

*Hames, Peter: The Czechoslovak New Wave.*

California University Press, Berkeley 1985, X and 322 pp., illustrated.

*The Czechoslovak New Wave* is a scholarly, well-documented history of Czech and Slovak cinematography in the 1950s and 1960s. It is an important addition to the growing number of monographs on the subject from Josef Škvorecký's *All the Bright Young Men and Women* (1971) to Mira and Antonín J. Liehm's *The Most Important Art: Eastern European Film after 1945* (1977).

Hames discerns the origins of the New Wave in the experimentation of the 1920s and 1930s when Czech film-makers achieved international renown. Gustav Machatý's masterpiece *Extase* [Ecstasy] (1932) became famous as the first example of erotic cinema. The literary movement of *Devětsil* provided an important impetus to the new art form: the poet Vítězslav Nezval collaborated with Machatý on the script of *Erotikon* (1929) and *Ze soboty na neděli* [From Saturday to Sunday] (1931); in the latter surrealist techniques are combined with acute observation of urban life. This dichotomy of avant-garde experimentation and realism became the principal characteristic of the New Wave as chapters IV and V reveal. Vladislav Vančura, the greatest Czech novelist of the interwar years, was also active in cinema and made five films, the best-known of which is *Před maturitou* [Before the Finals] (1931), a good example of the Czech inclination toward lyricism of feeling.

Hames proceeds to examine in detail the First Wave of the 1950s when the stultifying orthodoxy of Socialist Realism gradually gave way to a renewed originality and sense of direction. The first film of the post-war era to transcend the prescriptions of Stalinist aesthetics was the anomalous *Daleká cesta* [Distant Journey] (1949), directed by Alfréd Radok who later pioneered the *laterna magica* theatre of Prague. *Daleká cesta*, a disturbing and original study of the Nazi Final Solution, uses the oblique techniques of Expressionism to convey its message of horror. It represents an important link of continuity between the avant-garde of the 1920s and the resurgence of creativity in the 1950s.

Hames analyzes the work of important figures like Vojtěch Jasný, František Vlácil, Karel Kachyňa and the Slovak Štefan Uher whose *Slnko v sieti* [Sunshine in a Net] (1962) he regards as the immediate precursor of the New Wave. The author pays considerable attention to major works of this period which are often neglected in the West, for example, Vlácil's ambitious adaptation of Vančura's *Markéta Lazarová*, completed in 1966.

The next chapter focuses on the Forman School which consisted of Ivan Passer and Jaroslav Papoušek in addition to Miloš Forman himself. Occasionally Hames misses a good opportunity to make connections between literature and film. His discussion of "cruelty" in the work of Forman could include a reference to the novels and stories of Milan Kundera. In *Konkurs* [Talent Competition] (1963), the camera scrutinizes the embarrassed female competitors with all the objective dispassion of *cinéma vérité*. Just as in the work of Kundera, the vantage-point from which the audience is invited to witness events is implicitly male- the male gaze. His film highlights the way our society privileges and takes for granted this male perspective. The "judgment" of

the women competitors within the framework of the narrative is indistinguishable from the scrutiny of the camera. Art, it seems, is implicated in the practices of sexual power.

Chapter V, entitled "Literature, Fantasy and Experiment", examines the avant-garde techniques of Pavel Juráček, director of the anti-Stalinist satire *Postava k podpisání* (English title: Josef Kilián 1963), and Jan Němec, as well as the celebrated Jiří Menzel and Věra Chytilová. The chapter concludes with a lengthy discussion of the Poetist fantasy of nascent female sexuality *Valerie a její týden divů* [Valery and her Week of Wonders] (1969), based on a novel by Nezval and directed by Jaromil Jireš. This bizarre account of a young girl's dream world as she enters pubescent development recalls the English film *A Company of Wolves*, a similar study of sexual fantasy proceeding from the first act of menstruation.

The final chapter of the book is devoted to developments in Czechoslovak cinema after 1968. One of the more interesting conclusions of this chapter is the apparent transference of creative energy from Prague to Bratislava, analogous to developments in the sphere of literature and attributable, in part, to the Slovaks' escape from the worst excesses of the purges. Hames discerns in the work of the Slovak Dušan Hanák some of the vitality and freshness of the early New Wave; from the Slovak Uher to the Slovak Hanák the wheel has come full circle.

The greatest strength of *The Czechoslovak New Wave* is its comprehensive breadth of scope. Film-makers little known in the West are given their due; moreover, the early careers of the famous directors, such as Chytilová, are accorded space so that their later work is placed in an overall context. Chytilová's early *Pytel blech* [Bagful of Fleas] (1962) is a brilliant study of female alienation and social hypocrisy which sheds important light on her major work, *Sedmikrásky* [Daisies] (1966). The weak point of the book is its preference for description to analysis: this is due in part to the author's lack of assurance concerning the literary background to so many films from the 1920s onward, a fact which leads him to rely heavily on the opinion of Czech scholars. This is a pity for sometimes his insights and parallels are strikingly original.

Hames is occasionally impeded by his positivism. He reacts to the assertion of one critic that Chytilová's *Ovoce stromů rajských jíme* [The Fruit of Paradise] (1969) is a study in homosexuality by pointing to the lack of relationship between the male protagonists, Josef and Robert (p. 226). Whatever the merits of the critic's claim, it deserves more analysis than it actually receives. One of the most interesting aspects of Czech cinema is the connection between sexuality and politics. Voyeurism, so frequent an activity in Czech films, is surely a metaphor for political passivity and impotence. Here again a valid link with literature is possible: the novels of Kundera explore the relationship between sexual and political power; sex and cruelty become substitutes for people who are placed by circumstance in a position of political marginality.

But my most serious bone of contention with Hames is his discussion of the predicament of compromise in the post-1968 period. Referring to the decision by certain artists, such as Menzel, to deny their previous work in the 1960s, he adds: "Recantation should be judged by the use to which it is put" (p. 278). Admittedly this is a delicate, complicated issue and western scholars must tread warily amid the ethical pitfalls of Eastern European politics and culture. In spite of our privileged position, it seems

to me that there is no excuse for lowering our moral standards to accommodate the actions of those with whom we naturally sympathize. If one makes the necessary obeisance to the status quo, one is not entitled to regret the loss of freedom which follows. By adopting a utilitarian argument on this issue, Hames is investing with dignity those Leninist principles which, elsewhere, his book condemns.

There are a few minor points which might be mentioned: the Russian title for *Strike* by Eisenstein is not *stachka* – perhaps confused with Czech *stávka* – but *Štrajk*, a transliteration of the English word (p. 37); Mr Slušný should be translated Mr Decent, not Mr Polite (p. 278). These details are not intended to detract from Dr Hames's achievement in having produced a major study of the New Wave of the 1960s, that all-too-brief period of creative talent in the development of Czech and Slovak cinematography.