

much about the realism in the final scene, for example, where all the characters of the film appear suddenly together after the press conference and everybody has left. *8 1/2* did not seem to be a puzzle to resolve, like *Last Year at Marienbad* (about which the most frustrating thing is that after all there is no puzzle to resolve). Fellini, by contrast, makes it clear right at the outset that what we see is nothing to be resolved in terms of chronological order and causal links; it is rather his own artistic vision about himself making a film. Thus Fellini not only made the mental journey form approachable for ordinary audiences, but in many respects his film foreshadowed the radical turn of modernism in the second half of the 1960s. It was the first film to reflect on filmmaking as an overt and self-conscious auteurial discourse.

322 All three essential principles of the modern film form were represented in *8 1/2* in a very special mixture: *subjectivity* in the form of a highly personal, even overtly autobiographic story; *critical reflexivity* in the sense that the film meditates over the use and the powers of filmmaking, and Fellini's own ambiguous relationship to it, containing also direct references to its own making; *abstraction* in the sense that the story is entirely "mentally based," where the scenes are connected by a very loose chronology, by a very weak causal order, if any, and where the degree of reality versus fantasy is not always distinguished. Thus, *8 1/2* became the first explicit demonstration of what modern cinema was. Beyond its artistic qualities, its self-reflexive and all-embracing character made *8 1/2* the archetype of the modern filmmaker's subjective vision about his work and inspired at least five important modernist films about filmmaking: Sjöman's *I Am Curious (Yellow)* (1967), Wajda's *Everything for Sale* (1967), Paul Mazursky's *Alex in Wonderland* (1968), which is a declared tribute to Fellini (who appears in the film), Tarkovsky's *Mirror* (1974), and Wenders's *The State of the Things* (1982).

Central Europe

Four major modern filmmakers made their first modernist films in Eastern Europe in 1962 as well: Roman Polanski in Poland (*Knife in the Water*), Andrei Tarkovsky in the Soviet Union (*Childhood of Ivan*), Miklós Jancsó in Hungary (*Cantata*), and Milos Forman in Czechoslovakia (*Black Peter*). These films bear the marks of different cultural traditions, whether cinematic or literary, that associate them with their cultural environment, but at the same time an attachment to different models of modernist cinema is discernable as well. For Tarkovsky, the modernist model is undoubtedly *Hiroshima, My Love*, and the mental journey genre that he introduces into the Soviet heroic war-film tradition. For Jancsó the model is Antonioni, especially *La*

notte, which he admits having consulted very thoroughly before he started shooting his own film.¹² He uses the Antonioni style to tell a story about the conflict between traditions of rural life and alienated urban intellectualism, a topic rooted in Hungarian literature. For Polanski the model was the 1950s closed-situation drama modernized by his fellow countryman, Jerzy Kawalerowicz. Forman's model is neorealism in a somewhat modernized form as inspired by Olmi's *The Job*. Forman injects this style with a harsh grotesque tone, which on the one hand is rooted in Czechoslovak literary traditions, and on the other hand creates an original, independent trend in modern cinema, inspiring Hungarian cinema as well in the early 1970s.

All in all we can say that the new phenomena in East European cinema were modernization movements in the sense that most of the new films applied to varying degrees the solutions introduced by French and Italian modern films into art filmmaking. In Hungary, among the first acclaimed young modernist directors were István Gaál with his *Current* (1963), which had a plot similar to Bertolucci's *Before the Revolution*, István Szabó with *The Age of Daydreaming* (1964), displaying a considerable amount of influence of Truffaut; and Sándor Kardos and János Rózsa with their *Children's Sicknesses* (1965), virtually a stylistic replica of Malle's *Zazie in the Subway*. I already mentioned Jancsó's film that launched Hungarian modern cinema, *Cantata*, which was strong influenced by Antonioni's *La notte*.

323

These films were not very original in their stylistic conceptions, yet they were important achievements in canonizing modernist norms in European and especially in Hungarian cinema. These "secondary" films are the ones that comprise a movement or a trend; thus modernism was not just a handful of high-class cult films but a real movement including real trends consisting both of primary films and their secondary variations. Needless to say, stylistic "secondariness" does not compromise in any way the aesthetic value of these films. *Cantata* may not be as important as *La notte*, yet it is a well-made early modernist film. And *Current* may evoke *Before the Revolution*, yet Gaál's film is a much more consistent and powerful work than Bertolucci's. And as Truffautian as Szabó's first film may appear, it is a sincere and personal expression of the spirit of a generation.

Modernism's power lay in its capability to "infiltrate" various national traditions and provide a common language with which to communicate with other cultures. It was the common experience of changing modernity that made the common language possible. Nevertheless, each country, each region formulated its own version of this experience, and this is what

12. Jancsó to the author, personal communication.

gave diversity to the modernist movement. This is why almost all of these films became international successes and acknowledged as widening the modernist movement. But most important, they turned out to be representing just the preparation for the emergence of real original achievements of Eastern European modernism.

Czechoslovak Grotesque Realism

While in Hungary post-neorealist and French new wave influences were both palpable, for Czechoslovak new cinema the only comparison that could be found with other new phenomena of the early 1960s was neorealism of the kind best exemplified by Jacques Rozier's *Adieu Philippine* (1961), but especially by Olmi's *The Job* (1961).¹³ Rozier's film could not have had a direct impact on new Czechoslovak films as it was released only in 1963, the same year as *Black Peter*. On the other hand, as Peter Hames notes, Forman admitted his admiration for Olmi, and the dance hall sequences in both *Black Peter* and *The Loves of a Blonde* testify to a direct influence of both Olmi films of the period.

324

The reemergence of direct cinema, whose roots go back to the late 1920s, was without a doubt a remarkable phenomenon at the rise of modernism. The end of neorealism obviously put a temporary end to direct filming. The spreading of lightweight handheld equipment and the renewed fashion of plein-air improvised filmmaking brought back the direct style in many ways, especially in Italy, but in France and Czechoslovakia too. These films obviously represented a new style compared to the conventions of the 1950s even in Italy, where the neorealist tradition had not faded away completely. However, as we saw in relation to Rouch, the new fashion of direct filming had in many cases nothing to do with neorealism. Moreover, the direct-film technique did not mean automatically joining the modernist movement. If some of these new direct-style films can be listed under the category of modernism, is not because of their direct style but because in some way they adapted their style to modernist principles. For example, in Olmi's

13. In his brilliant work (*The Czechoslovak New Wave* [Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985], 120), Peter Hames mentions also a slight "influence of *cinéma vérité*" with regard mainly to short- and medium-length films. However, what he means by *cinéma vérité* is "filming real people in uncontrolled situations." As we saw, the point in *real* *cinéma vérité* as invented by Jean Rouch was not the uncontrolled situation, rather the character's uncontrolled reflections on the situation. That is entirely missing in Czechoslovak new wave films, which is why I prefer to use the comparison with neorealism, whose distinctive feature is the loosely controlled acting style of professional or amateur actors, including improvised dialogues on a given topic.



Fig. 59. Czechoslovak grotesque: Frantisek Kosina and Ladislav Jakim in *Black Peter* (Milos Forman, 1963).

case one can definitely see an unfolding of an abstract style in *The Fiances* compared to the rather conventional neorealist *The Job*. While in the former he joins the social realist style of De Sica and Zavattini, in the latter he definitely seems to have become a follower of Antonioni: his wide empty spaces, his long contemplative shots, and especially the theme of losing contact and communication illustrates Olmi's modernizing post-neorealist direct style.

325

Likewise, one could oppose Rozier and Rouch within the French new wave. Rozier's first film, *Adieu Phillipine* (1961, but released only in 1963) was a typical "nonmodern new-wave" film with a rather impersonal candid view on the problems of young people in contemporary France and with some references to the Algerian war. It was shot in a rather nondramatic, improvised direct-film style concentrating on the everydayness of its scenes. However, *Adieu Phillipine* had nothing to do with neorealism's seriousness and social engagement; its form was rather playful, especially the editing style of some of its scenes, depicting mostly the pleasures of life. This definitely made this film a genuine product of the new wave spirit. But in no way did *Adieu Phillipine* become a referential film of the new wave, as it did not establish an original modern form and only inserted some elements of new wave style in direct filming. Rozier did not become a modernist new wave director.¹⁴ In contrast, Rouch with his *cinéma vérité* introduced a genuinely modernist version of documentary and direct filming.

This is where the Czechoslovak new wave introduced some innovations. As the Bazinian tradition of French film criticism was always very sensitive to stylistic connections, young film critic André Téchiné recognized

14. He made his next film in 1970 and has made only three more films altogether during the following thirty-five years.

immediately the originality of Forman's style within modern realism: "Neither Olmi and even less Antonioni are real points of reference to locate Forman among the contemporary filmmakers. . . . Forman's cinema talks about the ability to smile."¹⁵ In Czechoslovakia the new direct cinema movement was another genuine phenomenon only distantly referring to the neorealist tradition and at the same time modernizing direct film style. Right at the outset, in 1962 the first appearance of the young generation in Vera Chytilová's *A Bagful of Fleas* (1962) showed a peculiar grotesque vision infused with the direct film style that was nonexistent anywhere else in European cinema. This strange mixture of direct film grotesque comes out of the Czechoslovak literary culture of the absurd and grotesque from Franz Kafka and Jaroslav Hašek all the way to Bohumil Hrabal. The Czechoslovak filmmakers were conscious of their peculiar tradition and its function in their culture. As Forman explains:

326

The tradition of Czech culture is always humor based on serious things, like *The Good Soldier Svejk*. Kafka is a humorous author, but a bitter humorist. It is in the Czech people. You know, to laugh at its own tragedy has been in this century the only way for such a little nation placed in such a dangerous spot in Europe to survive. So humor was always the source of a certain self-defense. If you don't know how to laugh, the only solution is to commit suicide.¹⁶

The grotesque direct cinema style struck a harsh satirical tone in the first films of Milos Forman (*Black Peter*, 1963; *The Loves of a Blonde*, 1965) and Ivan Passer (*Intimate Lighting*, 1966). And the grotesque and satirical approach also became enriched by absurdist and surrealist elements in Chytilová's *Daisies* (1966), and in Forman's *The Firemen's Ball* (1967). Although a grotesque and satirical vision appeared already in Malle's *Zazie in the Subway*, it did not mix with direct film style. Grotesque satire and absurd surrealism, together with the emphasis on everyday banality, provided an original mixture that between 1964 and 1968 placed Czechoslovak cinema among Europe's most unique and original modern phenomena.

The "Central European Experience"

As Forman noted, Czechoslovak grotesque stems from a certain Central European historical experience. This experience, formulated also in the literature of Central Europe, is a common cultural background for Czechoslovak, German, and Hungarian cinema.

15. André Téchiné, "Le sourire de Prague" *Cahiers du cinéma* 174 (January 1965): 61.

16. Cited by Hames, *Czechoslovak New Wave*, 120.



Fig. 60. The last freeze-d image:
Jan Votrčil in *Black Peter* (Milos
Forman, 1963).

As opposed to West European modernism's universalistic vision, fueled by the existentialist anxiety over the emptiness of freedom and by the loneliness of the abstract individual facing nothingness, the power of the approach proposed by the Czechoslovak films was precisely the representation of the ultimate impossibility of overcoming provincialism. Not only do the heroes of these films not have a mental perspective that goes beyond their small community, as their automatic reflexes are directed by empty conventions, but they constantly try to generalize their way of being in an attempt to make a superior order out of their provincial mentality and situation. And this pretension to generalize provincial narrow-mindedness is precisely what makes their persona and behavior grotesque and raises them above the quality of realist representation. The absurdity of this attitude stems from the tension between the generalizing pretension and the inability to be consistent. These characters always try to adapt to the changes in their immediate environment, but as they are unable to see the general laws that rule those changes, and their attempts to adapt result in total chaos. This is well illustrated by the end of *Black Peter*, where the father, who all through the film constantly tries to discipline his son by teaching him lessons and making all kinds of inconsistent speeches, raises his finger and says, "Because the important thing is . . . the important thing is—," at which point Forman cuts the scene short to end the film.

The inconsistency of narrow-minded provincialism is not always funny. It may become fatal, too, as is beautifully shown in Klos and Kádár's classical-style film *The Shop on Main Street* (1965). In this film simple inconsistency, the loss of moral orientation, and the inability to understand the rules of the outside world become fatal. Nobody is all good or all bad in the film (even the Nazi brother-in-law has some redeeming features). The characters

just cannot understand the rules according to which the situation changes around them, and consequently their responses are always inadequate and destructive. Elmar Klos and Jan Kadar, codirectors of the film, put this idea in exact terms:

As soon as something like that can happen, anything can happen, thanks to the indifference of the bystanders. All that is needed is a little bit of cowardice or fear. Someone once wrote that people are, after all, for the most part, good, reasonable, sensible, they aren't murderers. . . . It is an immense oversimplification to paint brutality simply in the form of the Devil. It can just as well be very jovial, neighborly—and no less evil. The basis of violence consists for the most part in harmless, kind people who are indifferent toward brutality. Sooner or later these people may overcome their indifference, but then it is usually too late.¹⁷

328

In his famous novel *The Confusions of Young Törless*, Austrian novelist Robert Musil came to the same conclusion in the early twentieth century. Musil showed that what one can learn in a conservative and hierarchical society is that such things as personal integrity and autonomy cannot exist at all. When Törless sees that there is no limit to how far one can go in humiliating another person and also that there is no limit to how far one can go in allowing oneself to be humiliated, his final conclusion is that “Alles geschehen,” everything just happens. If anything can happen, one cannot predict what will happen in the next moment; the sequence of events shows no consistent order or law behind human behavior. Anything can happen and everything just happens.

A parable by Franz Kafka, “Before the Law,” puts this experience in concise form. A man from the countryside arrives before the open gate of the law and asks for admittance. But the doorkeeper who watches the gate says that he has to wait. He obediently sits down and waits. From time to time he asks when he will be allowed to enter, but the answer is always the same: he has to wait. The man waits for years, finally he is about to die. Before he passes away he asks the guard: “Everyone strives to reach the Law. So how does it happen that for all these many years no one but myself has ever begged for admittance?” The doorkeeper answers, “No one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it.”¹⁸

17. In Antonin J. Liehm, *Closely Watched Films* (White Plains, NY: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1974), 407.

18. *Collected Stories*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York, 1993), 175.

Kafka's highly mysterious parable has an important aspect that explains much of the specificity of Central European modern cinema. It is the paradoxical relationship between the law and order and the individual autonomy. The frequent and rapid changes of rules in Central Europe, which were the fundamental experience of peoples of this region during the last couple of hundred years, have developed an ability for quick mental and moral adaptation together with appreciation for a stable order regardless of its form or content. Individual autonomy standing up to the order is painfully missing from this experience. The lack of moral consistency is generally explained, in literature and political theory, by the survival of traditional hierarchical and authoritarian political structures in this region, which were the solutions chosen in frequent situations of political instability. The only meaning personal autonomy has in these conditions is the ability to accept any order that comes from the exterior, and then trying to survive it. Resignation and humor mentioned by Forman is one strategy. Selfishness and indifference to other people's suffering is another. When the order offends moral conviction, the individual's response is a desperate attempt to make a compromise that finally leads to schizophrenia or cynical resignation of moral consistency.

329

The experience of lack of moral autonomy, witnessed in Central European literature and cinema from Musil and Kafka to the Czechoslovak new cinema, is also the basic material for many important works of the new German cinema. One of its debut films was Volker Schlöndorff's adaptation of Musil's novel, *The Young Törless* (1966), and to show how society oppresses and humiliates personal integrity will be one of the central topics of Werner Herzog and R.W. Fassbinder as well starting from the mid-1970s.

But it is Miklós Jancsó who gave the most genuine form to the Kafkaesque experience of Central European historical existence by introducing it into the radicalized form of Antonioni-style modernism.

Jancsó and the Ornamental Style

As I mentioned above, modern Hungarian cinema starts with Jancsó's little-known Antonioni replica, *Cantata*. There is however no way to recognize the real originality of Jancsó's visionary style in this film apart from his taste for long traveling shots appearing at that time only as a mannerism of the Antonioni style. But in 1964 Jancsó came out with his own, novel, radical continuity style, which has become the most original and most influential innovation since the beginning of modern cinema. The film that first represented this style was *My Way Home* (1964). This is the first film in which