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FROM NEW REALISM TO FAIRY TALES: Czechoslovakia, 1945-1955

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THE FIRST NATIONALIZED CINEMA AFTER WORLD WAR TWO

Before the end of the war, proposals for the nationalization of Czechoslovak cinema prepared by Czech film-makers during the Nazi occupation were sent to London and Moscow on microfilm. The final wording of the nationalization decree, issued in Prague on August 11, 1945, was not entirely in keeping with the original, looser, conception, but film is clearly referred to in the document as “cultural activity.” And when Czechoslovakia’s president, Eduard Beneš, declared, “If there is anything in our country ripe for nationalization, it is film!” he was simply giving voice to the old central European conviction that financing the development of culture is the task of the state.

After the war, Czechoslovakia had a special position in this part of the world. A country with a liberal tradition, it had a well-developed industry that for the most part had not suffered the ravages of the war; the West had a bad conscience with respect to Czechoslovakia because of Munich, and the Soviet Union justifiably saw it as a country in which it was popular; the two groups of war-time political representatives, those in London and those in Moscow, had come to an agreement during the war, and thereby avoided the fratricide that took place, for example, in Poland; cultural life began to develop with the same intensity as did the revival of the economy.

For reasons similar to those that had at one time held true in the Soviet Union, film represented the most homogeneous and the most committed segment of the cultural sphere. The man who became the head of the film section at the Ministry of Information was Vítězslav Nezval, the surrealist poet. Directors and writers had their say wherever it was a matter of artistic creation; fulfillment of the dream of the late thirties seemed within reach. The Prague studios (where Russians, Poles, and others soon came to shoot their films) were the scene of the completion of two feature films started before the end of 1945: *Rosina the Foundling* (*Rozína sebraneč*) a seventeenth-century historical film directed by Otakar Vávra, and the first film that Václav Krška directed independently, *Magic of the River* (*Řeka čaruje*). In 1946, 10 feature films were completed, and 18 were produced in each of the two years that followed. For the most part they were done hastily, carried more by enthusiasm, good will, and practiced hands than by anything else. They were also wartime stories, stories from the Nazi occupation (the best was *Men Without Wings*, *Muži bez křídel* – 1946, directed by František Čáp) or films that had originated during the war (for

example, another historical film of Vávra’s, *The Mischievous Bachelor*, *Nezbedný bakalář* – 1946).

One of the things that survived from the prewar period was the ability – fortified during the war – to transpose good literature to the screen (e.g., Vávra); another thing that survived was the poetic lyricism of Čáp and Krška. Continuing this dual tradition, Vávra filmed the lyrical story of adolescence, *Presentiment* (*Předtucha* – 1947), and Krška made a film of the poetically stylized biography of a Czech violinist (Paganini’s contemporary, Josef Slavík) entitled *The Violin and the Dream* (*Housle a sen* – 1947). But new impulses began to become evident. The strongest of them, the influence of the British new realism, was already apparent among young film artists. To begin with, these new film-makers strove to remove the theatricality from film language. A major contribution to this effort was made by Bořivoj Zeman (b. 1912) in *Dead Among the Living* (*Mrtvý mezi živými* – 1946), a psychological study about fear and courage that was based on a script by Elmar Klos, who also codirected. Jiří Krejčík (b. 1918) was another film-maker who believed in documentarist approach. But he made his debut with an adaptation of some short stories by the nineteenth-century classic Czech writer, Jan Neruda, *Week in a Quiet House* (*Týden v tichém domě* – 1947).

It was Jiří Weiss’s first feature film, *Stolen Frontier* (*Uloupená hranice* – 1947), that made the first real splash. Weiss had made two medium-length fiction films during the war in London for the British Crown Film Unit (*John Smith Wakes Up* and *Before the Gate*), but it was the Munich-inspired *Stolen Frontier*, which told the story of the inhabitants of a Czech frontier village at that crucial period, which confirmed the emergence of a mature artist with an original style.

A second event was the film *The Strike* (*Sířena* – 1946), directed by Karel Steklý (b. 1903), which received the first and only Golden Lion of St. Marc (at the Venice Film Festival) to be awarded to a Czech film. Even before the end of the war, Steklý, who for long years had been a scriptwriter, had finished a film adaptation of the popular novel by Marie Majerová that was to be the basis for *Strike*, a film set early in the century in a mining area near Prague. After his initial film, the mediocre *Turning Point* (*Přelom* – 1946), he brought together a number of prewar avant-garde stage and screen artists-among whom were E. F. Burian, whose music for the film also won an award at Venice, cameraman Jaroslav Tuzar, and others – to create *Strike*, a film that joined social pathos with avant-garde poetics and period color. Steklý never made a good film after that. The success of *Strike*, however, reminded Europe that there was such a thing as Czechoslovak cinema and fortified its self-confidence at a time when the period of postwar advancement was just beginning.

The third important event was Jiří Trnka’s (1912-1970) first feature-length puppet film, *The Czech Year* (*Špalíček* – 1947), confirming the fact that when public funds and the free development of talent meet, they can bring success to public film-making in a small country where no immediate return on the production investment can be

expected. The fact that it was folk art that inspired *The Czech Year* was no coincidence – it was simply the end result of Trnka’s development of one of the creative notions of the Czech prewar avant-garde, primarily represented by E. F. Burian, and also by Josef Trojan, who thereafter was Trnka’s indispensable collaborator in the sphere of music.

Slovakia, which did not produce any independent feature fiction films before 1945, began to do so under the new nationalized cinema, although for a while with such Czech directors as Frič and Cikán. The first Slovak director to make a feature film was the star of the prewar *Jánošík*, the actor Palo Bielik (b. 1910), who shot *Fox Holes (Vlčie diery)* in 1948. (The interior scenes were shot in Prague, as the construction of the first studio at Koliba in the Slovak capital of Bratislava was not completed until 1950.)

Work at the former Bat’a Studios – now the Gottwaldov Studio at Kudlov – resumed, not only with the production of documentaries and popular science films, but also with activity at the animated film studio by Hermína Týrlová and Karel Zeman.

In 1947, the first Czechoslovak film in color was made, Vladimír Borský’s (1902-1962) *Jan Roháč of Dubá (Jan Roháč z Dubě)*.

During this period, the political future of Czechoslovakia was uncertain. Czechoslovakia – along with Yugoslavia – was the only country where the Communist Party was a great political force (38 percent in the 1946 elections). Czechoslovakia also was the only country in this part of Europe with a highly developed industrial base and a democratic tradition. All this led to the idea that the advance toward socialistic development would take its own path, in cooperation of course with the Soviet Union, but without any direct interference, and without any obligation to copy the Soviet model. These ideas also survived for a short time in the leadership of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, even after the Communists took power in 1948 and forced the abdication of President Eduard Beneš.

In 1948, Vávra made a film that was for years to remain his best. After filming a parable about the danger of atomic warfare (*Krakatit* – 1947), based on the prewar novel by Karel Čapek, Vávra filmed *Silent Barricade (Němá barikáda* – 1948), which was set during the few days of the Prague uprising against the Nazis in early May 1945. For the first time Vávra toppled the barrier that literature had built in front of his camera and indicated that he could become a spokesman for reality, observed in all its immediacy. Also in 1948, Krejčík made his third – and very mature – film, *Conscience (Svědomy)*. The coauthor of the script was Vladimír Valenta, who was to spend years in prison, and who would not return to film as an actor and scenarist until the sixties. Psychological realism based on the restraint of the actors’ expression – that was the style that Krejčík developed in the story that was almost identical to that of the later Spanish film, J. A. Bardem’s *Death of a Cyclist*. And he encountered as sharp a reaction from the establishment as did Bardem.

Martin Frič also seemed to be catching his second breath, and after *Tales from Čapek (Čapkovy povídky* – 1947) and the interesting *Lost in Prague (Návrat domů* – 1948), filmed from a script by Leopold Lahola, about a soldier’s bitter return to his homeland, he created a successful parody of a commercial tear jerker, *The Poacher’s Ward (Pytláková schovanka* – 1948).

THE CHANGE AFTER 1948

Illusions about the “Czechoslovak path to socialism” only lasted a few months after the February 1948 takeover, or more exactly, until the split between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union in June of that year. During the years that followed, the Soviet Union desperately tried to impose the experience of Stalin’s Russia onto an industrial, liberal, central European country. Attempts had been made even earlier to apply the Zhdanov resolutions and laws to Czech and Slovak culture. As long as there was comparatively broad freedom of speech and expression, however, the absurdity of such efforts was apparent even to those who were faced with the task of fulfilling Moscow’s demands. Czech culture on the one hand followed its traditional strong socialistic inclinations, and on the other hand continued to nourish a strong individualistic avant-garde movement. But when in the latter half of 1948, the position and prestige of the Communist Party was ensured by force, freedom of expression was gradually liquidated, and an atmosphere of fear and suspicion became dominant, there was nothing to prevent Czech and Slovak culture from being measured by Zhdanov’s yardstick.

Three leading representatives of the avant-garde responded to the attack on their movement and its heritage with suicide: poet Konstantin Biebl, choreographer Saša Machov, and theatrical director Jiří Frejka. Also, many talented people fled abroad, including a sole film-maker – František Čáp, who started his second successful career in Yugoslavia.

The first targets of the Zhdanov-line criticism were the best films of 1948: *Conscience* (the very title called attention to undesirable problems), the “neorealism” of *The Silent Barricade*, and the “intellectualism” of *The Poacher’s Ward*. And of course the poetic melancholy lyricism of Trnka’s new puppet film, *The Emperor’s Nightingale (Císařův slavík* – 1948). What followed was a swarm of schematic films. One of them, however, remains surprisingly fresh. It is *Katka* (1949), a story that encourages young girls in Slovak rural areas to leave the farms and go into industry. After it met with official rejection in Slovakia, its director, the young and avid Communist, Jan Kadár (b. 1918), went to Prague, where he was offered a helping hand by Klos.

Weiss was criticized for *The Last Shot (Poslední výstřel* – 1950), which showed the end of the war in a large steel mill. Singled out for criticism were the film’s lack of pathos and the fact that Weiss had given the leading roles to nonprofessional actors, following in the footsteps of British and Italian film-makers. At that time, and to a

large extent still today, socialist realism required, among other things, theatrical acting and professional actors.

Even the most notable member of the prewar theatrical avant-garde, one who really believed in the “truth” of Stalinism – E. F. Burian – was unsuccessful. His second film, *We Want to Live* (*Chceme žít* – 1950), about the unemployed before World War Two, was cut by 30 per cent in length because it was guilty of “formalism and naturalism.”

In 1950, though, two other films were produced that had pioneering significance. The first was *The Distant Journey* (*Daleká cesta*), the work of Burian’s pupil, stage director Alfred Radok (1914-1976). Radok took a dime-a-dozen story of a pleasant lad who, under the Nazi occupation, risks his life for his Jewish sweetheart, and made of it an expressionistic tale of the Terezin ghetto and the struggle for human dignity, a visionary film frequently inspired by surrealist poetics. Labeled as existentialistic, the film was banned for years. Only occasionally did it turn up in one small-town movie theater or another; but it was sold to distributors abroad, where it gained for its director a reputation as one of the great Czech postwar film talents. In 1953, Radok succeeded, under difficult conditions, in making the first Czechoslovak musical, *The Magic Hat* (*Dívtovorný klobouk*), based on a classical comedy by V. K. Klicpera. But the genre and the method used were so unusual that Radok was proscribed in the film industry, to return only one more time with *Old Man Motorcar* (*Dědeček automobil* – 1956) – a clever art-nouveau film about the beginnings of the automobile.

Another important debut of an entirely different sort was the feature-length graduation project by two students of the Film Academy (FAMU – Filmová fakulta Akademie múzických umění), Vojtěch Jasný (b. 1925) and Karel Kachyňa (b. 1924), *The Clouds Will Roll Away* (*Není stále zamračeno* – 1950). Spending long months at a farm in the border region resettled by Czechs after the so-called Sudeten Germans were expelled to Germany following the war, they captured, in a semidocumentary manner, the struggle of man against the difficult conditions there and particularly his struggle within himself. The film was not only an expression of a unique talent, but also a confirmation of the unity of postwar artistic impulses and their aesthetic solutions in different parts of Europe. But that was all that was needed to move the authorities to bury in the archives this evidence of the possibilities of a nationalized cinematography and its film school (FAMU was established by decree on October 25, 1945). The two young directors were banished to the limbo of making propagandistic documentaries for several years.

The inconsistency of the establishment (as proven, for example, by the fate of *Distant Journey*), as well as the differences in traditions and in interpretations of dogma, led to varying applications of Zhdanovism in each of the Eastern European countries. Thus, in the 1950-1951 period, director Miroslav Hubáček (b. 1921) made his debut with a good detective film *In the Penalty Zone* (*V trestném území*), Martin Frič made a two-part intellectual comedy about the limitations of unlimited power, *The*

Emperor’s Baker and *The Baker’s Emperor* (*Císařův pekař* and *Pekařův císař*), in the spirit of Prague’s Liberated Theater of the thirties, with one of this theater’s founders, Jan Werich, in the title role. Something like that would have been unthinkable in the Soviet Union, as would Weiss’s film about the beginnings of the labor movement, *New Warriors Shall Arise* (*Vstanou noví bojovníci*). This picture, one of Weiss’s best films, was based on the autobiographical novel by Czechoslovak president, Antonín Zápotocký, with emphasis in the film’s key scene on democracy and the right to vote.

The Soviet model was used in making biographical films about artists, scientists, and inventors from the period of the nineteenth-century Czech “national rebirth.” The director of many of them was Václav Krška, but the best was made, again, by Martin Frič – *The Mystery of Blood* (*Tajemství krve* – 1953).

The April 1950 resolution on cinema issued by the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party attempted to combine the criteria spelled out in the original Soviet resolutions of 1946-1948 with the criticisms against schematism and lack of conflict formulated in later resolutions and policy statements. One result, of course, was not at all surprising: fewer films, but all of them heavy-handed. In 1951, only 8 films were made, as compared to 24 in 1950.

Soon a wave of arrests and trials, first of non-Communists and later of Communists hit Czechoslovakia. In November 1952, 11 death sentences were handed down in a trial in Prague in which the main defendant was the secretary general of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, Rudolf Slánský. Most of the defendants and the condemned were Jews. At the same time, the campaign against “cosmopolitanism” reached its peak and Czechoslovak film settled on its own Stalinist style, “national in form, socialist in content.”

The first to capture the style of the times was Otakar Vávra. After *The Silent Barricade* he did not make any films for four years; at the end of this period, which was filled with struggles with others and with himself, came the color super-production *Lining Up* (*Nástup* – 1953), about the Communists’ battle with reactionaries between 1945 and 1948 in the Czech border area. The film was not only a political illustration of the party interpretation of recent history, but also a formally faithful imitation of the Soviet style for color films of those years. The same is true of Vávra’s subsequent work, the Hussite trilogy, *John Huss* (*Jan Hus* – 1955), *Jan Žižka* (1956) and *Against All* (*Proti všem* – 1957), based on the Czech classic by Alois Jirásek about the struggle of adherents to the Czech Reformation in the fifteenth century against the Pope and the Emperor. Only the first part of this trilogy bears traces of Vávra’s own style. By means of these films, Otakar Vávra succeeded in securing his position in Czechoslovak film, but he lost his artistic authority.

As is often the case in such situations, the ones to take advantage of the new trend were people of lesser talent, including Karel Steklý, who, in 1956, made the worst version to date of Hašek’s *Good Soldier Schweik* (*Dobrý voják Švejk*), K. M. Walló (b. 1914), and Vladimír Vlček (b. 1919). The latter had graduated from the Soviet

Film Academy shortly after the war, and, along with V. Belyayev, was codirector of one film in a series of “documentaries” about the Eastern European countries, *New Czechoslovakia (Nové Československo)*. He made his independent debut in 1952 with *Tomorrow There Will Be Dancing Everywhere (Zítřka se bude tančit všude)*, a color film about “joyous” youth made in operetta style. Then, entirely in the spirit of Chiaureli, he filmed another autobiographical book by Zápotocký, *Red Glow Over Kladno (Rudá záře nad Kladnem – 1956)*, a film that surpassed even Vávra’s *Lining Up*. After two unsuccessful adaptations of modern Czech classics, Vlček made the first Czechoslovak coproduction with France, an undistinguished film entitled *In the Currents (V Prouděch – Liberté surveillée – 1957)*. Soon thereafter he became the first Czech director to emigrate to the West.

ANIMATED FILM

Might it be said, then, that no sooner had nationalization opened new possibilities for Czechoslovak film-making, than it turned around and eliminated them by establishing strong central control and stifling artistic guidelines? Yes and no. In these years, for example, great development took place in animated film, with both Jiří Trnka and Karel Zeman turning out a large portion of their life’s work.

Nationalization established excellent material conditions for the successful development of animated film in the period before television, by ridding it above all of worries about profit and the market. The creators of animated films, working in well-equipped studios, felt no need to pursue lucrative contracts or commercial advertising film orders, nor to run a successful style into the ground to satisfy a passing spectator interest. On the contrary, the doors to the studios were open to the largest possible number of artists, to a multiplicity of styles, and to experimentation with new animated techniques. This was the contribution of the Prague “Bratři v triku” Studio and the animated film studio in Gottwaldov, where Hermína Týrlová created delightful puppet films for children.

TRNKA AND ZEMAN

Jiří Trnka began as a painter, a Czech heir to Odilon Redon. In the sixties, an exhibition of his paintings and graphic art created a sensation, first in Prague, and later in a number of Western European cities. But he had years of puppet-making experience as well. “The unexpected possibilities of the use of trick technique in cartoon film amazed me,” he said,

but at the same time they instilled a longing in me to take three-dimensional puppets on the screen where “everything’s possible” – puppets that can move not only on a plane but in three dimensions. From the very beginning, I insisted on my own conception of the stylization of the puppets, always with an individual – but

unchanging – facial expression, as opposed to the ones who change their expression thanks to various techniques. Which – as practice proved to us – is not so much in keeping with realism, but leads rather to naturalism, instead. Puppet film has unlimited possibilities, and would be capable of use in any of the genres of acted film. But of course there it could do no more than imitate. Puppet film is unique and original only where it oversteps the limits of acted film, wherever stylization, pathos or lyricism as presented by live actors would appear improbable, ludicrous, and uncomfortable (From an interview with J. Brož in *Czechoslovak Film* No. 6, 1955).

Trnka’s best interpreter, Jaroslav Boček, who himself later became a director of animated films, wrote:

Puppet film entered the cinematography of the world with *The Czech Year* and *Song of the Prairie [Arie prairie – 1949]* not as a plaything or a supplement, but as a self-sufficient poetic work. Trnka joined the ancient art of the puppeteers with the most modern art of film, and arrived at exceptional charm that soon brought him worldwide success. As to material, development covered the legendary antiquity of *Old Czech Legends [Staré pověsti české – 1953]*, through the recent past in the adaptation of Hašek’s *Švejk [Schweik – 1955]* to the present in *Obsession [Vášeň – 1961]* all the way to a vision of the future in *Cybernetic Grandma [Kybernetická babička – 1962]*. He worked on native themes like the fairy tale *Bayaya* (1950) or the *Czech Year*, but he also reached for foreign literature, like Hans Christian Andersen’s *Emperor’s Nightingale [Císařův slavík – 1948]*, Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream [Sen noci svatojánské – 1959]*, or *The Archangel Gabriel and Mother Goose [Archanděl Gabriel a Paní Husa – 1964]* adapted from Boccaccio. In spite of this broad range, he is the most consistent philosopher of human destiny. He asks about the essence of Czech heroism in *Bayaya*, and finds it in a fidelity to homeland and a rejection of evil, and in *Old Czech Legends* in defense of one’s country and one’s heritage. And at the same time he makes fun of noisy soldiering and force and robbery. In *The Emperor’s Nightingale* and in *Cybernetic Grandma*, he asks about the conflict between man and technology, and man and knowledge, and he finds the solution that will prevail over the horrors of machines. He seeks the meaning of human life and finds it in love, in work, in simplicity, and in creative enthusiasm. At a time when Czechoslovak art was answerable to temporary needs of propaganda, Trnka polarized the entire development of cinematography with his orientation toward permanent values and ideas that for years comprised both the development of national history and the essence of Czech culture (*Film a doba* No. 5, 1965, Prague).

Karel Zeman did not possess Trnka’s gift of poetic vision and philosophical profundity, but inclined instead toward playfulness, experimentation with materials, and contemporaneity. His *Christmas Dream (Vánoční sen – 1945)* soon became a classic of its genre, his serial about *Mr. Prokoupě* (1947-1955) an example of combining art with the needs of the times, his *Treasure of Bird Island (Poklad z Ptáčího ostrova – 1952)*, *King Lávrá (Král Lávrá – 1950)* and *Inspiration (Inspirace – 1948)* evidence of his effort to breathe life into static materials (paper, glass, etc.). In *A Journey to Primeval Times*

(*Cesta do pravěku* – 1956) he once again combined live actors (a group of boys) with puppets, using animation to bring the world of prehistoric flora and fauna to life. He remained faithful to this practice in all the films that followed – *Baron Münchhausen* (*Baron Prášil* – 1961), *A Jester's Tale* (*Bláznova kronika* – 1964). Eventually, inspired by the work of Jules Verne – the source of his major triumph, *The Invention of Destruction* (*Vynález zkrátáky* – 1957) – he made *On a Comet* (*Na kometě* – 1970) more than 10 years later.

How can we explain that in the period of the most rigid dogmatism such original talents could emerge in the sphere of animated films – and not only in Czechoslovakia – talents so ill-fitted to the image of the times? The reply is not too complicated. The nationalization presented a secure material foundation for the extant talent. Directly after the war, film production was decentralized into small, ultimately autonomous workshops, headed by experienced producers, artists, directors or scenarists. In the creative atmosphere of these small collectives, the successes of the early postwar years were born. It was just this organization that was the first to fall victim to the Zhdanov line, which required central control over every phase of the creative and production process. This was not very feasible, however in the sphere of animated film. Production in this area is by nature craftsman-like – work is only possible in small groups, where the responsible person is the author of the artistic concept. Scripts for animated, and particularly for puppet films, are difficult for the layman to understand, and the world of dreamlike fairy-tale fantasy in which they move is on the periphery of consciousness, difficult to measure by criteria that authorities at all levels are accustomed to using. So these authorities were presented with the finished work, which frequently received disapprobation – most of Trnka's films did – but which were defended from the consequences of disapproval both by their artistic quality and by the immediate international response that they evoked, both of which were more than rare at that time. Thus, in the sphere of animated film, a model of organization was formed that was later to facilitate the development of feature film – both in Czechoslovakia and in other Eastern European countries.

VÁCLAV KRŠKA

In the first half of the fifties, though, such things were still unthinkable. Everyone felt the influence of the prevailing Stalinist attitude. In the film world, the one who felt it most acutely was, paradoxically, the very one who rediscovered himself because of it. In the years from 1949 to 1956, Václav Krška filmed five biographical films and one opera. The times ripped him away from his poetic, imaginative lyricism, his striking pictures of the Czech countryside, and his tense sensualism. It tossed him in the direction of the biographical genre, the content and the esthetic conventions of which had clear limitations. But at the same time, in 1953 and 1954, he managed to make two films, one right after the other, based on a stage play and a novel by his

compatriot from southern Bohemia, Fráňa Šrámek, an impressionistic, pacifist poet who spoke for the young people who were eventually killed on the battlefronts of World War One. The two films were *Moon Over the River* (*Měsíc nad řekou* – 1953) and *Silvery Wind* (*Stříbrný vítr* – 1954). Until 1950, Šrámek's position in Czech literature and film was tolerated, apparently because late in his life his pacifism had developed into a sympathy for communism. But in the early fifties, his voice was too different to be tolerated. The Spectator, with his hypocritical and puritan morality, could not help but be repelled by a nostalgia for the passing of a generation, by a sorrowful farewell to a youth that had never fully experienced life, as shown in Krška's sensitive interpretation of *Moon Over the River*; and above all by Krška's sensitivity to the awakening sensuality of adolescent youths as depicted in the film version of *Silvery Wind*. For a while, *Moon Over the River* slipped through on the weight of Šrámek's name. But *Silvery Wind* was banned straight away, and Krška returned to biography and opera.

Two years passed; *Silvery Wind* was rehabilitated. Its belated premiere late in 1956 gave notice that Czech film was entering a new stage.

In: Liehm, Mira and Liehm, Antonin J. 1977. *The Most Important Art. Soviet and Eastern European Film After 1945*. University of California Press, Berkeley, pp. 96-111.