

5

FRANTIŠEK VLÁČIL

Peter Hames

Of the new directors to make their mark in the late fifties and sixties, František Vlácil has appeared as a figure set apart, owing little to the example of his contemporaries. His preference for historical subject matter and his visual style – a concern for composition within the frame reminiscent of the later Eisenstein – separate him from both the “poetic humanism” of Jasný and Uher and the social critics. Yet his assertion of the values of form is itself in the nature of a manifesto, and many of his historical films are concerned primarily with an attack on dogmatism, the contemporary significance of which would not be lost on his audiences.

After two films made for the Czechoslovak army, the short *Glass Skies* (*Skleněná oblaka*, 1959) and the medium length *Pursuit* (*Pronásledování*, 1959), both revealing his formal preoccupations, Vlácil made *The White Dove* (1960). His first feature film found itself under attack both at home and abroad. When the director of the Venice Film Festival selected it for competition in preference to Krejčík's *A Higher Principle* (*Vyšší princip*, 1960) and Weiss's *Romeo, Juliet, and Darkness*, the Italian left wing linked this selection of a “nonpolitical fantasy” to a general attack on the management of the festival. Vlácil himself feels that his film had an influence on New Wave directors, who, at that time, had scarcely started to study. “Not that they started to imitate what we did; they simply began to work freely, to create outside the given rules. Personally, I never submitted to any rules. It turned out that it is always possible to find a way.”¹ For *The White Dove*, Vlácil had Jan Curik as director of photography, Miroslav Ondříček as his assistant, and as editor Mila Hájek – three names that were to be associated with many of the best of the New Wave films.

The film begins strangely as a lorry, twin headlamps lit, approaches across a moonlit landscape. It turns in by a huge sign filling the left-hand side of the screen, Charleroi-Liège. A man sits on top of the sign and, as the sun rises, gives the signal for the release of hundreds of pigeons. However, one of the birds is missing and released after the others. The film then develops as a moral story in which the pigeon or dove, recognized universally as a symbol of peace, serves as a link between a girl, Suzanne, who waits forlornly for its arrival on an island in the Baltic, and a boy, Míša, who discovers the bird in Prague after it has lost its way in a storm.

When we first learn that Suzanne's bird is lost, there are shots of morning mist among strange exotic towers. It is not an Eastern city from a fairy tale but Prague, the city of a hundred spires. An artist and a cat look through a window at the dove as it perches on a sculpture outside a top-story apartment. When it flies to a new spot, its

shadow is cast on the wall, and the artist begins to trace its shape. Then, in a montage of confusing, half-understood images, we see a long streak of blood on the window, a hand grasping at a floating feather in a lift shaft, and the cat watching with predatory interest. Finally, the artist stands at the bottom of the shaft and picks up the “dead” bird.

Míša has shot the bird with his air gun, but the fact that he is crippled and confined to a wheelchair is initially hidden. The artist is determined to bring home to him the enormity of his action, and, together, they virtually wish the bird back to life and prepare it for freedom. This goes beyond the obvious symbolic links between East and West, between children on opposite sides of the Cold War. Míša compensates for his physical condition through pointless destruction. The artist, on the other hand, through his sensitivity, can act as a mediator, encouraging the growth of a sympathy and understanding linked to the boy's recovery of his ability to walk.

Following Karol Bacílek's example with *Sunshine in a Net*, this schematic structure could be decoded to reveal a Czechoslovakia crippled by ideological dogmatism. Through the vision of the artist and a reassertion of humanist values, a rebirth of purpose and conviction may be achieved. While the film's use of symbolism invites this kind of response, nonetheless, it would be wrong to reduce it to the one-to-one equation of political allegory.

The film's importance, as with *Desire* and *Sunshine in a Net*, lies primarily in the strength of its aesthetic charge. Formally, it follows an alternating structural pattern similar to the second half of *Sunshine in a Net*. A strong polarity is also created between the black and white of the Baltic seashore and the drabness of the highrise apartments in Prague (despite the exotic spires).

The Baltic scenes provide an opportunity for some lyrical photography characteristic of Curik and the traditions of Czech cinematography. After the bird has failed to arrive, Suzanne is shown sitting alone at the end of the jetty in her black headscarf, the surf breaking round her deserted figure as night approaches. There is a beautiful sequence that begins with a shot of an empty cage hanging outside her window at sunrise, followed by an upside down shot of her lying in bed. As the camera rights itself, an imaginary voice hypnotically whispers her name. When she hears that a bird has been sighted, she leaves her hut and appears to be walking on water. There are delicate shots of her searching on the beach, dressed only in a negligee. Later, when the artist's drawing of the bird arrives from Czechoslovakia, it is delivered to her as she sits among the shallows sheltered by a black umbrella. This rather whimsical style can be traced not only in the later work of Cuřík (e.g., *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders*, 1969) but also in the work of Ondříček in apparently dissimilar films such as Passer's *Intimate Lighting* (*Intimní osvětlení*, 1965) and Němec's *Martyrs of Love* (*Mučedníci lásky*, 1966).

The Prague scenes are more directly related to the film's narrative content, but even here there is opportunity for some beautifully visualized sequences. The first is that in which the artist draws the bird, to the accompaniment of fluttering wings and

¹ František Vlácil, interviewed in *ibid.*, p.174

the ringing of bells. In following the long process that leads to the final print, the film provides an early version of scenes more elaborately developed by Marco Ferreri (Michel Piccoli's culinary preparations in *Dillinger Is Dead* [*Dillinger é morto*, 1969] and, more especially, Antonioni (the photographic "blowup" in the film of that title, 1966). The function of the sequence, apart from its analysis of artistic process, is to stress the elusive search for a poetic equivalent to the living bird with its human associations of grace, beauty, life, and peace.

The height of the building is also exploited to great effect. When the bird is shot, it falls into a tall elevator shaft, which Vlácil uses as a central motif. Míša's friends later call up the shaft to him, directly leading to a dream in which he finds himself stranded halfway up a sheet of wire netting. He tries to reach a parachute lodged just above him, but it falls to the ground, recalling the floating feather of the original shooting. It is fair to assume that the wire netting represents his physical and psychological confinement and the parachute his failure to find a means of escape.

When the dove has begun to recover, it tries to escape through the shaft, which is both a possible pathway to freedom and a smooth-sided prison. As the bird is caught between the tall sides of the shaft, the cat backs down the netting toward it. It leaps – a beautiful and frightening shot of its black shape falling, legs outspread – but just fails in its attempt. The netting explicitly links the elevator shaft to Míša's dream. At the end of the film, when the reluctant Míša releases the bird, he runs to the front of the building and out in time to catch a floating feather. The story has moved full circle.

The film's theme, that understanding and respect for both human and animal life are necessary in any attempt to gain true freedom, may seem naive when reduced to paper. Likewise, the film's tendency toward schematic poetics is often unconvincing. When Míša refuses to release the bird, there are shots below of men trying to catch a runaway horse (i.e., restrict freedom). A huge airline advertisement the size of a house is made much too dominant (both a linking device between East and West and another connotation of freedom). Finally, the artist, disillusioned by Míša's failure to release the bird, cuts the face from a sculpture of him on which he had been working. At the end of the film, when all is well, it has been miraculously restored. However, the final shots of television aerials in Prague, with the sound of waves beating on the beach, provide an effective and essential unifying device.

The White Dove was made halfway between Jasný's *Desire* and Uher's *Sunshine in a Net* and, like them, asserts simple humanist ideas within elaborate aesthetic structures, striving for poetic association rather than narrative content. It was a formula characteristic of the times and can similarly be traced in the early work of Kachyňa and Procházka. However, while clearly confined within the letter of what was considered permissible, the significance of their dissent from the status quo should not be underestimated. They assert values that relate both to the traditions of pre-war lyricism and lie outside of restrictive definitions of committed cinema. They have an importance related to their historical and social context but are also works that exist

in their own right and should not be reduced to a mere footnote in the prehistory of the New Wave.

It has not been possible to see Vlácil's next film, *The Devil's Trap* (*Ďáblona past*, 1961). According to Škvorecký, it was a film that gained official support precisely because it was misunderstood. "A simple miller from the 'time of darkness', i.e., counterreformation, uses his own findings gained by the study of nature to fight against clerical dogmatism as it was proclaimed by the disciplined and well-organized Jesuits. Formally, it was a very sombre film, and the parallel to the other, more contemporary dogmatism, was still somewhat timid."²

Following *The Devil's Trap*, Vlácil turned his attention to what was to become his major work, *Marketa Lazarová*, finally completed in 1966. In adapting Vančura's novel, he was working on safe ground. A committed Communist, Vančura had died a martyr's death at the hands of the Nazis as part of their retaliation for the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich. This, together with his reputation as a major novelist, one of the founders of the art of Czech cinema, and prime mover in the nationalization of the film industry, ensured him a place within the Communist pantheon. The resources lavished on the production have been equaled only by those devoted to Vávra's Hussite trilogy (1954-57) and the same director's wartime trilogy: *Days of Betrayal* (*Dny zřady*, 1972), *Sokolovo* (1975), and *The Liberation of Prague* (*Osvobození Prahy*, 1977).

René Wellek has written that the dominant theme of Vančura's work was one of hatred for war and social oppression. *Marketa Lazarová* (1931) marked a complete change of style and subject matter. "The social pathos and the glorification of the 'idiot' have disappeared. Vančura now tells a good yarn about robbers and knights, rapes and elopements. Only the display of language and of metaphor suggests that the author has ambitions beyond those of an adventure writer. In addition, the celebration of brute force and lust seems to represent a definite break with the past."³

An article in *Czechoslovak Film* describes Vančura's objectives as follows:

The story is of secondary importance to Vančura. If he does relate a story it is only in order to introduce some new elements of narration. He intentionally omits specifying the place and time of the action and does not even characterise the protagonists by a particular manner of speaking. He makes ample use of proverbs and sayings. In this way he attempts to reveal the very essence of human nature. In the psychological portrayal of the characters he gives material form to subconscious states. The material of his descriptions is realistic, but his highly figurative mode of expression may be likened to that of poetry. Vančura coins new words and refreshes his idiom with obsolete expressions from old chronicles and popular sayings. He imparts a subjective

² Škvorecký, *All the Bright*, p.209

³ René Wellek, "Vladislav Vančura," *Columbia Dictionary of Modern European Literature*, ed. Horatio Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), p. 842

character to the epic by interlarding the story with personal observations and comments, and points out important passages to the readers.⁴

The experimental form of the original is clear, and Wellek's somewhat puritanical response can also be detected in his reactions to the work of Vítězslav Nezval. Jaroslav Boček notes some significant differences between the film and the original. In using a structure based on set tableaux, he sees Vlácil coming under the influence of Vančura's novel *Three Rivers (Tři řeky)*, 1936). In contrast to what he regards as Vančura's sober and gothic style, he describes Vlácil's work as baroque, barbaric, and antique. He sees the film's intentional paganism and revolt against God and world order as Vlácil's personal contribution.⁵ On the other hand, as František Pavlíček, who adapted the script with him, has testified, the filming of *Marketa Lazarová* was one of Vlácil's life ambitions.⁶ There is little doubt that it is intended as a homage to Vančura, whatever the personal additions.

Vlácil's stated objective was to provide a "testimony about people six, seven hundred years ago, as if they were our contemporaries. Whenever I watched a historical film, I always felt as if I were seeing contemporary people all dressed up in historical costumes. I wanted to understand them, see through the eyes of their lives, their failings, their desires – in short, I wanted to drop back seven centuries."⁷ In order to achieve this, he studied groups of people still living at the level of the Middle Ages and extended his researches further afield to include the lives of Australian aborigines and Brazilian Indians. He insisted on as much authenticity as possible and ensured that implements and weapons were made from the correct materials and by the original methods. His actors even had to endure physical pain.⁸ Vlácil's attempt to complete the film reduced him to a near breakdown as he deliberately tried to force himself into identification with the thought processes and psychology of the time:

People then were much more instinctive in their actions, and hence much more consistent. If a person made up his mind he was going to do something, he went through with it. The only controlling emotion was fear, and that brought its pressure to bear mainly at night. That is why some pagan customs stayed with man for such a long time. Pagan myths were much better for explaining things that man can't explain rationally.⁹

The film has been admired for its poetic vision and criticized for its lack of control, the sprawling set pieces often holding up its necessary return to narrative.

⁴ "A Film Epic: *Marketa Lazarová*," *Czechoslovak Film* (1966-67), p.2.

⁵ Jaroslav Boček, "En marge de 'Marketa Lazarová,'" *Image et Son*, no. 221 (November 1968), p.73.

⁶ František Pavlíček, quoted in "A Film Epic: *Marketa Lazarová*," *Czechoslovak Film* (1966-67), p.3.

⁷ Vlácil, interviewed in Liehm, *Closely Watched Films*, p. 175.

⁸ "A Film Epic: *Marketa Lazarová*," *Czechoslovak Film* (1966-67), p.3.

⁹ Vlácil, interviewed in Liehm, *Closely Watched Films*, p. 177.

This is not surprising given Vlácil's devotion to individual images and sequences in *The White Dove* and the complexity of his task in the case of *Marketa Lazarová*. The film is divided into three sections: "Straba the Werewolf," "The Holy Lamb," and "On the Way to Summer." While the fierce and primitive nature of the first section dominates throughout, the second and third sections raise the possibility of alternative models for human relations.

In a striking precredit sequence, we see a black and white snowscape, the effect of which is enhanced by the film's cinemascope format. As dawn breaks, a small party of wolves makes its way through the snow toward the camera in an oblique movement. A hawk hovers above the reeds, and we note that it is linked to the hand of its master. This is followed by a close-up of the film's hero, Mikuláš Kozlík (František Velecký). The sombre photography and the images of hunters both animal and human establish the context of a harsh and predatory world.

The impact of the film's opening scenes draws heavily on conscious polarities: violence/beauty, male/female, pagan/Christian, young/old. The visual association with hunting wolves is immediately reinforced by the opening scenes of "Straba the Werewolf." The two adult Kozlík brothers, Mikuláš and Adam the one-armed, launch an attack on a Saxon count and his retinue as they proceed through the wintry landscape. The onslaught is merciless, violent, and exciting. A merchant is stabbed, writhing in agony, and horsemen hunt a running figure. There are impressive shots of a horse running through reeds and images of the pursued seen over the head of a following horse. This is the violent world of Mikuláš Kozlík, photographed in appropriately dark tones.

In contrast, we are introduced to Marketa (Magda Vašáryová), daughter of the rival clan of the Lazars. The screen is suddenly transformed from blinding white light. Nuns are seen spread out in angular patterns on a hillside before a convent. A girl runs forward from the sunlit skyline, plucking a soft bird from between her exposed breasts. A nun takes the bird into the convent. In extreme close-up, the girl looks up into the camera and then at birds flying overhead. It is Marketa.

These two scenes introduce us to the hero and heroine of the saga, the clans of Kozlík and Lazar. The contrast between dark and light also serves to juxtapose a violent male world with the gentle feminine world of the young girl linked to the positive forces of nature and freedom (the flight of the birds). On the other hand, the scene contains a contradiction in the angular face of organized religion, to which Marketa may soon be forced to submit.

The narrative resumes when the Kozlíks bring young Kristián (Vlastimil Harapes) to their stronghold after they have killed his father. When they dismount, a raven lands on one of the horse's saddles and begins to peck at it. The men pass a voluptuous black-haired girl, their sister Alexandra (Pavla Polášková), who is seen hacking erotically at an animal carcass stretched between two poles. The sequence leads to a major confrontation between Mikuláš and his father, Old Kozlík, ostensibly concerned with the number of men that Mikuláš has spared in the attack. It is also, of

course, a conflict between the old and the young, between the present and future leaders of the clan. The scene is filmed with a Wellesian epic grandeur, the two men framed against the long, heavy rafters of the ceiling as they recede within a murky interior.

There is a sudden shock similar in effect to the blinding light of the scene introducing Marketa as the camera moves rapidly forward through grass to a naked girl seen as she hangs charms on a tree. She walks forward with a dove and cuts its throat, the blood dripping into a bowl. A raven and a snake are in the tree, but a man kills the snake. The woman is then seen stretched against the tree in various close-ups of sexual intercourse, her hands clutching at the man's back. It is only revealed at the end that the woman is Alexandra and the man Kristián. In the final shot, linking the sequence to present "reality," she runs away across snow.

Besides the unexpected nature of the sequence, there are many other parallels with the introduction of Marketa. Just as the relationship between Mikuláš and Marketa will cut across clan rivalries and, to a lesser extent, pagan/Christian oppositions, so will that of Kristián and Alexandra. Here, however, the opposition is explicitly cultural, between a man of another race who is fully committed to Christianity and a woman who is actively pagan. Both sequences are similar in that they employ poetic/figurative effects to introduce the leading female characters outside of the narrative framework. Marketa is blonde and Alexandra is brunette. Marketa gives up her bird to the church, Alexandra sacrifices hers in a pagan ceremony. The complex series of interrelated oppositions set up in these opening scenes provides the basis for the film's development of sexual, political, religious, and generational themes.

The film progresses from here through a continued succession of tableau-like sequences in which elements of narrative serve to forward the movement. While Vlácil, like Vančura, uses his narrative as a basis for formal interests, it is necessary to provide a brief resume of the story both because of its complexity and to make sense of the issues raised by the film.

Continuing in this section, "Straba the Werewolf," the Hetman (military commander) attempts to bring Old Kozlík to account for his crimes. Kozlík, however, escapes after knifing the Hetman, and a proclamation is issued calling for the pursuit of his clan. Since the Lazars had shared in the proceeds from the attack on Kristián, Mikuláš seeks an alliance with Marketa's father but is savagely beaten and thrown out of the fortress.

In retaliation, the Kozlíks lay waste to the Lazar stronghold. Mikuláš drags off Marketa by force, preventing her entry to the convent, and leaves her father nailed to the gates of his burning castle. The Kozlíks now move to a secret hideout in the forests. "Straba the Werewolf" ends with the rape of Marketa by Mikuláš and the love-making of Alexandra and Kristián.

The second part of the film, "The Holy Lamb," introduces the character of Bernard (Vladimír Menšík), a wandering monk who is accompanied everywhere by a pet lamb. The lamb is caught and devoured by the Kozlíks who leave Bernard with

only its head. He serves as a narrative link between the film's diverse plot elements, which here include the death of Adam the one-armed at the hands of the Hetman's forces and a horrific battle between the Hetman and the Kozlíks, which ends in the insanity of Kristián.

The final section, "On the Way to Summer," opens in a quiet, idyllic fashion with the survivors of the Kozlík clan peacefully fishing. The relationship between Mikuláš and Marketa has now developed into one of love. Kristián is killed by Alexandra. Marketa returns to her father in the ruins of his camp but is rejected. She is again about to enter the convent when she hears that Mikuláš has attacked the Hetman's castle at Boleslav where her father is being held prisoner. Marketa joins him, and they are married immediately before he dies from his wounds. The Hetman and Old Kozlík, whose dispute has been at the heart of the suffering, are reconciled. It has been unnecessary, but the landscape is strewn with the bones of their conflict.

The theme of sexuality is developed through the relations between Marketa/Mikuláš and Alexandra/Kristián. The bold portrayal of sexual instinct is fully in line with Vlácil's own view of the directness and consistency of his characters' actions. The love between Marketa and Mikuláš is a matter of straightforward passion that develops into gentleness and understanding. Marketa's love for Mikuláš is first indicated when her open lips pass down bare stone walls as his blackcaped figure gallops across the snow to her father's fortress. When Mikuláš carries her off, the rape scene occurs with an inevitability seemingly independent of conscious choice.

At the Kozlíks' stronghold in the woods, an atmosphere of sexual tension is generated. Kristián is tied with his arms above his head and released periodically to satisfy Alexandra's desires. Mikuláš is unable to sleep. The camera moves forward to Marketa via a group of hawks symbolically placed on the branch of a tree. She has a vision of Mikuláš's bleeding face before he appears, throws her down, pursues her, and rapes her. The vision links the scene with that at her father's castle where she had been the unseen observer of the vicious treatment meted out to Mikuláš by her father's men. In this sense, the rape can be seen as both retribution (there had been a vicarious element to her watching) and an attainment of her subconscious wishes. There are various comments from watchers and listeners at the sounds she makes during intercourse. This stresses the public and almost ritual nature of the event, which is far removed from the conventions of twentieth-century morality.

The force of sexuality is more directly embodied in the character of Alexandra and her close links with paganism. We learn in flashback that Adam has lost his arm after making love to Alexandra in the sanctuary. He had been bitten by a snake and Old Kozlík had been forced to chop off the arm in order to save his life. Both Adam's name and the associated imagery contain allusions to the Garden of Eden, but there is no suggestion that this should be interpreted in the conventional manner.

Kristián is clearly destroyed by his experiences, the contact with unrestrained sexuality, paganism, and the horrors of battle. His madness is conveyed in a hallucinatory sequence similar in function and shock effect to those introducing Marketa and Alex-

andra. After the confrontation in the woods between the Hetman and the Kozlíks, he lurches forward (subjective camera), running through the snow and then flattened grass. In his disordered imagination, he imagines his blood-stained father and Alexandra attempting to lead him away from the scene of battle. Alexandra is captured but stabs one of the men. She is then set upon, dismembered by the Hetman's soldiers, and her severed limbs spread out on the hillside. In the Kozlíks' stronghold, naked bodies are piled high as if in an extermination camp. Kristián fires an arrow that pierces an eye. In the third part of the film, Kristián is found crawling in a ditch almost unrecognizable, with his mouth horribly swollen. When Alexandra kills him with a rock, his face and body return to their original purity.

Kristián's inability to survive the realities of this primitive and violent world finds its parallel in the failure of organized Christianity. In fact, Vlácil seems to reject its solutions as irrelevant. The religious wanderer, Bernard, is an embodiment of sentimental Christian imagery and presumably relates to the tradition of the wise fool. However, he has no effect on those around him, his lamb is destroyed, and he is beaten up. His virtues are simple-minded and irrelevant to the real nature of man and society. At the end of the film, he is shown chasing after a little goat-away from Marketa, who has just asked to join him.

If the virtuous individual can make no headway, religious institutions can only provide repression. This is emphasized by the angular presentation of the convent in the early scenes of the film. When Marketa later decides to join the convent, Vlácil stresses the freedom that she is about to give up. As she moves forward, a deer turns its head in a freeze shot that draws attention to this and recalls those that pass in an earlier and idyllic love scene with Mikuláš. There is a return to the deer as she approaches the convent door, and as the camera tracks through, it flees. Marketa lies prostrate before the cross, her hair spread out. Later, the fighting at Boleslav is intercut with the verbal exchanges at the convent, the violent images contradicting the words and indicating the irrelevance of Marketa's proposed abdication from life. Like the woman in Buñuel's *Nazarin*, she chooses her lover rather than Christ.

The world of *Marketa Lazarová* is primitive and brutish, and, if anything, Vlácil's film celebrates the immediacy of its direct passions, which were, of course, the opposite of the compromise required within his own society. While the Christian solution is rejected, the only hope for tolerance and humanity is offered by the young generation and the transforming power of love (i.e., Mikuláš and Marketa). Their lives are sacrificed to the political feuds engineered by the old, and in this respect, the film recalls William Wyler's western *The Big Country* (1958). However, in the latter film, the old eliminate each other. In Vlácil's film, the old survive their crimes, and a conclusion of false optimism is avoided.

The combination of elliptical narrative with a visually rich and evocative style produces a powerful and fascinating film unique in the history of Czechoslovak cinema. In particular, the powerful emblematic images should be emphasized: the wolves, the raven, the snake, the hawks, the deer, the lamb, a poetic menagerie of

hunters and hunted with their associations of death and freedom. The continual presence of the idea of the werewolf, a common superstition at that time, provides an apt parallel for the lives of the film's leading male characters.

Bedřich Balka's use of black and white cinemascope strongly recalls such divergent inspirations as Grigori Kozintsev and Akira Kurosawa. The setting of horses against landscape is reminiscent of Kurosawa's work in *Seven Samurai* (*Shichinin no samurai*, 1954) and *Throne of Blood* (*Kumonosu jo*, 1957). The influence of Bergman's pioneering attempts to evoke the Middle Ages in *The Seventh Seal* (*Det sjunde inseglet*, 1957) and *The Virgin Spring* (*Jungfru kaellen*, 1960) must also be acknowledged. However, these influences should not be allowed to diminish the vision of either Vlácil or Vančura.

What is peculiarly characteristic of the film is its battery of poetic, associational, and disruptive effects, which are in no way typical of Vlácil's other films. They are primarily an attempt to find an equivalent to the figurative and metaphorical ambitions of Vančura's original. The bardic titles that break up the film give it the epic quality of the picaresque novel and can also be related to Brechtian distancing. Similarly, the violence of the film's rapid forward tracking movements and its succession of visions, flashbacks, and flashforwards mark a significant break with traditional narrative conventions.

In *Valley of the Bees* (1967), Vlácil again worked with similar material. While still concerned with the "essential" passions of human beings, the film makes more explicit points about religion, culture, and ideology. The visual style is restrained and more obviously derived from the geometric rigor of Eisenstein or even Vávra, whose Hussite trilogy sometimes made up for lack of historical insight with formal composition and structure.

Co-scripted with Vladimír Kórner, whose novel *Adelheid* was to form the basis of Vlácil's next film, *Valley of the Bees* tells the story of Ondřej of Vlkov (Andrew of Wolfenberg), the son of a Czech nobleman, who is raised as a member of the Order of St. Mary of Jerusalem (the Teutonic Knights). At the beginning of the film, Ondřej rejects his father's new teenage bride by hiding a collection of squirming bats in a ceremonial basket of petals. A chant of exorcism is heard, and in his anger, Ondřej's father throws his son bodily against a stone wall. Appalled and fearing for his son's life, he vows him to the service of the Virgin should his life be spared. The shape of the film is then simple, following Ondřej's later return from the knight's castle and its consequences.

Vlácil loses none of the opportunities for formal and geometric composition offered by the castles and costumes of the knights. There are, of course, parallels with *Alexander Nevsky* – the knights clad in white, the formal repressive force of Teutonic Christianity; the Czechs clad in black, linked still to the traditions of primitive religion and the indulgence of sensual passion. This is very much the same symbolic distinction as that made by Eisenstein between the repressive force of the Germans and the everyday humanity of the Russians. However, while it would be pointless to

deny this symbolism, Vláčil is not content with a simple propaganda exercise and tries to project himself into the conflict of traditions and values with historical insight.

Following the film's opening confrontation between father and son, during which the incipient love of Ondřej for his stepmother, Lenora, is already suggested, the background changes from one of spring celebration to the bleak, dark outline of the knights' castle on the Baltic. As the camera examines the formal perfection of the architecture, we hear Ondřej's voice as he takes his vows. He promises to renounce his father and mother, to harden his heart, and never to succumb to the temptation of man, woman or his own body. The visual mass of the stone walls emphasizes the repression that this implies and the rejection of humanity.

The suppressed feelings reemerge in the form of an unacknowledged homosexual relationship. Ondřej is befriended by a handsome and bearded religious bigot, Armin von Heiden (Jan Kačer). The latent homosexuality is emphasized when Armin first comes upon the naked youth crouched by the edge of the sea. Later, when adults, Ondřej (Petr Čepek) lies naked in the sea with Armin, their arms locked in a bondage that will destroy them both. The object of the exercise is "to numb the lower body for the sake of the spirit."

Ondřej's desire to return to his homeland and escape from his religious prison is strengthened when he sees a fellow knight thrown to the dogs for attempting to run away. When he does leave, Armin obtains a special dispensation to bring him back. There is a scene of tremendous power that superbly conveys Armin's mixture of personal passion and religious mania. His helmeted figure kneels in the pouring rain and cuts a cross into the wood of the seashore that marked their meeting place. Later, when Armin reaches Vlkov castle, the scene is recalled as he approaches the door of the church, again in pouring rain, and hammers on the wooden door with the haft of his sword. Armin's encounter with the opposite sex takes place only after he has entered Bohemia. He informs the blind girl he meets, in a matter-of-fact tone, that if she were to touch him, she would lose her hand.

On Ondřej's return to the castle of Vlkov, he finds that his father is dead – devoured by his own hunting dogs – while his stepmother, Lenora (Věra Galatíková), and her predominantly aged retainers eke out a frugal and apathetic living. He learns that his father had cursed her for what happened and had been hoping to secure Ondřej's release from the order. Lenora prays:

O Lord, save us from the poison that went into the grave
Let the grain ripen
Do not let the werewolf poison the well
Do not let the snake drink the cow's milk
May Vlkov castle live in peace.

When the passion of Ondřej and Lenora reasserts itself, she scourges herself since, according to church law, such a relationship counts as incest. Nonetheless, the local

priest, whose religious views are more adaptable, is prepared to sanction their union. He likens their relationship to that of the bees who immediately build a new house when the old one is destroyed. But the new spring and the new hope are short-lived. Armin arrives at their wedding, in a scene that provides a precise parallel to Ondřej at that of his father. Fatefully, Lenora's insistence that he attend the wedding feast leads to her death at his hands in the bridal chamber. Armin is thrown to the dogs and explicitly likened to a werewolf, but, in the final analysis, Ondřej accepts his dying advice to return to the order.

Valley of the Bees is a film in which the leading characters are destroyed by the logic of their own passions, which include "technical" incest and unacknowledged homosexuality. Not least of the film's virtues lies in the way in which Vláčil shows his characters' feelings as latent, as motivating forces operating independently of conscious intention. Armin's love for Ondřej is never shown as anything other than an attempt on his part to return him to the path of true Christianity. Similarly, his rejection of women forms part of the same ideology. Despite his beliefs, his passions find a way even in the fulfillment of obligation. At the same time, he recognizes an internal struggle, and life can only be meaningful for him if the guilty are punished. He must believe that the angels would still exist even if the whole of mankind were to be destroyed. Without them, he argues, men would be no better than dogs or wolves.

The film is set in the thirteenth century when Bohemia had already been a Christian kingdom for two centuries. Nonetheless, Vláčil indicates the positive elements to be found in pagan survivals such as the traditional mid-summer solstice and the accommodating, though almost irrelevant, form of local Christianity. Against this is set the austerity of Armin's foreign brand of Christianity, which would seek fulfillment of the ideal at the expense of existing humanity. The explicit Czech/German opposition is given added weight if the order's subsequent career of aggression and territorial aggrandizement is taken into account. Although the film is clearly opposed to the dogmatism represented by Armin, Ondřej finally accepts the values of his "foreign brother," less because he believes in them than because there seems to be little else to do. It is a situation not uncommon in Czech history.

As in *Marketa Lazarová*, life is shown to be crude, brutal, and violent. The references to werewolves and cannibalism and the continuous presence of hunting dogs permeate the film. The escaping knight, Ondřej's father, and Armin are all, in the end, eaten by dogs. When Ondřej's dogs hunt down a deer, we see a tear roll from its eye when its throat is cut. The image is recalled when Armin's mailed arm draws a knife across the throat of the half naked Lenora – the unfeeling destruction of beauty, of the positive elements in the human situation. As the human werewolf, Armin's actions link with the dogs/wolves/death associations.

Like Vláčil's previous film, *Valley of the Bees* shows a remarkable ability to evoke the atmosphere and cultural values of a past age. Although the ideological ascendancy of the knights is finally accepted, it is not shown as a solution to any problem, and Vláčil sides with the cause of pagan humanity. The tragic outcome of the conflicts

engendered by culture and ideology remains a constant preoccupation with Vlácil, and the contemporary relevance of the theme is made more obviously apparent by his next film, *Adelheid* (1969), which is set in the period immediately following the Second World War.

Adapted once again in collaboration with Vladimír Körner, *Adelheid* is set on the northern Moravian frontier and presents its story within the context of relations between the Czechs and Germans, who were to be deprived of their property and expelled from the country. In a parallel context, Eugen Loebel has described a visit to the Sudetenland after the war, in which he likened the Czech treatment of Germans to the Nazi treatment of Jews:

When I came into the town from which the area was administered, I saw a lot of people wearing white armbands. I was told these were Germans who were being gradually expelled. The white armbands were the equivalent of the Star of David, which Jews had had to wear under the Nazis. These Germans also received Jewish rations, that is, the starvation rations which the Jews received under Hitler. At dinner in the evening, we were served by German girls, apparently from good families, and apparently the preserve of the new supermen. When I got back to Prague, I told my friends and relations how shocked I was by this. They were quite surprised at what they called my “decadent liberalism.” They said I had been in England during the war and knew nothing about the atrocities committed by the Germans except what I had read in the newspapers, whereas they had been through it all. They had been humiliated, tortured and persecuted. So any nastiness that was being done to the Germans was less than they deserved. I gradually realised that Hitler had not really lost the war. The power he had exploited was still there. His ruthlessness, his profound contempt for human beings and their rights, had taken root. His ethics had not been destroyed with the Third Reich.¹⁰

As is evident from Loebel's observations, this is a controversial subject, and it is precisely against such a background that the story of *Adelheid* is set. It examines the relationship between Viktor Chodovický (Petr Čepek), a Czech airman returned from service in the Royal Air Force, and Adelheid (Emma Černa), the daughter of a Nazi factory owner now in captivity. She speaks only German and he only Czech. Despite this undeniably schematic basis, Vlácil is not content to engage in easy moralizing, to allocate blame on the one hand or preach a message of brotherhood on the other. Instead, he carefully follows the nuances of a developing relationship between two people broken by the conflict and divided by culture and history.

Adelheid is a film of considerably more interest than might be expected from Skvorecký's observation that it was basically a soap opera rescued by Vlácil's art.¹¹ The opening of the film provides an ominous setting for what is to follow, with the credit *Adelheid* appearing in red against the black and white background of a railway

tunnel. It is a violent and contradictory effect that suggests blood, tragedy, and the emergence from nightmare. When the exhausted Viktor refuses to show his papers at the frontier, he is forced off the train and hit with the butt of a gun by the frontier guard (Pavel Landovský). He rolls down the embankment in slow motion to the incongruous accompaniment of music by Johann Strauss. His face bleeds. A woman spits on the ground. Besides conveying the habitual violence of the period, the scene suggests the sick and delirious state of Viktor's mind. The shock value of slow motion within a conventional context also serves as an alienation effect, preparing the audience to look at what follows with a new awareness.

Viktor has returned from the war, but it is by no means clear why he has come to this part of Czechoslovakia. The only answer is provided through the images of horses grazing in a lush green landscape and the beauty of the mansion that Viktor is free to adopt as his home. But the images of peace are deceptive. Behind the green fields are German women working in their white armbands, and there are also minefields. When he opens a window in the house, the sound of machine gun fire can be heard in the distance.

He becomes aware of Adelheid's existence the morning after his arrival when he finds her scrubbing the floor. She has been assigned to him as a servant, and she asserts proudly that she does not understand a single word of Czech. Viktor is informed by the local police chief (Jan Vostrčil) that her father, Haldemann, had been “the biggest fascist in the district,” had originally taken the house from a Jewish family, and was now about to be tried for his crimes. He is shown caged in the gardens that had first been used for dogs and then for Polish prisoners. Like Loebel, Viktor is told that the Germans deserve the treatment they are getting and that he should be careful not to treat Adelheid too well.

Their awareness of each other is at first conveyed in small, delicate touches. She looks up from her work at his bare feet and waist as he leans on the doorpost, looking out of the house. He watches her movements as she reaches into a cupboard or pushes the hair back from her brow. At first, his interest is obvious and voyeuristic, a point emphasized by Vlácil when Viktor looks at her through binoculars and, subsequently, through the slats of a Venetian blind.

Gradually, through his exploration of the house and its contents, Viktor builds up a picture of her family background. Most affecting is his discovery of a child's birthday book, used for writing, painting, and the exchange of poems and pictures. He notices that one of the pieces is written in Czech and asks Adelheid in surprise if she understands Czech. The child's book not only recalls a past when racial differences mattered less, but suggests that the values of childhood were different, that Adelheid had Czech friends. Her present stance is shown as a pose, a habit acquired during the war and now maintained in self-defense.

This penetration into her past leads to a sequence of romantic intimacy. They sit together by the fire, smoking, the black silhouettes of their figures outlined against the flames. She maintains her silence, but, for Viktor, this is an advantage. He says

¹⁰ Eugen Loebel, *Conversations with the Bewildered*, trans. George Gretton (London: Allen & Unwin, 1972), p. 27.

¹¹ Škvorecký, *All the Bright*, p. 212.

that he's pleased she doesn't understand him and is able to talk freely about his past and the house where he was born. He puts his hand on her knee and then kisses her passionately. The falling rain and the firelight provide a conventional accompaniment to their romance but are not overstressed.

This fragile mood is immediately shattered the following morning. The images of Adelheid washing, stripped to the waist, are frank and unromanticized. She soon has a cigarette drooping from her mouth as in previous scenes, and the return to reality is complete when two women come to tell her that her father has been executed.

The final tragedy is precipitated by the return of Adelheid's brother from the Russian front. During a struggle between him and Viktor, she hits at them with an iron bar and kills her brother. After her arrest, she and Viktor put their feelings into words, although the relationship is still expressed in oblique references. She reveals that she stopped hating him when he saw her chopping wood and he blushed. He tells her that he has no one else and offers to help. His offer is rejected visually by an extreme close-up of her face followed by a long held shot of prison bars. The barriers imposed by history are too great.

Viktor waits, an isolated figure at the far end of a large room – a deep focus shot in which his situation is stressed by the impersonal framing of walls and ceiling. He runs from the room when he hears that Adelheid has locked herself in the lavatory. But she has already hanged herself. Again, the scene is in long shot and parallels the earlier image of Viktor. The lonely, isolated, and pathetic figure recalls the stripped and degraded heroine of Robert Bresson's *Au Hasard, Balhazar*. A policeman reads the formal report that converts her life into words and statistics.

Again, as in his previous work, Vlácil places his hopes in the possibility of human exchange between individuals, and again it is the intervention of wider social and ideological demands that prevents their realization. In *Adelheid*, the tentative understanding between two people is threatened and finally destroyed by the intervention of the outside world, symbolized by regular visits from the police chief. It is he who fires bullets into the pictures in Adelheid's house, exposes the cages in the garden, almost goads her into a stance of Germanic superiority by playing a Nazi march on the gramophone, and meets a bloody death at the hands of her brother on his third visit. He represents the official view of reality as conditioned by the war.

The main formal device in *Adelheid* rests on the fact that the two protagonists are unable or unwilling to communicate with each other in words. The fact that this can be explained logically means that Vlácil is able to make his observations without being accused of pretension or formalism. The way in which he follows and observes his characters in everyday movement has much in common with the work of Antonioni.

If his previous films could be read in an allegorical way, *Adelheid* must be regarded as striking much harder and more directly at some of the simplifications of Socialist Realism. The conventional treatment of the war, and one that has returned since 1968, has always stressed the heroism of the partisans in the fight against the evils of

fascism. In crossing the barriers, in having a German heroine who was the daughter of a Nazi, in showing how the Germans were mistreated by the Czechs in the postwar period, Vlácil broke quite radically with conventional stereotypes. He was not the first to do this, and *Adelheid* came three years after the Kachyňa/Procházka *Coach to Vienna* (1966), which also featured a silent heroine. However, Vlácil's muted psychological analysis generates greater force than the more polemical approach of Kachyňa and Procházka. It is a deeply felt account of the distortions forced on humanity by racial and ideological conflicts beyond conscious control.

The continuing theme of Vlácil's work is the human distortion caused by cultural and ideological conflict: East versus West (*The White Dove*), Christianity versus paganism (*Marketa Lazarová, Valley of the Bees*), Czechs versus Germans (*Valley of the Bees, Adelheid*). With the exception of *The White Dove*, a work that is beautiful but scarcely convincing, his vision may be characterized as one of pessimistic realism. All of the last three films described here end in the death of at least one of the principal characters. In holding the potentiality for freedom and humanity in juxtaposition with the distortions of ideology, his approach is surely more Marxist than that of approved propaganda. While he inevitably projects his own and his society's preoccupations into the past, his attempt to see historical periods including the postwar years in terms of their own values and contradictions is genuine and rarely attempted. The absence of solutions can be seen as part of a general trend within Czech cinema of the mid- and late sixties, the idea that audiences should examine their own consciences and situation.

Vlácil's interest in visual effect and formal composition owes much to his early training as an art historian. While it is obvious that he has chosen specific visual approaches appropriate to his themes, it is interesting that his cinematographers have differed. Jan Čuřík worked on the lyrical *The White Dove*, Bedřich Bařka on the baroque *Marketa Lazarová*, and František Uldrych on the visually more traditional *Valley of the Bees* and *Adelheid*. Although Vlácil's work avoids some of the more obvious formal innovations of the sixties, the strength of imagery quite clearly removes his films from any consensus or establishment style.

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