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## Betrayed by blondness: Jiřina Štěpničková between authenticity and excess – 1930–1945

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The blondness of female stars is invariably associated with glamour, sexuality and wealth. But not much attention has been paid to stars articulating different sets of values attached to fair hair found in artistic, national and religious discourses. This article focuses on the Czech star Jiřina Štěpničková and her star image from the 1930s to the mid-1940s. I argue that, while blondness heavily contributed to her status as a national icon and dedicated performer, it also resulted in a complex set of negotiations between her star qualities and the national rural characters she performed. On the one hand, Štěpničková was labelled the ‘Czech Madonna’, the perfect embodiment of heroines defined by loyalty, self-sacrifice and chastity. On the other, she was questioned as too beautiful and elaborately styled for the parts she was cast in. Analysing formal elements of her image and reconstructing the promotional and critical discourses surrounding her allows me to present Štěpničková under three categories – as a celebrated actress, as an ideal woman and as an ‘inauthentic’ star – for which her blondness played a key role.

**Keywords:** blonde; Czech; Štěpničková; stardom; authenticity; performance; national

### Introduction

Among the many insights Richard Dyer brought to star studies there is the focus on the purely visual, luminary aspects of stardom. In his short analysis of Lilian Gish’s star persona he famously opened his essay by considering the etymological roots of the theoretical paradigm. Stars are not only celebrities and famous personalities but also, in the true meaning of the word ‘... things that shine brightly in the darkness’. He adds that we should not forget how appropriate the term was (and still is) for ‘... people, who did seem to be aglow on stages and screens in darkened halls’ (Dyer 1993, p. 1). Such elegant phrasing is not only significant in itself, but it invites us to consider wider issues concerning stardom in relation to whiteness and, more specifically, blondness. Blond stardom is a very powerful cultural and ideological construct and is invariably associated with glamour, sexuality and wealth. When considering such questions in terms of hair symbolism, other paradoxes enter the frame (Synnott 1987). Whereas blond women are easily labelled as beautiful, rich and boldly feminine, brunettes are considered mostly as good, intelligent and familiar. The mystique associated with the blonde escapes the melancholy undertones or sense of enigma so readily connected with dark hair; blondes instead go for fun, but also run the risk of being qualified as ‘dumb’. Many memorable

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female film stars sport fair or bleached hair, articulating the values and notions already outlined – such as Marilyn Monroe or Marlene Dietrich.

Apart from these prevailing readings, not much attention has been paid to stars articulating different sets of values attached to blondness found in historically specific artistic and national discourses. Opening the topic to new topographies, time frames and star identities will allow for other discourses pertaining to glamour versus authenticity, and varied concepts of period beauty and national heritage.<sup>1</sup> These criteria are developed in this study of Czech<sup>2</sup> star Jiřina Štěpničková, whose career was at its most successful throughout the 1930s and up to the mid-1940s. Her star persona contained notions of ideal womanhood based on endurance, self-sacrifice and chastity, and also on the myth of the dedicated artiste in pursuit of noble goals such as projecting a positive national self-image. Therefore, in what follows I argue that while Jiřina Štěpničková's blondness significantly contributed to her status as national icon, it also gradually resulted in a complex set of negotiations between her star quality and the rural characters she performed. The next section thus introduces her as a typical Czech leading lady whose fair hair was in harmony with her national image. The second part focuses on Štěpničková's star vehicles as the site of ideal womanhood. The final section moves to the following decade and is concerned with critical discourses surrounding Štěpničková, positioning her as 'too glamorous' and 'inauthentic' for her film roles. Blondness is therefore presented as a twofold category; on the one hand cementing Štěpničková as a truly Czech artiste, and on the other undermining her credibility as a folksy heroine.

Scholarly attention dedicated to blondness is relatively scant and unsystematic. Richard Dyer touched on the topic notably in his analysis of Marilyn Monroe's star image (2004, pp. 19–66) and later elaborated on the concept in *White* (1997).<sup>3</sup> While the Monroe chapter presented blond hair in the traditional sense of glamour, in his subsequent work Dyer interpreted it as a sign of extraordinary virtue. Fair hair resembling a glowing halo predated cinema, but this visual trope was reinforced after the emergence of film technology. While Dyer perceives blondness as being connected either to moral superiority or glamorous stardom, I would like to offer a case study ticking both of the boxes. My aim is to understand not only the values and meanings attached to domestic stardom of a particular era, but also to engage with broader issues connected with blondness. Prevailing scholarly discourse on non-Hollywood stardom stresses different working conditions such as the smaller scale of production and close links between cinema and theatre, but it rarely focuses on the looks and physical assets of stars outside the dominant paradigm. This article therefore invites scholars to consider the cultural negotiations that had to be mobilised in order to promote and frame a concrete physical body as the site of idealised national virtues in a specific geo-political context.

### National icon

The nature and contours of Jiřina Štěpničková's star persona, as well as its origins, are firmly rooted in the second half of the nineteenth century. Many of her star vehicles adapted novels or dramas from that era, dealing with rural motifs and simple peasant life. Readers' and spectators' pleasure resided not so much in the basic storylines as in the settings and the display of a variety of local festivities, folkloric costumes and regional landscapes and accents. Such heritage craving was caused by the absence of any direct political activities in the public sphere since the Czech country was part of the Austrian empire up to 1918. Overt nationalist manifestations and domestic pride were thus strongly displaced onto culture and mostly theatre. Actresses at the time were cherished not only as

fashion models or trendsetters, but mostly for their ability to speak clear and literary Czech and thus demonstrate the extraordinary euphonic qualities of a long suppressed language.<sup>4</sup> Frequently labelled as ‘mothers of the nation’, they saw their elevated status fortified by allegorical paintings, ‘casting’ them as mythical figures. For example, Otýlie Sklenářová-Malá was portrayed as the mythical princess Libuše; years later, in 1926, Alfonse Mucha, a skilful painter of celebrated women who paid special attention to their hair, concluded his ambitious Slav Epic cycle with an image of the Goddess Slavia. These idealised national visions, channelled through bodies of star actresses, displayed certain features, which later returned through Jiřina Štěpničková. These ‘timeless’ Czech women had fair skin and a solid, busty physique clad in pristine, simple dress; their honey-coloured hair was pleated or braided and covered with a carefully arranged piece of cloth.

As in other small nation cinemas, the emerging star identities offered a unique combination of Hollywood modernity and older, localised contexts of performance. In Czechoslovakia, film stardom initially seemed to depart from these anachronistic, consciously national fantasies in the 1910s and 1920s. The first major Czech star was the blond Anny Ondráková, or Anny Ondra as she was known to international audiences, who embodied a local version of the flapper. This type of modern woman struck a perfect balance between fun and sexiness, initiating various adventures and encounters with men. Ondra’s and other Czech flappers’ comic performances removed any risky or controversial undertones, despite these heroines adopting the latest fashion of short skirts and haircuts. Such a pattern of relegating blond leading ladies to the realm of light-hearted comedy persisted in the following decade as well. The Czech star system of the 1930s and up to the middle of the 1940s thus was not short of blond female stars – quite the contrary, blond actresses prevailed. But their fair hair somehow seemed to disqualify them from the critically acclaimed dramatic or heritage parts. In the Czech film culture of that era, hair symbolism evolved around a set of contrasting ideas; with the blondes labelled as fun, dumb and cute, brunettes were perceived as more authentic, and as somehow enigmatic and tragic. Although this was not directly articulated in the journalistic discourse of the time, a quick survey of female stars working throughout the decade illustrates my point. Anny Ondra was followed by Věra Ferbasová. The latter was discovered by film director Vladimír Slavínský, a seasoned maker of popular comedies and romances, and the pair together launched a successful collaboration, in which the starlet played daring, yet goodhearted, female characters who were willing to turn their life upside down in order to secure the desired man. Ferbasová’s looks accentuated her almost childish cuteness and gave her the appearance of a teenager. Her facial features were round, complemented by a rather chubby figure, and her lips were made up in a strong heart-shaped manner. Her blond hair was shorter than was common for a 1930s star, barely reaching her shoulders, but always styled into tight curls. Although she was ridiculed by critics, who frequently mentioned her lack of acting skills and described her comic performance as too obvious and ponderous, Ferbasová’s star vehicles were the top crowd-pullers of the decade. Another blond icon of the era, Nataša Gollová first embodied sentimental heroines, but later moved towards local versions of screwball or crazy comedies. Her particular type lost any teenage connotations and offered more mature, although still entertaining, visions of femininity. Her hair was less elaborately styled than Ferbasová’s, adopting a modern, more natural wave with a distinctive peekaboo look. Gollová’s lock of hair shadowing her left eye is still nostalgically celebrated today. Not only did it interestingly structure her face, but it also contributed to her comic performance in terms of providing an excuse for a number of ‘spontaneous’ gestures – blowing the curl from her forehead or sweeping it away with her hand. Adina Mandlová provides another appropriate example, highlighting

the transformative potential of darker hair. At the dawn of her screen career she dazzled audiences with almost platinum hair, but was given only a few lines of dialogue in her films. More important parts of brides and spoilt daughters followed; finally in 1939, with notably darkened hair, she won a starring role in *Kouzelný dům* (The magic house) (1939). The part of Marie, the heroine, suffering from amnesia and forced into starting a new life among strangers, enabled Mandlová to showcase her developing acting skills. Similar opportunities started coming on a more regular basis and the actress significantly never bleached her hair again. Melodramatic or even tragic parts required from performers a certain level of maturity and a hint of sensuality – and such qualities seemed to be more readily associated with brunettes.

With blondes normally reduced to fun, light-hearted, uncomplicated versions of femininity, Štěpničková's stardom clearly broke the established scheme. Judging from journalistic discourses in the 1930s and early 1940s, for instance the popular film weekly *Kinorevue*, the actress gained her unique star status by combining platinum blond hair with the 'serious' nature of her star vehicles, featuring adaptations of classical Czech literature and drama. To make Štěpničková suitable and authentic for the films she was cast in, her glowing blond hair had to be perceived as a major sign of Czech womanhood. One article at the time thus stated that having light coloured hair was not a sign of exoticism but a fairly usual thing. Although national aspects of beauty evaded precise description, journalist K. Karlas made it clear which Czech actresses 'naturally' stemmed from the local environment. In his opinion, a blond leading lady would be extraordinary for example in Italian films, but in the domestic productions brunettes came to stand for the unusual. For the author Štěpničková thus represented the typical, common young Czech woman resembling any other rural girl (Karlas 1937, pp. 16–17). Other journalistic contributions to the issue of national beauty frequently depicted Štěpničková as the only actress in whom truly Czech qualities could be found (Rádl 1938, p. 1, Anon. 1940, pp. 2–3). These rather obscure descriptions put the accent on the notion of depth, standing for this star's beauty, talent and personality. Such a persona was in stark contrast with that of other, mainly international celebrities, namely Jean Harlow and Marlene Dietrich, who were considered shallow, their beauty reduced to a mere shimmering surface. While these 'imported' celebrities were deemed to project conspicuous consumption and luxurious lifestyle, domestic actresses, in order to get a fair amount of press coverage, had to distinguish themselves in artistic terms. Some of the pieces mentioned Štěpničková's urban origins, thus pointing to the constructed nature of her image, but her convincing performances secured a strong connection between the star and her roles as country women. Stills rarely featured her in contemporary clothing and modern hairstyle, and instead numerous photographs depicted her in plain rural costumes. Promotional stills from her upcoming films, and especially close-ups, foregrounded her glowing hair, with direct implications for her performance and posture. Her head was usually slightly tilted down with eyes gazing into the distance and not at the camera. Her face remained serious with only a hint of a smile and her back was frequently slightly hunched. This is in sharp contrast to the prevailing glamour presentation of stars at the time, who flashed large smiles, looked at the viewer and arched their bodies in statuesque poses. Štěpničková's visually subordinate, chaste position matched perfectly the broader contours of her star image as that of a responsible national star. The posture described also implied willingness to immerse herself in the particular part instead of foregrounding her own image. Štěpničková employed these visual and performance strategies based on stage icons from previous decades such as Ellen Terry, Eleonora Duse or the Czech Hana Kvapilová. These leading ladies were careful to the point of obsession to present

themselves both on and off stage as sentimental, transparent, vulnerable and above all chaste models of femininity very much in line with the conventional ideal of ‘true’ womanhood (Buzsek 2006, p. 121).

### *Ideal woman*

From the beginning of her film career, Jiřina Štěpničková was presented as a skilful, talented and dedicated artiste. Such a powerful position stemmed from her connection to the established theatrical tradition that valued celebrated actresses as positive self-images for the nation. While still in her teens, Štěpničková was asked to join the company of the illustrious National Theatre. Early on she became associated with parts in the classical domestic repertoire, falling under the category of the ingénue, or the young innocent woman on the verge of matrimony. The ultimate breakthrough part was that of Maryša – first on stage in 1933 and in the film version two years later – with Štěpničková applauded for the novelty of her performance, bringing youthful sparkle to traditional interpretations of the part of a suffering murderer. The original drama, introduced in 1894, tells the tragic story of a young girl forced by her parents into marriage to an older man. She longs for a boy from the village and because she cannot stand her brutal husband, Maryša kills him by serving him a poisoned cup of coffee. Both the film and the play end with Maryša’s imprisonment and her full realisation of the horror of her act. Despite the tragic ending, this piece was celebrated mostly for its realistic depictions of rural life, specifically the Vlčnov accent and folkloric costumes. The complex relationship between the actress, the significance of her hair and national overtones came to prominence in this film which established the basis of her stardom. For the first time, genuine attention was brought to Štěpničková’s hair; or in this particular case, a headdress (Figure 1).

The iconic image of her profile, detailing Štěpničková’s face in the manner and pose described previously, became a kind of visual *leitmotif* for the whole film. In colour or in black and white, as a poster or a collector’s postcard, it created a strong connection between the emerging star and her breakthrough part. The visually stunning picture was not only a wisely chosen marketing tool, but also a reminder of a significant scene in the film; this featured an elderly lady placing a heavily decorated, multi-layered bridal wreath resembling a glowing crown on Štěpničková’s head. This particular moment invites audiences to shift their attention from narrative flow to the ‘mere’ enjoyment of the unfolding spectacle. The scene is disconnected from both the immediately preceding drama (Maryša begging her father not to insist on the marriage) and the events that follow (the wedding). Instead of pushing the story forward, the film immerses itself in a contemplative moment, focusing on the highly decorated adornment and the face of the actress protruding under it. Therefore in this short sequence we are able to witness crucial aspects of Jiřina Štěpničková’s star image in terms of framing, lighting and the focus on her face. While her blond hair in this scene is partly covered by the sparkling wreath, other aspects of *mise-en-scène*, such as the visual dominance of fair hair in the shot and the subsequent halo effect, are already firmly in place.

Feeding from this visual pattern, Štěpničková’s subsequent films developed and intensified the scheme, finally resulting in one of the most coherent and brightest star images of the era. Such stability was secured with two factors, starting with narrative schemes. The classic literary works and dramatic plays centred on kind and gentle heroines, young women who were obedient to their parents and respectful of conventional moral codes within the community. Love was their imperative; without a cherished partner by their side they committed horrible crimes, escaped the village or lost their mind. Self-



Figure 1. Iconic profile: Jiřina Štěpničková as Maryša in the promotion photography (1935). Source: Národní filmový archiv.

sacrifice was their main character trait, as they were willing to trade their well-being for a man's sake, life or peace of mind. When, like Maryša, they rebelled, they did so in order to secure their right to choose a prospective husband freely and according to their will and emotions. Cast as the central heroine of these marital rural dramas, the star always embodied the ethical core of her films and her blondness served as the aesthetic ratification of their innate qualities.

The second cornerstone of such a consistent and bright image resided in stylistic and formal ways of presenting the star. Light and its distribution in the shots thus became crucial for Štěpničková's ability to glow. 'Glow' is the appropriate word preferable to shine because, as Richard Dyer (1997, pp. 122–125) noted, shine connotes a mirroring effect and physicality. Glow, on the other hand, gives idealised Caucasian women an aura of transcendence and solar radiance. They do not merely reflect light but are bathed in and

permeated by it. Such an impression was achieved with the aid of formal, stylistic and performative techniques. In order to secure the desired effect the star had to be illuminated through three-point lighting, with the overall composition stressing the backlight responsible for the required halo impression. Such visually privileged moments accentuating the star in her uniquely fair beauty are to be found in every title within the star's corpus of major films. Close-ups captured her face in profile during dialogue scenes, or, when she was silent, focused on her beauty and meaningful expression in a more contemplative manner. Either way, Štěpničková seemed to be fully saturated by light, with sharp facial lines softened. Although critics at the time never really acknowledged the existence of such star lighting operations in practice, in cases where the framing and lighting formula was altered they instinctively felt something substantial had gone wrong. As in the review of the film *Preludium* (1941), where critic Bedřich Rádl noted: 'Karel Degl [the camera operator] provided great artistic value in terms of the visual aspects. However it is a pity he didn't find adequate lighting and angles in order to flatter Jiřina Štěpničková's face' (Rádl 1942, p. 170).

'Cinematic virtue is blond', stated one Czech journalist in a mocking article focusing on beauty stereotypes deployed in the cinema and their various national manifestations (Poláček 1937, p. 423). For Poláček the Latin American beauties with various shades of dark hair stood as the ideal vehicles for sensuality and intense sexuality, while pale white stars had to offer other qualities such as purity and innocence or display comic talent. However, stars such as Jean Harlow and Mae West were not unheard of in Czechoslovakia in the 1930s. Despite their critically acclaimed performances, both of them were readily associated with values attached to platinum hair – glamorous charm and sexual appeal. In the case of Štěpničková these were precisely the notions needing to be counterbalanced in order to prevent a clash with the desired virtues of self-sacrifice and chastity. Štěpničková's figures were thus effectively stripped of their sexiness because the overall styling and lighting strategies presented them as pure characters driven by selfless love. The halo impression over Štěpničková's head created by backlighting clearly echoes Christian aesthetic paradigms. Christianity equates light with moral superiority (the glowing Virgin Mary being the ultimate example), while darkness and shadow are associated with sin and sexuality. This luminary scheme mirrors adjacent characteristics of Štěpničková either in the films themselves or in subsequent promotional material. At the time, the press indeed dubbed the actress the 'Czech Madonna' (Anon 1937), based on a photograph where she holds a baby boy (Figure 2).

Her hair is lit from above, transforming it into the glowing centre of the whole setting. In the film *Kříž u potoka* (The cross by the brook) (1937), certainly the most successful of Štěpničková's vehicles in terms of turning her into a martyr, other characters frequently label her an 'innocent dove' or a 'saint'. Coquetry and sexual innuendo are mostly shifted onto other, dark-haired women or onto male characters. Thus the blond factor contributed to this perceived purity and repression within Štěpničková's star image, rising above and beyond physical longing.

### **'Inauthentic' star**

Despite the fact that Štěpničková's blond hair was, as we saw, easily sutured into the concept of a national star, the question of its authenticity remained somehow tenuous. In the central European cultural space, Štěpničková was not the only fair-haired celebrity constructed as the projection of the national ideal. In Fritz Lang's *Die Niebelungen* (1924), Paul Richter in the main part of Siegfried displays a masculine torso topped with a cascade of flowing white hair.





Figure 2. Czech Madonna: Jiřina Štěpničková in the title part of *Vojnarka* (1936). Source: Národní filmový archiv.

Early on, blondness became a prominent physical trait pointing to the superiority of the Aryan race. In the case of Richter's *Siegfried*, hair was elaborately described already in the screenplay by Thea von Harbou; during the shooting it was sprayed with a special chemical substance in order to secure a shimmering effect (Kaes 2001, p. 388). Štěpničková was also compared with Paula Wessely, the Austrian *heimat* (homeland) ideal, because they shared some key characteristics (Černý 1996, p. 148). Both were perceived as great actresses rather than mere stars, and both played similar parts characterised by virtue and also had the same, rather robust physique with round facial features underscored by fair hair. Such parallels and comparisons would be innocent in a different time and place, but the end of the 1930s was a challenging period for Czechoslovakia. On 15 March 1939 the state was annexed by Nazi Germany resulting in the so-called Protectorate era, lasting until the final days of World War II. The cultural politics of the period oscillated between relative autonomy and strict supervision. In the case of the cinema this was manifest in the on-going production of Czech-speaking films on the one hand, and centralised, Nazi-sympathetic control over the film industry on the other. Since many domestic stars spoke fluent German, a number of them adopted international-sounding names<sup>5</sup> and shot a few films in German. These activities resulted in fierce post-war criticism and in some cases even in career bans. Throughout the Protectorate era, Štěpničková starred in one or two films per year, but always in the realm of

Czech-speaking production. However, her pale Nordic beauty seemed to be easily transferable and in accordance with Nazi aesthetic preferences. Although the star denied any offers coming from German-speaking cinema, her direct competitor Adina Mandlová in her memoir, published years later, speaks of Štěpničková's unsuccessful screen test for a German film in the early 1940s (Mandlová 1990, p. 93). True or not, these speculations point to the highly constructed nature of her star image, absorbing influences simultaneously from the Czech cultural legacy as well as from wider central European contexts.

In the 1940s, Czech cinema started to gravitate towards realism, especially in screen adaptations of the literary and dramatic canon. Offering audiences familiar stories, biographies of domestic celebrated personalities, instantly identifiable musical scores or iconic landscapes; all of this was part of a heritage-as-resistance project. Such tendencies provided audiences not only with traditional spectator pleasures in terms of star cast, popular genres or period settings and costumes, but delivered subtle messages, pointing to timeless visions of homeland as a source of national endurance. This is the moment when the notion of glamorous beauty connected with platinum blond hair entered the frame and threatened to dismantle the star's image. Although Štěpničková was frequently described in the press of the time in terms of a deeply spiritual beauty and '...talent shining through' (Rádl 1938, p. 88), blondness imbued her heritage performances with questionable visual excess – the kind of excess gradually needing to be displaced onto landscapes and historical sites. The reviewers considered the star as possibly too beautiful for the parts she was cast in. Her charms and glamour were seen to be unsettling the films' quest for authenticity and accuracy. The ontological character of Štěpničková's beauty could not be altered, especially after she had reached and secured her star status, but journalists felt that some styling or grooming aspects could have been minimised. For example, in 1940 when *Muzikantská Liduška* (Liduška and her musician) (1940) was released, critics noted that her make-up and hairstyle pulled her performance below her usual acting level (Kautský 1940). Jindřich Honzl, in his aptly titled essay 'Preaching for Actors', viewed excessively glamorous styling as inadequate for her playing healthy and modest women (Honzl 1940, p. 103).

In 1941 for the screen adaptation of a nationally celebrated book *Babička* (Grandmother) (1940), Štěpničková strictly followed the description of her character in the original story and dyed her hair brown. Although she must have highlighted her naturally fair hair throughout the 1930s – compared with other popular actresses of the period the star's shade of blonde was unusually light – the radically darkened look certainly opened her image to questions about its constructedness. As a brunette the actress made two films, and in both of them she was cast along the lines of her previous parts as a kind, patient and selflessly loving woman. When Štěpničková returned to her bleached hair, she was given a couple of negative parts, although she had previously rarely played women accused of causing misfortune and suffering in men. First, in *Preludium* (1941) the actress portrayed a housewife racked by the consequences of her infidelity; this was followed by *Barbora Hlavsová* (1942), where she embodied a small town 'dame' whose expensive lifestyle draws her husband into corruption and suicide. Such a career twist can clearly be linked to her visual transformation. As long as her blond hair could be perceived as a natural, innate trait, its authenticity was not questioned. However, toning down her looks and then re-establishing the glowing blond image made Štěpničková seem less in tune with the prevailing trend towards realism.

The breakdown of Štěpničková's blond image continued as she opted again for a darker shade in 1944, this time for the comedy *Počestné paní pardubické* (The respectable women of Pardubice). Štěpničková's last film of the war years marks a shift towards more mature parts as the actress reached the age of 30. Her star image became more welcoming

towards comic elements and contemporary settings, and it channelled different notions of womanhood. While in the previous decade the blond star embodied suffering young women on the threshold of matrimony (usually followed by tragedy or at least misfortune), the parts she performed around the mid-1940s establish her as a settled wife. However, Štěpničková's image was far from unchanging – films such as *Děvčica z Beskyd* (The girl from Beskydy mountains) (1944) and *Počestné paní pardubické* introduced her to parts of practical women in charge of the household, not being afraid to talk back to their husbands or the wider community. The angelic, ethereal blondness associated previously with the star clashed with the more down-to-earth contours of her later roles. *Počestné paní pardubické* offers a particularly interesting case in terms of negotiations between various hair colourings and adornments. This film, in contrast to *Babička*, did not require Štěpničková to turn into a brunette in order to match pre-existing material, but the hair, its styling and decorations, provided a vital source of comic action. Rozina, the main character, is a hangman's wife who rebels against her lower social status through her common sense but also her excessive grooming. Other characters refuse to treat the executioner couple equally and frequently protest against Rozina's behaviour. The ladies point to her elaborate headdresses, arguing that such richly decorated and flattering adornments clash with her subordinate position. In the end the couple is finally accepted among respectable society, while the ladies applaud Rozina for discarding her opulent hair decorations. Yet, in the last shot of the film, the heroine proudly displays her new centrepiece – a platinum blond, ornate wig; reaching high on top of her head with a few tight curls let loose on the back of her neck (Figure 3).

Looking at this finale, the change in the treatment, presentation and status of blondness becomes obvious. Instead of being perceived as an aesthetic signifier of ethical and moral qualities or a major feature of beauty with national connotations, blond hair is reduced to a mere comic prop. The star, in this final sequence, is strongly de-familiarised.



Figure 3. Betrayed by blondness: Jiřina Štěpničková (centre) in the finale of *Počestné paní pardubické* (1944).

Source: Národní filmový archiv.

Although the framing and lighting follow the established pattern, the wig is too elaborately styled and sophisticated to evoke the natural, peasant-like soft waves and braids Štěpničková sported in her earlier parts. The final platinum hairdo triggers notions of artificiality and superficiality, ultimately portraying the heroine as a fashion victim and pointless provocateur. The honorary society Rozina so much wants to be a part of is throughout the film presented as a group of selfish and two-faced snobs. Putting on fake hair might be perceived as a sign of her losing her spirit and genuine personality in order to blend with the small-town 'elite'. Štěpničková's later performances thus give us a glimpse of what her career would evolve into if it had not been so dramatically interrupted – embracing comedy and/or realistic parts instead of tragic martyr figures, accompanied by less flamboyant looks. Fair hair associated with the star's previous parts had to be discarded because it was too ethereal, too constructed and too reminiscent of the actress in her early twenties. As Štěpničková outgrew the first phase of her professional path, her blondness tumbled from a sign of genuine, virtuous character to mere physical trait: shallow, flashy, interchangeable.

### Conclusion

The blond, but not bombshell, star image of Jiřina Štěpničková from the early 1930s to 1945 contained values attached to fair hair up to the end of World War II. Štěpničková was perceived as a true star, not only based on her industry status and the etymological roots of the word, but mainly due to the qualities her image channelled. The concept of truth did not structure only her celebrity persona, conveyed through beauty, talent and acting skills, but the parts she was cast in also carried notions of ideal womanhood. Two key aspects of her star image made her stand out exceptionally among her peers. Firstly, her acting abilities connected to discourses of artistry and dedication to her craft. Secondly, there was her hair: platinum blond, reaching to her shoulders, framing her face and styled with the aid of headscarves and headaddresses. This particular physical asset enabled the star to glow and this aesthetic quality gave her the aura of a morally superior character. Štěpničková's star persona, constructed around notions of responsible artistry, together with her image being saturated with blondness, allowed her to embody a highly valued and distinguished version of Czech womanhood based on heritage literature and drama. As such, this particular star image could easily articulate values such as endurance, self-sacrifice and chastity.

However, the blond factor gradually took on a different set of connotations, turning it towards more ambivalent notions of artificiality, redundancy and visual excess clashing with the heritage cinema as a form of passive resistance during the war. These initially minor critical voices resulted in the post-war erosion of Štěpničková's career, and as a result with her being treated more like a star from the past than a genuine actress and therefore unsuitable for the new nationalised film production. After World War II the concept of blondness underwent a major transformation. Radiant women were no longer perceived as the moral and aesthetic cores of the films they featured in, but were treated as light traps – as in the newly triumphant film noir. In post-war Czechoslovakia, blondness came to be seen as a matter of the past, partly corrupted by Nazi aesthetic preferences, but mostly mocked and ridiculed as an outmoded cliché. Such is the case of *Pytláková schovanka aneb šlechtivý milionář* (The poacher's foster daughter or the generous millionaire) (1949), intended as a parody of pre-war popular genres, namely melodramas, high-society dramas and romantic comedies. The blond hair of the main star – bleached Hana Vítová, previously a melancholy brunette – was crucial in exposing the outdated

stereotypes, clearly echoing the stylistic and formal tropes previously associated with Štěpničková. Blondness, either as a sign of moral purity or glamorous charm, was doomed throughout the 1950s. In the following decade fair hair returned, this time as a vehicle for attracting international attention, personified by stars such as Marilyn Monroe and Brigitte Bardot, leading in turn to the popularity of local stars such as Jana Brejchová or Olga Schoberová. However, neither of them gained the label of Czech Madonna again, cementing Jiřina Štěpničková's place as the ultimate angelic Czech star – ascending to fame and then sadly falling from grace.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes

1. The concept of heritage cinema addresses the ways in which various national film industries use particular historical moments for representing the idealised visions of the past. My definition of heritage cinema is also infused with notions of homeland/*heimat* cinema as witnessed in the Austrian, German and Swiss film production between the 1930s and 1960s. Such films are usually set in rural exteriors, narrated in a sentimental way and characterised by polarised morality (town versus village, younger versus older generation, tradition versus progress). For more on heritage cinema, see Vidal (2012).
2. This article follows standard practice by using the term 'Czech', as opposed to 'Czechoslovak', film industry and film culture because, prior to World War Two, Prague served as the centre of film production, distribution and exhibition. See, for example, Szczepanik (2009, p. 14).
3. See also Tremper (2006).
4. For more on topic of nineteenth-century celebrated actresses and the nature of their fame, see Sochorová (2006, pp. 155–170).
5. For example, Adina Mandlová for the purposes of German-speaking film production turned into Lil Adina, Nataša Gollová became Ada Goll or Hana Vítová transformed herself into Hana Witt. However, these pseudonyms were used only rarely in Czech critical discourse.

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