

A few thoughts on Karel Čapek's and Hugo Haas's *The White Disease*

- If the white plague is a metaphor of a *moral* disease (totalitarianism), which affects the whole society, even those who do not necessarily support the regime (the poor), then this metaphor can be construed as Čapek's statement *decades* before the fall of Nazism and communism, that the authoritarian regimes have within themselves seeds of their destruction. (Ian Hargreaves, British professor of history specialising in Nazism, points out that Nazism was, in this respect, particularly virulent. The moment it assumed power, it worked for its own destruction, by declaring wars which were unwinnable in the end, etc. This is why it only lasted for 12 years.

You can see this very well in the figure of the Dictator, whom his white disease infection leads absolutely into a dead end: he cannot win the war he has set out to wage.

- Contrary to what some students argued in class, *The White Disease* is NOT a propaganda piece for pacifism. Čapek wasn't that simple-minded. He was a pragmatist, pluralist and a democrat. He always juxtaposed a view to an opposite view. *The White Disease* is a conflict between two forces, The Dictator and The Doctor, each of whom has his own moral vision and sets out to implement it quite ruthlessly. What is the difference between the dead left behind by the Dictator and the dead left behind by the Doctor when he refuses to treat the rich? The film is interesting exactly because it presents this conundrum, this unanswered question. We may sympathise with the Doctor, but we are deeply uneasy with his decision to make his cure available only to some. And that's what Čapek intended. The work in no way sides with the Doctor.

- The Dictator. Because we are only used to seeing shadowy figures of Hitler and Mussolini on the screen, and are not familiar with the "real life" of dictators, we may feel that Čapek's portrayal of the Dictator is too human, and in this, too old fashioned. It is true that we know nothing about the private lives or private thoughts of people like Stalin, Husák in post-invasion Czechoslovakia, etc. We normally assume they were faceless cogwheels in a monstrous impersonal system. But could it have been really true? How would even dictator feel when he was confronted with the prospect of imminent death? Is Čapek really unjustified in tracing a development in the character of the Dictator from an infantile man who uses the army as a kind of train set to satisfy his whims and he hides his aggressiveness and imperialism by empty nationalistic clichés into a real human being?

- Personal responsibility. As I said in class, the film spoke to me very much during real communist authoritarianism because by his action, Doctor Galén appealed to everyone and to their sense of moral duty, exactly the same way as the Charter 77 human rights manifesto appealed to all the population of Czechoslovakia in 1977. Just as in the film, most people were too cowardly to step out of their existing lives, which depended on a lie, and say "I am free and will not participate in the evil system". (The accounting manager in the film: "I would gladly give up my job if I can work as an accounting manager somewhere else.") - Incidentally, is this position a caricature? Would not a husband who loved his wife *give up* his job in order to save it? Wasn't this callous bastard too hard so that in the end he was unconvincing.

- Why we may feel that the film is propaganda. Normal works of art reach out to real life and try to imitate it and discover something new about it. Čapek's work is often the result of his philosophical contemplation. Thus, his characters are not taken from real life, rather, they are representatives of certain philosophical attitudes. When Čapek sets them in motion in his narrative, he is trying to teach us a lesson, to show us certain things that we may have not noticed. Thus when he creates his literary works, I think for him the process of creation is not a process of discovery. He already *knows* what he wants to say at the outset. He just uses appropriate instruments to express his already existing thoughts. Maybe this "educational" aspect of his writing is what bothers us.

- As I said, Čapek was very popular in the UK between the two wars. Did he lose his popularity because his work did not encompass the horrors of the second world war (as Jamie pointed out, the film is totally influenced by the horrors of the First World War, war as such is conceived in terms of the First World War only). Čapek certainly didn't experience the killing machinery of the holocaust. Is his depiction of the conflict of Dr. Galén with the militaristic regime too kind and idealistic? If someone discovered something strategically important to a militaristic regime and refused to give it to the authorities, or even tried to blackmail them, surely the regime would torture the Doctor so that he would be forced to give up his invention.

- The notion of the corrupt, fellow-travelling intellectual, in Professor Sigelius, is very important for Čapek. Notice how he sleazes up to the authorities and is needlessly callous to those who are under him.

- "Ordinary decency". Dr. Galén says he is only an "ordinary man", but, as someone has pointed out in class, there was also the "ordinariness" of the crowd of fanatics who kill him in the end. What is the difference between these two types of "ordinariness". I think Čapek was extremely afraid of the mindless violence of the crowd. In fact, I think, and rightly, this was the main fear in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s – have a look at the silent film *Metropolis* by Fritz Lang from 1927 where a large crowd of workers is manipulated by an evil force to destroy their own city. Democracy was still young and there were no guarantees that it couldn't be misused. And, indeed, it was, by demagogues like Hitler. – Dr. Galén is a different type of "ordinariness" – the decency of a thinking man, ordinary man, intellectual. – And, also, note, in those pre-postmodernist times, there were still values that people believed in. There was no relativism as today.

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