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# New Eastern Europe

# 1918

## THE YEAR OF INDEPENDENCE

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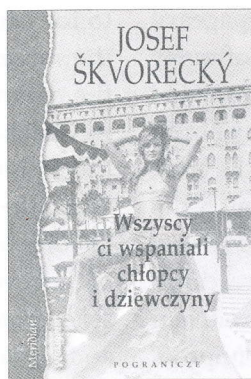


# A miracle from the inside

MACIEJ ROBERT

*Wszyscy ci wspaniali chłopcy i dziewczyny. Osobista historia czeskiego kina. (All the bright young men and women: a personal history of the Czech cinema). By: Josef Škvorecký. Polish edition published by Wydawnictwo Pogranicze, Sejny, 2018.*

This year the Polish publishing house Pogranicze published the first translation of Josef Škvorecký's work on Czech cinematography – a book like no other. Hence four decades after its original published it is worth reflecting on this book. Škvorecký, the author of the book, left Czechoslovakia in 1969, first heading to the United States and later to Canada where he spent the rest of his life. Škvorecký's decision to leave his homeland was a reaction to the political and artistic atmosphere after the 1968 Prague Spring. The artist, whose work was already quite problematic for the communist authorities – especially since the 1958 publication of *Zbabělci* (*Cowards*), his debut novel – found Gustáv Husak's normal-



isation policies unbearable. He joined many of his co-patriots who left Czechoslovakia at the time. Among them were distinct representatives of Czechoslovak cinematography: Miloš Forman, Ivan Passer, Vojtěch Jasný, Jan Němec and Pavel Juráček.

In solidarity with these artists, who were also Škvorecký's friends, and driven by a mission to popularise Czechoslovak cinematography in the West, he agreed to deliver a number of lectures at the University of Toronto. His classes on Czechoslovak film were so popular among students that in the end he decided to write a book on the subject. *All the bright young men and women: a personal history of the Czech cinema* was published in 1971.

### More than a memoir

Škvorecký's publication was not a typical book. First, it was authored by a Czech writer but written in English, with a western reader in mind. It targeted readers who were less familiar with post-war Central European cinematography. Second, the book was – as Škvorecký admitted – a product of his nostalgia for his homeland. Third, it was the work of a mature writer, not an academic researcher; it read more like a diary. Fourth, Škvorecký was also one of the founding fathers of the Czech new wave, which is described in the pages of the book. Being a close friend of many Czech filmmakers, Škvorecký interpreted the phenomenon he was describing from the inside. Finally, while writing the book Škvorecký was not able to rewatch the films he was discussing. He had to rely solely on his own memory and research archival collections of Czechoslovak film magazines, which was probably unprecedented in film research.

All these things make *All the bright young men and women* a unique and highly valuable piece of work. It was a true “personal history of Czech cinema,” as the subtitle suggests. It is not only a private memoir but also one that provides the reader with brilliantly bal-

anced insights with anecdotes on the absurdities of the socialist film industry. Škvorecký correctly shows that the new wave of Czech cinema did not come out of a vacuum. The introduction of the book presents a brief historical outline of Czech cinematography along with the somewhat forgotten films of the 1950s. These were the works of artists such as Vojtěch Jasný, Ján Kadár, Elmar Klos and others.

While explaining the high value of their productions, Škvorecký points to the same causes that contributed to the success of their followers – namely, the nationalisation of the film industry in Czechoslovakia and the creation of the Prague film school. Seeing a certain difference between the generations, Škvorecký notes that while the “fathers of the revolution” were members of very strict brotherhoods, sealed by ties of faith and mission-driven, the “sons” were the rebels who wanted to live their lives to the fullest. In essence, it was this youth rebellion, laced with irony and humour, which marked the main characteristic of the new wave of Czech cinema, determining its uniqueness despite the differences that naturally existed between its representatives.

### Unhappened history

As is often the case with such works, *All the bright young men and women* is

incomplete. There is little discussion in the book about Slovak directors which,




in Škvorecký's view, required a separate publication. Neither is there an analysis of many important films which were stopped right after they had been produced and stayed locked up in safes until 1990.

Nor is there any mention of the films that were never made. And, in this way, we can interpret Škvorecký's book as a kind of testimony to the "unhappened history" of Czech cinematography. It shows how the pictures of the new wave could have been even more interesting if some films were allowed to be made, including those based on Škvorecký's own works such as *Eine kleine Jazzmusik*, which Forman planned to make based on *Cowards*. Némec, too, wanted to turn the novel *End of the Nylon Age* into a film, Evald Schorm had planned to do the same with the short story *Murders for Luck*, and Hynek Bočan with *The Republic of Whores*.

Surely the fact these films were never made is a reflection of the times that accompanied them. More than anything else, this context has to be kept in mind when reading Škvorecký's *All the bright young men and women* today, as indeed the book is more than a story about a number of films that took place in a small European country which nonetheless revolutionised world cinema.

All told, *All the bright young men and women* is a story about Central Europe's fate, one that its author happened to be part of, just like many of his protagonists. In fact there were many of them, starting with the actress Lída Baarová (who was Joseph Goebbles's mistress and collaborated with Nazi Germans), Vladislav Vančura (who was a writer and a filmmaker murdered by the Gestapo), and the director Martin Frič (who died of a heart attack after Warsaw Pact troops entered Prague).

Many Czech artists faced situations where they had to collaborate with the authorities, make difficult moral choices, agree to concessions, or leave their homeland. While reflecting on this, Škvorecký admits that, while Hollywood might have seen all kinds of human tragedies, the ones coming from Czechoslovakia had its own idiosyncrasy. It is marked not only by illnesses and other malaises that put marks on the human condition, but also all kinds of competing ideologies that demand loyalties, often through coercion. Thus the miracle of Czech cinema is in its directors' ability to turn historical tragedy into films that were, at the same time, tragic and comical. Indeed, it was difficult to imagine Czech cinema without irony – as Bohumil Hrabal would say, tragedy and comedy are twins. 

*Translated by Iwona Reichardt*