This points to an unspoken rejection of the ideological and propaganda dimension of *Smugglers of Death* because of the film's "incompatibility" or inconsistency with the post-1956 standards (and possibilities) of Polish public discourse. When it premiered in Poland, Kachyňa's film appeared as an instance of anachronistic harking back to a bygone stage in building a socialist society. Its ideological sense seemed too "hard-line," "indoctrinating" and "disgraceful" (even considering that by 1960 most of the achievements and the emancipatory mood of October 1956 had been abandoned¹⁸⁰), and was glossed over as a result. In a certain sense, therefore, the Polish reception of *Smugglers of Death* reflected the striking difference in the pace and peculiar nature of social, political and cultural developments in Poland and Czechoslovakia in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Most importantly, however, the manner in which Kachyňa's film was received demonstrated the inclinations of contemporary Polish film criticism. *Smugglers of Death* came to the screen when Czechoslovak cinema productions were looked down upon and treated, usually with much prejudice, as "obsolete" and "petit bourgeois" (although solid and efficient) but, on the other hand, burdened with "too much ideology" and "sluggish thinking," despite having "a fair sense of realism." The preferences and prejudices of Polish criticism proved to be a hindrance; there was not enough sensitivity and flexibility to notice, at the right time and with due attention, the symptoms of changes taking place in contemporary Czechoslovak film-making. The critics thus treated *Smugglers of Death* as a leading work of Czech cinema, focusing on its entertainment value and solid production, but at the same time overlooked or ignored the importance of the "thaw-era" First Wave films that rejected old moulds and experimented with language, subjects and ideas. The mode of reception of Kachyňa's work erased the ideological and propaganda aspects and focused on those of genre and entertainment, but it was actually such First Wave films as *Hic Sunt Leones*, *School for Fathers* or *At the*

¹⁸⁰ The symbolic end of the October thaw is taken to be the suppression of the *Po Prostu* weekly and the resulting riots that spread through Warsaw for several days in October 1957, while the last remnant of the "October achievements," the Crooked Wheel discussion club, was closed in February 1962.

Terminus that were deeply misunderstood by Polish critics, falling victim to their tendencies and attitudes at the time.

However, just four years after *Smugglers of Death* had its premiere, Polish cinemas began to screen New Wave Czechoslovak films which were so progressive that – for much more essential reasons – mismatched the capability of Polish critics for reception and discussion.

Abstract

Polish film criticism had tended to react ambivalently and rather disparagingly to Czechoslovak films screened in Polish cinemas since the end of 1947, praising them for their technical aspects, a sense of realistic observation and dealing with the affairs of ordinary people, while on the other hand denouncing their “decrepit style,” “petit bourgeois” tendencies and “sluggish thinking.” A change in attitude took place in the late 1950s when Polish critics rapidly and perspicaciously noted the post-thaw revival symptoms in Czech film-making (treating them, however, as part of a wider, international “new socialist wave”). The films that met with the most lively welcome and garnered the highest scores in Polish press were not those classified as First Wave pictures (such as *School for Fathers* by Ladislav Helge, *Hic Sunt Leones* by Václav Krška, or *At the Terminus* by Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos), but rather such titles as *Invention for Destruction* by Karel Zeman or *Romeo, Juliet and the Darkness* and *Wolf Trap* by Jiří Weiss.

Likewise, critics treated Karel Kachyňa’s *Smugglers of Death*, which came to Polish screens in 1960, as the leading achievement of Czechoslovak cinema, but focused on its entertainment and technical values (considering it a successful action film) while entirely glossing over its origin, ideological content and political message. Polish reviewers believed that *Smugglers of Death* satisfied the demand for attractive and quality entertainment cinema. Thus, a peculiar shift of emphasis and a certain mystification took place in the reception, as a result of which the film, belonging to a trend in the Czech cinema that revived the mood of suspicion, espionage obsession and confrontation with the West following the 1959 Banská Bystrica conference, was discussed in Poland mostly in terms of its genre and technique as a well-made thriller title.

More importantly, however, the focus of journalist attention and high scores for the aforesaid “safe” works of Zeman, Weiss or Kachyňa “glorified” with film festival awards reflect the state of Polish film criticism of the late 1950s and early 1960s. In particular, it reveals the inclinations, reception modes, prophetic intuitions and anachronistic *idées fixes* of critics, which resulted in the profound misunderstanding, downplaying and overlooking of the novel First Wave works that woke Czechoslovak cinema from its slumber as it attempted to break out of the socialist realism mould through thematic and formal experiments that anticipated the emergence of the New Wave.

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