Aesthetics or Ethics? Italian Neorealism and the Czechoslovak New Wave Cinema
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> A man who has no conscience, who doesn't die, who cannot laugh, who is unaware of personal responsibility—such a man is of course the perfect unit needed in a manipulated, bureaucratically regimented system. In contrast, Man as portrayed by Czech culture of the last decade is a potential revolutionary, because he finds life in such a manipulated system unbearable.
> (Kosík, 1973, 399)

According to Mira Liehm, neorealist films were often described in terms of film consciousness and despite differences between filmmakers, "all these artists, one so unlike the other, brought to life a phenomenon with clearly defined technical and moral components that influenced almost all subsequent film trends in the West and in the East" (1984, 5 & 129).[1] Describing the work of Roberto Rossellini, Liehm explains that neorealists were not concerned with true pictures of facts or slices of life. According to her, this is misunderstanding of the technique. What they *were* interested in was an *impact on the viewer* of a life as represented in film; neorealism was "a moral weapon aimed at the artistic conventions of the past" (71). Reality is not an independent, autonomous phenomenon that exists outside of representation. It is always a construction of the filmic text. Some argue that the style of neorealism can be traced to the Soviet montage cinema.[2] Yet neorealists did not aim to represent life as the peoples' struggle against the bourgeoisie, as Soviet filmmakers did, but as the individual's struggle against an overwhelming reality. As Liehm notes, "Zavattini's theory of the 'necessity to render facts as they are'" was his recognition that reality is constituted through "the relationship between men

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[1] See also Sorlin, 1991.
[2] See, for example, André Bazin, 1971, p. 42; Liehm, 1984, pp. 5-6. See also Nichols, who writes, "constructivist art, Soviet montage theory, and the European avant-garde stood in accord: the world as it offers itself to us provides the starting point for both political and aesthetic acts of transformation" (Nichols, 2001, p. 596). See also Nichols, 2001, footnotes 21, 38 and 53.

and reality" and is always open to "ontological cognition" (73). Instead of concentrating on aesthetic properties of neorealist films or enumerating techniques that supposedly define neorealism, I will argue that Neorealist filmmakers' ethical-political engagement with the everyday (understood not as a mode of aesthetics but as a method) is their lasting legacy for world cinema.

Critics and filmmakers have persistently questioned neorealism's 'actuality' as a coherent movement.[3] Some critics suggest that neorealist films were not economically successful and that the aggressive commercial war of images by Hollywood hastened its death.[4] Yet as French *Nouvelle Vague*, Czechoslovak New Wave cinema, or more recently, Iranian films indicate, neorealism in different guises seems to form a constant return of the repressed: despite the triumph of Hollywood, dedicated to production of films with guaranteed financial return, some filmmakers understand their role to be more than just the production of entertaining and commercially lucrative films. For example, Alistair Whyte proposes, as Liehm did when speaking of Italian neorealism, that the experimental nature of the Czechoslovak New Wave of the late 1950s and 1960s is ineluctably tied to "serious moral and social problems"(94). He suggests that filmmakers intermingle humour and tragedy by manipulating stylistic techniques that create a certain element of fantasy in order to produce "more serious, more experimental, more socially critical films" (124). Likewise, Václav Macek claims that in the late 1950s, under the influence of Italian neorealism with its ideals of social truth, young filmmakers attending the Film Academy in Prague rejected as lies film schematism and the socialist realism of previous years to assert their right to authenticity, originality and a meaningful artistic standpoint. The

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[3]See, for example, Liehm, 1984; Sorlin, 1991, or Furhammar and Isaksson, 1971 (especially 87-92). For a critical appraisal, see Bazin, 1971a; Bazin, 1971c; Bazin, 1971b; Deleuze, 1989, 1-6. For a critical account of literary neorealism, see Procaccini, 1978.
[4]See Mattelart, 2000.

most important criteria became truthfulness, desire to show human emotions and conflicts rather than class defined narratives and schematic sketches. In a certain way, this claim is the same as that made by Liehm when she argues that Italian neorealism was a moral weapon to be used against artistic conventions of the past.

One of the attributes of neorealism—from its defining moment in Italy, through the French *Nouvelle Vague*, the Czechoslovak New Wave and Iranian film, for example—is the creation of a space by and for filmmakers to account for the ethical freedom of the individual in the face of the overwhelming reality of globalization.[5] In the following account, I will look at Italian neorealism's appropriation by filmmakers of Czechoslovak New Wave Cinema, keeping in mind Simona Monticelli's claim that neorealism is not a singular event but an extension of earlier Italian film production. Similarly, Czechoslovak New Wave cinema did not materialise in a vacuum; it was a continuation of a longer, literary history, beginning in 1898.[6] I will attempt here to weave together two stories: one is a kind of history of Czechoslovak cinematic politics; the second is a claim about ethics. I will outline various filmmakers' efforts to negotiate the political reality they faced and their attempts to transfer ethical concerns about the present into their work, following their endeavours through parallels between Italian neorealism and Czechoslovak New Wave Cinema.

The point of this essay is not so much the historical account of the Czechoslovak cinema, or an outline of the more particular instance of it reresented by the Czechoslovak New Wave Cinema but, rather, by comparing two seemingly distinct movements—Italian neorealism and

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[5]Richard Corliss—noting the influence of "Italian postwar neorealism"—writes that "Iran is today's one great national cinema. Not since the Czech New Wave of the mid-60s has a country made such a lovely noise at the big festivals and in Western capitals … Directors Abbas Kiarostami (*A Taste of Cherry*), Jafar Panahi (*The White Balloon*) and … Mohsen Makhmalbaf (*Gabbeh*) are … revered in the world film" (Corliss, 1999, 85).
[6]See Bartošek, 1985; Skvorecky, 1971, 54ff; Whyte, 1971, 91ff.

the Czechoslovak New Wave cinema—I want to highlight the importance of art that consciously aims to confront the public consciousness by showing that 'reality' is never neutral.

Czecho-Slovakia

Properly speaking, we can only locate the Czechoslovak film industry after the First World War. Until 1918, there was no Czechoslovakia. The post-First World War period marks not only the establishment of Czecho-Slovakia, but also the beginning of the production of Czecho-Slovak, or rather, Czech films. It was not until 1921 that the first Slovak narrative film *Jánošík* was produced, and not by filmmakers from Slovakia, but by a Slovak American Film Company (Jánošík is the Slovak counterpart to Robin Hood, although Jánošík came from a poor family, was captured and hanged.). The director Jaroslav (Jerry) Siakel and the camera operator Daniel Siakel, Slovak brothers living in America, produced the film in two versions: one with the hero hanged at the end (as Slovak folklore has it), targeted at Czech and Slovak audiences, and a second version— made for American audiences—with a happy ending (Jánošík runs away from the gallows into the mountains with his love and lives happily ever after).[7]

The first Czech encounter with the style of neorealism is found in the book *Náš Film* (*Our Film*) by Luboš Bartošek. According to Bartošek, the film *Šťastnou Cestu* (*Farewell*, 1943), directed by Otakar Vávra, was almost a neorealist drama. He explains that Vávra shot the film at a dynamic pace, reverberating with the everyday tempo of modern life. The narrative was linear, yet, by way of documentary stylistic techniques, the space constantly changed, following the multiple activities of the characters. Bartošek claims that the style of neorealism, if not the name, was already employed by Vávra in the early 1940s.

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[7]Bartošek, 1985. See also Brož, 1967.

The Second World War was 'kind' to the Czechoslovak industry, if not by granting freedom of choice where subject matter was concerned, then at least in providing industrial possibilities. Antonín Liehm notes that Germans not only preserved but upgraded the film studio Barrandov. The idea behind this upgrade was that Prague would become the film-capital of the Third Reich.[8] After the War in 1945, the film industry was nationalised by the Government of President Eduard Beneš. The nationalisation meant that in 1945 the Slovak film industry, with the help of Czech technicians and specialists, was established in Bratislava. The year 1947 marks another international success for Czechoslovakia. A film produced before the imposition of Zhdanov's socialist realist formula, *Siréna* (*The Strike*), directed by Karel Steklý, received the Golden Lion—the *Grand Prix* of the International Film Festival in Venice.

In 1947, in the last democratic election in Czechoslovakia, communists won control of the government. In 1948 they ousted Eduard Beneš and other non-communists and a single-party government became a fact of the Czechoslovak political milieu. From then on, socialist realism became the only stylistic norm for filmmakers. The new working-class hero was born. In practice, as David Paul explains, it meant that films were about "how disciplined workers overcome imperialist sabotage; interpersonal conflicts that are resolved through the common struggle to fulfil production plans; peasants discovering the virtues of collectivization and so forth" (16). In short, any representation of the personal life of an individual was seen as an attack on the Communist Party itself. Not only did depiction of contemporary life disappear from film screens, but struggling, feeling, emotional individuals and their personal problems were simply eliminated. The overall outcome of the imposed cultural policies in Czechoslovakia (and other European State Socialist Societies) was two-fold. According to Paul, films were produced that

[8]See Piech, 1997, 38; Liehm, 1974, 84; Liehm and Liehm, 1977, 26-7.

shunned present-day topics. Instead, films concentrated on famous events of Czech history or portrayed the lives of bygone Czech public figures. This was a route taken by many filmmakers who wanted to avoid the extremity of the socialist realist prescription. The other route was the socialist realist formula *per se*, a principle taken from Soviet cultural policy.

In 1946, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union legislated so-called Zhdanov decrees that reinforced the control of artistic production by the legislative state apparatus. This legislation was simply an extension of Zhdanov's earlier position. In August 1934, the Congress of the Soviet Writers' Union instituted the doctrine of socialist realism as the only way to depict reality in the Soviet Union. Andrey Zhdanov, using Stalin's definitions of writers as engineers of human souls, defined the responsibility of a writer or filmmaker to represent reality not in a dead scholastic way, not simply as objective reality, but to depict reality in its revolutionary development. Zhdanov explained that "the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic portrayal should be combined with the ideological remoulding and education of the toiling people in the spirit of socialism. This method in *belles lettres* and literary criticism is what we call the method of socialist realism" (in R.S.F.S.R., 21). Martin Ciel—drawing from the journal *Náš Film* (*Our Film*)—notes that from 1949 on, all photographs from abroad disappeared and strong pro-Soviet and anti-American propaganda began. Hollywood became the leading exemplar of ideological fraudulence and the socialist realist mode was set as the only mode of artistic expression. Ciel explains that socialist realism's formula should be pure and simple—the creative illustration of life. Under any circumstances, films must not be about life here and now. According to Zhdanov's recommendation, society is in transition; hence, its interpretation should follow the official line that prescribed the *ideal* society as it will be one day in the very near future (14). In Czechoslovakia, there were some

efforts to resist socialist realism and to produce films outside its prescriptive mode, as Alfred

Radok's film *Daleká Cesta* (*Distant Journey*, 1950) demonstrates. However, the official

ideologues labelled the film existentialist and, because of the censorship regulations, its

screening was blocked.

The situation changed a little after 1956 when the Twentieth Congress of the Communist

Party in the Soviet Union took place. Revelations about the distortion of socialism under Stalin's

leadership made many reassess their political conscience and look at the past and present from a

different perspective. In Czechoslovakia, struggles between the Soviet-backed old guard holding

onto power and new democratic forces among the Party's leadership combined with the cultural

forces trying to break from socialist realism and its imposed optimism culminated in Prague in

the spring of 1968. The path was then open for new artistic representation in cinema.

The Film Academy of Music Arts

Neorealism's influence on Czechoslovak filmmakers, can be traced to the founding of the

Film Academy of Music Arts (FAMU) in Prague by decree on 25 October 1945.[9] It is generally

acknowledged that Czechoslovak New Wave Cinema was a cinematographic movement made

up of (mostly young), university educated (the Film Academy of Musical Arts) filmmakers

reacting to the imposition of a Soviet blueprint of socialist realist form and style. Galina

Kopaněvová notes, in the 1960s, the most important stimulus for the resurgence of Czechoslovak

cinematography came from the Prague film school.[10] At first, the university curriculum stressed

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[9]Liehm, 1984, p. 6. The importance of film education to the success of filmmaking can be traced to the Soviet State Film School, which was the first established film school in the world in 1919. The formation of an Italian film school in 1934 in Rome had had a similar effect. The school graduates were Roberto Rossellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Guiseppe De Santis, Luigi Zampa and many others.

[10] See Liehm, 1984, 6; Kopaněvová, 1989, 22. For a different reading, see Hames, 1985, 81.

the 'correct' educational model for new socialist filmmaking,[11] which meant that only some of

the films from Soviet Montage Cinema were shown. The theory of this school was 'improved'

by Zhdanov's prescriptive formula of socialist realism. In 1950, the first generation of film

graduates entered the industry. Kopaněvová praises Vojtech Jasný and Karel Kachyňa for

overcoming the indoctrination of the early film school's curriculum based on "illusive,

compromised" aesthetics of Zhdanov and for successfully competing with younger graduates,

who were spared such didactic practices (22).

Later, as in many other soviet satellite countries, Italian neorealist cinema was admitted

to the film academy's curriculum.[12] Under the influence of professional filmmakers who taught

at the film academy, students evaluated films made in Italy and France, especially works of

Italian neorealism, French New Wave Cinema and *Cinema Verité*. They were also introduced to

works of their Polish counterparts from the Polish Film School. A similar account is given by

Žalman mentioning Chaplin, Pudovkin, Fellini and Truffaut as important inspirations for young

cinematographers (1968, 18). In light of stringent restrictions imposed on foreign films that

originated from capitalist countries, Italian neorealist films seemed to be allowed by the Party for

their ability to serve as examples of the deprived life of the proletariat living under capitalism.

According to this logic, Italian neorealist films seemed to reveal the unethical capitalist

exploitation of the masses to lucky workers living under socialism (1990c, 385).

To return to the claim of neorealists that there is no 'neutral reality' independent of

representation, we can see how the films' meaning can be read differently. For the Party's

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[11]See Kučera, 1959.

[12]See also Dina Iordanova, who writes, "The stylistic influences over Balkan cinema can be located mostly within Europe-the Italian Neorealism and the French *Nouvelle Vague* … The visual style, however, was mostly influenced by the dynamic camerawork seen in Czech cinema of the 1960s, and by the elaborately staged takes of directors such as Hungarian Milkos Jancso and Russian Andrei Tarkovsky, as well as by the tableau-style of Georgian Sergei Paradjanov" (Iordanova, 2001, 23-4).

representatives, Italian neorealism revealed the corruption of the capitalist mode of production. Not so for the young filmmakers. For the new filmmakers, neorealism offered the way to critically present 'socialist reality' as it really was, without the gloss over by the bright future that was supposedly coming soon, thus relegating the present into the future. As Liehm suggests, "Neorealism holds a special place in the development of East European cinema. In the mid-fifties, its influence in Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia was crucial, merging with the endeavour of these productions to free themselves from Stalinist aesthetics" (1984, 131). For the students of the Film Academy, neorealism represented the ethical-political possibility of an engagement with the everyday. Thanks to the film practitioners *cum* pedagogues—such as Milan Kundera, Elmar Klos, Otakar Vávra and Otomar Krejča—teaching at the School offered critical and not demagogic evaluation of films. Macek also reminds us that A. M. Brousil invited well-known world film practitioners to speak to students at the Film Academy. Unofficial visits by Cesare Zavattini, Giuseppe de Santis and others were a rule rather than an exception (15-6). Later on, students were also exposed to many Western films produced and sent to Prague for sale. Most of these films were never bought—shielding the population from the vicious propaganda of the West—but students saw them in the specially organised projections for study purposes only.[13] Following these projections were critical discussions. Hence, the future filmmakers of New Wave drew their inspirations from Italian neorealism and Soviet montage cinema, French *Nouvelle Vague* and *Cinema Verité* style.[14]

Patrick Cattrysse writes that "the Czech New Wave … shows formal analogies with … Italian neorealism and with the French New Wave movement … [and] a *cinema verité* style. [Films were] generally shot on location. They used natural light and nonprofessional actors who

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[13] See Liehm, 1974; Liehm, 1983; Liehm and Liehm, 1977; Macek, 1996, 15-6; Žalman, 1968; Skvorecky, 1971.
[14] See, for example, Ciel, 1993, 18; Trančík, 1966; Brož, 1967, 54.

often spoke improvised dialogues" (229). For Macek, filmmakers enthusiastically adopted Italian neorealist theoretical aspiration in order to portray the everyday life of people. Films ceased to represent the ideal picture of society where people will presumably live in one day in the future. They began to show reality that they lived in, with all social problems they daily encountered. Thus Macek poetically writes that these films "by the spark from Italian Neorealism lighted a small flame that was starting to warm up" (13-4).[15]

Italian Neorealism and Czechoslovak Cinema

Similarities between the situation in Italy after the Second World War and in Czechoslovakia after 1956 give credence to Bazin's observation that "neorealism is [neither] the exclusive property of any one ideology nor even of any one ideal" (1971a, 87). In the case of Italy, Monticelli argues that "Neo-Realist films provided an immediate response to the desire to wipe out the material and ideological legacies of fascism," (71) while in the Czechoslovak context, Liehm reinforces Monticelli's claim, pointing out that "the neorealist experience … symbolized the yearning for truth and freedom that obsessed the East European filmmakers as much as the early neorealists" (1984, 131). As mentioned above, in the case of Italy the post-war situation prompted a search for new values and, in the case of Czechoslovakia, this search was triggered by the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union.

Miloš Fiala explains that the Twentieth Congress and its revelations allowed a distinction between socialism and its distortion by the Stalinist cult of personality. Revelations prompted filmmakers to reassess their experience, revealing at the same time the moral conflict of the period (62-3). Hence Italian post-war experience reverberates in Czechoslovakia. Rossellini can

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[15] Given that Bazin and Deleuze claim that Italian neorealism influenced also the French *Nouvelle Vague*, in the following, I will concentrate only on Italian neorealism's impact on Czechoslovak filmmakers.

be used here to extend this qualification. The period after the Second World War prompted Rossellini to confront moral and emotional uncertainties of the time. Alfonso Procaccini suggests that historical circumstances force the writer [or filmmaker] to ask different questions, and through this process compel a redefinition of one's relationship to society. The important point for Procaccini is that neorealism is not only a manifestation of a subjective state, but "a disclosure which exposed a particular objective reality," while directing viewers' attention toward a specific social issue and voicing, "even if indirectly, a judgment on that reality" (43 and 5). Thus in both cases, in Italy's pre-war as well as post-war situation and in Czechoslovakia in the late 1950s and early 1960s, there was a need to re-examine the question: What is reality? For Italian and Czechoslovak filmmakers, the question belonged more to the ethical-political category than to the aesthetic one. In a similar vein, Bazin argued that "neorealism is more an ontological position than an aesthetic one" (1971b, 66). Likewise, in 1974, at the conference on neorealism, Lino Miccichè said that "Neorealism was 'an ethics of aesthetics.' It was the answer of a generation of filmmakers to the question asked by Vittorini: 'Shall we ever have a culture capable of protecting people against suffering instead of just comforting them?'" (cited in Liehm, 1984, 129). Thus, as Bruce Hinrichs observes, "the realist concept was purposely altered and reconceived … to portray the personal, emotional truth experienced in the everyday lives of ordinary people . . . [and strove to represent] . . . some fundamental truth of the human condition" (1996, 9).

To follow the comparison between the two countries, in Czechoslovakia the partial revelation concerning Stalin's policies was also a question of personal conscience (Skvorecky, 45). Žalman speaks of works that raised social and moral questions and thus addressed themselves to the public conscience (1968, 18). Films, such as *Tři Přání* (*Three Wishes*) or *Smrt*

se Volá Engelchen (*Death means Engelchen*) by Kadár and Klos, represented a reaction against

and denunciation of the archetypal worker struggling with class enemies. They represented a

shift towards the representation of idiosyncratic individuals and their personal problems. Film

narratives were altered from a prescription of an ideal life to a personal depiction of people

struggling with their mundane chores. As Siegfried Kracauer observed, "when history is made in

the streets, the streets tend to move onto the screen." Echoing Bazin's view that ideology is not

an exclusive property of a certain style, Kracauer stresses that neorealist narratives serve to

dramatize social conditions in general (98-9). So, speaking of directors Ján Kadár and Elmar

Klos, Žalman points out that they frequently emphasised that "the only art … is art concerned

with the key problems of the time, art that adopts a frank moral and social standpoint" (1968,

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For Kadár and Klos, films cancel out the view of art that had dominated the socialist

world under Stalinism. The point is not to withdraw from society to the imagined life of the

individual existing as a self-subsisting atom, but the aim of filmmakers is to help strengthen

man's faith in common sense, in moral certitudes, in the permanent values of truth and life. The

focus *is* on the individual, but it is his life as embedded in society where he must confront his

choices as always choices informed by his responsibility towards oneself and the society in

which he lives. Concerning man's relationship to society, Žalman notes, the purpose of the

individual's actions concerns "not 'whether' but 'how' to become committed" (1968, 17-8).[16]

Žalman explains that the link which connects films made by Kadár and Klos, for example, is "the

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[16] The idea that ethical norms can be derived unproblematically from the social life of the community was already questioned by Hegel. It follows then that in the absence of the prescribed mode of good and virtuous life, it is the question of responsibility that comes to the fore. The "ethics of responsibility," to use Adorno's expression, becomes linked to an individual's acting in the world. This moral attitude of an individual forged by taking up different options is the theme running through these films.

morally philosophical theme of compromise" (1990b, 201). Thus the film *Obchod na Korze* (*The Shop on Main Street*) made in 1965 and directed by Kadár and Klos can serve as an example of the ethical dilemma of responsibility that an individual must potentially face.[17] The overall framework in which the story unfolds is the Second World War and the context arising from Nazi Nuremberg Racial Laws against Jews. The Nazi era is used by the filmmakers as representative of an authoritarian government and through this historical setting, the filmmakers freely explore contemporary society and the moral predicaments faced by people living under totalitarianism.

Different stylistic methods are employed to highlight the central theme of ethical responsibility.[18] The opening scene of the film is constructed as a montage of various motifs that are developed throughout the plot. Accordingly, the opening shot relates to the last scene in the film. While in the first scene, a stork seems to dance and fly as he wishes, in the last scene, faced with the ethical impasse caused by a Jewish shop-owner's unintended murder, the protagonist, Tono, hangs himself. Another motif introduced is the subjective point of view (POV) shot. The first scene is constructed as the stork's POV taken from the high sharp angle revealing prisoners walking in a castle yard and then panning through roofs of the city to show people promenading on the main street. It is as though we are encouraged to see that we all are prisoners of some sort of order. This high sharp angle shot is repeated and varied throughout the film. The first repetition occurs in Tono's living room—the family dinner with Kolkocký. It is thus related to the opening shot, the supposed POV of the stork. Thus the scene of the family dinner is designed to show, by inference, that Tono is the prisoner of the family order and, in a larger context, a prisoner of political order as well, since his brother-in-law is the commander of Hlinka's guards,

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[17] The film was awarded an Oscar in the foreign film category in 1965.
[18] The treatment of the story, for one, is a mixture of Kafkaesque desperation, with the satirical undertones of Hašek.

which makes him the head of the city. The shot is taken from a high sharp angle, later used in connection with long shots, denoting Tono's subjective POV when he is not sure about himself, as, for example, in the shop which he comes to appropriate as the new 'Aryan' owner. His moral conscience causes him to feel uncomfortable with the role into which he was forced by his wife. He simply does not know what to say to Mrs Lautmanová, the Jewish, actual owner of the shop.

An interesting variation of this motif takes place at the end of the film. In front of the shop, the Nazis are rounding up Jews destined for a work camp. At this moment, Lautmanová suddenly sees what is happening outside of the shop and realizes the implication of the Jews waiting for transportation. Here the same angle is used but this time as *her* subjective POV. Her lack of knowledge compels her to scream: 'Tono, what is going on? I don't understand?' Terrified, Tono tries to stop her. The problematic nature of responsibility he felt towards her until then turns into panic for his own life. The final moral decision seems to be out of Tono's control.

Tono's relief when Jews are taken away turns to horror when he unlocks the door of a cellar into which he preciously pushed Lautmanová. She does not respond to his calls. A high sharp angle implies Tono's subjective POV as Lautmanová's dead body is revealed. Marked by her Jewishness, Lautmanová can be free only when her soul leaves the body. The angle never levels (as has happened in all previous variations of this motif) as if to suggest that this time, there is no way back. Tono's moral potential is exhausted. At the same time a connection with the opening scene is established and foreclosed: a soul trapped in a body (like a bird closed in a cage) is only able to fly free like a bird when it frees itself from the 'prison' of the body. The angle-motif is concluded in the same scene, when Tono, sitting on the chair in Lautmanová's bedroom, is framed from above, with a sharp high angle, for the last time. By this time, his inner

war and indecision has ended. The camera suggests that perhaps it is Lautmanová's soul (finally free) that looks down on him. The film closes with a dream sequence. Tono's dance with Mrs Lautmanová in front of people is only possible after death. Her Jewishness and his 'Aryanism' were incompatible in the eyes of the Racial Law. Only death gave them freedom.[19]

The film is structured around Tono, an atypical hero who talks to us through a struggle with his conscience as he faces everyday moral questions.[20] The film does not offer answers but presents the everyday life of this anti-hero trapped in the totalitarian order by showing that moral decisions are not heroic choices that take us outside of the mundane level of our lives. On the contrary, they are accumulations of banal, everyday events, never significant in themselves. And this non-conclusion is prefigured when various protagonists (like the Jew Katz, when he receives a summons to go to the camp; Lautmanová when she sees most of her friends summoned outside of the shop; and Tono on a few occasions) simply state 'I do not understand.' It is left up to viewers to engage with the film's meaning and to face the ethical possibilities which we can miss, as did Tono. The filmic reality is presented to viewers not as a *fait accompli*, not as something that simply mirrors the existing world. It is up to viewers to make sense of Tono's ethical dilemma.

In a parallel endeavour, as Rossellini suggests, "neorealism involves a greater interest in individuals … through the investigation of reality" in order to "reach an understanding of things, and to give them their true value" (cited in Liehm, 1984, 137). Italian neorealist filmmakers as much as New Wave cinematographers strove to produce films that will present reality anew; so

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[19] In his first dream sequence, while still alive, he does not dare to promenade with her in public.

[20] It is noteworthy to point out that if the narrative of the film had been couched in socialist realism mode, Tono would have acquired a proletarian consciousness and engaged in an underground struggle against the Nazi occupants with other unsatisfied workers, probably sacrificing his life for his country and Communist ideals along the way.

the film simultaneously will reveal and compel spectators to get involved with issues explored. The aesthetics of film style was used to explore social and ethical concerns of society. Czechoslovak filmmakers—as much as those in Italy after the war—recognising spectators' involvement in the text's construction of meaning, attempted to face up to ethical issues that confronted people in their respective political circumstances.[21] Procaccini suggests that neorealism "serves a double function: to be diagnostic as much as prognostic. … To bridge the two is to form a political consciousness" (52-3). In the end, the ideal achievement of this new art will be when the film's ending will prompt in viewers a new understanding of the world around them. In the last instance, it was precisely this possibility of critique triggered by new artistic expressions that the old-new communist guards feared the most. As Liehm and Liehm argue, "every advance, every experiment, as well as any attempt to establish contact with native or European artistic tradition of the twentieth century, was considered to be an expression of opposition and rebellion—and in effect, really was" (1977, 231).

Dirty Linen

We can see here another parallel between the Italian and Czechoslovak experiences: films that answer the question 'What is reality?' by suggesting that it is all around us, embodied in the small problems we struggle with everyday, and the authorities who reject this idea. In 1949, the Italian government's response to a neorealist vision of reality was a censorship law for films. This so-called *legge Andreotti*, withheld financial support from the state and severely limited production of films representing struggling people in Italy. Neorealist films were blamed for "'washing dirty linen in public' and for 'slandering Italy abroad.'" Giulio Andreotti wrote an

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[21] For a discussion of the spectator's activity in reading film text, see Kracauer, (1960) 1997, 308-9. See also Bordwell, 1985; Bordwell and Thompson, 1997; Sobchack, 1992.

open letter to De Sica, demanding that he "assume his social responsibility, which cannot be limited to a description of the poverty and abuses of a system" (cited in Liehm, 1984, 57 and 91). Similar charges were laid against filmmakers in Czechoslovakia.

In February 1959, the First Film Festival of Czechoslovak Films opened in Banská Bystrica. Contrary to general expectations, the occasion was used by official culture to publicly criticise and condemn certain trends in Czechoslovak cinema, especially those films that attempted to look critically at socialist praxis. This event marked the strongest criticism of the cinema by the Party since 1948. The official speaker, cited in Miloš Fiala, asked a number of rhetorical questions, such as: "What are the themes of our films, which should talk about contemporary society?" (1969, 68) Josef Škvorecký explains that Václav Kahuda, the Minister of Culture, blamed directors because they represented themes taken almost exclusively from private life that were not sufficiently optimistic. Moreover, reminiscent of Andreotti's accusations, Kahuda mourned that films showed "contemporary settings exclusively among old decrepit tenements, where life goes on in corridors and dirty flats" (cited in Skvorecky, 60).[22] Andreotti would have been delighted to hear Kahuda's indictment and condemnation. In particular, according to Škvorecký, Kahuda condemned the impact of Italian neorealism. As far as the Communist Party was concerned, it was one thing to approve films that reveal the exploitation of people in capitalist countries, yet quite another to apply the same treatment to the socialist society of Czechoslovakia. In conclusion, Kahuda asked the question: "When will we see our positive, proletarian, contemporary hero, political and public worker in our cinemas? How will our film help to change life for the better; how will film help to enrich our citizens with ideals,

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[22] See also Fiala, 1969, 67-8.

morals, and aesthetic values?" Thus, Italian neorealism turned out to be a blessing as much as a curse for Czechoslovak filmmakers.

Clearly, the Party's moral and political ideals were incompatible with the ones held by filmmakers. The speaker (and the Party) called for a continuation of, or rather a return to, the socialist realism which had dominated cinema screens since 1948. Again the call was for cut-out bright-eyed heroes who change history and build socialism; whose only problem was figuring out how to fulfil the five-year plan and produce more steel than any other country in the world. Socialist heroes had no personal problems; in fact, they had no personal lives at all. Here the personal was always tied to Stakhanov's ideal; an imaginary representation of society not yet here, but coming very soon: the 'land, where tomorrow already means yesterday.'[23] The only problem with the present, in 1959, was that tomorrow seemed a long way off and yesterday was the Twentieth Congress in the Soviet Union. Given this state of affairs, Škvorecký reminds us that because of the revelations of the Twentieth Congress, charges against filmmakers could not be formulated any longer as "intentional enmity, or of plotting schemes injurious to socialism; [and] the Jews, [directors] Kadár and Jasný [could not be conveniently] accused of a Zionist plot; and even the well-worn CIA failed to get into speeches"(62). All in all, two main culprits were identified: the Italian neorealist formula, wrongly applied to an otherwise bright socialist life, and "the remnants of bourgeois thought, represented by Yugoslav revisionism" (62). Clearly, Zavattini's theory speaking of necessity to render facts as they are was dangerous when applied to representations of Czechoslovak life. The Party was interested only in facts, how they should be ideally, that is, sometime in the future. As Škvorecký notes, "the socialist-realist critics tolerated [neo-realism] in Italian films, but were allergic to it in Czech cinema" (44).

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[23]This quote refers to the title of a book which talks about the Soviet Union, where changes are so fast that the tomorrow of other countries is a yesterday in the Soviet Union. See Fučík, 1932.

Unlike the Italian situation, criticism was not the end of the affair. In Italy, Andreotti could refuse to give money for film production and the Andreotti Laws could also make foreign distribution of certain films difficult, if not impossible, yet in Czechoslovakia, at least until a regime change, the Party could outlaw already produced films forever without any need to justify its decisions. So, the film *Tři Přání* (*Three Wishes*) directed by Kadár and Klos was singled out and banned. It was accused of "nihilism, petty bourgeois scepticism and defeatism" (Fiala, 68).[24] Films such as *Tři Přání*, *Zde Jsou Lvi* (*Here are Lions*, Václav Krška), *Konec Jasnovidce* (*The End of a Clairvoyant*, Vladimír Svitáček), and *Hvězda Jede na Jih* (*The Star Goes to South*, Oldřich Lipský) were prohibited and withdrawn from distribution. Furthermore, Kadár and Klos could not work in the film industry for the next two years. Reorganisations at the top level of the Barrandov film studio followed and censorship was reinforced through the so-called autocensorship of an author. As Žalman observed,

> nobody seems to wonder, why this young generation was blamed and punished; the generation, which grew up and was educated during the socialist era, which knew and experienced only the socialist system and further on, never looked for solutions to the problems beyond this system, but always within it. (1990a, 146)

As a result of the First Film Festival of Czechoslovak Films and the criticism of the film industry by the Communist Party and Government officials cinema was thrown back to the optimistic socialist realism era.

In the first half of the 1960s, the struggle reopened with the Party still managing to keep films from the domestic market using censorship regulations and its bureaucratic apparatus.

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[24] Noteworthy here is the fact that most of the delegates at the conference, while condemning the film, actually did not see it. See Fiala, 1969; Skvorecky, 1971.

Despite censorship becoming more and more lenient, there was one final act of conspicuous open interference by the Party resulting in the condemnation of films by Jan Němec and Ewald Schorm and prohibitions on the distribution of *O Slavnosti a Hostech* (*The Party and the Guests*, Němec, 1965) and *Každý Den Odvahu* (*Courage for Every Day*, Schorm, 1964). In January 1968, Alexander Dubček came to power and on 1 March 1968, censorship was lifted. Media openly engaged in debates about freedom, democracy and 'socialism with a human face.' Films locked in the Party's vault were released after this time but not for long. On 21 August 1968 all this came to an end. The invasion of Czechoslovakia by the armies of the Warsaw Pact ended artistic freedom. It took another year, but the ensuing normalisation process—that is, the reintroduction of censorship, the reapplication of the Soviet model with central power over the economy, politics and culture—became facts of life in Czechoslovakia until the Velvet revolution in 1989. These events meant the end of Czechoslovak New Wave cinema. Many filmmakers of the New Wave, such as Chytilová, Forman, Herz, Jireš, Jakubisko, Menzel, Němec, Schorm, were forbidden to make films, while others chose to leave Czechoslovakia. Among those who left were Forman, Herz, Němec, and Schorm. Alternately, some turned to the realm of fairy tales for children.

Czechoslovak New Wave Cinema attempted to do what Liehm suggests Rossellini did when he finished his film *Open City* in 1945. According to her, "Rossellini already saw film as an instrument of a modern vision, a way of seeing things '*with one's own eye*'" (1984, 63, italics added). I suggest that it is this idea—to represent life through one's own eyes and challenge moral and political complacency that Czechoslovak filmmakers appropriated from Italian neorealism. Věra Chytilová, Miloš Forman, Elo Havetta, Juraj Herz, Juraj Jakubisko, Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos, Jiří Menzl, Jan Němec, Evald Schorm, Štefan Uher and others attempted to

formulate new ways of understanding reality.[25] They endeavoured to challenge their audiences to face up to the moral and political landscape of their lives. The message of the New Wave cinema was enunciated as an ever-present need to confront the everyday in order to lead meaningful lives. This is what Italian neorealism attempted for the first time in film, and it is this heritage that is taken up anew by filmmakers whenever reality needs to be re-negotiated.

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[25] Some of these directors and their films include: Věra Chytilová: *Pytel Blech* (*A Bagful of Fleas*, 1962), *O Něčem Jiném* (*Something Different*, 1963), *Semikrásky* (*Daises* 1966); Miloš Forman: *Černý Petr* (*Peter and Pavla*, 1963), *Lásky Jedné Plavovlásky* (*Loves of a Blonde* 1965)*, Hoří má Panenko* (*Firemen's Ball* 1967); Juraj Herz: *Spalovač Mrtvol* (*Cremator* 1968); Elo Havetta: *Slávnosť v Botanickej Záhrade* (*The Party in the Botanical Garden*, 1969); Juraj Jakubisko: *Kristove Rok*y (*Crucial Years*, 1967), *Zbehovia a Pútnici* (*Deserters and Pilgrims*, 1068), *Vtáčkovia, Siroty a Blázni* (*Birds, Orphans and Fools*, 1968); Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos: *Smrť sa Volá Engelchen* (*Death is called Engelchen*, 1963), *Obžalovaný* (*The Accused*, 1964), *Shop on the Main Street* (1965); Jiří Menzl: *Ostře Sledované Vlaky* (*Closely Watched Trains* 1966), *Skřivánci na Niti* (*Skylarks on a string* 1970); Jan Němec: *O Slavnosti a Hostech* (*The Party and the Guests*, 1966); Evald Schorm: *Každý Den Odvahu* (*Courage for Every Day*, 1964), *Návrat Straceného Syna* (*Return of the Prodigal Son*, 1966), *Farářův Konec (The End of a Priest*, 1968); Štefan Uher: *Slnko v Sieti* (*Sunshine in a Net*, 1962), Organ (*The Organ*, 1963).

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