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MILOŠ FORMAN

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The most obvious antecedents of the work of Forman, Passer, and Papoušek, who can be argued to have developed their own characteristic group style, were Italian Neorealism and *cinéma vérité*. Their early films were concerned with the “recording” or “exposing” of everyday reality rather than the expression of a personal vision. Miloš Forman has said: “Many years ago people used to say ‘that’s like in a film,’ meaning that it was incredible; later they said: ‘He filmed it marvellously,’ meaning that someone hoodwinked the others, and now a third phrase is being used when film-makers want spectators to believe what they see on the screen.” He clarified their program when he said that he was interested in “the life, problems, joys, and sorrows of those people who had no chance of becoming a Gagarin, Čáslavská, or Karel Gott.”¹

While their approach to filmmaking was a matter of conscious choice, it is interesting that none of the trio graduated from the Prague Film School (FAMU) as film directors. Those members of the New Wave who did all adopted a more self-conscious and “academic” approach to the problems of direction. Forman, who graduated in 1955, was trained as a scriptwriter and only became a director as a result of perseverance and good fortune. Ivan Passer went to FAMU but did not graduate, while Jaroslav Papoušek graduated as a sculptor before writing the short story “Black Peter,” which was to become the basis for the group’s first feature film.

The realist/documentary tradition of filmmaking constitutes a set of conventions no more or less “real” than others, but there is no question that it can still exert considerable force in an appropriate context. On what might be regarded as the superficial level of whether or not life in Czechoslovakia “looks like” the world of the Forman group, there can be no doubt. The cafés and dance halls look exactly as they do in the films, and the characterization is, in the main, authentic.

In their use of nonactors, the focus on everyday environment, and the employment of a deliberately functional camera style, they fall squarely within the neorealist tradition. Forman has admitted his admiration for the work of its latter-day exponent, Ermanno Olmi, and they both share an obsession with dance halls. (There are a number of significant parallels between the dance hall sequence in Forman’s *Loves of a Blonde* and Olmi’s similar sequence in *Il Posto* [*The Job*]). However, by the

standards of *Loves of a Blonde*, Olmi’s work is much more obviously manipulative and might almost be described as self-indulgent.

Cinéma vérité is clearly a movement that influenced the Czechs. Besides the group, it left its mark on the early films of Schorm, Jireš, and Chytilová. In Jaroslav Boček’s view, the use of *cinéma vérité* techniques to come to grips with social reality provided an experience of authenticity that

left deep traces on the members of the Czechoslovak “new wave.” It penetrated not only into their experience as film makers but also into their minds. Contrary to the members of the French “nouvelle vague,” they did not wrap themselves up in subjectivity and intimacy even later, but polarised the relation between the subjective and the objective world, subdued the tension between the individual and society, between man and history.²

It is not entirely clear what Boček means. It is certainly true that whatever the style adopted, nearly all the films of the Czechoslovak New Wave were concerned with both the individual and society. Nothing was produced merely for the purpose of making art. On the other hand, it can be argued that the direct influence of *cinéma vérité* was slight and primarily limited to short or medium-length films (e.g., Forman’s *Talent Competition*, Chytilová’s *A Bagful of Fleas* [*Pytel blech*]).

Stephen Mamber describes the essential element of *cinéma vérité* as “the act of filming real people in uncontrolled situations. Uncontrolled means that the filmmaker does not function as a ‘director’ nor, for that matter, as a screenwriter. In a *cinéma vérité* film; no one is told what to say or how to act.”³

From this point of view, the Czech films are clearly at fault. What they do – and this is particularly true of the Forman group – is to use elements of these techniques to give their scripted and directed films a sense of relevance and conviction. Their objective is the time-honored realist one of making the work seem more real.

Despite an indebtedness to outside influence, the films of the Forman group are distinguished in a number of important ways from the raw experience of Rossellini’s *Paisan*, the sentimentalism of De Sica and Zavattini, or the documentary concern with “men at work” that characterizes Olmi. The films provide more conscious (and less simplistic) critiques of society than their Italian counterparts, they are comedies, they are more cruel, and their character analysis is more profound. Invariably, they examine the hopes and failures of different generations (although this is an explicit theme only in Papoušek’s *The Best Age* [*Nejkrásnější věk*]), a confrontation with failure, disillusion, or death that is offset only through a concern for basic human qualities and a bitter but genuine humor. As Forman has said:

¹ Forman, quoted in Boček, *Looking Back*, p. 22.

² Boček, *ibid.*, p. 4.

³ Stephen Mamber, *Cinéma Vérité in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1974), p.2.

The tradition of Czech culture is always humor based on serious things, like *The Good Soldier Švejk*. Kafka is a humorous author, but a bitter humorist. It is in the Czech people. You know, to laugh at their own tragedy has been in this century the only way for such a little nation placed in such a dangerous spot in Europe to survive. So humor was always the source of a certain self-defense. If you don't know how to laugh, the only solution is to commit suicide.⁴

Ivan Passer has also produced some apt comments that might, without too much reservation, be extended to the work of his colleagues: "I don't like ambitious films, which end in compromise. I like those little films, which are as if by accident important. Those which you suspect of being more important than they at first glance appear to be." He continues:

A man might live through momentous events, or important encounters, which influence his life. But it doesn't happen too often. We are rather influenced by everyday banal situations. These situations cannot be uninteresting, that is unworthy of interest, because after all human life is made up of them. I think that . . . the physics of elementary particles provides answers to questions regarding the stars.⁵

Forman was the first to achieve success. However, before considering his film career in detail, it is worth recalling that, like Jiří Menzel, his early commitment was to theater; it was only after his failure to gain entry to drama school that he went to FAMU. During the war, his elder brother, who had studied under the surrealist artist František Tichý, worked as a set designer with the Eastern Bohemian Repertory Theater. It was while the company was visiting Náchod, where Forman was being brought up by an uncle, that he spent most of his time backstage with his brother and the Nazis decreed the closure of all the theaters in Czechoslovakia. He recalls the company's last performance, a "cheerful" operetta:

There was a very funny scene in the third act; and that was when, all of a sudden, everybody broke down . . . they opened their mouths, but nothing came out. They couldn't go on. The conductor rapped his baton, and they tried again. But all that happened was that tears streamed from their eyes. It went on like that for almost fifteen minutes. The performers didn't finish the show that night. Maybe for the first time in my life, I was terribly touched. From that moment I knew that, more than anything else in the world, I wanted to work in the theater.⁶

⁴ Forman, interviewed in Joseph Gelmis, *The Film Director as Superstar* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. 133.

⁵ Passer, quoted in Škvorecký, *All the Bright*, p. 94.

⁶ Forman, interviewed in Liehm, *Miloš Forman Stories*, p. 4.

Later, while at boarding school, Forman was involved in the organization of a drama club, and in his final year they put on a production of *Ballad of Rags* (*Balada z hadrů*), a musical about François Villon by Voskovec and Werich, with music by Jaroslav Ježek. They used E. F. Burian's theater, adopted the name the Musical Comedy Theater (causing confusion with the professional Comedy Theater), and bribed bill posters to put their advertising next to that of the National Theater. This production, which included the use of jazz orchestra and modern dance, was advertised as a "drama about the French revolutionary poet, François Villon," and they were even invited to give a guest show at a regional party conference. The whole significance of the episode lay in the fact that, to quote Forman: "In those days we weren't allowed to refer to Voskovec and Werich even by their initials."⁷

After leaving FAMU, Forman contacted Alfred Radok, for whom he had great admiration and, as a result, got the opportunity to collaborate with him on the script of his new film *Grandpa Automobile* (1956). It was while working as assistant director on the film that Forman first used a camera and learned most about the techniques he would have to employ if he was ever to become a director himself. In 1958, Radok invited him to work with him on *Laterna Magika*, a project that was really the opposite of everything that Forman has attempted in his film work. Forman has thus served his apprenticeship with one of the most talented figures in Czech theater and cinema.

Despite the tremendous success of *Laterna* at the Brussels Exposition of 1958, it was not long before its creators were fired for a complex series of petty political and careerist motives.⁸ Working under an assumed name and in collaboration with Jan Roháč, Forman continued his theatrical career by writing burlesque sketches for the Alhambra, a theater that Škvorecký describes as enjoying a reputation as a "den of depravity" among visiting Soviet tourists.

At about the time when he had worked on *Grandpa Automobile*, Forman had collaborated on two other films, Frič's *Leave It to Me!* (*Nechte to na mně!* 1955), starring Oldřich Nový, and Ivo Novák's *Puppies* (*Štěnata*, 1957). It was with *Puppies* that the world of the Forman school made its first appearance. Škvorecký writes: "It was a gentle and humorous story of young people, offering here and there a few glimpses into the real life of the young. After years of socialist realist fairy tales this was a complete novelty, and the critics predicted a great future for Ivo Novák."⁹ In effect, little more was to be heard of Novák, although *On the Tightrope* (*Na laně*, 1963), scripted by Jan Procházka, did treat the theme of youth with freshness and originality of *Puppies* is now attributed to Forman, who wrote the initial screenplay, worked as assistant director, and agreed on Novák as director because of the care and consideration he felt would be shown to his ideas.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 28-31.

⁹ Škvorecký, *All the Bright*, p. 75.

Despite these early involvements with film, it was ultimately through the theater that Forman came to make his directing debut. He had shared an apartment in Brussels for six months with Roháč, Vladimír Svítáček, and Jiří Šlitr of the Semafor Theater was out of this background that his project to film a documentary on the work of the Semafor developed.

Suchý and Šlitr, all of us admired Voskovec and Werich; but their early beginnings, particularly the legendary “Vest Pocket Revue” from 1927 we knew only from hearsay. It suffered the fate of all famous theatrical productions – it disappeared into oblivion, changed into a legend, and no one will ever know what it really looked like. I used to say to myself that Voskovec and Werich would have been happy to have their “Vest Pocket Revue” on film.¹⁰

Even at his early stage, Forman brought in his friends Ivan Passer and cinematographer Miroslav Ondříček. Despite his work with Radok, it was left to Ondříček to show Forman how to load and focus his new 16mm camera. When they projected what they had done, they liked the look of it and conceived the idea of filming the auditions that were to form the basis of *Talent Competition* (1963). Forman showed the footage to Jiří Šebor and Vladimír Bor of the Šebor-Bor production unit, which had previously backed Puppies and was to be associated with all the Forman/Passer/Papoušek films. They bought the footage and encouraged him to complete what was envisaged as a fifteen-minute film. It was then that Forman developed a story element featuring Věra Křesadlová, one of the audition’s young hopefuls and destined to become his second wife. He delivered a film with the awkward length of forty-five minutes, but events again ran in his favor when he was commissioned to make another forty-five minute film and combine the two together in one program. The two films, *Competition* and *If There Were No Music (Kdyby ty muziky nebyly)*, were then released under the collective title of *Talent Competition (Konkurs)*.

Škvorecký described *Talent Competition* as “a documentary hitherto unequalled in Czechoslovakian cinema. It was a cruel record of embarrassing female self-love, conceit and dreams of fame.”¹¹ Answering critics of the film’s cruelty, Forman wrote: “The cruelty which glares at you from the screen is present in the very nature of the audition . . . to film an audition and deprive it of that cruelty, would mean depriving it of its essence.”¹²

Jaroslav Papoušek’s short story “Black Peter” was set in 1947, but after the preparation of the first screenplay, Forman and Papoušek recognized that the problems with which they were dealing no longer corresponded to those of

contemporary youth. It was completely rewritten with the new generation in mind, and the resultant film and its successor, *Loves of a Blonde* (1965), were principally concerned with the problems of this generation. Within the format of the boy-meets-girl formula acceptable to socialist realist cinema and by a fusion of *cinéma vérité* with elements of classical film comedy, they were able to provide a more profound analysis of Czechoslovak society than any yet attempted. As Forman pointed out, they were able to get away with a lot because people don’t take comedies seriously.

Forman’s concern with presenting a realistic, albeit ironic, context for his film is evident during the credit sequence of *Black Peter*. As the manager of a supermarket moves back and forth across his shop to let in the female staff, the radio plays the *Nutcracker Suite* and *Entrance of the Gladiators*. The humor is gentle and naturalistic. The manager is soon engaged in familiar and coarse conversation with his staff and tells them to watch their language since the new lad he is expecting is only “a baby.” On cue, Petr is seen making a tortuous attempt to cross the road. He is short, confused, slouching, and self-conscious. He brushes his hair with the flat of his hand. The shop blind goes up, the supermarket is open, the stage is set.

Dialogue takes over as the manager outlines the nature of the new job, that of store detective. He points out, with no sense of contradiction, that although they trust the customers 100 percent, every now and then someone steals something. It’s not that there’s any lack of trust, but it’s Petr’s job to prevent this. As the film progresses Petr reveals himself as remarkably ill-equipped to deal with this particular of “socialist reality.” Not only does he hunt down a trusted friend of the management as a suspected thief but, when faced with a genuine thief, can only stare – transfixed with amazement.

The fact that Forman’s Petr did not conform to the ideal of “socialist youth” not only broke with aesthetic precedents but identified a real problem facing Czechoslovakia in the early sixties, that of teenage apathy. If one considers that a high percentage of nineteen-year-old boys had not heard of the Warsaw Pact and that, according to one poll, 47 percent of students considered themselves to be politically neutral,¹³ one can see that Petr’s limited horizons were not at all abnormal. At times, it even seems as if his underperformance is self-imposed. It is certainly the case that the absence of real opportunity to influence developments in society may lead to such a reaction and/or a preoccupation with personal problems. At worst, it can produce delinquency.¹⁴

Children are most directly the product of domestic environment, and the portrayal of family life in both *Black Peter* and *Loves of a Blonde* is uncomfortably penetrating. The films preceded the Kenneth Loach/David Mercer film, *Family Life*

¹⁰ Forman, quoted in *ibid.*

¹¹ Škvorecký, *ibid.*

¹² Forman, quoted in *ibid.*

¹³ See *Smena* (28 December 1965), and *Život strany* 6 (1966):13, cited in Golan, *Czechoslovak Reform Movement*, p. 100.

¹⁴ In 1963, delinquency in Czechoslovakia rose by 12 percent (Bratislava radio, 8 March 1964, quoted in Golan, *ibid.*).

(1971), by some years and touch on similar problems. Forman's obsession with child-parent relationships is evident also in his first American film, *Taking Off* (1971). It is sometimes argued that this preoccupation results from the loss of his own parents to concentration camps when he was eight (where they died in 1944). In view of the close parallels between *Black Peter* and *Loves of a Blonde*, I shall consider them together, examining the portrayal of child-parent relations, the analysis of teenage love, the formal debts to silent comedy, and their general criticisms of society.

Petr (Ladislav Jakim) lives with his two parents in a small apartment, the size of which is constantly emphasized by a tight panning shot that accompanies his father's well-worn path across the room during endless monologues. After his initial failure as a detective (when he has pursued and lost his first suspect), he simply goes home. His reception concisely sums up the essence of the domestic routine, the static relationships, and the failures in understanding.

His father (Jan Vostrčil) greets him with a barrage of meaningless rhetoric: "Where have you been? Ever seen your boss? He was round here looking for you." When Petr tries to explain, his father tells him what he should have done. "Why did you come home? Who do you think you are? In my time, I had to do many things I disliked. I faced up to them." At this point, his mother, whose own personality has clearly been suppressed by years of drudgery, intervenes and asks him to leave Petr alone: "He's only a child." For the first time, Petr defends himself, looking up indignantly from his soup in denial. His father immediately forms a male alliance with his son and tells his wife not to argue and to warm up the soup. Angry, he passes back and forth in front of a picture of the Virgin Mary and starts a tirade against the female sex: "Women! [His wife looks up momentarily in a reaction that parallels Petr's earlier defiance.] Women everywhere! Then who takes over when they get married? The men, of course." He concludes his lecture with the hope that there will not be another war and reminds Petr of the maxim, "Who keeps near the food, keeps far from the grave."

The scene admirably conveys the tensions and deceptions present in the triple relationship, and these are to be exposed in a more extreme form after Petr's failure to catch the real thief. Although played for laughs at the father's expense, the strength of this first scene lies in the very basic nature of its statement – the father's materialist preoccupations, male chauvinism, and concern with his own experience and the mother's protective but misplaced impulses. It is a situation that has its counterparts in all advanced industrial societies.

Despite the criticism of the family situation, there is no suggestion that Petr's parents are anything other than well-meaning or that there is an absence of love. The father tries to help him in his relations with the opposite sex by presenting him with a "useful" book entitled *Your Body*. Petr has already read it, but he and his father join forces again in the case of the "naked Venus," one of a range of art reproductions available for sale in the supermarket. His father is amazed that such a picture is on

sale, and his mother immediately comments: "And they call themselves socialists! You'll have to complain." But an unaccustomed sparkle has come to his father's eyes, and he asks what's wrong with a naked woman, and Petr has got to grow up, hasn't he? However, he is not prepared to go along with Petr's observation that she's prettier than the girl in their picture (the Virgin Mary). He points out the beauty of the Virgin, the way in which her eyes follow you. "Nobody paints like that today – they're all daubers."

The film's final scene comes after Petr's confrontation with the manager's friend (his first suspect) and his inability to act when faced with a real case of theft. He is subjected to another monologue from his father who lets loose his comments on the iniquities of modern youth and Petr's preference for the guitar over the violin he once bought him. ("Strum without practice and sing a bit.")

They are interrupted by the arrival of Petr's friend, Čenda (Vladimír Pucholt), a bricklayer, who had earlier stated that he liked his job because he felt like a "real worker." He is bullied into holding out his hands. "Take a look," says Petr's father, "he's not a hooligan." After several non sequiturs and contradictions, he makes the classic double bind comment that since Petr cannot make up his mind and does not know what sort of job he wants, he will make all the decisions until he can.

The film concludes when the model worker, Čenda, inadvertently mentions to a waiting friend that he does not want to leave yet because "This is interesting." Petr's father asks: "Do you know what you are talking about, do you have any idea at all?" At this point, the exasperated father clasps his head – the shot is frozen. Petr looks up in surprise. There is a second frozen shot of the father, and the film closes with the opening strains of the *Nutcracker Suite*.

The common sense prejudices of Petr's parents seem to be equally well bolstered by socialism or Catholicism. It is surely no accident that the nude reproduction is explicitly associated with antisocialist activities and compared unfavorably to the portrait of the Virgin Mary. While it is true that both Petr and his parents have their counterparts in other societies, the kind of repressive apathy that dominates their lives (with the exception of a weekend escape, in Petr's case, to dances, in his father's, to his beloved brass band) was also specific to Czechoslovakia in the early sixties.

Forman has described his original conception of the father's character:

He's the type of Czech who is wise in many ways, half old-style patriot, half Social Democrat. Life has taught him a lot; he has lived through the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the First and Second Czechoslovak Republics, and the Nazi occupation and all that followed – at least six different regimes. This already gives a man a certain amount of experience. He's the kind of man who certainly has told his son at one time: "Don't ever be an informer!" By now he knows he always has to have some

explanation for every changing situation. He just doesn't know yet how to explain this to his son.¹⁵

While the final conception was by no means as specific as this, these words give support to my contention that the remarkable frozen shot of Petr's father after asking "Do you really understand?" is open to a wide interpretation. How can Čenda be expected to understand the reality of thwarted hopes and crippled personalities that have given rise to this "interesting" domestic situation, partly the product of age but also of history.

Forman's use of the frozen shot in this connection is very clever since it ends the film with the same question mark as Truffaut's *Les quatre cents coups*. At the same time, he avoids the sense of déjà vu by focusing on the father instead of the son and by completing the sequence with a moving shot of Petr and a second frozen shot of his father. It suggests that neither generation has a monopoly on problems.

The role of parents is again examined in *Loves of a Blonde*. The theme is first introduced when we learn that the heroine, Andula (Hana Brejchová), had once slashed her wrists in a suicide attempt after the divorce of her parents. When she turns up unexpectedly in Prague in search of her lover, Míla Vašita (Vladimír Pucholt), we are introduced to his parents, who become the subject of an extended examination.

They are first seen dozing quietly in front of a cabaret musical program on television.¹⁶ The doorbell rings, and the mother draws the father's attention to it. "It couldn't have," he replies (i.e., no one ever calls). Andula has arrived unknown and unexpected. Her initial appearance sparks off a remarkable and neurotic diatribe on the mother's part. She and her husband bicker incessantly, their isolation from each other emphasized by the use of cross-cutting. Andula is not present during this scene, but when she returns, she has to submit to an extended inquisition from Míla's mother. Throughout this scene, the father consistently tries to take her part.

When Míla eventually arrives home, he is taken into his parents' bed for moral protection and becomes the center of an extended squabble over the bedclothes. His mother continues to talk on about his and Andula's iniquities and their effect on herself and the neighbors. The scene was completely improvised. Forman has explained how

these nonprofessional actors, like the father and mother ("she was a factory worker we found on a Prague tram") kept getting better and better during the shooting. On the last day of shooting I had enough material and enough time, because we were ahead of

schedule. And I decided that I'd like to try something different than I had planned. I told them the situation I wanted, but the words are their own.¹⁷

The portrait of the parents in *Loves of a Blonde* is more vital than that in *Black Peter*. This is principally because in the latter film the wife was little more than a cipher. However, it is also a result of the way in which Forman's two new nonprofessional discoveries, Josef Šebánek and Milada Ježková, were able to strike such sparks in their acting (whether scripted or improvised). The father comes across as both likeable and positive while the mother is anything but downtrodden. Her excesses are much more the product of middle age than social ills despite her concern for what the neighbors might think.

The domestic situation is a mirror reflection of that in the previous film. In *Black Peter*, there is a three-cornered situation with the mother defending her son against a domineering father whereas *Loves of a Blonde* shows a father defending his son's girlfriend against a domineering mother. The social comment is more generalized and exterior to the action, revealed in the down-at-the-heel nature of the apartment with its peeling plaster, the playing of the Czech national anthem after an evening of mediocrity, and the ironic accompaniment of "Moscow Nights"¹⁸ for an intercut scene of Míla entertaining a young lady in a Prague night club.

Although *Black Peter* and *Loves of a Blonde* are principally examinations of two youngsters and the society in which they live, their conventional audience appeal romances (both unsuccessful) that are featured in each of the films. In both cases, the importance of personal life is asserted and contrasted with the demands of day-to-day drudgery.

After Petr's first, unsuccessful experience of work, he is able to follow up his real interests at the weekend. He spies on Pavla (Pavla Martínková) through the knotholes of a bathing cubicle, and his conversation is concerned with female breasts, topless bathing suits, and nudity. While scarcely dynamic, his relationship with the sensual-looking Pavla is less disastrous than his forays into other walks of life.

Forman and Papoušek show a remarkable ability to project themselves into the uncertain world of teenagers, and this is often reflected in the dialogue. As Petr and Pavla lie side by side in the grass, he asks her what she's looking at. When she replies that she's looking at the green color because it calms her nerves, he retorts: "That may be the reason the cows are so calm. They do it all day." After attempting to dispatch an interruption from Čenda with the allegation that he is skinny and has smelly feet, Petr asks Pavla for a date.

¹⁵ Forman, interviewed in Liehm, *Miloš Forman Stories*, p. 42.

¹⁶ *The Lost Review*, (1961), a prize-winning television musical at Montreux, directed by Zdeněk Podskalský in collaboration with Jan Roháč, Vladimír Svitáček, and Ladislav Rychman

¹⁷ Forman, interviewed in Gelmis, *Film Director*, p. 134.

¹⁸ "Moscow Nights" was a Russian song of the mid-sixties. It was also popular in the West under the title "Midnight in Moscow."

The dance sequence that follows is, in its mixture of *cinéma vérité* style and comic invention, a prototype for that in *Loves of a Blonde*. Both are, in turn, a preparation for the more extended and elaborate use of this device in *The Firemen's Ball*. It provides an admirable framework for the analysis of tentative relations between members of the opposite sex. The section opens with a shot of a crowded dance floor, people begin to twist, and the music starts. In an almost exact parallel to the scene between the soldiers and the young girls in *Loves of a Blonde*, the camera focuses on Čenda and his friend Zdeněk (Pavel Sedláček) sitting at one table and a blonde sitting alone at another. Čenda demonstrates the art of the pickup with uncertain confidence. Having sat down with the blonde, he can think of nothing to say and eventually asks her to dance as the band stops playing. Petr puts off the evil time when he must actually dance by complaining that the floor is too crowded and goes behind a booth to practice the twist on his own. By the end of the evening, he has actually tried it on the dance floor. Čenda, despite his surface bravura and role as “positive” hero, gets himself thoroughly drunk trying to pluck up enough courage to have another go at the blonde.

Although much of the emphasis is on subsidiary characters shot against a *cinéma vérité* style background, the sequence also reveals that behind Petr's insecure façade is a dogged individuality that finds little scope for expression at home. The beauty and assurance of Pavla when she finally gets to dance emphasize the greater sophistication of the teenage girl and suggest that Petr will have to change rapidly if he is to maintain any sort of hold over her.

Petr is allowed one more date, during which they look at one of the nude reproductions from the supermarket. But that is the end of their relationship. During their idyll in the countryside, there is a lyrical panning shot of Pavla's sexually triumphant face against a background of trees. This is similar to the portrayal of her self-confidence at the dance, and together the scenes provide the only examples of poetic camera work in the film.

Petr's request for another date is turned down. After taking Pavla home, he walks dejectedly downhill but is suddenly called back. However, Pavla's mother merely wants to know if his shop sells gherkins. His failure is further driven home by a high angle shot from the balcony emphasizing his desolation. It is this scene that leads finally to his disasters at work. He is a “loser” in both aspects of his life. On the other hand, his relationship with Pavla is not serious, and his rejection is a setback and affront his ego – nothing more. The same can be said of his “failures” at work

For Andula, in *Loves of a Blonde*, love is much more important. The credit sequence begins in the style of Talent Competition with an unattractive plump girl gazing at the camera head on in a scene of Godardian self-consciousness. Against a background of banal flowered wallpaper, she plays a guitar and sings a tuneless pop (Petr's father's “strum without practice and sing a bit”). In opposition moves to shots of Andula's hands, twisting and turning in the darkness. She whispers to her friend about her

boyfriend, Tonda, showing her a ring and snapshot. The whole scene – the whispering, the turning hands, the examination of treasured and private possessions – adds a poetic and self-conscious element to Forman's work. It is entirely appropriate to Andula's romantic hopes.

The poetic mood continues with a whimsical scene set in a snow-covered forest for best. She engages in a friendly and mildly flirtatious conversation with a forest guard. Later, she tells her friend how they had discussed the mating habits of wild animals, from those who mated once a year to the wild geese, which are like people and live together for one hundred and twenty years. Andula reveals that she probably won't see the man again because he is married. It is a neat summing up of the way in which she is searching for a permanent relationship but deluding herself about existing prospects.

Her real romance, in terms of the narrative, begins during the central dance sequence when she exchanges glances with the young pianist, Míla, who is visiting her hometown of Zruč with the Meteor Orchestra from Prague. When the evening is over and Andula and her two friends are trying to extricate themselves from the attention of three army reservists, Míla persuades her to go to his room.

The bedroom scene that follows was, for its time, outspoken even by Western European standards. In Czechoslovakia, as Škvorecký has pointed out, it revealed the well-kept state secret that people take off their clothes in order to go to bed with each other.¹⁹ In fact, it is shot with taste, humor, and considerable subtlety.

Míla has to work hard and draw on all his experience to overcome Andula's timidity and her vulnerability is fully captured in the scene's opening shot. She is shown seated in medium shot, nude, with her back toward us. Míla puts his hand on her shoulder, and she instinctively moves away. He caresses and then kisses her in a moment of fragile simplicity. There is also a piece of comic business when the blind shoots up when they get into bed and eventually falls down. It gives Forman the chance to have Míla roll up the blind with the dangling cord between his legs in a kind of upward striptease, Andula averting her eyes at the crucial moment of revelation.

When Andula follows him to Prague, she receives her less than enthusiastic welcome at his parents' apartment. However, despite the clear evidence that Míla does not really love her and that she will probably not see his family again, she persists in her illusions. Back in the dormitory at the end of the film, she tells her friend about the virtues of Míla's parents – the father is “fantastic.” Yes, she says, she will probably visit them often. The romance with Míla has taken its place along with her previous dreams. As the screenplay puts it, she smiles, perhaps to the angels. The

¹⁹ Škvorecký, *All the Bright*, p. 84.

scene ends with “Andula smiling in her sleep, a smile perhaps sad, perhaps bitter, perhaps happy. The half light prevents us from seeing precisely.”²⁰

I have discussed Forman’s concern with realism, child-parent relations, and the uncertainties and sufferings of teenage love. While many of the incidents described can be seen as amusing, they are also serious – if falling short of the tragic. Forman’s ability to mix these responses is something that he shares with Chaplin. He has said: “The first film maker who really touched me was Charlie Chaplin. All of his films. I don’t know if I started liking films because Chaplin was so good or if he touched something that was already in me that I didn’t know about before. I was very moved by his mixture of laughter and tears”²¹ Forman’s own capacity to attain this kind of mixed reaction cannot be ascribed to formal script and direction, although these provide a necessary context. In a very basic sense, the comic flavor of his films is instinctive to him and his collaborators. However, the comedy is considerably aided by set pieces deriving their inspiration from silent film comedy.

In *Black Peter*, the key scene comes toward the beginning of the film when Petr begins his first day’s work. He is immediately thrust into the supermarket in conspicuous white overalls and proceeds to eye people almost eyeball to eyeball as they collect their purchases. He exchanges glances with a suspicious-looking man and acts embarrassed when he gets a stern look in exchange. There then follows a sequence owing something to *Emil and the Detectives* and shot in Chaplinesque mid-distance.

Petr follows the man when he leaves the shop, walking so closely behind him that he is almost standing on his heels. When the man stops to light a cigarette, Petr almost walks into him and, when spotted, affects exaggerated interest in contemplating the sky. As the man leaves a second shop, a boy runs out apparently chasing after him. Now convinced that he is a thief, Petr joins the pursuit only to discover himself in a repeat of his previous predicament when the boy suddenly runs off in another direction. From the foot of a flight of steps, the camera looks up through an arch into a street on a higher level. The man passes, Petr following, but in the next shot, the man is alone and Petr has given up the chase.

In *Loves of a Blonde*, the comic set piece is the dance hall sequence although, as mentioned above, it shares many ideas with the dance in *Black Peter*. The social director responsible for the welfare of the girls in a shoe factory at Zruč (Josef Kolb)²² has arranged for troops to visit the town. As was the case in a number of provincial towns, there was a shortage of men, and his plans were intended to provide a temporary solution to the problem. A dance is arranged in their honor.

²⁰ Miloš Forman, Jaroslav Papoušek, and Ivan Passer, “Les Amours d’une Blonde,” *L’Avant-Scene du Cinéma*, no. 60 (June 1966), p. 34.

²¹ Forman, interviewed in Gelmis, *Film Director*, p. 133.

²² Josef Kolb was the social director of the factory in real life.

Unfortunately, the soldiers are not the national service boys the girls had hoped for; they are reservists, or “old buffers,” as the girls put it.

The dance is a special event and the Meteor Orchestra has been specially booked for the occasion. On the right of the hall sit the young girls and a few older ones, on the left the “old buffers.” Various individual incidents are shown on or around the dance floor, all observed in cinéma vérité style. Kolb, arms folded, presides with smug satisfaction over the evening he has organized. As he claps his hands a half-drunk soldier looks up in annoyance (repeat of a similar incident in *Black Peter*). When a soldier asks a girl to dance, she holds her hands together in prayer as if to express gratitude and surprise that anyone could conceivably ask her. A particularly obese and balding man dances with a tall, thin brunette who is having the time of her life. The down-at-the-heels surroundings, the apparently willful selection of unglamorous young ladies and grotesque middle-aged men has obvious links with the cruel” and “inhuman” observation with which Forman was charged in the case of *Talent Competition* and *The Firemen’s Ball*. However, in this instance, such views are more a reflection on the spectator than the filmmaker. Despite the ironic build-up to the evening and its sad aftermath, it is obvious that the occasion itself is a success and that most of the men and girls are enjoying themselves.

It is within this context that Forman focuses on his two sets of protagonists, the trio of reservists on one side of the hall who eye the trio of girls (Andula plus two friends) on the other through a forest of bodies. With the exception of the dominant, initiating soldier (Vladimír Menšík), the other two were both played by non-professionals (two of Forman’s old school friends). The soldier played by Ivan Kheil is merely nondescript, but the other (Jiří Hrubý), with his brush haircut, thick-lensed glasses, and double chin is exactly like a caricature by Josef Lada from *The Good Soldier Švejk*. After each group has assessed the other’s merits in unflattering terms, Menšík starts things moving by getting the waiter to take a bottle of wine to the girls’ table. Unfortunately, the waiter gets the message wrong and delivers the bottle to a second and older trio of girls, two of whom are positively ugly. Menšík goes off to correct the error as his two colleagues try hard to ignore the smiles and nods of encouragement that are directed at them from across the floor. Hrubý, however, nods back.²³ Menšík returns, self-satisfied, ads shirt cuff with the air of someone who has taken decisive action to retrieve a lost situation. As the bottle is removed to the obvious disappointment of the older girls, the central one (who is brunette and quite attractive) turns her head to one side with suppressed tears and quiet suffering.

As the three soldiers get ready to move, Hrubý says that he’s not coming – he does not want to move in procession behind the other two. While they go on without him, he straightens his tie, tucks in his shirt, smoothes his hair with his hands, and takes off his wedding ring. As the girls approach across the floor, he massages his ring finger under the table, moving obscurely in time to the music. When he rises to

²³ A joke developed to absurd proportions in Papoušek’s *Homolka and the Purse* (1971).

shake hands, the ring falls from his pocket and rolls across the floor, ending up unerringly, between the nylon-clad legs of the brunette. Hrubý follows, crawling under the table and finding himself “between three pairs of female legs which close one against the other like flowers closing for the night.”²⁴

After the dance, the three soldiers plan to develop their romantic inclinations, but in Zruč there’s nowhere to go after dark except to the woods. (“Imagine it, in this weather.”) The three girls escape to the lavatory to discuss evasion tactics, leaving the soldiers to their uncertainties and stirrings of conscience. Their discussion hinges on the expense of the evening (the bottle of wine), and Menšík points out that you can only get “it” (sex) free at home, although he has his doubts in Hrubý’s case. In succession, they each threaten to go home, taking turns standing up and sitting down like updated versions of Laurel and Hardy. Eventually, Andula spends the night with Míla, and Kolb, with poetic justice, directs Menšík firmly to the brunette to whom he had mistakenly sent the wine bottle.

The whole of the dance sequence is much more elaborate than the simple interlude in *Black Peter* and more rigorously structured. The careful balance in the presentation of the three trios each with their focal point (Menšík, Andula, the brunette), the panning shots that follow the waiter round the edge of the dance floor and establish the physical/psychological distance between the groups, the sense of the dance floor as an arena and place of danger – all this demonstrates that, despite its “realistic”, opening there is nothing accidental about the content. The business with the wine bottle and Hrubý’s ring are devices that come straight from silent comedy. This self-conscious use of the dance situation enables Forman to reveal a great deal about the hopes and aspirations of different generations and sexes and is a clear preparation for *The Fireman’s Ball* where the whole film is based on the activities surrounding a dance.

A major difference between *Black Peter* and *Loves of a Blonde* is the extent to which the criticism of contemporary society has become overt. The prime object for attack is the bureaucracy. Immediately after our introduction to Andula, Kolb is shown at administrative headquarters, where he puts forward his scheme for importing soldiers for his 2,000 isolated girls. A girl is waiting outside an office door, looking through the frosted glass at a committee discussion taking place inside. Her fate is in the balance as an official points out that girls should only be allowed to leave the factory to get married and that priority must be given to the fulfillment of the production plan. In response to Kolb’s ideas, an army colonel (Jan Votrčíl) points out that there is no strategic case for the stationing of troops in the area of Zruč. But Kolb asks him to imagine himself in the position of a young girl and to remember that even he is fighting for peace. Visibly embarrassed, the colonel announces that he cannot give a definitive decision and will have to pass the request to his superiors. “Superiors! Who are these superiors?” demands Kolb.

Kolb’s determination carries him through the well-trying tradition of buck-passing, and the next scene opens with the banner “Welcome to the Czechoslovak People’s Army.” In answer to the maiden’s prayer, a small train slowly rounds a curve as the town band plays in welcome. An extremely unmilitary-looking group of middle-aged men descends and is confusedly lined up by its officers. The hopes of the waiting girls are dashed. As the soldiers march off, they sing an incongruous military song, “Crossing rivers of blood. . . .” This antimilitarist portrayal of the army is both “realistic” and straight from Hašek, emphasizing the Czechs’ real attitude to war, particularly when the cause is dictated by others. Perhaps the most amusing “Švejkian” image in the film is of Hrubý leaving the dance hall, the long belt of his military greatcoat trailing on the ground.

Having attacked both bureaucracy and militarism, Forman still has time for sham democracy. After Andula has spent the night with Míla, she stops seeing her former boyfriend. As a result, he invades the girls’ hostel, creating a scandal and demanding the return of his ring. The result is an address in the Union of Young Czechoslovaks where a woman of “a certain age,” serious and preoccupied, talks to the girls. After they have listened to a whole range of moral platitudes on sex and marriage, one of the girls suggests that they should all reflect on what has been said, and the motion is put to a vote. Everyone is for and no one against. Apart from a few half-smiles, the passive solemnity of the occasion is presented as a farce, a ritual imitation of democracy in which nobody says what they think. It seems all too authentic and is presented without any of the obvious absurdist humor of Havel’s *The Memorandum*. Andula’s reaction is shown when, asked if there are any abstentions, the next shot shows her sitting by the roadside waiting for a lift to Prague where the real preoccupation of youth is with rock and roll.

Following the scene in which we see Andula’s smile “perhaps sad, perhaps bitter, perhaps happy,” there is one more – the conclusion – where she is seen at work in the shoe factory. She is supervised by Kolb as Schubert’s “Ave Maria” is played on the soundtrack. The scenes indicate the permanence of illusion, hope, and routine work. The factory scene recalls the final episode of Olmi’s *Il Posto* with its rhythmic turning of the office duplicator. Andula, however, has shown none of the resignation to the future characteristic of Olmi’s Domenico.

Loves of a Blonde is not an “intellectual” film, and its themes of the impermanence of young love, the confusion and despair of middle age, and the gulf between the generations are substantially the same as those in *Black Peter*. However, more than any other Forman film, it points to some of the obvious absurdities within Czechoslovak society – the official morality, the ritual repetition of platitudes, the apathy that this induces – and the fact that no one, with the exception of Kolb, is prepared to cut through the pattern of bureaucracy that dominates life. It is circumvented, but in a way that implies a kind of conditioned acquiescence.

²⁴ Forman, Papoušek, and Passer, “Les Amours,” p. 15.

Forman's work is occasionally quoted in connection with the sixties attack on narrative primacy. However, there seems to be little conscious intent behind his characteristically loose structure where individual scenes are only tangentially attached to a largely implicit narrative development. He is guided by his own interests rather than any desire to attack narrative per se.

When I'm writing a screenplay, the only thing that guides me is what I feel is interesting. I don't know why I have never worried much about whether a story is logical or not. Still, a certain logic does crop up at certain moments, in certain situations and scenes. If one adds up all these "interesting" moments, they don't have the weight of a "classic," logical construction; but they do have the advantage of a certain nonsense with its own strict rules, depending on the behavior of the characters who are involved. I don't like guessing the future. I'd rather let myself be surprised by how things develop.²⁵

The form is also related to the collaborative nature of the work, the creative use of nonprofessional actors, and, in particular, the contributions of Passer and Papoušek.

We worked together, but all three of us had our own ideas about the film as if each of us were solely responsible for the film as a director. And because, by some quirk of fate, it happened that their thinking fit right in with mine, and vice versa, we stimulated and inspired each other.²⁶

Speaking of his experiences in the United States, Forman has drawn attention to the absence of collaborative effort in scenario writing and the obsession with attributing creative ideas to individuals.

There is obviously no deliberate attempt by Forman to subvert narrative tradition, and in his concern with the realistic surface of his subjects, he is interested in increasing the illusionism of his films. In fact, Roy Armes has criticized the "lack of abrasiveness" in Forman's work, by which he means that the films do not "make us question our ways of living and loving."²⁷

However, their effect within the society that produced them was to do precisely this, and the fact that they were considered too negative for distribution in the Soviet Union should not be forgotten. Even if one considers the films outside of the context in which they were made, Armes' criticism is difficult to sustain – certainly if the justice of the points I have made about the films is accepted.

²⁵ Forman, quoted in Liehm, *Miloslav Forman Stories*, pp. 108-109.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 140.

²⁷ Roy Armes, *The Ambiguous Image* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1976), p. 185.

Forman does use estrangement techniques derived from the "nouvelle vague" (Truffaut at the end of *Black Peter*, Godard at the beginning of *Loves of a Blonde*) but within a "realist" and "popular" context. It can be argued that they are the more effective for that reason. It is noticeable that Forman's "realist" and "humanist" film version of Ken Kesey's novel, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1976), created a genuine sensation and discussion – not among film critics but among audiences. It is precisely Forman's popular and human touch that enables him to make his points "felt" as well as demonstrated.

Forman's next film, *The Firemen's Ball* (1967), was much more radical in form with its social criticism conducted on allegorical plane. The original plan was to make a film about people who organize dances and entertainments with Prague's Lucerna Ballroom as a background. The idea had obvious relations to Kolb's "entertainment" in *Loves of a Blonde*. Forman describes how they went to the mountains on the script:

One evening, to amuse ourselves, we went to a real firemen's ball. What we saw was such a nightmare that we didn't stop talking until the next day about it. So we abandoned what we were writing on to start writing this script, because it was something really fantastic.

I didn't want to give any special message or allegory. I wanted just to make a comedy knowing that if I'll be real, if I'll be true, the film will automatically reveal an allegorical sense. That's a problem of all governments, of all committees, including firemen's committees. That they try and they pretend and they announce that they are preparing a happy, gay, amusing evening or life for the people. And everybody has the best intentions. And everybody's prepared to be happy, to help. But suddenly things turn out in such a catastrophic way that, for me, this is a vision of what's going on today in the world.²⁸

He originally intended to make one of the girls in the firemen's beauty contest the leading character in the film. However, he has explained how his interest in the general atmosphere of the ball and the activities of the firemen's committee made this impossible. He did not foresee the drawbacks of this approach until he began to edit the film. "Then I understood that this collective hero doesn't keep the film together as solidly as one leading person."²⁹ This is perfectly true, but it is not the only factor that makes it difficult for audiences to relate to the film. The first half of the film is constructed in the traditional Forman style of comedy plus social comment, but from the onset of the fire, the atmosphere turns sour and the expected appears almost entirely. In terms of the film's overall structure and objectivities, the change is logical, but the adjustment is difficult in the context of a film aiming for a popular and accessible level.

²⁸ Forman, interviewed in Gelmis, *Film Director*, pp. 134-135.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 135.

The film's subsequent development is prepared in a precredit sequence (Forman's use of this device) when the film's major themes are introduced. It begins close-up of a poster advertising the annual firemen's ball. Decorative flames frame the edges, and we are promised an evening of music, dancing, and raffles. This is followed by a close-up of a black presentation case containing a ceremonial hatchet. The local firemen's committee has decided to honor their aged president who has recently developed cancer. As they pass the case round at a meeting, one of them comments: "We should have given it to him last year when he was eighty-five. Now it looks as if we're rushing to give it to him before it's too late." In view of the president's advanced age, it is an observation that has more than a grain of truth. The leader of the firemen is played by Jan Vostrčil and his second-in-command by Josef Šebánek.

The scene shifts to a dance hall where preparations are being made for the evening's entertainment. The dignified old president is sitting at a table, a full pint front of him, waiting patiently, as he will all evening. Josef Kolb (also a fireman) enters, beaming with pleasure and carefully wiping the froth from his own pint. He is responsible for the supervision of the raffle prizes and is here being used for much the same avuncular qualities that he exhibited as the social director in *Loves of a Blonde*. He notices that one of the prizes is gone and calls to his colleague, Václav, who is holding a ladder as another man chars the edges of a huge banner with a flame gun. During the argument that follows about the missing prize, the ladder falls and the banner goes up in flames, leaving the third fireman swinging from the roof. The two firemen cannot work the fire extinguisher, and when the president shows them how, it won't work. The credits follow with a sequence of tinted photographs showing various village fire brigades and ending with a photograph of the current one, looking every bit as dated as its predecessors.

This highly conscious summation of the film's themes – the inadequacies of bureaucratic rule, the mixed motives behind the presentation, the theft of the prizes, the incompetence, the chaos caused as people argue about responsibility testifies to a new approach from Forman. In fact, in its conscious structure, the film is more reminiscent of Papoušek's solo works than the other films of Forman and Passer. Despite yet another borrowing from silent comedy, the episode with the ladder, Forman has already adopted a more direct and critical attitude toward his characters.

The first part of the film is given an alternating structure which features the organization of a beauty competition and the progressive disappearance of the raffle prizes. The beauty competition is very much the film's set piece and begins as the firemen look at a double-page spread of a Miss World competition in the privacy of their board room. Vostrčil adds up the contestants, prodding a fat lascivious finger into each female figure as he does so.

The search for beauty on the dance floor is approached from two viewpoints – they go to the balcony to look down at breasts and retreat to floor level to look at legs. The shots of a woman with huge breasts that almost surround the man with

whom she is dancing and another of a woman with varicose veins are more cruel than anything that had appeared in Forman's earlier films. Even at the level of amateur beauty competitions, corruption and bribery are rampant. A list of finalists is eventually scraped together, but only after the rejection and then acceptance of a bribe and a name being put on the list and then taken off without anyone knowing why.

The actual parade of the contestants in the committee's private room provides a delightful study of male lechery. Prior to the occasion, one of them combs his hair and another smooths his bald head with the flat of his hands. They then arrange themselves in the form of an interviewing panel to meet with their first disappointment, Růžena, whose ambitious father has used his influence to get her on the list of finalists. The remaining contestants are equally disappointing and, in one instance, accompanied by her mother. Even when the body is captivating, it will be capped by an embarrassed and giggling face.

The committee has absolutely no idea how to organize the proceedings, its approach varying from pompous bureaucratic verbiage to military drill tactics. The day is apparently saved by a late arrival who had gone home to get her bathing suit. Without hesitation, she proceeds to strip off her dress. "Hold it," shouts Vostrčil – she stops with her dress half off, her head covered like a shrouded sculpture – "she can't undress here." The others urge him to let her, and he agrees provided that they lock the door. After his initial puritanical reaction, he whispers accusingly: "Why didn't you tell them all to wear bathing suits?" When there is a knock on the door, the luckless girl is hurriedly thrust back into her dress and Vostrčil pulls up his trousers and buttons his jacket as if caught *in flagrante delicto*.

The scenes have obvious connections with the auditions in *Talent Competition* and *Taking Off* in their conscious deglamorization of the process of achieving popular fame. On the other hand, most of the contestants of The Firemen's Ball have been coerced into appearing before the firemen, the emphasis being placed on the fantasies of middle-aged men rather than the delusions of teenage girls. Like the precredit sequence, the process ends in total chaos. The old president finds himself marching forward for his presentation twice in lieu of the beauty queens, only one of whom (Růžena) ever reaches the platform. Eventually, the contestants all hide in the ladies' lavatory as men chase girls all over the hall and a fat, middle-aged crowns herself queen to universal acclaim.

Intercut with the committees futile attempts to organize the competition are Kolb's equally hopeless efforts to hang on to the raffle prizes. The woman left in charge (Milada Ježková) when he goes to fetch a beer has herself stolen one of the headcheese, and hidden it under the table in a bag. The entertainment is by a repetition of the ring gag from *Loves of a Blonde*. Růžena loses her beads both down her bosom and all over the floor. While crawling about in search of them, she ends up under the prize table with a boyfriend in hot pursuit. The band plays the Beatles's

“From Me to You” as objects mysteriously fall over and unspecified sexual activities go on underneath. It recalls the similar episode in Buñuel’s *Belle de Jour*.

It is during the chaotic end to the competition that the fire intervenes. This not only provides a respite from the evening’s progressive deterioration but also serves as a prelude to the change of mood that characterizes the second half of the film. As the sound of the siren gradually percolates through the din accompanying the death throes of the beauty competition, Vostrčil’s face is transformed with rapture. A house is totally ablaze and a bell rings, which is, at the same time, both an alarm and a knell. Inevitably, the firemen fail completely in their efforts to put out the fire. Their glossy new engine gets stuck in a snowdrift, and they expend vast amounts of energy doing very little, using shovels to heap snow on the fast-blazing house. None of this is conveyed in narrative fashion but in a series of short, fragmented images.

The fire itself and the tragedy of the old man whose house is burning down become a spectacle for the assembled audience. The crowd arrives from the dance hall in scenes that recall the commercialization of the fake miracle in Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita* or the rescue of the trapped man in Billy Wilder’s *Ace in the Hole*. The barman has two waitresses drag out a sled full of drinks and is soon in business again. Having failed to get paid for his previous sales in the confusion, he walks round sniffing people’s breath to find out if they are telling him the truth about what they owe him. The old man, wearing long, white underwear, is rescued from his burning house, and members of the crowd, well-meaning but clumsy, move him around in a manner that is both cruel and comic. The humor is black. The barman borrows a table salvaged from the wreckage so that he can continue with his trade. The old man’s view of the fire is both blocked and unblocked. They sit him down with his back to it so that he can’t see it and they move him nearer so that he doesn’t get cold.

The section closes with a curious, reflective sequence as, warmed by their drinks, the people gaze at the final images of the burning house to the accompaniment of pop choral music. The effect is poetic, spiritual, and ambiguous; one would be tempted to describe it as an effect of brotherhood if it were not for the catalogue of selfish cupidity that is to follow. An old fireman is left behind and wrapped in a woman’s headscarf to keep him warm. When he complains that he will look like a woman, he is told: “you’re an old man. What’s the difference?” He has been left to guard the old man’s belongings, to see that nothing is stolen.

On the words “nothing’s stolen,” Forman cuts to the dance hall where everything has been stolen. One couple is waltzing and another is dancing a desultory rock and roll. Prior to the discovery of the mass theft and as a collective gesture, the people donate their raffle tickets for the benefit of the homeless old man. When the theft is discovered, the lights are twice switched off in the hope that the ill-gotten gains will be returned under cover of darkness. The only result is that Kolb is caught red-handed trying to return the headcheese.

After a long discussion among the firemen on whether Kolb should or should not have returned it, they remember that they have not made the presentation to the president. By this time, everyone has gone home. The president makes a marvellous and sincere speech of thanks but, on opening the box, discovers that the hatchet too has been stolen. He looks sorrowfully and pityingly at the firemen. The film then moves back to the old man’s house, a black square burned out of the surrounding snow. The old man makes his way from the ruins and climbs into a bed, with the fireman left on guard. Assorted belongings including pictures, a sewing machine, and a crucifix in a wastepaper basket are scattered about the bed. There is a return to sad choral music with the film ending on a poetic/surreal note.

There are clear political observations during the second part of the film. Most is the speech prior to the presentation of the valueless collection of raffle tickets to the old man. The spokesman searches vainly for the right ideological clichés, with appropriate interventions from the audience. “Please accept this, the result of our . . . [“collection” calls out someone] . . . yes, but the collection is the of our [“goodwill” shouts another] . . . no, it’s on the tip of my tongue . . . [“kindness” shouts a mean-faced father] . . . no [“comradely feelings” whispers one to another, and ““solidarity” is also suggested] . . . yes, solidarity – and with sympathy you in your tragic misfortune.” Throughout the speech, the audience maintain sober faces, which are almost literally tongue in cheek and an exact parallel to the girls’ reaction to their moral address in *Loves of a Blonde*. The same impassive faces greet the firemen’s attempts to get the prizes put back on the raffle table.

The discussion on whether or not Kolb should have returned the headcheese is also conducted in terms of platitudes and self-justification. His honesty is generally regarded as idiocy, and as one particularly faceless member of the brigade puts it: “The prestige of the brigade is more important than my honesty.” They conclude that the real crooks were those who stole without tickets. The dialogue continues:

“*The people are waiting. What will we tell them?*” [In fact, they have all gone home.]

“*They were all there. They’re all under suspicion so they’d better keep quiet*” [says the faceless one].

“*We mustn’t underestimate people. We must have faith.*” [Vostrčil]

This last statement echoes the views of the Communist mayor in the Škvorecký/Schorm *End of a Priest* with his endlessly pious and hopeful simplifications. Škvorecký, in fact, regards the whole of this final sequence of *The Firemen’s Ball* as “the greatest political metaphor in Czech cinema.”³⁰ Kolb’s honesty, about the headcheese is seen as a parallel with the situation of those who wished to tell the

³⁰ Škvorecký, *All the Bright*, pp. 88-89.

truth about the past, namely, the Slánský affair and the purges of the fifties. The argument, to admit the truth or cover it up, was well to the fore at the time the film was made.

The Firemen's Ball disgusted critics in the United States, the USSR, and West Germany – to say nothing of Carlo Ponti, who withdrew his financial involvement. What they all disliked was the film's pessimistic and cruel picture of human relations. Forman's deliberate use of the firemen in *Keystone Kops* – style chases and compositions fails to disguise this harsh quality. Everyone is alone, it seems, and death the only future. How else can one read the film's conclusion? Three old men face precisely this emptiness – the president, dying of cancer and without his hatchet; the old man who has lost his house; and the fireman wrapped in an old woman's headscarf, his sex no longer relevant. There are humorous moments, moments of common humanity, but the good deeds are ineffective formalities, and in the final analysis, the "people" do not seem to feel or care. Only Kolb is benevolent and honest, and even he engages in accusation and recrimination.

The effect of Forman's work is best summed up by the surrealist critic Vratislav Effenberger, who is quoted in full by both Škvorecký and Liehm. Speaking of Forman's humor as "vicious, dangerous, concealed, and explosive," Effenberger continues:

He has dared to do something for which he should not be forgotten . . . he has struck out against the petty bourgeois Czech. He has taken aim at cowardice, apathy, soccer fanaticism, brutality, aridity, good-natured empty-headedness, parochialism, taproom philosophising, and egotism. . . . He has struck into the marrow of spiritual wretchedness out of which, essentially, spring various kinds of fascism and Stalinism. . . . In [his] active understanding of reality, in this feeling for contemporary forms of aggressive humour and for the critical functions of absurdity, in the fanatical anger which in his case can only be a function of some new inner light and freshness, Forman's work fulfils the most advanced functions of modern art.³¹

As a statement on *The Firemen's Ball*, this would seem fair comment, but it is only partially true of the earlier work where Forman tempers criticism with sympathy and understanding, observing an inner strength in his characters that makes them more than the product of social conditions and limited perspectives. For man's anger is directed at the system and the establishment, not at the individual who suffers from its distortions.

Unlike any of Forman's other films (including those made in the United States), *The Firemen's Ball* is consciously abrasive and deliberately subverts audience expectations. In both *Black Peter* and *Loves of a Blonde*, Forman showed his ability to

³¹ Vratislav Effenberger, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 91 .

move from humour to serious comment – to hit the audience while it was still laughing. An example from *Black Peter* is the final scene, which begins as comedy when Cenda is dragged into the apartment and forced to sample the cooking of Petr's mother. To quote Cenda, the situation becomes "interesting" before ending with the question mark of the frozen shots. A better example comes from *Loves of a Blonde* when Andula eavesdrops on Míla and his parents bickering in their double bed. We laugh at the situation, and it looks as though she is doing the same until it becomes apparent that she is, in reality, weeping bitterly. *The Firemen's Ball* provides an extended elaboration of this technique. For the first half of the film we laugh, albeit a little uncomfortably, but in the second half the laughter is frozen as the awful reality of what has amused us is fully revealed. The effect is heightened by the surface comic procedures that are still maintained, an exaggerated farce about matters that are no longer funny.³²

Forman accepts the cruelty of his film and relates this directly to the absence of a central hero.

As we know, a hero is often used as a device to illustrate certain sins. He takes up his cross and, by arousing the spectator's sympathies, eliminates any bitterness the latter may feel. There is nobody like this in *Firemen*. That's why it seems more bitter and more cruel than my previous pictures. I think this is quite all right, because when I'm dealing with somebody who is weaker than I, I cannot be completely cruel; but if I'm attacking someone who is a hundred times more powerful, then malice and even a certain amount of cruelty are quite appropriate.³³

This quotation seems to contradict Forman's earlier interview with Joseph Gelmis, in which he sees the absence of a central sympathetic character as a fault.³⁴ Here, on the contrary, the cruelty and absence of a central hero seems to be part of deliberate strategy. It gives support to the interpretation of the film as a political allegory. On reading the script before production, Liehm noted that the film "might turn out to be the most penetrating political pamphlet that had ever been made into a movie or written up as a novel or performed on the stage anywhere east of the Elbe."³⁵ The post – Dubček government appears to have accepted of the film by including it on its 1973 list of films banned forever.

³² It is noticeable that Forman is now using his "nonprofessional" actors as a repertory company, and they often overact in a grotesque and uncomfortable manner. This is larly true of Josef Kolb. It is difficult to assess how much of this is intentional, but it is due to the nonprofessionals regarding themselves as real actors and rehearsing contrary to Forman's wishes.

³³ Forman, quoted in Liehm, *Miloš Forman Stories*, pp. 84-86.

³⁴ Forman, interviewed in Gelmis, *Film Director*, p. 135.

³⁵ Liehm, *Miloš Forman Stories*, pp. 82-83.

Forman's own attitude remains evasive. He has said:

If I succeed in making a thoroughly honest motion picture, it cannot help but a certain political and social meaning, no matter what the film's about.

But, on the other hand, I must admit that I'm impressed by stories about people who have been shoved into a crisis or into a dramatic situation by their helplessness; and the cruelest kind of helplessness, the kind that arouses deepest sympathy, is the individual's helplessness against the Establishment. Maybe this is what really determines the social message of a movie. And from then on, it is interpreted politically, I guess.³⁶

This rather grudging admission of the political aspects of his work is almost certainly not an attempt to stay on the right side of official opinion. Theoretically, this could have been a motive in 1968 when the cultural implications of the Soviet invasion were unknown. It is much more likely that he does not wish to see his work reduced to being no more than a political pamphlet. Attacking the use of the word *dissident* in connection with his own work, Milan Kundera has criticized the Western tendency to interpret Eastern European art in terms of being pro- or anti-Communist in its attitudes:

If you cannot view the art that comes to you from Prague, Budapest, or Warsaw any other way than by means of this wretched political code, you murder it, no less brutally than the worst of the Stalinist dogmatists. And you are quite unable to hear its true voice. The importance of this art does not lie in the fact that it pillories this or that political regime but that, on the strength of social and human experience of a kind people here in the West cannot even imagine, it offers new testimony about mankind.³⁷

The Firemen's Ball cannot be reduced to political allegory although this element should be recognized. If the film was transparently allegorical, Forman, Passer, and Papoušek would not have had to travel throughout Czechoslovakia to explain to local fire brigades that it was not intended as a literal criticism of their work. In fact, international audiences have largely missed the political significance of the film since they are unaware of the events to which it might be related. The tendency has been to interpret it precisely in Kundera's sense as a testimony about mankind that has been accepted or rejected according to individual experience.

Forman's two American films, *Taking Off* (1971) and *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1976), lie outside the scope of detailed consideration here, but it is interesting that

³⁶ Forman, in *ibid.*, pp. 147-148.

³⁷ Milan Kundera, interviewed by George Theiner, *The Guardian* (London, October, 1977, p. 10).

both mark a continuation of the concerns in his previous work. In *Taking Off* he returned to the themes of *Black Peter* and *Loves of a Blonde*, an analysis of the generation gap seen in terms of American society. Just as the origins of *Loves of a Blonde* were based on Forman's own encounter with a girl like Andula who was looking for her boyfriend in Prague, so *Taking Off* was based on a newspaper article about a teenage girl who left home for New York's East Village. As in the past, he became more interested in the problems of the parents, with the important difference that they were now middle-aged rather than old. "I've never worried about the middle-aged, because I was naive enough to think they were strong and had all the power, so that they didn't deserve anybody's sympathy. It was only now that I discovered that no generation had a monopoly on feeling helpless and impotent."³⁸

The other interesting point about *Taking Off* is the extended series of teenage auditions with which it opens, a sequence entirely derived from *Talent Competition* and the auditions for the Semafor Theater.

In the case of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Forman worked for the first time with a script based on an outside source. Despite the presence of a star in Jack Nicholson, he was able to preserve the emphasis on ensemble playing that had characterized his earlier work. In bringing his humorous and realistic approach to Ken Kesey's novel, Forman was inevitably criticized for lack of respect. What he did was to render the original's allegory more oblique and generalized, hence strengthening the range of possible interpretation and the potential for public discussion and reaction. It is a simplification to regard the film as a portrait of American society as a lunatic asylum. It is rather an attack on all systems that repress human freedom and individuality and has clear links with *The Firemen's Ball*. If it has specific applications, they apply as much to Czechoslovakia as to the United States. The theme is still that of the individual versus the all-powerful establishment.

In: Hames, Peter. *The Czechoslovak New Wave*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1985, pp. 119-143.

³⁸ Forman, in Liehm, *Miloš Forman Stories*, p. 112.