Editorial

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Studies in Eastern European Cinema has been planning a special issue on Věra Chytilová for a number of years. Her death in 2014 seemed to mark the end of a cinematic era but, despite the reputation gained by many of her films, her work as a whole has never received the attention that it deserves. Of course, much of this can be accounted for by the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 – the years of so-called normalisation when both the country and its culture faded from international attention. As the conformist regime promoted ideologically acceptable subjects, films such as Chytilová’s *The Apple Game* (1976), *Panelstory* (1979) and *Calamity* (1980) were either suppressed or received lukewarm promotion. The fog that then descended in ‘Western’ perceptions of Czech and Slovak culture after 1968 has still barely lifted even after almost thirty years.

While her work has never received the critical acclaim of her West European counterparts, all of her 1960s films attracted international interest. The peculiar resonance of her best known film *Daisies* (1966) owes much to its individual qualities but it was also, to all intents and purposes, the only one of her films available to international audiences. With the DVD revolution, more of her work has become available, and the originality of films such as *Ceiling* (1961), *A Bagful of Fleas* (1962), *Something Different* (1963) and *The Fruit of Paradise* (1969) has been more generally recognised.

I once wrote that the humour in *Daisies* was frequently perceived by only one half of the audience (Hames, 2005, 196). But while a male audience is unlikely to identify with the preoccupations of young girls, the film has nonetheless attracted considerable attention from male critics. Curiously, the 1970s developments in feminist film criticism ignored her work despite its theoretical relevance and formal originality. It was not until Bliss Cua Lim’s article ‘Dolls in Fragments: *Daisies* as feminist allegory’ in *Camera Obscura* in 2001 (Lim, 2001) that her films began to attract serious attention from this perspective.

While Chytilová always denied being a feminist she has regularly identified with the cause of women film makers. Petra Hanáková describes her experiment with ‘visual and semantic clichés’ as ‘latent feminism’ (Hanáková, 2014, 212). But while the formal elements in her films do not have an obvious male equivalent, they involve the marshalling of some distinctive male talents. The collaboration with her cinematographer husband Jaroslav Kučera and writer and designer Ester Krumbachová to say nothing of composer Zdeněk Liška (in the case of *The Fruit of Paradise*) certainly challenges notions of gender essentiaility. The debate will continue. However, the fact that her early films can find new audiences and resonances after 50 years is challenging and significant.

The wide interest generated in her films is reflected in the fact that this special edition devoted to her work has become two, the second of which will be published in early 2019. The current issue begins with Jan Čulík’s wide ranging introduction to her work in the 1960s and the 1970s–1980s era of normalisation. He discusses her style and approach drawing on her own interviews, her relatively rare theoretical writing and a range of post-Communist analyses. He suggests that, while she was unable to continue her formal experimentation in the years of normalisation, her work exhibited a civic commitment and strong moral stance in the face of bureaucratic pressures.

While *Daisies* has always been Chytilová’s most discussed film, Cheryl Stephenson offers a new analysis likening it to the traditions of puppet theatre and drawing on the theories and
writings of Otakar Zich, Henryk Jurkowski and Heinrich von Kleist. She suggests that, by examining the puppet’s simultaneous status as subject and object, a status of which the protagonists are themselves aware, new light can be thrown on the film’s moral ambiguity and its treatment of consumption and destruction. She argues that it enables the film to operate on a level of subversion that goes beyond moral assertion.

In a revealing study of original documents, Lukáš Skupa analyses the production history of Chytilová’s 1960s films arguing that, far from being produced in a period of unquestioned liberalisation, her work was made in a context of competing forms of censorship and control. Her films were subject to evaluation both within Československý Film/Czechoslovak Film, the Barrandov studios and Central Press Supervision – and ultimately by the Ideology Department of the Communist Party. Attitudes could change according to circumstances and problems with other directors (e.g. Evald Schorm, Pavel Juráček and Jan Schmidt) with her freedoms dependent on internal negotiation. He notes that because her work defied studio conventions, it was viewed as unpredictable and difficult to control.

Beginning with Mr. Haňt’a’s dream in Bohumil Hrabal’s novel Too Loud a Solitude (1976), Alice Lovejoy discusses Chytilová’s most controversial post-89 film Panelstory or the Birth of a Settlement (1979) and her documentary Time is Inexorable (1978), both of which were set against the half finished buildings and construction sites of the late 1970s. Referring to Bohumil Hrabal’s evocation of ‘the melancholy of a world eternally under construction’, she examines the ways in which the films raise questions of time and history alongside both Hrabal’s novel and Daniela Hodrová’s theories of the literary city, referring specifically to her trilogy of novels, City of Torment (1991–1992).

Finally, Asmara Beraki Marek provides the lively personal recollections of an American student who studied under her at FAMU (the Prague Film School) in 2006–2012. It throws considerable light on the operation of the school, its personalities, and Chytilová’s own character, personality, and convictions, describing her as ‘a light to the world’.

Note: The second issue devoted to Chytilová will include Jindřiška Bláhová’s analysis of Chytilová’s post-1989 work together with two wide ranging essays inspired by The Fruit of Paradise – by Iveta Jusová and Dan Reyes and by Felicity Gee, a study of her 1980 film Calamity by Luboš Ptáček together with a review of her documentary Flights and Falls (2000).

In this issue, we publish two obituaries on two recently deceased Eastern European directors: Miloš Forman and Juraj Herz.

In the review section, our readers will find four book reviews and one conference report. Cheryl Dueck discusses Re-Imagining DEFA: East German Cinema in its National and Transnational Contexts edited by Seán Allan and Sebastian Heiduschke. Hajnal Király reviews György Kalmár’s monograph Formations of Masculinity in Post-Communist Hungarian Cinema. Labyrinthian Men. Elżbieta Durys examines Popular Cinemas in East Central Europe: Film Cultures and Histories, edited by Dorota Ostrowska, Francesco Pitassio and Zsuzsanna Varga.


Note

1. Note the attention given to her work in the February 1968 issue of Cahiers du Cinéma and, in particular, the interview with Michel Delahaye and Jacques Rivette. See Delahaye and Rivette. ‘Le champ libre; entretien avec Véra Chytilová. Cahiers du Cinéma, 198 (February): 46–73.


References


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