

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 2. 11. 2023

# Krumbachová, Nezval, Valerie

Upon its release, the film adaptation of Vítězslav Nezval's surrealist prose *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* (*Valerie a týden divů*, 1970) attracted considerable interest from the media. And not only in comparison with other new wave films finished shortly after the restoration of strict cultural and political conditions. Most texts, reports, interviews, and reviews credited Jaromil Jireš as the biggest contributor to the film's final shape and form, while sometimes mentioning cinematographer Jan Čuřík. While the pressure to problematise this "auteur" approach increases, such reduction of a bountiful creative crew to just the director remains the norm in writing about films. That's probably why it took so long to appreciate the contribution of Ester Krumbachová to concrete titles and Czech film industry in general.

Both in newer and older reflections, Krumbachová is usually named as the artistic designer of *Valerie*. Her contribution to the film's content, form and style was actually much more significant and began with writing the story. Thanks to publishing house Kodudek, which recently issued an extraordinary literary work by another Czech filmmaker, Věra Chytilová (*Tvář naděje*, a film story about Božena Němcová, which was never filmed, was published in 2021), Krumbachová's story was published as a book for the first time.

In addition to her story, until now only accessible to researchers in the archives of the Barrandov Film Studio, the book *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* includes also Nezval's original. It matches the first edition from 1945. As editor Pavel Hájek mentions in the foreword, Nezval's *Valerie* has been published in six editions since then. But during writing the film story, Krumbachová and Jireš only had at their disposal the version published right after the war by F. J. Müller with illustrations by Kamil Lhoták.

Nezval wrote his variation on spooky gothic novels and Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* in the 1930s. Various sources usually mention the year 1935, but according to Hájek, the exact date cannot be verified. In any case, the leading Czech poet couldn't find a publisher for his text in which his unleashed imagination meets pulp folkish tales, horrors, and romances. It was apparently perceived as a mere literary curiosity (Nezval's prosaic work had for a long time been overshadowed by his poetry).

Nezval outlines his inspiration for his "black novel" in a short explication that has also been included in the latest edition. He wrote the book for his "love of secrets of old tales, superstitions and romance novels written in Schwabacher."<sup>[1]</sup> The story of this short book works with fantastic and irrational motifs characteristic for the given type of literature. An innocent adolescent girl passes through chilling locations (a dark yard, a basement, tombs), discovers her sexuality, is endangered by malevolent creatures and finds objects with magical powers. She is constantly treading a thin line between dreams, reality, and a mythical space.

The usage of dream motifs and the application of dream logic while working with spacetime is proof that Nezval remained loyal to surrealist poetics. It's also manifested in his thematization of sexuality (Valerie's week of wonders is also a metaphor for her first period) and the number of phallic symbols so rewarding for psychoanalysis. Thanks to a third-person narration, the story is also more self-contained compared to Nezval's previous work. In general, the aesthetics of *Valerie* is, much like in gothic novels, based on the evocation of strong feelings and experiences of beauty and horror.

While Nezval followed a long tradition of scary stories with erotic elements, the filmmakers ventured into the unknown. As far as Czech cinema was concerned, vampires, witches and horror stereotypes were very scarce. The authors needed to find their own film language. Krumbachová, who often drew inspiration from pulp literature and fairytale archetypes (she wrote some dark fairytales for radio, among other things), played an instrumental part in the process.

When talking about the challenges of adapting the novel to film, Jaromil Jireš said: "At first glance, we were mesmerised by Nezval's book, but when we started writing the script, we found out that it's impossible to adapt the original text. Not even

freely. So, Ester and I were forced to write a significantly different story in a similar style to Nezval's. We were lucky that our patron was Nezval's only son, 16-year-old Robert Nezval." [2]

Krumbachová finished the literary script in the autumn of 1967 when Jireš was busy with *The Joke* (Žert, 1968). In September 1968, he was still working on the adaptation of Kundera's novel, eventually banned in February 1970. Also its film version ended up in a vault during the Normalisation period. But Jireš was allowed to continue working. The fact that the literary script was approved before the Warsaw Pact invasion, in April 1968, actually helped *Valerie*. The new management of State Cinema couldn't stop the project. The production headed by the creative group Novotný-Kubala lasted from June to November 1969. Work on the film was finished in April 1970.

In addition to writing the story and the literary script, Krumbachová worked on the technical script together with Jireš and cinematographer Jan Čuřík. She also prepared an illustrated version of the script, essentially a storyboard, with detailed instructions pertaining to individual compositions and props, their colours, and materials.

Her work wasn't limited to paper. She also contributed to the artistic design of the film, including costumes, jewellery and Art Nouveau decorations. Thanks to her, each scene is markedly stylised and characters differentiated by costumes and colour symbolism. Krumbachová also had her say in the casting process.

"For the main characters' costume design, Ester came up with an impressive system of tone scale from white to black contrasting with the colours of their surroundings. It was astonishing how she managed to combine spontaneous observation with inner logic and imbue a seemingly random detail with a deep meaning," is how described Jireš her precise approach. [3]

The comparison of the novel and the story we now have in a single publication suggests what the final film confirms. Krumbachová remained faithful to the story's synopsis. After losing both her parents, young Valerie (a 17-year-old in the book, a 13-year-old in the film – just like the lead role actor, Jaroslava Schallerová) lives with her grandmother and develops a relationship with a shady character named Tchoř and his ward Orlík. Thanks to them, Valerie discovers her hidden desires and a girl

becomes a woman.

Krumbachová's descriptions are much more vivid, detailed and sensual than in the original in which Nezval makes do with several vague terms. In the opening chapter, he writes for instance: "Valerie entered the yard with a kerosene lamp. It was full moon... her bare feet touched the moonlight. She also smelled the gardens. The poultry kept on clucking. With her right hand, she was holding her nigh bodice"<sup>[4]</sup> and then uses direct speech.

In her description, Krumbachová is concrete and more lyrical. She uses an entire paragraph to describe the atmosphere of the yard. It starts with: "A starry summer night. Crickets are chirping in the treetops and wind murmurs in plentiful gardens. From the stable in the back, we hear a horse neighing sleepily as a chain rattles. In a distant tower, a church bell rings midnight. The sound is deep and majestic, and while the bell announces the time, we hear swift and light steps."<sup>[5]</sup>

The presentation of the events in the film is more fragmented and based more on images than dialogues. The transitions between settings aren't explained. Also, the characters' speeches were reduced significantly. They only explain what may not be apparent from the visuals and symbols.

With its elliptical structure, the story resembles a poem or a dreamy tale, but the chronology of the events remains intact. The film's focalisation isn't limited to Valerie's perspective, however; in some scenes, the point of view shifts. The biggest deviation is at the end. In the film, we see multiple scenes with various characters. The book, however, ends with an idyllic scene of Valerie living with her newly discovered family.

Jireš and Krumbachová have toned down the original's macabre elements, but they kept and even amplified the decadent and sensual plotline with hints of lesbian and incestual relationships. The relationship between Valerie and Orlík is erotic in nature, and even an overnight stay at Valerie's friend Hedvika is sexualised. Krumbachová also added black humour and irony so typical of her work. Jan Čuřík's cinematography and Luboš Fišer's score enhanced the film's suggestive atmosphere.

The first filmed prose written by Vítězslav Nezval was for a long time the only unrestricted title of Czechoslovak cinema. This frightening and erotic carnival was premiered at the 13<sup>th</sup> Bergamo Art Film Festival, where it won the Grand Prize. Despite the disgust of some prudish critics, it stayed in Czechoslovak cinemas throughout the entire period of Normalisation.

The strong impression the film had on some viewers is evidenced by a humorous incident recalled by the writer Josef Škvorecký. Already in exile, he received a letter from a Czech-American, a retired railwayman, who had seen *Valerie*. He had this to say about the work of Krumbachová and Jireš: "I think it's the best film in the history of Czechoslovak cinema. It's so masterful that Fellini seemed like a bungler to me." [6]

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### **Literature:**

Jan Bernard, *5 a 1/2 scénáře Ester Krumbachové*. Prague: NAMU 2021.

Peter Hames, *Československá nová vlna*. Prague: KMa, s.r.o 2008.

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Ester Krumbachová, Vítězslav Nezval, *Valerie a týden divů*. Prague: Kodudek 2023.

Antonín J. Liehm, *Ostře sledované filmy: československá zkušenost*. Prague: Národní filmový archiv 2001.

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### **Notes:**

[1] Ester Krumbachová, Vítězslav Nezval, *Valerie a týden divů*. Prague: Kodudek 2023, p. 17.

[2] Cit. In Jan Bernard, *5 a 1/2 scénáře Ester Krumbachové*. Prague: NAMU 2021, p. 85.

[3] *ibid.*

[4] Ester Krumbachová, Vítězslav Nezval, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

[5] *ibid.*, p. 151.

[6] Josef Škvorecký, *Nejdražší umění a jiné eseje o filmu*. Prague: Books and Cards 2010, p. 141.