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Representation of sports and physical education in Czechoslovak documentary film (1945–1959)

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Obraz sportu i wychowania fizycznego w czechosłowackich filmach dokumentalnych (1945–1959)

Streszczenie

We wczesnych czasach filmu (prekinematografia), w trakcie technologicznego rozwoju kineoskopu (1865), ruchomych zdjęć, a później fotografii błyskowej (1873) pojawiły się pierwsze próby zarejestrowania ruchu (biomechaniki). Fotografię z użyciem lampy błyskowej późniejszego okresu (protofilm) zastąpiono syntezą ruchu (1878), gdy tło społeczno-kulturowe pojawiło się również na ruchomych klatkach zdjęciowych, skupiając się głównie na wybranych tematach obrazujących cielesność sportu i fizyczności w relacji do ówczesnej atmosfery społecznej. Przedstawiony tekst selektywnie opisuje rozwój ciała i obrazowania ciała w ograniczonym okresie, na który wpływ mają mechanizmy polityczno-ideologiczne. Aczkolwiek funkcjonuje również jako czynnik, który może wpływać na społeczeństwo i powodować zmiany, filmu dokumentalnego nie można jednoznacznie kojarzyć z propagandą. Sport nie został przedstawiony wyłącznie z perspektywy ówczesnej ideologii, masowe ćwiczenia przede wszystkim pokazywały narodową wspólnotę i ideologię państwową.

Słowa kluczowe: kinematografia, film dokumentalny, sport, wychowanie fizyczne, nacjonalizacja, propaganda.

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Abstract

In the early stages of the film (pre-cinematography), during the technological development of the kinescope (1865), or the moving photos, and later the flash photography (1873), the first attempts to record motion (biomechanics) appeared. The flash photography of the later period (proto-film) was replaced by the synthesis of motion (1878) when the social-cultural background also appeared on the moving photos, mainly focusing on selected themes reflecting the sports body and physicality in relation to the contemporary social atmosphere. The presented text selectively describes the development of body and body imaging in a limited period influenced by political-ideological mechanisms. However, it also functions as a factor that can influence society and bring about change. The documentary film cannot be unambiguously described as propaganda. The sport was not depicted solely from the perspective of the ideology of that time. But above all, mass exercises demonstrated the national community and state ideology.

Keywords: Cinematography, documentary, sport, physical education, nationalization, propaganda.

Sport and physical education as a political instrument of the selected period

At the time of nationalization, the documentary filmmakers, who focused on sport, assumed that the politically unacceptable business principle would disappear from cinematography. It was supposed to be replaced by the so-called “cultural service to the people” principle. Most importantly, future production was to be understandable and instructive for the viewers, but also political by dealing with many national problems. Czechoslovak documentarians entered the cinematography as more or less active witnesses of the period. However, there is no doubt that movie makers have also become co-creators of the period. The principles of active, creative service to the people, the state, and the socialist ideal were already based on the nationalization decree, the Beneš Decrees of March 5, 1946, ratified by the Provisional National Assembly by the Constitutional Act No. 57/1946 Coll.¹

The area of sport, being easy to grasp and, therefore, always generating heightened interest within the public, did not avoid the ideological dictate of the period. The entire system of physical education began to be politicized. Particularly after February 1948, the emphasis was on the folk and mass character of the sport. Sport and physical education began to be portrayed ideologically; sport and physical education had become political.

The production groups (1945 to 1948), creative collectives (1948 to 1951) and creative groups (1954 to 1970) acted as an interface between the corporate, political and state cin-

¹ See Article 1, paragraph 1 of Constitutional Act No. 57/1946 Coll., which ratifies all decrees issued by the President. Available in Czech online <http://ftp.aspi.cz/opispdf/1946/028-1946.pdf>.

ematography and the everyday film practice. At the same time, they acted as mediators between general cultural and political trends in society and film production².

In this period, the film may be studied from a socio-cultural perspective, either as an area that reflects, to a certain extent, the attitudes and behavior of a society at that time or as an agent that triggers changes in society in some way and interferes with social processes.

However, for the film industry to function in the communist era, and most intensively at the end of the 1940s and the 1950s, state planning was given a specific role, creating a vital external framework for virtually all levels and areas of the film industry, from dramaturgy to production, distribution to cinema construction, and did not (only) concern sales plans but also cultural-political tasks³.

It is not only the history of film that is important, but the political, economic, social and technological history as well. For the contemporary historian who is focusing on archive research on the subject, this area covers a wide range of documents. Thus, it is possible to study the position the film occupies at a given period as well as how the government and politics interfered with its production, or how the phenomena of the period and social situation were reflected in the cinematography of that time. Documentaries can primarily be interpreted as sets of periodical expressions. Nonfiction film is closely related to the impact on society, new social structures, wider social discourse, audience structure, and national identity constructions.

Socio-political context of the socio-economic transformation

In order to understand the situation and conditions for institutionalized work, we need to enter into a wider socio-political context and take into account the perspective of contemporary models of political representation. Let us, therefore, turn to the circumstances of the establishment of the Ministry of Information. The communist exiles took advantage of the influence of the Soviet Union reinforced by the victory over Germany and the liberation of the majority of Czechoslovakia by the Red Army. This constellation – supported by the stigma of Allies’ “betrayal” under the Munich Agreement – was an effective platform for the Communist Party for the realization of a radical political and socio-economic transformation of post-war Czechoslovakia.

Already during the war, the Communist Party had planned a power take-over strategy: nationalization processes, attitude to other political parties, the domi-

² P. Szczepanik, “*Machři*” a “*Dilettanti*”. *Základní jednotky filmové praxe v době reorganizací a politických zvrátů 1945 až 1962*, [in:] P. Skopal, *Naplánovaná kinematografie. Český filmový průmysl 1945–1960*, Academia, Praha 2012, p. 28.

³ P. Skopal, *Úvod: plány, změny a kontinuity*, [in:] P. Skopal, *Naplánovaná kinematografie. Český filmový průmysl 1945–1960*, Academia, Praha 2012, p. 12–13.

nance of some ministries, including the Ministry of Information. It is, however, necessary to remember, that the nationalization of cinematography, as well as the nationalization of some financial and economic sectors, was not exclusively a communist interest: it was also anticipated by the London government on the basis of concepts of domestic trade unions, albeit in a less radical sense. After the liberation, the Communists accomplished most of their “sub-partisan” intentions – one of them being the nationalization of the film – for their own political merit. A highly conceptual and decisive was also the approach of the Communist Party to the negotiations on the composition of the post-war government and its program⁴.

After the resignation of the exile government, Edvard Beneš appointed the domestic government of the National Front of Czechs and Slovaks on April 4, 1945. In the history of Czechoslovakia, it was the first government in which the Communists were represented. Of the 16 ministries, the CPC, together with the CPS, held the Ministry of the Interior, Agriculture, Welfare, Education and Information⁵.

The composition of this government was based on the meeting of the London government representatives with the Moscow leadership of the Communist Party and the Slovak National Council in the last days of March of 1945. The disputes that emerged during the negotiations on the composition of the government surprisingly did not concern party representation as much as the ratios of Czech and Slovak representation. One exception was the reservation of the National Socialists that their party would not manage any of the key ministries, i.e. the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of National Defense, the Interior, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Agriculture or the Ministry of Information⁶.

Despite these disagreements, a proposal for a new government was quickly and unanimously approved. Immediately after its appointment, the Košice government program was approved, which, among other things, formulated the concept of post-war revival, dealing with war enemies, and the pro-Soviet direction of foreign policy. The “People’s Democracy” regime was set up, which – besides the political sphere – was supposed to enforce democracy also in the economic

⁴ S. Balík, V. Houšek, J. Holzer, J. Šedo, *Politický systém českých zemí 1848–1989*, Masarykova univerzita, Mezinárodní politologický ústav, Brno 2011, pp. 118–134. A parallel to the Communist appropriation of the project of nationalization of the film can be found in the Ministry of Agriculture, led by Communist Minister Julius Ďuriš. In 1946, the confiscated land of German inhabitants was handed over to Czech farmers, a deed for which the Communist party claimed the credit. The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia succeeded in acquiring rural voters whose land was later taken away by the collectivization of agriculture.

⁵ V. Průcha, *Hospodářské a sociální dějiny Československa 1918–1992*, Doplněk, Brno 2004–2009, pp. 64–65. Klement Gottwald and Viliam Široký also served as Deputy Prime Ministers. Zdeněk Nejedlý, as Minister of Education, then represented the position of an independent.

⁶ According to the contents of the Record of the Political Composition of the First Postwar Government from March 27 and 28, 1945, the reservation did not find the appropriate response in Moscow and no further solution was found. In: Kaplan 1992, p. 119.

and social spheres⁷. This “radical people’s” concept of democracy was represented by the Ministry of Information, interpreting its own existence as a “practical realization of an ideal”⁸.

The Ministry of Enlightenment and Information intends to practically realize the ideal that all the values of cultural, wealth of science and of education, and all the highest creations of the arts, musical, dramatic and visual arts will be made “popular” in the sense of making it accessible to the people [...]”. For this conception, the decisive rhetoric was the one of collectivism in which national interests were interwoven with the interests of the state, and at the same time served to spread the political influence of the Communist Party. In this sense, Václav Kopecký, the future Minister of Information, argued for the establishment of the ministry as a lesson from the unfortunate war experiences, with a special emphasis on the Allies’ failure within the framework of the Munich Agreement.

Ministry of Information as central control

One year after the war, the anti-fascist argumentation was naturally the most effective appeal to public opinion. A similar justification for the existence of this institution can be found, for example, in the contemporary Slovak press, but it is related to the local Office of Information⁹. It is necessary to remember that, in the Slovak context, anti-fascist rhetoric had more pronounced internal political connotations. The Ministry of Information represented a highly strategic resort that

⁷ In regards to the combination of elements of pluralist parliamentary democracy with the authoritarian strengthening of state power through the appropriation of private property, the regime of the Third Republic is referred to as a hybrid regime. Historians and political scientists, however, are inconsistent in calling the Third Republic a “hybrid regime”. For example, in the compendium *Political System of Czech Lands 1848–1989*, it is preferred to be included in the category of totalitarian regime.

⁸ The Ministry of Information operated under this name since its establishment in 1945 to April 1948. Subsequently, it gained also the enlightenment agenda, so until its abolition in 1953 it was called the Ministry of Information and Enlightenment.

⁹ The centralization of cinematography was also reflected in the organization of Slovak film, which de facto fell under the Kopecký’s Ministry of Information as a central governmental institution. After the elections in 1946, which was won by the Democratic Party in Slovakia, and not by the Communists, this vassal relationship contradicting the original agreement under the Košice government program was of strategic value. In regards to the period of the Third Republic, however, part of the power was delegated to the Information Office, which included also the V. Film Department, the department led by literary critic Michal Považan. The extent of the power and its relation to the central government had no stronger anchor until 1948 as an agreement was always reached with the Czech side. The degree of autonomy of the state management of Slovak cinematography towards the Czech central authorities was the reason for confusion and disagreement. There often was a concurrence or rather crossing of powers between Czech central authorities and Slovak authorities.

ensured centralized management and control of the mass media and some (technically reproducible) art disciplines such as radio, print, publishing, cinematography, and photography. In 1946, the Ministry of Information consisted of six unions: I. Information Department, II. Press Department, III. Publishing Department, IV. Radio Department, V. Film Department, VI. Department for Cultural Relations with East and West. Together with the leadership of the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of the Interior, it secured the right conditions for the Communist takeover of power. The postwar role of the Ministry of Information very much anticipated the social and political conditions after February 1948. However, the continuity or rather the succession relation of the Ministry of Information to the Ministry of Public Enlightenment, which was set up in the mid-1942 as part of a public administration reform called the Heydrich reform, cannot be omitted. In the Second World War, the Ministry of Information was established also in England, or the United States of America. After the war, similar ministries were established in France, Poland, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and other countries. This institution was set up with the aim to centralize the control of mass media: foreign trade, print, and publishing, theater, fine arts, music, dance and cinematography. In this area, the ministry specifically managed the state support for film, film approval, and cinema license; film production remained under the administration of the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Trades¹⁰. Although the Protectorate Ministry of Public Enlightenment did not have the corresponding impact of the planned scope, it indirectly helped the postwar adoption of the ministry's supervision over culture. Another important change, adopted by the successor of the Ministry of Information, was the administration of cinematography. All levels of state management of cinematography were concentrated under the V. department of the Ministry of Information, including those that were under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Commerce and Ministry of Interior during the Protectorate. The fifth department then managed the production, distribution, release, development and import, the amateur cinematography as well as photography¹¹.

Václav Kopecký's speeches in the Provisional National Assembly from 1946 show that the Ministry of Information was the subject of criticism of political competitors. These reservations were related to over-employment, high office costs, and its temporary status¹². Kopecký logically interpreted them as attacks that were directed against the Communists. In his speech in January 1946, he

¹⁰ J. Dobeš, *Stát a kultura za druhé republiky, protektorátu a v letech 1945–1948*, [in:] I. Klimeš, J. Wiendl (eds.), *Kultura a totalita: národ*, Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Karlovy, Praha 2013, p. 180–204.

¹¹ S. Balík, V. Houšek, J. Holzer, J. Šedo, *Politický systém českých zemí 1848–1989*, Masarykova univerzita, Mezinárodní politologický ústav, Brno 2011, pp. 118–134.

¹² The school film agenda partly was subordinated to the Ministry of Education, like the other artistic disciplines such as theater or fine arts.

protested against the view that the Ministry of Information was only a passing work of the revolution¹³.

He related its existence not only to the post-war building of the renewed Czechoslovakia but also to the “new character of the Republic”, which was to be constantly developed. The “new character” here means a radical political and socio-economic transformation that should lead to the takeover of the power by the Communist Party. In Kopecký's interpretation, the Ministry of Information represented the manifestation of a new political and social identity of post-war Czechoslovakia. From the available sources and secondary literature on the establishment of the National Front government, it does not follow that the Ministry of Information was conceived as a temporary institution related, like the Ministry of Nutrition, only to the transitional stage of post-war rebirth. Despite all this, during 1948, Václav Kopecký participated in the reorganization of the Ministry of Information, which meant the abolition of the film department and the related institutions and in 1953 also to the dismantling of the entire ministry. In the end, it was indeed a temporary institution that helped the successful takeover of the power by the Communist Party, whether it was planned in advance or emerged from current political needs and preferences. The Film Department of the Ministry of Information was a typical institution of the pre-totalitarian regime, or its “national socialist” phase taking place just after the liberation of Czechoslovakia¹⁴.

This relatively short period was marked by the enthusiasm connected with a spectacular social and cultural transformation that promised to meet the demands of many industry and political groups. One of Vaclav Kopecký's artful political moves was the realization of the long-planned nationalization of cinematography under his own ministerial office, under Communist administration, and with the participation of respected representatives of the artistic scene. The Fifth Department of the Ministry of Information had relatively large power until 1947 when the film production was partially untied from the ministerial leadership and its position began to change. The onset of party management of culture in 1948 closed the department.

Representation of sport and physical education in the Czechoslovak documentary film

The representation of sports and physical education in the Czechoslovak documentary film (1945–1959) focused on the display and promotion of the subject

¹³ The Ministry of Information employed 689 people in 1946, of which 145 were pragmatic and 517 contract staff. The monthly cost of running the ministry was between twelve to fifteen million, ranging among ministry departments with the lowest operating costs. Exposition of the Minister of Information, Václav Kopecký, in the PNS Information Committee, 24 January 1946. NA, f. KSČ – Central Committee 1945–1989, Prague – Václav Kopecký, volume 5, archive unit 153.

¹⁴ S. Balík, V. Houšek, J. Holzer, J. Šedo, *Politický systém českých zemí 1848–1989*, Masarykova univerzita, Mezinárodní politologický ústav, Brno 2011.

in a genre-defined film in post-war Czechoslovakia. Time-wise, these efforts were prominent from the end of the Second World War to the end of late Stalinism, especially for thematic, but also formal and aesthetic reasons. Economic and industrial development then determined the direction of Czechoslovak cinematography as an economic sector. The time period can be divided into four sections; 1945–1948 (post-war years, period of the Third Republic), 1949–1955 (process of the new establishment and Sovietization of Czechoslovak cinematography), 1956–1959 (reorganization, period of new tendencies and loosening of the rules), after 1959 (interruption of development by events after the film festival in Banská Bystrica).

Sport propaganda films from the second half of the 1940s and the 1950s represent a specific type of historical source. Its detailed analysis may also reveal at first glance hidden elements of the character of the regime at that time, which differed in many ways from that of the later regime (the 1960s, the period of normalization, until 1989). “In Czechoslovakia, hundreds of short purpose films were made annually in the 1950s; however, in the secondary literature, little is known about them, usually, because they were schematic, non-innovative, and with higher emphasis placed on their quantity than on their quality”¹⁵. The approach to the presentation of sport and physical education is often different, and the totalitarian language and propaganda rhetoric are also changing. It is, therefore, possible to ask how the representation of the sport and physical education in the Czechoslovak documentary film was influenced by political developments in 1945–1959, how sport and physical education were displayed from ideological perspectives and whether all production of documentary films could be described as propaganda¹⁶.

Physical education as an inspiration for socialist youth

History has ceased to be a series of exceptional acts, masterpieces, genius personalities, and dramatic causal lines in the theoretical concept of new film history. History has become more of a story, a record of the history of problems. In both theoretical and historical fields, it is known that some of the results obtained so far represent only the ostensible objectivity of the research. The study of the sources of the period documentary production from the 1950s, which also focused on sport, rebuts the claim that it was clearly propaganda pictures¹⁷. The stereotypical view that, in sport-focused films, the aim is to primarily define itself

¹⁵ L. Česálková, *Obrazová kronika státu, továrny, rodiny i školy*, Iluminace 21, 2009, č. 2, p. 178.

¹⁶ L. Česálková (eds.), *Film – náš pomocník. Studie o (ne)užitečnosti českého krátkého filmu 50. let*, Národní filmový archiv a Masarykova univerzita, Praha – Brno 2015, pp. 16–25.

¹⁷ L. Česálková, *Atomy věčnosti. Český krátký film 30. až 50. let*, Národní filmový archiv, Praha 2014.

against capitalism and Western society, can be disproved by qualitative and quantitative research.

On the occasion of important sporting events, films of propagandistic character (other than reportage) were often shot. These Czechoslovak documentary films were primarily films from Sokol Slets (Reunions) and Spartakiads in. The main purpose of these documentaries was to showcase the high level of Czechoslovak sport and athletes and show the exemplary organization of such significant spectacular events. But there was a significant manipulation and a distorted and fake picture of Czechoslovakia born. In particular, the Reunion and Spartakiad films form a significant part of the promotion of Czechoslovak physical education.

In the contemporary film production, Czechoslovakia was portrayed as a country that was wealthy, and there was still time for leisure activities, in which the industrious and friendly working people strengthened their bodies in sporting activities. The most important message in such production was above all a demonstration of the fact that the people considered such behavior as their civic duty. Film shots of mass exercises caused a double feeling for the audience. On the one hand, the interchangeability of an individual in a choreographically precisely arranged mass and the necessity of his position in the stunning, organically interconnected complex. This is most evident during mass exercises performed during the Sokol Slets (Reunions) and Spartakiads (Athletic Meetings).

Among the documentary films from the discussed period are One-Thousand-Million, The Slet Prelude in the Tatra Mountains, the two-part Song of Slet, See You at Strahov, Greetings to Spartakiad!, another two-part documentary Pictures from the Spartakiad and The Spartakiad. The films are related mainly thematically. The central theme is the preparation for and the course of both specific phenomena of Czechoslovak physical education. The XI Sokol Reunion in 1948 and the first national Spartakiad in 1955 became the key events. At the same time, however, other common features can be found in these documents, revealing the real significance of mass sporting events for the Communist regime:

- Acquisition of the physical education movement as the concept of mass development (set at the 9th Congress of the Czechoslovak Sokol in June 1951).
- Relationship between the communist ideology and sports institutions with the aim of creating the so-called new person – the result of state promotion of sport and physical education.
- Political anatomy and mechanics of power manifesting itself in Sokol Reunions and Spartakiads.
- Sport and Physical Education which have a political role to play in the propaganda mechanism of the Communist ideology – to be fit, to be ready for possible struggle with the West (civic duty).
- Concept based on the Soviet model – the best possible performance and record-breaking.

— An athlete meeting the ideological standards – inspiration for the socialist youth.

In terms of the socio-cultural perspective, the attitudes and manifestations of the society at the time and the ways of applying changes in society and intervening in social processes are both reflected here. The film, technological, economic, political, and social history are all essential. The research includes a wide range of documents, a critical assessment of the sources and the direction of archival research.

Sport-promotional films from the second half of the 1940s and the 1950s are a specific kind of historical source.

- Central state supervision over the media.
- Ideology as the primary object of the propaganda.
- Theoretical unavailability of opposition (capitalist) media channels.
- Institutional criticism and repression as a means of discipline through the media.
- “Anti-capitalism” as an ideological determinant¹⁸.

Conclusion

The film reflects the attitudes and behavior of the society at the time and acts as a factor triggering changes in society and interfering with social processes. However, all documentary film productions cannot be described as propaganda because sports and physical education were not shown only from ideological perspectives, even though mass exercises demonstrated the national solidarity and the superiority of the whole over the individual¹⁹.

The concept of order and discipline then became a determining part of the Spartakiads. The main thing was not the demonstration of freedom of movement, but gaining control over the exercising bodies. This is obvious from the structure of the abovementioned Slet [Reunion] and Spartakiad films. The documentaries are intertwined with stories of individual participants from all over Czechoslovakia, the imaginary particle of national unity, all framed by the magnificent construction of the Strahov stadium.

These documentaries can be perceived as the result of a political request of the government and government institutions. All the available instruments, both the cinematographic apparatus and the political representation that influenced it, were thoughtfully used. The aim was to educate citizens. We see the socialist society of the 1950s as a period in which the government, but also the media, supported the concept of the society of knowledge²⁰.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ Ibidem.

The role of the documentary film on sport and physical education was politically motivated in Czechoslovakia at the time. Therefore, the findings can be summarized in the conclusion that the non-fictional films were largely formed by non-film institutions.

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