

Cosmopolitanism, Immigration, State Collapse and the Oppression of Women A Report from the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival, June 30th - July 8th, 2023

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Considering how enclosed into itself both culturally and linguistically the Czech Republic currently is, and how it is struggling with nationalist populism and its not particularly competent politicians, the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival is a veritable miracle. It is internationalist and cosmopolitan and it almost feels it is not located in the Czech Republic at all. Judging by their reactions, the audiences attending the Karlovy Vary film festival also seem to be highly enlightened, not representing the average Czech citizen at all. What is more, as it has been noted by the participating international film makers with amazement, all the nine screening halls and cinemas where the nine day festival takes place are always packed. International filmmakers presenting their films often gasp with surprise when they appear on stage in the Great Hall of the Thermal Hotel in front of 1200 people, where the screen is 20 meters wide. They say that their films have never been presented in such a large hall in front of such a large audience.

The Karlovy Vary film festival closely collaborates with a number of international festivals such as Sundance, Cannes and Berlin and much of its programming is made up of films taken over from there. For me, this is the most valuable part of Karlovy Vary because it thus presents a selection of the best films made around the world during the previous year. In my view, the main Karlovy Vary competition is usually relatively weak, because if you have a new, interesting film, will you send it to Cannes or to Karlovy Vary? This year, during the 57th Karlovy Vary festival, however, the main competition was better than in previous years, maybe disproving the above-mentioned rule somewhat. Undoubtedly, Karlovy Vary is now regarded as very important by film makers in Eastern Europe, in the Middle East and in Africa.

Karlovy Vary always presents a showcase of the latest Czech feature films. They often suffer from their inability to produce a really gripping, well-written narrative, dealing with important social issues. Instead, they tend to specialize in visual, “artistic” effects or they have a narrative which helplessly peters out. Such was for instance David Jařab’s film *Hadí plyn* (*Snake Gas*), a vague variation on Joseph Conrad’s novel *The Heart of Darkness*, consisting of an interminable, although picturesque boat journey along the wilderness of the Danube delta in Romania, or a rather brave film version of Jáchym Topol’s unfilmable novel *Citlivý člověk* (*A Sensitive Man*) directed by Tomáš Klein, an experimental film about a few somewhat wild Czech down-and-outs drinking and travelling aimlessly around the Czech Republic. It should also be pointed out that there were also a number of international films where the film director just recorded “ordinary daily life” of his/her characters without any

narrative for 90 per cent of the film's time, and then tried to save the film by introducing a crisis 10 min before the film's conclusion.

There was one truly remarkable Czech film in the main competition, *Úsvit* (*Dawn*) (with a much better English title *We Have Never Been Modern*), made by the 29-year old film director Matěj Chlupáček, who had never studied at a film academy. (But the film of course had full support from a European Union film fund and other institutions.) The screening of the film turned out to be extremely topical, since only a week before, there was a long and shameful debate in Czech parliament where many MPs attacked homosexuals and refused to approve a law allowing single sex marriages. *Úsvit* was a passionate defense of otherness. It takes place in 1937 in a factory in Slovakia, built by Czech entrepreneurs. A shocking event occurs: a corpse of a strangely deformed baby is found in the factory on a heap of sand. The manager of the factory, suspecting sabotage, calls intelligence officers from Bratislava to investigate. They are right-wingers who excuse Hitler in the same way in which today's supporters of fascist Russia defend Putin. They do not bother investigating anything, they arrest some communists from the local village and some people get killed. However, the young wife of the factory director, a medic, properly investigates the case and discovers that the dead baby was born to a factory employee who is in fact a hermaphrodite – a more frequent occurrence in the general population than we normally think. While most males in this film are either right wingers, ideologues or cynics, the young female doctor is the epitome of decency and adherence to facts. She is trying to secure a proper legal recognition for the young man-woman, but of course she fails – it is only 1937 and “We have never been modern”. The most bigoted characters in the film speak exactly the same way as the Czech MPs in the above-mentioned parliamentary debate in Prague on 29th June 2023. No wonder the film was rewarded by a long standing ovation by the Karlovy Vary audience.

Robert Kirchhoff's documentary about Alexander Dubček and Czechoslovak history of the second half of the twentieth century *Všetci lidé budou bratia* (*All People Will Be Brothers*) argued that Dubček, contrary to a common belief, was not a coward because he really fought Brezhnev during their meeting in the border town of Čierna nad Tisou in July 1968, before the August 1968 invasion. The film also pointed out that Dubček did not join the dissidents in the 1970s and 1980s because he continued believing in his reform communism, and hoped that it would prevail even in the Soviet Union and he would be able to return to leading his country.

The main prize of the festival was awarded to a very good Bulgarian film, *Uroctite na Blaga* (*Blaga's lessons*), directed by Stephan Komandarev. The film deals with an issue discussed in the consumer programmes on UK radio almost every day: fraudulent phone calls by sophisticated criminals who are trying to steal money from you. But the film has an important general message. Seventy-year-old former teacher of literature Blaga is persuaded by fraudsters, pretending to be police, to throw her savings in a plastic bag out of her window because “you are in danger that criminals might steal it from you”. When she discovers that she has been manipulated, no one will help her in the post-communist society in Bulgaria, and the tabloid press even mocks her (“She gave her money to criminals, is she senile?”) But Blaga eventually wins – the only possible way to do so is to start behaving individualistically, selfishly and criminally. Under a false name, she becomes a courier for the criminals and manages to recoup the money that had been stolen from her. The film is a potent accusation of the feebleness of a post-communist state.

The refugee crisis is an ongoing, brutal international problem and there were a number of films dealing with the issue of immigration at the festival. A dramatic Romanian film *Spre nord (To the North)* by Mihai Mincan deals with the plight of two young stowaways on a cargo ship travelling from Europe to Canada. The issue of immigration and bigotry is also addressed in the Iranian film *Marzhaye bi payan (Endless Borders)* by Abbas Amini. The situation of a young Afghani female refugee, former interpreter of the UK troops in Afghanistan, now in the USA, is dealt with in a really pleasing film *Fremont* by Babak Jalali. There were a number of other important Iranian and Middle Eastern films, highlighting the oppression of women. The Lebanese film *Dancing on the Edge of a Volcano*, directed by Cyril Aris, follows the attempts to make a feature film in Lebanon, a country experiencing an almost total social and economic collapse. The film is nevertheless extremely optimistic.

Apart from the topic of immigration, the issue of the position of women was extremely important throughout this year's Karlovy Vary film festival. It appeared even in two highly sophisticated Western courtroom dramas. The Canadian film *Les Chambres Rouges (Red Rooms)* by Pascal Plante dealt with the case of a brutal murderer of young girls. A mysterious young female, obsessed by the case because she was highly knowledgeable about the shady online world of the dark web, provides key evidence in the story. The film was a serious warning about the uncontrolled illegality taking place on the dark web. *Anatomie d'une Chute (The Anatomy of a Fall)* by Justine Triet showed us how seemingly innocent events in a family relationship may be interpreted in court in such a way as to make you guilty of a murder of your husband. Again, a woman is a key character in this drama which justifiably won the main prize in Cannes this year.

The Karlovy Vary International Film Festival has developed into a truly important platform for the most relevant films of today, in spite of the fact that it seems to exist almost outside the contemporary Czech Republic – where, paradoxically, its impact seems minimal because the local media tend to be obsessed with which Western celebrity has visited the festival and what she wears, rather than discussing the important issues that the festival highlights each year. Maybe it is all the more important for people actually to visit it.

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