

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 4. 4. 2023

# The Party and the Guests

One of the last competition films screened at the Cannes Film Festival in May 1968 was the grotesque allegory *The Party and the Guests* (O slavnosti a hostech, 1966) by Jan Němec. It was one of three Czech competition films that year, along with *Capricious Summer* (Rozmarné léto, 1968) and *The Firemen's Ball* (Hoří, má panenko, 1967). But no winners were announced that year. In light of the turmoil that month in France, filmmakers, led by Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut, curtailed the event. That meant that Němec's film, with an already limited domestic distribution that subsequently was basically terminated by the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, didn't get a chance to earn recognition either at home or abroad.<sup>[1]</sup>

The film's development and production went smoothly. When Němec finished *Diamonds of the Night* (Démanty noci, 1964) he had started looking for a theme for this following film. Ester Krumbachová brought him one of her older stories in three acts, a parable about the relationship of an individual to power. In February 1964, she signed an agreement to write a synopsis.<sup>[2]</sup> In addition to a plot summary, the fourteen-page-text titled *The Summer Carnival* included an introduction by Krumbachová and a psychological characterisation. It indicated that the film should be an attack on oblivion, which "often makes us move in a vicious circle."<sup>[3]</sup> According to the author's explication, the film's genre was to be social comedy. Krumbachová wrote the film story in collaboration with Němec, who later said: "I made some surgical changes to the story, I narrowed it, I kept the plot, but it was given a certain asceticism."<sup>[4]</sup> The story was submitted in November 1964. The approval from the creative group of Erich Švabík and Jan Procházka came soon, probably due to the success of *Diamonds of the Night*. Without undue delay, the literary script *A Report on the Party and the Guests* was approved the following spring. Only film critic Jan Kliment, who later became editor of the cultural section of *Rudé právo*, had some

objections in his assessment. He thought the script was too fabricated and encrypted and unsuitable for socialist cinema.[5] But Kliment's objections didn't sway the management of the creative group. Lukáš Skupa thinks that the approval process was relatively easy because the responsible people couldn't identify the potentially harmful content of the film[6] and also thanks to Jan Procházka's political connections[7]. But these very connections would later prove be harmful to the film. The technical script was submitted on 21May 1965, and the censorship committee approved it on 11June 1965.[8]

As early as in May 1965, the crew scouted locations, held auditions and chose props that would fit an Art Nouveau style with their manneristic ornamentation. Due to a higher number of characters, rather than design original costumes, Krumbachová used costumes from the studio repository, which were modified to represent the personality traits of the characters. The relatively short and quick shooting took place in June and July in a forest near Těptín, a village South of Prague.

As his DoP, Němec chose Jaromír Šofr. According to the actors, the director, the cinematographer and Krumbachová knew how each scene should look down to the slightest detail. They laid out the image concept, often determined by a concrete work of art[9], and shot composition in advance. They cast mainly non-professional actors, popular artists and friends whose civil appearance and mentality – in the spirit of medieval moralities – corresponded with the portrayed characters. But within the meticulously laid out scenes, they could afford to improvise, so multiple takes were not necessary. That's why the shooting was quick and there were no delays. The film was supposed to be premiered in the spring of 1966. But in January, Procházka screened the film to his friend, President of the Republic, Antonín Novotný, as was his habit. Novotný swiftly banned the film. He also ordered that Němec be dismissed from Barrandov Studio and made it impossible for him to continue his career. Novotný allegedly thought that the character of the host represents Lenin. Just like other people with power, he considered *The Party* incomprehensible (and thus open to undesirable political interpretations); an absurdity, ridiculing the socialist society.

Němec and Krumbachová didn't intend to refer to specific Czechoslovak phenomena but rather to portray people unable to act, who could exist at any given time. They always rejected the label of a political parable. They knowingly wanted to follow the

tradition of absurd drama (Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett) and present several model situations to depict the nonsensicality of social principles.

The film without a main protagonist is divided into three acts. In each of them, the leading part is assumed by a different character. It is set in a non-specified time period and neutral landscape. It begins with a picnic of several middle-aged men and women. It continues on a clearing and culminates at a party by a lake. In the interest of their own survival and peace, the participants resort to collaborating with the authorities. They don't have the courage to stand against them. Restrictions and submission to the benevolence of the host becomes a medication for anxiety.

Standardised characters lack their own identity; they are spiritless figures communicating with incomprehensible allusions, mere fragments of longer statements without beginnings and sense. Conversations don't represent means of communication – they don't use them to convey any message and most likely have nothing to say to each other – but merely a mechanically observed social tradition.

The motivations of the spiritless characters remain more or less hidden. Ivan Vyskočil, as the host, represents an archetypical ruler who rewards and punishes his subjects on a whim. By his side is Rudolf (Jan Klusák), his servant and loyal follower. Individual guests personalise passivity, servility, the inability to perceive context, and other character flaws.

The balance upheld by willing submission to power games is disrupted by the character of the Husband (Evald Schorm), a taciturn outsider who's the only one to prefer freedom to a false sense of security. By expressing a moral standpoint, he illuminates the unprincipledness of others who are indifferent to anything but their own comfort and profit. But their small-mindedness and series of small concessions has consequences. "Everything they express is humorous – but in totality, it's tragic" is how Krumbachová summarised the film's message.<sup>[10]</sup>

Despite its figurativeness, *The Party* is narrated with a curt realistic style of a report based on facts from a testimony filed in a Police protocol. The statements aren't encoded; they're just incomplete. Only the events of a given moment are portrayed. There's no context. The politicians were most concerned with the possibility of ambiguous interpretation clouding the film's real meaning. But the ruling elite's

negative perception wasn't the only thing complicating the screening. After 1965, the approval process at Barrandov got much stricter. *The Party* and *Daisies* (Sedmikrásky, 1966) by Věra Chytilová were labelled examples of undesirable experiments. These two titles were the basis of MP Jaroslav Pružinec's interpellation at the National Assembly in May 1967. He called for a total ban on their distribution. The new wave directors responded by sending a protest letter to Minister of Culture Karel Hoffmann.

Despite the critical response from various sides, no one was initially considering a total ban. It was assumed the appeal to general audiences of an incomprehensible film like *The Party* would be minimal. The plan was to limit public awareness of the film, also abroad. That is apparent from Pavel Juráček's diary entry from June 1966: "Deputies holding the rank of ministers write to Italy that they can't tolerate interfering in our domestic cultural policy because the Central Committee of the Italian Communist Party asked them to allow screening *The Party and the Guests* at the Venice Festival. Hendrych allegedly shouted that we're bastards and informers and that we were speaking about the existence of these films in Cannes and Pesaro."  
[11]

Any kind of promotion and festival screening was banned. The press was allowed to write about *The Party* only with approval of Miloslav Brůžek, Miroslav Barvík, or their head from the Ideological Section of the Central Committee, Pavel Auersperg.[12]

After December 1966, screening were allowed only in smaller regional town and club cinemas. At the end of May 1967, Juráček wrote in his diary: "There is still to be no public mention about *The Party and the Guests*. Press supervisors even delete the name of this film. It can only be referred to as Němec's second or previous film."[13] Cinemas in Prague were allowed to screen the film after 1967, when the conservative wing of the Communist Party lost some influence. During the Prague Spring, the situation was reassessed and *The Party* was included in the first artistic category. But Němec had already given his notice to the Barrandov Studio in August 1967, and after he finished the hastily approved *Martyrs of Love* (Mučedníci lásky, 1966) with Ester Krumbachová, they were only allowed to work on apolitical stories such as television songs.

Krumbachová, who wrote *The Party's* story and script, and designed the costumes, sets and props, was designated a subversive element. She wanted to publish *The Party* in an anthology book with other stories. But because of the abovementioned ban, the book was never published. In her memoirs, she said that Němec's second film literally ended her career.<sup>[14]</sup>

The film's sharp analysis of compromises, obedience, cowardice and manipulations has remained timeless despite the injustice, as proven by its newly digitally restored version created by the National Film Archive in collaboration with the State Cinematography Fund and Karlovy Vary IFF. British company Second Run released this version on Blu-ray with a rich bonus section. In a recent poll by website DVDBeaver, its readers picked *The Party and the Guests* as the 8<sup>th</sup> best Blu-ray of last year.

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**The Party and the Guests** (O slavnosti a hostech, Czechoslovakia 1966), director: Jan Němec, screenplay: Ester Krumbachová, Jan Němec, director of photography: Jaromír Šofr, music: Karel Mareš, cast: Ivan Vyskočil, Jan Klusák, Jiří Němec, Pavel Bošek, Karel Mareš, Evald Schorm, Jana Prachařová, Zdena Salivarová-Škvorecká, Helena Pejšková et al. Filmové studio Barrandov, 71 min.

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#### Notes:

[1] Despite the fact that public had almost no chance to see the film, the critics and filmmakers praised it very highly. It received the Czechoslovak Film Critics' Award in 1966, won in a poll by *Film a Doba* magazine and both Ester Krumbachová and Jan Němec won the Trilobit Award given by the Union of Czechoslovak Film and Television Artists (for *The Party* and *Martyrs of Love*).

[2] Jan Bernard, *Jan Němec. Enfant terrible české nové vlny. Díl I. 1954–1974*. Praha: AMU 2014, o. 185.

[3] *ibid*, p. 186.

[4] *ibid*, p. 204.

[5] *ibid*, p. 197–198.

[6] As evidenced by the opinion of the Central Committee's Ideological Committee:  
"This film, realised as a seeming absurdity, is essentially a persiflage of social events and allows for various political interpretations." Lukáš Skupa, *Vadí – nevadí. Česká filmová cenzura v 60. letech*. Praha: National Film Archive 2016, p. 140.

[7] *ibid*, p. 139.

[8] Jan Bernard, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

[9] Some scenes, especially in establishing shots, were arranged according to Goya's *Caprices* or Dutch and Flemish still lifes; the scene at the brook refers to Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass*; the feast is supposed to resemble a photography from the Nobel Prize Awards; the loyal listening to the host imitates the footage from Hitler's Munich speech; and the scene in which Karel is beaten up is inspired by a documentary from Vietnam in which eight armed men attack a defenceless person.

[10] Antonín J. Liehm, Slovo má... Ester Krumbachová. *Literární noviny*, no. 50, 1966, p. 7.

[11] Pavel Juráček, *Deník III. 1959–1974*. Praha: Torst 2018, p. 530.

[12] Lukáš Skupa, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

[13] Pavel Juráček, *op. cit.*, p. 659.

[14] Ester Krumbachová, *První knížka Ester*. Praha: Primus 1994, p. 20.