



From Censored to Restored

The Ear Ucho

The Garden Zahrada

Directed by: Jan Švankmajer
Production Company: Krátký Film (Praha)
Produced by: Josef Soukup
Assistant Director: J. Toms
Script Editor: J. Gold
Written by: Jan Švankmajer
Idea/Dialogue: Ivan Kraus
Photography by: Svatopluk Malý
Edited by: Milada Sádková
Costumes Designed by: Eva Švankmajerová
Sound [Recording] by: J. Kindermann
Cast:
Jirí Hálek
Ludek Kopřiva
Mila Myslíková
Václav Borovicka
František Husák
Czechoslovakia 1968
16 mins
35mm

A BFI National Archive print

The Ear Ucho

Director: Karel Kachyna
Production Companies: Svabik-Prochazka,
Filmové Studio Barrandov
Production Manager: Karel Vejřík
1st Assistant Director: Milada Mikesová
Screenplay: Jan Procházka, Karel Kachyna
Based on a story by: Jan Procházka
Director of Photography: Josef Illík
Editor: Miroslav Hájek
Design: Ester Krumbachová, Oldřich Okáč
Set Design: Ladislav Winkelhöfer
Make-up: Stanislav Petrek
Music: Svatopluk Havelka
Sound: Jirí Lenoch
Cast:
Radoslav Brzobohatý (Ludvík)
Jirina Bohdalová (Anna)
Gustav Opocenský (Comrade)
Lubos Tokos (Pucák)
Borivoj Navrátil (Cejnar)
Jirí Císler (Stanislav)
Jaroslav Moučka (Vagera)
Czechoslovakia 1970
91 mins
Digital 4K (restoration)

Restored in 4K in 2022 by Karlovy Vary International
Film Festival in collaboration with the Národní
filmový archiv, Prague and the Czech Audiovisual
Fund in UPP and Soundsquare

Courtesy of The Czech Film Fund

The main Cannes Film Festival competition line-up in 1990 was somewhat unusual in that not everything in it was brand new. Or rather, while two films were receiving public premieres, they were decidedly delayed: eight years in the case of Ryszard Bugajski's *Interrogation* (1982) and a full 20 for Karel Kachyna's *The Ear* (1970).

Films about political subjects made in Warsaw Pact countries before communism's collapse in 1989-91 were usually (and necessarily) oblique and euphemistic, but what makes these two films remarkable is that they're so bluntly upfront. Both are set in the 1950s, during the Stalinist period (although *The Ear* is calculatedly vague about this), and both deal explicitly with the notion of government as an instrument of terror. Bugajski benefited from the cultural thaw of 1980-1981, finishing shooting just before martial law was declared; *Interrogation* would certainly have been cancelled mid-production otherwise, while Kachyna and his writer Jan Procházka were perhaps too confident that their high-profile party contacts would protect them in the event of any controversy – a theme that also informs the content of their film.

Although *The Ear* often gets grouped with the Czechoslovak New Wave, Kachyna (1924-2004) was older and more established than Milos Forman, Jirí Menzel, Vera Chytilová et al. One of the inaugural graduates from the Prague film school FAMU, he began making documentaries in 1950 with Vojtech Jasný (future director of the masterly *All My Good Countrymen* in 1969), before they moved into fiction with *Everything Ends Tonight* (1955). Kachyna first made an impact as solo director with the drama *Smugglers of Death* (1959), effectively about the creation of the Iron Curtain in 1948. The Czech title translates as 'King of the Sumava', the forest region where the film is set, describing a man notorious for smuggling anti-communist Czechs over the border. The film is notionally critical of him, in line with prevailing ideological requirements, but audiences (especially younger audiences) read it somewhat differently.

The 1960s saw several collaborations between Kachyna and Procházka (1929-71), whose personal friendship with President Antonín Novotný is assumed to have helped greenlight projects that other filmmakers would have struggled to realise, because they dealt more directly with explicitly political subjects than was normally allowed. *The Hope* (1964) was about alcoholism in the impoverished Prague outskirts, *Long Live the Republic* (1965) offers a hallucinatory study of the end of the Second World War as experienced by a young Moravian village boy, while *The Nun's Night* (1967) explicitly dramatised the strong-arm tactics used to impose collectivisation on a reluctant populace (this would join *The Ear* on the banned list, although it was at least released beforehand).

If *The Nun's Night* was forthright, *The Ear* went even further, being explicitly set amongst the higher echelons of Czechoslovak power as its movers and shakers gather and gossip at a clearly important party – from which people's absence is just as significant as their presence. This is doubly true if one of the absentees is the boss of the film's protagonist Ludvík (Radoslav Brzobohatý), a notionally loyal senior party member who during the course of the film repeatedly has to question what 'loyalty' actually means against a backdrop of unexplained arrests and mysterious disappearances.

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From Censored to Restored

My Grandmother Chemi Bebia + extended season intro by season curator Giulia Saccogna
Wed 2 Jul 18:10

The Passion of Joan of Arc

La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc
Thu 3 Jul 18:10 (with score); Sat 12 Jul 14:25 (with piano accompaniment)

UK Premiere of 4K Restoration:

L'Atalante + Zéro de conduite

Sat 5 Jul 12:10; Sun 20 Jul 18:10; Mon 21 Jul 18:00

25&Under Introduction:

From Censored to Restored

Mon 7 Jul 19:15 Blue Room

UK Premiere of 4K Restoration: Le Rendez-vous

des quais Rendez-vous of the Docks

Mon 7 Jul 20:50 (+ intro); Sun 20 Jul 15:45

The Cow

Gaav
Tue 8 Jul 18:05 (+ intro by film curator Ehsan Khoshbakht); Thu 24 Jul 20:30

Viridiana

Wed 9 Jul 18:20 (+ intro by filmmaker Peter Strickland); Sat 19 Jul 11:50; Wed 30 Jul 20:30

Accattone

Wed 9 Jul 20:40; Sat 26 Jul 15:10

The Ear

Ucho
Sat 12 Jul 20:40; Sat 26 Jul 12:30

Andrei Rublev

Sun 13 Jul 15:00; Sat 19 Jul 14:30

The Long Farewell

Dolgie Provody
Sun 13 Jul 18:30; Sat 26 Jul 20:55

Sambizanga

Fri 18 Jul 20:40; Wed 30 Jul 17:50

A Woman Alone

Kobieta samotna
Thu 24 Jul 18:15; Tue 29 Jul 20:45

Stars in Broad Daylight

Nujum al-Nahar
Fri 25 Jul 20:45; Thu 31 Jul 18:20

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Procházka's dramatic masterstroke was to stage much of the film in the presumably grace-and-favour house that Ludvík shares with his wife Anna (Jirina Bohdalová), and to have as many thematic nods to Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* as to the universe of Franz Kafka. The film starts partway through the narrative, as Ludvík and Anna return home from the party, tired, drunk, horny (in her case) and desperately worried (in his). Their bickering is compulsively convincing, not least because they're approaching their plight from different angles (she's angry, he's terrified), and the way that they bond in marital solidarity over their discovery of a number of tiny microphones is oddly touching – this isn't a spoiler: Anna assumes throughout that the house is riddled with bugs, and joshingly refers to 'The Ear' very early on.

When the doorbell rings, have the men in suits that it heralds come to take Ludvík away, or do they merely hope to continue the party in a similarly congenial environment? Ostensibly the latter, but we're never quite sure what their true motivations are. The film is riddled with similarly unsettling touches – why, if a power cut notionally extends for several blocks, does the next door house still have its lights on? Did the fact that Ludvík's boss was Jewish inform his arrest? (Translation: is the non-Jewish Ludvík therefore safe?) Flashbacks to brief but potent encounters at the party pepper the central situation like unexpected gunfire (Miroslav Hájek, who cut many New Wave classics, is on frequently inspired form here). *The Ear* remains a brilliant analysis of how political power is maintained and enforced – and not just in a totalitarian situation. For instance, while the ministers purged in Boris Johnson's notorious July 2019 reshuffle weren't arrested and 'disappeared', one can have little doubt that the paranoia in those circles would have looked decidedly familiar to anyone who'd just watched this film.

Broadcast on Channel 4 in 1991, and then released on DVD in 2005, in both cases from a less than wonderful videotape source, *The Ear* has now been properly restored. Unlike many contemporaries, Kachyna carried on working (his filmography is both substantial and regularly spaced), but the fact that his next project was *Jumping Over Puddles Again* (1971), about the relationship between a young disabled boy and his horse, spoke volumes in itself.

Michael Brooke, bfi.org.uk, 27 August 2019

The Garden

Although not actually banned, this is the last film Jan Švankmajer made freely before the censors started banning his work for years.