

## ***Bílá paní/The White Lady* (Zdeněk Podskalský, 1965)**

Title: *Bílá paní/The White Lady*

Studio/Distributor: Film Studio Barrandov/ Ústřední půjčovna filmů (Central Film Lending Library)

Director: Zdeněk Podskalský

Producer: Film Studio Barrandov

Screenwriter: Karel Michal, Zdeněk Podskalský

Cinematographer: František Valert

Sets: Josef Calta, Miloš Sršeň, Ludmila Sovová

Editor: Zdeněk Stehlík

Length: 2585,3 metres

Duration: 92 minutes

Genre: Comedy, Satire

Cast: Vlastimil Brodský, Rudolf Hrušínský, Miloš Kopecký, Irena Kačírková, Jiřina Bohdalová, Josef Bek, Čestmír Řanda, Václav Voska, Vlasta Chramostová, Vladimír Hlavatý, Ilja Prachař, Darja Hajská, Václav Trégl, Zdeněk Řehoř, Vladimír Menšík

Year: 1965, premiere on 24<sup>th</sup> September 1965

### **Synopsis :**

In a small Czech town, a mediaeval ghost, the White Lady of Komonice comes out of a castle painting when there is a full moon and does good for the local people. In response to a request from an old age pensioner, she installs a water tap in her cottage and provides the local town with a number of other amenities which the local council has patently failed to organise. The ruling communist officials are horrified, but eventually, they come to terms with the existence of the ghost and try to incorporate it into the town's economic plan, seeking to give the White Lady major building projects to accomplish. But the castle warden, a "lover of truth" to the horror of his despairing wife ("There are truths punishable by 20 years' imprisonment!") reports the existence of the ghost to the Prague authorities, launching an official investigation. The central authorities remove the painting to a depository in Prague, just at the time when celebrations are organised in the town to mark the building of a new bridge. Her absence is why the bridge does not materialise, yet the townsfolk plunge into the river anyway, praising the new bridge while swimming across.

### **Critique:**

Although this is a hilarious comedy, the film functions as an incisive social commentary. It is a precise sociological study of the mechanism of a totalitarian regime. Its main feature is the shoring up of power to the exclusion of all else.

Marxist totalitarianism East European style always prided itself on controlling the natural environment. In this respect, it was the product of 19<sup>th</sup> century historical optimism ("History is developing towards ever better ends, Man will always be ever richer, happier and more in control.") – The slogan of the Stalinist 1950s was "We shall control even the wind and the rain". This is why it is ironic that a regime that prides itself on mastering everything, from every individual to all natural phenomena,

is suddenly at a loss when confronted with a manifestation of natural reality – the appearance of a mediaeval ghost. In its outcome, the film argues that the regime actually does not control anything and is locked within the fantasy of its own virtual world.

The town is run by two communist officials, who are extremely ineffectual. Nothing in the town works. When the White Lady “installs” a water tap into the house of the old age pensioner, the power machinery of the town almost grinds to a halt. The two communist officials decide to solve the “problem” bureaucratically: the water tap hasn’t been recorded in any paperwork, it is a “bad” water tap and will be dug out. The town rebels and the officials are forced to backtrack. But the central authorities from Prague cannot cope with the phenomenon of the “White Lady” either.

The film is primarily a parody of official communist, bureaucratic “newspeak” – this is clearly apparent when one of the Prague officials is trying to telephone his superior to inform him that the White Lady really does exist. The ideological language that officials use makes it impossible for them to communicate meaningfully. The regime’s newspeak does not allow its representatives to talk about real things. The film argues that the communist system controls society by means of an ideological metalanguage through which it tries to subjugate natural reality. Everyone in the film knows that whatever is being said in public is untrue, but everyone goes along with it, to the point of absurdity. But natural reality is not controllable by language and eventually the regime will collapse, warns the film. Even in the Prague depository, the White Lady will not be controlled.

The film is also a satire on the conformism of ordinary citizens. However, it sympathises with their predicament up to a point. They have been pushed about so brutally for so long that it is now no wonder that they ignore the authorities, go through the paces of what is ritually required of them, and otherwise attend to their own interests.

The film culminates in a famous scene, when the White Lady is meant to have created a new bridge, but the Prague officials had, in the meantime, taken the castle painting away. This does not prevent the population of the whole town from plunging enthusiastically into the river, chanting happily “Long Live the New Bridge”. When Pupenec, the “lover of truth”, complains in the middle of the river that there is no bridge, his wife snaps: “Shut up and swim.” – This scene illustrates rather persuasively that the enthusiasm of the participants of the May Day parades in Eastern Europe under communism – by definition the enthusiasm of the participants of any official rallies in dictatorships – is hypocritical and artificial.

