

Betrayed by blondness: Jiřina Štěpničková, 1930-1945

Among many insightful findings Richard Dyer brought into star studies there is also one focusing on the purely visual, luminary aspects of stardom. In his short analysis of Lillian Gish' star persona he famously opened his essay by considering the etymologic roots of the theoretical paradigm. Stars are not only celebrities and famous personalities but also, in 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."¹ Such elegant phrasing is not only a mean to itself, but invites us to consider more general issues of 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 starting to consider such elementary questions concerning hair symbolism one sees the same paradoxes entering the frame as in case of stardom. Whereas blond ladies are easily labeled as beautiful, rich and boldly feminine, brunettes are considered mostly as good, intelligent and familiar.² The blonde mystique evades any melancholic undertones or a sense of enigma so readily connected with dark hair; instead it goes for fun, but also dumb. Memorable female film stars are in many cases sporting fair or bleached hair, articulating values and notions outlined above - such as Marilyn Monroe or Marlene Dietrich.

Apart from these prevailing readings, not much attention has been paid to stars articulating different set of values attached to blondness found in artistic, national and

¹ Richard Dyer, 'The colour of virtue: Lillian Gish, whiteness and femininity', in Pam Cook and Philip Dodd (eds.), *Women and Film. A Sight and Sound Reader*. (London: Scarlet Press, 1993), p. 1.

² For more on the sociology of hair see: Anthony Synnott, 'Shame and Glory: A Sociology of Hair', *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (Sep., 1987), pp. 381 - 413.

historically specific discourses. Opening the topic to new geographical landscapes, time frames and star identities will allow for discourses pertaining to glamour versus authenticity, various concepts of period beauty and national heritage.³ All of these criteria are developed in this study on Czech⁴ star Jiřina Štěpničková, whose career peaked throughout 1930s 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 dedicated artiste in pursue of noble goals such as projecting positive national self-image.

Therefore on the following pages I argue that, while Jiřina Štěpničková's blondness heavily contributed to her status of national icon, it also resulted in a complex set of negotiations between her star qualities and the rural characters she performed.

Her starring parts gave her two strongest and mostly positive characteristics based on their being film adaptations of heritage literature or dramas. Therefore in the first section, I will focus on Štěpničková as national icon. Being able to put on array of diverse aspects yet still shielded under the national category, such as typical landscapes, costuming, festivities and accents, has lent this star image its impressions of patriotic quality. Blond hair corresponded naturally with these roles, contributing to the notions of typical Czech beauty, therefore a relevant background for the local construction of

³ The concept of heritage cinema addresses the ways in which various national film industries use particular historical moments for representing the idealized 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 1930s and 1960s of the 20th century. Such films are usually set in rural exteriors, narrated in sentimental way and characterized by polarized morality (town versus village, younger versus older generation, tradition versus progress).

For more on heritage cinema see: Belén Vidal, *Heritage film. Nation, Genre and Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press 2012).

⁴ This essay 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 center of film production, distribution, and exhibition. See for example Petr Szczepanik, *Konzervy se slovy. Počátky zvukového filmu a česká mediální kultura 30.let.* (Brno: Host, 2009).

blondness will also be addressed in this segment. The following section focuses on Štěpničková's star vehicle⁵ as the site of ideal womanhood. Her filmography featured mostly young women facing multiple challenges concerning romance, marriage and familial bonds. Confronting dramatic situations such as rejection from their beloved ones, manipulation into unwanted matrimony or relationship collapse, these leading ladies always embodied exemplary ethical core of featured stories. Their conduct mobilized the vision of bravely suffering heroine, patiently enduring all the misfortunes. As such, these narratives contained strong religious undertones, resulting into mise-en-scene highlighting Štěpničková's hair in the form of angelic halo. Although blondness made almost perfect match with the concepts outlined above, the star cast nevertheless seemed to bring back the aspects more readily associated with bleached hair. The final section will be thus concerned with critical discourse surrounding Štěpničková, positioning her as too glamorous and inauthentic for her parts. Therefore blondness will be presented as a twofold category; on one hand cementing Jiřina Štěpničková as the truly Czech artiste, on the other undermining her credibility as the folksy heroine.

Scholarly attention dedicated to this topic is rather scant and not systematical. Richard Dyer touched on the topic first in his analysis on Marilyn Monroe's star image⁶ and later elaborated on the concept in his *White*⁷ essays collection. While the Marilyn Monroe article presented blond hair in its traditional glamour significance, in his subsequent work Dyer interpreted them as a sign of extraordinary virtuous character.

⁵ Star vehicle originated in the production practice of Classical Hollywood. It points to building films around star images and selecting themes and stories in order to feature and even highlight the particular star qualities. Long-term and consistent star vehicles provided audiences with the same predictability as genres. See Dyer, *Stars*, p. 62.

⁶ Richard Dyer, *Heavenly bodies* (London, New York: Routledge 1986), pp. 17 - 63.

⁷ Richard Dyer, *White. Essays on Race and Culture* (London: Routledge 1997).

Fair hair in resemblance to a glowing halo naturally predated cinema, but this visual trope was reinforced after the emergence of film technique. Since 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. In Jiřina Štěpničková's star persona we are thus able to witness the ultimate blond characteristics (inauthenticity and glamour) gradually eroding the image of timelessly ideal Czech heroine. My aim is thus to understand not only values and meanings attached to period domestic stardom, but also to open broader issues connected with blondness. Therefore this essay invites scholars to consider cultural negotiations, which had to be mobilized in order to promote and frame concrete physical body as the site of idealized national virtues.

National icon

The nature and contours of Jiřina Štěpničková's star vehicle, as well as its deepest origins are firmly rooted in the second half of the 19th century. Many of her starring films adapted novels or dramas originated in this era, dealing with rural motives and simple peasant life. Reading and audience pleasures resided not so much in the basic storylines as in the settings; displaying variety of local festivities, folkloric costumes and regional landscapes and accents. Such heritage craving was caused by absence of any direct political activities in the public spaces, since Czech country was a part of Austrian monarchy up to 1918. Open nationalist manifestations and domestic pride were thus strongly displaced onto culture and mostly theater. Period actresses were cherished not only as fashion models or trendsetters, but mostly celebrated for their ability to speak clear and literary Czech and thus demonstrating extraordinary

euphonic qualities of the long suppressed language.⁸ Frequently labeled as “mothers of the nation”, their elevated status was fortified by allegoric paintings, “casting” them as mythical figures. For example, Otýlie Sklenářová-Malá was captured as mythical princess Libuše; years later, in 1926, Alfons Mucha, a skillful portrayer of celebrated women with special attention paid to their hair, concluded his ambitious cycle *Slavic Epopee* with an image of goddess Slavia. These idealized national visions, channeled through bodies of star actresses, displayed certain features, which later returned through Jiřina Štěpničková. The timeless Czech woman had a fair skin and solid, busty physique clad in pristine, simple dress; their honey-colored hair pleated or braided and covered by carefully arranged piece of cloth.

Cinematic stardom seemed to depart from these anachronistic fantasies in the 1910s and 1920s. The first major Czech star was Anny Ondráková or Anny Ondra as she was known to international audiences, embodying localized version of a flapper. This type of a modern woman stroke a perfect balance between fun and sexiness, initializing various adventures and encounters with men. The comic performance erased any risky or controversial undertones, despite these heroines adopted latest fashion of short skirts and haircuts. Such pattern of delegating blond leading ladies to realm of lighthearted comedies persisted in the following decade as well. Czech star system of the 1930s till the mid of 1940s wasn't 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 case of the domestic situation in this particular period, hair symbolism evolved around set of contrasting ideas; with the blondes labeled as fun, dumb and cute, brunettes were in Czech film

⁸ For more on topic of 19th century celebrated actresses and the nature of their fame see: Ludmila Sochorová, ‘České divadelní umělkyně 19. století-vzory národně probudilých žen’, in Petra Hanáková and Libuše Heczková and Eva Kalivodová (eds.), *V bludném kruhu: mateřství a vychovatelství jako paradoxy modernity*. (Prague: Slon, 2006), pp. 155-170.

culture perceived as more authentic, somehow enigmatic and tragic ones. Although not directly articulated in journalistic discourse, a quick survey of star actresses working throughout the decade illustrates my point. Anny Ondra was followed by Věra Ferbasová. Discovered by film director Vladimír Slavínský, a versed maker of popular comedies and romances, they together launched a successful collaboration, casting the starlet in parts of 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 impression of a late teenager rather than of a young woman. Her facial features were round, complemented by 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, only rarely reaching to her shoulders, but always styled into tight curls. Although ridiculed by critics, who frequently mentioned her lacking acting skills and described her comic performance as too obvious and ponderous, her starring films were the top crowd-pullers of the decade. Another blond icon of the era, Nataša Gollová, embodied sentimental heroines from the start, but later rebranded towards towards local versions of screwball or crazy comedies. This type lost any teenage connotations and offered more matured, though still entertaining gal. Her hair was not so elaborately styled as in case of Ferbasová, but took on modern, more natural wavy flow with a significant peekaboo look. The lock of hair shadowing her left eye is still celebrated in contemporary nostalgic discourse on Gollová. Not only it interestingly structured her face, it also contributed to her comic performance in terms of spontaneity and ease of adjacent gestures - blowing the curl from her forehead or sweeping it away with her hand. Adina Mandlová provides another adequate example, highlighting the transformative potential of dimmed hair color. At the dawn of her screen career she dazzled the audiences with almost platinum hair, but was given only

few lines of dialogue in each of her films. Larger parts of brides and spoiled daughters followed; finally in 1939, with notably darkened hair, she won a starring role in a movie *Kouzelný dům*. The part of Marie, the main heroine, suffering from amnesia and forced into starting new life among strangers, enabled Mandlová to showcase her gradually developed 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 being reduced to fun, lighthearted, uncomplicated versions of femininity, Štěpničková's star vehicle clearly broke the established scheme. Judging on the journalistic discourse in the 1930s and early 1940s, the actress gained her unique star status through a combination of platinum blond hair with the nature of her star vehicle, featuring adaptations of classical Czech literature and dramatic parts. To make Štěpničková suitable and authentic for the movies she was cast in, her glowing blond hair had to be perceived as a major sign of Czech womanhood. One of the period articles thus stated that having light colored hair was not a sign of exotic qualities but pretty usual thing to see. Although national aspects of beauty evaded precise description, journalist K. Karlas made quite clear which Czech actresses naturally stemmed from local environment.⁹ In his opinion a blond leading lady would be quite extraordinary for example in Italian film production, but in case of domestic film industry the brunettes came to stand for the fairly unusual. For the author Štěpničková thus represented a typical, fairly common young Czech woman resembling to any other rural girl. Other journalistic contributions to the issue of national beauty frequently depicted Štěpničková as the only actress, where truly Czech qualities can be found. These rather

⁹ K. Karlas, 'Něco zvláštního', *Kinorevue*, Vol. 7, no. 1 (1937), pp. 16 - 17.

vane descriptions accentuated the notion of depth - as for this star's beauty, talent and personality - which was in stark contrast with other, mainly imported celebrities considered as shallow, with their beauty reduced to mere shimmering surface. Some of the pieces mentioned her urban origins, thus pointing to the constructed nature of the image, but Štěpničková's persuasive performances secured strong connection between the star and her rural parts. Published photographs rarely featured her in contemporary clothing and modern hairstyle and numerous photographs in plain rural costumes were published instead. Not only promotional stills from her upcoming movies, but mainly close-ups foregrounded her glowing hair, having profound consequences on her performance and posture. Her head was usually slightly tilted down with eyes locked into the distance and not into the camera lens. Face remained serious with only a hint of a smile and her back was frequently slightly hunched. This is in sharp contrast to prevailing glamour presentation where stars are throwing large smiles on us, looking in the viewer's direction and bending bodies in statuesque poses. Štěpničková's visually subordinate chaste position matched perfectly with the broader contours of her star image being that of a responsible national star. The described posture also implied willingness to immerse herself in the particular part instead of foregrounding the image itself. Štěpničková employed these self-promoting and performance strategies based on the stage icons from the previous decades such as Ellen Terry, Eleonora Duse or 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 ideal of true womanhood.¹⁰

¹⁰ Maria Elena Buzsek, *Pin-Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture* (London and Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 121.

Ideal woman

From the beginning of her film career, Jiřina Štěpničková was presented as skillful, talented and dedicated artiste. Such powerful position stem from her connection to established theatrical tradition, valuing celebrated actresses as positive self-images for the nation. While still in her late teens, Štěpničková was asked to join the company of the illustrious National theatre. Early on she became associated with parts in the classical repertoire of domestic origin, falling under the category of young innocent woman on the verge of matrimony. The ultimate breakthrough part was that of Maryša - first on stage in 1933 and in film version two years later; with Štěpničková applauded for the novelty of her performance, bringing youth sparkle to more traditional interpretations of the suffering murderer. The original drama was introduced in 1894, telling a tragic story of a young girl forced by her parents into the marriage to an older man. She longs for another boy from the village and because she cannot stand her brutal husband, Maryša kills him by serving poisoned cup of coffee. Both the film and the play end with Maryša's imprisonment where she fully realizes 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 folklore costumes. The complex relationship between the actress, the significance of her hair and national overtones came to prominence already in this establishing movie of the whole star vehicle. For the first time a genuine attention was brought to Štěpničková's hair, or in this particular case, a headdress. The iconic profile image, detailing Štěpničková's face in a manner and pose described previously, became sort of a visual leitmotif for the whole movie. Colored or in black and white styling as a poster or collector's postcard, it creates a strong interlocked connection between the emerging star and her breakthrough part. Concentrated, visually stunning picture was not only wisely chosen

marketing tool, but also a reminder of a significant scene in the film itself, featuring an elderly lady applying multiple layers of heavily decorated bridal wreath resembling a shining crown on Štěpničková's head. This particular moment invites audiences to shift their attention from narrative flow to “mere” enjoyment of the unfolding spectacle. The scene is neither aware of the drama, which happened just seconds before (Maryša begging her father not to insist on the marriage) nor of the following events (the wedding itself). Instead of pushing the story forward the film immerses itself in the contemplative moment, focusing only on the heavily decorated adornment and the face of the starring actress protruding under it. Therefore in this short sequence we are able to witness crucial aspects of Jiřina Štěpničková's star vehicle in terms of framing, lighting and focus on face. While her significant blond hair were in this scene substituted for the sparkling wreath, the other settings and implications such as the visual centerline governing the shot and the halo effect were already firmly installed.

Feeding from this visual pattern, Štěpničková's following 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 centered on kind and gentle heroines; obedient to their parents and following commonalty rules as well. Love was their imperative; without a cherished partner by their side they committed horrible crimes, escaped the village or lost their mind. Self-sacrifice was their main character trait, willing to trade their wellbeing for a man's sake, life or peace of mind. When rebelled, they did so in order to secure their right to choose prospective husband freely and accordingly to their will and emotions. Cast as the central heroine of these marital rural dramas, the star always embodied ethical core of her films and her blondness served as aesthetic ratification of inscribed qualities.

The second cornerstone of such fixated and bright image resided in stylistic and formal ways in presenting the star. Light and its distribution in the shots thus became crucial for Štěpničková's ability to glow. Glow is the appropriate word preferably to shine because, as Richard Dyer noted, shine connotes mirroring effect and physicality. Glow on the other hand gives idealized Caucasian women an aura of transcendence and solar radiance. They do not merely reflect light but are bathed in and permeated by it.¹¹ Such impression was achieved with the aid of formal, stylistic and performing techniques. In order to secure the desired effect the star had to be illuminated through three-point with the overall composition highlighting 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 movie in the star vehicle group. Either in the dialogue scenes or in the detail focused on her face, Štěpničková seemed to be fully saturated by light, with sharp facial lines softened. Although period critics never really acknowledged the existence of such star lighting operations in practice, in case of altering the framing and lighting formula they instinctively felt something substantial went wrong. As in the review of the film *Preludium* (1941), where critic Bedřich Rádl noted: "Karel Degl (the camera operator - my emphasis) secured a 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."¹²

"Cinema virtue is blond", stated one Czech journalist in a mocking article focusing on beauty stereotypes employed in cinema and its various national manifestations.¹³ For him the Latino belles with various shades of dark hair stood as

¹¹ Dyer, *White*, p. 122.

¹² Translation: "Karel Degl dal filmu hodnotnou fotografii: tím více je nutno litovat toho, že nenašel pro fotografování Jiřiny Štěpničkové správný způsob osvětlení ani správný úhel." Bedřich Rádl, 'Preludium', *Kinorevue*, vol. 8, no. 22 (14. 1. 1942), p. 170.

¹³ Karel Poláček, 'Biograf', *Kinorevue*, vol. 3, no. 48 (1937), pp. 423 - 25, 439.

the ideal vehicles for sensuality and fierce sexuality, while pale white stars had to offer other qualities such as purity and innocence or displaying comic talent. However, stars such as Jean Harlow or Mae West were not unheard of in Czechoslovakia in 1930s. Despite their critically acclaimed performances both of them were readily associated with values attached to platinum hair - glamorous charms and sexual appeal. In case of Štěpničková these were precisely the notions needing to be counterbalanced in order to prevent clash with the desired virtues of self-sacrifice and chastity. Štěpničková's figures were thus effectively stripped off their sexiness as the overall styling and lighting strategies presented them as pure characters driven by unselfish love. The halo impression over Štěpničková's head created by slightly elevated backlight echoes Christian aesthetic paradigms. Christianity equates light with moral superiority (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 film narratives themselves or in the subsequent promotional material. The actress was dubbed by the period press as "Czech Madonna",¹⁴ based on the photograph where she holds a baby boy. Her hair is lighted from above, transforming them into the glowing center of the whole setting. In the film *Kříž u potoka* (1937), certainly the most successful one in terms of turning Štěpničková into persuasive martyr, she is frequently labeled by other characters as innocent dove or a saint. Coquetry and sexual innuendo were mostly shifted onto others, dark haired or male characters. Thus the blond factor contributes to this perceived purity and repression of Štěpničková's star image, rising above and beyond corporeal longing.

Inauthentic star

¹⁴ Photography legend, *Kinorevue*, vol. 4, no. 18 (1937). p. 340.

Despite Štěpničková blond hair was easily sutured into the concept of a national star, the question of its authenticity remained somehow tenuous. In central European cultural space Štěpničková wasn't the only fair-haired celebrity, constructed as the projection of the national ideal. In Fritz Lang's film *Die Nibelungen* (1924) Paul Richter in the main of Siegfried displays a masculine torso topped with a cascade of a flowing white hair. This significant marker pointing to the superiority of Aryan race was elaborately described already in the screenplay by Thea von Harbou; during the shooting Richter's hair was sprayed with a special chemical substance in order to secure a shimmering effect.¹⁵ Štěpničková was also compared to Paula Wessely, Austrian “heimat” ideal, because they shared some key characteristics.¹⁶ Both were perceived as great actresses rather than mere stars, both played similar parts defined by virtuous character and also had the same, rather robust physique with round facial features underscored by fair hair. Such parallels and comparisons would be innocent in different time and place, but the end of 1930s was a challenging period for Czechoslovakia. Since March 15th 1939 the state was annexed by Nazistic Germany resulting in the so-called Protectorate era, lasting till the days World War II. **Period cultural politics balanced between relative autonomy, in case of cinema manifested in ongoing production of Czech speaking films, and strong centralization and arization of the whole movie industry on the other hand.** Since many domestic stars spoke fluent German, a number of them adopted internationally sounding nicknames¹⁷ and shot a few films in German language. These activities resulted in fierce postwar criticism and in some cases even

¹⁵ Anton Kaes, ‘Siegfried: A German Film Star. Performing the Nation in Lang's Nibelungen Film’, Laura Vichi (ed.), *L'uomo visibile / The Visible Man. VIII International Film Studies Conference* (Udine: Forum 2001), pp. 385 - 393.

¹⁶ František Černý, *Jiřina Štěpničková* (Prague: Brána 1996), p. 148.

¹⁷ 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 the Czech critical discourse.

in career stopping bans. During the Protectorate era, Štěpničková continually starred in one or two movies per year, but always in the realm of Czech speaking film production. However, her pale Nordic beauty seemed to be easily transferable and in accordance with Nazistic 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 about Štěpničková unsuccessful screen test for a German flick in the early 1940s.¹⁸ True or not, these speculations point to highly constructed nature of this star image, absorbing influences simultaneously from Czech cultural legacy as well as from wider central European contexts.

Entering 1940s, Czech cinema started to gravitate heavily towards realism, especially in screen adaptations of literary and dramatic canon. Offering audiences familiar stories, biographies of domestic celebrated personalities, instantly identifiable musical scores or iconic landscapes; all of that was a part of 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 whole star image. Although Jiřina Štěpničková was frequently described by the period press in terms of deeply spiritual beauty¹⁹ and “... talent shining through”,²⁰ blondness imbued her heritage performances with questionable visual excess - that kind of excess gradually needing to be displaced onto landscapes and historical sites. The reviewers considered the star as maybe too beautiful for the parts she was cast in. Her charms and

¹⁸ Adina Mandlová, *Dneska se tomu už jen směju* (Praha: Československý filmový ústav 1990), p. 93.

¹⁹ ‘I my je máme!’, *Kinorevue*, vol. 6, no. 27 (1940), p. 2-3.

²⁰ Bedřich Rádl, ‘Z domácí produkce: Dva nové filmy, Včera neděle byla’, *Kinorevue*, vol. 4, no. 31 (23. 3. 1938), pp. 88-89.

glamour were seen as disbanding the quest for authenticity and accuracy. The ontological character of Štěpničková's beauty couldn't have been altered, especially after reaching and securing her star status, but additional styling or grooming aspects could have been minimized. For example, in the year 1940 when *Muzikantská Liduška* was released film critics noted that her make up and hair style pulled her performance below the her usual acting level.²¹ Jindřich Honzl in his aptly titled essay *Preaching for actors* viewed excessive styling as inadequate for her parts of hale and modest females.²²

First in 1941 for the purposes of screen adaptation of a nationally celebrated book *Babička* (The Granny), Štěpničková strictly followed the description of her part and dyed her hair brown. She opted for a darker shade in 1944 as well, this time for a comedy *Počestné paní pardubické*. This film, however, didn't require changed color in order to match with pre-existing original, but the hair, its styling and adornments, provided a vital source of comic action. Rozina, the main character, was a hangman's wife and rebelled against her lower social status through her common sense and excessive styling. Other burghers refused to treat the executioner couple equally and frequently protested against Rozina's behavior. The ladies pointed to her elaborated headdresses, arguing that such richly decorated and flattering adornments clash with her subordinated position. In the end the couple is finally accepted among respectable and elevated society, while the ladies applaud Rozina for dissing her opulent hair decorations. In the last shot of the whole movie, the heroine proudly displays her new centerpiece - platinum blond, ornate wig; reaching high on top of her head with few tight curls let loose on the back of her neck. Looking at this finale, the change in

²¹ Oldřich Kautský, 'Muzikantská Liduška', *Kinorevue*, vol. 6, no. 44 (1940), pp. 354-347.

²² Jindřich Honzl, 'Sváteční herec (herecké kázání)', *Kinorevue*, vol. 7, no. 6 (1940), pp. 103-105.

treatment, presentation and evaluation of blondness becomes obvious. Instead of being perceived as aesthetic signifier of ethical and moral qualities defining Štěpničková's leading ladies and also a major feature of beauty described in national terms, blond hair are reduced to a mere funny prop. The star is in this final sequence strongly defamiliarized. Although the framing and lighting follows the established pattern, the wig is too elaborately styled and sophisticated for resembling the more natural, peasant-like soft waves and braids Štěpničková sported in her previous parts. The final platinum hairdo triggers notions of artificiality and superficiality, ultimately portraying the heroine as fashion victim and pointless provocateur. The honorary society Rozina so much wanted to be a part of, was throughout the film presented as a group of selfish and two-faced snobs. Taking on fake hair might be perceived as a sign of her losing the grit and genuine character in order to blend with small-town "royalty".

Conclusion

Blond, but not bombshell star image of Jiřina Štěpničková in the 1930 up to 1945 contained values attached to fair hair prior to the end of World War II. Štěpničková was perceived as a true star, not only based on etymological roots of the word, but mainly due to the qualities her image channeled. The concept of truth didn't structure only her celebrity persona, conveyed through beauty, talent and acting skills, but the parts she was cast in also carried an imprint of the notions of ideal womanhood. Two key aspects of her star image made her exceptionally stand out among her peers. First her acting abilities pertaining to discourse of an artiste dedicated to one's craft. Štěpničková's other crucial facet was her hair; platinum blond, reaching to her shoulders, framing her face and styled with the aid of headscarves and headdresses. This particular physical asset enabled the star to glow and such aesthetic effect gave

her the aura of morally superior character. Štěpničková's star persona, constructed around notions of responsible artiste in accordance with her image being soaked up in blondness allowed for embodying 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 different set of connotations, turning it towards more ambivalent notions of artificiality, interchangeability and visual excess clashing with the cinema of heritage resistance. These at first minor critical voices resulted in the postwar erosion of Štěpničková's career, caused by treating her more like a past star rather than a genuine actress and therefore unsuitable for the nationalized film production. After World War II the concept of blondness underwent a general transformation. Radiant women were no more perceived as ethic as well as aesthetic cores of films they featured in but were treated as light traps - the ascendance of film noir being the ultimate example. In postwar Czechoslovakia blondness came to be seen as a matter of the past, mocked and ridiculed as a surpassed cliché. Such is the case of a film *Pytláková schovanka aneb šlechtný milionář* (1949), intended as a parody on prewar popular genres, namely weepies, high society dramas and romantic comedies. Blond hair of the main star - bleached Hana Vítová, previously a melancholic brunette - were crucial in exposing the outdated stereotypes, clearly echoing 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 absorbing international influences personified by stars such as Brigitte Bardot or Marilyn Monroe, resulting in local brand names of Jana Brejchová or Olga Schoberová. However, theirs is a different story to tell.

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