The "young working women" of Zruc pledge sexual chastity
(*Loves of a Blonde*, dir. Miloš Forman, Czechoslovakia, 1965)

Betrayed Promises: Politics and Sexual Revolution in the Films of Márta Mészáros, Miloš Forman, and Dušan Makavejev

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"The October Revolution was ruined when it rejected Free Love," declares Milena (Milena Dravić) in Dušan Makavejev's *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* (*WR: Misterije organizma*, Yugoslavia/West Germany, 1971). Her neighbors have gathered to hear her ad hoc lecture on the stairs of an overcrowded building in 1960s Yugoslavia. Milena reproaches her comrades for having neglected an essential aspect in the life of an authentic revolutionary: free love. Her address raises the crucial question of whether the revolution might not be *complete* without a sexual revolution, or whether, more problematically, the revolution might simply not be a revolution without a sexual revolution. In other words, isn't the very phrase "sexual revolution" redundant?[1] Isn't the revolution always, *necessarily*, also a sexual revolution? If this is the case, as Milena believes, why is it that our revolutions have historically betrayed their investment in the reorganization of sexuality? Why is it that at the moment when the revolution closes off, when it gives birth

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to what we oxymoronically call a "revolutionary government," it gives up its interest in sexuality? Eastern Europe, the terrain on which the twentieth century challengingly experimented with revolutionary discourse, is a site where such questions are posed in most explicit terms.

We will look here at a constellation of Eastern European films from the 1960s and the early 1970s, a period haunted by a revisionism that, among other things, interrogated sexual practices in "real-existing socialism": Márta Mészáros's *Riddance* (*Szabad lélegzet*, Hungary, 1973); Miloš Forman's *Loves of a Blonde* (*Lásky jedné plavovlásky*, Czechoslovakia, 1965); and Dušan Makavejev's *Love Affair; or, The Case of the Missing Switchboard Operator* (*Ljubavni slucaj ili tragedija sluzbenice P.T.T.*, Yugoslavia, 1967) and *WR: Mysteries of the Organism*. As we will see, the inquiry into the workings of sexuality reveals the inscription of power on two of its most enduring institutions: marriage and the family. It also becomes, once again, an inquiry into "the woman question" and the revolution's betrayed promises for woman.

Eastern Europe is rarely the focus of a biopolitical investigation because, as a result of long-sedimented Cold War perceptions, the very phrase "Eastern Europe" is associated with totalitarianism, terror, dictators, Gulags, and the cult of personality. That is, "Eastern Europe" triggers visions of repressive politics, fundamentally different from the "gentle coercion" that is thought to characterize disciplining mechanisms in the capitalist West. Concerned with the everyday workings of power within conditions of "normalcy," the films we will look at here challenge these widespread Cold War assumptions, which, ironically, have also been uncritically adopted by intellectual elites of a post-1989, capitalism-bound Eastern Europe. To focus on the everyday and the mundane at the expense of camps and censorship, is, of course, not to deny the Gulag or the influence of repressive politics (abortion laws, for example) on communist sexuality; it is simply to say that the Gulag is not the only story to be told about Eastern Europe. It is time we have the courage to look at our experiments *as* experiments, from within the history of the Left, and tell the story of their failures *and* achievements.

In his account of the twentieth century, Alain Badiou recently reminded us that the nineteenth century dreamed some very wild dreams, which the twentieth century pursued.[2] One such dream would become crucial for an age thirsty for an encounter with "the real" and therefore ready to experiment, to act on the impulse of the dream. Eastern Europe is the site where, in the wake of Marx and Freud, an experiment that imagined socialism and sexuality as intimately connected saw the light of day. And, as Fredric Jameson would have it, whenever history meets the real, it hurts.[3] Looking back at the twentieth century and its experimental politics, we can, however, learn to read that which hurts and perhaps, as Slavoj Žižek urges, dare to *repeat* some of the impulses we once thought revolutionary.[4] A medium of desire and fantasy, cinema offers an archive in which, in light of this project, we can spend some productive time.

Marriage and the Family: Márta Mészáros

Mészáros's films are concerned with women going through periods of crisis. Her characters are in the process of making important decisions, and the viewer is challenged to participate.[5] Cinema is here, as often elsewhere during this time in Eastern Europe, an important part of the public sphere, a space in which intellectual debates are staged. The frameworks of such debates are fictional, but the viewer, sutured to the decision-making process, takes part in *historical* decisions. In *Riddance*, the decision Mészáros's heroine has to make concerns marriage. Jutka (Erzsébet Kútvölgyi) is a working-class young woman, independent and emancipated. She has recently met András (Gábor Nagy), an attractive literature student. They fall in love, and thoughts of matrimony emerge. The film, however, defamiliarizes marriage, framing it as an institution. Marriage is not the natural, inevitable outcome of Jutka's love for András. It is as if Jutka has read Engels and is aware of the history of the institution and its unavoidable traps.[6] A classic "meet the parents" scene dramatizes her decision making. Later, the scene is repeated as an engagement party, when Jutka brings her parents to András's house so that the future in-laws can meet.

If this sounds like a recipe for a romantic comedy, we are in for a challenge.

Jutka's dilemma is not sentimental, not a matter of whether András is the right man for her in terms of interests, personality, and sexual match. Her decision is political because marriage is a political institution. Jutka is one in a series of Mészáros's characters who question family life. Mészáros's films often take as protagonists orphans, individuals socialized outside of the framework of the traditional family, or women before or after marriage.[7] They thus denaturalize the family, its gender roles, division of labor, and political function.

Not entirely parentless, Jutka comes from a broken family, with a violent past. Her parents have been separated for years, and she lives in a factory dormitory. Mészáros uses Jutka's diegetic visits to her remarried parents and to András's house as anthropological investigations into the status of the family within the communist project. If Jutka's emancipated presence is a positive statement on behalf of the "real-existing" communist order and its industrialization program, which has provided her with a supportive framework for her social and sexual emancipation (including a physical space to live independently, a factory dormitory), her visits to her parents and would-be in-laws offer forays into the politics of retrograde family life.

Mészáros combines the marriage theme with that of social mobility. While Jutka is a working-class girl, András's family belongs to a new middle class, a "red bourgeoisie" that has emerged within the "classless society" of Eastern Europe. András himself is a *literature* student, knocking at the doors of an intelligentsia that has grown apart from the working class. In order for Jutka to feel accepted by András, and his friends and family, she pretends she is a student too and even sleeps through a lecture at the university. The subaltern role Jutka contemplates as her future upon her entry into András's world is augmented by this class distinction. The irony of having to apologize for being working class within a system imagining itself as one in which proletarians rule is not lost on the viewer.

During the first visit-scene, the would-be mother-in-law is giving Jutka a tour of her house, a house surrounded by a tall metal fence with a locked gate. "Your gate is always locked," Jutka later reproaches András. The bourgeois family, regrouped on communist terrain, is in need of "privacy," which names here the division of the imagined commune into "family units," as well as clearly demarcated property relations. Once inside the house, the mise-en-scène is politicized, from the mother-in-law's orderly appearance to the impeccable cleanness of the house, from the mother's distant politeness to the crowded but neatly organized shelves of the dining room, from the tense bodily interaction of the two women to the alienating light effects.

Riddance, dir. Márta Mészáros, 1973

A working-class girl is introduced to middle-class values. "Lovely," is all Jutka can say. The question in the air is, Jutka, do you want to be like me? Jutka's compliant but rather indifferent body language answers in the negative. A handheld camera follows them walking along shelves full of porcelain figurines, walls crowded with paintings, tables covered in embroideries, and windows enclosed in drapes. There are no cuts. The viewer experiences the exhibit-like interiors in real time and in actual spatial relations.

From the dining room, the two women move into the bathroom, or powder room, the space where the body is subjected to mechanisms of order. Whereas the light in the previous interior was dim, calling on their bodies to encode the tension in the air, a bright light in the bathroom allows the viewer to dissect facial expressions. A marble-top vanity hosts the necessary instruments for the creation and enhancement of female beauty. The standing Jutka is dominating the scene, but Mészáros does not portray the mother as caricature. There is politeness in the characters'

demeanors, conveying a certain female solidarity. However, the camera emphasizes an impossible apprenticeship. Jutka exhibits an unenthusiastic gaze, and the cuts that mark the end of this scene reveal an insurmountable distance.

In another makeup scene at the beginning of the film, Jutka and her dorm friends are preparing to go out dancing. Within the shared communal space of the dorm, putting on makeup in front of a mirror has radically different meanings than in the bourgeois powder room. It is an exercise in the art of seduction and a celebration of youth and independence. For the future mother-in-law, however, seduction is no longer the end of makeup. The woman in front of the mirror adjusts an image of herself as mother and household manager. The same rigorous discipline that governs the interiors of her house is applied to the face and the body, symbolically repressing the erotic, the spontaneous, the uncontrollable that we see on display in the dorm.

What, as a consequence, is the viewer challenged to think about the institution of marriage? Later visits to András's house show Jutka in what is, along with the bedroom, the most ideologically loaded locus of the bourgeois household: the kitchen. With ritual gestures, András's mother hangs an apron around Jutka's neck; cut to images of András's father watching TV and András taking a nap. Within the family and its bourgeois domestic shrine, men and women belong to clearly demarcated political and architectural spheres and follow a strict division of labor. The revolution has not changed much.

If the visits to András's house are forays into Jutka's future as a wedded woman, the visits she pays to her own parents are incursions into the history of marriage. We move into the realm of the "real" working class, and the family picture becomes even gloomier, loaded with traumatic events that probably marked Jutka's childhood. The bourgeois family, we are reminded, founded on values of civility and myths of "the angel in the house," protects and grants its women some amount of respect, something that is missing from the working-class families of Jutka's separated and remarried parents. These families are the result of an unhappy

crossbreeding of working-class and rural preindustrialization gender roles. Violence and abuse are at home here.

Jutka's respectability in the eyes of her future in-laws seems to be a function of her own family background. When silently interrogated, "Where do you come from?" Jutka needs to answer, "I come from a healthy, happy family." An engagement dinner is planned at András's house, and Jutka has to show her pedigree. She thus sets out to find her parents. Her mother lives on the outskirts of the city with a man who eyes Jutka, an allusion to possible child abuse in her past. Jutka finds her mother at work, but the mother refuses to help. She does not want to see her former husband. Jutka understands and asks her, "Are you happy now?" The mother's answer is unconvincing. Happiness is out of the question. As Jutka exits the frame, the camera zooms in on the bent head of the crying wife and mother.

Jutka visits her father's house next. The atmosphere is apparently more relaxed here. The relationship between the two spouses seems stronger; they can actually be seen in the same frame. But throughout the scene, Jutka and her father occupy the foreground, while her father's wife—whom not even Jutka, otherwise sensitive to female solidarity, greets—attends silently to her household duties in the background. This woman without a name never speaks. She is in the frame, here and later during the engagement dinner party, where she is brought to play the role of Jutka's mother; she listens and helps with the dishes. But she—like the household labor she performs—remains otherwise invisible. She is the true subaltern of this world—without a name, without a voice, without a story.

During the dinner party, the men do all the talking, while the women eat in silence. After dinner, in a classical feminist montage, we see the three men continuing their conversation in the living room, while the silent women clean and do dishes in the kitchen, with the offscreen voices of the men still audible. Though the visit seems a success, in the next scene we see an unhappy Jutka dropping plates on the kitchen floor. She is not marrying András, and it is up to the viewer to draw the necessary conclusions. The film's title translates as "free breathing," and Jutka is not

willing to give up her "free breathing" for the sake of the family. We do not know what she will do. It is not clear what options are open to her. We later see her crying in the factory, but we are not invited to juxtapose this image to that of her crying mother. Jutka is not a victim. Women of her generation, the true beneficiaries of communist industrialization, have choices. The next cut shows Jutka in the shower, in a scene that both opens and ends the film. Close-ups of her face and body, of her skin covered in running water, depict a smiling Jutka who likes being in her body. It is an optimistic ending. This, however, is not the mandatory optimism of the postrevolutionary Soviet Union, the alternative to the crime of ideological pessimism. This is actual optimism, acknowledging that, even if we do not know where Jutka will go from here, *for her* there is a place to go.

Two names emerge as explicit reference points for Mészáros's film, as well as for other Eastern European films of this time that deal with issues related to marriage, the family, and sexuality: Alexandra Kollontai and Wilhelm Reich. In 1921, in an article titled "Sexual Relations and the Class Struggle," Kollontai warned the young Soviet regime in Moscow—which in its first three years of life had a progressive attitude toward gender roles—not to avoid "the sexual question." She advised Communist leaders not to relegate the issue to the private sphere, as a question that can solve itself, because "the way personal relationships are organized in a certain social group has had a vital influence on the outcome of the struggle between hostile social classes."[8] Kollontai argued that it is the private and social spheres that construct the state and not the other way around.

The postrevolutionary Soviet Union, however, *needed* the family as a unit of economic production. It was agreed that the family would eventually wither away, but that for now it was a necessary evil. Radicals like Kollontai were urged to defer expectations related to the woman question or the sexual question in the name of economic efficiency and political stability. Once the political and economic realms were consolidated, the Party would return to these issues. *Now*, however, there simply is no time for sex. "Lack of restraint in one's sexual life is bourgeois; it is characteristic of

decay," Lenin declared in an interview with Clara Zetkin.[9] Patience is needed. Moreover, all the energy of the proletariat should be channeled into work. Sex, unproductive and insufficiently communal, is a waste of energy. If the proletariat is to know love, the proper object of love is Lenin, the Party, or one's factory. The revolutionary body is to be strictly a communal body, and the question of how to collectivize pleasure remained an unsolved conundrum.

Procrastination, leaving issues of sexuality and gender roles unchallenged, Kollontai responded, could open the gate to "counterrevolutionary" discourses. In particular, Kollontai was afraid that the institution of the family, founded on monogamy and private property, could inform the sexual ethics of the working class and ossify as a new form of individualism. Both the prerevolutionary era and contemporary Western civilization served as warnings. A private sphere dominated by bourgeois sexual mores would be lethal to the communist project. According to Kollontai, the Party had the obligation to formulate an unequivocal theory of sexual revolution. The revolution needed to foster healthy and joyful sexual relationships. An alienating discourse on sexuality would produce a melancholic worker—idealistic and possessive, identifying individualistic love with salvation. It would create proletarians who compete for their lovers, who are not able to respect their freedom. Such a predicament would inevitably perpetuate gender inequality and promote a jealous monogamy instead of relations of communist comradeship. The subject of the revolution should indeed reserve his or her love for Lenin, but should also be free to engage in joyous sexual relations with his or her comrades.[10]

For his part, Reich spoke in an even more radical tone. The libertarian psychoanalyst condemned the Soviet regime for its superficial engagement with issues of sexuality and for having tackled them as bourgeois concepts. He challenged the hidden biopolitical goals he believed informed the Communist government's approach to sexuality.[11] Unlike Kollontai, whose intervention was ultimately part of a discourse concerned with the health of the body politic, Reich's approach to sexuality was centered on the concept of joy. He looked at communism with the same eyes with which he had looked at fascism, and he concluded that Stalinism was unable

to produce a positive and nonrestrictive position on sexuality. Its quest for order and its need to integrate individual effort into a collective whole could not condone—let alone encourage—the chaotic and anarchic nature of sexual joy. Fifteen years after Kollontai, Reich acknowledged that the Soviet Union still lacked a theory of sexual revolution and clung to the false idea—erroneously attributed to Lenin—that once economic relationships were reorganized and progressive legislation passed, the sexual question would miraculously solve itself.[12]

Mészáros's *Riddance* confirms that the realm of the family and the gender roles it calls for are framed, as Kollontai feared, by a bourgeois imaginary. "Free breathing" is simply not possible given contemporary gender relations. Radically changed economic structures of the kind Jutka experiences in the factory have simply not triggered the much expected reorganization of gender roles. "State feminism," the communist response to the woman question, has turned out not to be a feminism at all. The woman question will be forever postponed. Mészáros's film does not idealize the factory dorm, but, in the spirit of Kollontai, it envisions the comradeship that is built there as an alternative to the family model. The young women in the dorm share not only the crowded space, clothes, and makeup but also their secrets and hopes. They touch one another and bond along the lines of an alternative community. The dorm is an attempt at a commune.[13]

Riddance, however, is interested only in what Kollontai believed was one side of the sexual question: inherited gender dynamics and the bourgeois family. The film presents the situation of a young independent woman in the Hungary of the 1970s and acknowledges that communism has done a lot to allow its character to "breathe freely," but not enough. Mészáros portrays Jutka as a self-determined young woman, suggesting that her life in the dorm has contributed to her emancipation, but the film stops short of questioning what Kollontai believed was the other side of the sexual question: its predatory individualism, its romanticized investments, and its moralistic monogamy.

Biopolitics: Miloš Forman

Forman's *Loves of a Blonde* moves this discussion further. While Mészáros's method is to stage a calm intellectual debate, Forman uses satire to unmask the alienation of the working woman and her very limited chances at free breathing. The first part of his film focuses on the sexual predicament of a young worker, living, like Mészáros's Jutka, in a factory dorm. The second part depicts the working-class family and its reaction to the more relaxed sexuality of the younger generation.

"The blonde," Andula (Hana Brejchová), is in her early twenties and works on the assembly line of a shoe factory in the town of Zruc in 1960s Czechoslovakia. Given the fact that only women work in this and other such factories, the men-to-women ratio in this town is one to sixteen. We know of this predicament from the beginning of the film. Through a glass door, we see a young woman spying on a meeting of the factory's management. On the agenda is the question of whether the factory should allow her to leave town and live with her boyfriend, or whether it should permit this departure only if the couple is married. The management is hesitant to let her go because what matters most are the production deadlines the factory has to meet. Allowing employees to leave might have a negative impact on production.

Love and sexuality are distractions from the important things on the agenda of Soviet-style communism: production and the five-year plan. But the Soviet position does not go undisputed. There is a more sympathetic voice on the factory's board. An older foreman, who supervises "the girls" on the assembly line, believes that their "needs" should be taken more seriously into account. They should have a life outside work. Thus the foreman suggests the factory arrange for an army unit to come on a "patriotic" mission to the town of Zruc and supply the young women with what they are lacking. This arrangement would disseminate pleasure in assembly-line fashion.

The plot of *Loves of a Blonde* becomes a parody of socialist-realist film, whose formula involves a production issue plus melodrama. The irony here is that the production problem is sexuality

itself. As Kollontai hoped, the sexual problem is explicitly acknowledged as a problem. But the way the factory's management, and, by extrapolation, Communist leadership, deal with it is worthy of ridicule. If the dispatch of an army unit to Zruc might pass as an open-minded gesture, the film's sarcasm and the unhappy story of its naive heroine unmask such false appearances. According to Reich, for the Communist authorities, pleasure is never a goal in itself; it is always subordinated to other goals. The irony of *Loves of a Blonde* is twofold. On the one hand, it is a function of the fact that the factory's management cannot address the issue of sexuality outside the framework of production. On the other hand, even within this framework, the response is a fiasco. The language of apparatchiks is uncannily similar to that of capitalism and its invention of leisure. Sex is leisure, and pleasure is integrated within a humanism of work whose bottom line is production. The message is, "Let them have some sex tonight, so they can work better tomorrow."

The fact that the factory management has no experience or language to address these issues becomes apparent in the effort of the foreman to persuade an army major to dispatch a unit to the Zruc area. His euphemisms for sex are that "youth needs what you used to need, comrade major . . . and myself, and the others too." In his effort to make his project understood, the foreman explains the everyday life of a "girl": "A girl works in a plant for eight hours at the machine. She leaves the factory. Then what? She gets something to eat . . . right? And then she has nobody to caress her. Nobody to kiss her." The words for sex are "kiss," "caress," and "what we used to need but no longer do."

In one of the film's seduction scenes, three middle-aged reservists (the much desired men turn out to be "a bunch of grandfathers") besiege three disappointed factory girls. The clumsiness of the seducers makes the scene laughable. However, their tactics are discomfiting, especially given the framework within which they are displayed. All the reservists seem to want is to get the young women drunk and rush them to a private place where they will please *them.* Needless to say, the factory management, the self-appointed administrators of pleasure, consists of a group of men. The factory girls

have no say in the engineering of their gratification and eventually accept being interpellated as producers of pleasure. They come to the party organized by the foreman—as if they have to. They are bored, but accept the invitation to sit at the three men's table, even though they seem to dislike them. They dance, empty their glasses of wine when they are told to, and consider "going somewhere else" with them, even though they display no sexual interest.

The group ends up going nowhere, mainly because there is nowhere to go, as one of the young women puts it. One can only go into the woods, but it is winter. The factory management did not seem to take into consideration that it should arrange for "places to go to," as Reich explicitly advises Communist elites, calling on them to provide workers with free rooms where they can make love. This move, Reich believes, would stand as clear proof that the Party is committed to addressing the "sexual problem." Not an argument for bourgeois "privacy," as opposed to communal living, "places to go" refers to an acknowledgment of the prioritizing of pleasure in the life of the working class, something the communism-building states of Eastern Europe have overlooked in their architectural planning of a better world.[14]

As in slapstick comedy, nothing goes as planned in Forman's film, and if what needs to happen eventually happens, it is the result of a fortunate turn of events. The three working women and the reservists do not "go" anywhere, but one of the soldiers is eventually matched with another factory girl as desperate for sex as he is, and Andula, the "blonde," has her share of gratification in the arms of another seducer, Milda (Vladimír Pucholt), the young piano player she had been eyeing during the dance. Milda stays in a hotel. He has the "place to go" the soldiers were looking for.

Another seduction scene unfolds in Milda's room, with the same tragic and comic overtones. The sexual act happens within a gray zone between consent and rape. If Andula consents, it is not to the sexual act itself. She consents to being seduced; she persuades herself that she has found love. Her body does not radiate Jutka's emancipated self-confidence. It is closed off, contained in codes of decency. It has not caught up with the discourse of free love and has remained inscribed by preindustrial sexual morality. For her,

sex is remote from joy. It is something one—given the romantic circumstances—does because men seem to expect it. If there is to be some pleasure for her it is a side effect.

Myths of the good boy and of romantic love haunt the factory dormitory; the film begins and ends with girls talking about idealized relationships. It is in this dreamlike reality that the alienated working-class woman can find happiness. Once she tries to break out of her fantasy world and touch happiness, all she finds is humiliation. This will be the story of Andula's trip to Prague, where she follows Milda in an attempt to convince herself that their encounter was more than a one-night stand. Her hubris will be punished, and she will have to return to Zruc, to her reality as a working girl in an industrial wasteland.

The scene that precedes Andula's departure for Prague shows an earnest-looking elderly female Party-apparatchik lecturing a classroom of "girls"—among them, Andula—on the importance of saving one's "honor." She ends by recommending chastity. If the foreman's initiative now appears as a "state of exception," a grotesquely organized alternative, the apparatchik's lecture stands for normality. In what seems like a countermeasure to the foreman's liberalism, the young women are asked to pledge to be virtuous. Should they fail to heed the impulse of the pledge, comes the warning, men will treat them badly. What every girl wants, the educator goes on, is to marry a good boy, who will love her forever. But this is something one has to deserve, and the recipe is sexual abstinence.

The camera records the young women's faces and body language. Their reaction to the discourse of power is more interesting than the predictable prudery of the official approach. When the young women are asked to vote on whether or not to accept the pledge, it is obviously not out of conviction that they vote in the affirmative. They want to bring the tedious experience to an end. Sure, we will pledge, their bodies seem to say, but can we go now? Their passivity does suggest a certain degree of distance: inertia and Soldier Švejk-like, clownish compliance are familiar resistance devices on the Czechoslovak screen. However, as in the seduction

scenes, the "girls" come across as an easily manipulated crowd. Their bodies remain malleable when confronted with mechanisms of power. If there is a form of protest here, this protest is silent, distracted, lacking a voice. There is no true interest or attention on the young women's faces. They are not persuaded. But persuasion is no longer the expected outcome of such staged spectacles.[15] The Party machine is no longer interested in changing the subject of the revolution; it requires only its passive spectatorship. The disciplining mission of this scene is already successful once the women have been herded into the classroom, once they are shown "their places" as "students," to be instructed by a member of the Party elite. Their boredom, which can be read as a form of resistance, is in fact part of the spectacle, its endorsement.[16]

Once in Prague, the focus of the film shifts from Andula to Milda's mother. Instead of spending the night with her lover, Andula has to endure the company of his defensive parents. The "real world" outside the ideological cocoon of Zruc is more brutal but just as limited in perspective. Upon Andula's arrival, Milda is not at home. Her presence confronts Milda's parents with their son's sexuality. They seem to be aware of it but have so far ignored it.

Like the foreman in Zruc, Milda's parents speak about sexuality with discomfort. The family, like the factory management and Communist political institutions, lacks a point of view on sexuality. As Kollontai feared, the issue has been marginalized, never talked about, and thus the parents cannot find the words to engage it. Forman shows us the frustrated and frustrating rants of Milda's mother, who becomes more agitated as language fails her. Her words—"I can't do anything, I can't even see. Can't get it off my mind"—reiterate Kollontai's and Reich's warnings that the sexual question would haunt the communist state and that shying away from it would ruin the revolution. Andula returns to Zruc and, most probably, to a former abusive lover. The optimism at the end of *Riddance* fades away, and we are left with a tragicomic acknowledgment that the "loves of a blonde" can take place only in the imagination.

Bodies on the Dissection Table: Dušan Makavejev

Makavejev's films pick up this thread from the deadlock in which Forman left us. It might be too much to call Makavejev a follower of Reich, but Reich's theses are explicitly present in his work, and he uses *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* to explicitly stage a discussion around Reich's legacy (the initials "WR" in the title stand for Wilhelm Reich).[17] The film offers a fresh look at Stalinism and Soviet-style communism through a Reichian lens. While *WR* is almost a theoretical debate on the German sexologist's insights, an essay film with a documentary feel, narrative plays a more important role in Makavejev's earlier features. Their position on the condition of the working class in real-existing communism and the latter's management of pleasure is harder to decipher. *Love Affair; or, The Case of the Missing Switchboard Operator* does not engage in the same kind of dialogue with its audience as does *Riddance*. It does not invite its spectators to participate in the making of a decision, but lures them into a labyrinth, exposing them to elliptic and deceiving messages. The audience is challenged to rethink its own cultural baggage, which it uses to enter the conversation about workers, gender roles, and their (sexual) emancipation.

Love Affair questions the position of the intellectual with ready-made answers, including that of Reich himself. In contrast to *Loves of a Blonde*, under scrutiny here are not only the realities of communism as they become embodied in sexual relations but also the person judging them. The film favors a Kollontai-inspired "method." In her fiction, Kollontai acknowledges that even the most committed revolutionary carries historical baggage that cannot be so easily thrust aside. Her "worker bees" are imperfect beings struggling to free themselves of the bourgeois remnants that still inform their understanding of love and sexuality. *Love Affair* asks whether an intellectual segment of the audience might be too quick to judge the drama of the working-class man turned "serious man" and label it "fascist," that is, (self-)mutilating in a Reichian fashion. *Love Affair* tries to understand such a discursive environment and asks a fundamental question: how much (sexual) revolution can man (and woman) endure?

Ahmed rejected (Dušan Makavejev's *Love Affair; or, The Case of the Missing Switchboard Operator,* 1967)

The film centers on a couple, Izabela (Eva Ras) and Ahmed (Slobodan Aligrudić). Ahmed works in pest control, believes in socialism, is domestic, upholds monogamy, and sticks to traditional gender roles. He struggles to be rational and open-minded and to improve his condition. He falls in love and eventually marries what he calls a "modern girl," Izabela, with whose emancipated sexuality he tries to keep up. Izabela eventually dies, and the intellectual stakes of the film emerge from questions as to how and why this death occurs.

The conservative background of the main male character is a function of Ahmed's Muslim name. Makavejev plays here with stereotypes alive in 1970s Yugoslavia. In an ethnically mixed country, Ahmed stands for the more "backward" segments of the mix, and Izabela, of Hungarian ethnicity, for the more progressive (she is more "Western"). Diegetically, the drama of the couple is triggered by Izabela's affair with a coworker while Ahmed is dispatched for a month to a different part of the country. But in fact Makavejev does not clearly spell out whether Ahmed knows about his wife's affair. What Ahmed knows for sure is that, upon his return, she rejects him. She reproaches him for his patriarchal and domesticating practices. "What else do you want from me?" she asks, when he responds positively to the news of her being pregnant. "I don't want to be your slave." It seems Izabela has become a victim of a domesticity that she has so far willingly accepted. We also notice the gendered effects of a liberated sexuality: unlike men, women become pregnant.

Ahmed does not kill Izabela, although, in the eyes of the police, it will seem obvious that he did. This outcome will be in line

with the traditional commercial film plot, and part and parcel of the melodramatic genre. It is what an audience expects to see in a "love story," and Makavejev does his best to lure us into misreading the film. He has a criminologist lecture on the psychology and sociology of crime, feeding the fantasies of its imagined audience.

From Izabela's point of view, the story of *Love Affair* is the story of an independent woman who agrees to live together with a man and gradually sinks into domestication. When she revolts, she dies. Ahmed's story, a man's story, is slightly different. The question *Love Affair* poses is how should we, the audience, think of a character like him, who is a passive and not necessarily malevolent reinforcer of traditional gender roles? It is easy to blame him, but is he responsible? His deeds are not a matter of choice; he tries to be open-minded, to keep up with the "modernity" of his wife, but fails.

Love Affair does not follow linear chronology. Izabela's dead body appears ten minutes into the film. The film apparently seeks to find out how and why the woman has died. We know from the beginning that Ahmed is involved in her death, but we do not know how and will not find out until the end. What we are given, in the meantime, is a narrative background and an interpretative framework. We learn more about the two characters' relationship and the ensuing affair, but we are also exposed to lectures on sexual liberation and on the motives, tactics, and weapons of sex murderers. Both presentations provide the background for the criminalization of Ahmed and for the generalization of his case.

The criminologist's and the sexologist's lectures are embedded readings of the plot. The criminologist provides the aural background for the images that show the police discovering Izabela's corpse in the dark sewers of the city. His role is to deliver a logically coherent explanation. An autopsy follows, and the body's dissection becomes symbolic of the dissection of the ideological profile of the perpetrator and of the film itself. The criminologist is, however, proved wrong. *Love Affair* suggests that our incrimination of Ahmed's traditionalism might be superficial. His arrest is erroneous. The focus thus shifts from him to the functioning of

investigative discourses. Where do they fail? How? What are the consequences? Whom do they serve?

These questions take us back to the beginning of the film, where similar ones are posed: "Will man be remodeled?" "Will future man preserve certain old organs?"[18] Can the working class regress to an original organ-free status, of pure vital energy and revolutionary potentiality? Wouldn't this regression be tantamount to suicide? How much (sexual) revolution can a historical being survive? What are our limits?

Love Affair brings a potentially destructive aspect of the revolution to the fore. In his reading of the film, Herbert Eagle emphasizes that both Ahmed and Izabela are victims of a world that asks them to change at a pace they cannot keep up with.[19] The fact that the criminologist is wrong suggests that any given theoretical discourse cannot fully map the mental landscape of the revolution's subjects. The film does not overtly criticize Reich's theses on sexual revolution, but it warns that radical change comes with certain risks; such change torments and can lead to self-destruction.

Makavejev's film questions a certain ritual of incrimination that persists in the discourse of radical intellectuals like Reich. In the same way in which the criminologist's logic proves reductive, revolutionary discourse might sometimes be too quick to find a scapegoat in the figure of the reactionary. Not because the revolutionary ideals are debatable, but because theory has problems dealing with the inertia of history. Ahmed is not the traditional male oppressor or a "red fascist," Makavejev tells us. He reproduces traditional structures because he is a historical being carrying an ideological baggage whose immediate discarding could prove self-destructive.[20]

This is why *Love Affair* is closer to Kollontai than to Reich. In her fictional work, Kollontai herself has her Vasilisa Malygina question the limits of free love.[21] Malygina does so not because she opposes it, but because she understands that to live up to the call for sexual revolution represents a challenge. Kollontai's stories depict the inner struggles (and failures) of her characters to overcome their own inheritance. Her heroine, Vasilisa Malygina, cannot "take it," and, once she falls in love, despite her emancipation,

she wants monogamy. She vehemently refuses the family and the new "red bourgeoisie" that fosters it and whose interests it serves, but she cannot get over her own "counterrevolutionary" impulses.[22]

Ahmed does not want to kill Izabela; if he wants to kill somebody, he wants to kill himself. Once a year, he tells her, he needs to get drunk, because this is the way in which he can overcome his weltschmerz. His descent into the sewers in which Izabela ends up (his "depression") names his self-annihilating impulse. It reveals a desperate introspective attempt to discover something, a set of values he can cling to when the world around him has become incomprehensible.

Makavejev uses images of the urban landscape to suggest the mix of old and new. The city is a matter of both old structures and revolutionary inscriptions. Prewar, "reactionary" habits survive in the walls of the city, while other parts of town host signs of renewal. The city is noisy, and many places are under construction. Some areas are murky; others shine brightly in the sun. The newlywed couple moves into a nineteenth-century building. Ahmed wants to "modernize" his world, the metonymy of which becomes the updated bathroom, but the nineteenth-century building in which he lives is already striated architecturally, and he would literally have to fight the very walls that surround him. Blame, the film suggests, might not be the most productive mode of critique. The question of why things are the way they are, and why they remain so despite our efforts to change them, cannot be reduced to finger-pointing at someone like Ahmed. But Izabela's death, even if diegetically acknowledged as an accident, remains a fact, and the viewer is challenged to keep looking for answers as to why, at another level, her death is perhaps inevitable. Makavejev needs to make *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* in order to engage this latter question.

Like *Love Affair*, the fictional part of *WR* is grafted onto a melodramatic structure, and once again its female protagonist is sexually emancipated. What differentiates Milena of *WR* from Jutka or Izabela is the fact that she is actively involved in challenging sexual mores. Milena is lucidly aware of her situation. She has a revolutionary theory. She wears a uniform and lives a hyper-

politicized life. She reads *The Communist*, whose lead article is suggestively titled "How Marx Fell in Love." She has pictures of Reich and Freud on the wall.

The Tito-Stalin split of the late 1940s allowed Makavejev the freedom to criticize Stalinism in a language almost unheard of in Eastern Europe. While several Eastern European films reflected on Stalinism's show trials, cult of personality, or political cynicism, Makavejev was the filmmaker who subjected it to a psychoanalytical critique and equated it with fascism. In the spirit of Reich, the film defines fascism as the "frenzy of sexual cripples," which has stifled the free expression of life energies under a politics of excessive mobilization. Fascist love is apprehensive, frightened by pleasure and liberated bodies. Joy is deferred, sublimated, recast in political ambitions and in talk about ideals, the building of a new and better world. Fascistoid revolutions are revolutions without joy, fixated on the future, and repressive when it comes to the pleasure of the moment. For Reichians, the revolution is always in the present. It is a radical embrace of the present as present. Joy cannot be deferred. Any form of deferral, any road or path to joy, already implies distortion, perversion, alienation. This is why the revolution cannot be *made* (built, strategized); it can only be experienced.

WR is made up of various segments. Besides the fictional one, there is a documentary section on the life of Reich in the United States; an antiwar happening on the streets of Manhattan; newsreel footage; a promotional film made by Reich and sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld; and excerpts from Stalinist propaganda. Reich's theses are delivered via voice-over, intertitles, and, within the fictional sequence, by Milena herself.

Milena calling for sexual revolution (*WR: Mysteries of the Organism*, dir. Dušan Makavejev, 1971)

Milena leads a spontaneous political meeting in the interior courtyard of an old multilevel Austro-Hungarian apartment building. She has just arrived home to find her roommate (Jagoda Kaloper)

having sex with a soldier-comrade, Ljuba, meaning "love" (Miodrag Andrić). This is one of the most deromanticized sex scenes in the history of cinema. It is filmed in plain daylight; it is joyous and lacks the spectacular nature of pornography. No romantic background music and no dramatic lighting. The two naked bodies are filmed in long shots that show them in their entirety, without prudery or apologies. The roommate even engages in conversation with Milena and tells her that Ljuba is on leave after six months in the barracks: "Ever ready, our military! Oh, the People's Army!" A rhythmic Balkan tune starts, and the couple continues their sexual play in its accelerated rhythm, while Milena, with beer and cigar in hand, reads the newspaper without paying much attention to them. The scene illustrates the promise, refuted by an ascetic Lenin, that the satisfaction of sexual desire in communism should be as easy as drinking a glass of water (or beer).[23] From a picture on the wall, Reich smiles approvingly.

"Communism without Free Love is a wake in the graveyard," Milena reminds us. She leaves her roommate to continue her sexual encounter with the sex-deprived soldier, and, after a brief stay in the Reichian orgone accumulator, she puts on her jacket and signature revolutionary-army hat (poking fun at a certain masculine image of revolutionary agency) and steps outside the apartment. The oration on free love she delivers in the interior courtyard is every now and then interrupted by cuts to the lovemaking scene in the apartment. Once outside, Milena runs into a neighbor, a bitter old woman who is peeking at the couple inside and who declares that "our youth shouldn't exhaust itself." Like the apparatchiks in *Loves of a Blonde*, the neighbor has productivity concerns. "Our youth" should not squander its energies.

But Milena will not hear of it: "Abstinence," the recipe for happiness prescribed in *Loves of a Blonde*, is "unhealthy, inhuman, and, what's worse, counterrevolutionary." Her speech offers an alternative to the classroom scene in *Loves of a Blonde*. If there the "girls" are patiently waiting for the lecture to be over, Milena's neighbors, in a parody of early revolutionary rallies, are rowdy and, it seems, ready for action. The speech is meant to persuade that

"between socialism and physical love there can be no conflict." "Life without fucking isn't worth a thing," the neighbors chant.

The promotion of free love is an opportunity to criticize the legacy of Stalinism. The Soviet revolution, Milena tells us, was doomed the moment it rejected free love. In that, it alienated the working class and produced a new man, resigned to his material and sexual misery, who associates sexual pleasure with guilt and sublimates his frustrated desire in the realm of material gains and political ambition: "Deprive them of love and they'll seek everything else."

Once again, it turns out the old order of bourgeois asceticism has seeped into the new one. Who can decide the future of the revolution today? In Milena's view, the system reproduces pathologic social and political behavior: "the cerebral orgasm of the dogmatists or religious fanatics" and "the muscular orgasm of compulsive workers, athletes, or artists." The ad hoc rally culminates in a joyous solidarity dance, which is contrasted to images of orderly mass rallies in China of the Cultural Revolution, organized crowds and organized pleasure, and to stylized images of Stalin, symbolically stepping on Nazi flags. A balalaika version of the Nazi-era hit "Lili Marlene" emphasizes that Stalin's walk on the flags is a return to the swastika disguised as an overcoming.

The fictional and melodramatic section of the film depicts Milena trying to put her revolutionary theories to work. She is attracted to a Soviet figure-skating champion, who stars in lavish ice follies. His name is Vladimir Ilyich (Ivica Vidović), and their affair becomes a confrontation between two ways of understanding communism and revolution. The libertarian Milena will fight the dogmatism of the Lenin-Stalin line. For his part, Vladimir will question her revisionism and lack of party discipline.

Makavejev precedes the argument between Milena and Vladimir with a montage of documentary footage depicting two types of psychiatric therapy (read engineering of social change). The Soviet-style method harks back to the years of Stalinist terror. It is symbolized by electroshock therapy. It is silent but violent, technology-based, and reminiscent of the spasmodic contraction

of the fascist body denounced in the rally scene. Milena stands for Reichian therapy, which is spontaneous, noisy, and "natural." It does not render docile by inducing violent spasms but aims at liberating the body from contractions, allowing it to be a transmitter of a free flow of energy. Whereas the first practice involves silencing and immobilizing the patient and requires assistance of experts (the engineers of the soul), the second is noisy, nonviolent, collective, and in need of few "coordinators."

At a key moment in the couple's dialogue, Vladimir discovers a picture of Hitler surrounded by adoring women in Milena's room. Intrigued by the presence of such an object on the walls of a communist, Vladimir asks for an explanation. Milena's reply does nothing but further his bewilderment: "Look at these women," she explains. "Those stupid cows, those slaves. They love . . . honor . . . and obey authority." "Thanks to them," she concludes, "this inhuman . . . this bestial force . . . [becomes] humane." Milena puts her interest in gender roles in a wider political perspective, arguing that totalitarian structures "feminize" the body politic, turning it into a mass of spectators. The discussion about women becomes a discussion about the docile political subject: "With their blind allegiance, their irrationality, women espouse their ideological delusion," Milena continues, ironically acting out her own situation as a woman, pretending she is sexually aroused. In the background, her roommate has already undressed.

This confuses Vladimir, the man of spectacle, used to the adulation of passive audiences and not to women grabbing for their share of pleasure. He is not able to cope with their desire. Emancipated women, like unorthodox versions of communism, "return the gaze." They claim agency and independence and call for a rethinking of the revolutionary project. They challenge the center, Moscow's hold on revolutionary action, and they create their own interpretative frameworks within which to read the course of the revolution. Vladimir's response is uncompromising, tough, *of steel* (Stalin). He decapitates Milena with his skate.

In both *Love Affair* and *WR* the emancipated woman dies, her desire safely put aside. She dies different deaths; one is eventu-

ally revealed as accidental, while the other is the outcome of repressive intervention. But it seems that, in both cases, the emancipated woman needs to die, since, once everything is said and done, there is nowhere else to go. In both cases, she ends up in a symbolic sewer. Hers is an abject body the world of order needs to reject so it can go on with its fantasy.

There is something anarchic and "feminine" about revolution that the "revolutionary government" cannot tolerate. According to Reich, repression of pleasure becomes repression of diversity, originality, and spontaneity. No revolution is ready to have these values as its ultimate goals. This is true of Eastern Europe but also of a Western world going through the challenge of the 1960s, to which Makavejev's work is strongly connected. A postmortem analysis of the murdered female character has the same guiding/misguiding narrative function in *WR* as in *Love Affair*. Looking at Milena's decapitated body, a forensic expert suggests that the police check all the mental institutions in the area to see whether a deviant sex offender has escaped. On the dissection table, Milena's head has no choice but to start speaking. Her question—and this is the main question of the film—is, what is it we are after? Is this film about deviants and vicious criminals, marginal members of society? Or is it about a certain frightening normality that the totalitarian state has created, about someone who, in Erich Fromm's terms, is afraid of freedom?[24] This someone, Milena's head tells us, cannot bear it and is, unlike Ahmed of *Love Affair*, "a true red fascist."

The question Milena leaves us with is: Do we really want the revolution or only a softer version of it, stripped of some of its most radical impulses? If so, is this still a revolution? Furthermore, do we want it *now*, or will the revolution always have to be a *long march* toward a safely postponed future?

Notes

1. The phrase "sexual revolution" is not an invention of the 1960s. It dates back to the 1920s. For a genealogy of the phrase, see John Levi Martin, "Structuring the Sexual Revolution," *Theory and Society* 25 (1996): 105–51.

2. Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007).

3. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982).

4. Slavoj Žižek, *Repeating Lenin* (Zagreb: Arkzin, 2001).

5. Mészáros states, "An independent woman—one who finds herself in a situation where she must make a decision on her own—is the central character in each of the pictures I made so far." Quoted in Barbara Halpern Martineau, "The Films of Márta Mészáros; or, The Importance of Being Banal," *Film Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (1980): 21.

6. Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, trans. Lewis Henry Morgan (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2001).

7. Such films include *The Girl* (*Eltávozott nap*, Hungary, 1968), *Adoption* (*Örökbefogadás*, Hungary, 1975), and *Diary for My Children* (*Napló gyermekeimnek*, Hungary, 1984).

8. Alexandra Kollontai, "Sexual Relations and the Class Struggle," in *Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. Alix Holt (London: Allison and Busby, 1977), 32.

9. Clara Zetkin, *Reminiscences of Lenin* (New York: International Publishers, 1934), 50.

10. This is the conclusion of Kollontai's short story "Three Generations," one of the three stories published under the title *Love of Worker Bees: Toward a Self-Governing Character Structure*, trans. Cathy Porter (London: Virago, 1977).

11. Wilhelm Reich, *The Sexual Revolution*, trans. Theodore P. Wolfe (New York: Noonday, 1962), esp. chap. 10, "The Inhibition of the Sexual Revolution."

12. Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860–1930* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 377.

13. The first major post–World War II Hungarian film, Geza Radvanyi's *Valahol európában* (*Somewhere in Europe*, Hungary, 1947), proposed a new social order. The war has obliterated family structures, and its orphans are rebuilding a communal life on different social principles.

14. Reich, *The Sexual Revolution*, 191.

15. In his book on postwar Europe, Tony Judt argues that historically the myth of communism died with the invasion of Hungary in 1956. From then on, Party elites gave up the project of creating a revolutionary subject and concentrated their efforts on making sure they stayed in power. See Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 321–22.

16. It is this passive acceptance, this illusion of autonomy within the private space, that the writings of dissidents such as Václav Havel address. See Václav Havel et al., *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the State in Central-Eastern Europe*, ed. John Keane (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1985).

17. It has been noted that "WR" also stands for "World Revolution." See James Roy MacBean, "Sex and Politics: Wilhelm Reich, World Revolution, and Makavejev's *WR*," *Film Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (1972): 2–13.

18. "Man" is used here with reference to both genders.

19. Eagle uses the word "tragedy" to describe the couple's predicament. See Herbert Eagle, "Yugoslav Marxist Humanism and the Films of Dušan Makavejev," in *Politics, Art, and Commitment in the East European Cinema*, ed. David W. Paul (New York: St. Martin's, 1983), 131–48.

20. Makavejev's position anticipates the human rights movement of the seventies in Eastern Europe following the signing of the Helsinki Treaty: the human right to be an imperfect subject of the revolution, the right to fail its imperatives without being incriminated.

21. Kollontai, *Love of Worker Bees*.

22. For an alternative reading of Kollontai's "Vasilisa Malygina," see Eric Naiman, "NEP as Female Complaint (II): Revolutionary Anorexia," in *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 208–49.
23. Clara Zetkin, "Lenin on the Woman Question," in Zetkin, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, 50. The glass of water theory is attributed to August Bebel.
24. Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Holt, 1976).

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Milena shows Vladimir Ilyich the picture of Hitler surrounded by adoring women (*WR: Mysteries of the Organism*, dir. Dušan Makavejev, 1971)

<Betrayed Promises: Politics and Sexual Revolution in the Films of Márta Mészáros, Miloš Forman, and Dušan Makavejev

Constantin Parvulescu>

Eastern Europe has been a terrain on which the twentieth century has challengingly experimented with revolutionary discourse, and cinema has been there to document these experiments. This article focuses on a constellation of Eastern European films from the 1960s and the early 1970s that interrogate sexual practices in "real-existing socialism": Márta Mészáros's *Riddance*, Miloš Forman's *Loves of a Blonde*, and Dušan Makavejev's *Love Affair, or The Case of the Missing Switchboard Operator* and *WR: Mysteries of the Organism*. To what extent has the communist revolution also been a sexual revolution? How did it mange to reform (or fail to reform) some of the state's most enduring institutions, marriage and the family? Has the revolution betrayed its promises to radically address the "woman question"? Has it perpetuated bourgeois values? Could the subjects and regimes of Eastern Europe have survived a sexual revolution? What does sexuality tell us about the repressive politics of Eastern European revolutionary governments?