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# How Olga Hepnarová travelled the world in a Praga lorry

The unusually optimistic public discussion on the current state of cinema in the Czech Republic that unravelled in the spring contained notions of a “renaissance”, the “reversal of polarity from mainstream to art” and a very cautious use of the expression “new wave”. Following an extended period of dormancy, auteurs in the country resumed direct links with European production and saw their films screened at prestigious festivals in notable numbers.

One factor behind the development is a change in the way of thinking employed by young filmmakers for whom the domestic market is not the primary target but who instead think in advance of possible presentations at international shows and, by extension, of distribution abroad. What are the decisive factors then? What are the unwritten “rules” to abide by to help a film from a small country – still seen as “developing” when it comes to its film industry – to break through in global art cinema? And how are these rules reflected in film production itself?

Traces of such proactive thinking can be easily detected in the cases of some of the Czech films that have made it abroad over the past year, namely in the choices made for the title, theme and character profiling. It is no accident that the most likeable protagonist of *Rodinný film (Family Film)* is Border Collie Otto. Just about anyone, regardless of race, sex or nationality can sympathise with a dog, especially if the poor pooch is pitted against the whims of the wilderness. But how about the story of a person whose name may resonate quite strongly in the film’s domestic media environment, but who is completely unknown outside the country’s borders?

That is precisely what the auteurs of *Já, Olga Hepnarová* had to grapple with. The lead character of the film is a mass murderess who was also the last woman to be

executed in Czechoslovakia. It may come as a surprise then that the debut of the duo of directors Tomáš Weinreb and Petr Kazda is doing just as well abroad as the seemingly more universal *Rodinný film*, if not better. “*Olga*” embarked on her world tour as the opening title of the competitive Panorama section at this year’s Berlinale, before winning an award for direction at a showing in Sofia, Bulgaria, and finishing its journey in the “Home art cinema” catalogue of the global film website MUBI (formerly The Auteurs). The following paragraphs will attempt to identify the possible reasons behind this international success.

By way of a beginning, I intend to attempt to dispel the idea some might conceive of a film’s media image being fully in the hands of its creators or being the straightforward result of a carefully planned strategy. Far from it. As soon as a film enters the realm of international cinema it becomes open to a broad range of more or less desirable associations, the most visible of which can be found in reviews by foreign journalists. It is especially during the hustle and bustle of a film festival that publicists often resort to simplistic and sometimes quite inaccurate comparisons. In this vein, another Czech film screened during this year’s Berlinale, *Nikdy nejsme sami* (*We Are Never Alone*), directed by Petr Václav, was likened by webserver Indiewire to films by Alejandro González Iñárritu for its network-like storytelling structure and attempted universal overlap. *Hollywood Reporter* then wrote that *Já, Olga Hepnarová* targeted fans of the Polish blockbuster *Ida*, a black-and-white period drama about a young nun.

The auteurs of *Já, Olga Hepnarová*, with producer and mixer Vojtěch Frič among them, objected several times to the frequent comparisons with the Oscar-winning film directed by Pawel Pawlikovski. Both projects actually ran concurrently so the making of *Olga* can hardly be perceived as a calculated move that was devised to feed off the Oscar-winning movie’s fame. It is true, however, that there are a few – if superficial – similarities between the two, such as the black-and-white “retro” visual style, the bleak story of a young woman from a socialist Central European country, and the Polish participation in the production. That was probably enough for the average festivalgoer, unfamiliar with details or regional nuances, to connect the two films. No matter how many differences we could detect (such as Adam Sikora’s photography not being as over-aestheticised as that of the rather “academic” *Ida*), the unintended association may have eventually turned into a subconscious prestigious label that

may have helped to open foreign doors for *Já, Olga Hepnarová*. The UK distributor will certainly feel more at ease promoting *Já, Olga Hepnarová* (under the shortened name of *I, Olga*) knowing that Pawlikowski's film won top prize at the UK's biggest film festival, organised by the British Film Institute (BFI), not that long ago.

Another path taken by *Já, Olga Hepnarová* to converge on the current tendencies of art filmmaking is the dimension of queer drama. Films exploring LGBTQ topics have long since ceased to be consigned to specialised film shows or fringe screenings that deal with the theme at big festivals. Instead, they have regularly appeared in festivals' competitive line-ups. Following the victory of *La vie d'Adèle – Chapitres 1 et 2 (Blue Is the Warmest Colour)* in Cannes three years ago, it finally became apparent that this class of films definitely has the potential to win even the most prestigious trophies. Yet once again, the decision taken by Weinreb and Kazda to picture Hepnarová as an ostracised lesbian cannot be reduced to a simple calculated move. Nevertheless, it was a decision with foresight that made the murky character and her suffering experienced in post-1968 socialist Czechoslovakia at least that little bit more comprehensible for the global audience. It also has to be pointed out that the Berlin International Film Festival's Panorama section, where *Já, Olga Hepnarová* premiered internationally, regularly includes sexually provocative films, often exploring gay and lesbian themes.

If the two reasons for the positive reception of *Olga* abroad described above were closely related to current trends in art cinema, then another two will reveal some of the longstanding rules of the festival circuit. Even though the concept of the auteur film has evolved in many ways since the 1960s, the reverberations of its modernist beginnings still remain prominent, especially in its European context. A visible familiarity with this tradition can then provide a considerable leg-up to a "local" movie produced by a fringe film industry on its way to international screens.

It is therefore an important aspect of *Já, Olga Hepnarová* that it is far from being a traditional biography, stuffed to the brim with carefully reconstructed events, information and data gleaned from period records. The film is more of a timeless portrait of a young woman, pushed to the edge of society. Olga is perhaps not an exact version of a Joan of Arc even though she does resemble the French heroine somewhat in her stubborn rebellion. Rather than Joan, Olga is more reliably

reminiscent of Robert Bresson's *Mouchette*. There is also another link to the 1967 film by one of the most famous auteurs by way of *Olga*'s frugal style, unpretentious yet effective framing of the camera and no-frills editing. There is a lot that can only be gleaned from the contrast between the sullen, hunched figure of the (anti)heroine and the people around her.

In these contexts the film can easily excite discussion as to whether the real Olga Hepnarová was a pitiable martyr, deranged monster or misunderstood woman who was unlucky in many respects. The fact that the film does not offer definitive answers to these questions is another bonus certain to resonate with film festival audiences. It continues to hold true that the culture of global art film is to some degree still a culture of interpretation. Ambivalence, unfinished narratives, and openness to a number of interpretations have always been seen in these circles as the marks of maturity and quality. Even more so, if the filmmakers manage to build their stories on the ideological currents deeply rooted in European culture. In the case of *Olga* there is the admitted influence of existentialism, and of Albert Camus in particular, a person who is even cited by the lead character herself.

If there is any resemblance between the recent generation of promising Czech filmmakers and the famous New Wave generation of the 1960s it lies in the close relation to the wider standards of European art film. After all, one of the reasons why early films by Miloš Forman succeeded at festivals in Locarno and Venice was their clear-cut adherence to neorealist principles so closely linked to Italian culture. Although today's festival circuit is more diverse and globalised, some of its basic, historically established customs governing the rules of inclusion remain steadfast. Festivals are, on the one hand, open to films from virtually anywhere in the world but on the other they still make life easier for those that give the impression of being familiar, informed and conforming to the universally shared ideas of "good quality" filmmaking.

I am far from claiming that *Já, Olga Hepnarová* achieved success abroad exclusively thanks to the above outlined qualities. It would be a mistake to perceive Weinreb and Kazda's film merely as a well-thought-out product whose creators followed some sort of a recipe for a "festival entry". A stand-out chapter in the film's success is the excellent acting performance by Michalina Olszanska, who was not steered by the

Bresson directing style but was rather allowed to immerse herself in the role in the spirit of method acting. The relatively long and uninterrupted scenes of lesbian sex are far from self-serving since they depict the only moments when Hepnarová was capable of close human contact.

If this year's debate on the new Czech cinema aimed predominantly at defending the existence of a stable ascending tendency and explaining its sources in the domestic context, the case of *Já, Olga Hepnarová* in particular uncovers several key international aspects and confirms their historical dimension. It is a paradox then that out of the latest batch of domestic productions the imaginary ideal of a competitive European film was most convincingly fulfilled by a drama about the tragic fate of a "woman in a Praga lorry", i.e. a theme fundamentally tied to the national history of its country of origin.