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JIŘÍ MENZEL

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If writer/director Pavel Juráček was among the first to reflect the new concern with Kafka and Hašek, Jiří Menzel did most to place cinema at the direct service of literature. All of his films of the sixties were based on literary sources, and his primary concern seems to have been the accuracy of his adaptations. The main inspiration was Bohumil Hrabal, from whose work he adapted *The Death of Mr. Balthazar* (*Smrt pana Baltazara*) in *Pearls of the Deep* (1965), *Closely Watched Trains* (1966), his best-known film; and *Larks on a Thread* (*Skřivánci na nitích*, 1969). *Capricious Summer* (1967) was based on Vladislav Vančura's novel, and he worked with Josef Škvorecký on *Crime in the Girls School* (1965) and *Crime in the Night Club* (1968). Despite this wide range of sources and his devotion to the "vision" of the original authors, Menzel's work has, to adopt Joseph Losey, an unmistakable "signature."

The international impact of Forman's *Loves of a Blonde* has been equaled only by *Closely Watched Trains*, which won the Hollywood Oscar for Best Foreign Film in 1967. Critics in both the West and the East have linked the films in terms of their gentle observation of ordinary people, sense of humor, and their themes (love versus the repressive status quo). Because of these similarities, the work of Forman and Menzel is frequently confused or grouped together. In fact, Menzel's approach to filmmaking is quite different from that of Forman. Not only does he remain close to his literary sources, but his films are conventionally well made and carefully scripted and use mainly professional actors. His use of visual imagery is distinctive and reveals a strong surrealist influence.

Like Forman, Menzel's first love was theater, and he maintained links with both the Semafor Theater of Suchý and Šlitr and the Činoherní klub, where he produced Machiavelli's *The Mandrake*. In the early seventies, when he was unable to direct films, he produced pop concerts featuring such stars as Eva Pilarová. Throughout his career, he has acted in both his own films and those of other directors. He appeared in and was assistant director on Chytilová's *Ceiling* (1962).

Menzel's first film as director was *The Death of Mr. Balthazar*/*The Death of Mr. Baltisberger*, one of the seven episodes made for *Pearls of the Deep*, an anthology film adapted from Hrabal's stories. The film not only reflected widespread admiration for Hrabal's work but was regarded at the time as something of a New Wave manifesto. Despite his debt to Surrealism, Hrabal's work was welcomed primarily for its authenticity, its vignettes of everyday life, and a speech and humor derived from the real world.



Closely Watched Trains, Jiří Menzel, 1966

The original stories for both *The Death of Mr. Balthazar* and Chytilová's episode *At the World Cafeteria* (*Automat svěť*)¹ have been translated. Both adaptations show extreme loyalty to Hrabal. Despite this, Menzel's episode is much the most impressive and individual of the five that made up the final film.²

The original story for *The Death of Mr. Balthazar* was based on the death of a West German motorcycle rider during the Czechoslovak Grand Prix in the early fifties. Škvorecký writes:

In both the story and the film, the race is seen through the mythologising eyes of four motorcycle fans; it is really a chain of folkloric narrations with the motorcycle race turning into a legend.³

The film is structured around the simple device of recounting events during a family outing to the race track. The group consists of a middle-aged couple without children and an aged father. In the opening section, there is a sense of liberation as a succession of tracking shots carries us forward to experience the carefree joys of motoring. Soon, however, there is an explosion, and we see the abrupt and static image of the car – a 1931 Walter cabriolet – isolated and broken down in a field.

The car's breakdown is attributed to the wife's having done a favor for a butcher by transporting six people and a bedstead. Later, the husband boasts that it has carried six butchers and a wardrobe. Their repairs to the car are conducted like a major surgery, their only exchanges centered on their common interest – motorcycle. The stylized observations are based on their ability to detect the make, cubic capacity and year of manufacture from the sounds of passing engines.

The father remains isolated, a small figure standing against a background of foliage, and delivers the first of several self-absorbed monologues about the past, to which only he listens and in which only he is interested. As is often the case with Hrabal, it is the Austro-Hungarian past to which he refers and, in particular, to the dilapidated state of the old archbishop's residence, the incumbent having long since departed for the Tyrol "so as to be nearer heaven."

The literary nature of the film's dialogue is undoubtedly straight Hrabal as are the absurd confrontations. Where Menzel scores is in applying Hrabal's observation within the context of an actual race meeting, the documentary or cinéma vérité views of reality serving as a counterpoint to the literary elements. However, he has already

¹ *The Death of Mr Balthazar* has been published as *The Death of Mr Baltisberger* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), and *At the World Cafeteria*, in Jeanne W. Němcová, ed. and trans., *Czech and Slovak Short Stories* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967).

² Only five episodes were included in the feature release (those by Menzel, Chytilová, Schorm, Jireš, and Němec). The episodes by Passer and Herz were released separately.

³ Škvorecký, *All the Brights*, pp. 168-169.

begun to contribute his own poetic imagery – the oddly isolated shot of the broken-down car in a field, the iconic and magical details that make up its appeal, the old man almost swallowed up by his background, the apelike onlookers hanging from the pine trees, and, most of all, the slow motion photography of the race itself as the riders move in dream ballet to the sound of Bach's Fugue in B Minor. The magic, the freedom, the dream that they represent for the devotees are all caught in a few images. It is, of course, a freedom intimately bound up with the idea of death. Two old men live in the past but reinforce the fact of their survival by reflecting on the deaths of famous motorcyclists.

Menzel's second work was for yet another episode film, this time the title story from the three-part adaptation of Josef Škvorecký's *Crime in the Girls School*.⁴ The story concerns a very English-style detective, Lieutenant Borůvka, who is faced with solving a crime at a girls school closely modeled on Ronald Searle's St. Trinian's. The school itself is an old country house, and Borůvka is soon on a trail of theft and possible murder in which the girls' secret society, KKK, is brought to book and the caretakers illicit whiskey still uncovered in the basement. KKK stands for "Kill Kitten Klan" (Kitten, or rather Kočička, is the name of the missing math teacher) and the members rejoice in the Czech equivalents of such names as Miss Jackie Ripper and Miss Dracula. Their world is far from that of "meritorious mathematicians" (the award decorates the teacher's room) and the school slogan "Studovat, Studovat, Studovat" (Study, Study, Study). Their extramural activities range from orthodox sex, stealing cars, lesbian sex, and posing for *Playboy* magazine (wrongly interpreted by the English teacher as a magazine for sporting youth) to looking at pornographic slides. No doubt the film was regarded in some quarters as highly subversive, but the humor is at a fairly routine level and could scarcely be more innocuous.

There are one or two surrealist touches – the bust that blows smoke at the girls when offered a cigarette, the whiskey still that looks like a corpse when covered with a cloth, the wizened and grotesque faces of the teachers spaced among potted plants during the lieutenant's interrogation, and the black underwear and leather-like gear of the Kill Kitten Klan. As the Imperial Dragoness and leader of the Klan, Věra Křesadlová bears a striking resemblance to the evil Diana Monti (Francine Bergé) of Georges Franju's *Judex* (1963). Despite these pleasures, *Crime in the Girls School* is a minor work that does little to prepare for the aesthetic complexity and power of *Closely Watched Trains*.

The chance to film Hrabal's story was originally offered to Schorm and, subsequently, Chytilová, neither of whom felt capable of accommodating it to their own filmic approach. Menzel apparently accepted without having considered the problem. In any event, he and Hrabal collaborated very closely on the script and introduced a number of modifications to the original story. It is a testament to the harmony with

⁴ Published in Josef Škvorecký, *The Mournful Demeanour of Lieutenant Borůvka*, trans. Rosemary Kavan, Kaca Poláčková, and George Theiner (London: Gollancz, 1974).

which they worked that Hrabal ultimately preferred the film to his original⁵ and that Menzel, when accepting his Oscar in 1967, attributed all the credit to Hrabal. Menzel has said:

As Schorm says, a film is a gesture of love towards man. And when love is in question, I believe that Mr. Hrabal is the most qualified, that is why I placed myself at his service.⁶

The precredit and credit sequences of the film are brief and condensed preludes to the development of the main theme and provide an indispensable context for what follows. The film opens with a fade-in to an almost empty room where we see small pictures in plain frames of the hero's great-grandfather, grandfather, and father. The hero's voice records: "My name is Miloš Hrma. People often laugh at my name, but ours is a famous family." We are told about great-grandfather Lukáš who fought on the Charles Bridge and retired early after a student demonstrator threw a stone at him "with devastating effect." Grandfather Vilém, on the other hand, was a hypnotist, widely considered an idler, who tried unsuccessfully to hypnotize German tanks as they advanced on Prague. Father, an engine driver, had been able to retire at forty-eight since engine drivers are credited with double time. During this recording of the family heritage, Miloš is dressed in his new uniform. The camera moves gradually from his polished shoes, up his trouser legs, past shining buttons, to his cap, which his mother lifts ceremonially above his head. The scene recalls the coronation of Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible and Olivier's Richard III. Miloš later comments: "I myself have just finished a training course to be a station guard. It is common knowledge in our town that like all my family . . . my one desire is to stand on a platform and avoid hard work, while others have to slave and slave and slave. . . ."

The humor of this introduction is very much in the tradition of Hašek and Švejk, the legendary idleness a political stance against authority and dogma. Occasionally, when aggression becomes physical, this will take the form of an absurd and quixotic gesture such as the hypnotizing of invading tanks as they "liberate" the capital. The focus on Miloš's uniform strikes an apparently incongruous note in that only the absurd stationmaster has a similar obsession. However, the grandeur of the uniform is in inverse proportion to the importance of his job, and its use here is primarily symbolic and ironic. It signifies his entrance into adult life where he will continue the family tradition and encounter the mysteries of the opposite sex.

The film is set during the German occupation, and the credit sequence summarizes its impact in mainly still shots. The music, with its flat percussive effects, echoes those satirical pieces about mythical military heroes, Prokofiev's *Lieutenant Kije*

⁵ Bohumil Hrabal, in Jiří Menzel and Bohumil Hrabal, *Closely Observed Trains* (script), trans. Josef Holzbecher (London: Lorrimer, 1971), p. 8.

⁶ Jiří Menzel, quoted in Jan Hořejší, "Jiří Menzel," *Czechoslovak Life* (July 1968), p.12.

and Kodály's *Háry János*. The terrifying nonentity of the "closely watched trains," their weapons shrouded in tarpaulin sheets, is effectively conveyed. However, the human reality behind it all is established by the intercutting of an image of a German soldier eating. It is surely no accident that the sequence ends with the restless circling of pigeons, suggesting the madness they symbolized in Georges Franju's antiwar documentary *Hôtel des Invalides*. The aesthetic complexity of this opening reveals the enormous gap between Menzel's approach and the adopted by Forman, Papoušek, and Passer.

There is no need to provide an extended outline of the film's theme and narrative progression since the shooting script is both obtainable in English and extremely readable. Since, as with all Menzel's available features, his prime concern is with characterization, I shall approach the film through the depiction of individual characters and continue with a consideration of its distinctive visual imagery.

Miloš Hrma has embarked optimistically on a career, he hopes, of glory and idleness. Nothing very striking seems likely to happen to him when he arrives for his first day of work, and his three colleagues seem to share most of the attitudes, particularly idleness, for which the Hrma family is also famed. There is the station guard Hubička ("Smallkiss"), sleepy and preoccupied with his midnight love life; the stationmaster, who greets him with a pigeon perched on his head and covered in bird droppings; and the porter, Novák, who leaves all the minor jobs undone in a manner that can only be described as conscientious.

The significance of the war and of the German occupation impinge only accidentally on Miloš, who, for most of the film, is preoccupied, like most youths of his age, with his sentimental education and the problem of losing his virginity. Since he is an innocent abroad in the adult world, I shall consider him last, examining first of all the characters with whom he comes in contact.

It is the lascivious and sex-obsessed Hubička (Josef Somr) who is the prime mover in the solution to Miloš's problem, both frustrating him in his early romance and keeping the subject constantly before him. When Miloš's girlfriend Máša, conductress of the local train, is about to kiss him, it is Hubička who whistles the train out. The two youngsters, eyes shut, reach out their lips to each other as the train starts from the station. The bemused Miloš is brought back to reality only when Hubička's whistle is popped into his wide open mouth. The scene emphasizes Miloš's innocence and leads directly to Hubička's more "sophisticated" view of the world. He is interested only in what Máša may be like in bed.

Shortly after their discussion of Máša, there is the famous episode with the countess, which is suffused with Hubička's lustful musing. "The very first glance would tell you that she was bred in silk – a stout feudal lady with aristocratic behaviour even on a horse."⁷ As she whispers to the avidly disgusted stationmaster about the decline of morals in the district – in particular, the need to reconsecrate a

⁷ Menzel and Hrabal, *Closely Observed Trains*, p. 30.

church after the discovery of fornicators behind the high altar – Hubička gazes with fascination as her well-textured hindquarters case themselves out of and then into the saddle. He whispers: “If only she would lean over me... that would black out the whole world for me.”⁸ He confides his dream of being a cart that the countess would hold by the handle and push into the storeroom.

Hubička’s activities are not, however, confined to talk. During his first spell of night duty, Miloš is able to spy on him entertaining a “cousin” on the stationmaster’s prize Austrian sofa. On the night when Miloš is in the hospital, Hubička stamps the telegrapher’s backside with the station stamps (resulting in a high-level inquiry). It is also Hubička who is entrusted by the resistance with the task of blowing up a Nazi munitions train. Finally, he arranges for Miloš’s sexual initiation at the hands of the glamorous resistance fighter, the suitably named “Viktoria Freie.”

This association of sex with the theme of national liberation was one of the most politically “subversive” qualities of the film, undercutting the traditional (and inhuman) convention of the noble resistance fighter. Despite, perhaps because of, his escapades, Hubička is a “positive” character. There is no hesitation on his part when the resistance movement approaches him for his cooperation. Yet, even for him, there is an element of the accidental in what happens. Despite his sexual prowess, it is the telegrapher who involves him in her ploys, and it is the resistance movement that comes to him (he is not a member). He fails to become a hero only by accident.

The stationmaster, played by Vladimír Valenta, already mentioned for his work on *Conscience*, *Desire*, and *The Accused*, is the embodiment of traditional virtues and an undisguised figure of fun. Apparently dedicated to the ideals of patriotism, militarism, religion, respect for authority, and hard work and consistently nostalgic for the great days of the Austro-Hungarian past and the aristocracy (in the shape of the countess), he fails conspicuously in his attempts to live up to his own moral values.

Besides his deference before the countess and his Austrian sofa, he claims to have served in a cavalry regiment under “Baron Chotek and Earl Silva el Torre el Tasse.” (The result of this last boast is an invitation to ride the countess’s stallion, an act performed with the greatest discomfort.) He also shows an unhealthy interest in the forces of corruption that are striking at the foundations of the old order. It is he who compliments Hubička’s “cousin” on her charming little ears and tells her the story of the butcher who hid a piece of udder in his fly, cutting off a protruding nipple to the horror of a lady sitting next to him on a train. However, he is soon called away by his wife, an evening of sexual jealousy completed by the sound of girlish laughter filtering up the ventilator shaft. From his moral prison, he shouts the first of a series of tirades down the shaft about the fall of the church of Rome, the Last Judgment, Armageddon, and a sink of iniquity. Later, in a line of dialogue reminiscent of *Capricious Summer*, he refers to “this decadent age” and offers the opinion that all pornographic writers should be shot.

⁸ Ibid., p. 32.

The stationmaster’s elaborate preparations for his long-awaited promotion are thwarted by the inopportune visits of the Nazi controller, Zedníček (Vlastimil Brodský). On the first occasion he is being fitted for his new uniform and finds himself saluting with one sleeve missing. When Zedníček pays his final visit, he is discovered feeding the pigeons and covered in droppings. The controller’s assistant, Mr. Slušný (“Polite”), will see to it that his promotion is deferred. However, despite Hrabal’s merciless attack on his hypocrisy and on traditional values, the stationmaster remains a sympathetic, humane, and well-meaning figure who always shows a personal consideration for Miloš.

The explicitly political points made in the film center on the character of Zedníček, who is both a collaborator and spokesman for the occupation regime. His first appearance occurs shortly after the visit of the countess. Lest my description seem too ornate, I will let the screenplay speak for itself:

A car mounted on rolling-stock wheels is coming along the tracks towards the station. The car door opens and Councillor Zedníček, dressed in an expensive overcoat, steps ceremoniously out on to the running board; he stands there saluting as the car trundles towards us. His entry is somehow reminiscent of Lohengrin on the swan or Field-Marshal Keitel entering the great captured cities, with one hand leaning against the windscreen of his car and the other holding his marshal’s stick adorned with diamonds. . . . [Zedníček] is an inconspicuous human being, inspired throughout with the great ideas of Nazism, Mission and Providence sparkling from his eyes.⁹

Zedníček has brought a document with him that requires everyone’s signature, recognizing the minimum sentence for neglect of duty as ten years. In some cases he asserts in incongruous juxtaposition, people may be sentenced to life – or even death! Before reaching that point, he sets out a map to show the various tactical moves that the Germans are making to “liberate” Europe. In a scene that is a precise repetition of a similar one in *The Good Soldier Švejk*, he demonstrates “the masterly tactical retreat of our armies.” To indicate the strategy, he uses official stamps that will later be put to better use on the telegrapher’s backside. Even Zedníček is distracted by her as she scratches between her breasts with a pencil.

Miloš greets the various stages in this ideological pep talk by asking the simple question “Why?” Zedníček is forced into platitudes about saving civilization, eventually shifting his ground to the wishes of the Führer. He finally concludes: “We must all keep together, we are all in the same boat.” He leaves in his car with the same pomp and ceremony as his arrival, only this time the car moves backward. The martial music that previously accompanied him (Liszt’s *Les Préludes*) is repeated.

His final appearance coincides with the moment when Hubička is due to blow up the munitions train. He arrives with the telegrapher and her mother (Milada Ježková)

⁹ Ibid., pp. 45-46.

to follow up the complaints about Hubička's exploits with the rubber stamps, which were registered first with the police and then with the regional magistrates. These have now been passed to a disciplinary commission of the railway authorities. On all three occasions, either the girl's buttocks or a close-up photograph of them is shown to unbelieving officials. The girl smiles tenderly and proudly as she tells her story. Zedníček concludes that Hubička has not committed a crime against personal freedom but that the use of the station stamp constitutes abuse of the German language. He finishes by summarizing Hubička's and Miloš's reactions to the urgent problems of the time-one stamps the telegraphers backside while the other tries to commit suicide in a brothel: "We all know that the Czechs are nothing but laughing hyenas." His words are greeted with successive explosions as the munitions train blows up. The humor and the policy of noncooperative acquiescence have become political acts after all.

The quality of innocence required in the role of Miloš made his part one that was extremely difficult to cast. After fifteen different nonactors had been tested, it was Ladislav Fikar's wife who come up with the suggestion of pop singer Václav Neckář. In using a nonactor, Menzel was able to capture the vacuous and dreamy innocence of a youth about to be initiated into the ways of the world. He is entirely dependent on others for action and advice in both love and life.

His first tentative efforts to develop a relationship with Máša are both thwarted by Hubička (the whistle episode and the loud noise in the next room when Hubička and the "cousin" tear the Austrian sofa in their passion). Throughout, it is Máša who must take the initiative and she who suggests that they spend the night together at her uncle's. He is a photographer who provides a constant stream of good-natured innuendo while fingering and touching the young girls who come to be photographed in his studio. Again, the conditions for love-making are not perfect (the door will not shut properly), and Miloš keeps both his hat and his virginity.

The next morning is greeted by a bomb attack, a huge explosion that completely wrecks the studio. The uncle, waking to find that everything has collapsed, roars with laughter at the absurdity. It is the film's first association of laughter with explosions. Incongruously erect among the general destruction is a long humiliating reminder of Miloš's sexual inadequacy from which he sadly collects his coat before leaving.

Confronting the evidence of his failure, Miloš makes his one personal decision – to commit suicide. He goes to a brothel where, to the disgust of the madame, he hires a room for himself alone. He slashes his wrists in a frightening and methodical scene and is rescued only by the accidental intervention of a builder who happens to knock a hole in the wall. At the hospital, Miloš is advised by Dr. Brabec ("Sparrow"), played by Jiří Menzel himself as a far from reassuring young man. He reveals that he had experienced the same problems of premature ejaculation and suggests that Miloš should think of something else, such as football, and seek the help of an older woman.

Miloš first consults Zedníček, to whom he has to report, but is thrown out when he asks for advice about women. Next he tries the stationmaster's wife, who is busy force-feeding a gander, caressing and stroking its long neck. She is unable to offer any practical advice, but the sight is sufficient to give him an erection. It is only after Hubička has explained the situation to the resistance fighter "Viktoria Freie" that Miloš "becomes a man" and then only after he has been physically thrust into the room with her.

The next morning, Miloš hums Hubička's theme, the one that always signifies a night of sexual adventure. He is seen in an identical pose, looking in contemplation at the sky and poking his finger in his ear as the stationmaster examines a second tear in his precious Austrian sofa. Having proved himself, Miloš takes on Hubička's role in blowing up the munitions train while the latter is involved with Zedníček's investigation. Thus, despite himself, he achieves manhood and dies the death of a romantic martyr. In the blast from the explosion his hat is caught by Máša, Hubička roars with laughter, and Novák grins broadly. This conclusion, which decisively integrates the personal story of Miloš with the fight for national liberation, brings together the points made in the opening sequence, revealing that the film is something more than the study of a young man's sexual problems.

In its attitudes, if not in its form, *Closely Watched Trains* is the Czech film that comes closest to the humor and satire of *The Good Soldier Švejk*, not least because it is prepared to include the reality of the war as a necessary aspect of its comic vision. The attack on ideological dogmatism, bureaucracy, and anachronistic moral values undoubtedly strikes wider targets than the period of Nazi occupation. However, it would be wrong to reduce the film to a coded reflection of contemporary Czech society. The attitudes and ideas derive from the same conditions that originally inspired Hašek. Insofar as these conditions recur, under the Nazi occupation or elsewhere, the response will be the same.

The film asserts the power of humor and good-natured nonconformism and has none of the abrasive qualities of a Forman or the earnest social analysis of a Schorm. In the final analysis, it is a film of reconciliation, for, as Menzel has said: "We all know that life is cruel and sad. What's the point of demonstrating this in films? Let us show we're brave by laughing at life. And in that laughter let us not look for cynicism but rather reconciliation."¹⁰ As with Renoir and Truffaut, the oppressors in Menzel's films are human like the rest of us.

There are few scenes more unusual in contemporary cinema than that in which a group of wandering German soldiers eye a trainload of pretty nurses with "little-boy-lost" looks and starry-eyed lust. This is a far cry from the fascist beasts of the conventional war film. It is in subverting the stereotypes, showing everyone as human, war as absurd, and heroism as accidental that the film contrives to be both reassuring and thought-provoking.

¹⁰ Menzel, quoted in Zalman, *Films and Filmmakers*, p. 87.

Menzel's debt to Surrealism has already been mentioned, and much of the imagery in *Closely Watched Trains* has the kind of poetic charge typical of Franju's work. His major achievement lies in a consistent eroticization of the images that reflect Miloš's situation. On a simple level, this is conducted with a deliberate use of phallic symbolism – the levers that Miloš must handle while Hubička pesters him about Máša, the coffee grinder gripped between the “cousins” thighs, the swelling mound of ticker tape as he spies on Hubička and the “cousin,” the coat rack, the goose's neck, and finally, the lone signal among the clouds of the final explosion (an exact parallel to the earlier coat rack image). More important than these, however, is a strong feeling for texture, whether it be the new cloth of uniforms, the shining leather of the desecrated Austrian sofa, or the soft skin of the telegrapher's backside.

The same ability is reflected in Miloš's suicide scene where two razors are set parallel in the cracks of a wooden stool, the two blades carefully aligned with the grain of wood. When Miloš brings his wrist down onto the blades and a pool of blood is released, the image is “felt” in the same way as the other textural images. All the young girls are soft and nubile, even the older “Viktoria Freie” sharing in the magical quality with which Menzel invests his women. In the latter case, he emphasizes her white boots and scarf, which appear in the dark before we see her face. She carries the bomb wrapped in Christmas ribbon, has long eyelashes, and is a circus artist in peacetime.

The use of this kind of imagery interspersed with points made on the level of script and characterization makes for a powerful and emotional work. One strange, dreamlike sequence, which occurs shortly after news is received that the munitions train is expected, illustrates the originality of the approach adopted by Menzel and Hrabal. There is a sudden warning that an SS transport train is coming. Everyone disappears from sight, leaving Miloš alone to salute as it passes. The SS are armed with submachine guns, and the train stops in front of him. Two bodies are lying on the steps of the freight car, the studded boots of one beside the head of another – yet another example of the “chosen” image. Miloš finds himself prodded by the pistols of two SS men, “beautiful as gods,” is taken to the Kommandant of the train, forced to leave with them.

Miloš stands with his hands above his head as an incongruous cheerful and lyrical melody is played on the soundtrack. The countryside slips away behind him – a girl walking along a path, farm buildings, cottages, trees in blossom – the constant movement of the train evoking a physical sensation of beauty and of life slipping away. Again this is intentional. The script describes the scene: “We see laid out in front of us all the beauty of the world as Miloš had known it, the beauty of the world to which he is saying goodbye.”¹¹ But he is spared when the Kommandant notices the scars on his wrists, stops the train, and motions him to leave. As he climbs down the steps of the freight car, it is as if he is backing down the rungs of a ladder into a

¹¹ Menzel and Hrabal, *Closely Observed Trains*, p. 109.

swimming pool, the beauty of the landscape surrounding him like water. From a conventional script situation, Menzel and Hrabal have produced a sequence of sensitivity and poetry, of love and humanity.

Menzel's second feature, *Capricious Summer*, was awarded the Grand Prix at Karlovy Vary in 1968. Vančura's novel, which Ivan Olbracht considers, like *Švejk*, to be one of the greatest works of Czech humor,¹² was a natural choice for Menzel, and he approached his task with the intention of maintaining absolute respect for the original. Škvorecký writes:

Menzel's treatment was flawless and reverent and, with the assistance of an excellent cast, he exploited the text to its fullest potential. Among the film makers Menzel must be the most ardent servant of modern Czech literature...¹³

Milan Kundera has written of Vančura's original:

He preserves a content smacking of mediocrity, but he confounds it with a deadly serious expression of pathos. This gives birth to prose of a remarkable parodying humour, a sparkling tension between pathos of delivery and pettiness of material...¹⁴

In view of the film's strong dependence on Vančura's words, it can be fully appreciated only if these are understood. This is so obviously the case that most Czechs regard the essential qualities of the film as inaccessible to a foreign audience. I would contest this on two grounds. The first is on the superficial level of subtitles, where there has been a genuine attempt to preserve the literary and archaic qualities of the original. Second, and more important, is the superb acting of the three principals, where stylized delivery, physical stance, and gesture do much to overcome the language barrier. Finally, Menzel's direction has the strong visual qualities that were a distinctive element of *Closely Watched Trains*. His respect for the original ensures that in adapting it to a new medium, he recognizes the need for imaginative re-creation. His film goes beyond simple reverence for a literary text.

Capricious Summer is a visually beautiful, reflective, and nostalgic film that examines the provincial world of three aging members of the bourgeoisie. Their routine is disturbed by the arrival of a traveling conjuror and a beautiful blonde. While emphasizing the romantic dreams nurtured by the three men, the film also juxtaposes their inaction with the fundamentally subversive life of the artist.

The film's action is prefaced by an absurd, witty, and faintly iconoclastic quotation:

¹² Ivan Olbracht, quoted in *Czechoslovak Film*, (1969).

¹³ Škvorecký, *All the Bright*, p. 172.

¹⁴ Kundera, quoted in Hořejší, “Jiří Menzel,” pp. 12-13.

This church was at one time the object of much abuse, having been built by a fool conceited enough to alter the ground plan contrary to the rule. We were acquainted with that master builder and we liked him well, even if he was somewhat immoral.

The attitude of engaging irreverence would not be out of place in Menzel's other films.

The quotation is followed by a shot of the church spire as the camera moves down and back through a lush green field to a notice saying "Bathing Establishment". There the significance of the church, other than its geographical association, comes to an end. The three central characters, each representing a pillar of bourgeois society, are introduced. The fat Antonín Dura (Rudolf Hrušínský), proprietor of the huts, represents commerce while his colleagues Canon Roch (František Řehák) and Major Hugo (Vlastimil Brodský) represent the church and the military. Much of the film's humor derives from the ritual interplay among the three as they argue the case for material, artistic/spiritual, and heroic values. The theatricality of all this is emphasized by the fact that they sit on a jetty, which is at the same time a raised platform resembling a stage.

It is a summer afternoon and Menzel introduces a number of evocative and impressionist shots – the shadow of a wooden fence on the ground, a wasp buzzing round a half-empty wine bottle – an idyllic sequence that ends with Antonín floating on his back in his blue-and-white-striped bathing suit, his cigar sticking up like a funnel. However, the rain, in a manner reminiscent of Renoir's *Partie de Campagne*, soon negates the lazy, summer's afternoon by extinguishing Antonín's cigar and pouring rapidly into their half-empty glasses. He comments prophetically: "This is a most unfortunate summer," the line with which he will close the film and which, by then, will apply to more than just the weather.

The sexual theme makes an early appearance in the person of Kateřina, Antonín's large, domineering, and sexually deprived wife. Her charms are readily available to the three men, who prefer talk to action and fantasy to reality. As they discuss "philosophy," she interrupts to reminisce, no doubt with some exaggeration, on the forceful ardor shown by Antonín when they were courting. His achievements may lie in the past, but her needs do not and she makes a play for both the canon and the major. While punting on the river with the former, she recalls the times when the organist used to pinch her bottom and suggests that since he, the canon, is an educated man he would surely not lag behind in inventiveness. As the boat slowly sinks, he replies in the film's characteristically pompous dialogue: "The swimming master, you, and I are old enough not to be tempted to jump over a neighbor's fence." She tries the same tactics on the major, telling him of the soldier who used to wear red breeches and twist feverishly at her buttons. The major is unimpressed with her exploits with the lower classes, responding dryly that those who wore red breeches were recruited from farmers.

For the three men, sex is a spectator sport, as indeed is everything else, for they are never shown doing anything except eating, drinking, and talking. They eye pretty girls in the village and keep a watch on the activities of young couples, but that is all. When a group of young ladies come to use the bathing huts, Antonín pats their backsides as he ushers them into cubicles. The major, however, seeks to escape lest they try to drown themselves and thereby force him to perform a heroic act.

The sterile routine of their life is broken by the arrival of Arnoštek's caravan, a square horse-drawn vehicle, which recalls that of the traveling conjuror in Bergman's *The Face* (*Ansiktet*, 1958) and the Cirque Daisy in Franju's *Judex* (1963). Arnoštek (Jiří Menzel) crosses the stream with the help of his blue and white balancing pole, trips on the bathing jetty, and completes his "entrance" by walking on his hands. Perhaps it is because he is a tightrope walker that he shows a remarkable inability to keep his feet on the ground. After cadging a meal – "My audience normally showers me with uneatable objects" – he turns to the cinema and announces a program of "mysteries and diversions," which will be presented in the village, with half-prices for children and soldiers. The last shot of this sequence shows Arnoštek walking off along the opposite side of the river long balancing pole bobbing comically in tune to the music of a fairground organ.

In casting himself as Arnoštek, Menzel clearly draws attention to his function director. He is a presenter of "mysteries and diversions" but at the same time a walker of tightropes who may fall to his death and, more often than not, will have "uneatable objects" thrown at him. In fact, on the third night of his performance, an old man approaches the arena and shouts at Arnoštek to come down before he kills himself. He grabs one of the posts and shakes it insistently until Arnoštek falls and then walks off with the comment: "What did I tell you?" He represents the apathy and conservatism of the ordinary man who resents the difference and courage of the deviant. To confirm him in his own prejudice, it is necessary to ensure that Arnoštek does, in fact, fall. When a man tries to collect money for the injured performer, the worthy citizens turn tail, arguing that far from being a poor fellow, he deserves a good whipping. Besides presenting the image of the artist whose talents (and women) are resented by others, it is this scene more than any other that gives the film its bitter taste – indicating the petty and selfish nature of the average man. If one considers the fate of Menzel's film *Larks on a Thread* (1969) and his own inability to work in the early seventies, his "self-portrait" can be seen as prophetic.

While Menzel's announcement has given due notice of the magic that is to enter the humdrum lives of the three friends, there has been no indication of the form it will take. When the trio go to the village at dusk to watch the new entertainment, they pass the time in observing the local female talent. Nothing prepares them for the shock that is to come, and they are struck dumb when Anna, Arnoštek's golden-haired assistant, emerges from the caravan. She is dressed in yellow with a black mask, recalling the image of Daisy in *Judex*. The mystery and surrealist magic of

Franju's film is echoed in the use of the mask and the dawn/dusk howl of a dog that is a virtual trademark of the French director's work.

Anna is a vision that recalls their youth and the possibility of attaining a romantic dream. Their attempts to recapture that youth and the successive efforts of all three to seduce the beautiful Anna form the subject matter of the film's bittersweet comedy. This is also the obverse of Kateřina's unsuccessful attempts to interest them in her charms.

All of the seduction attempts begin with erotic tension and a willing Anna, but none is successful. Antonín takes her punting by moonlight before carting her into one of the bathing cabins. She lies back invitingly with one armpit exposed. There is a shot of her legs only in frame, bent upward with a portion of her slip showing, before she places a naked foot on Antonín's chest. With keen anticipation, Antonín pushes it down and then retreats, flexing his fingers as if for a major encounter. We see his hands moving in front of him, and the camera moves down to reveal that he is massaging her foot, a task with which he remains occupied all night. There are close-ups of an ecstatic Anna that suggest that something more may be happening, but they are intentionally misleading. Nonetheless, Antonín's exploits incur the wrath of Kateřina and the jealousy of his friends.

In the canon's case, he arrives at the caravan door with a book of "chaste love stories" for Anna to read – Ovid's *The Art of Love*. She tells him that she is cooking fish and promises, erotically, that she will let him hold the saucepan over the fire. As she scrambles about him in her underwear, he finds himself face to face with her breasts and then her backside. In the meantime, two pieces of fish shrivel and curl up symbolically in the pan. It is in keeping with his profession that he should not take the initiative, but the tryst is soon broken when the caravan is attacked by drunkards. In the ensuing melee, the canon is involved in a fight and his ear lobe torn.

The major takes Anna to his house where the scene begins with them eating, momentarily suggesting that we are about to witness a *Tom Jones* – style sequence. However, the sexual tension is restrained. As the major approaches, Anna bites incessantly at red apples. He sits behind her to the faint echo of military music, the sound of which gradually increases in volume as he plucks up the courage to make his attack. After some struggle, they fall back on the table, the candlestick is knocked over, and Anna's face is ecstatic at the major's passion. But suddenly it is over, and the major is asleep on her breast.

The abortive attempts of the three would-be lovers to fulfill their dreams are not merely a function of their age but also of their social position. They have ceased to be individuals, and each is defined by the characteristics of his social role. As inactive pillars of a static society, they have lost the capacity to act and can only fantasize and talk. Running parallel to their adventures with Anna are those of Kateřina and Arnošek, who, at any rate initially, is able to help her with her most pressing problem. The main point about this relationship is the visual absurdity, the contrast

between the thin, spindly, "knock-kneed" (to quote one of the villagers) Arnošek and the mountainous Kateřina. When he carries her off to the woods, staggering under a tremendous burden, his problem evokes sympathy.

The magical effect of the beautiful Anna has already been mentioned, but Arnošek himself is something of a wonder, from the moment when one of the trio comments that "everything is bulging through his pink tights." His act is a mixture of amateurism and skill. While perfectly able to walk the tightrope, his performances are executed with a gracelessness verging on disaster. In presenting the couple in all their unprofessionalism, Menzel inevitably evokes echoes of Fellini's love affair with third-rate variety. However, Arnošek's dirty white tights are forgotten when he wears his beautiful crimson cloak. Bathed in colored lights and with all its faults, his act too is a work of magic. Anna's dance on the night of his fall from the wire has the same qualities, although choreographically mundane. It again renders the three watchers speechless.

It is difficult to convey the importance of the dialogue in *Capricious Summer*, but one of the scenes in which it systematically attacks some sitting political targets is when the canon undergoes an operation on his injured ear. The words are played in counterpoint to the operation itself, which is carried out with a gory intensity of effect recalling the attempted suicide of Miloš in *Closely Watched Trains*.

After the canon's abortive night with Anna, the camera again moves back across the fields from the church to the bathing jetty. Antonín and the major discuss the canon's injury, catch a fish, and select a fish hook to use in the operation. In the idyllic setting of the country vicarage, they advise the canon that "a physician might spread the rumor that your ear was not injured in defense of the church." Antonín asks him to "present his ear in heroic determination." As the loose ear lobe is shown in bloody detail, the major goes ashen, tears trickle down the canon's face, and Antonín reinforces his determination with alcohol. During the operation, he launches an attack on poetry, reinforcing each point with a forceful tug on the thread:

O lecherous poets, O confounded literature!

When shall we read about the economics of production, costs, patriotism, agriculture . . . ?

Or a book of poems about physical strength, the problems of the masses, fighting principles in the correct class sense?

When will it be? In some distant time?

He inveighs against "verses of no apparent value . . . meaningless verses filled with the violence and cruelty of people," and efforts to "introduce new unintelligible beauty." "The major and I say this is foolish and vulgar." "Now your morals are so loose you get involved in brawls." He could almost be speaking for the post-1969 bosses of the film industry.

In the film's final scene, the three men gather together again by the jetty. The canon approaches the stage, his head completely encircled by his bandage, with an umbrella held over his head. The major has his arm in a sling (the result of a walking stick duel with Arnoštek), and Antonín, worst of all, has had to face the return of Kateřina. As the buzzing music of the opening scene resumes, they watch the departure of the caravan, but this time the walking figure is Anna, the object of their hopeless fantasies. The three men drink from the small remains of a wine bottle and sit forlornly under the sun umbrella. The rain pours in through a tear in the top as they are seen in long shot, raised on their stage.

Menzel's next film, *Crime in the Night Club* (1968), never reached the West. Scripted by Škvorecký, it was another film owing much to the influence of the Semafor Theater. It was designed as a starring vehicle for Eva Pilarová, whose singing had been featured on the soundtrack of *Crime in the Girls School*, and also featured Suchý and Šlitr, who composed the music, along with Vladimír Valenta, František Řehák, and Vlastimil Brodský (as the minister of interior). At the end of the film, Suchý and Šlitr stand on a scaffold awaiting execution. For their last wish, they sing an endless song: "Let's go to a promised land across the barbed wire he meadows end, the meadows end, the meadows end. . ."15 In the meantime minister has sent a reprieve, but a second messenger has been dispatched with orders to murder the first.

Larks on a Thread (1969), Menzel's third collaboration with Hrabal, has not been seen outside of the Barrandov studios, but it is rumored to be his best work. In the early seventies, Menzel was among those directors unable to work in films, but following an obligatory denunciation of the excesses of the New Wave, he returned in 1975 with *Who Looks for Gold? (Kdo hledá zlaté dno?)*. Liehm described him at the time as an "ostentatiously uncommitted artistic personality."¹⁶ fair to assume that Liehm is referring to political commitment, but he may mind Menzel's apparently exaggerated respect for his sources. Whatever the case, it is clear that Menzel's films of the sixties did have a political impact. To attribute this solely to his collaboration with Hrabal and Škvorecký is to ignore the process of filmmaking and the differences between original script and finished product. The oblique criticism of his later film *Seclusion Near a Forest (Na samotě u lesa, 1976)* and his acting role in Chytilová's *The Apple Game (Hra o jablko, 1976)* show a desire to avoid the bland platitudes imposed on his colleagues, albeit leavened by his liking for "reconciliation."

In: Hames, Peter. *The Czechoslovak New Wave*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1985, pp. 170-186.

¹⁵ Alan Levy, "A Promised Land Across the Barbed Wire Where the Meadow Ends, the Meadow Ends, the Meadow Ends...", *New York Times Magazine*, 9 February 1969.

¹⁶ Antonín J. Liehm, "Triumph of the Untalented," *Index on Censorship* 5(3) (Autumn 1976): 60.