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## Jiří Menzel's treatment of sacrifice

Daniel Brennan<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The paper explores the philosophical treatment of sacrifice in four of Jiří Menzel's films of the 1960's, *Closely observed trains* (*Ostře sledované vlaky*), *Capricious summer* (*Rozmarné léto*), *Mr Balthazar's death* (*Smrt pana Baltazara*), his short film contribution to the anthology film of the New Wave, *Pearls of the deep* (*Perličky na dně*), and *Larks on a string* (*Skřivánci na niti*). The paper argues that Menzel problematizes romanticized versions of messianic sacrifice as they all too easily disregard the moral significance of mundane relations. By analysing the treatment of sacrifice in each of these films, the paper makes a case for the significance of Menzel's treatment of sacrifice for current philosophical debates.

**Keywords:** Jiří Menzel, Czech New Wave, sacrifice, mundane life

### Menzel and sacrifice

This paper explores the treatment of sacrifice in four of Jiří Menzel's films of the 1960's, *Closely observed trains*, *Capricious summer* (*Rozmarné léto*), *Mr Balthazar's death* (*Smrt pana Baltazara*), his short film contribution to the anthology film of the New Wave, *Pearls of the Deep* (*Perličky na dně*), and *Larks on a String* (*Skřivánci na niti*). What emerges in Menzel's films is a unique and nuanced exploration of the morality of sacrifice when an agent acts for political and social improvement at the expense of their life.

There is an interesting double meaning to the word for sacrifice in Czech, as there is in German. The word, *oběť*, can refer both to the sacrifice itself, but also, importantly, to the victim of the sacrifice. It is to this second possible meaning that Menzel's films offer a filmic exploration. In my reading, Menzel's films critique a naïve notion of sacrifice that suggests that political change is a direct consequence of sacrifice. Menzel's films weigh carefully the gift of death involved in sacrifice and shine an often-overlooked light on the significance of the magnitude of responsibility towards mundane private relations that one must wilfully look past to become a sacrifice. That is, Menzel demonstrates the moral neutrality of a concept like sacrifice. Menzel achieves this through a phenomenological depiction of care relationships which might bind a character, and which the character must relinquish, to become a sacrifice.

Menzel's depiction of sacrifice highlights some important ideas in the work of Hannah Arendt. In the collection of essays, *Men in dark times*, Arendt illuminates the powerful ability of individuals, in friendship and through communication to produce an "uncertain, flickering, and often weak light" which holds open the possibility of political action, despite the challenging circumstances they may face (Arendt, 1995, p. ix). It is to this flickering light in dark times that Menzel's films depict. Rather than asking what political situation is best, Menzel instead asks a more foundational question of what kind of person we should be. The political is cast as a distant, overbearing force that has only minimal impact on the character's choices. Consequently, the question of a character's morality is all the more visible due to the focus on interpersonal relationships. By refocusing on the morality of a character as they act in their care relationships, Menzel reframes sacrifice, by lingering on the rich phenomenological ground from which action arises. If sacrifice is a means of creating truth, as it is for some philosophers, Menzel's films remind us that there are other sources of truth which should also be considered carefully.

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The films analysed span the artistic freedom of the pre-1968 Prague Spring through the post-1968 period of “normalization” where censorship was tightened to hyper-oppressive levels. The last film explored here, *Larks on a string* was banned before its release and only received its first screening in 1990. Despite the changing times and political conditions, Menzel continued to explore the complex contours of sacrifice and his films ultimately argue for the same careful and balanced response to terror that does not recklessly undervalue the importance of illuminating dark times through subtle actions.

Lisa Tessman, in her book *Burdened virtues*, describes the difficulty of applying normal virtue analysis to actions undertaken under highly oppressive political conditions (Tessman, 2005). For Tessman, it is important to remember that morality and the achievement of eudaimonia are not connected projects (Tessman, 2005, p. 111). However, when individuals under highly oppressive conditions are asked to perform base acts, this does not, therefore, mean that those individuals have become base characters (Tessman, 2005, p. 111). Tessman’s book asserts that the anguished choice individuals make at times to not overtly resist oppression can be still understood as virtuous if the reaction of the individual still demonstrates care and concern for others and distress and regret at the consequences of those actions. This, when considered with Arendt’s identification of the significance of small acts in dark times, is an important idea for understanding the treatment of sacrifice in Menzel’s films of the 1960’s as what Menzel depicts is the rich phenomenological ground from which a sacrifice is made. Menzel demonstrates the consideration that should be taken when determining whether sacrifice is a valid response to oppression. Essentially Menzel considers sacrifice without tying his stories to a messianic renewal.

Currently in political debates around the idea of sacrifice much is made of the ability of sacrifice to new opportunities for political renewal. A few examples will suffice as evidence of a more general trope. Thinkers such as Alain Badiou suggest that one does not possess an identity unless one is taking part in a mass political movement. For Badiou, one’s identity is forged through fealty to the ‘event’, the metaphysical construct elaborated by Badiou for describing the unity of protest movements that expose the exclusions that exist at the heart of most political systems (Badiou, 2013). Sacrifice is thus a means of demanding truth.

Similarly Jan Patočka, in his work *The heretical essays on the philosophy of history*, argues that sacrifice is a means of shaking established ideologies which cloud over the truth of our being (Patočka, 1996). Also, George Bataille makes a strong connection between wisdom and death suggesting that if the Sage were to raise themselves to the height of death then they might attain authentic Wisdom (Bataille, 1990, p. 13). This rising up is to come through the anguish of the Sage. I could continue if space permitted to list many of the major thinkers in European philosophy who valorise sacrifice as a means of truth making. Ann Murphy, in *Violence and the philosophical imaginary*, makes a strong case for considering much of contemporary European thought to be held captive by a set of examples used in explaining theories that employ violence to make their analogies clear (Murphy, 2013). For Murphy, the problem is that these thinkers are then unable to think outside of the imaginary that their theories are explained by. Thus, the theories are ineluctably connected to the violence that explains them. If sacrifice is thought to be always moral, rather than neutral, then the danger remains that the value of what Arendt had described as the flickering light between friends could be discounted.

These theories are also lacking in the kinds of considerations of character that are analysed in the work of Tessman. Tessman notes that to become a sacrifice, one must cultivate a certain sort of character. She writes,

The image of such a resistor can be invigorating or thrilling if one envisions the bold and determined fighter striving tirelessly for fundamental change, never giving in to

the lure of compromising reforms but maintaining instead a clear knowledge of who the enemy is and driving anger against this enemy... But this is a romanticisation of the resister, and below the surface of this image there is something sad having to do with what the resister sacrifices or loses. The traits that enable resistance and the traits that enable human flourishing often fail to coincide (Tessman, 2005, p. 114).

Such sadness is worth dwelling on and the films of Menzel analysed here offer a rich illustration of the magnitude of the sacrifice made by the dissident before they make themselves a sacrifice. For Tessman, we should always be thankful for the sacrifices made by dissidents; however, in order to ensure the moral credibility of sacrifice, it is important to ensure that valour is not the only motivating factor in the decision, or, that when we express gratitude it is for more than valour that we are thankful. The rich character development in Menzel's films offers a glimpse at a nuanced facet of sacrifice which reveals just how careful one needs to be about the motives of one's resistance and one's freedom from other responsibilities to act as a public dissident. Menzel critiques sacrifice which is based purely on valour. Furthermore, adding to Tessman's critique of the broken relationship between resistance and flourishing, Menzel's films locate a possible site of flourishing, in line with Arendt's analysis, even under oppressive conditions which were untouchable by the regime.

Hence the films analysed here, insofar as they treat sacrifice, stand in stark contrast to the set of thinkers listed above who valorise unconditionally the sacrifice of the radical dissident. In these treatments of sacrifice, there is a tendency to see the political as the only space where human activity has any importance. Menzel's careful consideration of nuanced interpersonal relationships under oppressive conditions are a filmic reminder that our private actions reach into public spaces. With Arendt, and Tessman, Menzel generates a careful consideration of what actions are most called for in dark times. The answer is not always a grand gesture. Menzel's films offer this means of rethinking the significance of the mundane world in a manner more consistent with the thinking of someone like Pierre Hadot, for whom the role of the Sage is to attempt to live fully in the moment, without excluding anything (Hadot, 1995, p. 251).

In Menzel's films the political is framed as an outside oppressive force that hangs over the affairs of the protagonists. They must consciously choose to enter into conflict with it, that is they must exclude their other responsibilities, otherwise it remains a surmountable hurdle to their flourishing. In *Closely observed trains*, one form of the political is represented by the oppressive presence of the Nazi occupiers who arrive on a train from a distant horizon. In *Capricious summer* it is the oppressive summer, complete with cold rain, and a mesmerising travelling magician who offers a glimpse of a life which they perceive as vastly different to the drudgery of the mundane. In *Mr Balthazar's death* the political is a motorbike race in the woods which the audience are travelling to attend, hoping to see great crashes and injuries. Finally, in *Larks on a string*, the political is again represented as an oppressive visitor from a distant place, this time it is a socialist leader who comes to the work camp to make a vague speech before promptly departing. The undoing of the protagonists in each of these films occurs precisely at the moment they deliberately make a rupture with their private life and attempt overtly political action that ignores or excludes their established responsibilities to those in their relationships of care. When they become a sacrifice, it is strongly suggested that they are more the victim than the fecund gift that others would portray them as. They have been captivated by the romanticised sacrifice and lack the full virtue of one who carefully considers whether sacrifice is the best action available to them.

The protagonist's own projects prior to their political action are usually aimed at sexual fulfilment. Sexual frustration in Menzel's films is always the consequence of engaging with the political in a manner which ignores other relations and responsibilities. That is, for Menzel,

grand political gestures have an element of hubristic sexual pride about them. Menzel criticises the notion that one raises oneself up to the level of political actor and instead shows just how rich, meaningful and most importantly, ethical are the relations that remain relatively untouched by political oppression. The comedic sexual frustration and the tragic deaths of protagonists that ignore this valuable component of the life world stand as a reminder that sacrifice requires a victim. Rather than simply suggesting that sacrifice is not a fruitful concept, Menzel instead demonstrates another side to the concept by illustrating the point that life is more than can be contained in conceiving human activity in terms of two unequal, dichotomous spheres of interaction. Menzel aims to depict the whole of human activity rather than a demarcated and cut-off sphere of activity.

Hadot highlights that, in Seneca's thoughts on the sage, the sage is presented as the individual who knows the world. For Seneca, Hadot writes, "we must, as it were, perceive our *unity with* the world, by means of an exercise of concentration on the present moment" (Hadot, 1995, p. 261). The kind of concentration required to think that identity comes through specifically political action fails to grasp the world in its moment, as it must put blinders up to some essential features of the world. For Hadot, when considering the importance of the figure of Socrates to the philosophical tradition, we are right to highlight the value of his question of whether to choose life or the good (Hadot, 1995, p. 94). In this sense, philosophy after Socrates is a kind of preparation for death (Hadot, 1995, p. 95). The Platonic tradition has understood this training as a renunciation of the passions. That is as an elevation from the world of the finite and physical to the world of the immortal. For Hadot, the error lies in reconceiving the proper object of knowledge from the soul to the intellect (Hadot, 1995, p. 101). For Hadot, the spiritual exercises of antiquity that aim at independence and inner freedom are what constitutes the practice of philosophy as a way of life (Hadot, 1995, p. 266). With Hadot, I take Menzel's films to be a responsible meditation on the proper object of wisdom, a life that excludes nothing. The following sections each explore a different film of Menzel's from the 1960's showing the rich and varied depiction of this theme.

### ***Closely observed trains***

*Closely observed trains*, Menzel's most famous film, was released in 1966 and was awarded the Academy Award in 1967. Consequently, it is one of the key films in the Czech New Wave cinema movement. The film is based on the novel of the same name by Bohumil Hrabal, and Hrabal collaborated closely on set with Menzel during the production of the film (Hames, 1985, p. 173). It is to Menzel's credit that Hrabal claimed Menzel's film was a better version of the story than his novel. The film is set in a small Czechoslovak town during World War Two. The main protagonist, Miloš (Václav Neckář), is a young train dispatcher whose innocence makes him oblivious to the war surrounding him. Miloš, in the manner of other sex-quest films, hopes to lose his virginity with the young train attendant Máša. He works with Hubička (Josef Somr), a senior train dispatcher whose sole concern, seemingly, is sex; however, it is later revealed that Hubička is involved with the resistance. There is perhaps no greater Epicurean image than the post-coital Hubička, standing on the train platform cleaning his ears with a look of complete serenity on his face, a look which will be later emulated by Miloš after he loses his virginity to the resistance fighter Victoria Frei. Hubička's sexual successes are the source of much envy amongst the other men working at the station and he is clearly the most satisfied and perhaps happiest individual in the film.

The Station Master, Max (Vladimír Valenta), is a source of parody in the film as he lectures Miloš on the virtues of patriotism and hard work whilst himself exhibiting none of the qualities which he propounds. He too fantasises about sexual exploits and is constantly frustrated by his ambition for promotion in the collaborationist rail company. Finally, there is a political presence in the character Zedníček (Vlastimil Brodský), the Nazi controller. Zedníček

comedically arrives in a car especially designed to drive on the tracks, and his first arrival at the station is coupled with fanfare music that gives the impression of satire. When he leaves the station, the station master is standing to attention saluting in the direction the car is facing; the car, however, reverses in the opposite direction from the station master's focused gaze and enthusiastic salute. The individuals of this film who occupy their time exclusively with politics are being lampooned as missing something important. Zedníček embodies political involvement and is the administrative presence of the occupiers. It is also worth noting that Zedníček is only intermittently present at the train station. This unsustained presence suggests that for Menzel, the political is not a constant, overbearing presence, despite the reality that Czechoslovakia is occupied.

Sean Martin sees Zedníček as a humanised character, who despite his collaborator role is still a source for sympathy (Martin, 2013, p. 133). Martin's claim is too broad. He is humanised, all of Menzel's characters have great depth; however, Zedníček's arrival on the rail and bumbling nature cinematically capture more than just a well-developed character. Zedníček's presence on screen represents the involvement of politics in the lives of the protagonists. The comic nature of a car on train tracks, coupled with a fanfare and the saluting by Max in the wrong direction add up to a clear feeling that this political force is not a normal presence in the everyday, nor is it being treated with the respect that a dangerous oppressive force would be treated with. I do not mean to understate the danger of the occupying force, the Nazi massacres of entire Czechoslovak villages were truly horrific moments in an incredibly violent war. Rather Menzel's point is that, despite the occupying force, many people did attempt to live relatively normal lives, and furthermore, many people tried very hard to gain favour with the occupying force.

Peter Hames argues that Menzel's most poignant filmic technique is character development (Hames, 1985, p. 174). We can see this ability on display in what is known as the 'bottom stamping' incident where Hubička, while flirting with a station telegrapher, playfully uses an official station stamp to stamp the bottom of the secretary. When the telegrapher's mother discovers the stamps on her skin the next morning, a comedic and high-level inquiry ensues as the mother drags her daughter to the courthouse and the station demanding that Hubička be disciplined. The courtroom officials, when presented with the telegrapher's bottom, are all deeply interested, but decide it is not a matter for the courts. The mother then brings the telegrapher to the local army station where everyone again gets great pleasure in examining the buttocks; however again there is an inability to deal with what really is a simple act of erotic fun between two private individuals. Finally, it is Zedníček who takes the matter the most seriously. Zedníček recognises that there has been a breach of some moral code but all that he can find to charge Hubička with is defaming the German language – clearly a comic charge.

The attempt by the official political institutions to 'deal' with this indiscretion produces a lot of the film's comedy. But behind the comedy there is a cinematically conveyed subversive point. Through the images of courtroom officials and railway officials staring intently at the bottom, trying to take the matter seriously one can see just what a limited reach the political sphere has. It is just not possible for all of life to be contained in it. Jonathan Owen explores the surrealist elements of *Closely observed trains* and argues that the films concern for materiality says something about the role of sex in undercutting the power of a political ideology. Owen writes,

The visual concern for surfaces and bodies is replicated at the level of narrative and character, and developed into a sustained exploration of the claims of materiality and subversive qualities of the erotic: unproductive sexual activity represents the ultimate challenge to political systems (Nazi fascism is only the most directly implied) that reduce the body to its use value (Owen, 2011, p. 77).

Hence the subversion of the stamps proper function is a powerful symbolic representation of the power of unrestrained desire. Josef Škvorecký highlights that with the stamps there is a contact with the “unmentionable” (Škvorecký, 1982, p. 73). For Škvorecký the film highlights the fear that political force has, about it, the power of a cultivated private realm, as Zedníček sees great offence in the subversive use of the stamps (Škvorecký, 1982, p. 73). Owen argues that the film counterposes the low from the high in that, in Menzel’s treatment, lofty political ideals become low, and base sexual desires are elevated to a high status (Škvorecký, 1982, p. 79). The stamps that are the centre of the incident are first shown being used by Zedníček on a large map on which he is showing how the retreat of the German army (the film is set in the final year of the war) is actually a tactical move of brilliance. Zedníček is engrossed in explaining the army’s movements; however, he is distracted when the telegrapher seductively scratches her breasts with a pencil. He ignores the distraction, after a while, and continues to use the stamps to show the army’s movements. Contrasting with Zedníček’s use of the stamps, Hubička’s subversive employment makes a compelling point.

That the film is also concerned with challenging prevailing views about dissent is most clear through the character development of Miloš. Miloš is an innocent young man from a family who despise work. He is shown in the opening sequence putting on his new uniform. The sequence is full of irony. Miloš’ uniform is handled and smartened up as if it was the uniform of a high ranking official. The irony foregrounds the depiction of the ridiculousness of taking political duty so seriously that everything else is forgotten. The closing shot of the opening sequence shows Miloš’ mother ceremoniously placing his hat on his head as if it were a crown. For Owen, the hat is a sign of repression (Owen, 2011, p. 93). For Škvorecký, the hat is a sign of sexual failure (Škvorecký, 1982, p. 76). To make something of both of these interpretations, the hat is symbolic of a desire to join in politics. Miloš, while wearing the hat, is sexually frustrated. So much so that he attempts suicide.

Eventually, after his suicide attempt, Miloš loses his virginity to the resistance fighter Victoria Frei and, now full of virility, takes the place of Hubička in planting a bomb on an incoming ammunition train. Miloš is spotted by guards on the train and shot. He falls onto the train which explodes in the distance. One can clearly question the wisdom of the sacrifice as Miloš’s death comes when he ignores something very real in front of him and misplaces his libidinal energy to make a grand and abstract political gesture.

Several salient features of the film add to the sense of tragedy at Miloš’ death. The film is set in 1945, hence the audience would be aware of the futility of blowing up an ammunition train when the war is nearly over. Furthermore, Menzel places a foreboding propaganda poster on the wall of the station warning of the approaching threat of communism - a cruelly dark joke about the lack of connection between politics and social renewal. He is taunting the audience with the historical reality that one oppressive state seemingly follows another. The sacrifice of Miloš must be understood against this joke, a young person brimful of potential, and in a space in which flourishing was possible despite the oppression, has been fooled, by the seductive lure of a grand political vision, into too lightly giving away their life.

### ***Capricious summer***

*Capricious summer* is a complex and seemingly light-hearted film. The film was released just prior to the invasion by Warsaw pact countries after the Soviet regime decided to end the period of relaxed censorship and economic reform known as the Prague Spring. Škvorecký has said that it is a film about nothing (Škvorecký, 1973, p. 171). That does not mean there is none of the political to speak of. There is no overt presence of a political force, such as the Nazis in *Closely observed trains*; instead, in *Capricious summer* the political is a disguised presence - the weather and the arrival of the travelling magician. Firstly, the weather surrounds them, the

cold rain hinders, but does not destroy their fun. The characters lament the unfavourable weather conditions, but otherwise their obligations to their friends, and families remain unchanged. The travelling magician, on the other hand, arrives with a beautiful assistant in tow and the main characters are all mesmerised by the idea that life could be better if they abandon their life as it currently is.

The film benefited from the Prague Spring's period of relaxed censorship and was one of the highest grossing films of the New Wave. The story centres on three friends - a bathhouse proprietor, Antonín (Rudolf Hrušínský); a priest (František Reháček); and Major Hugo (Vlastimil Brodský). All three men are in their fifties and are symbolic presences representing business, religion and the military, respectively. The story meanders through each man's failed attempt to consummate their desire with Anna (Jana Preissová) a beautiful young assistant to the mysterious acrobat Arnoštek (played by Menzel himself). Both Kateřina and Arnoštek arrive in the village at the start of summer and are living out of their caravan, earning money through nightly tightrope performances.

*Capricious summer*, like *Closely observed trains*, involves characters deciding to rupture with their current existence and attempt to elevate themselves by interacting with the symbolic political, which arrives as an abstract and uninvited presence to their detriment. Katherine Arens describes Arendt's discussion of political action as "an engagement with the present, rather than in terms of abstracts or dogmas" and this description is equally apt for Menzel (Arens, 2016, p. 544). In *Capricious summer*, the characters are bedazzled by an abstract vision of romantic possibility and consequently ignore the present situation they are immersed in. Hence their sacrifice, they do not die, but they attempt to give up their everyday situations, is a source of the film's comedy.

I have claimed that the abstract ideology that frames *Capricious summer* is represented by a complex interplay of the oppressive summer rain and the aura created by the arrival of the travelling acrobat team. This is clear through an examination of the opening sequences of the film. In the opening shot we are shown the three men in bathing suits playfully running into a river and splashing about playfully. As they share a cigar, the film shows half-drunk beers laid out further inviting the reading that this is relaxed mundane fun. Next, we see a wasp buzz around the beer glass bringing a sense of foreboding. A grey sky presently appears and then it rains. The priest and the major leap from the water and Antonín remains, remarking, "the course of this summer seems somewhat unfortunate." Getting out of the water, Antonín continues asking rhetorically, what month is left if they can't take care of their bodies in June. Antonín clearly has Epicurean concerns for a peaceful healthy life and his comment on the weather is pertinent considering the political climate in Czechoslovakia at the time. The oppressive socialist ideology that permeated daily life is, as I read it, the summer's analogous partner, as the oppressive political conditions, like the rain, hinder the free activity of the friends. This concern for bodies echoes the treatment of surfaces in *Closely observed trains*. The men are at this moment showing care for their material self, in their situation, and by the film's end, as the characters neglect their material well-being to attempt to increase their pleasures, as I will explain in more detail below, their bodies are left bruised and battered, and their situations unchanged, or worse than before.

The political nature of the weather in *Capricious summer* is amplified by the arrival of Arnoštek, the magician. With the pomp and ceremony of a circus performer, he captivates his audience by walking across a pole and then, after pretending to trip, walking on his hands. Arnoštek announces himself as a magician and the tone of the film changes. Arnoštek is the tumultuous presence of the political in the village. The film treats the political as a mesmerising entertainment act which interrupts the usual behaviour of individuals. The protagonists attend the magician's performance that night and are all overcome with desire for the assistant, Anna.



After spending the first sequences of the film declaring that they are past the age of sexual temptation, they spend the next segment of the film attempting to woo Anna.

In Menzel's, films sexual frustration is a result of characters engaging in political projects requiring some kind of sacrifice. In *Capricious summer* the characters' desire for Anna, is representative of a misplaced sexual desire, as it is for Miloš's desire to place a bomb in *Closely observed trains*. Peter Hames notes that each character woos Anna in a manner peculiar to their job; and their failure to fulfil their sexual desire is symptomatic of the particular role that they play in society. He writes,

The abortive attempts of the three would-be lovers to fulfil their dreams are not merely a function of their age but also of their social position. They have ceased to be individuals, and each is defined by the characteristics of his social role. As inactive pillars of a static society, they have lost the capacity to act and can only fantasize and talk (Hames, 1985, p. 184).

For Hames, the sexual frustration is symptomatic of a Czech society which has lost a public space in which action occurs. I disagree. Menzel does not suggest that a heroic sacrifice would be better suited, rather the problem is more complex than the loss of a political space for action. Instead, the problem is with their misplaced desire and their overly strong identification with their social role. The three suitors lack an inner depth that would let them express a more vivid and complete wisdom that would satisfy them. Tessman declares that an important virtue for a dissident is loyalty, and that is what these men, enchanted as they are by the romanticized vision of being perceived as virile and 'important' people, are lacking (Tessman, 2005, p. 117).

*Capricious summer* elaborates the limits of social roles for enhancing the flourishing of society. They are important but if one performs those roles in public and does nothing else to cultivate other social virtues then the political realm in which people socialise and forge their identities has been created by diminished, rather than elevated, beings. Antonín and Anna are also diminished by their interactions with the three suitors. It is fair to say that everyone is worse off because of their behaviour in the summer, rather than forging a new social reality the avaricious behaviour of all of the characters leaves them reflecting on how best to rebuild their now troubled relationships.

This is clear in the final scene where the three characters are again meeting on the river bank. One has a bruised marriage, one has a bandaged ear and the another a black eye and a sling. These are the marks of their conflict with the mysterious mesmerising other. As they sit and watch the caravan roll off as rain again comes, Antonín again remarks that "the course of this summer seems unfortunate indeed." The film then shifts to a view of the river with water splashing across its surface before changing to a shot of the three sitting with beer looking after the caravan. With the departure of the caravan the friends are together again. Rather than running from the rain they are determined to stay it out. This is the final image of the film; a bruised and battered, but now intact group of friends. There is no hint of an alternative action which would justify Hames' interpretation. Menzel does not pine for a society of dissident heroes. Rather he hopes to furnish a view of wisdom that aims not at using victims to promote a violent struggle with the political, but instead to highlight the potential for a continuous, flickering light to illuminate dark times.

### ***Pearls of the deep – Mr Baltazar's death***

That Menzel is concerned with sacrifice is immediately obvious when one considers his early short film *Mr Baltazar's Death*. This short film is the first film in the manifesto-cum-anthology of the Czech New Wave, the 1966 film *Pearls of the deep*. *Pearls of the deep* is a series of short films made by the notable New Wave directors, Jan Němec, Evald Schrom, Věra Chytilová,

Jaromil Jireš, and Menzel. Each story is an adaptation of a short story by Bohumil Hrabal (author of *Closely observed trains*), from a collection of short stories also titled *Pearls of the deep*.

*Mr Baltazar's death* is, on the surface, a short film about a group of late-middle aged motorsport enthusiasts travelling to a motorbike race. The political in this film is the motorbike race, a death-defying spectacle where viewers can sit and watch riders fling themselves around the circuit at impossibly dangerous speeds. As the racers are shown coming over a hill, the audience watches expectantly. There is a stark disconnect between the spectators and the racers. It is clear as soon as spectators arrive at the track that the only thing anyone is there to see is a crash, and death. They speak of their heroic racers who have died in the past, and struggle for the best vantage from which to see the possible carnage.

The film centres on three middle aged enthusiasts and their journey to the race. As they push cyclists off the road and reminisce about races past it is clear that these protagonists are treating the race as a spectacle – that is, something to enjoy. They compete for knowledge about the racers. They, in small and petty ways, mimic the behaviour of the racers on the road, but they are not racers, and are interested in the race only to see whether it will produce carnage. To draw out the analogy, there is a conversation amongst ordinary individuals about the main players in politics, the leaders, the dissidents, and people in the spotlight. They perform life at what seems like a great speed to the slower more routine way of the spectator; yet the spectator gets great satisfaction from talking about politics, from knowing the famous players, and from watching them be sacrificed through the political processes. The spectators, as it is for the protagonists of *Closely observed trains* and *Capricious summer*, have a redirected desire towards the drama of the political that comes at the expense of more meaningful relations with those immediately in front of them.

Depicting the political as a motorsport race is interesting. Škvorecký writes that the film presents the race as a new folklore (Škvorecký, 1973, pp. 168–169). He writes that the spectators mythologise the race as they watch it. If this is so, the effect of the mythologising is to lose connection with the racers as people. Dissidents or politicians, they are living a different, valorised, life in comparison to that of the spectators. The spectators are transfixed on the track which the racers must follow. As the attention shifts from the crowd to the racers, serene, dreamy music is introduced. It contrasts greatly with the fast-paced drama of the race. The crowd is clearly mesmerized, one spectator even setting fire to the ground beside him and a picnic blanket, without noticing. Such hypnotised viewing is clearly a symbolic representation of the sacrifice one must make in an attempt to ‘elevate’ oneself to the level of the political. The mundane could burn and one wouldn’t know it. After watching the hypnotising movement of the racers suddenly the film cuts to a shot of an injured or dead rider. The crowd sits up with excitement as numerous nurses run to the man who turns out to be dead. While this sad drama unfolds the same serene dreamy music is playing. After a veil is placed over the dead racer the film shows the crowds dispersing – they have had their death and are satisfied. The removal of the body is accompanied by the Czech composer Julius Fučík’s carnivalesque circus piece ‘Entry of the Gladiators’. The music gives the impression that it is as if the whole race had been a mere spectacle for the crowd’s entertainment (which it has been), or as if the crowd itself were a dramatic performance, where everyone performed their prescribed roles (which it also is). Either way the shot is not friendly to the crowd – the new folklore, and its bloodlust, is not politically healthy.

However, the film treats two characters with care - a young couple who ignore the race and sneak off amorously into the forest. The crash occurs while they are gone. On their return they are the only people concerned for the dead rider. Upon the body of the racer being pointed out to them they immediately race to his side and show genuine concern for a dead human being – not excitement at a dramatic crash. One cannot debase Menzel’s film for delighting in sexual encounters at the expense of something more meaningful. The fact that the characters who

engage in sensual experiences are also the ones who demonstrate the most compassion is a key point. For Menzel, responsible action necessitates an understanding of connections with those around us. Menzel, I contend, uses sexual relations as a sign for care and touch, not mindless frivolity.

The two lovers resemble the hopeful picture of youth developed by Emmanuel Levinas in his essay, 'Without Identity' (Levinas, 2006, pp. 58–59). Levinas, responding to the theoretical reactions to the protests of 1968, was fearful of the way that seductive theories were warping the desire for a better world in the youth who took part in the protests. Levinas laments the way that the desire to be good was given a form that deviated the actions of the youth from concern for the good, to something baser. Menzel, like Levinas, celebrates the unformed desire for good, and is far more hopeful of the positive effects of compassion and care, than revolution.

### *Larks on a string*

*Larks on a string* was released in 1969, less than one year after the Soviet led invasion of Czechoslovakia and the removal of Alexander Dubček from office. The state censors had increased their presence and severity in the new regime and this film was a casualty of the time. It was banned and Menzel momentarily lost his permission to make films. The film only got its release in 1990, after the collapse of socialism in Czechoslovakia. It is easily Menzel's most political film and it is thus not hard to see why censors objected to its release. It is another adaptation of a Bohumil Hrabal novel and the two worked closely together on the film's development. Numerous commentators have suggested it is Menzel's best film, which is a shame considering how few people have seen it. Škvorecký only saw stills from the production and was immediately convinced that it would come close to being his best (Škvorecký, 1973, p. 168).

The film is set in the early days of socialist Czechoslovakia (around 1948) and is a brutal depiction of the harsh reality of a program of accelerated and unchecked industrial growth. The *mise-en-scene* gives a sense of an almost post-apocalyptic world. Most of the action takes place in a junk-yard where political prisoners are working to erase their bourgeois tendencies. There is a barber who, due to cutbacks, cannot find work in his profession and is hence a political prisoner, a Professor who refused to destroy certain books, a cook who for religious reasons won't work on Sundays, a saxophonist who is a prisoner because the saxophone has been declared a bourgeois instrument, a lawyer who claimed that a person had the right to defence, a washtub manufacturer who had the brazen cheek to hire four workers in his factory (making him bourgeois) and others. The absurdity of the reasons for their imprisonment are amplified by the hyperbolic presence of rusting junk and meaningless slogans plastered all through the yard with such messages as "work gives you honour" and other similar clichéd messages.

That the film is a direct criticism of the socialist project is evident from the opening seconds. A fanfare begins and abruptly ends accompanying a blank screen. There is a sense that some message should be on the screen but there is none. The music cuts short and there is low volume drone sounds accompanying the image of an industrial wasteland. The contrasts between the empty image, the fanfare, the empty sound and the overdeveloped land clearly suggest that the promise of the ideological and abstract vision of socialism has delivered instead a terrible place.

The men in the prison have been separated from the women and much of the film involves both genders attempting, and succeeding to subvert the separation and interact with each other. The separation is watched over by a young prison guard, who, though enthusiastic in the performance of his duties, is not militant in his application of rule. The men are shown cutting each other's hair, talking about Charlie Chaplin, engaging in general horseplay, supplying each other with contraband items, and there is even a wedding in the scrapyard, even though men and women are supposed to be segregated. What happens in this film is that all of the characters are able to flourish in some way despite the appalling living conditions and oppressive political

force that monitors them, projects slogans at them, and uses them as instruments for further industrialisation. The characters find real joy in moments of shared community. Furthermore, the political authorities are powerless to interfere with life at this level. An analysis of the three separate parts of the film will demonstrate the treatment of sacrifice in *Larks on a String*.

In the first sequence to be analysed, the cook (Václav Neckář) in the opening minutes of the film is shown sneaking across the junkyard. Climbing over large rusting motors and the imposing landscape he finds a high point and stares down at a young female prisoner Jitka (Jitka Zelenohorská), she catches his eye and they look lovingly at each other. Immediately we are aware that this is a love story, and more than that, despite the imposing oppressive setting, that love can blossom here. That Neckář is able to subvert his imprisonment and scamper over the top of the scrap waste to make a gesture of affection suggests that again Menzel is making a point about the inability of the political to invade the private. This again leads to the declaration that in the rich humanity found in our non-political moments there also lies a rich means of non-sacrificial subversion.

As the story develops the prison community endeavour to put the two of them together and arrange a marriage. Even the guard who is supposed to be maintaining segregation allows the marriage by having each marry a surrogate in separate ceremonies. A climax in the film occurs when the cook is brought to a hastily improvised shed which will serve as their honeymoon suite. Jitka is waiting inside and the cook is momentarily delayed by the arrival of a party official who makes a vague and clichéd speech to the prisoners about the progress of socialism. For some reason never articulated, at the point where sexual fulfilment can be reached, and analogous to the walking past of Máša by Miloš at the end of *Closely observed trains*, the cook decides to ask the official about the fate of two other prisoners who have disappeared after asking pointedly political questions of the authority. Moments later as the cook makes his way to meet his wife in an improvised honeymoon suite, he is whisked away by men in a black car. The trope of sexual frustration has appeared again. The cook had a choice between spending his time with his wife, who he had real responsibility for, or involving himself in politics to advance an important, but costly cause. Choosing the later leads him to a hard labour mine deep underground.

Menzel's depiction of this act of defiance by the cook is absurd. He seemingly has good reason to ask, and has valuable reasons to not. Had he not asked, the audience would have delighted in his new marriage and not at all judged him for not availing of a moment to express dissent. Menzel clearly wants the audience to see the value of moral obligations to those in care relations as he demonstrates how these relationships can flourish even under oppressive conditions. The cook is not immoral for asking, but he does look past other obligations to become a sacrifice.

Consider a sequence at the beginning of the film which has the junkyard manager introducing the prisoners to a filmmaker who is shooting a propaganda piece. The photographer is carefully selecting prisoners to appear in his film, he is coaching them on what clichéd slogans to say while placing plants and an aquarium around them to massage the image of the prison conditions into something more comfortable. The cook is brought into the frame with Jitka. The manager of the scrapyards attempts to sit beside Jitka but the Cook jumps down first. The director asks the cook and Jitka to hold hands and pretend to be a couple. Despite the presence of the authorities, Jitka and the cook still manage to hold hands grow their relationship. This is while the scrap-yard manager has a strong grip on the cook's shoulder. The film is full of sequences of the prison functioning as a place of oppression, and simultaneously a place of flourishing humanity.

## Conclusion

Robert Pynsent diagnoses the presence of a martyr complex in historical Czech notions of national identity (Pynsent, 1994, p. 190). He finds across Czech history a messianic complex around the blood sacrifice of various national Czech heroes. For example, in the morning following the first wave of police violence against protesters at what would become the Velvet Revolution, Prague citizens lit candles at the stones which were covered in blood. In a manner of speaking the Czech way of considering resistance is similar to the spectators watching the motorcycle race in 'The Death of Mr Balthazar.' In Menzel's films of the 1960's there is a clear break with this celebration of sacrifice. Menzel's films offer an emotional encounter with the richness of what is lost when a sacrificial victim offers the gift of death.

If one has not, as Lisa Tessman rightly points out as a precondition for being a dissident, undergone the intense loosening of connections with those in one's immediate circles of interaction, whom you necessarily have responsibility and care duties towards then this consideration is of vital significance. Menzel offers an alternative way to think about the attachment to sacrifice in politics. If it is the case that sacrifice is more about the spectacle than the effect, then sacrifice is not necessarily the wise way to choose the good over life. Of course, there is an obvious moral element to making the choice to choose attempting to end oppression, even if that attempt has little chance of success, rather than staying a victim of oppression. Menzel asks us to be more authentic and thorough in our deliberations about why one would make this choice – is it really for the emancipation of the masses or is the desire something that has been deformed along the way. Is the sacrifice for the present and its concrete reality, or for an abstract or ideological vision? Our concrete relations with those near us must be weighed more carefully when theorising on the relationship between the political and sacrifice.

Ultimately Menzel, with his sensual depictions of the vibrancy of life located in our care relations, makes a compelling case for rejecting theories of sacrifice which act as a seduction towards radical action, when such action might not be the most moral response to the dark times being faced.

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