

HAMMER HORROR

Otakar Vávra's drama about 17th-century witch hunts had clear resonances in 60s Czechoslovakia – and has other resonances today

WITCHHAMMER

Otakar Vávra; Czechoslovakia 1969; Second Run; Region-free Blu-ray; Certificate 15; 107 minutes; 2.35:1. Features: filmed appreciation by writer and film historian Kat Ellinger; Otakar Vávra's short film *The Light Penetrates the Dark* (*Svetlo proniká tmou*, 1931); Booklet featuring a new essay by writer and film critic Samm Deighan.

Reviewed by Pamela Hutchinson

With the phrase 'witch hunt' bandied around misguidedly in the film industry at the present time, it is rewarding to explore more apt uses of the metaphor in cinema. While Carl Th. Dreyer protested that his *Day of Wrath* (1943), made during the Nazi occupation of Denmark, had no deeper political meaning, its tale of a 16th-century woman suspected of witchcraft resonated deeply with wartime audiences. Jonathan Rosenbaum wrote that it "may be the greatest film ever made about living under totalitarian rule" and suggested it as an influence on Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. That play, first performed in 1953, used the Salem witch trials of 1692-3 as an allegory for the contemporary communist panic in Hollywood and the McCarthyite practices of condemnation and allegation without evidence.

Otakar Vávra's *Witchhammer* also takes witch trials as its subject and appeared at a time when satanic themes were in vogue in horror cinema, from Michael Reeves's *Witchfinder General* (1968) to Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and Ken Russell's *The Devils* (1971). However, this starkly photographed gothic drama is more concerned with the oppressive regime in 1950s Czechoslovakia and the activities of the secret police than with trends in horror cinema. Vávra was inspired, in particular, by the 1952 show trial of Rudolf Slánský, former general secretary of the Czech Communist party, along with several other senior party members: "I experienced it. I saw how he became a puppet... how it is possible to manipulate a man to the point where he prays for his own death." Shot in 1969, *Witchhammer* can also be read as passing comment on the period of 'normalisation' and tighter political control that followed the Prague Spring.

Witchhammer's clearest stylistic neighbours are the stark monochrome photography of Bergman and Dreyer. Josef Illik's CinemaScope cinematography contains several haunting images, memorable among them faces contorted with pain and stakes set out for witch-burning at dawn. The film's keynote is coolness rather than lurid sensationalism, though, despite its gothic trappings and scenes of torture and nudity. There's also a throwback to Benjamin Christiansen's silent-era drama-documentary *Häxan* (1922), which sets out satanic lore only to debunk it. In *Witchhammer*, a goblin-like



Burn notice: *Witchhammer*

older man with black teeth, shot in a gloomy close-up, interrupts the narrative to spout aphorisms about witchcraft, a bleak reminder of how seriously these claims were once taken.

Set during the 17th-century Northern Moravia witch trials, Vávra's film is an engrossing, dialogue-heavy story of a community ripped apart when an old woman is spotted stealing a communion wafer from church. An inquisitor, Boblig von Edelstadt (Vladimír Smeral), is brought in by the local countess to rout the satanic pollution. Wielding a copy of the 'Malleus Maleficarum', or 'Witchhammer', a 15th-century Latin text, he sets about extracting testimony under torture. From the outset it is clear that the confessions Boblig records are false, elicited only by the agony of thumbscrews and the Spanish boot, but he consolidates his authority with each conviction. As the local priest Krystof Lautner (Elo Romancík), whose growing resistance to the witch hunt forms the spine of the story, eventually says to the

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inquisitor: "You may have power, but power and truth are two different things." Boblig is, of course, the real demon infecting the village, his nightly drunken banquets as unwholesome a spectacle as his imagined black masses. Smeral plays him with a grisly sneer, a petty tyrant who demands massages from his flunky and utter compliance from fellow judges.

Following the 'Malleus Maleficarum', which contends that women are naturally more susceptible to temptation, Boblig's victims are mostly female, including a young cook Zuzana (Sona Valentová) who is involved with Lautner. *Witchhammer* portrays the witch hunt as an essentially misogynist exercise, which may partly reflect the input of Vávra's co-writer: Ester Krumbachová, many of whose screenplays, including *Daisies* (1966) and *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* (1970), tackle female oppression, totalitarianism and the supernatural. The opening sequence combines a scene of young women bathing together with the goblin-man intoning that "the womb of woman is the gateway to hell". The defiance of the first three women burned alive on Boblig's orders, proclaiming their innocence as the flames rise, inspires a local clergyman to doubt the trials' veracity, and Lautner's special sympathy for Zuzana catalyses his confrontation with Boblig. A video essay by Kat Ellinger on this Second Run release of the film delves into the subject more deeply, including the precedent set by the resilience of female politician Milada Horáková at her own trial in 1950.

Remastered in HD and presented here on Blu-ray for the first time, *Witchhammer's* crisp, and frequently disturbing, images gleam, despite occasional specks. The disc also contains the aforementioned video essay, a fascinating article by Samm Deighan, new subtitles, and Vávra's first film, an experimental short from 1931, *The Light Penetrates the Dark*, a tribute to electricity. It's a fitting addition to the main feature, which is likewise a plea for enlightenment. Ⓢ