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ESSAY

Red and White All Over: Transgressive Female Sexuality

Věra Chytilová's *Fruit of Paradise* (*Ovoce stromu rajských jíme*, 1970)

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Living up to her reputation as an unrelenting provocateur, Věra Chytilová's reimagining of the Garden of Eden, or more specifically the fall therefrom, subverts and problematizes the familiar Biblical imagery. At the same time, however, it teases and taunts by withholding an unequivocal key for its interpretation. As such, the visually operatic *Fruit of Paradise* (*Ovoce stromu rajskych jime*, 1970) can be viewed through many lenses. One particularly intriguing and rich example is the taboo of female sexuality, in keeping with the Augustinian interpretation of the parable, whereby the eating of the apple is viewed as a metaphor for sexual awakening.

Chytilová famously refused to be labelled a feminist, and certainly to view her work only through a feminist lens would be to disregard a rich and nuanced world. That said, her portrayal of female characters remains exemplary and fascinating, and her representation of female sexuality and women's negotiation with male sexuality and sex in general acquires particular interest when considered across her entire oeuvre. From the use of seduction as a means to an end by otherwise sexually disinterested women in *Daisies* (*Sedmikrasky*, 1966) to the repercussions of rape in *Traps* (*Pasti, pasti, pastičky*, 1998), sex in Chytilová's films is never simplistic and always entails problematic power dynamics and a discussion of social conditioning more widely.

The main narrative of *Fruit of Paradise*, in so far as it can be described as such, takes place within a meticulously constructed liminal world that seems to consist of a surreal yet banal bourgeois health resort. This diegesis is in turn divided roughly into a lush green fecund area, arid rocky or desert-like open spaces and decaying Baroque villas, undermining Eden's status as a paradise.

Would-be Adam and Eve, Eva (Jitka Nováková) and Josef (Karel Novák), have seemingly yet to integrate within the community, and we are first introduced to them lounging under the shade of a tree. Eva partakes of the notorious apple as Josef lies disinterested and morose by her side. However, this precarious idyll is immediately interrupted by the appearance of a suspicious man in red velvet, Robert (Jan Schmid). His already obvious affiliation with the role of the seductive serpent is made even more explicit with images of Robert writhing on the floor and peering through the grass, as well as intercut shots of Eva playing with an actual snake intertwined around her fingers.

This last image also foreshadows one of the central tenets of the film, namely the inversion of the classic relationship between Eve/Eva and the snake/Robert. Instantly and instinctively, Eva's curiosity is aroused by Robert. She is compelled towards him, while for his part Robert is put on guard by her presence and does everything he can to avoid her. Eva is no longer passive and gullible, but rather an active pursuer, something apparently abhorrent to both men. Josef resents her wanderings, but is later revealed to be a philanderer himself, and thus a hypocrite. Meanwhile, Robert wantonly flirts with every woman in the community, septuagenarians included, but consistently and vehemently rejects Eva's advances. If Eva's discovery of the forbidden fruit stands for the discovery of lust, her overt sexuality is clearly disruptive and upsets the established order. Promiscuousness on the part of men is accepted and even approved of, as testified by Robert's popularity among the other holiday-makers, but women should remain coquettishly passive. Within the conservative Christian tradition that considers bodily desire to be inherently undesirable, Eve is often vilified for allowing herself to be seduced, thereby introducing shame to humanity. Chytilová's Eva has to go to great lengths to even catch her snake's attention, however, challenging the concept of the archetype as a gullible victim and restoring a sense of agency, with the implication that perhaps her actions were motivated by more than a simple inability to say no.

The development of the misshapen love triangle between the three key characters is bookended by a dramatic choral narration of the Original Sin fable. The film opens with a scintillating collage of a naked man and woman overlaid with pulsating, colorized images of nature. This introductory segment culminates with the repeated refrain "Tell me the truth", as Eve chooses to acquire knowledge, despite having been warned of the consequences. This quest for truth is manifested in various ways throughout the body of the film, most notably in the recurring motif of Robert's red leather satchel. During his first interaction with Eva, he leaves it behind, giving her an excuse to seek him out. She then finds it again, buried in the sand (where she herself is planning to plant fully grown carrots), but he interrupts her before she is able to inspect its contents. She eventually gets her chance while both Robert and Josef are distracted by a lascivious ball game with a group of buxom women, and she sneaks into his house. After rifling through Svankmayer-esque drawers full of

cherries, buttons and chamber pots, she finally gets her hands on the bag. In it, she finds a red stamp of the number 6, which she takes erotically-charged delight in imprinting on her thigh, just above her white stockings (a moment that has also been associated with the famous buttock-stamping scene from *Closely Observed Trains*). In the next scene it is revealed that a serial killer has been targeting blonde women and leaving a red number 6 stamped on each of the victims. Eva makes the association. Robert catches a glimpse of her telltale branding, and suddenly their relationship changes. Robert is now the one giving chase, and with sexually-loaded murderous intent.

Throughout this thread, the symbolic meaning of the satchel can be interpreted at various levels in relation to the notion of truth. Most basically, Eva wants to know what is in the satchel, which is forbidden to her (like the contents of her husband's mail, to which she is also denied access, and which likely contains love letters from another woman). Indeed, this barrier probably constitutes a large part of her curiosity in itself. In this sense, the satchel could conceivably represent sexual pleasure, which is withheld from Eva and which she has to actively seek out for herself. In any case, she revels in her discovery of the stamp, presumably because of its inherently illicit nature and a sense of dominance over Robert through possession of an intimate secret. It is as if she has somehow overcome his rejections of her by branding herself with his own possessive marker, again playing on the power relations binding them.

The meaning of this discovery in terms of the overall narrative is only subsequently revealed through the disclosure of Robert's homicidal nature, however. The truth of the stamp could therefore be related to the discovery of Robert's predilection for sexualized violence, and perhaps the inherent danger of male sexuality for women. Alternatively, or as an extension of this, it could have a more expansive meaning referring to the complex, confusing male-female power dynamics that arise from her newly acquired knowledge in relation to both Robert and Josef. Now that he has a rival, Josef also takes a new-found interest in his wife, but as she impetuously rejects both of them, the two men strike up a friendship, united by their common cause of entrapping her (in perversity and banality respectively). Despite the danger, or perhaps precisely because of it, Eva chooses Robert, offering another possible variant of the truth she is seeking – that sexuality, especially female sexuality can also be destructive in addition to reproductive.

One of the most striking elements of the film is its remarkable use of color, which serves to exult the exquisite set design by Ester Krumbachová and evocative cinematography of Jaroslav Kučera. In particular, the costumes play largely on the dichotomy of white (or off-white, significantly) and red. These two colors have various symbolic meanings attached to them, such as innocence and temptation, blandness and passion, purity and danger, and simply male and female, as in the Mărțișor/Martenitsa traditions from further East, leaving aside possible political interpretations in the tradition of Jancsó.

With his extravagant velvet attire, matching leather satchel and, of course, stamp, Robert's redness could hardly be more explicit. At the opposite end of the spectrum, bland Josef only ever wears suits that range from white to almost-white, just like the envelopes he receives. In this sense, he fits in better with the other residents of the strange sanatorium, who are largely, albeit barely, covered in flesh colored attire during the ball game, making Robert's already stark vibrancy even more pronounced. Eva, conversely, changes chromatic allegiance throughout the film. At the beginning, when we are introduced to her, her dress is also made of red velvet but embellished with a white flower and paired with extremely white tights. However, at the time of breaking into Robert's house her outfit is inverted, with the same dress in white with a pink rose. When choosing between suitors, she is swathed in pink organza, only to be wrapped up in extremely bright red by Robert after choosing him over her spouse.

Eva is clearly caught between two opposing forces, red/Robert and white/Josef, but space for interpretation lies in what those two forces actually represent. Following the thread of female sexuality as a transgressive force both in itself and in society, white would stand for the preservation of conservative gender roles and bourgeois behavioral norms. Josef is permitted his sexual freedom, but resents it in his partner, who should be devoting herself to him and his needs. The red of Robert is mysterious, uncharted social territory that leads to almost certain ruin, but which has a magnetic appeal. This could conceivably span anything from simply overt, active sexual desire on the part of women to sexual permissiveness or even some form of masochism.

The film climaxes with Eva dressed in flowing white frantically pursued by Robert, who is armed with a seemingly endless strip of red cloth. After a tug of war, Eva gains possession of the fabric, but as it becomes entangled in the forest it serves as a trail leading Robert back to her. He ceremoniously ties her to a tree, kisses her, and then unwraps her, revealing her erstwhile white dress to be transformed into crimson. Throughout the scene, it is difficult to distinguish to what extent this is a playful game between lovers and to what extent the threats are real. In their final romantic-homicidal encounter, Robert is on the brink of shooting Eva when he has a sudden turn of heart and entrusts her with both his gun and his black coat. With a rose in one pocket and a pistol in the other, Eva ends up shooting her lover, but again it remains unclear whether this is intentional or not. It is at this point that the choral singing returns, once again imploring an unknown interlocutor to "tell the truth", as Eva flees to the snow-covered land where Josef has been left behind. As she feverishly struggles to cast off her red mantel, she implores her husband not to ask for the truth, just as she refuses to ask for it too.

Through this exchange, Eva ultimately rejects the love she has sought since the beginning of the film, exchanging roles with Robert, and appears to have learned the lesson not to upset the status quo. The unfortunate truth that costs

her so much seems to be that a sexually proactive woman is a dangerous one, for whom there is no place in paradise. Indeed, there is not even place for such a person in a subpar bourgeois simulacrum of paradise. Irrespective of whether Chytilová's aim was specifically to critique the imbalance in permissiveness between the genders, *Fruit of Paradise* is unambiguous in its representation of the discomfort caused by women who refuse/are unable to conform to the dictates of patriarchal society. While Eva ends up trying to capitulate and recanting her vibrancy in an attempt to rejoin her husband's cold, snow-bleached world, he rejects her plea and walks away, abandoning her to her fate in an undefined non space. In some sort of bleak poetic irony, the director herself was to be cast out of the filmmaking world for some seven years after the release of this work, but went on to leave a legacy as a tenacious and uncompromising force. Within the context of both her sadly curtailed oeuvre and her life, the final message of the film is clear: to hell with paradise, revel in the forbidden fruit.