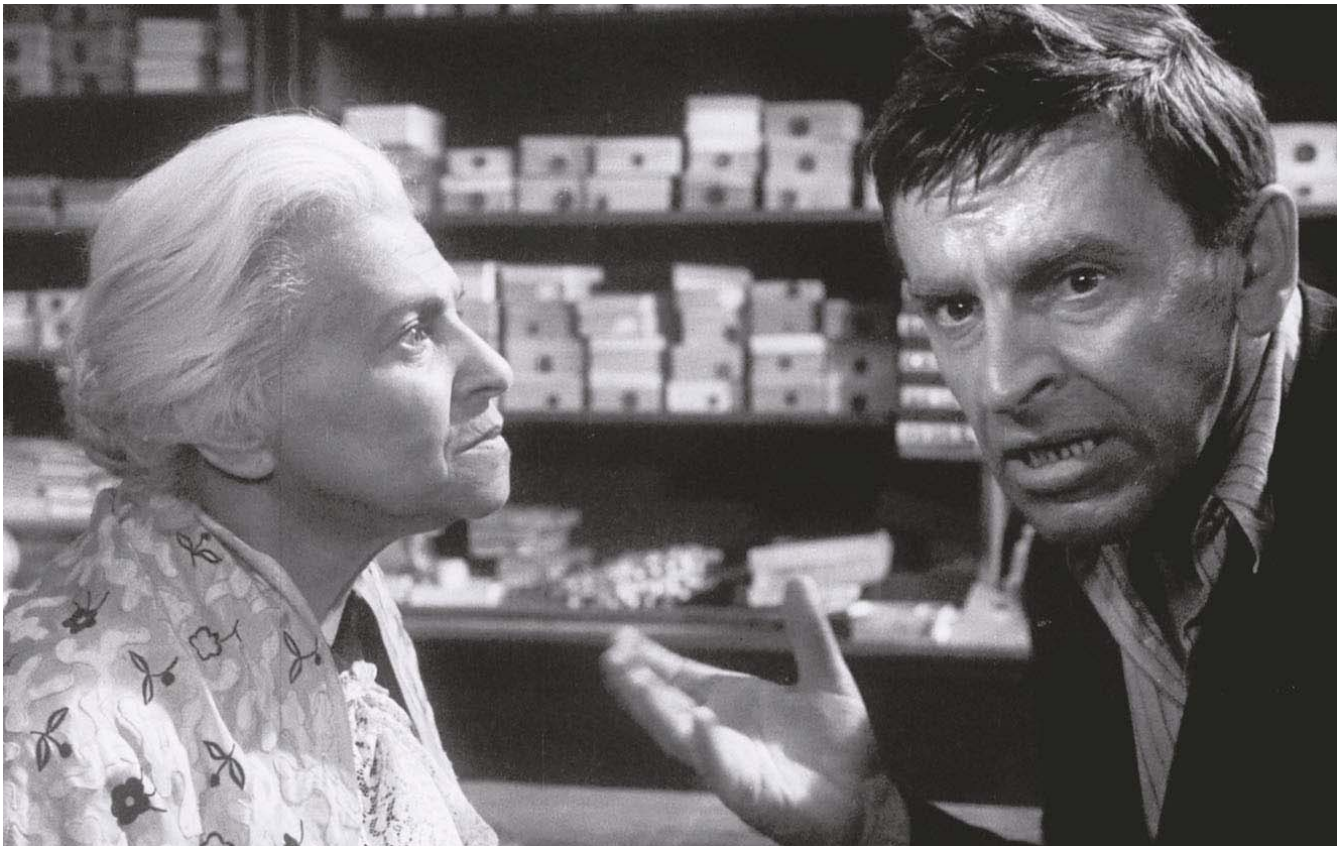
Home cinema



Ordinary people: Ida Kaminska and Josef Kroner in *The Shop on the High Street*

NIGHTMARE ON MAIN STREET

A 'good' man finds himself on the wrong side of history in this masterpiece from the Czech New Wave

THE SHOP ON THE HIGH STREET

Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos; Czechoslovakia 1965; Second Sight/Region B Blu-ray; Certificate 15; 125 minutes; 1.33:1; Features: appreciation by Michael Brooke; original US press book

Reviewed by Trevor Johnston

The standard line on this Oscar-winner for Best Foreign Film has long been that it was the gateway movie that alerted global audiences and critics to the wonders of the 1960s Czech New Wave – in the same way that Kurosawa, say, opened Western eyes to post-war Japanese film, or Herzog and Fassbinder flagged up the emergence of the New German Cinema.

With this first ever release on Blu-ray likely to introduce Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos's masterpiece to a whole new audience, however, it's clear that this familiar thumbnail assessment offers only a partial summation of the film's significance. First, its key creative partners weren't actually among the Prague Film School graduates (including Milos Forman, Vera Chitylová and Jirí Menzel) who came to define the Czech New Wave, since the much older Kadár (born 1918) and Klos (born 1910) had a feature track record going back over a decade, involving sundry scrapes with the authorities along the way. Second, although *The Shop on the High Street* was a production of Barrandov Studios in Prague, culturally it's very much a Slovak film, shot in a small town in the north-east and dramatising a very specific historical moment during the 1939-45 Slovak State.

That's the thing. For a film that constitutes one of the screen's most potent representations of the Holocaust, you have to look very hard for a swastika. Instead, the black uniforms here sport the double-cross insignia denoting the so-called Hlinka Guard, who carried out the anti-Semitic legislation set down by the new Slovak State as it sought to establish friendly credentials with the Nazis occupying the Czech territory next door. All of which explains how, in 1942, when the film is set, the Jewish community in a pleasant, ordinary town could find themselves herded into the civic square and loaded up for transportation to the Nazi camps as, all the while, the Slovak neighbours they'd lived beside for years simply stood by and watched.

For co-director Kadár, a Slovakian of Hungarian-Jewish descent who was interned in Hungary during the war and lost almost all his family in Auschwitz, this adaptation of Ladislav Grosman's novella *The Trap* was evidently a deeply personal undertaking. As well as expressing deep sympathy for the Jewish victims – and consciously avoiding any visual reference to the horrors of the camps – the material also generates a timeless resonance by exploring, through its easygoing local carpenter Tono, how a kindly, decent yet lackadaisical individual can find themselves on the wrong side of history.

As played by the splendid Josef Kroner, here's a guy who's always stayed out of politics and whose default solution to everything is to keep his head down and hope it will all go away. His brother-in-law, on the other hand, has twigged

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that donning the uniform of the Hlinka Guard offers him a unique opportunity to line his pockets. Since Tono is under pressure at home to bring home a bit more bacon, he accepts the offer to become the 'Aryan controller' of old Mrs Lautmann's haberdashery shop on the high street. The prospect of a lucrative income without having to do anything for it proves too tempting to resist, but the challenge of explaining to Ida Kaminska's elderly and infirm proprietress how and why he's the store's new owner utterly defeats him. Instead, he tries to help this sweet old lady about the shop and restore her ancient furniture, but a reckoning is looming... and he's increasingly aware that the Hlinka Guard reserve their harshest treatment for 'Jew-lovers'.

While Kadár and Klos didn't really go on, either separately or together, to have the careers they perhaps should have, their level of mastery is thoroughly engrossing. Weighty subject matter notwithstanding, so much of the film has that distinctively Czech (or even Slovak?) humour – also seen in Forman's *The Fireman's Ball* (1967) – which observes small-town bumbling with a certain wry bemusement. Tono's inability to get to grips with the concept of the sabbath and Mrs Lautmann's unerring knack of misconstruing his intentions play out as a bittersweet comedy of miscommunication, while the pompous preening of the Guard is played for ridicule – until the wheels of fascist bureaucracy start to grind and the jokes just aren't funny any more.

Stylistically, too, the directors absolutely nail it. Early on, the camera effectively moseys around, taking in domestic tribulations, folks out for a Sunday stroll and an adorable mutt named Essenç. But by the time the town-square tannoy is calling out the names of the deportees, it has taken on a much more oppressive role, positively hounding Tono as he paces around the shop – a telling formal expression of the conscience he cannot escape.

The fear that falls over the old dear's face when she finally grasps the reality of her situation remains, like the overgrown train tracks in *Shoah* (1985), one of the indelible images of Holocaust cinema. Yet the plight of Kroner's essentially amiable handyman cuts even deeper. When social inequity and nationalist insecurity combine, this perennial idler finds himself going with the flow. 'I' becomes 'We', and that 'We' is quite prepared to stand on a few heads if it's only an outsider minority that will get hurt. The contemporary resonances are so obvious they hardly need pointing out, making this not merely some lauded exemplar of a particular moment in arthouse history but very much a film for now – and always. A particular boon, too, to have it in such a pristine new edition.

A brand new transfer from the Czech National Film Archive does a sterling job of controlling the film's potentially problematic but intentionally expressive use of overexposed white light. Wisely prefaced with a spoiler alert, Michael Brooke's 40-minute appreciation offers an exemplary guide to the film's historical and production context, artistic qualities and contemporary reception. All very sound.

New releases

AROUND CHINA WITH A MOVIE CAMERA

China/UK 1900-48; BFI/Region 2 DVD; 68 minutes; 1.33:1; Features: score, essays, two shorts

Reviewed by Pamela Hutchinson

Shot by missionaries, diplomats, amateurs, travelogue-makers, war correspondents, newsreel cameramen and possibly even a Conservative MP, the films in this BFI presentation offer a shimmering portrait of a lost China. It's a collection of archive film from the first half of the 20th century that reveals the country as it was before communism, and travels along its roads, rivers, canals and coastline, from the exotic serenity of Kunming opium-smokers in 1902 to the more familiar elegance of 1930s Shanghai. The digitally restored footage has all been retrieved from the BFI National Archive, and like the way of life it depicts, most of it has barely been seen for decades.

The clips are run together, grouped by region rather than date, with brief title cards to situate each fragment, offering where possible information about who shot the footage. Each scene teems with social, political and architectural history, but there is also purely aesthetic pleasure to be found. The appeal of the picturesque scenery, palatial structures and embellished costumes in many of these clips is enhanced by vivid tinting and toning. *An Oriental Venice*, a 1925 travelogue of the Grand Canal in Hangzhou, is rendered in sugary Pathécolor, transforming actuality footage into a living, stencil-painted postcard.

Ruth Chan's newly composed score for the collection is just as beautiful, sympathetically combining traditional Chinese instruments and styles with western sounds. One of the clearest narratives to emerge from the vignettes on this disc is the creeping modernisation and westernisation of China, from motor-cars, illuminated shop signs and men wearing suits and ties in Beijing and Hong Kong to British troops marching into Shanghai in 1927. That process continues beyond the scope of the DVD, too. While gazing at the wooden boats mooring in Hong Kong harbour in the 1920s, most viewers will be able to conjure the shadows of today's towering skyscrapers.

This disc reminds us of what has been blocked from our view over the past century of change.

Disc: The restored footage is clear and mostly very clean, with bright tints. Extras comprise two complete short travelogue films from 1907 and 1910, and useful booklet essays from curator Edward Anderson and composer Ruth Chan.



Flashpoint: ***Conversation Piece***

CONVERSATION PIECE

Luchino Visconti; Italy/France 1974; Eureka/Masters of Cinema/Region B Blu-ray and Region 2 DVD Dual Format; 120 minutes; Certificate 18; 2.35:1; Features: two language versions, interview with Alessandro Bencivenni, featurette 'Luchino Visconti – the Quest for the Impossible', trailer, booklet

Reviewed by Philip Kemp

In the summer of 1972, while completing his ambitious 19th-century drama *Ludwig* (1973), Luchino Visconti suffered a stroke. He was to survive another four years but his activities were severely restricted. His last two films, *Conversation Piece* (1974) and *L'innocente* (1976), were essentially chamber pieces, studio shot with few exteriors.

Even so, *Conversation Piece* (as Pasquale Iannone argues in his booklet note) shouldn't be written off as a minor work; it's rich with themes that resonate throughout Visconti's work. In particular, links to *Senso* (1954) and *Death in Venice* (1971), both dealing with the destructive effects of erotic obsession, aren't far to seek.

Not surprisingly, the film is also darkened by premonitions of death. The unnamed Professor (Burt Lancaster, 60 at the time but playing older) leads a quiet, reclusive life in his old-fashioned Rome apartment, surrounded by his books and paintings. This hermit-like existence is rudely broken into by an obnoxious marchesa (Silvana Mangano) and her entourage: her teenage daughter, the daughter's boyfriend and the marchesa's lover Konrad (Austrian actor Helmut Berger, Visconti's own lover for the final years of his life). This rowdy bunch browbeat the Professor into renting them his upstairs apartment, which they subject to a brutal modernist makeover. Despite himself, the Professor becomes increasingly fascinated by the intruders, especially Konrad.

The clash between tradition and modernity might well sum up Visconti himself, the Catholic Marxist aristocrat. Dominique Sanda and Claudia Cardinale make touching brief, unbilled appearances in flashback as the Professor's mother and wife; but an attempt to insert contemporary political relevance (the marchesa's husband, we learn, was implicated in an attempted fascist coup) feels superfluous.

Disc: English- and Italian-language versions are offered; in both cases the