

Ucho/The Ear

Directed by Karel Kachyňa

James Mennie

‘Who would be sitting in a car with the headlights off?’ asks Anna (Jiřina Bohdalová), wife of a deputy minister, Ludvík (Radoslav Brzobohatý), in the Czechoslovak Communist government. Having just returned to their villa after a reception at Prague Castle, the seat of the president, they notice a government-issue car watching them, its occupants barely attempting seclusion and parking underneath a nearby streetlamp. Anna’s naivety may have struck contemporary Czech audiences as surprising. Surprising not only in having not recognised the operations of the secret police, but further in how openly the film gestures towards the repressive atmosphere left in the wake of the Prague Spring of 1968.¹ Indeed, no audience could have registered this surprise as Karel Kachyňa’s *The Ear* [Ucho]

(1970) was pulled from release by the authorities even before its first public screening. The film’s polemics profoundly reside in this heightened and uncomfortable sense of proximity to character and events. Its dark paranoid world both locks the viewer into the centre of Anna and Ludvík’s dysfunctional marriage but also, was filmed only streets away from a garrison of occupying troops. Given its stark depiction of the terrifying frustration and ceaseless anxiety of life and work under totalitarianism, by the end of the film, no viewer would be left in doubt as to the intentions of the men in the car.

The Ear works successfully as both scathing political parable and unnerving home invasion movie. Kachyňa and screenwriter, Jan Procházka, deftly weave in and out of these seemingly disparate modes through their

¹ From January to August 1968, the rapidly liberalising satellite of Czechoslovakia was ‘normalised’ back under Soviet control by an invasion of Warsaw Pact forces.

parallel narrative structure. The ‘main’ narrative, which takes place in the present, concerns the long dark night of the soul of Anna and Ludvík’s marriage. As they discover their villa’s electricity cut, doors thought closed now open, and room after room proving to be bugged, the couple bicker, panic, go through varying stages of inebriation and, as dawn begins to break, appear close to madness. As this narrative progresses, the film sporadically intercuts with scenes from the party they have just attended, with the analepsis planting suggestions as to why their house has come to be bugged.

Josef Illík’s cinematography helps bolster the mounting sense of dread which builds in the scenes within the home. Frequently filmed from low angles in locked down shots, there is a sense of the camera having been hurriedly planted in the house, as if waiting for Anna and Ludvík to return. The detail of the power cut further lends the film’s first 50 minutes an almost gothic quality. Scenes are primarily lit by cigarette lighters or candelabra, casting long shadows over the interiors and giving these early scenes a striking atmosphere. If there is a fault to be had with the mostly impeccable 90-minute pacing of the film it is that *The Ear* loses much of its mounting momentum when the electricity is turned back on.

Though the tone and feel of the space in the film changes when the lights turn back on, a further layer is added to the film in evoking the quotidian existence of a junior apparatchik. In darkness, what appears to be a somewhat stately home is revealed, in the bright white light of a bulb’s glare, to be a house composed of gaudy wallpaper, faux-fur rugs, formica and cheap

mod cons. The house becomes like a microcosm of how society in the USSR and its satellites operated. Behind all of the pomp and grand facades, there merely lay commercial stagnation and paranoid human relations.

Helping to flesh out this portrait of life inside the Communist government are the aforementioned interspersions of scenes from the party, nightmarishly illustrating its incomprehensible levels of bureaucracy, petty authority and social conformity. In chatting with other ministers, their wives, drunk generals and fanatical party functionaries, one of the longest discussions Ludvík endures revolves around how best to pour concrete in freezing temperatures. Perhaps this is a coded reference to the system of penal labour camps common to the Soviet Bloc, as well as a reference to the potential fate of Kosara, Ludvík’s boss, who, as it is whispered into Ludvík’s ear, has ‘excused himself.’ Uncomfortably, the majority of these shots are filmed from Ludvík’s perspective, with our gaze focused on the minute shifts in facial expressions and emotions of the plotting ministers who gather around him. In these sequences, the dread is subtly filtered through language, with no party or line of dialogue being completely innocent. Does the party official who enquires on his wife’s behalf ‘if the house (Anna and Ludvík’s) is warm enough in the winter?’ have some knowledge that their home will soon be liquidated? Another nameless official encourages Ludvík to watch how poorly the waiters serve the food, commenting matter-of-factly: ‘None of them is a trained waiter, they’re all spies.’ The presence of Franz Kafka—perhaps Prague’s most famous son—is

most keenly felt in these castle scenes. Similar to the dizzying anxiety felt by Kafka's bank cashier, Josef K., in *The Trial* (1925), the terror of the arbitrary institutional forces exerted upon Ludvík is compounded by the fact he is no dissident or traitor, but an actual functionary of the state apparatus. Ultimately, the only release we are given from these claustrophobic set-pieces is when Ludvík vomits in a nearby toilet. As the film's title implies, *The Ear* is a film built on the senses. Aside from flourishes of woodwind from the soundtrack, the film works in deafening silences. The concurrent heightened attention to listening this evokes makes the viewer aware of any presence within the general feeling of absence, directing our attention to every piece of muffled dialogue, fumbled object or piece of paper burning.

The titular 'ear' is even an actual presence within the house. Even before discovering the microphones left behind in their rooms, Anna constantly addresses and goads it: 'What do you want from us? What do you want, Ear?'. The routines of their marriage are further directed by it, with Anna and Ludvík only making love on a rug in the kitchen, believing (and wrongly so) that no government would bother to bug a kitchen. The warring couple at the centre of Paweł Pawlikowski's more recent work, *Cold War* (2018), seems to echo the details of Kachyňa's couple's life under mid-century surveillance and paranoia.

However, for all its power and polemicism, *The Ear* is recognised as the unfortunate coda to the Czechoslovak New Wave. Alternatively dubbed the 'Czechoslovak Film Miracle' (Žalman 1967: 19), this period

of filmmaking between 1963 and 1970—remarkably operating under the auspices of the nationalised film industry—risked censorship to deliver a number of subversive masterpieces. Mixing the avant-garde and the blackly comic, its films—such as *Loves of a Blonde* (Forman 1965), *Closely Watched Trains* (Menzel 1966) and *Daisies* (Chytilová 1966)—signalled an alienation towards the Communist state through a dynamic and vibrant anticipation of the freedom of expression promised by the Prague Spring. Peter Hames, for instance, asserts that 'internationally, Czechoslovak cinema provided the most visible manifestation of the intellectual ferment that developed from the mid-1960s' (Hames 2005: 3). British director Lindsay Anderson even considered that the New Wave had 'every chance of becoming the best in the world' (cited in Liehm 1974: 413). What is therefore surprising is how a film such as *The Ear*—perhaps the New Wave's most explicit comment on state repression and surveillance—could have been produced post-Prague Spring. Comparative to their younger contemporaries, such as Miloš Forman, Jiří Menzel and Věra Chytilová, Kachyňa and Procházka enjoyed a relatively privileged position as older, established figures in the Czechoslovak film industry. Procházka's allegedly close friendship with President Antonín Novotný has been cited as a reason as to why his work was able to pass censorship more freely than the projects of his peers (Slater 1992: 164). However, following the invasion, Kachyňa was fired from his teaching position at the Prague Film Academy, the KGB accused Procházka of co-heading a dissident party, and *The Ear* was banned (Jachnin 1995:

5-6). The question of *The Ear*'s release therefore becomes a tricky one, it having had its first public screening only months before the Velvet Revolution in 1989 and having been submitted for competition for the Palme d'Or in 1990, two decades after its production wrapped.

More recently, the film has enjoyed something of a second afterlife. In 2019, Second Run released a Blu-ray copy of the film for the first time and last summer, it was further featured as part of the Criterion Channel's programme on the Czechoslovak New Wave. This sustained interest in the film suggests something beyond the specific politics of its day. Indeed, its relevance is clear to see in the ongoing democratic backsliding occurring in the former USSR. This attests somewhat to Milan Kundera's perception of the importance of art from Central and Eastern Europe; rather than merely condemn the specifics of a given political regime, the film asserts itself 'on the strength of social and human experience of a kind people over here [the West] cannot even imagine, it offers new testimony about the human condition' (Kundera 1977: 6). Yet in the case of *The Ear*, this is testimony given through furtive plotting, mistakenly divulged details and frightened whispers, any sense of recognisable human conditions or relations being as shabby or brittle as the furnishings of Anna and Ludvík's rooms.

In the film's final blackly comic twist, it becomes clear that this 'act' of surveillance has posed no real threat to Anna and Ludvík; instead, it has been a barely concealed ploy to keep them obedient. This revelation exposes to the viewer the ever-present motive which has

guided the film. It is less of a character study concerned with its individual protagonists and more of a simulation of the pointless and elaborate rituals of state power.

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Filmography

–*Closely Watched Trains [Ostre sledované vlaky]*. Dir. Jiří Menzel. Filmové Studio Barrandov, Czechoslovakia, 1966. 92 mins

–*Cold War [Zimna wojna]*. Dir. Paweł Pawlikowski. Opus Film et al., Poland/UK/France/Belgium, 2018. 89 mins

–*Daisies [Sedmikrásky]*. Dir. Věra Chytilová. Filmové Studio
Barrandov, Czechoslovakia, 1966. 74 mins

–*Loves of a Blonde [Lásky jedné plavovlásky]*. Dir. Miloš
Forman. CBK/Filmové Studio Barrandov/Sebor,
Czechoslovakia, 1965. 82 mins