

Dream realism, *Diamonds of the Night* and the opposition to Socialist Realism in the Nová Vlna

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Abstract. This essay aims to reflect on the Czechoslovak Nová Vlna cinema movement and its opposition to the Socialist Realism aesthetic through the analysis of the film *Diamonds of the Night* (*Démanty noci*, 1964), directed by Jan Němec. This work presents a perspective on the representation of reality in the Nová Vlna movement and the construction of ambiguity in the works of Jan Němec mainly through historiographical debate and the analysis of audiovisual and literary sources.

Keywords. Nová Vlna, Socialist Realism, Czechoslovakia, Jan Němec

1. Introduction

The Nová Vlna, also known as the “Czech film miracle”, retains worldwide notoriety to this day as one of the most “fruitful, fascinating and radical” cinema movements of the 60s [1]. The vast amount of productions, the amplitude of themes, aesthetic approaches, political stances and the use of different cinematic methods and genres are aspects that make the Nová Vlna so rich. However, these are also the reasons why outlining general aspects of the movement becomes such a difficult task, mainly due to the lack of an official manifesto or even a clearly defined group of directors involved in the movement.

Taking into account the political context of the Nová Vlna’s emergence, the effervescence of popular political movements against the country’s socialist government – which culminated in 1968’s Prague Spring – and the discussions in the artistic environment about the official aesthetics of Realism Socialist, we seek to understand how this vast escape influenced the way filmmakers involved in the movement constructed their works throughout the 1960s.

This situation puts forth the following question: how can we understand (and define) the political and aesthetic approaches in the Nová Vlna movement?

Our hypothesis is that, through an analysis of films that are deemed emblematic of the movement, it is possible to outline certain aspects that are recurrent in its productions in order to comprehend the main trends, politics, aesthetics and philosophical proposals of the Nová Vlna, in line with the historical context unfolding at the time.

With this purpose in mind, we chose to analyse the 1964 Jan Němec’s film *Diamonds of the Night* (*Démanty noci*) [2] as a starting point for investigating the movement as a whole. This choice came after considering a few factors. The first factor pertains to the abundance of themes approached by the film, allowing for an analysis that acknowledges both its political and historical relevance in the context of 1960s Czechoslovakia as well as its aesthetic experiments and philosophical proposals.

The second factor that influence this choice comes from the fact that, although *Diamonds of the Night* is Jan Němec’s debut feature film, it is not as widely discussed as the other works in the director’s filmography, such as *A Report on the Party and Guests* (*O slavnosti a hostech*, 1966) [3], *Martyrs of Love* (*Mučedníci lásky*, 1967) [4] and *Oratorio for Prague* (*Oratorium pro Prahu*, 1968) [5].

The third factor concerns Němec’s trajectory in the cinematic and political history of Czechoslovakia. The Czech director and screenwriter of politically

loaded films, Němec's films suffered from the censorship in his country. After the occupation of the Warsaw Pact in 1968, which dismantled the Prague Spring movement, and Němec's production of the short documentary *Oratorio for Prague*, the director was exiled from Czechoslovakia for years.

Therefore, we believe that a comprehension of Němec's trajectory allows us to catch a glimpse of Nová Vlna's political impacts in Czechoslovakia and its philosophical approaches to the criticism of Socialist Realism aesthetics in cinema.

2. Research Methods

In this present work, we use the historiographical debate combined with the analysis of audiovisual and written sources, such as films, interviews, film reviews and theoretical texts on cinema as research methods.

Among the difficulties encountered during the research, it is worth mentioning that all the sources analysed were limited to the English language and many important texts in other languages could not be taken into account.

3. Development

3.1 *Diamonds of the Night* and literary adaptation

Diamonds of the Night is based on the novella *Darkness Casts no Shadow* (*Tma nemá stín*) [6], by Arnošt Lustig, who also collaborated on the movie's screenplay alongside Němec.

The film, as well as the text that it is based on, tells the story of two young Jewish boys who escape from a train destined to a Nazi concentration camp. Driven by hunger, they roam the forest searching for freedom. The characters eventually decide to break into a house to look for food. They are denounced and then chased by a group of elderly Nazis. At the end of the film, the fugitives are captured and put to trial, and Němec presents us with a montage in which two directly opposite endings collide: the boys being freed and the boys being shot.

In *Diamonds of the Night*, the breach of commitment to reality is evident in the narrative, which is built from the juxtaposition of images that mix the past, present, future, possibilities, dreams, nightmares and hallucinations of the characters.

It is curious to think, however, of Němec's choice to adapt Lustig's work in this way. The book that gave rise to the film, *Darkness Casts No Shadow*, is one of many works by Lustig to depict his experience of the Holocaust in a fictionalized framework.

Lustig, like his characters Danny and Manny, was a Jew captured in Nazi concentration camps. The author himself was in Terezín, Auschwitz and

Buchenwald, escaped a death train, was captured three times and sentenced to death another three times. Unlike the end of the book or one of the possible endings of the film adaptation, Lustig survived and dedicated his literary career to recording memories of the dark Czechoslovak past under the Nazi occupation in the country [7].

Furthermore, the success of Němec's choices is reflected in the opinion of the author of the literary work: for Lustig, *Diamonds of the Night* was the best of the filmic adaptations of his works, being the one that best managed to describe his experience as a Holocaust survivor, even while forgoing a classic, realistic, and linear framework [7].

3.2 Holocaust films in Nová Vlna

Winner of the Grand Prix at Manheim in 1964, and the Critics' Prize at Pesaro in 1965, *Diamonds of the Night* is part of the trend of Holocaust films that, according to Peter Hames [7], "became a significant strand in Czech cinema, ranging in style from realistic to expressionist, intimate to experimental, to tragi-comedy, black comedy and horror."

During the 1960s in Czechoslovakia, the trend of Holocaust films formed an important part of Nová Vlna's cinematography. Two of the movement's most acclaimed films, *The Shop on Main Street* (*Obchod na korze*, 1965) [8], by Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos, and *Closely Observed Trains* (*Ostře sledované vlaky*, 1966) [9], by Jiří Menzel, were the first to receive the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film in the country, in 1966 and 1968 respectively.

Němec, in turn, transforms an emotional account, full of dialogues and digressions between the past, present and future, clearly demarcated in Lustig's narrative, into a poignant and immersive experience, much more visual than verbal. Despite the discrepancy in the aesthetic and narrative choices of the original work for its adaptation, *Diamonds of the Night* can be considered one of the most potent literary adaptations ever made and, although unexpected, Němec's choices in direction and script are "an entirely logical approach to its subject" [7].

The aesthetic and narrative motifs in Němec's debut film allow us to understand not only the director's own career but also the motifs of a significant part of Nová Vlna's films.

3.3 The representation of reality

The critic Antonín Liehm, in *Closely Watched Films: The Czechoslovak Experience* [10], points out the vastness of Nová Vlna's approaches, especially in the different proposals for the representation of reality. According to the author, it is possible to divide them into at least three different groups.

The first would include directors who challenged the generalisation of reality by creating microcosms in their films. Miloš Forman, Ivan Passer and Jaroslav Papoušek are cited among the directors

who, according to Liehm, constructed portraits of small human spheres to understand a broader social reality.

The second group delimited by the author would be composed of directors such as Antonín Máša and Jaromil Jireš, who had as a characteristic in their works what he calls "ideological generalisation" in social analyses.

The third group would include Jan Němec alongside directors such as Věra Chytilová, Pavel Juráček, Ester Krumbachová and other filmmakers who used a different approach to reality, through fables, fantastic dialogues, objects and the conception of art as reality unto itself.

Němec, in an interview with Liehm [10], states that his aesthetic proposal "(...)" could be called some sort of dream realism, something on the borderline between vision and reality. Or better yet: a picture of the real world painted with the aid of visions." More than that, Němec's directorial proposal aims to build a new reality, a new world within the filmic space.

For the director, the concern with the most accurate representation of life demonstrates a state of development of the cinematographic work and should eventually be abandoned. Němec also defends, in an interview with Josef Škvorecký [11], that "(...)" the trend should be towards stylization."

In this way, the construction of a world of its own, without commitment to social reality, allows the director to go straight to the central theme of the film, without the spectator wasting time comparing what he sees on screen with reality or seeking similarities with his experience in the real world [11, 12].

Despite bringing up important debates about the Holocaust in Czechoslovakia, Němec's work is truly great in its ability to expand its scope beyond simple historical analysis. Here, Němec proposes a moral, political and philosophical debate about freedom, persecution and injustice, that is present in most of the works of the Czechoslovak movement of which the director was a member.

3.4 Nová Vlna and the Socialist Realism aesthetics

To understand the philosophical and political proposals contained in the aesthetic innovations of Nová Vlna, we need to understand what the aesthetics of Socialist Realism was, what it defended, and the reasons and ways in which the cinema of Nová Vlna was opposed to it.

Socialist Realism was the official style of art production in the USSR, particularly during Stalin's rule. Not limited to cinema, Socialist Realism was incorporated into the arts as a whole, from literature to the fine arts.

In the specific case of Czechoslovakia, the

government itself guaranteed that, after joining the Socialist Bloc in 1948, there would be no imposition on national artists to follow a specific model of art, dictated by Soviet leaders. However, shortly after 1948, the principles of Socialist Realism were adopted in the country, following the guidelines of Andrei Zhdanov [13].

According to the guidelines of Socialist Realism, the artist's objective would be to represent reality in view of the horizon of revolutionary development, that is, according to Zhdanov [13], "The truth and historical concreteness of artistic representation must be combined with ideological reprogramming and the education of the working people."

The most common view in the West about Socialist Realism is that this aesthetic would be a corrupted art form, subjugated to the state. The author Peter Hames [14] himself replicates this limited view of Socialist Realism by saying that: "Implicit in Socialist Realism was the view that the system should never be criticised and that, at least morally, it should be seen as a triumph and the path to a better life"; and in replicating the words of Herbert Eagle [13] who declares: "The system of official Socialist Realism (...) encouraged the production of grossly distorted representations of real life and real history."

In this sense, Robin Bates, in *The Ideological Foundations of the Czech New Wave* [15], presents a much more complete view of the aesthetic of Socialist Realism. According to him, referencing the Russian critic Semyon Freilikh, Socialist Realism is commonly misunderstood in the West, which does not see this aesthetic as a practice of art, but as a practice of orders and decrees of the socialist system. To Bates, this reaction comes from a view of socialism as an arbitrary system imposed on society by dictatorship –which is opposed to the socialist realists' vision of an art that arises organically from the historical process.

Also according to Freilikh [15], art is not a way of illustrating a trend or ideas, but the way in which ideas and trends exist. Bearing this in mind, Socialist Realism's own contradictions become understandable: since its commitment was to portray reality and the "perfect" socialist horizon – and that horizon had not yet been reached; including several contradictions – it is natural that art reflects these same contradictions.

None of the questions presented mean, however, that any criticism of Socialist Realism is unfounded – especially when one perceives a change in the initial goals of aesthetics. Also according to Bates [15], the danger encountered by Socialist Realism is what he calls the "reification of the state", that is, the solidification of the state that ends up being divorced from its initial revolutionary proposals and the flow of history. In this process, the conservation of the *status quo* becomes a priority and the debates raised by art, a threat.

What happens with Socialist Realism from the

1950s onwards, according to Škvorecký [11], is that the aesthetic becomes a “puppet show”: the characters become living stereotypes such as the class-conscious worker, reactionaries who become intellectuals when they get to know socialism, factory owners and villainous bourgeois, understanding Party officials, among others.

In practice, Socialist Realism unfolds to what Hames [13] calls the “theory of lack of conflict”, in which “positive” heroes triumph over “negative” characters. In the specific case of cinema, another characteristic is the use of the classic narrative: a plot similar to the traditional hero's journey, very common in Hollywood cinema; a logical development with spatial and temporal linearity; clear motivations of the characters, avoiding ambiguities; and clear causes and effects, with the intentions of the characters motivated by ideological and class matters.

And it is in this sense that the critique of Socialist Realism by Nová Vlna was developed: the artists perceived that the official aesthetic contrasted strongly with the reality they lived in. One of the objectives of Nová Vlna, therefore, was not to reject Socialist Realism altogether, but to revitalise its elements and dynamics, criticising and overcoming the aforementioned formulas, stereotypes and standards [16].

It is in the midst of this growing opposition to Stalinist politics that, according to the Czech philosopher Karel Kosík [17], a vision of human identity radically opposed to that of official ideology is promoted by the Czechoslovak culture of the 1960s. For Liehm [10], the process of disintegration of official ideology leads to a growth in the philosophical meanings of Nová Vlna's films, with an emphasis on human ethical and moral ambiguities.

3.5 The ambiguity in Němec's *Diamonds of the Night*

Returning to Němec's work, the ambiguity of human nature is a recurring theme in his dream reality constructions. According to the director himself, in an interview with Antonín Liehm [10], his three feature films cited here [2, 3, 4] had the lack of human freedom as a common theme. In the case of *Diamonds of the Night*, the Czech director explores the lack of freedom in a context of war and collective oppression.

The hand-held camera follows the young men so closely in the action that the spectator becomes a third participant in the characters' escape in the present time and on the physical plane. In another sphere, we follow the characters' mental and emotional escape to peaceful futures, comforting memories and fever dreams.

Near the end of the narrative, one of the young protagonists invades a house in the countryside in search of food, carrying a piece of wood, with the

intention of killing the woman who inhabits the house. Upon entering the place, we follow his mental process – or what can be interpreted as hallucinations, desires and actions – in a frenetic montage that shows us different versions of the scene.

We follow the murder of the woman, her peaceful donation of food to the young man and her attempt to seduce the invader. In the end, Němec does not confirm what actually happened and we can only assume that the persecution and capture of the boys by the elderly Nazis is the result of the complaint of the woman that, after all, was not murdered by the young man.

Interestingly, in Lustig's book [6] is confirmed that, after a lot of moral struggle, the character decides to spare the life of the woman, who later denounces the young fugitives to the village authorities, causing their capture and death in the end.

For author Alison Frank [12], ambiguities like this in Němec's work “(...) can be seen as both disrupting the surface of reality and making that reality more convincing.” Jonathan Owen [17] explains that in the worn-out aesthetics of Socialist Realism, ambiguities were not welcome, since the main objective of the works was to reinforce ideologies and manipulate the spectator's thoughts.

In *Diamonds of the Night*, Jan Němec does not present us with an open-ended film. On the other hand, the director presents us with a work with multiple pasts, present and futures. We don't suppose that the characters could have died or fled in the end. We see both endings intertwined and ambiguously placed in the narrative.

When composing his dream reality piece, Němec relinquishes a hierarchical convention of the relationship between author, work and spectator. We become witnesses, accomplices and builders of the narrative in a film in which the “meaning coincides with non-meaning” and the plasticity of filmic reality question the very ambiguities of our social reality [17].

4. Conclusion

By filming the characters' mental state instead of sticking to a faithful adaptation of Lustig's work, Němec created a great example of the Nová Vlna's reality depiction debate in his first feature film. *Diamonds of the Night* is, above all, a parable about human capability of brutality and companionship, the existence of individual universes and collectively imposed oppressions, and the fine line between reality and imagination.

The physical experience contained in the characters' representations of hunger, tiredness, thirst, pain and weakness collides with the representation of their mental states in which consciousness is the most important factor and they are able to imagine a world in which they can freely live. While filming the

ambiguities in the characters' escape from a past of Nazi occupation in Czechoslovakia, Němec exposed the ambiguities of his own present, questioning human nature, his moral and ethical values, the future of his nation and Czechoslovak art. *Diamonds of the Night* gives us a glimpse of all the creative power of the Nová Vlna movement and, above all, the possibilities of cinema to say so much through images.

5. References

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