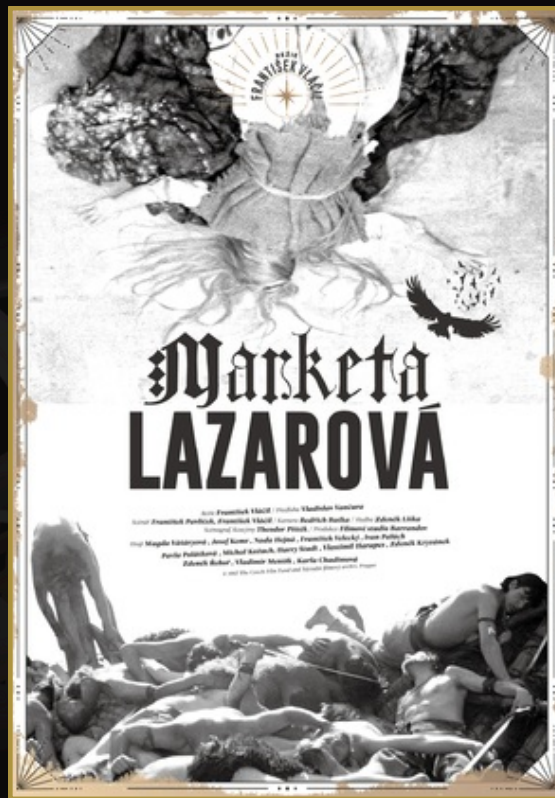




The Raw Expressionism in František Vlácil's '*Marketa Lazarová*' (1967)

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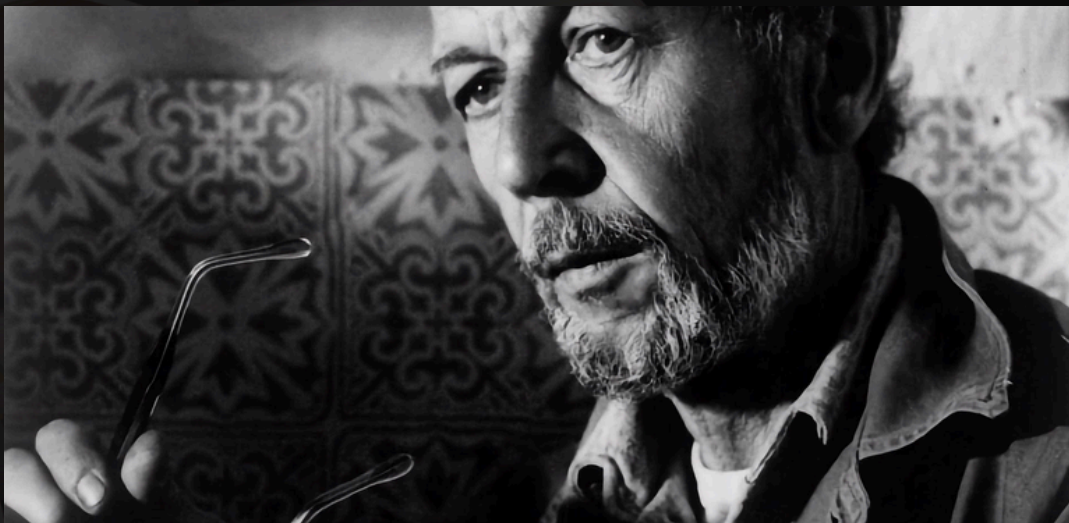


The greatest Czech film - *Marketa Lazarová*
Source: Cine Material (all images for references)



The Czech New Wave movement is coveted as one of the most liberally expressive and ground-breaking cinematic movements of all time. The radical films by prolific filmmakers of Czechia in the decade of 1960s revolutionized the way cinema should be consumed - unfiltered, beyond censorship, and motion art in its jarring and crudest form. As the flagbearer of national cinemas of Eastern Europe in world cinema, Czech cinema introduced various interventional filmmaking techniques, experimental concepts, and nuanced stories to the world (Semlyen & Freer, 2016).

In the league of numerous films of the Czech New Wave, a quintessential classic *Marketa Lazarová* (1967) stands out as the greatest of all. The film was created by a native Czech director František Vlácil who attempted to depict the conservative social systems of his nation, without any extravagant or experimental formats but with pristine truth (The Criterion Collection, n.d.). However, you might wonder, 'There are many Czech films that portray realism, but what makes this film stand out?', or 'Is representation of crude reality enough to classify a film as the greatest of all time?' We will explore the answers to these questions as we explore the Czech classic film, *Marketa Lazarová*.



Director František Vlácil became an auteur of Czech New Wave Cinema for his film *Marketa Lazarová*

Source: KVIFF.TV



The film was director František's first commercially and critically successful film, which also set his path in filmmaking career beyond his practices of graphic art and painting. The film's success catapulted him as a central figure of art-house cinema and extremely critical filmmaking in the Czech Republic. His artistry was quite distinct compared to other Czech New Wave directors like Miloš Forman, and Věra Chytilová who emphasized modernization of the course of Czech films. In contrast, František's vision of filmmaking was based on presenting authentic stories of Czech natives, its tumultuous history, and social criticism. It's intriguing to note that František's films dwell in between the genres of crude realism, thriller, grunge, and even horror.

He was one of the very few directors who could create surreal horror in an epic historical film. His film *Marketa Lazarová* stands as the epitome of horrific yet surreal realism. We can also observe František's distinct use of bold colors (such as red, black, and deep grays) in his films' color palette to enunciate the themes of symbolic darkness and horror in his films. Such finesse of filmmaking awarded the director the title of 'greatest Czech film director' by a group of Czech critics in the 1990s (České Noviny, 2008).



The grotesque imagery and bold color palette of the film's official poster

Source: IMDb



Marketa Lazarová is an immaculate adaptation of a 1931 historic Czech novel of the same title. The epic period drama film is set in medieval Czech during the shift from Paganism to Christianity. It depicts the tale of two rival medieval clans who clash fiercely due to their opposing sentiments for religion and God's definitions of purity and sin. The epic film's grandeur doesn't lie in its settings or extravagance but in its exceptional cinematography and music design. František designed it as a 'film opera' - a drama film infused with exaggerated expressions and musicality (Labuza, 2013).

The film indulges in extreme levels of battle sequences, grotesque visuals, and violence, however, creates an irony with its poetic narration. The film starts with visualizing the vast landscapes of Czechia in winter. As we immerse ourselves in the film, we observe that each element, be it an object in the background or a movement of a character, is 'metaphorical'.



A 3-image set: The metaphorical symbolism of animals in *Marketa Lazarová* (a pack of wolves, a white pigeon, and an eagle)

Source: Close-up Film Centre, Another Gaze, and East-European Film Bulletin



The season of winter in the film symbolizes the cold war between the two rival families in a Czech village that insinuates an escalated battle of communal violence. The wide landscape shots and the constant sound of church bells in the backdrop paint a scenario that is alluring in its natural beauty yet suffers the tragedy of cruelty and bloodshed. The film engages in an intriguing dynamic between 'humans and nature'.

We see that the lives of the villagers and their leaders go on scavenging the forests and hunting wild animals with minimal to nil traces of sophistication. The only sites in the film that depict sophistication and discipline are the 'church' and the nunnery - symbolic of the order and supremacy of God's rules on the unsophisticated and prone-to-sin humans in medieval Czechia.

The connection of the film's narratives to nature intensifies as it explores many animals as metaphors for the characters. The prime symbol in the film is the 'pack of wolves'. The consistent rivalry and killings in conservative periods of the country are compared to the ferocity of wolves, creating a narrative of 'humans transforming into animal-like predators' (The Cine-Files, n.d.). On the other hand, bleeding white pigeons in the film symbolize committing a sin - 'staining one's pristine purity'.

One of the protagonists, Mikoláš, is portrayed as the human personification of a ferocious wolf as he is devoid of any humane attributes. Ironically, the young and naive female protagonist, Marketa, is symbolized as a pristine pigeon who becomes the primary victim of the whole scenario. Marketa transforms into the bait, the eventual victim, and the final survivor of the whole battle, as she experiences betrayal, pain, and love in the process.



**The two opposing sides (the wolf, and the pigeon) -
Mikoláš, and Marketa tragically fall in love**

Source: Da Films



**The film is primarily from the perspective of an innocent girl
victimized by religious politics and warfare
(cinematography through Marketa's POV - point of view)**

Source: Vramonline



The legacy of the film strongly lies in its expressionist cinematography. The artistry of the film becomes all the more commendable with its monochrome palette yet maintaining stark contrast. The natural landscapes of Czechia are presented immaculately in the film even without the usual range of colors we witness on-screen today. The visuals of the film are consistently based on the icy grounds of the village, with a surreal effect on the real surroundings. However, how can surrealism and expressionism be achieved in real-life settings? *Marketa Lazarová* sets a great cinematic example for such a feat.

The film explores expressionism's core attributes of distorted and jarring experience through three instruments - cinematography through a character's POV (point of view), immersive sound design, and hyperbolic acting performances. The scenes are designed in such a manner that we can experience a character's growing fear, pain, or desperation through the screen, thanks to the incorporation of the expressionist style of shots (inspired by the German Expressionist movement).



**Symmetrical cinematography and positioning of subjects in the film
- a unique visual style in Czech New Wave cinema**

Source: Pinterest, and *Marketa Lazarová*



Ironically, the film is accompanied by intriguing compositions and scenic wide landscape shots with choir music in the background. The choir music combined with the daunting sounds of bells, echoes, and screams create a horrific yet surreal experience on-screen. On keen observation, the film carries a dominant characteristic of the Czech New Wave - interventional filming techniques. František's film was one of the first to intricately use 'symmetrical compositions of scenes' in its cinematography to enhance the visual impact on audiences.



The legacy of *Marketa Lazarová* mainly lies in its creative cinematography (wide landscape shots, and intriguing scene compositions)

Source: Radio Prague, and Film Affinity

The film strongly highlights the social evils of old Czechia such as the staunch idealism of the virginity of a female and prohibited marriages between different communities of Czech society. The punishments and cruelty of the medieval period were also graphically depicted in the scenes. However, František's vision turned the film into an 'expressionist tale of crude, violent reality'. Cinephiles of modern times consistently revisit the classic to understand the roots of Czechia and the director's remarkable technique to depict three genres (expressionism, horror, and realism) all together in a simplistic environment.



It's intriguing to note that the direction of the masterpiece film is highly stylized and ahead of time to be produced in the 60s. It's also reminiscent of modern filmmakers with distinct cinematography styles such as Hollywood's futurism and expressionism-oriented director Denis Villeneuve. Some of the films that share parallels or have derived inspiration from the Czech film are *The Devil's Trap* (1964), František another piece *The Valley of the Bees* (1968), and *Witchhammer* (1970) (Taste Dive, n.d.). Thus, *Marketa Lazarová* remains a timeless classic that serves as one of the greatest milestones of not only Czech but European cinema.





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