



Ester Krumbachová: The Lady and her Wunderkammer

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“Ester made me do an analysis of what we actually wanted to do [...] in order to specify its meaning and purpose.”

“She had that sense for constructing a situation, which was of course connected to her substantial inventiveness as a designer.”

“For me, she uncovered the world of props, the contextual world of costumes, how costumes could really be a dramatic element in a work.”

“Ester Krumbachová was a renaissance woman.”

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

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

“There's no dumber film than *The Murder of Mr. Devil*.”

A selection of quotes from Ivan Vyskočil, Jiří Svoboda, Otakar Vávra, Věra Chytilová, and Jan Němec, *Searching for Ester*.





This handful of quotes about Ester Krumbachová (1923–1996) contains a broad continuum of respect and rejection spanning over almost the entire decade of the nineteen-sixties. A graduate of painting and graphic arts at the Arts and Crafts High School 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, labelled “an inspiration and just a muse”.¹ In the statements recorded in the biographical film essay *Searching for Ester* (*Pátrání po Ester*, 2002) her crucial aspect is her role as a mentor, a coach, maybe even a therapist, whose competence is realized only in connection to others. It seems like Krumbachová existed mainly in relation to other leading names of the Czechoslovak New Wave — not only directors like Jan Němec,² Otakar Vávra, Jaromil Jireš and Vojtěch Jasný, but above all as a director and friend of Věra Chytilová. *Searching for Ester*, a film realized by the latter, is as much about Krumbachová as it is about the director herself, most famous as the director of *Daisies* (*Sedmikrásky*, 1966). It is Chytilová who visibly interferes with the collection of photographs seen on screen, selects them, arranges them on the timeline. She is the one who connects different environments and various biographical episodes from Krumbachová’s life, she moves smoothly from conversations with professionals, film people, to the denizens of the Green Fox Pub, where Krumbachová spent her time making new friends in the last period of her life. Chytilová is heard from behind the camera as she supplies the leads and asks questions. On rare moments, she stands by. She encourages her interlocutors, she imposes subject matter on them, she even places them in the role of adversaries to her theses. Her conversation with Jan Němec goes the same way. Discussing his collaboration with Ester Krumbachová on *Diamonds of the Night* (*Démanty noci*, 1964), he confesses that “during the work it occurred to me [...] that she was, I’d say the spiritual guru of the project”,³ which quickly turns into one of the harshest critiques of the only film Krumbachová directed:

Jan Němec: “I’m very ashamed to have been the co-writer [...]”
 Věra Chytilová: “But I heard that you were there, on the set, at the filming.”
 JN: “I was, ’cause I was paid for a small part. So I sat there and got 200 crowns for it.”
 VC: “So you prostituted yourself for something more stupid than the stupidest thing.”
 JN: “Yeah.”
 VC: “Yeah? And couldn’t you see it? Didn’t you understand it?”
 JN: “I knew the whole thing was nonsense.”
 VC: “And why didn’t you give her any suggestions?”
 JN: “But I did! [...] The idea was that she had a radio play, there was a lack of screenplays and we had a good name, so why not? So, in three days we turned the radio play into a screenplay, we got paid for it, and I said, Ester, that’s it, it’s total nonsense, there’s nothing there, this tale, and with Menšík and Bohdalová, and she said no, if you’re not going to direct it I’ll do it myself. I said sure, who am I to stop her?”
 VC: “But she, a scriptwriter, and you, such a thinker, both of you, such analyzers, how come you weren’t able to do better than *The Murder of Mr. Devil*?”⁴

Two subplots are actually intertwined here: the indisputable, arbitrarily low artistic quality of Krumbachová’s directorial debut and its commercial aspect as an excuse and justification for participating in the project. At the same time, we see the expectation of a high level of artistic cinema, as well as a disinclination to accept the features of an individual, authorial language. The conversation is even more significant because of the personal relations connecting Krumbachová 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 Petra Hanáková’s use of a common and, as it were, ambiguous term positioning Krumbachová

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1 Petra Hanáková, “Voices from Another World: Feminine Space and Masculine Intrusion in *Sedmikrásky* and *Vražda Ing. Čerta*”, in *East and Central European Cinema*, ed. Anikó Imre (London: Routledge, 2005), 181.

2 Ester’s third husband during the period 1963–1968 and, above all, her artistic partner.

3 *Pátrání po Ester*, directed by Věra Chytilová, 2005.

4 *Ibid.* In reality, Jan Němec was not only the co-author of the screenplay for Ester’s film, but also appears as an actor in one of its brief roles.



in the Czechoslovak film community (“the queen of Czech film design”),⁵ and take it, perhaps against the author’s intentions, at face value. I wish 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, which come down to control over structure, material and purpose.⁶ Others make reference to the “complex consideration of groups of objects in the context of the function and the role they fulfil in our life”.⁷ I wish to emphasize the relevance of this profession in the context of Krumbachová’s multimedia interests and activities. In trying to define Ester Krumbachová’s competencies, David Sorfa emphasizes above all the social character of her nature and her exceptional ability to work in a group or to cooperate in general.⁸ These traits are closely related to the work of a designer. Famous Austrian-born American designer Herbert Bayer, in the context of organizing exhibitions, wrote that his main role is that of improving and intensifying communication.⁹ It is equally important to make the invisible visible.

There are at least a few basic themes that organize specific aspects of Krumbachová’s artistic discourse. There are the 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 description. This constellation forms the material from which the films Krumbachová was involved in, as a writer or director, are woven. The details of the interior, often adjacent to a “metaphorical and mental”¹⁰ map of the artist’s apartment, becomes an important background for the platform of culinary images. The records of her expression 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 Krumbachová’s case, it is difficult to isolate one single path that led her to cinema. There are rather multiple

roads, paths and bridges. If we were to observe chronological order, she entered Czechoslovakian cinematography through the theatre and experiences in set design. She began her work as a set designer and costume designer in theatre in České Budějovice (1954–5), then moved to Prague together with the principal stage director, actor and company leader there, Miroslav Macháček. In the capital she worked in the Prague City Theatres and the National Theatre. She first worked on film in 1961, entering the cinema through genre films by co-designing the costumes for two science-fiction films, *Man in Outer Space* (*Muž z prvního století*, dir. Oldřich Lipský, 1961) and *Ikarié XB-1* (dir. Jindřich Polák, 1963). Her path then led to films more or less closely related to the Holocaust: *Transport from Paradise* (*Transport z ráje*, dir. Zbyněk Brynych, 1962), *Diamonds of the Night, ...and the Fifth Horseman Is Fear* (*A pátý jezdec je Strach*, dir. Zbyněk Brynych, 1964). She subsequently worked on costume design for three films directed by Karel Kachyňa: *Long Live the Republic!* (*Ať žije republika*, 1965), *Carriage to Vienna* (*Kočár do Vídně*, 1966), and *The Nun’s Night* (*Noc nevěsty*, 1967)¹¹ as well as a film important for Czech identity, Vojtěch Jasný’s story about a Moravian village, *All My Good Countrymen* (*Všichni dobří rodáci*, 1968). Thanks to her collaboration with Věra Chytilová, Krumbachová began 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 when she directs her only film.

What is so interesting in the evolution of Ester Krumbachová’s artistic practice is the transition period from visual communication — under which I include costumes, props and locations demarcating various aspects of the work of set designers and costume designers — to co-responsibility for screenplays, whose medium is language. This period lasts from 1964 to 1970.¹² Of course, this is not to say that, over the course of a dozen years,¹³ her work underwent a complete separation from her first medium of expression. Krumbachová’s work in costume design, set design, and screenwriting should be considered as parts of

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5 Hanáková, “Voices from Another World”, 180–181.

6 This definition is referenced by, among others, Charles Eames in *Design Q & A* (dir. Charles and Ray Eames, 1972).

7 Joanna Hübnér-Wojciechowska, *Lata 60. XX wieku: Sztuka użytkowa: Przewodnik dla kolekcjonerów* (Warsaw: Arkady, 2014), 7.

8 David Sorfa, “Ester Krumbachová”, in *Women Screenwriters: An International Guide*, eds. Jill Nelmes and Jule Selbo (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 254.

9 Herbert Bayer, “Aspects of Design of Exhibitions and Museums”, *Curator: The Museum Journal* 4, no. 3 (1961): 257.

10 Edith Jeřábková, preface to *Green Fox Street* by Jan Kolský (Prague: AAAD Publishing House, 2018), 2.

11 Krumbachová continued her collaboration with Kachyňa on the set of *The Ear* (*Ucho*, 1970), but only in the role of designing visuals and costumes.

12 After she was blacklisted, Krumbachová also worked on

Chytilová’s next film, *The Very Late Afternoon of a Faun* (*Faunovo velmi pozdní odpoledne*, 1983), as well as *Strata* (dir. Geoff Steven, 1983), whose screenplay she wrote in collaboration with Michael Havas, one of her life partners.





a continuum. On films in which she was in charge of costumes and set design, her competence as an advisor and her ingenuity were acknowledged precisely by assigning her more visible and responsible functions. It was then that she became the co-author of two scripts for Jan Němec's feature films, *The Party and the Guests* (*O slavnosti a hostech*, 1966) and *Martyrs of Love* (*Mučedníci lásky*, 1967), and one short film by the same director, *Mother and Son* (*Matka a syn*, 1967). After that came literary film adaptations: *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* (*Valerie a týden divů*, dir. Jaromil Jireš, 1970)¹⁴ and *Witchhammer* (*Kladivo na čarodějnice*, dir. Otakar Vávra, 1970).

One scene from the last of these films can help us understand the nature of seeing Ester Krumbachová's film images.¹⁵ In this story of slowly escalating church trials, which takes a close look at people who have been falsely slandered and are subject to interrogation procedures founded on tools of oppression, the director emphasized an Aesopian language. The fabricated evidence, the coerced confessions, and the stakes at which the alleged witches were burnt are a reference to the Stalinist show trials of the fifties. Boblig of Edelstadt, a forgotten inquisitor, and his servant Ignác are given a second chance to demonstrate their knowledge of church trials and ability to take charge of a spectacular judicial project. Krumbachová's responsibilities included managing the set design team, collaborating on the adaptation of Václav Kaplický's novel into the screenplay and making decisions concerning the *mise-en-scène*. For an emblematic example of the last of these duties, let us consider a dialogue between the two characters mentioned above. The key element is the physical relationship between the two interlocutors, which introduces an obvious hierarchy and interdependency thanks to the fact that one of the characters is constantly moving his hands and the other is resting his body in a horizontal position. This also places a strong emphasis on the haptic sphere, a synaesthesia of the senses. While 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 viewer, a libidinal theatre unfolds: the relocation of causes and effects, the backstage behind the inhuman repressions undertaken during the day. The foot massage in the scene is a specific physical action that determines the words and behaviours of the characters; the touch that 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 predetermined and hopeless from the start. Francisco Goya's *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, the most famous aquatint from his *Los Caprichos* cycle, does not just serve as the background for the film's opening – it seems to have inspired certain shots as well.¹⁶ The idea of staging is crucial in the scene described. It is both purposeful and dramaturgically useful in playing out different senses, and the composition also introduces, within the image, a division of the screen (in other words, a "split screen"): the inquisitor, lying down, and his servant are separated by a curtain. There is no division into good and evil, but here 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 his duties with sexual desire; an ecclesiastical, well-paid ministry, with carnal perversion. The mechanism, the tactile-verbal dynamic, reaches far beyond the choice of locations, interiors and costumes. Its effect lies in the original manner of seeing the role of an actor's body and its relation to its immediate surroundings, both human and not. According to Vávra, Krumbachová was also responsible for choosing and writing original lyrics for the soldiers' song accompanying the opening credits, an adaptation of "Der Tod in Flandern".

Krumbachová's contribution to the films on which she worked as a screenwriter has been characterized by David Sorfa as a foundation built on two pillars, aesthetics and humour, both with a subversive power capable of shaking up the political and patriarchal arrangement.¹⁷ I consider the following commentary

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13 Ester Krumbachová worked as a costume and production designer in the following years: 1961–72, 1983, 1991, 1992, 1996. It is likely that not all cases of collaboration have been recorded in present databases. Ester Krumbachová was never officially allowed to return to work at the Barrandov Film Studios. Years after her ban, when she was permitted to submit a portfolio, she was met with a rejection that emphasized insufficient experience. See *Searching for Ester*.

14 An adaptation of Vítězslav Nezval's 1935 novel of the same name.

15 Otakar Vávra discusses Ester's contribution to the final version of the film in *Searching for Ester*.

16 By comparison, Němec himself specifies that Goya's paintings and the works of photojournalist Henri Cartier-Bresson, among others, were the inspiration for the visual aspect of *The Party and the Guests*. Peter Hames, "Enfant Terrible of the Czech New Wave:

Jan Němec's 1960s films", https://www.pecina.cz/files/www.ce-review.org/01/17/kinoeve17_hames.html.

17 Sorfa, "Ester Krumbachová".





from Krumbachová to be complementary to this analysis; although it references the basic idea of *The Party and the Guests*, it goes into her approach more holistically:

“[T]he large army of people who contribute to a film remains more or less anonymous. [...] Anonymity suits me quite well. [...]

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. [...] 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. [...] 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 [...].¹⁸

PRIVATE / PUBLIC: EATING, OR PROTOCOLS OF USE IN A SPECIFIC ENVIRONMENT

“In the course of the interview, which lasted several hours, she manages to prepare a meal that would put a first-class restaurant to shame”.¹⁹ The sentence with which I initiate the section of the essay dedicated to the function of food in Krumbachová’s private and artistic microcosm is taken from an interview conducted in fall 1966 by Czech film critic and historian Antonín Liehm. This seemingly neutral commentary locates his interlocutor in the domestic sphere, which is traditionally assigned to a woman, usually unpaid and unseen. What is also important is that it reconstructs an invisible layer of the conversation that has just ended, during which Krumbachová’s body was in constant motion, her hands working independently of reason, as evidenced by a record of the conversation published in the collection *Closely*

Watched Films. The act of simultaneous, “invisible” cooking could be viewed on the plane of physiology and communication as an instinctive concern and a need to feed others — as a layer which makes it possible for additional 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.

The interview repeatedly emphasized the convergence of this “private” image of Krumbachová with the only film she directed independently, the reception to which I presented previously. However, images of food and practices related to it have an important place in two earlier films on which Krumbachová worked as main screenwriter: *Daisies*²⁰ and *The Party and the Guests*. In describing the functions and roles to which these culinary tropes were delegated, I make use of concepts introduced by Roland Barthes. The author of *Mythologies* understood food not only as a collection of products which could be utilized in statistical research, but also, indeed, as “a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of uses, situations and behavior.”²¹ This definition was based mainly on a collection of American and western European customs, not just of the consumption of meals, but also of organizing work and leisure time. One of the points of access was visual culture. In Czechoslovak society, there was a tension — existent throughout the world, but intensified in socialist countries — resulting from a lack of food, its disproportionately fast consumption and the surplus of it reserved for privileged groups. An interpellation presented before the National Assembly on 17th of May 1967 by Jaroslav Pružinec and signed by at least twenty other MPs provides an example of a local political criticism which remains significant to this day. This interesting example of a dissent against experiments in Czechoslovak cinematography explicitly addressed the two directors most closely collaborating with Ester Krumbachová, stating: “We ask the directors Němec and Chytilová: what kind of lessons in labour, politics or entertainment will these titles bring to working people in the factories, in the fields, on construction sites and in

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18 Antonín J. Liehm, *Closely Watched Films: The Czechoslovak Experience* (White Plains: International Arts and Science Press, 1974), 278–280.

19 Ibid., 281–282.

20 David Sorfa emphasizes the process by which the screenplay for *Daisies* was created. The first draft was written by Věra Chytilová together with Pavel Juráček, the “main screenwriter” of the Czechoslovak New Wave. She was dissatisfied with the results and invited Ester Krumbachová to collaborate. Chytilová describes this process in her documentary *Searching for Ester*. The film, originally inspired by dormitory life, transformed into “a grotesque documentary” about destruction thanks entirely to Ester, who inspired the director of *Something Different* (*O něčem jiném*, 1963) to specify the subject of her film. “Ester made me do an analysis of what we actually wanted to do [...] When we specified its meaning and purpose, we decided in favour of stylization. That involved destruction in every sense of the

word [...] including of the cinematic image itself. We were bored of the form of existing films and we wanted to go against the current. [...] It was there that Jaroslav Kučera’s touches really helped us. He, Ester, and I were in perfect harmony in the protest against the destruction happening all around us. This film was, for us, the philosophical record of the time.”

21 Roland Barthes, “Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption”, in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, eds. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (London: Routledge, 2013), 14.





other occupations? We ask those workers of culture: how long will they poison the lives of honest working people, how long will they tread upon socialist achievements, how long will they get on labourers' and farmers' nerves?"²² One of the objections raised was to wasting food in the film *Daisies*. Whether one wants it or not, this reaction unconsciously references Barthes's definition of food as an institution employing sets of ready-made images, dreams, tastes, choices and values connected to them.²³ Krumbachová's own film was created two years after the interpellation, riding the wave of recognition of her name at Barrandov and just before the implementation of restrictions connected to the beginning of the normalization era. The history of the film's origin dates back to a short story published in the fall of 1968 in the magazine *Plamen* and continues as a multi-part radio drama. The film version premiered on September 18, 1970. Similar to *Daisies*, for which Krumbachová was the screenwriter, *The Murder of Mr. Devil* (*Vražda Ing. Čerta*, 1970) focused on the compulsive nature of eating, albeit in an obstinately dissimilar way.

The Murder of Mr. Devil is a culinary comedy-drama, at the base of which smoulders a fantasy of the erotic reanimation of a past relationship. The film 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. This character, played by Jiřina Bohdalová, distances herself from the developments by appearing several times throughout the film in a portrait position distinctly associated with the tradition of European painting. She appears in frames — of a mirror or a painting — and impersonates a hypothetical ancestor, but also takes on the role of a reflection.

The film begins with the character reading, or rather studying in depth, some housekeeping guides. The landscape of focus is broken by the ringing of a telephone. A childhood friend, Bohouš Čert (the titular Devil, the meaning of his last name in Czech),²⁴ is calling to announce that he will be coming for a visit. The initial meeting, as well as subsequent ones, initiate

a ritualized environment of culinary procedures, the originality of the selected menu and the etiquette of serving food. The key element for the rickety plot is the fact that She nourishes — merely tasting and seasoning the food — and He devours. Right up until the moment when he is vanquished by his own mortal weakness: raisins. 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 her male counterpart.

What is significant is the balance of genre from nearly the first scene towards the fairy tale (*pohádka*), which has always been important in Czech culture.²⁵ The poster for the film, created by Eva Galová-Vodrážková, also suggests the potential for a fairy tale. Thanks to the use of collage, elements of disparate 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 poisoning. The film's poster, in using two typefaces in the title of the film, one a serif font and the other mimicking handwriting, references the poetics of a poster advertising an upcoming event. It can be seen as an invitation for a new circus act or magician's performance — according to this formula, the body of Vladimír Menšík levitates upside-down and the letter "Č" seems to hypnotize. A man's outstretched hand is reaching for the dessert just as much as the woman. In addition to the fairy tale, the poster also introduces the contexts of culinary and crime films.

The fairy tale framework includes space for a fantastical world. As early as in the first scene of the film, the telephone is visibly fetishized; it seems to have eyes, an ominous countenance; its image is surprisingly close to Švankmajer's surrealist objects, inanimate things transformed into animals. Traces of interference are visible in singular graphic swirls of the image, more mannerist impressions than expert special effects. More literal signs of havoc are left after the Devil's subsequent visits: his teeth have their

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22 Two other films came under attack: *Hotel for Strangers* (*Hotel pro cizince*, dir. Antonín Máša, 1967) and *Sign of the Cancer* (*Znamení Raka*, dir. Juraj Herz, 1967). Cf. Jan Lukeš's statement in the documentary cycle *25 ze šedesátých aneb Československá nová vlna*, directed by Martin Šulík, 2011.

23 Barthes, "Toward a Psychosociology", 23.

24 The choice of a devilish character is also a direct reference to the title of Antonín Dvořák's comic opera *The Devil and Kate* (*Čert a Káča*), which tells the story of a village girl who loves to dance and is prepared to frolic with the devil himself. However, the majority of Ester Krumbachová's collaborators emphasized the spontaneity, or even affective dimension, of the ideas implemented in the film, and in accordance with this interpretation, this historical context would ultimately be qualified as accidental. The "devilish" contexts are also the subject of Libuše Heczková and Kateřina Svatoňová, "Esteřiny vraždy: Zabíjení filmovosti a zrod

acinematičnosti", *Illuminace* 30, no. 1 (2018): 29–44, which appears in this book in reworked form.

25 Cf. Zofia Tarajło-Lipowska, *Historia literatury czeskiej: Zarys* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 2010).





way with table legs and other furniture. 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 culinary challenges. Her need to focus on her own desire and her own body becomes visible during one of her phone conversations, as she involuntarily caresses soup vegetables hanging off of a cupboard, a phallic carrot and celery. On another occasion, while showing the ever-hungry Devil the contents of her fridge, she arches her body, including it in the edible products on offer. At this point, Ester Krumbachová's imagination approaches Meret Oppenheim's famous *Spring Banquet* (also called *Cannibal Feast*), during which, in the middle of a cloth-covered table, surrounded by candles, china and silverware, the body of a girl lay decorated with food. The sophisticated menu — appetizers, steak, mushrooms, desserts — was picked up using lips directly from the naked body.²⁶ All the dishes prepared by the heroine of *The Murder of Mr. Devil* are served as a replacement for herself. The woman's body is merely metonymy for a *landscape* of various forms of food, though it does introduce the hypothesis of a radical manner of delivering polysensory pleasure. The centrality of the body and food acts as a challenge to the habit of isolating sensory stimuli — a challenge ostentatiously not accepted by the Devil. The woman, strengthened by an awareness of her own needs, resolves to frighten the tireless consumer. She prepares a trap which the Devil will not be able to resist: a bag of raisins, a magical, fairy-tale object. The Devil's body did not undergo any grand changes during earlier strategic binges, but the category of the grotesque body described by Bakhtin becomes realized in the moment when the Devil "dives" 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 is no longer an entity; he is 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. Any compliance with a carnivalesque interpretation is incomplete, given that, besides the mouth devouring meals and pieces of furniture, no other orifices connected to the logic of physiological processes are emphasized. Beneath the cover of a jute bag, a single body is transformed into small, wrinkly fruits.

We cannot know whether the woman just wanted to frighten Mr. Devil — due to the transformation, she loses him irreversibly. And yet, she does not grieve; instead, in a victorious gesture, she — perhaps a temptress and poisoner after all — 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 give the film yet more devilish attributes. The woman keeps the fruit, which now has a distinct power. After she eats one, she experiences a vision. She realizes that, by selling the rest, she may become rich and independent. The final sequence, determined by an oneiric, imaginative style, is quite sparse: the short alternates between shots of the heroine wearing a wedding dress surrounded by not one but several men and photos of a framed empty composition, up until the "entrance" — the camera becomes immersed in the image, which seems three-dimensional thanks to an optical illusion. This manifests the woman's earlier repressed desire, now that she is freed from the duty of satiating the hunger of a man, of anyone but herself. Her appearance in the frame with a champagne flute has the same undertone. A song by Marta Kubišová, which accompanies this scene and is also present in the opening of the film, helps to create a thought-out manifesto of female freedom to do what is not socially acceptable, outside of the rules. Through the elaborate culinary creations deposited at the altar of men's expectations, the film reaches the story of the woman's untamed hunger, which is represented by a fantastic (but also comical) figure, a mythical, animal-human Yeti from the *soundtrack*. The picture frame plays a significant role here: it is a measure of meeting oneself, "liberation from man",

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²⁶ Cf. Maria Poprzęcka, *Uczta bogiń: Kobiety, sztuka i życie* (Warsaw: Agora, 2012), 137–139.





the end of culinary and sexual affect. Raisins — like pills of happiness and forgetfulness or drugs representing the liberated (or perhaps only feigning freedom) sixties — 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 provide undue rigour to female play by giving it a form and burdening it with male expectations. These are seemingly satisfied at the level of things offered for consumption in the film, but at the same time frustrated at the level of its logical and bounded structure. Krumbachová mocks the viewer who has come to consume a finished product. Instead, she offers a heterogeneous story of a woman who slips into the frame of a mirror every now and then. This treatment brings the protagonist's statements into the domain of a timeless monologue of female needs — a completely different language from the one she uses in her conversations with the Devil. From the level of her own infantilism and coarse male phrases, she ventures into literary language. David Sorfa emphasizes the rhythms of such a solution,²⁷ while Petra Hanáková writes about the use of visual semantic clichés, which Krumbachová brought to an extreme.²⁸

INTERMEDIALITY

Libuše Heczková and Kateřina Svatoňová redirect the conclusions from this observation of the film's visual language — not towards the modernist theatrical style distinguished in cinema,²⁹ but towards the tradition of *tableaux vivants*.³⁰ This formula includes the opening of the film. When looking at the opening credits, one finds that they are themselves 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 foreshadows the jewellery that Krumbachová went on to design outside of her film work. According to Heczková and

Svatoňová, it is the *tableau vivant* formula that unites such different areas as jewellery, theatre, costume design and drawing — all important for Krumbachová herself.³¹ Thanks to this initial attention to detail, we also come into contact with the form of the cabinet of curiosities.

According to Ágnes Pethő, this practice can be referred to simply as the embodiment of a painting.³² There is artificiality and stylization. The woman in frame is always more lofty, restrained, anachronistically distinguished, referring to some code of femininity connected with a prop room composed of furry wraps, gloves and pearls. The golden frame of the mirror emphasizes this ostentatious formal display.

Tableaux vivants have been called the art of reconstruction³³ 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 a scene with its attitude, clothing and facial expressions. Living images combining painting, sculpture and theatre are imperfect already at the level of definition: the medium's lack of purity is inscribed in its character. This lack of purity has been, in later years, willingly adapted and treated as a field for experiments by new media artists.³⁴ There is one scene in Krumbachová's film that can be combined with new media: the previously mentioned effect of three-dimensionality, or an optical illusion identical to it. This becomes visible in one of the sequences introducing an additional internal frame. Each time this is a new form of visual attraction, "an image inside an image".

Instead of a well-plotted 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 as in *Daisies*, the form is eaten. The central theme of Chytilová's earlier film, which preceded *The Murder* — its sophisticated visuality, supported by various formal tricks — is a wide range of eating and consumption. As Katarina Soukup has previously noted, eating is a way to assimilate into the world:

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27 Sorfa, "Ester Krumbachová", 261.

28 Petra Hanáková, "The Feminist Style in Czechoslovak Cinema: The Feminine Imprint in the Films of Věra Chytilová and Ester Krumbachová", in *The Politics of Gender Culture under State Socialism: An Expropriated Voice*, eds. Hana Havelková and Libora Oates-Indruchová (New York: Routledge, 2014), 211–233.

29 András Bálint Kovács, *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema, 1950–1980* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 140–167.

30 Heczková and Svatoňová, "Estefiny vraždy", 40.

31 Ibid., 41.

32 Ágnes Pethő, "Intermediality in Film: A Historiography of Methodologies", *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies* 2, no. 2 (2010): 51.

33 Małgorzata Komza, *Żyje obrazy: Między sceną, obrazem i książką* (Wrocław: University of Wrocław Press, 1995), 6.

34 Piotr Zawojcki, *Sztuka obrazu i obrazowania w epoce nowych mediów* (Warsaw: Oficyna Naukowa, 2012).





devouring the world prevents one from being eaten.³⁵ *Daisies*, even in its intentionally imperfect form, can be considered an effect of “being eaten”. The surrealistic game played at one point by the protagonists where they cut and quarter their own bodies shifts the boundaries of corporeal unity to the level of aesthetic spectacle, but it is also visible proof of how the narrative is cannibalized, torn and eaten. The fragmentation of the female body in *Daisies* does not just take on a completely different dimension than in Hollywood cinema. The “spoiled” narration³⁶ of *Daisies* or their “narrative restraint” goes hand in hand with the disappearance of the expectation that the title “anti-heroes” will provide visual pleasure. The chaotic organization of the narrative form is proportional to their gluttony.

While the paradoxical culinary hyperactivity of *The Murderer's* protagonist does not allow for bodily consumption, stops its potential course, the direction of the activities of the girls in *Daisies* can be viewed as 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 specialize primarily in eating at someone’s expense — they pick up older men for this purpose. Consumption is therefore closely linked to the hunting ritual,³⁷ although the prey and the hunter are interchangeable. The culmination of the effort is the meal eaten at a restaurant table. The culinary feast is separated 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 the two films, the effect is identical.

While the protagonist of *The Murder* compulsively creates sublime culinary performances in order to realize her own desire, in the film co-created with Němec, *The Party and the Guests*, the ritual of the meal is only a mouth-gagging disciplinary technique. As noted by Elizabeth Girelli, from the very first scenes, the viewer is burdened with a tight framing method used in an idyllic

forest setting.³⁸ The filming techniques signal the arrival of something unexpected and dangerous. The narrow, crowded frames even set off at a distance the language used by the participants of the picnic, even though, in the declarations of the creators, they were supposed to indicate imprisonment in clichés and empty words. After a ten-minute sequence paraphrasing *The Luncheon on the Grass*, the film turns into a proper parable as suggested by the title, depicting guests brought by force and with little information to the reception of some self-proclaimed Host.³⁹ Food is the background for the advancement from physiology to culture, associated with a surplus of props and performance rather than “food content”. As Němec said, the film was made as a result of taking 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 and others could be promoted to the position of ambassador. The table was a metonymy for participation in power”.⁴⁰ In fact, there is an intriguing separation here, a dissociation of conventions around food from the essence of the food itself. The space, furnished with tables topped with branching candelabra and chairs with embroidered upholstery, is a façade for the mechanism of oppression and violence that hides beneath it.

CABINETS OF CURIOSITIES OR WUNDERKAMMERN

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 and deficits. The process of preparing the meal involves not only cooking, but also building a landscape of consumption. The picture is framed by a branching potted plant spread over an ottoman. Half-exhibits, museum objects are created, and they have an original aesthetic quality even before human actors appear in them. The kitchen environment resembles a *Wunderkammer*⁴¹, a private study focused on cooking,

35 Katarina Soukup, “Banquet of Profanities: Food and Subversion in Vera Chytilová’s *Daisies*”, *Tessera* 24 (1998), <https://tessera.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/tessera/article/view/25123>: 38–52.

36 Herbert Eagle writes about “spoiled action” Jonathan Owen, about “spoiled aesthetics”. This, beyond all else, is the result of words overused by the two Maries, the protagonists of *Daisies*: “we are spoiled”. Herbert Eagle, “Dada and Structuralism in Chytilová’s *Daisies*”, *Cross Currents* 10 (1991): 242; Jonathan Owen, *Avant-garde to New Wave: Czechoslovak Cinema, Surrealism and the Sixties* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 9.

37 For those writing about the film, this mechanism was from the start more similar to begging.

38 Elisabetta Girelli, “Subverting Space: Private, Public and Power in Three Czechoslovak Films from the 1960s and ‘70s”, *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 2, no. 1 (2011): 49–59.

39 Grażyna Świętochowska, “O uroczystości i gościach:

Czechosłowacka nowa fala i kultura czasu wolnego”, *Kwartalnik filmowy* 39, no. 100 (2017): 109–125.

40 Cf. Němec’s statement in the film *Searching for Ester*.

41 I purposefully use the term introduced by Jan Švankmajer to his own artistic practice. The proper Czech term is *kunstkamera* (art chamber).





curiosities and a library of specialist volumes. Bordered by larger and smaller shelves, the kitchen has room for cans, containers, ladles, individual dishes, porcelain tableware, spice containers, dried herbs, garlic braids and bunches of fresh soup vegetables. The accumulation of all these objects in one space refers to the concept of the Renaissance cabinets of curiosities:

“these *Wunderkammern* had practically everything. The cabinet was to be a microcosm, a *theatrum mundi*, and its content reflected its owner’s interests.”⁴²

A certain form of revival of this tradition can be seen in the context of “classical” surrealism — one image corresponding to the collection of culinary objects might be André Breton’s room-chapel at 42 Rue Fontaine in Paris,⁴³ nowadays residing in the permanent exhibition of the Pompidou Centre in Paris. The accumulation of objects, inclined towards equipment adjacent to the traditional female sphere, raises questions about the limits of Krumbachová’s conscious parodying of male cabinets of curiosities. This becomes even more interesting if the figure of the Czech surrealist Jan Švankmajer, with his private mythology, is placed in her immediate vicinity. Here the context of French surrealism intertwines with its Czech derivative.⁴⁴ The artistic and film work of the director of *Dimensions of Dialogue* (*Možnosti dialogu*, 1983) contains not only many *Wunderkammern*, but also, similar to Krumbachová’s work, original forms of food in abundance.

In 1967, Švankmajer realized the nine-minute *Historia Naturae (Suita)*, creating an audiovisual tribute to the collector’s practices of ordering, segregating, separating and naming, and

turning for the first time to quotations from Giuseppe Arcimboldo’s painting practices. Even Josef Škvorecký, in his early critical commentary on Krumbachová’s film — which he allegedly did not see, but merely read its script — wrote about the touch of surrealism, a sentimental, campy kitsch.⁴⁵ Heczková and Svatoňová reference this criticism and find an, in a way, automatic elaboration of it: it is no accident that Krumbachová’s film resembles Švankmajerian animations of inorganic and inanimate matter exposed to biting, chewing and swallowing.⁴⁶ Švankmajer’s imagination goes much further by working on the key themes that drive his art: biology (or, more broadly, science), astrology, alchemy, psychoanalysis, genes and childhood.⁴⁷ In 1972, he and his wife Eva began working on a fake encyclopedia, *Švank-meyers Bilderlexikon* (1972–), creating various assemblages of stuffed animal parts, found objects and everyday accessories that combine minerals, vegetables and post-animal and human objects.⁴⁸ Later in life, he came to house this microcosm of objects in his own home⁴⁹ — transforming it almost entirely into a *Wunderkammer*. 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 food, which becomes fetishized. Švankmajer’s “food performances”, like Meret Oppenheim’s trailblazing project, blur the distinctions between the senses of touch, taste and sight. Krumbachová and Švankmajer’s creative paths only officially crossed once, at Prague’s Laterna Magika theatre in 1975.⁵⁰ However, their private paths crossed more frequently, and they developed a friendship and saw one another on numerous occasions.

PRIVATE / PUBLIC: THE APARTMENT

One more detail is important at Krumbachová’s *Wunderkammer*: the presence of her own private objects in the film’s set design: mirror

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42 Olga Topol, “Deliss: Plaszczynny percepcji”, in: *Muzeum sztuki: Antologia*, ed. Maria Popczyk (Krakow: Universitas, 2005), 401–410.

43 Kristoffer Noheden, *Surrealism, Cinema and the Search for a New Myth* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 95.

44 The Group of Czechoslovak Surrealists was led by Vratislav Effenberger. André Breton and Paul Eluard visited Prague in March 1935, and Breton, gave a lecture at the Mánes Gallery titled *The Surrealist Situation of the Object*. Derek Sayer, *Prague, Capital of the Twentieth Century: A Surrealist History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 4. The meeting was initiated by the founder of the Czech Surrealist Group, poet Vítězslav Nezval. It is worth adding that Švankmajer began to call his films surrealist in 1968, and in this context, one should consider works like his short film from that year mixing animation and live action, *The Flat (Byt)*. See Jan Švankmajer, *Dimensions of Dialogue / Between Film and Fine Art*, eds. Bertrand Schmitt and František Dryje (Řevnice: Arbor Vitae, 2012), 88.

45 Josef Škvorecký, *Všichni ti bystří mladí muži a ženy: Osobní historie českého filmu* (Prague: Horizont, 1991).

46 Heczková and Svatoňová, “Esteřiny vraždy”.

47 František Dryje, “Jan Švankmajer, Surrealist”, in Švankmajer, *Dimensions of Dialogue*, 172.

48 Švankmajer, *Dimensions of Dialogue*, 185.

49 According to Ivo Purš, the collection is not open to general public; during one of its exhibitions, just a fraction of the collection was showcased, and the exhibits were not signed. Švankmajer believes that they do not fulfil a didactic function, and that their purpose is to stimulate creative thinking.

50 Lucie Česálková and Kateřina Svatoňová, *Diktátor času: (De)kontextualizace fenoménu Laterny magiky* (Prague: Národní filmový archiv, Faculty of Arts Press, 2019).





frame, potted plants, tables. This can be seen as smuggling in, or perhaps quoting, her own private life. Indeed, the whole layout of her apartment was transferred to her only directed film. “You entered the apartment as if you were entering the interior of one of her works, her project, and at the same time her private sphere.”⁵¹ Krumbachová’s old friends also emphasize the way Krumbachová treated works of art. She never approached them with reverence and adoration. She used them, 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 Krumbachová’s world was her apartment is mentioned in Jan Kolský’s artistic project *Green Fox Street* (2018),⁵² the title of which refers to the street on which Krumbachová lived. The book weaves a detailed topography, nowadays understood as a metaphorical and mental place, from the memories of living friends. New networks of connections are created through the creative editing of individual interviews between June and December 2017⁵³ accompanied by sketches of Krumbachová’s apartment plan. Elements from various sources have been once again re-organized into a whole, into the physical space of a fantastic meeting. Distances and spatial relations are based solely on subjective feelings from many years prior.⁵⁴

In the stories of people who knew Krumbachová, emphasis is placed on the direction of movement, the need to climb stairs or ride up in the elevator. In both cases, this has a psychoanalytic overtone: a rising tunnel leading to Krumbachová’s apartment.⁵⁵ One had to go through the kitchen to get to the balcony. The kitchen was the site of preparation not just for dishes, but also elements used for making jewellery (amulets). The space’s connectedness, openness, and ability for multitasking, despite its modest size, seem to be a distinctive marker, so characteristic of Krumbachová’s own “cooperative” personality structure. There was no door between the main room and the kitchen, at most a curtain. In the hallway, wallpaper was laid

out on the floor and regularly changed every year, while the remaining rooms had a carpet. On the wallpaper there was an inscription written in Krumbachová’s hand, a Latin sentence: “Hic Sunt Leones” (literally, “Here be lions”) in a thick font, used on antique maps to mark undiscovered areas, unknown countries. In Krumbachová’s view, this was primarily a tribute to her cats. But in her environment, she also maintained relations with other animals: she had a parrot and turtles. Chytilová’s film *Searching for Ester* also has a very clear thread of ravens, to which Krumbachová, its designer, attributed the traces of an autonomous, independent existence. In these gestures, Krumbachová resembles the stereotyped image of a sorceress, a witch, but she also moves in the direction of today’s post-humanistic sensitivity.

Krumbachová’s urban apartment, bustling with social life, is also a tangible proof of the shift in the centre of Czech life during the normalization era. Descriptions of the characteristic leisure practices distinguishing the residents of the Czechoslovakia highlight notions like tramping, cabins (*chaty*) and cottaging (*chalupaření*), but the most important factor, which thus remains completely unspoken, is the characteristic of everyday life at the time, in which people commonly maintained their privacy by withdrawing from social life and limiting their interests to their circle of closest family and friends.⁵⁶ This “silent life” was primarily realized inside one’s own apartment, one’s “four walls”. These are the roots of Charter 77 (Olga and Václav Havel’s apartment) and the centre of life of the Czech Surrealist Group (Eva and Jan Švankmajer’s apartment). They are also common to Krumbachová’s living environment, where her professional projects were mistaken for private entertainment projects, extended at most to the Green Fox Pub (*Na Zelené lišce*) operating in her apartment building. Having no official commissions at Barrandov, she helped others by hosting. Without going out into the world, she made the world come to her.

51 Kolský, *Green Fox Street*, 4.

52 Ibid.

53 One conversation from 2016 was also included.

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

55 Kolský, *Green Fox Street*, 4.

56 Świętochowska, “O uroczystości i gościach”.

