

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 19. 12. 2022

Fruit of Paradise

„We don't want to make any experiments, but we do want to take risks. Otherwise, you can't talk about creation.” (Věra Chytilová)

Since the beginning of time, people have been asking “where's the truth,” convinced that the truth is something external that can be discovered and not something inside us created by our own actions and thoughts. Věra Chytilová's most experimental film which intertwines ways of searching for the truth with ways of searching for one's own self is a detective parable about truth. According to the Bible, we may either eat the fruit of knowledge and suffer the consequences or refrain from eating it and remain happy. The film's story, written in the critical year of 1968, suggests there is a third option – rejection of the revealed truth.

Chytilová's last film before a forced hiatus of several years, was created just like her previous film *Daisies* (Sedmikrásky, 1966) in collaboration with Ester Krumbachová and Jaroslav Kučera. The script, which changed several times because of the political and social situation, was largely written by Krumbachová. The main theme was the banishment from Eden from the book of Genesis. The script combines it with a story of a serial killer inspired by real events. The narration sticks to its detective framework and is more structured than *Daisies*. The investigator is simultaneously a potential victim tempting the murderer.

Krumbachová used both stories, the biblical and the criminal one, to explore the boundaries of truth and lies, friendship, infidelity and betrayal. Seemingly only in relationships between men and women, but indirectly – alluding to the events of August 1968 – in the relation of the citizens to their government or the relations between various countries. When the main heroine says, “They don't want to know the truth, just like I don't want to know it,” it's one of many indirect allusions to the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia.

But creating a political allegory wasn't the project's primary intention. After *Daisies*, Chytilová was linked among other things to a project titled *Jistoty*. The script telling the bitter story of an elderly couple reluctant to get divorced because they're afraid of loneliness was written by the director in collaboration with Zdena Škvorecká. The project was eventually cancelled. In an interview with A. J. Liehm in autumn 1967, Chytilová revealed that she and Ester Krumnachová had finished the first version of a script of another film and that they were trying to get a permission to shoot the film within the creative group Šmída-Fikar.

Mainly due to difficult negotiations with potential foreign co-production partners (first Canadian, then Belgian), the preparations didn't start until July 1968, shortly after the official cancellation of censorship, under the auspices of a newly established group Juráček-Kučera. Thanks to a lucrative deal with a foreign partner – Elisabeth Films Bruxelles – from whom Filmexport expected valuable foreign currency, the approval process was much faster than with *Daisies* and during the production itself, which started in August 1968, Chytilová enjoyed an unprecedented autonomy.

In the forefront of the radical protest against authorities and the period dictionary is a ménage à trois. One woman and two men. Eve, Adam and snake/devil. In the film, Eve's partner is named Josef (Karel Novák). They live in a weird and isolated guest house with a big garden located at the border of different worlds (or states). In the garden, dark-haired Eve (Jitka Nováková) meets a mysterious stranger (Jan Schmid) who's actually a murderer of fair-haired women. Eve's desire and curiosity come alive and she wants to solve a crime. In the meantime, Josef flirts with other women.

The actors express the changes of the dynamic between the characters by using a flat, naïve and psychology-suppressing style adopted from their home theatre scene – the experimental Studio Ypsilon in Liberec. Their lines often referring to an allegorical rather than real world are uttered in a same tone and rhythm as if they were singing (originally, the whole film was supposed to be a musical).

With a childlike unconstrained joy, Eva rejoices at the gifts of nature, crawls on the floor when looking for evidence of Robert's crimes and convulsively bangs drums. Robert exhibits exaggerated villainous gestures and his conflicts with Josef are stripped of any potential tension. The stylised performances take our focus away from

the characters and draw it towards gestures and symbols. As Eve's entanglement with Robert intensifies, the camera focuses more and more on the textures of costumes, water, soil and plants. The film governed more by dreamy logic than causality turns into a sequence of symbolical illustrations of the central theme.

In addition to the Biblical story, Chytilová and Krumbachová refer to other folk and mythological stories with heroines punished for their curiosity, Alice in Wonderland, Little Red Riding Hood, Bluebeard, Pandora's Box (in this case Eve's box) ... But Eve defies fairy-tale archetypes and clear-cut definition. She's a modern and active protagonist, a more mature version of the two Maries from *Daisies*. She doesn't follow the leads given to her by deceitful representatives of the opposite sex (or God, for that matter), but subjects reality to critical thinking and actively decodes the meaning. The film requires the same from its viewers.

In period interviews, Chytilová refused to give an author's explanation. She was afraid that – just like with *Daisies* – there could be a misunderstanding based on the discrepancies between her words and the impressions her film left on people. Besides, every interpretation inevitably reflects the time period in which it is given. Even though Chytilová was equally uncompromising towards men and women and refused to call herself a feminist, her comprehensive stylised allegory can now be interpreted as a story of female emancipation and deliberate rejection of the myth of the original sin.

The discontinuity in the actors' performances when their words don't correspond to their acts (and due to post-synchronisation neither does the lip movement to the words the actors utter) is transferred to the rest of the film which, starting with the psychedelic (or perhaps Edenic) opening sequence, uses a wide range of optical effects. The symbolic message is emphasised by twitching images when actors turn into animated puppets, multiplied frames, flattening widescreen objectives with short focal distance and impulsive incursion of cantatas by Zdeněk Liška. During the filming, Kučera used masks and later in the laboratories, he copied additionally toned material into the developed negatives. This multiplication of film frames created composition reminiscent of abstract paintings.

Audiovisual variability with alternation of “normal” and deformed images captures the dynamics of the main heroine. While Josef and Robert remain boringly predictable even in the way they dress (dull grey-beige Josef, sensual red-black Robert), Eva undergoes a transformation. She constantly changes costumes to correspond with the men she’s meeting and her feelings, she tests new ways of behaviour and being, and sometimes, like when she shoots a gun, surprises even herself.

Censorship was restored in September 1968. But a censorship office for films was established later. *Fruit* could therefore be finished as planned and its Czech premiere was held in July 1970 two months after it was screened in Cannes. According to Chytilová, unlike other provocative films from the late 1960s, *Fruit* didn’t end up on a blacklist because no one understood its hidden meaning. The reviewers considered it to be too encrypted for anyone but Chytilová and Krumbachová who supposedly made the film only for themselves.

The impalpable allegory whose themes and form refuse to succumb to period aesthetic and ideological compromises indeed steps outside the boundaries of a generally shared film language. But if you want to discover something new, explore the unknown, an old dictionary using to name what is already known is not enough. *Fruit of Paradise* is a shining example that only few people in Czech film dared to venture into language games with such courage and gusto as Chytilová, Krumbachová and Kučera.

Fruit of Paradise (Ovoce stromů rajských jíme, Czechoslovakia, Belgium 1969),
director: Věra Chytilová, screenplay: Věra Chytilová, Ester Krumbachová, director of
photography: Jaroslav Kučera, music: Zdeněk Liška, cast: Jitka Nováková, Karel
Novák, Jan Schmid, Eva Gabrielová, Julius Albert, Blanka Hušková, Luděk Sobota,
Jaromír Vomáčka, Alice Auspergerová et al. Film Studios Barrandov, Elisabeth Films
Bruxelles, 96 min.

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