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Juraj Herz (1935–2018)

The career of Slovak-born film director Juraj Herz, who died last April at the age of 83, straddled that of the highly adaptable professional and that of the visionary auteur. During the half-century he spent making films for (predominantly) the Czechoslovak film and television industries, Herz managed to turn his hand to a wide range of genres, including horror, comedy, crime film, historical drama, fantasy, musical, and various combinations thereof. Yet beneath an overt mutability that was partly imposed by circumstances and partly the result of his own desire to avoid repetition, Herz retained a distinct artistic personality that is steeped in the Gothic and the Romantic, a sensibility given to the blackly comic touch or the floridly lyrical effect. He may have displayed a self-deprecating attitude towards much of his output, but, unlike many of his celebrated contemporaries, the Herz of the 1970s and '80s produced a range of strikingly imaginative and often brilliant work in a creatively constricting era for Czechoslovak cinema, opposing the rules and orthodoxies of the time with a recurrent taste for decadence.

Herz's path towards film directing was a circuitous route that included puppetry training, acting and directing at the famed Semafor Theatre and work both in bit parts and then as an assistant director at Barrandov studios. Such a hands-on apprenticeship was closer to the biographies of the classic studio directors than to those of the formally trained filmmakers of the post-war years. Indeed, the fact that Herz had not studied at Prague's FAMU film school is something that he felt separated him – or excluded him – from his contemporaries in the Czechoslovak New Wave. It is telling, perhaps, that Herz's filmmaking debut, a contribution to the multi-director New Wave episode film *Pearls of the Deep* (1965), was one of two episodes omitted from the final film for length reasons (though Herz himself volunteered to pull it). It is equally noteworthy, however, that Herz's episode, 'The Junk Shop' easily holds its own against the work of then better-established names, boasting some eccentric and even vaguely macabre images – like a religious statue chopped into pieces – that foreshadow Herz's future preoccupations.

Following two bold but now sadly obscure first features that already reveal Herz's interest in genre material, he made his most celebrated film, *The Cremator* (1968). Produced amid the tumultuous context of the Prague Spring, the Warsaw Pact invasion and a brief window of artistic liberty, this film sees Herz give unbridled vent to some of his wildest visuals and his darkest satirical humour. Set in Prague in 1939, on the eve of German Occupation, it tells the story of crematorium-owner Karl Kopfrkingl, a soft-spoken family man of fastidious tastes and crankish beliefs who slides, with seeming inexorability, into complicity with the Nazis and then into shocking, calculated murder. This perverse premise came from Ladislav Fuks' source novel, but Herz maximises its impact with a heightened and appropriately deranged visual language of monochrome Gothic imagery, distortions and fisheye-lens shots – the latter a novelty in Czechoslovak cinema at this time and one that Herz, wrongly, felt that he had over-used. Herz also deserves credit for steadfastly securing his original casting choice of Rudolf Hrušínský, whose unctuous, purring incarnation of Kopfrkingl is an unforgettable performance of Peter Lorre-like menace. Another key masterstroke on the director's part was to change the novel's anti-climactic ending, opting instead for an

outrageous final development in which the pathological ambitions of both this cremator-saviour and the Nazi occupiers become fused together in the most chilling way imaginable.

Herz had hoped to continue with adaptations of Ladislav Fuks' books, an indication that he would have established his nightmarish, psychologically oriented sensibility even more forcefully had circumstances allowed for it. In the actual Czechoslovakia of the 1970s, characterised by the repressive and conservative cultural tendencies of post-Prague Spring 'normalisation', Herz instead had to follow an often-frustrating path marked by compromise and necessary pragmatism. Throughout this period, he was subjected to censure, stymied by official interference, and compelled to take on projects his heart was not in simply to keep working. But, for all of these troubles, Herz's output was at its richest during the 1970s and, tactical though his choices might sometimes have been, he almost totally avoided the humiliating resort to politicised, pro-regime filmmaking. Indeed, Herz began the 1970s in a provocative spirit with two stunning turn-of-the-century melodramas, tales of poisoned bodies and diseased minds that exude a vividly unhealthy atmosphere. In the melancholy *Oil Lamps* (1971), Iva Janžurová is touching as a lonely and romantically unfulfilled provincial woman who marries her wastrel cousin, a syphilitic former soldier. The baroque *Morgiana* (1972) is an even stronger vehicle for Janžurová's talents, with the actress cast in dual roles as twins Klára and Viktoria – the former a vision of purity with her unpainted features and lacy white outfits, the latter a resplendent villain in black Goth finery and evil-doll makeup. Herz was forbidden from retaining the schizophrenic basis of Alexander Grin's original story, in which one twin was revealed as the figment of the other's mind. Yet if this psychological dimension was lost, the film remains a dream-like and hallucinatory visual experience, as potent in its stylised colour as *The Cremator* was in its expressionist black and white. Herz rounded off the 1970s with *The Beauty and the Beast* (1978) and *The Ninth Heart* (1978). Nominal examples of the family fairy-tale genre then popular in Czechoslovakia, both films boast effective sequences of horror that would result in aggrieved letters from viewers and official disfavour for Herz. For *The Ninth Heart* Herz utilised design and effects work by his friend (and former puppetry classmate) Jan Švankmajer – probably Herz's most kindred spirit among Czech or Slovak filmmakers.

Herz's films of the 1980s include *The Ferat Vampire* (1982), an amusing and imaginative horror-comedy whose outlandish gore effects (again by Švankmajer) themselves fell victim to official 'mutilation'; *A Magpie in the Hand* (1983) an avant-garde fairy-tale that featured the dissident rock group Pražský výběr and earned a ban for its audacities; and *The Night Overtakes Me* (1986), a strikingly visualised concentration camp drama that Herz – himself a survivor of the camps – has referred to as 'my greatest horror'. In 1987 Herz emigrated to West Germany, only returning 12 years later to what was now the Czech Republic.

The surreal, Kafkaesque *Passage* (1996), a Czech-based coproduction with French and Belgian participation, was a much-cherished project that was received better internationally than at home. Through the 1990s and 2000s Herz worked more frequently in television than cinema, with his credits including two episodes of a Maigret serial. His last two features were the horror film *T.M.A.* (2008) and *Habermann* (2010), a drama dealing with the treatment of the Sudeten Germans after World War Two. While these two films may have their clunky moments and stylistic shortcomings, neither of them shows a veteran director playing it safe and mellow. In his last years Herz published the superb memoir *Autopsy*, which is crying out for an English translation, and he enjoyed the ever-expanding interest in and recognition of his work. Herz seemed to relish the way his films were taken up by an international community of horror lovers, joking in his memoir about his pride at being one of a select group of people to play a vampire (as he does in *The Ferat Vampire*). Herz

may not, perhaps, qualify as a New Wave director, though this is not a reflection on the quality of his work but rather on his stronger genre orientation and on the fact that he began producing his greatest work only once the New Wave was ending. Where he does undoubtedly belong is among the equally auspicious ranks of international cinematic masters of the grotesque and the macabre, and to this extent Herz is virtually a unique figure among Czech and Slovak live-action directors.

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