

## **The White Lady by Zdeněk Podskalský (1965)**

- Although this is a hilarious comedy, the film functions as a precise sociological study of the mechanism of a totalitarian regime, whose main characteristic feature is the shoring up of power.
- Marxist totalitarianism always prided itself on controlling the natural environment. In this sense, it was the product of the 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. The “White Lady”, a noblewoman from a 16<sup>th</sup> century painting, comes out and “does good” to the inhabitants of the little socialist town.
- The town is run by two communist officials, who are extremely ineffectual. Nothing in the town works. The officials are only interested in protecting their own power. When the White Lady “installs” a water tap into the house of an old age pensioner, the power machinery of the town almost totally grinds to a halt. The two communist officials are trying to solve the “problem” bureaucratically, since the water tap hasn’t been recorded in any paperwork, it is a “bad” water tap and will be dug out.
- Eventually, the two officials come to terms with the existence of the ghost and, in a Švejkian manner, incorporate it into the town’s economic plan. Unfortunately, this runs into problems since the caretaker of the local castle, Pupenec, 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 authorities in Prague, so this launches an official investigation and even more comedy, because Central Authorities cannot cope with the natural phenomenon of the “White Lady” either.
- Amongst other things, the film is a parody of official communist, bureaucratic “newspeak” – this is clearly apparent when one of the Prague officials is trying to telephone his superior, but the ideological language that they use makes it impossible for them meaningfully to communicate.
- The film is also a satire on the conformism of the ordinary citizens. However, unlike Němec’s film *The Party and the Guests*, *The White Lady* has a certain amount of understanding for the conformism of the people. 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 supposed to have been 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.” – Maybe this scene is a bit of an explanation about what was the source of the enthusiasm of the participants of the May Day parades in Eastern Europe under communism.