Directed by František Vláčil
Written by Frantisek Pavlícek and František Vlácil
Based on the novel by Vladislav Vancura
Original Music by Zdenek Liska
Cinematography by Bedrich Batka
Film Editing by Miroslav Hájek
Costume Design by Theodor Pistek

Josef Kemr...Kozlík
Magda Vásáryová...Marketa Lazarova
Nada Hejna...Katerina
Jaroslav Moucka...Jan
František Velecký...Mikolás
Karel Vasiczek...Jirí
Ivan Palúch...Adam 'One-handed'
Martin Mrázek...Václav
Václav Sloup...Simon
Pavla Polaskova...Alexandria
Alena Pavlíková...Drahuse
Michal Kozuch...Lazar


Walerian Borowczyk: František Vláčil: an introduction
The recent retrospectives and DVD boxes of films by the long-neglected Japanese master Mikio Naruse serve to emphasise the wealth of important cinema that still remains to be discovered outside the established canons. František Vláčil (1924-1999) may be Naruse’s closest equivalent in Czech cinema, not because their aesthetic and thematic preoccupations have much in common, but because he’s an unquestionably major talent who has been almost entirely ignored outside his native country, except in the most specialist critical circles.

And yet the first few shots of Marketa Lazarová (1967) alone make it clear that here is an artist with a quite exceptional cinematic sensibility. Taking an overwhelmingly visual approach, Vláčil thrusts the viewer straight into an alarmingly convincing medieval environment without so much as a by-your-leave, from the opening dolly shot of a pack of wolves roaming the snowy wastes, through the early scenes in which the camera appears to crouch amongst the foliage as if trying to hide from both human and natural predators. It’s a disorientating experience, but also an exhilarating one, its sheer sweep and ambition and its intricate visual poetry amply compensating for any first-time bewilderment, and its elemental physicality made it unprecedented in both Czech and world cinema.

Born on 19 February 1924, Vláčil originally studied art history and aesthetics before spending the 1950s dabbling in various media (including puppet animation) before turning to live-action filmmaking. Initially seconded to the Czech Army Film Unit, for
whom he made documentaries (and gained useful experience in working under difficult conditions), he first made his reputation with the Venice Film Festival prizewinner Glass Skies (Skleněná oblaka, 1957), a 20-minute short that tells a virtually wordless story of a young boy and an old man bonding through their shared love of flying. He then made Pursuit (Pronásledování), part of the portmanteau film No Admittance (Vstup zakázán, 1959).

Vláčil’s feature debut came in 1960 with The White Dove (Holubice), which represented Czechoslovakia at that year’s Venice Film Festival and is considered one of the first films to be made in the spirit of what eventually became the Czechoslovak New Wave. A low-key fantasy, not dissimilar to Albert Lamorisse’s classic The Red Balloon (Le Ballon rouge, 1956), it crosscuts the experiences of a young girl in an unnamed Baltic country awaiting the arrival of the homing pigeon of the title, a wheelchair-bound boy in Prague who inadvertently intercepts it, and his neighbour, an artist who tries to teach him the importance of respecting living creatures through his preferred medium. As with many of Vláčil’s films, dialogue is kept to a barely functional minimum, as he prefers to explore his themes through a strikingly inventive use of landscape and architectural space. It also marked his first collaboration with the prodigiously inventive composer Zdeněk Liška, who would score all his films for the next seventeen years.

Vláčil then made the first of several trips into the distant past, turning to 16th-century Bohemia for The Devil’s Trap (Dáblová past, 1961), a thinly veiled political allegory in which the Inquisition investigates a man on suspicion of being in cahoots with the Devil, because of his seemingly supernatural knowledge of his local environment — which is actually a product of ancient family secrets passed through the generations.

Then came Marketa Lazarová, Vláčil’s third feature and his acknowledged masterpiece. It was shot on a huge budget over a two-year period, during which Vláčil immersed himself in the medieval era both in terms of study and physical reconstruction. He told the critic Antonín Liehm that “whenever I watch a historical film, I always felt as if I were seeing contemporary people all dressed up in historical costumes. I wanted to understand them, see through the eyes of their lives, their feelings, their desires - in short, I wanted to drop back seven centuries.” Largely ignored by the West, which tended to associate Czech cinema with low-key humanist dramas of Miloš Forman and Jiří Menzel, it was voted the best Czech film of all time by a poll conducted in 1998.

Vláčil stayed in the medieval era for Valley of the Bees (Údolí včel, 1967), though stylistically it was quite different. Whereas Marketa was wild and untamed, Valley is formal and rigorous, appropriate for its theme of a young man (Petr Čepík) forcibly raised as a member of the Teutonic Order of St Mary of Jerusalem and required to dedicate every fibre of his being to their cause, renouncing family and earthly pleasures alike. He eventually escapes and returns to his old home, where he falls in love with his stepmother — technically incest, despite their lack of blood ties. There’s also a thinly veiled gay subtext of a kind that was highly unusual for 1960s cinema generally, never mind from a Communist country.

The last of Vláčil’s films that’s reasonably accessible to English speakers is the 1969 Adelheid. Shot in colour for the first time since his 1950s shorts, it was set at the end of World War II, at a time when Germans were declared second-class citizens and expelled from Czechoslovakia, regardless of whether they’d lived there all their lives. Petr Čepík again stars as a Czech airman who returns to his native country to reclaim an estate formerly held by a Nazi collaborator. He discovers that the German’s daughter Adelheid is working as a general dogbody, and the two begin a wary relationship, hampered by their lack of knowledge of each other’s languages and a secret that she withholds from him until the film is nearly over.

After Adelheid, Vláčil found his career hampered by state opposition. After a few years’ making short films for children (one of which, the 50-minute Širius, 1974, won the Grand Prix at the Tehran Children’s Film Festival) and a documentary on Prague’s Art Nouveau history, he returned to fiction features with Smoke on the Potato Fields (Dým bramborové natě, 1976), a simple, lyrical story about a lonely doctor who copes with his wife’s permanent emigration by relocating to a small provincial town that reminds him of his childhood. This was followed in quick succession by Shadows of a Hot Summer (Stíny horkého léta, 1977), a kind of Moravian Straw Dogs in which a man is forced to draw on his darkest impulses to protect his family from a gang of bandits. It shared the Grand Prix at the Karlovy Vary Film Festival.

Vláčil’s final films have barely been seen outside his native country. Concert at the End of Summer (Koncert na konci léta, 1979) was a biography of the composer Antonín Dvořák, made to mark the 75th anniversary of his death. Serpent’s Poison (Hadí pepek) forcibly raises him from Czechoslovakia at that year’s Venice Film Festival. The last of Vláčil’s films that’s reasonably accessible to English speakers is the 1969 Adelheid. Shot in colour for the first time since his 1950s shorts, it was set at the end of World War II, at a time when Germans were declared second-class citizens and expelled from Czechoslovakia, regardless of whether they’d lived there all their lives. Petr Čepík again stars as a Czech airman who returns to his native country to reclaim an estate formerly held by a Nazi collaborator. He discovers that the German’s daughter Adelheid is working as a general dogbody, and the two begin a wary relationship, hampered by their lack of knowledge of each other’s languages and a secret that she withholds from him until the film is nearly over.

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lifetime achievement award at the 1998 Karlovy Vary Film Festival, just months before his death on 28 January 1999.

At the time of writing, four of Vláčil’s 1960s films are available on English-subtitled DVDs of varying quality. The best by miles, and a clear first choice for Vláčil beginners, is Second Run’s new release of Marketa Lazarová (Region 0 PAL). The other three are on the Facets label (Region 0 NTSC), and range from flawed but adequate (Valley of the Bees, Adelheid) to VHS quality at best (The White Dove). Further reading

Peter Hames has written extensively about František Vláčil in the books The Czechoslovak New Wave and The Cinema of Central Europe (both Wallflower Press), the booklet accompanying Second Run’s DVD of Marketa Lazarová and one-off articles such as ‘In the Shadow of the Werewolf’ (Kinoeye, 16 October 2000). Facets’ Vláčil DVD releases are accompanied by 12-page booklets with an informative essay by Susan Doll. Czech Speakers have far more material to draw on, starting with this extensive tribute website hosted by Nostalghia.cz - with plenty of illustrations on offer for those who can’t read the text.

František Vláčil (1924-99) was not a member of the famous Czech New Wave of the 1960s, nor a product of the Prague Film School (FAMU). He originally studied art and aesthetics in Brno before working in both puppet and documentary film. This was followed by a stint in the Czech Army Film Unit, where he made over 30 instructional films and documentaries. He first attracted international attention with his poetic documentary, Skleněná oblaka (Glass Skies, 1957), which was awarded a prize at the Venice Film Festival. His fiction debut, Pronásledování (Pursuit aka Persecution), was part of a two episode feature, Vstup zakázán (No Admittance, 1959). It was followed a year later by his feature debut, Holubice (The White Dove, 1960), which won further awards at Venice, for Vláčil and his cinematographer, Jan Čufík.

Vláčil’s preoccupation with the visual image was apparent from the beginning and a concern to make visually sophisticated works served him well. He never made Socialist Realist films (i.e. the works of propaganda) but focused on humanist and historical themes that could be interpreted through wider perspectives. The White Dove was selected by the European Federation of Cinematography in 2003 as one of the 100 films representing “the art of cinematography at its best”. It tells the story of a dove blown off course to Prague. A small boy shoots it with an air gun, but it is rescued by an artist living in the same apartment. Together they resuscitate the bird and prepare it for its eventual release. The film’s general humanist theme promotes a world without borders, with its central character, the artist/sculptor, acting as a healing mentor. This somewhat schematic premise nonetheless provides the basis for a complex poetic work based on images and associative editing. Zoë Bicât wrote that the lyricism of Curik’s photography conveyed its “ideas through poetic association, a feature more present here than in previous films from the Eastern bloc”.

Vláčil’s second film, Dáblova past (The Devil’s Trap, 1961), the first of his historical films, was set during the Counter Reformation. It tells of a miller, whose understanding of nature, caverns, and the sources of water, is considered supernatural. The Jesuits are in search of scapegoats and, because of his knowledge, the miller is deemed to be in league with the Devil. Not for the first time, the history portrayed had contemporary parallels. The film also continued with Vláčil’s emphasis on “film poetry”, with the strength of formal composition, tenderness of its love scenes, and a sense of history as something present, which looked forward to his later works.

With Marketa Lazarová, Vláčil approached a novel by Vladislav Vančura, which was first published in 1931. Vančura, one of the leading Czech novelists, was a member of most of the experimental art movements of the period and was the first chair of the avant garde Devětsil group. He was also a prolific author of (unfilmed) screenplays, and had directed or co-directed five feature films in the 1930s. In his film work, he aimed to take cinema in new formal directions, experimenting with both sound and montage in such films as Na sluneční straně (On the Sunnyside, 1933) and Marijka nevěrnice (Faithless Marijka, 1934), the last of which featured acclaimed composer Bohuslav Martinů’s only film score. Vančura’s novels emphasised the poetic and experimental use of language. As a result, it presented obvious problems for film adaptation, although Jiří Menzel
successfully brought two of Vančura’s other novels to the screen as comedies: Rozmarné léto (Capricious Summer, 1967) and Konec starých časů (The End of Old Times, 1989).

While Marketa Lazarová was inspired by Vančura’s novel, it remains very different. A short text has been converted into a vast epic that bears comparison, in different ways with each, to Kurosawa’s Shichinin no Samurai (Seven Samurai, 1954) and Tarkovsky’s Andrei Roublëv (1966). It was also inspired by motifs from Vančura’s Obrazy z dějin národa českého (Pictures from the History of the Czech Nation, 1939-40). And if Vančura’s original novel provided no historical clues and was designed to be autonomous, Vláčil’s film was set very specifically in the mid-13th century, a time he attempted to evoke with the utmost accuracy.

Vláčil wanted times to appear as if they were present, portraying characters as though they were our contemporaries, but also showing the world through their eyes, beliefs, and feelings. He studied tribes living at the same “level” of social development, ensured that weapons and implements were made according to the original methods, and forced his cast to “live” their parts in a location shoot lasting over two years.

Vláčil’s approach to history was in marked contrast to the Hollywood romantic epic, but also to Otakar Vávra’s Hussite trilogy (1954056) where history became the servant of ideology. Yet, despite this re-creation of reality and the desire to present an authentic world, Marketa Lazarová is also an experimental film, with an unorthodox structure, and a variety of different narrative techniques. As Emory Menefee and Ernest Callenbach wrote in Film quarterly: “The film is initially as confusing as it would be to arrive in such an alien culture”.

The narrative is centered on a series of short episodes or Tableaux, which Vláčil has likened to chapters of a romanesque novel, or the movements of a musical work. Describing the finished film as a “Film-Opera”, he argued that the final structure was very close to that of Janáček’s Sinfonietta.

The film is divided into two major sections: Straba (Straba the Werewolf) and Beránek Bozi (The Holy Lamb/Angus Dei). In Straba the Werewolf, we are introduced to the two Kozlík brothers, Mikolás (Frantisek Velecký) and Adam (Ivan Palúch), who launch a merciless attack on a Saxon count and his brothers, Mikolás (Frantisek Velecký) and Adam (Ivan Palúch), in the context of the film’s unrelenting violence. Christianity and paganism. The old men (Kozlik, Pivo) show little weakness in their relentless struggles for dominance.

In The Holy Lamb, we are introduced to a simple-minded monk called Bernard (Vladimir Mensik), who travels everywhere with his pet lamb. He introduces a comic element to the story and serves as a narrative link between the film’s increasingly diverse plot elements, which include the death of Adam at the hands of the king’s troops and a horrific battle with the Kozliks that ends with young Kristián going insane.

In the film’s final section, the relationship between Mikolás and Marketa ripens into one of love, while Alexandra kills the mad Kristián. Marketa returns to her father, only to be rejected by him. She enters a convent, but as she takes her vows she recognizes the hypocrisy of the institution. On hearing that Mikolás has attacked the prison where his father is now held captive, Marketa joins him, becoming his wife shortly before he dies from his battle wounds.

From this complex narrative, two general themes emerge: the struggle between central authority and the clans, and between Christianity and paganism. The old men (Kozlik, Pivo) show little weakness in their relentless struggles for dominance. Mikolás, the film’s “conventional” hero, only appears less extreme in the context of the film’s unrelenting violence. Christianity and paganism are presented as parallel forces, with scenes that suggest that organized religion stands in opposition to natural freedom. In one sequence, the closing door of the convent to which Marketa has been consigned by her father is contrasted with the startled flight of a deer.

The film is not “anti-religious” in a way that reflects Communist propaganda. Vláčil rather suggests a parallel with the dogmas of “socialism”. In an interview with Antonin J. Liehm in 1969, he observed: “recently I’ve come to feel that socialist thinking has in fact stopped developing, and turned into a religion, in which the dogmas and principles are untouchable. If you take a poke at them, you are a heretic. The historical material in my films occasionally makes me realize that it is a much better way to disclose contemporary problems”.

After the Kozlíks have brought the noble’s son, young Kristián (Vlastimil Harapés), and his servant to their camp, there is a major conflict between Old Kozlík (Josef Kemr) and Mikolás, his eldest son, for allowing the escape of Old Kristián, and for sparing young Kristián. We are also introduced to Alexandra (Pavla Polášková), sister of Mikolás and Adam, although this is anything but clear at this stage. The mutual attraction between Alexandra and the captured young Kristián also becomes apparent. Pivo, commander of the king’s army, comes to arrest Old Kozlík for his crimes, but Kozlík escapes and a proclamation is issued calling for the pursuit of his clan.

When Mikolás goes to Lazar (Michal Kozuch) in search of an alliance against the king, he is savagely beaten under the watching eyes of Lazar’s daughter, Marketa (Magda Vásáryová). In retaliation, the Kozlíks attack the Lazar stronghold and Mikolás kidnaps Marketa, leaving Lazar nailed to the gates of his burning fortress. At a secret hideout in the woods, Marketa is raped by Mikolás. Old Kozlík’s wife tells the story of Straba the werewolf, “who is from the line of men”.

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However, the film’s most distinctive qualities lie in its formal originality and aesthetic impact. In his student days, Vláčil once drew Eisenstein’s *Bроненосец Потёмkin* (The Battleship Potemkin, 1926) frame by frame. That same attention to detail can be seen in his sketches for the storyboards for Marketa Lazarová. At the same time, Marketa Lazarová, despite being a wide screen historical epic, can almost be viewed as an avant garde work. While perhaps less obviously radical than the work of a Godard or a Janscó, Vláčil’s approach to narrative is highly unconventional and, together with his use of mise-en-scene, promotes an unusual relationship with the viewer.

Recounting, the “story” or narration in the conventional sense is not the film’s primary point of interest and the plot development is often obscure, certainly on the first viewing. Vláčil is much more interested in the reaction and interplay of character and object—the subjective and psychological world. The use of inter-titles, which function much like the chapters of an old chronicle or picaresque novel, provide succinct summaries of what is to follow, occasionally offering only explanatory clues. However, Vláčil also uses other methods of narration, including the voice of a narrator, stories, and monologues. Dialogue and dramatic exchange off-screen frequently interacts overlaps with the staging of quite separate action. The distinction between flashback and parallel action is sometimes confused. The film’s conventional narrative interest—the changing relationship between Nikolás and Marketa—is anything but central. Reinforced by the fact that there is only one dialogue exchange between them. Battles and action sequences are fragmented and incomplete, having been designed primarily to reflect the psychological state of the combatants. Vláčil makes striking use of composition within the frame, freely admitting to the influence of painting. He also makes extensive use of deep space (and depth of field) to achieve some of the most forceful uses of the cinemascope format, extending to extreme close-up composition and contradictory images or parallel actions within the frame. Subjective camerawork is used extensively and, despite the concern with composition, the camera is almost never still. In one scene, where Pivo is staying with the Lazars, he is not seen at all, with only his voice participating in the action.

Zdena Skapová argues that Vláčil’s narrative is very much a response to Vancura’s original, where the narrator is an active participant in the action. The multiplicity of narrative approaches helps to re-create the immediacy of a story where “the whole” remains hidden. Similarly, Vláčil’s emphasis on the expressive power of the image—direct experience—communicates through a poetic power that mirrors Vancura’s concern for the emotional significance of words.

As a “Film-Opera”, the role of music is paramount and Zdenek Liska was to prove an ideal collaborator. A prolific composer of scores for both Czech and Slovak films, Liska is well-known for his work with Juraj Herz and Jan Svankmajer. In Marketa Lazarová, he employed electronic and echoing percussive effects, as well as xylophone. He even invented new instruments. At the same time, the score is linked to the early traditions of church music….

While the film always maintains its narrative links, it is difficult to find any scenes that present their subject matter in an orthodox way. This is less because Vláčil is opposing classical narrative and more the result of extending it through a process of “making strange” or “making difficult”, to adopt Viktor Shklovsky’s terms. We see and experience feelings and image that are repressed in conventional films.

There are some striking set pieces, including the “paradise sonata” (Adam and Alexandra) and “the soliloquy of madmen” (Kristián’s journey through an apocalyptic landscape) but, for most of the film, we are visiting a world in which there is a complex but coherent web of relationships. However, we are visitors to this world, and, like the characters themselves, our understanding is incomplete. As many Czech critics have noted, the film signified a new approach to history without moral or ideological messages, in which the lives and wills of individuals interacted with ongoing forces.

Despite a number of international awards, the radicalism of Vláčil’s film was not recognized at the time. Perhaps its historical subject and the fact that it was not sufficiently polemical for the period accounted for this. Its “extension” of conventional narrative may have just seemed too confused (the poetry of The White Dove had also offended some of the more radical Italian critics). Even its international exposure the year after the Prague Spring and the Paris events of 1968 worked against it. Yet, as the 1998 Czech survey has indicated, it remains a remarkable and unique film.

The film’s leading actress, Magda Vásáryová, went on to become a major star of Czech and Slovak films, appearing in work by Juraj Jakubisko, Jiri Menzel, Jaromil Jires, and Dusan Hanák among others. She was originally slated for the lead role in *Sophie’s Choice*. Since 1989, she has followed a career in diplomacy, as Czechoslovakia’s ambassador to Austria, Slovak ambassador to Poland, and an independent Presidential candidate in Slovakia….

While Marketa Lazarová is Vláčil’s outstanding work, his total output is certainly worthy of reassessment given its consistency and achievement. It was recently the subject of a fascinating feature film, *Sentiment* (2003), directed by Tomás Hejtmanek. Based on tape recordings made with Vláčil before his death, the words are re-enacted by the actor, Jiri Kodet. The close ups of Kodet (as Vláčil) are then juxtaposed with highly evocative shots
of the locations from Marketa Lazarová, Valley of the Bees, and Adelheid, sometimes with extracts from the soundtracks overlaid. The striking photography by Jaromir Kacer makes an effective tribute to one of cinema’s supreme visual artists.

After the gothic trip-out The Devil's Trap(1961)—his only film to be released here, but not included in the BAM series—Vlácil spent some five years adapting Vladislav Vancura's complex novel Marketa Lazarová. Recently voted the greatest Czech film of all time, this crazed musk ox of a movie (1967), a nightmare epic about warring medieval tribes, brands you with images of one-of-a-kind pagan muscularity. The least that could be said is that it's the most convincing film about the Middle Ages made anywhere. Lyricaly eliding bloody hunks of plot, and dropping us down into the historical current at seemingly indiscriminate intervals, Vláčil achieves a rampaging forward momentum—never has an impenetrably plotted movie been so riveting.

Outside of a rapidly made sequel—the gorgeous if slight Valley of the Bees(1967)—Vláčil had already run out of luck. Once Soviet cultural enforcement began in earnest at the end of 1969, many of the Czech director-stars emigrated, and Vláčil's films became small-boned and cinematographically pedestrian. His first color film, Adelheid(1969), typified his perspective from then on—a small story about the uneasy ghosts lingering in the days after World War II. Likewise, Hot Summer Shadows(1977) is a non-thriller about a post-war gang of escaped SS holding a farm family hostage. Smoke on the Potato Fields(1976) and Serpent's Poison(1981) are less dependent on WWII's sociological turmoil, but the filmmaking is just as garden-variety. Who knows if the Soviets squashed Vláčil, or if the extraordinary labor of Marketa Lazarová cleaned him out by itself. He kept working under various degrees of governmental control for another 18 years, and died in 1999. Among cinema history's many crash-and-burn biographies, Vláčil's requires an international reawakening, if only for Marketa Lazarová, and that watchful wolf pack standing in the snowy wastes.

Michael Atkinson: Plastic Fantastic Bohemian Rhapsodies
(Village Voice)
One of the most inspired subjects for a metro-etro in years (BAMcinématek, June 7 through 28), Frantisek Vláčil was, with just a handful of films to prove it, the Czech New Wave's formalist, post-expressionist wrecking ball. In the modest window between Moscow's Twentieth Congress in '56 and the tanks of '68, Forman, Passer, and Menzel made Bohemia safe for the Oscars, Juraj Jakubisko pursued his orgiastic apocalypses, and Jan Nemec crystallized the Kafkaesque suffocation of extra-Soviet life. But briefly, Vláčil was the idiosyncrat and the image master, first trumping his compatriots' notions of nouvelle-ness with 1960's The White Dove.

Vláčil is known for having pursued what he termed "pure film," and his best movies display a lackadaisical attitude toward narrative clarity and a hypnotic plastic originality. An abstracted tale about modern civilization visited by and visiting upon a symbolic flock of doves, The White Dove bristles with startling iconography: a junk heap emitting crowds of white birds, a cat-dove duel in a multi-story outdoor elevator shaft, a life-size clay boy without a face that acts, somehow, as a vehicle for the doves' liberation. Pure is one word for it—The White Dove is a Rorschach blot, but visually, it's also as beautifully conceived as any European movie of the '60s.

COMING UP IN THE FALL 2011 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XXIII:

October 25 The Last Wave, Peter Weir (1977)
November 1 True Confessions, Ulu Grosbard (1981)
November 8 Chunking Express/Chung Hing sam lam, Wong Kar-Wei (1994)
November 22 Frida, Julie Taymor (2002)
November 29 Revanche, Götz Spielmann (2008)
December 6 My Fair Lady, George Cukor (1964)

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