

The TV series “Chronicle of Orgasm” has the wrong title, but it offers an enlightened view of Czechoslovak socialism

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This new documentary series proves that the personal is indeed political. In eight short episodes, sociologist Kateřina Lišková guides us through topics that we often tend to perceive as something purely intimate.

The Chronicle of Orgasm is an eight-part documentary series produced by Cinebonbon in cooperation with Czech Television for the online platform CT iBroadcast, where it can also be viewed in its entirety.

The expert guarantor of the docuseries is sociologist Kateřina Lišková, who also appears as a moderator and guide across the thematic areas, which concern studies of the female orgasm, Czechoslovak attitudes towards homosexuality or trans issues, sex education or prostitution. Kateřina Kořínková Sobotková, who together with Adéla Klingohrová is also behind the script, directed each fifteen-minute episode. Kořínková Sobotková and Lišková are also preparing a feature-length documentary that will expand on some of the themes from *The Chronicle of the Orgasm*.

Sex and the State

Lišková, an academic and author, including of the books, *Sexual Liberation*, *Socialist Style*, on which the docuseries is based, is a good choice in her role: not only can she bring the historical context to life in an informative and, above all, comprehensible way, but you also feel like listening to her - she is simply entertaining, and that is no small feat. It is no coincidence that she is also a member of the stand-up duo Duo Docents where she and her colleague Lucie Jarkovská “standupize” and popularize gender research.

For those who associate Czech Television documentaries with boring talking heads, the whole *Chronicle of Orgasm* will definitely be a surprise, because of the short format of the episodes, and also because of the playful work with graphics, the period clips and the commentary by actor Václav Neuzil.

We learn, for example, quite shocking information - that the female clitoris has been fully described only very recently, or that in the anatomy textbook for seventh grade we still do not have a vagina at all.

For those who are not familiar with the person and work of sociologist Kateřina Lišková, who has been researching and popularizing the topics discussed in the series for a long time, the documentary series will come as a big surprise. The central motif of most of the episodes is Czechoslovak socialism (with the exception of two episodes touching on the transformation years of the 1990s). The socialist period is captured from a completely new perspective for the Czech Television audience, countering the myth of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic as a grey and

asexualized society.

In her research, Lišková traces and reveals to the audience what sex and sexuality say about the functioning and organisation of the state and society, and what dynamics these themes have had in our country. Thus we learn that Czechoslovakia was progressive in many ways, legalizing abortion and decriminalizing gays and lesbians. We are introduced to the pioneers of Czechoslovak sexology and to the purely domestic intrauterine device.

Lišková's role as a serious academic who can explain complex contexts succinctly to a general audience is complemented by small light-hearted "behind the scenes" clips, and the whole series does not feel heavy and inaccessible. On the contrary, despite the density of the information presented, the programmes are light, in the best sense of the word. The short format of fifteen-minute episodes suits an age when our attention deficit is being stolen, as we consume increasingly shorter types of content. This is definitely a big plus and a good step towards the contemporary format and approach that Czech Television is trying to set on iBroadcast. Moreover, the whole is well complemented by catchy graphics, animation and a balanced mix of period clips and interviews.

Orgasm as a symbol of satisfaction

"I take the orgasm in the title as a metaphor for a satisfied private life. In the work on emancipation, we can see that a contented work or private life is the basis for a person to have a contented sex life. And a satisfied sex life sometimes, not necessarily always, hardens the orgasm," director Kateřina Kořínková Sobotková explained the choice of the title to Novinky.cz.

It is true that at first glance the title may be deceptive, because only the first part is devoted to the female orgasm, while the others are a mosaic of various themes from early socialism, through normalisation to the post-revolutionary era. Even so, the first episode is enough to hook you. For example, we learn some rather shocking information - that the female clitoris has only been fully described very recently, or that the anatomy textbook for the Czech seventh grade still does not mention or show the vagina.

"As a sociologist, I find it important and interesting to study public things through private things. Because it is all interconnected. And even in the way the concept of sex changed during socialism, you can see how the spirit of the times changed. Of course, this is true for every era," said Kateřina Lišková about the launch of the series, which, among other things, disproves the stereotype that communism was asexual or too prudish.

Not only because of its intimate subject matter, but also because of its debunking of the myths surrounding sterile communism, I find the series groundbreaking within the mainstream and could imagine it as an entertaining learning tool not only for students, but actually for everyone.

Sex and Time

Through an exploration of period sex, the series reveals socialism as very progressive at certain points. One interesting case is that of the psychiatric hospital in Kroměříž in the fifth episode ("Can Sex Be Taught?"), which was known for its experimental treatment (for example, the use of hypnosis or LSD), and where 'sex training', i.e. couples sex therapy, was also conducted from 1973 to 1991.

This was led by Stanislav Kratochvíl and based on the findings of the American scientific couple William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson, who studied human sexuality in laboratory conditions and were the first to describe the female experience of orgasm as longer than the male one and also described multiple orgasms.

Their efforts to understand the physiology of sex intrigued Kratochvíl so much that he managed to open the aforementioned experimental facility, which is discussed in the series by, among others, two of the nurses who worked there.

The therapy was intended for couples whose sex life was causing them neuroses. Although the sex life is primarily linked to the physical body, it is fully connected to the psyche.

Whether it was premature ejaculation, vaginismus or erectile dysfunction, the Kroměříž sex therapy had successes, and up to three-quarters of the couples who underwent it spoke of being cured.

But better sex did not automatically mean saving a marriage, among other things because learning the art of better sexual experience emancipated people - women in particular.

Sex and queer

Another interesting topic that the series introduces, which unfortunately is still not mainstream, and where attempts to thematize it are often met with unseemly tabloidization or insensitivity, is the topic of trans people and homosexuality. Given that queer history is a neglected topic, I see these chapters as some of the most important ones also for understanding the current situation regarding marriage for all or the ongoing requirement for castration of trans people as a precondition for official gender reassignment. This regulation goes back to socialist Czechoslovakia, where it was enacted in the 1970s and unfortunately, as one of the last countries in Europe, it continues to be applied in Czechia to this day.

Another often overlooked issue on the part of trans people is the condition of divorce as part of the transition process.

The Orgasm Chronicle does not trivialise, but gives space and respect to people who are still marginalised in public space and debate. As we can hear in the third episode of the series, “the Czech system still mistrusts trans people and denies them bodily autonomy.”

The case of trans people is a good example of how life behind the Iron Curtain was not just one monotonous and grey block, but was diverse from state to state. In the 1960s in Poland, for example, there was a groundbreaking case in which a person feeling female did not have to undergo operative change and yet could still become officially recognised as a woman.

We also learn that the first person to advocate for support to trans people to lead a rewarding life was the German physician Magnus Hirschfeld, who founded a sexology institute in Berlin in the 1920s.

But it wasn't until a decade later that scientists were able to isolate female and male sex hormones and the first hormone therapies began. The series does not leave out the Czech trans athlete Zdenka Koubkova, who had to give up all her previous sporting records after her transition, or the first international “trans-superstar”, the American Christine Jorgensen, whom the US boasted as proof of the wonders of Western modern medicine.

We learn about the actual sex life of trans people in Czechoslovakia not only from context and contemporary data, but also through Jan Novák, who mentions, among other things, that none of his partners ever found it a problem: “Before I started having sex with any woman I always told her that I was a cross-dresser. None of them minded and none of them rejected me because of it.” And despite the seriousness of the subject matter, the work is not lacking in humour, lightness and interesting reflections concerning gender expression: “The ideals of femininity and masculinity are almost never given naturally, but ideologically. For me, being trans means finding my own ways to

masculinity and femininity, finding what this actually means for me.”

American Studies scholar Jamie E. Rose muses, illuminating for the audience in a natural and simple way why a strictly biological and medical view of the issue may not be the only, or even always the right, one.

The episode on homosexuality offers a similarly interesting dive, presenting in the quick fifteen minutes format not only Czechoslovakia’s failed attempts at Kurt Freund’s conversion therapy as well as the everyday lives of gays and lesbians in an era that, while decriminalizing homosexuality fairly quickly (as early as 1961), certainly didn’t excel in awareness as much as it did in subtle repression and, with a few exceptions, social disdain.

Historical exceptionalism

And while we learn right off the bat that the function of the female orgasm is still actually a mystery to us (there are three theories currently circulating), perhaps after eight episodes some things will cease to be a mystery to us.

And, as a nice bonus, lots of little tidbits of trivia that, if nothing else, we can regale our friends with over drinks. Did you know we had our own Czechoslovakian IUD? And that the greatest “expert” on marriage and sexologist Dr. Plzák drew not from research but from folk wisdom? Thanks to Kateřina Lišková and Kateřina Kořínková Sobotka you will find out all this and more.

The only pity is that this series is only available online. So the core audience of Czech Television’s regular TV broadcasts won’t find out.

Among the toothless attempts to present new “bachelors”, notably the prime time homophobic tale **With a Song in Distress** by Jiří Vejdělko and Mark Epstein, such a series could at least partially straighten out the mainstream view on some topics. Without prejudice and stereotypes, in context, yet with insight and humour. And recognising that humour does not have to a priori “shoot down”, ridicule and perpetuate entrenched homophobic and other prejudices.

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P.S.

Alarm:

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