

## **The tailor, the prince and the boys of bronze.**

### **The homosexual phantasm in the post-war Czechoslovak cinema**

#### **Summary**

Karol Szymański – inspired by the idea of „phantasm” as proposed by Maria Janion, and using the concepts of, among others, Jacob Stockinger (the notion of „homotextuality”), German Ritz (the poetics of inexpressible homosexual desire and „complex of corporality”), Marc Ferro (film as a symptom revealing the „hidden side” of power and society) and Michel Foucault („arrangement of sexuality”) – examines the attitude of Czechoslovak cinema towards male nudity and sexuality in a broader context of socio-political history and filmmaking in Czechoslovakia after the Second World War. An analysis, centred on five films: the *Labakan (The false prince)* by Václav Krška (1956), *První den mého syna (The first day of my son)* by Ladislav Helge (1964), *Údolí včel (The valley of the bees)* by František Vlácil (1967), *Radúz a Mahulena (Radúz and Mahulena)* by Petr Weigl (1970), and *Kluci z bronzu (Boys of bronze)* by Stanislav Strnad (1980), is to comparatively examine how homosexual phantasms were sublimated and transferred to the screen in certain historical moments – in the second half of the fifties, i.e. when the country was going out of the Stalinist and socialist realism period, in the sixties, when the New Wave arose and the Prague Spring arrived, and at the turn of the eighties, that is in the middle of the period of normalization and the regime of Gustáv Husák. The main purpose of the analysis is to examine a symptomatic change in quality – called by Szymański as „degeneration” – of the way in which homosexual imaginations were disclosed and functioned in films, that reflected their appropriation, „reorientation” and exploitation by the totalitarian authorities.

In the rich literary, dramatic and film achievements of Krška we find many homosexual „hidden signals” as well as clear connotations and indications, expressing themselves in, among other things, spectacularization and erotization of the male body, a peculiar construct of protagonists-outsiders, questioning of gender stereotypes, stylisation modelled on antiquity, oriental or expressionistic one, etc. Special place in his opus is occupied by the Czechoslovak-Bulgarian film super-production titled *The false prince*, in which the adaptation of the fairy tale about a tailor’s apprentice who wanted to take the place of the vizier’s son became for the director a vehicle for his personal, author’s commentary. The homotextual character of Krška’s film reveals itself in its transgressive plot open to a „double reading”, in its specific pansexuality and the „complex of male corporality”, governed by the logic of covetous look, and in the paracamp aesthetic associated today with queer style. In Szymański’s opinion, the materialization of homosexual phantasms on the screen offered both for the author and the spectators an area of freedom and „artistry of life”: on the one hand it offered them shelter and was an escape from the oppressive cultural reality, on the other – it was

becoming the means to contest and the practice of resistance to the heteronormative and totalitarian world.

Whereas a barracks-sports farce titled *Boys of bronze* by Stanislav Strnad belongs to a bigger group of films which in this popular form were taking up the subject of exceptional and unique on the world scale events – Czechoslovak Spartakiads, with their most spectacular part in the form of mass gymnastic compositions performed at the Strahov Stadium in Prague. The fictional history of soldiers, who – overcoming their limitations and reverses of fortune, were preparing a composition of artistic gymnastics for the Spartakiads, was combined with documental shots of the real performing sports compositions at the Strahov in 1980. It inscribes into the normalized film „formats”, that is the tested and „patented” stylistic and genre formulas used by the authorities as „soft ” means of propaganda and indoctrination. The way in which Strnad presents military and sport homosocial relations, together with a domination in the film of the element of masculinity and the specific „complex of male corporality”, imply some special interrelation between the erotisation of the male body, ideological directives, and political needs. What is more, according to Szymański, they also indicate that the purpose of the communist authorities was not only the „standard” creation and propagation of „appropriate” models of „real” masculinity, but also such shaping of male corporality and eroticism that they would support the existing political order instead of subverting it, and replicate the normalized „arrangement of sexuality”. In this context the author looks closely at the Spartakiada’s mass gymnastic exercises demonstrated by male gymnasts, and especially at the hugely popular shows performed by almost fourteen thousand of half-naked soldiers, which were an unprecedented in the communist public space celebration of male physicality and sensuality, characterised by special idealisation and aestheticisation, outstanding choreography and spectacular figures of the performers, erotic dialectics of clothes and nudity, and the condensation of tension which was gradually and sophisticatedly built. In these shows, the instrumentalisation of gender and eroticism, characteristic of Spartakiads in general, was followed by the instrumentalisation of codes of homosexual look and desire, neutralisation of inversive connotations – were harnessed for the use of normalization.

Homosexual phantasms which in the time of Krška could have been a stimulant of personal expression and practice of opposition, and at least an internal shelter and refuge, twenty years later were appropriated, manipulated and instrumentalised by the communist authorities, becoming part of their system normalizing procedures, a tool for ordering or „arranging sexuality” in accordance with political lines, and an instrument of self-totalitaring and self-harnessing actions.

In the meantime, however, there were „the golden sixties”, requiring separate treatment and a special approach. Films from this era (not necessarily the new-wave ones), such as *The first day of my son*, *The valley of the bees* and *Radúz and Mahulena*, reveal a „hidden” side of the condition of society and communist power in the sixties, associated with a gradual and culminating in the Prague Spring „loosening up” the political system. Abovementioned films show that in the era of arising artistic freedom homotextuality has become one of the possible artistic strategies for directors, and for

viewers - one of the equal and valid way of reception. However, unlike the films of Krška or František Čáp, in which sublimation and stylization as well as a kind of „complex of corporality” were the main tool for encrypting homosexuality strategies, in the cinema of the sixties the main field of operation for homotextuality was primarily the structure of the works: the peculiarity of the author or/and narrator, the specificity of film discourse and the ambiguity and „openness” of modernist forms. Admission and validation of homotextual interpretation testified to the fact that Czechoslovakian culture, not only film culture, was then on the road to normality, maturity and democratization.

However, Weigel's films, initiated in this spirit by *Radúz and Mahulena*, make us realize how, under the rush of political forces and social changes, something that could have seemed an oasis or asylum for elite homotextual ideas, easily became a ghetto and a trap of various artistic and political entanglements. Either way, however, against the background of the progressive cinema of the sixties, and even against the background of the unique works of Weigel, the aforementioned qualitative change between the fifties and seventies which reflects *The false prince* and *Boys of bronze* seems to be more vivid. The degeneration of homosexual fantasies and their „redirection” for the use of power appear as obvious in the era of normalization when comparing both with Krška's films and, above all, with the free cinema of the sixties. Another thing is that the freedom that was awakened at that time, both for the authors and the viewers, could no longer be later reversed or forgotten, especially in the context of global social changes, also visible in contemporary cinema. Therefore, the power remained to use the homosexual imagination and homotextuality for the needs of the standardized „arrangement of sexuality”. As a result, (homo)sexuality from the domain of personal fantasy (which, however, let's not forget, in the conditions of communist cinematography always finally remained political) definitely entered the arena of politics.