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Věra Chytilová's *Ceiling* (*Strop*, 1961)

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Věra Chytilová's *Ceiling* both presages this unique director's later masterpieces and is a fascinating, fully formed, quite remarkable and unique film in its own right. Gaining unusual international and critical attention for a student production at the time of release, the 42-minute film – which Chytilová wrote and directed as her graduation project at the Prague Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts – suffers none of the tentativeness of form, conceptual terrain, and authorial style that often plagues such 'apprentice' works. Instead, *Ceiling* is soaked through with what we would come to know and celebrate particularly in *Daisies* (*Sedmikrásky*, 1966) as Chytilová's playful and concurrently radical approach to filmic, gender, thematic, and political material.

Generative instability

Chytilová's work is characterized by seemingly whimsical but ultimately rigorous filmmaking that offers a singular, sustained critique of women's roles and apparent choices in a society both selectively desiring of them and disinterested in their potential agency. The twin pleasures of seeing both cinema's and society's purported rules being played with, undermined, and idiosyncratically reconfigured before our eyes and minds, results in a film concurrently threatening to veer out of control yet somehow forging its own unique coherence at every turn. At the level of the shot (to the extent we can delineate such a unit), sequence, and film – the formal conception and impact thereof that scholars sometimes evoke via the French term (usually adapted from Michel Foucault's work), *dispositif*, a concurrently micro and macro concept especially relevant in this director's case – Chytilová is one of world cinema's great orchestrators of generative fragmentation and instability.

The apparent downplaying of stability, while supplying a new method of organization that ultimately gives the on-screen material customized shape, relates equally to the director's treatment of cinematic form and presentation

of concepts or couching of ideas – which, as with the best modernism, become impossible to selectively privilege or unravel. In addition to the films themselves, such dual-track and ultimately fused interests can be guessed at in Chytilová's background studying both architecture and philosophy. That she also left university without completing her degree to subsequently work as a model before going to the Prague Film and TV School, naturally relates to *Ceiling*'s loose story of a young woman who has dropped out of university to become a fashion model, but also more broadly to much of the director's subsequent cinema's foregrounding and interrogating questions of female identity and presentation, and the possibly fruitless challenge of finding a satisfying role and place within social reality.

With the credit sequence, *Ceiling* effectively enunciates contrasting cinematic registers that it will go on to engage and inhabit, concurrently evoking a documentary mode and a more oneiric film-world marked by glamour, with mysterious and perhaps-sinister overtones (subtly recalling Alain Resnais' almost contemporary and controversial 1961 art-house hit, the formally radical *Last Year at Marienbad*). Following the first few seconds showing theatrical-looking silver curtains, a sophisticated looking young woman soon parts them from behind to direct her gaze directly at us as while performing exaggerated gestures with her arms, looking like a robot or marionette. Throughout the images accompanying the credits, she will continue to model her mannequin-like body to the camera, the image periodically freezing as the rather uncanny figure continues to gaze at us. In this film, as with *Daisies* (if not to the same radical degree), cinematic form and female subjectivity are characterized by ongoing unpredictability and instability. *Ceiling*'s initial formal-thematic and stylistic questions make us wonder what kind of film this is and what kind of woman it features, inaugurating what will be a shifting journey in which cinematic nor human identity will offer any sense of home.

After the hybrid credit sequence, its first scene clarifies one of the film's main aesthetic poles, thrusting the viewer into a much more overtly documentary-like portrayal of a fashion show in full swing, with the same young woman – our protagonist, Marta (Marta Kaňovská) – parading on the catwalk. Peter Hames argues that the documentary mode is *Ceiling*'s dominant one,[1] yet many others are also invoked throughout. As the film develops, in addition to documentary – which usually appears in the form of its then-recent French *cinéma vérité* turn – rather disparate modes are in turn suggested: social realism, essay film, Hollywood-style genre movie, modernist European art film, and Surrealism. Rather than eclecticism for its own sake (again common with student productions), Chytilová's formal shifts early in *Ceiling* announce a multi-mode, palimpsestic, at times even 'cubist', approach to filmmaking that will mark her most impactful cinema as seen in *Daisies* and *Fruit of Paradise* (*Ovoce stromu rajských jíme*, 1969). These films remain utterly refreshing to return to for the way they make us realize how staid and safe most directors' cinematic choices are, how rote or repetitive their overall conception of what a film can be,

clinging to a single approach throughout a movie, period, or entire career. With Chytilová, you never know where a shot, scene, sequence, let alone film, is going. While this can loosely be said of much famous 1960s European cinema in a general sense compared to ‘classical’ Hollywood’s narrative obsession, it is especially true here.

If many canonical Western ‘new wave’ films can today appear less radical (even somewhat ‘classical’) than their reputations suggest, with longstanding critical attention and influence to some degree dulling their more disorienting aspects, and in comparison to more recent world cinema that goes much further down the path of narratively attenuating ‘slowness’, Chytilová’s work retains an incredible freshness only in part because her key films were out of circulation for some time compared to those of more famous, male, typically Western 1960s directors. If her Hungarian contemporary Jancsó Miklós’ cinema has also finally (if selectively) come back into the spotlight thanks to digital-era release, its radicalism triumphantly undimmed at the level of the long take, Chytilová’s films show how mild many famous ‘new wave’ films are in their approach to editing and play with fragmentation. Both Communist-bloc filmmakers’ very different work demonstrates how far the ‘60s European feature film’s modernist surge really goes. But while Jancsó’s masterful, immaculately stylized historically-set films remain disconnected from the everyday, presenting reality through a unique formalist and conceptual unity befitting his obsessive political project (even as the films evoke and comment on very real ongoing oppression and violence), Chytilová’s radicalism comes quite directly from the contemporary everyday itself in a thoroughly reconfigured form made up of disorienting sights and sounds entirely germane to the time and place the films were made. Like most vital modernist work, their fragmentary form directly responds to, engages with, and comments on the quickly changing, vertiginous reality of a particular urban-based, increasingly media-dominated post-war modernity.

In *Ceiling* and subsequent films, Chytilová’s cinema offers no idealized sense of narrative, thematic, or formal unity enabling the retreat from reality in favor of personal artistic expression. The direct responsiveness to her Prague modernity, manifest on screen in decidedly and appropriately indirect cinematic form, is key to the work’s central slipperiness and ambiguity, both defining and driving the film-world we see and hear. That her focus is usually women both provides a more concrete subject of sorts and escalates further the stress on generative fragmentation and ambiguity borne of a particular reality, in part reflective of the fact that women inhabit the society we see but are by-and-large not in charge of its structures, meaning, language, or expression. Hence the films being so thoroughly marked by apparent heterogeneity and contrast rather than defining and approaching a central thesis or subject by direct communication, or – more specifically still – voice.

The elusive woman

Chytilová's fragmentary, heterogeneous yet never arbitrary tendency reaches its peak in *Ceiling* with a strange sequence a few minutes into the film that lies somewhat outside its main structure yet most clearly, while importantly still not directly, enunciating the key ideas and critique. Overtly documentary-like images initially continue following the first catwalk scene, showing in literal close-up the indelible boredom and ennui on Marta's face as she sits while a male hairdresser complains about his work and what modelling is doing to her hair. As throughout almost the entire film, she stays quiet while men talk. However, if the viewer is starting to settle into what she might assume to be a documentary-based, or at least realist, film following two scenes in a similar vein, Chytilová now commences a striking montage sequence featuring extensive, potentially discombobulating image-sound disjunction. The sequence returns multiple times to a humorous-looking but disorienting medium-close shot showing two men apparently watching a tennis match, moving their heads in unison as if following an off-screen rally. There is a peripheral relationship between this repeated image to one of the singular intercut montage shots showing Marta having what appears to be a fake tennis lesson as part of a photo set-up, but as no actual tennis is played, conventional continuity between the image and the male spectators is undermined. That it is two men in the process of theatricalized viewing – their head movements excessively synchronized, the dual gaze focused at an exaggeratedly high angle – resonates with the sequence's complex foregrounding of gendered expression, and the film overall.

The remainder of the montage-sequence images show Marta apparently on location for various far-flung photo or advertising shoots, performing silly-looking actions made to seem even more ridiculous thanks to a dismissive commentary on the soundtrack. Once again, it is a male voice we hear (just as we see male spectators watching the tennis match). The critique offered by the voice-over of the fashion and advertising worlds' absurdities are very likely shared by our ex-model filmmaker herself. And/or, the voice could be articulating Marta's own views, Hames suggests, the sequence thereby commenting on how even women's ideas become translated and appropriated by men. Marta does not say a word in *Ceiling* until its final minutes, and if we take the thoughts expressed in the off-screen commentary as her own internal monologue, quietly mumbled as if someone is talking to themselves, the act of gender translation or 'speaking for' is certainly in keeping with one of the film's core questions: can a woman speak?

Certainly, one of *Ceiling*'s obvious strengths is its uncommonly intimate, quasi-insider account of the fashion industry, covering both production and consumption. In her excellent account of the film,[2] Cristina Álvarez López writes:

Watching *Ceiling*, one is immediately reminded of certain scenes from Hollywood's classical period that feature female characters, often from modest

origins, working as models. I'm thinking of particular moments in *Caught* (Max Ophüls, 1949), *Pitfall* (Andre DeToth, 1948), or *Mannequin* (Frank Borzage, 1937) that hint at how, below the fashion milieu's image of glamor and sophistication, lies an environment of harassment, entrapment, and exploitation that has to be endured by the models.

More than another film touching on the subject, *Ceiling* both offers a more intimate and detailed account than most and a very different contribution when it comes to film form, cultural-political context, and gender, adding its Communist-bloc European, finally female-authored, former-insider perspective and idiosyncratic aesthetic rendering of what has been an often Hollywood- and nearly always male-dominated representation.

The troubling, generative question remains: why is the most overt articulation of this critique, no matter our understanding of these thoughts' origin, delivered via a male voice? If we understand the speaker to be articulating his own ideas, the effect is more misogynistic than feminist, a smug condescension directed at what the woman on screen is doing and the situations she finds herself in. If he is articulating Marta's or the director's ideas, the sequence demonstrates how what could be a feminist address can easily be elided, undermined, even erased, through 'conventional' enunciation: men speaking for women. The narration comes across less as a traditional documentary-style 'voice of God' and more like a person (our understanding of the words' message influenced by the gender we ascribe to their authorship) casually describing and dismissing the risible things on screen while watching the footage with a friend – perhaps the two men watching the tennis match – or, more likely, alone. If the words are Marta's, she might be watching behind-the-scenes clips of herself at work, increasingly deriding what she does. But her persona remains impenetrable, literally inaudible.

In addition to opening up questions about gendered translation, appropriation, or neutering of ideas, including a nascent feminism, the voice-over draws attention to the inherently perplexing images on screen and their combination, as if he/she doesn't know what the film is doing, thereby articulating what some viewers may be thinking. (Again, the two male tennis spectators could stand in for the film's, perhaps impressed but confused.) Especially coming right after the *cinéma vérité-style* hair salon scene ('documentary'-like but without hiding the camera's presence, such is its proximity to her face), making clear Marta's intense boredom, by showing one shot after another – each one potentially itself part of a 'magazine' television program but taken together suggesting an absurdist collage, or tennis rally – the montage shows Marta either waiting for a photo to be taken or someone to say 'Action!', or simply hanging around, her expression traveling from minor interest and pleasure to enervation.

With the above sequence operating like a coiled-up version of the film in

miniature, here and throughout *Ceiling* Marta is portrayed in turn as glamorous and 'beautiful' then normal or 'plain', sometimes within the same shot. A nice, shyly seductive smile easily becomes an expression of ennui. This particular expressive address is one of the film's great strengths, enabled through Kaňovská's almost wordless central performance: catching a life, in this case one with some surface small-scale glamour, in its unremarkable but revealing and always fragmentary moments – whether rendered in close, medium, or long shot – that occur 'between' what would in many other films be more important events. Álvarez López writes:

Chytilová … privileges those gestures performed before the show, and between the photographs, because they fully manifest Marta's exhaustion, boredom, and sense of meaninglessness: the body losing its composure, the eyes wandering around, the heaviness of the feet, the dishevelled hair, and a smile turning into a yawn.

As so often with Chytilová's cinema, playfulness and boredom, child-like fooling around and serious reflection, are omnipresent sides of the same everyday coin. And there is always a gendered nature to this portrayal, with women both often at the center of attention yet ultimately marginal to the dominant culture's articulation, sometimes denied even narration of their own experience and thereby voice, with exhaustion and ennui a more than logical response. Beyond two brief sequences (to which I will return), *Ceiling* shows a world in which men speak and do things, while women are silent, looked at, and talked about. Their apparent role – at a photo shoot, catwalk, nightclub, or even university cafeteria – is to be desired but not be granted equal agency.

The film's true pathos derives from Marta's growing sense that she does not have a role in her own life. Like the more mature female protagonists of Michelangelo Antonioni's then-contemporary cinema (*Ceiling* emerged the same year as the Italian director's ultimate film addressing such a subject, *L'eclisse*), while herself the product of post-war modernity's increasingly free and partially liberated urban culture, and perhaps ultimately rejecting the dominance and demands of the men in her life (no matter how benign or otherwise they appear), Marta doesn't seem to know what she wants, how to act, or what to do. The dominant trajectory as the film goes on is to move away.

Repetition and difference (A): Performative fashion

While the generative co-presence of different filmic modes and styles means we cannot be sure which genre or aesthetic regime a given scene will favor, *Ceiling* presents a coherent, singular kind of feminist thematic address as I have discussed it so far. Giving a more formal structure to the loose narrative of a day in the life of a young woman who has dropped out of her medical degree to work in the fashion industry, the film is primarily organized around a series of dual repetitions marked by similarity and difference: two

presentations of a catwalk show; two solo walks; and two large-scale social scenes. This structure is both enabling and challenging. The first repetition is highly ambiguous when it comes to temporal order, while the second two are more clearly coded in oppositional (but non-binary) terms, as suggested by very different day- and night-time settings.

Following the freeze-frame credits, the first catwalk show scene begins. Its second occurrence exactly halfway through the film could be either a re-presentation of the same event or a second show, putting *Ceiling*'s otherwise presumptive linearity into question. In addition to timeline confusion, this repetition further signals one of the film's clearest concerns: a complex critique of the fashion industry and more broadly the radically different way a society genders people through surface presentation of bodies in an emerging consumer culture. The camera gives as much attention to close-ups of largely female faces in the fashion show audience as to Marta on stage, suggesting that here women aspire to be 'feminine' in an updated, urban-based, 'modern' sense through being (in its distinct Czech, comparatively 'liberal' Communist-bloc version) good consumers of mass media images and culture.

That we cannot tell for certain whether the second fashion show is a repeat of the first or a separate event, suggests the unchanging and tedious nature of these rituals (they could even be days, weeks or months apart), especially for its on-stage performers – the worker participants/employees/producers of this culture. The film's critique of the intertwined consumer, fashion, media, and advertising worlds and their gendered nature, is given added complexity through concentration on one of the low-level workers, complicating the usual pre-feminist sense that women 'consume' and men 'produce'. Hence the importance of seeing Marta yawning backstage while at work, no doubt tired of the extensive manipulation of the female body required for such performance. But we also see that its privileged producer-status effectively continues from behind the scenes not only on the catwalk but also – in an interesting extension thereof – out in the streets when she goes for the first of two walks, the caché and authorship of glamour feasibly extending to the 'real' world for a while at least.

Repetition and difference (B): Walks

Marta's first walk is a stroll through Prague's central shopping district, standing out from the grey-looking crowd thanks to her chic attire and cool, confident appearance (complete with reflective sunglasses). Recalling foundational, and then very new, *cinéma vérité* – Jean Rouch and Edgar Moran's seminal *Chronicle of a Summer (Chronique d'un été, 1960)* only emerged the previous year – in its convincing urban setting and apparent sync-sound, as well as an implicit acknowledgment that at least the protagonist knows the camera is present (she has shown the predilection to look right at the viewer from the film's first shot), the sequence also recalls an exactly contemporary French film

and product of a then-more famous female director well known for combining documentary and fiction elements, Agnès Varda's *Cleo from 5 to 7* (*Cléo de 5 à 7*, 1962). Chytilová's and Varda's films feature tall, glamorous young women – a model and a popular singer respectively – walking through their fashionable metropolis' consumer hearts like elegant early-'60s *flâneuses*. Both blonde figures stand out from the crowd for the same overall reasons (Cléo is an actual celebrity, while Marta occupies a lower popular culture rank), hiding growing anxiety about their lives. In an especially multi-levelled and fragmented way, Chytilová excels at suggesting the co-presence of apparently conflicting ideas by offering the viewer a genuine celebration of female glamour, beauty, and protean agency, while at the same time critiquing the role all this usually plays in framing regimes of gendered culture-industry work and consumption.

Ushering in *Ceiling*'s remarkable multi-part concluding sequence, Marta's second walk shows a now much less glamorous and confident-looking protagonist, despite wearing similar clothes and moving through possibly the same urban space in which she earlier enjoyed her daytime *flâneuserie*. Having fled in the middle of the night from a man she could be pregnant to, Prague's shopping district now looks desolate and disquieting, empty except for two non-human-looking helmeted construction site welders. The daytime walk's reassuring sounds of street bustle are now replaced by Jan Klusák's clearly non-diegetic atonal chamber music. Hames identifies the shift into atonality on the soundtrack as suggesting the cinematic correlative now moves much closer to Antonioni's contemporary work (presumably he is thinking of *L'eclisse*'s famous coda, accompanied by Giovanni Fusco's modernist score). We may also recall his *La Notte*, released the previous year, which features a much-discussed lengthy and entirely plotless walk by Jeanne Moreau through Milano. But this sequence also evokes both the famous nocturnal Manhattan walks by single women in Val Lewton's low-budget war-time Hollywood productions, like *The Seventh Victim* (1943), and Surrealism through the uncanny sensation of shop window mannequins in various states of construction or repair, many with faces partially veiled by odd surgical-type cloth patches.

A noisy, banal consumer environment has been transformed into the nocturnal world of the uncanny, where reason is supplanted by disturbing dreams and dread. The spaces of newly dark, 'haunted', urban modernity then give way to the equally Surrealism-friendly oneiric image of the rural world and pre-modern architecture reminiscent of late shots from *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) and many other films associated with Surrealist and avant garde cinema. In addition to these diverse cinematic connections, the way Chytilová shoots Marta via carefully-framed and -lit images showing her looking into half-made shop window displays as if into her own abyss, before transitioning to the even less rational space beyond the city and perhaps reality itself, also echoes Rod Serling's then-contemporary and now classic US television series *The Twilight Zone*, an even more popular-culture spin on locating the uncanny at the heart of post-war modernity's apparently non-mysterious, secular world.

Repetition and difference (C): Social life

If her two walks show Marta alone, either in the confident reality of an anonymous daytime crowd or literally by herself facing a very intimate void, the two scenes of large-scale social life portray connected oppositions via different lifestyle, career, and even ideological-system contexts in which Marta cannot find or embrace a footing. The daytime university cafeteria scene follows on from her first walk, when a friend and former classmate (who does not yet know she has dropped out), accompanied by another student, sees her on the street and rather demandingly coaxes our protagonist to lunch. Set in a world that she has left behind, the resulting scene and milieu starkly contrasts with that of her fashion industry life.

Featuring apparent sync sound, the university lunch scene could be from any number of then-contemporary documentaries or realist features about student life in a socialist country. One of the film's real pleasures here is its portrayal of the Communist bloc's truly international nature, the cafeteria comprising a multitude of ethnicities, accents and spoken languages, bound together by what was once called The Second World. Through references from newspapers and overheard snippets of conversation, here we get the sense of a global, today virtually disappeared, politics through comments about recent events in the Congo and elsewhere that remind us of a political prism very different to that predominating across Europe today. From its start, the scene radiates this now-lost reality. Yet, once again, Marta remains seemingly disconnected from the worldly discussion dominated by men.

Now in the realms of intellectual and seemingly still very much Communist-context life, far removed from the earlier scenes' evocation of the fashion and consumerist (and therefore proto-capitalist) world, with the cafeteria scene we see a different iteration of the key point to which *Ceiling* returns: men speak, women are silent. Even in this theoretically more enlightened academic context, young men openly leer at Marta – in fact, more than we have seen so far in the film – and make sex jokes about her within earshot. But in addition to offering a potential feminist analysis, the scene expertly evokes the very common experience of visiting a place you were once a part of, feel you should be, or would like to join but for whatever reason just can't, resulting in a kind of sadness or guilt and the sense that your life is hopelessly marginal or lost while others' are firmly on track.

On the one hand, the university scene emphasizes the ubiquitous, perhaps well-intentioned but still uncomfortable (and sexist) attention a young, attractive woman faces even within what might be assumed to be a more elevated or respectful social – and socialist – context. But as events unfold, the center of gravity shifts again as if Chytilová's camera wants to investigate the broader milieu more thoroughly without entirely losing track of Marta – even perhaps, Álvarez López suggests, temporarily taking on her gaze, and thereby

quietly making what appeared a passive, depressed subjectivity into a more active, if still silent, one. The effect is rather liberatory, the second half of the scene evoking perhaps the film's primary moment of openness and happiness. In the face of such a social milieu's uncomfortable nature for this young woman, the noisy cafeteria nonetheless also brings with it a sense of convivial energy that seems to generate a shift of perspective whereby Marta briefly ceases to be an object of the on- and off-screen gaze, now potentially taking it over at least for the moment. Despite the gendered social relations on display, Álvarez López writes:

Marta seems to enjoy the company. Her presence triggers much fuss around her, and she laughs earnestly at all this light nonsense. Then, something marvellous happens: as Marta becomes more relaxed, Chytilová's camera aligns with her gaze and starts wandering around the canteen. While Joey sings and plays 'Chlupatý kaktus' [Hairy Cactus] at the piano, a popular jazz tune by the avant-garde artist Emil František Burian, Chytilová offers us a mosaic of the canteen's multicultural youth.

The correlative of the university cafeteria scene comes with the appearance later in the film of a very different large social space more aligned with the world of her new identity and its associated ideology: the after-hours milieu of the nightclub.

First seen cuddling together in a cozy corner of the nightclub, we soon glean that Marta's apparent boyfriend Julián also appears to sanction a business associate flirting with her for presumed economic advantage. Now entirely despondent – her early flickers of interest and pleasure seemingly gone – our protagonist subsequently sits alone at the bar, perhaps thinking back to the comparably lighter, more diverse and less commerce-based (if still sharply gendered) very much Communist-world environment of the university she has left behind. In place of that earlier social scene's realist-documentary mode and other diverse sequences in the film, the cinematic references in the nightclub scene are much more overtly to narrative fiction modes (and emanating, appropriately, from an unambiguously capitalist culture), particularly Hollywood genre cinema such as the gangster film, melodrama, and film noir. In both the university cafeteria and nightclub, men – respectively younger and poorer, or slightly older and clearly richer – dominate. When Marta's former student colleague shows up again looking for her, accompanied by what now seems like his besotted friend – further connecting the two scenes – they appear confused as to whether she is socializing or working in this nocturnal word of codified, consumable pleasure where middle-aged men look at, use, and possibly rent younger women. She doesn't even look at her two former peers, let alone speak.

Consumerism has been a theme throughout the film, especially in the advertising-shoot montage and now even more overtly in the nightclub

associated with capitalist America, the latter featuring US pop songs mixed with Czech music. (What sounds like a recorded version of ‘Chlupatý kaktus’, first heard in raw live performance at the cafeteria, further connects the scenes’ relationship representing radically different worlds, comparably authentic/socialist and inauthentic/commercial.) But even at this late point of a film that grows ever more literally and figuratively dark, nothing is simple or unambiguous. The consumable nature of women is certainly emphasized, but we also see a group of them speaking to each other for one of only two times in *Ceiling*, now overtly discussing the enjoyment of sex. The cost of an increasingly liberated culture is addressed here and throughout the film, especially while it remains unequal when it comes to gender and dominated by an emerging consumerist mentality. But the protean power of women’s sexual agency and pleasure is also acknowledged, even if in need of more overt feminist channeling.

The film’s earlier all-female conversation follows the university scene, when Marta and other women wait and prepare backstage before the second catwalk presentation. In both conversations, the topic is men and sex, framed through the lenses of consumption and desire for social progress (the first scene cites what kind of car a man drives as a key to deciding whether he is worth going with). This discussion focus suggests a level of liberation but also its prescriptive limitations. Importantly, Marta takes part in neither conversation and doesn’t appear to listen, refusing perhaps both the restricted version of desire being articulated but also its codification in the dual interests of men and consumption, even as – or perhaps in part because – her current career choice involves an acute experience of such a contradictory culture.

On the run

The mismatch between liberation, agency and equality is made all too clear when Marta is whisked home by Julián, her nightclub purpose apparently done with, as the final song heard at the bar bleeds over into the couple’s taxi ride. Following an initial continuation of her glum mood, the last flicker of pleasure in the film is now expressed when our protagonist seems able to will herself into returning to a coupling mode as if flicking a switch. The film then cuts to a clearly post-coital scene in Julián’s apartment, whereupon Marta soon becomes extremely frustrated with his patronizing attitude towards her desire to discuss what to do if she is pregnant, and visibly irritated by his repeated reduction of her identity to one defined by surface beauty. (‘You will lose your figure’ is one of the reasons he gives against having a child.) A few minutes before *Ceiling*’s end, we now finally hear Marta speak, saying: ‘Let me up’ when Julián attempts to keep her in bed, then, ‘Let go of me’ as she tries to escape his clutches and get dressed. When this man follows ‘I love you’ with, ‘Such a beautiful girl’ – said as if privately to himself without acknowledging Marta’s active presence in the room – she sighs loudly, ever more determined to really leave before repeating even more assertively: ‘Let me go’.

Finally rejecting Julián, and potentially a job and lifestyle intimately tied to commence, in her liberatory yet bleak – indeed abyssal – walk through the city's deserted shopping district, Marta looks at the disfigured window mannequins as if into a mirror, perhaps wondering if she too is just 'an object amongst objects', Hames suggests, at least to the men around her. Further making this connection, one shot matches Marta's legs to the uncanny non-humans'. The moment's true horror, this stare into the internal and very inhuman void, motivates another change upon the film's penultimate aesthetic-conceptual shift. The deeply unnatural, darkened modernity of the streets and mannequin-lined windows all suggestive of Marta's world at its empty core, now gives way to a very different kind of space marked by the rural and the pre-modern. But to finish the film on a 'return to nature', invoking both pantheism and Surrealism (despite their stark differences), would be to resort or retreat entirely into dream, and likely cliché. Following the striking images showing Marta spectrally moving rightward across a forest with very large trees, then passing through the gateway of an ancient stone wall, she reaches an open field. The filmmaking here is superlative in evoking the sheer euphoria of a finally expansive space and the desiring gaze that sees it – Marta's, whose face we return to in close-up via intercuts as it looks upon what the viewer also sees in the alternate shot: a mythic, 'natural' (albeit in fact highly manicured), 'timeless' world without human presence.

To conclude *Ceiling* with Marta staring out in awe at a dreamlike paradise would be evocative, and the exquisitely framed images contain much graphic and textural interest. But Chytilová is far from an escapist filmmaker, so we soon return to earth for the film's short final movement – but not the reality from which our protagonist has fled. Rather, we see her situated in a world thus far completely outside the film, that of a train traveling through everyday provincial Czechoslovakia. Seated adjacent to an extended family, she acquiesces to an offer of cake by the grandmother who won't take no for an answer after Marta initially refuses, insisting 'It's home-made'. But undermining any potential romantic – and very much conservative – conclusion whereby our protagonist realizes the error and nihilism of her big-city ways to return to the country's 'real' culture and people, following the announcement by a passenger that it is raining, we finally hear another lament: 'Yes, it's always raining.'

There is, finally, nothing to suggest Marta has 'come home' with these concluding shots. Once again loosely recalling Antonioni's female protagonists, her trajectory throughout *Ceiling* seems less to choose and pursue an alternative reality than to instinctively walk away from that which she finds unsatisfying, uninteresting, or limiting. No matter how fast (or even whether) she moves, this is ultimately a woman on the run. Álvarez López writes:

In Chytilová's films, each woman is irked or pleased at different things. Each woman has to find her own way to cope, resist, flee, or rebel. Each woman has

to craft her own response, strategy, or escape. And there is no right decision for all, just as there is no single revolution that fits everyone.

Belonging and ultimately aligned with neither the university cafeteria's international Communist world or what now seems the future-oriented capitalist one represented by the Prague fashion industry, Marta, film, and Chytilová offer us a unique, fragmentary, feminist study in dissatisfaction. Meanwhile, the occasional, protean flashes of potential pleasure, joy and interest we see always appear just out of reach, perhaps because their requisite freedom is as yet insufficiently developed in the world as it is currently organized.

References

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