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Éminence Grise or a Mentor? More on Ester Krumbachová

“Ester made me realise what we actually wanted to do”.

“She had that sense for constructing a situation”.

“For me, she discovered the world of props and costumes”.

“She was a renaissance person”.

“It would surely be worth considering whether such ability to inspire other people isn't in many cases more than the actual directing of a film project”.

“A big surprise and a big disappointment, because she was expected to do more”.

“There isn't a dumber film than *The Murder of Mr. Devil*”¹.

In this handful of quotes about Ester Krumbachová (1923–1996) there is a dramatic scale of respect and rejection spanning over almost the entire decade of the nineteen-sixties. A graduate of painting and graphic arts at the Higher School of Arts and Crafts in Brno, she became known in her professional life as a costume designer, set designer, scriptwriter, author and finally a director. However, she was often pushed to the margins of authorship with the label of “inspiration and just a muse” (Hanáková, 2005, p. 181). In the statements recorded in the essayist biographical film *Searching for Ester* (2002) the crucial aspect is her role as a mentor, coach, maybe even therapist, whose competence is voiced only in connection with

¹ Selection of quotes originating from the Věra Chytilová film *Searching for Ester* (2002), that I reference in the text numerous times. It is, in practice, a collage created from separate statements by Ivan Vyskočil, Jiri Svoboda, Otakar Vávra, Jan Němec and Věra Chytilová.

others. It seems like Ester existed mainly in relation to other leading names of Czechoslovakian new wave, not only directors like Jan Němec², Otakar Vávra, Jaromil Jireš or Vojtech Jasny, but above all as a director and friend of Věra Chytilová. *Searching for Ester*, the film realised by the latter, is as much about Krumbachová as it is about herself, the famous director of *The Daisies* (1966). It is she who visibly interferes with the collection of photographs seen on screen, selects them, arranges them on the time line. She is the one who connects different environments and various biographical episodes from Ester's life, going smoothly from conversations with professionals, film people, to the residents of the Green Fox/*Zelená liška* pub, where at the close of her life Ester spent her time, making new friends. Chytilová is heard from behind the camera as she supplies the leads and asks questions. There are singular moments where she stands by. She musters her interlocutors, she imposes on them a subject matter, she even places them in the role of adversaries to her theses. Conversation with Jan Němec goes the same way. Seemingly another puff piece, as it begins with a confession: "While working on the *Diamonds*, Ester was the 'guru' of the project"³, which quickly turns into one of the most stern critiques of the only film Ester directed:

- "I'm very ashamed to have been the co-writer...
- But I heard that you were there, on the set, at the filming⁴.
- I was, 'cause I was paid for a small part. So I sat there and got 200 Crowns for it.
- You prostituted yourself on something more stupid than the stupidest thing.
- I did... I knew the whole thing was nonsense. The idea was that she had a radio play, there was a lack of screenplays and we had a good name, we thought that within three days we'd turn this play into a screenplay. The screenplay was done, and I said: "... It's so dumb, this tale, with those two in it".
- But she, a writer, and you, such a thinker, both of you, such analysers, how come you weren't able to do better than *Killing the Devil*?⁵

Two subplots actually intertwine here: the indisputable, arbitrarily low artistic quality of the directorial debut and the commercial aspect as an excuse and justification for participating in the project. At the same time, the expectation of a high level of artistic cinema, as well as the disinclination to accept the features of individual language of an author is formulated. The conversation is even more heavy

² Ester's second husband in the years 1963–1968 and, above all, art partner.

³ Words are uttered in the film *Searching for Ester*, dir. Věra Chytilová.

⁴ In reality, Jan Němec is not only the co-author of the screenplay of Ester's film, but also appears as an actor in one of the episodic roles.

⁵ Transcript of a dialogue from *Searching for Ester* (2002).

because of the personal relationship connecting Ester with Chytilová and Němec and the inevitable absence of the main character. The only film directed by Ester Krumbachová provoked and still provokes extreme emotions.

I would like to repeat something Petra Hanáková said, a common and, as it were, ambiguous term positioning Ester in the Czechoslovakian film community (“the queen of Czech film design”, Hanáková, 2005, pp. 180–181) and take it, perhaps against the author’s intentions, at face value. I want to treat Ester Krumbachová as a designer, a producer of certain ideas successfully introduced into film. One of the primary definitions of design lists three of its core characteristics and they come down to control over the structure, material and purpose⁶. Other times there is talk of “complex consideration of groups of objects in the context of the function and the role they fulfil in our life” (Hübner-Wojciechowska, 2014, p. 7). I want to emphasise the relevance of this profession in the context of multimedial interests and activities of Ester. While trying to define the competences of Ester Krumbachová, David Sorfa emphasises first of all the social character of her nature and her exceptional ability to work in a group or to cooperate in general (Sorfa, p. 254). It is closely related to the area of a designer’s work. The famous American designer of Austrian origin, Herbert Bayer, although in the context of organising exhibitions, wrote that his main role is improving and intensifying communication. It is equally important to make the invisible visible (Bayer, 1961, p. 257).

There are at least a few basic themes that organise the specificity of Ester’s artistic discourse. There are costumes, and props for which she was responsible: hats, shawls, black umbrellas, silk shirts, camp coats or overalls made out of newspaper and twine. But the whole galaxy of food, meal preparation, feeding and gluttony demands describing. The films Ester was involved in, as a writer or director, are woven from it. The specificity of the interior, often adjacent to the “metaphorical and mental” (Kolský, 2018, p. 2) map of the artist’s apartment, becomes an important background for the platform of culinary images. The recorded registers seem to speak of food and clothes, typically female areas of interest and activity. The main aim of this article will be to treat them as semantically important mechanisms of communication, mostly visual and non-verbal.

In Ester’s case, it is difficult to discuss one path that led her to cinema. There are rather roads, paths and bridges. If chronological order is to be kept, she entered Czechoslovakian cinematography through the theatre and set design experiences. She began her work as a set designer and costume designer in the theatre in České Budějovice (1954–1955), from which along with the principal director and actor of the stage

⁶ Such a definition is quoted by, among others, Charles Eames in: *Design Q & A* (1972) film, dir. Charles and Ray Eames.

there: Miroslav Macháček, she moved to Prague. In the capital she works in Prague City Theatres and the National Theatre. She appears in film in 1961. She enters the cinema through genre films: she is a co-creator of the costumes for two science-fiction films (*Man in Outer Space / Muž z prvního století*, dir. Oldřich Lipský, *Ikaria XB1*, dir. Jindřich Polák (1963). Then her path leads to films more or less closely related to the subject of the Holocaust: *Transport from Paradise*, dir. Zbyněk Brynych, *Diamonds of the Night / Démanty noci* dir. Jan Němec (1964), *The Fifth Horseman Is Fear*, dir. Zbyněk Brynych (1964). She works on costume design for three subsequent films of Karel Kachyňa: *Long Live the Republic! / Ať žije republika!* (1965), *Coach to Vienna* (1966), *The Nun's Night / Noc nevěsty* (1967)⁷ as well as for a film tale important for Czech identity, directed by Vojtěch Jasný, telling a story about a Moravian village: *All My Good Countrymen / Všichni dobří rodáci* (1968). Thanks to her collaboration with Věra Chytilová, Krumbachová begins to get close to feminist experimental cinema, to which she also consciously contributes. By collaborating with the biggest names she attracts all the more criticism for the only movie she directs.

What is incredibly interesting in the evolution of artistic practice of Ester Krumbachová is the transition stage from visual communicates – those, for me, are the costumes, props and locations demarcating various stages of a set designer's and costume designer's work – to co-responsibility for the screenplay being created in the fabric of the language. This period lasts from 1964 to 1970⁸. It does not mean, after all, that during over a dozen years⁹ of work a complete separation from her first medium of expression happened. The costume designing, set designing, screenplay writing activities of Krumbachová should be considered as a continuum. In films in which she is in charge of costumes and set design, her competence to advise, her ingenuity is appreciated precisely by assigning her more visible and responsible functions. It is then that she becomes co-author of two feature film scripts of Jan Němec: *The Party and the Guests* (1966), *Martyrs of Love* (1967) and one short film by the same director *Mother and Son* (1967). It is then that literary film adaptations are created: *Valerie and*

⁷ She continued collaboration with Kachyňa on the set of *The Ear* (1970), but only in the role of production designer.

⁸ Beyond this censorship there was the next film of Chytilová: *The Very Late Afternoon of a Faun* (1983) as well as the film *Strata* (1983), dir. Geoff Steven, the film screenplay of which was written by Ester in collaboration with Michael Havas, her subsequent life partner.

⁹ 1961–1972, 1983, 1991, 1992, 1996 – these are the years, encompassing the work of Ester Krumbachová as a costume and production designer. It is probable that not all cases of collaboration were recorded in present-day databases. Ester Krumbachová was never officially allowed to return to work at Barrandov. When, years later, she was permitted to submit a portfolio she was met with rejection, which emphasised insufficient experience. This information is in accordance with Chytilová's film *Searching for Ester* (2002).

Her Week of Wonders (1970)¹⁰, dir. Jaromil Jireš and *Witch Hammer* (1970), dir. Otakar Vávra.

What can help with understanding the character or specificity of seeing and understanding of the film image by Ester Krumbachová is the choice of one particular scene from the last of the mentioned films¹¹. In the story of the slowly accelerating church trials, which take a closer look at people who are falsely slandered, involved in interrogation procedures founded on tools of oppression, Aesopian language was most important for the director. The fabricated evidence, coercing the confessions, and the stakes at which the alleged witches were burnt are a reference to Stalinist demonstration processes. Boblig of Edelstadt, a forgotten inquisitor along with his servant Ignác, are given a second chance to demonstrate their knowledge of church trials and the ability to take charge of a spectacular judicial project. One of Ester's responsibilities was to manage the set design department, screenplay collaboration when working on the adaptation of the novel by Václav Kaplickí and specific decision concerning the *mise en scène*. For an emblematic example of the last type of creation let us consider a scene with a dialogue between the aforementioned characters. The key element is the physical relationship the two interlocutors remain in, which introduces an obvious hierarchy and interdependency, thanks to constant movement of the hands of one of the characters and the horizontal position of the resting body of the other, which also places strong emphasis on the haptic sphere, synaesthesia of the senses. Whilst Boblig, never stopping his speech lets himself rest as he constantly interrogates and makes judgments on the lives of others as a clerical official, he allows his servant to massage his body. Before the very eyes of the spectator a libidinal theatre is realised: the relocation of the causes and effects, the backstage of anti-human repressions undertaken by day. The foot massage scene is a specific physical action, which determines the words and behaviours of the characters, the touch which soothes, relaxes, even gives bliss, mercilessly reveals the sadistic satisfaction inextricably connected to the public performance of inquisition, in which the roles of the guilty parties are determined and hopeless from the start. *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* by Francisco Goya, the most famous aquatint from the *Los Capricios* cycle besides being a graphic background of the opening, seems to have inspired certain frames¹². The idea of staging is the most important in the described scene. It is both purposeful and dramaturgically use-

¹⁰ An adaptation of Vítězslav Nezval's 1935 novel.

¹¹ Otakar Vávra talks about Ester's contribution to the final cut of the film in *Searching for Ester* (2002)

¹² For comparison Němec himself, specifies that, among others, Goya's paintings and works of photojournalist Henri Cartier-Bresson were the inspiration for the visual aspect of *The Party and the Guests*. Ref. P. Hames, *Enfant Terrible of the Czech New Wave. Jan Němec's 1960s films*, <http://www.ce-review.org/01/17/kinoeye17_hames.html>, [access: 5.01.2012].

ful in playing out different senses, and a composition introducing an intra-image division of the screen (the so-called “split screen”): the character lying down and the servant are separated by a curtain. There is no division into good and evil, but Boblig hesitates for the first and only time. Intimidated by the beauty of Zuzana, one of the accused women, here on this bed, during a massage, at times growing in strength and intensity, he combines the domain of duty performed with sexual desire, ecclesiastical, well-paid ministry with carnal perversion. The mechanism, tactile-verbal dynamic reaches far beyond caring to choose locations, interiors and costume suggestions. It is the original manner of seeing the role of the actor’s body and the relation of it to its closest surroundings that are either human or non-human. According to Vávra’s words, Ester was also responsible for choosing the soldiers’ song, Death the killer comes riding, accompanying opening credits and for writing the song’s original lyrics.

Krumbachová’s contribution to the films she worked on as a screenplay writer is characterised by David Sorfa as a foundation build on two pillars: aesthetics and humour, both of them of a subversive power capable of shaking up the political and patriarchal arrangement (Sorfa, 2014). I consider Ester’s commentary to be complementary, despite being separate, as it references the basis of the idea of *The Party and the Guests*, it is going into a holistic approach:

“[T]he large army of people who contribute to a film remains more or less anonymous ...Anonymity suits me quite well...” (Krumbachová, 1974, p. 278). In *The Party and the Guests*, the main creative element was distorted dialogue. I tried to create conversation in which the characters said nothing meaningful about themselves. The audience heard only isolated fragments of sentences, as if they had walked suddenly into the midst of a sophisticated party and had no idea what the conversation was about... I tried to create conversation in which the characters said nothing meaningful about themselves ... it was my intention to demonstrate that people generally talk only in terms of disconnected ideas, even when it appears that they are communicating with one another. I tried not to mimic real speech but to suggest its pattern, to find a language for the sort of phenomenon that Ionesco discovered in drama. Not a single word in the film was intended as a secret code; the dialogues were not intended to conceal anything but to reveal the nonsense we hear around us every day” (Krumbachova in Liehm, 1974, p. 280).

Private/public: eating or the protocol of use in a specific environment. “In the course of the interview, which lasted several hours, she managed to prepare a meal that would put a first-class restaurant to shame.” (Liehm, 1974, pp.

281–282). The sentence with which I initiate the part dedicated to the function of food in Ester's private and artistic microcosm is taken from an interview conducted in the autumn of 1966 by Antonin Liehm, Czech film critic and historian. This seemingly neutral commentary locates his interlocutor in the domestic sphere, traditionally assigned to women, usually unpaid and unseen. What is also important is that it reconstructs an invisible layer of the conversation, which has just ended, during which Ester's body was in constant motion, her hands working independently of her reasoning, evidenced by a record of the conversation published in the collection *Films under special surveillance*. The act of simultaneous, "invisible" cooking could be seen on the plane of physiology and communication as an instinctive fussing and a need to feed others. As a layer, that makes it possible for the next layers to start working and from which they can draw. It is, at the same time, a visually attractive model, entering into a circulation of haptic objects.

What was repeatedly emphasised was the convergence of this "private" image of Ester with the only film she directed independently, the report of the major reception which has already been presented. However, the images of food and practices around it have an important place in two earlier films Ester worked on as the main screenwriter: *Daisies*, dir. Věra Chytilová (1966)¹³ and *The Party and the Guests*, dir. Jan Němec (1965). When describing the functions and roles to which those culinary tropes had been delegated I would like to reference the context once introduced by Roland Barthes. The author of *Mythologies* understood food not only as a collection of products which could be utilised in statistical research, but precisely as a system of communication, a collection of images, a protocol of uses, situations and behaviours (Barthes, 1961, p. 24). The definition was based mainly on a juxtaposition of American and Western-European manners of not only meal consumption but also about organising work and leisure time. One point of access was the visual culture. In Czechoslovakian community there existed a tension, a factor common for the whole world, but in socialist countries focused like under a lens, resulting from the lack of food, its disproportionately fast consumption and the surplus reserved for privileged groups. An interpo-

¹³ David Sorfa emphasises the order of working on the screenplay of *Daisies*. The first draft had been created by Věra Chytilová along with Pavel Juráček, "the main screenwriter" of Czechoslovakian New Wave. She was not happy with the results and invited Ester Krumbachová to collaborate. Chytilová speaks about it in her documentary *Searching for Ester*. Film, inspired by life in dorms, went into the phase of "a grotesque documentary" about destruction only thanks to Ester, who inspired the director of *Something Different* to specify the subject of her film. "When we had realised that, we resolved to formulate it. We resolved to show the destruction on every plane – including the plane of cinematic image. We were bored of the form of the existing films and we went against the current. It was there that Jaroslav Kučera helped them. Thanks to him, Ester's contribution could be implemented. This very film was, for us, a record of an epoch – in its aesthetic form it "registered" what was around us."

lation presented before the National Assembly on 17th May 1967 by Jaroslav Pružinec and signed by at least twenty other MPs may serve as an illustration of a local political commentary which has still not lost its significance. This interesting example of dissent against experiments in Czechoslovakian cinematography addressed by name to the two directors most closely collaborating with Ester Krumbachová, the common dialogue of which was initiated thusly: “We ask the directors Němec and Chytilová, what kind of labour and political teaching or entertainment those titles will bring to the people working in department stores, in fields, on construction sites and in other occupations. We ask those workers of culture, how long they will poison the lives of honest, working people, how long they will thread upon socialist achievements, how long they will get on labourers’ and farmers’ nerves”¹⁴. One of the objections raised was wasting food in the film *Daisies*. Whether one wants it or not, this reaction unconsciously references the food defined by Barthes as an institution employing sets of ready-made images, dreams, tastes, choices and values connected to them (Barthes, 1961, p. 23). Ester’s own film was created two years after the interpolation, still on the wave of recognition of her name in Barrandov and just before the implementation of restrictions connected to normalisation of the existing policy. The history of the film’s origin extends to a short story published in the autumn of 1968 in the magazine *Plamen* and continues as a multi-part radio drama. The film version was made on September 18th 1970. Similar to *Daisies*, of which she was the screenwriter, *The Murder* focused on the compulsive nature of eating, although in a obstinately dissimilar way.

The Murder of Mr. Devil is a culinary comedy-drama, at the base of which there smoulders a fantasy of an erotic reanimation of a past relationship. The film’s formula presented to the audience is a constant stream of performative cooking and consumption on screen with short breaks for alienated interjections delivered by a nameless female character. The character played by Jiřina Bohdalová distances herself from the developments by appearing several times throughout the film in a portrait position distinctive for the tradition of European painting. She appears in the frame – of a mirror or a painting – and impersonates a hypothetical ancestor, but also takes the role of reflective instance.

The film begins with a scene of reading, or rather in depth studying of housekeeping guides. The landscape of focus is broken by a telephone ringing.

¹⁴ Two other films came under attack: *Hotel for Strangers* (*Hotel pro cizince*, 1967), dir. Antonín Máša and *Sign of the Cancer* (*Znamení Raka*, 1967), dir. Juraj Herz. Cf. Among others the statement of Jan Lukeš featured in the documentary cycle *Zlatá šedesátá* [DVD edition *25 ze šedesátých aneb Československá nová vlna*, dir. Martin Šulík, idea and script by Jan Lukeš, 2011].

A childhood friend Bohouš Čert (titular Devil¹⁵) calls to announce he will be coming over for a visit. The first and subsequent meetings initiate a ritualised environment of culinary procedures, the originality of the selected menu and the etiquette of serving food. The key element for a rickety plot is the fact that she nourishes, only tasting and seasoning the food, and he devours. Up until the moment when he is vanquished by his own mortal weakness: raisins. The food here is connected not only to the ritual of preparation but also to the sin of gluttony. The process of consumption is twofold: restrained and barely initiated by the phantasm of the ideal female hostess and ostentatiously voracious in the male version.

What is significant is the balance of genre nearly from the first scene towards *pohadka*, which was always close to Czech culture (cf. Tarajlo-Lipowska, 2010). The poster of the film, created by Eva Galová-Vodrážková, also suggests a fairytale potential. Thanks to the technique of collage, elements of foreign origin – a dessert cup placed in the middle, and the mysteriously smiling female face just behind it – are presented on the same stage. It is simultaneously a temptation and a threat of being poisoned. The poster, using two types of font in the title of the film, both a serif one and another, mimicking handwriting, references the poetics of a particular placard advertising an upcoming event. It can be seen as an invitation for a new circus act or prestidigitator's performance – according to that formula, the body of Vladimír Menšík levitates upside-down and the letter “c” seems to hypnotise. A man's outstretched hand tries to reach the dessert as much as the woman. Outside of the fairy tale, the contexts of a culinary and crime film are introduced.

In the fairytale matrix, there is place for a fantastical world. As soon as the first scene of the film, the telephone is visibly fetishised, it seems to have eyes, ominous countenance, its image is surprisingly close to the Švankmajerian surrealist objects, the inanimate things subjected to animalisation. Traces of interference are visible in singular graphic image swirls, more mannerist stamps than expert special effects. The more literal signs of havoc are left after subsequent visits of the Devil: table legs and other furniture are not safe from his teeth. It is a rather disturbed fairy tale, infiltrated by surrealist influences: the heroine tries to fulfil an impossible mission of getting a man. She gets closer to her goal through subsequent culi-

¹⁵ The choice of devilish character is also a direct reference to the title of the comic opera by Antonín Dvořák *The Devil and Kate* (*Čert a Káča* in Czech), which tells the story of a village girl who loves to dance and is ready to frolic with the devil himself. The majority of Ester Krumbachová's collaborators, however, emphasised the spontaneity or even the affective dimension of the ideas implemented and, in accordance with this interpretation, this historical context would ultimately be qualified as accidental. The “devilish” contexts are also written about by Libuše Heczková i Kateřina Svatoňová. cf. Eadem. (2018), pp. 29–44.

nary challenges. The need to focus on her own desire and her own body becomes visible during one of phone conversations: the woman involuntarily caresses the soup vegetables hanging from a cupboard, a phallic carrot and a celery. On the other occasion, while showing the ever-hungry Devil the contents of her fridge, she arches her body, including it in edible products on offer. That is when Ester Krumbachová's imagination approaches the famous *Spring Banquet* (or *Cannibal Feast*) by Meret Oppenheim, during which, in the middle of a cloth covered table, surrounded by candles, china and silverware there laid the body of a girl decorated with food. The sophisticated menu – appetizers, steak, mushrooms, desserts – were picked up with lips directly from the naked body (cf. Poprzęcka, 2012, pp. 137–139). All the dishes prepared by the heroine of *The Murder* are served as a replacement of herself. The woman's body is only a metonymy of a landscape for various forms of food, albeit that it introduces the hypothesis of a radical form of delivering poly-sensory pleasure. The exposure of the body and food is a challenge towards the habit of isolating sensory stimuli. A challenge ostentatiously not accepted by the Devil. The woman, stronger with the awareness of her own needs, resolves to frighten the tireless consumer. She prepares a trap the Devil will not be able to resist: a bag of raisins, a magical, fairytale object. The Devil's body did not undergo any grand changes during earlier strategic binges, the category of grotesque body described by Bakhtin becomes real in the moment of "diving" into the bag full of raisins. In that very moment the insatiable corpus, still hungering after more food, stops being a self-contained form and transcends its own boundaries. The world, in the form of raisins given to the devil, consumes him, pulls him inside, strips him of his substance. He's no longer an entity, he's an object of meta-consumption. The raisins are simultaneously magical and comical. They are a necessary prop, which facilitates the resolution of an identity hitherto focused on biting and chewing. There is no full compliance with carnival interpretation, as, besides the mouth devouring the next meals and pieces of furniture, no other orifices connected to logic of physiological process are emphasised. Beneath the cover of a jute bag, a single body is transformed into small, wrinkly fruits.

There is no knowing if the woman only wanted to frighten Mr. Devil. The transformation results in her losing him irreversibly. And yet, she does not grieve, and instead, in a victorious gesture she – maybe, after all a temptress and poisoner – settles on the bag and smokes a cigar, choosing a typically male pose and attribute. The smoke wafting from the bag, a gust of wind and, finally, a male voice, are more devilish parameters in the film. The woman keeps the fruit of a particular power. After she eats one, she experiences a vision. She realises that, thanks to selling the rest, she may become rich and independent. The final sequence, determined by an oneiric, imaginative style, is quite hermetic: the alternation between

the shots of the heroine wearing a wedding dress surrounded by not one but several men, there are photos of a framed empty composition, up until the “entrance” – the immersion of the camera into it: the image, thanks to an optical illusion seems three-dimensional. It manifests the earlier repressed desire of the woman, now freed from the duty of satiating a man’s hunger, anyone’s hunger but her own. Her appearance in the frame with a champagne flute has the same undertone. A song by Marta Kubišová, accompanying this scene, and present already in the opening of the film, co-creates an intentional manifesto of female freedom to do what is not socially acceptable, what is outside the rules. Through the elaborate culinary works deposited at the altar of men’s expectations, the film reaches the story of the woman’s untamed hunger, for which a fantastic (but also comical) figure is the mythical, animal-human figure of a Yeti from the soundtrack. The frame of the picture plays a significant role here, it is a measure of self meeting, “liberation from the man”, the end of culinary and sexual affects. Raisins, like pills of happiness and forgetfulness, or drugs summarising the liberated (or perhaps freedom feigning) decade of the 60s, bring inner peace and reconciliation with oneself.

Thus, the culinary process ultimately turns out to be an intermediate act on the way to becoming the largest consumer in the food chain. Using above all the tool of irony, the film hinders the consistent and exclusive use of a psychoanalytical apparatus that would over-rigorate female play with form and male expectations. These are seemingly satisfied at the level of consumption offerings, but at the same time frustrated at the level of logical and finite structure of the film. Ester mocks the viewer, who has come to consume the finished content. Instead, she offers a heterogeneous story of a woman who slips into the frame of a mirror every now and then. This solution takes the protagonist’s statements into the sphere of a timeless monologue of female needs. This is a completely different language from the one she uses in her conversation with the Devil. From the level of her own infantilism and rough male phrases, she traverses into literary language. David Sorfa emphasises the rhythmicity of such a solution (Sorfa, 2014, p. 261). Petra Hanáková writes about visual, semantic clichés, which Ester brought to an extreme (Hanáková, 2014).

Intermediality

Libuše Heczková and Kateřina Svatoňová redirect the conclusions from this observation not towards the modernist theatrical style distinguished in cinema (cf. Kovács, 2007, pp. 140–167), but towards the tradition of *tableaux vivants* (Heczková, Svatoňová, 2018, p. 40 and next). This formula includes the opening of the film. When looking at the opening credits, one will find that they

are already designed to be both spatial and immovable. Their components are actually miniature props: the fonts are composed of knick-knacks, colourful stones and beads. This is a foreshadowing of the later, non-film jewellery that Ester will design. According to Heczková and Svatoňová, it is the *tableaux vivant* formula that combines such different areas as jewellery valuables, theatre, costume design and drawing – all close to Ester herself (Heczková, Svatoňová, 2018, p. 41). Thanks to this initial attention to detail we enter the chamber of curiosities as well.

According to Āgnes Pethő, this practice can be simply called the embodiment of a painting (Pethő, 2010, p. 51). There is artificiality and styling. The woman in frame is always more lofty, restrained, anachronistically distinguished, referring to some code of femininity connected with a prop room composed of a furry wrap, gloves and pearls. The golden frame of the mirror emphasises this ostentatious outlet of form.

Tableaux vivants have been called the art of reconstruction (Komza, 1995, p. 6) since their beginnings in the 15th century. The original definition referred to the para-theatrical re-interpretation of paintings or sculptures, created with the participation of people, depicting the chosen scene with their attitude, clothing and countenance. Vivid images combining painting, sculpture and theatre are imperfect already at the definition level: the lack of purity of the medium is inscribed in their character. This lack of purity is, in later years, willingly adapted and treated as a field for experiments by new media art (cf. i.a. Zawojski, 2012). There is one scene in Ester's film that can be combined with new media, the already mentioned effect of three-dimensionality or an optical illusion that is identical to it. And it becomes visible in one of the sequences of introducing an additional internal frame. Each time it is a new form of visual attraction, "an image inside an image".

Instead of a well told film, we get cooking on screen, feeding and consuming, which only increases the appetite. We witness the tasting, seasoning and directing of the aesthetic system. Just like in *The Daisies* (1966), the form is eaten. The central theme of Chytilová's earlier film preceding *The Murder*, its sophisticated visuality, supported by various formal tricks, is a wide range of eating and consumption. As Katerina Soukup has already noticed, eating is a way to assimilate with the world: devouring the world prevents one from being eaten (Soukup, 1998, p. 42). Even the intentionally imperfect form of the film can be considered to be an effect of "being eaten". The surrealistic game, undertaken at some point by the protagonists, of cutting, quartering of their own bodies, shifts the boundaries of corporate unity to the level of aesthetic spectacle, but it is also visible proof of the cannibalism of the narrative, the tearing and eating of it. Fragmentation of

a female body in *The Daisies* takes on not only a completely different dimension to that in Hollywood cinema. The “spoiled” narration¹⁶ of *The Daisies* or their “narrative restraint” goes hand in hand with the disappearance of expectations that the title “anti-heroes” will provide visual pleasure. The chaotic organisation of the narrative form is proportional to their gluttony.

While the paradoxical culinary hyperactivity of *The Murder's* protagonist does not allow for bodily consumption, stopping its potential course, the direction of the girls' activities can be called a constant escape from being the main course. The girls wander from restaurant to restaurant, leading subsequent old men “to be eaten”. Although they outdo each other in wastefulness and destruction, they specialise primarily in eating at someone's expense – they pick up older men for this purpose. Consumption is therefore closely linked to the hunting ritual¹⁷, although prey and hunter positions are interchangeable. The culmination of the effort is the meal eaten at a restaurant table. The culinary feast is peeled from its uniqueness, fingers and hands are often used instead of cutlery. The moment of promised male consumption is postponed indefinitely and never reaches the level of sexual satisfaction. Despite different vectors of movement in both films, the effect is identical.

While the protagonist of *The Murder* compulsively creates sublime culinary performances in order to realise her own desire, in the film co-created with Němec *The Party and the Guests* (1966) the meal ritual is only a mouth gagging disciplinary technique. As Elizabeth Girelli has already noticed, from the very first scenes, the viewer is burdened with a tight framing method, used in an idyllic, forest setting (Girelli, 2011). The filming techniques signal the arrival of something unexpected and dangerous. Narrow, crowded frames distance even the language used by the participants of the picnic, even though it was supposed to indicate imprisonment in clichés and empty words in the declarations of the creators. After a ten-minute sequence paraphrasing “the luncheon on the grass”, the film turns into a proper, title parabola: about guests by force and with little information brought to the reception of some, self-proclaimed Host (cf. Świątochowska, 2017). Food is the background for the advancement from physiology to culture. It is associated with a surplus of props, performance over “food content”. As Němec said, the film was made as a result of taking over Ester Krumbachová's philosophical essay and turning it into a film in which: “everyone wanted to sit at this table, from which some were thrown into prison, others could be promoted to the position of ambassador. The table was the metonymy of participation in power”¹⁸. In fact, there is an

¹⁶ Which, beyond all else is a result of the words overused by both Maries “we are spoiled”.

¹⁷ For the ones writing about the film, that mechanism was from the start closer to begging.

¹⁸ Cf. Němec's statement in the film *Searching for Ester*.

intriguing separation here, a dissociation of the convention from the essence of the food itself. The space furnished with tables with branching candelabra atop them, and chairs with embroidered upholstery is a facade for the mechanism of oppression and violence that hides beneath it.

Chamber of curiosities or wunderkammera

In *The Murder*, other elements of interior design are as important as the food and tables themselves. Three tables of different sizes (and a book levelling out the height of the tabletops) in the guest room are an example of a creative patchwork, patching up the shortcomings, deficits. The happening of the meal preparation annexes not only cooking but also builds a landscape of consumption. The branching potted plant spread over the ottoman frames the picture. Half-exhibits, museum objects are created, and they have an original aesthetic quality even before human actors appear in them. The kitchen environment, unique for the film's content, resembles a wunderkammera¹⁹, a private study focused on cooking, its curiosities and a library of specialist volumes. Surrounded by larger and smaller shelves there is room for cans, containers, ladles, individual dishes, porcelain tableware, spice containers, dried herbs, garlic braids or bunches of fresh soup vegetables. The accumulation of all these objects in one space refers to the concept of the Renaissance Cabinets of Curiosities: "in these Wunderkammeras there was practically everything. The cabinet was to be a microcosm, theatrum mundi, and its content reflected the owner's interests" (Topol, 2005, p. 402). A certain form of revival of this tradition may be spoken of in the context of "classical" surrealism – an image corresponding to the collection of culinary objects would be, for example, a room-chapel of Andre Breton at 42 Rue Fontaine in Paris (cf. Noheden, 2017, p. 95), nowadays remaining in a permanent exhibition at the Parisian Pompidou Centre. The accumulation of objects deviating towards equipment adjacent to the traditional female sphere makes one ask the question about the limits of the conscious parodying of male cabinets of curiosities by Krumbachová. It becomes even more interesting if the figure of the Czech surrealist Jan Švankmajer with his private mythology appears in her immediate vicinity. The context of French surrealism intertwines here with its Czech modification²⁰. In the artistic and film work of the

¹⁹ I use the term introduced by Jan Švankmajer for his own artistic practice, purposefully. The term used properly in Czech would be *kunstkomora* (art chamber).

²⁰ The Group of Czechoslovakian Surrealists led by Vratislav Effenberger, Andre Breton and Paul Éluard visited Prague in March of 1935, and Breton, in gallery Mánes, gave a lecture entitled *Surrealist Situation of the Object* (Sayer, 2013 p. 14). The initiator of the meeting as well as the foundation of the Czech Surrealist Group was the poet Vitezslav Nezval. It is worth adding that Švankmajer called his films surrealist from 1968 and in that context one should consider, for instance, the animated, live action film created in that year *The Flat (Byt)*. See: J. Švankmajer, *Jan Svankmajer: Dimensions of Dialogue* (2012).

director of *Dimensions of Dialogue*, not only many *Kunstkabinetten*, but similar to Ester's work, the original forms of food appear in abundance.

In 1967 Švankmajer realises a nine-minute *Historia Naturae, Suita*, creating an audiovisual tribute to the collector's practices of ordering, segregating, separating and naming, and for the first time reaching for quotations from Giuseppe Arcimboldo's painting practices. Already Josef Škvorecký, in his critical commentary on Ester's film, which he allegedly did not see, but the script of which he read, wrote about the touch of surrealism, a sentimental, camp kitsch (Škvorecký, 1991). Heczková and Svatoňová, referencing this opinion, find a kind of automatic elaboration of it in the statement that it is no accident that Krumbachová's film resembles Švankmajerian animations of inorganic and inanimate matter exposed to biting, chewing, swallowing (Heczková, Svatoňová). Švankmajer's imagination goes much further by working on the key figures that drive his art: biology or, more broadly, science, astrology, alchemy, psychoanalysis, genes and childhood (Dryje, 2012, p. 172). In the year 1972, he and his wife Eva began working on a false-encyclopedia *Švank-Meyers Bilderlexikon* (1972–), creating various assemblages of stuffed animal parts, found objects and everyday accessories. It combines minerals, vegetables, post-animal and human objects (Svankmajer, 2012, p. 185). Later in life, he will house this microcosm of objects in his own home²¹ – transforming it almost entirely into a *wunderkammera*. Fantastic inanimate creatures and tactile objects become the material basis for subsequent personal film scripts.

In Švankmajer's work, food is also closely linked to the position of power. To eat is to consume the world, but also to be afraid that this position cannot be kept forever. There is a clear fixation on the very act of eating and on fetishised food. Švankmajer's "food performances", like Meret Oppenheim's trailblazing project, blur the difference between the sense of touch, taste and sight. The meeting of Ester's and Švankmajer's creative path took place officially only once at Prague's *Laterna Magika* theatre in 1975. However, their private paths crossed more than once, and friendship resulted in mutual meetings.

One more detail is important at Krumbachová's *wunderkammera* – the presence of her private objects in the film's set design: a mirror frame, potted plants, tables. This can be seen as smuggling, or perhaps quoting her own privacy. Actually, the whole layout of this apartment has been transferred to the artist's only directorial film. "You entered the apartment as if you were entering the interior

²¹ Ivo Purš: The collection is not open to the general public; during one of the exhibitions just a fraction of the collection was showcased, two exhibits were not signed – Svankmajer thinks, they do not fulfil a didactic function, and that they are to stimulate creative thinking. See: Svankmajer, 2012.

of one of her works, her project, and at the same time her private sphere” (Michal Bregant in Kolský, 2018, p. 4). Ester’s old friends also emphasise the way Ester treated works of art. She never approached them with reverence and adoration. She used them, she made them part of her everyday life. When they were in her apartment, they were often impractical objects, obstacles dethroning the functionality of the interior, but not its aesthetic arrangement.

The fact that the centre of Ester’s world was her apartment is mentioned in the artistic project by Jan Kolský *Green Fox Street* (2018)²², the title of which refers to the name of the pub located in the tenement house where Ester lived. A detailed topography, nowadays understood as a “metaphorical and mental” place, has been woven from the memories of living friends. New networks of connections are created through the creative editing of separate interviews between June and December 2017²³ and the accompanying sketches of Ester’s apartment plan. Elements from various sources have been once again re-organised into a whole, into the physical space of a fantastic meeting. Distances, spatial relations are based solely on subjective feelings from years ago²⁴. The three-dimensional reconstructions generated in the computer programme are at first glance close to the commercial visualisations offered by companies preparing fitted furniture. The seven sketches of the apartment are accompanied by ten photographs, giving an insight into the foreign, “inhuman” interior. The door, which is tilted in one of the pictures, suggests a possible route for a walk through an interior that is empty, lacking a person. This impression is broken only by a few inserted silhouettes of cats that claim their place in this project. Reflections, shadows, tones, elements sometimes as though they were cut out of an inadequate material, sometimes like skeletons indicating only the right size of an object, but without its individual characteristics. In two pictures there are two bodies lying on the floor: the body of a cat and the body of a woman whose face we cannot see, but know that it belongs to Ester. Apart from the emphasis on alternative and varying use of interiors, the whole project also makes us think about the current of Jeff Wall’s intellectual photography which, in what seems to be a recording medium, creates places that contain elements that have never before, in the physical relation, occurred next to each other. It is Wall who says that he is primarily interested in the re-creation of images from memory, since this is how the space of the new witness is created²⁵. From his own, individual memory, the artist has been trying

²² Jan Kolský, *Green Fox Street*, Published by the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague 2018. Graphic design and typesetting: Anežka Minaříková. Published by AAAD Publishing House in 2018.

²³ One conversation from 2016 was also included.

²⁴ With the exception of Ester’s last partner, whose answers have also been interwoven in the text of the book.

²⁵ Cf. i.a. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/nov/03/jeff-wall-photography-marian-goodman-gallery-show> [access: 21.04.2020].

to capture what fascinates him, while in the project by Kolský, the reconstruction of meta-collective memory has been considered a priority.

In the stories of people who knew Krumbachová, the direction of movement is emphasised, the need to climb the stairs or riding up in the lift. In both cases it has a psychoanalytic overtone – a rising tunnel leading to Ester’s apartment (Michal Bregant in Kolsky, 2018, p. 4). One had to go through the kitchen to get to the balcony. In the kitchen, apart from the dishes, elements used for making jewellery – amulets – were also prepared. Connectedness, multitasking and openness of the space, despite its modest size, seem to be a distinctive marker, so characteristic of the “cooperative” personality structure of Ester herself. There was no door between the room and the kitchen, at most a curtain. In the hallway, wallpaper was laid out on the floor, regularly changed every year, while in the remaining rooms there were carpets. On the wallpaper there was an inscription handwritten by Ester, a Latin sentence *Hic Sunt Leones* (From Latin, literally ‘Here be lions’) in thick font, used to mark undiscovered areas, unknown countries. In Ester’s view, it was a tribute paid primarily to her cats. But in her environment she also maintained relationships with other animals, she had a parrot and turtles. In Chytilová’s film *Searching for Ester* there is also a very clear thread of ravens, to which the Czech designer attributed the traces of an autonomous, independent existence. In these gestures she encounters the stereotyped image of a sorceress, a witch, but she also goes in the direction of today’s post-humanistic sensitivity.

Ester’s urban apartment, bustling with social life, is also tangible proof of a shift in the centre of Czech life during the period of normalisation. In the description of the characteristic leisure time practices that distinguish the residents of Czechoslovakia, notions such as tramp(ing), chata and “chalupaření” are above all highlighted, but the factor that is completely primary, and thus completely unspoken, is the characteristic of everyday life at the time, for which privacy strategies manifesting themselves in withdrawal from social life and limitation of interests to the circle of closest family and friends were commonplace (cf. i.a. Świątochowska, 2017). The “Silent Life” was primarily realised inside one’s own apartment, the so-called four walls. These are the roots of Charter 77 (the apartment of Eva and Jan Švankmajer) or the centre of life of the Czech Surrealist Group (the apartment of Olga and Václav Havel). They are also common to Ester’s living environment, where the order of professional projects was mistaken for private entertainment projects, extended at most to the Green Fox pub, open in the same tenement house. Having no official commissions at Barrandov, she helped others by hosting. Without going out into the world, she made the world come to her.

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Abstract

A graduate of painting and graphic arts at the Higher School of Arts and Crafts in Brno, Ester Krumbachová became known in her professional life as a costume designer, set designer, scriptwriter, author and finally a director. However, she was often pushed to the margins of authorship with the label of “inspiration and just a muse”. There are at least a few basic themes that organize the specificity of Ester’s artistic discourse. There are costumes, and props for which she was responsible: hats, shawls, black umbrellas, silk shirts, camp coats or overalls made out of newspaper and twine. But the whole galaxy of food, meal preparation, feeding and gluttony demands describing. The films Ester was involved in, as a writer or director, are woven from it. The specificity of the interior, often adjacent to the “metaphorical and mental” map of the artist’s apartment, becomes an important background for the platform of culinary images. The recorded registers seem to speak of food and clothes, typically female areas of interest and activity. The main aim of this article will be to treat them as semantically important mechanisms of communication, mostly visual and non-verbal.

Key words: Czech cinema; female director; female set designer; women’s cinema