

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 25. 5. 2020

# Czech Classics

YouTube playlist [Czech Classics](#) offers a varied selection of thirteen Czech films from silent era to the 1980s. They include adaptations from classic Czech literature (*Krakatit*, *The White Disease*), original genre experiments (*The Vampire of Ferat*), some gems of the Czech new wave (*A Carriage Going to Vienna*, *Shame*) or bold feminist satire (*Murdering the Devil*). All of them are available with English subtitles.

## **The Arrival from the Darkness (Příchod z temnot, 1921)**

One of the first Czechoslovak films to be shown abroad was a fantasy horror, filmed on the fully furnished premises of the Berlin film studio Am Zoo. The central role is portrayed by the “arrivee from darkness”, Ješek, who is awakened from a deathly sleep. The film represents unusual sparks of creative efforts and the ambitions of creative community around the director Jan S. Kolár, who was inspired by international trends and techniques.

## **A Carriage Going to Vienna (Kočár do Vídně, 1966)**

One of the best roles of Iva Janžurová was the heroine in a psychological war drama by director Karel Kachyňa and screenwriter Jan Procházka. In *A Carriage Going to Vienna*, she plays young villager Krista, who is forced by two Austrian deserters to carry them through town and across the border in her cart. She agrees, spying a chance to revenge the murder of her husband. After the Warsaw Pact invaded the country, this timeless story ended up in the vaults of normalisation-era censors.

## **Every Young Man (Každý mladý muž, 1965)**

Pavel Juráček left his mark on the history of the Czechoslovak New Wave as both screenwriter and director. Alongside the feature-length parable *Case for the New Hangman*, he also created the 1965 diptych *Every Young Man*. While both stories set

against the backdrop of basic military service met Barrandov's dramaturgical demand for current, topical subjects, their absurdist tone means they significantly exceed that brief. In the first story the playwright Václav Havel appears briefly in the role of a hospital patient.

### **Krakatit (1948)**

Otakar Vávra made two film adaptations of Karel Čapek's science fiction mystery novel *Krakatit*. The second, a rather forced modernised interpretation, was released in 1980. The first appeared in 1948 and it amplified the anti-war side of Čapek's story about the gifted chemist Prokop – who in vain tries to prevent his revolutionary invention, an explosive called krakatite, from being abused. The whole movie takes on the form of a feverish flashback.

### **Long Live the Republic! (Ať žije republika, 1965)**

One of the earliest films which re-evaluated the previously entrenched, ideologically hijacked view of World War II was the result of rewarding cooperation between director Karel Kachyňa and screenwriter Jan Procházka. The story of a young participant in the bitter battle for the Dukla Pass contrasts sharply with the tale of 12-year-old Olin, through whose eyes we witness the final days of the war. The impressive visual scope was in no small part thanks to cinematographer Jaromír Šofr.

### **The Lovers of an Old Criminal (Milenky starého kriminálního, 1927)**

Silent farce directed by Svatopluk Innemann tells a story of the factory owner Pardon and his uncle Pondělíček. They swap their identities and invent fictitious stories to escape marriage. Starring Anny Ondra and Vlasta Burian, this silent movie excels for its original slapstick, especially the mélange of invented murders, chases, and doppelgänger scenes.

### **Murdering the Devil (Vražda ing. Čerta, 1970)**

The first and only movie directed by screenwriter and costume designer Ester Krumbachová was this original film satire. The film is a complete and mature debut that includes the period's feminism, fortified with a peculiar form of sinister criticism with which Krumbachová targets both sexes, much as did another female director,

Věra Chytilová. The nameless central character, a pretty, clever and refined fortysomething, strives to escape her loneliness through an association with a friend from her youth, who is probably a devil not only by his name.

### **The Poisoned Light (Otrávené světlo, 1921)**

After *The Arrival from the Darkness*, Jan S. Kolár and Karel Lamač filmed the adventure film *The Poisoned Light*, featuring Durk, an illusionist, attempting to steal a cold light invention. The film stands out for its distinctive adaptation of stylistic procedures known from contemporary European or Hollywood production. Interesting and agreeable performances were given by the Czech silent film star Anny Ondra.

### **Shame (Stud, 1967)**

Throughout the late 1950s and early 60s, director Ladislav Helge's films took on an increasingly independent and critical point-of-view. Helge's courage in challenging regime orthodoxy was strengthened by the increasingly liberal climate of the 1960s. The political drama *Shame* offered the public a topical, non-ideologically conformist picture of the life of a regime functionary and top-placed workers, who devote all their energies to shameless self-enrichment.

### **Skid (Smyk, 1960)**

The protagonist of this spy thriller, František Král, escapes across the border in 1948. He leaves his native Prague, his parents, brother and his young wife. The frivolous young man changes into a very hard person in the foreign country, and for money he joins the intelligence service. After he burns his face in a serious car accident, plastic surgery entirely changes his appearance. He returns to Prague with a new identity and a cover occupation of a variety clown, so as to acquire microfilms during the tour and revive a spy network.

### **Those Wonderful Movie Cranks (Báječní muži s klikou, 1978)**

Jiří Menzel's nostalgic comedy was shot for the 80th anniversary of the establishment of Czech cinema. The movie is based on the lives of real historical figures like the owner of Prague's first permanent cinema, Viktor Ponrepo, the film pioneer Jan Kříženecký or the cabaret artist and first Czech film actor Josef Šváb-Malostranský.

The cinematographer Jaromír Šofr and composer Jiří Šust made an important contribution to the film's retro atmosphere.

### **The Vampire of Ferat (Upír z Feratu, 1981)**

The story of this sci-fi horror is centred on racing car which runs on human blood. The protagonist is Mima, who satiates her love of high-speed driving via her job as an ambulance driver, racing with Doctor Marek to the scenes of countless accidents. While Mima falls under the spell of the winning bloodsucking vehicle, Doctor Marek tries to save her and unveil the nefarious goings-on at Ferat. Director Herz used the plot to make an archetypal drama about the self-destructive nature of human obsession.

### **The White Disease (Bílá nemoc, 1937)**

The top work of actor and director Hugo Haas was a film adaptation of an allegorical play by Karel Čapek. As a screenwriter and director, Haas fulfilled a humanistic concept that strongly resonated in pre-war Europe engulfed by nazi aggression. Haas plays physician Galén, who discovers a cure for a disease known as „the white sickness“. But he refuses to reveal the cure to Marshal, who is waging a war of conquest on a neighbouring country...