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# Slovak bohemians: revolution, counterculture and the end of the Sixties in Juraj Jakubisko's films

## **ABSTRACT**

*The Sixties films of Slovak New Wave director Juraj Jakubisko demonstrate how one can adopt 'revolutionary' aesthetics without necessarily espousing actual revolution. Deeply engaged with the ideas and motifs of surrealism and the counterculture, Jakubisko is nonetheless radically critical of those movements. Above all Jakubisko rejects Sixties-style, macro-level utopianism and modernist notions of historical progress. This essay focuses particularly closely on the 1969 film Birds, Orphans and Fools, whose bohemian protagonists turn their backs on a world of unchangeable horror and oppression and decide to become 'fools'. This film explores, and also problematizes, both the Sixties aspiration towards self-transformation or alternative lifestyle practices and the countercultural valorization of madness. I will suggest that Jakubisko is poised ambivalently here between a consuming negativity and a nuanced critique of Sixties radicalism that preserves, in more limited and personal terms, a sense of the utopian.*

## **KEYWORDS**

Juraj Jakubisko  
Slovak New Wave  
Sixties  
utopianism  
revolution  
counterculture

Juraj Jakubisko's films of the Sixties are both expectant and elegiac, at once charged with fresh, rude life and marked by a sense of finality and deathly foreboding, not to mention copious violence. Representing one of the last

flowerings of Czechoslovakia's prematurely aborted New Wave, as well as one of that movement's artistic peaks, these films typify the spirit of the Sixties at its boldest even as they intimate the decade's advancing end. A scene from the 1969 *Vtáčkovia, siroty a blázni/Birds, Orphans and Fools*, Jakubisko's richest and most seminal work, captures this ambivalence by virtue of its double meaning: the film's wild young protagonist Yorick urinates on a pile of burning film while declaiming 'The new wave!' Does this moment encapsulate the Sixties generation's destruction and desecration of the orthodoxies of its cultural and political predecessors? Or does the scene allude rather to the coming destruction of the New Wave itself at the hands of the Soviet-backed normalizers, the cancelling out of the Sixties' great cultural achievements, the death of Prague Spring liberal reformism and its attendant promises? Both readings are apposite to the general character of these films: *Birds, Orphans and Fools*, for instance, is a work of incendiary cinematic radicalism, yet it also comprises a funeral pyre of New Left political optimism, a work suffused with defeat and the anticipation of Czechoslovakia's imminent cultural conflagration.

Jakubisko's early work might seem to be among the most typical products of the late Sixties, partaking as it does of the uninhibitedly experimental sensibility that characterizes much of the international cinema of this time. Jakubisko was remarkable in fact for achieving his avant-garde aesthetic in part through the appropriation of the 'primitive' forms of Slovak folk culture, and for connecting with international trends while insisting on the cultural 'localism' of his work. Yet while *Birds, Orphans and Fools* or the earlier *Zbehovia a pútnici/The Deserter and the Nomads* (1968) may evoke the same formally adventurous spirit as the contemporaneous works of Godard or Rocha, their political positions are more grounded and sceptical – or more cynical and despairing, depending on one's sympathies for Sixties-style idealism. Though deeply engaged with the ideas, motifs and preoccupations of the hippie counterculture, the New Left and a then in-vogue surrealist sensibility, Jakubisko's early work is often deeply critical of these movements. His colourful evocation of the revived avant-gardism and cultural-revolutionary fervour of the Sixties thus serves the sombre, ironized dissection of that decade's dreams. That dissection is nowhere so keen or cruel as in the response to utopian ideas and the viability of liberatory political change; it is with Jakubisko's approach to these issues, an approach that gives these films a strikingly 'contemporary' dimension, that this essay will mainly be concerned. Jakubisko's disillusioned negotiation of countercultural and surrealist tropes could even be described as proto-postmodern, at least to the extent that postmodernism is vigorously anti-utopian, dismissive of emancipatory 'meta-narratives'. Yet if postmodernism is frequently characterized in such terms, it arguably also retains, in however modified or reduced a form, something of the Sixties' liberatory ideals. During the following discussion, I will pose the question whether any hope of such a preservation mitigates Jakubisko's bleak vision, or whether the whole stock of Sixties dream-images must go up in smoke.

### **THE DESERTER AND THE NOMADS**

The progression from Jakubisko's debut feature *Kristove roky/Christ's Years* (1967) to its successor, *The Deserter and the Nomads*, virtually comprises an individualized, accelerated summation of the Sixties New Waves' trajectory as a whole. The first film is black-and-white, focused on individual

introspection, not lacking in a certain naturalistic offhandedness, while the second is a work of blood-red baroque and ecstatic technique, straining after allegory and a vision of universal horror. *The Deserter* also marks the emergence of Jakubisko's 'mature' style and signature themes: indeed the director's mordant humour and historical despair are at their shrillest and least measured in this film. A harsh reproof to the stereotyped view of Slovakia as a land without history, timeless and unchanging in its pastoral way of life, *The Deserter* is a film saturated in the blood of world events (Steiner 1973: 18). The narrative collapses the twentieth century into a series of global wars, leaping from one catastrophe to the next as though propelled by the same energy as Jakubisko's dizzying camerawork. A story of two deserters from the Austro-Hungarian armies during the First World War is followed by episodes dealing with, respectively, the Soviet 'liberation' of Slovakia after the Second World War and the aftermath of a future nuclear apocalypse. The pattern of historical events as Jakubisko presents it would be cyclical and monotonous in its brutality, were it not for the increase in the crop of victims at each stage. The ever-greater scale and efficiency of violence is as much as can be offered in the way of progress, notwithstanding that it may be some notion of 'progress' or 'enlightenment' that is to blame in the first place. Jakubisko's evocation of a post-apocalyptic world offers a cruel parody of the utopian climax of history, the only survivors of this final war being the young nurse Nevěsta and the hordes of terrified, half-mad old people who take shelter, naked or swaddled in blankets, in underground shelters. The ascent of civilization is thus not only humanity's twilight but also its senile, infantilized decay. The world outside is peaceful because everyone has been killed or driven underground, and pastoral because civilization has destroyed itself.

*The Deserter* undoes itself as polemic by the sheer promiscuity of oppressive forces, just as Jakubisko's suggestion of an overwhelming and terminal insanity makes it hard to see the bleak final scenes as simply cautionary. The attribution of blame for the nuclear apocalypse to a specific side is immaterial in Jakubisko's eyes. The film is not without its benign figures, yet these are only powerless, persecuted and martyred victims, lone innocents caught up helplessly in the vortex of battle and revolution: Kálmán the gypsy deserter; an egg-seller accused of espionage, young Dominika (who is nearly raped by a Soviet soldier). In contrast to the Marxist, agit-prop trends in cinema that were prominent during the late Sixties, *The Deserter* displays scant faith in the existence of a progressive or liberatory historical agent. Martin, one of the army deserters of the first episode, ferments Bolshevik-style revolution, yet his brutal and degrading treatment of a couple of deposed landowners suggests that such socialism will be at least as cruel as the old hierarchies. That the actor playing Martin lends his leering, malevolent features to the Soviet captain of the second episode comprises a further disillusioned assertion of the continuity between full-blown Stalinist tyranny and an initial, 'pre-corrupted' Bolshevism. As Dina Iordanova notes, both *The Deserter* and *Birds, Orphans and Fools* have been interpreted as Jakubisko's 'reaction to the crushing of the Prague Spring' (Iordanova 2003: 58). Jakubisko had already begun shooting *The Deserter* by the time of the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion, so one cannot entirely attribute the film's bleak view or its jaundiced eye on communism to the events of August. These events may, however, have strengthened and confirmed those views, reiterated as they are, with different degrees of emphasis, in Jakubisko's subsequent films. In a move that was unique among Czechoslovak film-makers, Jakubisko worked footage of the invasion into

the finished film. Real images tear through the stylized world of *The Deserter*, at once a traumatic impingement on the fictional construct and a means of giving documentary reinforcement to the narrative's despairing, even misanthropic vision. More than just a Czechoslovak tragedy, the invasion constitutes a formidable emblem (and contributing cause) of the death of hopes for a truly emancipatory socialism, an expression of the Sixties' general loss of optimism or 'innocence'.

For Alex Callinicos and Terry Eagleton, the origins of postmodernism lie precisely in the comprehensive 'snuffing out' of the Sixties' 'political dreams' (among which the Prague Spring, in Perry Anderson's words 'the boldest of all Communist reform experiments', of course looms large (Anderson 1998: 91)). Postmodernism rejects the broad political utopianism so characteristic of Sixties radical modernity as naïve at best, totalitarian at worst; its own humbler sensibility can either be attacked for its frivolous quietism, complicity with late-capitalist power and irresponsible abandonment of absolutes, or applauded for its rejection of oppressive, totalizing 'grand narratives', defence of particularity and commitment to localized political interventions. Clearly then, *The Deserter and the Nomads* has certain affinities with postmodern political attitudes (in whatever terms they are characterized), though the film's attitude equally evokes the 'pre-modern' peasant of the second section's coda, who scoffs at the idea of a quest for 'happiness'. Jakubisko dismisses all possibility of global emancipation or progress towards peace and justice, and if his film adopts any teleology at all, it is only the downward spiral towards self-destruction. *The Deserter* could even be linked with attacks on the crimes and failures of modernity, or at least with critiques of scientific rationality's tendency to serve, rather than guard against, evil and irrational ends. One product of a machine-dominated twentieth century has been the mechanization of human beings themselves, a coolly machine-like and ultimately anonymous killing that for Jakubisko is far more horrifying than the primitive sway of passions: 'When people kill each other out of hatred, it is terrible; it will be far more terrible when they learn to murder mechanically.' The gaunt, hulking figure of Death has stalked and cavorted through the film's first two episodes, but by the time of the apocalyptic final story, he realizes he has no role to play. This indicates at once how mythologies and 'irrational' beliefs have been vanquished – in a triumph of reason that no one is now alive to enjoy – and how humanity has usurped Death's own supernatural powers: the mythological being is left to look on at mankind's now God-like capacity for mass annihilation.

*The Deserter and the Nomads'* original Slovak title, *Zbehovia a pútnici* ('Deserters and Pilgrims'), could be seen to juxtapose the rejection of certain values, ideologies or political configurations (desertion) with the embrace of new values, faiths and destinations (pilgrimage). Yet the film's 'pilgrimages' are ultimately forms of transient and partial escape, into revelry and song, love and sex, and the shrines revealed betoken only modest respites. Carnivalesque spaces of refuge prove all too porous to authority and intimations of violence: moustachioed hussars and the ever-watchful military commanders through the merry dances of the wedding festivities, while Kálmán's romantic idyll with his lover Lila is obscurely troubled by the shadow of death. Reserves of freedom and jouissance have been forced into the realm of cinematic form: the film's swirling, kaleidoscopic style compensates for the thuggish crowding of the diegesis by repression and brutality. A final, particularly pitiful respite is the would-be Eden created by Death and Nevěsta in the post-apocalyptic episode. The pair instal themselves in a (naturally) deserted windmill, and

Nevěsta declares that she and Death have found 'paradise' without even looking for it (the windmill itself, an obvious allusion to Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, stands as a lone, sad commemoration of pre-enlightenment romance, and perhaps also as a reproof of the 'quixotic' futility of all attempts at utopian social change). Yet this 'paradise', like the wider world of the final section, constitutes a cruel inversion of the utopian: the windmill is plagued by bats, just as Nevěsta falls prey to morbid thoughts and what appear to be religious hallucinations. These scenes in effect comprise a grotesque, derisive representation of the Sixties counterculture, something that is made explicit by the fact that Death dresses up in hippie apparel and is seen bopping and gyrating to pop music: Sixties cultural upheaval as literal dance of death.

### **BIRDS, ORPHANS AND FOOLS**

Such images adumbrate the more nuanced, sustained and sympathetic exploration of Sixties-style utopianism and alternative living in *Birds, Orphans and Fools*, and it is on account of this later film's greater concentration on ideas and forms of radicalism specific to its era, as well as the greater sophistication or complexity of its analysis, that it deserves a more detailed discussion than I have given *The Deserter and the Nomads*. Yet if *Birds* is more enamoured than *The Deserter* was of many of the Sixties' articles of faith, it is equally far from any promise of a libertarian paradise. The film's folk-hippie furnishings and avant-garde ambience are not the microcosm of a new world, only – and at best – a refuge or enclave for another band of anxious 'pilgrims'. *Birds, Orphans and Fools* once again asserts the impasse of revolutionary ambitions, with the vision of history so remorselessly hammered home in *The Deserter* now being apparently enough of a given to become mere background, a profusion of gloomy aphorisms and absurdist, violent black-out scenes. This less sprawling if equally wayward work is the story of Yorick, Marta and Andrej, who form an initially idyllic *Jules-et-Jim-style ménage à trois* (though as Godard, rather than Truffaut, might have imagined it). Orphaned literally and, thanks to their sense of alienation and deracination, figuratively, these characters turn their backs on a violent and senseless world and determine to become 'fools'. Indeed what are these apparent orphans if not the children of Death and Nevěsta from Jakubisko's previous film, born under the shadow of the atomic bomb and at the foot of Quixote's windmill?

One of the most obvious ways in which *Birds, Orphans and Fools* manifests its greater affinities with a Sixties countercultural or New Left sensibility is in its representation, and indeed its conception, of revolution. For a start this film seems more sympathetically disposed than *The Deserter* to the very idea of revolution, which is incarnated here in such uncontroversially noble and 'liberatory' endeavours as the 1944 Slovak National Uprising and the First World War-era drive for Czechoslovak independence. The sanctified figure of Milan Štefánik, a Slovak general and politician instrumental (along with Masaryk and Edvard Beneš) to the creation of the 1918 Czechoslovak state, is particularly central, although the film's attitude towards this Slovak national martyr is far from conventionally reverent. A single reference to Mao could simply be jocular, throwaway or ironic, but a certain sympathy for cultural revolution, Chinese- as well as Haight Ashbury-style, would of course tie in with the film's evocation of the New Left and its debts to Godard (*Birds, Orphans and Fools* is in fact Jakubisko's most Godardian film and specifically recalls the very explicitly Mao-preoccupied *La Chinoise* (1967)). Yet if revolutionaries are not excoriated here,

as the Bolsheviks were in *The Deserter*, they are often imbued with a sense of absurdity and impotence (and the horrific failures of Maoist revolution are of course more than evident in retrospect): a gun-toting Slovak partisan runs alongside Yorick's car, apparently convinced that the fascists have not yet been vanquished, and an incongruous band of guerrillas fall down 'dead' in a street skirmish, only to get up again. On the other hand, such images could also be seen as attesting to the commonality and continuity of revolutionary attempts throughout history, the resilient throb of the emancipatory urge.

Yet it is that quintessentially Sixties 'revolution' in lifestyles that is explored most fully throughout the film. That kind of revolution, like many of the European New Waves themselves, was often portrayed in generational terms, as an Oedipal rebellion by the young against social and cultural 'fathers': does the protagonists' symbolic 'orphanhood' result from a kind of patricide? In this case the apparent polarization of the generations assumes perhaps a graver and more substantial dimension than usual, as the trio's alliance across national or religious lines (Andrej is a Pole and Marta a Jew) is shown to mark a clear break with the murderous nationalisms and ethnic squabbles of the older generation: 'Our parents killed each other,' remarks Yorick. As Peter Hames notes, in his feature debut *Jakubisko* was concerned to demonstrate that 'the traditional Czech/Slovak antagonisms were always linked to older people and not shared by his own generation' (Hames 2006: 213). In addition to these fraternal or internationalist attitudes, the characters adopt such 'alternative' values as 'free love', play and casual creativity, and the abandonment of work or remunerative activity (one subtle sign that the idyll has come to its end is Andrej's attainment of paid employment as a photographer). They do not balk at the more 'frivolous' or decorative trappings of the counterculture, as their weird apparel, halfway between Slovak goatherd and Carnaby Street freak, suggests. A key facet of Sixties radicalism was the link it established between politics and the spheres of subjectivity and lifestyle, a link best expressed by the well-worn New Left/feminist slogan 'the personal is political'. In the words of Marianne DeKoven, the Sixties' 'modernist politics of the self [...] radiates out from the exemplary subject to a potentially transformed society and culture' (DeKoven 2004: 190). DeKoven roots this politics in the 'romantic tradition of adequation of transformed self with transformed world'; that tradition is also clearly incarnated in the surrealism of Breton, which famously synthesized the goals of imaginative (self-)liberation and revolutionary political upheaval by juxtaposing the injunctions of Marx ('transform the world') and Rimbaud ('change life') (DeKoven 2004: 190; Breton 1969: 241). Yet the so-called politics of the self comprises a point of transition from the modern to the postmodern, shifting later (or, according to DeKoven, during the Sixties themselves) 'into a postmodern politics that coincides with and is contained by formations of subjectivity' (DeKoven 2004: 190). As we shall see later, *Jakubisko's* film can itself be seen to depict a concern for subjectivity, for the cultivation of lifestyle and the imagination, that subsumes political engagement or even provides a form of consolation for the world's horrors and the individual's powerlessness within it. To this extent Yorick and his friends make for decidedly demoralized hippie trailblazers and strangely meek surrealist refuseniks.

## **MADNESS**

The embrace of 'foolishness', the most radical aspect of the protagonists' lifestyle experiment, connects back to a long tradition of the valorization

of madness that runs through romanticism, various modernisms and avant-gardes, and, perhaps most obviously of all, surrealism. The cultural iconography of the preternaturally wise fool or mad person of course stretches even further back in time, as *Birds, Orphans and Fools*' allusive naming attests (Yorick's name, as well as being the diminutive of Jakubisko's own name Juraj, obviously refers to the dead jester in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, while in one scene Yorick re-christens Marta 'Sibyl'). As an ideal identity for the protagonists and an expression of otherness, madness is aligned throughout the film with two other ubiquitous avant-garde avatars of irrationality, childhood and the feminine; the tropes are even combined, as with the mentally handicapped children whom Yorick and Andrej seem to 'adopt' as so many unambiguous mascots of privileged alterity. (It is worth noting, incidentally, that Deleuze and Guattari link the notions of 'becoming-child' and 'becoming-woman' with the figure of the orphan, the three conditions all representing degrees of 'deterritorialization' or 'flight'; flight itself, both in its avian form and in the more Deleuzian sense of escape or fleeing (*fuite*), is also a key presence in this film (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 78).) The view of madness as something positive, a condition one should seek somehow to emulate or even attain, was not only central to surrealism and the avant-garde but was also part of the radical Sixties cultural and political landscape that Jakubisko's film evokes. That view was expressed most rigorously in the writings of the British pioneer of anti-psychiatry, R.D. Laing: according to Laing, madness may be 'break-through' as well as 'breakdown', 'liberation and renewal as well as enslavement and existential death' (Laing 1967: 109–10). For the tradition of which Laing's work partakes, madness, conventionally defined, is associated with an innocent, authentic self, and thus counterposed to the alienations or 'devastations' of socially acceptable identity. Mental illness is portrayed as a source of poetic wonder and visionary revelation, and the madman upheld as a model for more calculated strikes against convention and logic. We should note that madness, broadly speaking, is also a constant point of reference in postmodernism, where it is again valorized (of course in very different terms from modernism's 'innocence' and 'authenticity') or at least tied somehow to the definition of a 'revolutionary' model of desire: take Foucault's 'strong defence of the voice of unreason' in *Folie et déraison/Madness and Civilisation* (1961), or Deleuze and Guattari's schizoanalysis (Pegrum 2000: 131).

As the discussion of *The Deserter and the Nomads* has already suggested, rationality is hardly an object of enthusiasm in Jakubisko's work. 'Civilized' reason has proven incapable of defending against the outbreak of barbarism, and the copious horrors of both *The Deserter* and *Birds, Orphans and Fools* are at least in part attributable to particular forms, or applications, of rationality: Yorick recalls that his parents were killed 'by those who are said to be [...] sane'. (It could also be argued that the fascination of such avant-gardists as Dubuffet with the *art brut* of the mentally ill, situated outside dominant cultural traditions and defying the assumptions of modernity through its effusive irrationalism, is analogous to Slovak surrealism's appropriation of folk forms and miraculous local tales, a tendency that Jakubisko himself of course embodies.) Yet *Birds* is by no means an unambiguous celebration of 'foolishness', and the film could even be seen to problematize or subvert those ideas about madness on which the avant-garde and countercultural valorizations were founded. Even the protagonists themselves might be seen to embrace and uphold madness less because it is 'revelatory of an innocent vision' than because

it promises the comfort of ignorance, indeed because it represents the very denial of vision in its disturbing guise (Foster 2001: 3). Yorick, it is implied, was himself raised in an institution for mentally handicapped children; as Peter Hames points out, he envies these children 'their happiness and ignorance of the true nature of the world' (Hames 2006: 218). Jakubisko appears to endorse such a view in the scene where the protagonists visit the institution, by means of a sympathetic nurse who remarks, 'These kids will never become people.' Presented in such terms, mental illness represents debility rather than any special potency, the lack of insight or vision rather than their abundance. Elsewhere Jakubisko has directly characterized the protagonists' adopted foolishness as a form of willed obliviousness towards the world, a means of taking 'the load off [one's] conscience' (Jakubisko, in Liehm 1974: 359). The film also implies how the language of madness functions better to secure one's seclusion from the world than as a means of changing it. Indeed, despite its having been mobilized or emulated by movements with radical political aspirations, that discourse is too hermetically private to work effectively as protest. In one scene, Yorick's incipiently senile old landlord plummets to earth wearing a makeshift parachute that bears the slogan 'The word is the weapon of the powerless': no less than the film's instruments of flight, the would-be revolutionary message of faux-delirium falls short of its purpose.

Admittedly, the reading I have given of the protagonists' project belies the complexities of the film and the characters' confused or ambivalent impulses. The submission to blinded vision or narcissistic obliviousness jostles with a concern for compulsive observation, the intense need to explore and document the world. Photography is a key motif: Andrej, a professional photographer, takes pictures throughout the film, while Marta, addressing the camera directly, claims that she is comprehensively 'photographing' the world's evils with her eyes, in an attempt to absorb and thereby eliminate them. This conceit could be seen as metaphorically asserting the subversive power of representation and thus as implying the political efficacy of an engagement with the world; it also suggests that the protagonists' self-induced madness might itself represent the instructive 'absorption' or imitation of the grotesque absurdities of society. Is Marta's notion not at the same time a comforting fantasy that obviates the need for real action? Yet despite the film's various ambiguities, the protagonists' oscillation between escapist and documentarist tendencies, it is undeniable that the film powerfully articulates the feeling that escape, in whatever sense, is a feasible response to a world of horror and systematic violence. The Sixties counterculture and the surrealists yoked madness and 'liberated' subjectivity to political revolution and an ebullient utopianism; in many ways Jakubisko's film, or its protagonists, link these things with a posture of despair or resignation. Given that history constitutes little more than an irredeemable cycle of violence and oppression, how can 'foolishness' be anything other than an indulgence, a retreat or distraction, a minimal and marginal breach of the established system? Jakubisko ultimately problematizes even some of these shrunken ambitions, casting doubt over the possibility of a meaningful or sustained resistance to the prevailing logic.

Yorick's rationale for his 'project' proves eloquent, striking and multi-layered:

Everything which is subject to the law of eternal changes, to the law of power, everything beside yourself, is vanity. So return into yourself. If they have demolished your house, start to build it again – but in your soul [...] Build a house inside, live in it and you'll find happiness. They



will call you a fool. But don't pay attention, if you are fine. You are fine because you are free. You are free because you are a fool.

Yorick's description of the external world of history and politics as 'vanity', an obvious echo of the Book of Ecclesiastes (Yorick wears a monk's cowl while making the speech), can be seen to proffer a vision of life as something absurd, senseless, cruel and mad; vanity is perhaps also what inheres in the attempt to change that reality. In itself that vision might be a sufficient injunction to will the world out of existence, yet the reference to vanity has the additional, perhaps more properly Biblical meaning that the exterior world is insubstantial, ephemeral and illusory. In contrast to the world's inessentiality, the self or 'soul' is substantial and real: at least those houses built in the soul are less likely to be demolished than real houses. The suggestion that we build such houses represents the insistence that we should compensate for material deprivations and sufferings with the riches of the inner life, and also implies that the surest barriers against the world are internal rather than external. We attain freedom in foolishness either because our dependence on the outer world for our happiness is relinquished, or because, as already suggested, that world now ceases to trouble our consciousness. Madness, as a 'drug for life' (Jakubisko's own description), is both hallucinogen and painkiller (Liehm 1974: 359).

These remarks, apparently supportive of a reorientation towards subjectivity, lifestyle and even spiritual values, could be linked with postmodernism and perhaps also New Age tendencies (the suggestion of an insubstantial or illusory outer world seems particularly attuned to the latter). The turn towards self-cultivation and spirituality is often and easily seen as 'the fallen progeny of the sixties', the substitution of the failed attempt at the transformation of the world with the transformation of the self (DeKoven 2004: 255). The suggestion here of such a 'return to the self' is not presented in the pejorative terms commonly used in regard to that phenomenon, although the individualistic, or at least atomistic, character of Yorick's retreat may seem a step backwards from the more broadly communal pleasures of *The Deserter and the Nomads*. Of course, what makes Yorick's stance more daring than many contemporary examples of self-transformation or 'dropping out' is that this retreat is enacted not under a 'permissive' late capitalism that sanctions an endless proliferation of lifestyle choices, but in an authoritarian society where difference, not least of the idly introspective hippie variety, is quite unwelcome. To that extent the protagonists' project, escapist and founded in political despair though it may be, is inevitably 'subversive' and politically provocative; this will be affirmed when Yorick, for no good reason, is arrested and thrown into prison. Moreover, while Yorick's notion of building a house in one's soul might evoke, from a contemporary perspective, the hackneyed language of New Age self-help, these sentiments were still fresh at the point of the film's making and in general the speech, like many of the protagonists' escapades, retains an immense lyrical vitality.

If the self is to be a site for the building of houses, the real house in which the film's protagonists live all too readily offers a model of the inner self, especially an imaginatively liberated self, a self as envisaged in the mind's eye of surrealist art: a rough-edged, folk-art approximation of Magritte or Escher, this dream domain gives concrete form to an imagination believed to represent sanctuary. Yet the very outlandishness of that house, whose razed façades, smashed windows and protruding poles render its occupants forever

within reach of the outside, is itself problematic: while that sense of permeability could be seen as alluding to that breakdown of boundaries between self and other that is, for Laing, part of the experience of madness, it perhaps also affirms the impossibility of erecting an absolute barrier between self and world. Jakubisko's oneiric, literally 'unhomely' architecture of openness and interpenetration, clouding the distinction between inside and outside, could further be seen as a subtle refusal of modernist binary structures that looks back to the hybridities of Bakhtinian carnival as much as it anticipates post-modernism's 'both/and' sensibility (Pegrum 2000: 168). Jakubisko's critique of modernist or avant-garde idealizations of the mad 'other' is thus complemented by his attack on the very binary oppositions that sustain the notion of a pure otherness.

The futility of attempts to enact change within the wider political arena is implicit in the film from the outset, yet the attempt to construct new lifestyles or values on an individual basis fails dramatically too. The protagonists' *ménage à trois*, which derives from the embrace of free love as well as Yorick's commitment to 'sharing' Marta, 'selflessly', with his friend, is complicated by Yorick's jealousy. After Yorick is imprisoned Andrej and Marta revert to conventional coupledness, and Andrej starts to have his photographs published. If the attempt to change the world is utopian (in the pejorative sense of that word), then the attempt to escape it is also implied to have a utopian dimension. Yorick remarks ruefully at one point that in attempting to flee the world, he has really been fleeing himself. The world is inextricably a part of us; its mores, values and desires are perhaps even fundamentally determining. The film's climactic murder, ironically given that it in part represents Yorick's reaction to the very failure of his ideals, suggests how the commitment to a new mode of life has not vanquished an all too worldly capacity for violence. Shortly before she and her unborn child are killed by Yorick, Marta rebukes him for having 'lost the courage to be mad'. Yet Yorick's horrific reaction to the failure of his project suggests something like an emergent psychosis, the onset of a form of madness seldom emphasized among the surrealist or countercultural eulogies to irrational 'inner voyages' and the casting off of social inhibitions. At the same time this violence evokes the dark excesses of the counterculture itself at the heady turn of the Sixties (Marta's horrific murder recalls, inadvertently no doubt, the 1969 killing of Sharon Tate).

### **'UTOPIA LIMITED'**

All his hopes dashed, poor Yorick finally enacts the ultimate escape from the world. This grotesque suicide, which has Yorick attempting at once to strangle, immolate and drown himself, evokes political martyrdoms both conscious and retroactive: the self-immolation has obvious echoes of both Jan Palach's suicide-protest against the Warsaw Pact invasion and the iconic images of burning Vietnamese monks, while a statue of Štefánik, attached to a rope around Yorick's neck, is used both to choke and sink him. The elaborately ritualistic, referentially over-egged nature of the suicide suggests a communicative and thus purposeful act, even though the suicide itself comprises an acknowledgement of failure and futility. Is this simply a narrative expression of Jakubisko's own perverse taste for surplus gestures, or is there something strangely indicative of hope in that act? Might we consider the copious flames and violent acts of Jakubisko's films as less an expression of the death or defeat of ideals than a show of undiminished, martyr-like resistance? Perhaps

that is taking things too far; nonetheless, I would suggest that *Birds, Orphans and Fools*, whatever the savage and emphatic pessimism of its final developments, is not an entirely pessimistic or unremittingly bleak work. In the very last moments of the film, birds are glimpsed flying over the river in which Yorick drowned, a faintly hopeful rejoinder to the predominant imagery of failed and fatal flight (trapped birds, Štefánik's crashed plane). Turning full circle, we should also take heed of the film's cryptically suggestive (if not sibylline) prologue, which invites us to laugh at the film's tragic events, 'as even our heroes do to the very end', and insists that 'the world is nice, although not completely', 'crazy and full of love, and just the opposite'. This is in effect to suggest that progressive values, the liberatory qualities of love, joy and 'craziness', are real possibilities in this world, even if (as the prologue understatedly puts it) the reign of this raucous virtue will never be 'complete'. There exists then a shadow or double of the film we actually see, a version more deserving of our laughter, where love and happiness, not murder and suicide, finally triumph: does not the protagonists' eternal exuberance already defy the narrative imposed on them? 'There is no end without a beginning', the prologue concludes. The utopianism of the Sixties, committed to large-scale revolutionary transformation, may have expired with the decade itself, yet it was destined for a kind of rebirth, as the 'utopia limited' (DeKoven) of post-modernity, a matter of local interventions and alternative lifestyle practices. It is in such terms that Jakubisko moots the salvation of Sixties ideals.

The possibility of a 'utopia limited' clearly preoccupied Jakubisko, as he returned to the idea in his 'subsequent' film, *Dovidenia v pekle, priatelii!/See You in Hell, Friends!* (begun in 1970, completed in 1990), and *Sedím na konári a je mi dobre/I'm Sitting on a Branch and I Feel Well* (1989), his most unproblematically affirmative portrait of self-exclusion. While the hippyish idyll of the former film is less intrinsically troubled than that of *Birds*, the outer world, all homicidal 'red' nuns and war-whooping priests, proves more tyrannical and invasive. That said, the film's 1990-shot coda shows the now-aged bohemians escaping from the oppressive 'red ark' in which they have been imprisoned, a clear allegory of the fall of communism. Where Jakubisko's late Sixties films were bleak and cynical in their assessment of revolutionary 'liberation', he seems to see something positive in this revolution, as is evidenced by the promise held out here of a restitution of anarchic freedoms. Jakubisko's own career, however, has hardly benefited from the new conditions, with some of his recent work having vulgarized familiar tropes and concerns (the playful nudity of *Birds* becomes the coarse sexuality of *Post coitum* (2004)). Yet if this habitually frenzied film-maker has lost his real urgency, his early films are still highly relevant: a veritable fun-house of vivacious Sixties aesthetics, they nonetheless speak – in aggressive, yet qualified, tones – to a contemporary sense of political impotence.

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