“The Idea of Eternal Return”: Palimpsests and National Narratives in Czechoslovak New Wave Literary Adaptations

Dissertation

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Abstract

The Czechoslovak New Wave (1963-1968) has often been referred to as a film “miracle” because of the high volume of very high-quality films produced in such a short amount of time, and – one suspects – also because of its country of origin. Although contemporary critics in the West were taken by surprise by this “sudden” prominence of these films, Czechoslovakia’s film industry in the 1960s was not particularly surprising or even miraculous: it was, instead, the logical evolution of a robust and long-standing tradition of socially engaged public art.

The films of the Czechoslovak New Wave emerged from a perfect alignment of circumstances. The State funded all aspects of production, but had relaxed its political control. When freed of both commercial and ideological constraints, filmmakers in Czechoslovakia created the films that they had always wanted to make: sensitive and often experimental pieces that challenged viewers to revisit their values and their ways of thinking about the world. In fact, the films of the New Wave – especially the considerable number of literary adaptations – can ultimately be viewed as palimpsests: layers upon layers of inter-/sub-/con-text, artistic media, cultural values, and social commentary. This dissertation looks specifically at literary adaptations of the New Wave and how they – together with their source and supporting texts – attempt nothing less than the construction of alternative national narratives. These narratives were offered up as substitutes for and supplements to the official narratives of the socialist realist State.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, my Oma and my Tante, and my Grandmother Worrall, who have never tired of hearing my book reports.
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Introduction

The Soviet leader, Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924), has been credited by the Commissar of Enlightenment, Anatolii Lunacharskii (1875-1933), with the famous observation that, “for us, the cinema is the most important of all the arts.” From the vantage point of almost one hundred years later, one can easily see how his statement – whether he actually said it or not – has reverberated around artistic circles in both the former Soviet Union as well as in its former satellites within the Eastern bloc. For those early Communist filmmakers, the appeal was immediate: the new medium was visual (important in those areas with low literacy rates), it harnessed the technology and modernism so dear to their hearts, it was immutable (no well-meaning but poorly trained proselytizers could garble the message), it was reasonably portable, and – best of all – it drew a crowd (Kenez, Cinema and Soviet Society from the Revolution to the Death of Stalin 27-28). As the industry grew and developed, new virtues were discovered: unlike many of the other arts, films could not be made outside of the studios or without studio support, nor could they be distributed and shown outside of those few places equipped to screen them. Once the government assumed control of both, it effectively assumed control of film, in a way that it could never completely control the other arts. No one understood this better than Lenin’s successor, Josef Stalin (1878-1953), whose love of cinema and belief in its ability to shape reality prompted him to “consider[] the control of
films to be one of the main goals of the party and state apparatus," a goal that ultimately "bordered on an obsession" (Shlapentokh 75).

In the Eastern bloc, those countries that came willingly or unwillingly to communism in the aftermath of World War II, it is this matter of complete ideological and aesthetic control that became such a crucial fact of life for filmmakers in those studios for roughly fifty years. On the one hand, the state-run studio could be a benevolent patron: funding was not an issue, and films were guaranteed an extensive (if captive) audience. On the other hand, the government so completely controlled who made which films on what topics that artistic freedom was often a challenge, as Stalin’s centralized system of studio control – often with the General Secretary himself acting as final critic and arbiter – became the norm in the communist bloc. In the years that followed Stalin’s death, however, many of the ideological restrictions that had shaped so much of the region’s everyday life – both aesthetic and otherwise – were loosened, but the basic structure of the nationalized, socialist cinema remained. Under such extraordinary circumstances, the question became: what could socialist cinema achieve? And, perhaps more provocatively, what would it look like?

The Czechoslovak New Wave, which spanned only a short time (1963-1968), offers the most compelling and the most enduring answer to these questions, and the reason for this lies entirely in the New Wave’s perfect alignment of cultural, political and historical circumstances. As this dissertation will show, the Czechoslovak New Wave could only have been achieved at that time and in that place, although this alignment weaves itself around the more central argument that Czechoslovak cinema – more so than any other art-form – became the medium of cultural discourse, no small assertion for a
nation so replete with fine theater, provocative visual art, and socially engaged literature.

Cinema’s ascendance stems partly from the nature of the medium – some of the very qualities that Lenin and Stalin instinctively recognized as valuable – in that it remained very popular with audiences, it continued to enjoy a freshness and a modernism that its older aesthetic siblings did not, and it generally continued to reflect and shape prevailing norms and values. More to the point, though, cinema in the Czechoslovak context was the next logical step in a long progression of national art, and became so rich and vibrant largely because of how extensively it borrowed from the other arts.

At face value, such an assertion fails to make much of an impression. The casual reader would be entirely within her rights to point out that the Soviets accomplished similar goals during “the Thaw,” the period of aesthetic de-Stalinization that loosely parallels Nikita Khrushchev’s tenure as general secretary (1953-1964). Similarly, cinephiles would protest that contemporary auteurs such as the Polish Andrzej Wajda (b. 1926) or the Hungarian Miklós Jancsó (b. 1921) contributed every bit as much to world cinema as Miloš Forman (b. 1932). It is also fair to note that no one produces a “heritage epic” quite like the Poles or, to a slightly lesser extent, the Russians. All of these statements are entirely accurate, and yet do not capture what was so special about the Czechoslovak New Wave. Unlike others in the region, the Czechoslovak New Wave was a movement, rather than a collection of auteurs, and, unlike the Soviet Thaw, the New Wave had an unprecedented amount of freedom and resources to produce films that more fully reflected their aesthetic and philosophical values. In fact, the context that produced the New Wave is so critical to its understanding, that the whole of Chapter I will be devoted to a fuller exploration of the topic. With this in mind, a critical error will be
avoided: a recent issue of the film magazine, *Cineaste*, congratulated itself for “attempt[ing] to rectify film criticism’s traditional obliviousness to politics and history without abandoning its obligation to the realm of esthetics” (Torn from Today's Headlines (Editorial)). One suspects that the situation in film criticism is not nearly as dire as the Editors at *Cineaste* are suggesting, and yet socio-political context remains one of the crucial factors of film scholarship that is often, oddly, overlooked. Such an omission when discussing the film industries of socialist nations – where art and the socio-political context are inextricably linked – is particularly grave. Chapter 1 thus investigates the full context that helped to produce the New Wave, beginning with the basic historical details but also incorporating a broader exploration of the film industry, the cultural expectations of art, and the underpinning values of the New Wave itself.

While Chapter I will help to illustrate *how* film became such a crucial cultural medium in Czechoslovakia, the subsequent chapters will look more closely at the content of the films of this period and, specifically, how they have evolved out of other art forms and from prevailing cultural preoccupations. More to the point, a close and careful look at the literary adaptations of the films of the Czechoslovak New Wave is particularly warranted, not only because there were so many of them, but also – and perhaps more importantly – because of what these adaptations truly accomplished for this aesthetic movement:

Aside from the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia was the only country in which the belated de-Stalinization brought with it an exceptional flowering of national literature, bringing to light such extraordinary talents as [Ladislav] Fuks, [Bohumil] Hrabal, [Milan] Kundera, [Věra] Linhartová, [Vladimír] Páral, [Josef]
Škvorecký, [Ludvík] Vaculík, and, later, [Jiří] Šotola and others. The symbiosis of theater, literature, art, and music with film, in a tense period of anxiety and searching, and in the inspiring uniqueness of the setting that was Prague, indisputably represented an important stimulus to the development of film culture. In many ways, it was a repeat of what had happened in the thirties. (A. J. Liehm 290)

The “symbiosis” of the arts mentioned here cannot be overstated in the context of the New Wave. From its earliest days, the Czechoslovak film industry has drawn extensively, organically, lovingly from the other arts, and particularly from literature. During the New Wave, the film culture that was cultivated was one that could only be described as “palimpsestuous,” to use a term coined by the Scottish poet and scholar, Michael Alexander (qtd. Hutcheon 6), and the films from this period, like actual palimpsests, are layered works of art. As Linda Hutcheon argues, “texts are said to be mosaics of citations that are visible and invisible, heard and silent; they are always already written and read. So, too, are adaptations, but with the added proviso that they are also acknowledged as adaptations of specific texts” (Hutcheon 21). The films from this period are vibrant with collaboration, allusion, adaptation, polemic and intertextuality, and a closer look at the literary adaptations of this period – and there are many – throws into relief and highlights the truly “palimpsestuous” nature of the Czech art scene. The Czechoslovak New Wave lent itself naturally to adaptation: as the filmmakers of the period played with the conventions of cinema and developed a truly experimental style, their efforts were complemented by similar experiments in the modernist literature of the time – all of which was made possible by attendant shifts in
both socio-political expectations and aesthetic values. Interestingly and significantly, though, the New Wave directors did not limit themselves to artistic sources for their borrowing, adapting, and alluding: woven into their films are historical and political commentaries, some of which are present in the source texts, some only in the New Wave films. Once the censors backed off a bit, the world was able to see what the Czechoslovak film industry could really do, and what it did was to return to its roots, but with all of the technology the 1960s had to offer. With the return of some artistic freedom, the film industry – as well as the other arts, and local and national politics – picked up where it had left off during the interwar First Republic. Adaptation, as it is realized in this “palimpsestuous” context, thus allowed the filmmakers to construct an alternate national narrative. Now, of course, national narratives – even in very small nations – tend not to be monolithic, and one hesitates to make the point too strongly. Yet, these filmmakers nevertheless felt a strong and abiding pull to seek the truth (as opposed to the Truth), to flesh out their values and those they wanted to hold up as national values, and, above all, to create something beautiful, compelling, and genuine. The filmmakers of this period stopped short of dogmatism, and made no attempt to posit their individual artistic visions as the national narrative or the final word on Truth. Rather, these filmmakers embraced a more nuanced and multivalent attitude. The necessarily subjective nature of this quest is also indicative of a certain time and place: the New Wave allowed for the personal and the subjective in ways that Stalinization and Normalization did not.
With the introduction of this dissertation’s primary focus – literary adaptations – comes the need for a few words on adaptation theory, and how adaptations will be evaluated in the following chapters.

On Film Adaptation

Film has had a meaningful, if complicated, relationship with literature and theater since its inception. In the earliest years of the cinema, films were often shot in a manner reminiscent of sitting in a theater’s auditorium: a single, unmoving camera recorded the action before it, as actors and actresses moved in and out of the frame (Giannetti 142, 145). Additionally, one of the first pioneers of the cinema, the French director Georges Méliès (1861-1938), built on his theater experiences in his early experimentation with film; one of the first of the trick effects that he perfected, substitution splicing or “stop motion substitution,” reproduces the effect of the stage’s trap door (Williams 36). With a quick edit, the filmmaker could substitute one object for another, or one actor/actress for another. Méliès defined this technique as early as 1896, but would later use it to great effect in many of his films. Similarly, many of his other effects built on techniques found in theater that could be adapted and developed even further in the new medium: “[g]hostly figures had been produced in his theatre by means of half-silvered mirrors; in his films they would appear via superimposition. Decors could “dissolve” on stage by means of double-painted scrims and suitable changes of lighting; in the films, one scene could cinematographically dissolve into another” (Williams 37).

It is, perhaps, unsurprising that the new medium borrowed techniques from a similarly performed and visual art like the theater; what is perhaps more surprising is that the new medium also developed techniques from an art traditionally considered non-
visual: literature. As cinema evolved from the short tableaux and the documentary-style shorts of its earliest days, it became decidedly more and more narrative, and thus required techniques that would convey the same level of complexity that literature had to offer, rather than just the visual trick effects that Méliès enjoyed so much. Toward the end of his life, the celebrated Soviet director, Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948), wrote his famous essay, “Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today” (1944), in which he reminisced about the development of cinema – both in the Soviet Union and abroad – and made the case that many of the techniques now taken for granted came directly from the literature of the nineteenth century. Quoting extensively from passages of Charles Dickens’ work, Eisenstein carefully builds the case that D.W. Griffith’s use of such techniques as the close-up, montage, and the illusion of parallel action in films such as *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916), stemmed directly from similar techniques in the novelist’s work. Similarly, Eisenstein argues, Griffith’s mastery of tempo and of what he calls the “extraordinary plasticity” of Griffith’s characters and images also comes from the great novelist (Eisenstein, Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today 208). Last but not least – and certainly very dear to the Soviet director’s heart – Eisenstein makes the case that Griffith derived his sense of the social function of cinema from Dickens as well: in both cases, Eisenstein argues, the public has responded overwhelmingly to the two authors, and these audiences respond not only to the chosen media but to the chosen messages (206-208). Whereas the capitalist West might have interpreted this popularity in box office receipts, the Soviets – and, according to Eisenstein, Griffith as well – saw in film an enormous
potential for telling important stories and for conveying very selective and important ideas.¹

One of the most notable borrowings from theater and literature, in addition to techniques, then, was content, and the borrowing began very early in cinema’s development: “[a]udiences were eager for whatever adaptations the available technology could supply” (Leitch 22). From its inception, cinema borrowed heavily from the other narrative arts, partly because early filmmakers felt compelled to draw upon the perceived respectability of the older arts, but also because they were always interested in new narratives – particularly ones that had already proven themselves to be popular/lucrative (Leitch).

With the first adaptations, however, came the first critiques of these cinematic borrowings, particularly if the source text was particularly well-known and beloved. The criticism was not accompanied by any theory for some time. There is Eisenstein’s essay, mentioned above, and – roughly contemporary – the writings of André Bazin (1918-1958) and François Truffaut (1932-1984). In his essay, “Adaptation, or the Cinema as Digest” (1948), Bazin takes the very progressive stance that, “it is possible to imagine that we are moving toward a reign of the adaptation in which the notion of the unity of the work of art, if not the very notion of the author himself, will be destroyed” (Bazin

¹ For his part, Eisenstein was an unapologetic propagandist. His theories on editing centered on its ability not only to convey a narrative, but – much more important to Eisenstein – to convey an idea: “Not in vain . . . was the new concept of film-language born, film-language not as the language of the film-critic, but as an expression of cinema thinking, when the cinema was called upon to embody the philosophy and ideology of the victorious proletariat” (17).
26). In other words, the work will exist as a concept apart from both the author(s) as well as from its many manifestations (whether literature, film, or another medium); thus, each manifestation can be judged by its own criteria, rather than by how well it matches or follows a preceding manifestation. Truffaut, for his part, railed against the concept of the literary adaptation as it was realized in the films of Jean Aurenche (1904-1992) and Pierre Bost (1901-1975), two of France’s most prolific screenwriters and contributors to the so-called “Tradition of Quality.” In his essay, “A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema” (1953), Truffaut agrees with Bazin that one need not be faithful “to the letter” of the source text, but rather that one has some latitude to hew more closely to the spirit of the work. Truffaut bridles at first at the idea that there are “unfilmable scenes” in literature and second that these “unfilmable scenes” would be “unfilmable” for all directors:

Talent, to be sure, is not a function of fidelity, but I consider an adaptation of value only when written by a man of the cinema. Aurenche and Bost are essentially literary men and I reproach them here for being contemptuous of the cinema by underestimating it. They behave, vis-a-vis the scenario, as if they thought to reeducate a delinquent by finding him a job; they always believe they’ve "done the maximum" for it by embellishing it with subtleties, out of that science of nuances that make up the slender merit of modern novels. It is, moreover, only the smallest caprice on the part of the exegetists of our art that they believe to honor the cinema by using literary jargon. . . . The truth is, Aurenche and Bost have made the works they adapt insipid, for equivalence is always with us, whether in the form of treason or timidity. (Truffaut)
The basic underlying principle for both Bazin and Truffaut – and even, to some extent, Eisenstein – is that literary adaptations stop being literary the moment they are transposed to celluloid. At that point they are undeniably cinematic, and should be evaluated as such.

This very simple premise has taken decades to catch on, and is still arguably in the process of becoming a generally accepted idea. In 1957, George Bluestone published what is widely considered a seminal text, *Novels Into Film*, in which he takes as his basic premise the idea that filmic adaptations will *always* differ from their source text “the moment one abandons the linguistic for the visual medium” and that furthermore “it is insufficiently recognized that the end products of novel and film represent different aesthetic genera, as different from each other as ballet is from architecture” (5). In this respect, Bluestone’s arguments echo those of Bazin’s. Despite these contributions to the scholarship on adaptation, others have been slow to dismiss the criterion of “fidelity” as the primary one for evaluation adaptations, and literary studies have overwhelmingly remained the prism through which film adaptations should be viewed. As the critic, Robert Stam has put it:

The traditional language of criticism of filmic adaptation of novels, as I have argued elsewhere, has often been extremely judgmental, proliferating in terms that imply that film has performed a disservice to literature. Terms such as “infidelity,” “betrayal,” “deformation,” “violation,” “vulgarization,” “bastardization,” and “desecration” proliferate, with each word carrying its specific charge of opprobrium. Despite the variety of the accusations, their drift seems always to be the same – the book was better. (Stam 3)
To put all of this in slightly different terms, then, the point that Stam – and for that matter, Bazin, Truffaut, and Bluestone – is making is not so much that “the book was better,” but that the book is fundamentally different. Indeed, much of the scholarship that has followed has attempted to explore and codify these differences. Consequently, writers like Brian McFarlane build on the post-structuralists and have investigated the process of adaptation by mining the distinction between what can be transferred from literature to film (narrative) and what cannot (enunciation). Dudley Andrew sifts through types of adaptation – borrowing, intersecting, and transforming – and arrives at the conclusion that “[f]ilmmaking . . . is always an event in which a system is used and altered in discourse. Adaptation is a peculiar form of discourse, but not an unthinkable one.” He continues, “Let us use it not to fight battles over the essence of the media or the inviolability of individual artworks. Let us use it as we use all cultural practices, to understand the world from which it comes and the one toward which it points” (Andrew 37). Both Kamilla Elliot and Ella Shohat take on the distinctions between the visual image and the word: Elliot attempts to break down the distinction by calling attention to the visual images in texts (illustrations, e.g.) and the actual words of films (scripts, e.g.), while Shohat takes on the fascinating issue of making sacred words visual – particularly in religions that prohibit doing just that. There is also the much looser exploration of intertextuality, or the practice suggested by Christopher Orr, of regarding the original text as a resource for the purposes of seeing how “the choice of a specific source and how the approach to that source serves the film’s ideology” (72). Even more recently, Thomas Leitch has attempted to situate the study of adaptations more squarely within the field of film studies by tracing the evolving nature of cinematic adaptations. Perhaps most
cutting edge of all, Linda Hutcheon reminds her readers that for a profitable discussion of adaptation to take place, one must first remember that adaptations can move in any direction (from novel to film, but also from film to television series or novel to video game or any combination therein) and that the “experiential” element of adaptation (telling, showing, and interacting) is every bit as important as the chosen medium.

The recent scholarship on adaptations in cinema has progressed significantly beyond the fidelity model. At times, though, the scholarship manages to be either too broad (i.e., broad discussions of medium, and – again, broadly – what one medium can do that the other[s] cannot)\(^2\) or too narrow (i.e., tied very tightly to specific “case studies”). Additionally and frustratingly, despite advances in the criticism on the subject, film reviews – both professional and on the level of the average film-goer – tend to persist in their use of fidelity as a major criterion for evaluation. In recent film reviews on Salon, critic Stephanie Zacharek offers a primer on the fidelity model:

There are all sorts of ways to botch a book-into-film adaptation: A filmmaker can be too cavalier about changing an author’s character conception or meaning, or he can be so slavishly respectful of those things that he fails to make a work that resonates cinematically. He can rely too heavily on the use of voice-over; he can miscast one actor, or every actor; he can simply fall down on the job of capturing the lyricism or muscle of a particular writer’s prose, as plenty of great directors have done. Adaptation is an art, not a science, and it’s a thankless job to boot: Not even the most graceful filmmaker can escape the carping of the “Movies are

always inferior to the books they're based on" crowd. (Zacharek, The Lovely Bones: Be Very Afraid 1)

Zacharek, oddly enough, often seems to place herself squarely within this camp of “Movies are always inferior to the books they’re based on,” as she proceeds to savage Peter Jackson’s newly released adaptation of Alice Sebold’s 2002 novel of the same name, The Lovely Bones. She continues by insisting that Sebold’s novel, “a fiercely delicate and often funny piece of writing,” has been horribly disserviced by Jackson’s “garish, pointless and downright inept rendering,” which has “reinvented Sebold's story in the most facile and needlessly way imaginable: He's turned it into a supernatural thriller” (1). Zacharek’s review then continues largely by pointing out all the ways the film failed to live up to her vision of the book. In a separate review, Zacharek takes an opposite tack, this time demonstrating how the film is a vast improvement over the source text. In a move that clearly demonstrates to this writer why Zacharek is a film and not literature critic, she argues that, “John Hillcoat's ‘The Road’ [2009] is an honorable adaptation of a piece of pulp fiction disguised as high art; it a [sic] has more directness and more integrity than its source material, the 2006 novel by Cormac McCarthy” (Zacharek, The Road: Post-Apocalypse Now 1). She continues:

And that's where Hillcoat, as a filmmaker, proves his sound judgment. By its nature, film is more immediate and visually direct than literature. Hillcoat uses that immediacy to his advantage, but he doesn't abuse it -- in fact, he's more mindful of his visuals, and their ultimate effect, than McCarthy is of his images. His picture is straightforward in ways the novel only pretends to be. (Zacharek, The Road: Post-Apocalypse Now 1)
Her contention that “film is more immediate and visually direct than literature” is both true and misleading; film *is* more “visually direct,” but more qualifications are needed for her assertion that film is “more immediate.” Whereas her review of *The Lovely Bones* goes to extraordinary lengths to savage director Peter Jackson’s realization of the novel—one that clearly fails to match hers—the review of *The Road* is markedly more positive precisely because it improves on the author’s vision, and thus more clearly matches her own. The problem with her critical model is that it is subjective. To some degree, all art reviews are subjective, but she seems oddly unwilling to move beyond the fidelity model towards a more objective model for criticism.

The *New York Times* reviews of the same films—both written by A.O. Scott—are considerably more balanced and more willing to address the film directly, rather than as a shadowy simulacrum of the source novel. When Scott takes issue with the two films, he does so with reference to the source novels, but not in a way that makes the film a prisoner to the original piece, but rather on their own terms:

As a pictorial artifact “The Lovely Bones” is gorgeous. It pulses and blooms and swells with bright hues and strange vistas.

But it does not move. Or, rather, as it skitters and lurches from set piece to the next, papering the gaps with swirls of montage, it never achieves the delicate emotional coherence that would bring the story alive. My point is not that Mr. Jackson and his fellow screenwriters have taken undue liberties with the book, a complaint that some other critics have made. On the contrary, the problem with this “Lovely Bones” is that it dithers over hard choices, unsure of which aspects of Ms. Sebold’s densely populated, intricately themed novel should be
emphasized and which might be winnowed or condensed. (Scott, The Lovely Bones: Gazing Down, From a Suburb of Heaven, at an Earthly Purgatory)

Or these comments, equally lengthy and evocative, from his review of *The Road*:

But “The Road,” though frequently powerful, and animated by a genuinely troubling premise, is hampered by compromises and half-measures. These have less to do with changes made to the story — [Joe] Penhall’s script follows the novel as faithfully as a hunting dog — than with shifts in emphasis and tone. The intermittently fake-folky orchestral score by Nick Cave and Warren Ellis is musically inoffensive, but the way it is used softens crucial scenes and turns the sublime into the sentimental.

It may seem perverse to complain that a vision of human near-extinction is insufficiently bleak. After all, even Mr. McCarthy’s book offers a few hints of consolation. But for these to mean anything, the full horror of the situation has to be grasped, and despair has to be given its due. The film is reluctant to go that far, and, like [Viggo] Mortensen’s character, offers a reassurance that can feel a bit dishonest. The difference is that the father is fighting not to lose his son, while the filmmakers are striving not to lose an audience.

And, for the most part, they succeed. “The Road” is engrossing and at times impressive, a pretty good movie that is disappointing to the extent that it could have been great. Is this the way the world ends? With polite applause? (Scott, The Road: Father and Son Bond in Gloomy Aftermath of Disaster)

Scott’s reviews differ from Zacharek’s in that they do not oblige the film to follow the novel, or perhaps more accurately, he does not review the film through the prism of
literary studies, but instead from a vast experience with the medium of film. Scott’s reviews evaluate what is cinematic – either successful or not – about the two films, whereas Zacharek’s approach is perhaps best summed up by the link on Salon’s page to her review of *The Lovely Bones*: “How to Ruin a Good Novel.”

This foray into recent reviews of film adaptations serves not only to show how unevenly the recent scholarship on the subject has permeated professional reviews, but also to suggest that there is an effective way to talk about film adaptations and a less effective way: in the discussions of film adaptations that will follow, Scott’s model – one that acknowledges the source text without using it as a criterion for criticism – will be more closely followed.

These reviews, plucked as they are from recent publications, also reflect another trend in adaptations studies: although film adaptations are common in virtually all film industries since the inception of the medium, these new trends in film criticism are slow to be applied to films outside of the Anglo-American film industries, although a notable exception to this is Stephen Hutchings and Anat Vernitski’s *Russian and Soviet Film Adaptations of Literature, 1900-2011: Screening the Word*. This dissertation will attempt to do something similar – although on a slightly smaller scale – for the Czechoslovak New Wave, a movement that screened many literary adaptations.

Four films based on pre-existing literary texts have been selected precisely because of their larger ability to communicate the alternative national narrative – at least as their directors envisioned it. In Chapter 2, this dissertation will explore how the omnibus film, *Pearls of the Deep* (1966), functions as a kind of retroactive “manifesto” for the New Wave, in the absence of a contemporary, officially-sanctioned one. The film
consists of five short films, each based on a short story by the writer Bohumil Hrabal (1914-1991), directed by a handful of the New Wave’s most famous filmmakers: Jiří Menzel, Jan Němec, Evald Schorm, Věra Chytilová, and Jaromil Jireš. The multi-layered film functions as a kind of manifesto not only in how it is filmed, but because of the themes introduced across the five segments. The five directors – with the help of the renowned New Wave cameraman, Jaroslav Kučera – employ numerous innovative techniques including subjective camerawork, unconventional editing, experimentation with motion (sped up, slowed down), and meaningful mise-en-scène, to name only a few. The overarching themes of the films are where the film really starts to take shape as a manifesto: over the course of the five constituent parts, the filmmakers each explore the role of art in society, its creation, consumption, and legacy.

Chapter 3 returns the discussion to one of history and in particular to Dina Iordanova’s idea of the “burden of history.” It looks specifically at two films most profitably evaluated together: Jaromil Jireš’s 1968 adaptation of Milan Kundera’s novel, The Joke and Vojtěch Jasny’s All My Good Countrymen (1968). The latter is not a literary adaptation, but is coupled with The Joke in large part because it also explores the Stalinist past and thus also exemplifies the idea of the “burden of history.” Iordanova’s argument is that Czechoslovakia – like Poland and Hungary – has been so often on the losing side of history that nothing short of a national complex has resulted. The two films offer two different sides of the “burden”: whereas The Joke is largely the story of an urban intellectual, All My Good Countrymen shows the Stalinist devastation of the collective and the countryside.
Chapter 4 also treats the idea of the “burden of history,” but in different ways. In this chapter, Juraj Herz’s 1967 adaptation of Ladislav Fuks’ novel, *The Cremator*, takes on the issue of collaboration around the time of the Munich Agreement (1938) and into the initial years of the Protectorate. Although there are numerous intertextual references throughout the film, the focus of this chapter is on how the novel and film function as a polemic with an earlier literary work, Jaroslav Hašek’s *The Good Soldier Švejk and His Fortunes in the World War* (1923). Josef Švejk has emerged in Czech culture as something of a folk hero and – to the chagrin of some – an emblem of the national character: he is a wily “idiot” who feigns compliance with the various representatives of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (the Army, the Church, the judicial system, etc.) while regularly wreaking havoc and undermining their authority. It is precisely his seeming compliance – rather than an active dissent – with which Fuks and then Herz (both survivors of the Second World War) take issue. The film’s main character, the sinister Karel Kopfrkingl, can be read as the evil other side of Švejk’s compliance.

In all of the films mentioned so far, the author of the original text was not only alive to see the release of the adaptation, but was also an active participant in its adaptation. In Chapter 5, however, Jaromil Jireš’s and Ester Krumbachová’s 1970 adaptation of *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* was completed well after the death of its author, Vítězslav Nezval, in 1958. The timing of the film’s release is such that it comes not only after the author’s death, but also after the Soviet invasion and, thus, the end of the New Wave as a movement. The film can be seen as a final exclamation point on the movement, demonstrating as it does many of the aesthetic and philosophical traits of its predecessors, as well as its own inimitable, erotic political commentary.

To be sure, several scholars and observers – both domestic and international – have taken up the topic of the Czechoslovak New Wave, and this dissertation is greatly indebted to their work; they have not, however, consistently looked at the history, context, and values that informed the New Wave. Instead, their works have provided excellent – encyclopedic, even – film histories, such as Josef Škvorecký’s gossipy first-hand observations in *All the Bright Young Men and Women* (1971), Peter Hames’ considerably more scholarly, *The Czechoslovak New Wave* (1985), and Luboš Ptáček’s *Panorama českého filmu* (2000). Other works, such as Dina Iordanova’s *The Cinema of the Other Europe* (2003) and Antonín J. and Mira Liehm’s *The Most Important Art* (1977), tend to focus more broadly on the region. On the other end of the spectrum, Robert Buchar’s *Czech New Wave Filmmakers in Interviews* (2004) and Antonín J. Liehm’s *Closely Watched Films* (1974) focus more narrowly on the filmmakers themselves in interviews. This paper will refer to these and other works often while attempting to fill some of the holes in their otherwise exceptional scholarship. The
following chapters will examine the film industry’s palimpsests and uncover the values that the New Wave posited as more representative of the nation than those so recently imposed from outside.
Chapter 1: History and Context

The 1960s were marked by social tumult, political uncertainty, and a desire for change, all manifested in the decade’s riots, assassinations, police actions, rhetorical menacing, sit-ins, boycotts, arms races, invasions, and war. Internally, many nations grappled with civic unrest, as movements for change met with strong resistance from the entrenched powers. Globally, numerous governments were caught up in the struggle between mutually exclusive foreign policies of the world’s two superpowers: the Soviet Union’s desire to spread communism, and the United States’ equally powerful desire to contain it. Behind the scenes, the Soviet Union experienced a political (and therefore social, economic and aesthetic) “thaw” when the worst of the Stalinist excesses were repudiated by leading party officials and the much of the population at large. In the United States, progressive legislation brought about greater enfranchisement and a Great Society committed to taking care of its own in a manner startlingly reminiscent of Marx’s slogan, “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.”

Politics naturally do not play out in a vacuum, and these changes not only influenced, but were in turn influenced by, similarly unprecedented changes in other spheres of society. In the arts, the 1960s were in many places a time of innovation, experimentation, and change. In film, the national cinemas of many countries were actively rejecting the old styles in favor of newer, fresher perspectives. These new wave cinemas belonged to a movement characterized by “rebellion” that was every bit as political and polemical as it was aesthetic (Nowell-Smith 3). For filmmakers all over the world, cinema was a way to change the way viewers thought about the world, and with any luck and skill at all, to change the viewers themselves. It was a heady moment in
world cinema history, one that attempted to do so much with an art form that was, relatively speaking, still so new and untested.

Worldwide, cinemas were exploring how best to achieve high-levels of aesthetic and technical sophistication and to reach audiences, and they were doing so at roughly the same time: the French New Wave, the British “Kitchen Sink” realism, the Polish School, and, to a lesser extent, the films of the Soviet Thaw all fall under the general heading of “new wave” cinema. The film historian, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, notes:

The new cinemas, wherever they appeared, emerged to fill a gap. . . . . The need felt in the 1960s was not just for new product. It was also, crucially, for new thinking and new modes of experience, often in ways which went against the imperatives which ruled (or appeared to rule) the market. If there was a gap between what the cinema had been and what it aspired to be, it was ideological and cultural at least as much as it was economic. It was a gap between different concepts of art, or different concepts of the relationship between art and politics, and the impulse for change came from film-makers, or critics, or political or cinephile activists, who wanted a cinema responsive to different imperatives than those that ruled in the market-dominated mainstream. (Nowell-Smith 28)

In few places were these sentiments held so strongly and realized so profoundly as they were in Czechoslovakia. The films that emerged from the Czechoslovak film industry during the 1960s were so startlingly new and fresh that many commentators both at home and abroad began referring to it not only as a new wave, but as nothing short of a miracle. In the case of the Czechoslovaks, the cinema of the New Wave was dedicated to “new thinking and new modes of experience,” and as such was a logical, aesthetic extension of
what would later be known as “socialism with a human face” (socialismus s lidskou tváří). Within a nationalized industry, Czech filmmakers of the New Wave were considerably less concerned about the market forces of the industry than were many of their Western colleagues, but this desire to change radically the pre-existing notions of cinema – what it can accomplish and how – was certainly something they shared with the West.

Although similarities between the Czechoslovak New Wave and the contemporary new wave cinemas produced elsewhere can be found, one runs the risk of overstating the similarities and/or eliding the differences. The specific and singular history and context that led up to and ultimately produced the New Wave cannot be overemphasized; indeed, they are the backbone of this and every other artistic movement in the small nation. Czechoslovakia’s history, like that of other small nations in the region, is one of invasion and occupation, tragedy and adversity, as well as brief interludes of self-determination and national awakening, and this very unevenness has left an indelible mark on the culture and politics of the nation – although even the use of the term “nation” must be used advisedly in this context. History here has been marked by the tension between the nation’s own goals and inclinations, and those that have been imposed so often from outside. Despite these interruptions, or perhaps because of them, Czechoslovak artists, intellectuals, and politicians have engaged in a constant struggle to build a cultural and political concept of “Czechoslovakia,” itself a somewhat invented idea:

Czech history cannot be reduced to an orderly procession of presidents or a triumphal march from sea to shining sea. . . . It constantly forces us to rethink
what we understand by a history in the first place, and to confront the question of how much forgetting is always entailed in the production of memory. There is coherence in Czech history, but it is not the coherence of a logical argument. . . . But the continuity of this identity exists in, and only in, its perpetual salvagings and reconstructions in the face of repeated disruptions and discontinuities. The imagination of community and invention of tradition never ends; it is a ceaseless labor of bricolage. Bohemia confounds the neat oppositions and orderly sequences upon which our histories and geographies of the modern depend. This is a world of Czech national awakeners whose mother tongue is German, of urban modernities dressed up in timeless peasant costumes, of Jews who are Germans in one decennial census and Czechs in the next and who are gassed, regardless, a few decades later, of communist futures watched over by the resurrected shade of the nationalist past. (Sayer 15)

In his book, The Coasts of Bohemia: A Czech History (1998), Derek Sayer greatly simplifies the challenge of discussing the art, politics, and history of the area by limiting himself only to the Czechs, and the Bohemians in the western part of the country. Nevertheless, his central point – that Czech history is finely-crafted bricolage – fits nicely into a more comprehensive discussion of Czechoslovakia. The jagged oppositions that he notes above are more grimly highlighted in the context of the shared nation and its subsequent divorce. This dissertation will build on his arguments, but will draw a finer point: what is bricolage but a form of adaptation and intertext? In effect, though this dissertation will look specifically at literary adaptations in the New Wave, it must be understood that adaptation as a grander concept and as a more general process is part of a
larger cultural and political strategy of survival, and that the history and artistic works described are part of this more comprehensive narrative.

Before looking more closely at the specific films of later chapters, it is first necessary to get a general sense of this all-important history and context. Such a survey will include political history, as well as a more cultural history, of the region. What emerges from such a discussion is several important factors, chief among them the understanding that, when left to their own devices, Czechoslovak politicians and artists strive for the personal and the democratic (as opposed to more officially orthodox narratives), for a humanist ideal (but one that eschews the belligerence of dogmatism), and for an aesthetic that communicates these values (though not in the sense of an all-encompassing state aesthetic). Such strivings set Czechoslovakia apart from the rest of the region: one need only look at the First Republic (1918-1938) – the only interwar democracy in the region – and the haven it provided to émigrés and the flowering of aesthetics that grew from it to see this. As we shall see, the New Wave is what happens when the Czechoslovaks are able to tell their stories as they see fit.

I. History and Context

The Czechoslovak film industry is older than the nation itself and has survived its numerous names and governments over its relatively short history. Such a fact necessarily complicates any discussion of a “national” cinema, while at the same time underscoring the crucial concept of continuity. In his article, “The Czech Difference,” (1983) František Daniel explicitly cites continuity as one of the most important aspects of
Czech cinema. At the heart of his argument are the related observations that the Czech film industry is long-standing and that it has continued, uninterrupted, since its inception. Given the cataclysmic events of twentieth-century European history, this is saying something indeed: in effect, the Czech film industry has weathered invasion, occupation, two world wars, and independence. The industry has also weathered more technical storms: with the advent of sound cinema, industries of similarly-sized nations experienced a drop-off in demand for their films; the Czech film industry, rather surprisingly, given how few people speak the language, did not experience a similar fate (Daniel 51). Daniel notes that “[c]urrent-day film trends in Czechoslovakia have their roots in earlier periods,” but he stops just short of spelling out exactly what that means; the point is absolutely crucial to any understanding of the New Wave, which grew so organically out of the native film tradition, and will be explored in greater detail below.

The Czech film industry was strong and steady from the beginning, which came soon after the Lumière Brothers and Edison began making their films in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Škvorecký also notes that a Czech physician, Jan Evangelista Purkyňe (1787-1869), could lay claim to early developments in the medium by inventing a device that animated daguerreotypes in the mid-nineteenth century, and that the architect, Jan Kříženecký (1868-1921), brought the first Lumière camera to Bohemia in 1896 (1). In fact, he goes on rather acidly to point out that:

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3 Daniel very clearly mentions the Czechs in this context, noting that the Slovaks only had an industry of their own in the post-war period. His assertion is both true and misleading: Slovak filmmakers were at work during the early part of the twentieth century (also pre-dating Czechoslovakia) and produced several notable films, but they did not have a film studio to call home until after World War II.
Czechs began to make films as early as the classical film nations of the West; they made many, and several received world acclaim both before and after the war. Despite this, the “World” acknowledged the existence of Czechoslovakian film as an art form only at the beginning of the sixties. At that time, the films of the New Wave started to accumulate prizes at Western Festivals, and this appeared to the world to be almost a miracle. Czechoslovakia was thought of as some East European country – political schizophrenia had long before replaced geography – *eo ipso* technically undeveloped and culturally impoverished. (Škvorecký 28)

Škvorecký’s observation is worth a closer look, as it underscores two factors that continue to affect how the “World” perceives cinema from this small nation: in the first case, there is a marked condescension (and in other cases a belligerent misunderstanding) on the part of the West towards the art of Czechoslovakia, and a refusal to recognize Czechoslovakia as a nation with equal claim to a “Western” historical and cultural heritage. If one is to appreciate the cinema of the Czechoslovak New Wave, then it is imperative that one understands that these films are a part of a hardy and respected tradition, and that this tradition is unique to the nation that produced it.

The Czechoslovak film industry is – as its name suggests – made up of both Czechs and Slovaks, and although such a fact seems so obvious and simple, the practical effects of this reality are anything but. Although the two nations have many things in common in their cultural development, certain major differences must be addressed. Czechs and Slovaks – long before they thought of themselves in such terms – earlier shared a “nation:” both were united under the Great Moravian Empire (ninth century – tenth century) more than a thousand years before they were re-joined as Czechoslovakia.
in 1918. Fatefully, the western part of the empire was later absorbed into the Kingdom of Bohemia, and the eastern part was ultimately incorporated into the Magyar kingdom. At this point, the Czechs and the Slovaks developed very differently: though they both came under the domination of the Hapsburg empire, the Czechs developed industrially, while the Slovaks developed agriculturally:

As important as the differences in historical experience of Slovakia and the “historic lands” of the Bohemian crown was the enormous gulf between them at independence as kinds of societies. They were two worlds. The Czech lands had all the accoutrements of a modern civil society: large cities and abundant middling-size towns, a literate public, established political parties, trade unions and chambers of commerce, a multitude of voluntary clubs and societies, a vigorous press, universities, high schools, theaters, art galleries, and so on. Poor and rural Slovakia for the most part did not; in particular, it lacked an indigenous educated elite. (Sayer 172)

Although both peoples experienced a national revival in the nineteenth century, they encountered slightly different challenges along the way.

Efforts to create a discrete Slovak national culture were problematized by precisely this rather complex relationship with Austria, Hungary, and the Czechs themselves. In the seventeenth century, Slovak Protestants adopted Czech as their written language while maintaining Slovak as the spoken language. This usage of the Czech language spread throughout Slovakia and became virtually standard: “[the Czech language’s] durability in Slovakia was made possible by the absence of a major cultural or economic center that would have provided a nucleus for the development of a Slovak
literary language” (Kirschbaum 94-95). In the twentieth century, the “major cultural and economic center” of Czechoslovakia was Prague, a city (relatively) far from Slovakia and one in which very few Slovaks lived. The relationship between the two halves of Czechoslovakia became “inevitably” and “effectively a colonial one” (Sayer 174). Both Czechs and Slovaks were affected by Joseph II’s Edict of Tolerance (1781-1782), which made German the official language of education, commerce, and government; for both Czechs and Slovaks this suppression of their language was a threat to their national culture and identity. To complicate things further for the Slovaks, the Hungarians – particularly after the establishment of the Dual Monarchy in 1867 – implemented a fairly extensive policy of “magyarization” in Slovakia that systematically rooted out and eliminated any attempts to establish a national culture or language.

Thanks to the efforts of the poet and politician L’udovit Stur (1815-1856), the Slovak language developed as a means of identifying Slovaks as distinct from the Hungarians – and the Czechs, for that matter. Stur’s followers (the Sturovci) took up the “new” language and produced a flurry of literary pieces that directly or indirectly articulated a newfound sense of national identity and national values. Stur himself led the charge, writing pieces in defense of the Slovak language as well as epic poems celebrating Slovakia’s rich history and cultural legacy (Kirschbaum 100, 102).

Meanwhile, Czech intellectuals also answered the call for national revival in much the same way. The linguist and historian, Josef Dobrovský (1753-1829), worked tirelessly to promote both the Czech language and Czech culture, two concepts that were, for him and his followers, indivisible. His contemporary, the equally devoted linguist Josef Jungmann (1773 – 1847), summed up the basic principles of language and identity
politics as follows: “The people is still Czech; as for the lords, let them speak French or Babylonian. . . . Every language is, in its own home, a peasants’ language, and since the peasant is the foremost inhabitant of the land, he could with justice demand: ‘…speak so I can understand you!’” (Agnew 112). Later, the historian František Palacký (1798-1876) would add to the work of his predecessors by writing the epic multi-volume history of the Czech lands, “a key element of Czech national ideology, its image of its own past” (Agnew 113). Although originally written and published in German, Palacký’s history later appeared in a Czech-language version.

Like the Slovaks, the Czechs produced several important works of lyric poetry and collections of folk songs in the nineteenth century, but the Czechs – unencumbered by the markedly more complicated matter of language, unlike the Slovaks – were deeply committed to narrative art forms that could showcase the national language and, thereby, the nation itself. Thus, the Czechs invested their art, and specifically their narrative arts, with an urgency and an importance that quickly took on political overtones: the National Theater, built in the latter half of the nineteenth century, was national in all senses of the word: not only was it paid for by contributions from the entire populace – rich and poor alike – but “the ceremonial laying of its foundation stone on 16 May 1868 was tantamount [to] a nationwide political manifestation” (Národní divadlo: Theatre Buildings, National Theatre). When the structure was destroyed by fire in 1881, the nation (such as it was) rallied to rebuild: the new structure was finished in 1883. Over the proscenium were the words, “Národ Sobě” or “The Nation, to Itself” (Agnew 143). Fittingly, Bedřich Smetana (1824 – 1884), one of Bohemia’s most ardent sons, wrote the
opera that served as the National Theater’s premiere (both of them: in 1881 and again in 1883): the historical epic Libuše, after Bohemia’s mythical founder-queen.

This minor digression on the nineteenth century national revivals of these two peoples is particularly useful for understanding their respective film traditions. Although the Slovaks were just as interested in self-expression and just as talented and motivated as the Czechs, one has a sense that they were caught in a constant game of catch-up, and Stanislav J. Kirschbaum’s observation that Slovakia lacked a cultural and economic center to counter Prague takes on the unfortunate quality of prophecy. When, after a separation of almost a thousand years, the two peoples found themselves united again, there was an unmistakable Czech-centrism, a tension that would lead, eighty years later, to the Velvet Divorce. In the mean time, though, aspiring Slovak filmmakers were obliged to attend Prague’s film academy and Prague’s impressive, state-of-the-art film studio for much of their shared history.

This dissertation will also be guilty of a certain Czech-centrism, precisely because of the dominance of the Czech film academy, the Czech film studios at Barrandov, the preponderance of Czech-language films in the New Wave, and the absence of a concentrated Slovak equivalent until well after the second world war. Nevertheless, Slovak filmmakers such as Stefan Uher, Jaromil Jireš, and Juraj Herz were crucial to the development of the Czechoslovak New Wave, and should not be overlooked by any study of the cinema of this region.

With this disclaimer of Czech-centrism in mind, we turn back to the early development of the Czechoslovak film industry. The above-mentioned artistic tradition of the Revival and Libuše logically culminated in the twentieth century in the spheres of
theater, literature, and film, with a great deal of overlap among the three: all were very popular media in a nation that valued the narrative arts – perhaps above all others – since they so necessarily showcased language. The Czechs began producing films by the end of the nineteenth century, and were as active and technologically savvy as their larger neighbors. During the interwar period, film became the focus of a number of aesthetic movements, although the avant-garde affected the Czechoslovak film scene about ten years after such collaborations had flowered elsewhere in Europe (Ptáček 61). The accomplished architect and photographer, Alexandr Hackenschmied (1907-2004), brought his considerable artistic talents to the cinema and thus helped to usher in avant-garde cinema in Czechoslovakia; his Aimless Walk / Bezúčelná procházka (1930) has been called the best avant-garde film of the Czechoslovak interwar period (Ptáček 61). Art groups such as the avant-garde Devětsil actively promoted the new medium, and several of its members – Karel Teige, Vítězslav Nezval and Vladislav Vančura, chief among them – were later very influential in the New Wave (Hames 9). In fact, with the efforts and aesthetics of Devětsil come some of the most concentrated overlapping of the arts: among its members were writers (poetry and prose), architects, journalists, painters, actors, (theater) directors and theoreticians. The group was “closely, if at times uneasily, linked with” the Czechoslovak Communist Party and, like its avant-garde contemporaries in the new Soviet Union, was particularly enamored of the modernism the new film aesthetic promised (Sayer 209, 210).4

4 Devětsil’s contribution to the film industry will be discussed more extensively in Chapter 5.
Czech artists were taken with the possibilities of the medium, and remained so: Stanislav Hlavsa, “charmed by [Georges] Méliès,” filmed a version of Faust as early as 1912, complete with special effects and with Hlavsa himself singing the part of Mephistopheles off stage, “thus creating one of the first sound films in history” (Škvorecký 4). Such an innovation again underscores the importance of language to the Czechs: in 1912, sound film was a solid 15 years away and there was not yet a developed sense that film would be narrative in the same sense that theater already was. Clearly, the Czechs were already considering this component of filmmaking. In other, perhaps more risqué developments, Gustav Machatý (in collaboration with Nezval) created his scandalous films Eroticon (1929) and Ecstasy (1933), both of which featured Czech film’s very first nudes. The theatrical duo of Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich worked with directors Jindřich Honzl (Powder and Petrol / Pudr a benzin [1931] and Your Money or Your Life / Peníze nebo život [1932]) and Martin “Mac” Frič (Heave Ho! / Hej rup! [1934] and The World Belongs to Us / Svět patří nám [1937]) on four comedies throughout the 1930s that clearly benefited from the crossover of theater and film. Their films, as well as their theatrical pieces, tended towards political satire, and anti-fascist musicals in particular. Frič also borrowed easily from Czechoslovak literature, and in 1931 directed the first film adaptation of Jaroslav Hašek’s The Good Soldier Švejk. The writer Vančura tried his hand at directing, and adapted Julius Schmitt’s Before the Finals / Před maturitou (1932) and Nezval’s On the Sunnyside / Na sluneční straně (1933), as well as Ladislav Strupežnický’s play, Naší furianti (1937).
Such experimentation in the arts was not without a matching movement in politics. Indeed, the arts in Czechoslovakia closely mirrored the ideals of the Czechoslovak people themselves. Interwar Czechoslovakia under Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850-1937) and Edvard Beneš (1884-1948) was a place that, for better or for worse, was deeply committed to democracy, the free expression of ideas, and the basic principles of civil liberties. It was a government that embraced political parties across the spectrum, and granted equal rights to all of them. As noted above, the Czech half of the nation emerged from the Austro-Hungarian Empire with several native political parties, and the other constituents of Czechoslovakia quickly added their own parties to the mix.

There were never fewer than fourteen parties in parliament, and many more failed to win enough votes to gain a seat. Major parties were organized on social or ideological bases, though in Slovakia, personalities also played a strong role, as did nationality everywhere. The proliferation of parties did not mean, however, that Czechoslovak politics was totally fragmented. The fundamental division was between parties that accepted and those that rejected the republic, with a group in the middle whose attitude was neither unconditional acceptance nor rejection. Nearly all Czech and Slovak parties supported the state, and thus in spite of the large numbers of parties and frequent cabinet reshuffles, interwar politics had an underlying stability. (Agnew 180)

In effect, the Czechoslovak nation welcomed and embraced many voices – not only in its government, but in its cultural and social spheres as well. The boisterous polyphony that informed these discourses underscores the belief in and the quest for the personal and the subjective, in the form of a prevailing belief that there were many roads to Truth and
Beauty. This basic democracy of ideas is one of the most cherished hallmarks of Czechoslovak art. Thus, while its coalition government made room for the conservative Agrarian Party, the strongly Catholic and anti-Communist Hlinka Slovak People’s Party, the pro-Nazi Sudeten German Party, and the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, the art world embraced the many voices of those who came to Czechoslovakia in search of freedom:

As Hitlerism grew stronger in Germany, émigrés from the ranks of the German artistic avant-garde began to filter into Czechoslovakia, forming, after the Russian formalists and structuralists, the second major leftist émigré influence on Czech culture. As a result, Prague became a center of avant-garde innovations in Central Europe for the remainder of the prewar period. (M. a. Liehm 24)

Such émigrés included the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva and her husband Sergei Efron, as well as Vladimir Nabokov’s family and the famous Russian linguist, Roman Jakobson; the three families had fled the Russian Revolution and sought refuge in Prague. The German writer, Klaus Mann also sought brief refuge in Czechoslovakia, as did the influential publishers, Wieland Herzfelde, Bruno Frei and F.C. Weiskopf. The interwar film industry (as well as the other artistic media) flourished as a result of this influx of new people, new ideas, and a freedom of expression increasingly uncommon in the area, all of which allowed for their talents to be more fully realized. Amazingly, their cultural legacy would survive the terrible cataclysm on the horizon.

In 1933, both Stalin’s Soviet Union and Hitler’s Third Reich were keen to harness the arts for political purposes. They were certainly not the first governments to impose ideological censorship on the arts, but an argument can certainly be made that they were
the two most successful in the twentieth century. In both countries, art became the province of bureaucrats who determined great and lofty questions of aesthetics by committee. In the Third Reich, Josef Goebbels oversaw the Reich’s Culture Chamber (Reichskulturkammer) and made sure that all art met with his (and, more accurately, with Hitler’s) exacting aesthetic tastes. Goebbels was also charged with erasing all remaining vestiges of so-called “degenerate art” (entartete Kunst), which generally referred to avant-garde and/or “Jewish” art. Goebbels understood that films that entertained would be more beneficial to the state than films that overtly advertised the Third Reich, remarking that,

“I do not in the least want an art which proves its National Socialist character by the display of National Socialist emblems and symbols, but rather an art which expresses its attitude through its National Socialist character and through raising National Socialist problems. These problems will penetrate the hearts of the German and other peoples more effectively the less ostentatiously they are handled. . . . At the moment that propaganda is recognised as such, it becomes ineffective.” (qtd. Petley 178)

To this end, the films of this period – at least in terms of form and production – look remarkably similar to the contemporary films coming out of Hollywood (Petley 178-179).

In the Soviet Union, aesthetic parameters were no less rigorous, but arrived at differently. In 1933, the Congress of Soviet Writers adopted an aesthetic, socialist realism (sotsialisticheskii realizm or sotsrealizm), as the true manifestation of proletarian art. The aesthetic called on artists to portray the path to the glorious (socialist) future, to
illustrate and celebrate the archetype of the New Soviet Man and the New Soviet Woman, and to show the optimism of the people who lived and, more importantly, worked in this Brave New Soviet World. In the narrative arts, socialist realism tended to manifest itself in a short list of genres, most of which involved the same trajectory. In a seminal work on the subject of Soviet socialist realism, Katerina Clark identifies six primary types of novel: the production novel, the historical novel, the “novel about a worthy intellectual or inventor,” the war/revolution novel, the villain/spy novel, and the “novel about the West,” although she notes that “[t]he differences between these types are not as great as they might seem, since all involve, minimally, a ‘road to consciousness’ pattern and usually a ‘task’ as well” (255).

In both the Third Reich and the Soviet Union, the state-sponsored aesthetic was marked by a belief that by representing the glorious fascist/socialist future, one could actualize it. Art in this context had a transformative quality that could—and would—transform the people (das Volk or the narod) into model citizens. This concept of the transformative nature of art demonstrates a marked idealism and a pronounced belief in the power of art: in this respect, the filmmakers of the Czechoslovak New Wave are truly not so different from their socialist realist predecessors. On the other hand, the singular clarity of purpose that defined both the art of the Third Reich as well as that of socialist realism is of particular relevance to a discussion of the Czechoslovak film industry since it runs counter to the aesthetic aims of Czechoslovakia but was nevertheless imposed on Czechoslovakia first by the Third Reich and then by the Soviet Union.

These were the clouds gathering over Europe during the 1930s. Czechoslovakia could not afford to ignore the rumblings of its larger, more belligerent neighbor, and
indeed, the attention of the world powers focused fateful on the small nation in 1938. One of the most telling and crucial details of the Czechoslovak film industry is that it continued at an uninterrupted pace throughout the interwar, Occupation, and post-war years. The single-most important reason for this continuity in production is a large complex on the southwest side of Prague: the Barrandov Studios. The brothers Miloš and Václav Havel (uncle and father of the future president) conceived the idea of a studio as early as 1924, and construction began in late 1931. The complex included not only the studios themselves, but villas for film stars, a restaurant, a swimming pool, and a shuttle linking the complex with Wenceslaus Square in downtown Prague. The layout was inspired by the campus of the University of California, Berkeley (Barrandov Studio - History). The massive studio was the most extensive and “cutting edge” in the region and today claims to be the largest film studio complex in Europe (Iordanova 25). It was precisely because of these qualities that the studio not only survived the Nazi occupation, but positively flourished – something that cannot be said of any other film studio in occupied Europe. When the Nazis moved to annex the Sudetenland and then the rest of Czechoslovakia, they had their eye not only on the Škoda tank factories, but on the modern film studio: Goebbels had every intention of making the Czechoslovak studio into a satellite of the Third Reich’s two other studios, in Babelsberg and Munich (Iordanova 26). Over the course of the war, the Nazis preserved and improved upon the Barrandov complex, and feature films continued to be made. To be sure, these films were commissioned and carefully monitored by the officials of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, and were a shadow of the number and style of films made before the war, but the studios were still active.
The Slovaks took a slightly different path during the war. In March of 1939, the Slovak Republic declared its independence, and by July of the same year had adopted its own constitution. The new nation was headed by a former member of the Czechoslovak parliament, Monsignor Jozef Tiso (1887 – 1945), a Roman Catholic priest. Although this new Slovak government attempted to steer its own independent course, it did little without the explicit approval of the Reich, and for all intents and purposes was a puppet of Berlin:

Slovakia’s dependence on Germany, hopes of revising the frontiers, and fears of Hungary’s intentions determined its foreign policy. It joined Hitler’s attack on Poland in 1939, in the fall of 1940 it adhered to the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo Axis, and 50,000 Slovak soldiers went to war with the Soviet Union after June 1941, though after some mass desertions the Slovak contribution was reduced to 16,000.

(Agnew 217)

Against this backdrop of pseudo-independence, the Slovaks actually did make some gains, albeit limited, in the cultural sphere. The government sponsored the Nastup Film Studios, but no feature-length films were made during all of the war years; instead, Slovak filmmakers produced short films and newsreels, and imported the rest of their films from the Reich (Votruba).

The years immediately following World War II were crucial in establishing Czechoslovakia’s course for the rest of the twentieth century.Čechs and Slovaks were rejoined as a single nation in talks between Edvard Beneš and Klement Gottwald in

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5 The post-war years and the communist take-over will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three.
March and April of 1945. During these discussions, it was decided that both the (republican) government in exile in London and the (communist) government in exile in Moscow would work together to form a National Front government that would exclude all of the “compromised” pre-war parties (Agnew 220). Beneš hoped to restore the nation to its pre-war, Masarykian values, and was uneasy about the direction the Czechoslovak Communist Party was headed. Nevertheless, he deferred to Gottwald’s more clearly articulated post-war plans (Agnew 221). With many of the pre-war parties outlawed and with the relative popularity of the liberating Red Army, the communists took a huge number of the available seats in parliament and in the cabinet in the post-war elections. To add to the drama of the immediate post-war period, a particularly dark chapter in Czechoslovak history followed with the decree that all ethnic Germans and Hungarians be stripped of their citizenship as well as their civil and human rights; millions of both ethnic groups were expelled from the country, and a wave of retributive violence swept through the country throughout the summer of 1945. Perhaps the most crucial moment came when Czechoslovakia accepted the United State’s invitation to the Paris Conference in 1947 to discuss US aid – in the form of the Marshall Plan – to war-ravaged Europe. The Soviet Union had denounced the offer and the rest of the Bloc had followed suit; only the Czechoslovak delegation travelled to Paris. Stalin made it clear to Beneš and Gottwald that accepting US aid would be construed as a “hostile act to the Czechoslovak-Soviet alliance,” and the government was obliged to walk away from the offer – a move that “isolated Czechoslovakia from its former friends among the Western countries, and exposed its dependence on Moscow” (Agnew 228).
What these and many other policies ultimately led to was the so-called “Victorious February” (Vítězný únor) in 1948. In a series of well-organized moves on the part of the communists, and a series of non-organized moves on the part of the non-communists, Gottwald found himself with a government almost entirely under the control of the communists. All of the major media organs, such as newspapers and radio, were in the hands of the communists, as were the regular army and an armed workers’ guard. Gottwald announced his consolidation of power on February 25, 1948, a scene immortalized in Kundera’s novel, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting (1979):

In February 1948, the Communist leader Klement Gottwald stepped out on the balcony of a Baroque palace in Prague to harangue hundreds of thousands of citizens massed in Old Town Square. That was a great turning point in the history of Bohemia. A fateful moment of the kind that occurs only once or twice a millennium.

Gottwald was flanked by his comrades, with [Vladimír] Clementis standing close to him. It was snowing and cold, and Gottwald was bareheaded. Bursting with solicitude, Clementis took off his fur hat and set it on Gottwald’s head. The propaganda section made hundreds of thousands of copies of the photograph taken on the balcony where Gottwald, in a fur hat and surrounded by his comrades, spoke to the people. On that balcony the history of Communist Bohemia began. Every child knew that photograph, from seeing it on posters and in schoolbooks and museums.

Four years later, Clementis was charged with treason and hanged. The propaganda section immediately made him vanish from history, and, of course,
from all photographs. Ever since, Gottwald has been alone on the balcony.

Where Clementis stood, there is only the bare palace wall. Nothing remains of 
Clementis but the fur hat on Gottwald’s head. (Kundera, The Book of Laughter 
and Forgetting 3-4)

This passage reveals much on both a textual and a meta-textual level. On the level of the 
text, Kundera’s re-telling of the event clearly demonstrates not only the genuine zeal of 
the true believers (the hundreds of thousands gathered to make history, Clementis’ 
gesture of generosity), but also the terrible truths of what was to come: the revolution that 
devours its own. On a meta-textual level, the novel from which this excerpt comes is a 
fine example of the fate of many Czechoslovak artists during the Communist years: the 
 novel, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, was written after Kundera’s exile to France 
in 1975 and takes on the subject of ordinary Czechs wrestling with the realities of 
communist life following the Soviet invasion in 1968.
It is against this political backdrop that the Czechoslovak film industry nationalized in 1948, the first in the region to do so. This decision cannot be overemphasized: film historian Peter Hames even goes so far as to call nationalization the “first and most important fact of Czechoslovak cinema” (26). The nationalization of the film industry has been seen in retrospect as an inexorable step towards state socialism and, thus, as a not so tacit acceptance of Gottwald’s communism and of the gray blandness of socialist realism. In the Czechoslovak context, though, this move makes a great deal of sense: throughout the region there existed a venerable tradition of public support of the arts, as evidenced by the National Theater, and “[i]n a small country limited by its language from access to foreign markets, the concept of transforming cinema into a cultural service could be seen as a logical progression” (Hames 27). The
impetus to nationalize had existed before the war; with the comparatively smooth return
to a peace-time existence, it was relatively easy to resume the transition to
nationalization. In any event, nationalization was a process that the Soviets and the ever-
active Czechoslovak Communist Party supported.

With nationalization came the first steps towards the New Wave. The “pros” and
“cons” of this type of studio system have been well-documented elsewhere, but bear
repeating, if only the highlights. On the one hand, the state could be an exacting
producer, and one that had very definite views about what was acceptable – both
aesthetically and ideologically; its views on appropriate art were primarily informed in
the 1950s by the expected aesthetic of Soviet-style socialist realism. The State-as-
Producer (Škvorecký 28) also tended to determine who could work and who could not as
well as what s/he could work on. On the other hand, this system brought with it perks
that commercially-driven studios could only dream of: production times were lengthened
and budgets were enlarged. Completed and approved films were guaranteed an audience,
at least insofar as the State-as-Producer was also the Distributor and Theater Owner,
though this did not necessarily translate into audience approval. After 1948, films made
behind the Iron Curtain were also guaranteed an international audience within the
fraternal confines of the Bloc, and some even made it to the West. The ideological
censorship that ruled the film studios of the Bloc are not to be underestimated, but neither
are the positive aspects of nationalization. Škvorecký explicitly cites nationalization as
one of the primary factors that led to the development of the New Wave precisely
because of these more nurturing qualities of a nationalized system (Škvorecký 28).
Economic considerations were not the only concerns in the post-war years. The Czechoslovak film industry could boast of a long history, a state-of-the-art studio at Barrandov, and a nationalized industry to shoulder the costs of the relatively expensive medium. All that was missing at this point was the means to sustain and further energize an already high-quality industry. With this objective in mind, Czechoslovak filmmakers lost no time in founding the Prague Film Academy (Filmová a televizní fakulta akademie můzických umění v Praze, or FAMU) in 1946 to train future filmmakers. It produced its first graduates in 1949-1950, and virtually all of the well-known directors of the 1960s were alumni. The Academy was broad in scope and purpose: its original departments included screenwriting, direction (and editing), photography, documentary and reportage, sound and music techniques, production and theory (Hames 28). In addition to this broadly defined curriculum, perhaps the most important contribution to a young filmmaker’s education was the “extracurricular” activities the Academy afforded: they were given unprecedented access to a wide variety of contemporary and archived films, both domestic and international, which were screened for their edification on a regular basis. With this exposure, film students were able to “acquire[ ] a solid knowledge of the history of cinematography, as well as of its contemporary trends” (Škvorecký 29).

Noting these advantages, Peter Hames calls the access to such a broad selection of films “vital” observing that “[i]f foreign films were brought to Prague, the students would get to see them, whether or not they were subsequently purchased for distribution” (Hames 28). This exposure to the classics as well as to contemporary cinematic trends cannot be emphasized too much, as it directly shaped the films of the 1960s and beyond. In fact, Škvorecký speaks of this exposure as nothing less than an inoculation against what he
calls the “nationalization of aesthetics” (29). As noted above, the Soviets had instituted an aesthetic policy of socialist realism in 1933, and by the late 1940s, it had been more or less officially instituted in the Bloc as well. The fundamental truth of socialist realism is that it can only exist where it has a monopoly, “for it must convince the audience that it alone depicts the world as it really is”: once viewers (and, for that matter, filmmakers) have a point of reference for decent cinema – to say nothing of a point of reference for reality – the genre collapses (Kenez, Soviet Cinema in the Age of Stalin 55). It not only collapses when compared against other, more well-crafted films, but it certainly collapses when compared against other aesthetic representations of the world. Because Czechoslovak filmmakers were given, as part of their general cinema education, access to a wide variety of films, they were in effect “inoculated” against this rather pernicious art form. Such skepticism proved to be corrosive, and by the late 1950s, socialist realism had long since run its course – with audiences as well as filmmakers. By the end of the decade, Czech audiences could not be bothered with the laborious effort of watching contemporary films: “People in the cinemas laughed at dramas and slept through comedies. The workers complained that their arms ached from watching Czech films, and the Party’s Central Committee had to intervene in 1950 with the declaration in support of real life problems” (Škvorecký 35). Czech cinema was ready for rebellion.

FAMU produced the vast majority of the famous names of the Czechoslovak New Wave, but preceding them was an earlier generation of filmmakers whose contributions to the medium must also be noted. This Ur-Wave (to use Škvorecký’s term) included such names as Ján Kadár (1918 – 1979), Elmar Klos (1910 – 1993), František Vláčil, (1924 – 1999), and the early FAMU graduates Vojtěch Jasny, (b. 1925), Karel Kachyňa
(1924 – 2004) and Štefan Uher (1930-1993). By the beginning of the 1950s, the Ur-
Wave was pushing back against the limitations of socialist realism and attempting the
first tentative steps towards innovation. In this respect, they were not alone in the Bloc:
Khrushchev gave his famous anti-Stalinist “secret speech” in 1956 and Soviet filmmakers
followed shortly thereafter with films that reflected this “Thaw” more so than the official
aesthetic of socialist realism. In Hungary in the 1950s, directors such as Zoltán Fábri and
Miklós Jancsó also rebelled against state-imposed aesthetics, and in Poland directors such
as Andrzej Wajda and Roman Polanski gained international fame.

Just as in the Soviet Union, though, this “Thaw” was not without periodic re-
freezes: films were banned, filmmakers were blacklisted, and – darkly presaging what
was to come – the Hungarian “revolution” was brutally crushed by the Soviets. In
Czechoslovakia, the re-freeze in the 1950s came in the form of the Banská Bystrica
conference in 1959. At this conference, several films were banned, and the tenets of
socialist realism were re-asserted:

that budding renascence was crushed as then-President Novotný moved to destroy
the ‘revisionist nest’ of intellectuals. . . . Thus that promising movement was
stopped temporarily. When it resumed again three years later, it did so discreetly,
cautiously, and with a keen sense of the constraints within which the film industry
had to operate. (Daniel 52)

The Banská Bystrica conference dealt a sound blow to the Czechoslovak film industry,
insofar as it reminded all of the players that the government still made the rules of the
game. The three films that had provided the pretext for the conference - Václav Krška’s
Zde jsou lvi / Hic sunt leones /Here There Are Lions (1958), Ján Kadar and Elmar Klos’
Tři přání /Three Wishes (1958), and Vladimír Svitáček’s Konec jasnovidec / End of the Soothsayer (1958) – were banned outright, along with films by Vojtěch Jasné and Ladislav Helge. Other filmmakers were attacked for many of the old socialist realist standbys such as formalism, excessive emphasis on private life, and pessimism. What was subtly, but significantly, missing from the conference was the level of terror and doom that would have permeated such a meeting even ten years earlier:

[O]ne important reality came out at the conference: Khrushchov [sic] had deprived the militant Stalinists of the most potent arguments which could have transposed the aesthetic controversy to the level of treason and counter-revolution. No one was accused of intentional enmity, or of plotting schemes injurious to socialism; the Jews, Kadar and Jasné, were not accused of a Zionist plot, and even the well-worn CIA failed to get into the speeches. Everything was reduced to the remnants of bourgeois thought, represented by Yugoslavian revisionism, and influenced by Italian neo-realism. (Škvorecký 62)

Although the true believers among this generation of filmmakers were “shockingly disillusioned and prohibited from making films” they were not imprisoned, but instead were returned to their classrooms at FAMU where their students – the filmmakers of the New Wave – absorbed the lessons of the challenges of contemporary filmmaking in Czechoslovakia (Daniel 52).

Thus the Czechoslovak New Wave cannot be seen as a movement that emerged ex nihilo; in addition to its own contributions, which were significant, this generation also inherited the cultural legacy of the previous generations of filmmakers: not just the Ur-Wave, the New Wave’s teachers, but also the preceding two generations of filmmakers.
that took the industry from its infancy in the First Republic through the war and immediate post-war years. In effect, everything that the previous three generations had hoped to accomplish was “suddenly coming to pass in this period. Film-makers of all generations were finally, for the first time, finding it possible to make films the way they wanted, the way they felt they should be made, and to arrive at some measure of self-realization” (M. a. Liehm 277). In short, virtually all of the necessary factors were in place for something truly amazing to occur: there was a long-standing film tradition to draw on, a nationalized industry to support expensive budgets and longer production times, and an academy to produce highly trained and well-educated professionals. Moreover, the winds of political change were blowing in favor of such highly-prized Czechoslovak ideals as freedom and humanism. Now that filmmakers had the opportunity to make the films that they wanted, what would Czechoslovak film look like?

II. New Wave Films

The short answer is that Czechoslovak film would look as it always had, except now under an optimal alignment of circumstances. Thematically, New Wave films would continue to articulate the same values Czechoslovak art had always championed: humanism, private life, the ordinary Czech citizen, and subjective truth-telling. On the surface, such qualities do not seem unique to Czechoslovakia, and indeed many of the new wave cinemas in other nations took up the call for similar values in art. What marks these qualities as particularly resonant in the Czechoslovak New Wave is how they illustrate a continuity even within this context of political fragmentation. Furthermore, the Czechoslovak New Wave embraced the influence of the other arts in a way that many of the other new wave cinemas did not: the French *nouvelle vague* repudiated the
costumey dramas of the “Tradition of Quality,” preferring instead the gritty realism of cinema vérité and, later, the directors associated with the Young German Cinema movement felt similarly, and declared the Heimatfilme of the 1950s dead. The British New Wave struck a happy middle ground, preferring equally auteurist cinema, but with a great deal of overlap between the arts (Cf. A Hard Day’s Night; dir. Richard Lester, 1964). The Czechoslovak New Wave filmmakers borrowed extensively from theater, the visual arts, and literature, often with schmaltzy avant-garde results. For many of these filmmakers, the desire for sincerity and genuineness did not always rely on realism. To be sure, the more realist “school” that evolved around Miloš Forman, Ivan Passer, and Jaroslav Papousek made much use of non-professional actors, improvised dialogue, on-location shooting, and, occasionally, hand-held camerawork. Just as emblematic, though, are the films of Věra Chytilová, Ester Krumbachová, and Jan Němec, whose artistic vision was not always troubled by the details of realism.

As part of that exploration of the movement’s values, one must come to terms with the fact that the movement was never monolithic in its specific aims and values: Just as there did not exist any authorial manifesto, there also did not exist any index of names of who was and who was not a member of the New Wave. Accordingly, there was no one to issue certificates that would confirm their poetics. A distaste for any kind of organization, for endless meetings or for internal personnel screening – so typical of the interwar avant-garde movement – was obvious after the hysterical organization of public and artistic life during the 1950s. (Ptáček 137)
At issue in this statement are two important details of the New Wave. First, that the movement did not have any definitive written manifesto or any roster of members; quite to the contrary, the movement and the filmmakers who contributed to it rejected that level of organization, preferring instead to follow a more subjective aesthetic. The second issue, which arises out of the first, is that the New Wave was above all things a reaction to the aesthetics and the committees of the recent Stalinist past; the fact of this reflexive element to the New Wave’s general aesthetic will be treated in every chapter of this dissertation.

Although one cannot easily say that the films of the Czechoslovak New Wave followed a coherent checklist of artistic styles, settings, narrative structures, or directorial philosophies, the films made under the auspices of the Barrandov Studio between 1963 and 1968 shared a kind of “family resemblance” (Ptáček 136): the unsurprising result of these filmmakers’ shared studies and collaboration. As mentioned above, there was a prevailing emphasis on – even an obsession with – seeking out authenticity and telling the truth (as each individual filmmaker understood it), so much so that the concept will be well-worn by this dissertation’s conclusion. Films from this period explored the “little man” or the average Czechoslovak, sometimes in all his cowardly, petty, vulgar, dishonest glory. These films also frequently explored the human condition (often through the perspective of the “little man”) by asking questions, but refraining from forcing answers. In this way, the movement holds together convincingly enough to be thought of as a coherent whole, but remains very porous and open-ended, thus allowing for more subjective directorial paths. Consequently, the New Wave remains an exceptionally vibrant movement of many aesthetics and many philosophies.
Chapter 2: Pearls of the Deep (1966)

The description of the Czechoslovak “film miracle” as a wave seems remarkably apt in retrospect, given its first, small wave in the late 1950s, its development into a slower but stronger surge in the early 1960s, its crest in 1968 and 1969, and its recession during the dull years of normalization. The film generally recognized as the first of the New Wave belongs to the Slovak director Štefan Uher (1930-1993), *Sun in a Net / Slnko v sieti* (1962), although the movement gained greater momentum in the following three years with such films as Miloš Forman’s *Black Peter / Černý Petr* (1963) and *Loves of a Blond / Láský jedné plavovlásky* (1965), Věra Chytilová’s *Something Different / O něcém jiném* (1963), Vojtěch Jasny’s *The Cry / Krčík* (1963), Jan Němec’s *Diamonds of the Night / Démanty noci* (1964), and Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos’ *The Shop on Main Street / Obchod na korze* (1965), to name just a few. These films were shockingly different from those of the recent socialist realist past both in terms of aesthetics and ideology, and their reception by both the viewing public and the censors was immediate and significant: audiences responded very favorably to them and the censors and commentators were alternately confused and opposed to them. The issue that has bedeviled contemporary and later commentators is that while these films noticeably differed from screen products of socialist realism, they were also often different from one another. As noted above, there was a generally noted “family resemblance” (*rodinná podobnost*), but at the same
time, this image of a wave is, in this context, less useful, suggesting as it does a unified move in the same direction, something that the New Wave filmmakers renounced: “[t]he New Wave was not a monolithic block of authors who would present a common manifesto like the individual avant-garde movements during the interwar period, their work did not in the end even unite into a common authorial document” (Ptáček 136).

The New Wave may never have produced an official manifesto, but this is not to say that a substitute cannot be found: when the film *Pearls of the Deep / Perličky na dne* (1966) appeared, directed by the most prominent figures of the film movement, many were inclined to see in it a kind of declaration or broad aesthetic program. While observers such as Škvorecký and Ptáček have openly referred to *Pearls of the Deep* as the New Wave’s enduring manifesto, they have been reticent in their explanations of how it functions that way.

The omnibus film is comprised of five short stories by the famous Czechoslovak writer, Bohumil Hrabal (1914-1997) and each of the five shorts is directed by one of the New Wave’s best-known talents: *The Death of Mr. Baltazar / Smrt pana Baltazara*, directed by Jiří Menzel (b. 1938), *The Impostors / Podvodnici*, directed by Jan Němec (b. 1936), *The House of Joy / Dům radosti*, directed by Evald Schorm (1931-1988), *The Globe Buffet / Automat svět*, directed by Věra Chytilová (b. 1929), and *Romance*, directed by Jaromíl Jireš (1935-2001). The film originally included two pieces that were cut and distributed as “stand-alone” films: *The Junk Shop / Sberně surovosti*, directed by Juraj Herz (b. 1934) and *A Boring Afternoon / Fádné odpoledne*, directed by Ivan Passer (b. 1933). Ultimately, the only major New Wave director missing from this roster is Miloš Forman (b. 1932), who was filming *Loves of a Blonde* at the time. The five episodes of
the finished film were all shot by cinematographer Jaroslav Kučera (1929-1991), whose own contributions to the New Wave were extensive: Jasny’s films The Cry (1963) and All My Good Countrymen / Všichni dobrí rodáci (1969), Němec’s Diamonds of the Night (1964), and Chytilová’s Daisies / Sedmikrásky (1966) and Fruit of Paradise / Ovoce stromu rajských jímé (1970), to name only a few. Kučera’s personal ties to the movement were also strong: he and the director Věra Chytilová were married.

Another major contributor to Pearls of the Deep and to the New Wave generally was the composer Jan Klusák (b. 1934). He scored Pearls of the Deep and not only contributed his musical talents to several other New Wave films, he also occasionally appeared in them (Němec’s Report on the Party and the Guests, Chytilová’s Daisies and Jireš’s Valerie and Her Week of Wonders). Such extensive collaboration perhaps would be entirely expected of a small country’s centralized film studio, but what is noteworthy here is that this younger generation of film professionals was keen to create an ideologically responsible and aesthetically viable socialist cinema. In other words, the New Wave may not have had a unifying manifesto, but its creators possessed a strikingly similar point of reference:

For the New Wave, socialism was not something new and desperately fought for. It was not the great divide of their lives, but rather the status quo; they saw no reason for calling rot “insufficiency,” a gangster “an atypical exception,” and incompetence “developmental difficulties,” nor why they should repent for liking beautiful things (including naked girls) because they are “only” beautiful. Unlike the filmmakers of the Ur-Wave, few of the New Wave were Party members. Of the thirteen leading representatives of the group only four belonged to the Party,
and of the leaders (Forman, Passer, Schorm, Chytilová, Němec, Menzel, Krumbachová) none were Communists. This had a greater importance than is generally admitted. It does not mean that these young men and women weren’t socialists. They were socialists without complexes. The Fathers of the Revolution are members of strict brotherhoods, bound by the inhibitions of their beliefs for which some of them died – ironically, in greater numbers after the revolution than before it. The Sons of the Revolution are protestants who want to marry life. (Škvorecký 62-63)

The New Wave thus began within the framework of socialism and not necessarily as a rejection of it: the New Wave, in short, was not so much a reaction to or a rejection of socialism as a return to the Czech humane ideal. This ideal – the striving for democracy, individual rights and dignity, social justice and the like – was never opposed to socialism: Czechs elected a major socialist presence in 1946 because they had been promised a “Czechoslovak [not Stalinist] road to socialism” and, now in the 1960s, another politician promised “socialism with a human face.” The New Wave filmmakers wanted to show this “human face” in their work.

The New Wave directors, in other words, had their priorities elsewhere than in the airless tenets of socialism’s official aesthetic, socialist realism, and their films tended to be joyfully apolitical, private in their focuses and, in some cases, downright incomprehensible. *Pearls of the Deep* has retroactively been called its manifesto because it defies the conventions of socialist realist filmmaking on every possible level, starting with Hrabal’s earthy, irreverent narratives and threading through Kučera’s imaginative cinematography, and ending with the directors’ authorial visions. Besides this rejection
of socialist realism, the film acts as a startling commentary on art and performance, the role of the artist, and the impact of art on society at large; the film is, in other words, a meta-textual comment on itself and the other films of the New Wave.

Most commentators have noted that sincerity became of paramount importance to New Wave directors, largely in reaction to the perceived non-truth of the socialist realist art that preceded it. What is, perhaps, less acknowledged is that the New Wave never claimed to be the final arbiter of Truth. Instead, what emerged were relentlessly subjective quests for truth (rather than Truth) – such factors go a long way toward explaining why the films of this period shared a “family resemblance” but little more.

Socialist realism became the official manifestation of Soviet “proletarian art” when the Union of Soviet Writers declared it so in 1934. This decision ultimately quashed all other forms of aesthetic expression and, indeed, made them illegal. Socialist realism was, above all else, an aesthetic of optimism: its goal was to portray socialist life not as it was, but as it could be, as it should be, and verily as it would be. As noted in Chapter One, socialist realism favored Positive Heroes with socialism-building tasks as well as a general subordination of the content to a realist form. To Clark’s assessment, Dina Iordanova merely adds that socialist realist narratives also inclined towards a plot developing in the canon of “historical optimism” (occasionally expressed with the concept of “revolutionary romanticism”), namely one that keeps in view the difficulties the hero may encounter in the course of his struggle to build the bright socialist future, this future should never disappear from sight, thus determining all outcomes in a historically optimistic framework. (Iordanova 37)
Iordanova’s concise summation of some of socialist realism’s characteristics must be understood as one compiled well after the fact: contemporary artists, filmmakers, writers, and musicians were given the vaguest of guidelines and were often referred to successful pre-existing works for guidance. Consequently, some socialist realist works were derivative and formulaic. Their revolutionary optimism also typically ensured the existence of a disparity between the reality presented in art and that experienced by most people. Though many socialist realist artists worked to portray a brighter future and to create art that would make their vision a reality, it was precisely this disparity between art and reality (“truth,” perhaps) that New Wave filmmakers wanted to avoid. In the Soviet Union, socialist realism was the official aesthetic from 1934 until the late 1950s: Stalin’s death in 1953 was the beginning of the end, Khrushchev’s “secret speech” in 1956 was the final nail in its coffin, but “slower” art forms – like film – lagged behind the other arts until the late 1950s (Woll).

In the Eastern Bloc, socialist realism did not hold sway for nearly as long or to such an extent. It has been argued that few, if any, relics of socialist realism persisted in these countries after 1956 (Iordanova 36). The Czechs adopted the aesthetic in 1948, when the coup introduced hard-line, Stalinist-style communism and policies. In Czechoslovakia, where comedy tended to be dark and irony honed to a fine point, sophisticated film audiences viewed this optimism and the idealism it conveyed with a certain amount of skepticism. Škvorecký, in his “personal history of the Czech cinema,” describes his impressions of Czechoslovak socialist realist films at length:

Despite all their unintentional comedy, it would not be fair to assume that the strange adventures of Joey Hillbillies and walking dredgers did not have some
foundation in reality. Shock-workers did exist, although the endings of their real dramas were usually not as happily optimistic as the films would have it. . . . The wealthy peasants who sometimes sabotaged things also existed – even a few retaliatory murders occurred – and once in a while an angry ex-businessman probably poured some sand into the gears of a fine lathe. The films, however, gave the impression that the country was faltering under the terror of the kulaks, while at the same time developing successfully. The real dramas of a truly dramatic period were reduced by the socialist-realists to a crude puppet show. Its characters were squeezed into stereotypes with unchangeable attributes: class-conscious workers, understanding Party officials, wavering small peasants, intellectuals who started out as reactionaries but soon unerringly recognized the truth, villainous kulaks and factory owners – the real incarnation of Satan. The workers wore caps, while intellectual noses were adorned by spectacles; Party officials always appeared tired and chain-smoked cigarettes – their fatigue coming from over-devotion; kulaks had bristles in their hat-bands and thermometers in their pockets – they used the mercury to poison cows at the collective farm. The former factory owners secretly listened to records of Duke Ellington and Count Basie. After some time the characterizations deepened: shock-workers were allowed human weaknesses such as mild indulgence in beer or an occasional curse; the kulak was given a son who saw the light and became a progressive. (Škvorecký 34-35)

The cast of characters and their appearance were as unchanging of those in medieval morality plays, and indeed, on many levels, these were socialist-style morality plays. To
be sure, American Westerns, or romantic comedies, or horror films can be boiled down in a similar (though perhaps less snide) manner; the difference however, is that in the Stalinist years of state socialism, these films were all that was shown at the theaters.

Škvorecký goes on to say that this initiative (on the part of the Central Committee) only managed to drive down film production to the lowest in Czechoslovak history: eight films in 1951. In any event, one sees clearly that socialist realism in Czechoslovakia was as transparent and predictable as it was elsewhere in the Bloc. What is unique to some of these Eastern Bloc countries – as opposed to the Soviet Union – is that there is evidence of non-socialist realist films during this period (1948-1956): in Czechoslovakia, the works of Alfred Radok, Martin Frič, and Václav Krška stand out as notable exceptions to the rule. Czechoslovakia also appears to have dropped socialist realism promptly after Khrushchev’s “secret speech”: “[f]rom 1956 to 1960, Czech filmmakers, like their Polish contemporaries, had begun to make a new start in the uncertain atmosphere of the post-Stalinist thaw. Some pictures were made that were remarkable for their time . . .” (Daniel 51). Thus Czechs responded quickly to the events unfolding in the Soviet Union.

*Pearls of the Deep*

Škvorecký, a good friend of these directors and of Hrabal as well, has pointed out that “[t]he directors of the Ur-Wave were of course concerned with truth. Unlike them, the New Wave soon realized that the truth also is – and in the final analysis, is foremost – a technical problem. Naturally what – but from there came how” (80-81). In this respect, Hrabal is a particularly excellent choice for literary adaptation, since he too concerned
himself with matters of truth, both in terms of his telling, but also, insofar as it is possible in prose fiction, the showing.

In both the source texts and the short films, the reader/viewer is invited to assume the perspective of Hrabal’s characters; for these films to work, the viewer must be an active participant, willing to assume the private concerns and the personal pleasures of the individual. While the impersonal heroes and heroines of socialist realist works aspired to the objective Truth of communism, Hrabal’s heroes are much more interested in their private, subjective truths, and these prove to be considerably more compelling and truthful. This appeal to audience engagement was inherited in Czechoslovak New Wave cinema from the similar trend in French New Wave cinema. For the French, following André Bazin, “the ideal reality needed by good cinema was not that of the individual artist, but of the audience as functioning social entity” (Williams 311). Both the French and the Czechoslovak directors who subscribed to this notion of the engaged audience were profoundly dedicated to everyday life and to the shared (audience and character) ordinary act. Film, as the New Wave directors intended it, is thus meant as a filter through which to see the everyday, one that allows a more careful and discerning perspective. At the very least, these filmmakers wanted the act of film viewing to be an opportunity to see life more clearly, and not through the rose-colored glasses of socialist realism. As Hames concludes, “[d]espite his debt to Surrealism, Hrabal’s work was welcomed primarily for its authenticity, its vignettes of everyday life, and a speech and humour derived from the real world” (Hames 152).

Like that of other contemporary writers, such as Škvorecký and Kundera, the real world from which Hrabal derived his “speech and humour” was one that had been shaped
by the Czechoslovak penchant for irony and black humor. František Daniel notes that Hašek’s famous novel, *The Adventures of the Good Soldier Švejk* had a far-reaching effect on subsequent generations of Czech writers, who were quick to note “the effectiveness of irony and satire as a weapon,” a concept “that has been ingrained into the Czech psychology and artistic imagination” (Daniel 55). Daniel then points to the Liberated Theater, the Semafor Theater, and Jiří Menzel’s adaptation of Vladislav Vančura’s (1891-1942) *Capricious Summer / Rozmarné leto* (1967) as particularly resonant examples of this tendency toward irony and satire. In the lands of Kafka and Hašek, he goes on to note, neither “heroic pathos and tragedy” nor “themes of charismatic sacrifice and faith” were to be found as frequently as they were in the cultural repertoires of Poland and Hungary – or the Soviet Union, though he does not mention it (Daniel 54). Rather, Czechoslovaks embraced a sharp irony, one that did not take itself too seriously, and one that strove, often obliquely, to tell simple, humanistic truths.

The other great influence on Hrabal, and indeed many Czechoslovak artists, was one of deeply black humor. The literary critic, James Wood, attributes this influence to another famous Moravian: Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939). He observes that Hrabal’s artistry stems from a particularly keen grasp of Freud’s distinction between comedy and humor, a poignant distinction for dark humor:

> It is a comedy of blockage, of displacement, entrapment, cancellation. Hardly surprising, then, that Hrabal sometimes said that he rooted his comedy in one of his favourite findings, a dry-cleaner’s receipt, which read: ‘Some stains can be removed only by the destruction of the material itself.’ In *Total Fears*, Hrabal

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6 The novel and its legacy will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four.
glancingly commends Freud’s writing about comedy and jokes, and calls it ‘typically Central European, and especially typical of Prague’. Freud, it may be remembered, distinguishes humour from comedy and the joke. He is particularly interested in ‘broken humour’ – ‘the humour that smiles through tears’. This kind of humorous pleasure, he says, arises from the prevention of an emotion. A sympathy that the reader has prepared is blocked by a comic occurrence, and transferred onto a matter of secondary importance. . . . This is blocked humour about blocked people. Hrabal, in Freud’s terms, is a great humorist. (Wood)

These ideas of the “humour that smiles through tears” and the “prevention of an emotion” are important keys to unlocking not only Hrabal’s aesthetic, but also many of the films of the New Wave. Menzel and Forman are arguably the masters of this style of humor, but these tendencies unite the five films of *Pearls of the Deep*.

**“The Death of Mr. Baltazar / Smrt pana Baltazara” Directed by Jiří Menzel**

Born in 1938, Menzel is the youngest of the New Wave directors, but the one perhaps most responsible for bringing literature to the silver screen during this period: all of his films of the 1960s come from literary sources, “and his primary concern seems to have been the accuracy of his adaptations” (Hames 151). He directed two films (*Crime in the Girls’ School* [1966] and *Crime in Night Club* [1968]) based on Škvorecký’s two novels, but it was his first film as a director, *The Death of Mr. Baltazar*, that launched his extremely productive collaboration with Hrabal. Menzel more than any other director has become the adapter of Hrabal’s works, based largely on the fact that the two men seemed to share an aesthetic. The collaboration would produce several well-known and well-loved films: *Closely Watched Trains / Ostře sledované vlaky* (1966), *Larks on a
String / Skřivanci na niti (1969; released 1990), and more recently, I Served the King of England / Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále (2006). In Menzel’s hands, Hrabal’s tale of a motorcycle race and the death of one of the East German riders is a testament to New Wave aesthetics and values.

The episode begins with a fast tracking shot, and it is clear that the point of view is from a vehicle: as the camera switches between down tilts of the quickly receding road and up tilts of the canopy of trees above, it is an elegant way to set the stage for characters who are completely obsessed with motorcycles, cars, engines, races, and “wipe outs.” When their car breaks down, Father and Mother act as surgeon and surgery nurse under the hood, conversing all the while, entirely in engines. Uncle Pepin – for these are all characters taken from Hrabal’s own life – stands off to the side, soliloquizing about the glorious past; the two conversations sail past one another, unheeded. The feel of these conversations is Chekhovian: characters carry on full conversations, almost entirely with themselves, and for all of the talking, there is very little communication. No one seems the worse for it, and such cheerful non-communication is revisited to equally comic effect in The House of Joy.

7 The Russian writer and dramatist, Anton Chekhov (1860-1904), often wrote plays in which his characters’ interactions were hampered by a fundamental self-absorption. As Hugh McLean observes, “Chekhov stresses people’s lack of emotional reciprocity and poor communication. They talk, but seldom listen to one another; they love and hate, but these emotions are seldom returned in kind or in proportion” (80). In Hrabal’s works, characters often share an inability to communicate, but one senses that Hrabal plays up the comic element of the mis-/non-communication, rather than offering up a greater comment on human relations. If anything, it is his characters’ inability to process tragedy that is more disturbing; in this respect, they are more demonstrative of Freud’s blocked emotions than they are of Chekhov’s broken intimacy. Hugh McLean, "Anton Pavlovich Chekhov," Handbook of Russian Literature, ed. Victor Terras (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) 79-81.
The entire scene is made up of alternating close and medium shots of the real star: Father’s beloved Škoda 430 convertible, captured in a loving long shot at the end of the sequence. What this sequence accomplishes in about ten minutes of screen time is the complete rejection of socialist realist aesthetics and the celebration of something new and different for Czechoslovak audiences. There is a joyful materialism here, and not in the politically correct, negative sense of the word: the conversation is personal, the concerns are private, and there is no sign of a Positive Hero anywhere on the horizon. In short, for the first time in a very long time, Czechoslovak audiences were looking at and listening to real Czechs.

Figure 2: Mother (Pavla Marsálková) and the beloved Škoda 430 convertible
The cinematography and the editing are handled with this simple goal in mind; the audience is drawn in, however subtly, to the characters’ points of view and given their interests, at least temporarily. Audiences are encouraged to allow their eyes to linger affectionately over every detail of the Škoda and to guess the approaching engines along with Mother and Father.

Hrabal’s and Menzel’s sense of the comic converge throughout the short film. As they drive on to the main event, Father tells a story about his exploits in driving; as he recounts a particular memory of driving well above 95 kilometers an hour, he is passed by a cyclist (played by Menzel himself). Such visual comedy and irony are staples in the works of the New Wave directors, with Forman a particularly notable master. Menzel’s skill with the devices, however, is not to be scoffed at; he ends the sequence with Father rather cavalierly driving around the hapless cyclist who has fallen off bike – intentionally? Menzel leaves this unclear.

Once they have arrived at the course, the mood shifts to one of almost breathless anticipation. Mother and Father pause briefly where the racers are preparing, and many close and medium shots of the motorcycles and the riders themselves convey Mother’s and Father’s growing excitement. Scenes of spectatorship follow: the crowds find the best seats – typically, as Father notes, where the riders are most likely to “wipe out” – in trees and under them, on blankets and lawn chairs: “you never run out of things to watch,” remarks the man in the wheelchair. What is evoked here, however subtly, is questions of spectatorship and voyeurism, a rather self-reflexive theme for a film to
address. When the man in the wheelchair later remarks, “I just have to see everything!” the viewer is to some extent implicated, particularly as his comments follow the death of Jan Baltazar, a composite of a real West German motorcyclist killed at the Czechoslovak Grand Prix in the 1950s. As critics have noted, there is an unsettling disregard for the enormity of death in Menzel’s film, one that is perhaps more poignantly addressed in Chytilová’s *Globe Buffet* (Ptáček).

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**Figure 3** Becoming part of the spectacle: a young woman (Vlasta Spánková) and the death of Mr. Balthazar

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8 A curious note on the name of the character: in Hrabal’s short story, the character is referred to as Hans Baltisberger. In the film, however, the character is referred to as Jan Baltazar, a more Czech version of the same name. I have used the name from the film throughout, although a few of the passages I cite will refer to Hans Baltisberger.
The characters in Menzel’s film seek out tragedy: horrific it might be, but it is *interesting*. A young woman, who wants to be a part of the spectacle pushes her way through the first responders to be at the dead Baltazar’s side, even though she has been explicitly warned what she will see there.

Hrabal’s works tend to have elements of the tragic, the grotesque, and the inclusion of anecdotes “torn from the headlines,” but once transposed onto film – particularly when the characters are so explicit about their desire to see accidents and their long memory of accidents of the past – the quality takes on an undeniable element of voyeurism. The characters’ voyeurism obliges the film audience to reflect upon its own voyeurism; as noted above, the characters and the audience are already joined by the shared act, and this self-reflexive element merely underscores the connection. In a more didactic work, the audience would learn a valuable lesson from this connection and no doubt resolve to be less crass about its thrill-seeking. For their part, Hrabal and Menzel, like the rest of the New Wave directors, seem less interested in awarding gold stars and more interested in cheerful indulgence of both their characters and their audience, allowing them the freedom of drawing their own conclusions. Furthermore, these artists are very clearly excited about what the medium can do: if a spectacle can garner such interest, then what can a spectacle *about* a spectacle do? In this respect, Menzel does not disappoint; as Škvorecký describes the transposition, the effect of Menzel’s filming is nothing short of a rare achievement in literary adaptation:
In both the story and the film, the race is seen through the mythologizing eyes of a few motorcycle fans; it is really a chain of folkloric narratives with the motorcycle race turning into a legend. This is fairly easy in literature, and Hrabal is a master of that genre, but it is more difficult to accomplish in film, because of its rather uncinematic quality. Menzel’s solution had the touch of genius – and it was purely cinematic. He selected a section of the circuit, where the race led down a hill towering against the horizon, and placed it in the centre of the frame. Then he filmed it with a telephoto lens and fast-action camera. Fantastic silhouettes appear on the horizon and slowly descend along the winding road down the hill in a perpetual front shot. The machines and riders in crash helmets move in a somewhat ghastly but very elegant, slow ritualized dance – in the rhythm of Bach’s B minor Fugue. The resulting effect lies somewhere between a poem, a danse macabre, and a legend. The Angels of Death are coming to claim Hans Baltisberger [sic]. (169)

On a similar note, Hames refers to the same scene as a “dream ballet,” and this consistent idea of the race as a kind of highly choreographed dance perhaps underscores the connection between the film’s voyeurism (of the race-dance) and the audience’s voyeurism (of an entirely different performed art).

In the short story, the vignette concludes with two apprentices coming late to Baltazar’s side, having missed the race; the scene closes with the loudspeaker describing the award ceremony, without any reflection on the race’s tragedy. Attention has already turned from one spectacle to another. The film is similarly uninterested in dwelling too long on the enormity of the disaster. As Mother, Father, and Uncle Pepin drive off
camera, Uncle Pepin holds forth on having a beer. It is a fitting ending for Hrabal, the inveterate pub-crawler, and one that lowers the register just a touch: the New Wave had had enough of the perceived self-importance of socialist realist art and Party ideologues and often wanted to puncture any lasting feelings of grand emotion. Rather than leaving the audience to sort out the tragedy of Baltazar’s death and the transience of human life, Menzel blocks those feelings with a parting shot of Uncle Pepin prattling happily about beer. This is the irony and black humor that Hrabal and Menzel celebrated in four separate films, and is arguably why Menzel is seen as the adapter of Hrabal’s work.

_The Impostors / Podvodníci, directed by Jan Němec_

Škvorecký rather affectionately refers to his friend Jan (“Honza”) Němec as the _enfant terrible_ of the New Wave and the “worst student” at the film academy (113). Though Němec’s scholarship may have been lacking, his skill behind a camera is certainly not, though he is not particularly well-known outside of his homeland. His first major film, _Diamonds of the Night / Démanty noci_ (1964) is an adaptation of Arnošt Lustig’s novel, _Darkness Casts No Shadows / Tma nemá stín_, although Němec’s approach is to tease out the stream of consciousness of the narrative to create a film that has the surreal and often terrifying feel of a dreamscape. Němec’s films show his clear inclination for experimentation and his disregard for conventional notions of “reality”:

Unlike his fellow directors, most of whom could justify their films as in some sense related to everyday reality, Němec made no concessions in his attempt to develop a non-realist cinema. Regardless of any qualities possessed by the films, this stance was bound to provoke controversy. In the West, formal innovation
can, to some extent, be ignored. In East and Central Europe, it automatically posed a threat to the art establishment. (Hames 167)

If the work of the New Wave can be seen as a rejection of socialist realist aesthetics, then Němec may be the ranking iconoclast. Němec wanted not only to break with the conventions of film – socialist realist and otherwise – but also to shake the very foundations of the philosophy upon which it was built. Perhaps more than the rest, Němec subscribed to the French New Wave’s ideas about using the medium to understand life in a different way. In any event, Němec’s audiences are obliged to discard any preconceived ideas of how a film should “work” and how it should tell its story, or indeed, if film should be obliged to tell a story at all.

Němec’s contribution to Pearls of the Deep, the comparatively short Impostors, clearly demonstrates his interest in playing with the conventions of film and film narrative. The plot, such as it is, revolves around two elderly patients in a hospital who regale one another with tales of their impressive youthful exploits. The stories are untrue – they are brusquely denounced by the barber at the end of the film – but “truth” can be more than just factual accuracy. The larger truth of the film is the underlying human motivation. The two old men are charming in their frail eccentricity, and their wild exaggerations have less to do with vanity and aspiration and more to do with the comparatively harmless exercise of amusing one another with tall tales. It is also entirely possible that they themselves believe their own hagiographies. What is very poignant is that Hrabal and Němec are indulgent of the two men, and the visual treatment of the two is somewhat reminiscent of William Faulkner’s musings on the inaccuracies of the aged, who often “confus[e] time with its mathematical progression, as the old do, to whom all
the past is not a diminishing road, but, instead, a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches, divided from them now by the narrow bottleneck of the most recent decade of years” (Faulkner).

Many critics are not inclined to see the film as one that is tolerant of the two men and their fabrications. Škvorecký refers to Němec’s editing of the old men and their storytelling as achieving nothing short of “an unreal nightmarish effect,” and Ptáček argues that the film takes up “the cruelty of life with regard to old age, unmasking the ‘wisdom of age’ [and] describing it as childish and helpless in the face of death” (138). Their statements are accurate, but focus too narrowly on the content of the two men’s stories and take an unnecessarily harsh view of the two old men.
The bulk of the film is shot as an edited sequence of close, relatively tight shots of the two men; it is precisely this nearness and claustrophobia – with perhaps an unconscious recoil from the real, average faces that the New Wave so loved – that Škvorecký responded to in his comments about the editing. It is an unsettling sequence, but perhaps the reason for this unease is more complex than just a visceral response to the sequence’s claustrophobia. The two men are shot individually, never in a frame together. The perspective of the filming is also highly subjective: The Journalist, who stands throughout this early sequence, is shot from below, from the perspective of the bedridden Singer, whereas The Singer is always shot from above. The angles reinforce a kind of
intimacy or privacy from which even the camera seems excluded, since there is no third, objective perspective, only the two men’s. In short, there is a certain element of loneliness and isolation attributed to each man, and the closeness of the shots subtly reinforces the idea of restriction: they are restricted by age, by infirmity, and, as it turns out, by time. Their situation is tragic, its very human tragedy is underscored by the grand stories that they tell. It seems uncharitable and cruel to refer to their storytelling as “childish and helpless,” however accurate such a statement might be. One supposes that the counter-question might then be, “And why shouldn’t they be?” To die with dignified stoicism while dispensing wise platitudes certainly does meet a particular cultural ideal, but one would argue that meeting such a cultural expectation is only worthwhile if culture is there to witness it. These two men are completely alone, except for one another, and The Journalist’s rather tender ministrations to The Singer, amidst spectacular fibbing, should not be condemned with such broad brushstrokes.
The film cuts to the morgue, where The Barber and The Attendant are tending to the now deceased men. During this sequence The Attendant reveals the discrepancies between the two men’s stories and their actual successes, or lack of them, in life, and The Barber rather angrily denounces the dishonesty of the deceased: “What would this world come to if you stopped distinguishing the good people from the bad, the honest folk from the conmen?” The condemnation seems unnecessarily strong, particularly since The Barber himself is no stranger to half-truths: as he leaves the morgue, he encounters a patient on a guerny. He asks the patient what he suffers from (a duodenal ulcer) and
pronounces judgment (“soon you will be good as new”). He jauntily continues on his way to the hearse, with the patient calling, “Thank you, doctor!” after him. Hrabal and Němec do not seem to mind exaggeration and truth-bending, but hypocrisy is a different story altogether. The Journalist, The Singer, and The Barber are all guilty of a little self-aggrandizement, but The Barber is different; though no less human in his vanity and his aspiration toward greater things, The Barber nevertheless leaves a more sinister impression precisely because of his comments about “bad people” and “conmen.” The Czechoslovak New Wave may not have been a coherent aesthetic group in terms of style and philosophy, but there was nevertheless an overwhelming inclination towards what it considered truth-telling, a fact that seems curious when seen in the light of a short film dedicated entirely to non-truth-tellers. It bears repeating, then, that truth-telling is about more than factual accuracy and includes much larger concepts of integrity and ethical consistency.

Němec would take up these concepts again in a film released later in 1966, The Report on the Party and the Guests / O slavnosti a hostech. In it, a group of picnickers make their way to a party hosted by a man and his adopted son, Rudolf. The mood of the film is ominous and made more so by Rudolf’s mock interrogation of the guests and The Host’s continued comments about how there is a chair at the table for everyone and

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9 The actor playing the Host is Ivan Vyskočil – he plays one of the insurance agents in House of Joy. The already-inflammatory content of the film was made worse by the fact that, in the film, Vyskočil looks remarkably like Lenin. The resemblance, claims Škvorecký, was entirely accidental. In other casting notes, the character of Rudolf was played by the composer Jan Klusák, who contributed often to New Wave films, both as a composer and as an actor. Klusák appears again as the debauched Father Gracián in Valérie and Her Week of Wonders.
all will eventually come to the table. What is of interest to Němec is how the guests then respond:

The film’s set-up provides an excellent opportunity to study the disoriented reactions of individuals in a controlled environment where no reliable hints are given of what might represent desirable behaviour. The situation is masterfully constructed and offers a perfect opportunity to scrutinise the impulsive conformism instigated by autocratic control. (Jordanova 101)

All but one of the guests feel their way along, trying to anticipate the desires of the Host. One guest (played by director Evald Schorm) leaves the party, and the film ends with the collective resolution to find him, to bring him back, and to make sure that he is happy. The film fades to black with the sound of the snarling bark of a German Shepherd, who has been brought along, of course, to help find the missing guest.

The parallel with *The Impostors* is the idea of integrity and ethical consistency. The Barber does no real harm when he says one thing and does another. On a larger scale, though, when the collective fails to act according to its principles and instead gropes blindly for what it thinks is “desirable behaviour,” there is a larger problem. This is the side of truth-telling that so often got New Wave filmmakers in trouble. For his efforts on *Report on the Party and the Guests*, Němec was removed from the Barrandov studios by President Novotný himself.

*The Impostors* thus makes Němec’s more ideological point about the integrity of the individual, but in the larger context of *Pearls of the Deep*, it also addresses a more oblique point about artistic legacy. The Singer and The Journalist may not have been as famous and successful as their stories suggest, but there is the very subtle implication that
the artist him- or herself is ephemeral, but his/her contribution, however modest, will continue to live on. The Attendant is able to reveal the discrepancies precisely because the two left something behind. This detail is very small, but important enough to highlight. In a context wherein texts were banned, films were shelved, and artists were blacklisted (a kind of living infirmity and death, one could argue), there is tremendous comfort to be drawn from the fact that the artist’s work and the artistic legacy can endure. One’s contributions to Art and Culture may be little more than a collection of scribbles and chorus credits, but they, too, survive.

**House of Joy / Dům radosti, directed by Evald Schorm**

Evald Schorm (1931-1988) has been called “the philosopher” of the New Wave by so many critics on so many occasions that the label has become ‘received knowledge’ about the director. Because of his stature as the moral compass of the New Wave, other directors occasionally cast him in roles that reflected his standing; Němec cast him as the dissenting guest who leaves the party in *Report on the Party and the Guests*, and Jireš cast him as Kostka, Ludvík’s Christian friend in *The Joke*. As Hames points out, “[w]hether or not his work genuinely influenced that of the other filmmakers is difficult to assess. It is much more likely that they were impressed by his moral example, by an intense and profound reflection on the meaning of life” (88). Like most of the other New Wave directors, Schorm attended FAMU but worked primarily on documentary films after graduation. Throughout the period of the New Wave, however, he directed mostly fiction films such as *Courage for Everyday / Každý den odvahu* (1964), *Return of the Prodigal Son / Návrat ztraceného syna* (1966), *Saddled with Five Girls / Pet holek na
krku (1967), and End of a Priest / Farářův konec (1968), based on a novel by Josef Škvorecký.

House of Joy, Schorm’s contribution to Pearls of the Deep, is the only one of the five to be shot in color, and this artistic decision is just one of several reasons that the film stands out as a kind of centerpiece for the rest. The Death of Mr. Baltazar and Romance (films I and V) relate to one another on a basic level as showing the consumption of art/entertainment. The Impostors and The Globe Buffet (films II and IV) are linked a bit more tenuously as reflections on the legacy of the artist, or how s/he wishes to be remembered. House of Joy focuses on the artist himself. The film, like Hrabal’s short story before it, features an actual naïve painter, Václav Žák, who plays himself. On its most basic level, the film is about the collision of two worlds – the unconventional world of the artist and the official world of two insurance agents – and their complete inability to understand one another.

Although the film relies on the comic element, the underlying point is anything but comic – a common feature in Hrabal’s writing. The role of the artist has been vested with considerable importance, particularly in cultures where few other forums for public dissent exist. In 1956 at the Second Congress of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers, the Nobel laureate Jaroslav Seifert called upon his peers to act as “the conscience of [Czechoslovakia’s] people,” adding, “[i]f somebody else keeps silent about the truth, it can be a tactical maneuver. If a writer is silent about the truth, he is lying” (qtd Gibian 9). Years later and a world away, President Kennedy eulogized the recent death of Robert Frost, remarking that
[t]he artist, however faithful to his personal vision of reality, becomes the last champion of the individual mind and sensibility against an intrusive society and an officious state. The great artist is thus a solitary figure. He has, as Frost said, a lover's quarrel with the world. In pursuing his perceptions of reality, he must often sail against the currents of his time. This is not a popular role. If Robert Frost was muchhonored in his lifetime, it was because a good many preferred to ignore his darker truths. Yet in retrospect, we see how the artist's fidelity has strengthened the fibre of our national life. (Kennedy)

Kennedy’s comments are contextually removed from Seifert’s, and yet the importance that both men ascribe to the arts and particularly to the artist are worth looking at in connection with House of Joy. For Seifert and Kennedy, the artist shoulders the burden of truth and integrity, and does so often in opposition to society at large; the artist must tell truths that no one wants to hear and stand firmly as “the last champion of the individual mind.” In Schorm’s short film, the artist, Václav Žák, could not more remote from society and artistic convention if he tried: his naïve paintings portray a wild range of subjects and suggest a lack of any formal artistic training (though, of course, many naïve painters were very highly trained, despite the impression their work makes). Instead of canvases, Žák paints the walls of his warren-like house, a fact that makes his house all the more strange and unsettling. He is cheerfully uninterested in the insurance policies that the two agents try to press upon him. Taken all together, Žák emerges as a singular figure and one that is – to use the terminology of the time – anti-social in his individualism. To be unique, “to sail against the currents of his time,” is to make a dangerously political statement. Žák may not have the stature to be a Seifert- or a Havel-
style “conscience of the nation,” but simply pursuing his own aesthetic is an enormous cultural responsibility in a context not particularly amenable to it.

The film begins with a peculiar tableau of paintings arranged in the snow accompanied by a rather oppressive organ musical score.

Figure 6 The opening tableau in *House of Joy*: the snow, Žák's paintings and a lone rabbit set the stage for the surreal flights of fancy to come.

As the two insurance agents (Antonín Pokorný and Ivan Vyskočil) approach, Žák is painting a large mural, while another man berates him for how he has drawn the horse,
and with this sequence, the film immediately addresses audience exasperation with art that is not more appealingly mimetic: much like Schorm, Žák is uninterested in how his audience perceives the (un)reality of his paintings, and Žák’s sunny indifference to this criticism sets the tone for the rest of the film.

The two insurance agents are foils for one another: whereas one (Pokorný) doggedly attempts to steer conversations back to the matter of insurance, the other (Vyskočil) is immediately drawn to the paintings, often touching them, getting close to them, and repeatedly asking Žák where he gets his ideas. Pokorný, attempting all the while to interest the painter and later his mother in particular insurance policies, follows Žák into his home and is immediately confronted with the disconcerting image of a hanging – swinging! – disemboweled goat that Žák is in the process of skinning. The shot, like virtually all of the interiors, is crowded, tight, and, especially in this case, morbidly claustrophobic.
“Doesn’t all this scare you?” asks Vyskočil. “That’s why I want to paint them all. I wish I could bring all the goats I’ve killed back to life,” Žák replies. What then follows is a strange sequence featuring a slow-motion Žák running around in a goat pen with a large knife, accompanied by the unsettling organ music. There are several more such digressions in the film, and they follow discussions about Žák’s inspiration for his paintings; they are subjective ventures into Žák’s own flights of fancy.

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10 Žák’s comment here is reminiscent of the artistic legacy idea raised in The Impostors: by painting them, Žák gives them eternal life through his art. The idea of the artistic legacy is here slightly problematized (perhaps) by the fact that Žák is the one responsible for their all-too-real deaths.
In addition to these adventures in inspiration, there is also a lengthy sequence in which Žák and his mother recount what happened on the only occasion when his work was commissioned: in sped-up motion, the two are shown creating a life-size figure of the crucified Christ, which is displayed at a busy intersection and quickly causes an accident. Peter Hames identifies these digressions as “alienation effects” – which he very clearly does not like – and the term is apt: not only does it interrupt the flow of the narrative, but it also evokes the Russian Formalists’ idea of “estrangement” (ostranenie) and Bertolt Brecht’s “alienation effects” (Verfremdungseffekte). The purpose of such effects is not only to call attention to the medium, but also to disrupt reader/viewer assumptions about the narrative: as Brecht conceived it, “Verfremdung would therefore produce a jolt of surprise and illumination, as the familiar and predictable were not only historicised and seen afresh but ‘seen through’; judged with the eyes of a suspicious, quizzically naïve spectator” (Brooker 191-192). On a meta-textual level, then, Schorm adopts some of Žák’s unconventional style: just as Žák’s paintings challenge the insurance agents’ notions of art and what it should look like, so too does Schorm play with his audience’s expectations about what a film should look like and how it should tell its story. It need not be mimetic to be true.

The insurance agents are slowly brought into Žák’s world, although Pokorný periodically and testily murmurs about how this guided tour “thwarts official business.” His comments, in the context of the Czechoslovak New Wave, are noteworthy. Art had been an arm of official business for so long, that any art that was not took on an immediate anti-establishment quality. Within the film, Žák’s unusual paintings are largely apolitical – the dwarves waging an assault on the radio that tells only lies is a

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humorous and notable exception – although his fascination for religious figures such as Jan Hus, St. Václav (Wenceslaus), St. Dominic, and of course the life-size Christ can be seen as having political overtones, given the government’s anti-religious campaigns. When confronted with the life-size Christ figure, Vyskočil cannot help himself, and reaches out to touch the painting. This small, throwaway gesture evokes the image of Thomas the Apostle, demanding to see and feel the resurrected Christ’s wounds. The association is unmistakable, yet garbled for Vyskočil appears too ready for faith, rather than skepticism – but perhaps it works as a larger commentary on conversion: one senses that whereas Pokorný will remain untouched by what he has seen, Vyskočil will take something away from the experience. (Indeed, he quite literally walks away with a painting depicting “The Revelation of St. Dominic.”)

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On the level of the film, though, Schorm’s subject matter and his formalist style are deliberately designed to “thwart official business,” to Pokorný’s continued dismay. As Ptáček observes, “[t]he fascination with [Žák’s] work overcomes the arguments of the world-wise insurance agents. Somehow we instinctively sense the price of creative freedom: poverty, contempt, and the label of ‘crazy people’ [bláznů]” (Ptáček 139). That price has been known to include imprisonment and blacklisting, but Schorm’s film is ultimately optimistic: the two insurance agents take leave of the two artists, and Vyskočil remarks that “some things are better left the way they are” – a complete victory for Art
over the Official World. For at least a couple of years longer, the New Wave directors would win similar battles.

*The Globe Buffet / Automat svět*, directed by Věra Chytilová

Věra Chytilová (b. 1929) is often portrayed as the only woman of the Czechoslovak New Wave, part of a distressing oversight of the peerless scriptwriter, set and costume designer, Ester Krumbachová (1923-1996). The two women contributed much to the New Wave, often collaborating together on projects: Krumbachová wrote the script for Chytilová’s most famous film, *Daisies*, as well as Chytilová’s later *We Eat the Fruit of the Tree of Paradise / Ovoce stromu rajských jíme* (1970); she designed the costumes for both films as well. Chytilová’s own contributions to the Czechoslovak New Wave are much better known, though this is a somewhat relative claim, as her work remains largely unknown outside of the former Czechoslovakia. She came late to film, having been trained as an architect first and spent some time modeling, she eventually found herself in a film studio as a “script girl.” Antonín Liehm points out that much of her struggle to break into the film industry as a director is recounted in one of her first feature films, *The Ceiling / Strop* (1962). A “bitter documentary” about the challenges faced by women in Czechoslovak society, it was the first of Chytilová’s many films to delve deeply into the discomfiture that telling a truth often yields:

> In the mid-sixties, the film was shown in France. During the discussion that followed, someone in the audience stood up and said, “They shouldn’t make that kind of film. It undermines people’s faith in socialism. If that is the way it really is, then none of it is worth it at all.” How to answer him? People want to be deluded. Everywhere, always. They are afraid of the truth. But can we live
Věra Chytilová always thought that we could live only with the truth. Her consistent efforts at unmasking illusions and disclosing myths caused her films frequently to be labeled cynical – the universal human defense against truth.

(Liehm 241)

Chytilová’s film lacked the revolutionary optimism that earnest young socialists in the West had come to expect and, consequently, her version of truth clashed hopelessly with theirs. The French episode that Liehm recounts resonates with the irony and black humor that Czechs enjoy so much, but dark comedy aside, he stops just short of spelling out the importance of sincerity and (self-)honesty to Chytilová’s œuvre: they are the most fundamental core of her aesthetic. Chytilová’s goal is precisely to expose the shaky foundation of the audience’s values and to oblige them to question their most deeply-held beliefs. Chytilová’s best and perhaps most famous embodiment of this drive to portray her vision of the truth is her 1966 film, Daisies, the surreal picaresque adventures of Marie I and Marie II. The film is episodic and comic – often dangerously close to being incomprehensible – but at its center is an attack on apathy and indifference. Krumbachová recalled that the two Maries “would remain untouched and unmoved even if dead bodies were falling around them” and that though they might be “a pair of silly young girls, [ ] they could just as well have been two generals. They talk a lot of nonsense, mix everything up, and the inevitable catastrophe follows” (Liehm 280,281).

Chytilová’s honest appraisal of reality is also evident in The Globe Buffet, although it is important to note that in her films, reality and conventional notions of Realism are not the same thing. Instead, Chytilová plays with the medium and refuses to be chained to verisimilitude, indulging instead in surrealism or experimentation with such
film techniques as color filters and washes, unconventional editing, sped up or slowed down motion, and the like. Hrabal’s story is a strange but simple one: while a wedding takes place on the second floor, the self-service cafeteria below must close temporarily in order to deal with a young woman’s suicide in the restroom. On a more overt level, the narrative thus incorporates – to some extent, anyway – the human experience, comedy and tragedy, life and death. On a deeper, allegorical level, however, the film functions as an exploration of life and art in a socialist society and, more to the point, the elision of the private in favor of the public.

Throughout the short film, the creation and consumption of art is linked explicitly with a similar consumption of human life. A similar theme is more obliquely handled in both the novel and the film adaptation of The Joke, in which it is made clear that in a healthy socialist society, there is no need for private life, and everything can and should exist on the level of the public. The need for privacy, then, is construed as a dangerous, bourgeois individualism. The logical conclusion of such thinking plays out in The Globe Buffet, a film in which the underlying premise is that both art and life require an audience. The result is a sad baseness.

Although largely unseen, the wedding upstairs provides a raucous backdrop for the macabre situation below: in a long tracking shot, one of the waitresses draws a beer for a customer, walks the length of the bar, has a brief conversation and makes her way to the restroom. Upon opening the door, she (and the audience) sees two gently swaying feet. The sequence takes place while the band above offers a particularly exuberant rendition of Škoda lásky (translated variously as Wasted Love or Unrequited Love, its literal translation is simply, Misfortune of Love), a song better known to the rest of the
world as *Rosamunde* or *The Beer Barrel Polka*, but whose Czech original is decidedly more gloomy. The choice of song is felicitous: its music belies the sadness of the lyrics, the wedding upstairs an ironic counterpoint to both the song and the tragedy in the cafeteria. What follows in the cafeteria is a crass voyeurism, as the customers crowd around the back room, where the body has been laid, and then, later, at the plate glass windows of the restaurant.

![Crowds](Figure 9 Crowds are drawn to the spectacle (or the potential for spectacle) in the cafeteria in *Globe Buffet*)
The public wants access to the spectacle, and the voyeurism is as pronounced as it is crass; Ptáček links the indifference to death in this film explicitly with the indifference to death seen in *The Death of Mr. Baltazar* (139). In film format, it is impossible not to link the voyeurism of the audience at the race and the passersby of the cafeteria with the film audience, for whose pleasure equally morbid subject matter is presented.

Soon after the discovery of the body and the closing of the cafeteria, a young man, Karlík, is allowed to enter, and he quickly reveals himself to be a lovelorn artist, whose fiancée has left him. He begins telling the waitress about the strange girl he has been dating, and her obsessive thoughts of suicide. In neither the short story nor the film is it ever made explicit, but the narratives of both hint broadly that the young woman in the back room is precisely the young man’s fiancée. He is the only person in the film who is both aware of the body in the back and uninterested in seeing the body himself. Instead, he pours out his story to the tap woman about his fiancée and her suicide attempts. The couple were going to jump out of their window, but at the last moment, he noticed the television antennae below, and decides against it, fearing that they would be completely cut up by them: “That would not have been very aesthetic.” “And what do you care, where you’re going,” retorts the tap woman, but the linkage has been made: just as art is meant to have an audience, so too does life (and death) in the socialist state. Since you are guaranteed an audience, why not make it (art, life, death) aesthetically pleasing? So at least, is Karlík’s thinking. In Hrabal’s short story, his reminiscences continue with another suicide attempt, and in this instance, his fiancée attempts to strangle herself with the belt of her coat in their apartment. Even in what should be this private setting, there is an audience: some neighbors bang on the walls, complaining
about the noise, while another neighbor has an eye at the keyhole. The waitress responds to his story with an account of a young woman who threw herself under the wheels of a train. All of these deaths—attempted or realized—are squarely located in the public domain; indeed, the deceased have largely sought out the most public possible venues.

With the faces of the public literally pressed up against the glass, Chytilová’s larger point here is that people want to be entertained, and will seek out all manner of spectacles to feed that desire. In a society that discourages any semblance of a private life, that just means there is more to consume.

The other great spectacle of the film is art, both the film itself and the artwork showcased within it. Savvy contemporary audiences might have recognized Karlík as Hrabal’s real-life artist and friend, Vladimír Boudník (1924-1968). Chytilová uses actual footage of Boudník creating his work during two lengthy sequences in the film, and the effect is similar to that of a mirror reflecting another mirror: here, we have art portraying the creation of art, and the link is such that Boudník’s creations in the film become representative of the film, of all art. The scenes are also reminiscent of Václav Žák in *House of Joy*, who is also captured in the process of creation.

The first sequence occurs as Boudník recounts the story of the shared but aborted suicide attempt, and while he narrates, the setting changes from the cafeteria to an industrial environment, where Boudník labors over a lathe. Like Karlík’s, Boudník’s studio is a factory, and it is with factory support that he exhibits his works. The point is subtle, and worth teasing out: like so many of the arts in Czechoslovakia—film chief

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12 Hrabal actually met Boudník while the two were employed at a large ironworks in Kladno
among them – Boudník’s creations are made for and supported by the public. Writers, of course, can self-publish, as evidenced by the samizdat and tamizdat publications so prevalent in both the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc, but for many of the other arts (again, film chief among them), the means of production belong to the public and are controlled on its behalf by the government. Thus, Boudník’s factory exhibits function subtly in the film as a stand-in for the film itself: a work of art sponsored by the public it aims to entertain and educate.

The second sequence is particularly interesting, as it takes up a remarkable amount of screen time and focuses exclusively on the work of art emerging from Boudník’s hands. For extra emphasis, the soundtrack is silent for 30-40 seconds – an unusually long period of screen time – before the sounds of the wedding again float back over the visual.

There is a third sequence involving the creation of art, but it differs from the others in that the artist here is Karlík, not Boudník. The sequence is astutely edited, visually linking the deceased girl in the back room with the runaway fiancée. The police enter the cafeteria and head toward the back room, followed by a shot of a woman laid out on a table. Conventional continuity leads the audience to believe that this is the suicide.
Instead, the audience is presented with another of Karlík/Boudník’s artistic narratives. Karlík recounts how he met his fiancée “beautifully”: he and a friend were bored and decided to create death masks for one another (“as something to leave behind”). As they work, they realize that they are being watched by a girl at the window; she asks to have her death mask made as well, and what unfolds is the sequence that the audience now watches. The film re-asserts the link between the fiancée and the suicide with another edited sequence immediately following his narrative: a slow pan of another woman, also laid out on a table, whose face is also covered, now with a real death mask.
At this point in the film, Chytilová decides to push the envelope and to test the audience’s willingness to consume just any spectacle. Up until now, the film audience and the watchful public have not been presented with anything particularly difficult to consume; the fact of the woman’s death is unfortunate, but not terribly difficult to grasp as a concept. Chytilová has made use of some clever edits and Kučera’s camerawork is always splendid, but there has not been anything very unconventional about the film’s style. In this way, the audience complacently follows the short episode in which the bride returns to the cafeteria, groomless, and demanding that the police release her husband from jail so that she need not spend her wedding night alone. When the policeman refuses, she turns her attention to Karlík, who tells her that she has the same blue eyes and dimpled chin as his fiancée – a detail that is particularly unsettling for the film audience, knowing what it does – and agrees to leave with her.

What follows is classic Chytilová: the pair cavort in a park despite the downpour and the darkness, while Karlík attempts to shore up the more fragile saplings that have been loosened from their supports. The sequence is strange in the original story, and when the bride demands to know why Karlík cares so much about the trees, he responds, “These trees are public property, just like everything I say and do. You know, I’m as public as a public pissoir or a public park” (Hrabal, The Death of Mr. Baltisberger 186). In addition to being laudably civic-minded, Karlík also draws a final fine point on this prevailing idea of public-ness in the socialist society. Karlík the Citizen is every bit as public as Karlík the Artist. The statement is missing from the film, but Chytilová is busy making her own point. The sequence is made even stranger with motion and dialogue tracks that are alternately sped up and slowed down; the result is unnerving and almost
unwatchably bizarre. Karlík runs out of material to tie up the trees, and asks the bride if she has anything; she responds that she does, but on one condition: will he make a death mask of her too? In response, he rips her wedding dress, fleetingly exposing her breasts – and she screams at first, but quickly begins laughing. The closing shot of the film is a much calmer park, by daylight now, after the storm has passed. The saplings have survived, and pieces of the bride’s gown flutter in the breeze. With such an ending to an otherwise reasonably conventional film, Chytilová is challenging her audience: must art – even the publicly-owned and –sponsored – be invariably and easily palatable? Why not make it something with which the audience must struggle?

Chytilová enjoyed making her audiences work to understand her art and enjoyed making challenging art and inviting her audiences to re-evaluate their expectations of what “good” art is and what “good” art should look like. Underpinning these experiments is Chytilová’s staunchly held belief that “real” art is sincere, and that particularly in the context of a public art – is what audiences should consume in their aesthetic diet. As she herself noted,

“The artist may and indeed must express only what he knows and what concerns him, because he thinks it should be changed. We want to create a new social morality and in the same breath we – artists –lie. Lying in art should be outlawed. . . . What more could we lose as artists, if we lost truth?” (qtd. Škvorecký 112)

Though *The Globe Buffet* is one of Chytilová’s lesser-known films, it nevertheless clearly demonstrates the all-important element of truth, in addition to its exploration of the public nature of art and life in a nation that had, officially at least, renounced the private.

*Romance, directed by Jaromil Jireš*
If the other four films of the omnibus *Pearls of the Deep* have acted as a manifesto on art and technique in communist Czechoslovakia, then *Romance*, its concluding film, drives home the relationship between this manifesto and contemporary film. On its most obvious level, the short film is a love story about an awkward young plumber who falls in love with a fiery Roma girl; on a deeper level, though, Jireš (himself discussed more extensively in later chapters) explores how film shapes and defines the viewing public’s desires and expectations.

In Aleksandr Pushkin’s novel-in-verse, *Eugene Onegin* (1831), the heroine, Tatiana, is gently mocked by the narrator for her abiding love of French romances, and the implication is that her love for the eponymous hero – himself an affected variation on the Byronic hero – has been fired and molded by the romances in her novels. Pushkin’s novel, like so many of his works, functions as a commentary on the role and impact of art, a power that was not lost on the government censors. More than a hundred years later, little had changed for artists in the communist bloc, except perhaps the media available to the enterprising storyteller. In Jireš’s adaptation of *Romance*, there is a similar, though updated, trajectory: a young Prague worker, fed a regular diet of romanticized adventure films (funnily enough, also of French provenance), falls in love with an exotic Roma girl. In Jireš’s hands, the role of the cinema is privileged: the opening shot of the film is a movie theater, with a quick succession of ever-closer shots of the building’s façade, ticket office, and crowds emerging, blinking, after a matinee. One of these filmgoers, the young Gaston, pauses next to a marquee of publicity photos of Christian-Jacque’s film, *Fanfan la Tulipe* (1952). Gaston is drawn to the pictures of Gérard Philipe, and uses the mirror next to the marquee to compare himself with the hero.
Without a word of dialogue, the audience is nevertheless entirely aware of what Gaston’s thought process is, for his desire and mild dissatisfaction are written clearly across his charmingly awkward face. The filming is done from behind him, catching his reflection and the posters together and visually linking them. As he preens, he pauses long enough to catch a glimpse of an intriguing girl.

Figure 11 Gaston (Ivan Vyskočil) first glimpses the Gypsy Girl (Dana Valtová)

The decision to shoot the sequence with the use of mirrors is particularly crucial to this interpretation of the film as a commentary on itself: even within the world of the
narrative, there is distance; there continues to be an additional lens through which the two young lovers see one another. The ultimate point is that from the start, the two of them are not seeing one another directly, as people, but instead as the roles they play. An undercurrent to the whole film is, as well, her appeal to him because she is Roma; she is, in other words, exotic, interesting, Other. She is inherently an adventure for this ordinary Czech.

As Gaston follows her through the crowded streets and she periodically turns and gives him a suggestive look there is still no dialogue, but the exchange of meaningful looks and the use of equally meaningful edits nevertheless makes everything completely clear – after all, the audiences watching Romance are no strangers to film language. Once the two actually begin talking, their relationship progresses quickly. For those who are looking for a more realistic portrayal of a relationship’s beginning, there is only frustration; for those who are more accustomed to the compressed timeline of a romantic comedy, their pacing is just right. Within moments, the Roma girl – she is never given a name – has asked for and received a cigarette, has asked for and been deferred money for a sweater. Soon she leads Gaston back to an apartment, where their relationship is further defined. As they enter, they are filmed from behind, their actions caught in a large mirror opposite. The Roma girl flits about, alternately flaring up at Gaston (she assumes that he has accused her of stealing the large chandelier hanging overhead), proudly proclaiming her ancestry (the grandfather Roma baron) and attempting to seduce him. Gaston, meanwhile, is again fascinated with his own image in the mirror.
Taped to the mirror are all of her pop culture idols, cut out variously from newspapers, magazines, and posters, and Gaston is again framed by these famous images; more to the point, though, her view of the world is equally founded on such figures.

Back at his apartment, the relationship is firmly decided: after a few flare ups, she smooths his wounded pride (she has rebuffed his initial advances) by suggesting to him that perhaps they could start a new life together, to which he guilelessly, artlessly responds, “I’ve never tried that with anyone yet.” As a record of African-American spirituals plays in the background, she assures him that there is nothing to it, and holds forth – framed by more pop culture pin-ups – about how she will cook for him, clean for
him, and sing for him. By the end of the conversation, they have already discussed
children ("She can go and get beer for you"), his role as a family man (he will not allow
her to dance with other men), and integrating her into his family (if need be, he will step
over his mother’s dead body).

Figure 13 Framed by more pop idols, the Roma Girl explains how marriage works.

They have matter-of-factly solved all of their potential marital problems, so there is
nothing left but to consummate the relationship, as any good romantic comedy would
dictate. Their confidence and genuine zeal are touching, and in keeping with the expectations and demands of the genre.

On a walk immediately following, the couple pauses at a movie poster of *Fanfan la Tulipe*, and Gaston remarks to her that he wishes he could be Fanfan for a day. She retorts immediately and vehemently that he is a plumber! He is important! If nothing else, “they” should be making films about him! The episode explicitly calls attention to Gaston’s desires to be something more than what he is, and in this respect, his desires are similar to those of the old men in *The Impostors*; Hrabal, Němec and Jireš indulge their characters’ fantasies and handle them kindly. On another level, the exchange is something of an in-joke for the film audience; after all, Jireš has made a film about Gaston and has done so precisely because he is a plumber with big dreams of being Fanfan for a day.

The film concludes with Gaston walking her back to the Roma camp where she lives. The camp is demonstrably Other for Gaston, and he is unable to resist stopping and staring at the living tableaux: families in various states of dress and undress sleeping out in the open, a Roma couple’s tumultuous argument, a guard who follows them at a distance, rifle in the crook of his arm. Gaston is quite taken by the scene, but for the Roma girl, the exotic is perfectly normal: at one point she shrugs and tells him that every other Roma man looks like Fanfan la Tulipe. As Gaston takes leave of her – with the promise that they will meet at the Fanfan la Tulipe poster later – he is accompanied by the guard. They pass a naked young boy, who is urinating off the side of a rock face, and the guard observes, “even he might become president someday.” With this remark, the image switches to a bird’s eye view of busy streets of Prague, and then back to the
smiling boy, as the film somewhat abruptly ends. It is a strange ending, but perhaps
functions as a testament to the power of dreams, particularly those that encourage the
individual to be more than what s/he is. The ending could also be read as a playful wink
towards the power of films to instill proper values. At the very least, it is a lighthearted
ending to a sweetly good-natured film.

Conclusions

The omnibus film, Pearls of the Deep, showcases the emerging talent of some of
the most important directors of the Czechoslovak New Wave and functions effectively as
their collective manifesto. In its five components, the directors take on weighty issues
such as the creation and consumption of art, the role of the artist, and the methods and
techniques best-suited for a “truthful” cinema. The films all make extensive use of
innovative and interesting cinematography, complete with subjective camerawork,
suggestive edits, experimentation with movement and soundtrack, and thoughtful mise-
en-scène. In short, Pearls of the Deep operates as the movement’s manifesto in both
form and content. Underlying all of these cinematic experiments is the simple but
trenchant prose of Hrabal, whose works embody the black humor, earthy wit, caustic
irony and abiding humanism that are representative of the nation’s aesthetic tastes. The
combination of Hrabal’s writing with the New Wave’s innovations is nothing short of a
call to arms for fellow filmmakers in the Czechoslovak studios.

As a palimpsest, the film is not only the adaptation of Hrabal’s short works and
the reflection of numerous cultural values, it is a clear evolution of the genre of the
manifesto. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw the publication of numerous manifestos, which accompanied, explained and agitated for political, economic, and aesthetic movements. The Czechoslovak New Wave directors were not particularly interested in roll calls, committee meetings, and formal mission statements, as has been noted. More appealing, then, is a collaborative effort that lays out their aesthetic principles across five short “chapters.” Such an approach is democratic and open-ended, reflecting their distaste for dogmatism. Rather than present this manifesto in the old-fashioned way – in writing – they adapted the genre to a new medium, and one more appropriate to their goals and their message: why not use art to comment on art? Furthermore, from a practical standpoint, if one wants the message to reach the appropriate audience, then it makes sense to release a manifesto on contemporary film aesthetics in the theaters where moviegoers – potentially millions of them – will see it.

The parallel with early Soviet agitprop is unmistakable, but one that New Wave directors probably would have found irritating. Still, the manifesto-as-film remains a remarkably modern concept, and one at which the New Wave directors clearly excelled – even if their manifesto, *Pearls of the Deep*, was never officially acknowledged as one.

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Chapter 3: *The Joke* (1968) and *All My Good Countrymen* (1968)

“State-sponsored amnesia has a long history in the Czech lands” (Sayer 257).

The tendency in Czech letters, both historical and fictional works, has been towards a definition of national character and a reclamation of the national past (however problematic). This tendency was particularly marked during the National Revival of the nineteenth century, as historians like the famous František Palacký, and writers such as Ján Kollár, Pavel Josef Šafařík and Karel Hynek Mácha, glorified their Slavic (rather than Austrian) heritage, but did so just as often in German as in Czech. After the creation of Czechoslovakia in 1918, a new way of thinking ran somewhat counter to the grand historical narratives of the nineteenth century, and emphasized instead a tendency towards looking forward – rather than backward – and defining Czechoslovakia in the present and in reality. Taking the lead on this alternate way of thinking was no less a personage than the nation’s first president, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850-1937), who wrote extensively on the subject in his rather controversial piece, *The Czech Question* [Česká otázka]:

History is really the teacher of life and must be so for us more than for others. And so it was – but the main teacher of life is the present, life itself. And it cannot be denied that thus far we have been more diverted from the present toward the past than is good for us, and this one-sidedness hides a serious danger for the national cause. (qtd. Sayer 155)
Masaryk’s call for an emphasis on and an understanding of the present met with mixed results; certainly many in both politics and the arts focused their attention forward, but the pull of history proved – and continues to prove – to be a powerful force in the region as a whole and in Czechoslovakia in particular.

In a region of the world where cultural and historical memory is long, this interest in history has not proven as harmful a pursuit as Masaryk seemed to think it might become. Rather, honest explorations of history during the communist years were as much a “national act” as Palácký’s seminal works. The chosen medium has changed over time; rather than epic or lyrical poems or historical fiction such as operas and novels, the trend has been towards an exploration of such themes in film. In this respect, it is another evolution or adaptation of medium, as we saw with the manifesto in the previous chapter. Thus, although many, if not most, of the films of the Czechoslovak New Wave handle contemporary topics and are, on the whole, rather forward-thinking, several focus on themes from both the recent and distant past. In addition to medium, the emphasis of these narratives has shifted: though nineteenth century writers tended to look to history as a means of defining the present, and setting off the Czechs and Slovaks from the Austrians and their influence, the writers and filmmakers of the 1960s who took up historical themes did so not only to restore national memory, but also as a way of getting at larger, existential questions of the individual’s place in society and in the world.

Filmmakers around the region took up a similar theme in their work as well. Iordanova coined the phrase, “the burden of history” to describe this broader, regional tendency, arguing that numerous Central European filmmakers (she specifically focuses on Polish directors Andrzej Wajda and Andrzej Munk as well as the Hungarian director
István Szabó) have taken up this theme in fairly predictable ways. These films, she argues, tend to favor “insignificant, small protagonists, rather than the ‘hero,’” the individual and history usually portrayed as “adversaries, or as rivals in a game.” On a grander level, she observes, the larger narratives of “officially sanctioned memory” throw into relief the very personal ethical dilemmas of the individual: “[p]ersonal accounts here often substitute for public ones” (Iordanova 58-59). The “burden of history” as both theme and concept resonates with countries like Poland and the former Czechoslovakia, which for many years were variously occupied, partitioned, carved up, and generally used as bargaining chips by their larger and more aggressive neighbors. The appeal of this theme in the late 1950s and early 1960s was particularly keen, as it stood so resolutely outside of the rigid parameters of socialist realism. In a socialist realist setting – one that mirrors Karl Marx’s ideas on the evolution of communism – history must be construed as a logical progression towards socialist triumph; any notion of the “burden of history” challenges such an evolution, and shifts the focus away from the larger picture to the more problematic and immediate picture of the individual. In other words, these individuals are not empowered by the pull of history as a Positive Hero might be, but caught up in its whirlwind, incapable of doing much to further any agenda – their own or anyone else’s. With this general historical context in mind, it is not terribly surprising

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14 As we have seen in the previous chapter, though, state socialism attempted to conflate the public and the private wherever and whenever possible. In this respect, then, the personal standing in for the public might stem not only from an inclination toward the “insignificant” (the individual in the cosmos, Czechoslovakia in Europe), but also from the more political stance of renouncing the public in favor of the private.

15 Several of the films of the Czechoslovak New Wave illustrate an unusual affinity for the roughly contemporary trends in Soviet Thaw-era film and literature: as Aleksandr Prokhorov argues interestingly and plausibly, Soviet films and literature from the period
that main characters in novels and films from this region are “little men” (or women, in some rare cases) who view the flow of history as inexorable, uncontrollable, and downright hostile.

Two films that serve as particularly excellent examples of this concept are Jaromil Jireš’s 1968 adaptation of Kundera’s novel, The Joke / Žert (novel completed 1965, published 1967) and Vojtěch Jasný’s All My Good Countrymen / Všichni dobří rodáci, also released in 1968. In both films, the prism of Czechoslovak state socialism is used by the directors as a means of showing how larger historical forces ultimately impact and guide the individual’s moral development (or degradation), free will (or ideological servitude), and greater existential absolution (or condemnation). They are explorations of the recent Stalinist past, but perhaps more importantly, the two films show clearly that though the individual is powerless to bring about large, grand-scale change, his personal impact can be devastating on other individuals. In this way, the two films endure as two of the most explicit embodiments of the era’s values, while being rather emphatic historical narratives. A profitable discussion of these films must first begin, then, with a look at the historical context that produced them, and how these three communists - Kundera, Jireš and Jasný – came to create such biting indictments of the political reality they helped to produce.

are less of a rejection of Stalinist tropes than they are re-workings and re-imaginings of socialist realist paradigms. Thus, he argues, the Positive Hero and a trajectory of enlightenment persist, but in less insistently Soviet forms (Doctor Zhivago, for example). In the context of post-Stalinist Czechoslovakia, the Positive Hero is more problematic, in that he (and it is usually “he”) is rather uncomfortably positive and unconvincingly heroic as he struggles mightily even for basic enlightenment.

Александр Прохоров, Унаследованный дискурс: парадигмы сталинской культуры в литературе и кинематографе “оттепели” (Санкт-Петербург: Издательство ДНК, 2007).
The narratives of both films span a period of almost twenty years, roughly from 1945 to 1965. This period in Czechoslovak history – the communist years that helped to produce the New Wave – is a particularly tumultuous one, and the films stand out as among the few that directly engage the highs and the lows of the era. Perhaps most importantly for the historical record, films like *The Joke* and *All My Good Countrymen* show unflinchingly the fervor of the post-war idealists and how the communists enjoyed reasonably widespread popular support. In perspective, the two films strike a careful balance: while *The Joke* illustrates the busy political activism of the city and the urban intelligentsia, *All My Good Countrymen* shows a much quieter introduction of communism in a small Moravian village.
Figure 14 Jíří illustrates the broad appeal of communism in the immediate aftermath of World War II in *The Joke*. The irony is that these scenes were shot after the Soviet invasion of 1968.

In *The Joke*, the majority of the characters (Ludvík, Markéta, Zemánek, Alexei, and Helena) are active supporters of the communist party in the beginning, with differing levels of enthusiasm over time; the farmers and small tradesmen of *Countrymen* prove to be more mixed in their responses to the Party - Očenáš and Bertin respond immediately and favorably; Fraj, Trňa, Plécmra, and Zejvala recognize it as a vehicle for self-promotion; Lampa is strong-armed into adherence, while the rest remain doggedly apolitical (itself a political stance). Socialist realist works did not allow for such nuance and certainly not for such open criticism as these two films offered. Whereas a socialist
realist film might have shown a trajectory towards (socialist) enlightenment, these two films show a reverse trajectory: faith is lost, lives are destroyed, farms are ruined, human relationships are poisoned, and a palpable feeling of despair settles like a blanket over the survivors. As we shall see, Iordanova’s idea of “the burden of history” plays out differently in the two films, and largely as a result of the difference in the two films’ emphases.

As similar as the films are on a superficial level, the narratives unfold in strikingly different ways. *The Joke* adopts the perspective of a single individual (Ludvík Jahn), whose self-absorption and preoccupation with his own past provides the driving force behind the entire narrative. As such, the film is a sequence of flashbacks and point-of-view shots, illustrating just how much of Ludvík’s life in the present interacts with his past. It is the story of the individual struggling with the overwhelming forces of history. Throughout the film, Ludvík of the present literally interacts with the people of his past, and several of the cross-cuts are deliberately disorienting; the viewer is encouraged to experience Ludvík’s past from his subjective vantage point. *All My Good Countrymen*, on the other hand, almost appears to adopt an agricultural, pre-modern peasant view; its emphasis is on the collective (rather than from the perspective of any one character) and on the eternal and cyclical nature of time and its progression. The film contains several lengthy passages of nature and the outdoors, community life, and repeated images. Thus, whereas *The Joke* is a narrative told in quick edits and subjective time, *All My Good Countrymen* is a film built upon long shots that call particular attention to the eternal and the permanent. When the two films are viewed together, a fuller picture of the twenty or so preceding years begins to emerge.
Czechoslovakia, 1945-1965

The Communist Party had always enjoyed a certain amount of support, and had been a legal and viable presence in First Republic (1918-1938) politics. After the war, however, it gained greater popularity, partly because of a popular reaction to the recent right-wing Nazi past and because of genuine affection for Soviet soldiers, but also – and perhaps most significantly – because of trends in the national government. Gottwald returned from war-time exile in Moscow with an organized and motivated movement, a stark contrast to Beneš’s own return from exile in London, and it quickly became clear, that the non-communist segments of government were unwilling or unable to put up much opposition (Čarba 24). In the immediate aftermath of the war, Beneš himself took the first steps towards a more socialist future by nationalizing agriculture and major industry (Agnew 223). Though parliamentary elections did not take place until 1946, right-leaning parties were banned and all remaining parties were grouped under the National Front. When elections were held, the Communist Party scored 40% of the votes. The communists under Gottwald’s leadership continued consolidating their power over the next several years. At a meeting of the newly formed Cominform (Communist Information Bureau) in 1947, the USSR chided the Czechoslovak communists “for being the last country of the bloc where the communist victory was not definite” (Čarba 21). The communists continued to organize and bide their time, waiting for the right moment.

That moment came in February of 1948, when the communist Minister of the Interior, Václav Nosek, transferred the last remaining non-communist police out of Prague, a move that infuriated the non-communists in the capital city, who demanded that he rescind the order. What followed was a sequence of events that quickly developed
into a crisis: twelve non-communist ministers resigned in protest, gambling that the other non-communists (notably the Minister of Defense, Ludvík Svoboda, and the Foreign Minister, Jan Masaryk) would follow suit, and that this mass resignation would serve as incontrovertible proof of no confidence in the communists, who would then be forced to resign. “The communists could hardly believe their luck. Their opponents had provoked the inevitable clash at a time and in a way that gave the communists practically all the advantages” (Agnew 230). What followed was a complete debacle. Masaryk did not resign along with the other ministers, and Svoboda voiced support for Gottwald. The Communist Party sent thousands of well-organized factory workers into the streets for mass, pro-communist demonstrations. Gottwald demanded that Beneš accept the ministers’ resignations:

Thus the entire burden of resolving the crisis descended on Beneš, who delayed accepting Gottwald’s re-organized government for four days, hoping that the non-communist parties could do something to resist the communists’ moves to control power. Their failure left him isolated, exposed to pressure from Gottwald and the perfectly organized communist mass demonstrations. Beneš feared conflict splitting Czechoslovak society, perhaps even civil war leading to a Soviet intervention and, in the end, alone and seriously ill, he decided to accept the resignations and the new government on February 25, 1948. (Agnew 231-232)

Beneš resigned from government in June, and died in September; before that, Jan Masaryk was found dead from an apparent suicide (one of Prague’s famous defenestrations) in March. With the loss of these two men, two important non-communist voices were silenced, and the communists were free to take the reins and lead
the government in the direction that they saw fit. The communists wasted no time: with Gottwald as president, Antonín Zápotocký (1884-1957) as prime minister, and Rudolf Slánský (1901-1952) as general secretary, the key positions of government were filled with communist hardliners, who would quickly renege on the original post-war promise of a uniquely Czechoslovak road to socialism and would instead slavishly follow all directives from Moscow.

Setting the tone for this prevailing mood in Czechoslovakia was Stalin’s increasing fear and suspicion. Although the great Soviet purges had more or less quieted by the late 1940s, it was felt that the newly initiated bloc nations were ripe for purges of their own. In The Joke, Ludvík himself suffers indirectly from this larger impetus to prune the Party, the government, and the universities of undesirable elements. In Czechoslovakia, the first round of political purges occurred as early as 1949 and focused on non-communist soldiers, security workers, activists, publishers, clergy, and Sokol members. In this round of purges, General Heliodor Píka – an army officer with well-known Western sympathies – was arrested, tried, and executed. In the following year, the

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16 The Sokol (Falcon) gymnastics group was founded in 1862 by Miroslav Tyrš and Jindřich Fügner as a means of developing and strengthening Czech culture and identity. It strove to “cultivate[] the physical and moral health of the nation through gymnastics and other patriotic activities” (Agnew 132). Though the group was seen by the communists as a threat, the concept of political athletics continued in the form of the epic spartakiads held every five years (1955-1985) so as to illustrate the “disciplined unity of the nation” (Čarba 47).


Tomáš Čarba, Alexandr Koráb, and David Borek, Legacy, ed. Clare Britton and Glenn Spicker, trans. Lily Císařovská (Lysá nad Labem: Jana Kappelerová, n.d.).
purges cracked down specifically on the Catholic Church, as well as launching a general campaign to remove any Titoist\textsuperscript{17} elements in Czechoslovak society. The latter initiative cast a wide net and zeroed in on those who had fought in the Spanish Civil War, in “Western or domestic” resistance movements, and in Yugoslav partisan units, as well as those with any connections to the West. The most famous casualty of this purge was the National Socialist Party MP, Milada Horáková, who was arrested, tried and later executed despite numerous international calls for clemency.

The conflagration of political show trials had not quite burned itself out, but was instead building towards its hideous climax: the waning years of Stalin’s life were marked by such extreme paranoia and anti-Semitism that the effects were felt elsewhere in the bloc, and 1951 brought another round of arrests and trials. The targeted victims this time were those who demonstrated “bourgeois nationalism” (particularly when that nationalism was Slovak), State Security forces, and mid-level party officials, with a particular focus on those who were also Jewish. In \textit{All My Good Countrymen}, these events coincide roughly with the deaths of Jořka and Zašínek (“as if he were not designed for the times to come”), as well as František’s ominous fortune of hardship and imprisonment (“St. Francis was also a martyr”). It is also probably during this round of purges that Ludvík – serving time in the military with the “black insignias,” the unit set apart for the politically unreliable – meets the tragic Alexei.

\textsuperscript{17} Josip Broz Tito (1892-1980) was the leader of the Yugoslav partisans during World War II and, after the war, Yugoslavia’s Prime Minister (later President). Marshal Tito plotted an independent course from Stalin’s Soviet Union, and thus gained harsh opprobrium from Moscow and its satellites.
Alexei’s path to ruin begins with his father’s arrest during the purges and Alexei’s own subsequent denunciation of him: because of his relationship to the “traitor” he is nevertheless put with the “black insignias” and later expelled from the Party. On the national level, well-known names were among these early arrests: the Slovaks Vladimír Clementis – whose photograph with Gottwald was immortalized in Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* – and Gustáv Husák, the future president of Czechoslovakia. The purge picked up speed with the scandalous arrest of Rudolf Slánský himself, the general secretary and one of “the most strident in denouncing the comrades arrested
earlier” (Agnew 240). The trial had a predictable, but nevertheless shocking, resolution for the fourteen co-defendants: Slánský and ten others (including Clementis) were executed by hanging, while the remaining three (including Husák) were given life imprisonment.

In the countryside, communist developments were no less traumatizing, though slightly less bloody. In the first year of his tenure, Gottwald had promised that there would be no *kolkhozes*, or collective farms, in Czechoslovakia, a small but significant departure from the Soviet model. The initial post-war land reform, begun under Beneš and continued under the communists, went a long way towards redistributing the wealth and satisfying what were, at best, Marxism-Leninism’s rather limited directives on agriculture. The Soviet Union had had similar issues:

Marx was not at all interested in the farmers’ role in a revolutionary socialist society and Lenin only reluctantly dealt with them when it became absolutely necessary. In his opinion, people who gained authority (or property) from their common sense and practical skills were the worst adversaries of the Revolution. Thus collectivization and the making of the farmers’ cooperatives were based on the perverse interpretation of the class struggle in the countryside, whose motto was “the mass drive of peasants and smallholders against the rich.” (Čarba 33) Sadly, the Soviet example would play out in Czechoslovakia as well. A paucity of factory workers would ultimately lead Gottwald to renege on his original promise and to free up a significant percentage of the agricultural workers by forcing farmers onto collectivized farms. Collectivization was not, in other words, an economic move, but a practical one: “[i]t broke the resistance of a recalcitrant social group, while freeing labor
for industry” (Agnew 241). Aggressive collectivization, like the purges, came in waves, the strongest in 1952-1953 and again in 1955-1958; in the film, František is arrested during each of these two periods for refusing to join the collective farm.

*Countrymen* shows Beneš’s initial redistribution of property in the confiscation of the wealthy farmer’s house and farmland at the very beginning. The inclusion of this scene is crucial: over the course of the next twenty years, mismanagement, graft, and large- and small-scale thievery completely destroy the property, shown at the end of the film as a stark example of what collectivization had failed to achieve. The visual contrast is underscored by periodic shots of Zašínek’s and František’s farms, which are clean, functional, and efficient, quite unlike the collective farm run by committee.

Although the purges and forced collectivization would continue well into 1954, they lost a lot of their driving force after Stalin and Gottwald died – within days of each other – in the spring of 1953. Interestingly, the two nations moved in very different directions following the deaths of these two charismatic leaders. Whereas the Soviet Union under Khrushchev’s leadership (1956-1964) began a period of limited liberalization – “the Thaw” – the Czechoslovak leadership guided, by president Antonín Zápotocký and general secretary Antonín Novotný, became increasingly more hard-line. Just as the rise of communism in Czechoslovakia stemmed from a confluence of local circumstances, so too did its perpetuation during the 1950s:

The [Communist Party] leadership was too thoroughly and too recently implicated in the purges to accept serious de-Stalinization. The very ferocity of the Czechoslovak purges also meant that no figure with the stature of a [Władysław] Gomułka or [Imre] Nagy survived to lead a reformist party faction. Wider
popular mobilization was also weak: the efforts since 1953 to increase the
standard of living for the masses paid off now in their fundamental quiescence.
Thus conflicts between the party and its critics remained relatively isolated and
never coalesced into nationwide pressure for change. By the autumn of 1957 the
party seemed firmly in control. (Agnew 246)

While the Soviet Union was taking cautious steps to rehabilitate the victims of its purges,
Czechoslovakia established commissions to look into the purges precisely so as not to
rehabilitate the victims, but instead to reaffirm the findings of the courts (Agnew 243-
244).

This exploration of Czechoslovak history after the second world war and the
specific socio-political context of the late 1940s and 1950s is meant to serve primarily as
a context for the action of the novel and the films, but on a meta-textual level, the
excesses of the Communist Party also clearly demonstrate the extraordinary
circumstances that allowed that novel and the films to be created in the first place: in
1957, the cultural and political context of 1968 was as-yet undreamed of. During the
1950s, the Czechoslovak Writers’ Union, led by Kundera and Seifert, would declare that
writers – and implicitly, intellectuals generally – are the “conscience of the nation,” an
idea that clearly took root and bloomed during the subsequent decade, but was a radical
and brave statement during the darkness of that time. Later in the decade, the Banská
Bystrice conference would ban films, chasten filmmakers, and re-assert socialist realism.
It is also during this decade that Ludvík pays his debt to society, first through mandatory
military service and then through several additional years of work in the mines. It is only
when the decade draws to a close and the first tentative moves away from the hard-line
stance are made that he is able to move back to Prague, complete his studies, and begin picking up the pieces of his life. The early 1960s are the “present” of the novel’s and the film’s setting, although the majority of the action in both takes place during the cultural and political context outlined above.

Both films originated in the rather bleak years of the 1950s: Kundera (b. 1929) began writing The Joke and Vojtěch Jasný (b. 1925) began writing the script for Countrymen based on his mother’s memories of her own life in the countryside. The script was completed in 1957, but he held on to it, waiting for a more auspicious time to begin production. Jasný himself was “the most important member of the Ur-Wave” whom the New Wave directors regarded as an “older brother” (Škvorecký 48). Liehm echoes this assessment, calling him “the central figure of the generation of 1956” and adds that Jasný was “the first to seek a specifically Czech film language” (124). Liehm further argues that the signature element of Jasný’s films, evident in Countrymen, is his “profound link with Nature, with the people around him, [his] understanding of their wisdom, and the poetic language he uses to describe them” (125). Others were clearly in agreement with Liehm’s glowing assessments: Countrymen picked up numerous awards, including Best Direction at Cannes and a nomination for the prestigious Palm d’Or.

Jireš (1935-2001) had more trouble in his career than did most of his colleagues. Škvorecký refers to him as “the most unlucky of the group” (128) and it is relatively easy to see why: after a very promising thesis film (1958), which he directed and shot himself, he made the lyrical and critically popular film, The Cry / Křík (1964). Other than his contribution to Pearls of the Deep (Romance) in 1965, he did not successfully complete another film until The Joke, for the censors rejected project after project. Whereas
Škvorecký calls this unlucky, Liehm suggests that more was at work than simple bad luck:

The praise he got from [powerful men] irritated him because, in that situation, such praise was equivalent to an attempt to get him excluded from the ranks and to set him up as an example for the rest, particularly since he was one of the few Communists among the young ones. Jireš made a firm decision that his next film [after The Cry] would not give cause for any such misunderstanding. And that is probably the main reason – more so than his active and dedicated participation in everything that was happening in those years – why the director of The Cry racked up the largest number of rejected scripts, and why his next film, The Joke, wasn’t made until the spring of 1968, and turned out to be one of the most powerful critiques of Stalinism, if not the most powerful one, in Czechoslovak cinematography. (Liehm 214)

Perhaps no greater indication of how much times had changed exists than the release of The Joke: its subject matter is incendiary, and its authors – Kundera and Jireš collaborated on the script – were highly-respected artists with a communist background.

The adaptation itself differs starkly from the original novel, the two most notable being the loss of the other narrative voices – the film privileges Ludvík’s – and the loss of the sub-plot, the “love story” involving Lucie. The result of these cuts is to create a film that is concentrated on the struggle between the individual and history. Unlike the novel, which adopts numerous perspectives and ranges across several timeframes, the film is situated entirely in the present. Ludvík’s present, however, is completely dominated by the past. The film’s opening credits highlight the importance of time, and, perhaps more
accurately, its passage, with close-up edits of figures from a mechanical town clock striking the hour. The figures themselves are appropriately proletarian (workers, smiths) but display a certain regional flavor as well – the Moravian band. It is furthermore a narrative concerned with the tragedy, the burden, of history:

Even without the story of Lucie, the film is a multi-faceted work that attempts to assess the human cost of the 1950s and its role in a changing situation. Indeed, rather than launching a simplistic attack on the system, Jireš and Kundera attempt to understand the attitudes of the time. Kundera himself had been a Young Communist who had to interrupt his studies in 1950 for “saying something I would have better left unsaid,” and was subsequently expelled from the Party.

(Hames 84)

Similarly, the event that precipitates Ludvík’s ultimate change of fortune—the joke of the title—also clearly demonstrates Iordanova’s notion of the “burden of history,” particularly as it relates to the tension between personal accounts of history and the larger, public ones: Ludvík sends a postcard to his would-be girlfriend, Markéta, who has offended his sensibilities by preferring her Party training course to spending a summer exploring a physical relationship with him. On the postcard he writes simply, “Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky! Ludvík” (Kundera 34). The postcard is confiscated and read by the authorities, and the ultimate result is Ludvík’s expulsion from the university and from the Party. Because he can now no longer defer his military service, he is then sent to work in the mines with a special political unit (the “black insignias”). A second “joke” in the novel is Ludvík’s horribly misplaced attempt at revenge on the man he believes to have been responsible
for his expulsion from the university and the Party, Pavel Zemánek: Ludvík sets out to seduce Zemánek’s wife, Helena, in an attempt, through sexual conquest, to torment his friend-turned-enemy. This joke is ultimately on him, as it is revealed, far too late, that the Zemáneks are estranged and soon-to-be divorced; the only one tormented and humiliated by all of this, then, is Helena. These jejune and personal jokes serve as the engine driving a larger, more existential joke: that of the individual’s role in history. “He who once saw himself as a captain of destiny has been unable even to control the consequences of his own jokes: once set in motion, they live a life of their own, exposing him as not their master, but their victim. Which is more futile, to seek to shape the future? Or to recapture a once precious past?” (French 238).

Apart from being a frank look at the excesses of the Stalinist past, The Joke is also a straightforward look at how powerless the individual ultimately is to affect real control over his/her future or even to come to terms with the past. As in many of the films that exemplify this theme, Ludvík Jahn is not a high-ranking or important personage in the conventional sense; rather, he is a university student in natural history in Prague during the late 1940s and early 1950s. The result of his joke, the postcard to Markéta, is the effective loss of control over his own life, and the whole of the novel dramatizes his attempt to reassert control. The larger joke is the fact that these attempts to re-assert control – the conquest of Helena – are ultimately futile, and he remains as helpless as in the beginning: history, or at least the larger currents of human experience, proves to be a wilier opponent than Ludvík.

Within moments of the film’s opening, Ludvík drifts into a flashback of his first meeting with Helena; the reverie is triggered by his arrival in his hometown, where he
will shortly meet with her in order to put his horrible plan in motion. What becomes clear even in this brief passage is that the primary attraction for Ludvík and Helena is that each believes that the other will give him/her a longed-for access to the past. Though Helena has not been quite the victim of circumstances that Ludvík has been, it is clear that she, too, lives in her past; it is, after all, no coincidence that the picture she carries of her husband is twenty years old. Just as Ludvík despises the Zemánek of the past, Helena adores him, and both are bewildered and put off by what he has become and the fact that he has changed at all. This flashback is the first of nine (depending on how one counts them), and most of the film is presented as a flashback. Throughout the film, Ludvík interacts with his past. Thus, much like in the novel’s narrative structure, most of the film is told in flashbacks, but the film is free to rely on cross-cutting to move smoothly (although rather disconcertingly) between two distinct timeframes. The result is a very fluid timeline: history has never stopped unfolding, and Ludvík, at least as he perceives it, continues to have little control over it. In a flashback later on in the film, Ludvík opens the door to his hotel room onto the fateful hearing that took place in his youth; later in the film, he attends a sort of christening ceremony that also becomes a memory cross-cut with the hearing. As he looks back from the distance of twenty years, he sees clearly the events of that day, the damning reading from Julius Fučík’s (1903-1943) prison

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18 Julius Fučík became one of Communist Czechoslovakia’s secular saints. An early communist, Fučík worked as a journalist and was quite active in the resistance during the Occupation. He was arrested by the Gestapo, and during his tenure at Pankrác Prison – variously interrogated and tortured – he wrote what would later become Notes from the Gallows / Reportáž psaná na oprátc. His writing was smuggled out of the prison by sympathetic guards and compiled into a book after his death. He was beheaded in Berlin in September 1943.
writings contrasted with the reading from his postcard, the hands raised in the vote to expel him: Markéta looks directly at the Ludvík of the present while joining the vote.

Figure 16 Even from the distance of twenty years, Markéta's (Jaroslava Obermajerová) betrayal still pains Ludvík

The sequence is shot in this way to make clear that for Ludvík there is no distance of twenty years: it may be a flashback, but on many important levels, Ludvík has never left

Zemánek, of course, has purposefully excerpted Notes from the Gallows, a text that every Czechoslovak schoolchild knew well, which would have delivered a considerable visceral punch to a youthful communist audience in the late 1940s and early 1950s.
that hearing and clearly has never overcome his feelings of pain and betrayal. Likewise, through the visual conflation of the portrait of Fučík with the young children in the ceremony, and the hands raised in solidarity against Ludvík with the parents signing the register, Jireš indicates that not only has there been no change, but that these children will ultimately become a latter-day version of the zealots from the late 1940s and early 1950s. Ludvík remembers his interactions with Markéta, the would-be girlfriend, in similar fashion, and this sequence, too, is shot in such a way that the Ludvík of the present speaks directly to the Markéta of twenty years ago.

In one of the most prolonged flashback sequences, Ludvík listens to Jaroslav’s cimbalom band perform (itself a meaningful symbol of the past), and the camera cuts between the band performing and scenes of the political prisoner-soldier Alexei’s humiliation and suicide in the mining camp. As the music joyfully plays over the scene, Alexei is forced to read the letter expelling him from the Party in front of the entire company, and in the present, Ludvík winces at the still-fresh recollection. Just as then, Ludvík is powerless to prevent Alexei’s tragedy. The band plays on over the scene of Alexei’s suicide by overdose (a grim foreshadowing of Helena’s own attempt, later on), and the performance is later tied to a sequence of Jaroslav and Zemánek dancing to the folk music. Such a linkage draws together the victimizers and the victimized in a horrible danse macabre of larger historical forces: Zemánek is the charismatic student leader who ensures the condemnation of his friend at the hearing; Jaroslav clings desperately to a way of life that is quickly passing and falling out of favor with the younger generation; Ludvík drags his past into the present, tormenting others no differently than others once
tormented him. Ludvík may well have had lofty thoughts of communism’s promise in his youth, but in his adulthood he is crushed by the very movement he helped to unleash.

All My Good Countrymen represents the concept of the “burden of history” differently. As is so often the case in Slavic folklore, danger (here, communism and, explicitly, collectivization) comes from outside of the village and destroys its internal harmony. Whereas Ludvík demonstrates Iordanova’s idea that “the individual and history are often seen as adversaries, or rivals in a game,” the ensemble cast in Countrymen act as a kind of microcosm for Czechoslovak society, their personal histories substituting for the larger, national one (Iordanova 59). This collective approach does not, however, absolve the individual characters of personal responsibility: quite to the contrary, the opening title screen informs the viewer that, “in everyone’s life comes a decisive moment…” and the implication here is that everyone makes choices every day, many of which will have far-reaching and unknown consequences. While Ludvík fights his battle with history alone, the villagers here illustrate, perhaps better than in The Joke, that this battle with history does not take place in a vacuum and that individual actions carry consequences that have an impact on the group.

The film focuses on a group of friends in the immediate aftermath of the war, roughly up until the present (1965), and demonstrates how communist policies ultimately destroy not only the relatively smooth functioning of rural-agrarian life, but also the social fabric that once bound the villagers together:

It examines the process of collectivisation and the tragic consequences of Stalinism, in which the policies of the 1950s are shown as a blight that not only led to mismanagement, but also encouraged the worst of instincts. Dispossession,
near-compulsory collectivisation, careerism, and vindictiveness are the end results of a policy that was never economically justified. (Hames 47)

In effect, the political climate created by the communism of the day was such that the moral and the upright became the exception rather than the rule. For his part, Jasný refrains from painting in broad strokes: whereas Trňa, Plčmera, and Zejvala are clearly crass opportunists, the organist Očenáš and the postman Bertin are just as clearly, good men who mean well. As Jasný himself described the film, it was “a rosary of destinies, first about one and then about another individual, a history of the collapse of people’s dreams, people who meant well and broke their legs trying” (qt. Liehm 126).

The film opens with a long shot of village life: the eye is drawn to the church in the middle ground, with the other village structures spilling out around it, all of it contrasting with the vibrant green of the surrounding land.
Figure 17 The village and the church recur often as an establishing shot in Jasný’s *All My Good Countrymen*.

This particular shot is repeated frequently throughout the film and at different times of the year, and the recurrence – clearly one of structural, natural permanence – highlights how much the rest of society has changed over the years. Similarly, several of the elderly villagers, and one old woman in particular, are shown in close-up multiple times over the course of the film. The other characters change, the politics change, the circumstances change, but the old Masaryk-era villagers do not. The village and its people live cyclically rather than linearly, and they are shown over the course of the film engaging in similar activities in similar places: what changes over time are the relationships between
them. The seven friends around whom most of the action takes place are shown early in the film drinking in the pub together and then moving their celebration out to the fields: they fall asleep at the base of a haystack, and in one of the film’s most beautiful shots, they slowly walk towards the camera as the sun rises behind them, slowly lighting up the scene.

Figure 18 Early camaraderie: after a night of carousing, the friends head home. The shot is repeated, less beautifully and with fewer characters, thus underscoring the damage done to personal relationships.
A similar scene is repeated in 1951, but now without Očenáš, Bertin, and Jořka. Hames has suggested that the use of the interstitial titles “emphasise[s] the permanence of nature over the arrogance of human nature” and notes as well the repetition of several of the shots — the church, the pub, and the fields (48). His observations are apt, but there is more to these recurring scenes than the opposition of the natural setting and the unnatural imposition of communism: what the viewer is watching is no less than the death of a way of life.

Structurally, the film is split imperceptibly into two parts: in the initial episodes (approximately 1945-1951) the emphasis is on the inception of communism and its immediate effects on the community; in the second set of episodes (approximately 1952-1958), the emphasis is on collectivization and its impact. Thus, the first part focuses primarily on Očenáš (the organist), Bertin (the postman), Franta Lampa (the tailor), and Joza Trňa (the photographer), all of whom embrace communism. The narrators intones darkly that “the world divided in two,” and Jasný films a sequence in which the newly appointed local Party chariman, Očenáš, and the secretary, Bertin, walk through the village. The carefully edited sequence of reaction shots shows that some of the locals are, if not in agreement, at least comfortable with the political changes, whereas others are opposed. From the outset, then, the communists are in conflict with virtually everyone else, the political and the non-political alike. By the summer of 1949, Očenáš is receiving death threats (Bertin is later killed in his place, in an instance of mistaken identity) and is genuinely perplexed by this popular response to him and to communism. “You’re forcing them into something they don’t want,” his wife tells him:
“One day they’ll see that we meant well and we wanted the best for them. And if not them, their children...”

“Their children will want something different.”

The truth of his wife’s statement does not resonate with Očenáš at the time, but from the vantage point of 1968, her comment rings true. Očenáš is ultimately run out of town, leaving the less scrupulous and more opportunist Plécmera, Zejvala, and Joza Trňa to mismanage things.

With this change of leadership, the film transitions to the second theme, collectivization. The initial title of this second section of the film tells the viewer that the year is 1952, thereby situating this part of the film neatly within the period of aggressive collectivization mentioned above. During this part of the film, the farmer František emerges as the film’s honorable, ethical center. Unlike Lampa and Trňa, František is principled and brave enough to stand alone; unlike Očenáš he doggedly remains (or returns) in the village, until the strain of doing so literally kills him. The primary conflict in this section of the film consists of the refusal by the local farmers, following František’s lead, to join the cooperative farm, which is failing without proper labor and leadership. The local party organs, headed by František’s boyhood friends, Lampa, and Trňa, have František arrested, and in his absence, there is no one brave enough to call for his release or to resist their repeated calls to join the cooperative farm. The narrative then becomes one of good vs. evil, or, at the very least, integrity vs. expedience.

Another unusual contrast is one of modernity vs. tradition. The only car seen in the film is driven by Trňa, and the only home explicitly shown with a flushing toilet is Lampa’s. (Lampa makes such a point of inspecting it.) Alternately, František is filmed
as at one with nature and the pre-modern; he is very rarely filmed indoors, and when he
is, it is usually as a model of ethical living (standing up to the Party committees,
attending mass with his family). He is typically filmed in long shots, plowing, mowing,
and farming, but with horse-drawn ploughs, scythes, and none of the modern
conveniences normally associated with the communist cult of modernity. The film,
furthermore, goes to some lengths to show either the folk traditions of the area – the
children dressed for Epiphany, the drunken revelry of the mummers\(^{19}\) – or the traditional
signposts of rural living – the centrality of the church, the local dances, the necessity of
cooperation in the fields. The associations carry the clear implication that communism
brought with it an artificialness not present in the pre-communist countryside: the village
was communal and collective until it was forced to be communist and to work on a
collective farm.

In the summer of 1957, the narrator intones, “Nothing is so bad that it couldn’t be
worse. And nothing is that good that it couldn’t be better,” a deeply pessimistic
observation that precedes František’s ultimate capitulation in 1958. He is arrested (for a
second time) and held hostage until all of the other farmers sign on for the cooperative
farm, and in 1958 František is prevailed upon to help them by running it. By this point,
the farm itself is in shambles, its trajectory of mismanagement already familiar to the
viewer. By the time František takes over ten years later, the destruction is nearly

\(^{19}\) Mummery was the pan-Slavic peasant custom of dressing up and carousing as one
went from house to house during the so-called “dirty days” between Christmas and
Epiphany. This time of the year was thought to be particularly prone to supernatural
attack and spiritual activity, and the countermeasure was mummery, which was believed
to frighten off the spirits. The costumes were ritualized and tended to involve tabooed
boundary-crossing: the dead man, the goat, the devil, the angel, cross-dressing, and the
like.
complete and his task a Herculean one. It is precisely because of its disrepair that František agrees to oversee it: rather than making an ideological decision, he has ultimately becomes its director because he believes it is his duty to help his fellow villagers when help has been requested of him. It is a principled but costly decision: the viewer is told in the Epilogue that František died shortly after taking over, regretting until the end his decision to help.

Both *The Joke* and *All My Good Countrymen* conciously reflect upon the recent past and upon greater questions of personal responsibility and culpability. While Ludvík struggles to control his destiny in the face of larger forces, the villagers struggle to come to terms with the choices made by individuals in their midst. What is significant in these films – and indeed, in the films of the New Wave as a whole – is the extent to which they reflect the basic principles of Dubček’s “socialism with a human face,” or at least the aesthetic manifestation of it. In these films, politics and ideology do not motivate the characters (a notable exception might include Alexei in *The Joke*). Instead, they are motivated by altruism, love, honor or, conversely, by greed, vengeance and hatred. The films, in short, embody how Czechoslovaks understood the concept of humanism: the individual, the private, the non-ideological. This is not to say that characters like Kostka in *The Joke* or Očenáš or František (to a lesser extent) in *Countrymen* are not good communists, but the point that the filmmakers are making is that they were good people first, and their politics were realized at the intersection of genuine fellow-feeling and current events. Such an approach was an inversion of accepted socialist realist norms, where people were communists first, and decent human beings second – and as a result of being communists.
Despite these basic humanist principles, neither film ends on a particularly optimistic note. In *The Joke*, Ludvík, Helena and Jaroslav are brought face to face with a younger generation that has no interest in their past or, indeed, the recent political past. They are, perhaps, students of Masaryk’s “main teacher of life” – “the present, life itself.” In this respect, the younger generation in *The Joke* is precisely the future that Očenáš’s wife foretold: they do want something different and cannot be bothered with the challenges and the sacrifices of previous generations. Interestingly, the film stops being a string of flashbacks precisely when Zemánek appears in the narrative. The unctuous Zemánek does not struggle with the challenges of the present because he is not haunted by the traumas of the past; he has adapted to the present, and as such, he has discarded his past (Helena) in favor of the vibrant present (Miss Brožová):²⁰ “these twenty year olds really are different,” he tells Ludvík. “That’s why I like them.” For her part, Miss Brožová interacts with Ludvík politely but indifferently; he does not speak her language. At the end of the film, Ludvík and Jaroslav perform as part of a cimbalom band to the marked apathy of the young revelers in the audience, the past is simply not interesting to them. The point here is that the young are undamaged by the traumas of the past and therefore they are poised to do wonderful, new things, if they are able to do so without the intervention of the previous generation. The closing scene of the film shows Ludvík

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²⁰ As further evidence of Jireš’s careful casting, the role of Pavel Zemánek was initially extended to the writer Pavel Kohout (b.1928), himself an early proponent of communism who was later an equally strong proponent of the Prague Spring and, later, Charter 77. Miss Brožová was played by the actress Věra Křesadlová (b. 1944) – the wife of New Wave director Miloš Forman. These choices draw a very fine point on the generational difference between the Ur-Wave, of an age with Pavel Kohout, and the New Wave directors.
beating up Jindra, Helena’s teenage assistant and would-be lover. He stops himself, looks into the camera, and laments, “It wasn’t you I wanted to beat up.”

Possibly for the first time in his life, Ludvík has stopped projecting the misfortunes of his own life onto others, and (perhaps more to the point) this is the first indication that Ludvík is aware of how his actions damage others. In 1968, the parallels with contemporary Czechoslovak politics are striking: just as in the film, an older generation,
with all of its historical baggage, put an end to the youthful optimism of the Prague Spring.

*All My Good Countrymen* ends on a similarly pessimistic note. The Epilogue (the present) opens with the same long shot of the village and the church that opened the film, and from a distance, little has changed. Očenáš returns from his long absence to find an empty pub with few provisions. He encounters František’s daughter, Maria, who tells him that her father has died and that the other farmers had abandoned him on the cooperative farm. Očenáš cycles aimlessly through the village, musing about the loss of his friends and the way of life they had once enjoyed. As the camera cuts to the familiar long shot of the church and the fields, Očenáš wonders aloud, “you make your bed, you lie on it. But was it your own bed you made?” The rather sad point returns to the film’s beginning and the “decisive moment” in everyone’s life: every individual is obliged to make decisions and to live with them, but those decisions carry consequences, both foreseen and unforeseen, for everyone else in the community. In other words, one will have to live with not only the consequences of one’s own actions, but also those others’ actions as well. Such a reality requires a greater faith in humanity than what communism as currently practiced can deliver.

The pessimism of *All My Good Countrymen* and *The Joke* has tangible and obvious origins: both were begun during the Prague Spring, but completed after the Soviet invasion in August of the same year. As Hames notes of *The Joke*, “[t]he real irony of filming ecstatic pro-Soviet May Day celebrations while the country was in the process of occupation was not lost” (Hames 84). The films had set out as attempts to reclaim the historical record and to explore larger historical questions of the importance
and the impact of the individual in the grand scheme of things. Most importantly, the films embraced central values of the era: humanism and honesty. As Jireš declared in the aftermath of *The Joke*'s release:

> It is necessary to believe in the power of truth – and it is just as important to realize that there is never enough truth. The theory which claims that up till this point it is a useful truth, but from there on it is useless is absurd and dangerous, because every expurgated truth immediately becomes a lie . . . . If we succeed in saying the truth about a person irrespective of its external “impact” or “utility,” this has an immense social importance although the truth itself might well be negative. The very fact of its disclosure is in itself positive and indicates a healthy society. (qtd. Škvorecký 185)

Jireš’s observations on the importance of honesty echo those implied by *Pearls of the Deep*, and particularly, Němec’s views on ethical consistency. Jireš does not argue here for a single, immutable Truth, but rather that the artist must maintain his/her integrity – precisely what Kennedy referred to as “sail[ing] against the currents of [the] time” and what Seifert meant by his call to be the “conscience of the nation.” That passion for truth-telling was one of the defining qualities of the Czechoslovak New Wave and it is one of the ways in which its films spoke to such disparate audiences within and outside of the bloc, and why these films continue to have power today. Indeed, Jireš’s comments go a long way toward explaining the appeal of adapting *The Joke*: although both the novel and the film are pessimistic in their tone, the images and the themes that he develops in the film are broadly representative of an alternative national narrative, one in which the historical record is evoked on its own terms and in ways that make sense to the local
audience and in which the individual is encouraged – even obliged – to reflect on such wide-ranging values as humanism and personal responsibility.

In his essay, “Adaptation,” Dudley Andrew wonders, “[h]ow does adaptation serve the cinema? What conditions exist in film style and film culture to warrant or demand the use of literary prototypes?” (35). Although only one of the two films in this chapter is an adaptation, Andrew’s answer to his own question offers a key to understanding both *The Joke* and *All My Good Countrymen*:

Although the volume of adaptation may be calculated as relatively constant in the history of cinema, its particular function at any moment is far from constant. The choices of the mode of adaptation and of prototypes suggest a great deal about the cinema’s sense of its role and aspirations from decade to decade. (35)

As we have seen, the cinema’s “sense of its role and its aspirations” in the Czechoslovak New Wave was one of personal sincerity, and of constructing narratives that contended with larger, more official narratives put forth by hardliners and *apparatchiks*. Rather than viewing the world from the towering heights of the Positive Hero, the New Wave reduced its perspective to that of the individual, the “little man,” whose view of the world is much more circumscribed but potentially more honest. With a more modest perspective, the New Wave arrived at more lasting and personal truths, which is what these directors were hoping to achieve from the outset.
Chapter 4: The Cremator (1968)

Stalinism and the excesses of communism were the most immediate traumas of the nation’s memory. As we have seen in the previous chapter, individuals of all stripes, in the city and in the country, wrestled with the ethical dilemmas of the larger national narrative and struggled mightily to stay on the “correct” side of history. That the individual could do very little to influence larger historical forces has become something of an article of faith. Such a viewpoint, however, did not absolve the individual of personal responsibility; s/he may not be able to steer the ship of state, but s/he certainly could be the difference between salvation and disaster for someone local.

If the twenty years of communism leading up to the New Wave had brought these themes to the forefront of artistic endeavors, the seven years of Nazi occupation and the Holocaust preceding it had illustrated in horrifying ways the true dynamic between those with power and those without. Explorations of power, as well as an increasing interest in the “burden of history” as an aesthetic leitmotif became common in much of the art of the 1960s: such topics allowed for polemic and catharsis, to say nothing of the fact that Nazis in the Czechoslovak consciousness often made an ideologically correct stand-in for the Soviets, another assertive neighbor who liked to interfere in Czechoslovak sovereignty.

Ladislav Fuks (1923-1994), much like Arnošt Lustig and Jiří Weil, and to a lesser extent Škvorecký and Hrabal, was one of a handful of writers to take up the theme of the Holocaust in his writing, a theme that grew in popularity during the period of liberalization that led up to the Prague Spring. Fuks’ literary career began later than the others’ and was launched by his first novel, Mr. Theodore Mundstock / Pan Theodor Mundstock (1963). The novel, which effectively put Fuks in the public eye as a writer, is
the first of several novels to handle the topic of the occupation and the persecution of Jews in Czechoslovakia. Mr. Mundstock is an elderly Jew who resigns himself to the fact that he will be deported to a concentration camp, and vows to “train” himself for the privations that he will encounter so that he can survive his internment. The novel thus introduces not only a theme common to Fuks’ later works, but also several stylistic attributes that came to be closely associated with his writing: the grotesque, the absurd, the Kafkaesque, and the blackest of black humor. Mr. Mundstock spends the entire the novel training himself rigorously for the deportation he knows will come, only to be killed by a German truck on his way to the staging area.

Several collections followed Mr. Theodor Mundstock in short order – My Black-haired Brothers / Mí černovlasí bratři (1964) and Variation for a Dark String / Variace pro temnou strunu (1966) – but it is perhaps his next novel, The Cremator / Spalovač mrtvol (1967), that has ensured Fuks’ fame and popularity within literary circles within Czechoslovakia and beyond. Part of Fuks’ interest in the occupation stems from the fact that he experienced it as an adult, and was himself sent by the occupying forces to Moravia for forced labor for most of the war. Fuks may also have been drawn to these themes because of his own role as an outsider and victim of both real and perceived persecution: “[He] was a homosexual who developed a profound interest in Jewish mysticism and the esoteric arts; he led the life of a victim and a potential victim, always subject to blackmail by the authorities. Fuks was from the start, as Miloš Pohorský has said, ‘trochu pozdivný cizinec’ (a slightly eccentric outsider) in Czech literature” (Pynsent 89). For the 1968 adaptation of the novel, Fuks shares the screenwriting credits with another outsider, the Slovak director Juraj Herz (b. 1934). Like Fuks, Herz
experienced the occupation firsthand, although Herz’s experience involved actual
internment at the Ravensbrück concentration camp, where he was sent as a ten-year-old.

Unlike the other directors of the New Wave, Herz did not study cinematography
at FAMU, but instead studied puppetry, with Jan Švankmajer, no less. Possibly as a
result of this less conventional route to directing, Herz felt apart from the other New
Wave directors, even though he was of an age with most of them. In an interview with
Škvorecký, Herz indicated that he believed himself to be outside of the New Wave, but
felt a connection with certain individuals, namely Jireš and Schorm (Škvorecký 214).

Although he gravitated towards particular individuals, collaborations with the other New
Wave directors did not occur for Herz as much as they did for others. In a later interview
with Ivana Košuličová (2001), Herz describes the exclusion he encountered on the New
Wave’s manifesto project, *Pearls of the Deep / Perličky na dne*: not only was he initially
rejected for the project, but subsequently he was denied access to the cinematographer
used by the other directors (Kučera), and his piece was ultimately cut from the finished
product (Košuličová 4).

It was Herz who approached Fuks: “I heard about a book with an interesting title,*
*Spalovač mrtvol*, written by Ladislav Fuks. So I read it and I was actually disappointed.
But I arranged a meeting with Fuks anyway, and we worked on the script for about two
years” (qtd. Košuličová 7). In this fine collaboration, then, two outsiders found one

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21 Ravensbrück, located in northern Germany, was primarily a camp for women, although
children were sometimes interned with their mothers or born to women already interned.
Some of the children from Lidice (see footnote 27) were interned there as well.
22 Jan Švankmajer (b.1934) continues to create and direct wildly imaginative, and often
vaguely disturbing animated films, largely using stop-motion. Švankmajer was very
active in the Czech Surrealist Group along with Karel Teige.
another and produced a truly unique and well-made (albeit disturbing) film. Herz remains enormously pleased with the result, calling it “[t]he only film that’s the way I wanted it” (qtd. Košuličová 11).

The novel follows Karel Kopfrkingl (Karel “Curlyhead”), a mid-level manager at a Prague crematorium in the months leading up to and immediately following the Munich Agreement (1938) and the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia (1939-1945). In most critical pieces on the novel, Kopfrkingl is described variously as a “deranged psychopath [vyšinutý psychopat]” (Galík 349), as “increasingly deranged” (Bird), “deranged” and “maniacal” (Schofield) and, lastly, an “insane worker in a crematorium . . . [whose] mental deterioration is linked to the rise of Nazism” (Hames 224). There is no doubt in anyone’s mind that Kopfrkingl is both sadistic and insane by the close of the novel and the film: by that point, he has murdered both his wife and his son, and attempted to murder his daughter. The narrative closes with the broad hint that he has come completely unhinged. What is crucial for an understanding of Kopfrkingl’s character is the order in which collaboration and madness transpire: given Fuks’ singular impatience with collaborators, it seems unlikely that madness brings about collaboration; rather, it seems much more likely that Kopfrkingl comes to the Nazi ideology of his own, unclouded volition, but that its barbaric principles and its appeal to his most bestial urges twist his mind in such directions that he ultimately does become a collaborator and a murderer. Like many of the characters in The Joke and, particularly, All My Good Countrymen, Kopfrkingl is not political or even terribly interested in Party platforms; instead, the film makes it clear that he is drawn to the Party simply because it promises greater power and the satisfaction of all of his lascivious desires. This interpretation is
given a certain amount of weight by the novel’s epigraph: “The devil’s neatest trick is to persuade us that he does not exist,” a paradox that Fuks attributes to the Italian writer (and fascist), Giovanni Papini (1881 -1956), but was actually formulated by Charles Baudelaire (1821 -1867) in his prose piece, *The Generous Gambler*. In any event, the epigraph seems designed to warn the reader away from too casual a reading of Kopfrkingl, and echoes – however indirectly and obliquely – Hannah Arendt’s (1906-1975) post-Holocaust conclusions about the banality of evil.\(^23\)

The novel itself is written rather “cinematically” and lends itself well to adaptation. The narrative has numerous ellipses (jump cuts, in film) that transition rather suddenly from one scene to another. The narrative also relies heavily on recurring visual motifs, such as the pink-faced girl with the black dress, the fat man with the red bow tie, and the elderly woman wearing a hat with a long feather. The pink-faced girl in the black dress is the only one to make it into the film adaptation, and her role there is interpreted as that of a silent harbinger of death (Hames 227; Bird 2).

\(^23\) Hannah Arendt followed the court proceedings of Otto Adolf Eichmann (1906-1962) in Israel for *The New Yorker* and later compiled her articles into the controversial book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963). Eichmann, believed by many to have been the architect of the Final Solution, was kidnapped in a suburb of Buenos Aires and brought to Jerusalem for trial for numerous counts of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and first-degree murder. The book proved controversial because it argued against prevailing interpretations of the Holocaust as the apotheosis of European anti-Semitism and the most extensive pogrom of all time, and instead posited an arguably more disturbing explanation that the Holocaust was the result of (among other things) the destructiveness of stupid and shallow individuals. As Amos Elon writes in a recent Introduction to the book, “Evil, as she saw it, need not be committed only by demonic monsters but – with disastrous effect – by morons and imbeciles as well . . .” (xi). Their very ordinariness – their *banality* – is precisely how the devil manages to convince us that he does not exist. Amos Elon, "Introduction." Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).
The adaptation from novel to film was achieved with the close collaboration of the two outsiders, Fuks and Herz. The film immediately sets a tone of nightmarish dread. As Adam Schofield has noted, the “key” to this prevailing sense of horror is disorientation (1). In the pre-credit sequence, the viewer is introduced to the Kopfrkingl family, as it promenades through the zoo – the same zoo where Kopfrkingl met Lakmé nineteen years earlier. In one of the many ominous juxtapositions of the narrative, Kopfrkingl reminisces about meeting her in the Predators’ House, an unromantic but fitting location. This juxtaposition of romance and predators is made obvious and sinister in the film: the quick edits and close-up shots continually juxtapose extreme close-ups of Kopfrkingl’s face with those of the various predators on display, and the parallel, though not yet explained, is nonetheless established. This sequence continues with quick edits, close-ups, extreme close-ups, unconventional camera angles, and Kopfrkingl’s rather unsettling monologue/voice-over. The whole sequence is crowned by a family portrait, first viewed from the family’s point of view (looking into a convex mirror that distorts them terribly) followed by a high-angle shot of the family that uses a fish-eye lens.
The shot clearly has expressionistic flair, and critics have noted that the distortion here belies Kopfrkingl’s own statements about their “decent, perfect family” (Schofield 2). Another technique observed by critics is Herz’s use of unusual edits, a technique that Adam Schofield has in mind when he discusses the film’s reliance on “disorientation” (1). On at least three occasions, Kopfrkingl is the subject of a zoom-in and close-up; there is a subtle edit, and then the camera zooms out again, to reveal Kopfrkingl in a new locale. He is edited from one scene to another in such a way that is vaguely disconcerting to the audience. Such edits are not only disorienting, but also meant as quiet irony: the third such edit first has Kopfrkingl in a brothel, showing off a new picture, and then the camera zooms back to reveal him now at home, showing the picture to his wife. Such
juxtapositions highlight Kopfrkingl’s depravity. Similarly, Herz shows Kopfrkingl’s
deception in action when he tells of his experiences with Dr. Bettelheim at the
synagogue. While he recounts the spurious details of his experience (who is plotting
against the Germans, who is an enemy of the Party, etc.), the viewer is shown what
actually happened and the degree to which Kopfrkingl’s narrative is fabricated.

**Intertextuality**

*The Cremator* is one of the most intertextual films of the entire New Wave. In
addition to being a literary adaptation, the film derives a lot of its visceral power from
recognizable references. Indeed, Fuks’ novel engages musicians, operas, and other
novels, while Herz’s film adds painters, architecture, and famous figures to the mix with
his careful mise-en-scène and casting. Consequently, the film may be viewed as an
extended critical dialogue with Czechoslovak history and culture. As will be shown,
Fuks’ and Herz’s obsession with other arts is not a pointless exercise in cultural literacy;
rather, the context of this story makes it clear (*pessimistically* clear) that art cannot be
counted upon to tame the savage beast and that, quite to the contrary, the good and the
beautiful can serve as mere window-dressing for some of the greatest savagery.

Herz starts small, but his images pack a cultural punch. In the beginning of the
film, Kopfrkingl hosts a party, and many viewers no doubt recognize the setting as the
Palacký Hall in the Municipal House (*Obecní dům*). The setting is interesting not only
because of the Art Nouveau paintings made so prominent in the cinematography, but also
because of the building itself. The Art Nouveau movement is, perhaps, best exemplified
by the Czech artist, Alfons Mucha (1860-1939), and many of his paintings are exhibited
in the Municipal House. Additionally, the hall where Kopfrkingl holds his fête is the Palacký Hall, named, of course, after the famous historian so important to the National Revival. Situated in the historic heart of Old Town, the Municipal House was constructed at the turn of the last century, to be “a center for Czech official and social undertakings,” as there was the “necessity for a counterbalance to a German casino and the German House (now Slovanský dum — the Slavic House) on Na Príkope Street” (The History of the Municipal House). The contrast between the Slavic/Czech Municipal House at the beginning of the film, and Kopfrkingl’s keen desire to join the Party simply to gain access to the German casino, is striking, particularly since his only interest in the casino is primarily sexual.

Other intertextual references abound. Later in the film, at the birthday party of his daughter, Kopfrkingl suggests that she put on some music – he professes throughout the film to be a great lover of music and beauty – and suggests Mahler’s *Kindertotenlieder*, or *Songs on the Deaths of Children*. The request is obviously morbid, particularly on the occasion of his daughter’s birthday, attended as it is, by other children, and made more so with the knowledge that the original cycle of poems stems from a father’s grief over the death of his two children. While he delivers the eulogy for his wife, Kopfrkingl works himself into such a frenzy that his mannerisms and his speech patterns, normally so reserved, take on the distinct appearance of the Führer’s. Towards the end of the film, as Kopfrkingl’s madness takes a firmer hold, he fantasizes about enormous crematoria that

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24 His famous, and deliberately nationalistic, *Slavic Epic / Slovanská epopej* (1928) was intended for the Municipal House, but currently resides in Moravia.

25 The poet, Friedrich Rückert (1788-1866), lost both of his children to scarlet fever. Gustav Mahler, himself, would later lose a daughter to the same illness.
could incinerate hundreds and hundreds of people. As he does so, he stands in front of “Hell,” the third panel in Hieronymous Bosch’s triptych, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. The painting depicts horrific images of torture and punishment, and it is unclear if the painting is meant as an indication of the bestiality to come, or if it merely promises punishment for the Kopfrkingls of the world.

Much has also been made of the credit sequence, which shows fragmented female body parts in a rather unnerving collage. The film, on the whole, dwells much more explicitly and much more obsessively on Kopfrkingl’s depravity – his hypocrisy, his desire for prostitutes, his sadism – than did the novel, and this credit sequence has been interpreted as a visual hint of Kopfrkingl’s “uncontrollable sexual desire and his tendency to objectify women” (Schofield 2). What other critics have not noted, however, is the sequence’s subtle tribute to the collage-work of Karel Teige, of the Czechoslovak
Surrealist Group. Teige also frequently depicted the fragmented female form in his artwork. The fragmented female form finds its place in “Surrealist iconography” which “more often than not displaces any sense of masculine anxiety upon the female body” (Spiteri 13). The masculine anxiety in question here is, of course, Kopfrkingl’s: his inability to perceive the world from any other perspective than his one – his complete lack of empathy – leads to the deranged pathology he exhibits for much of the film.

Having attended FAMU with the Surrealist animator and friend of Teige, Jan Švankmajer, Herz was almost certainly familiar with the very basics of the Czechoslovak Surrealist Group’s tenets, and employed them throughout his film.
Other intertextual references stem from one of Kopfrkingl’s many unusual habits: his compulsive need to rename people, places, and things, as if creating them anew according to his own sense of order. The first hint of this peculiar inclination comes early in the novel, when he plans to invite Mr. Strauss to a local restaurant:  

Lakmé gently chides him to “give him the correct name of the restaurant, so that he won’t have to search for it” (Fuks 9). The comment is enigmatic and left unexplained until after Mr. Strauss has departed from the luncheon:

“Yes,” Lakmé gave a nod, “he’s certainly a good businessman. He’s Jewish.”

“Do you think so, my dear?” smiled Mr. Kopfrkingl. “I don’t know. His name doesn’t prove it. Strausses are not Jewish. Strauss means ostrich.”

“Names do not mean anything,” smiled Lakmé, “after all, you know yourself how they can be changed. You yourself call The Boa The Silver Casket . . . you call me Lakmé instead of Marie and you want me to call you Roman instead of Karel.”

“That’s because I’m a romantic and I love beauty . . . .” (Fuks 16)

Kopfrkingl may well “love beauty,” but his penchant for renaming is unnerving, as it speaks to the presence of a delusion that, left unchecked, can and does become homicidal: in Kopfrkingl’s worldview, the inconvenient, the unbeautiful, the problematic can be banished by simply being recast in a new role.

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26 In the film, Herz chooses to move the party to the Municipal House, presumably to underscore the contrasts mentioned above.

27 There are several “speak names” in the film. In addition to the two “composers” – Strauss and Dvořák – most of the employees of the crematorium are animals: Zajíc (“hare”), Beran (“ram”), Pelikan, Lišková (“fox”), Vrána (“crow”), and, of course, the reference Lakmé makes with Strauss (pštrosí / “ostrich”). Unlike the predators at the
Later, he purchases a portrait to hang in his dining room, and although the portrait is actually of Nicaraguan president, Emilian[o] Chamorro, Kopfrkingl insists that the portrait is of Louis Marin, a minister in Raymond Poincaré’s third and fourth terms, and offers to cover up the “wrong” name with a strip of paper (Fuks 34). The choice of names cannot be accidental. Both Chamorro and Marin are conservative politicians, but Marin served under the anti-German Poincaré, a detail that does not escape Willi Reinke. Later in the novel, after Kopfrkingl has murdered both his wife and his son, the reader learns that he has replaced Chamorro/Marin with a more fitting portrait, one of the Führer, “a perfect print of a perfect gentleman” (Fuks 170).

That Kopfrkingl calls his wife Lakmé is also a rather piquant choice that directly and rather appropriately calls to mind Léo Delibes’ opera of the same name (1883). The opera is set during the British Raj, and opens with the secret observance of Hindu rites, since the British had outlawed their practice. Lakmé, the daughter of the priest Nilakantha, falls in love with a British officer, even nursing him back to health after her father has attempted to kill him. Ultimately, though, the officer chooses his obligations to his regiment rather than his love for her and Lakmé commits suicide. The parallels between Lakmé and the film are interesting, particularly in how Fuks has inverted the two Lakmés’ tragedies. Rather than an occupying force of British officers, Czechoslovakia had an occupying force of Nazi Germans. Marie-Lakmé is revealed to be as exotic and distressingly Other as the original Lakmé, in that Reinke insists that she is of Jewish heritage. Poignantly too, Marie-Lakmé does not nurse Kopfrkingl back to health, but it is a beginning of the film, these are animals that are typically hunted, sacrificed, or otherwise generally on the losing end of the “kill or be killed” laws of the jungle.
made clear throughout the course of the novel and the film that it is because of her dowry and her connections that they have their home and their financial stability. These monetary contributions are not the same as saving another’s life, but in Kopfrkingl’s materialistic obsessions, equally important. The two narratives diverge significantly in the fate of the heroines: whereas the original Lakmé kills herself rather than be spurned by her lover, Kopfrkingl murders Marie-Lakmé in order to preserve his honor, though his explanation to the police sounds more like the opera, at least from Kopfrkingl’s point of view:

“She apparently did it out of despair. She had Jewish blood and could not bear living by my side. Perhaps she sensed that I was going to divorce her, that it was not compatible with my German honour.” And inwardly, he said to himself: “I was sorry for you, my dear, I really was. You were dejected, withdrawn. Of course, No wonder. But as a German I had to make the sacrifice. I’ve saved you, my dear, from the suffering which would otherwise have been in store for you. My heavenly one, how you would have suffered in the just and happy new world, on account of your blood…. ” (Fuks 158)

In evoking Delibes’ opera, Fuks and Herz have highlighted not only Kopfrkingl’s sadism and depravity, but also his staggering self-delusion.

These intertextual references – though a part of the overall aesthetic of the novel and the film – pale in comparison to the most important intertext of all, one that takes on Czechoslovak self-identity at its most basic. One of the most important and influential figures of twentieth-century Czechoslovak literature is the good soldier himself, Josef Švejk. Jaroslav Hašek’s novel, The Good Soldier Švejk and His Fortunes in the World
War i Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka (1923), chronicles the roguish adventures of the hero as he skillfully negotiates the precarious role of a Czech in the Hapsburg army during World War I. Hašek elegantly introduces the world to Švejk in a matter of a few paragraphs:

“And so they’ve killed our Ferdinand,” said the charwoman to Mr. Švejk, who had left military service years before, after having been finally certified by an army medical board as an imbecile, and now lived by selling dogs – ugly, mongrel monstrosities whose pedigrees he forged.

Apart from this occupation he suffered from rheumatism and was at this very moment rubbing his knees with Elliman’s embrocation.

“Which Ferdinand, Mrs. Müller?” he asked, going on with the massaging. “I know two Ferdinands. One is a messenger at Pruška’s the chemist’s, and once by mistake he drank a bottle of hair oil there. And the other is Ferdinand Kokoška who collects dog manure [psí hovinka]. Neither of them is any loss.”

“Oh no, sir, it’s His Imperial Highness, the Archduke Ferdinand, from Konopiště, the fat churchy one.”

“Jesus Maria!” exclaimed Švejk. “What a grand job! And where did it happen to His Imperial Highness?”

“They bumped him off [práskli ho] at Sarajevo, sir, with a revolver, you know. He drove there in a car with his Archduchess.”

“Well, there you have it, Mrs. Müller, in a car. Yes, of course, a gentleman like him can afford it, but he never imagines that a drive like that might finish up badly. And at Sarajevo into the bargain! That’s in Bosnia, Mrs. Müller. I expect
the Turks did it. You know, we never ought to have taken Bosnia and Herzegovina from them. And so you see, Mrs. Müller. His Imperial Highness now rests with the angels...” (Hašek 3-4)

Virtually everything that has made Švejk an enduring figure in Czechoslovakia is contained in these opening few paragraphs. For those reading in the original Czech, the language is far from literary and its earthy crudity places it more closely to the common Czech (obecná čeština) of the pub, a literary style that Hrabal would later adopt as well. More to the point, though, Švejk is established immediately as an “imbecile” (za blba), but as one who is quite capable of taking advantage of the ignorance of others by virtue of his professional ability to pass off mongrels as purebreds.28 Furthermore, Švejk on the one hand garbles completely the situation in the Balkans, but then in an unexpectedly biting moment of clarity notes that the Hapsburgs should never have meddled there in the first place – a sentiment no doubt easily applied to Bohemia as well. (He cloaks the venom of this observation very neatly with “we,” as though the Czechs were equally supportive of Austria’s foreign policies.) The fact of Švejk’s imbecility is a point of contention: is he truly an idiot (“Humbly report, sir, I am.”) or is this a cunning strategy for rebellion through seeming compliance? Overwhelmingly, Czechoslovaks interpreted it as the latter, and saw in him their own struggle to live with various occupying forces. Also present in this opening sequence is Švejk’s often maddening predilection for

28 As Cecil Parrott notes, Švejk’s profession is one shared by Jaroslav Hašek himself. A man of many dubious professions, Hašek was also fired from The Animal World when it was discovered that his articles on natural history largely focused on plants and animals that have never existed, and that he had created for the occasion. Cecil Parrott, "Introduction," Jaroslav Hašek, The Good Soldier Švejk and His Fortunes in the World War, trans. Cecil Parrott (London: Penguin Books, 1973) vii-xxii.
digression and pointless story-telling; throughout the novel, he employs these strategies as a means of railroading official policy, jeopardizing the execution of orders, and generally driving his superior officers crazy. Švejk may very well be under their control, but he is certainly does not make that an easy or enjoyable set of circumstances, though he always carefully presents himself as the consummate non-threat.

Also interesting in these opening paragraphs is the blending of the “high” and the “low,” a common motif throughout the novel: Mrs. Müller refers to “our Ferdinand” and Švejk immediately (logically?) assumes that she is referring to a more local Ferdinand. In his epigraph, Hašek writes, “Great times call for great men. There are unknown heroes who are modest, with none of the historical glamour of a Napoleon” (Hašek 1). The effect of this blending of high and low is twofold: on the one hand, it highlights Švejk’s status as the common man, which is so central to his appeal in Czechoslovakia, which is, itself, the “little man” in Central Europe on many important levels. By extension then, if “great times call for great men,” then what does it say of the times that the hero here is decidedly not great? The translator and critic, Cecil Parrott, notes that there were some Czechoslovaks who were uncomfortable with where such thoughts might take a person: at the dawn of the First Republic, Czechoslovaks did not necessarily want their newly-created national character to be defined by the roguish anti-hero. Parrott maintains, though, that such worrying was not necessary:

30 A similar implication is made during Joňka’s eulogy in All My Good Countrymen: “If he had been born in better times, he would have been a great inventor.” He was, instead, an incorrigible pilferer, who would rather poison himself than go to prison and be reformed of his drinking.
Although “Schweikism” [švejkovina] is a word often used to characterize the passive resistance of Czechs, anyone who reads the book carefully and knows the Czechs will perceive that Švejk is not necessarily a Czech figure. He might be any Central European and is in fact a “Mr. Everyman,” in the sense that he resembles any “little man” who gets caught up in the wheels of a big bureaucratic machine. (Parrott xv)

Parrott is rather coy here in that he never truly explains why Czech patriots (or any other Central European “little man”) should not be uncomfortable with Švejk as a standard-bearer: should there not be a greater goal than basic survival?

The question is not completely an idle one confined to literary circles. When Ladislav Fuks sat down to write The Cremator / Spalovač mrtvol (1967), he had seen what passive resistance could do – or more accurately, not do – for the Czechoslovak people. Even thirty years later, the sting of the Munich negotiations had not faded, as other European powers decided the fate of the small nation. Neville Chamberlin was famously dismissive of the lone interwar democracy in Central Europe: “How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas masks here because of a quarrel in a far away country between people of whom we know nothing” (qtd Sayer 22). For his part, Jan Masaryk, son of President, and himself the Foreign Minister, bitterly observed that the whole deal had been concluded “about us, but without us” (o nás, bez nás). Though there were some discussions of mounting an armed resistance to the German invasion, in the end, the Nazis rolled into Prague unopposed. What followed were, of course, the atrocities of occupation, deportation and
extermination, and – in such cases as Lidice and Ležáky31 – obliteration. Like most Czechoslovaks of his generation, he had witnessed firsthand these and other horrors and was in no mood to be conciliatory to his and others’ passive resistance.

Figure 22: Rudolf Hrušínský as the good soldier Švejk (Lazarová); Hrušínský as Kopfrkingl (Erickson)

In his most chilling character, Karel Kopfrkingl, it is possible to detect Švejk’s diabolical other face – literally as well as figuratively: Rudolf Hrušínský was cast not only as Kopfrkingl, but also in the 1957 adaptation of The Good Soldier Švejk (dir. Karel Steklý).

31 These are the two towns razed to the ground by the Nazis in retribution for the assassination of Reichsprotektor Reinhard Heydrich in June 1942. The men were executed and the women were deported to concentration camps. The towns were destroyed and removed from maps.
There are some notable differences between Švejk and Kopfrkingl, to be sure. The obvious one – Švejk’s pretense at compliance, unlike Kopfrkingl’s genuine collaboration – will be addressed in greater detail below, but is worth mentioning from the outset. Švejk’s appeal to Czechoslovaks lies in the fact that he resists, and in this respect he is unlike the long-suffering but rule-following Lieutenant Lukáš, for whom Švejk serves as batman. From the distance of time, the distinction between seeming compliance and greedy, non-ideological collaboration becomes less and less visible.

Kopfrkingl is much more obsessively middle class than the grubby Švejk, and he purports to be better educated and more refined. In making Kopfrkingl more “civilized” than Švejk, Fuks demonstrates that even those who, theoretically, at least, are best equipped to resist the hateful ideology of the Nazis (or any other group) are ultimately just as susceptible. In acknowledging this difference, Fuks is also aware of contemporary thinking on the subject of the Holocaust:

The question of culture after Auschwitz, of the humanities that failed to prevent mass murder, was broached in 1967 when George Steiner first published his collection of essays Language and Silence. Steiner asked how the barbarity of genocide could exist inside the cradle of European civilization. How could there be a concentration camp, Buchenwald, where heads were shrunk and skin turned into lampshades, just outside Weimar, home of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe? How could a concentration-camp commandant do his work gassing people and go home at night to read Rainer Maria Rilke? These questions go beyond the possibility that the humanities failed to humanize. They strike at the definition of
culture and the integrity of Western society, which collaborated or stood silent.

(Sicher xix -xx)

This notion of the “humanities [that] failed to humanize” is frightening enough, but where Fuks converges with contemporary thinking is at the most disturbing notion of all: that the entire basis of Western culture is hollow. Having grown up during the occupation, Fuks was particularly sensitive to the failings of passivity or, worse, collaboration. Švejk may not be a collaborator on par with Kopfrkingl, but Kopfrkingl does not start out as a collaborator either: instead, like Švejk, he begins as a passive figure whose mildness, tenderness, and gentleness are repeatedly emphasized.

Kopfrkingl’s love of music, his devotion to beautiful things, and his obsession with the Tibetan Book of the Dead ultimately do nothing to refine the man or his thinking; he may wear nicer clothes and speak in gentler terms, but he is more bestial even than Švejk’s lowliest barroom companions or the curs he sells.

As noted above, Hašek continually blended the high and the low, the Napoleons and the Švejks, to play up the latter’s “everyday-ness” and his “commonness.” To a lesser extent, Fuks borrows the same technique in The Cremator. Fuks weaves in many names and titles from high culture: Strauss, Dvořák, Wagner, Janáček, and other composers, but it is Willi Reinke’s rant about the Spartans that introduces the novel’s lone classical reference:

“In Sparta, ladies and gentlemen,” said Willi turning to those present, “they used to kill their sickly children. It may seem cruel to some sensitive souls. But it was, after all, an act of immense kindness to those children themselves. How they would have suffered had they lived . . . and then, it was healthy for the nation.
How greatly it contributed to Sparta’s soundness and how successful was Sparta’s history! We’d be committing an offence against the nation and mankind.” Willi turned to his friend Kopfrkingl, “if we didn’t get rid of undesirable elements. We’re responsible for the happiness of the German nation and of the whole of mankind. For the prosperity of the whole. The details are a mere decoration or complement, nothing more.” (Fuks)

Nazi propaganda did draw from the myths and history of Sparta, and Reinke’s rant has an immediate impact on the plot: it is at the conclusion of this rant that he begins sowing the seeds of suspicion and ill-will against Lakmé and it is made abundantly clear to Kopfrkingl that his success rests on getting rid of his wife. Fuks seems more interested in perverting high culture and classical references, calling attention precisely to the idea of the “humanities [that] fail to humanize,” than in underscoring Kopfrkingl’s “everyday-ness.” Herz underscores this perversion of high culture in the film adaptation: the scene takes place in the German casino, access to which Kopfrkingl’s recent Party membership now entitles him. It is a place where wives are not taken, and where only blond German women are allowed to work. While Reinke holds forth on the subject of the Spartans, Kopfrkingl is repeatedly distracted by the fact that a fellow Party member is receiving oral stimulation from a woman under the table. It is hard to say whether the rhetoric or the lady’s generosity is more appealing to Kopfrkingl. For his part, the official on the receiving end of the ladies’ attention sits up and underscores Reinke’s insistence on the importance of one’s blood being pure, an obvious hypocrisy and a blackly comic juxtaposition meant to poke holes in the idea that any of these men subscribe to values higher than the gutter.
Another dissimilarity between Kopfrkingl and Švejk is that Kopfrkingl is – at least in the beginning, and on the surface – a devoted family man, whereas Švejk has only his charwoman and the various officers that he serves/bedevils as his companions. Kopfrkingl’s wife and children do not exist as fully-drawn individual characters, but are instead more like props in the larger narrative. Their lack of individuation stems partly from Kopfrkingl’s pronounced egomania: he is completely incapable of seeing life outside of himself or his perspective. In the novel, the reader is left to interpret the comments of others, such as when Dr. Bettelheim asks whether Lakmé is feeling all right, as she has appeared rather sad of late; Kopfrkingl’s shock is complete: “He had never heard that Lakmé could be sad and that there was anything wrong with her. What is more, it had never in his life even occurred to him” (Fuks 57). In the film, Kopfrkingl’s self-absorption is portrayed with frequent point-of-view shots from his perspective, including, but certainly not limited to, his frequent Tibetan-inspired hallucinations. As the film progresses, he sees Lhasa outside his Prague window, and a monk-acolyte (also played by Hrušínský) appears and pays his respects to Kopfrkingl, who is identified as the reincarnated Buddha.
Additionally, all of the edited sequences of fragmented body parts – the opening credits sequence, the photographs in the framer’s shop, the titillating photographs of the blonde women from the casino – suggest that no other person exists for Kopfrkingl as an actual, whole person. Other than underscoring his self-absorption, the family functions as a device to highlight his madness and depravity. In other words, Kopfrkingl may say all of the right things – speaking affectionately to them, fretting about his ability to provide adequately for them, endlessly averring his devotion and fidelity to them – but his actions continuously undermine these sentiments. On a very basic level, the novel tracks even his changing relationship with the family cat: though he is tender and attentive to it in the beginning of the novel, as he slips into the Nazi mindset, he becomes markedly more
indifferent to it. More tragically, however, is his changing attitude towards his wife and children. Kopfrkingl insists to Dr. Bettelheim that he has touched no other woman but his angel yet continues to insist on being tested for venereal disease (Fuks 54). The film makes Kopfrkingl’s hypocrisy much more obvious, and includes a scene in which Kopfrkingl chides a prostitute, played by the same actress who plays his wife, not to damage the gift he has purchased for his daughter’s birthday.

Nothing demonstrates the extent of Kopfrkingl’s depraved ambitions more directly than the murder of his wife and son, and the attempted murder of his daughter. In all three cases, the circumstances are diabolically well-planned and coolly covered up. In the instance of his wife, he hangs her (“He returned her smile, kicked the chair away and that was that”) and calmly ties her shoe lace; doing otherwise would, after all, ruin the aesthetic. The episode is presented to others as a suicide.
In the case of his son, he carefully plans out how to kill him (beaten to death in the easily cleaned mortuary of the crematorium), how to dispose of the body (in the coffin of a Nazi officer scheduled for cremation), and how to conceal his son’s sudden disappearance (“…Mili, don’t run away, wait for me,’ he called out in front of Mr. Fenek’s porter’s lodge so as to be heard inside, in the little room.”). In the novel, Kopfrkingl is called upon to provide his expertise with crematoria before he can kill his daughter, whereas in the film, she manages to escape from the crematorium before he can carry out his plan, though the film implies that Kopfrkingl’s plan will be realized.

Kopfrkingl makes decisions and acts upon them: the carefully premeditated murders of his wife and son, his betrayal of his neighbors and co-workers, and his easy fellowship with Party officials. Thus, another important difference in the styles of the
two novels is the voice of the narrative: Hašek uses the passive voice to describe many of Švejk’s adventures, whereas Fuks uses the active voice to describe Kopfrkingl’s. In short, Švejk is carried along by forces and events that are larger than he, whereas Kopfrkingl cunningly, shrewdly makes choices and acts upon them. Thus, the most significant difference between Švejk and Kopfrkingl is that whereas Švejk passively resists, Kopfrkingl actively collaborates; even though Švejk serves in the Hapsburg army, he has killed no one by the end of the (admittedly unfinished) novel, but Kopfrkingl, for all of his refinement, kills two people and attempts to murder a third – though he cannot bring himself to kill the two Christmas carp. This difference between the two men, Fuks would argue, is only temporal: Kopfrkingl is the logical endpoint of passive resistance. Like Švejk, he emptily parrots what he has heard from others, garbles it, and repeats it endlessly to others, and although Švejk at no point appears to buy into the philosophies and policies of the Austrians, he does not set himself apart from them, either. For Švejk, the goal is basic survival; for Kopfrkingl it is survival plus prosperity, and both goals require a certain level of tacit approval of the ideologies to which the men purportedly subscribe. Like Švejk, Kopfrkingl is an “everyman” in that he lives comfortably, but has no real influence or power, but the difference between the two authors and their respective handlings of their anti-heroes is a matter of historical perspective: Hašek lived and died before the occupation, World War II, and the Holocaust, whereas Fuks survived all three catastrophes. Fuks has no patience for Švejk’s passive resistance, and is much more interested in driving home the simple truth that the “little man” can do a lot of damage on his own. The judgment that Fuks passes on him is harsh and final, and does
not allow for the gray area that Hrabal, Kundera, or other contemporary writers might have allowed for.

For his part (and on a much more metatextual level), Herz views the genre of Czech horror, into which *The Cremator* is generally placed, as having an overall, cultural affinity with Švejk-ish dissembling:

For me the typical horror film is a chainsaw massacre. And, of course this wasn’t possible to do during the socialist era. Here we used another Czech attribute *švejkování*. I tried to derogate the scenes and use humour, because it largely counter-balances the horror. Humour was also a way to smuggle the film into approbation and projection. So it was very deliberate to combine horror with humour. (Košuličová 11)

This blend of horror and humor made Herz a perfect match for Fuks, whose own literary style was similar in that he “gave a distinctive, grotesque portrayal of autocracy and racism and colored his psychological assessments of evil, fear, and despair with irony, sometimes even with something approaching slapstick” (Pynsent 90). This uncomfortable pairing of the horrific and the humorous can be traced back to Švejk, but is a cultural trend that spread far and wide in the small nation, to become one of its most notable aesthetic attributes.

On the whole, *The Cremator* was made exactly as Herz wanted it to be made; the remaining months of the Prague Spring and the initial confusion after the Soviet invasion allowed him to finish the film with relative freedom. After the Soviet invasion, however, Herz shot a new ending:
If you remember, the film ends in the vision of the main character where he becomes a cremator for the Party. (I never mentioned it as the Nazi Party, it was always just “the Party.”) Then the occupation came, and we made another ending: Two employees of the crematorium are sitting in a coffee shop in Reprezentační dům, and the Russian occupation tanks are passing behind the windows. The employees are talking about Mr Kopfrikingl, he was such a nice man, what happened to him? The next shot shows the Museum in ruins. A long window reflects sad people’s faces right after the blowing up of the Museum and among them Kopfrkingl is back again smiling. We filmed this, and we showed it to the studio director in 1969. But he was against it and took it out. I have no idea where the sequence went; maybe he burned it because he was too scared of the possible consequences. (Košuličová 11)

The redacted ending puts a fine point on the film’s larger message: the Kopfrikingls of the world not only flourish during moments of political cataclysm, but, perhaps more to the point, human frailty and cowardice will ensure that Kopfrikingls always exist. Even without this ending, the subject matter of The Cremator was nevertheless too provocative for the climate of the post-invasion, and the film was banned shortly after its release. A screen exploration of an occupying force and an unspecified “Party,” and the damage done to the individual’s conscience, was not nearly subtle or oblique enough to slide by the censors. Nevertheless, Herz was able to continue making films during the period of normalization that followed. In fact, he attributes his freedom to adapt the film Morgiana (1972) precisely to the Soviets: the original novel was written by the Russian writer, Aleksandr Grin (1880-1932), a detail that disarmed Soviet censors (Košuličová 8).
Fuks was also able to continue writing after the Soviet invasion, and often continued to handle many of the same Holocaust-related themes that characterized his works during the 1960s. Although Škvorecký “condemned” Return from the Rye Field / Návrat a žitného pole (1974) as “an incoherent conformist mess,” Robert Pynsent more charitably sees the novel as a “a gentle Aesopian attack on early 1970s Party anti-Semitism” (Pynsent 93). Such divergent interpretations would follow many of Fuks’ subsequent works. Towards the end of his life, he suffered from dementia and died in 1994.

Much of the power of The Cremator lies in the film’s complicated web of intertexts, along with historical trauma, personal biography, careful casting, still-wounded hindsight, and uncanny prophecy. Herz’s adaptation of The Cremator is thus more demonstrably a palimpsest than any of the other films of the Czechoslovak New Wave. Herz and Fuks appropriated the cherished cultural artifacts of the nation and used them to call into question the nation’s very identity. Using a shrewd layering of symbols and figures – Mucha, Obecní dům, Dvořák, Švejk – Herz and Fuks savaged the identity that Czechoslovaks had carefully built for themselves, and demanded that the national narrative come under further scrutiny. What is so disturbing about the film is that it does not offer much in the way of a positive alternative narrative: the film’s cast of wolves and lambs only offers up a parable of how not to live. In this respect, The Cremator differs from many of the films of the New Wave because of its uncompromising didacticism. Whereas many of the other films of this period espoused a subjective search for the truth and embraced many voices and numerous paths, Fuks and Herz have no interest in stepping gingerly around their point. Instead, they go for the throat, railing at average
Czechoslovaks for a perceived cultural inclination towards passivity. In the shadow of Soviet tanks, their argument takes on a particular urgency and tragedy. Though it seems terribly clichéd to ruminate on history and those doomed to repeat it, one senses that their insistent evocation of the “humanities [that] failed to humanize” is intended as a warning to their 1969 audience-in-occupation: implicitly asking, what will you take away from our film?
Chapter 5: *Valérie and Her Week of Wonders* (1970)

At first blush, Jaromil Jireš’s 1970 adaptation of *Valérie and Her Week of Wonders / Valérie a týden divů* does not fit with the other films discussed thus far. It was released well after the Soviet invasion and, in look and in feel, strikes the viewer as oddly dissonant: the films of the New Wave, though not usually overtly political, nevertheless share an earnest sense of purpose, even if they also freely mix in elements of the comic. By contrast, *Valerie* is a strange and often eyebrow-raising film that may be more interesting in principle than in actual fact. In spite of – or, more intriguingly, because of – its bizarre incoherence and sexual charge, *Valérie* rather unexpectedly provides the final punctuation on the New Wave’s overall statement of humanism, individualism, and principled liberty.

Vitezslav Nezval (1900-1958) published his surrealist novel, *Valérie and Her Week of Wonders* (1935), during one of the more unstable periods of Czechoslovak history. To the north, Hitler was already dismantling both the civic and artistic freedom of his people, and *Anschluss* with first Austria and later Czechoslovakia was on the horizon. Just over thirty years later, Jaromil Jireš would adapt *Valérie* in the wake of another, more “fraternal” invasion and in the face of the bleak years of “normalization.” The timing in both cases – novel and then film – is striking in that neither fascism nor Husák-style communism is particularly amenable to the flamboyant incoherence of Surrealism, and yet, in the Czech context, these pairings make sense: in the 1930s and
again in the late 1960s, Surrealism was intended as a defensive stance against the forces of conformity and the bland aesthetics offered up by committee. In this respect, the choice of this novel for adaptation is in keeping with New Wave values generally, and particularly with Jireš’s chosen themes. Indeed, this last film of the New Wave can be seen as the era’s apotheosis: it clearly shows continuity with the early film industry and other earlier aesthetic trends; it carefully (if obliquely) re-asserts fundamental Czech values, and it serves as one of the era’s last great examples of art as the aesthetic arm of a greater socio-political sentiment.

Valérie hearkens back to trends from the early days of the Czechoslovak film industry, and specifically to artistic circles of the interwar years. “The idea of eternal return is a mysterious one,” writes Milan Kundera,32 and indeed, though we have already touched on this period in Czechoslovak film history, it is nevertheless worth revisiting for a closer look at the movements that shaped Jireš’s film decades later.

Nezval lived much of his life at the cutting edge of the artistic world, although his youth was spent a bit more prosaically. Born in Moravia to a family of teachers, he began his education studying law in Brno. The pull of Prague proved too much, and he moved there in the early 1920s to be a part of the artistic life of the interwar capital, a place still struggling with grander questions of identity and direction, and thus open to new suggestions – aesthetic and otherwise. Once in Prague, he studied briefly in the Philosophy Department, though he never finished his degree (Léhar 577-578). Nezval, “essentially an individualist,” was perhaps ill-suited to the rigors of academic life, and he

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“surpassed all in his gay and impudent disrespect for convention, both in life and in art” (French, *The Poets of Prague: Czech Poetry Between the Wars* 29). His true passion was poetry, which led him to a group of like-minded intellectuals in the avant-garde group, Devětsil. The group took its name from the Czech word for “butterbur,” but it also evokes “nine forces/strengths” (*devět síl*), the reference usually attributed to the nine muses (Sayer 209). Nezval’s bravado and anti-conventional attitudes put him in tune with the group’s founding figure, Karel Teige (1900-1951), the so-called “dean of the Prague avant-garde” (Sayer 209).

Teige was the creative force behind Devětsil as well as its overall aesthetic, Poetism. In his view, Poetism was the most direct – and the most aesthetically-pleasing – route to a true understanding of life. It was an aesthetic that eschewed philosophy and embraced a more visceral, less “professional” aesthetic; as he asserts in his “Poetist Manifesto” (1924), Poetism was not art at all, at least, not “in the romantic use of the word.” Rather, it was “the art of life,” and a “grand education.” He continues: “It relieves depression, concerns, resentment. It is spiritual and moral hygiene . . . . To not understand Poetism is to not understand life!” (Teige 4-5). In effect, Poetism was intended from its inception as something more than an aesthetic movement: it was a method for understanding the world as a poem, for understanding the art of life (Galík 213). As Alfred French elegantly describes it,

The art of tomorrow, as already demonstrated by the architecture of today, would shun romanticism and decoration, and its spirit would be akin to that of geometry or science. But though the new living style was to be, at its best, severely logical, it must also cater for the irrational side of man, that side of him which hungered
for the bizarre, the fantastic, and the absurd. For six days would man be rational, but on the seventh would he rest from reason. This recreation [re-creation] or social hygiene, as Teige regarded it, was the function of Poetism, which thereby supplemented Constructivism, being itself its opposite face. (French, The Poets of Prague: Czech Poetry Between the Wars 39)

One can see how Poetism presented a challenge to the status quo: its aesthetic not only encouraged, it obliged the reader/viewer to step away from the logic of the everyday and to embrace a new and more daring way of thinking about the world. Additionally, Teige’s writings make clear that the group had a marked affinity for Marxist thinking and believed that Poetism might be another road to proletarian art, just as similar-thinking intellectuals in the Soviet Union viewed the Left Front of Arts, RAPP/VAPP, and the works of the so-called “fellow-travelers” as being equally valid routes to proletarian art. For his part, Nezval was a committed Communist Party member as early as 1924, and remained so until his death, although his commitment was not without a certain level of rebellious non-conformity. Both the Soviets and the Czechs in these artistic groups would discover in no uncertain terms that there was only one route to proletarian art, and it was socialist realism, but these revelations were still in the future when Devětsil was hitting stride.

Devětsil, from its inception, was multi-disciplinary. Teige himself was not only its chief theoretician, but also a passionate lover of avant-garde architecture. The group comprised of such poets as Nezval, Jaroslav Seifert (1901-1986), František Halas (1901-1949), Konstantin Biebl (1898-1951), and Jiří Wolker (1900-1924), and the prose writers Vladislav Vančura (1891-1942), Karel Konrád and Jiří Weil (1900-1959). There were
also numerous artists from the theater, including Emil F. Burian (1904-1959) and Jiří Voskovec (1905-1981), as well as several visual artists including Jindřich Štyrský (1899-1942) and Toyen (Marie Čermínová; 1902-1980). Its eclectic membership, together with its general love of such varied amusements as circuses, films, sporting events, and the like, meant that Devětsil’s influence was far-reaching, and quickly found a foothold in the growing and evolving film industry. Teige, Nezval, and Vančura were particularly supportive of the newest art form, and became actively involved in it.

The primary appeal of film for Devětsil was its modernity; no other art form could claim to be so fully in tune with the modern world and its needs as film: “[t]he film was today as pregnant with cultural possibilities as the printing press had been at the time of the renaissance: it was on the techniques of film that modern poetry should base itself. The new art was the expression of revolution in a whole living style: the new art would in fact cease to be art in the traditional sense” (French, The Poets of Prague: Czech Poetry Between the Wars 34). True to form, Devětsil and Poetism were looking to completely re-define the parameters of art and how people viewed art and its purpose. For them, art – and particularly film – was at the vanguard of a larger movement to create a new world, a new society, and new people.

In the Soviet Union, similar movements had sprung up, spear-headed by such artists as the great constructivist director, Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940), and filmmakers such as Vsevolod Pudovkin (1893-1953) and Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948); the Soviets viewed film as a kino kulak (“film fist”) that would attack the outdated aesthetics and viewpoints of earlier times. In Czechoslovakia, the Poetists were no less ardent in their fervor, but were, perhaps, somewhat more circumspect in their language.
Their involvement in the “new” art form was nevertheless quite extensive. Vančura,\(^{33}\) the first president of Devětsil, worked very closely with the Czechoslovak Film Society (Českoslovensá filmová společnost) and helped to lay the groundwork for the post-war nationalization of the industry. Much later, his influence would continue in Jiří Menzel’s adaptation of his novel, Capricious Summer / Rozmarné leto (1968). Nezval’s own activity in the film industry was perhaps even more extensive: he wrote screenplays for the films Erotikon (1929) and From Saturday to Sunday / Ze soboty na neděli (1931) – both directed by Gustav Machatý – and he served as the head of the film section in the Ministry of Information for a time as well.

By the 1930s, the socio-political winds had shifted, and Poetism’s appeal had begun to fade; indeed a “period of crisis” (čas krize or krizi uměleckých kritérií) had taken hold of not only the aesthetic community, but the greater European political community as well. As the storm clouds gathered, the cheerful playfulness of Poetism and other aesthetic movements seemed increasingly out of step, irrelevant, a crass distraction from more important matters.\(^{34}\) In Czechoslovakia a slow but inexorable turn away from poetry to prose began to take place during the early 1930s. Furthermore,

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\(^{33}\) Vančura’s activities extended beyond the artistic world: he was very active in the resistance during the occupation. He was one of the thousands rounded up and executed in retribution for the assassination of Reichsprotektor Reinhard Heydrich.

\(^{34}\) Writers and artists like Nezval and Teige, who sympathized with and openly supported communism, did not necessarily subscribe to the Soviet model of aesthetics. “What had divided the [Soviet] communists from their liberal [Western] allies was the question of whether artists should choose their own way of aiding the cause, or whether they should operate according to directives laid down by the Party. Only the former alternative was acceptable to the Western writers, who included the Czechs” (16-17). Poetism and later Surrealism were, in Teige’s and Nezval’s view, very much in the service of the Party; the Party, however, did not agree.

writers of this “mid-generation” (mezigenerace) began slowly to take up more weighty themes, such as existential musings on the meaning of life and angst vis-à-vis death (Galík 219), as well as general feelings of misery, uncertainty, and premonitions of impending danger (Léhar 616). In 1933, following a visit to Paris, Nezval sent a letter to French Surrealist André Breton, indicating his support of Surrealism and promising Devětsil’s dedication to its tenets. The year following, Devětsil splintered, leaving Nezval and Teige still determined to keep the modern and revolutionary edge to their aesthetics, rather than to submit to the prevailing sense of dread and malaise. Because of this shared philosophy, Nezval and Teige resisted the growing movement away from aesthetic groups and instead founded a new one in 1934: the Czechoslovak Surrealist Group (Surrealistická skupina). The Surrealist Group was as interdisciplinary as their original Devětsil had been; Nezval endured as the lone poet of the group, but Štyrský and Toyen as well as Burian and Honzl all left Devětsil.

Surrealism had its origins in the aftermath of the First World War, as Europe attempted to process the horrors of the recent years. No good had come from an over-reliance on realism, and in Breton’s view, Surrealism was a means of escape from a repressive dependence on realism in art. Instead, Surrealism relied on dreams, the unconscious, and the nonsensical, as they allowed the individual to explore areas beyond mere facts of living and to explore rather more interesting – and potentially liberating – aspects of life. For Teige and Nezval, Surrealism was a kind of “hyper realism” (nadrealismus) that,

similarly to the preceding avant-garde movements, was not only poetry, but also the scope of a cultural movement, a revolt against bourgeois society, its
conventions and its moralistic contemplativeness (moralistní rozuměřství). The surrealists wanted to free human imagination from the shell of controlled thought, to illuminate “hyper-reality,” the subconscious and repressed movement, and to liberate the “principle of bliss” (princip slasti). (Léhar 628)

Teige and Nezval hoped to oblige people to question the reality around them and to reject the tired bourgeois aesthetics to which they had become accustomed: Surrealism was intended to shock people out of their complacency and to light a fire of revolutionary thinking.

In the late 1930s, however, Nezval began to turn away from Surrealism and his Surrealist colleagues. The primary motivation for the break was political: Nezval admired and supported the Soviet leader, Josef Stalin, whereas Teige and the rest most certainly did not (Léhar 631). In 1938, Nezval dissolved the Surrealist Group, and although they cheerfully re-formed it without him, he would not work closely with them again.

It was against this backdrop that Nezval wrote his “black novel,” Valerie and Her Week of Wonders / Valérie a týden divů (1935), a work that shows elements of Poetism, surrealism, and Nezval’s own inimitable understanding of them. The novel touches on a number of Nezval’s favorite preoccupations: dreams and the dream-like, childhood, and eroticism. At face value, Valérie is a coming-of-age story: the eponymous young heroine experiences her first menstruation and a series of subsequent encounters that open her eyes to the ways of the world. In his handling of this process, Nezval stays close to his Poetist roots: the novel hearkens back to Poetism’s blithe self-gratification, its characters
are uninterested in much outside of themselves and their immediate desires, in keeping with Poetism’s overall anti-didacticism:

Poetism was based on the principle of pure poetry, poetry for poetry’s sake, poetry that did not serve the purposes of actual existence and that scornfully rejected all tendentiousness; it was a poetry that cultivated sheer playfulness, plunged headlong into inventive fantasy in order to heighten the delights of hedonistic existence, reached with the magic of carefully selected words, oxymoronic concepts and paradoxical images of an aesthetic intensity hitherto unknown, shimmering with dreamlike visions and fascinating in its abandonment of logic and common sense. Since Poetism ruled out all intellectual content and eschewed the benediction of emotional fervor, it brought about a significant narrowing of the province of poetry. (Novák 319)

That Valérie is without any “tendentiousness” or “intellectual content” is a matter of debate, especially in Jireš’ handling of the work, but this description of Nezval’s lyrical oeuvre in general, and Valérie in particular, is otherwise accurate.

Valérie is a dark tale of sexual predation, incest, and voyeurism, filled with vampires, evil priests, and witches; the narrative structure teems with ellipses, illogical turns of events, and confusing contradictions. As usual, Nezval is less interested in the conventions of story-telling and much more interested in creating particular impressions, evoking certain images, and sustaining an overarching mood of dread. Nezval’s brief preface sets the tone of the novel:

I wrote this novel out of a love for the secrets of old tales, superstitions, and romantic books written in Gothic script that once flashed before my eyes without
entrusting me with their contents. It seems to me that the poetic art is no more and no less than a repayment of old debts of life and its secrets. Without wanting my “black novel” to seduce anyone from the path (especially those who are afraid to look beyond the limits of “today”), I turn to those who, like me, like to pause from time to time over the mystery of certain courtyards, cellars, gazebos, or nooses and think about its secret. If, with my book, I give them the reminiscences of certain precious and rare feelings – which forced me to write this story, which touch on the edge of the humorous and the worthless – I will be content. (Nezval 7)

In this preface, Nezval sets the stage for secrets and intrigue, for mysterious and possibly forbidding settings, and – most titillating of all – an intimated return of the repressed: in short, all of the hallmarks of a particularly good gothic novel. What follows certainly delivers on all of these promises, with several aspects further underscoring its gothic overtones: the novel is set during a generic past, the heroine is a beautiful, virginal girl, the villain is (among other things) an evil priest, there are byzantine twists and turns in the plot, complete with secret/changed identities, and the settings do indeed include courtyards, cellars, and gazebos, as well as crypts, secret passageways, and sinister church masses.

Despite these Poetist – Surrealist – gothic overtones, the novel – and particularly the film adaptation – is not without an ideological level. When Jaromil Jireš and Ester Krumbachová decided to adapt this work by Nezval, it was a daring choice on a variety of levels. Nezval was, and continues to be, a problematic figure in Czechoslovak literary history. For the hard-line communists, his predilection for the unconventional, the
incoherent, and/or the erotic antagonized their aesthetic sensibilities. For many of his former colleagues in Devětsil and the Surrealist Group, his acceptance of Stalin – to the extent of devoting a cycle of poems (“songs”) to him shortly after his death – was ideologically repugnant, at best. In the early years of normalization, these and other considerations remained as fresh as they had been fifteen and more years earlier. More to the point, the novel, particularly as it was realized by Jireš and Krumbachová, was a provocative choice: few films were as out-of-step with the early 1970s as Valérie.

Jireš’s film is more Poetist than Nezval’s novel. Jireš and Krumbachová in their adaptation were careful to preserve the lyricism and general aura of a Nezval poem: “The film is carefully structured, because it is essentially a poem – an organised work of imagination based, at least in part, on conscious daydreaming” (Hames 202-203). Or as Škvorecký put it, “[i]n it Jireš rose from the swamp of the world and entered the realm of beauty, which is – or should be – an important part of being human” (189). Škvorecký may be overstating his case just a touch, but the sentiment behind it indicates an emphasis on the overall aesthetic of the film, an aesthetic that rests more on the film’s images than its plot.

Teasing out what these two critics mean by their statements is a challenge, but even a cursory viewing of the film reveals that its basic structure is that of a collage: a procession of strange, disturbing and often erotic images follow one after the other, sometimes without immediately making a lot of sense. Jireš, like Nezval before him, is not terribly bothered by the pressures of narrative logic, and this is one of the primary ways that Valérie shows its familial ties with the rest of the New Wave and its rejection of normalization’s return to the realist aesthetic. The images that Jireš has assembled and
arranged are reminiscent of “conscious daydreaming” and one senses that these images are Valérie’s own impressions, fantasies, and fears projected. In this respect, Valérie is structured very similarly to The Cremator, which also mostly relied on the projected impressions and fantasies of a single character.

The plot of the novel and of the film is unsurprising, given Nezval’s fascination with both childhood and eroticism. Nezval the Poetist is abundantly evident in the pages of his novel, Valérie, insofar as its basic narrative centers entirely on “just” a young girl’s sexual awakening; the novel, in other words, is in keeping with Poetism’s perceived silliness and frivolity, rather than the weighty rationalism of the more didactic works common at the time of both the novel’s and the film’s release. Additionally, the choice of a youthful protagonist sits well with Surrealism’s belief in and celebration of “the imaginative liberty of childhood” (Spiteri 6). Nezval looked back fondly on his own boyhood, and attempted to reclaim many of those memories in his creative work, both poetry and prose. His credo as a writer and as a man was “to live with all of the joys and beauties of the world” (žít všemi radostmi a krásami světa), and this overarching principle led him to a “certain infantilism” and an “artificially-maintained illusion of perpetual boyhood” (Galík 218; Novák 320). What makes Valérie a nightmarish tale of danger and uncertainty is precisely the fact that she is leaving the “joys and beauties” that Nezval connected explicitly to childhood; in this novel, the heroine makes a one-way trip from childhood to adulthood, and the transition is fraught with danger and Nezval’s eroticism.

The surrealism and eroticism of Valérie is very reminiscent of an earlier film, Beauty of the Day / Belle de Jour (1968), directed by Luis Buñuel. Both films feature
primly bourgeois females (Séverin is a young newlywed), who are equally uninitiated in and fascinated by sexuality, and both films feature erotic fantasy sequences from the perspectives of the heroines. For both protagonists, sexuality could be something beautiful, but is more often shown as disturbing and potentially dangerous. Although Valérie mostly only witnesses the sexuality of others, Séverin, who works as a high-end prostitute while her husband is at work, is an active participant, and the sexual appetites of the upper classes in both films are a licentious mix of sadomasochism, voyeurism, and necrophilia. In *Belle de Jour*, female sexuality is ultimately destructive: Séverin brings disaster to her marriage as a direct result of her extracurricular activities. In *Valérie*, sexuality can be destructive and cruel, but the young heroine emerges at film’s end serenely unbesmirched, though a little more world-wise.

In Jireš’s adaptation, the film begins by highlighting Valérie’s girlish, virginal state. The credit sequence is interspersed with close-ups (“fetishistic fascination”) of Valérie, her hair, her mouth, and her eyes: she is shown praying, tying up her hair, cradling a dove, playing with her earrings (Krzywinska 2). In short, she is a little girl, played by then-thirteen-year-old Jaroslava Schallerová. Following this sequence, she is shown sleeping, complete with a doll in her lap. Throughout the film, her virginal status is constantly emphasized, and her youth and relative lack of power are often suggested through the use of high angle and sometimes bird’s eye shots of her.
Figure 25 Valérie's (Jaroslava Schallerová) purity, innocence, and virginity are constantly played up in the film. Here, the bird’s eye angle suggests an element of vulnerability in her sleeping form.

The strange events of the narrative begin during the night of Valérie’s first menstruation, and with it begin Valérie’s first fantasies, realizations, and experiences with sexuality: “the film constructs adult sexuality as strange, mysterious and enigmatic: the people we think we as children know so well turn out to have dark, bestial desires that undermine our earlier idealisation of them” (Krzywinska 5). Though this is all couched in highly sexualized terms, sex in literature and film is so rarely just about sex; here, sex, sexuality, and sexual awakening can all be read in terms of power dynamics and specifically, about the contemporary situation in Czechoslovakia, as the older generation
preys upon and exploits the younger, and as people are revealed to have hidden, and often
hypocritical, agendas. This reading and these themes will be expanded upon later.

On-screen sex is also one of the fastest and most effective ways to rile up the
censors, which may or may not have been one of Jireš’s and Krumbachová’s goals, but
certainly was one of the reactions that the film elicited. Though the Czechoslovaks were
relatively progressive in such matters (Cf. Erotikon, Ekstase), the Soviets – now an
occupying force – were certainly not. Though the films of the New Wave tended not to
be as risqué as Valérie, the films that followed were of a decidedly more chaste nature.

Valérie’s point of view is that of sexual awakening, and her feelings – as
indicated by the images of the film – are clearly ambivalent. Visual metaphors,
characters, and scenarios are repeated throughout the film, clearly demonstrating her

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The first on-screen sex scene in a Soviet film occurred in the film Little Vera /
Malen’kaya Vera, 1988. To put this in context, one need only think of the famous
exchange on the US-Soviet Space Bridge from the early 1980s. When asked by an
American about sex, a Soviet woman rather proudly declared, “We do not have sex in the
Soviet Union.”

Slavic folklore and the peasant worldview might normally be irrelevant to a discussion
of Czechoslovak film from 1970, but given the number of vampires in this film, an
argument can be made for its inclusion. In the pan-Slavic folk context, a young girl’s
transition from childhood to sexual maturity was viewed as being especially fraught with
(supernatural) danger. As she moved from one discreet category (childhood) to another
(adulthood), she was believed to be vulnerable to supernatural attacks – vampires being
only one of the Slavic beasties that were believed to prey on this demographic. More to
the point, a young girl’s transition to adulthood was viewed in very real terms as a loss.
This loss was not couched in Victorian “death of innocence” terms; rather, peasants
viewed this loss in more literal terms, insofar as the girl would soon be lost to the family
through her eventual marriage. Consequently, many elements of the Slavic wedding
ritual very much duplicate those of the Slavic funeral ritual – at least where the bride was
concerned. In short, Valérie’s ambivalence and the explicit linkage of sex and death (to
say nothing of the vampires) are not without cultural precedent. Cf. Natalie Konenko
Moyle’s article, “Mermaids (Rusalki) and Russian Beliefs About Women.” Though
slightly removed in context, Eve Levin’s Sex and Society in the World of the Orthodox
Slavs, 900-1700 is also a good source for further information.
preoccupation with the changes she is experiencing. In the beginning of the film, Valérie encounters night visitors – Orlík and Richard/Constable/Tchoř – and while she is out in the courtyard, she notices a small daisy dappled with a few drops of blood, an image that clearly mixes the literal and the figurative. She picks up the flower, examines it, and clearly has a moment of realization before panicking and running inside. White flowers – a reasonably clear symbol of purity and innocence – recur often: the young girl with the basket of white flowers (who, ultimately, will not give Valérie one of her white flowers) appears frequently. Significantly, when Valérie arrives at the disquieting “mass for virgins,” the other girls wear white and hold white flowers; Valérie alone wears black and clutches a sprig of rosemary, traditionally associated with brides. The wedding of Valérie’s friend, Hedvika, (note the rosemary wreathes) also features the white flowers, but here they are withered and crumpled; the wine spilled on them links them visually to Valérie’s flower from the beginning of the film, and the implication here is that this is the logical conclusion for Valérie and her flower.
For her part, Valérie is clearly traumatized by the thought of Hedvika’s nuptials: “Poor Hedvika,” she sighs, when she learns of the wedding. (Grandmother, ever rapacious, points out that Hedvika will become a rich farmer’s wife, and there is, therefore, no reason to pity her.) Grandmother’s wisdom, such as it is, does little to change Valérie’s opinion on marriage, and in one of the film’s more striking fantasy sequences, Valérie imagines Hedvika as martyred innocence.
Valérie’s suspicions about Hedvika’s fate is then confirmed when she watches (imagines?), huddled and appalled in her virginal white room, the events of Hedvika’s wedding night. The fact that Grandmother and Richard/Constable/Tchoř are also present underscores the implication that sex in this context is a relationship of predator and prey, a topic that will be revisited later.

Flowers are not the only recurring motif in the film. In addition to the little girl with the basket of flowers, other characters recur in the film, usually carrying with them the weights and counter-weights of societal pressures. On the one hand, there is the rather oppressive presence of the missionaries and the nuns, who bring with them not
only the sanctions of official piety and morality, but are also presented as the face of authority. On the other hand, this authority is subverted – or at least challenged – by the frolickings of the troupe of actors/musicians and the variously undressed class of servants. Valérie is clearly more interested in and fascinated by the latter. Early in the film, she excitedly observes that a circus has come to town, and Grandmother’s stern rebuke is that she should be much more excited about the missionaries coming to town. Despite Grandmother’s projected austerity, Valérie remains interested in the pleasures that these characters promise: several times in the film, Valérie stumbles upon (seeks out?) the highly-sexualized interactions of the servants, whether it’s the erotic games of the servant women in the river or their trysts with the coachman. Valérie watches them, but her feelings as she watches them are different from those when she watched Hedvika; instead of hiding her eyes, she watches intently, often comparing her own pubescent body to theirs. In addition to the lustiness of the servant women, there is also a roving band of half-dressed men: first seen running across the town square, self-flagellating, they are later the ones helping to enact her auto-da-fé.
In short, the servant men are every bit as sexually suggestive as the servant women, and even perhaps more so, because of their actual physical interaction with Orlík (chasing him with their whips) and with Valérie (tying her to the stake). Though Valérie is very much the subject of this latter interaction, the sequence nevertheless has the feel of fantasy – her fantasy.

Interestingly, the worlds of abstinence and gratification collide at one point in the film: as Father Gracián leads a procession of nuns through the fields, they encounter one of the servant women and the coachmen, flagrante delicto. As the camera lingers over the couple in the throes of passion, one is aware that the religious procession is in the
middle of the Litany of the Saints, and specifically at the part whereupon intercession is asked of Saints Agatha, Lucy, Agnes, Cecilia, Catherine, and Anastasia. The six women, all roughly contemporary, were martyrs of the early Christian church, though Agatha, Lucy, Agnes, and Catherine have the distinction of being virgin-martyrs. In particular, Agatha, Lucy, and Agnes were all denounced as Christians by spurned lovers, and – given the Roman Empire’s prohibition on the execution of virgins – all three were first dragged to brothels (Agnes by her hair) prior to their execution. As part of their further mortification, Agatha’s breasts were cut off and Lucy’s eyes gouged out. Though extreme, these details are uncomfortably at home in the film’s prevailing interest in the kinky and sadistic. The gruesome circumstances of their deaths and the careful juxtaposition of this recitation and visual images of the pleasures of sex are certainly not accidental. If anything, the contrast underscores the adult world as it has been presented to Valérie: saints and sinners, virgins and whores, martyrs and profligates.

Truly, the film tends to skew heavily towards one end of that drastically curtailed spectrum; the film is so filled with sexual content as to be almost soft-core. Indeed, the narrative takes a turn for the Freudian here: certainly there are elements of the deeply repressed, the inversely Oedipal, and embroideries on the primal scene. Indeed, the sexual component of the narrative is privileged almost above all others: Nezval’s original is filled with racy scenes, and Jireš’s adaptation ups the ante by making these – and entirely new – racy scenes visual. Valérie’s initiation into the adult (sexual) world is comprehensive. Not content to limit itself only to conventional examples of sexuality, the film explores incest, homoeroticism, sadomasochism, and – vaguely, possibly – necrophilia and bestiality. Everyone is implicated. Valérie witnesses Grandmother’s
humiliation before Gracián, shortly before Gracián assaults Valérie in her own bedroom. Grandmother/Elsa attacks Hedvika (in a rather explicit *ménage à trois*), comes on to Orlík (who may or may not be her grandson), and ultimately kills the coachman with her advances. Orlík attempts to kiss Valérie (who may or may not be his sister), who eventually blindfolds him to prevent him from leering at her. He spends much of the film tied up and offers, in the beginning, to dress in her clothes to gain access to her. For her part, Valérie experiences untold overnight intimacies with Hedvika, smears blood on her lips and kisses the dying/undead Richard/Constable/Tchoř (“Daddy!” – he may or may not be her father), and kisses her mother in a most unchaste way. Interactions are sexualized that need not be. There is, of course, the erotic sermon for the maidens and Gracián’s hideous story of rescuing the young girl from cannibals by bringing her back to their tent and converting her to the Catholic faith (for which she “showed great talent”), though she was ultimately lost to immoral ways in some French harbor, due to her particular aptitude for breaking the sixth commandment. Valérie visits a subterranean bar towards the end of the film, and finds Grandmother/Elsa and Richard/Constable/Tchoř holding forth with prostitutes – though the prostitutes do not seem terribly interested in them. Valérie’s twisted family tree variously involves her illegitimate birth to her mother (who may or may not be a nun) and a local archbishop or her grandmother’s jealousy of her lover, who claimed to be Valérie’s father. These relationships are fluid and inappropriate, and Valérie seems inclined, by film’s end, to be more mistrustful than she had at the beginning.
Figure 29 Valérie concludes her week of wonders with a heartier skepticism and suspicion than when it began.

The end of the film is an unusual flight of fantasy in which Valérie encounters the various characters of the film complete with babies and lambs, nuns and musicians, a caged Gracián, Richard/Constable/Tchoř resurrected, the maidens from the mass, mother and father, Orlík and Hedvika – all of them beckoning to her, inviting her into the sexually-charged world of adulthood. Valérie demurs, instead climbing into her little bed alone; in the parting shot, she sleeps peacefully, now alone in the frame. Indeed, there is certainly reason to believe that the film espouses a trajectory of (self-)realization: as Tanya Krzywinska has noted, another one of the recurring motifs of the film is the image of Adam of Eve: the bee hives, Grandmother’s mirror, Valérie’s rather constant eating of
apples (Krzywinska 2). Krzywinska makes note of Valérie’s new knowledge, but takes
the parallel no further. For all their atheism, Czechoslovaks are nevertheless fully aware
that when Adam and Eve eat of the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden, they are
cast out of the garden by God. The point, of course, is that Valérie’s newfound
knowledge comes at a terrible price: though not at the cost of immortality, one
nevertheless senses that Valérie is now cut off forever from her former (innocent) life,
but not quite a part of the life illustrated by the others in the final sequence. The last
frame is Valérie alone in her bed – sleeping serenely, to be sure – but apart from society
at large. One does not want to overstate the implications, but a parallel with
contemporary politics nevertheless seems vaguely apt: the youthful generation, now
aware of the older generation’s treachery and perfidy is cast adrift in society, no longer
having access to the more fulfilling times from before, but also not quite a part of the
changing times.

It is possible that Jireš and Krumbachová adapted Nezval’s novel simply to bring
erotica back to the screens; certainly there was precedent for art-house erotica as early as
Machatý’s Erotikon (1929), for which Nezval wrote the screenplay. A better reason for
adapting Nezval’s novel is that it allowed for oblique political commentary:

37 It is perhaps interesting to note that, in Genesis, God casts the two out of the Garden of
Eden so as to bar them access to the Tree of Life (or, immortality). The Tree of Life
makes a fairly frequent appearance in Czech literature as well, and in particular in the
context of the Golem legend, and – more specifically still – in the rather Surrealist novel,
The Golem (1915), by Gustav Meyrink (1868-1932). There, it served as an allegorical
symbol of completion and the conclusion of the hero’s journey. It is interesting to
consider the implications in Valérie: has she, too, and others of her generation, been cut
off from this mystical completion and conclusion?
In presenting the opposition of actors and missionaries at such an early stage in the film, Jireš presents a comment on the nature of his own project. It raises the problems of art vs. repressive morality (or ideology), play vs. ordered behavior, and fantasy vs. “official” or “accepted” reality. Orlík, the artist and dreamer, is young, but the representatives of official morality are old, vicious and/or hypocritical. In linking art with youth, the film positively asserts the values of its own fantasy against those who would deny them, those of Poetism as against realism (including socialist realism). This was not to suggest that the film is intended as a political tract, but, in asserting the values of a suppressed cultural tradition, it opposed the official art of the 1950s that was again to prove dominant in the 1970s. (Hames 204; emphasis added)

Indeed, the weights and counter-weights that Hames has identified above are striking in this film, and although this viewer would not have put as much stock in the character of Orlík, the fact remains that there is a very marked distinction between the youth of the film and the adults of the film, and in this respect, Valérie begins to resemble one of Jireš’s other contributions to the New Wave, The Joke. Here, too, adults preyed upon the young either literally (Ludvík beating up Jindra, his hapless stand-in; Zemánek’s oozing charm seducing the young Ms. Brožová) or more figuratively (Ludvík and – to a lesser extent – Helena trying to recapture and punish the figures of their own youth). Jireš (b. 1935) was of an age with the majority of the other New Wave directors, and decidedly younger than the majority of those in politics, and this theme of adults preying upon youth is one that would have resonated with others of his generation, as they watched the
youthful reforms of the Prague Spring dismantled by the likes of Leonid Brezhnev (b. 1906) and Gustáv Husák (b. 1913).

Additionally, the Poetist/Surrealist “cultural tradition,” noted by Hames above, was employed as a means of staving off the gray blandness of Husák’s normalization, and the aesthetics (or lack thereof) that were ushered in with it. Certainly with Surrealism, the goal was to break out of conventional thinking about *anything*. From its inception during the interwar period, Surrealism recognized that “its effects could not be limited to art schools or creative workshops” and that, more to the point, “[t]he conventions of consensual reality maintained by the patriarchal, white, Christian establishment in Western Europe had robbed people of their ability to imagine alternatives and wild possibilities by denigrating perception, desire, instinct and intuition” (Spiteri 4). Though the cadres in charge in Czechoslovakia were largely atheist, the assessment here remains accurate: “alternatives and wild possibilities” were precisely the sorts of things that the official aesthetic of the 1970s and 1980s were designed to ellide and discourage.

*Valérie,* though often a dreamy, sexualized, fairy tale of a film, nonetheless can be read as the last stand of New Wave aesthetics and values and a last gasp of the cultural trends of a bygone time. In Jireš’s and Krumbachová’s hands, the film revisits the look and feel of Poetism and Surrealism and thereby makes the case for *l’art pour l’art,* for the personal or subjective narrative, and for making a defensive stance against the return of 1950s-style aesthetics. As an adaptation, it survives as a testament to Nezval’s resolute – though ultimately short-lived – non-conformity, and very deliberately hearkens back to his days with the Czechoslovak Surrealist Group, rather than his days of toeing the party line.
With an occupying army of Soviets, this last, isolated resurgence of Surrealism and New Wave aesthetics was a cry in the wilderness and one that made a last call for the personal narratives and the alternative world view that the New Wave so cherished. To the Establishment, the film was considered “an embarassment to official policies,” and although it accrued modest international acclaim (Grand Prix at Bergamo, 1970), Czechoslovak critics representing the government’s views panned the film at every opportunity (Hames 242; Škvorecký 190). With the re-assertion of the safe, old aesthetics, films like Valérie were shelved as inappropriate and out of step. Although Jireš was able to make films after 1970, Krumbachová never made another film.
Conclusion

During the night of August 20, 1968, the Soviet Union – along with units from Poland, Hungary, East Germany and Bulgaria – invaded Czechoslovakia, a fact that has been mentioned multiple times, however indirectly or obliquely, over the course of this dissertation. This fraternal intervention, later justified by the logic of the Brezhnev Doctrine, was intended as a preemptive strike against the progressive policies of Alexander Dubček’s Prague Spring (*Pražské jaro*); Dubček’s reformist movement spelled a deep and abiding threat to the rest of the Bloc, and Moscow was not about to let the threat continue to get out of hand. The invasion was the largest show of military force in Europe since World War II, with a cast of half a million soldiers, over 6,000 tanks, 2,000 artillery pieces, and hundreds of airplanes: it was a force nearly twice the size of that used to put down the Hungarian uprising in 1956 (Agnew 262). At the time, New Wave filmmaker, Jan Němec, was shooting a documentary on the Prague Spring; the film, originally intended as the movement’s cinematic benediction, became, instead, its requiem. As cameras rolled, Němec and his crew captured scenes of civil unrest, the inexorable approach of tanks, and brutal violence; the film took a turn toward the tragic when Němec’s cameraman was shot. When all was said and done, Němec and his film were both “banned forever,” although copies of what would become known as *Oratorio for Prague / Oratorium pro Prahu*, (1968) circulated outside of occupied Czechoslovakia and were shown to millions worldwide in television broadcasts. It was one of the very
few voices to indicate that the invasion was anything but a comradely get-together. Soviet forces gathered up Dubček and several of his highest-ranking officials, and spirited them out of the country, where they were held for some time; when they were eventually released and sent back to Prague, it was with the understanding that their reinstatement was temporary, and their obligation to overturn the policies of the previous several months was complete. In the year that followed, the Slovak Gustáv Husák (1913-1991) – one of the victims of the Slánský purge in 1952, and one of the few to escape with his life – was made the leader of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (KSČ) and then, later, president of Czechoslovakia (1975). His tenure lasted through most of the 1980s and became known as the period of Normalization.

Husák’s Normalization destroyed the Czechoslovak New Wave. To begin with, the invasion was followed by an epic “cleaning house,” during which no strata of society was safe: 170,000 people fled the country, 70,000 were expelled from the Party, and another 400,000 were removed from its rosters (Hames 239-240) – all this in a country of approximately 14,000,000 people. The film industry was able to continue along for a short while (Cf. The Joke, Valérie and Her Week of Wonders), but it was not long before the nationwide house-cleaning reached the Barrandov and Koliba Studios: their respective directors were removed, the studio structures reorganized, the production schedule cancelled and the Union dismantled (Hames 241). Films considered “objectionable” by the new regime were stopped at various stages of production or, if already completed, banned outright (A. J. Liehm 13). It was, in short, “a seemingly more catastrophic repetition of the Banska Bystrice events” (Škvorecký 241). After the dust settled, “[m]ore films were banned in 1970 than during the previous twenty years of
communism” and included New Wave offerings such as Jasný’s All My Good Countrypmen, Forman’s Firemen’s Ball, Menzel’s Larks on a String, Chytilová’s The Fruit of Paradise, and Němec’s Report on the Party and the Guest (A. J. Liehm 13).

What followed was a return to the aesthetic tastes of the 1950s. Škvorecký notes that many of the films produced during Normalization were made in the Hollywood mold and were meant to provide escapist fantasies for viewers (244), a trend that mirrored the contemporary film culture in the Soviet Union. The most common genres were comedies and detective thrillers, but there were many other films with a careful emphasis on World War II and the early days of communist Czechoslovakia, for the rather transparent purpose of “emphasis[ing] the threat from the West (West Germany) and the role of the Soviet Union as Czechoslovakia’s only and natural ally” (Ptáček 158; Hames 243).

New Wave directors like Herz and Jireš were able to continue making films, almost without interruption, largely by making films that were, if not completely in step with the changed politics, at least very neutral in tone. Jireš displayed an “overt

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38 Though Soviet film scholar, Anna Lawton, refers to the films of the Brezhnev era as “the least stagnating art,” she notes that “audiences demanded light genres” and cites research conducted by the All-Union State Institute of Cinema (VGIK) that ranked the most popular film features: contemporary theme, Russian production, adaptation of a popular book, fast tempo, continuity, simplicity, spectacular, active and attractive leading characters, appealing title. Anna Lawton, Kinoglasnost: Soviet Cinema in Our Time (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

39 Herz, ever the outsider, was able to continue making films, but felt “misunderstood” by many of his colleagues, critics and viewers, particularly after the release of his film, I Was Caught by the Night / Zastihla mé noc (1985). The film was considered by many to be an “oblation to the regime” (úlitba režimu). Following its release, Herz emigrated to West Germany and did not return until the late 1990s. Peter Hames, The Czechoslovak New Wave, 2nd (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), 249. Luboš Ptáček, ed., Panorama českého filmu (Olomouc: Rubico, 2000), 173.
commitment to socialism“ and Hames has argued that Jireš’s substantial pile of rejected scripts might have helped him during the 1970s: although the scripts were rejected because they were variously inappropriate, he was nevertheless unable to shoot films for which he would later have to repent (Hames 245, 246). He followed The Joke (1968) and Valérie (1970) with the more ideologically suitable, …And Give my Love to the Sparrows / …a pozdravuji vlaštovky (1972), which adapted the diaries of the real-life resistance fighter, Maruška Kuderiková. Herz continued through the 1970s with more adaptations; first with Gas Lamps / Petrojeové lampy (1971) by the novelist Jaroslav Havlíček (1896-1943) and then with Morgiana (1972) by the Russian novelist, Alexander Grin (1880-1932). Herz would continue on with musical comedies (Porcelain Girl / Holky z porcelánu, 1974), detective thrillers (A Girl Fit to be Killed / Holka na zabíti, 1975) and vampires (Ferat Vampire / Upír z Feratu, 1982).

Many of their contemporaries were not as lucky, and remained out of work for some time. Jiří Menzel resumed his career in 1974 with Who Looks for Gold? / Kdo hledá zlaté dno? Shortly thereafter, Věra Chytilová followed with The Apple Game / Hra o jablko (1976), and Evald Schorm with Killing with Kindness / Vlastne se nic stalo (1989). Ester Krumbachová never made another film, and Jan Němec was unable to do so until after the Velvet Revolution in 1989: when he was finally allowed back into his home country after an imposed exile dating from 1974. Vojtěch Jasny, Miloš Forman as well as writers, Milan Kundera and Josef Škvorecký were among the hundreds of thousands who left Czechoslovakia for exile and specifically to Austria, the United States, France and Canada, respectively.
While it lasted, the Czechoslovak New Wave was an extraordinary achievement in world cinema: it was the perfect synthesis of highly-trained and well-educated filmmakers in a permissive environment free from the constraints of commercial pressures. This unique confluence of circumstances allowed Czechoslovak filmmakers to produce essentially the films they wanted. What emerged was an alternate and polyphonic national narrative: the socialism as Czechoslovaks wanted it realized, the historical perspective that they understood, and the principled exchange of ideas that they valued so highly. In effect, the films of the Czechoslovak New Wave can be viewed as cross-sections, or core samples, of the nation’s culture of bricolage. Not only are the films from this period particularly representative of cultural values, but the film industry itself consisted of a diverse borrowing from the entire artistic spectrum: writers and composers offered up their works for adaptation and still more wrote or composed directly for the industry; visual artists starred in films and/or lent their works to the mise-en-scène; directors borrowed from their work in the theater. That film became the chosen medium – rather than literature or theater – is less a question of ranking one medium above another and more a question of the period’s zeitgeist: cinema is modern and “cutting edge,” it is collaborative, it speaks (literally) to wide audiences. It was the public forum. “Adaptation,” writes Linda Hutcheon, “is how stories evolve and mutate to fit new times and different places” (Hutcheon 176). Cinema, in other words, breathed new life into important and dearly-held cultural values, and artists from a variety of backgrounds recognized the cinema’s potential and were drawn to it.

The films discussed in this dissertation, arguably more so than their source texts, represent the broad spectrum of values making up this alternate national narrative. They
are palimpsests upon which layers of cultural meanings are transcribed. Consequently, New Wave directors saw no reason to draft a manifesto, as artistic groups of the past were so wont to do; instead, they filmed their manifesto, *Pearls of the Deep*, in 1966. The principle remains the same, but the medium has evolved. Similarly, František Palacký’s numerous volumes of history may very well have carved out a distinct Czech identity during the National Revival of the nineteenth century, but why tell the Czechoslovak historical perspective, when you can show it, in films like Jireš’s *The Joke* and Jasny’s *All My Good Countrymen*? In a similar vein, Ladislav Fuks and Juraj Herz polemicized in *The Cremator* with a perceived national tendency towards passivity, made so famous by Jaroslav Hašek’s anti-hero in *The Adventures of the Good Soldier Švejk*. In the confused mayhem of the immediate post-invasion period, Jireš’s *Valérie and Her Week of Wonders* seized the opportunity to give the aesthetic values of the First Republic – Poetism and Surrealism – one last reprise before the glossy emptiness of Normalization-era films took over.

Writing early in 1970 and already in exile, Škvorecký eulogized what had been lost with the Soviet invasion in his “personal history,” *All the Bright Young Men and Women*. Beyond the personal and professional tragedies of the artists, his friends, Škvorecký is troubled by the void in the public discourse that opened after the invasion:

In Czechoslovakia, films and literature are not just entertainment on different levels of sophistication, nor are they the subject of snobbish conversations, as is all too frequently the case in the West. They play an important part in the lives of wide masses. Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, later Pope Pius II (1458-64), declared once that any Czech old woman can quote the Bible better than a Roman

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Cardinal. Similarly, an average Czech bank clerk, not to mention doctor or nuclear scientist, knows his Fellini better than many an American film producer.

(248-249)

Škvorecký’s writing, often elliptical and often opaque, does not spell out the “important part” film and literature play “in the lives of wide masses,” but the juxtaposition with scripture is provocative. Where once Czechs and Slovaks might have consumed scripture for moral and ethical guidance, the “wide masses” of the 1960s were looking to more humanist sources. For the average Czechoslovak citizen, then, the films of the New Wave – those films able to tell the stories most important to contemporary viewers – provided not merely entertainment, but sustenance of a markedly more spiritual nature. Such a statement could easily be written off as histrionic, but in a context where artists are called upon to be the “conscience of the nation,” it does not seem as overstated.

The filmmakers of this period were shaped by the cultural and historical forces that helped to create the New Wave and, in turn, they hoped to shape contemporary culture and politics. One wonders where the individual visions of these directors – and, indeed, Dubček’s reforms – would have gone, had they been allowed to run their course. We can never know, of course, but the films remain as a testament to the beautiful dreams they dared to have.
Bibliography


"Gottwald-Clementis Photograph." Flickr, 2 January 2009.


--. Collage 293.


<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v23/n01/wood02__html>.


Appendix A: Film Stills and Photographs

Figure 1: "Gottwald-Clementis Photograph." Flickr, 2 January 2009.


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Figure 21: Teige, Karel. Collage 55. Museum of Czechoslovakian Literature, Prague. EuroArt and Beyond. n.d.

Figure 21: Teige, Karel. Collage 293.


Figure 22: Erickson, Glen. DVD Savant Review: The Cremator. 22 March 2009. 7 June 2009 <http://www.dvdtalk.com/dvdsavant/s2875crem.html>.


Appendix B: Filmography


--. *Firemen’s Ball / Hoří má panenka!*, Czechoslovakia, 1967.


--. *Heave Ho! / Hej rup!*, Czechoslovakia, 1934.


--. *A Girl Fit to be Killed / Holka na zabití*. Czechoslovakia, 1975.


--. *Your Money or Your Life / Peníze nebo život*. Czechoslovakia, 1932.


Jireš, Jaromír. *...And Give my Love to the Sparrows / ...a pozdravuji vlaštovky*. Czechoslovakia, 1972.


--. *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders / Valérie a týden divá*, 1970.


--. *Eroticon*. Czechoslovakia, 1929.


--. *The Death of Mr. Baltazar / Smrt pana Baltazara (Pearls of the Deep / Perličky na dne)*. Czechoslovakia, 1966.


--. *The Impostors / Podvodnici (Pearls of the Deep / Perličky na dne)*. Czechoslovakia, 1966.

--. *Oratorio for Prague / Oratorium pro Prahu*. Czechoslovakia, 1968.


