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Signs of Life: Questions of Survival

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Signs of Life: Questions of Survival

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The End of August at the Hotel Ozone made in 1966 is an astonishing film out of pre-Prague Spring Czechoslovakia, produced by the Czech army. Filmed in black and white, its setting is an end of times post-nuclear catastrophe and its context is both post-World War II and mid-Cold War. In an interview the director, Jan Schmidt, recounts the genesis of the film in 1957-58 when he and the writer, Pavel Juracek, were film students, and perhaps influenced by the post-apocalyptic novel, *On the Beach*, by Nevil Shute, published in 1957 and filmed in 1959 (Schmidt 4). What astonishes is the brutality and beastliness of its band of seven young women and an older woman leading them through a landscape empty of other people. Timeless in their demeanor and their dress—including camouflage—and nomadic in their ways, they are shockingly cruel and uncivilized, having lived most of their lives off any grid of the social except what their 'surrogate' mother sometimes supplies in the way of tenderness and cruelty. Certainly a dystopia, and perhaps a feminist dystopia but only in the sense that the population represented is exclusively women. Until, that is, they come upon a lone elderly man who welcomes them eagerly to his ruined Hotel Ozone, and provides them with a sit-down meal, an unprecedented experience for them.

My aim is to examine the notion of the post-apocalyptic as it is represented at this particular moment in this film, given the dormant period as far as the feminist movement is concerned; the distance from the actual nuclear blast that ended the war in Asia; and the not-yet of the Prague Spring. Among the questions then are: what is suggested about the configuration of past, present and future in this unnamed yet European landscape? How to read the directorial gesture of populating what's left of the known world with young women who seem to have never known men? What to make of the precious but fading knowledge offered to them in the barest way by their elder leader? On her death, what is left for them to carry on as a minimal legacy? And the man who houses and feeds them: how to interpret his maternal qualities? His invitation to culture in the form of music and manners? Isn't this film misogynistic in the most obvious sense that it presents a world without men as an uncivilized world? Or is this film empty of the very category of gender, given that the women do not appear to recognize the category of a "man" when they see the proprietor of the Hotel Ozone? Nor do they appear to possess a sense of themselves as "women." What to make of the disciplinary mother-woman and the empathic father-man?

One of the few critics who have written about the film, Alfred Thomas, suggests that it speaks from a time in Czech social history that constructed the nation as fatherless after World War II. And certainly among the subtexts is the unspoken and as yet unnamed holocaust. Empty of many identity categories, including location and nation, it is also a Jew-less film: the nameplate that has fallen off the door of the dilapidated villa where the women stop one day says "Goldmann." This is where they also come upon a strongbox filled with love letters which one of the women reads aloud, halting and unpracticed in the act of reading, and amazed and puzzled at a discourse and rhetoric of romantic love that seems opaque to her and her companions. They laugh at expressions of intimacy and affection as preteen boys might do, suggesting a heart-lessness as well. And yet stories and their telling are the core components of that which remains of the human in this narrative.

Perhaps even "beasts," as these women are called in the closing scenes, have a love of stories. From the archival tree rings that begin the narrative to these love letters, to the stolen gramophone and single surviving 'record' that closes the cinematic text we are in a world where Giorgio Agamben's notion of bare life is amplified by stories, and may yet suggest a bottom line definition of the human. Stories and names: a key moment between the elder/woman/mother-surrogate and the man at the Hotel Ozone comes when he addresses her as "madame." The smile that appears in response is one we have barely witnessed previously. And she says, "it's been so long" since she has been addressed personally and respectfully.

The first few minutes of *Hotel Ozone* are uncharacteristic of the how the rest of the film proceeds; yet this beginning sets up the scenario of a post-apocalyptic landscape literally, in the felling of a grand old tree. The film begins with a post-Hiroshima countdown in multiple languages that overlap in different voices as the camera pans from what appears to be a vast hangar, to a field of grass or wheat,

to an open book, upon which rests a pair of spectacles, and finally to the windows of a church or a university building. The world, the globe and the planetary are all set in orbit. As the countdown ends, we see a crack in the earth open, and with a kind of prescience, as if to reach across the past four decades of our ecological idiom, the next shot is of a dark, right, carbon footprint, as we say. The next shot is of a tree trunk whose rings are being read, narrated, by the voice of a woman who tells the stories of the past five decades; where the counting was down from ten to one, she tells what happened fifty, thirty or fifteen years ago. We learn the moment when the "ast boy died," when "Marie died," and when the "you" being addressed was born. And we learn that this band of women have been nomads for some fifteen years.

Another of the few readers of this film, Glenn Erickson, refers to the women of the film as "Amazon butchers" (www.dvdtalk.com). More disturbing than the adolescent responses to words of romantic love are the behaviors we see when the women come face to face with the animals also roaming this depopulated world: dogs, snakes, and ultimately a milk cow. Monique Wittig's 1969 harbinger of feminist u- and dystopias in her novel, *Les Guérillères*, also revived Amazon tropes for her world of women and few men; that text is equally astonishing in its emergence on the cusp of second wave feminism in Europe and the United States. Amazon riders these Czech women are: bareback on a white horse; in the pamphlet accompanying the DVD, the director tells us that some of the women cast in the film were members of the Czech army. Some were chosen not only on the basis of their physical strengths, but also for their exceptional and conventional beauty, providing the cinematic pleasures that presume spectatorship. Such has been the convention of the Amazon warrior woman—sensuous, powerful, dangerous and barbaric, even. They have served as imaginary mythos of women's collectivity, projective screen for the terrors of the displaced patriarchs.

When the mother/woman disciplines and punishes a young woman by slapping her across the face, she goes to her horse for comfort. The relations of the women to animals are volatile, erratic, fearful and violent. We first see the women playing with a dog, only to realize that they fear it, and they shoot it as soon as they have watched it run after some objects they have thrown at it so as to chase it away. A small snake is decapitated with a kind of perverse curiosity. And, most dramatically, a cow is shot and disemboweled.

While these women may seem anonymous and nearly interchangeable in their lack of character development, yet three of them are called by name by the old woman who may or may not be the biological mother of one of them. They are called Judith, Barbara, and Eva: names of founding women in the Bible, and Saint Barbara, venerated in the Eastern Orthodox Christian church, whose name means "barbarian woman," and who is the patron saint of artillerymen. Names and the individuals who bear them do matter; when the older woman narrated their history by the tree rings, she spoke of "Maria." For as much as this scenario suggests an empty anonymity, even as they function as an intimate group, we don't hear the women call each other by any names at all. If the amazon myth were more enabling of the imaginary (of women), they might by now have given each other or acquired heroic names.

Writing is also found in these unnatural ruins: chalk symbols of circles and arrows, and finally a classic primitive stick figure. The older woman seems filled with the hope that someone has recently passed through this abandoned space, only to discover that one of the young women has been making these marks on the walls with a natural chalk she has found—the beginnings of art and writing. Yet we are not witnesses to this act and no one of the seven women emerges to claim this signature, authorial gesture; once again, replaying anonymity within collectivity.

This is a film with minimal dialogue, nevertheless there comes a moment when more words will emerge: at a sudden turn in their peregrinations, searching for people, the elder says there "used to be a bridge...everything is different." Memory will drive the remainder of *her* narrative, while for the younger women, fiction and history will come to life. She recollects her girlhood at the river, and her

encounter with the man soon thereafter also takes her back to her name and another time in the past. The cow they killed for food turns out to belong to the man they meet; this encounter divides the film in two. For with this meeting their seeming end of times confronts time past where he continues to live, awaiting some possible future. That he is a "man" needs affirmation and confirmation from the older woman. We are given to understand that they have not seen a man before. And he exclaims, upon seeing the group, "oh, children! The future has come!"

In a shot that functions as the obverse of the falling tree that opened onto the barren country, there is a jump cut that marks the second part of the film where we are looking down onto a striped open outdoor umbrella which covers the round table where all the women are now gathered as guests, as the man brings to the table a serving tray that holds glasses of milk. In this scene the older, leader-woman is smiling for the first time, even as she warns that they haven't had milk in over fifteen years. But just as unfamiliar as what the glasses hold are the glasses themselves. One of the women drops hers, and watches it shatter—a phenomenon that produces a dumbfounded surprise. Destruction they know; breakability and vulnerability are more destabilizing moments.

This accident leads the older woman to break down sobbing. Soon thereafter, she is taken ill and the man is glad to be able to care for her, though he apologizes about having no medicines—only some liquor he mixes with lemon and cloves as a home remedy. As the older woman faces what she seems to know is her death, we watch the young women explore his home and hotel.

The hotel becomes their schoolhouse: a mirror scene, a book about chess—a game he tries to teach the young women—a television ("there's nothing on in the morning"), a map of the world, the last newspaper from twenty years ago that speaks about "trouble in the Middle East" and "an explosion on a Pacific atoll," and the man explains that the "next day everything was gone." When he is not teaching the young women, he is nursing the older one. His feminized civilizing functions are clear. He and the older woman at last introduce themselves to each other with first and last names. She smiles again as she hears him speak her name, and address her as if she is known—the recognition deeply desired at the moment of her death.

Along with names and stories is the humanizing and civilizing effect of music; an eager teacher, the old man shows them around his hotel-home reproducing an itinerary of cultural milestones: from the lacanian mirror—a thing they have never seen—through to the end of the world as he and Madame Hubertova had known it. However, as eager as he is to teach, the willingness of the women to learn is in serious question. His gramophone is the treasured object they steal from him in their abrupt departure after the death of their mother-leader. His entreaties to stay, to live with him and make the hotel a home, to wait out the winter there, are bluntly and again brutally refused.

To return to my opening concerns and speculations. What the young women have and know is a broken sense of any past, archived in the tree of their bare knowledge; a legacy of minimal care in the company of their elders because that is all they have left to offer of their ruined histories; no mutual recognition among them of those mirrored selves they briefly caught a glimpse of; no strategic sense of the wide world they inhabit, empty as it may be. And finally, no seeming wish to know and be known as their elders longed for and valued. Only the nomadic is familiar to them. Only the daily hunt for survival and shelter. Where their elders were preserving shards of a past, and searching for a future, they are rather focused on a present that promises to be as void as the journey that brought them to the Hotel Ozone. As spectators of this scenario decades later, we can only hope that their collectivity, their pack, their band and bond will bring music to that void. It is, after all, the music that they attempt to take away with them from the Hotel Ozone, to fill the empty cosmos with some song they have yet—but may never get—to sing.¹

¹ I wish to thank Alfred Thomas who shared his unpublished essay on this film with me; Lee Quinby and John Keefe tracked down the lyrics to the song we know in America as the "Beer Barrel Polka," which was a popular love song in its Czech version; this song is the sole surviving piece of recorded music at the Hotel Ozone.

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