

INTRODUCTION

Surrealism In and Out of the Czechoslovak New Wave



Figure I.1 A poet's execution. *A Case for the Young Hangman* (*Případ pro začínajícího kata*, Pavel Juráček, 1969) ©Ateliéry Bonton Zlín, reproduced by courtesy of Bonton Film.

The abrupt, rebellious flowering of cinematic accomplishment in the Czechoslovakia of the 1960s was described at the time as the ‘Czech film miracle’. If the term ‘miracle’ referred here to the very existence of that audacious new cinema, it could perhaps also be applied to much of its content: the miraculous and marvellous are integral to the revelations of Surrealism, a movement that claimed the attention of numerous 1960s filmmakers. As we shall see, Surrealism was by no means the only avant-garde tradition to make a significant impact on this cinema. But it did have the most pervasive influence. This is hardly surprising, as Surrealism has been the dominant mode of the Czech avant-garde during the twentieth century, even if at certain periods that avant-garde has not explicitly identified its work as Surrealist. Moreover, the very environment of the Czech capital of Prague has sometimes been considered one in which Surrealism was virtually predestined to take root. The official founder of the Surrealist movement, André Breton, lent his imprimatur to the founding of a Czech Surrealist group when he remarked on the sublimely conducive locality of the capital, which Breton describes as ‘one of those cities that electively pin down poetic thought’ and ‘the magic capital of old Europe’.¹ Indeed, it would seem a given that Czech cinema should evince a strong Surrealist tendency, especially when we consider the Surrealists’ own long-standing passion for this most oneiric of art forms.

However, the convergence between Surrealism and film in the Czech context was long thwarted by such factors as lack of commercial interest, Nazi occupation and, most enduringly of all, Communist cultural repression. In the interwar period members of the avant-garde occasionally realized film projects of their own: the poet Vítězslav Nezval collaborated on screenplays for several feature films, including Gustav Machatý’s *From Saturday to Sunday* (*Ze soboty na neděli*, 1931), and the filmmaker Alexandr Hackenschmied even made commercial shorts. Surrealist elements ‘escaped’ in the 1930s films of the comedy duo Voskovec and Werich, and later in the magical animated films of the 1950s. Even Socialist Realism, with its tendentious idealizations of reality, can exhibit a certain involuntary Surrealism. Yet generally speaking, Surrealism, as a form that had been reviled and suppressed during the Stalinist years, had to wait for the cultural liberalization of the Sixties, ushered in with the reform politics that would culminate in the 1968 ‘Prague Spring’, before it could make its mark on cinema. Surrealism’s erstwhile absence from the screen was richly compensated for by the emergence of the Czechoslovak New Wave, one of the most intensely experimental film movements in an era of

1. André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, translated by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), p. 255.

experimental film movements.² If one strand of New Wave experimentation headed in the direction of an ever-greater verisimilitude, the other tended towards fantasy, formal play and the exploration of the inner life. The Sixties climate of innovation and investigation meant that aesthetic practices and ideas that had traditionally been the preserve of the cultural margins could now be transposed to the mainstream. Liberated from the aesthetic constraints of the previous decade, filmmakers were eager to engage with the suppressed cultural heritage of the interwar years, as well as with contemporary negotiations of the avant-garde legacy.

It might be helpful at this point to clarify what we mean by ‘Surrealism’. The term itself is a capacious and ambiguous one, having accrued many meanings since this faux-dictionary-entry definition from Breton’s original *Manifesto of Surrealism* of 1924: ‘Pure psychic automatism by which it is intended to express, either verbally or in writing, the true function of thought. Thought dictated in the absence of all control exerted by reason.’³ Surrealism has gone through numerous shifts of orientation within the Czech context alone. Indeed with this study I hope to illuminate the diverse and sometimes contradictory ways in which Surrealism impacted on these films. Least controversially perhaps, Surrealism is a movement preoccupied with dreams and other imaginative products, and one that upholds the basic Freudian conception of a subjectivity divided against itself, haunted by the repressed impulses of a seething unconscious. It has long been conventional to consider Surrealism as Breton himself did, as the voice of Eros, a movement embodying and portending ‘love and liberation’.⁴ The influential critic Hal Foster has challenged or qualified this critical commonplace, suggesting how classic Surrealist art dredges up not only erotic desire but also such troubling phenomena as the compulsive repetition of trauma, considered by Freud a manifestation of the death drive. The attribution of a darker, morbid side to Surrealism is especially relevant when we turn to those variants of the movement outside the Bretonian norm, namely Bataille’s ‘heretical’ counter-tradition and Vratislav Effenberger’s postwar Czech grouping, whose

2. The national entity within which the 1960s films were made was, of course, Czechoslovakia. Hence, the nationality of these films is, technically, ‘Czechoslovak’. There is a case for defining the New Wave, and Surrealism itself, as genuinely Czechoslovak phenomena, in so far as these developments impacted on both the Czech and Slovak regions. The focus of this study is generally limited to Czech cinema and culture, a ‘bias’ that ensues partly from the greater number of relevant Czech texts, and partly from practical necessities (availability of resources, personal expertise). The one chapter dealing with Slovak cinema focuses on a filmmaker, Juraj Jakubisko, whose work seems both closely connected to, and fascinatingly different from, that of the Czech filmmakers covered here.

3. Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, p. 29.

4. Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1993), p. xi.

abandoning of the noble, ideal and ‘liberatory’ was a matter of programme and principle.

What also requires qualification is the stereotype (perhaps more a popular than a critical one) of ‘the Surreal’ as a condition of airy transcendence or confinement to a world of make-believe. Surrealism asserts the interplay of the imaginary and the real, and ultimately problematizes the very distinction between the two: a dialectically-minded Breton pledged his faith in a mental ‘point’ where that opposition, along with the other apparent antitheses of ‘life and death ... , past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions’.⁵ Surrealist ‘discoveries’ are derived from the concrete and everyday, a constant since those original fleeting visitations of what Breton calls the ‘marvellous’ amidst the quotidian world of boulevards and flea-markets. Supposedly revelatory of a secret order and necessity in reality, marvellous encounters (such as the fortuitous finds of ‘objective chance’) explode our commonsensical, rationalist apprehensions of that reality.⁶ Foster, it should be noted, portrays the marvellous as the projection of ‘unconscious and repressed material’ toward the outside world.⁷ Whatever the case, the ‘real’ remains a vital inspiration or reference point for the Surreal, and this is true above all of postwar Czech Surrealism, where the material and social worlds become grist to a much more disenchanting poetic mill and a sense of underlying chaos replaces intimations of immanent order.

If this general summary has not involved identifying a uniquely ‘Surrealist’ aesthetic, then this is in the spirit of practising Surrealists themselves, who scorn the association of Surrealism with particular artistic styles and even deny that ‘true’ Surrealism constitutes art at all. Filmmaker and animator Jan Švankmajer insists that Surrealism is everything *but* art: ‘world views, philosophy, ideology, psychology, magic’.⁸ Švankmajer is right to redress such popular reductivism, and indeed there is little artistic uniformity amongst the various manifestations of literary and plastic Surrealism, even considered as a single, long closed chapter of art history: it arguably makes more sense to speak of a shared politics of Surrealism, grounded in steadfast hostility to an essentially ever same ‘status quo’, than a shared aesthetics. Yet we should not neglect the aesthetic dimension: the Surrealist commitment to authentic self-expression has often mobilised formal innovation, and resulted in works of striking elegance and virtuosity, from the poetry of Nezval and Éluard to the paintings of Toyen and Istler.

5. Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, p. 123.

6. Michael E. Gardiner, *Critiques of Everyday Life* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 36.

7. Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, p. 20.

8. Jan Švankmajer, ‘Interview with Jan Švankmajer’, in Peter Hames (ed.), *Dark Alchemy: The Films of Jan Švankmajer* (Westport: Praeger, 1995), p. 104.

The precise delimitation of what is and is not Surrealist is further problematized by those pre- and post-Surrealist avant-garde movements that share important characteristics with Surrealism. In the Czech context, the phenomenon of Poetism, a native movement that according to its founder Karel Teige anticipated Breton's Surrealism in many ways, exacerbates these problems of identification. Wrong as it is to regard Poetism as merely a forerunner or local variant of Surrealism – the former is distinguished by, among other things, its infatuation with modernity and technological progress, its resistance to Freudian psychoanalysis and its greater formal experimentalism – both movements are also bound by certain qualities, notably their commitment to cultivating the inner life and their foundation of a poetics of irrationality and surprising, 'illogical' juxtapositions. It might, to take another case, seem slightly easier to distinguish Surrealism from the Theatre of the Absurd, despite some overt similarities and the philosophical implications common to both movements from the outset (as discussed in Chapter 2). Yet Czech Surrealism itself grew even closer to the Absurd during the postwar period, at least through such conspicuous characteristics as a propensity towards the mordant and satirical. Surrealism shades into and interacts with its antecedents, contemporaries and descendants, and that interaction takes concrete form in the 1960s Czechoslovak cinema, where the Surrealist presence is often far from 'uncontaminated' by other movements. Determining where one influence ends and another begins can be an arduous task; a single cultural echo may easily be attributable to multiple voices. Nonetheless this study tries, at the risk of overly contentious judgement, to be as specific as possible in invoking avant-garde tradition.

Did the mark of the avant-garde make for a superficial graze or a searing wound? The central aim here is to show that the latter was the case, that the bond forged by 1960s Czechoslovak cinema with the avant-garde, and especially Surrealism, was a profound and fundamental one. That is true not only of the 'organically' Surrealist works of Jan Švankmajer but also of many of the New Wave films, despite Švankmajer's attempts to distance himself from what he clearly sees as the New Wave's ersatz, false or compromised Surrealism.⁹ The body of this work comprises a close analysis of the films that exemplify the Czechoslovak cinema's avant-garde tendency at its most interesting, complex and fully developed: Pavel Juráček's *Josef Kilián (Postava k podpírání)*, 1963) and *A Case for the Young Hangman (Případ pro začínajícího kata)*, 1969), Jiří Menzel's *Closely Observed Trains (Ostrře sledované vlaky)*, 1966), Věra Chytilová's *Daisies (Sedmikrásky)*, 1966), Juraj Jakubisko's *The Deserter and the Nomads (Zbehovia a pútnici)*, 1968) and *Birds, Orphans and Fools (Vtáčkovia, siroty a blázni)*, 1969), Jaromil Jireš's *Valerie and Her Week of*

9. Ibid.

Wonders (*Valerie a týden divů*, 1970) and Švankmajer's short films (the discussion here is largely restricted to Švankmajer's 1960s and 1970s films, with occasional references to later works).

Throughout the analysis use has been made of the insights of psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theory. The application of such critical tools can court accusations of imposing ill-suited and anachronistic theories on 'innocent' texts. To be sure, the ideas of, say, Jacques Lacan were hardly common currency even in the intellectually rich Czechoslovakia of the 1960s. Yet such theoretical frameworks in many ways represent the development of ideas and themes already implicit in the historical avant-gardes. Of course, Freud's psychoanalysis was itself of foundational importance for Surrealism; Lacan and Georges Bataille came to intellectual maturity within the broader milieu of the French Surrealist movement, and Julia Kristeva developed her conception of 'poetic language' in relation to avant-garde literature. In the Czech context specifically, the structuralist movement and the artistic avant-garde were closely connected with one another from the beginning. Psychoanalysis and poststructuralism are important here because they provide a vocabulary with which to discuss the aesthetics, concerns and 'discoveries' of Surrealism or Poetism, and help to identify theoretically what the avant-garde artists, and New Wave filmmakers, grasped intuitively. This approach best illuminates the transgressive (then and now) ideas at the heart of these films, focused as the latter are around desire, subjectivity, childhood, social or political authority, the imagination and, in its broadest sense, language.

Regrettably, most of those ideas or themes have seldom been explored in critical studies of the Czechoslovak New Wave, at least not in any sustained way. In part the present study grew out of a frustration with the existing critical literature, or lack thereof, on Czech and Slovak cinema (and indeed on East and Central European cinema more generally). To this day there are only a handful of book-length studies of the Czech New Wave in English, the best-known and most significant of which are Josef Škvorecký's *All the Bright Young Men and Women: A Personal History of the Czech Cinema* (1971) and Peter Hames' *The Czechoslovak New Wave* (1985; second edition 2005).¹⁰ Škvorecký's book is, as its subtitle suggests, a personal account of those friends and collaborators that comprised the New Wave. It is an anecdotal work,

10. Škvorecký, *All the Bright Young Men and Women: A Personal History of the Czech Cinema*, translated by Michael Schonberg (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1971); Hames, *The Czechoslovak New Wave* (London: Wallflower, 2005). The other texts are Jaroslav Boček's *Modern Czechoslovak Film* (Brno: Artia, 1965, translated by Alice Denešová) and *Looking Back on the New Wave* (Prague: Československý Filmexport, 1967), Jan Žalman's *Films and Filmmakers in Czechoslovakia* (Prague: Orbis, 1968) and Langdon Dewey's *Outline of Czechoslovakian Cinema* (London: Informatics, 1971), though these works are less studies than cursory guides.

entertaining and informative, yet it scarcely offers in-depth criticism. Moreover, its date of publication denies it the benefits of hindsight, as is the case with most of the other studies. Peter Hames' book amply fulfils its aim of providing a comprehensive, well-informed and clear overview of the New Wave, and Hames' critical judgements are always sound and perceptive. Yet, important as Hames' work is, a space still exists for intensive, focused studies of New Wave films. The dearth of sustained criticism is really no less grave in Czech scholarship. The fourth volume of the series *The Czech Feature Film* (*Český hraný film*, 2004) deals with the 1960s, yet these books are documentary in nature. A recent critical work co-authored by Zdena Škapová, Stanislava Přádná and Jiří Cieslar, *Diamonds of the Everyday* (*Démanty všednosti*, 2002), might claim the function of a definitive volume on the Czechoslovak New Wave.¹¹ Yet, in addition to being much less informative and exhaustive than Hames' book, this work's critical approach is somewhat pedestrian, with the authors settling for an essentially descriptive analysis of the various technical, narrative and thematic innovations of the New Wave. Disappointingly, in view of its recent date of publication, the book makes no use of contemporary theoretical perspectives.

Another problem that has afflicted writing on Eastern bloc cinema, English-language writing at least, is an excessive tendency to treat films as an adjunct of politics. In such studies as Daniel Goulding's *Liberated Cinema: The Yugoslav Experience* (1985) and the anthology volume *The Red Screen: Politics, Society, Art in Soviet Cinema* (1992, edited by Anna Lawton), films are regarded either as a conduit of official discourse, or as a forum for critique and dissent. This tendency can also be seen in studies of other artistic media, such as Alfred French's *Czech Writers and Politics: 1945–1969* (1982). Such an approach is particularly ill-suited to the Czech culture of the Sixties, which to a large extent was concerned precisely with breaking free of politics in its narrowest sense by asserting the importance of other aspects of existence. The Polish filmmaker Kazimierz Kutz once complained about Western attitudes towards Polish cinema during the Cold War, arguing that Polish films 'never had to compete intellectually': 'we were allowed to enter salons in dirty boots to describe communism, which the public wished a quick death'.¹² A similar attitude has long pertained to the other national cinemas of Eastern and Central Europe. This is not to deny the value and validity of the previously cited works, but rather to assert that there is a place for studies that look beyond the films' immediate socio-political context. Film scholarship is

11. Stanislava Přádná, Zdena Škapová and Jiří Cieslar, *Démanty všednosti: Český a slovenský film 60. let: Kapitoly o nové vlně* (Prague: Pražská scéna, 2002).

12. Kazimierz Kutz, quoted in Marek Haltof, *Polish National Cinema* (New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002), p. xii.

accustomed to dealing with such subjects as desire, sexual politics and radical aesthetic practices in relation to US or French cinema; where, then, are the books dealing with Czech (or Polish, or Hungarian) films in the same terms? Individual essays are to be found here and there that adopt such an approach: in the case of the Czech New Wave, Herbert Eagle has written sophisticated pieces on *Daisies* and *Closely Observed Trains*, the former essay dealing with the influence of Dada and Structuralism on Chytilová's film; Tanya Krzywińska has written a psychoanalytically oriented essay on *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* for the (sadly now apparently defunct) online journal *Kinoeye*, where a number of interesting and original studies of Central and East European cinema have appeared; and Bliss Cua Lim and Petra Hanáková have both published excellent, theoretically informed appreciations of *Daisies*. Švankmajer's work, as always, constitutes something of an exception here, as in recent years there has been a relatively large amount of high quality criticism dealing with Švankmajer's aesthetic and philosophical concerns: most notably Peter Hames' admirably varied anthology *Dark Alchemy: The Films of Jan Švankmajer* (1995), but also individual pieces by Michael O'Pray, Paul Wells, Michael Richardson and David Sorfa.¹³

Certainly there is some justification for treating Eastern bloc films as symptomatic of political realities. The politicization of East European art is something for which the East European regimes themselves are largely responsible in the first place. A totalizing political culture transforms all activities into political gestures, of assent or dissent, and it seems such an attitude is contagious. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (*Knihla smíchu a zapomnění*, 1979), Milan Kundera relates an anecdote from the time of the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, ordered by a Soviet Politburo anxious to halt the Dubček government's ambitious reforms and reverse an unprecedented liberalization. One man sees another man vomiting, to which the first responds, 'I know just what you mean'.¹⁴ Yet a narrowly political approach is more apposite to some periods and countries than to others: the

13. Michael O'Pray, 'Surrealism, Fantasy and the Grotesque: The Cinema of Jan Švankmajer', in James Donald (ed.), *Fantasy and the Cinema* (London: BFI Publishing, 1989); Paul Wells, 'Animated Anxiety: Jan Švankmajer, Surrealism and the "Agit-Scare"', *Kinoeye*, Vol. 2, Issue 16, 21 October 2002 (<http://www.kinoeye.org/02/16/wells16.php>) (retrieved 20 September 2008); Michael Richardson, *Surrealism and Cinema* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2006) (see chapter 8: 'Jan Švankmajer and the Life of Objects'); David Sorfa, 'The Object of Film in Jan Švankmajer', *KinoKultura*, Special Issue 4, Czech Cinema (Nov. 2006); David Sorfa, 'Architorture: Jan Švankmajer and Surrealist Film', in Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice (eds), *Screening the City* (London: Verso, 2003).

14. Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, translated by Michael Henry Heim (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 7.

constraints pertaining to Czechoslovakia or Yugoslavia during the 1960s were hardly those pertaining to the Soviet Union in the 1930s. To focus overwhelmingly on overt politics in the case of the Czech New Wave would be to miss the point that the New Wave was frequently oppositional and subversive precisely for exploring themes and asserting ideas that were neglected and even rendered taboo during the previous decade. Moreover, the reduction of these films to 'Aesopian fables' concerning the immediate political situation means also reducing politics itself to the day-to-day misadventures of totalitarian bureaucracies. The Czech philosopher Karel Kosík argued that the 'political, critical, revolutionary essence' of Czech culture in the 1960s 'did not consist of subtle political allusions nor explicit criticism of the political situation nor of veiled attacks on government leaders': '[T]hose were superficial, ephemeral things. The real, fundamental polemic of our culture lay in the fact that against the official ... concept of Man, it put forth an entirely different concept of its own'.¹⁵ The Sixties culture 'began to emphasise such basic aspects of human existence as the grotesque, the tragic, the absurd, death, laughter, conscience, and moral responsibility', phenomena that 'the official ideology had simply refused to acknowledge'.¹⁶ While challenging the suggestion that the Czech culture of the Sixties universally reinforced Kosík's own humanist philosophical formulations, the present study would concur that the New Wave's polemic with its own society went deeper than direct political critique.

Of course, the Czech and Slovak filmmakers were faced with an obstacle that their politically and aesthetically radical Western counterparts never encountered: the repressive cultural practices of the Communist state, still operative, if less restrictively so, in Czechoslovakia for much of the 1960s. To what extent did the various confrontations with officialdom reflect an accurate understanding of these films and their subversive content? The struggle between the authorities and artistic dissidents was far from an even match intellectually speaking. In the case of films that were banned, suppressed or denounced, we must account for a large degree of stupidity, arbitrariness, literal-mindedness and plain wrong-headedness. In a 1966 diary entry, the director and screenwriter Pavel Juráček, pondering the fate of his latest project, lists the paranoid and foolish accusations made by various Party and industry authorities against the New Wave:

When they see in Ivan Vyskočil's moustache an allegory of Lenin, when they assert that *Slavnost* [Jan Němec's *The Party and the Guests* (*O slavnosti*

15. Karel Kosík, in Antonín J. Liehm (ed.), *The Politics of Culture*, translated by Peter Kussi (New York: Grove Press, 1971), p. 398.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 399.

a *hostech*, 1966)] is a film about the hunt for Evald Schorm,¹⁷ when in *Mučedníci* [Němec's *Martyrs of Love* (*Mučedníci lásky*, 1966)] they see Catholic mysticism and in *Sedmikráska* [*Daisies*] 'a work foreign to our ideology' and when they consider all of us the agents of Kennedy's cultural offensive, then it's simple enough to figure out what is going to happen.¹⁸

No doubt there is a certain comfort in knowing that one's work has been suppressed for the 'correct' reasons, yet this frequently seems not to have been the case. As in other areas of the state socialist system, entropy often reigned. The reason why many films were disliked seems to have been simply the fact that they were difficult to understand: *Daisies*, *Martyrs of Love*, *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* and various films by Švankmajer were all denounced at one time or another as incomprehensible. This conflicted with the Socialist Realist precept that art should always be easy to understand: as goes the Czech joke made famous by Philip Roth, 'socialist realism consists in writing the praise of the government and the party in such a way that even the government and the party will understand it'.¹⁹

Of course, to some extent the objection to 'difficult' works derived from the fear that filmmakers might be smuggling in dissident messages safely wrapped up in impenetrable aesthetic forms. Yet, at the same time, this objection does reflect a degree of perverse appreciation. That very resistance to easily comprehensible and unambiguous meaning by many of these filmmakers should be seen as a significant and subversive quality, suggesting that reality is itself never fully comprehensible and legible, but always opaque, ambiguous and multifaceted. Perhaps behind that disapproval of 'difficult' aesthetics there lay a more substantial intellectual disagreement than is usually assumed. One might even suggest that the authorities were sometimes intuitively correct in their denunciation of certain films as subversive and 'foreign to our spirit', even if their objections could not be fully articulated. Yet one must also reckon with the fact that cultural censorship in Czechoslovakia, especially after the onset of Normalisation in 1969, frequently had more to do with the artist and his or her political sympathies, real or supposed, than with anything in the work itself. Censorship was more often a phenomenon dominated by the ad hominem, contingent and haphazard than a form of punitive critical exegesis. Thus it would be unwise to get too closely involved with tracing why this or that film was suppressed or criticized. In any case it ill-serves these complex and sometimes demanding texts to put them at the mercy of official interpretation.

17. A prominent, and controversial, New Wave director who plays the role of a dissident in *The Party and the Guests*.

18. Pavel Juráček, *Deník 1959–1974*, edited by Jan Lukeš (Prague: Národní Filmový Archiv, 2003), p. 456.

19. Carlos Fuentes, *Myself With Others: Selected Essays* (London: Picador, 1989), p. 167.

Appropriation or Recuperation?: From the Underground to the Mainstream

The New Wave's experiments formed part of a wider engagement with the avant-garde by the mainstream Czech culture of the 1960s. This absorption of underground into 'overground' was a source of displeasure not only for neo-Stalinists and cultural conservatives but also, strange as it may seem, for the Czech Surrealists themselves, who considered such acceptance as yet another threat from a nebulous and pervasive 'establishment'. In a 1968 lecture, the Surrealist writer Zbyněk Havlíček warned against the 'old-new principle of modishness' that had ensued from the 'bankruptcy of the market of values'.²⁰ Quoting from another Surrealist, Jean Schuster, Havlíček suggested that Surrealism and the avant-garde had themselves fallen victim to this principle: 'the unusual applies as a recipe for painting, shock, the dream-like or provocation are the ingredients of the new literature, political pseudo-radicalism supports careers'.²¹ The leader of the postwar Czech Surrealists, Vratislav Effenberger, saw the new taste for the avant-garde among artists and critics as indicative of a facile 'eclecticism' that was nothing but the reverse-side of the Stalinist hyper-uniformity that it had replaced. In other words, the Surrealists saw the popular appropriation of their movement as shallow, recuperative, another tactic of the cultural 'market' whose existence impinged on all authentic moral and spiritual values. Undeniably, Effenberger and Havlíček were prescient in attacking the commodification of Surrealism: from today's perspective, when the most hackneyed visual tropes of Surrealism, Dada and the Sixties counterculture are present in everything from television advertisements to music videos, such observations seem ever more relevant. This process of commodification is one in which the mannerisms and stock images of Surrealism, or its sibling movements, are severed from the qualities that made these movements original and subversive: psychic insight, socio-political critique, the perception of the marvellous within the everyday, intensive formal experimentation. In a sense this process illustrates the distance between 'Surrealist', a precise critical category, and 'surreal', the now ubiquitous synonym for weird, bizarre, funny-peculiar. Does the Czechoslovak New Wave represent another instance of such commodification? Does a film such as *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* or *Josef Kilián* qualify as Surrealist, or merely surreal?

The larger issue here is whether avant-garde aesthetics or ideas can ever be incorporated into a commercial mass medium without some sort of compromise. In one obvious sense, the notion of 'commercialisation' seems

20. Zbyněk Havlíček, *Skutečnost snu*, edited by Stanislav Dvorský (Prague: Torst, 2003), p.218.

21. Jean Schuster, quoted in Havlíček, *Skutečnost snu*, p. 219.

inappropriate in regard to the New Wave: were not these films produced within an entirely state-controlled film industry that protected filmmakers from the vulgarising pressures of the marketplace? It is worth noting that members of the Czech avant-garde itself, including Karel Teige and Vladislav Vančura, promoted the creation of a nationalised film industry in the 1930s and 1940s, clearly in the hope that state funding would enable the creation of a cinematic avant-garde that would approximate modern developments in literature and painting. Of course, the nationalised industries of Communist states brought their own complications: even in the more liberal era of the 1960s, Czechoslovak filmmakers were at the mercy of political concerns, as well as the intelligence of often unsophisticated and culturally conservative bureaucrats. Additionally, Communist bureaucrats were not always averse to measuring a film's worth in terms of its commercial success, something that may be attributed both to the official precept that culture always be accessible for the masses and to straightforward economic interests. Ironically, the success that the more experimental Czechoslovak films enjoyed with international audiences was no doubt partly what made them tolerable to the authorities: in his autobiography Miloš Forman amply attests to the change that took place in official attitudes once a film had scooped some prestigious foreign prize.²² Such recognition also meant plaudits for the regime. Michal Bregant describes the New Wave as an 'official' version of the avant-garde, fostered as a means of gaining a good image for Czechoslovak Communism abroad: 'The state needed positive representation on the outside and the so-called young cinema of the Sixties, which got an exceptionally positive reception around the world, was used as evidence of the liberal basis of communist cultural politics'.²³ Without disputing the 'artistic value' of the New Wave films, Bregant argues that the New Wave was implicated in the system from which it ostensibly stood apart: '[t]he films of the new wave were in essence not an alternative to the dominant stream, but a part of it, situated within the confines of what was permitted'.²⁴ Thus, totalising Communist power at once created and contained its own artistic opposition: for Bregant, the New Wave's conditions of production mean that it cannot attain the status of an authentic cultural 'alternative'.

Yet the strict opposition between the commercialised mainstream and a 'pure' underground sits oddly with the enthusiasm that many Surrealists and avant-gardists have held for the products of industrial cinema. The Parisian Surrealists were famously enthusiastic moviegoers, and far from baulking at

22. Miloš Forman and Jan Novák, *Turnaround: A Memoir* (London: Faber, 1994).

23. Michal Bregant, 'Skutečnější než realita: Alternativy v českém filmu', in Josef Alan (ed.), *Alternativní kultura: Příběh české společnosti 1945–1989* (Prague: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2001), p. 423.

24. *Ibid.*

the more populist manifestations of cinema they seemed to find their own concerns and aesthetic principles manifested precisely in the most unrespectable and artistically suspect genres. A Surrealist pantheon of cinema would include Charlie Chaplin, Harry Langdon, the Marx Brothers, Mack Sennett, and such popular films as Cooper and Schoedsack's *King Kong* (1933) and Henry Hathaway's romantic melodrama *Peter Ibbetson* (1935). In his Devětsil period Karel Teige lauded Chaplin as one of the two great heroes (with Lenin) of the modern world, and the Czech Surrealist Petr Král has written a passionate, book-length exegesis of silent film comedy. Effenberger and Švankmajer have even praised the work of several New Wave filmmakers. However, they have favoured precisely those filmmakers whom one might associate with the 'realist' or '*vérité*' tendency of the New Wave: Forman, the documentarist Karel Vachek, and the early Chytilová. According to Effenberger, Forman's films cruelly satirise the worst aspects of the 'petty Czech citizen' and thereby strike 'exactly those centres of spiritual wretchedness, from which spring essentially all kinds of Fascisms and Stalinisms'. Effenberger further posits that, 'in [his] active understanding of reality, in this feeling for contemporary forms of aggressive humour, and for the critical functions of absurdity', 'Forman's work meets the most advanced functions of modern art'.²⁵ The praise for such films as Forman's suggests not only that 'the most advanced functions of modern art' can manifest themselves within the mainstream but also that a film can exhibit Surrealist qualities even if its maker was not consciously influenced by Surrealism at all. Conversely, however, a film that *is* consciously intended as a Surrealist film might turn out to be anything other than Surrealist – especially, as Švankmajer might suggest, when a filmmaker simply equates Surrealism with a particular artistic style.

Further examples of unwitting Surrealism can be found in Czechoslovak cinema. The great animator Jiří Trnka, despite having developed a very different animated technique from that of Švankmajer, might lay claim to a Surrealist sensibility, whether with the oneiric concerns of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (*Sen noci svatojánské*, 1959) or the imaginative anti-Stalinist allegory of *The Hand* (*Ruka*, 1965). One might even assert that a film like Václav Vorlíček's critically neglected comic fantasy *Who Wants to Kill Jessie* (*Kdo chce zabít Jessii*, 1966) has Surrealist qualities. In Vorlíček's film, a trio of American-style comic-book characters escape from the dreams of the film's protagonist into real life, courtesy of a bizarre invention designed to eliminate bad dreams. While overtly light-hearted and having little to do with the New Wave, various aspects of the film – the grotesque parody of the utopian aspirations of science and of state attempts to regulate human activity, the disruption of 'bourgeois' order by the three superheroes, and of course the superheroes' repeated declaration 'freedom

25. Vratislav Effenberger, 'Obraz člověka v českém filmu', *Film a doba*, No. 7, 1968, p. 351.

for dreams? – can conceivably be described as Surrealist. Furthermore, as a tribute to popular culture *Who Wants to Kill Jessie* is more successful than Jan Němec's New Wave *Martyrs of Love*, in which the various trappings of popular genres are worked through a portentous cinematic style.²⁶ Němec's film is generally reckoned to be a film in the Poetist tradition, yet it is Vorlíček who best approximates Devětsil's celebration of all that is most vital, modern and indeed subversive in popular culture. *Martyrs of Love*, a film that pays tribute to silent film comedy while seldom being funny itself, presents popular culture not in its vitality and modernity but as a quaint object of nostalgia, ghostly in the half-life of retrospect.

Yet the best of the avant-garde-inspired New Wave films avoid either making excessive compromises to mainstream tastes or reducing their avant-garde flavour to a few clichéd motifs and stylistic tics.²⁷ In a number of New Wave films the inspiration in question is most obviously that of a literary source: *Closely Observed Trains*, *The Miraculous Virgin*, *Marketa Lazarová*, *The Cremator*, *Larks on a String* and *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* are all adaptations of avant-garde or at least modernist fictional works. However, that does not necessarily mean that the avant-garde credentials of these films are merely secondhand: most of these films use their source works as a pretext for forging an original and sometimes highly experimental visual language and as a means to comment critically on the present. Furthermore, the disapproval of, or lack of interest in, the New Wave expressed by the Czech Surrealists should not prejudice us *a priori* against these films. It could be suggested that Effenberger's preference for Forman over other New Wave directors springs from the affinities between Forman's sensibility and that of Effenberger's own group, committed as the latter was to the 'critical functions' of the imagination and an emphatic concreteness. As we shall see, the Czech avant-garde encompassed many different styles and viewpoints. The hazy lyricism and fluid stylistic refinement of a film such as *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* could not be more anathema to Effenberger and his associates, but does that disqualify this film as a work of Surrealism? It will even be contended in the

26 Jim Knox, 'A Report on the 13th Brisbane International Film Festival', *Senses of Cinema*, September 2004 (<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/festivals/04/33/biff2004.html>) (retrieved 10 November 2007).

27 In addition to the works analysed in this study are such films as Němec's *Diamonds of the Night* (*Děmanty noci*, 1964) and *The Party and the Guests* (1966), František Vlácil's *Marketa Lazarová* (1967), Menzel's *Larks on a String* (*Skrivánci na niti*, 1969) and Chytilová's *The Fruit of Paradise* (*Ovoce stromů rajských jíme*, 1969). Juraj Herz did not class himself among the New Wave, but his extraordinary historical grotesque *The Cremator* (*Spalovač mrtvol*, 1968) deserves consideration in this context. Slovak New Wave cinema offers Štefan Uher's *The Miraculous Virgin* (*Panna záračnica*, 1966), Jakubisko's *See You in Hell, My Friends!* (*Dovidenia v pekle, priatelja*, 1970–1990), and Dušan Hanák's *322* (1969) and *Pictures of an Old World* (*Obrazy starého sveta*, 1972).

discussion of Chytilová's *Daisies* that Effenberger has essentially failed to appreciate the subversive aesthetic practices of that film. Whether all of the films studied here are 'authentic', pure embodiments of Surrealism or the avant-garde is perhaps something best left to the individual viewer. That all of these films are in their own way complex, original and oppositional works is something that this volume will attempt to show.

The Politics of Irrationality: Critical Aspects of Avant-Gardism

The most obvious connection between the avant-garde and the New Wave is to be found at the aesthetic level. This connection should be seen as the result both of the direct influence of the historical and contemporary avant-gardes, and of an intellectual environment that fostered the cultivation of avant-garde experiment: the Prague Structuralist movement was resurrected in the liberalised Czechoslovakia of the mid-1960s, and new critical approaches that were then circulating around Europe, including reader-response theory and French semiotics, penetrated Czechoslovak culture. That the experiments of the New Wave were a reaction against the norms of the previous decade should also be noted. Such postwar Czech Surrealists as Effenberger disdained any concern with the 'autonomous' role of aesthetics as frivolous and politically irresponsible; nonetheless, decisions regarding artistic form can have their own epistemological and philosophical (and therefore political) implications. Umberto Eco has even argued that '[t]he real content of a work is the vision of the world expressed in its way of forming'.²⁸ Of course, the more experimental New Wave films were subversive not only of Socialist Realism but of classical aesthetics more generally, and thus represent a break both with obviously propagandistic works such as Bořivoj Zeman's 'Mr. Anděl' films and with such excellent and undogmatic but conventional films as Jiří Weiss's *Romeo, Juliet and Dark* (*Romeo, Julie a tma*, 1960). While the incorporation of aesthetic codes into official dogma forces the issue of the political dimension of aesthetic form, it could be said, as Eco does, that this dimension is present anyway, even in the most enduring and apparently apolitical of artistic conventions.

One component of this aesthetic shift was the tendency towards a greater narrative and interpretative openness. This tendency is present even in the more realist or formally conservative films of the New Wave. It operates visually in Forman's work, for instance in the crowded images of *The Firemen's*

28. Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, translated by Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), p. 144.

Ball (Hoří, *má panenka*, 1968) that present us with multiple loci of action and thus compel or enable us to select our own objects of attention. In its most extreme form (in, say, *The Fruit of Paradise* or *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders*), this tendency manifests itself in that radical indeterminacy of meaning that, for Eco, makes a work of art an 'open work'. In certain cases the cultivation of such openness is, at least on one level, an attempt to approximate the radically ambiguous discourse of dreams, though it is also significant in itself. Ambiguity is nowhere so unwelcome as in Socialist Realism, where the desire to manipulate the spectator's thoughts and feelings in a particular way is reinforced by the para-aesthetic goal of ideological persuasion: Socialist Realism is not only normative but, ideally, transformative, as it aims, in the words of the notoriously orthodox critic Ladislav Štoll, to 'conquer that principle in man which ... gravitates to the past'.²⁹ According to Eco, the open work permits different discourses to intersect and coexist; it is, in Bakhtinian terms, 'dialogical', asserting the relativity of all viewpoints. Moreover, the open work changes the conventional, hierarchical relationship between author and consumer into a collaborative one: as Eco suggests, an open work is an unfinished work. No text is absolutely univocal, and even the most crudely propagandistic works cannot entirely delimit meaning to a single, coherent interpretation, yet avant-garde and modernist artists have sought to extend rather than restrict the scope for the participation of the spectator. (The concern for interpretive openness is of course even more prevalent and extreme in the postmodern, and the promotion of a multiplicity of meanings in these films is one of several things that connects the New Wave to a then barely incipient postmodernism.)

Another aspect of the shift in film style was a greater aesthetic self-consciousness. The assertion of language (or any other artistic medium) as self-sufficient entity was characteristic of the avant-garde even in the postwar period, and perhaps took its most extreme form in the 1960s writings of Věra Linhartová, where the process of narration is itself frequently seized on as a fictional subject. The avant-garde influence combines with that of re-emergent Prague Structuralism, a movement that was founded, like its French counterpart, on the notion of language as a system of signs and that dedicated itself to the close formal analysis of literary works. The then still active Jan Mukařovský, much of whose key work was reprinted in the mid-1960s, defined the single text as itself system or structure: for Mukařovský 'the meaning of [a text's] component units was determined much more by their place in the structure of the work than by their reference to individual realities'. In this sense the work of art could be considered 'an autonomous

29. Ladislav Štoll, 'Skutečnosti tváří v tvář', in Jiří Ševčík, Pavlína Morganová and Dagmar Dušová (eds), *České umění 1938–1989: programy, kritické texty, dokumenty* (Prague: Academia, 2001), p. 140.

sign'.³⁰ That emphasis on form, and the conception of the artwork as a specific structure, a reality unto itself, surely had an influence, however distant, on the formalist 'wing' of the New Wave (Chytilová, Němec, the Slovak New Wave filmmakers and, up to a point, Jireš). Perhaps more immediately important is the Prague Structuralists' principle, carried over from the Russian Formalists, of defamiliarization or estrangement: the principle that the specificity, indeed the value, of art consists in its emphasis on the materiality of 'language', its capacity to 'make strange' the medium of expression.³¹ (The idea of estrangement will be discussed at length in relation to *Daisies*.) Once again, the emphasis on the plasticity of the medium can serve psychoanalytic concerns. The writings of Jacques Lacan were almost certainly unknown among the New Wave, and Kristeva's major work was unwritten when these films were being made (although books by the semiotician Roland Barthes and the Lacan-influenced Marxist theorist Louis Althusser were published in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s), yet such figures prove apposite here: in linking the materiality of expression to the prehistory of the subject, Lacan and Kristeva's theories have much to say concerning the poetics of Chytilová's and Švankmajer's films. Formalist aesthetics also have a more obviously political, Brechtian dimension, giving the lie to the idea that art can offer an objective, thus non-ideological, vision of the world.

That preoccupation with form did not mean that the New Wave neglected the representational practices of the avant-garde and their directly critical function. Once Socialist Realism stopped being enforced as the sole permissible aesthetic model, the question of how best to represent contemporary reality, indeed the very meaning of what constitutes 'realism', could freely be debated. In a 1960s interview, the critic Eduard Goldstücker pondered, apropos the modernism of Kafka, whether 'conventional literary means are capable of expressing the complex situation created by the history of our era'.³² Goldstücker advocated the dynamic view of realism originally propounded by Brecht, suggesting that realism, 'as we have inherited it', is 'obsolete': nineteenth-century methods are inadequate for portraying twentieth-century realities, especially those of the postwar period.³³ A central insight of Effenberger's Surrealists is the idea that reality is itself no longer 'realistic', with recent history having surpassed the wildest imaginings of avant-garde art: 'what the Dadaists considered as the most powerful charge of provocative nonsense, is ... very tame and ... sweet in comparison with the absurdity of the horrors of Hitler's bloody machinery or with the mechanism of the

30. Jiří Veltruský, 'Jan Mukařovský's Structural Poetics and Esthetics', *Poetics Today*, Vol. 2, No. 1b, Winter, 1980–1981, p. 139.

31. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 99.

32. Eduard Goldstücker, in Liehm, *The Politics of Culture*, p. 284.

33. *Ibid.*

Stalinist epoch, which transformed the pages of the protocols of the Moscow trials into the libretto of a farce such as the Dadaists never dreamed of'.³⁴ Only fantastic and avant-garde forms can uncover that irrationality at the heart of the real. The role of imaginative art, if it is to resist becoming decoration or mere 'beautiful nonsense', consists in the 'concrete actualisation of the irrationality within the rational carapace of the contemporary world'.³⁵ Similarly, Zbyněk Havlíček defined his poetry as an 'absurd equivalent of an absurd world'.³⁶

In Czech Surrealist terminology, the most penetrating representations are thus achieved by means of imaginative 'analogy' rather than through strictly literal depiction. Such a conception of imaginative art is not unique to Surrealism, and it is obviously also implicit in the Theatre of the Absurd, then much in vogue on Prague's theatrical fringe. The notion of fantasy as a means of social or political critique may evoke the now hackneyed idea of 'Aesopian' allegory, an idea frequently applied in discussions of East European cinema, yet this form of Surrealist or Absurdist critique offers something more profound: rather than representing reality in a disguised form, as in the Aesopian form, this method actually *reveals* reality in its authentic irrationality. Such critique adopts a logic similar to that of what Slavoj Žižek describes as a process of 'double reflection', where an apparently 'inverted', i.e. grotesque, topsy-turvy, image of reality acts to reveal the 'invertedness', the topsy-turviness, inherent in reality itself.³⁷ While a number of New Wave films (including Chytilová and Jirěš's early work) comment on contemporary society through the techniques of Neo-Realism and *cinéma vérité*, practices themselves still radically new in the 1960s, many of the most successful films (*Josef Kilián, The Party and the Guests, Daisies, The Cremator, The Deserter and the Nomads, A Case for the Young Hangman, Valerie, and See You in Hell, My Friends!*) enact their critiques in the Surrealist or Absurdist terms described.

While all these innovations are important, arguably the most significant aspect of this engagement with the avant-garde, one that to a large extent underpins the other aspects, consists in the New Wave's approach to subjectivity. As previously noted, Karel Kosík argued that the Czech culture of the 1960s, including cinema, promoted a vision of human identity radically opposed to that of official ideology. In numerous films, this vision broadly approximates a Freudian or psychoanalytic model, embracing dreams,

34. Vratislav Effenberger, *Realita a poesie: k vývojové dialektice moderního umění* (Prague: Mladá Fronta, 1969), p. 55.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

36. Zbyněk Havlíček, quoted in Stanislav Dvorský, 'Z podzemí do podzemí: Český postsurrealismus čtricátých let až šedesátých let', in Alan, *Alternativní kultura*, p. 127.

37. Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 11.

fantasies and ‘aberrant’ desires. The imagination is ostentatiously present both through the literal representation of dreams and as a general cinematic property. Certain films, including *Valerie*, *Closely Observed Trains* and Švankmajer’s *Jabberwocky*, even deal in explicitly Freudian ‘language’. Whether or not all these films were directly influenced by the avant-garde (the three mentioned certainly are), that vision represents a fundamental reconnection of the ‘mainstream’ with the cultural underground, for psychoanalytic principles have always been at the centre of Surrealist thought. From the late 1920s onwards, Freudian psychoanalysis constituted one of the great taboos for orthodox Communism, the crude, disavowed appropriations of Soviet psychologist Aron Zalkind notwithstanding.³⁸ Freudian theory was attacked for its ‘idealism’ (with psychoanalysis compared unfavourably to the ‘materialist’ stance of Pavlov), its ‘subjectivism’ or lack of an empirical basis, and, not least, its preoccupation with sexuality (and ‘deviant’ sexuality at that). Moreover, Freudian conceptions of the self were completely incompatible with the Communists’ task of creating the ‘new man’. As Martin A. Miller writes, the Soviets demanded an individual ‘who had transcended inner conflicts, who functioned in the external social world where the demons were visible’. ‘In such a world,’ this austere philosophy insisted, ‘there could be no tolerance for Freud’s psychic demons who carried out their devastation deep within the unconscious.’³⁹ Needless to say, in artistic terms this disapproval translated into a distaste for the representation of dreams and other imaginative forms, and for an immoderate concern with subjective experience or sexual life.

It is worth asking what the real implications were of this ‘return’ to Freud, psychoanalysis and their avant-garde representatives within Czech culture. The Marxist humanist philosophers considered this return something of a victory for their own ideas. According to Ivan Sviták, the avant-garde and modern art in general, in their preoccupation with ‘chance, absurdity, madness, dream, sleep and the poetization [*sic*] of reality’, uphold the

38. There were however Communists and Marxists who refused to share the Soviets’ animosity to Freud, even before the advent of Marxist humanism and the New Left in the 1960s. As will be shown in the second chapter, the interwar Czech avant-garde was able to reconcile its Party allegiances with the psychic and libidinal concerns of its art. Another significant example in the Czech context is Závěš Kalandra, a critic, historian and Party member (until his expulsion in 1936) who had an avid interest in psychoanalysis (see Kalandra, ‘The Reality of Dreams’, *Slovo a smysl*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 2005, pp. 329–43). Kalandra’s enthusiastic writings on Surrealism for the workers’ press are quoted in a 1935 bulletin of the Czech Surrealist Group (Konstantin Biebl et al, ‘Bulletin international du surréalisme’, in Maurice Nadeau, *Histoire de Surréalisme* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1964), pp. 400–12). Kalandra would ultimately be executed for conspiracy during the Stalinist-era political trials.

39. Martin A. Miller, *Freud and the Bolsheviks: Psychoanalysis in Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 113.

'humanist aim'.⁴⁰ Kosík, as we have seen, aligned cultural developments with contemporaneous trends in philosophy, arguing that the Sixties culture, cinema included, presented an image of 'man' as an 'active' subject, indeed as a 'potential revolutionary'.⁴¹ Yet is not the relation between a psychoanalytically inclined avant-garde and Marxist humanism, and specifically the relation between the unconscious and the key humanist principle of agency, more problematic than this? Sviták praises modern art for positing an authentic humanity that is being forgotten or eroded within the technology-obsessed present: avant-garde and imaginative art defend an integral selfhood against a modern world determined to render the individual a 'dull rationalist, ... deprived of his emotions and fantasy', and 'a willing cog in the machine of an almighty state'.⁴² Yet the self proposed by psychoanalysis, and valorised by Surrealism, is a self dominated by unconscious instincts. Another Marxist philosopher committed to the notion of individual agency, Jean-Paul Sartre, rejected the Surrealist model of the self as incompatible with the idea of revolutionary praxis. Surrealism, with its psychoanalytic conception of the unconscious, postulated the existence of mysterious, in a sense alien, forces that moved 'through' the individual. How could a person 'haunted' in this way become a rational, determined and responsible agent of change? If the type of individual fostered by modern society is a cog in the machine of the state, is not the individual posited by Surrealism a mere pawn of a feckless and intractable unconscious?

It would be unfair to suggest that psychoanalysis or Surrealism necessarily promote a surrender to the unconscious: Havlíček, who was both a Surrealist and a practising psychoanalyst, argues that, on the contrary, Surrealism's aim is a form of self-recognition that can 'anchor' us within the 'flow of instinctually unconscious ... forces, whose plaything we really are'.⁴³ Yet in itself, the psychoanalytic and Surrealist model does complicate humanist conceptions of an active, self-determining subject. Furthermore, as recent critical accounts of Surrealism have emphasised, the 'subject' of Surrealism is barely a determinate property at all, and certainly not a coherent one, riven as this subject is by the split between conscious and unconscious, by the inherently diffuse nature of the unconscious itself, and by the role of external influences in the shaping of identity.⁴⁴ To understand the challenge that

40. Ivan Sviták, *Man and His World: A Marxian View*, translated by Jarmila Veltruský (New York: Delta, 1970), p. 80. See also Robert Kalivoda, 'Avantgarda a humanistická perspektiva', in *Literární noviny*, Vol. 14, No. 50, 1965, p. 5.

41. Kosík, in Liehm, *The Politics of Culture*, p. 399.

42. Sviták, *Man and His World*, p. 58.

43. Havlíček, *Skutečnost smu*, p. 208.

44. See Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); David Lomas, *The Haunted Self: Surrealism, Psychoanalysis, Subjectivity* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2000).

Surrealism offers to humanist ideas, one needs only to think of the historical connection between Surrealism and Lacan's work, which postulates a subject caught up in the play of signifiers and always in conflict with itself, or of the avant-garde's importance for Kristeva, who dissolves the subject into a plurality of desires and positions.

Such philosophical tensions are played out within the New Wave itself. While a certain humanist essentialism may be implicit in the very philosophy of auteurism that underpins the New Wave, with filmmaking considered a means of expressing an integral or unique self, there are nonetheless some New Wave films, including Juráček's films and certainly *Daisies*, that lead us in an anti-humanist direction. Where the New Wave 'avant-garde' films seem most in accord with the Marxist humanists is in the assertion of the utopian function of the imagination. (This function will be considered in relation to *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders*, but it can also be observed in *The Miraculous Virgin*, *Martyrs of Love*, *Birds*, *Orphans and Fools* and *See You in Hell, My Friends!*). The idea that the imagination can construct speculative social images contradicts the orthodox, Leninist theory of 'reflection', in which consciousness and thus artistic expression is seen only passively to mirror an objective socio-historical reality.⁴⁵ For Sviták, '[p]oetry is man's rebellion against literal reality, ... the revolt of his imagination against a given order of facts'.⁴⁶ This echoes Karel Teige's assertion from the 1930s that 'miracles of the imagination are an effective imputation of desolate social reality'.⁴⁷ If Effenberger's postwar Surrealists were generally deeply sceptical about possibilities of liberatory political change, the utopian spirit that had originally characterised Surrealism was extensively resurrected within sections of the Sixties counterculture. So-called 'father of the New Left' Herbert Marcuse, who referred to Surrealism more than once and who seems to have been influenced by the movement, argued that the imagination (and its objectification by art) could offer images of a new, free, and non-repressive way of life.⁴⁸ In its 'constructive' utopian dimension as much as in the force of its 'irrational' instincts, the inner world comprises a disruptive, politically troubling phenomenon.

45. James H. Satterwhite, *Varieties of Marxist Humanism: Philosophical Revision in Postwar Eastern Europe* (Pittsburgh; London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992), p. 138.

46. Sviták, *Man and His World*, p. 115.

47. Karel Teige, quoted in Karel Šrp, *Karel Teige*, translated by Karolina Vočadlo (Prague: Torst, 2001), p. 26.

48. See Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), p. 149; Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 38; Ben Agger, 'Marcuse and Habermas on New Science', *Polity*, Vol. 9, No. 2, Winter 1976, p. 168.

This last section of the introduction has suggested ways in which the New Wave's absorption of avant-garde ideas and practices has been politically critical and subversive. It has also shown how that subversive aspect might emerge from form, from changes in the language of cinema, as well as from direct, critically inflected representation or the construction of alternative, utopian realities. Throughout the ensuing, close analysis of the various films, the subversive qualities or ideas sketched in here will be explored in greater detail, though of course in such measures and configurations as the specific films demand. This exploration is intended to develop and reinforce the assertion, made throughout this introduction, that the 1960s Czechoslovak cinema's engagement with Surrealism and its sibling movements was a profound and fruitful one.

Prior to the analysis of the films, Chapter One will provide a short history of the Czech avant-garde, itself a sorely neglected subject, and sketch in the political, cultural and institutional context of the 1960s cinema.

Chapter Two, focusing on Pavel Juráček's *Josef Kilián* and *A Case for the Young Hangman*, will reveal the intertwined influences of Surrealism and the Absurd in Juráček's work. It will be suggested that these films can be read not only as bizarre satires on socialist bureaucracy but also as explorations of such wider themes as desire, the constitution of the self and language (the latter theme representing an important point of connection between the Surreal and the Absurd). In their representation of desire and identity in terms of lack and their assertion of the polyvalence of language, Juráček's films will be related to Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts. Lacan's theory of transference ('the subject supposed to know') will help connect the psychoanalytic dimension and the exploration of political authority in Juráček's work.

Chapter Three focuses on Jiří Menzel's *Closely Observed Trains*, and specifically examines the influence of the 'post-Surrealist' work of Bohumil Hrabal, who wrote the novella on which Menzel's film is based. It will be argued that Menzel largely retains the spirit of Hrabal's work, while making his film more explicit in its critique of fascist and Stalinist ethics. This chapter draws on Georges Bataille, whose ideas (themselves comprising an 'alternative' tradition of Surrealism) offer an appropriate framework with which to examine Menzel's concern with materiality, his valorisation of 'expenditures' or wasteful activities, and his exploration of the connections between sexuality and sacrifice.

Chapter Four deals with Věra Chytilová's *Daisies*, and introduces further influences such as Dada and 1960s 'happenings' (though the Surrealist influence is still evident). At the same time, the film's experimental formal practices will be read in terms of the Russian Formalist notion of 'estrangement'. In *Daisies*, estrangement operates in both aesthetic and socio-political terms, serving on the

one hand to foreground the processes of aesthetic construction and on the other to satirise greed and inequality and denaturalise socially defined identities. It will be argued that Chytilovs violation of aesthetic norms not only defies traditional realism but also enables her to found a superior ‘realism’ that provides social insight and exposes the constructed and unnatural.

Chapter Five turns to Slovak New Wave cinema, focusing specifically on Juraj Jakubisko’s *The Deserter and the Nomads* and *Birds, Orphans and Fools* (and, to a lesser extent, Elo Havetta’s *Party in the Botanical Garden* (*Slvnos v botanickej zhrade*, 1969)). It is worth examining the specificity of the Slovak New Wave aesthetic, with its combination of folk and avant-garde, and local and international, influences. This chapter will suggest how certain aspects of Jakubisko’s cinema, such as his concern with dissolving binary distinctions, his interest in ‘Otherness’ and his themes of history, oppression and utopian possibilities, both look back to the avant-garde and anticipate the postmodern. The particularly intensive study of *Birds, Orphans and Fools* will explore the configuration of Jakubisko’s hopeless view of history and revolution, the founding of alternative lifestyles and the embrace of the imagination and madness. Surrealism and the Sixties counterculture comprise two of the film’s points of reference, yet it will be suggested that Jakubisko at once evokes and debunks Surrealist and countercultural valorisations of madness.

Chapter Six deals with Jireš’s *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders*, another adaptation of a novel, in this case Vtzslav Nezval’s eponymous work of classic Surrealism. This chapter will show how Jireš draws out the book’s psychoanalytic dimension, and uses the story to illustrate Freudian notions of the family romance and the uncanny. Yet it will also be shown how Jireš’s treatment of Nezval’s ‘dream text’ fosters the play of meaning and enables the viewer to construct his or her own interpretation. The film will be analysed as a broad political allegory of repression and liberation that also asserts the liberatory power of art. Finally this chapter will explore how the film speculates upon, without wholly affirming, possibilities of utopian change. It will be argued that the film’s formal practices and utopian vision owe as much to Poetism and the Sixties counterculture as to Surrealism proper.

Chapter Seven examines the short films of Švankmajer and concentrates on Švankmajer’s multi-faceted engagement with the issue of language. It will be shown that Švankmajer is concerned with forging a kind of non-verbal ‘language’, though one that exceeds and sometimes defies a merely symbolic or unambiguously denotative function. This ‘language’ will be explored in relation both to Švankmajer’s interest in the communicative properties of objects and to the creation of a sensuous, affective formal language; Kristeva’s concept of ‘semiosis’ will be deployed in the discussion of this formal language. Švankmajer’s preoccupations and formal practices will be linked to aspects of contemporary Czech Surrealism, as well as to other avant-garde traditions, such

as Poetism and Czech Informel. It will be shown that Švankmajer's approach to language and expression is a subversive factor in his work, as is evident both in his rejection of the authoritarian codification of language and in his attempt to express the 'analogical' thought processes of the unconscious.