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Virginity

Marie Majerová's first novel, *Virginity* (Panenství: historie děvčete) from 1907, was originally to be adapted by director Josef Rovenský. He wrote the script together with the later dramaturg A. J. Urban and the later director František Čáp for a project financed by Miloš Havel's Lucernafilm and started filming. After the second day of shooting, however, he was taken to the hospital due to health complications and had to undergo surgery. Rovenský died on 5 November 1937, the day after the premiere of *Virginity*. Twenty-six-year-old Otakar Vávra finished the job for him.

Luboš Bartošek sees this replacement in the director's chair as a signal of far-reaching changes in Czech film. The pioneers, who often came to film from the theatre and learned their craft on the fly, were replahced by young filmmakers with artistic training and previous experience in the field (Vávra, Martin Frič and Miroslav Cikán...). Vávra studied architecture, wrote film reviews, and collaborated on several avant-garde films (most notably on *The Light Penetrates the Dark* [Světlo proniká tmou, 1931]). After years of writing film scripts, he made his debut in 1937 with *A Philosophical Story* (Filosofská historie).

Vávra was finishing the adaptation of Alois Jirásek's *A Philosophical Story* at a time when Havel was looking for a replacement for the ailing Rovenský. Despite this overlap, the young director was approached as a suitable replacement. While he agreed to shoot *Virginity,* he did not agree with the script. Majerová's multidimensional novel was simplified by the original adapters into a sentimental fable about unhappy love. After discussing it with the production, he decidaned to rewrite the script, bring back the socially critical motifs, and create a work he could sign his name to without shame.

But Vávra did not have much time. The sets were already in the studio, the actors had been hired. The beginning director and screenwriter did not let himself get

discouraged, though. He received the script on Thursday, rewrote it by Sunday, recast several of the main roles, and on Monday the filming began. At least this is what Vávra claims in his memoirs and recollections; the truth is, however, that he used those to build the myth of himself as an extremely efficient professional. They are therefore to be taken with a grain of salt. The same applies to the assertion that the script existed only as a manuscript and was not available to the actors. The sets had to be redesigned and some of the costumes had to be newly made. Nonetheless, the filming was said to go smoothly. Eight days were spent filming in studios, two days outdoors.

The low number of shooting days is not necessarily a manifestation of Vávra's tendency to exaggerate, though. It really did not take long to make a drama with many locations and characters in the 1930s. With this in mind, it becomes clearer how little Rovenský needed to complete the film. Lída Baarová, a rising star of European cinema, was chosen to play Hana, a shop assistant who tries to raise five thousand crowns for the treatment of her seriously ill fiancé while compromising her own dignity. However, the start of production had to be postponed for a week since he needed to finish shooting another film in Berlin. In the meantime, Rovenský's health deteriorated…

Baarová remained the leading actress even after Vávra took over the project. Until then, she had played mostly shallow characters in simple First Republic comedies and melodramas based on Mills and Boon-type fiction. The psychologically well-drawn character of a proletarian girl who, in her moment of greatest despair, accepts an invitation to the apartment of a lecherous *Kommerzienrat*, allowed her to exercise her acting talent on a larger scale. Vávra's direction, Jan Roth's expressive cinematography, and changes made to the script probably contributed to the convincing nature of her performance.

Compared to in the novel, the motif of Hana's self-sacrifice was psychologically deepened. On the contrary, the author's theoretical reflections on virginity were omitted. The novel's naturalistic ending, in which the heroine strangles her unloved husband and dies of meningitis, was toned down. The whole plot was then updated by moving it from a pre-war inn to a big city automat. Otherwise, however, the realism of the book was preserved, which was welcomed by Marie Majerová, who would support Vávra on various occasions from then on. Being a respected communist author, she

was a valuable ally for him especially after WWII.

The attempt to imitate the rawness of the subject is evident already from the opening scene of the film at the home of Hana's mother. There, her drunken stepfather returns home in the morning and stares at Hana, standing in her underwear in front of the mirror. She bravely resists his attempted rape and is eventually brutally pushed away. At that moment, the mother enters the room and judges the whole incident to be Hana's transgression. The girl gets slapped and branded a slut on top of it. With a similar emphasis on authenticity, the next scene is filmed in the kitchen of the automat where Hana works. In one wordless shot, we see the preparation of sandwiches, the cooking, the washing-up…

When Hana then waits the tables, men of all ages eagerly eye her from all angles, and address her with patronizing names such as "little lady," "baby" or "little girl." We see a horror-infused variation of the same in the final third of the film, when Hana, with great self-denial, sets out to seek advice. Her ascent up the Art Nouveau staircase, each hesitant step betraying shame, is intercut with auditorium shots of tacky busty busts. The railing casts ominous shadows that gradually engulf the heroine. In addition, many foreign eyes stare at her from the peepholes of the surrounding doors, their juxtaposition recalling Vávra's avant-garde beginnings.

Hana's humiliation is completed in the *Kommerzienrat's* flat. In a large dark bedroom with heavy curtains and kitschy female nudes on the walls, she becomes prey to the old lecher. Just as the stylization of the film varies between realism and expressionism, some characters behave naturally and are even civilly acted, while others, like the *Kommerzienrat* himself, are horrible caricatures. The shabbiness of the Prague automat or of the bar where a decrepit singer croons sentimental hits is intertwined with melodramatic metaphors, such as the view into the dead composer's apartment, where the wind blows bills symbolizing the heroine's useless sacrifice.

In his second film, Vávra also uses film shortcuts, montages, expressive details and short flashbacks (the hug becomes the trigger for Hana's traumatic memory of the attempted rape) to enhance the atmosphere and give the viewer a better idea of the heroine's experience. The individual settings also mirror the nature and social origins of the characters. Hana's innocence is contrasted, even in the visual aspects, with

the cynicism and cruelty of the surrounding world, represented by her friends or the men who want to take her over. These are very innovative practices for the time of the film's creation.

For its rhythm and stylistic imagination, the non-idealised and in some ways still topical depiction of moral misery and hypocrisy (men behave vulgarly, but women are punished for it), *Virginity* is a gem of both First Republic cinema and Vávra's filmography. It is not surprising, then, that in addition to a gala première at the Passage cinema in Prague, attended by the President of the Senate and several ministers, *Virginity* was also shown at the 6th IFF in Venice in 1938.

Virginity (Panenství, Czechoslovakia, 1937), director: Otakar Vávra, script: Otakar Vávra, František Čáp, A. J. Urban, Marie Majerová, cinematography: Jan Roth, music: Roman Blahník, cast: Lída Baarová, Jaroslava Skorkovská, František Kreuzmann st., Ladislav Boháč, Zdeněk Štěpánek, Adina Mandlová, Božena Šustrová, Jaroslav Průcha, and others. Lucernafilm, 82 min.

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