

# THE FEMALE SPORTING BODY IN VĚRA CHYTILOVÁ'S SOMETHING DIFFERENT

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In her book *The Little Communist Who Never Smiled*, Lola Lafon constructs a fictionalised account of the life of the famous Romanian gymnast Nadia Comăneci. For the development of the novel, Lafon exchanged a series of emails and phone conversations with Comăneci, who shared various details about the events of her life. Based on this information, the author puts together a story that explores various issues shaping Comăneci's career, including of course the context in which this young girl became famous (Ceaușescu's Romania and the gradual shift from Cold War to globalisation, as she herself became a worldwide sports star) and perceptions of the female body (both her own and those of an international audience). These two issues underpin the novel, the whole life of the gymnast and even the life of the writer, who although born in France lived part of her childhood

In an email to Nadia I mention the punctuation in the articles written about her comeback a year after Montreal, exclamation points that compete with ellipses: "50 kg!!!" "Nadia is now a real woman....." She confirms, "It's true, it shouldn't be called female gymnastics, the spectators don't come to see women... You know, if competition leotards are always long-sleeved, it's to hide the girls' arms. Our biceps, our veins. Because above all we mustn't look too masculine either!"

(LAFON, 2015: 110)

in Romania during the dictatorship and who includes some of her own experiences in the book. The historical context of a communist regime and the conception of the female body—of sports-women and others—are also key issues in *Something Different* (*O něčem jiném*, 1963), the first feature film by the Czech filmmaker Věra Chytilová, a key figure in the Czechoslovak New Wave. With none of the lush aesthetics that would characterise her later films (*Daisies* [Sedmikrásky, 1966] being the most obvious example), *Something Different* breaks down the boundaries between fiction and documentary with its presentation of two parallel stories about two women who are very different yet share certain life experiences in common. One is the world champion gymnast Eva Bosáková, and the other is a housewife named Věra. Bosáková's story is told in a docu-

## THE CONSTRUCTIONS OF CHYTILOVÁ'S AND LAFON'S STORIES BEAR CERTAIN SIMILARITIES, AS THEY BOTH TAKE ELEMENTS FROM REALITY AND FICTIONALISE THEM

mentary style, with details typical of *cinema vérité*, such as the use of non-professional actors and improvisations, while Věra's story purely fictitious. Chytilová's leanings towards feminist discourse and the documentary style were already evident in her two previous films, the shorts *Ceiling* (Strop, 1962) and *A Bagful of Fleas* (Pytel blech, 1962), and these two impulses converge in *Something Different* (Hames, 2005: 185).

The constructions of Chytilová's and Lafon's stories bear certain similarities, as they both take elements from reality and fictionalise them. Although Bosáková's story uses documentary footage, its juxtaposition with the fictitious story of a housewife, much like the short quotes by Comăneci that Lafon scatters throughout her novel, turns it into part of the fictional tale. In this way, both the novelist and the filmmaker play with the line between reality and fiction, documentary and construction, to recreate fragments of the gymnasts' lives. However, the weight of reality, the sociopolitical context in which each story takes place, becomes essential to both the construction and the comprehension of the narratives. It is only through an appreciation of each context that the treatment of the key questions—a central one in both cases being the female sporting body—can be understood.

The concept of the female sporting body is defined by Tatiana Sentamans as an initial attempt to invert the domains traditionally associated with each gender: the invariable identification of the public sphere with masculinity and the domestic sphere with femininity. Professional sport would challenge this logic by positioning the woman in

the public sphere and contravening the female norm not only in relation to social roles but also in terms of the body (Sentamans, 2010: 15-16).

These women established a new imaginary (visuality and visibility) through a series of changes to their behaviour (attitudinal changes) and their image (formal changes), [...] in relation to their integration into the development of sporting practice [...]. These changes of appearance and attitude, however, would be marked in this sense by two general tendencies, a schizophrenia suffered by the sportswoman, who would be torn between doing (action) and appearing (passiveness). (Sentamans, 2010: 15)

This article explores *Something Different* in terms of this notion of the female sporting body, which arises out of the comparison—and the identification of similarities—established in the film itself between the lives of the elite sportswoman and the housewife. The aim is to analyse this representation of the female sporting body in relation to *traditional norms of femininity* and the implications of the comparison made between the two in this film. The interplay between fiction and documentary established in the film and the sociopolitical context in which it was made are also aspects that need to be considered in this analysis. As a kind of culmination of the other ideas explored here, the article will conclude by returning to the comparison initially established between the film and the book about Comăneci, examining the different conceptions of the body in female gymnastics, based on Natalia Barker-Ruchti's article "Ballerinas and Pixies: A Genealogy of the Changing Female Gymnastics Body" (2009).

## SOMETHING DIFFERENT

The story begins with the gymnast Eva Bosáková, who is training for various major competitions, after which she plans to end her career as a top-level sportswoman. Meanwhile, Věra is a housewife looking after her husband and four-



Image 1. Věra telling her husband that she never has time to rest



Image 2. Eva telling her trainer that if she doesn't read the newspaper during her training session, she will have no time to do it

year-old son. The two women never meet, and yet they have a lot in common: they belong to the same generation, both being in their thirties, and they are both victims of the usual stereotypes that tire and frustrate them. Věra attempts to overcome her dissatisfaction with life in an extra-marital affair, while Eva is forced by her trainer to keep up her constant training for her competition routine. Věra eventually realises that she and her lover don't get along and she ends the relationship. Eva wins the competition and thinks that at last she will have time to spend on her hobbies and on making her dreams a reality, but she is unable to give up gymnastics and ends up becoming a trainer. Věra is also unable to change her life, even when fate offers her a way out: her husband tells her he wants a divorce, confessing to her that he has been unfaithful (Věra herself never manages to confess her own infidelity to him). Instead, at this point she begins fighting for her marriage and convinces her husband to stay with her and their child.

The similarities between the lives of these two women are reinforced over the course of the film in the dialogues, the respective plotlines, the decisions they make and various formal elements. For example, there are various references to the fact that despite their completely different lifestyles,

both women are constantly working and never even have time to engage in an activity as ordinary as reading a newspaper (see Images 1 and 2). Notable among the formal devices used is the simple alternation of scenes between the two women, which, although there is no narrative continuity between the two stories, serves a comparative and structural function. The main aim of this juxtaposition is to provoke reflection, although it is also used for purely formalist purposes (Hames, 2009: 185). In addition, it serves as a way of establishing a parallel between the *real* story and the *fictional* one. Eva's story is constructed with shots that seem as if they are being filmed *at random* (her rigorous training sessions in the gym, where she is subjected to the strict instructions and abusive behaviour of her trainers) and others that suggest a certain degree of intervention on the part of

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the filmmaker (her interview with a journalist or when she and her husband decide what song she will use in the championship), while Věra's story may seem comparatively artificial and purely fictitious. The *mise-en-scène* is thus mainly comprised of techniques characteristic of *cinéma vérité* while always maintaining a somewhat stylised quality. The transitions between the two plotlines are often made using close-ups. To underscore the authenticity of the interaction between gymnast and trainer and between mother and son, the film includes several long scenes with no cuts, and some images are emphasised by means of freeze frames (Čulík, 2018: 205). This technique elicits a vague sensation of suspense from the viewer, as suddenly it seems that the film is going to turn into a video essay with the filmmaker commenting on the production, although this never actually happens. This is a very common technique in the video essay format that is used to accentuate the tension in the story, surprising and unsettling the viewer. Some of these editing techniques may be applied for strictly stylistic reasons—perhaps influenced by the editor, Miroslav Hájek, and his approach to editing the film—but others have a profound relationship with the ideas underpinning both stories; just as in a video essay where a fragment is frozen to draw attention to it, these moments intrigue the viewer and highlight the reflexive tone of the narrative.

## SPACES AND BODIES

The pure fiction sequences following the life of Věra the housewife show us her everyday routine, confined to the prison of her home (except when she attempts to *liberate* herself through her infidelity), in a way that could even be described as a forerunner to what Chantal Akerman would do a decade later in her films, such as *Je, tu, il, elle* [I, You, He, She] (1974) and *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* [Meetings with

Anna] (1978), which would redefine the idea of home in an effort to move beyond the context of the family. Akerman seeks out interior spaces that function in opposition to the family hearth. Irene Valle Corpas argues that the filmmaker effectively presents “‘anonymous rooms’ where time and the norms governing society are suspended, where Akerman herself, or other characters who serve as her alter ego, move from one bodily state to another, carrying out the basic activities of the body: eating, sleeping, or engaging in sexual relations” (Valle Corpas, 2021: 1). In *Something Different*, Chytilová not only presents a rejection of the traditional domestic space, but also depicts the reality of an elite sportswoman who, despite having managed to *liberate* herself from domesticity by entering the public sphere, can also feel repressed, confined in a different space that also functions as a prison: the gym where her abusive trainers subject her to hours of physical preparation for the championships. The opposition of *prison* spaces posited by Chytilová thus prove interesting for reflecting on the notion of a space free from “the norms governing society” proposed by Valle Corpas in her analysis of Akerman's films (ibid., 2021: 1).

Image 3. Eva at home, telling her partner that the song they are listening to would work perfectly with her free routine



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**IN SOMETHING DIFFERENT, CHYTILOVÁ NOT ONLY PRESENTS A REJECTION OF THE TRADITIONAL DOMESTIC SPACE, BUT ALSO DEPICTS THE REALITY OF AN ELITE SPORTSWOMAN WHO, DESPITE HAVING MANAGED TO LIBERATE HERSELF FROM DOMESTICITY BY ENTERING THE PUBLIC SPHERE, CAN ALSO FEEL REPRESSED**

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Private spaces are not limited to the domestic sphere, as the gymnasium meets the requirements to be considered one and the gymnast never really escapes from it—when she is at home with her partner, she talks to him about how perfect the music they are listening to would be for her sports routine (see Image 3), and when she competes she is reproducing what she has learned in training—just as the housewife never manages to escape her domestic life despite her attempt to do so with a love affair. What connects the two protagonists is their dissatisfaction with their respective routines. In her interview, Eva says that after her last championship she would like to try “something different” (an allusion to the film’s title, whose literal translation from Czech, “about something different”, could also be considered to refer to the film’s *different* topic, i.e., the lives of two women), while Věra directly seeks “something different” in an extramarital affair. But both women prove unable to give up the very thing that makes them unhappy: in the end, Eva continues working as a gymnastics trainer after her last championship, and Věra chooses to fight to keep her marriage and her family, even though her husband has also been unfaithful to her. Neither of them ultimately chooses *something different*; both stay in their comfort zone. The message of women’s liberation and emancipation that the premise of escaping unhappiness and rebelling might be supposed to convey is ultimately crushed by the fear

of change. This could be understood as a snapshot of the era in which the two stories take place and of the general situation of women in that era; the woman’s absolute dedication to the sphere in which she has specialised or to which she is accustomed: the domestic world in Věra’s case and the world of gymnastics in Eva’s.

In this context, it is interesting to explore how the protagonists’ bodies inhabit these spaces, and the way the film is constantly comparing them and identifying similarities between them. This is repeatedly reinforced through the editing, which alternates between sequences following the life of each protagonist. Particularly revealing in this respect is the moment in the second half of the film where sequences of one of Eva’s intensive training sessions are interspersed with sequences of Věra’s dates with her lover. This parallel editing underscores the idea discussed here: the representation of the sportswoman’s body in opposition to the traditional representation of the female body. Music plays an important role in this juxtaposition of sequences, with the use of a jaunty, upbeat piano melody almost suited to a comedy cartoon while showing the gymnast in training, and a slower, more sensual tune accompanied by the vocalising of a female singer during the sequence of the housewife with her lover.

As would be expected in rhythmic gymnastics, Eva’s training consists of repeating her movements over and over with one of her trainers (who is also her partner) guiding her. However, the music vests this repetition or loop with a comic quality, as if it were a kind of slapstick sketch. The subsequent sequences showing her training do not feature this extra-diegetic music; all we hear is a diegetic piano when the song chosen by the gymnast for her free routine is played.

Meanwhile, Věra’s sequences show her meetings with her lover in a café, sketching a chronology of her dates that presents the various stages of their relationship. In the first stage, we see them locked in passionate embraces, but gradually the fire goes

out and Věra looks increasingly disappointed. She wants her lover to be someone she can talk to, as it is impossible to talk to her husband because every time she tries he ignores her or talks about his own worries while showing no interest in hers. But now she realises that her lover is just another selfish man who only cares about his own problems, just like her husband. The emotional void she feels with her husband ends up defining her relationship with her lover as well; despite his caring words ("I really love you," he tells her), what she wants is someone who will listen to her and with whom she can engage in two-way conversations. When she makes the decision to end their relationship, she tells him: "I'm just sorry that I was wrong about you. Sorry that we don't understand each other." In response, he says nothing but simply walks away. However, they meet one more time; at this meeting, Věra is overwhelmed by a fit of giggles and her lover thinks she is laughing at him and at his love for her. At one point he shakes her in an effort to make her stop laughing, and she reacts to his aggression with outrage. She is a married woman, she reminds him, and apart from her duty to her family, she is free to do as

she likes. And with that she leaves him. Her lover tries to chase after her, but finally gives up. The following sequences show her back with her husband and son; she has given up on her quest to find an escape from her life as a housewife.

To fully understand the way the female body is represented in this film, it is important to consider the circumstances in which the two women are portrayed. A comparison of the fragmented sequences of Eva's training with those of Věra's love affair reveals various aspects in relation to the body. Returning to the definition of the female sporting body offered by Sentamans (2010), in terms of public and private spheres, a kind of basic opposition is discernible. As noted above, the idea of a boundary between the sportswoman in the public sphere and the housewife in the private sphere becomes somewhat blurred in this film. Although her work as a professional athlete makes her a public figure, Eva's life as depicted in the film belongs more to a private realm, as the gymnasium is established as a space that confines her in much the same way that the family home confines the housewife. The housewife's body in the family home represents motherhood, a role

Image 4. Věra touching up her make-up while on a date with her lover



Image 5. Eva in one of her training sessions, with her trainer telling her that after several repetitions she has got the routine right



that Věra attempts to escape from. In the socialist context of the Eastern bloc countries in this era, despite having the obligation to contribute to the construction of the new socialist state on equal terms with men, motherhood was a “social obligation” for women (Kollontai, 1977: 149, quoted in Sywenky 2016: 1). Although it was much more common for a woman to work while looking after her children than it was in the West, there were still many Eastern European women who spent years of their lives dedicated exclusively to the home. Věra’s body is an example of this submission to the social obligation of motherhood; her husband no longer desires her, as he only sees her as his child’s mother and as the person responsible for looking after his home. This is why she goes searching for desire and for an identity beyond her status as a housewife in an extramarital affair.

Věra represents the contradiction between the maternal figure and the young woman compelled by the patriarchy to seek male approval. In Jungian psychology (and in society in general), the mother archetype is associated with qualities such as nurturing, love, compassion and protection. In the first half of the film, Věra seems to surrender her body to the work of looking after her home and child (albeit with apathy and aversion), while in the second half she tries to rebel against the maternal archetype with her efforts to make herself attractive again to the male gaze. Her marriage makes her feel empty and unwanted, so she looks elsewhere to find what is missing from her life. However, her attempt to escape from traditional motherhood proves unsuccessful, as she understands that it is not enough to have a lover who desires her; she also needs him to listen to her. Unable to find outside the family home what she was missing inside it, Věra resigns herself to her fate, even forgiving her husband for his confessed infidelity (without ever revealing her own) and resuming her role of housewife. She thus surrenders her body to her *social obligation*.

The gymnast might seem to be the antithesis of the traditional notion of the woman’s role, contravening the female norm not only in social terms but also in relation to the body, as Sentamans (2010: 15-16) suggests. However, as noted above, the portrayal of both women’s bodies as confined in equally oppressive spaces blurs the distinction between private and public spheres in this film. Eva’s subjection to long hours of training and the abuse of her trainers reinforces the idea of a similarity between her life and the housewife’s. In any case, to better understand how this question is dealt with in *Something Different*, it is important to reflect on the notion of the female sporting body in the historical context of the film. In her article, Natalia Barker-Ruchti offers a genealogy of the changes to the bodies and styles of gymnasts in Eastern bloc countries during the Cold War, based on Foucault’s conception of the body as “wholly constituted by discourse” and his idea that “[c]ontextual discursive forces [...] are inscribed on the body and thus shape a person’s being and conduct” (Barker-Ruchti, 2009: 46). She thus constructs a notion of the body as playing a part in the reflexive cycle of social change. Barker-Ruchti focuses her analysis on the shift from a form of rhythmic gymnastics closer to dance, which dominated the sport in the 1960s with the Czechoslovakian gymnast Věra Časlávká recognised as its greatest exponent (Eva Bosaková was the second most successful Czechoslovak gymnast of the period), towards an “acrobaticization of women’s gymnastics” that took place in the 1970s, of course with Nadia Comăneci as its biggest star. Barker-Ruchti notes that before this “acrobaticization” the sport was associated with a “mature gymnastics body performing graceful ballet-type routines” like Časlávká’s, which “typified the model of mature femininity in this sport” (Barker-Ruchti, 2009: 47). She defines these two types of gymnasts as “ballerinas” and “pixies”, the former represented by the graceful female bodies of Časlávká and Bosaková, and the latter by the sex-



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**LIKE BARKER-RUCHTI'S GENEALOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE FEMALE SPORTING BODY, THE FILM CONCLUDES THAT DESPITE THE PROTAGONISTS' DESIRE FOR EMANCIPATION, THE CONTEXT IN WHICH THEY LIVE PREVENTS THEM FROM ACHIEVING IT, AS THEIR PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY REDUCES THEM TO "OBJECTS OF GAZE, PROTECTION AND DEPENDENCE," JUST AS THE WORLD'S EQUALLY PATRIARCHAL MASS MEDIA DOES TO FEMALE GYMNASTS**

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ually undeveloped body and quasi-programmed movements of Comănești. Female gymnastics became popular in Eastern Europe as part of the quest of the USSR and the countries under its influence for supremacy over the West in the world of sport. In pursuit of that quest, these countries promoted the participation of women in sports by providing infrastructures, funding and top salaries for athletes and trainers. Elite athletes were thus afforded advantages and privileges that included cultural capital (recognition), prestige and better living conditions. The international success of these gymnasts was glamorised by the mass media, turning female gymnastics into a dramatic spectacle. The new trend took off definitively after Comănești's success and the standardisation of pre-pubescent bodies as the *ideal* body type for the performance of complex exercises that a mature female body was not suited for.<sup>1</sup> However, this media attention actually began before the rise of the acrobatic model of gymnastics, as even in Časlávká and Bosaková's time, sports coverage was already presenting female gymnastics with a focus on the athletes' sex appeal, emotional reactions, and the "paternal care" they received from their predominantly male trainers (Barker-Ruchti, 2009: 56). Barker-Ruchti cites the German sociologist Michael Klein, noting that "television's

focus on femininity underpinned women's social status as objects of gaze, protection and dependence" (Klein, 1980: 4-21, cited in Barker-Ruchti, 2009: 56). This observation is easily applicable to *Something Different*, as it is this social status that the film's two protagonists ultimately succumb to, despite their attempts to escape it. Like Barker-Ruchti's genealogical analysis of the female sporting body, the film concludes that despite the protagonists' desire for emancipation, the context in which they live prevents them from achieving it, as their patriarchal society reduces them to "objects of gaze, protection and dependence," just as the world's equally patriarchal mass media does to female gymnasts.

## CONCLUSION

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*Something Different* offers a highly interesting portrait that is the product of its context, using experimental and avant-garde techniques such as mixing styles and filming methods. By presenting the female sporting body in opposition to traditional representations of the female, the film allows us to reflect on Sentamans' definition, while also questioning it and proposing new readings of it. While it is true that the female athlete challenges the patriarchal order through the transformation of her body (acquiring a musculature, strength or elasticity that contravenes the female norm) and her activity in the public sphere (her participation in international sporting competitions such as the Olympic Games), this article has sought to question this notion, accepting its base meaning but highlighting alternative definitions suggested in Chytilová's film. What happens when the female sporting body is placed on the same level as the traditional female body and confined to spaces that are in fact just as oppressive, with men as the chief oppressors in both cases? This is the underlying question of the ideas explored in this article, pointing to the conclusion that in the context of the 1960s when the film was



made—and still today—the emancipation of women is undermined by the patriarchal social structure that maintains these inequalities. It is clear that even in the countries of the Eastern bloc during the Cold War, which in theory sought to create a wholly egalitarian society, this patriarchal framework was difficult to dismantle, although this was given somewhat less attention than it is in the West today. ■

## NOTES

1. It was at this time when media coverage began a process of sexualisation of the bodies of these underage gymnasts, even verging on paedophilia.

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## THE FEMALE SPORTING BODY IN VĚRA CHYTILOVÁ'S SOMETHING DIFFERENT

### Abstract

The female sporting body is a concept defined by Tatiana Sentamans as a first step away from the patriarchal conception of the public sphere as masculine and the private sphere as feminine. By making changes to their bodies that depart from the traditional canon of female beauty and entering public spaces traditionally deemed male, female athletes challenge this logic. In *Something Different* (O něčem jiném, 1963), Věra Chytilová, a key figure in the Czechoslovak New Wave, plays with blurring the line between fiction and reality by combining what could be a documentary about the elite gymnast Eva Bosaková with a fictional story about a housewife named Věra. What at first appears to be an opposition between the two very different lives portrayed alternately on screen turns out to be a comparison of two women who have more in common than expected. Taking into account the sociopolitical context of Czechoslovakia in the 1960s, this article aims to explore these similarities and to identify how Chytilová reflects on and reconstructs the notion of the female sporting body, placing it in opposition against—and on a par with—the canonical body of the traditional housewife.

### Key words

Film; Czechoslovak New Wave; Female gymnastics; Representation of women; Věra Chytilová

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## EL CUERPO DEPORTIVO FEMENINO EN HABLEMOS DE OTRA COSA DE VĚRA CHYTILOVÁ

### Resumen

El cuerpo deportivo femenino es un concepto definido por Tatiana Sentamans como un primer acercamiento a la ruptura con la concepción patriarcal de la esfera pública como masculina y la privada como femenina. Mediante cambios en sus cuerpos que se salen del canon de belleza tradicional femenino y la ocupación de espacios públicos tradicionalmente masculinos, las atletas desafían esta lógica. En *Hablemos de otra cosa* (O něčem jiném, 1963) de la cineasta clave de la Nueva Ola Checoslovaca, Věra Chytilová, la directora juega con el desdibujamiento entre ficción y realidad y combina lo que podría ser un documental acerca de la gimnasta de élite Eva Bosaková con una historia de ficción sobre un ama de casa llamada Věra. Lo que en un principio parece una oposición entre las dos vidas tan diferentes que se van intercalando en la pantalla acaba siendo un símil, pues las dos protagonistas tienen más en común de lo que parecía. Este ensayo pretende observar estas similitudes y ver cómo Chytilová refleja y reconstruye la noción del cuerpo deportivo femenino, enfrentándolo —e igualándolo— al cuerpo canónico del tradicional ama de casa, teniendo en cuenta el contexto sociopolítico de Checoslovaquia en la década de los sesenta.

### Palabras clave

Cine; Nueva Ola Checoslovaca; Gimnasia femenina; Representación femenina; Věra Chytilová.

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