

REVIEW: Czech film in 2019

With the arrival of the new year, the time is here for taking stock and looking back at the most important events in Czech fiction, documentary and animation film production in 2019.

In Czech cinemas

Last year saw the production of 42 live-action feature films of which 36 vied for domestic cinemagoers. Like in previous years, comedies were the most popular overall, with [Women on the Run](#) by debuting director Martin Horský being the biggest hit at Czech cinemas in 2019. Over 1.3 million viewers came to see the mosaic of stories about a mother and her three daughters finally getting their lives under control. Second and third places were taken by Jiří Vejdělek's nostalgic comedy [The Last Aristocrat](#), about a family who get their ancestral castle back after the Velvet Revolution, which sold nearly half a million tickets, and the romantic comedy set in the world of sports, [Přes prsty \(Unexpected Server\)](#), in which seasoned screenwriter Petr Kolečko took his first shot at directing. That film brought more than 350 000 to cinemas.

In documentary field, 21 out of 40 produced documentaries were distributed in Czech cinemas. The biggest box-office success was [Trabant: There and Back Again](#) by director Dan Přibáň, an endorfilm and Czech Television production seen by more than 50,000 cinemagoers. Portraits of well-known personalities are traditionally among the most watched documentaries and the film [Jiří Suchý – Tackling Life with Ease](#) was no exception, with over 16,000 viewers. Lending to its success was the name of popular Czech director Olga Sommerová, who made the film through a coproduction between Cineart TV Prague, Czech Television, Arina (SK) and Zámek Liteň. Audiences also responded very well to the winner of the Czech Lion for best documentary film, [King Skate](#), the debut film of director Šimon Šafránek produced by Negativ. Another debut, [When the War Comes](#) by Jan Gebert may have filled fewer cinema seats but had all the more impact at foreign festivals, and also winning the Critics' Award in the Best Documentary category.

Of five feature-length animated films produced in 2019, four have been released in cinemas, the fifth premiered at the beginning of 2020 ([The Impossible Voyage](#)). Several of these were sequels to popular films or television and comics series ([Great Adventure of the Lucky Four](#), [Pat and Mat: Handymen's Adventures](#), [TvMiniUni: The Question Thief](#)). Cinema releases also included the coproduction [Fritzi – A Revolutionary Tale](#), which familiarizes children with the fall of the Iron Curtain. More and more often, Czech cinemas are also screening short film reels for children and adults – in 2019 one of these was Three Voices, which includes the international award-winning film [Daughter](#).

International Success

The film that was probably discussed most abroad was Václav Marhoul's long-awaited [The Painted Bird](#). The world premiere of the star-studded film was in the main competition at the Venice International Film Festival followed by a North American premiere at the festival in Toronto and a tour of festivals throughout the autumn and winter with stops in London, Warsaw, Tokyo, or Chicago, where the jury awarded the work of cinematographer Vladimír Smutný.

Other festival accomplishments include that of Ondřej Erban's short film [One Hundred and Twenty-Eight Thousand](#) in the Cinéfondation students' section at Cannes. Cannes also hosted the premiere of the restored version of Miloš Forman's *Loves of a Blonde* last year. The National Film Archive followed up on this success with a screening of the restored version of Gustav Machatý's *Extase*.

As is customary, several feature-length narrative films had their world premieres at the Karlovy Vary festival before going abroad. The main competition included a Slovak-Czech coproduction by director Marko Škop, [Let There Be Light](#), while Michal Hogenauer's debut [A Certain Kind of Silence](#) competed in the East of the West competition before winning the audience award at the Milano Film Festival or Bronze Pyramide at Cairo IFF, and [Old-Timers](#) by directing duo Martin Dušek and Ondřej Provazník had its world premiere out of competition ([Best Film at Czech Film Critics' Awards 2019](#)).

In the second half of the year the Slovenian-Czech [Oroslan](#) had its world premiere at the Locarno festival in the competition section Concorso Cineasti del Presente, the student film [Playing](#) by FAMU student Lun Sevnik premiered first in Karlovy Vary and then internationally at San Sebastian, Jiří Mádľ's second film [On the Roof](#) won the main prize at the festival in Mannheim, and before the year was out, Mira Fornay presented her new film [Cook F**k Kill](#) in the Rebel With A Cause competition at the Black Nights festival in Tallinn.

More and more frequently, documentaries are gaining ground on fiction films in festivals and film awards, as was the case with the Czech documentary [Solo](#), which premiered in Cannes last year alongside predominantly fiction films in the ACID programme. French director Artemio Benki's look at a fragile Argentinian piano genius was a coproduction between the Czech Republic, France, Argentina, and Austria. The film received the best film award in the Czech Joy section of the Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival.

Czech documentary filmmaking played a notable part in the program of the Swiss Visions du Réel festival. The debut film by Czech-Swedish director Greta Stocklassa, [Kiruna – A Brand New World](#), produced by Analog Vision, was screened in the main competition. The Burning Lights section, which is devoted to films stepping boldly out of the mould, saw the screening of [The Sound Is Innocent](#), a playful ramble through the world of electronic sound by another debuting director, Johana Ožvold. The formally unconventional film made in Czech-French-Slovak coproduction, was also screened at Sheffield Doc/Fest and DOK.fest München. In the Grand Angle section, mapping out the contemporary documentary filmmaking scene, Rozálie Kohoutová and Tomáš Bojar presented their docu-comedy [Off Sides](#).

The most successful Czech documentary overall the last year was a masterful portrait of the recently deceased Miloš Forman made by another Czech director of note, Helena Třeštíková. The combination of these two names launched the film [Forman vs. Forman](#) from its

premiere in the Cannes Classics section to another forty festivals before the year was even out, and it continues to travel the world. The competitive documentary film section of the Karlovy Vary festival presented a film by seasoned director Martin Mareček, [Over the Hills](#), which tells of the distance between people who should be closest to one another. The coproduction between Negativ and HBO Europe was the last Czech film to be screened in this competition, as the festival has decided to cancel it and move documentaries to the same level as fiction films, further bearing out the aforementioned trend toward convergence of the two genres.

Films In Progress

At the When East Meets West coproduction market in Trieste, two Czech projects were presented in January – *Year of a Widow* by director Veronika Lišková, which is being developed by producers Petra Oplatková and Artemio Benki (Artcam Films) and *Victim*, directed by Michal Blaško and being prepared by producer Jakub Viktorín (nutprodukcja) in collaboration with Pavla Janoušková Kubečková of Czech nutprodukcje. At the Venice Gap Financing Market, partners were sought for [Charlatan](#) by Agnieszka Holland, produced by Marlene Film Production, and producer-director Slávek Horák presented a couple of scenes from the biopic *HAVEL* to foreign sales agents and festival programmers at the Works in Progress presentation at the festival in Les Arcs.

Word spread abroad about children's films in the works, too. At the Warsaw Kids Film Forum producer Vratislav Šlajer and director Štěpán Fok Vodrážka familiarized the professional community with their comics-based children's film *Dustzone* which is being developed in the Kids Kino LAB, and Tomáš Pavlíček attended the Cinekid Script LAB with the project *Don't Drink Our Blood!*

Some of the most highly anticipated documentaries in postproduction include the new film by established directing duo Vít Klusák and Filip Remunda (Czech Dream) called *Once Upon a Time in Poland*, which looks at the divergent relationships that two neighbouring countries have with God. Vít Klusák is also co-directing another eagerly awaited film with Barbora Chalupová, *Caught in the Net*, which is already causing a stir even before its release as it breaches the taboo subject of child abuse on the internet.

Several projects that participated in the 2019 dok.incubator workshop are also nearing completion. In his new film *Wolves on the Borders*, director Martin Páv (*Vote for Kibera*) deals with people's relationship towards nature. Debuting director Jindřich Andrš covers society's transition from manual to virtual labour through the eyes of a former miner in *A New Shift*, Petr Záruba creates a probing portrait of an émigré artist in *Jan Jedlička: Colourful Traces of a Landscape*, and Ondřej Vavrečka is completing his experimental documentary essay *Personal Life of the Hole*.

Projects in earlier stages of production are also arousing attention. The coproduction market When East Meets West in Trieste saw the presentation of *Brotherhood*, a documentary dealing with religious radicalism in Bosnia Herzegovina being coproduced by nutprodukcje and Italian Nefertiti Film and directed by Francesco Montagner. Thanks to recognition received at the East Doc Platform, Czech-Japanese director Haruna Honcoop and producer Vít Janeček (D1 film) was able to present their project, *Olympic Halftime*, at the international

Sunny Side of the Doc market. The film looks at the other side of the organization around the Olympic Games and its effect on the areas they take place in. The project was also among the documentaries receiving significant support from the Czech Film Fund both for development (11 755 EUR) and the production phase (78 431 EUR).

Number of animated films currently in development received positive attention at foreign coproduction markets in 2019. In March, the professional jury at the Cartoon Forum awarded the Eurimages Co-Production Development Award to the feature-length project *Of Unwanted Things and People*, a Czech-Slovak-Slovenian coproduction produced on the Czech side by Martin Vandas from MAUR film. In Bordeaux, MAUR film presented two more films: *The Crossing* and [Fritzi - A Revolutionary Tale](#).

Among the 66 projects presented from around the world was another Czech project – *Pearl* by director-producer Martin Kotík (Rolling Pictures). At the CEE Animation Forum in Třeboň there were three Czech feature projects presented – the aforementioned *Pearl*, *Babu in the Night City* from director Petr Vodička and producer Radim Procházka (Kuli Film), and *My Sunny Maad*, directed by Michaela Pavlátová. The producers of that project, Petr Oukropec and Kateřina Černá from Negativ, were also in Annecy looking for partners through the Gap Financing Program and in Venice at the Gap Financing Market. That film, too, was funded by Eurimages in the amount of 340,000 EUR.

The long-awaited children's puppet film *Even Mice Belong in Heaven*, directed by Denisa Grimmová and Jan Bubeníček, is nearly finished. Industry professionals got a sneak preview of the film this year during the Works in Progress presentation at the Annecy festival which was attended by producers Vladimír Lhoták (Fresh Films) and Alexandre Charlet (Les Films du Cygne). The second half of the year should see the completion of the latest feature from director Jan Balej, *A Colourful Dream*, produced by Hafan Film as well as the ambitious French-German-Czech coproduction *The Crossing* by debuting director Florence Mialhe (MAUR film).

The Czech animations most talked about abroad were shorts. Diana Cam Van Nguyen's animated documentary about the loss of a loved one, [Apart](#), made it to the prestigious festival in Rotterdam in January, and in February Martin Smatana followed up on that success with his [The Kite](#), about the relationship between a little boy and his dying grandfather, which was screened in the Generation section at the Berlinale. Both films managed to just about circle the globe over the following year, even making it to the important Annecy festival.

Annecy also hosted the premiere of what was without a doubt the most successful animated short of the year, *Daughter*, by Daria Kashcheeva. The puppet film about a girl trying to rekindle a relationship with her father after many years won the main Cristal for a Graduation Film at Annecy IAFF as well as the Junior Jury Award for a Graduation Film. Over the following months it won over forty festival awards, the climax of which was the Student Oscar for best animated film in the section for international schools and a nomination for the "classic" Oscar in the Animated Short Film category. In the autumn, festival programmers' attention turned to the short film [Sh t Happens](#) by creative duo Michaela Mihályi and Dávid Štumpf loosely based on the story of Noah's ark, which had its world premiere at the Venice film festival in the Orizzonti competition section.

Czech TV production caught attention of international animation scene too – TV series Barney the Piglet developed by Filmovy uzal Zlin was presented at Cartoon Forum in French Toulouse and the series Overboard! prepared by nutprodukce was selected for Junior Co-production Market of the children’s media festival Cinekid in Amsterdam.

Supported projects

The Czech Film Fund provided a number of live action feature projects with major support last year. The largest sum, 588 235 EUR, went to Tomáš Mašín’s ongoing project *Brothers*, inspired by the Mašín brothers who literally shot their way through from heavily guarded post-war Czechoslovakia to the West. The fund council also awarded support to the second film by Tereza Nvotová, *The Nightsiren*, which looks at the character of a modern-day Slovak village, with 392 157 EUR. Major support also went to the second film of another distinct young female director, Beata Parkanová and her project *The Word*, which received 333 333 EUR.

There have been a number of promising debuts by young filmmakers in recent years, and the Czech Film Fund has decided to support the development of this up-and-coming generation’s projects. An almost twenty thousand euros subsidy has gone toward the second feature documentaries of three female directors. Anna Kryvenko, a specialist in working with archive materials, is now using her source of inspiration to map out compassion in society. The producer behind *Dead and Alive* is Michal Kráčmer (Analog Vision), who also produced her debut. Barbora Chalupová decided to expand on her own documentary short about “flat Earthers” into a feature-length *The End of the World*. Her protagonist’s odyssey to the edge of the world is being undertaken by production company PINK. In the five years since Veronika Lišková’s debut, the theme of her second film, *The Visitors*, has had time to mature into an ambitious testimony about the changing world as seen through a tiny sampling of civilization that she is working on with producer Kristýna Michálek Květová (Cinémotif Films).

The Czech Film Fund gave its highest production grants to experienced filmmakers for a change. Filip Remunda’s *It’s Not Moscow Here!* about issues surrounding contemporary Russia, received approximately 78 000 EUR while Tepich – *The Magic Carpet* by filmmaker and activist Andrea Culková, about the attempts to revive a once successful family business, produced by Duracfilm and HBO Europe, received a little more than 70 000 EUR. The highest amount for a minority coproduction went to the production house Hypermarket Film for the Canadian-German-Czech continuation of a famous series of documentaries by activist duo The Yes Men. In *The Yes Men Build a Wall*, the protagonists turn their attention toward renewed interest in building walls between nations. Minority coproductions supported include production company Krutart’s project *One More Question* with the UK and Slovakia about the fluid identity of Czech Roma in Britain who have to face new challenges in conjunction with Brexit.

Among the projects the Czech Film Fund supported – both in development and production phases – there were several student short films of film schools students and graduates, who made their mark in animation in 2019: including *Abandon* by Daria Kashcheeva (MAUR film), *Hello Summer* by Martin Smatana, *Love, Dad* by Diana Cam Van Nguyen or *Mud Pie!* by Kateřina Karhánková (MasterFilm).

Supported feature animation projects in development include Aurel Klimt's new film *Tapaboy*, produced by Studio Zvon. Substantial support was granted to production of the animation feature films *Babu in the Night City* (Kuli Film, EUR 392 157), *Rosentaal* (MAUR film, EUR 392 157) and *Diplodocus* (PFX, EUR 196 078).

A number of Czech projects underway also succeeded amid international competition and received funding from the Creative Europe – MEDIA program. The children's film *Martin and the Forest Secret* by established director Petr Oukropec, the aforementioned biographical drama about the first Czech president *Havel*, the lesbian romance drama *The Ugly Mandarin* by Chinese director based in Prague Piaoyu Xie, and the family adventure series with elements of sci-fi, *Dorotka*. Production companies Bionaut, nutprodukce and Sirena Film also received the slate funding for a couple of their projects, so there is a lot to look forward to.

The only support from the Eurimages Fund in 2019 went to the prison drama *Censor* by Peter Kerekes, a Slovak-Czech-Ukrainian coproduction which received 140,000 EUR. The Czech coproducer is Jiří Konečný and his company endorfilm.

Awards at home and abroad

The winner of the Czech Film Critics' Awards was [Jan Palach](#) by Robert Sedláček, Olmo Omerzu took the best director award for his film [Winter Flies](#), and Tomáš Pavlíček and Lucie Bokšťeflová won best screenplay for [Bear with Us](#). The best actors selected by the critics were Jenováfa Boková for the lead role in the film [Moments](#) and Martin Huba for [Talks with TGM](#), for which director-producer Jakub Červenka also won the Discovery of the Year award.

The Czech Lions were dominated by the aforementioned *Winter Flies* by director Olmo Omerzu and producer Jiří Konečný, which came away with a total of six awards in the categories best film, director, screenplay, actress and actor in a supporting role, and editing. Four statuettes went to the film [The Hastrman](#) by debuting director Ondřej Havelka – best actor, cinematography, music, and costumes. The academy also awarded the best actress award to Jenováfa Boková for *Moments*, best sound to [Domestique](#) by director Adam Sedlák, and set design to Jan Švankmajer's latest film, [Insect](#). The award for best student film was taken by Ondřej Erban for his *One Hundred and Twenty-Eight Thousand*. In the autumn, the live-action short [Reconstruction](#) by directing duo Ondřej Novák and Jiří Havlíček earned itself a place among the five shorts nominated for a European Film Award.

The Czech Film and Television Academy selected the drama *The Painted Bird* to vie for an Oscar and the film has made the shortlist of ten international films.

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