

# THE POLITICS OF CLOSE ANALYSIS

## No compromise: Jan Němec's rough diamond

**1.** A bell tolls and then silence. White titles fade in over black. Another bell. Clang resonating over dense black space. Another pause, longer this time, and then the bell. Five times this ponderous rhythm builds as white text looms forward out of darkness. Then a crash and we are running, bright light, black and white, sound of gasping breath, train chugging, bullets ringing, shouts. 'Halt!' Two boys run across the grassy flat. Trees behind shoot straight up, vertical pull against the boys' horizontal thrust. A train glides across the top of frame. The camera runs apace, wide at first, then closing in. One runs ahead. Swish pan back to the other, camera shaking. Now they run up the slope, bent low. The frame tilts and the trees teeter at forty-five, slicing across the screen. The camera closer now, careening along behind them, beside them, sometimes ahead. Footfall, panting breath. No skyline, just struggling backs, striding legs, grass, branches, pine needles. Heads bobbing out of frame.

The frame is a box, but it might as well be a cage. The boy is running inside the box as the camera jerks along beside him. Stumbling as the box teeters with him, jagged edges all askew. Gasping for breath as a chug-a-chug ricochets around him, echoing the rhythm of his rasping breath. The box starts



to close in around him, shaking and tumbling as he runs, bent double, clawing at the earth. The box tightens, catching at him as he crouches, grasping the grass to pull himself along. He collides with the box now at every step. It trails behind him, now races ahead of him, jumping and jolting with every move he makes. His legs start to give way and all he can see is the grass beneath his feet, dense mat of blades, as bullets slice the air. They have not caught him yet, but the camera has him shackled, trapped in its sights as it lurches along at his heels.

**2.** When Jan Němec was a student at Prague film school, he was taught that tracking was a bourgeois technique. Filmmakers in communist Czechoslovakia were expected to use editing to emphasise the difference between good and bad. Tracking was verboten.<sup>1</sup>

The opening shot of Němec's 1964 debut feature, *Démanty noci / Diamonds of the Night*, was the longest, most complicated tracking shot ever before produced in Czechoslovakian



cinema (*První* 2009). For two minutes and twelve seconds the tracking camera crashes against the bodies, the grass, the slope. A slope so steep that the crew had to build two tracks up the hill: one for the camera to go up and another for a carriage to come down as a counterweight.<sup>2</sup> One take per day was all they could do, so exhausting was the shot for both cast and crew. At twenty minutes the camera is still tracking, at fifty-seven, at the last moment tracking still. There are breaks, cutaways after the first shot, but always we come back to the relentless moving camera.

### 3.

Running he stumbles. The slope is steep and he is weak from hunger. He gave his boots for bread but now his feet are bleeding and the ground is sharp. Staggering he falls. A breath. Heart pounding. Legs screaming. But this is no resting place. The men are close. He can hear their shouts and the whistle of their bullets. Even an old musket can fire straight and true if the range is close, the sights steady.

Running, the camera tracks him. Close behind it veers from side to side, never wavering in its pursuit. Grasping him in its eye. Shuddering. Jolting. Narrowing in. The camera sways violently but every moment it closes in, pinning him down, fencing him in as shots ring out.

They had no choice, crammed together on the floor of the carriage and the guards at the door. The sound of the train missed a beat on the rise. One chance only. The flick of an eye and the pact was sealed, but the leap was high and the landing hard. Limbs jarred, head thumping. We know none of this yet. Just their scrawny bodies, clothes dishevelled, heavy breath gasping, feet scraping desperately across the ground. They can see the forest on the ridge but the hill is long and the



going rough. All around a wall of sound. Heavy breathing, feet beating on the rugged field, angry voices calling, train engine pumping, bullets whirring. Menace ratcheted up to a cacophony of fear.

**4.** Němec eschewed psychological cinema.<sup>3</sup> Narrative realism was anathema to him. Storytelling is fragmented, elliptical. He took as his base a story of escape from a Nazi transport, but he chiselled this narrative down to its existential core: escape from persecution, the fight for survival, for freedom.<sup>4</sup> There are hints at a context, flashbacks to a past life, hallucinations, fantasies, but these are mere snippets, terse, cryptic. No explanation given.<sup>5</sup>

Němec says, 'All my life I have felt that film is much closer to music than to anything else. It means that I work with fantasy, imagination, tones, rhythm, harmony and feelings' (Němec & Fryš 2001). He wanted to build a 'pure cinema' (Košuličová 2001: 2). His camera is a vehicle for pure sensation: kinetic rhythm, texture, pulse. He wanted his film to have the structure of a musical composition.

**5.** The camera is an eye but whose eye is this? There are labels we could give this camera – at times subjective, unmotivated – but what purchase do these names have on this wild unshackled eye that carves the space into colliding perspectives? At one moment it is our eye, as if we are in pursuit. Then in a jolt the camera swings from the eye of the pursuer to the eye of the pursued, as the world narrows to just the patch of



ground in the boy's sight, close-up, single point of focus as he scrabbles to reach the forest. Again the camera jolts to become an emotional field all of its own, fractured rhythms, shards of chaos, random fleeting moments: the unhinged eye of panic. This is a camera that breaks all the rules, forges its own existential dynamic, invents cinematography anew.

Němec knew what Eisenstein before him knew: that the camera '[hews] out a piece of actuality with the ax [*sic*] of the lens' (Eisenstein [1929, in Leyda 1949]). Not for him the inertia of a 'dry quadrilateral' frame with a picture composed inside it. His frame is a scythe to cleave a space; an energetic force, propelled into motion with as much feverish energy as

the runners. And we as viewers are wrenched from the stable ground of point-of-view and catapulted full-pelt into the kin-aesthetic maelstrom.

Rather than space and figure excised into fragments, collision *and* continuity of motion build the kinetic rhythm that engulfs us here. Montage would not cut it in this opening

scene. The inexorable driving, plunging momentum of the tracking shot welds the conflicting forces of the frame with the desperate flight of the boys, and the landscape stuttering by, into one roiling, racing energetic trajectory.



6.

To refuse the primacy of linear narrative: this is an easy gambit. But how to undercut entrenched habits of viewing inculcated in narrative modes? By withholding the certainty



of narrative and the stability of vision, Němec throws us onto our other faculties. Through the opening shot, we are transported into the film through our bodies, mirror neurons fired up to roll with the ramshackle movement of the camera, to sprint and stagger with the struggling bodies of the boys. The primacy of kinaesthesia knocks vision off its pedestal. We are thrown onto our vestibular system: we 'watch' the film with our inner ear.

7.

*Diamonds of the Night* stakes a dazzling claim for a space to think cinematically, stylistically, outside the normative strictures imposed by Němec's teachers, in an echo of the pushback against restrictive regulations happening across Czechoslovakian society in the 1960s. The historical context of the film is so vaguely hinted at, the existential scramble for freedom so central, that the film could easily be interpreted



as a nod to the struggle for liberation in the country – the calls to develop a new ‘socialism with a human face’, that culminated in the Prague Spring in 1968 – as Němec and his compatriots battled to open up the civic and political space of Czechoslovakia against the repressive controls of the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup>

## 8.

Of all his peers, Němec was the ‘enfant terrible’, the one who refused to compromise (Hames 2001). Only four years after the release of *Diamonds*, the Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia and the brilliant flurry of experimentation of the Czechoslovakian New Wave was stilled. Němec was forced into exile.<sup>7</sup> In the US, unable to make films because of his refusal to budge on his cinematic principles, he turned his talent to making wedding videos. He claims to have invented the genre (Košuličová 2001: 1).<sup>8</sup>

## Postscript

To write this moment in Czechoslovakian cinema, to capture something of its dazzling inventiveness, demands more than a sober analytical commentary. It demands immersion in the energetic propulsion of the film. This article attempts to develop a performative writing that can circumvent the linear constraints of academic writing. It aims to evoke, in the writing itself, the body of the film and the embodied viewing it provokes: it asks to be read not as a commentary on the film but as a parallel text ignited by the sparks of its innovation.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Němec cites his textbook at FAMU (Film and TV School of Academy of Performing Arts in Prague): ‘dollying is a bourgeois means of expression. Because when you track a scene you can’t make a selection. And we, as Marxist-Leninists, we must draw attention to positive and negative things. When you are dollying you are making it all the same. That kind of movement makes it all equal and there’s no class consciousness.’ Video interview with Němec (2021).

<sup>2</sup> Peter Hames describes this remarkable tracking shot as a handheld shot, and it definitely feels handheld, but in a 2009 video interview Němec explained that, as there was no such thing as Steadicam at that time, the shot was filmed by three cameramen ‘sitting on carts to balance each other. Two were sitting in a cart and a second cart was a counterbalance and a camera was on a tripod fastened with rubber bands to keep it steady. [They used] this invention to make the film as unique as possible [...] something not seen previously’ (První 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Němec was inspired by Bresson’s non-psychological cinema. He admired the ‘discipline and concentration’ of Bresson’s films and ‘the lack of pathos’ (2009). He says, ‘I was always interested in the Bressonian distance between actor and his role’ (Košuličová 2001: 3).

4. The film is adapted from a 1958 story written by Arnošt Lustig, 'Darkness Casts No Shadow', first published in the anthology, *Démanty noci / Diamonds of the Night*. Prague: Mladá Fronta, Inc.
5. For a detailed account of the narrative threads of the film, see Peter Hames (2005: 166-183). According to Hames, Němec's aim was to emphasise 'the interaction between physical sensation and mental states' (Hames 2001). Němec says he tried 'to convey abstract thoughts and feelings in a visual way' (Němec and Fryš 2001). He 'sought to [...capture] emotional and mental states in a way that strived to be intrinsically filmic rather than just theatre on film' (Košuličová 2001: 1).
6. During the 1960s there was widespread social and political agitation for reform in Czechoslovakia, that culminated in the Prague Spring in 1968. The movement called for a new 'socialism with a human face', an end to censorship and to the power of the secret police, and an acceptance of pluralism in political life.
7. Němec was given the choice in 1974 to leave the country or be prosecuted and go to gaol (Košuličová 2001: 1). His 1968 blacklisting by Barrandov Studios had already made his cinema career impossible to pursue in Czechoslovakia (Brooke 2010).
8. In the US, Němec also made documentaries and music videos.