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Nostalgia, Original Desires and Utopia: A study on Jirí Menzel's Cinematic Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the films of Czech director Jirí Menzel, a leading figure of the Czechoslovak New Wave, through the lens of nostalgia, original desires, and utopia. It argues that Menzel's "pastoral trilogy" constructs a nostalgic aesthetic by reimagining rural landscapes as poetic spaces of escape, compensating for the anxieties of modern society and offering a sense of belonging amid historical dislocation. At the same time, his films repeatedly foreground bodily needs and primal desires, dramatized in playful and carnivalesque forms, which serve both as a release of individual trauma and as an implicit critique of political repression. The construction of utopian worlds—shielded from external intrusion yet subtly marked by political allegory—reveals the deep tension between reality and ideality in Czechoslovak cultural identity. By blending humor, poetry, and desire, Menzel developed a distinctive cinematic language that not only reflects the lived experiences of his generation but also expresses a collective longing for freedom and self-definition.

INTRODUCTION TO THE FILMS OF JIRÍ MENZEL

In the 1960s, the New Wave film movement first rose in France in an unprecedented way and then spread to the rest of the world, including Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the United States (the New Hollywood Film Movement). Meanwhile, the tide of this wave inevitably arrived in Eastern Europe, and the Czechoslovak nation. After several decades, when we go back to that age and see the series of New Wave films, we could still praise Czechoslovak as "a small country with great films." In 1998, to commemorate the centenary of Czechoslovak film, the Czechoslovak film critics voted for the 100 best films in Czechoslovakia, with 112 films on their shortlist. Of these 112 films, more than 50 films were created between 1962 and 1970, during the

Czechoslovakian New Wave. The essence of centuries-old Czechoslovakian films has been concentrated for almost eight years. Therefore, the marked impact of the New Wave on Czechoslovak films is evident.

The Sun in a Net by Štefan Uher in 1962 fired the first shot of the Czechoslovakian New Wave, followed by a number of filmmakers, such as Vojtěch Jasný, Miloš Forman, Věra Chytilová, Ján Kadár, Pavel Juráček, Juraj Jakubisko, and Jirí Menzel. They emerged to bring Czechoslovak films to the world in their own way. This article focuses on Jirí Menzel, who won the 40th Berlin Golden Bear Award for Best Picture by *Skylarks on a String* and has been nominated many times in the three major film festivals throughout his decades of film career. At the same time, he is also a screenwriter, an actor, who is in his 70s and created the film *Skirt Chasers* in 2013, and is still active in the film industry. I will give

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a brief analysis of Menzel from the perspective of Utopia, nostalgic aesthetics and original desires in his films.

AESTHETIC NOSTALGIA: THE RETURN OF THE RURAL LANDSCAPE

The appearance of the rural landscape is a major feature of Menzel's films.

Especially in the 1980s, Menzel successively created three films: *Cutting It Short*, *The Snowdrop Festival*, and *My Sweet Little Village*, which are hailed as his "pastoral trilogy". The political metaphors that often appeared in his former films, such as *Skylarks on a String*, *Closely Watched Trains* disappeared and were replaced by beautiful rural scenery in the three films. At this time, Menzel's creating style began to change obviously. The content of the films presented something "not related to modernity", since the complexity of modern industrial society did not exist, and the hometown, the homeland, and the old time became important landscape elements of Menzel's image expression.

Ordinary daily country life has become a major feature of Menzel's film: livestock, fields and gardens, and country roads have become important elements of his image poetry. Menzel shows us one after another wonderful picture of rural life in Czechoslovakia with poetic lens and warm stories. The people in the films celebrate for hunting a wild boar; the men's eyes only stay on the long-haired beauty; the poultry of all kinds are scattered throughout the country lanes and brick houses... In the 1980s, Czechoslovakia was in a "dramatic change". Whether for its economy or politics, it was not optimistic. The growing dissatisfaction of the people with the Soviet model also led to the escalation of contradictions... But those conditions were not shown in Menzel's films. The ironies and political metaphors in his early films no longer existed, replaced by beautiful rural life and rural vision in the new films. In films of beautiful countries far from modern life, "nostalgia" has become one of the themes of Menzel's narration.

For 'nostalgia', many scholars have different definitions. Keith Tester (1993) believes that "...nostalgia is in important part a mythical response to the experience of the urban. The sense of futurity attaches to the city whilst the sense of nostalgia attaches to the country. 'Nostalgia, it can be said, is universal and persistent.' " (p.64) Scott Lash & John Urry (1996) believe that "nostalgia is a reminiscence of an idealized past, a narration of a purified tradition rather than history." (p.247) There are many related definitions. In my opinion, the nostalgic return of the rural nature in Menzel's film is a utopian escape from the modern Czechoslovakia. It is a compensation and adjustment to the pain of reality. It points to a perfect ideal state with a strong poetic aesthetic structure. At the same time, it is the director's fiction and re-creation of the 'past'. The 'past' becomes infinitely

beautiful in the director's creation. The return of the rural landscape can further subside the turmoil and inner vacancy of the Czechoslovaks for decades.

A typical example is *Cutting It Short*, a film adapted from the Czechoslovakian writer Halabar's novel *Cutting It Short* based on his parents' and childhood experiences, focusing on the daily life of a family. The most beautiful woman in the village married a winemaker. She has a waterfall-like long blond hair, often rides a bicycle on a country road. The owner of the barbershop will drive away other guests because of her arrival. The men on the roadside are all glancing at her, which is similar to the role played by Monica Bellucci in *Malèna*. Malèna is attractive and sexy, who draws all men's attention no matter where she goes. But they are somehow not the same, as Malèna is tagged as a "slut" in the film, who is humiliated by the unscrupulous men, and hurt by the jealous women. Yet in *Cutting It Short*, the heroine is sexy and not lascivious, with a little girl-like innocence, knocking around the town, who is admired by all the opposite sex: "This fountain and that lady's hair are the Pride of our town." They will climb up the chimney for her and use every method to save her down, and she climbs so high just to see the distant scenery. In this vibrant village that has not been affected by modern civilization, the heroine with all feminine traits such as kindness, innocence and sexiness has become the most important symbol of Menzel's nostalgic aesthetics.

There are many kinds of means for modern people to comfort themselves and save themselves, and nostalgia is only one of them. But compared to extreme experience in real life, aestheticization of daily life, or transcending the secular enjoyments and entering the high level of belief, nostalgia is the easiest way to calm the restless hearts of modern people and appease the harm of modern technology to them, because it is closest to the theme of homecoming. As a small country, Czechoslovak had been controlled by other more powerful countries for centuries, whether it was the Austro-Hungarian Empire before World War I, or Germany during World War II, or even the high-pressure control of the Soviet Union after World War II. In politics, we cannot hear the voice of the Czechoslovak people. What was their identity? Where was their home? In the process of being invaded again and again, Czechoslovakian literature and art had become stronger and stronger. We can see that optimism and humor were deeply rooted in the blood of the Czechoslovak people. In the field of literature, Hashek's humor is accompanied with ironies; Kundera's humor is with some coldness; Javier's humor contains absurdity. In Menzel's films, poetry and comedy are mixed together, so the countryside, fields and gardens, and beautiful innocent girls are probably the source of his sense of belonging.

UTOPIA CONSTRUCTION: POLITICAL ANXIETY UNDER A GOOD VISION

The term "Utopia" is not new to us. In the long history of mankind, we can see that both the East and the West have an endless stream of ideas about "a perfect country that is different from the real world." In the West, there are Plato's "ideal country", and Moore's "Utopia"; in the East, there are Confucian ideology "the world is like a commonwealth shared by all", and Tao Yuan-ming's "They (the people live in the Peach Colony) thus completely cut off from the world, and asked what was the ruling dynasty now. They had not even heard of the Han Dynasty (two centuries before to two centuries after Christ), not to speak of the Wei (third century A.D.) and the Chin (third and fourth centuries)." (Translated by Lin Yutang, 2002, p.31). This good wish for the ideal country always exists. He Lai (1998) says that "It stays on the periphery of normal discourse, transcending and independent of the manipulation of specific interests such as power and capital, and criticizing human existence with its unique value standpoint." (p.7) But similarly, Utopia construction is inseparable from the real life and real world. It is precisely because of the dissatisfaction and incompetence of the world that there will be such a super-realistic ideal world. This transcendentalism can make this kind of "incompetence" in Utopia become "not important" or "no longer a problem."

And we can see that Menzel has built a world in his image that is completely undisturbed by the outside world. *Capricious Summer* just tells us that a young magician and his female assistant suddenly came up in a village. The young and pretty female assistant instantly became the dream woman of all the men in the village, and the hostess of the swimming pool was deeply attracted by the magician. But in the end, the magician and his assistant left and the village returned to peace. *The Snowdrop Festival* tells of a carnival that was held after people in two villages hunted a boar that plunged into the two villages. *Closely Watched Train*, which is well known to the majority of film audiences, built this "Utopia" at a train station, with the concupiscent Hubička, the virgin Miloš, the photographer of the photo studio...What they cared about were never "war", or "aggression", but lust. Even under the theme of war, the people in the film were still entertaining themselves, and these external factors could not affect them. On the contrary, this serious subject turns extremely humorous under Menzel's creation: when the German plane dropped a bomb to the Czechoslovak territory and the house was blown up, the photographer woke up from his sleep and laughed; in the train compartment, the German nurses brought only sexual orgies to the conductors; the seal representing the German soldiers became a sex tool for girls.

After studying carefully on these stories, we find a structural pattern in which an originally calm place is invaded by outsiders, and these outsiders will stir up a

turmoil here, but in the end these intruders will be forced to leave. Whether it is a magician, a boar or a German, these "outsiders" can never change the world built in Menzel's image. Instead, they will be driven away (destroyed). In *Capricious Summer*, everything goes back to the beginning; in *The Snowdrop Festival*, the boar is killed, and after a carnival, the villages return calm; in *Closely Watched Train*, the coming German train is blown up.

This structure reflects the political anxiety hidden in the hearts of the Czechoslovak people. Czechoslovak had long been under the control of different political forces and could not get released. The country had always been under the pressure of big countries, especially before and after World War II. After it finally pulled itself out of the German claws, it was squeezed into the Soviet socialist camp. The influence of these two powerful forces from the outside world on Czechoslovak was apparent, and the Utopia in the film that was not changed by any external factors was what they longed for. When they were dissatisfied with real life and their political demands could not be met, the construction of Utopia appeared in the works of art.

However, the structure of this utopia is not very stable. Many plots and contents imply a metaphor for politics. In *The Snowdrop Festival*, in order to celebrate the hunt for the boar, the people in the two villages held a banquet, but ultimately they fought with each other and brought the party into chaos because of the pointing direction of the boar head. The two villages stand for the two camps, arguing for a piece of spoils. Does the director really just tell us a pig story? *Closely Watched Train* is more interesting. Impotent young man went to see a doctor. The doctor answered him: "You are healthy as an ox, maybe too healthy. When a young man's too healthy, he can suffer from premature ejaculation, I had it too. It's just nerves. You're overly sensitive. There are natural, normal things. You need to be matter-of-fact about it." Being impotent is too healthy, and the morbidity is presented because it is too normal. If you want to get rid of this morbidity, you can only be "unhealthy." At the end of the film, the boy was no longer impotent, had sex experience, and completed a boy-to-man transition. At the same time, he became a hero, but he died prematurely. On the contrary, those who were not interested in things other than sex, such as more morbid Hubička were undisturbed. The mediocrities like Hubička became survivors. This typical irony of Jirí Menzel is similar to the spirit of "cynics".

It can be said that the director builds a utopian egg for his audiences in his film.

The pressure from the outside world cannot bring any influence to the egg, but the internal life vaguely wants to break through the shell.

DEPICTION OF THE ORIGINAL DESIRES: BODILY NEEDS AND LUSTS

If "Utopia" is not enough to reflect the characteristics of Menzel's films, then the original desires such as bodily needs and lusts are common factors in his works. From the early film *Closely Watched Trains* (1966) to the latest film *Skirt Chasers* (2013), we can easily see Menzel's preference for this proposition.

In Freud's theory, the ego, the id, and the super-ego are harmonious and unified, and the close cooperation of them enables people to effectively carry out various interactions with the external environment. The id is filled with the impulse of instincts and desires, driven by happiness, blindly pursuing satisfaction; the ego is influenced by the perpetual system and also a part of the id that mediates between the desires of the id and the super-ego. It acts according to the reality principle, supervises the impulse of the self, and pleases the id's drive in realistic ways; the super-ego is the part that represents ideals in the personality structure, represents social norms and self-ideals, and follows the "moral principle." Hence, the ego is oppressed by the three parties: happy principle of the id, idealism of the super-ego, and the real society. If the power of the ego is not enough to mediate the relationship between the id and the super-ego, the personality structure will be in an unbalanced state, which will cause anxiety, and the causes of anxiety are mostly due to traumatic memory.

Menzel's films infinitely magnify the original desires (the id), and the individual lusts are presented to the audiences in a playful and surrealist way: in *Skylarks on a String*, the official who guards the prisoners especially loves secretly bathing the gypsy girl; the couple in *The Snowdrop Festival* quarrels, and the wife lets a dog swallow her husband's car keys; in *Closely Watched Trains*, the passion of sex is displayed through the broken sofa; in *My Sweet Little Village*, the woman kisses her lover at her husband's swimming breathing breaks; in *Capricious Summer*, the man finally swindled the girl to his house with food, but fell asleep at the crucial moment; In *Cutting It Short*, the woman and her beautiful long hair became the spiritual belief of all the men in the village... In the Utopia world built by Menzel with his lens language, if there is anything important, it is lust. This kind of lust does not mean perpetual love or unbroken vows, but natural consequences.

Similar to the lusts, the bodily needs are also common: in *The Snowdrop Festival*, the man stole and ate most of the sausages; in *Capricious Summer*, a table of food was instantly wiped out by the girl; *Cutting It Short* describes a charming woman who is beautiful and often gobbles down food.

Mankind's most primal needs have been repeatedly mentioned by Menzel. The things that the audiences cannot see in real life are dramatized and exaggerated, and the original desires are in a clear view. It seems that the characters in the films are "degraded". Menzel

uses this "degeneration" to bring the audiences a different feeling. The army, politics, political power, and economy have long since disappeared, leaving only "carnival." And this kind of perceptual, personalized carnival of primitive desires is a vent of the creator trying to balance the traumatic memory from reality and the inability to obtain a balance of personality structure. The films as a "dream" are a method for unconscious or oppressive desires to seek self-satisfaction in the form of dreaming, as well as a cry against the centralized rule of the Soviet Union in Stalin period. His subconsciously constructed Utopia and quiet mountain villages are only concerned with lusts and bodily needs. They are undoubtedly a form of alienation of modern people. When this alienated aesthetic is passed on to the audiences, apart from novelty, a utopia that transcends reality to escape centralized rule will also be built in their subconscious. Furthermore, a political appeal that to get rid of Soviet Union's control is conveyed.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the emergence of the Czechoslovak New Wave film movement has brought our attention to this country that has never had much voice in history. It also gives us a better understanding of the innate humorous genes of the Czechoslovak people. Even so, there is a bit of bitterness in the humor. Jirí Menzel takes the lens as his weapon and stands on the shoulders of the Czechoslovak writers. He uses his images to create a colorful world for the audiences, which is not disturbed by outsiders. Sex and carnivals are the main theme of the world, and yet wars and disputes are just flavoring agents.

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