

Coach to Vienna

Peter Hames

Coach to Vienna (1966) is the only one of their films to have attracted international attention. To a Western observer, it reveals a standard pacifist theme accompanied by an abundance of camera tracking through the pine forests that superficially recalls films such as Mikhail Kalatozov's *The Cranes Are Flying* (*Letyat zhuravli*, 1957) and Vulo Radev's *The Peach Thief* (*Kradetsut na praskovi*, 1964). In fact, just as the Russian and Bulgarian films marked radical breaks within their own production contexts, so *Coach to Vienna* proved particularly controversial in the Czechoslovak situation. Its importance lay in its failure to present the wartime partisans in conventional heroic terms, a sin that the film shared with the rather different *Closely Watched Trains*, which was produced in the same year. However, in *Coach to Vienna*, the partisans not only murder the hero, who is German (albeit Austrian), but rape the heroine.

Leaving aside the controversy, Kachyňa and Procházka produced a film of classical dimensions. The heroine is determined on vengeance, to kill Germans in retaliation for the murder of her husband. She drives a cart carrying two Germans, one of whom is seriously wounded, through the pine forests, which serve both as an endless labyrinth and as a means of insulation from the reality of the war outside. Eventually, her relationship with the innocuous young Austrian, who only wants to be friends and wishes that Hitler was dead, turns to one of human understanding and, perhaps, to love. It is at this point that outside reality reasserts itself, the hatred generated by war returning to destroy the hope that has been born. Like much of Vlácil's work, the film's statement is fundamentally humanist, a plea for the assertion of human qualities in the face of cultural and ideological divisions.

It is worth considering *Coach to Vienna* in some detail because of its impact and its clever construction. As always with Kachyňa, the opening is impressive. The camera tracks forward along a forest road followed by further tracking shots through misty woods as the credits are completed. Organ music accompanies the visuals, creating a sombre and oppressive mood. In the prologue, we are told that the woman prays for the strength to accomplish her vengeance. The camera moves down from a shot of the sky seen between tall black pines to provide a concise visual statement of the basic situation: the wounded man lying in the back of the cart; the young one walking ahead; the woman, unsmiling, dressed severely in black with a headscarf; the axe lodged underneath the cart.

As they move through a gate into the forest, the image serves also as the opening of the film's narrative. When the story is over, the woman will drive her cart back again through the same gate. The film is divided into two separate sections, in each of which the woman is intent on revenge but lacks the resolve and inhumanity to attain her objective.

In the early part of the journey, Kachyňa focuses on the significant objects that provide the young soldier, Hans, with his power, position of authority, and control of direction. The compass, the pistol, the bayonet, and the rifle are items that the woman will systematically dispose of during their journey. They are balanced by the axe, which is telegraphed from the opening as the means she intends to use in killing him.

Her plans are frustrated both by the guileless innocence of Hans and her own inability to act in cold blood. She stops the cart on the pretext of fixing the horse's shoe but with a clear intention of killing him. His eagerness to help interferes with her movements, and his total vulnerability prompts her to postpone the accounting. Her purpose is further weakened as he takes an interest in squirrels and deer, shows her pictures of his family, and tries to give her presents. When bells ring out in the distance, he immediately assumes that Hitler is dead and strips off his insignia—an act with fatal consequences since the partisans later take this as evidence that he is a member of the SS.

The first part of the film concludes when the second soldier regains consciousness, and the values of war are resurrected. The woman is forced to strip, but Hans allows her to escape, ignoring his friend's demand that he shoot her. His fear and confusion are mirrored by her own reactions as she runs round in circles, calling for help, finally pursuing the cart as they drive off.

In the second half of the film, the woman follows them on a distant but parallel course while the older German ensures that Hans remains vigilant. It is a beautifully visualized section with effective long shots of her figure scrambling between the trees and shots from above as she looks down from a hill at the cart passing beneath her.

Hans sets an ambush in an attempt to force her to go back, but it only delays her, and taking a wooden stake from a pile of logs, she again chases after them. In an extended tracking shot, the camera appears to be searching in the woods, eventually focusing on half-seen images of horses and prisoners carrying wood. To a characteristic organ accompaniment, she runs through the woods in a frenzied fashion until she reaches the point of exhaustion. She emerges on the road, removes her headscarf, and then rushes back into the forest.

The intense and blind activity of her pursuit maintains the ambiguity of the film's first section, and it is by no means clear what will be the outcome. Her treatment by the two Germans has reawakened her determination for revenge, but the ice-cool control that characterized her earlier behavior has given way to confused emotions. Repose has been replaced by action. Her femininity has also been aroused, first,

when she is forced to strip and, second, in the removal of her headscarf. She is transformed from a symbolic figure of vengeance into a woman whose feelings have been involved despite herself and whose momentary weakness appears to have been betrayed.

In the film's final stages, following the death of the older German, the woman again advances on Hans with the axe. She repeats the Lord's Prayer that had accompanied her earlier vow of vengeance as he sleeps in a fetal position under a white flag of truce. When he wakes up and backs away in fear, she simply beats up with her bare hands. This is by no means implausible since her peasant strength has been emphasized throughout, both in her ability to lift the corner of the cart single-handedly and to run almost endlessly through the forest. She points out the direction he must take to reach Austria, but he stays, and they cling to each other. The implication is that they do this because of the nearness of each other's bodies (the physical contact of the fight), their shared loneliness and suffering. They sleep together in the cart, and it is there that they are found by the partisans. Hans is made to strut behind the cart in an imitation goose step with a rope around his neck, the woman is raped when she tries to intervene, and he is finally shot.

Apart from its plea for human understanding, *Coach to Vienna* generates a powerful and poetic intensity. As in *The High Wall*, the film's strength rests on the simple and clear-cut situation depicted and the careful, traditional building of narrative tension. It is almost without dialogue, and Iva Janžurová's silent portrayal of the heroine is superb. She looks absolutely authentic, and it is difficult to believe that this is the same actress who was to appear in Herz's two "romantic" pieces, *Oil Lamps* (*Petrolejové lampy*) and *Morgiana*.

The sense that the film will end in tragedy is present throughout in the woman's severe dress and the organ accompaniment. The impressive black and white photography is sombre while the muffled sounds that penetrate the labyrinth create a sense of suffocation. The importance of individual objects within the narrative progression has already been mentioned. In effect, they also acquire an independent "poetic" importance based on their selective visual presentation and the rhythmic intervals between their appearance. In this respect, the white manes and tails of the horses, even the reins leading from the cart to the horses (a frequent image), form an important part of the visual interplay.

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