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Ester Krumbachová (1923 – 1996)

Ester Krumbachová was a Czech screenwriter, costume and set designer, author and a one-time film director. She was born in Brno, 200 km north east of Prague, moving to the capital city in the early 1960s after studying at her local art college and working on theatre productions in České Budějovice.¹ After a first marriage to Slaviček Písařík, Krumbachová married the Czechoslovak New Wave director Jan Němec and collaborated with him on a number of films. She first entered the film industry in 1961 as a costume designer and went on to provide aesthetic advice on many productions, including *Transport z raje* (*Transport from Paradise*, Zdeněk Brynych, 1962), and *At žije republika* (*Long Live the Republic!* Karel Kachyňa, 1965)

Krumbachová's is credited as writer or co-writer for ten films, her first screenplay credit as co-writer was in 1965 for *...a pátý jezdec je Strach*/*The Fifth Horseman is Fear* (1964) and her last, *Faunovo velmi pozdní odpoledne* (*The Very Late Afternoon of a Faun*, 1983). After her divorce from Němec in 1968, Krumbachová wrote and directed her only feature film, *Vražda ing. Čerta* (*The Murder of Mr Devil*, 1970), and subsequently fell foul of various political machinations at the Barrandov film studio following “normalisation”² which meant that she found it difficult to work during the 1970s and 1980s. Her collaborators believed that “she was imbued with a versatile talent; they compare her to a renaissance type of an artist” (Urgošíková 1999, p. 224). In her 70s, Krumbachová published a collection of her letters and reworked Czech fairytales in 1994 as *První knížka Ester* (*The First Book of Ester*). She died in 1996.

A defining feature of Krumbachová's life is her essentially social nature and a preference for working collaboratively. This may go some way towards explaining both her apparent lack of productivity and the dearth of attention paid to her work, in comparison to her most famous collaborator, the director and screenwriter Věra Chytilová, probably the most famous Czech director aside from Miloš Forman. Krumbachová saw filmmaking as an exciting group venture and one that necessarily brings anonymity to many who work in cinema. Invoking medieval craftsmen (and the paranoia of post-normalisation Czechoslovakia), she explains:

I am fascinated by the harmonious interplay of the huge number of components that make up a film. In other ways, too, a film resembles a Gothic cathedral. The painter paints, the sculptor contributes his talents, the large army of people who contribute to a film remains more or less anonymous. (in Liehm 1974, p. 277)

¹ There is little biographical information available about the specific details of Krumbachová's life but Věra Chytilová's 2005 biographical film, *Pátrání po Ester* (*Looking/Longing for Ester*), contains invaluable interviews with friends and family from throughout her life. Unless otherwise indicated, biographical details come from this film.

² On 20 August 1968, Warsaw Pact troops entered Czechoslovakia in order to bring the increasingly liberal politics of “socialism with a human face” in line with “normal” Soviet politics. See Golan (1971, pp. 316-329)

The venerable director Otakar Vavra with whom she co-wrote an adaptation of Vaclav Kaplický's novel *Kladivo na čarodějnice / Witch Hammer* (1969) points out that "she'd often do more talking than drawing or writing." Krumbachová's portmanteau career and her designation as a "muse in the service of other geniuses" (Hanáková, 2014, p. 216) have made it easy for her to fall out of film history and Antonin J. Liehm notes that "because she never refused to help anyone who was at this wit's end [...] we will frequently find the imprint of her hand where her signature is missing" (Liehm 1974, p. 271). However, Krumbachová is often mentioned in histories of Czech cinema but her work is seldom given specific attention. The important exceptions are Petra Hanáková's two articles "Voices from Another World: Feminine Space and Masculine Intrusion in *Sedmikráska* and *Vražda ing. Čerta*" (2005) and "The Feminist Style in Czechoslovak Cinema: The Feminine Imprint in the Films of Věra Chytilová and Ester Krumbachová" (2014). Also worthy of mention is Zuzana Formánková's unpublished and Czech language 2013 BA thesis on the reception of *The Murder of Mr Devil*.

Hanáková argues that Krumbachová, and to a lesser extent Chytilová, has been written out of cultural history because of the lack of a specifically feminist and gender-sensitive discourse in both historical and contemporary accounts of women in communist Czechoslovak film. While the question of the development of feminism under communism in Czechoslovakia requires further nuanced research³, it is clear that both Krumbachová and Chytilová were often discussed by their male colleagues in terms of their supposedly "feminine" qualities, with a particular emphasis on their looks rather than their work (see Hanáková 2005, pp. 65-66). Indeed, in his early history of the Czechoslovak New Wave Škvorecký describes Krumbachová on first mention as "an uncommonly beautiful woman" (Škvorecký 1971, p. 118). In addition, the prominence of auteur theory in film writing since the 1960s tends to ignore the role of scriptwriters and directors who do not produce a substantial body of individually authored work. Nevertheless, it is clear that a host of related issues; collaborative working practices, the unavailability of material, the denigration of women's roles among filmmakers and critics served to make Krumbachová's important role in Czechoslovak film history nearly invisible. Liehm characterises Krumbachová thus:

Ester Krumbachová's artistic vision exerted an influence first on the Czech stage and, later, on the films of numerous directors. It might be said that she long anticipated the artistic and visual fin-de-siècle inspiration that has since become a fad throughout the world. Her thinking and what she wrote (which for the most part went unpublished) became an ideological hinterland, a framework, for many films. (1974 p. 271)

³ For instance, the development of second wave feminism in the West during the 1960s was importantly concerned with access to legal abortion, but abortion had been legalised in most Soviet states in the mid-1950s and so this issue would not have been a strong motivating force. Radka Dudová (2010) discusses the fascinating history of abortion laws and attitudes in Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic from the 1950s to the 2000s.

Krumbachová co-wrote her screenplays, despite Urgošíková's claim that *The Murder of Mr Devil* was "truly her own," as even this film was not written solely by her. The collaborative approach causes problems for more traditional approaches to film analysis which prefer to identify a single practitioner as the source of what we might call the film's "meaning."⁴ Nevertheless, by considering all the films that she wrote, with a variety of people, we should be able to make a claim for the specific qualities and concerns that Krumbachová brings to these films. These elements are, I argue, an interest in the body, particularly in sensual pleasure, which is combined with an examination of the relationships between men and women especially as this relationship can be seen as a broader metaphor for the functioning of political power. Fundamentally, Krumbachová is concerned with the issue of freedom and the complex ways in which pleasure cannot be an easy index of value. Just because something is enjoyable, be it sex or food, does not mean that it is necessarily valuable but, at the same time, Krumbachová celebrates a certain *jouissance* available to us only through pleasure and enjoyment.

Krumbachová's first contribution to a script was on Zbyněk Brynych's *...a paty jezdec je Strach* (*The Fifth Horseman is Fear*, 1964) where she helped the director rewrite the script to "deprive it of references to any particular time and space" (Hames 2005, p. 140). The resulting narrative was no longer a historically realistic portrayal of Jewish life under Nazism, but could serve more generally as a warning against the continuing threat of Fascism. Krumbachová's pivotal role in the rethinking of *The Fifth Horseman is Fear* is obscured by the fact that she is only listed in the on-screen credits as the costume designer and omitted as a scriptwriter. Nevertheless, here we can see very early on Krumbachová's taste for abstraction and myth rather than history. This predilection is not one of mystical passivity but, on the contrary, one which strongly realises that history should not be forgotten and that its lessons need to be made relevant and alive in the present. She was clearly deeply affected by the German invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1938 and the subsequent atrocities of the second World War and, perhaps unsurprisingly, given the rumbling of Russian tanks into Prague in 1968, acutely aware that such barbarities are not consigned to the past.

The Fifth Horseman is Fear is shot in Prague, where Braun, a Jewish doctor, is forbidden from practicing. Braun's task is to categorise the various objects confiscated by the new totalitarian regime. He is forced to confront his collaborationist pragmatism when a seriously wounded resistance fighter stumbles into his building and is asked to help by one of his neighbours. The film has clear echoes of Franz Kafka's bureaucratically beleaguered protagonists as Braun navigates the unofficial and official worlds in his attempt to save the dying man. He has to go to a nightclub in order to find some morphine and is soon after very nearly mistaken for an inmate in an insane asylum. Braun's interrogation by the secret police is reminiscent of the opening of *The*

⁴ For an extended discussion of the problem of single authorship as such in film, see Berys Gaut's chapter on "Cinematic Authorship" in *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art* (pp. 98-151).

Trial (1925), as is the general atmosphere of paranoia and vague threat. The narrative eventually unravels under the weight of mutual mistrust. The films ending in 1960s Prague drives home the point that the allegory is contemporary rather than historic. Krumbachová's impact on the script, costumes and set design seems to infuse the film with an abstract tone which maps political power onto sexuality in a way which she develops in her later work.

The next two films to which Krumbachová contributed as screenwriter are the most well known in her oeuvre: *O slavnosti a hostech /A Report on the Party and the Guests*, (1965) which she co-wrote with the director and her then husband, Jan Němec, and *Sedmikrasky /Daisies*, (1966), her first collaboration with Věra Chytilová. In *A Report on the Party and the Guests*, Krumbachová was interested in creating a sense of the meaninglessness of everyday polite language and the fact that real injustice is ignored through the application of a veneer of phatic drivel. She elucidates:

In *The Party and the Guests*, the main creative element was distorted dialogue. I tried to create conversation in which the characters said nothing meaningful about themselves. The audience heard only isolated fragments of sentences, as if they had walked suddenly into the midst of a sophisticated party and had no idea what the conversation was about. Some critics claimed to have found hidden meanings in the fragments, but it was my intention to demonstrate that people generally talk only in terms of disconnected ideas, even when it appears that they are communicating with one another. I tried not to mimic real speech but to suggest its pattern, to find a language of the sort of phenomenon that Ionesco discovered in drama. Not a single word in the film was intended as a secret code; the dialogues were not intended to conceal anything but to reveal the nonsense that we hear around us every day. In the past, heroes used words to express tragic situations. Now, tragedy is revealed by pictures, and our words have no relationship to what we see. Newspapers and televisions are full of the killed and wounded, and people sit around with legs crossed and sipping coffee. I know that this is connected with the development of communication media, but all the same it is hard to accept. (in Liehm 1974, p. 280)

In the film a happily chatting bourgeois picnic group are accosted by a group of men, one of them obsequiously intimidating and the others thuggish, who coerce the gathering to attend a birthday banquet for the Host. The fawning guests are unsure as to why these strangers are there but, nevertheless, feel the importance of appearing enthusiastic as the Host begins his formal speech. Proceedings are halted however when one of the picnic guests goes missing and a search party with dogs is sent to retrieve him. The "guest who refused to be happy," as he is dubbed by Škvorecký (1971, p. 123), is the only person at the party who refuses to co-operate with the injunction to "Enjoy!" As Škvorecký explains, "It is evidently a parable about the process which takes place in all modern societies - the adoption of a dominant ideology - and about the destruction of those who do not adopt it" (1971, p. 121). The clear political allegory of

the film caused much consternation at Barrandov studios especially when it was noticed that the Host, played by Ivan Vyskočil's, uncannily resembled V.I. Lenin, apparently an unwitting coincidence.

Daisies has been extensively analysed in film and feminist academic literature and Hanáková discusses Krumbachová's role in the film in her two articles (2005, 2014). She points out that the film is "acknowledged as an allegorical and philosophical statement against materialism and consumerism" (2005, p. 67) but that this reading contrasts with the film's presentation of "a female space of desire, enjoyment and disruptive creativity, with the space of jouissance" (2005, p. 67). Hanáková goes on to posit that the "productive tension" between the film's political critique and its anarchic celebration of destruction may be due to:

the fact that the first version of the scenario was written for Chytilová by Pavel Juraček, probably the most misogynistic writer and director of the Czech New Wave. The script was then reworked by Chytilová and Krumbachová, but it can still be read as revealing traces of the original sexism (destruction appears as a symptomatic trait of female activity) revalorized by the reworking (destruction of norms appears liberating and amusing). (Hanáková 2005, p. 67)

In *Daisies* two young woman, both named Marie, live a feckless life where they taunt men into supplying them food and gifts but then decide to destroy themselves because everything is spoiled anyway. In an important echo of *A Report on the Party and the Guests*, in the final sequence of *Daisies*, the Maries go to the countryside and find a lavish but eerily abandoned banquet which they proceed to annihilate. What they cannot eat they wreck until they are brought to their senses as the chandelier in which they are swinging crashes into a river. Now dressed in newspapers, they return to the banquet hall and attempt to clean up their mess until the chandelier falls on them again and the scene cuts to war bombing (for a more more detailed discussions of this film see Sorfa 2013, pp. 137-139, and Hames 2005, pp. 187-197). *Daisies* gives Krumbachová and Chytilová the opportunity to present a form of feminist revolution which is both political and diabolically destructive. The film explicitly engages with the problem of moving into what we might call a new economy of thought: an economy in which the old order is completely rejected but which has no ground on which to base itself. Krumbachová went on to co-write and collaborate with Chytilová on two further films, *Ovoce stromů rajských jíme* (*The Fruit of Paradise*, 1969) and *Faunovo velmi pozdní odpoledne* (*The Very Late Afternoon of a Faun*, 1983).

Mučedníci lásky (*Martyrs of Love*, 1966), Krumbachová and Němec's next film, unlike *A Report on the Party and their Guests*, was not seen as a problem at Barrandov. Their most experimental film was "not an attack on a political climate, or its methods, but it was guilty of something almost as obnoxious: it was incomprehensible"

(Škvorecký 1971, p. 126). The film is associated with interwar Czech Poetism and what Němec called “dream realism” (Hames 2005, p. 177). It is divided into three sections: “Temptations of a White-Collar Worker”, “Nastěnka’s Revery” and “Orphan Rudolf’s Adventure”. The film is almost silent and the first section features a dumb protagonist, reminiscent of Chaplin, who engages in a number of sexual scenarios which are never consummated. In the second, Nastěnka is ignored by a famous singer and then picked up an army officer who dresses her as a veiled bride for an obscure ritual. In the third and final part, Rudolf is mistaken for Jakub by an amiable garden party and invited to join their drunken revelry. Němec and Krumbachová describe the film thus:

These aren’t pictures of or from life, but three stylised love-adventures. Rather than attempting to show the world as it is, these are fables or songs. The first story [...] is intended as a silent comedy; it has practically no dialogue, and it aims to be funny with a bit of sadness. If somebody gets put off by the somewhat gloomy character of its milieu, let him kindly remember the places in Chaplin’s comedies - the huts, dives, hovels, and dumps - which as everybody recognizes do not serve to nauseate life, but rather are a backdrop for the spirit of the work; the work itself being almost exclusively a defence of a withdrawn and unsuccessful person. This should also be the meaning of the three stories: the grotesque confession of the operator, Nastenka’s sentimental dream, and the wonderful adventures of Rudolf the orphan. (in Škvorecký 1971, p. 129).

Martyrs of Love is perhaps the most inaccessible of Krumbachová’s scripts, even the unfailingly generous Hames remarks that it “is not a seamless film, and its mood is sometimes broken by what appears to be miscalculated overstatement” (2005, p. 182). But we see again Krumbachová hallmarks in the importance of sexual desire, social ritual and the inability of both men and women to find true freedom or happiness except in the absurdity of the moment.

Krumbachová’s following screenplay, *The Fruit of Paradise*, co-written and directed by Chytilova, was filmed just after the Prague Spring invasion of 1968. It is an allegorical tale of Eva and her husband Josef on holiday or retreat at a country spa while the highly attractive Robert acts the role of the tempter devil. Robert also appears to be a serial killer who has marked Eva out to be his seventh victim but it is she who shoots him instead. The film is loosely structured and is interspersed with highly impressionistic scenes, most famously the long opening sequence in which the parable of Adam and Eve is played out. Finally Eva finds herself, ‘not only outside society [...], but also outside the story, language and time’ (Hanáková 2014, p. 221). For Eva, then, the only way to escape the choice to leave her philandering and ineffectual husband or to succumb to the temptations of the devil, is to enter a form of exile. This may also be a reflection of the political pessimism of the late 1960s and the ending of *The Fruits of Paradise* presages the depressive exile, both internal and external, so characteristic of the normalisation years (1968-1989).

After her work on *The Fruit of Paradise*, Krumbachová perhaps unexpectedly teamed up with the elderly Otakar Vavra who had begun his directing career in the early 1930s and had taught Chytilová and many of the other Czech New Wave filmmakers at FAMU. Vavra's films were primarily historical or literary adaptations and Krumbachová helped Vavra adapt Václav Kaplický's 1962 novel *Kladivo na čarodějnice* (*Witch Hammer*) for the 1969 film which, apart from the scriptwriting credit, also includes an acknowledgement of Krumbachová's "Creative collaboration and soldiers' song lyrics". *Witch Hammer* is set in 1680 in North Moravia and chronicles the mania following the arrest of an old woman for stealing communion wafers to feed to cows in the belief that this would make them yield milk. Following the familiar structure of such witch-hunt frenzies, innocent superstition is used as a cover for large scale ideological, political and personal gain. A principled dean's career is ruined because of, an innocent relationship with his servant woman. Clearly the novel and the film were both intended as comments on contemporary abuses of ideological power.

There are specific changes in adaptation of the novel to screenplay. The novel begins sedately with Susanne Voglick, the dean's servant, knitting stockings for her master and thinking ruefully of a wedding taking place later that day. The film's introduction is much more dramatic; a monk whispers, "Through woman sin into the world. Woman is sin," and then lasciviously intones, "The womb of woman is the gateway to hell. Bodily desire is the root of all evil, in woman insatiable." The monk concludes, "The embrace of woman is like unto the snares of the hunter. Woman works her trickery with the devil who appears in the form of a man." All the while he stares at a montage of naked women bathing. Vavra and Krumbachová quickly set up the premise that the terror to come is a result of the sexual repression and violence of the church, a message that would have been palatable to the communist regime, thus sidestepping any possible accusations of political allegory. Sexual repression, itself, then comes to symbolise political oppression which is the argument that Krumbachová will follow in two of the films remaining to be discussed, *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* and *The Murder of Mr Devil*.

Krumbachová adapted *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* with the film's director Jaromil Jireš. The film, released in 1970, was based on the 1935 gothic novel by the surrealist poet Vitěslav Neval. The narrative is a heightened psychoanalytic and incestuous drama with vampiric overtones, in which Valerie experiences her sexual awakening at the hands of various family and quasi-family members (for a detailed discussion of the film, see Hames 2005, pp. 201-208). Krumbachová's interest here is in the intricate and exaggerated mise-en-scène but also in the young girl's search for authentic pleasure which is, for Krumbachová, the sign of a certain freedom.

In late 1969, Krumbachová and Němec wrote the script of *The Murder of Mr Devil* together and, according to Němec, the film was not written as something that

would actually be made but rather as a script to fulfil a prior contractual obligation: “We needed a screenplay and we made easy money.” Němec’s reaction to the film is extremely negative and he goes on to say, “I can’t think of a more stupid film than *Killing the Devil*. I’m very ashamed to have been the co-writer and that I’m in it as an extra.” Perhaps his cynicism here can be attributed to the difficult political period in which this ostensibly lightweight film was made. Nevertheless the film has been ignored in discussions of Czech cinema. Hanáková rather hyperbolically claims that “*Vražda* remains one the most underestimated and misinterpreted films of its time” (2005, p. 68). Certainly, Hames does not mention it at all in *The Czechoslovak New Wave* but Škvorecký does refer to the film even though he had only read the script:

Judging by the scenario, the film should bear no traces of Chytilova’s feminism. It is a phantasmic, dream-like story, gently ridiculing the amorous dreaminess of gentle women. A story not of this world, full of magic, miracles, and of very original humour: the protagonist falls in love with an engineer called Devil, who in the end turns out to be a real devil, who once in a while turns into a kind of abominable snowman. The whole thing cannot be described in traditional and rational terms. It contains a touch of surrealism, with its delight in sentimental campy kitsch. Once again everything is conceived very visually, with an overwhelming display of colours, shapes, costumes, objects, hair, etc. All told, *The Murder of Engineer Devil* (1970) is a portrait of Ester’s soul, which is just as feminine as Vera’s. (1971, p. 133)

The film is set in one location, a flat, and has no exterior scenes. It is essentially a two hander with the unnamed woman and Čert (meaning “devil” in Czech). The story itself is fairly basic as the woman tries to seduce and satisfy Čert with increasingly elaborate meals until she realises that he is indeed a real demon. She then decides to use his weakness for raisins to trap him in a large hessian sack full of the fruits. Once he is caught in the sack, he disappears but she realises that the raisins are now “more potent than best quality hashish” and that by eating one single raisin she could “taste the beauty of the clearest illusions.” Ever the pragmatist, she sells the raisins for an enormous profit and decides to fund an expedition to Tibet in order to bring her back an abominable snow man, but a “better snow man” (*lepší snežný muž*), a “better, gentler man” (*lepší nežný muž*).

The overall structure of *The Murder of Mr Devil* consists of a rhythmic pattern alternating between her cooking preparations for Čert’s visits, his actual visits in which he stuffs food into himself in every greater quantities, and odd chorus-like sections in which she addresses the viewer directly. In these disquisition she adopts a flowery, literary tone in contrast to the coarse language of Čert and in which she deliberates on her desires and considers what steps to take next. The film has resonances of the 19th century Czech fairytale *Otesánek* in which a desperate childless couple carve a wooden trunk to resemble a baby which miraculously comes to life. The ‘baby’ begins to

consume everything, eating his parents and various villagers. An old woman eventually strikes Otesánek down with a hoe and releases everything and everyone he had eaten. The original couple live happily without ever desiring a child again. In the film, Čert functions as a perverse child for whom, as Hanáková writes, “the heroine tries to perform the ideal of ‘feeding’ and caring femininity, [but] it is she who is facing the danger of being eaten by the ‘devil’” (2005, p. 73). We can then see Čert as the embodiment of female desire but a desire that will inevitably destroy its subject.

Krumbachová’s last two co-written films were released in 1983: a New Zealand film, *Strata*, directed by Geoff Steven, and *The Very Late Afternoon of a Faun*, her final collaboration with Chytilová, in which an ageing lothario, Karel Faun, seduces a series of much more younger women and worries about his own decrepitude. Hanáková sees Faun as a:

basically tragicomic figure trapped in his role much more fatally than the women of the earlier films: unlike them, he does not even try to break free; on the contrary, he clings stubbornly to his ways irrespective of the fact that, at his age, they bring him more problems than pleasures. (2014, p. 223).

Krumbachová’s subtle sense of humour and interest in joy and freedom is something that defined her contribution to the two earlier films made with Chytilová. This film looks forward to Chytilová’s more brutally pessimistic films such as *Pasti, pasti, pastičky* (*Little Traps*, 1998) in which two men rape a veterinarian who then drugs and castrates them.

For Krumbachová, who remained single until her death, her own film ends with the image of a woman alone, drinking, but happy. It is this happy aloneness, without bitterness or misanthropy, that would appear to define Krumbachová cinematic legacy. In a letter that she writes to herself, she says:

From my own life I remember precisely this, that I was once a child and that now I am not, and also that I have had many different occupations (*hodně různých zaměstnání*), some of which suited me, and others which I myself left – [...] I had thirty eight lovers, I left thirty of them and eight left me and one of them was a dentist - and then when one day I found myself in a film studio, my heart was pierced by the fatal/fateful (*osudný*) arrow of love and that was it (*a byl se mnou konec*), I submitted/succumbed (*podlehla*) to film in the way some people do to alcohol. (1994, p. 7: my translation)

Krumbachová’s particular contribution to Czech cinema is a peculiar sense of aesthetics and humour which is acutely aware of the power dynamics, both political and patriarchal, of the real world but which nevertheless insists on the pleasures of fantasy and reality.

The feminine temperament is, of course, quite different from the masculine. We live and function in a man's world. We live in the twentieth century, yet in many respects it is still hard for a woman to get along without a man. Particularly in the social sense. We are still living as guests in a man's world. Naturally, this also implies certain a certain advantage for women, since we can laugh at this world made by men. (Krumbachová in Liehm, 1974, p. 281)

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