

“All the terrifying things all really happened”

Toyen: A film about the Czech surrealist painter and her times

By David Walsh
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Toyen, the name adopted by Marie ěermínová (1902-1980), was a Czech artist associated with surrealism. André Breton, in a 1953 monograph, referred to Czech history in the 20th century as “swamped by catastrophe” and noted that there was “no nobler, no more punctual reply” to this history “than the work of Toyen, as radiant as her heart, albeit tinged with dark foreboding.”

Czech director Jan Němec, who died in March 2016, made a film about Toyen in 2005, which is now available from Facets Multimedia. The work, *Toyen*, is intriguing and sometimes deeply moving—although the life and work of the artist, in many ways, is even more remarkable.

Němec’s film treats, above all, the period in World War II during which Toyen hid her Jewish lover, the poet, photographer and object-maker Jinděich Heisler, who refused to wear a yellow star, from the Gestapo. For most of 1941 to 1945 they lived in her small apartment in Prague in semi-darkness, to attract as little attention as possible. (“Because we lived in darkness,” the female narrator later explains, “Jinděich loved light.”) Heisler also slept in the bathtub, to minimize any noise.

The film is an evocation, poetic, impressionistic, rather than a conventional chronicle. It combines the words of Toyen, Heisler and Toyen’s longtime collaborator, painter and poet Jinděich Ťtyrský, as well as Němec’s narration, and complex images, often several layers deep, along with dramatic sequences with actress Zuzana Stívínová as Toyen and Jan Budar as Heisler.

In addition, we see footage of Joseph Goebbels in Prague in 1940, as well as shots of Reinhard Heydrich, the bloodthirsty, high-ranking Nazi official assassinated in the Czech capital in May 1942. In retaliation for Heydrich’s killing, German forces murdered every male over 15 in the village of Lidice (whose residents the Nazis believed, wrongly, had aided the assassins) and sent its women and children to concentration camps. Toyen painted one of the children’s faces. The children, says the narrator, “vanished.

Their faces vanished.” We hear machine guns.

Meanwhile, the Gestapo raids the apartment building where Toyen lives. “We stood ready for death.” But the apartment is not entered.

After the war, the Stalinists eventually assume power in Czechoslovakia. Toyen and Heisler move to Paris. The film shows horrifying footage of the show trials of one of their former comrades, historian and surrealist sympathizer Závěš Kalandra. Kalandra was expelled from the Czech Communist Party in 1936 for his criticism of Stalin’s policies. He was arrested by the Gestapo in 1939 and held in various concentration camps until 1945. After the war he was arrested by the Stalinists as a “Trotskyist” and hanged in June 1950.

Toyen asks Heisler to pose for a painting. He thinks he will have a nice portrait to boast about for the rest of his life. Instead she uses only his silhouette in “The Myth of Light,” in which we also see on the right a pair of hands whose shadow forms a wolf.

Heisler dies suddenly of a heart attack in 1953. Lines of his poetry speak to the psychic impact of the period in which he lived: “But only a pair of knives / Keeps the measure / Between the blade and the handle / Exactly the distance of a kiss”

The last portion of Němec’s film, with actress Zuzana Stívínová wandering around the streets of Paris is least effective. She intones, “Splinters of dreams! Slivers of dreams!” But what were the “dreams” of Toyen and her comrades? The film is largely silent on that. *Toyen* concludes with images of dozens of her paintings. One of the female narrators’ final comments is, “All the terrifying things all really happened.”

Němec (born 1936) was a member of the so-called Czech New Wave, a group of directors whose films came to international prominence around the time of the Soviet invasion and suppression of the “Prague Spring,” the anti-Stalinist mass movement, in August 1968.

N?mec is probably best known for *A Report on the Party and the Guests* (1966), a study in official brutality and conformism. A group of middle-class men and women have been invited to a party in the countryside by an unseen host. Following a picnic, they are set upon in the woods by a group of men, looking very much like plainclothes policemen, who harass and generally order them about. All the guests, except for two, accept the commands given them. One of the group, who attempts to leave, is surrounded and pushed around. The others criticize him for his “rebelliousness.”

The party’s host comes along and chastises the thuggish men, including his adopted son, and assures the guests that he thoroughly disapproves of their treatment. However, at the banquet itself, held outside by a lake, the host proves to be an egomaniac and fanatic for “order.” This time another guest tries to leave and a search party, complete with a German Shepherd, is sent to bring him back. The most conformist and casuistic of the original guests ends up with a rifle slung over his shoulder, looking very much like a prison or camp guard. The last sound the viewer hears is the tracking dog barking menacingly and angrily. The influence of Kafka, among others, is unmistakable.

The Czech Stalinist regime, at whom the film was obviously aimed, banned *A Report on the Party and the Guests* and considered arresting N?mec. He eventually left Czechoslovakia, living in Europe for a time and then spending 12 years in the US, where he pioneered wedding videos! He returned to Czechoslovakia after the fall of the Stalinist regime and made a number of more films, including *Toyen*, before his death earlier this year in Prague.

It seems from interviews that, ideologically, N?mec became little more than a garden variety anticommunist and understood or cared to understand little about the big issues of the 20th century, including, above all, the betrayal of the Russian Revolution by Stalinism and the consequences, including for the Czech people, of that betrayal.

Belonging to another generation, Toyen and her comrades held different views. According to historian of Czech surrealism Peter Hames, Toyen and Štyrský collaborated from 1922 onward. “They turned to surrealism in the early 1930s and, together with Karel Teige and Vit?zslav Nezval, were co-founders of the Prague Surrealist group in 1934. [Breton made an important visit to the city in 1935.] Following the imposition of the Soviet line on Socialist Realism, Nezval attempted to dissolve the group in 1938. It was in that year that Heisler (1914-1953) joined the group and, after refusing to register as a non-Aryan during the Nazi occupation, Toyen hid him in her apartment until the end of the war. They continued to work in Prague during the war and after until their departure for Paris in 1947, where

they became associated with the Breton group.”

Teige became the leader of the Czech surrealist movement. He was hounded to his death by the Stalinist authorities in 1951. The Czech Stalinist “art review,” in a three-part diatribe, denounced “Teigeism” as a “a Trotskyist Agency in Our Culture.”

In Paris Toyen worked with Breton, Benjamin Péret and others in the French surrealist movement. She continued to produce her disturbing, often beautiful works. In his 1953 monograph, Breton noted that the painter’s most recent efforts showed “a marked tendency to resolve her conflicts... She uses lightning flashes of recognition and perception of the magical intertwining of invisible links in order to exorcise the sufferings of the past.”

Toyen was also a signatory to various French surrealist manifestos and statements in the 1950s and 1960s, including a letter to American co-thinkers in May 1967 that denounced “the war led by [Lyndon] Johnson, the Pentagon, and the CIA in Vietnam.” As late as April 1968 one finds her signature attached to the “Surrealist Platform of Prague,” a wide-ranging, confused, but unmistakably left-wing document.

The “Platform” asserted that in the current conditions, “the forces of reconstruction must, we believe, rally behind the idea of permanent revolution, the inspired idea of Marx developed in turn by Trotsky, whose current content needs to be interpreted in relation to the new forms adopted by the repressive systems.”

Unfortunately, as I noted above, N?mec chooses to ignore this side of the extraordinary history.

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