

# BREAKING NEWS

*Spending the same day in two different newsrooms*

A feature documentary directed by Tomáš Bojar  
Karlovy Vary 2018

*“It is necessary to adopt the attitude of a second-order observer, an observer of observers.”*

– Niklas Luhmann



# A BRIEF SYNOPSIS

One day, two newsrooms, one event that has grabbed the headlines. Tonight, the Czech president is expected to make it clear whether he is going to run for the office again, announcing his decision to a group of his sympathizers and supporters gathered at the Prague Castle. Journalists are not allowed to attend the event, and will only be notified about the president's decision the next day. This obviously piques their interest and they want to get the information tonight. The newsrooms in the Czech Television and Hospodářské noviny daily have been closely monitoring the event since early this morning. This gives us the opportunity to get a close look at two different teams of reporters and editors as they put together their "breaking news", both covering one and the same event. However, the way these two newsrooms go about their business is not quite the same. The resulting document offers a very fresh and authentic inside look into the practices of journalists working for the traditional media, within the context of our hectic times characterised by information overload.

## SOME BASIC FACTS ABOUT THE FILM

**Screenwriter and director:** Tomáš Bojar

**Editor:** Šimon Špidla

**Director of photography:** Jiří Chod

**Sound engineer:** Václav Flegl

**Dramaturgist:** Jan Gogola, Jr.

**Executive producer:** Alžběta Noll

**Producer:** Tomáš Bojar – Cinema Arsenal

**Co-producers:** Jordi Niubó – i/o post, Václav Flegl – Sounderground, Petr Novák – Bystrouška

**Footage:** 73 minutes

**Distribution format:** DCP

The film was created with the support of the Czech State Cinematography Fund.



## DIRECTOR

**Tomáš Bojar (1981)** has a degree in politics, law and moral philosophy (Ph.D.) from the Charles University in Prague. He has been active in the film industry since 2003, first as a script-writer, later also as a producer and director. He worked on multiple film projects in a creative duo with Pavel Abrahám – most notably on two feature length documentaries, Czech RAPublic (2008) and Two Nil (2012). Together with Rozálie Kohoutová he directed a feature-length documentary FC Roma (2016). Together with Zuzana Špidlová he recently completed a documentary series The Magnificent Five, which will be screened by the Czech Television in the following months. He also worked as a co-writer of different feature film scripts (most notably The Ritual and The Caravan), which are yet to be filmed.

Tomáš Bojar runs a small-scale production company Cinema Arsenal.

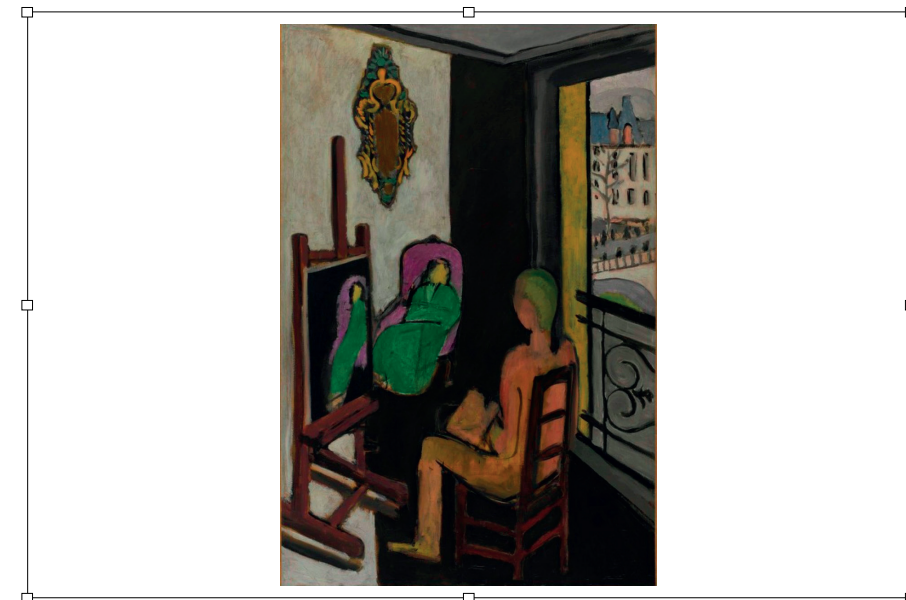
# AN INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

## WHAT MADE YOU SHOOT THIS PARTICULAR FILM?

The initial impulse is always the same: astonishment and curiosity. I am astonished by the amount of information we are exposed to on a daily basis. There are so many different things “out there” which somebody finds relevant enough to be brought to our attention. And before bringing them to our attention, the news peddler probably needs to invest a considerable mental effort in order to transform these snippets of information into legitimate news items. And I was understandably very curious to find out what exactly happened in the newsrooms which the average news consumer did not have access to. I wanted to learn what criteria informed the selection of newsworthy items, and the manner in which journalists discussed these issues with each other. I was also interested in the degree to which the news might reflect the personal worldview of the journalists in question, and whether the journalists would manage to overcome their personal sympathies or antipathies towards the people they were reporting on. It only took me several days spent in the newsrooms to realize that I was observing an extremely intriguing organism, worth every bit of our attention. And besides, I have always liked to observe the observers.

## TO OBSERVE THE OBSERVERS?

This idea had been fermenting in my brain for quite a while. When I was about twenty years old, I visited Centre Pompidou and saw Henry Matisse’s painting *Le Peintre dans son atelier*, which translates as *The Painter and His Model*. I immediately became fascinated by this painting, which features the painter, his female model and even the painting itself. This image has remained with me ever since, crossing my mind once in a while. What I find so appealing is the notion of “second-order observers” which Matisse elaborates on. It occurred to me that a similar principle could be used in cinematography with interesting results, especially if there were more observers and each would see things from a slightly different point of view. And then it dawned on me that this principle could be elegantly put into practice by visiting two different newsrooms on the same day. I also realized that this was an excellent environment for shooting a film that would be filled with very lively, maybe even dramatic situations.



## **WHAT INFORMATION DID YOU LEARN WHILE FILMING?**

I learned quite a few things – this would actually deserve a separate analysis, as the list would be quite long. If I were to single out at least one aspect, I'd have to mention the speed with which the newsroom operates. You may have a rough idea even before you arrive there, but when you see it in action, it will still take you by surprise and exceed many of your expectations. For example, I will never forget December 19, 2016, when the David Rath court trial took an unexpected turn, followed by the killing of a Russian ambassador in Ankara and even later by the terrorist attack at a Christmas market in Berlin. The Czech Television newsroom became one big beehive. Watching the hustle and bustle was simply electrifying. Everybody was completely engrossed in his or her respective activity, intoxicated by journalistic adrenaline, and things kept changing literally minute by minute. The journalists saw all those dramatic events primarily as a subject to process and report. Given the enormous time pressure, it was virtually impossible for them to contemplate the events in some depth, or even to get emotionally involved. I understood that this was inevitable, and yet I could not help questioning the purpose of that information inundation. The European society is indeed inundated by information and it is moving at an ever-accelerating pace. This sometimes makes me think that we might benefit from some information diet, and perhaps should slow down in general. But I don't want to sound preachy. Advice is cheap.

## **WHY DID YOU CHOOSE THE CZECH TELEVISION AND HOSPODÁŘSKÉ NOVINY?**

These are two newsrooms whose reportages I had been following for quite a while. So I was naturally curious to learn more about the production process of the news which I had routinely “consumed”. If I had peeked behind the curtain of those newsrooms whose output I had not watched on a regular basis, I might have approached the entire thing with less curiosity and astonishment. But then, as I have said, curiosity and astonishment are always my alpha and omega. Besides, my original premise was that I was interested in traditional and independent mass media, the ones which are regarded as serious. This criterion narrowed down my options significantly. During the preparatory stage, I had also visited other newsrooms, but Czech Television and Hospodářské noviny eventually came up on top. For example, I kept reading the Saturday issue of Lidové noviny daily, for many years, so I would probably be interested in their newsroom meetings as well. However, now that the newspaper has been bought by Andrej Babiš, the new Czech Berlusconi, I do not think it would be a good idea to shoot my film there.

## **WHY TRADITIONAL MASS MEDIA? WHY WOULD YOU NOT CHOOSE TABLOIDS OR NON-TRADITIONAL MEDIA OUTLETS LIKE PARLAMENTNÍ LISTY? DON'T YOU THINK THIS WOULD ALSO BE INTERESTING?**

It certainly would, but the resulting film would be completely different. Also, it is very doubtful we would manage to shoot the film in the first place. It is not certain whether the non-traditional media would





have allowed us into their newsrooms and would have shown the same amount of benevolence and openness as the Czech Television and Hospodářské noviny did. In fact, it was not so easy even in some other places. For example, when I was scouting for eligible newsrooms, I also went to Český rozhlas (Czech Radio), but some members of the editorial team became slightly anxious about the kind of film we were planning to shoot. They simply came to the conclusion that they did not want to be recorded on camera, which I fully respected and did not try to change their minds about that. To film real people – whom we may also call “social actors” – is always a delicate matter. I generally try to shoot in places where there is some elementary trust between me and the potential protagonists of my film. If this kind of trust has not been established, the results cannot be good, in my opinion.

### **ALL RIGHT. BUT WHY TRADITIONAL MEDIA?**

Again, this decision was informed by my personal preferences. I happen to be a fairly conservative person who tends to view most novelties – especially the ones arriving with modern technologies – with mistrust. For example, when I see the impact of social networking sites on people and societies, I find it hard to rejoice at this kind of “progress”. I certainly do not think that traditional media are beyond criticism, as they also have numerous flaws. Even these media cannot always avoid superficiality, hastiness, and the tendency to be swayed by the mainstream opinion. And yet, when one sees what the non-traditional media are capable of... Judging by their news output, I’d bet my boots that the editorial staff in all these

obscure news websites hardly ever bother to meticulously reference their sources and double-check on the information they receive, not to mention critical editorship per se. Traditional media at least try to maintain these standard procedures. They do not always succeed at this, yet even the effort and the sense of obligation count for something these days. In fact, this is to some degree analogical to the dichotomy between traditional and non-traditional political parties: the former can certainly be criticized for their corruptibility, the ivory syndrome that alienates them from their electorate, or their absence of values. However, when one sees the current Italian government, it almost makes one long for the all those corrupt old timers and technocrats in the former Italian governments, and their “standard political mechanisms”. I will therefore readily admit that I chose the traditional mass media primarily because I tend to sympathize with them on principle, particularly in this day and age. The sympathy is quite akin to the affinity for these institutions as expressed by Timothy Snyder in his last publication. However, that affinity does not make me oblivious to their multiple flaws. I did not approach the filming process with some preconceived idea, and I was ready to show all the relevant events that took place in the two newsrooms on the same day. However, if this effort had tarnished the reputation of the traditional media, I would still have most probably persisted. In the realm of free authorial cinematography, there is nothing more dangerous than the question, “Who is going to benefit from this?” I think that once we start to think too much about the potential consequences of our artistic expression, and begin to accommodate these concerns, we are not likely to contribute any valid and substantial artistic observation.

**WERE YOU SURPRISED THAT THEY LET YOU INTO THE NEWSROOMS, ALLOWED YOU TO FILM INSIDE, AND EVENTUALLY EVEN AUTHORISED THE RESULTING FILM?**

Of course I was. This is unprecedented bravery, considering the widespread institutional cowardice typical of the times we live in. It is rather unique not just in the Czech context, but even in the European context. One simply does not expect this level of openness and benevolence. I would like to extend many thanks to both institutions. I think the mature attitude was a testimony to their integrity. You need to consider that I made it very clear, from the outset, that I was not going to create some agitprop they might benefit from, but I came there to film real people. And it is widely known that real people are far from being perfect. So if I had erased these human imperfections from the universe of my film, I would have created something unrealistic and sterile. Petr Mrzena and Martin Jašminský, who were in charge of the two respective newsrooms, proved very understanding in this regard. I would obviously hate it if they were to regret their decision later. They have enough problems as it is, so I would not be very happy if the film gave them even more problems to think about. On the other hand, if you see how their enemies tend to attack them these days, the specific content seems rather irrelevant. Sometimes it seems to me that no matter how hard they try – the Czech Television is almost comical in its anxiety as to whether the broadcasting is even-handed or not – their critics are not satisfied. That is why I am ready for the fact that many will be unwilling to understand the hyperbole, and for instance the jokingly disrespectful words meant for the fire fighters might be misunderstood as a demonstration of the arrogant contempt which

Prague intellectuals presumably feel towards ordinary Czech people. After all, fire fighters are a sensitive issue within the context of the Czech film. Miloš Forman knew a thing or two about that (laughter).

**THE TWO NEWSROOMS WHICH YOU CHOSE TO PORTRAY IN YOUR FILM HAVE RECENTLY BEEN IN THE CROSS HAIRS OF THE CZECH PRESIDENT MILOŠ ZEMAN. HE EVEN DEVOTED ONE SEGMENT OF HIS INAUGURATION SPEECH TO THEM, WHICH WAS LATER FERVENTLY DENOUNCED BY SOME OPPOSITION POLITICIANS AND NOTEWORTHY ARTISTS. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PRESIDENT AND THESE TWO NEWSROOMS HAS THUS BECOME A HEAVILY POLITICIZED ISSUE. DID THAT ALSO INFLUENCE YOUR DECISION?**

I began to ponder the subject some four years ago, when the issue was much less politicized than it is today. Of course, I knew how Miloš Zeman felt about journalists, as he had made that abundantly clear in the 1990s. It was already quite obvious that the president did not like neither the Czech Television, nor the Hospodářské noviny newspaper. So even back then, both editorial offices obviously felt some pressure from the president, or perhaps even more from his spokesperson. And yet hardly anybody could envision that this would become such a burning issue for him, that he would address these two newsrooms even in his inauguration speech. We naturally expect inauguration speeches to be delivered with some measure of dispassionate diplomacy. However, when he did attack these two editorial offices in his speech, a couple of friends phoned me and said, “Kudos, man, your film has hit the bull’s-eye.” I have to admit that I was not particularly happy about those compliments. In fact, they made me

uneasy. Everybody has the right to see any given work of art through an interpretive prism of their own choice, as long they are comfortable with it and it seems adequate to them. So if some people choose to understand the whole film as a reference to the current situation, possibly also with regard to the hysteria that is surrounding the issue, there is nothing I can do about that. Let me just point out that the film was intended to address slightly more universal concerns, so that the viewers might find it relevant even when these political skirmishes have become a thing of the past. The day when Miloš Zeman announced his candidacy for presidential re-election had a considerable dramaturgical potential. That is why I chose it. Once I'd learned that the president was going to announce his decision exclusively to a group of friends, sympathizers and supporters, thus deliberately cold-shouldering the press, I immediately pricked up my ears. I had previously been scouting quite a few newsrooms on a regular basis, so now I began to ask individual journalists how they felt about that issue and what they were going to do on that day. It turned out that Zeman's manoeuvre had had a fairly unambiguous effect: it seemed to have piqued their interest way more than if he had planned to hold a standard press conference by way of announcing his candidacy. It was also obvious that they were ready to expend quite a lot of time, energy and ingenuity in order to cover that event. In a little while, it dawned on me that this slightly absurd, possibly even Kafkaesque, situation when the Castle is closed to wider public and the journalists have to wait in the underground of the Castle, might also be convenient for a trial run of my film. The testing was meant to be quite thorough, but I certainly did not expect the situation to become so favourable that the trial run would evolve into a regular film.

## **YOU HAVE IMPLIED THAT MILOŠ ZEMAN IS PLAYING GAMES WITH THE PRESS. DO YOU THINK THIS IS A DELIBERATE STRATEGY ON HIS PART?**

I honestly have no idea. I cannot fathom the president's personality or thinking. Be that as it may, his case is somewhat similar to Donald Trump, who is also in open conflict with a majority of mainstream US media. It is quite paradoxical that the more antagonistic and belligerent he gets, the more he attracts the attention of American journalists. I think we are witnessing the same scenario in the Czech Republic, albeit on a slightly smaller scale. Some journalists seem to be virtually mesmerised by the presidential persona and they keep commenting on his actions almost incessantly. Needless to say, the president constantly whets their appetite by providing them with sensational material. I really cannot say whether these are strategically planned publicity stunts or just happenstance prompted by his momentary caprice. In fact, I do not care either way. Obviously, Miloš Zeman is nearly ubiquitous in the film, as he provides its basic momentum. And yet, this is certainly not a film about Miloš Zeman. With some exaggeration, I might say call the Czech president a sophisticated dramaturgist who created the main plot of our film. The president and his closest entourage are probably the only people who know what the intended purpose of that event was, whether he pursued some other objectives other than humiliating the journalists. In any case, these considerations are not particularly relevant to our film.

**HOW COMPLEX AND DEMANDING WAS THE FILMING PROCESS? AFTER ALL, THE FILM COMBINES SIMULTANEOUS COVERAGE FROM SEVERAL DIFFERENT LOCATIONS. HOW MANY CAMERAS DID YOU USE?**

We had acquired quite a bit of experience with this type of coverage during the shooting of *Two Nil* with Pavel Abrahám. We had used twenty two cameras on that film, so the eight cameras which we shot *Breaking News* with were, by comparison, a piece of cake. There were some minor technical mishaps, but other than that, everything went swimmingly throughout the entire day. I think it paid off that we had not underestimated the preparatory stage so everybody knew exactly what they were supposed to do. Erika Hníková was in charge of the crew at the Prague Castle, while Martin Mareček ran the filming in the *Hospodářské noviny* newsroom. Both are very experienced directors with whom I had cooperated for quite a while. Other than their professional expertise, we had also developed a good relationship in general, so I knew the two crews were in good hands. We had discussed the purpose of the shooting in considerable detail, and I had also introduced them to the surroundings and the main protagonists. They subsequently proved their directorial intelligence and flexibility by being able to respond sensitively to various unexpected twists and turns which occurred throughout the day. Their creative solutions were obviously still subordinated to my primary concept. They themselves might have shot something differently, but they knew what my authorial intent was, and behaved accordingly. They did a great job and their contribution to the film is immense. Of course, the same should be said about other

members of the crew. I was really lucky to have excellent camera people, sound engineers, production managers, etc., working on the film. I have to emphasize the editing skills of Šimon Špidla who largely shares my views on film montage and cinematography in general. It was pure joy to be editing the film with him.

**I AM ALSO INTERESTED IN THE FORMAL ASPECT OF THE WHOLE THING. THE FILM USES FAIRLY AUSTERE, DISCIPLINED AND UNPRETENTIOUS VISUAL LANGUAGE. WAS THIS THE INTENTION?**

Yes, it was. It had to be commensurate with the matter at hand. I felt that the situation did not call for some large-scale formal experimentation, even less than it would under different circumstances. I tried to keep the visual vocabulary as simple and precise as possible, with an eye on clarity and functionality as the main criteria. Earlier, we touched on the subject of traditionalism. To some degree, the traditionalist argument can also be applied to visual vocabulary used in film. The calm observational mode of *Breaking News* is in line with the tradition of European cinematic realism. This tradition shuns ornamentation and formal artifice, thereby foregrounding the film situation and letting it speak for itself. The composition of the film essentially also follows classic models, yet this hopefully does not prevent it from being formally interesting in some way. I have always liked poems by T. S. Eliot who was squarely rooted in the rich European literary tradition and yet managed to write path-breaking poetry within that traditional framework. I tried to at least emulate this principle in my film visual

language. It is of course up to other people to judge whether I have succeeded. Most importantly, I am still in the apprentice stage. I know full well that I am no Bresson.

**WHEN YOU WERE GETTING READY FOR THE SHOOTING, DID YOU WATCH ANY JOURNALISM MOVIES? DID ANY OF THESE INSPIRE YOU?**

I usually do it the other way around. Once I have started working on the script, I read and think a lot, yet I deliberately ignore all the films that explore a similar subject. I only watch these when I have completed the film. After that, I am obviously all the more interested in them. But I really only watch them afterwards. The thing is, I have found that watching various similar reference films tends to distract me. The real-life situation which I am up against gives me all the direction and inspiration I need. For instance, I am now looking forward to watching *The Newsroom*. Many of my friends told me about that TV series, some even claimed that it was to some extent comparable to my film. They said, “You basically shot a kind of docu-Newsroom.” I still have not seen the series, so I have no opinion on that. But I certainly look forward to watching it during those long November evenings. Other than that, I have always liked the newsroom as portrayed in the fifth season of *The Wire* series. You can easily tell that David Simon used to work as a journalist. He knew exactly which subjects to touch on in the individual scenes and, perhaps more importantly, how to bring these scenes to fruition. This series is a veritable treasure trove which I will always love to get back to.



# CONTACT |

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