

**Věra Chytilová's *The Fruit of Paradise* [Ovoce stromů rajských jíme, 1969]: Radical aura and the international avant-garde**



Figure 1 Jan Preisler *Adam and Eve*. 1908 Oil on canvas, 1908. National Gallery, Veletržni Palace, Prague.

**Abstract:**

Věra Chytilová's *The Fruit of Paradise* was filmed in 1969 on the heels of Chytilová's now world-famous feature *Daisies* [*Sedmikrásky* (1966)]. It symbolically bridges the spirit of the Czech New Wave and the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops, which began in August, 1968. The director herself has stated clearly that the film is a response to this invasion; it is a radical protest presented through abstraction, and a deliberate juxtaposition of mythology, classicism, eroticism, and formal experimentation, rather than a direct linguistic affront to the authorities. This article reflects on Chytilová's film within the context of a wider twentieth-century avant-garde, noting particular correspondences and sympathies between international surrealisms, the early twentieth-century Czech avant-garde, and American experimental filmmaking. It explores the collaborative sensory affect created in the film through a synaesthetic blend of haptic encounters staged in an imaginary Eden. Through

distortion, collage, convulsive chance, repetition, and slowness, the film build a radical aura in the Brakhagean sense, delivering an emotional and political intensity via formal rather than narrative elements. In the twenty-first century, Chytilová's body of work occupies a prominent position in an international female avant-garde, forming dialogues across regional and political boundaries past and future.

### ***The 'aura' of 'Eden': Spatial Distortion and Synaesthesia***

'Can you smell it?'

'What?'

'How volatile life is.' –Věra Chytilová's *Daisies/Sedmikrásky* (1966)

*The image is a pure creation of the mind.*

*It cannot be born from a comparison but from a juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities.*

*The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be -- the greater its emotional power and poetic reality...*

Pierre Reverdy, [1918]. Quoted in André Breton, 'The First Manifesto of Surrealism' [1924] 2010 20.

This essay seeks to locate Věra Chytilová's *The Fruit of Paradise* (1969) — an experimental, avant-garde requiem to the myth of Truth — within wider debates on radical creativity that circulated in the twentieth century, from Czech Poetism to the New York underground. It considers the links between three distinct yet overlapping concerns in the theorisation of the image: film as poetry; film as allegory, and film as aura; Chytilová's film intersects with all three. The latter of these categories is inspired by American filmmaker Stan Brakhage's writings on film, in particular the never-published text "The Domain of the Aura" (written during the late eighties), in which he strives to pinpoint the 'radical difference' between '(1). Picture (a framed collection of

nameable things) and (2) the Unnameable streaming of irregular biologically hewed shapes and mixed hues, or Aura (what's usually referred to as "ineffable/musical" in Art.) (Wees 2016 41)<sup>1</sup> In his earlier work *Metaphors on Vision*, he describes how aura emerges from the ineffable in cinema:

Forms merge, as the finger tips closing to touch, closely viewed, reach a blur of their color, changing their contour, visually merging with each other before physical contact ... Within this aura of non-shape, shapes reshape, and as long as the eye breathes them naturally ... they continue their transformatory dance until one is involved purely with the innards of what one once knew only as outline. [...aura is] an effervescence and as-bubbling up-out for viewability of spaceless, timeless entities. (Brakhage quoted in Wees 42)

In critical theoretical studies is it always a central paradox that in order to break with meaning, we require language and words to do so. Brakhage often made silent films, only later collaborating with musicians to produce soundtracks; his view was that light was sufficiently capable of communicating a story, or a world. Yet, he wrote extensively on film art and its potential to create meaning outside of language. He made a distinction between "thought" dependent on words, and "thought" free of, or previous to, words, which he considered the radical difference between "picture" and "aura" (Wees 41). The "picture" corresponds to an image of remembering, and "aura" to 'an emanation always and only experiential in every given present'. (46)

The distinction between named things, and the ineffable, intermingling, indescribable lights and shapes that he discusses are especially relevant to *The Fruit of Paradise's* formal rebellion against certainty or fixed meaning. With focus on the opening sequence of the film, the creative, alchemical collaboration between Chytilová, cinematographer Jaroslav Kučera, and co-writer and costume designer Ester Krumbachová, and the film's allegorical story, I will explore the film's radical potential as a creative response

to the aura of its time, and that which could not be directly named.

### ***The Fruit of Paradise and formal experimentation***

Imagine a world alive with incomprehensible objects and shimmering with an endless variety of movement and innumerable gradations of color. [...] After the loss of innocence, only the ultimate of knowledge can balance the wobbling pivot. Yet I suggest that there is a pursuit of knowledge foreign to language and founded upon visual communication, demanding a development of the optimal mind, and dependent upon perception in the original and deepest sense of the word.  
(Brakhage, 'Metaphors on Vision' [1963] 1978. In P.Adams Sitney (ed.) 120)

In the shooting script notes for *The Fruit of Paradise*, the opening sequence is described as 'monumentalizing a display of values that are by no means clear'. Certainly, the viewer enters a world in which nature is recognisable, yet abstracted and cropped, with 'associations by shape, teeth, petals, close-ups of plants, fragments of human bodies, tongues, eyes, animal mouths, heavy rainfall, water in various forms, a breast, an eye, a tree trunk, a thigh.' (Chytilová 1968)<sup>2</sup> The variations in scale and the erratic pulse of the image transitions as they flicker on and off screen render them difficult to grasp, or process fully; emphasis is drawn to the materiality of Nature. That Chytilová, and Kučera chose to deliberately create a state of confusion within the supposed order of Nature is significant. The sequence is convulsively beautiful, and this does not result from conventional verisimilitude. The images multiply, overlapping in masked shots and multiple exposures; the film skips and judders in its sprockets, and selected images are hand-coloured, rhythmically jerking between blurred and vivid, faded and saturated states. The world of paradise is off-kilter: a storm is signified by the effects of the wind and juxtaposed with sped-up footage of a peacock moving through the grass; figures move erratically as if created through stop-motion, and manipulated by reversed and slowed movement. We can almost smell the damp, close, coldness of

Kučera and Chytilová's morally adrift paradise, yet it also holds much of the decadent (lost) beauty of Czech Symbolist Jan Preisler's 1908 depiction of *Adam and Eve* (Fig.1)



Figure 2 'Dog Star Man' Criterion Collection DVD 2001

This newly awakening diegetic world unfolds in a realm of newness that is simultaneously tinged with traditional allusions. Furthermore, it works on the viewer's sensory stimuli, prompting recollections and creative images that spark as the associative montage flickers past on screen. Zdeněk Liška's operatic score (recorded with the Film Symphony Orchestra/Filmový symfonický orchestr) functions as a layered chorus of the people, which ebbs and swells, punctuated by shrill peacock cries. It plays with the boundaries between artifice and Nature; between dreaming and waking; between part and whole; and the synaesthetic confusion of the senses finds a visual equivalent in the materiality of the film's mytho-poetic Eden. What we experience corresponds directly to Brakhage's highly subjective and emotional descriptions of 'Aura-like' qualities, which priorities the synaesthetic apprehension of

colour, light and sound: ‘The “tones” of this “song” of lyric seeing are as-if ever emergent from some “silence” of sight, so flecked is this flush of tumbling shapes and trembling color-chordality with swarms of black, so set into dark night as these chandelier [sic] patterns and auroras of incandescent tones’. (Wees 47) To put this in context, Brakhage is attempting to describe how humans and the exterior world may mutually extend towards each other, absent from ego and receptive to all stimuli. Chytilová’s Adam and Eve are similarly stripped of ego in the opening sequence, voiceless, and de-centred. Their corporeality is displayed *in the midst* of the life forms, colours and lights that shift around them. In a succession of shots, they are rendered translucent, with the forms of plant life shining through their bodies, at once vegetal and luminescent – this is the world *a priori*, before the fall. The veiny hand-taped moth wings that Brakhage applied directly to celluloid in *Mothlight* (1963), and the hand-coloured textural land and objectsapes of the *Dog Star Man* series, (1961-1964) are the closest films to *The Fruit of Paradise*’s opening sequence and its cinematic explorations of free thought and experimental form that I have seen. In *Dog Star Man*, images of light flares bounce from the sun spliced in rhythmic counterpoint with images of blood being pumped and transported around the human body.

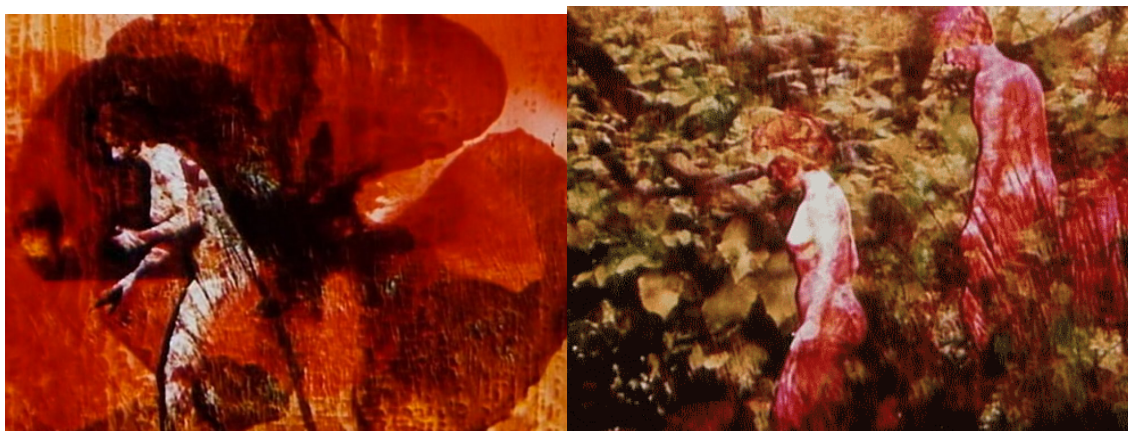


Figure 3 Stills *The Fruit of Paradise* Second Run DVD

The sensory experience I feel on each viewing of *The Fruit of Paradise* is akin to

‘seeing’ the veins exposed behind one’s closed eyes when light is shone upon them or to living as if inside a bruise. It is at once internal and corporeal, but also external, abstract and ephemeral, as if living inside a bruise, or pressed closely against nature’s strange forms – leaves, grasses, porous minerals, tree bark. R. Bruce Elder notes how these fragmentary films embody a ‘worldview that mythopoeically identifies every part with the whole’, and in which the exterior garden (be it Eden or not) allows the filmmaker to reflect on consciousness and Nature. (Elder 91) Tactile and confused sensory feedback leads to a state of emancipatory release, which, I argue, is at the heart of the collaborative experimentation in Chytilová’s film, albeit derived from the ‘exilic’ on-location shooting of the film in a disused sandstone quarry outside Prague. The effect and affect, is profoundly radical.

The critical tone of Eden’s biblical unfolding (accompanied by the repeated chorus of ‘Tell me the truth’) has a precedent in Chytilová’s 1961 film *Pytel blech / A Bagful of Fleas*, in which a female hostel filled with factory girls serves as a cinéma vérité Socialist Eden where adolescence butts against temptation. At one point a girl is upset at the thought that ‘God is just a mist’, and the narrative ponders whether truth is to be found in religious beliefs held for centuries and passed down through the family, or in the teachings of the schools. In the book of Genesis Eve is punished by God to endure a terrible labour when she gives birth. The reality of a painful childbirth cleverly corresponds to Chytilová’s own pregnant state during the filming of *The Fruit of Paradise*. Lastly, and most importantly, Chytilová has said categorically that the Soviet invasion of 1968 ‘is in’ this film. In interview she recalls how even her breast milk was infused by the sounds of the bombings. The allegory of the apple and the serpent was necessary to show how the Czech people recognised: ‘That we live in a lie. That we are

violently raped.’ adding: ‘That was the main reason for the movie.’ (Chytilová Interview n.d.)

*Communing with the avant-garde: tactile and radical materiality*



Figure 4 Still from *The Fruit of Paradise* Second Run DVD

As the opening sequence reaches its climactic end, the chorus swells and the viewer is caught in the cacophonous moment, fully present, and subject to the aura of the visual forms in the absence of language or structure. The two naked figures remain nameless and unfixed until the zoom-in shot of the apple, which transfers the aura onto the ‘Picture’ of the fruit, a named, symbolic object that now binds the mise-en-scène to the theatrical world of the stand-in characters, (Adam and Eve, played by Karel Novák and Jitka Nováková) and their ‘health retreat’ paradise. Chytilová’s script notes detail how the images in the opening sequence gradually sharpen and become less abstracted, ‘their



composition is simplified so far that when the first couple appear we can embark on a journey through an almost naive picture.’ (Chytilová 1968) This naïf quality is by no means a slight aside, as the players acting in the film are from the Studio Ypsilon Theatre, (evolving out of the Naive Theatre of Liberec in 1983) a school of acting based in the naïf style, and directed by puppeteer Jan Schmid (who plays Robert in the film). Chytilová employed actors from Ypsilon to appear in *The Fruit of Paradise*, resulting in the oppositional flat-affective and hyperbolic acting style that challenges identification and alignment with the characters on the part of the audience. These actors were seen to be part of the new mood of theatre in the 1960s:

The essential mode of an Ypsilon production is that of cabaret, a sprightly and at times naive cabaret, but always a thinking person's cabaret. Topicality, direct playful rapport with the audience, the strong role of music, an air of commedia-like improvisation, and a prevailing emphasis on good humor mark its productions [...] The actors are expected to incorporate their distinctive temperaments and personalities even when portraying historical characters. It is all part of the larger aim of providing an alternative to the gray routine, the leveling of quality, and the lies--in life and art--that have been associated with the era of "normalization" since the early 1970s. [...] In a nutshell, the distinctive ambience of Ypsilon productions arises from their integration of the cabaret method with subject matter and themes that involve penetrating comments on the Czech national character and on contemporary realities (e.g., the blatantly bourgeois, acquisitive, and amoral self-centeredness of much of the population at large)’ (Burian 386-387)

The players’ movements are often choreographed, with actors moving in over-exaggerated bodily motions, with comedic gestures. Eva’s childlike attitude is captured in her facial gestures, and playful repetitions of phrase, for example when she bids farewell numerous times to Robert in a singsong voice. The group of revellers on the beach clamber around in comedic play, and the final ‘showdown’ between Robert and Eva is theatrical and absurd in its non-naturalistic movement. As Burian suggests, the

aim of such artificialism and naïf play is to provide a vehicle through which biting social satire and political commentary can be presented. In particular the central three roles highlight the role of individuality, perhaps suggesting comedy and play as the only means of opposition to the lies of the state.

### ***Correspondences between early twentieth century Czech avant-gardes and Chytilová's tactile film-world***

As well as serving as a framing device for the film's quest for truth (and the impossibility of establishing it) the formal *radicality* of the opening sequence clearly draws upon avant-garde principles seen much earlier in Czechoslovak art movements in the first decades of the twentieth century, and international surrealisms of the 1930s. Akin to Luis Buñuel's famous assertion regarding *Un chien andalou* (1928) that the viewer should be shocked into readiness for what is to follow, Chytilová's script notes reveal the importance, for her, of affronting the senses, and highlighting the more confounding and precarious qualities (aura) of existence.

Prior to the proposed allegiance of Czech artists to the French Surrealist movement in the fifth issue of *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* (1933), or to Vítězslav Nezval's official founding of the Czechoslovak Surrealist group<sup>3</sup> in Prague on March 21, 1934, members of the avant-garde group Devětsil (founded in 1920, and active until 1931) had already discovered varied modes of creation that prioritised freedom, play, and the interpenetration of the senses. In 1923, leading avant-garde artist and writer Karel Teige declared that 'Art is one, and it is poetry', arguing that traditional delimitations and modes of exhibition were dead, pushed to the limits by a new poetry 'overflowing and uniting with the multifarious forms of modern life all over the globe.' ('Painting and Poetry', [originally published as 'Malířství a poesie' *Disk 1*, May 1923] and reproduced in Srp, Karel et al., *New Formations* 2011 75)

The autonomy of art was of the utmost importance, and Nezval and Teige declared 'Poetism' as an attitude and a way of life. In 1923 Nezval recalls strolling with Teige through the streets of Prague, when he was 'suddenly gripped by a vivid sense of happiness at "the odor of spring, the stars, beads of light, retching drunkards, and old beggar women against the street corners."' (Quoted in Levinger 1999 513) Poetism revelled in opposites, and like surrealism, worked across the traditional and plastic arts, finding poetry in modern art forms such as cinema and advertising billboards, rather than simply in language itself. Aura became mobile, rather than residing in an 'original', with mechanical reproduction seen as a freeing process which could lead to the pure poetry of the syncretic 'picture poem' enabled by printing presses. Teige saw a synthesis of art through which the 'magnificence' of the world could be perceived from the position of the traveller, wherein fantastical and utopian journeys would inspire the reader or viewer to action. In "New Proletarian Art," he writes: 'The proletariat does not need images of crushing reality, but a reality and an illusion that inspire and encourage. [...] events on the cinema screen, episodes from the unknown magnificent world, [...] conquer the proletariat's heart.' ('New proletarian art', ['Nové umění proletářské, 1922]. Quoted in Levinger 1999 524) For Teige the answers lay in the fantastic forces of reality, in the potential of imaginative flight and the haptic transference of that thrill to the viewer; film occupied a central position, turning ritual into dreams. Also members of Devětsil, Marie Čerminová (known by the gender neutral name Toyen) and Jindřich Štyrský spent three years in Paris (1925-1928) where they began their 'Artificialist' painting (exhibiting in Paris 1926-1927). Distinct from, although perhaps influenced by René Magritte's *Les mots et les images* [Words and Images, La Révolution surréaliste, no. 12, 1929] in which language and visual object are found not to conform to socially learned semiotics, the titles accompanying Toyen and Štyrský's paintings and poems

are deliberately titled to serve as emotional rather than intellectual prompts. Meaning, they argue is not pre-ordained, but arises from unexpected correspondences between memory and the act of creation. An artificial painting:

elicits not only optical emotions and arouses not only visual sensibility. It leads the viewer away from the merry-go-round of his usual imagination, dismantling the systems and mechanism by which ideas connect. [...] Artificialism abstracts real spaces, giving birth to a universal space...' (Štyrský and Toyen [1927] 2011 119)

What is of most gripping significance here is the emphasis on processual transformation at the level of the material itself. The paper, paint, relief work and texture evoke a range of differing spatial realms that correspond to the workings of the mind, and the abstract space of memory.

Toyen's paintings of the late 1920s Artificialism period often evoke sensory mindscapes through thick, layered impasto and rather fecund, overripe colours or inky-hued nightscapes. 'Twilight in the Primeval Forest' (1929) seems to have sprung straight from the mind onto the page, with abstract forms evoking natural ones. Toyen often created relief in these paintings by adding sand, fabric, or extra paint. In this example the dark grey openings denote cave recesses, and the eye is drawn to the red horizontal ribbon drips and the blue 'pools', the scene lit from within with a warm red glow. The central area is textured through frottage transfer, and the painting as a whole is suggestive of a geological or psychological aura of conflated time and space; a waking dream. Srp notes that Toyen's paintings of this period 'are so liberated from the external subject that they disturb any reference to ordinary perception of time and space.' (2000 66) In Peter Hames's vivid description of Chytilová's Eden, 'the contrasts in texture', the vertical lines, the geometrical triptych that divides the frame, and the depth of field (1985 66), present a formal meditation on conformity that is, I would add, ultimately overpowered by the magical and auratic enabling of non-literal thought that

the film provokes. The world evoked in *The Fruit of Paradise* is seemingly limitless, the horizon never realised, as reverse shots and cropped framing trick the viewer and confound space and time, and boundaries between subjects, objects and abstract forms coalesce .

By 1933, there is a clear turn toward the French surrealist group, evidenced primarily in the work of Štyrský and Toyen, and, much later, in that of animator and filmmaker Jan Švankmajer. Teige's structural and poetic optimism based on flight and form was gradually subsumed into experiments with *artificial* and surrealist ideas on objects, textures, and a strong dialectical materialism inspired by the works of Marx. The Czech avant-garde has always challenged the occularcentrism of the early twentieth century by foregrounding the accumulation of sensory responses that could be achieved through poetic methods of resonance and abstraction, automatism, and, as Brakhage much later postulates, freeing of the mind from socially conditioned fetters.

### ***Echoes of Czech Surrealist tactilism***

Eva, dressed in velvet with white tights and a childish demeanour, performs Lewis Carroll's Alice, seemingly evolving to fit to the moods of the characters and the strange spaces that she encounters on her travels. Like Alice, Eva controls the viewer's gaze as we follow her discoveries about the mysterious and dangerous Robert. Like Valerie in Jaromil Jireš's film adaptation of Nezval's novella *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders/ Valerie a týden divů* ([1945] 1970, screenplay also co-written by Krumbachová), Eva must solve the enigma of her spatio-temporal surroundings through encounters with men, and the negotiation of a series of magical key objects. Valerie falls through space and time, with the help of a pair of magical earrings; Eva, by turns wide-awake and dreaming, learns to uncover 'truth' by following false trails – the key, the drawer, the letters, the satchel and the no.6. *The Fruit of Paradise* soundtrack

includes a sound very similar to the musical trill that accompanies every appearance of Valerie's earrings in Jireš's film. Applied throughout the film, this musical leitmotif seems to associatively correspond to magic, or at the very least, a confusion of reality. Certainly the setting is that of a fairy tale: a garden by the sea, where peacocks turn out to be humans wearing hats, and ripples in the water generate cymbal crashes, where porous stone shot in close-up mimics the pattern of a snake. As to the Brakhagean aura, what matters is the 'experiential sense' (Wees 44) and not what classical laws of perspective tell us to see; therefore we experience a fractured and hazy approximation of the fairy tale rather than a parody or pastiche indebted to the genre. This is why the tactile nature of the surroundings and its strange objects are so significant.

In his 1989 essay 'Tactilism', Švankmajer recalls working on an adaptation of E.A. Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839) [*Zánik domu Usherů*, 1980]: 'I found myself struggling in a complex world. In Poe's work I discovered what an enormous role touch played in his psychological studies of pathological behaviour.' (Švankmajer xxi) Chytilová's and Jireš's gothic houses and magical landscapes provide mytho-allegorical environments through which to explore male pathological behaviour and, by extension, the pathological behaviour of the state. It is significant that our guides are female, clever, and defiant; metaphorically, they are not afraid to get their hands dirty, grasping the environment and evading its horrors. Eva spends a great deal of the film with her hands burrowing into earth and sand, plunging into water and mud, preparing food, or touching her own skin. The amplified sound of objects (creaking hinges, turning handles, clattering of objects on surfaces) all seem to be imbued with the malevolent, almost supernatural, spirit of the forest (Eden/Robert), but it is the girl-woman who fuses with it, open to its idiosyncrasies. I am reminded of Maya Deren's concept of female time, a physical reality that is rendered abstract in the spatial montage

of her film *At Land* (1944), which, similarly to the spaces favoured by Chytilová, explores the alchemical process of bringing a multifaceted, temporally overlapping female experience to the screen. The threat to women, the affects of patriarchal power and of male-narrated stories are intrinsic to the fabric of each of Chytilová's films, and each resolutely presents a counter-narrative; in *The Fruit of Paradise* this is woven from poetic, associative montage, and radical allegory of Eden, and the suggestion is that dictatorial state power can materialise in many shape-shifting entities. The film literalises what Eva Švankmajerová ('Touch', 1994) has explained as a correspondence of touch: 'In certain circumstances people who are in a different time and place can touch each other. Anyone can see with their own eyes that they can touch messages on a piece of paper, on a document or an ordinary letter.' (Švankmajerová quoted in Švankmajer, xxiii ) This extraordinary and surreal case of the *magic-circumstantial* (Breton, *Amour fou*, 1937) in the everyday corresponds to the weird chance, spatio-temporal-fantastical connections, and the synaesthetic conjuring of exterior reality in *The Fruit of Paradise*. In his tactile diaries from the 1980s, Švankmajer embarks on a 'tactile self-consciousness' that disrupts the order of the senses and the rituals of the ordinary. (Švankmajer 113-114) He details how the aroma of coffee, the ringing of a telephone, feeling his feet through a trouser leg or his hands over a banister, the touch of glass marbles or various materials on the genitals prompt 'a change in the emotive capacity of the substance.' (115) Chytilová's film similarly alters the realm of the everyday, and of the political reality, through a prismatic and tactile awareness of what it means to exist, to be *in* the world. The cold, hard revolver-object, the reeds in the water, the number six (which we still imagine stamped onto Eva's thigh), the connective ribbons, the velvet costumes, the final shot of the monochrome grass undulating in the breeze, and the verses from Genesis recited on the extra-diegetic track, resonate with the

viewer in a non-synchronous and alienating cacophony of sensations where the figural recedes into the hyper-realised layers of earthly experience. The viewer is made to feel the radical impossibility of truth *within* the ordinary and recognisable world of natural and manufactured objects that the film preserves.

### ***Female Revolution – Affective Labour***

Chytilová films *The Fruit of Paradise* during the ‘fateful year’ of 1968, (Richardson 2001 8) in a sandstone quarry outside Prague, yet close enough to feel the bodily and earthly shocks of the violent invasion. It is the particular crucible of these events and feelings, as well as the accord of the French and Czech Surrealists in this year that lead us to the second half of this article: the question of erotic desire, violence, and radical aura.

Chytilová studied at FAMU – Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (founded in 1947, and later home to directors of the Czech New Wave), but her path to reach the status of director took many prior turns: Chytilová originally studied philosophy and architecture, and moved into film after varied experiences as a draughtswoman, photographic retoucher and model. She got a job as a script girl and, despite the studio’s failure to recommend her, gained a place at FAMU, where she studied direction under Otakar Vávra.’ (Hames 1985 55) It is not difficult to see why she is so often hailed as a feminist (despite her ambivalence about a term that didn’t even exist within the Czech context at this point) considering her determination to speak as a woman from within a male dominated industry. In her autobiography she defiantly takes aim at the government: ‘Your mouths are full of women and of the importance of motherhood for our society. Well, I am a woman and a mother, so let me work!’ (Věra Chytilová and Tomáš Pilát, *Věra Chytilová zhlížka [Věra Chytilová in close-up]*, 2010. Quoted in Jusova and Reyes 2014 70) Her later films cover issues of



rape, abortion, HIV, gender inequality in the workplace, misogyny, and violence. As Zdena Škapová has pointed out:

When we consider the entire work of Věra Chytilová, we find that the bearers of positive character traits are invariably her heroines. None of them are understanding, patient and devoted wives, daughters or mothers [...] Instead we are presented with women who courageously face a variety of obstacles and actively take charge of their own lives and the world around them. (132)

Indeed the men in her films seem quite two-dimensional, lacking the verve and grit of the women. But what is so compelling is that she refuses to allow gender or sex to ultimately define the parameters, realising that each person must find her own way, her own truth and be responsible for her own actions – there are no martyrs. Rather than blame state interpellation, ‘Chytilová stubbornly attacks the individual’. (Škapová 131)

*The Fruit of Paradise*’s heroine, Eva, exemplifies this point; while her ridiculous husband chases women and lounges around, she actively pursues the murderer and tries to uncover his lies/the serpent’s duplicity. However, at no time is she exonerated from her own tendency to dream, play, or desire. There are extended sequences in the film where nothing happens, as she is stuck in a particular reverie, and the quest for knowledge is momentarily averted. In her famous letter to President Gustav Husak in 1975, Chytilová explains why she finds it necessary to reflect on the ‘ceiling’ (referencing her graduation film *The Ceiling/ Strop* (1961)) of human possibilities, and the ways in which apathy or lack of courage prevent action. She runs through her filmography, citing the ways in which she has put emphasis on the individual in order to explore questions of morality and evil (they are, again, found within the most ordinary of circumstances, as her films illustrate). However, when it comes to the question of censorship and being effectively released from her job as a filmmaker, she demonstrates how ‘unfair discrimination’ and ‘chauvinism’ within the industry thwart her own

determination, and how the system *can* be responsible:

I hope you will not permit it to become a shameful fact that in a country which boasts of its socialist ideals a woman film director whose films have brought international recognition to its socialist cinema and who is the mother of two children is unjustly persecuted and deprived of work and of the opportunity to meet her colleagues at the very time when we are celebrating International Women's Year. (Chytilová 1975)

She explains how she must protest, just as any woman unjustly dismissed from her job would necessarily need to do. Her activism is clear, but she sees no need for a label, and would rather enact difference through direct action, and preferably through her art.

From her early shorts, Chytilová was absorbed in the roles of female labour and performance, and in gender inequality, which are rendered visible through discourses of power. Likewise Krumbachová, often overshadowed by the names of her collaborators, felt the distinction between female and male realms acutely: 'The feminine temperament is, of course, quite different from the masculine. We live and function in a man's world. We live in the twentieth century, yet in many respects it is still hard for a woman to get along without a man. Particularly in the social sense. We are still living as guests in a man's world. Naturally, this also implies a certain advantage for women, since we can laugh at this world made by men.' (Krumbachová quoted in Sorfa 2015)

The defiant Jana in *A Bagful of Fleas* and her female hostel mates, including the colluding comrade Eva (intimately omniscient as the voice behind the camera), demonstrate how the negation of labour – Jana's absence from work and her refusal to speak about it - thwart order. The film involves discussion of state power, religious power, and military training, but the focus rests on the seemingly adolescent awakening of the group of women. While Jana's personal struggle is not resolved, the film reflects

on the *cultural life* of the girls and their quests for knowledge through: geography lessons, film culture, the wild west, fashion, sex, and health and grooming.

***Eros: the ambivalence of desire as a method of strengthening female agency***

Chytilová's unwavering and unsentimental commitment to portraying female experience also ruminates on the dangers and perversions of male behaviour. The figure of Robert in *The Fruit of Paradise* is a Sadean decadent, fulfilling his ultimate desire in the acts of rape and murder, yet the film does not judge him. It presents instead a wider philosophical conundrum in which our lives are governed by pervasive lies. This ambivalence recalls the high regard afforded eros and desire in surrealism, and issues involving male-driven objectification of the female muse. In her films, Chytilová does not posit woman as muse, nor equate her with Nature, but rather as existing *in the midst* of a working out, a puzzle or game in which the self cannot be distinguished from the elements that overlap with it. To understand the female self, stranded at various times in periods of socio-political horror, she advocates directness through radical expression that speaks through the body and its senses, and child-woman acquiring her own agency.



**Figure 5** Bound tightly, Eva in *The Fruit of Paradise*, *Second Run DVD*

Written jointly by the Paris and Prague surrealists (and including Toyen), ‘The Platform of Prague’ (1968) accompanied the *Princip slasti* (*Pleasure Principle*) exhibition of the same year. This combined effort to underline surrealism’s continued relevance is significant for both political and philosophical reasons: it advocated liberation through revolution, desire, and ‘magical thought’: ‘The role of Surrealism is to tear language from the repressive system and to make it an instrument of desire. [...] It also insists upon its refusal to admit the categories of reality (psychic reality, social reality and natural reality) as definitive.’ (Richardson 2001 60) Revolution, they hoped, would be recognised as a social necessity rather than a criminal act, and desire would function to stave off the ‘reality principle’ of everyday life. As Alyce Mahon has rightly argued, post-1938 surrealism continued its initial explorations into Freudian psychoanalysis and the central position occupied by repressed sexual desire and erotic impulses. She cites as evidence Breton’s introductory essay for the EROS exhibition of 1959 (a clear precedent for the 1968 exhibition in Prague) in which he held that ‘eroticism was the “highest common factor” in Surrealist art since the beginning.’

(Mahon 2005 169) The exhibition was a multi-sensory experience curated in order to highlight the distinction between cold violence and warm desire.

In *The Fruit of Paradise*, Eva's youthful lust and desire for Robert is caught up in his role as a sex-murderer, her dreams permeated with images of being bound, which is both pleasurable and terrifying. Each of her fantasies melds with an overt eroticism that is deeply conflicted, yet ultimately empowering. It would be a mistake to read the eroticism of the bedroom scenes as they are, when clearly Chytilová shows how self-knowledge leads to Eva's strength; at the end of the tale she seems to have the upper hand. Inversely, erotic interludes such as those discussed involving Valerie (in Jirěš's film) and Eva result in films that actually 'mobilise (and often deflect) that body-violating desire in their formal innovations.' (Dean 237) The 'truth' that Eva is asked to search for by the chorus, ends up being her experience of self and desire within the world.

Chytilová was not interested in labels, but in action, and each of her films, while centred on women, enacts a form of *dépaysement* (an uprooting from familiar or homely points of reference) that requires the viewer to make sense of a world with its own laws and preoccupations. Whether based on reality or on mythological allegory, the worlds are recognisable, yet operate within a framework that distorts logical cause-and-effect. The world presented to the viewer in *The Fruit of Paradise* is seemingly woven from the words of the surrealists in that reality is multifarious and interpenetrating, with mythological, actual, dreamed, erotic, recollected, and natural images flowing freely. Chytilová always asserted that her films were about reality, and this is also evident in her fascination with the world of fashion and textiles - the industry, the materiality, and the ability to transform. Fashion, craft, and decorative arts are often perceived as 'feminine'<sup>4</sup>. It is of no small significance that designer, Krumbachová, valued costume

as a dynamic art: ‘Costume is not about clothing. Costume, both for the film and the theatre, is an event. Something from the story must happen in the costume.’ (Fraňková 2009) The colour palette is restricted to earthy brown velvet, red swathes of fabric, white apparel (health and purity), but the interjection of brightly coloured balloons, or vivid oranges, underscores the dynamism that exists between nature and artificiality, danger and purity, or sex and love.



Figure 6 Fruitful abundance. Eva signals her number in *The Fruit of Paradise*, Second Run DVD

***Conclusion: radicality, formal innovation and female aura***

Chytilová was not a member of the Czech surrealist group, but she and her films, particularly *The Fruit of Paradise* and the earlier *Daisies/ Sedmikrásky* (1966), have often been reviewed and promoted as ‘surrealist’<sup>5</sup> – ‘made up of absurdist, surreal episodes’ (Gray 2016)– in what might be assumed a quite vernacular understanding of the movement. More recently Alfred Thomas has read *Daisies* as sharing ‘a subversive resistance to aesthetic and political conformity typical of Dada.’ (Thomas 2012 247) Although it was surrealism rather than Dada that took root in the Czech avant-garde,

Thomas argues that the earlier movement was re-visited in the post-1948 rise to Communism for its powerful political irreverence and bold collage. *Daisies* does lend itself to this reading as an allegory of political resistance, particularly with regards to the deployment of absurd humour, erratic montage, women presented as dolls, and the ‘breakdown of illusionism’ (254). Thomas also nods to Herbert Eagle’s assertion that the film has ‘the spirit of a Dada happening’ (259), examining the reversal of power performed by Maries 1 and 2 as they feast on male appendages. Surrealist Vratislav Effenberger, editor of the journal *Analogon* [Analogue]<sup>6</sup> was unimpressed by Chytilová’s film, which he saw as a gimmick, equating it with pop art and ‘absurdity in the style of the 1920s’, positing the film within a degenerated international art market as art turned from ‘the work of imaginative protest’ to ‘decorative formalism’. (‘Obraz člověka v českém filmu’, *Film a doba*, Quoted in Owen 2011 101)

Indeed, his damning critique of *Daisies* is somewhat superficial, lazily mixing elements of Dada and Pop Art appeals to mass culture to dismiss its witty performances as pastiche, while failing to perceive its actual subversive power.

As this article seeks to address, the question is not one of fidelity to a movement, but rather one of *correspondence* and shared aesthetic and philosophical traits. While Thomas and Effenberger might be right to align *Daisies* with the consciously anti-art goals of Dada, *The Fruit of Paradise* involves a more complex relationship with surrealist concepts of readiness, chance, convulsive beauty, and the marvellous; and with the erotic, psychological and generic themes (such as the fairy tale) that fascinated surrealist artists. It is a less obviously anarchic film, its radical potential concealed in plain sight within the suggestive and jarring layers, which fuse into a kaleidoscopic union of matter and sensation. It could be said that *The Fruit of Paradise* engages with the ‘tactic’ of an avant-garde film such as Man Ray’s *Emak Bakia* (1926), which in the

words of A. L. Rees ‘is seemingly to frustrate narrative and elude the viewer’s full grasp of the fantasies which film provokes’. For Rees, Man Ray’s films (which bridge Dada and surrealism) transpose the occularcentrism of film viewing (in which ‘the rule of the eye’ as the dominant sense is challenged) to a ‘sense of cinematic plenitude’ that engages all the senses in simultaneity. (Rees 45) We might account for the ‘curious indigestibility’ of *The Fruit of Paradise* (Jusová and Reyes 65) in its formal preoccupations – certainly in Chytilová’s opinion it avoided the censorship meted out to *Daisies* precisely due to its illegibility. The cumulative affect of the later film arises out of its incompleteness, its lack of rationale, and its refusal to prise the creative image from its poetry. Man Ray writing in 1934 about the role of freeing the unconscious in order to unleash the imagination, argues that:

An effort impelled by desire must also have an automatic or unconscious energy to aid its realization. The reserves of this energy within us are limitless if we will draw on them without a sense of shame or of propriety. [...] The intensity of this message can be disturbing only in proportion to the freedom that has been given to automatism or the unconscious self. The removal of inculcated modes of presentation, resulting in apparent artificiality or strangeness, is a confirmation of the free functioning of this automatism ... (Man Ray 54)

This collapsing of human emotion, unconscious energy and formal technique is relevant to the question of *The Fruit of Paradise*’s radical potential, as, rather than proving ‘indigestible’ the film enlivens the palate by removing the strictures of reason and decorum. In their experimental freedom, Chytilová, Kučera, and Krumbachová defy shame, defy propriety, and foreground ‘artificiality and strangeness’ in order to access directly the political unconscious of the time, their own subconscious desires, and ultimately in order to mobilise the multitude of potential desires of the audience through a wild, kinetic collage of Eden. It is important to consider the connections between



emotion, sensation, technology, and film-poetry, here, because they are philosophical, as well as aesthetic modes of enquiry that persist into the 1960s and beyond. Chytilová and Kučera travelled to New York in 1968, where, according to Peter Hames, they made a point of visiting Andy Warhol's Factory and Ed Emshwiller's studio, and 'were most interested in developments in underground film'.<sup>7</sup> The 'anti-aestheticism' (Rees 81) that characterises Warhol's film work (protracted slowness, repetition, theatricality, sexual explicitness, absence of shame or propriety, allusion and metaphor) seems to evoke rhythms and sympathies in *The Fruit of Paradise*, particularly in the film's insistence on imperfect, radical materiality and lack of narrative coherence.

If we take the word 'radical' as a composite of its various dictionary definitions, it includes the innovative, revolutionary and revisionist aspects of political, social, and aesthetic reform. It also signifies change relating to the fundamental nature of something, and, if we take the chemical reading, it refers to a group of atoms behaving as a unit in a number of compounds – a collective. Avant-garde and experimental filmmaking are often referred to as radical due to their break with form and convention, sometimes regardless of what is occurring at a contextual or thematic level. What is significant about Chytilová's film is that it presents a parade of radical dislocations that indirectly underscore very real socio-political issues occurring within earshot of the filming location. *The Fruit of Paradise* is a clear instance of radical filmmaking at every level, but especially because it refuses to coagulate into any easily readable shape. It enacts a confounding of meaning in order for the viewer to experience more about the urgent state of being in the present. For the viewer, Eden cannot be a petrified, mythologised world of the past, but exists as a place that is intertwined with the performances, and with fleeting light forms and colours that flicker across the screen. It implores us to investigate the nature of Truth, and to trust no one, as nothing stays the

same, but is fleeting and, as Brakhage would have it, ephemeral. The stories of Adam and Eve, of the Soviet invasion, or of contemporary women, are too immense, and the film asks us to make sense of them through its microscopic, fantastical, humorous and abstract ideas and forms. In Teige's *Second Manifesto of Poetism* (1928), he stresses the yearning for new spectacles that address the five senses: 'The sacred and healthy thirst of our modern senses and nervous systems, the hunger of our personalities, the desires of the body and spirit [...] are not satisfied with what the current arts offer.' (quoted in Švankmajer 100) Similarly in Chytilová's and Brakhage's creative experimentation, the aim is to view the world anew, to unstick it from convention in a sustained formal assault on our expectations, predictions, and on the normative patterns of lived experience. In addition, Chytilová's films respond to contemporary horrors with her own experience at the centre. *The Fruit of Paradise* is, for me, the most arresting of her films due to its enigmatic depths, and tactile force. It is not explicitly radical in voice, yet it is radiant and radical in its passion and form. For Brakhage, aura was a perceptual process particular to the medium of film and its viewers. In film scholarship since the early 2000s, affect theory has philosophised on the ineffable, the indistinct, and the virtual, knowing that pleasure and knowledge come from this experience of philosophising. In combining the ideas of Švankmajer, Teige, Chytilová, Kučera, Krumbachová, and Brakhage, I hope to have illustrated the radical poetics, the radical *aura* of Chytilová's work as a self-reflexive female phenomenology that draws from a range of avant-garde sources and *thinks* through formal innovation. That said, there is still much to explore in the links between Chytilová and early avant-garde Czech film, and the *aura* of the female, labouring and desiring body.

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<sup>1</sup> As well as Brakhage's *Mothlight* (1963), *Stellar* (1965), *Rage Net* (1965) and *Dante Quartet* (1987) all provide interesting comparisons with Kučera's hand painted and masked opening sequence.

<sup>2</sup> Citations from Chytilová's shooting script (1968) are courtesy of the Czech Centre London and the exhibition 'Věra Chytilová and Jaroslav Kučera: The Fruit of Paradise' curated by Kateřina Svatoňová, and held at the British Film Institute between 27 February 2015 and 16 March 2015. The exhibition also featured stills from the work in progress of the opening sequence discovered among Kučera's estate.

<sup>3</sup> A separate Slovak surrealist Group was later formed in 1938.

<sup>4</sup> Of interest here is an often-overlooked aspect of Toyen's career in which 'her intertwining of painting and textile can be seen as part of attempts she made to undermine traditional gender-based and gender-biased hierarchies'. (Pachmanová 2006 581)

<sup>5</sup> English language articles in the popular press typically reference surrealism, or apply the terms 'surreal', 'surrealist', or 'surrealistic' to describe *Daisies*, or to qualify the performances within. This has been particularly striking since 2014 in the wake of her death. See, for example: Rapold 2012 (on performance); Lattanzio 2014 (mislabelling Chytilová as a surrealist); and Singer 2015 (who merges surrealism and psychedelia). In addition online film viewing platforms from *Mubi* to the *BFI* refer to surrealism in their promotion of the film, as did the *London Review of Books* when promoting a screening of the film in 2017.

<sup>6</sup> *Analogon* published its first issue in 1969 despite the government crackdown on avant-garde activity, and continues to this day, currently co-edited by active member of the Czech surrealist group Bruno Solařík.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Hames interviewed by Simon Hitchman for *New Wave Film* in February 2015. As well as Warhol and Brakhage, this philosophical engagement with waves of late capitalism, is also epitomised in the audio-visual work of Maya Deren, Jonas Mekas, Yoko Ono, Yayoi Kusama, Joseph Cornell, Carolee Schneemann, R. Bruce Elder, among many others.

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