

Skvorecky, Josef. *Jiri Menzel and the History of the Closely Watched Trains*. Boulder, Colorado: East European Monographs, 1982. Distributed by Columbia University Press. 101 pages.

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Jiri Menzel and *The History of The Closely Watched Trains* by Josef Skvorecky is the story of a modern Czechoslovakian film director and his Oscar-winning (1967) feature film. Internationally acclaimed novelist, scriptwriter, Josef Skvorecky traces *Ostre Sledovane Vlaky* (Closely Watched Trains/Closely Observed Trains/On the Lookout for Trains/Special Priority Trains) from Bohumil Hrabal (1914 - ) and his fifties novella, through the best selling novel of the sixties, to collaborative screenplay (Hrabal/Menzel) to Czech-produced film (1966, 92 minutes). With Menzel and *Closely Watched Trains* (1966) as twin centerpieces, Skvorecky carefully analyzes three contextual cross-sections: 1) the socio-political milieu of modern Eastern Europe, 2) Menzel's films until *Postriziny* (Short Cut, 1980), and 3) the tension between artist, c.f., film-maker, and state in politically narrow societies.

In one sense, *Closely Watched Trains* was for twenty-eight year old Menzel was *Citizen Kane* was for twenty-six year old Orson Welles, a tour de force in which the virgin feature director/actor and co-author of the screenplay received an Academy Award and international status. On the other hand, *Closely Watched Trains* is as Czech and satirical as *Kane* is American and tragic. Much of Menzel's nuance, language, and political innuendo is lost for English-speaking audiences. A special translator between cultures and codes is essential.

Enter Josef Skvorecky, who is type-cast for that part. In fact, Skvorecky is type-cast for eight different roles, each of which sheds light on *Closely Watched Trains*. As author, screenplay writer, literary critic, scholar, political satirist, translator, humanist, and personal friend of Menzel, Skvorecky may offer more levels of insight than possibly any other English-speaking author. Like a composer who has played every instrument in the orchestra, Skvorecky can compose with specificity and levels of imagination.

As winner of the 1980 Neustadt International Prize for Literature, Skvorecky the novelist speaks authoritatively about Bohumil Hrabal's original novel and its adaptation toward the Menzel tale. Then as celebrated screen-playwright, Skvorecky assesses the merit of the Menzel/Hrabal screenplay. After these warmups, Skvorecky the literary critic analyzes the screenplay for cultural symbols, Freudian implications, and themes from literary heritage. Not to be outdone by Skvorecky the critic, Skvorecky the scholar provides historical documenta-

tion which lengthens the text by one third. Then Skvorecky the translator (of Faulkner into Czech, for example) comments on hidden linguistic and cultural contexts and subtexts of Menzel's oeuvre.

Menzel and *Closely Watched Trains* summon forth from Skvorecky far more than professional and artistic skills. Throughout Czech domination, whether by Germany in World War II (as in *Closely Watched Trains*) or more currently by the Soviet Union (as in *Closely Watched Trains* subtext) an underground language has developed in which intellectuals, artists, and nationalists may hint to each other. Menzel's statements are secret handshakes which Skvorecky is uniquely qualified to decipher. In fact, Skvorecky's own celebrated novel *The Cowards* was a forerunner within the subculture form which *Closely Watched Trains* was derived.

A major difference between Menzel and Skvorecky, however, is that while the former remains in Czechoslovakia, and must speak through indirect discourse, Skvorecky has settled in Toronto, and may publicly decode Menzel's messages. Hence the author's value is as a cultural translator who may obviate the East European social contradictions which Menzel must camouflage or deadpan.

Consequently, the book uniquely records an unspoken dialog between two outspoken, yet softspoken characters: Menzel, the inside outsider, sends cinematic carrier pigeons, to Skvorecky, the outside insider. As former "insider", Skvorecky may talk knowledgeably about censorship and artistic castration in Central Europe; as self-exiled "outsider", his longing for an open Czechoslovakia, his cultural homesickness, and his compassion for straight-jacketed colleagues brings his heart into his sleeve. By the final paragraph, the author fully unveils his most deeply-felt role as **humanist**:

So my youthful friend (Menzel), through perseverance and pragmatic diplomacy, was able to return to his own true theme. What is in store for him? I don't know. Maybe he will have to repent again, make another **libatio** to the gods of **realsozialismus** whose black and greasy mass he has so vividly pictured in the pork-devouring sequence of his movie. **Vita brevis, ars longa est. There are those who by their nature are unable to become compromise-making smugglers of beauty, such as Vaclav Havel, the great playwright. He refused pragmatic diplomacy and is now being tortured in jail. I take my hat off to him, and the likes of him, I bow deeply. There are others who, knowing that they would be forced to become compromise-making smugglers, and resenting it, left the country, such as myself. We shall be judged by the fruits of our labors.**

The fruits of this Skvorecky labor, Jiri Menzel and the *History of The Closely Watched Trains*, is an act of conscience and conviction. Skvorecky knew and collaborated with his younger friend, Menzel, and

now he has become his passionate cryptographer. Between Skvorecky's lines is a hint of nostalgia and a sad sense of lost comradeship, if not lost opportunity. Yet within the lines is a trumpeted tribute to the "youngest" of the Czech New Wave, to whom Skvorecky has devoted ninety pages of laudatory biography and analysis.

At a deeper level Skvorecky unknowingly pays tribute to himself. Like the subtle Sovietologist who knows the meaning of a minor gesture by a Russian negotiator at an arms talk, he inspects Menzel's dialog, metaphors, and even casting for hidden levels of significance. To bridge the cultural gap, he finds parallels in North American experience, such as the atmosphere of McCarthyism, to draw us closer to an understanding of Menzel's world.

The author, however, does not bridge the gap for a general public, but rather for the subspecialized film audience who have not only seen but presumably admired and examined *Closely Watched Trains*. Thus, if the book has a weakness, the narrow scope of readership might qualify. The writer assumes that *Closely Watched Trains* has not only been viewed by the reader but inspected and selected for particular detailed attention. Perhaps, however, the weakness, so called, is strength when seen in international perspective. The author rightly expects the English-speaking world to take Czechoslovakian film and politics no less seriously nor critically than the more dominant American authors expect readers, both domestic and foreign, to take American media and politics.

Ultimately, however, Jiri Menzel and *The History of Closely Watched Trains* transcends the scope of a single director, film, country, or field of study, such as politics. While we learn much about Menzel, *Closely Watched Trains*, Czech culture, and socialist realist censorship, we learn through observation much more about the art of cultural interpretation, implication, and understatement in aesthetically bracketed societies. Skvorecky demonstrates the basics of hybrid methodologies, such as political semiology and cultural hermeneutics, which add shading and depth to the interpreter's repertoire of revelations. In short, the most telling title of this mini-volume might be *Josef Skvorecky and the Mastery of Closely Watched Trains*.