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Women in Czech film – directors (I.)

Asides from a number of notable examples in Czech film, female Czech film directors are far fewer in number than their male counterparts. But the reasons for such marginalisation certainly do not stem from an overall lack of female directors working in the business.

Only rarely do we see cultivated public debates taking place in the Czech Republic on the subject of gender issues. Public sentiments suggest that most believe that gender inequality either never existed in the country, or has long since been overcome. Since communist times, feminism has been perceived as a western-imported pseudoscience, which seeks to both put down all members of the male gender and militantly advocate a matriarchal concept.

Objections with regards to the perceived lewdness of a trailer for this year's Karlovy Vary film festival, in which Zdeněk Svěrák used a cotton ear bud to "probe" the genital area of the statue of a naked woman, tend to largely be dismissed as merely narrow-minded and lacking a sense of humour. We have also learned to view the history of Czech film as one involving major male figures such as Martin Frič, Otakar Vávra or Jiří Menzel (incidentally, he also partook in a different festival trailer criticised for its sexism).

While in the case of men, diligence, talent, or charisma appear to play a decisive role, public perceptions around female success tend to revolve around traits such as beauty, an ability to make use of female "attributes", or hysteria (concepts subverted in the films of director Věra Chytilová). This division of roles, which assumes a more active role being played by a man, is also reflected by the way in which (chiefly) First Republic actresses were fetishised, becoming – as was recently seen with *Lída*

Baarová (Devil's Mistress, 2016) – objects of exploitation.

And staying with the subject of film: in comparison with men, the fact that women are frequently viewed as inferior and of lesser inherent worth is not just the fault of the kinds of films made in this country, but also the way in which we discuss and write about such output. But putting down and holding back women's cultural contributions need not be intentional. For a patriarchal system, views that men make a greater contribution, have greater influence, and are rewarded with higher incomes are seen as self-evident.

But such notions of an inferior place for women in the film industry are, among other things, overturned by the fact that for some time now women directors have been far more than just a small group of "impostors" seeking, in effect, to infiltrate a man's world.

Yet gender inequality in the film industry is far from just a Czech issue (famous public statements made by the likes of Meryl Streep and Jennifer Lawrence speak to the plight of all such women; add to that the small number of female directors with films at the Cannes film festival, or the small number of high-budget blockbusters directed by women due to the fact that the chief sources of financing for such films are largely in the hands of men). But in other countries, the debate has been raging for more than a decade on this matter. In the Czech Republic it has yet to begin.

Not all female directors pose the kind of questions, or offer the kinds of answers, inherent to the female experience. And not all female directors offer a fresh point-of-view or a subjective originality of form and content. However, that does not mean that they should receive less attention than similarly or less talented male directors.

Naturally, "re-inscribing" overlooked women back into the history of film is not merely the domain of a single brief text such as this. Moreover, the ensuing overview of Czech female film directors does not claim to be a definitive one. Still largely overlooked for now are the women directors of short, animated, or television films, not to mention the nature of the summarised profile format here, which can only offer the most basic information. Nonetheless, a sufficient number of names are collated here to sharpen the contours of the debate about the contribution of Czech female film directors.

Pioneering women in Czech film

While France's Alice Guy-Blaché – who began in this field in the early 20th century – is considered to be the world's first female film director, the Czech crown in this regard goes to Olga Rautenkranzová, director of the silent films *Učitel orientálních jazyků* (*Oriental Language Teacher*, 1918) and *Kozlonoh* (1918). After that came Terezie Císařová and Thea Červenková (1882–1961), whose first two short films were *Byl první máj* (*On the First of May*) and *Zloděj* (*The Thief*), both from 1919. In 1921, Červenková and her cinematographer Josef Brabec founded the Filmový ústav production company. Their adaptations of classic Czech literary works were made with limited financial resources and in Spartan conditions, which had a negative impact of the finished products. *Babička* (*Grandmother*, 1921) can thus hardly be described as the first filmic adaptation of the fairytale by Božena Němcová, given that the film only dramatises certain select fragments of the story.

Unfortunately, *Paličova dcera* (*The Incendiary's Daughter*), which premiered in December 1923, does not survive in its entirety. Three months after saw the premiere of *Závěť Podivínová* (*The Testament Of An Oddfellow*, 1924), the first film from Zdenka Smolová, better-known under the pseudonym of Zet Molas (1896-1956). Only two films followed after that, the sentimental *Mlynář a jeho dítě* (*The Miller and His Child*, 1928) and *Karel Hynek Mácha* (1937), a portrait of the romantic poet which had been several years in the works. [Click here](#) to read a detailed profile of the director, screenwriter, producer and film theoretician, who was strongly influenced by the French avant-garde scene, and who energetically propagated the work of authors from the Devětsil artists circle.

After Zet Molas, it wasn't until the 1960s and Věra Chytilová (1929–2014) that another female Czech film director made an impact. Her cinéma vérité-style *Pytel blech* (*A Bagful of Fleas*, 1962) set in a girls boarding school was screened jointly in cinemas with student film *Strop* (*Ceiling*, 1961) as *U stropu je pytel blech* (*There's a Bagful of Fleas by the Ceiling*). The director's *O něčem jiném* (*Something Different*, 1963), telling the story of two women, also underscores the pseudo-documentary trend of the times, as do countless other New Wave films focusing on the ascendant new generation. The indefatigable and uncompromising Chytilová was one of the few Czechoslovak directors able to retain a degree of authorial independence during the

normalisation era, continuing to “do things differently”. She also continued to advocate a singularly feminist outlook, which was otherwise almost entirely absent from Czechoslovak cinema. Perhaps only in *Vražda ing. Čerta* (*Killing the Devil* – filmed by designer Ester Krumbachová (1923–1996) in close collaboration with her friend Věra Chytilová – do we find a similarly concentrated defiance of gender stereotypes as evidenced in the likes of *Sedmikrásky* (*Daises*, 1966) and *Hra o jablko* (*The Apple Game*, 1976). The Chytilová-directed documentary *Pátrání po Ester* (*Looking for Ester*, 2005), serves as a snapshot of the work of both these women.

Drahomíra Vihanová (1930) was a contemporary of Chytilová, and similarly unyielding in her approach. Her graduation film *Fuga na černých klávesách* (*Fugue on the Black Keys*, 1964), which follows a young man from Africa studying classical piano in Czechoslovakia (as previously also studied by Vihanová), won First Prize at the Marseilles Student Film Festival, and also a special commendation at the Cannes Film Festival. *Zabitá neděle* (*Squandered Sunday*, 1969), an adaptation of a novel by Jiří Křenek, was Vihanová’s first – and for some time last – feature-length film. Shortly after its completion, the film, a nihilistic drama about a day in the life of a commissioned army officer, was placed in the vaults by the authorities and not seen again until its formal premiere in April 1990.

Even though Vihanová studied dramatic film directing and editing at FAMU she spent most of her career in the world of documentaries. These included profiles of František Vlácil (*Hledání; Searching*, 1979), František Rauch (*Variace na téma hledání tvaru; Variations on a Theme of Searching for Form*, 1986) and Eva Olmerová (*Proměny přítelkyně Evy; The Transformation of My Friend Eva*, 1990). Today, together with Helena Třeštíková (1949) and Olga Sommerová (1949) – director of overtly feminist films such as *Popelčín komplex* (*Cinderella’s Complex*, 2013) – Vihanová ranks among the pioneering women of Czech documentary film-making. Although she did return to dramatic films with *Pevnost* (*Fortress*, 1994) and *Zpráva o putování studentů Petra a Jakuba* (*The Pilgrimage of Students Peter and Jacob*, 2000). However, neither of these efforts were met with critical or commercial acclaim.

Eva Sadková (1931–2000), primarily a television director, belonged to the same generation as Věra Chytilová and Drahomíra Vihanová. Her two theatrical films premiered within a short time of each other. The comedy *Dvanáct* (*Twelve*, 1964) is

based on a play by Pavel Kohout and is all but forgotten today. *5 milionů svědků* (*5 Million Witnesses*, 1965) was a crime drama taking place in a setting familiar to the director – a television studio.

“Women’s” subject matters

Following her debut film *Zoufalci* (*Desperados*, 2009) director Jitka Rudolfová (1979) was proclaimed as a successor to Věra Chytilová. The contemporary tragicomedy follows a group of thirtysomethings. It was preceded by three short dramatic films from Rudolfová and a number of documentaries. Her follow-up *Rozkoši* (*Delight*, 2013) is a realistic story imbued to a far greater degree with ambiguous symbolism, similar to that seen in the later documentary realist works of Chytilová. Rudolfová studied directing at FAMU during Chytilová’s tenure heading that institution.

During the same period *Karin Babinská* (1974) also filmed a female variation on the male generational testimonial *Samotáři* (*Loners*, 2000) by way of *Pusinky* (*Dolls*, 2007), one of the first Czech films to deal with the subject of lesbian love.

Furthermore, Olga Dabrowská’s (1968), *Kuličky* (*Marbles*, 2008) examined the various ways in which women manipulate men. While writing the episodic work, Dabrowská took inspiration from chauvinistic handbooks written for men. The film also serves as an illustration of the fact that feminism is not the uncritical adoration of the “weaker sex” but rather showcases women in all their diversity.

Dabrowská selected a lighter subject matter for her next film, the fairytale-like *Křídla Vánoc* (*Wings of Christmas*, 2013), in which Richard Krajčo portrays an optician looking at the world through rose-tinted glasses. Dabrowská studied screenwriting and co-wrote the script for *Knoflíkáři* (*Buttoners*, 1997) and the aforementioned *Samotáři*, both from director Petr Zelenka. She only returned to film directing duties in 2016 with the documentary *Tajemství Divadla Sklep aneb Manuál na záchranu světa* (*The Mystery of Sklep Theater – A Guide to Saving the World*).

Věra Plívová-Šimková (1934) is the director of a number of much-loved children’s films. She started out at Studio FAMU as an assistant director working for directors Ladislav Helge, Vojtěch Jasný and Karel Kachyňa. Following her short comedy *Chlapci*,

zadejte se (*Boys, Pick a Partner!*, 1964) about dancers in Žofín, Plívová-Šimková made her debut family-oriented feature film *Káťa a krokodýl* (*Káťa and the Crocodile*, 1966). Subsequent films included *Tony, tobě přeskočilo* (*Tony, You Must Be Joking*, 1968), *Přijela k nám pouť* (*The Fair is Here!*, 1973) and *Jak se točí Rozmarýny* (1977, *How to Shoot Rosemaries*), some of which were filmed based on her own stories and screenplays. Such films won accolades at children's film festivals and have become staples on Czech television screens. Unlike other children's film directors, Plívová-Šimková offered a fictional world as seen chiefly through the eyes of her young protagonists, and one not sullied by the problems of the grown-up world. Drahomíra Králová (1930–2007) was also noted for her work with child actors, co-directing a number of projects with Plívová-Šimková.

Evidently, producers seeking appropriate scripts for Jaroslava Vošmíková (1943) thought that a female director would do a better job coaching child actors. During the mid-1960s, prior to studying directing at FAMU, Vošmíková worked as an assistant television director and producer at the Barrandov Studio; she also briefly collaborated with the Příbram and Pardubice theatres. After making her graduation film *Příběhy, žerty a všednosti z Rožmberka* (*Stories, Capers and Everyday Events at Rožmberk*, 1970), Vošmíková headed for Czech Television, making educational programmes for children. Her first feature-film was the psychological drama *Jakub* (1976) about the complex relationship between a father and son, which was co-directed with Ota Koval. She then assumed sole directorial duties on *Prázdniny pro psa* (*A Dog's Holiday*, 1980) with child actor Tomáš Holý and on the biting comedic portrait of a young teacher *Evo, vdej se!* (*Eva, get Married!* 1983) based on a script by Halina Pawlovská.

Asides from female directors such as Věra Plívová-Šimková, Oldřich Lipský also specialised in making films for children. His fantastic comedy *Ať žijí duchové!* (*Long Live Ghosts!*, 1977), featuring young Leontýnka, daughter of the Knight Vilém Brtník of Brtník, left young audiences spellbound. This may not have been the very first role for young actress Dana Vávrová (1967–2009), but this performance led to an increase in acting work. Vávrová also played in a number of films by director Věra Plívová-Šimková, and also appeared in Miloš Forman's *Amadeus* (1984). From the mid-1980s, she lived and worked in Germany. Asides from acting, Vávrová also devoted her time to scriptwriting and directing. Her *Hurá na medvěda* (*Hooray for the Bear!*, 2000), was

a Czech-German co-production and a family comedy which, while failing to stir much audience interest, nonetheless sought to revive the legacy of Czechoslovak children's film production. *Poslední vlak* (*Last Train*, 2006) was Vávrová's third and final film. The war drama was co-directed with husband Joseph Vilsmaier; Dana Vávrová died of cancer at the age of 41 in 2009.

The premiere of *Příběh '88* (*Story '88*, 1989), the first film from director Zuzana Zemanová-Hojdová (1956), took place just a few weeks before the Velvet Revolution. The relationship drama, which failed to ignite with audiences as a result of the real-life events of 1989, was written by Zemanová-Hojdová – a former assistant director to Vít Olmer and Věra Chytilová in collaboration with Olga Hanzlíková. Unsurprisingly, the main protagonist of the story is also a woman. A female fashion designer – played by Jana Krausová – who is unhappy in both her personal and working life faces a dilemma created by an act of infidelity. Should she keep an out-of-wedlock child? Zemanová-Hojdová's second film, the motherhood melodrama *Hrad z písku* (*House of Sand*, 1994), is also worthy of mention in terms of exceptional women's contributions, given that its screenplay was written by Anna Vovsová.

Also worth recalling in the sphere of female directors who, like Zemanová-Hojdová, worked primarily in television are Jitka Němcová (1950), whose film *Zuzana Michnová – Jsem slavná tak akorát* (*Regarding Fame I Can't Complain*, 2013) also secured a theatrical release; documentary filmmaker Hana Pinkavová (1950) and Petra Všelichová (1974), among other things the creator of the portrait of Ostrava-born filmmaker Karel Reisz (*Karel Reisz, ten filmový život; Karel Reisz, A Life in Film*, 2012).

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