the column pattern into other spaces. Astute cinematographer Barry Sonnenfeld aimed for a "handsome" but muted look, shooting all of the country scenes on overcast days. In addition to Frank Patterson's full-throated rendition of "Danny Boy" (notably used over an assassination attempt on O'Bannon), ace composer Carter Burwell punctuated the score throughout with his adaptation of a traditional Irish melody ("The Lament for Limerick") reflecting the mutual love that Tom and Leo never entirely relinquish. And even the briefest performances—by Steve Buscemi, Thomas Toner, Mario Todisco, and others—make impressions that last far longer than their fleeting moments on the screen. Although the film was influenced more by literature than by other films, certain movies also provided ideas. Byrne drew on memories of Paul Muni in Howard Hawks's 1932 *Scarface* and Harden got makeup ideas from Jean Harlow's famous look. Sonnenfeld reports that watching Bernardo Bertolucci's 1970 classic *The Conformist* was important preparation for this and other Coen pictures he has photographed.

The merits of *Miller's Crossing* notwithstanding, its first run was a box office disaster. After scoring the prestigious opening-night slot at the New York Film Festival—where it was not well received, as I recall with a shudder, since I was on the selection committee—it zipped to theaters the next day and died as definitively as the story's unhappiest characters. Reviews were generally good, however, and its reputation has grown over the years, helped by the growing renown of the brothers who created it. This said, I've always had reservations about it, and these have also grown. There's too much reliance on set pieces that undercut the narrative's flow; the city ambience is thin and sketchy; the political angles are vague and undeveloped; standard shot/reverse shot cutting recurs too frequently; some comic bits are far from funny—an encounter between Johnny and his little boy is just stupid—and the gifted Turturro overplays during the two crucial scenes when he faces Tom's gun.

But when it's good, *Miller's Crossing* is good indeed, as is the 2K transfer on the Criterion Blu-ray, although the extras package is limited to video interviews. The ending is especially resonant, with Bernie dead and Tom back in the Miller's Crossing woods, pulling down his hat in his characteristic gesture of melancholy detachment. Twice in the film Bernie begged Tom for mercy, pleading for him to look into his heart and find some pity there. It worked the first time but not the second, and in one of the extras Byrne eloquently comments on Tom's psychology as the story closes: "This man has changed. There will be no more heart, there will be no more revelations. It's almost like a curtain came down over his face." That's exactly right, and the film's last few seconds are its most powerful. Byrne's acting alone would justify multiple visits to *Miller's Crossing*.—**David Sterritt**

The Party and the Guests

Directed by Jan Němec; screenplay by Ester Krumbachová and Jan Němec; cinematography by Jaromír Sofr; edited by Miroslav Hájek; music by Karel Mareš; starring Jana Prachařová, Pavel Bošek, Karel Mareš, Helena Pejsková, Zdena Škvorecká, Jiří Němec, Evald Schorm, Jan Klusák, and Ivan Vyskočil. An all-regions Blu-ray, B&W, Czech dialogue with English subtitles, 71 min., 1966. A Second Run release, www.secondrundvd.com.

For the art-house film crowd, Czechoslovakia (now, of course, an anachronistic designation) is most associated with a celebrated cluster of films from the 1960s. The Czech New Wave denoted a collection of innovative and thematically provocative movies produced by a cohort of filmmakers (and affiliated creative artists), which coincided with a broader, liberalizing social movement that culminated in the Prague Spring in 1968—and the Soviet tanks which put a crushing end to all that, including any hint of a cinema of dissent.

The Czech New Wave (its best known alumn included Miloš Forman, Věra Chytilová, and Ivan Passer) was shaped, inevitably, by the trauma of its country's geography (a small state squeezed between rivalrous great powers), but some of its influences were homegrown. Prague, a cosmopolitan capital coveted by competing empires, and a fulcrum of much twentieth-century international political distress, was also the birthplace of Franz Kafka. The term Kafkaesque has perhaps become a shopworn cliché, but the influence of this Bohemian writer on celebrated Czechoslovak films of the Sixties is not to be underestimated—indeed, it is arguably responsible for its own subgenre: the paranoid political nonthriller. Such efforts expressed—and exposed—the quiet desperation of everyday life under pervasive dictatorship, which was rooted not in the visitation of violent horrors by blood-soaked authorities (though that threat loomed large, if implicitly) but the distinctly totalitarian terror of not knowing who is watching, what transgression you may have committed, and when one might be charged with indefensible crimes. (Indefensible in the literal sense—with accusations so abstract and legal structures so byzantine that there is no discernable path to resist or rebut the incomprehensible charges brought—a nightmare illustrated most vividly in Kafka's *The Trial*.)

Several notable entries of this subgenre endure. *The Joke* (Jaromil Jireš, 1969) tells the story of a man expelled from the Communist Party—and subjected to six years of political "reeducation"—on the basis of an innocuous joke he privately told his girlfriend. (Think of Joe Pesci in *GoodFellas* as representing the menacing State: "How am I funny to you?") *The Joke* was loosely based on the experiences of the dissident writer Milan Kundera, whose novel provided the source material for the movie, which was banned for twenty years after the Soviet invasion. The innovatively shot *Before Tonight is Over* (Peter Solan, 1966) takes place over the course of one apparently carefree evening in the nightclub of a lavish Slovak resort, but the mood darkens as the hours unfold into the night, with avid flirtations yielding to anxiety, despair, and regret. Perhaps the finest among these films is *The Ear* (Karel Kachyna, 1970) which can be described as a cross between *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *1984*. Stunningly shot in irresistible black and white (with crucial

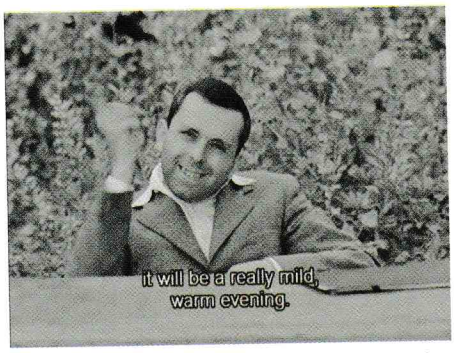
Evald Schorm (left) plays the lone dissident in Jan Němec's satire of authoritarianism *The Party and the Guests* (1966), a film "banned forever" by the Czech government of the time.

scenes set to candlelight after a power outage), this long day's journey into night features a bickering couple facing more than the prospect of an unraveling marriage—they are confronted with the revelation that they have been subject to invasive surveillance of their most private moments, yielding transcripts that will determine whether, like several of their close comrades, they have fallen into political disfavor. Not surprisingly, *The Ear* was immediately banned and not widely screened until 1989.

The Party and the Guests (original release title, *Report on the Party and the Guests*, 1966) is another landmark of the paranoid political nonthriller subgenre. Directed by Jan Němec (best known for his celebrated *Diamonds of the Night*, 1964), it is based on a story and co-written by Ester Krumbachová, an important Czech New Wave affiliate intimately involved in many of the films of the era, most notably contributing to the screenplays of *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* (Jireš, 1970) and Věra Chytilová's *Daisies* (1966) and *Fruit of Paradise* (1970). *Party*'s cast was comprised almost exclusively of nonprofessional actors in its leading roles (mostly drawn from a notable cohort of New Wave affiliates—dissident writers, intellectuals, composers, and other creative artists who had already caught the wary eye of the government). Perhaps even more outrageous from the perspective of the communist authorities who would have to approve the film, the one professional player, Ivan Vyskočil, who portrayed the powerful and unsympathetic host of the titular party, bore a plain (if, the filmmakers perennially insisted, narratively unintended) resemblance to Lenin.

Allusions to Lenin were but the cherry on top of this subversive sundae, and *The Party* had a legendarily difficult time reaching the screen. It was met with an uproarious response when first shown to the censorship authorities in 1966 and promptly suppressed. With the Prague Spring, however, the movie was made more broadly available to local audiences and entered in the 1968 Cannes Film Festival. But fate would twice unfavorably intervene. In that tumultuous year of global upheaval, Cannes was suspended midway in solidarity with the May '68 uprising in Paris (the festival upended in a wild melee); and in the wake of the Soviet invasion, the film was again pulled from Czech theaters—it would subsequently earn the honor of being banned "forever."

The Party and the Guests was nevertheless screened, and well received, at the 1968 New York Film Festival. Renata Adler, in her review for *The New York Times* declared it "one of the best Czechoslovak films ever made," perceptively emphasizing the power of the film's "restrained and sophisticated treatment of fear," which involves only "the merest touch of actual physical violence." The action (such as it is—walking, talking, and allegorical allusion) takes place in four distinct movements—short opening and



The Party authority (Jan Klusák) menaces the film's characters with vague political charges.

closing segments provide the framing for two elaborate sequences which present the principal set pieces for the drama.

As seen in Second Run DVD's release of a 4K restoration by the Czech National Film Archive, *The Party* begins, literally and figuratively, in a pastoral setting (in fact, the entire film takes place in the rural outdoors), with seven friends enjoying a rather elaborate (perhaps even gluttonous) picnic, merriments that suggest the relative material comfort of an upper middle class in this nominally classless society. (As has been commonly observed, the ambiance falls somewhere between Renoir's *A Day in the Country* and Buñuel's *The Exterminating Angel*.)

Despite the pleasant and even sensuous reverie (a stream provides the opportunity to strip down and bathe), from the very beginning a hint of danger is afoot. The second line spoken, "You'd make a great defense counsel—you stand up for your views," is an odd response to the patently benign (and plainly accurate) observation that it is "a beautiful day," which opens the film. But within ten movie minutes, a good defense counsel would have been welcome—and, regrettably, no views are stood up for. Out of nowhere—out of the woods, really, as in all good fables—a menacing figure, supported by a band of henchmen, suddenly appears.

Rudolph (the composer Jan Klusák), brandishing not a weapon but the tools of totalitarian authority (a desk and a file), confronts the seven friends with the chilling intimation that they might have done something wrong. More chilling still is their swift compliance with what approximates a show trial: voluntarily lining up and separating by gender, the four men and three women obediently stand within a circle drawn in the dirt, eager, as they will be throughout, to ingratiate themselves to authority. (The most pointed political message of *The Party and the Guests* is delivered via its serial illustration of how authoritarianism is dependent on the acquiescence and obsequiousness of those over whom it lords.)

"May I venture to ask what we've got ourselves into?" one of the guests gently asks his interrogator. But of course, no such explanation is forthcoming, beyond a menacing "You really don't know?"—except for the suggestion that perhaps it is all a joke. But the hopeful prospect that this inquisition is more show than trial is dashed when one of the men, in a brief display of defiance and to the disapproving shock of all, steps outside of the circle, and is promptly chased down and roughed up. The worst is averted, however, by the appearance of an even higher authority, the Host (Ivan Vyskočil), who expresses dismay at the overt resort to force, and insists on apologies all around. All is forgiven and forgotten as the Host escorts his guests to an elaborate outdoor celebration of his birthday (and an apparently unrelated wedding reception)—all presented matter-of-factly, if with an unmistakably surrealist flavor.

As the party becomes increasingly bizarre, a second crisis erupts. One of the original guests (played by film and stage director Evald Schorm)—who was notably silent and implicitly reproving earlier in the action as his comrades pledged their fealty to the unidentified authority figures harassing them—has vanished. As his wife explains (since all of the characters in the film are archetypes, it is fitting that these characters are without names), her husband decided he simply didn't want to attend the party, and so he left.

In response to this transgression (defection?), the totalitarian farce of comity and friendly persuasion (if supported by the veiled threat of force) will no longer suffice, and a search party, fortified by German shepherds put on the scent, are tasked with retrieving the wayward man. The original picnickers, now a party of six, are left behind to hold the fort. In this short reprise of the original assemblage, the frolicking friends have been reduced to willing (and now even armed) collaborators. The ending is ambiguous, but the increasing intensity of the barking dogs heard off screen as the picture fades to black suggests a less than happy resolution.

Second Run's sparkling Blu-ray comes loaded with a generous helping of extras, including Jiří Trnka's animated short film *Ruka* (*The Hand*). Released in 1965 (and banned in 1969), this widely praised classic can be seen as an allegory for censorship, but it helps to have that in mind when watching. The disc also features contributions from an impressive array of notable experts in Czech and Eastern European cinema. Peter Hames provides a welcome video introduction and appreciation of the film, and Michael Brooke contributes a lengthy and learned essay in an accompanying booklet. Also attendant to the feature are two full-length commentaries, one by a trio of interlocutors for the Projection Booth Podcast, the other by Jonathan Owen, author of *Avant-Garde to New Wave: Czechoslovak Cinema, Surrealism and the Sixties*. The Owen commentary is so insightful and informative that viewers inclined to watch the film only once would be extremely well served to set the disc to his audio track and follow the narrative by letting the subtitles do the talking.—**Jonathan Kirshner**

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