

4-1-2013

## For Country, For Women: Women Directors in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Romania

Kathleen McEneaney  
*Grand Valley State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cine>

 Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

McEneaney, Kathleen (2013) "For Country, For Women: Women Directors in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Romania," *Cinesthesia*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.  
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cine/vol2/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Cinesthesia by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

## **For Country, For Women Women Directors in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Romania**

Women have been involved in film since the creation of the industry over 120 years ago. However, the roles for women have been rather limited; they were either in front of the camera, shoved in the costume or makeup department, or fulfilled the duties of “script girl.” While women have been able to expand the roles offered to them in the film industry, there is still an extreme shortage of women in the technical departments, including directing. Cochran writes, “In a study published last year, Professor Martha Lauzen of San Diego State University found that only 9% of Hollywood directors in 2008 were women—the same figure she had recorded in 1998” (Cochrane np). While they are by no means a large force within the industry, female directors are fighting to create their works and leave an impact, often while telling the stories of women and issues that are prevalent to women. This is also true for the film industry in Central and Eastern Europe. While the number of women directors is not any higher than in Hollywood, women directors helped shape the cinema culture in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Hungary, and Poland and continue to make an impact and receive recognition for their work and their country as a whole.

Czech cinema would not be the same today without the works of Vera Chytilová. As one of the founding members of the Czech New Wave, Chytilová was the creator of an entirely new poetic within Czech cinema. As the only woman in the New Wave group of directors, Chytilová brought stories focused on women to the movement, as well as experimental film techniques. Chytilová’s first films centered more on the lives of women rather than the experimental nature of film. One of her first films was a short titled “Ceiling,” focusing on the main character’s critical view of the fashion industry and her eventual return to her career path as a doctor. The people within the fashion world are shown to be superficial and women are controlled by men within the industry; even the voice-over of the main character’s inner monologue is performed by a man (Hames 169).

Chytilová’s *Something Different* (1963) expanded on the comparison of women’s lives within society’s expectations. The film follows the lives of a gymnastic Olympic

hopeful and a housewife. The film juxtaposes the gymnast's structured life with the housewife's lack of direction and subsequent love affair (Hames 169). Chytilová uses editing to create parallels and comparisons between the lives of the two women who otherwise have no connection to one another. While the two main characters' lives never intersect, Chytilová parallels the two women's experience of questioning the point and purpose of their lives (Cieslar n.p.). This questioning is common to the female experience: career or family? Can one have both? And once the decision is made, was it the right one? Through this film, Chytilová presents these doubts as a common experience, but suggests there are many ways to deal with these doubts, some more successful than others.

Chytilová's next project was one that revolutionized Czech film. *Pearls of the Deep* (1966) was a collaboration between the unofficial founders of the Czech New Wave: Jaromil Jireš, Jiří Menzel, Jan Němec, Evald Schorm, and Chytilová. Each director took a short story from Bohumil Hrabal's collection of the same name and created a short film from it. Chytilová's contribution, "The Restaurant the World," juxtaposes a wedding and death in a surreal, non-linear storyline that serves as a transition to the more structured *Something Different to Daisies*.

Chytilová's next film *Daisies* (1966) is a world away from her previous works. While her other films used themes and techniques that were not uncommon in film language, *Daisies* was extreme in its presentation and formal techniques. Chytilová plays with all aspects of film: color, setting, perspective, narrative structure, sound, and character. Chytilová warps these features to the point of absurdity to convey her criticism of selfish indulgence and mindless apathy. While the subject matter in *Daisies* was not new, the method of conveying it was.



Because Chytilová chose to stay in the Czech Republic during the Soviet Occupation, she was prevented from making films from 1970 to 1976 (Hames 173). However, she made her case against the allegations that she had "adopted an elitist

stance” and made “uncommitted and pessimistic films that were experimental by nature, overvalued by critics, and appreciated in the West” (Hames 173). Chytilová was able to rebuke these claims, writing a letter to the president at the time, summing up the blacklisting as part of the chauvinism within the industry (Hames 173).

The first film Chytilová directed after the ban was lifted was *The Apple Game* in 1977. While some describe *The Apple Game* as “...the most orthodox of Chytilová’s films and presented in a conventional narrative format,” it does focus on feminist themes and is reminiscent of *Daisies* (Hames 173).

The film focuses on the story of a young nurse who is impregnated by a womanizing doctor. While the doctor initially rejects the nurse, by the end of the film she rejects him and chooses to raise the baby on her own. She refuses to submit to the “normal” ideals by being with the doctor; refusing to just be resigned to “dirty dishes and dirty laundry” (Hames 173). Chytilová references her previous works by including a song from her film *The Fruit of Paradise* and having the doctor mistake Marie II from *Daisies* as the nurse (Hames 173).

While Chytilová’s films have not been as popular with audiences since the 1990’s, she revolutionized the Czech industry for women directors (Cockrell 30). From being the only woman in her class at FAMU to bringing feminist viewpoints and issues to light in film, Chytilová paved the way for current Czech women directors, such as Alice Nellis. Nellis is a member of the new generation of Czech filmmakers and attempts to integrate the style of the 1960’s New Wave and mainstream to appeal to a wider audience. Nellis’ films often focus on female characters and issues. Most of the characters in *Some Secrets* are female and the road trip, which is the focus of the film, is caused by the Grandmother’s insistence to spread her son’s ashes in his hometown.

The women propel the plot (Holland 31). *Little Girl Blue* is centered around the midlife crisis of a middle-aged woman, spanning a day in Prague. *Mamas and Papas* focuses on pregnancy and children, a topic often emphasized in feminist works. From abortion to in-vitro fertilization to adoption to the death of a child, Nellis covers a wide range of topics told through four different, but connecting narratives (Scheib 9).

Nellis brings a feminist perspective to modern Czech film, which would be near impossible without the previous trailblazing done by Vera Chytilová.

Women directors who focus on women's stories and characters are not limited to just the Czech Republic. Hungary is represented by a female director whose work has been recognized and spans many years: Marta Meszaros. While Meszaros is most known for her "Diary" film series, she has made many other films that concentrate on feminist issues and topics. Like Nellis, Meszaros' main characters tend to be strong, independent women who decide to take control of their own lives. As she describes them, "An independent woman – one who finds herself in a situation where she must make a decision on her own – is the central character in each of the pictures I have made so far" (Martineau 23).

Meszaros' career began in documentary with her first film *Faces Smiling Again* (1954), and she has continued to make a mixture of documentaries, film shorts, and feature films ("I'm for liberal" np). Meszaros' first feature film, *The Girl* (1968), tells the story of a young woman who meets her birth parents after being raised in a state-run orphanage (NYT np). *The Girl* was extremely successful and Meszaros continued to feature strong women who take control of their own lives in her continued works. Some examples include *Adoption*, *Nine Months*, and *Women (The Two of Them)* (Martineau 23). Each addresses questions about feminism and what it means to be a woman in different ways.

*Adoption* focuses on two women each of whom feels they are stuck in life and long for something more. For the older woman who is stuck in a loveless affair with a married man, it is the dream of a child. For the younger woman from the orphanage, it is to marry her boyfriend. Although each eventually gets what she wants, the women are not portrayed as happy in the end, which challenges the societal ideal that a woman must get married and have children to truly be happy (Lopez np). As the title implies, Meszaros' film *Women (The Two of Them)*, focuses on the relationship between two women. Each has a dysfunctional relationship with her husband, which is juxtaposed with their strength

and self-confidence in their public lives and their relationship with each other (Martineau 24).

While *Nine Months* does not focus on a relationship between two women, Meszaros described the main character Juli as

...The most conscious and most mature of all the female characters in my films. She once had a straight-forward, true love affair out of which she had a child she wanted and is strong enough to raise it. She works hard to earn money for the upkeep of her child, and has strength enough left to complete the studies she was forced to break off because of her confinement. (Martineau 23)

While Juli's boss wishes to marry her, she refuses. They eventually start a relationship, but "...when she comes to believe that he will not learn from her, that he will not respect her integrity, she leaves him, to have her second child alone" (Martineau 24). Juli is fiercely independent, unafraid to leave a relationship that does not work and raise children by herself. Like *Adoption* and *Women (Two of Them)*, *Nine Months* calls the ideas of motherhood and society's expectations of what women should want into question.

While Meszaros is still active in film-making, with her latest work produced this year, other Hungarian women directors have started to develop bodies of work that discuss the similar issues. One example is Ágnes Kocsis. While Kocsis has only made two feature-length films so far, she has already developed a distinct personal film poetics (notes np). She uses minimal dialogue, muted and dreary colors, and an overall atmosphere that is strongly present in her current work (notes np).

In addition to establishing her poetics, Kocsis' first film, *Fresh Air* (2006), focuses on a theme used in Meszaros' work: a relationship between two women, a mother and a daughter. Viola is a bathroom attendant in the



subway and is attempting to find companionship, while her daughter Angela dreams of becoming a famous fashion designer. The two women do not communicate well and only bond over their mutual love of a television show, even though the two are more alike than either realizes. Kocsis has shown great potential in both her overall poetics and her address of feminist themes within Hungarian cinema.

Another director who has created a large body of work, though not as extensive as Meszaros, is Agnieszka Holland. Holland is from Poland and while her earlier films were created in Poland, she has worked outside of the country since 1981 after a military coup in Poland left her exiled (Crnković 3). Holland's work ranges from high-budget Hollywood adaptations of world-renowned novels to controversial films about World War II to an independent mystery. She studied at the Prague Film Academy during the Czech New Wave movement and was also involved in the Prague Spring. Her scripts were consistently rejected by the Polish censors until 1979 with her film *Provincial Actors* (Crnković 3). Holland made two more films in Poland before her exile in 1981 (Crnković 3). She went on to make numerous films in Germany, France, England, and the United States (Crnković 3). She continues to work, directing both films and television, and currently has a film in pre-production. Holland has had a successful career in Hollywood and independent films, which is extremely rare for a female director. Holland herself has stated:

...When I did my first movie here I was already an established director, so a lot of people in the industry were respectful of my work and were glad to work with me. I don't know what happens if someone comes from nowhere and is a woman, it's certainly not so easy. (Crnković 8)

While her films may not be overtly feminist, Holland does tend to tell stories about the lives of women. Her last film made in Poland, *A Woman Alone* (1981), follows the life of a single mother who is being run into the ground by her life (Crnković 3 and Maslin np). Unable to receive help from family or friends and abandoned by the system, Irene is forced to accept help from any source available, no matter how questionable it might



be (Maslin np). Holland presents a woman who is doing everything in her power to provide for her child, do right by her family, and survive. Two of Holland's adaptations, *The Secret Garden* and *Washington Square*, feature women as the main characters. Catherine, the heroine of *Washington Square*, transforms over the course of the film from a dependent girl desperate for her father and her suitor's affection to a strong woman who supports herself and rejects her former suitor, no longer needing a man to give her life purpose. Holland has great accomplishments as a female director, both in shaping stories and characters that present women's issues while keeping the characters strong, and in her success in both commercial and independent films. Holland gives hope to all women directors that it is possible to make it in the film industry while starting out as an outsider.

Like Vera Chytilová, another woman director who is part of a New Wave movement is Ruxandra Zenide. Zenide is a part of the Romanian New Wave and is the only founding female director within the movement.



Zenide attended FAMU in Prague. In her film *Ryna*, Zenide tells a girl's coming-of-age story, as she wrestles with gender identity and what it means to be a woman. The sixteen-year-old protagonist Ryna is forced by her father to dress as a boy and work as a mechanic in his shop, an occupation typically held by men. Men like her father and the

local mayor attempt to control Ryna's life, but she claims her life as her own by enjoying photography and meeting with the local postboy (Young 37). The metaphor of male control is continued when Ryna is punished after wearing a dress for the first time in her life, but "...Ryna shows she's tough enough to pull through..." (Young 37). Interestingly, Zenide herself does not feel that *Ryna* is a feminist film:

I don't think it's feminist. It treats feminine topics and the women in this film are a little bit suppressed by men...It's a story about a particular rural region where women aren't as emancipated as in the big city and I wanted to portray this realistically. For me it's a story about a strong girl so it has a feminine sensitivity. (Ryna)

This is a sentiment often held by women working in the arts today, whether they are directors, writers, or artists. Chytilová views herself as more of an individualist rather than a feminist (*Screen* np). *Ryna* was also described as a metaphor for Romania's inclusion into the European Union, which Zenide responded as being correct, but not the original intent of the film. While Zenide may have set out to create a film about rural life in Romania, the film has been interpreted as both feminist, and a metaphor for the country as a whole.

Chytilová, Nellis, Meszaros, Kocsis, Holland, Zenide. Each one of these women has an individualistic directing style, yet each represents her country's cinema. Collectively they have helped to create a female-centered cinema. They have faced critics, censorship, even exile, but all of these directors continued, moving forward against all of the difficulties placed before them. They have blazed a path for future women directors and brought international attention and recognition to their country's cinema.

## Works Cited

- Canby, Vincent. "Hungarian 'The Girl' Arrives: Precise Little Film Shown at Festival  
Marta Meszaros Sets a Classicist Story." Rev. of *The Girl*. *The New York  
Times* 17 June 1972. *The New York Times*. Web. 8 May 2012.
- Cieslar, Jiří. "'Now I Don't Know How to Keep on Going' The Early Films of Věra  
Chytilová." Trans. Hana Kulhánková. *Kinoeye* 2.8 (2002): n. pag. *Kinoeye*.  
*Kinoeye*, Apr. 2002. Web. 12 Apr. 2013.
- Cockrell, Eddie. "Fresh Air." *Variety* 20 Feb. 2006: 58. *General OneFile*. Web. 14 May  
2012.
- Cockrell, Eddie. "Little Girl Blue." *Variety* 23 July 2007: 40. *General OneFile*. Web. 7  
May 2012. GALE|A167252809
- Hames, Peter, The Return of Vera Chytilová, *Sight and Sound*, 48:3 (1979:Summer)  
p.168
- Holland, Jonathan. "Some Secrets." *Variety* 11 Nov. 2002: 31. *General OneFile*. Web. 6  
May 2012.
- "I'm for liberal, social democracy: Marta Meszaros." *Economic Times* 18 Nov. 2009.  
*General OneFile*. Web. 14 May 2012. GALE|A212234256
- "Journey: Portrait of Vera Chytilova." Interview by Eddie Cockrell. *Variety* 23 Aug.  
2004: 30. Print.
- Koresky, Michael. "Eclipse Series 32: Pearls of the Czech New Wave." *The Criterion  
Collection*. The Criterion Collection, 25 Apr. 2012. Web. 8 May 2012.

Lopez, Francisco. "Márta Mészáros, Adoption, (Hungary, 1975)." Rev. of *Adoption*. Web log post. *Eastern European Film*. 27 Feb. 2007. Web. 8 May 2012.

Maslin, Janet. "A Bleak Picture of Poland in 'A Woman Alone'" Rev. of *A Woman Alone*. *The New York Times* 15 May 1987. *The New York Times*. Web. 8 May 2012.

Maslin, Janet. "'Nine Months,' Hungarian Factory Tale." Rev. of *Nine Months*. *The New York Times* 16 Mar. 1981. *The New York Times*. Web. 8 May 2012.

"Ryna (2005) The Interview with Ruxandra Zenide (Director)." Interview. *OutNow.ch*. Web. 8 May 2012.

Scheib, Ronnie. "Mamas & Papas." *Daily Variety* 21 Oct. 2010: 9. *General OneFile*. Web. 7 May 2012.

"Screen: Bohemian rhapsodist: They say that Vera Chytilova is the 'Margaret Thatcher of Czech cinema'. Kate Connolly caught up with the self-confessed control freak whose career has been as dramatic as her films." *Guardian* [London, England] 11 Aug. 2000: 10. *Infotrac Newsstand*. Web. 9 May 2012.

Young, Deborah. "Ryna." *Variety* 5 Sept. 2005: 37. *General OneFile*. Web. 8 May 2012.