

# The flame and the flesh

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## The flame and the flesh

**Michael Brooke on one of the most memorable movies of the Czech New Wave**

### The Cremator

Juraj Herz; Czechoslovakia 1968; Second Run/Region O; Certificate 15; 95 minutes; Aspect Ratio 1.66:1; Features: introduction by the Quay brothers (MFB No. 452)

Unavailable for decades in an English-subtitled version, Juraj Herz's *The Cremator* (whose original title, *Spalovac mrtvol*, translates more explicitly as "the corpse incinerator") is one of the most memorable films of the 1960s Czechoslovak New Wave, though its macabre humour and lacquer-black sensibility have tended to set it apart from the movement's gentler features. The film's protagonist is crematorium attendant Karl Kopfrkingl, (Rudolf Hrusinsky) whose name suggests a blend of stifling suffocation and the tinkling Tibetan bell that can be occasionally discerned in the soundtrack's further recesses. He is a squat little man, whose almost perfectly round head is topped by slicked-down hair that often shares a comb with the corpses he lovingly administers to (The Crematoria peppered with such shiveringly outré touches). Kopfrkingl's purse-lipped smile suggests that pleasantries are a disagreeable social necessity, while his pathological obsession with the physical state of his blood confirms that he is not, as David O. Selznick once described Hitchcock, a man to go camping with.

Yet Hrusinsky's grotesque performance is delivered with such lip-smacking relish that you almost empathise with Kopfrkingl's evident disdain for lesser beings. The polar opposite of the world-weary cynics that the actor created for Jirí Menzel's films (Menzel also has a small role in this), Hrusinsky portrays the character as a messianic fantasist, his portly frame rendered terrifyingly outsized by cinematographer Stanislav Milota's frequent recourse to wide-angle and even fish-eye lenses. Though his near omnipresent voice rarely rises above a placid monotone, his philosophical assertions are given a florid bloom by the discreet addition of a wordless a cappella chorus.

Fascinated by the philosophy and rituals underlying Tibetan Buddhism, Kopfrkingl is in a constant state of rhapsodic elevation. His belief that burning their corpses helps his 'clients' head to a higher plane is given additional credibility by the fact that he already seems halfway there himself (this is reinforced still further by his constant glimpsing of a silent, black-haired woman who seems to be invisible to others). When Kopfrkingl chides his colleagues, Dvorák (Menzel) and Fenek (Dimitrij Rafalský), for their respective addiction to tobacco and morphine, it's clear that his own natural chemical make-up banishes the need for such indulgence. His total identification with his work even compels him to treat the carp cooked for the family dinner with the same degree of hushed deference that he shows the inhabitants of the coffins in the crematorium basement.

Since the setting is Czechoslovakia in 1938, the year of the Munich agreement and Nazi Germany's appropriation of the Sudetenland, it doesn't take a huge leap of the imagination to guess where Kopfrkingl's psychopathology and profession is likely to lead. And this marks the least successful aspect of the film: turning such a complex character into a Nazi sympathiser (however obliquely)

seems a little pat and predictable. It seems that Herz was equally unimpressed by the basic situation of Ladislav Fuks' 1967 novel, preferring to use it (and the sudden opportunities afforded by the 1968 Prague Spring) as a springboard for aesthetic and conceptual experimentation of a kind hitherto unavailable to a relative newcomer (*The Cremator* was his second feature). However, the shooting was interrupted by the Soviet invasion that August, and while Herz was able to complete the film to his original schema, it was banned in Czechoslovakia shortly after its initial release the next year.

It's impossible not to think of Jan Svankmajer when watching *The Cremator*, and these echoes are far from coincidental. Born on the same day, Herz and Svankmajer studied puppetry at Prague's Academy of Dramatic Art and did military service together before working at the Czech capital's Semafor Theatre. Herz was a puppeteer on Svankmajer's first film, *The Last Trick* (1964), and can also be seen in *The Flat* (1968) as a bowler-hatted man silently offering a chicken and an axe to the hapless protagonist.

Both directors favour a cabinet-of-curiosities approach to set decoration, strongly montage-based editing punctuated by shock-cut close-ups, and the music of Zdenek Liska (whose score for *The Cremator*, dominated by female vocals that are alternately soaring and woozy, is one of the film's highlights). Above all, they share a bleakly pessimistic, quasi-surrealist sensibility and an apparent belief that man and marionette are indistinguishable. This last obsession is emphasised in *The Cremator* by a family trip to a Grand Guignol funhouse where mechanical effigies seem to be live human beings until one of them is 'stabbed' through a clearly pre-cut slit.

In less than a year of existence, second Run has already assembled one of the most delightfully idiosyncratic catalogues of any British DVD label. Particularly valuable is its labour-of-love dedication to releasing long-unavailable central and eastern European titles. Presentation standards on this DVD are typically high, with the main feature given an anamorphically enhanced widescreen transfer, while the optional subtitles become sensitively placed surtitles when *Kopfrkingl* is framed at the very bottom of the screen, dwarfed by one of Hieronymus Bosch's visions of hell.

The disc's only extra is a 12-minute treat: a rare on-camera interview with the Quay brothers, whose infectious passion for *The Cremator* bubbles over into lavish praise of its most arcane ingredients. A 12-page booklet showcases an essay by film producer Daniel Bird offering tantalising descriptions of Herz's later features, apparently similar Gothic fantasies that remain frustratingly inaccessible to Anglophone monoglots.

### **Sidebar**

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