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IVAN PASSER

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Ivan Passer was the most elusive and retiring of the Forman group and, before leaving Czechoslovakia to work in the West, had made only two independent films, *A Boring Afternoon* (*Fádní odpoledne*), one of the separately released stories from *Pearls of the Deep* (1965), and *Intimate Lighting* (1965). Many Czechs regard these as two of the best films to have been produced by the New Wave.

Jaroslav Boček has described Passer's talent as the ability to create a "plurality of happening." "The number of actions surrounding a person, into which he enters, either actively or passively, enables the jumping of sudden sparks, which become the flowers of everyday life, its poetry and humor."¹ Of *A Boring Afternoon*, he writes:

Passer combines half a dozen events at one go: the youngster reads a book, the pub-keeper swears at him, the women singing over their beer, old Mr. Juppa meditates about football and the man with the pot of pickled cabbage leads the talk from football, which they don't know how to play anymore today, to that "wonderful woman" behind the window. And everything here discharges in contacts, promptings, small sparks, in one word: in an atmosphere both lyrical, fragile and captivating.²

The same could obviously be said of *Intimate Lighting*, a film which bears the stamp of apparent improvisation. It describes the visit of Petr, a classical musician, to the country house of his friend, Bambas, who is head of a provincial music school. As with Forman and Papoušek, Passer is concerned with presenting a situation, not a story, and there is minimal narrative content. During the weekend, Petr and Bambas go to a village funeral, compare past and present, and make a drunken attempt to "escape" (from circumstances, from age, from their life). However, Sunday morning marks the return of the status quo.

Embodied in this are typical Forman/Papoušek themes, but both the social milieu and the treatment are often very different. Neither of the main characters, Bambas and Petr, is young, and both find their meaning and direction in life through music. However, lest the film be presented in too individualistic a light, it should be remembered that Papoušek collaborated on the script and was assistant director, Věra Křesadlová appeared in the role of Petr's girlfriend, Štěpa, and Jan Vostrčil as Bambas's father-in-law. The photography was in part by Ondříček, although the

documentary gray of *Loves of a Blonde* is absent in favor of a sunny and sometimes glossy lyricism.

The opening scenes very much support Boček's comments on *A Boring Afternoon*, lacking the precise script points of Forman and Papoušek, creating rather a mood that is essential to the subsequent character observation. During the credit sequence, we see bars written up on the blackboard of the main practice room in a provincial music school. The conductor's hand appears in front of the board, once the back of his neck, his full face appearing when the credits finish. The orchestra is rehearsing its part in a concerto, which they are soon to play. There is an exchange between the conductor and the cellist, Honza the pharmacist, on a matter of interpretation.

Bambas is introduced, back to the camera and working at a typewriter, his administrative role emphasized. He walks through a small practice room where an old man is teaching a young violinist and on to the rehearsal. There is a good deal of discussion on the progress of ticket sales, and Bambas announces that he has asked the soloist (Petr) to come a day early. As the concerto is played, there is a panning movement across the room, revealing that the orchestra consists almost entirely of old men. The camera ends on a boy and then the window, moving outside to continue along the side of a railway car. We see the shadow outline of a cello case and two figures moving along the inside - Petr and Štěpa. Bambas meets them.

The only obvious points made in this opening scene are the way in which Bambas's enthusiasm for music has been side-tracked into administration (although this only makes sense in the light of what follows), the juxtaposition of youth and age, and the fact that the orchestra consists mainly of old men. Otherwise, it is simply a case of observing the everyday reality of the rehearsal and the routine dialogue between conductor and players. Where the film scores, both here and elsewhere, is in Passer's intimate knowledge of this situation and his love for musicians and the world of music. It is an admixture of *cinéma vérité* influence and lyricism, concluding with the obvious poetic device of the silhouetted figures in the railway car. Whatever hard truths may emerge from his observation, they are submerged by affection, and it is this that distinguishes Passer's work from that of Forman. It is a sense of reconciliation that is also to be found in the work of Menzel and Jasný.

The film's action is given a formal setting by the way in which Bambas's household is introduced. As Bambas, Petr, and Štěpa approach the house across the fields, there is an isolated shot of the garden gate, which is then supported by an image of the whole house. Like Petr and Štěpa, the audience does not know what it will contain.

Petr comments politely and admiringly on the house. Bambas's wife looks out from the terrace and goes in again, and a background of domestic triviality is immediately established. We are introduced to the chaotic world of young children comment from the older one that "Kaja did his wees in the bath." The wife and grandmother appear almost by accident, the camera observing their skirts before we see their faces. The confused situation in which both women are clearly preoccupied

¹ Boček, *Looking Back*, p. 27.

² *Ibid.*, p. 28.

with meals, children, and housework is nicely and unobtrusively captured. It is a sequence made up from the small sparks and promptings referred to by Boček and the *cinéma vérité* illusionism of Forman.

It is against this background that the disillusion of the two friends is gradually introduced. During the evening meal, Bambas speaks sarcastically of his provincial fate in a “village with the Blue Danube.” Petr observes that he is able to play only classics and that even Prague is not so different from anywhere else because its Philharmonic Orchestra spends so much of its time abroad. Bambas’s wife reveals that now that her husband is head of the school, he no longer comes home bad-tempered (an obvious indication of his unsuitability as a teacher). The only bright topic of conversation is a newly discovered work by Jirovec, which has recently been recorded by the Budějovice radio station.

Passer has described the unique contribution of Czechoslovak cinema as “the obstinate investigation of surrounding reality. . .” The films “are a diagnosis resulting from discovering reality - no critique, no prescription, no cure. A statement of the fact that as individuals and as a society, we are in a state of permanent crisis.”³ Leaving aside the impossibility of attaining such a dispassionate investigation, the influence of these ideas can be seen in the trivial and everyday problems of *Intimate Lighting*. The logic of the film is determined by chronological progression, what the characters might typically do on Saturday morning (they play at a funeral), at dinner, in the early evening (they rehearse a quartet), and in the late evening. With the exception of Bambas and Petr facing the death of their dreams after midnight, the film’s observations seem haphazard, accidental, and not directed toward any overall argument. There is an “obstinate investigation” of reality as it might typically be rather than the critical analysis of a problem. Passer allows himself time to develop sequences that do not require justification as part of a thematic development.

Forman has recounted how, during the filming of *Black Peter*, Vostrčil was always disappearing to play at various funerals, and it is this experience upon which Passer draws in the first major section of the film. The money that Bambas and his father-in-law earn from playing at funerals is put toward the cost of building additional housing.

Placed in a key position within the film, it is a lyrical and whimsical sequence that sets a dominant aesthetic tone, which is never negated. Bambas, Petr, Grandad, and Štěpa follow a funeral procession in a car, moving slowly through fiat fields of waving wheat and past evenly spaced telegraph poles. Grandad remarks philosophically that mourning is always the same. “They say you can travel the world with a single sad song.” In the role of Štěpa, Věra Křesadlová looks stunningly beautiful, a fit subject for any male fantasy. When she walks behind the procession, Grandad and Bambas have an opportunity to admire her figure. Grandad remarks that her breasts could be

a bit bigger, and the thought is sufficient to make him give an unaccustomed leap onto the roadside.

Then there is a curious and surreal scene in which the three men wait behind a wall and view the funeral in long shot. The camera pans from a girl’s legs pointing into the air in the middle of a field to the small figure of a man urinating against a wall near the church. When he disappears, more men appear to the sound of hymn singing to carry out the same task, and an old man with an umbrella approaches the girl in the field. In desultory fashion, Grandad reminisces about the time when he had “a girl like that” in a field of rye. The conversation turns to Smetana, and Petr fat female haymaker clad in a bikini. This combination of visions, with its reflective humor, is quite different from anything to be found in Forman and Papoušek. It is photographed with a high contrast largely absent from their work and close to the lyrical tradition of Czech cinematography.

The funeral party itself is a sweaty, shirt-sleeved, beery occasion with Grandad and Bambas “bringing forth the tears” as promised. While they are waiting outside in the car, Štěpa and Petr are passed by a group of peasant women. They look in on Štěpa, and she is obviously discomfited. As they disappear, rakes over their shoulders, their faces and figures worn by work, the last words of a song echo from the party – “the lovely girl I left behind.” The words could perhaps apply to their lost youth, and, at its most obvious this juxtaposition of Štěpa with peasant women is a confrontation between past and present, youth and age, town and country. In a conventional socialist realist film, the image would probably be explained in terms of a spoiled city girl/noble worker contrast. A director like Antonioni would use the idea in much the same way. As it is, Passer avoids all of this to provide an effect that is simply mysterious and poetic.

Later, when the four of them have returned to Bambas’s house, there is an apparently unstructured scene that gives the sense of a typical meal time. The meal disintegrates into a squabble over food as a chicken is apportioned to the diners. Štěpa offers her drumstick to Kaja as Grandad watches enviously. In quick succession, Bambas’s wife transfers the contents of her plate to Štěpa and Grandmother passes her food to the mother. In the resultant confusion, Grandad ends up with the drumstick (which he wanted), and the children try to pull the leg apart as if it were a wishbone. All this is played for overt comic effect while emphasizing the traditional sacrifice of food by the two mothers. The scene ends with Bambas losing his temper, the children being sent to bed, and Štěpa retreating to the kitchen in a state of uncontrolled giggling. Her innocence is juxtaposed with the habitual ill-temper of Bambas, which is exacerbated by the cacophony of family routine.

In the quartet rehearsal that follows, the bad temper and bickering is carried over from the previous scene as Bambas criticizes the playing of Honza the pharmacist and that of his father-in-law, who is likened to a lumberjack. Just as Štěpa had parted company from the men during the funeral, she again follows a separate course. Her actions are intercut with the rehearsal, but, in this case, the emphasis is on her and

³ Ivan Passer, interviewed in Liehm, *Closely Watched Films*, p. 384.

not on the reactions of the men. She talks to the grandmother, who can boast a more exotic past than the younger generations. Granddad, who had worked in a circus, had eloped with her after they had known each other for only three days and carried her off to France. Štěpa then finds some kittens in the garden, holding one of them up at the window where the four musicians are playing. The section ends with a scene in which Štěpa beckons a simple-minded farmhand over the garden wall and presents him with a half-eaten apple. It is an incident that seems precious when described but acceptable in context. The three elements in the sequence - the "fairy tale" (Grandmothers elopement) and Štěpa's fascination with the animals and the farmhand-all emphasize her spontaneity and youth.

At night, when everyone else is in bed, Bambas and Petr meet and, to beer and slivovitz, engage in some late night "philosophizing." For Bambas, this is the best time of day, when he can relax on his own and listen to music on the radio. The discussion again turns to Jirovec - he is old and simple but his music "has something." Eventually, the two of them take a positive act to reject the shared assumption that they are failures. They decide to take off "into the wide world" and make a living by playing their instruments-at funerals rather than concerts since no one goes to the latter. As they escape, they are silhouetted by car headlights as if greeting a new dawn while a full orchestra plays the music of Jirovec in sympathy. But the romantic mood is soon deflated when we notice that Petr is still wearing his pyjamas and a bus passes them as they walk in the wrong direction.

On Sunday morning, reality reasserts itself. When the family assembles for breakfast, Petr and Bambas have the expected hangovers and his wife has a toothache. An alarm clock shatters the silence (it often goes off two hours late depending on the weather). Grandmother has prepared eggnog as a special treat, and Granddad proposes a toast to health, the concert, and pretty women. Bambas's response is characteristically morose. As they stand up to drink, the eggnog fails to come out of the glasses. "Ah, these Sundays," Granddad comments. There is a final long-distance frozen shot of the house, bed linen hanging over the balcony, with the drinkers presented in a careful composition, Granddad's belly well to the fore.

The conclusion reinforces the mood of quiet despair that lies at the center of the [his derives principally from Bambas, a man financially dependent on his relatives, isolated in provincial obscurity, and a self-confessed failure. At meal-times, he eats his food in a kind of oblivion, using music and fishing as his means of escape from a petty environment. Petr, a more lightly sketched character, is different, it is implied, only because he has not got a car, a house, and a family. He has, of course, got Štěpa, which means that some of his illusions are intact.

The essentially faceless quality of these two middle-aged men is pointed up by the more vital life of the young and the old. On the one hand are the grandparents play with their memories of elopement, grandmother's ballet exercises, the ability to play with children, and the confidence to drink to "health, the concert, and pretty girls." On the other is the glamorous and ingenuous Štěpa. In Passer's portrait of a "mid-life

crisis," no one changes overnight and no new adjustments are made. It is worth noting that Bambas and Petr are men of the fifties, juxtaposed between those character was formed before the war and those with no adult experience of the Stalinist period.

While this pessimistic observation is present in the film, it is in no way allowed to dominate. As already indicated, the lyrical mood of the photography sets the prevailing aesthetic tone, and the film's observations are primarily affectionate and humorous. The more serious aspects of the analysis are injected into the film's I overall interplay of character. As Boček observes:

Forman's humour, though it is cultured, permits itself a clownish exhibitionism at times. Passer remains more at the humorous gesture, he only lightly touches the situation, and then goes on as if afraid that its further development might the human dignity of his characters.⁴

In the same way, he avoids giving added weight to the film's pessimistic elements lows the optimism of his own vision to dominate. Despite its "obstinate investigation" of reality, it is a film of love and reconciliation.

While the contribution of the Forman group to the New Wave is recognized everywhere, its nature is open to differing interpretations. In the case of Forman's films, do they mercilessly expose the spiritual sources of fascism and Stalinism, provide bitter political allegory, or show a humanist portrait of everyday "reality"? Do they make us think, or do they fail to question the reality portrayed?

Much depends on the standpoint of the interpreter, but it can be argued that Forman's films do a number of these things at the same time. Humanity does not rule out criticism. On both counts, the strength of Forman's films lies in the methods adapted - the use of nonactors, a concern with reflecting the look and situations of everyday life, and an examination of situations based on observation of character rather than literary analysis. They exhibit an apparent authenticity absent from the more obvious intellectual approach of the "critical realists" and the experimental products of the New Wave.

Stylistically, the look of cinéma vérité is consciously sought in *Black Peter* and *Loves of a Blonde*. The camera work is functional, people walk in front of the lens, there are jump cuts, and the editing often seems intentionally awkward. Passer's *Intimate Lighting* maintains some of these attributes although his country idyll is much more smoothly achieved. It is also more self-contained and does not extend far outside the interplay of the leading actors. With Forman's *Three Firemen's Ball* and Papoušek's *The Best Age*, the work of the group becomes more manipulative, more concerned with using characters to make points, less concerned with observation and improvisation.

⁴ Boček, *Looking Back*, p. 28.

The strength of Forman's satire in *The Firemen's Ball* makes it a unique and invaluable work, but its strength no longer derives from the shock of verisimilitude. Equally, Papoušek's films are consciously worked out in advance. The particular qualities of *Black Peter*, *Loves of a Blonde*, and *Intimate Lighting* arose from a specific period and a specific kind of collaboration. It is unlikely that their effect or appeal could have been achieved or maintained after 1968.

In: Hames, Peter. *The Czechoslovak New Wave*. University of California Press., Berkeley, 1985, pp. 150-157.