

Karel Kachyňa, *The Ear* (1970, 1990)

- This is study of nightmarish stress that a middle-aged couple experience during one night after they return from a party for government officials. The husband is a deputy ministry for the industry and the couple live a highly privileged life in a government villa. But their experience, in spite of all the material comforts, is extremely claustrophobic. The deputy minister is a part of a regime which distrusts even its own officials and subjects them to secret police supervision.

- The film depicts a degenerate, totalitarian regime which existed in Czechoslovakia probably some time in the mid-1950s. (At the time *The Ear* was made, in the late 1960, this type of oppression would no longer exist, since, obviously, the state would not have funded its own condemnation by this film.) So, the film deals with an extreme situation. Nevertheless, it is possible to argue that the film carries a general meaning. It is related to Graham Greene's observation that "failure humanises people, success dehumanises them". The general message of the film is: "Beware. You can only become a member of the power elite in any society at a price. Only such people rise to the top in society who do not hesitate to become part of a (always slightly corrupt) clique. Your involvement with the top power structures always means that you have to give up something of your own integrity. Paradoxically, whoever is at the top in society is always enslaved to a certain degree by this fact." (Is Gordon Brown free to do something that might displease the Americans?)

The film was scripted by Czech writer Jan Procházka, a reformist communist who was a protégé of the then Czechoslovak President and Chief of the Communist Party Antonín Novotný, an unreconstructed, but passive Stalinist who was deposed by the Dubček people early in 1968. The president in the film, "the Comrade", is closely modelled on Novotný. Procházka would have known the nightmarish top government parties, one of which is depicted in the film, rather well. The film is a gesture, made by Kachyňa and Procházka, both of whom started out as passionate supporters of communism: "We have been a part of this, we know this very well, but we know the price. We no longer wish to participate in the life of the upper class clique, which is a nightmarish life in prison."

- The Stalinist regime mobilised society, including the regime's top officials, by arbitrarily punishing them. The decision-making was quite arbitrary. It was usually incompetent: the regime relied on working-class individuals, elevated to positions of high power. These were often uneducated and relatively limited. The "Comrade" admits this in the film: "I often have to make decisions about matters I do not understand. But I do make that decision and then I see that it was good." – Thus it might happen that the author of a professional report about what to do with the country's brickworks is arbitrarily condemned for "producing wrong ideas" and arrested and destroyed.

- The film is a tour de force , an account of a nightmarish situation when the Minister and his wife return from a government party and when they reach home, they discover that doors to their villa are unlocked and open, that electricity is off and the telephone does not work. Apart from its political meaning, the film is also a remarkable study of a marital relationship. Both the husband and wife are under extreme psychological pressure and so they take the stress out on the other person. Self-indulgently, they transfer negative emotions to the other person, in order to relieve themselves. They systematically insult each other, but they still love each other. This becomes transparent when, in utmost anxiety, the Minister wants to shoot himself. He cannot because the secret police has taken away his gun.

- The film is a remarkable study of “lack of trust” (See Francis Fukuyama, *Trust* – according to Fukuyama, trust in society is the necessary social capital without which it is extremely difficult for society to function). Principal officials of the communist regime are themselves alienated from the regime, they have to grapple with secret police tapping and they are under such stress that they are near committing suicide. Only then is the protagonist of the film, Ludva, appointed a Secretary of State for Industry – when he receives a phone call from the Comrade at 4 am in the morning. (Stalin also worked in the small hours.) Ludva and his wife knows full well that the “Party” know everything about them and that he is fully blackmailable. This is a Mafioso practice – you only appoint to senior positions such people which can be blackmailed by you. Hence the film ends with the wife saying: “Ludva, I am afraid.” – when she hears that her husband has just been promoted.

- In a way, the film is a warning against personal ambition. In one of the quarrels during the night, the wife reproaches her husband that he had only married her for the dowry, he needed the capital to set up a builder’s firm and that in order to get on top, he would align himself with anyone – no matter whether right wing or left wing. But if you pursue your ambition so ruthlessly, it may well happen that you will end up in a trap – like the main character of this film.