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The Ghetto as Concentration Camp

There is, alas, very little chance that the reader of these lines will be able to act on them. If she lives in Paris and hasn't already gone to see this film at the Cinéma d'Essai, it will be too late by now; and if he lives in the provinces, I doubt that he would have the chance to find *Distant Journey*^[1] on the marquees of the cinemas in his city. This is not to imply the existence of a sordid cabal, or who-knows-what kind of Machiavellian plot; actually, that would even be preferable, because the phenomenon at hand is much more serious: it's the normal game of film distribution, which will probably keep this film out of more modest markets. Everything damns it: its Czech origin (just from this national reference, it's already a victory that censorship hasn't suppressed the picture), its subject ("we have had enough of these concentration-camp stories already"), and its unusual style. In short, "this movie's not commercial." There remains the possibility, if improbability, of appreciation elsewhere – an appreciation that nonetheless will not refute the pessimistic tone of this paragraph. I am referring to private screenings or the ciné-clubs, to whose attention I passionately recommend this film. At the very least, then, some several thousand spectators could learn of the existence of *Distant Journey*.

It is a curious coincidence that this month, January of 1952, has seen the release in Paris of the two best films yet (and under advertising conditions almost as unfavorable for one as for the other) about the war or the concentration camps. I refer naturally both to *A Walk in the Sun*,^[2] which has been reviewed elsewhere by Jacques Doniol-Valcroze,^[3] and – without question – to *The Last Stage*.^[4] It's at once difficult and unpleasant trying to establish a hierarchy between the Polish film and the Czech one, because their qualities can't really be compared. The first picture distinguishes itself through its complete, and seemingly impossible, detachment from

formalist concerns; *The Last Stage* conveys the most direct, the most brutal aspect of a reality that could, alas, have suffered excessive ornamentation. The second film, by contrast, is overburdened with aesthetic reference; I would even say, if a sort of terrorism-by-critique didn't hover around this word, that *Distant Journey* is one of the most formalistic films I have seen in a long time.

This remark shouldn't be taken a priori as being in its favor at all. Even less so when one considers that the reference in question points to German expressionism of the 1920s and 1930s. If there is an aesthetic that seems to have been overcome in world cinema, in Western as in Soviet films, it's precisely this one. It is therefore astonishing to find it taken to a paroxysmal level here, particularly in a Czech film of 1950 (if the film is indeed from this date, as has been said).^[5] It's even more astonishing that this unexpected, formalistic resurgence took place in consonance with a subject that doesn't seem to fit it in the least.

I have spoken of a concentration camp, but the film is more precisely about the anti-Semitic persecutions in Prague prior to the war and the life of the Jews trapped in the Terezín, or Theresienstadt, ghetto before most of them were transported to the Polish ghettos, whence there was no return. A Christian Czech has married a young female Jewish doctor, in spite of the persecution of Jews that has already begun. The marriage guarantees her, for the time being, some measure of immunity (even if it has brought, by contrast, additional danger to her husband). They see, one after the other, their friends and then their parents receive the order to relocate to the sinister Terezín, a small fortified village "arranged" into a ghetto. There, in effect, is the world of the concentration camp, in all its monstrous logic. Perhaps a less physically atrocious world than could be found in other places, Terezín was just a stage – and not the last – in the downward spiral, but a complicated one whose own sociology complemented that of the concentration camp. The least abominable aspect of this universe was not that it could have been even worse, on account of which it should have appeared to its victims as heaven on earth. The Jew from Prague may have lived in the anxiety of relocation to Terezín, but the Jew of Terezín subsisted in the anguish of transfer to the concentration camp of certain death.

When the incarcerated father of the young Jewish woman succeeds, thanks to the complicity of a guard, in having a letter from Terezín sent to her, it's just to demand

some money and – absurd request – a bit of hair dye; the old man hopes, against all evidence, that black hair will cancel his fate as an old Jew scheduled for the next departure. He is still selected, however, and when the convoy rattles heavily along the main street of Terezín, in mud and pouring rain, the soggy hair of the man falls across his face. It's true, by the way, that the Germans embellished these departures with music. A choir of inmates, ordered to appear in their Sunday best – bearded skeletons in stiff collars and bowler hats, perched atop a beat-up hearse as if they were on a podium – had to play for their coreligionists. Others would play for them later.

I doubt that Alfréd Radok consciously sought out the style of his film because he wanted the artistry that would result from combining it with such a subject. I'd more willingly believe that this style is mostly the product of the influence of expressionist aesthetics, which has always been latent if not explicit in Czech cinema.^[6] What surprises me here is that the most dubious characteristics of expressionism have paradoxically gained a profound justification, a kind of realistic virginity. The excess decor (understood nonetheless as real decor,^[7] this is the expressionism of *M*,^[7] not of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*^[8]), the high-contrast and symbolic lighting, the abnormal angles, the theatrical composition of certain scenes (the one, for example, in which a woman announces the arrival of the Russians – by striking the harp inside a grand piano – truly reminds the viewer of the gong scene in *Metropolis*^[9]). All the paraphernalia attending such artifice, which we thought was outdated, reveals itself here to be the most logical, and the most necessary, for the expression a nightmarish reality. Involuntarily, no doubt, but precisely because of an intrinsic and in a way metaphysical fidelity to the concentration-camp universe, the film recalls the world of Kafka and, more curiously, that of Sade.

My reference to the former man imposes itself irresistibly on the spirit in this instance, and, perhaps now for the first time, the name of Kafka can be invoked in connection with the cinema. The origin of the film can't be the cause of this, for the author, although he lived in Prague, isn't anywhere less known or loved than in his native Czechoslovakia. It is only because of the logic of its subject and its style that, influences aside, *Distant Journey* reconstitutes a universe similar to that of the Jewish Kafka. With Sade the comparison is less evident, since eroticism has but a minor and accidental place in this film. But a scene like the one where a Nazi forces, at gunpoint, a woman to transport a bucket of garbage with her teeth while crawling

on all fours achieves a refinement in mental cruelty of which Sade and only Sade could provide the archetype. More indirectly, the motif of the fortress, with its tall brick walls – this stony prison-house evokes the moral confinement of the Marquis himself.

I well know that these literary comparisons aren't those that the critique of such a subject would seem to call for, but what else could be said about this film, except to note that its story is true and distressing? And that, if Radok has not exactly been able to surpass himself, he has been able to bear witness not only to what the story objectively was, in the full extent of its horror, but also to an intimate dimension that, without denying the politics or the sociology of the subject, places each of them in an intrinsic position with regard to the human condition, so as to enable us to realize that maybe this ghetto is something other than a concentration camp. It is significant that salvation comes, yet that it doesn't seem possible it will come (from the outside, of course, when the first Soviet truck is seen on the road). The internal organization of the camp and the resistance – relative but effective – that was able to differentiate its workings from the oppression of the concentration camps, seem here not so much impossible as unthinkable. That is the essential difference between this film and *The Last Stage*. On *Distant Journey*'s victims rests a double curse, that of the camp and of their race; for this reason their fate appears all the more inexorable, as if it were fulfilling a prophecy. Only the young doctor represents an element of social and moral resistance, but she has married a non Jew and is therefore already halfway out of her personal ghetto. Yet she attempts suicide anyway – to liberate her Christian husband from the danger she represents for him. The walls of Terezín do finally open upon the arrival of the Russian soldiers, but only, as it were, at the Biblical sounding of the seventh trumpet.

Note:

From the original “Le ghetto concentrationnaire” (*Cahiers du cinéma*, 1952, no. 9, pp. 58–60), translated by Bert Cardullo: *The Ghetto as Concentration Camp*: Alfréd Radok's *The Long Journey*. In: Bert Cardullo (ed.), *Bazin on Global Cinema, 1948–1958*. Austin: University of Texas Press 2014, pp. 92–96 [revised by editor].

Notes:

[1] The film was screened in France under the title *Ghetto Térézin* [ed. note].

[2] American war film from 1930, directed by Lewis Milestone [ed. note].

[3] French film critic and director, one of the founders of *Cahiers du cinéma* [ed. note].

[4] Polish drama from 1948, original title *Ostatní etap*, directed by Wanda Jakubowska [ed. note].

[5] Since 1950, *Distant Journey* started appearing in foreign distribution – this is probably where the misinformation about the production year comes from. The film was screened, for example, in Switzerland, Austria, England, France and USA, later also in Belgium or Italy [ed. note].

[6] Even when taking the term “expressionism” very loosely, this statement does not correspond with the actual state of Czech cinema of its time. There are a few expressionist-tinged films in the interwar period (e.g. *Příchozí z temnot* [The Arrival from the Darkness, 1921], *Kreutzerova sonáta* [The Kreutzer Sonata, 1926] or *Batalion* [Battalion, 1927], but even in these cases the influence is partial or rather vague [ed. note].

[7] German drama directed by Fritz Lang, original title *M – Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder*, 1930 [ed. note].

[8] German drama directed by Robert Wiene, original title *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, 1921 [ed. note].

[9] German sci-fi film directed by Fritz Lang, 1927 [ed. note].