

## Surrealism and Cinema: The Czechoslovak New Wave

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There is no denying that Surrealism has had a pervasive influence in the history of cinema. From Germaine Dulac's *La Coquille et le Clergyman* (1928) to the films of David Lynch, there are numerous examples of works that have echoed the surrealist mode of perception, the most notable being Dalí and Buñuel's cinematic collaborations: *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) and *L'Age d'Or* (1930). Theorists and critics have endowed a special attention to the films connected to the original Paris-born movement, as well as those that have arisen in the Anglo-American tradition. However, the presence of Surrealism in Eastern Europe, and most precisely in the Czech Republic, seems to have been widely disregarded in most historical accounts regarding Breton's movement, fact that strikes as surprising considering the pervasive influence of this movement in all forms of avant-garde activity in the country. The Czechoslovak Surrealist group, which was founded in 1934 by Vítězslav Nezval under the name Skupina surrealistů v ČSR, following a meeting with André Breton, has been, despite its shifting members and leaders, one of the most active collectives of its kind until our days.

There are numerous linking factors that connect the Prague-based movement with its Parisian counterpart, for example, the connection between the two main driving forces of humankind, Eros and Thanatos, also occupy a central role in the creations of the Czech group, which often portray a lurid, depersonalized and alienated view of sexuality. However, they both stemmed from a remarkably different social, political and cultural background. Just like the original Surrealist movement developed partly out of Dadaism, we need to explore the avant-garde panorama in Czechoslovakia in order to trace the antecedents of the Czech group. In 1920 an association of Czech avant-garde artists was created under the name of Devětsil. "Like Dada, Devětsil reacted to the barbarity of World War I by rejecting Western culture and technology", but instead of falling into nihilism, it saw the cure of the modern disease in "leftist politics, folk art, and traditional lifestyles with their emphasis on simple pleasures"<sup>1</sup>. This movement constituted the path to Poetism, whose first manifesto was published in July of 1924, and which displayed surprising connections with Breton's ideas: they wanted to reformulate language's associations by freely creating new connections between images without the intervention of logic.

In regards to the screen, from Alexander Hackenschmied's *Bezúčelná procházka* (*Aimless Walk*, 1930), considered to be the first avant-garde Czech short film, we can feel a preoccupation with the forces of the unconscious and subjectivity, themes that the

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1. Šmejkal quoted in Allison Frank, "CZECH SURREALISM AND CZECH NEW WAVE REALISM: THE IMPORTANCE OF OBJECTS", 2011. Accessed 1 June 2015.  
<http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/article.php?id=494&feature>

director would later explore with his wife, Maya Deren. As Owen states, "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"<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, in general terms, the avant-garde did not show a large implication in cinema until the *Czech film miracle* of the 1960s, commonly known as the Czech New Wave, which presented two radically different, although sometimes interconnected strands: one concerned with realism and the other with fantasy, formal experimentation and the interest in the inner world. Although the second strand showed a clear stylistic influence of Surrealism, the members of the Czech Surrealist group would reject them, and would place more interest in the realistic variant. Paradoxically, André Breton's death in 1966 far from putting an end to Surrealist activities, would coincide with the year in which Surrealism and the avant-garde arose from the shadows in the Czechoslovak filmic tradition with, perhaps the movement's most iconic film: *Sedmikrásky (Daisies)*. Other representative films of the movement in which we can feel a preoccupation with surrealist themes and ideas are *Panna Zázračnica (The Miraculous Virgin, 1966)*, *Happy End (1967)* or *Valerie a týden divů (Valerie and her Week of Wonders, 1970)* an adaptation of an homonymous novel by Vítězslav Nezval, leader of the Czech Surrealist group.

*Daisies* is without a doubt the most representative and prominent film of the movement. Although the subtitles vary depending on the edition, the film begins with two girls (both named Marie) that decide that, since the world is behaving in a bad manner, they will do so as well, and so they start their anarchic and chaotic adventures through which they keep repeating "does it matter? No, it doesn't" as their excuse for the absolute destruction of everything they come in contact with. It is not a surprise that many critics have established a connection between this film and the Dada movement. For example, Eagle points to its "radical collision of signs from disparate cultural and artistic orders"<sup>3</sup>, and its subsequent display of pure anarchic play. The film was also discussed in relation with its feminist undertones. Although the author did not explicitly connect her intentions with a feminist agenda, the absolute and unprecedented freedom that Chytilová gave to the protagonists, who act as they please, using men to their advantage, seems to advocate for the emancipation of women. However, as Škapová argues, the girls "assert themselves with voracious energy and, in a reversal of the norms, take a great pleasure in manipulating others, especially men, [but] they are less an example of emancipation than a warning of the direction that emancipation might take"<sup>4</sup>. The film remains ultimately ambiguous and open to a multiplicity of interpretations, from the equation of the destructive power of the girls to that of the war, (which is made explicit in the mix of newsreel footage depicting real wars and a nuclear explosion with the scene of the banquet, where the girls are finally punished for their deeds), to the celebration of feminine creative power. Even if the girls suffer the consequences of their actions, the audience is invited to identify with

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2. Jonathan L. Owen, *Avant-Garde to New Wave: Czechoslovak Cinema, Surrealism and the Sixties*, Berghahn Books, New York, 2011, p. 2.

3, 4. Peter Hames, *Czech and Slovak Cinema: Theme and Tradition*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2009, p. 153.

them and enjoy their adventures. *Daises* also raises numerous issues in connection to the self. The girls constantly question if they even exist, as they do not have a job, their names are generic, Marie 1 and Marie 2, and there is nothing that connects them to the real world. *Daises* is also dominated by formal experimentation, mainly visible in its use of color and its dynamic editing. As Hames asserts, "it was difficult to find anything remotely similar within the feature film anywhere else". Nevertheless, he also points to the relative commercial failure of the film, which at the time of its release was not popular with audiences or with the authorities<sup>5</sup>. Alison Frank situates it as the favorite film of the French Surrealists, in opposition to the Prague group who had a predilection for the realist variant of the movement and states that Effenberg "criticized Chytilová for 'mere eclecticism' and 'decorative cynism' in her work. "For the Czech Surrealists, documentary-style film-making was perfectly suited to convey the rich variety of meaning that they perceived in everyday reality"<sup>6</sup>, which reminds of Breton's conception of the objective chance, projecting a multiplicity of subjective meanings into the objective world of reality. This trend was especially visible in the importance they awarded to everyday objects, portrayed as bearers of a variety of significances.

The rise of the avant-garde into the mainstream current was not only repudiated by the ruling forces, who tried to suppress it, labeling as degenerate art, as the Nazis had previously done with other expressions of Surrealism, but also by most of the Czech Surrealists, "who considered such acceptance as yet another threat from a nebulous and pervasive 'establishment'"<sup>7</sup>. They denounced the appropriations of their modes of expression, which were now being used in isolation from its original spiritual value, or simply declared their lack of interest in such practices:

I am not interested ... in people who are "influenced by surrealism". For them, Surrealism on the whole signifies aesthetics ... Surrealism is everything else – world views, philosophy, ideology, psychology, magic<sup>8</sup>.

It is curious, however, that the international success of some of these films made the authorities, despite their rejection of avant-garde experimentalism, embrace them as a tool to foster a good representation of their regime.

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5. Peter Hames, *Czech and Slovak Cinema: Theme and Tradition*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2009, p. 151.

6. Allison Frank, "CZECH SURREALISM AND CZECH NEW WAVE REALISM: THE IMPORTANCE OF OBJECTS", 2011. Accessed 1 June 2015.  
<http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/article.php?id=494&feature>

7. Jonathan L. Owen, *Avant-Garde to New Wave: Czechoslovak Cinema, Surrealism and the Sixties*, Berghahn Books, New York, 2011, p. 11.

8. Jan Švankmajer quoted in Peter Hames, *Czech and Slovak Cinema: Theme and Tradition*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2009, p. 104.

Together with *Daisies*, one of the films where the influence of the avant-garde, and especially Surrealism, is most visible is *Valerie a týden divů* (*Valerie and her Week of Wonders*, 1970), an adaptation of the homonymous novel written in 1935 by Vítězslav Nezval, the founder of the Czech Surrealist Group. This film, directed by Jaromil Jireš, is a highly stylized and delicate depiction of its protagonist's sexual awakening after her first period, where horror and fantasy eliminate the distinctions between reality and dreams. Nezval described his novel as a "free, concretely irrational psychic collage of everything from the genre of so-called pulp literature that belongs to the nethermost regions of our unconscious"<sup>9</sup>. It is also worth noting that it drew a significant influence from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, a text highly appraised by the Surrealists. Both the novel, which remained unpublished for the ten years following its completion, and the film display an extensive use of Freudian analysis. Subsequently, they draw from common fantasies and fears, what gives the film a universal and timeless quality. The importance of objects as carriers of a secret significance, which is present in films like *Un Chien Andalou*, and which will become one of the main thematic and stylistic subjects in the films of Czech Surrealist Jan Švankmajer, is also relevant in this film. In *Valerie and her Week of Wonders* we find the example of the earrings, which possess magical powers capable of rescuing the protagonist of the dangers that await her in this symbolic world: death and rape. In this film sexuality appears in connection to the grotesque, which reminds of the idiosyncratic use of this theme by director Luis Buñuel. *Valerie and her Week of Wonders* can be best described as pure visual and aural lyricism; it is precisely the delicate texture of the film and its childlike innocence that has made critics reject the work as an example of Surrealism, as it ultimately does not call for a change in life nor subverts a particular world view.

The relationship between Surrealism and cinema is certainly a complex one. According to Breton there were only two films that showed a complete engagement with the movement: *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) and *L'Age D'Or* (1930). However, this is far from encompassing the diverse number of films that owe their existence to the works and ideas of the Surrealists. *Valerie and her Week of Wonders*, rather than being Surrealist, has been widely regarded as a surreal film. Taking into account the rebellious nature of the movement, we cannot equate it with this apparently escapist example. On the surface it shows neither political engagement nor a defined ideology but, at the same time, it cannot be merely regarded as a fairytale for adults. It is open to different interpretations, one of them being the quest for individual freedom in an oppressive, totalitarian regime, embodied in the Church and its representatives as well as in the grandmother, and their subsequent attacks to the protagonist. We can take as an example of this the scene in which Valerie is condemned to die in a bonfire, but from which she escapes by using her magic earrings, which stands as a symbol for the oppressed artist who uses his or her creative power as the only tool to subvert the tyrannical regime of the time. The connection between Valerie

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7. Peter Hames, *Czech and Slovak Cinema: Theme and Tradition*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2009, p. 173.

and her Week of Wonders and Surrealism, as I have illustrated, is not simply limited to the fact that it was an adaptation of a Surrealist text.