

# 4

## JÁN KADÁR AND ELMAR KLOS

Peter Hames

Since Ján Kadar made his first film as early as 1950, he was, strictly speaking, too old to be considered a member of the First Wave. This is even more true of his habitual collaborator, scriptwriter, and producer, Elmar Klos, who was one of those involved in drawing up the original nationalization plans for the film industry. Together, they occupy an intermediate position between the older generation and those who made their debuts in the late fifties. However, the progressively critical and innovative nature of their work in the fifties and early sixties justifies their inclusion in the same stream as Helge, Jasný, Vlácil, and Kachyňa.

Kadar's first film, *Katka* (1950), made in his native Slovakia, told the story of a young village girl who became a factory worker. This apparently uncontroversial work got him expelled from the Slovak industry. "It had been decided that it was no longer necessary to urge people to leave their homes for industry. . . . But above all, the film wasn't 'national' enough, it wasn't sufficiently steeped in folklore and Slovakism. . . . And that was referred to as 'the bourgeois point of view.'"<sup>1</sup>

Forced to look for work elsewhere, Kadar turned to the Czech studios and began his long association with Elmar Klos. Their first film together was *Kidnapped* (*Unos*, 1952), and, although later rejected by Kadar as "an extremely naive, dogmatic cold-war type of film,"<sup>2</sup> it was accused of "bourgeois objectivism." Only the intervention of V. I. Pudovkin saved them from censure. Their next film, *Music from Mars* (*Hudba z Marsu*, 1954), was a musical comedy adapted from a story by Blažek<sup>3</sup> criticizing bureaucracy. This time, Kadar and Klos were accused of having slandered public figures.

In view of the unavailability of these films, it is not possible to provide an adequate analysis. However, it is possible to consider their next film, the apparently conformist *House at the Terminus* (*Dům na konečné*, 1957). According to Kadar, it was "a film which had nothing to do with politics or any so-called 'social' subject matter... There were no problems: everyone was happy."<sup>4</sup> It is all the more surprising, therefore, that *House at the Terminus* should present a pessimistic and highly critical

picture of Czechoslovak society at that time. While it does deal with "private" problems and there is little overt political criticism, the implicit criticism is considerable, and the problems with which it deals take place in a social context. Hence, loneliness, cynicism, personal and professional failure, compromise, wrongful imprisonment, and lack of faith are shown as generalized characteristics of a supposedly socialist society.

A strong sense of alienation is created by the mood of gloomy desolation with which film opens. There are shots of a church tower and a light accompanied by the ringing of bells. A lorry passes through the night streets. A drunkard is thrown out of a bar and catches a tram. The camera is situated with a driver's view of the road moving forward along the tram tracks as lonely figures are shown waiting by the roadside. Zdeněk Liška's music accompanies the movement to create a sense of misty isolation. As the tram passes by blocks of flats, it heads for the house at the terminus, a giant, isolated tower block that appears to rise out of a wasteland. It is a building that will be referred to later in the film as "the end of the world."

The film focuses on the subject of birth, on whether it is right to marry and have children given the state of the world. The subject recurs in Evald Schorm's documentary *Why?* (*Proč?* 1964) and Jaromil Jireš's feature *The Cry* (1963). The first film examined the problem of the falling birth rate following the legalization of abortion, and the second looked at the nature of the world into which a child was about to be born. *House at the Terminus* deals with essentially the same issues but is more directly linked to the atmosphere of the Cold War and the spiritual poverty of Stalinism.

The theme is raised through the relationship between Olina (Eva Očenášová) and Karel Martinec (Vladimír Ráž). He is a pharmacist who comes to live at the house, and Olina is a woman living on her own, hoping for children. They fall in love and she becomes pregnant. Karel initially tries to give her something to stop the pregnancy and, later, following a crisis in their relationship, takes her to an abortionist. Finally, she rejects him and determines to have the child out of wedlock. She hopes that her son (she's sure it will be one) will become a proper human being and "be able to love a lot and never be lonely."

In this sense, Olina can be seen as a "positive" character, asserting the values of human life. Karel, on the other hand, is clearly "negative," although it is a negativity rooted in the times. From his own point of view, he is a failure since he had always wanted to be a poet and pharmacy is a second choice. When he arrives at the house, he announces that these are his tenth digs and that he keeps moving on in the hope that "something may happen." Faced with Olina's pregnancy, he argues that he is a man who always thinks twice. What with the atom bomb and so on, there's no point in having children.

The film's theme is supported by subplots that contrast the situations of those who have children and are unable to care for them and those who want children and are unable to have them. Pešta (Martin Růžek), the drunkard from the film's opening,

<sup>1</sup>Ján Kadar, interviewed in Liehm, *Closely Watched Films*, p. 401.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Vratislav Blažek is known primarily as a comic and satirical dramatist and made a major contribution to the early films of Kadar and Klos. He later wrote the script and lyrics for the musical *The Hop Pickers* (*Starci na chmelu*, 1964), directed by Ladislav Rychman. It was a sensational success with the younger generation and marked a breakthrough in the musical genre. Blažek emigrated after the Soviet invasion.

<sup>4</sup>Kadar, interviewed in Liehm, *Closely Watched Films*, p. 402.

appears at key intervals in the film's narrative. His wife has died, and it appears that he was, at least in part, responsible. His small daughter, Hanka, now lives with her grandmother (his mother-in-law) in the house at the terminus. When the grandmother dies (the day Olina discovers her pregnancy), Hanka goes to live with the Kovanks, a decent couple unable to have children of their own. Pešta's genuine love for his daughter is never in doubt, but his attempts to live up to his responsibilities are woefully inadequate. His attempt to gain custody of Hanka provokes Mrs. Kovanková's comment: "Those that don't want them have them and those that want them can't have them." To her husband, she challenges: "Say what's inside, what makes you so unhappy. *She's* the one who couldn't have children." It is when Olina overhears this conversation that she finally rejects the proposed abortion.

Olina's story is directly linked to the lives of those about her and also to the circle of life and death (the juxtaposition of her pregnancy and the grandmother's death). Her positive and even hopeful attitude is presumably what saved the film from criticism. However, it is an attitude that contradicts rather than affirms the values of society that have been portrayed. The sense of isolation conveyed in the film's opening is carried through in its study of a group of characters "at the end of the terminus." The grandmother dies alone, Pešta is left with his drink, the situation of the Kovanks is unresolved, and Karel's cynical defeatism is unchanged.

The film even has an explicitly political dimension. Olina's neighbor has a husband in jail but dates a young soldier in his absence. When Karel and Olina discuss the situation, Olina points out that although the husband had received a long sentence, his friends had stood up for him. Karel replies that he will be forgotten inside a year. The implication of an unjust sentence combined with social apathy is a scarcely veiled reference to the political trials of the fifties, which affected all walks of life.

One assumes that the minister of culture must have been looking the other way when this film was released. It is, of course, possible to argue that the problems with which it deals could be characteristic of life in any advanced Western society. However, the same can be said of later films, such as Forman's *The Firemen's Ball* (1967) and Němec's *The Party and the Guests* (1966), which have been banned for their statement of unpalatable truths. The importance of *House at the Terminus* lies in the fact that the loneliness, cynicism, and compromise that it portrays are supposed to be either eliminated or exceptional cases within a socialist society. Since the films that were condemned at this time are safely locked away, it is not possible to make a comparison. However, the fact that a film like *House at the Terminus* could be made without condemnation suggests two things. The first is the extent to which the banned films must have been overt in their criticism. The second is a generally felt need to confront the realities of everyday life that probably went beyond the immediate individual interests and objectives of Kadár and Klos.

Their next film, *Three Wishes*, was, however, one of the main targets of the Banská Bystrica conference. Adapted from a stage play by Vratislav Blažek, it was a modern fairy tale in which the hero is granted three wishes. He achieves success in life, but his

best friend loses his job for justly criticizing evil happenings. The hero is granted a further wish. He can save his friend if he is prepared to give up all the advantages that he has gained. There the film ends, with a question mark. According to Mira Liehm and Antonín Liehm:

The film showed what the stage version had concealed: the mechanism of social corruption, cowardice, and hypocrisy that the old man takes advantage of to fulfill the wishes. And so the concluding question in the film was different from the one posed on the stage: if you truly begin to fight a situation that is destroying honest people, you have to count on losing the advantages that this situation brought to you. Are you really willing to do it?<sup>5</sup>

The film was banned and finally released in 1963 when "its criticism was toothless ... and its film language outdated."<sup>6</sup>

After *Three Wishes*, Kadár and Klos were banned from the studios for two years but returned again in 1963 for *Death Is Called Engelchen* (*Smrt si říká Engelchen*, 1963) based on Ladislav Mňačko's novel, and *The Accused* (*Obžalovaný*, 1964), based on a screenplay by Vladimír Valenta, which analyzed the nature of Stalinist justice in a style reminiscent of documentary. In *Death Is Called Engelchen* they attempted a more adventurous style in what many critics consider to be their best film. The story is told in flashback through the recollections of a wounded guerrilla who wonders whether the achievement of freedom has been worth the horror he has suffered. Jan Žalman writes:

Its highly effective style, alternating moments of the hero's introspection with passages of dramatic plot, is based on the author's [Mňačko's] own experiences; it strongly influenced the treatment of the film. While *Three Wishes* was still made in the conventional way, in *Engelchen* Kadár and Klos for the first time adopted modern methods, in particular those introduced to the cinema by Resnais. The film's construction creates a disturbing atmosphere, the associative sequences giving it a strongly personal dimension.<sup>7</sup>

Kadár and Klos were not familiar with Alain Resnais's work when they wrote the script. However, a later film, *Drift/Desire Is Called Anada* (*Touha zvaná Anada*, 1969), made in collaboration with the Hungarian writer and future film director Imre Gyöngyössi, clearly shows the influence of Resnais and Alain Robbe-Grillet. The role of memory and imagination is central to its fantasy about a beautiful girl who may or may not have been saved from drowning in the Danube. It was made with great

---

<sup>5</sup> Liehm and Liehm, *Most Important Art*, pp. 226-227.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>7</sup> Žalman, *Films and Filmmakers*, p. 22.

fluidity and technical assurance but is more a professional, mainstream equivalent of Robbe-Grillet's *L'Immortelle* (1963) than a breaking of new ground.<sup>8</sup>

The film for which Kádár and Klos received the widest international acclaim is their Oscar-winning *The Shop on Main Street* (1965). An account of life in Slovakia during the period of the independent fascist state, it tells the story of an old deaf Jewish woman (Ida Kamińska) and her relationship with a Slovak (Jozef Króner), who is allocated her button shop as "Aryan controller." He finds it almost impossible to communicate with her and is unable to tell her the truth. The deception continues until all the Jews are deported, but by some bureaucratic error, the old lady is left off the list. Scared of being accused of sheltering a Jew, he tries to get her to join the deportees, fails, pushes her into a cupboard, and locks it. When the deportation is over, he discovers her to be dead and hangs himself.

Despite its grim and ironic theme, the film is played primarily as a comedy, observing the human qualities and failings of its protagonists. It is conventional in its narrative approach while including subjective and fantasy scenes within its framework. It sought and attained a universal relevance outside of its specifically Jewish context.

For Czechoslovak audiences, its most important feature was the convincing portrayal of the banality of life in wartime Slovakia, the growth of fascism within an ordinary community.

Kádár was himself a Jew, and the film was inevitably accused, in some quarters, of "Zionist" inspiration. This was particularly so after 1970, but it is worth noting that although Radok's career almost certainly suffered as a result of anti-Semitism, the politically committed Weiss and Kádár worked regularly during the Stalinist period. Kádár said that he was never really aware of his Jewishness and deluded himself into dismissing the persecution of others as "mistakes." "In my case there was undoubtedly the fact that I had never encountered racial discrimination personally, neither in my work nor in my private life. . . ." He was also committed to the official view on culture in his early years even if his films mark a progressive dissension. He speaks of the humanist traditions of the Czech lands and the fact that anti-Semitism, although a Central European phenomenon, was a peripheral influence there. He approached *The Shop on Main Street* with the view that the tragedy of the Jews was identical with that of Europe as a whole.

Kádár only recognized anti-Semitism in 1967 when there was a clash between the intellectuals and the pro-Arab stance of the regime. Official language began to echo that of the fifties purges and Kádár became, from then on, consciously Jewish. Two of his English-language films, Bernard Malamud's *The Angel Levine* (U.S., 1970) and

Ted Allan's *Lies My Father Told Me* (Canada, 1976), have been derived from explicitly Jewish subjects. On the other hand, it may be that, as the "Jewish" director of *The Shop on Main Street*, these were the subjects that were offered him.

In Czechoslovakia, the treatment of Jewish themes has been clearly linked to an increasing liberalization in cultural policy. The production of *Romeo, Juliet, and Darkness* (1960), *Transport from Paradise* (1963) by Zbyněk Brynych, *The Shop on Main Street* (1965), *Dita Saxová* (1967) by Antonín Moskalyk, and *The Cremator* (1968) by Juraj Herz could only have been achieved in the more open atmosphere of the sixties. Conversely, the opposite proved the case when, in the seventies, accusations of "Zionism" were launched against the films, and all those based on novels by Arnošt Lustig, including *Transport from Paradise* and *Dita Saxová*, were withdrawn from distribution (although in Lustig's case, this is also linked to his emigration).

In 1975, the East German film *Jacob the Liar* (*Jakob der Lügner*), from the novel by Jurek Becker, in turn based on his own unfilmed screenplay, was considered a historic breakthrough. Its filmic presentation by director Frank Beyer was absolutely conventional, but it dealt openly with a Jewish theme. Perversely enough, considering the fate of the Lustig films, *Jacob the Liar* emerged as an East German-Czechoslovak co-production with the Czech actor Vlastimil Brodský playing the leading role. It was rejected by the Moscow Film Festival, and Becker has subsequently found himself a cultural "dissident."

In: Hames, Peter. *The Czechoslovak New Wave*. University of California Press., Berkeley, 1985, pp. 45-51.

---

<sup>8</sup> *Adrift* was filmed in Slovakia. An interesting footnote to this parallel is the fact that Robbe-Grillet filmed both *L'homme qui ment* (1968) and *L'Eden et après* (1971) as Franco-Slovak co-productions. The director of photography on both was Igor Luther, noted for his work with Juraj Jakubisko, and, later Volker Schlöndorff.

<sup>9</sup> Kádár, interviewed in Liehm, *Closely Watched Trains*, p. 406.