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“I’m Here Because I Didn’t Want to Be There”

Miloš Forman’s and Ivan Passer’s Reflections on Being in Exile in the US

Abstract

The essay examines the lives of two Czech film directors, Miloš Forman and Ivan Passer, in order to investigate the roles of exile and emigration in shaping their self-representation as cinematic authors and their filmic production. To this end, this article analyzes the experience of the two filmmakers in the US through the various forms of their testimonies—biographies, autobiographies, interviews—eventually engaging in a concise comparison of their oeuvre. The sources analyzed hint at a personal and professional self-representation in terms of ‘émigrés.’

Keywords: *exile, Hollywood, Czech New Wave, Miloš Forman, Ivan Passer*

1. Introduction

Between the end of 1968 and the end of 1969, several members of the Czechoslovak cultural establishment decided to leave their country. Going into exile was for them a consequence of the Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia, which began on August 21, 1968, and of the following Normalization. A small number of filmmakers relocated to America, including Miloš Forman (director of the film *Amadeus* [1984]), Ivan Passer (*Intimate Lighting* [1965]), and Jan Němec (*Diamonds of the Night* [1964]), who would leave the country later on, in 1974. At first glance, we discern several analogies among these three directors. They all belonged to the Czech New Wave, had become famous in Europe, and their work had been received favorably in the US. They also kept working in the film industry after relocating abroad. Their experience in the US, however, was profoundly different. At the one end of the spectrum, we have Forman, who won two Academy Awards and took US citizenship. At the other end, we find Němec, who did not shoot any movie in the US and went back to post-communist Czechoslovakia in 1989. In the middle, we find Passer, who lived between Europe and the US, although he had become an

American citizen roughly at the same time as Forman. The present contribution focuses on Forman and Passer, a choice based on a common timing factor, since they left Prague together in 1969; on the similar and extremely positive reception of their work, associated with the New Wave; and finally on the similarity of their initial experience in the US.

The different results Forman and Passer obtained in terms of celebrity and international success had a direct impact on the availability of sources for this essay, that is the existence of direct testimony found in interviews and autobiographical texts. Obviously, the body of literature on Forman is rather extensive and includes studies of his individual films and his entire production. Passer's case is different. He was famous for his reluctance to talk about himself (Liehm 1974, 376), so much so that what is available on him are almost exclusively research articles about the movies he directed. A few rather short interviews, given during some retrospectives dedicated to Passer or the New Wave, can be found online. What is evident, especially in the interviews, is the resistance of both filmmakers to the very act of introspection. Forman openly rejected every attempt to investigate himself and his profession: "I'm consciously avoiding to analyze myself. Because I have a horror, not to become one of this self-indulgent people who continuously analyze themselves, talking about themselves" (*Chytilová vs Forman*, 1981, 00:29:36). Both directors shared a tendency to answer questions by telling anecdotes. Passer, for instance, often replied to question by saying: "Yes, about that, I have a little story." The audience is a factor that cannot be ignored when working with interviews. The people who watched the interviews with Forman and Passer were Western viewers who were rather interested in films and it could easily be assumed that they had some standard knowledge of the Soviet Occupation of Czechoslovakia, and a basic familiarity with Forman and Passer having been orphans, having been part of the New Wave, and having left the country. Furthermore, in the US media, Forman and Passer were often described as those "who emigrated" or as "expatriate[s]." The real interest of the interviewers and the public, however, often resided in a specific movie, or in the directors' poetics, or in their filmographies. The same is true of Forman's autobiography, where the narration about the creation and approval processes of the movies and the stories about what happens during the shooting occupies two-thirds of the book.

2. Cinema and exile

Studying the production of artists in exile is a rather complex task. One of the difficulties is determining what 'exile' exactly denotes. From a terminological point of view, "the word 'exile' seems both very simple to understand and too complex to grapple with" (Kettler and Ben-Dor

2006, 2). The modern meaning of the term has a political dimension (Aprile and Diaz 2016, 3) but, as noted by Camurri, when we talk about it, "we implicitly refer to really different experiences and phenomena: social exile, political exile and the intellectual one" (2014). As argued by Fear and Lerner, "émigrés blend into exiles" (2016), and the distinction implies also a chosen perspective from which to look at 'being an émigré' and 'being an exile.' While the former "suggests that someone is 'pushed' out of their native land (from the lack of economic opportunity, political persecution, etc.)," the latter "stress[es] that they were forced out of the home country, usually for political reasons, and found a temporary home in exile in the host country" (Fear and Lerner 2016, 13).

Furthermore, we cannot ignore the historical-political context that has determined it. In this essay, it is a term linked with the individual's and the community's self-definition processes within the dynamics of the Cold War, when culture played a crucial political role as a 'battlefield.' It is also important to point out that the debate among the exponents of the exile itself is characterized by the distinction between emigration, perceived as an economic drive, and exile, as an act of disagreement with the political regime (Tabori 1972). Each departure of 'famous' people from Czechoslovakia after the August 1968 was read as a political act. The question is for how long such a departure remains a political act once the person has 'adapted' themselves to the new country. Especially in the eyes of dissidence and the community of exiles, the goal is cultural and political 'resistance', which may be manifested in works, interviews, etc. From this perspective, the distinction between emigration and exile plays a crucial role.

From a strictly theoretical point of view, identifying the criteria by which we can define what 'exile production' in cinema is, is everything but easy. Whereas the linguistic (e.g. writing and publishing in Canada a book in Czech) and authorial (being a Czech writer) aspects are both widely accepted as indicators in literature, in cinema exile tends to be seen as strictly connected with the filmmaker (Voráč 2004, 9-10), even if a movie is a collective endeavor. The authorial criterium is followed by those works that examine directors' individual stories in Hollywood (Phillips 1998, Wallace 2006). In his studies about Czech film in exile, for example, Voráč (1993, 2004) includes Forman and Passer because they left their home country due to the Soviet Invasion but also because their filmography was condemned by the Normalization. Alongside the authorial criterium, recent studies investigate movies through the lens of exile and

migration studies, such as Curtiz’s *Casablanca* (Ackerman 2009) and Wilder’s *A Foreign Affair* (Gemünden 2008).¹

In his work about exile cinema, Naficy focuses instead on the production system. He identifies a profound difference, both in production modes and, above all, in self-perception, between the exponents of the emigration and exile from Europe who came to the USA after *World War II* and those who arrived later, mostly from post-colonial, non-Western countries (1999, 133). If the latter tended to work in a collective, transnational way in terms of final product as well as production modes, the first group, of European origins, worked independently and individually. However, it is important to point out that in the 20th century, the production of movies was mostly in the hands of the big companies and the analogic technology prevented the practice of illegal distribution, ‘condemning’ the movies produced in exile to invisibility since it was not possible to see them in the director’s original country. Forman’s or Passer’s cinema, and that by other directors living abroad, did not exist for the Czechoslovak audience.²

The history of ‘political’ or ‘intellectual’ exile has often been one with the history cinema in the 20th century. The most famous and analyzed example is the emigration from Germany to the United States, historically divided into two waves, after the 1920s and after the 1930s. Likewise, the US was often the ‘chosen’ destination for those who were fleeing the Eastern bloc, escaping the Nazi and the Communist regimes. If American cinema has been defined by immigration (Elsaesser 1999), the historiography of Czech cinema is equally defined by emigration. We can identify four waves of migration (Voráč 2004, 19-23). The first one occurred largely in the interwar period and was triggered by economic reasons; the other three were strictly linked to the political context: after 1938, that is, after the German annexation of Sudetenland and the occupation of Bohemia and Moravia (in conjunction with the dissolution of Czechoslovakia); after the Communist *coup d’état* in February 1948 and the establishment of a Socialist regime that lasted forty years; and finally, after the Invasion in the summer of 1968, which ended the so-called Prague Spring and triggered the Normalization. The wave of migration that occurred after the soldiers of the Warsaw Pact entered Czechoslovakia took place at two different points in time: between 1968 and 1969, when the Normalization started to take form with the purges,

¹ In terms of reflection on the exile in their film productions, Forman and Passer often depicted characters in conflict with society or living on its margins, but none of those characters faced—directly or indirectly—issues such as displacement, emigration, or exile.

² As highlighted by Voráč (2004, 14), there were three ways in which the Czechoslovakian audience could come into contact with the ‘exile production’: through foreign TV channels whose signal crossed the borders (Austrian and German); the black market of VHS, which became popular only in the 1980s; and those Polish and Hungarian cinemas that showed Forman’s movies, for example.

targeting primarily intellectuals, and then after 1977, with the trials of the dissidents after Charter 77 was signed (Voráč 2004, 32). Vecchi aptly describes the options available to the exponents of the New Wave after 1968: “Remaining silent and committing an artistic suicide; accepting the *status quo*, with the degrading perspective of working for the regime; emigrating, with all the dangers and frustrations intrinsic to being a refugee” (1981, 6; my translation).

The directors who decided to emigrate can be divided into two groups based on their destination, Europe or North America (US and Canada). Among the major names of the Czech New Wave, Forman and Passer chose the US, where they already had professional contacts. It is interesting to observe that the division between the exiles in Western Europe and North America partly follows the two modes of production identified by Naficy (1999, 133) about exile cinema in general: whereas the Czech exiles in Western Europe produced less famous movies, usually documentaries mostly known in alternative film circles which were the result of a collective, transnational effort (corresponding to Naficy’s definition of exile filmmakers), Czech exiles in the US chose ‘autonomous’ paths, worked independently and individually, and mostly aimed at penetrating mainstream cinema (Voráč 1993, 8).

If we compare Forman and Passer with the ‘renowned’ exile directors who had emigrated from Germany, for instance, at least one significant difference should be noted: the absence of a specific network, a community of exile or émigré from Czechoslovakia in Hollywood or in the film industry in general. Except for some isolated personal working collaborations (Ondříček, director of photography, and Forman), both directors worked with different crews and staff, and none of them ever established any stable relationship with Czechoslovakian intellectuals in exile in the US.

3. The New Wave: a valuable ‘calling card’

It is hard to say to what extent the echo of the Invasion really affected the professional success of Forman and Passer. Němec often said that leaving Czechoslovakia later than the others somehow compromised his success (Košuličová 2001; Vecchi 2004), because he arrived in the West “when interest in Czechoslovakia and the New Wave was slowly fading away” (Voráč 2004, 91; my translation). Without delving into a question that would deserve a much deeper analysis, we can say that the New Wave was a fundamental ‘calling card’ for Forman and Passer. The Czech New Wave made them internationally famous, but this fact does not fully explain the nature and extent of their success. In fact, what happened to Passer’s *Intimate Lighting* and *Born to Win* (1971)—two films that will be discussed later on—shows how this ‘calling card’ could also be an obstacle. In addition, if the success of the New Wave allowed the two directors

to establish contacts with film production companies, it also 'channeled' them into the production system typical of those companies. In Forman's case, having a contract with Paramount did not make him automatically successful or his films automatically produced (*Taking off* [1971], for example, was produced by Universal, after Paramount turned down the script). It did, however, make him interact more with the so-called 'majors' rather than with the world of independent cinema.

The New Wave is among the most known and established cultural phenomena associated with the Prague Spring in the European and American imagination. From the mid-1960s, the attention of the film industry was focused on the "Czechoslovakian miracle" (Liehm 1964), as confirmed by the various European awards and the two Oscars for Best Foreign Film won by *The Shop on Main Street* (Kadár and Klos) in 1965 and *Closely Watched Trains* (Menzel) in 1968. The international success of the New Wave became a valuable 'calling card' for its exponents, opening unexpected doors in the American economic system (Blahová 2014).

The term 'New Wave' refers to a heterogeneous group of filmic products comprising a variety of genres—black comedies as well as documentaries and experimental movies—and characterized by the different poetics of its representatives. According to Král, the shared feature of this cross-generational, "collective phenomenon" was the rejection of the "regimented, conventional art that dominated Czech culture from the post-war period up to that point, submitted to the ideological imperatives of Stalinism" (1994, 43; my translation) and not a political view of cinema. While for Hames it was undoubtedly a movement, since it was strictly related to the socio-cultural changes of the 1960s (2005, 4), Cook writes that the New Wave "was political as well as artistic, in that its ultimate goal was to make the Czech people collectively aware that they were participants in a system of oppression and incompetence which had brutalized them all" (2016, 705-706). Král identifies three tendencies: a "moralizing" approach, as in Evald Schorm and Věra Chytilová; a "lyrical" or subjective one, as in Němec; and the "objectively critic" one of Forman (1994, 43). Forman's group (Liehm 1977, 72) or school (Hames 2005, 106) comprised Forman, Passer, and Jaroslav Papoušek. In filmic terms, Forman's was an out-and-out team whose works were characterized by a tragicomic tone and who created a cinema open to an "invasion of reality in its crudest and most accidental aspects" (Král 1994, 46).

As regards the American context, the interest in the New Czech Wave becomes evident when we consider the New York Festival. The 1965 edition featured *The Shop on Main Street* (1965) and *Black Peter* (1964) by Forman, while *Loves of a Blonde* (1965) opened the fourth edition a year later. In addition to Forman's work, the 1966 New York Festival also featured Passer's *Intimate Lighting* and the New Wave 'manifesto' *Pearls of the Deep* (1965), a collective anthology

film based on short stories by Bohumil Hrabal (one of the most representative writers of the Prague Spring). In 1967, the year of its final consecration, MoMA organized the Czechoslovak Film Festival, which had an extraordinary positive response in term of public. The 1968 New York Festival opened with Menzel and closed with Forman. *A Report on the Party and the Guests* (1966) by Němec was also shown on that occasion, and his *Oratorio for Prague* (1968) opened Forman's *The Firemen's Bal* (1967).

The overall idea we gather from the reception at the Festival is that there was a general interest in the 'Czechoslovak film miracle.' The openings in the 1960s and the success of the Czech New Wave at several festivals also allowed Czech directors to establish contacts with Western film companies (Bláhová 2014, 67-68). In particular, *Loves of a Blonde* was acclaimed by audiences and critics alike, also in the West. In 1966, for example, Carlo Ponti bought the rights of Forman's movie and offered him a contract for a second movie, agreeing to fund the one Forman, Passer, and Papoušek were already working on at that time and that would later become *The Firemen's Ball*. The collaboration with Claude Berri, who bought the rights to distribute the movie in Western countries after Ponti dropped the project, consolidated Forman's distribution in the US. Like *Loves of a Blonde*, *The Firemen's Ball* received a nomination to the Academy Awards as Best Foreign Film. In 1967, Forman signed a contract with Paramount and started to work with Jean-Claude Carrière on what would become *Taking Off* (1971).

4. Making films in the US

Forman's and Passer's productions are extensive, and some of their movies, such as *Amadeus* (1984) or *Cutter's Way* (1981) were extremely successful. Analyzing their works in their entirety goes beyond the scope of this essay, and so does delving into their poetics. The focal point here is examining the way these filmmakers talked about their early experiences in the US as regards their integration into the American film industry.

In analyzing Forman's career, a director "blessed with good fortune" and able to "perfectly integrate in Hollywood's film industry," Vecchi writes that the Czech director "perpetuates a tradition that seemed to have stopped decades before: that of European directors emigrated overseas" (1981, 16). However, it is important to point out that the Hollywood that Forman and Passer penetrated was the so-called New Hollywood. The deep renewal the system underwent in terms of genres and themes in the 1960s and 1970s overlapped, not surprisingly, with an interest in the Avant-garde European Cinema, including the Czech New Wave and the early

movies of the two directors analyzed here.³ The crisis of Hollywood cinema as a form of 'mass cinema' and the need to change the distribution system are rather evident in *Cutter's Way*, for example.⁴ *Taking Off* itself was, according to Forman, produced by Universal with an eye on the success of *Easy Rider*, one of the most representative movies of the New Hollywood period.⁵

When *Taking Off*, his first American movie, did not do well at the box office and received no praise from the critics either,⁶ Forman realized that he needed to make changes. He blamed its flop on the difference in taste that European and the US audience showed as regards open endings. "Either way," he wrote, "we needed to change work style" (1994, 149). The director's change in his way of working is at the base of the distinction between Czech and American productions in his autobiography, in which *Taking Off* is defined as his last Czech movie.

In his autobiography, he wrote:

In Czechoslovakia, I'd broken into the movie business as a screenwriter and, in my first years in America, I had to start out as a screenwriter again—in English and in a very different story-telling tradition. [...] It's as if I am watching a man who is relearning how to use his faculties after a debilitating injury. (1994, 186)

³ Passer, who later taught at several universities—including Columbia, NYU, and Yale—mentioned that the interest in European cinema had allowed him to survive in New York: "I had 40 bucks in my pocket when I arrived there. [...] But Americans then were interested in European films and my film *Intimní osvětlení* was showed at festival in New York so I was invited to speak at some seminar and got 500 bucks" (Csölleová, Formánek).

⁴ United Artists, on the verge of bankruptcy, withdrew the film as soon as it registered the first negative review in the *New York Times*. And yet, later on, the movie won Best Picture, Best Director, Best Screenplay, and Best Actor at the Houston Film Festival. According to Morrison, the usual mainstream film circles and the typical audience of Hollywood movies did not work for Passer's films, and the complex journey of the distribution of *Cutter's Way* is one of the most representative examples of how the relationship between audience and film companies had changed during the New Hollywood (1998, 248).

⁵ Despite Forman's tendency to storytelling (Liehm 1975, 1) that re-elaborated the facts for the sake of the audience, the idea of the changes the 'classical' studios underwent is here fully present:

I was lucky because it was exactly the time when Dennis Hopper's film *Easy Rider* was released. Film which was made for peanuts and made millions. So Universal got a bright idea. "Well, why we don't give these guys, these strange characters like Dennis Hopper, Marvey Helman," you know, the suspicious 'authors'... "If they can make a film for peanuts, we have a peanut." So, they give me a peanut and I made *Taking Off* (Foundas 2008, 31:55).

⁶ Canby criticized the film for being a series of comic sketches, and "artfully constructed," with a "barrenness of inspiration" (*New York Times* 29/03/1971). *Taking Off* was torn apart by Simon, who labeled it "an antihuman film: mean, arrogant and thoroughly destructive" (quoted in Czapińska 2014, 141). According to Forman, the fact that Simon himself emigrated from a Communist country played a role in his harsh review (1994, 185).

Language is the element that drove Forman to modify his way of working. He openly expressed the need to abandon the possibility of writing screenplays, since his writing had developed from a 'natural' relation with language: "I found out that I can't function as a writer in a country and in a language where I didn't spend my childhood and teenage years. I just can't, I don't feel safe enough. So, I have to relay to material written by people, who digested life experiences of childhood in this country" (Chytilová 1981, 00:40:54). Besides the linguistic aspect, he also modified his way of working and gave up something that characterized his Czechoslovak movies: casting nonprofessional actors. The decision to adjust his methods, however, didn't change his interests in subjects and scripts that speak about the society, the conflicts within it, and characters in struggle with it.⁷

While Forman acknowledged the need to change his filmmaking style in the US and frequently discussed it in several interviews, Passer never talked about any problems related to the writing or his way of working, even though, as Forman, he also started as screenwriter. Interestingly, this question was hardly ever raised by the interviewers, and Passer himself seemed to deflect any question that could lead to this particular aspect. When Voráč asked him whether he aimed at making a movie "as an instance of authorship" also in America, Passer replied that he was interested in movies as "tools to investigate the human existence" (2008, 234; my translation). He only hinted at the issue of language in an interview with Liehm: "I would like to do a film in Czech. [...] I'd really like to do that, terribly. And yet it is a temptation to do a film elsewhere, in different surroundings, under different conditions" (1975, 385).

Whereas Forman thought of himself as a director in the US and strongly believed he would make it (Forman 1994, 185), Passer thought of himself as a 'director by chance,' as someone merely curious about cinema as craftsmanship (Leydon 1981, 23). Chance seems to be the *deus ex machina* of Passer's career. It was by chance that he made *Intimate Lighting* (Voráč 2008, 171), and it was also by chance that he was presented with the opportunity to work as a

⁷ *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) is an example of this interest. For Forman, the essence of the story is the man's transition from one world, in which we live and which is close to us, into another one, with which we are not familiar. The psychiatric hospital becomes, in this regard, an example of the conflict between institutions and individuals (Sláma 2013, 61). Forman often stressed the reference to his experience with the communist regime in his film adaptation of Kesey's book (Foundas 2008; Sláma 2013). The experience of a form of power revealing itself as a series of pervasive forms of control of people's actions is evident in the choice to depart from Kesey's book when creating the character of the nurse (Morrison 1998, 223). In the 2020 Evan Romanek created the TV series *Ratched*. In it, the character references to both Forman's and Kesey's versions of the nurse Ratched.

filmmaker in the United States (Voráč 2008, 199). In the interview following the presentation of *Cutter's Way*, Passer stated:

I didn't come here to make movies. I remember thinking, "Why should I be making American films if there are so many good American directors?" And by now, I have made more American movies than Czech movies. I always think to myself "I came to this country with 250\$ and I didn't speak English. I'm still here, and I've made some movies. There's no reason why I shouldn't make more." When I first came here, I didn't see why I should make any. (Leydon 1981, 23)

In several interviews he gave in the 2000s, he added: "I didn't go there to make films 'cos I thought why the hell Yanks would want a Czech director" (Csölleová, Formánek). And again: "America accepting me as a director was a surprise to me, because I didn't expect that that country needs a Czech director, who doesn't speak English. What can he say really to that country, to that society? And everything happened totally by chance" (Père 2012).

And yet, Passer was not unknown as director in the United States: his *Intimate Lighting* received positive reviews in 1966 at the New York Festival and again in 1969, when the film was distributed in US cinemas. *Intimate Lighting* also received in 1969 the Special Award from the National Society Film Critic. Being an exponent of the Czech New Wave was decisive for his success, but if we look at the timing, we may notice that these important awards overlapped with the release of Passer's first American movie, *Born to Win* (1971). It will then come as no surprise that Passer was perceived as a European director who made 'European films.' Scott Milton remembered that the producers of *Born to Win* did not want him: "Ivan was merely a stranger. His movie was too 'European', it wasn't dramatic, the exact opposite of what American audience wanted" (Milton 2008, 258).

According to Passer, Forman's success was due to his ability to find the right material, that is, "American characters able to balance out with the European experience" (Liehm 1993, 215). The 'secret' was being able to merge the 'American matter' with his own expressive style, rather than simply reading American reality through the eyes of a European filmmaker. The same interpretation can be applied to Passer, with specific reference to his most successful US movie, *Cutter's Way*.⁸

⁸ Passer created the problematic character of Cutter, who returned to the US after the Vietnam War and who showed a "self-conscious refusal of social integration" (Morrison 1998, 263). The director maintained in various interviews that he had actually come across the Cutter type: "I met people after the war, who came back from the war, from concentration camps, and they were not very nice" (Père 2012).

5. The decision to leave (or not to return)

For Czech exile directors, the decision to leave their original country was a defining moment in their careers and personal lives. For Forman and Passer, talking about such a decision almost became a 'standardized' recurring topic in their interviews, many times referred to as an extraordinary episode. In several interviews (i.e. Voráč 2008, Passer 2015, Passer 2018), Passer talked about how both he and Forman managed to cross the border without a visa thanks to the fact that the customs officer was a fan of Forman's movies:

I talked to Miloš on the phone, Miloš Forman I mean, and told him, that somebody who worked in underground activities against the Russians, who occupied Czechoslovakia already for six months...that Russian tanks are living the military barracks around Prague and are coming to Prague...it was already dark... and Miloš, ok, I think we have to go...and pick me up in one hour and we go. So I did it and Miloš chose small border crossings to Austria, from Czechoslovakia to Austria. We got there around 4 o'clock in the morning. (Passer 2015, 00:20)

The chronology of Passer's narration about leaving the country included his return to Prague for Christmas 1968 and the decision to definitively leave the country in January 1969, by driving to Paris and then flying to New York. However, Forman's testimony does not entirely support this recollection, as pointed out by Voráč in the 2008 interview with Passer (2008, 193). In *Forman's Stories* the filmmaker mentioned being in Paris and the US in the summer of 1968, and then again in Paris in the early winter and in New York in November (Liehm 1975, 103). Not only did Forman contradict his colleague and friend about leaving the country in January 1969, but it is also unclear where he really spent the period between summer and winter, that is, soon after the Invasion.

In his autobiography, Forman claims that he did not flee the country: "I didn't have to burn my bridges to Czechoslovakia yet because I was still under my official Filmexport contract with Paramount. I entered the country with my Czech passport, on a visa that gave me the right to work in America" (1994, 141). A few lines later, Forman states: "I flew to New York with Ivan [Passer], who had decided to emigrate outright" (1994, 141). The director became an emigrant when he was already in the US and the situation in Czechoslovakia got worse: "The most important decision was easy: going back to Czechoslovakia was no longer a viable option" (1994, 185). Barrandov studios, in line with the policy of removal and 'containment' of the New Wave exponents, had fired him: "It turned out that it was not my decision to make. My studio sent me a letter saying I was fired. If I go back, I will be a nonperson, so I have no choice, and I decide to stay in the West" (Buckley 1981). The reason behind this inconsistency, or rather foggy reconstruction of his movements through Prague, Paris, and New York, is twofold. His children,

born in 1964, were in Czechoslovakia, and the risk of potential retaliations was not unrealistic for someone whose father could be convicted for treason. Forman's position was to never fully 'acknowledge' his decision by using the term 'exile' and to present his situation under a different light. "I still didn't want to emigrate from the old country as Ivan [Passer] had done" (1994, 183), he declares in his autobiography. Then he adds "[T]he dice was cast. I was an emigrate, so I applied for a green card" (185), as if this option was governed by fate.

The director also voiced more than once his wish to be able to go back someday (Polt 1970; Forman 1994, 185). For Forman, such a possibility was not an illusion, since he had not been convicted *in absentia* like Passer, who believed that Czechoslovakia was more reluctant to move against Forman after the international success he achieved with *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Penner 2019).⁹ On the one hand, the Communist Party was not interested in acknowledging that a famous filmmaker had chosen to emigrate; on the other, Forman never publicly mentioned exile, and applied for an entry visa to Czechoslovakia more than once, without success. For Forman, being in exile was something that 'happened to him.' Every time he reconstructed time and places, what he said was based on the assumption that he was abroad when Czechoslovakia was occupied, and that he remained abroad because his visa had expired and going back would have meant not being able to work as he used to, without further analysis of his decision.

While Forman decided not to go back and to become an emigrant, Passer decided to leave the occupied Czechoslovakia: "I'm not here [in the US] because I wanted to be here. I'm here because I didn't want to be there" (Leydon 1981, 23), he said. What appears to be fortuitous is the US itself as a destination. Passer presented his arrival in America as a coincidence. Forman suggests that, after refusing the proposal made by United Artists in Paris, they went to New York together, and he accepted it answering: "Why not?" (Passer 2015, 09:00). Just as they differed from one another in the matter of their 'vocation,' as mentioned earlier, they also had differing viewpoints on emigration. Unlike Forman, Passer considered himself an emigrant in the States from the beginning and, as is typical of migrants, he was destined to do various jobs to survive: "I've never taken for granted that I could work in Films in America. In fact, I thought I would have worked as a taxi driver or a laborer, manual works" (Voráč 2008, 194; my translation). If we look at Passer's life, there is an evident break between Czechoslovakia and the US, as he left the country illegally: not only did he lack a contract approved by the Czech Film Export like Forman, but he also did not have a visa for staying in Paris or the US.

⁹ For instance, the Czechoslovakian government allowed Forman's two children to travel to the US for the Academy Awards, accompanied by their grandfather.

In a 2018 interview, Passer mentioned that both he and Forman were convinced that the Soviet Invasion was only temporary and that, due to its singularity, the situation would change: "[W]e thought that we will go back within a year" (Passer 2018, 32:51). When censorship hit and the New Wave movies, including Passer's and Forman's, were banned from Czech cinemas, the impossibility to return to their homeland became real. An impossibility that, for Passer, became final when he was sentenced *in absentia* to two and a half years for leaving the country illegally, a fact which was considered treason.

6. Exile or emigration?

As mentioned above, in the Cold War period, the distinction between emigration and exile became crucial, very much like the decision to return or to settle abroad. When pondering the question of whether Forman's relocation was an example of exile or emigration, the issue of nationality cannot be overlooked. Forman obtained US citizenship in 1977, like Passer. The necessity of establishing his national identity appears evident in the documentary *Chytilová vs Forman* (Chytilová 1981).¹⁰ It is hard not to interpret this documentary through a binary perspective, as the "vs" in the title suggests,¹¹ on several different levels: those who stayed vs those who left; those who make their movies freely vs those who have been constantly subjected to censorship; those who achieved international success and are making money vs those who live in a stagnating Czechoslovakia; but, above all, those who changed their language and tone vs those who think they did not. This binary structure is reflected in the issue of nationality as a founding element of his identity: "Who is Miloš Forman in fact? A Czech or an American? Czech American or American Czech? Is it actually possible to unroot someone?" (Chytilová 1981, 00:06:06).

The debate about what kind of relationships to maintain with the Czechoslovakian institutions is one of the key concerns of post-1968 exile and became even more urgent after Charter 77. The interpretation of dissidence as a rejection of the structure of power, as a search for truth, as an alternative, parallel *polis* in opposition to the authoritarian communist system (Falk 2003, 8), does not leave room for compromises, and this same stand was taken by many exile intellectuals.

¹⁰ *Chytilová Versus Forman—Consciousness of Continuity* (1981) is a documentary film, shot by Věra Chytilová, and produced by Belgian Television. We have to notice that she did not have the permission to make the movie by the Czechoslovak government: officially, she was on a pleasure trip to London and New York, where she interviewed Forman while he was filming *Ragtime* (1981).

¹¹ Prádná maintained that the "vs" in the title should be considered an encounter between two 'high-intensity' worlds rather than an opposition (2009, 322).

From a practical point of view, it meant not going back even after the openings of 1977, which allowed those who were abroad without the State's approval to come back to Czechoslovakia.¹² With this strategy, the State managed to exacerbate the difference between emigration and exile, with the latter becoming a pure political act (Přibáň 1995, 29). Whether Forman was an emigrant or exile—having left the country for economic or political reasons, respectively—is a question that arises partly from the foggy nature of his status and partly from his manifest distance from politics. In his autobiography, he justifies this distance by not wanting to jeopardize the possibility to get a visa: “I'd been staying away from all politics abroad, but I was still an émigré” (Forman 1994, 261). Similarly, Forman always distanced himself clearly from any ideological or political interpretation of his cinema: “I don't associate my movies with any political implication. It isn't important whether, in the process of writing a script, I find any political or social significance. If it's there, all right; I don't mind. But I certainly don't force it into a movie” (Liehm 1975, 148). The director also acknowledged his predisposition toward certain subjects, like “people who have been shoved into a crisis” and situations of “helplessness,” and by stating that the cruelest of them all, “the individual's helplessness against the Establishment,” might indeed have political resonance: “Maybe this is what really determines the social message of a movie. And from then on, it is interpreted politically, I guess” (Liehm 1975, 148).

In 1979, the Czechoslovak State Film was offered to shoot *Amadeus* in Prague. The Academy Award-winning movie, critically acclaimed in US and Europe, was shot in Prague using Barrandov's studios and Czech workforce and directed by Forman, someone who had never really severed his ties with socialist Czechoslovakia. His return ‘home’ was everything but smooth (Přádná 2009, 127) and the complications he had to overcome were not only administrative. The Czechoslovakian institutions made a series of requests before granting permission to shoot in Prague: Forman could not have contacts with any dissident, and he had to grant an interview with journalist Jan Kliment, a member of the most conservative section of the Communist Party who penned many negative reviews about the New Wave. By and large, members of the cultural establishment, to which Forman formerly belonged, were now either dissidents or exiles. Some members of the dissidence reacted harshly to the interview, and their bitterness found space on the pages of some exile magazines. An open letter to Forman written by a dissident mentioned the ethical and political risk that the “carelessness” with which

¹² For those who were condemned for leaving the country without a visa, the conditions to have their sentence suspended were a monetary compensation and the commitment to take a friendly or neutral stand towards the Socialist regime, when abroad.

Forman faced the interview—a “journalistic adventure” with no consequences for him—could have on the dynamics of the Cold War (Špirit 2012).¹³ Forman himself recalls how a drunk friend of his had made criticism against him for going back to Prague and ‘cooperating’ with the regime:

suddenly, he turned to me. “You know, we looked up to you while you were out there. You were like a symbol of what we might have accomplished, too, if we’d have the same breaks. But you sure pissed all that respect away by showing up here now.” To him, I was an American big shot—a millionaire show-off who’d come back to rub in their misery, Mr. Oscar himself feeding on other people’s envy. (1994, 264)

In the eyes of Forman, the Academy Award for *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* and its enormous success at the box office meant that US critics—and, consequently, the US film system—had finally accepted him: “I’d directed a Hollywood movie that had made a lot of money, so I’d shed the reputation of an artsy European director who liked to work with nonactors and whose sense of humor was too cutting for apparatchiks” (1994, 227-228).¹⁴ Most of the accusations leveled against Forman for having somehow conformed to the American commercial taste can be seen in this perspective. Forman is widely considered an example of a successful cultural assimilation. Statement that often present a positive connotation, as well as a negative one. From a positive perspective, he did manage to sail along a fierce competition and was able to maintain a significant internal continuity and the extraordinary artistic balance of a European filmmaker who became a Hollywood director; from a negative perspective, some accused him of having betrayed his own ‘authorial’ voice by incorporating Hollywood standards and accepting the ‘domination’ of the story and the audience’s taste. By contrast, Morrison described Passer as “equipped with something of the mantle of the uncompromising maverick,” unwilling “to assimilate fully to Hollywood’s institutional demand” (1998, 248).

It is curious to notice that this tension, this need to label one as an emigrant or exile, only applies to Forman, mainly because of the international success of *Amadeus*. The issue concerning Forman’s affinity with ‘exile’ rather than ‘emigration’ seemed to be linked with the world of Czech dissidence and its criteria of self-identification and self-representation. Exile became a form of dissidence performed from abroad, the cultural and political resistance of those

¹³ In 1998, the author republished the letter and described the interview as “cynical flirtations” (Špirit 2012). Voráč reports that, while talking about this episode during an interview in 2003, Forman said he regretted it, partly recognizing the validity of the accusation (2004, 123).

¹⁴ While acknowledging that the film had “many good bits,” DeMott wrote: “The case is that *Taking Off* is not kind, not gentle, not earnest, not loving, and that its game is mockery, not sympathy” (May 16, 1971). Forman’s words partly embrace Morrison’s reflection on the stereotypical idea that European directors tended to make more ‘artistic’ movies, while Hollywood movies tended to be more commercial in style (1998, 13).

who could not come back or those who—and it is a key element here—decided not to come back even if they had the chance to.

7. Conclusion: being an émigré

Forman's and Passer's narratives of their being 'elsewhere' show the proximity of the terms 'émigré' and 'exile' at a personal level. During the Cold War, the use of the word 'exile' was strongly claimed by several exponents of the cultural establishment to explain their experience of being abroad. By using this term they pointed out a clear political implication in their leaving Czechoslovakia but also, and more important, in their staying in Western countries as an act of commitment against the regime. From this point of view, it is difficult to talk about Forman and Passer being in exile as a form of political 'resistance' and this may have played a role in their decision of present themselves as 'émigrés' instead. In their interviews, during the Cold War but even more after the fall of the regime in 1989, they identified themselves again and again as someone forced to leave the country for political reasons, as 'émigrés' who could not return. The focus of their narrations is, indeed, more on the impossibility to go back than on any kind of introspective analysis of being in exile. Moreover, for Forman it was this impossibility that led him to his success in America (Sláma 2013, 95), while for Passer, it was a component of his success but not the key element (Voráč 1993, 8).

However, we cannot exclude that Forman and Passer opted for simplifying the issue of exile and emigration for the audience in their interviews. Přádná points out that, in his autobiography, Forman omitted the episode of the interview with Kliment and that a possible explanation, apart from Forman's own embarrassment, could be the fact that a Western reader might not have been interested in such an anecdote (2009, 335).

A key component of exile is the experience of or wish to return, but this latter does not appear in the documents analyzed here, many of which date back to the period after 1989. The ever-present issue of possibly returning to one's homeland, however, was crucial for both the directors. Forman hinted at the possibility of coming back once he would have retired (1994, 289), but, despite traveling to the Czech Republic many times, he remained in the US. Similarly, Passer hoped for a collaboration in a Czech movie, but the possibility of going back for that purpose has never been explicitly addressed.

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