Stasis and the unexpected in "closely watched trains”

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Jiri Menzel's 1966 film Closely Watched Trains, with its plot that follows a young slacker's daily routine and its extremely languid pace, at first seems to cast a lazily nostalgic eye toward WWII-era Czechoslovakia. However, during pivotal moments in the narrative, the tone of the film entirely switches from placid comedy to melodrama. These unexpected tone switches reveal more about the world that the film's characters inhabit, a world shaped by the absurdly unpredictable and inconsistent dangers of wartime. Two scenes in particular reflect the chaos that characterized the lives of Czechoslovakian civilians during the war: the air raid and the finale. These two scenes that, respectively, give the plot its first main conflict and its climax both feature juxtapositions of death and laughter during their most audio-visually intense moments. The ironic contrast of humor and pathos in these violent scenes might otherwise come across as farcical if the effect of this contrast was to significantly alter, rather than to suddenly deviate from the steady tone of the film. Instead, as isolated incidents, these scenes are rather jarring. They thus effectively serve to remind the viewer that the atmosphere of the German occupation was one of unforeseen tragedies that either would or wouldn't eclipse day-to-day struggles, without predictability. These rapid thematic detours in Menzel's otherwise languid film highlight the randomness of wartime violence, violence whose un-focused nature lead to either preserving (as in the collapsed house) or destroying (as on the ammunition train) lives without warning.

The action of the film, or its lack thereof, is largely focused on the comic foibles of its protagonist, the young train dispatcher Miloš Hrma. Miloš is happy to stand idly by and move through the world without doing any actual

work, which is reflected filmically in his opening narration (“ my only goal is to uphold the family tradition and do nothing,” 4: 17-21) and in the many static shots of him gawking at the camera, staring flatly at others’ pleasures and misfortunes (8: 53-58, 28: 38-40, 37: 16-28, etc.). Despite his initial disinterest in doing anything active, let alone heroic, Miloš ends up following a skewed version of archetypical hero’s journey, set off by his desire to prove himself as a man (1: 14: 46-52), and ending with his transformation into a martyr (1: 30: 53-56) after combating first his own shortcomings (1: 21: 46-1: 22: 13, 1: 23: 22-27) and then an external foe (1: 30: 43-55). Miloš’ role as an understated hero complements his shared perspective with the rest of the cast to identify his character as a sort of Czech everyman. He is perhaps something like a modern update of Josef Švejk, a noted everyman character with whom he shares a proud tendency toward shirking work as a way of passively resisting an inhumane military, while still profiting from the honorable status granted by wearing the uniform (Hames).

As an everyman, Miloš’ is certainly a useful audience stand-in for showing how the Second World War affected regular Czechoslovakians. Nearly everyone in the film shares his proclivity for voyeurism: while this trait is mostly used for awkward and occasionally humorous depictions of the male gaze (13: 11-18, 58: 27-45), prying and people-watching is also noticeably undertaken with enthusiasm by women both young (40: 55-41: 05) and old (55: 36-55: 57). In the world of Menzel’s film, all the Czech people at the station are united by their interest in watching things from afar, so the character whose job is literally ‘ watchman,’ can very clearly be defined as their representative figure. Miloš’ stifled ability to take part in partisan

activities can therefore be indicative of the way the majority of Czechoslovakian citizens approached the war. It was something to observe without interfering, since the Nazis had so effectively denied Czechoslovak resistance movements, starting with a student massacre in Prague in 1939, and wiping them out entirely by 1942 with reprisals for Reichsprotektor Reinhard Heydrich’s assassination (Mastný). When Miloš does eventually interfere in the conflict, he does so from a remarkably static remove: after dropping (not throwing) a bomb onto an important German ammunitions train, he spends his last moments hiding on a gantry gazing at the train that is moving fast away from him (1: 30: 05, 1: 30: 25). His death by machine gun fire comes suddenly and unexpectedly, as the appearance of the gunner on-screen is preceded by a hypnotic movement of the train that lulls the audience into believing Miloš could almost have actually pulled off this sabotage safely (1: 30: 25-40). The explosion is seen later by his girlfriend once the train has already traveled beyond the horizon (1: 31: 39-44). This course of action suggests that the only way an everyman like Miloš might have effected resistance to Nazi power would have been with indirect actions and at great personal cost, which could neither be anticipated nor avoided. Such was the danger of living in an occupied country in the early 1940’s. Whether or not the Czech and Slovak peoples ever chose to interact with their occupiers, the war would inescapably come to them, in unpredictable and unseemly ways.

The film shows this by drawing attention to the odd ways the train station’s idyll is unexpectedly and bizarrely disrupted by the war happening all around them. In the scene that has the greatest transformative effect on his

character, Miloš fails to consummate his love for Máša, thus setting in motion his suicide attempt and his eventual heroism (43: 20-44: 36). He goes to sleep separately from her, and wakes up to find that the house they have both been sleeping in destroyed by aerial bombardment (44: 36-45: 53). The randomness of this sudden violence is communicated to the audience with one quick cut to the airplane mural in the house's photo studio (44: 54) and another to Máša's uncle sitting up in bed, laughing amidst the rubble, surprised that he is unharmed (45: 38-45). Both shots suggest that the actions of the war come to the train station employees as a sort of uncanny coincidence. The vision of a cartoonish painted airplane accompanying the sounds of an air raid siren, aircraft engines, and bombs falling is a funny-scary juxtaposition that makes the whole attack seem rather dreamlike. The implication here is that for Czechoslovaks away from the front, the war was both real enough to destroy the infrastructure of the country, but unreal enough to leave them personally unscathed, since their towns were not the sites of battles or deportations. In a twist of black humor, it is the embarrassment of failed sex, rather than the imminent danger of explosives, that sends Miloš toward death. This provides a thematic counterpoint to the ending scene, suggesting that individual worries could actually hold greater sway over a Czechoslovakian citizen's destiny than the threat of bullets or bombs when the war's effects were felt so intermittently in this part of Central Europe. The uncle's laughter at his lucky situation, and the morbid slapstick his resting in rubble signifies, strengthens the absurdity of this premise, this idea that some portion of a country could be occasionally saved by circumstances from the killing occurring all around them. His laughter is echoed in the afore-mentioned train bombing scene, wherein Miloš'

colleague Hubička laughs in response to the enemy train exploding, unaware of Miloš’ death (1: 31: 48-54).

Together, these sudden interjections of simultaneous mirth and disaster in a film whose humorous and tragic elements are otherwise dispensed at a much slower pace, shock the viewer into taking note of how the monotony of Czechoslovakian life could be both maintained and disrupted by the German occupation. If Miloš is the Czech everyman of the WWII era, then the topsy-turvy conflations of humor and violence, death and sex he encounters reflect the cognitive dissonance felt collectively by the nation of Czechoslovakia during the sometimes safe, sometimes deadly wartime.

Bibliography

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