

BEYOND REPRESENTATION: FREUD, LYOTARD AND INTER-WAR CZECH CINEMA

By Alfred Thomas

Contemporary criticism of inter-war Czech cinema tends to be somewhat limited in its range of methodology¹. There has been no attempt to reach beyond a restricted historical reading to embrace new approaches current in cinema studies, for example, deconstruction, post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, and feminism. This is a pity since early Czech cinema has been neglected by scholars both within and outside Czechoslovakia and therefore constitutes a rich area for new research.

In this essay I will provide a close reading of a selected number of Czech films from the late 1920s to the mid 1930s with regard to the problem of sexual and mimetic representation. It will emerge that these films trace a subtle line of development from a conventional mode of representation to a gradual breakdown of cinematic narrative (in the last two films to be considered) in which questions of being and identity become central issues.

One of the problems faced by feminist readings of cinema is how to get beyond what Luce Irigaray has referred to as the "blind spot of an old dream of symmetry,"² that is, the tendency of male-centred criticism to conflate questions of narrative with the themes of male subjectivity and crisis. This is a problem which confronts feminist critics of the Weimar cinema, for example, where the crisis of inter-war Germany (humiliation in war, economic collapse, the rise of fascism) has always been perceived as inseparable from the crisis of male identity. The feminist critic must look beyond these concerns to the question of female subjectivity. Patrice Petro argues, with respect to Weimar cinema, that the role of the female spectator is crucial to an understanding of the form taken by melodrama in the Weimar period. Both as actress and spectator, subject and object, women were instrumental in perpetuating and subverting formations of male-centred vision and power³.

¹ See Škvorecký, Josef: *All the Bright Young Men and Women*. Toronto 1971. – Dewey, Langdon: *Outline of Czechoslovakian Cinema*. London 1971. – Liehm, Antonín J.: *Closely Watched Films*. New York 1974. – See also the following recent articles on inter-war Czech cinema: Anděl, Jaroslav: *Artists as Filmmakers*. In: *Czech Modernism 1900–45*. Boston-Toronto-London 1990, 165–182, and Taussig, Pavel: *On the Sunny Side of Film*. In: *Ibid.*, 193–208.

² Irigaray, Luce: *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Tr. by Gillian C. Gill, Ithaca, N.Y. 1985.

³ Petro, Patrice: *Joyless Streets – Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany*. Princeton 1989. For classic studies of Weimar cinema, see Eisner, Lotte H.: *The Haunted Screen*. London 1969, and Kracauer, Siegfried: *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*. Princeton 1947.

My own reading of Czech cinema will avoid the important question of male or female spectatorship (since vital background information is not yet available on this subject) and focus on the relationship between psychoanalysis and epistemology/ontology as manifested within a limited number of Czech films of the inter-war period. A superficial study of these films would seem to offer little or no interest on the theme of male-centredness. Each of the four films to be considered in the main part of this essay – *Erotikon* (1929); *Ze soboty na neděli* (From Saturday to Sunday, 1930); *Extase* (Ecstasy, 1933) and *Tonka Šibenice* (Tonka of the Gallows, 1930) – rehearses a male-centred sadistic or masochistic fantasy: a 'crime' is committed by a female character which results in her own death or the death of her partner (in the case of *Ecstasy*).

I would like to propose that this standard melodramatic scenario, based on closure and resolution (death/attempted suicide) is significant, not so much for the narrative line, which is totally conventional, but for the underlying structure of repetition. Each of the films shares a similar dynamic – a mode of duplication akin to the repetition compulsion which repeats the subject's revenge against the mother as a compensation for the primal trauma (the mother's separation from the child).

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In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud questions his earlier theory that the sense of all human life is geared toward the pursuit and sustainment of pleasure⁴. He maintains that in certain extreme cases, namely the case of neurotics, a primal trauma experienced in childhood will overcome the pleasure principle and manifest itself repeatedly in the life of the subject. Freud links this repetition compulsion to instinct which he defines as "an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things" (p. 36). The mechanism underlying the constant rehearsal of the primal trauma is the death-drive within the individual organism, the impulse to revert to inorganic form once more; as Freud puts it, "the aim of all death is life" (p. 38).

In the early part of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud introduces the famous incident of the child which re-enacts its mother's presence and absence by means of the cottonreel toy. The child throws the toy out of his cot and pulls it back with the exclamations "oo" and "aa" which Freud takes to approximate the German words *fort* ("away") and *da* ("here"). The toy serves as a substitute for the child's primal trauma of the mother's departure. The game constitutes an imaginary mastery over the mother's power to leave the child. By crying "oo" ("away"), the child is, in effect, saying "I don't care; go away if you want to;" by pulling the toy back into the cot with the cotton thread, the child simulates its mother's presence through the surrogate form of the toy.

The incident of the *fort-da* game is of interest not merely to child psychologists or psychoanalysts (since it lies at the heart of our primal experience of loss), but also to

⁴ Freud, Sigmund: *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works vol. XVIII. Tr. by James Strachey. London 1955, 7–64. All subsequent page references are to this edition.

theorists of theatre and cinema. Jean-François Lyotard, for example, suggests that the *fort-da* game is based on a spatial idea of (theatrical) representation:

To say that the child acts out in his suffering the pain caused by his mother's absence is to take suddenly as given all the components of the theatrical space: an actor-spectator (the child for himself), an object-sign (the roll of film), a memory (the presence of an absence), a final cause or goal (catharsis)⁵.

Lyotard argues that this scenario is hardly consistent with the affirmative nature of the economy of drives as outlined by Freud elsewhere:

In short one immediately gives in to the demands of the order of representation (which is secondary), without allowing oneself to be concerned at all with the principle that one had oneself so cleverly established: if it is indeed true that the primary processes know no negation, then in the economy of drives there is not, nor can there ever be, an absence of *the* mother, or especially an absence of *mother* (as absent object); nor will there ever be a person to suffer from absence. Pleasure and pain, or enjoyment, must thus be conceived as purely affirmative; one can have no recourse to the easy epistemological solution of "the lack," which is a major concession to Judeo-Platonic theology. This is to say, among other things, that we must deal in some other way with the place and role of representations (*Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*) in relation to drives; not as substitutes concealing objects or the goals of drives, but as concentrations of libidinal energy on the surfaces of the visible and the inarticulable – surfaces that are themselves part of the endless and anonymous film of primary drives (p. 159).

It is significant that Lyotard refers to the "epistemological solution of 'the lack'." This statement brings us to our next concern – the philosophical debate raging in the late 1920s. Early twentieth-century thought in Central Europe was dominated by the ideas of Husserl and Husserlian phenomenology. In his work *Sein und Zeit* (1927)⁶, Heidegger, a former student and disciple of Husserl, challenged the foundations of phenomenology and of all western philosophy since Descartes. Returning to the pre-Socratic Greeks and their understanding of *alētheia* ("the unconcealedness of what is present," p. 79), Heidegger sought to shift the emphasis away from the subject-object relation – dominant in western thought since Descartes – to the problem of *Dasein* ("Being-there"). In short, epistemology, which had occupied philosophy from Descartes to Husserl, yields to the more pressing concerns of ontology.

This philosophical debate about epistemology and ontology can be related to Lyotard's critique of Freud. Heidegger's circumvention of the problems of phenomenology would seem to question conventional understandings of representation, based on the Freudian presupposition of primal lack (*fort-da*), since the dialectic of presence and absence cannot be divorced from the subject-object relation fundamental to epistemological enquiry. To explain this formulation, let us return to the Freudian model of the *fort-da* game. The child's experience of its mother's absence implies both representation and the relation of a subject to an object experienced in the world. The child is obsessed with its mother's presence/absence in much the same way that philosophy since Descartes has insisted that the human being is a cognitive subject in a world of objects.

⁵ Lyotard, Jean-François: Beyond Representation. In: The Lyotard Reader. Ed. by Andrew Benjamin. Oxford 1989, 155–168, 159.

⁶ Heidegger, Martin: Being and Time. Tr. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York 1962.

I will begin by discussing the four films selected as examples of art forms which perpetuate, while problematizing, the question of representation (with all its sexual and mimetic ramifications). I will then proceed to analyze two films which pose more complex problems – Alexander Hackenschmied's *Bezúčelná procházka* (Aimless Walk) (1930) and Čeněk Zahradníček's *Máj* (May) (1936), based loosely on Mácha's Romantic poem, and intended as a filmic back-drop to Emil František Burian's avant-garde theatre production of the same title⁷.

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The three films *Erotikon*, *From Saturday to Sunday* and *Ecstasy* are the work of Gustav Machatý, perhaps the best-known Czech film director of the inter-war period. Following his apprenticeship in Prague, Machatý worked in Hollywood as an assistant to D. W. Griffith and Erich von Stroheim (1920–21). His first important film was *Kreutzerova sonáta* (The Kreutzer Sonata, 1926), based on Tolstoy's novel, followed by *Švejk v civilu* (Švejk in Civilian Life, 1927). His first major film was *Erotikon* (1929), a story of sexual passion and shame similar in some respects to G. W. Pabst's *Die Büchse der Pandora* (Pandora's Box, 1929).

Erotikon takes the conventional form of an opposition between rural innocence and urban corruption. The story concerns the consequence of a night of passion at a provincial railway station. A stationmaster's daughter spends the night with a traveller who has missed the last train back to the city. The man leaves the next day and the girl soon discovers that she is pregnant. She writes a passionate letter to her lover who cruelly ignores the girl's outpourings of love. Abandoned, the heroine is sent away to relatives to give birth to her child in secret. One night, following her pregnancy, as she is returning to her father's home, the girl is set upon by the driver of the cart in which she is riding. Fortunately a stranger intervenes and rescues the heroine. This rich businessman from the city marries the girl and they settle down to a life of domestic bliss. But a curious twist of fate re-introduces the first lover into her life. The heroine makes the mistake of falling in love with the playboy a second time. The husband and lover become good friends and the heroine now attains a certain power over both men (this is beautifully encapsulated in one scene where the heroine is shown manipulating a game of chess between husband and lover). Besotted with the lover, the heroine decides to abandon her husband and leaves a farewell letter. In the meantime, the playboy is having an affair with a society lady. When the woman's cuckolded husband learns of the liaison, he goes to the playboy's apartment and shoots him. The heroine now seems to have lost both men. But fortunately she arrives back at the house in time to intercept the letter before it falls into the hands of her husband. The story ends with a heartfelt reunion between husband and wife.

Machatý's film is a typical period melodrama which combines a conventional narrative with psychological elements (the girl's double mistake) and novel stylistic touches (the alternating of realistic, lyrical, and expressionist details). In the early sequence of the girl's seduction in the railway station, the playboy is glimpsed head-on from

⁷ See Anděl: Artists as Filmmakers 172 f.

below in the sexual act as if seen from the woman's perspective; he assumes the aspect of a Dracula figure familiar from German Expressionist cinema (*Nosferatu*). Significantly, the playboy betrays traits of sexual ambiguity which complicates the narrative's seemingly clear-cut gender roles.

The interest of the film does not reside in its surface narrative but in the latent repetition compulsion of abandonment. We can tabulate this pattern of repetition as follows: the father is forced to go on night duty before the girl's illicit act of sexual intercourse with the stranger; the stranger leaves the girl; the heroine leaves her husband; the playboy's mistress leaves her cuckolded husband. The repetition mechanism imposes a self-conscious pattern of coincidence on an otherwise unoriginal narrative. At the heart of the repetition is a primal trauma which we can relate to the Freudian *fort-da* game. The woman plays the alternating role of child and mother in the episode of primal loss. In one scene she is the victim of neglect; in another she perpetuates it. The film involves more than a crude scenario of female oppression. The narrative may be said to dramatize a sadomasochistic repetition in which all the protagonists, regardless of gender, are involved. The film circumvents the standard theme of male-centred subjectivity and points ahead to a more experimental phase of Czech cinema by blurring gender roles and simultaneously problematizing the relation of subject to object.

Machaty's next important film was *From Saturday to Sunday* (1931). The script, written by Vítězslav Nezval, reflects the lyrical whimsicality of Poetism. The film tells of a young girl's blind date, her flight after being offered money, and her subsequent romance with a stranger. The story has something in common with German realist cinema. But the oscillation between surface reality and dream-like lyricism is, as Peter Hames has observed, characteristic of Czech cinema, an ambivalence which can be directly related to the influence of Poetism⁸.

From Saturday to Sunday betrays a repetition compulsion similar to *Erotikon*. Two female clerks go out on a blind date. In the course of the evening one of the male partners offers the heroine money for her sexual services. The woman escapes into the night and seeks refuge from the rain in a tavern. Here she meets a lonely bachelor who takes her back to his modest flat, dries her clothes and puts her to bed. While the heroine is asleep, the bachelor discovers the money, presumes that the heroine is of loose morals, and rejects her. In a state of despair, the heroine returns home and attempts to commit suicide. But at the last moment the bachelor breaks into the flat, saves the girl from imminent death, and the lovers are reconciled.

A superficial study of the film would suggest that Machaty has produced a straightforward melodrama. In fact the film is original on account of its realistic elements – the humdrum features of office life, the low-life tavern and the bachelor's flat strewn with clothes and shoes. In addition, the film reveals a remarkable pattern of repetition: the woman abandons the drunken older man; the bachelor abandons the woman; the woman abandons the man (by attempting to commit suicide). Thus the story cannot be reduced to the simplistic level of male vengeance since the male and female characters alternate roles as victims and malefactors.

⁸ Hames, Peter: *The Czechoslovak New Wave*. Berkeley 1985, 11–24 (for the inter-war cinema), 16.

Machatý's third film to be considered here is *Ecstasy* (1933). In contrast to the two earlier films, Machatý deviates from the repetition principle while continuing to explore the theme of male sadomasochism. *Ecstasy* tells of an estranged relationship between an unattractive bourgeois husband and a beautiful, frustrated wife. The heroine leaves her husband and finds happiness and sexual fulfilment with a working man of the soil. After failing to end the romance, the husband lapses into despair and commits suicide.

Tonka of the Gallows (1930), directed by Karel Anton, was the first Czech sound film. Made in French, German, and Czech, it was aimed at an international audience and reflected the growing ambition of Czech cinema directors. It is based on a story by the Prague-born German writer and journalist Egon Erwin Kisch. The prostitute Tonka leaves the denizen of the city to visit her mother in the countryside. Here she rediscovers the simple joys of childhood and first love. Following her reluctant return to the city, Tonka continues to pine for her home village. One night the police come to the brothel with an extraordinary request. A condemned prisoner has expressed a last wish to spend the night with a prostitute. The madam and her girls recoil in horror but Tonka steps forward and offers herself as a sacrifice. On her return to the brothel after the prisoner's execution, Tonka is branded "the bride of the hanged man" and ostracized by the other prostitutes. She is forced to go out on the streets where, one winter's day, she is hit by a car and killed. Her spirit flees to the happy haven of her village home. The film ends as it began with the train journey from the city to the village. But whereas the first sequence portrayed Tonka surrounded by peasant-farmers on their way back from the fields, the final sequence slides into the surreal as an empty train, the curtains flapping through the open windows, moves through the dream-like landscape.

This apparently crude melodrama of female exploitation reveals a complex interpenetration of stylistic elements reminiscent of Machatý's fusion of realistic and lyrical motifs in *From Saturday to Sunday*. The city and village sequences combine realistic and expressionist details as the camera moves from an exterior to an interior location. This marks a significant departure from Machatý's films where the interplay of stylistic modes is based on a city-versus-countryside opposition (for example, in *Ecstasy* the expressionist portrayal of the bourgeois husband contrasts with the epic realism of the labourer). In *Tonka* the shift in stylistic modes is related to a surface-depth opposition. In the city scenes, a realistic distant shot of Prague gives way to an expressionistic set of winding streets. Similarly, the naturalistic opening sequence of the peasants is followed by the expressionistic interior of Tonka's home. This switching of stylistic modes along the lines of an external-internal opposition raises the problem of objectivity. The 'objective' realism of the distant sequences is undermined by the subjective Expressionism of the internal shots⁹. The sceptical light this double perspective casts on reality anticipates the uncertainty of perception inherent in the later films of the Czech avant-garde.

⁹ See Weisstein, Ulrich (ed.): *Expressionism as an International Literary Phenomenon*. Paris-Budapest 1973.

Like Machatý's three films discussed above, *Tonka of the Gallows* is a study in abandonment and loss. Let us list this mode of repetition scene by scene: Tonka abandons the city; Tonka is "abandoned" by her mother and childhood sweetheart; Tonka abandons the brothel; Tonka is abandoned by her fellow prostitutes. The structure of closure (death, reconciliation with childhood) is denied by the "open" mechanism of repetition. Moreover, as in Machatý's films, the male and female characters seem to alternate roles as perpetrators and victims of abandonment. The bleak moral of the story is that there is no way out of the trap of capitalism, symbolized by the city where the heroine must eke out an existence as a prostitute. When Tonka flees to her native village, she faces the impasse of domestic aridity in the form of her mother and childhood sweetheart. The desire to return home is an expression of the death-wish. By volunteering to spend the night with the condemned prisoner, the heroine reveals a more obvious example of the death-wish (which Freud relates to the repetition compulsion). It is significant that the prison scene follows the village sequences for village and prison are both metaphors of female entrapment. The final, haunting sequence of the empty train undermines the film's closure; the empty train which moves through the landscape symbolizes the theme of endless desire implicit in Tonka's quest for a home and immanent in the film's structure of repetition.

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All of the films discussed up to now expose a mechanism of repetition which recalls the primal sense of loss – the *fort-da* game delineated by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Each film seems to explore (to a greater or lesser extent) the primal trauma of maternal abandonment, a trauma which is visited masochistically on each character. In his critique of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Lyotard advances the argument that the *fort-da* game perpetuates the illusion of theatrical representation. He goes on to claim that this game contradicts Freud's more original insight that the primary processes know no negation: there can be no primal lack. Therefore pleasure and pain must be conceived as affirmative¹⁰.

We come now to an analysis of two films which explore in greater depth the problematic nature of representation. At first sight, Alexander Hackenschmied's Surrealist short film *Aimless Walk* (1930) and Čeněk Zahradníček's *May* (1936) appear to have little in common. But a closer analysis will reveal significant areas of similarity.

Aimless Walk takes the form of a man's journey by tram to the outskirts of a city. In distinction to the films discussed above (which are organized as external-internal or surface-depth oppositions), *Aimless Walk* explores the theme of de-centredness. The man's identity becomes increasingly uncertain as the setting moves from the centre of the city to the periphery. When the man reaches the *terra nova* of the outskirts, the camera traces his shadow along the pavement. In the final sequence, the man seems to divide into two as one half of himself takes the tram back to the city while the other half remains on the outskirts. The conundrum of human identity implicit in the

¹⁰ Lyotard: *Beyond Representation* 159.

film's experimental mode preoccupied avant-garde artists of the period. In his poem *Stín* (Shadow) from the collection *Sepie* (Sepia, 1924–26), František Halas ruminates on the dichotomous nature of human identity¹¹:

Stín každý i tvůj je stínem věčnosti
dvojčata Siamská jež rozloučí jen smrt.

Every shadow, even yours, is the shadow of eternity,
Siamese twins divided only by death.

The journey from the centre to the outskirts dramatizes the process of fragmentation. It is no exaggeration to claim *Aimless Walk* as the first film in Czech cinematography to explore the enigma of human identity in the spirit of French avant-garde Surrealist cinema¹². By questioning the myth of essence, *Aimless Walk* also undermines the surface-depth, subject-object relation essential to conventional modes of representation. The film departs from an external-internal dichotomy to an avant-garde contemplation of surface. This involves a new-found tension between representation and non-representation. The emphasis has switched from epistemology (knowledge, meaning, essence) to ontology.

May is a further example of avant-garde cinema which banishes narrative altogether. The film presents various fragmented shots of a female body, seen from a distance and in close-up. Lacking the distraction of sound accompaniment, the film focuses the spectator's attention on the purely *ontological* contemplation of a fragmented anatomy. The woman seems to undergo a mysterious sexual metamorphosis into a man, a transference of identity consistent with the film's departure from a strictly representational framework. Representation involves a subject-object relation which underlies gender differentiation. By pointing to a possible sphere of non-representation (which can never be realized), *May* witnesses the breakdown of strict gender divisions.

I have already suggested some points of similarity between the two films: economy, experimentation with form, a rejection of orthodox narrative, and an exploration of fragmentation. The theme of city-as-woman and woman-as-city (common to so many European films at this period) presents a further area of similarity. *Aimless Walk* departs from the conventional avant-garde fascination with the technology of the city¹³ and concentrates on the theme of marginality. Similarly, *May* circumvents the theme of sexual exploitation in favour of a purely ontological focus on the experience of the body. Both films share a similar dynamic from the limitations of conventional representation (based on lack) to the more avant-garde notion of representation as "concentrations of libidinal energy of the surface of the visible and the articulable"

¹¹ Halas, František: *Sepie* (Sepia), second edition. Praha 1935, 40.

¹² Hackenschmied later emigrated to the U.S.A. where (under the new name of Hammid) he collaborated with Maya Deren on the classic of American Surrealism *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1944).

¹³ A good example of a Czech inter-war film which explores the technology of the city is *Praha v záři světél* (Prague in Shining Lights, 1928), directed by Svatopluk Innemann. For Devětsil and cinema preoccupation with new technology, see Anděl: Artists as Filmmakers 171 f.

(to repeat Lyotard's memorable phrase). *May* rejects all notions of lack; its study of the female body displays the affirmative nature of the drives; its heightened erotic images (lips, eyes, torso) exhibit an almost post-modernist engagement with the pleasures of surface.

But it would be a mistake to exaggerate the subversive claims of films like *Aimless Walk* and *May*. Their avant-garde exploration of the blurred margins of being identify them as unmistakable products of capitalism. As Lyotard persuasively argues, "there is a kind of collusion between capital and the avant-garde:"

The force of scepticism and even of destruction that capitalism has brought into play, and that Marx never ceased analysing and identifying, in some way encourages among artists a mistrust of established rules and a willingness to experiment with means of expression, with styles, with ever-new materials. There is something of the sublime in capitalist economy. It is not academic, it is not physiocratic, it admits of no nature. It is, in a sense, an economy regulated by an Ideal – infinite wealth or power. It does not manage to present any example from reality to verify this Idea. In making science subordinate to itself through technologies, especially those of language, it only succeeds, on the contrary, in making reality increasingly ungraspable, subject to doubt, unsteady¹⁴.

Although the Czech films under consideration in this essay point daringly beyond representation, they are of necessity confined by its contours just as their avant-garde experimentation pays a subtle obeisance to the restless Idea of capitalism.

¹⁴ Lyotard, Jean-François: The Sublime and the Avant-Garde. In: The Lyotard Reader, 196–211, 209.