Sexuality in the Czech New Wave

Throughout Eastern European film in the Communist era there is a preoccupation with the overt display of sexuality. Sexuality can appear in many guises: as comic relief, an expression of personal or political rebellion, a demonstration of personal power, a show of personal vulnerability, or all of these. It can be the primary subject or a supporting subplot, or it can make a minor appearance in a single scene. We can see a distillation of this trend in the Czech New Wave, and I intend to look deeper into various depictions of sexuality in the Czech New Wave in order to get to the core of what these depictions are meant to do. These depictions are in the service of many different topics and draw attention to many different issues both within Czechoslovak society and within the societies of all industrialized nations. I examine four films in this study: *Loves of a Blonde* (1965), directed by Milos Forman, *Closely Watched Trains* (1966), directed by Jiri Menzel, *Daisies* (1966), directed by Vera Chytilova, and *The Firemen’s Ball* (1967), also directed by Milos Forman. Each of these four films employs the use of sexuality in unique but equally important ways, and through my analysis of each of these films, I make explicit the different purposes of each of these varying depictions of sexuality.

Background

It is important for readers to understand the historical context of the Czech New Wave, which occurred in the 1960s in Czechoslovakia. Josef Stalin died in 1953, which was a critical juncture for both the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc countries because it led to de-Stalinization and increased attempts at reform. De-Stalinization began soon after Stalin’s demise, and Leonid Brezhnev had made two public denunciations of Stalin by 1963.1 Czechoslovakia, at first, was resistant to the changes that de-Stalinization could bring. Antonin Novotny had been appointed to the head of the government in 1957, after the death of Zapotocky. Novotny had been a lead player in the government for quite some time, and, as a result, had strong ties to Stalin. Because he was personally linked with policies and actions, such as the Stalinist purges, that were now being renounced, Novotny was hesitant to repudiate Stalin and was resistant to implementing some of the reforms that the Soviet government now wanted to initiate. After Brezhnev’s second denunciation of Stalin, however, Novotny could no longer resist and allowed some changes to begin.2

De-Stalinization affected not only politics but culture as well, and it is against this background that we should understand the Czech New Wave. This new movement in the country’s film industry was groundbreaking and unprecedented, and resulted in two Oscar wins for best foreign film: Milos Forman’s *Loves of a Blonde* in 1966 and Jiri Menzel’s *Closely Watched Trains* in 1967, both of which I examine. Though Czechoslovakia’s film industry begun in 1898 Czechs received very little attention for their efforts in film, and their reputation up to the 1960s relied almost completely upon filmmakers like Jiri Trnka and Karel Zeman, who were known for puppet films and animation.3 The Czech New Wave rocketed the country into the international spotlight, and the films of the movement would continue to win prizes and critical acclaim throughout the 1960s.

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2 Ibid, 319-321.
While the films that emerged from the Czechoslovak New Wave were political in certain aspects of their commentary, they also covered many other topics that were universal in 1960s industrialized societies. Indeed, Milan Kundera suggests that we should read the films of this period not simply through a political, anti-communist lens, as can be the tendency in the West today, but also with these broader social themes in mind. Reading the Czech New wave films with only an anti-communist agenda, and neglecting obvious issues such as teenage political apathy, miscommunication between generations, and the intricacy of family dynamics, “murders it”.4

Though liberalization and innovation in politics and culture continued through the sixties, growing ever more powerful, the movement toward liberalization came to an abrupt end after the Prague Spring of 1968 and the subsequent Soviet Invasion. Though some reforms had been encouraged, once a reform movement took hold in Czechoslovakia it began to spin out of control. Antonin Novotny, the leader of Czechoslovakia since 1957, was deposed in 1968 and Alexander Dubcek subsequently took power. His reforms were heavy handed and fast, and after considerable debate among Politburo members in the Soviet Union, it was decided that he must be stopped.5 The Soviets invaded on August 20, 1968 and after a fierce fight, innovation lost out, and Czechoslovakia was forced to return to its former self for another two decades until the revelation of the Velvet Revolution.

By the time the Prague Spring and subsequent invasion occurred, each of the films I herein examine had already been made. Though they were made prior to the Prague Spring, they were all released within four years of the Soviet re-suppression of the country, so they display quite nicely the amount of freedom the arts had been able to amass in Czechoslovakia in the years following Stalin’s death. Of the three directors of these films, only one, Milos Forman, chose permanent exile from Czechoslovakia after the Soviet invasion; the other two directors, Vera Chytilova and Jiri Menzel, chose to stay in the country with mixed career results over the following decade.6 All three of these directors’ films were suppressed after the Prague Spring, demonstrating their importance in this new, freer Czech culture that the Soviet Union felt the need to stifle.

**Milos Forman’s Loves of a Blonde**

I commence my analysis with Milos Forman’s *Loves of a Blonde* from 1965. Milos Forman lost both of his parents in a concentration camp when he was just eight years old, and it has been argued that losing his parents so early may account for his preoccupation with family relations later in his life.7 Though Forman has come to be regarded as one of the greatest directors of his time, not only in Czechoslovakia but in America as well, he originally gravitated toward theater, not film, and he never obtained any formal education in direction.8 He learned to shoot film from a fellow filmmaker on the job, and had the good fortune to work with many

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5 Ibid, 3.
8 Ibid, 119.
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filmmakers before striking out on his own. Forman’s first film was *Grandpa Automobile* (1956) with Alfred Radock, but his first solo piece was *Talent Competition* (1964). *Talent Competition*, like *The Firemen’s Ball* after it, was criticized for being too cruel, but the film allowed Forman enough notoriety that he was able to successfully continue on. Shortly after *Talent Competition* came *Loves of a Blonde*, with its many allusions to sexuality, young love, and withering relationships.

*Loves of a Blonde*, like *Firemen’s Ball*, is a comedy wrapped up in touching and depressing scenes that leave its viewer unsure of the appropriateness of laughing, and leave behind a lingering feeling of guilt after the viewing is complete. The film follows a young and rather flakey youth, Andula, throughout her various unsuccessful forays into love. Though there are several scenes which display Andula’s sexuality that are of integral importance to the rest of the film I must start at the beginning in order for Andula’s state of mind to be successfully conveyed to the reader. The first scene we see of Andula is an up close shot; it is evening and she is in bed at her dormitory with one of the other female youths from the shoe factory where she works. In hushed tones, Andula talks about her boyfriend, Tonda, and heaps praise onto him. Andula seems hopeful for the future with this young man, and as the two young women lay there she shows her friend a ring he has given her, and her friend marvels. But among this supposed certainty, with rosy pictures painted, the viewer doubts the seriousness of the relationship and can already sense Andula’s fickle nature; a young woman still searching for her place in the world.

Though the viewer can sense Andula’s capriciousness from the beginning of the film, they do not see the full scope of her nature until her encounter with a married guard in the woods. The encounter is simply a flirtation, and while the viewer believes from their visual experience that it was a short and innocuous conversation, though the guard certainly wanted more, Andula’s later retelling of the story to a friend from the factory leaves the viewer wondering whether they missed out or whether Andula’s embellishments of her love life are more substantial than they originally believed. It is after this encounter that Andula meets her love interest for the rest of the film, and the individual from which all drama springs: Milda.

Milda is a musician with a band, which comes to town for a dance that is thrown for the women of the factory and some middle-aged army reservists. This event is completely constructed for the women’s benefit, as their factory is an all female factory and there is a shortage of men in their town of Zruc. Milda and Andula catch each other’s eye over the course of the night, and Andula is eventually convinced to go up to Milda’s room. The events that follow are a textbook teenage sexual encounter. Andula and Milda are awkward, though Milda obviously has more experience than Andula; the two are rather hesitant, but they are obviously attracted to one another. Andula keeps saying she is going to leave, but she never does, though she is obviously conflicted about her choice, even after the two sleep together. Milda keeps reassuring Andula that she can trust him, though they both know this is not the case. After Milda is undressed we are given a shot of her bare back in the low light, and she tells Milda to close the blinds. Her vulnerability is palpable. Milda however, is comic in the scene. He struggles to close the blinds with little success, and tells Andula she resembles a Picasso painting, hardly a compliment, though the humor is lost on Andula, who does not seem to be familiar with the painter.

Andula and Milda are both realistic depictions of youthful sexuality, and each are both very strong and very weak in unique ways. Milda is domestically disempowered. He lives with a
domineering mother, whom I discuss at some length later, and in order to compensate for his emasculating home life he is sexually experimental and outgoing, romancing ladies at every concert he plays. Andula, however, is more domestically emancipated, not having anyone to report to directly; she also seems more experienced in life, holding down a more grounded job and having survived a suicide attempt after her parents divorce. She seeks validation and stability in love. While Mild

a's mother is characterized by her lack of sexual personality. Her relationship with her husband is tired and unloving, and she obviously is characterized by her lack of virility hints heavily at the lack of strength of the Czech army, and seems foreshadows the disastrous outcome of the Prague Spring.

The next political allusion comes in the form of a feigned democratic process. Andula’s first boyfriend of the film, Tonda, shows up after a period of absence and Andula informs him that their relationship is finished. After this encounter, he tells Andula that he wants his ring back, but she tells him that she does not have it. Some time after this exchange, Tonda arrives at Andula’s dormitory and forcibly bursts in and causes quite the scene. After this incident a housemother at the dormitory calls a meeting and there is a discussion held about the young women’s honor and reputation. After the lecture, it is put to a vote whether or not the women want to try to improve in this area, and every woman votes in favor of the resolution. It is clear from their behavior at the dance, however, and the blank looks on their faces during the vote, that nothing will really change. The women only hope to be done with the conversation and on their way. This mocking display of the democratic process clearly does not represent the true feelings of the group, and is easy to associate with the realities of the Czech government at the time.

Finally, we conclude with arguably the most interesting figure in the film, and it is her lack of sexual aura that defines her. Mild

a’s Mother is intensely domineering and fussy. The viewer is introduced to her after Andula sets out to see Mild in his hometown of Prague after the sham vote on feminine purity. While Mild

a’s Father is surprised but unbothered by the unannounced arrival of this young woman, Mild’s mother is absolutely appalled; she is scandalized that Andula would come to the city expecting to stay with a boy she barely knew. Mild

a’s parents are a clear reversal of the roles that we see manifested in Black Peter, a Forman film from 1964. Mild

a’s mother is characterized by her lack of sexual personality. Her relationship with her husband is tired and unloving, and she obviously holds the position of most authority within the family. It is she who mercilessly questions and berates Andula upon her arrival, and it is she who eventually lays down the law when her son returns home that evening from his concert.

While Andula represents the naïve, needy, sex and love absorbed young woman, Milda’s mother presents the viewer with a traditional type: the unsexed middle-aged woman. Milda’s mother’s only deviation from the character is her domestic dominance. Milda’s mother’s function in the film is primarily to provide a foil to the young and unrestrained Andula, and to

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demonstrate the emasculation and disenfranchisement that both Mild and his father suffer in their own home. A similar situation is hinted at with comments about the married soldier, and his inability to get free sex at home. In Forman’s *Loves of a Blonde*, it is the individual characters and their personal stories that shine through with revelations from their sex lives; though some political critique is present, it takes a backseat to individual journeys in this early Forman film.

**Jiri Menzel’s *Closely Watched Trains***

Jiri Menzel, like Milos Forman, was originally drawn to the theater, but after a series of events began a career in film. His style is significantly different than Forman’s, though it still falls into the category of the New Wave. Also like Forman, as has been previously mentioned, he won the Oscar for best foreign language film. This film, *Closely Watched Trains*, has come to represent the Czech New Wave in many ways, and is still one of the best known and appreciated films of the movement, as is evidenced by the number of books named after it.\(^{11}\) Menzel stayed in the country after the Prague Spring and has indicated the difficulty of working in the film industry after that time, but he has deemphasized the struggles, saying that it is also difficult having to work in an environment where the financial success of each film is paramount, making it harder to retain artistic integrity.\(^{12}\) Luckily, Menzel has continued to both direct and act; the last film he directed being 2006’s *I Served the King of England*.

*Closely Watched Trains* has a fair amount in common with *Loves of a Blonde* on a basic level, but it is significantly different stylistically. As in *Loves of a Blonde*, our main character in *Closely Watched Trains* is a sexually naïve youth who has attempted suicide, the major differences of course being that Milos, our main character, is a young man and attempts suicide not because of the failed love of his parents but because of his own failed attempts to lose his virginity. The film is centered on Milos and his entry into both the world of work and the world of love. His family has an interesting and conspicuous history in the town, which Milos relates to the viewer at the start of the film with a wonderful succession of film stills. The film is set during the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia, and this factors heavily into the way Milos enters manhood, and meets his end. After Milos relates his family history, he goes on to explain his goals. Milos aspires to follow in the footsteps of his father by avoiding work as a platform attendant at the local rail station. The viewer follows Milos on his first day of work, and throughout the rest of his short and absurd life, which is spent attempting to lose his virginity, and dying for the cause of Czech freedom.

Milos’ sexuality is tightly bound up with his own identity in this film; the act of losing his virginity stands for the larger event of his passage into adulthood and his ability to have a more active role in his decisions. Throughout the film Milos is confronted with both sexually emancipated young women and sexually experienced women in the primes of their life, most notably, Vikotria Freie, the freedom fighter and peacetime circus performer to whom Milos eventually loses his virginity. The constant exposure to sexually secure characters, both male and female, the males being best demonstrated by Milos’ superior Hubicka and a sexually adventurous photographer, drive Milos to first try to commit suicide because of his inequities, and later to sacrifice his own life in the struggle for freedom after his induction into manhood.

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\(^{11}\) Both Marilyn Fabe and Antonin Liehm both have books named after the film, one that deals specifically with the Czech New Wave and the other that deals with narrative film technique.

Sexuality in *Closely Watched Trains* stands for both strength and freedom, and the lack of sexual expression represents weakness and backwardness.

Since the whole film is centered around the pursuit of sexual love and gratification, I cannot filter through each scene in order to point out the way that it conforms to the reading I have given above, but aside from the examples I have already given, I would like to consider one more scene and a marginal character as the perfect exemplar of this truth. The telegrapher at the train station where Milos works, though she does not have a tremendous amount of screen time, has a wonderful part in the film. She demonstrates the way in which the body and the expressions one chooses to make with it are both a personal, as well as a political statement. Like the other women in the film the telegrapher is outgoing and pursues Hubicka with playfulness as well as forcefulness. Once the two have chased each other around the station when no one else is around and the telegrapher has happily let herself be caught, Hubicka proceeds to stamp the young women with official seals all over her bottom and upper thighs. Though these markings were never supposed to be seen by anyone else, the telegrapher’s mother enters her room one morning and sees she stamps on her daughter’s posterior and is outraged.

The telegrapher’s Mother takes her daughter to the courthouse and shows the markings to various officials either by photo or firsthand and attempts to have actions taken against Hubicka for this demeaning act. Though the telegrapher cooperatively comes along with her mother, she truthfully tells all of the officials that she willingly participated in this bit of fun and seems both amused and sincerely entertained by all of the proceedings. Eventually, her mother informs the rail commission, and they come to visit Hubicka on the same day that he is to bomb a passing Nazi weapons train. It is here that Milos takes the initiative and courage given from his newfound sexual identity to pull off the job intended for Hubicka, losing his life in the process. While Milos is meeting his patriotic end outside, an outrageous inquiry is taking place inside with a Nazi official and several others. Eventually, this commission comes to the same conclusion as the others: if the telegrapher is a willing participant, no action could be taken; however, this commission also found that using official stamps in this way was a perversion of the German language. *Closely Watched Trains*, like *Loves of a Blonde*, deals with sexuality as an integral component of an individual’s identity; however, it adds another layer as well, showing the subversive nature of sexual expression, and the power of sexual agency.

**Vera Chytilova’s *Daisies***

Vera Chytilova is well known for *Daisies*, but many of her other films from the period go unnoticed. Some believe that Chytilova is sincerely deserving of a better study, and it has been posited that Chytilova is one of the most revolutionary directors of her time.\(^1\) Chytilova’s style is not easily definable, as she was constantly changing in the sixties to look at new issues and approach her topics with new tactics. She worked closely with her husband, and other prominent men, though it is her vision that ultimately shines through. I argue that this is the case because her visions, especially in *Daisies*, are feminist, and, as Hames remarks in *The Czechoslovak New Wave*, when her films are shown to a contemporary audience they are met by laughter from the women and confusion from the men.\(^2\) Chytilova is the only female director whose work I assess here and her approach to sexuality and her methods within the film are completely different than the two male directors. Whether or not this has to do with her sex is not clear to me, but I feel

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that, in a way, her sex does give her more license and greater insight into the silly and unserious side of feminine sexuality.

Chytilova’s message in *Daisies*, which is undoubtedly feminist, is delivered in an almost incomprehensible way. We are introduced at the beginning of the film to Marie (or Mary, depending on your source of translation) I and II. The two girls, one blonde with short hair, and one brunette with cheeky pigtails, lament at the start of the film that the world is going bad, so they might as well go bad too. Our initial shot of them is straight on, and they are sitting like rag dolls, by their own assessment, against a wooden wall. Both women appear in bikinis, their legs are spread and their expressions are blank. As with the dialogue throughout the film, the way they talk is quite opaque and sometimes completely nonsensical. After their initial revelation that the world has gone bad the two women are seen in a garden, obviously meant to be paradise, and the two Maries eat the fruit of the tree, symbolizing their fall from grace and impending doom. Debauchery ensues from this point on. The women are often seen primping themselves up, and they make quite a scene most places they go. Their sexuality, rather than being a desire for closeness is simply a ploy to get them what they want, most notably: food.

The women dress up and seduce significantly older men, presumably offering them their companionship, but once the men have provided a nice dinner the two young women put the men on a train out of town and continue on their way. In an important scene, Marie II seduces a young man in his apartment. This is the only scene in the film where the two women are separated from one another. Marie II’s quarry speaks sweet nothings to her and plays the piano while she slowly undresses and uses the cases for his substantial butterfly collection in order to cover herself up (it is interesting to note that the butterfly is a uniquely Czech symbol for sex). Marie II obviously has no interest in sex, and is using her appearance and sexuality only as a means to an end. Eventually, she grows bored enough to ask her suitor if he has any food. The next scene shows the women eating sausages and bananas and Marie II even jokingly snips at Marie I’s toe with a scissors when the two run out of food. Some have referred to this scene an orgy, but I think a male massacre would be a better description. The women devour phallic looking foods just as they devour the men they come into contact with, and then cast them aside. The two are clearly man-eaters.

The film ends with another ‘food orgy’; the women crash and destroy a banquet, but through some unclear revelation, they are persuaded to become good again. After a completely out of the blue scene where the women are dunked in water repeatedly, clinging to wooden oars (universally interpreted as an allusion to the dunking of women in water during witch hunts), the women repent, and we return to the scene of the trashed banquet hall. They are wrapped up in newspaper and a string, the Czech symbol for ‘correct convictions’, is tied about their waists. The two Marie’s go about the room picking up the smashed plates and attempting as best they can to clean up the destruction they have wrought. The two women profess aloud their intentions be good and both say that they are now happy, though the viewer is not convinced. As soon as the women have finished cleaning they stretch out onto the banquet table, and the massive chandelier the two had been swinging from earlier falls and crushes them. Some equate this with the footage of the atomic bomb at the start of the film, and, admittedly, the chandelier does have

17 Ibid, 218.
18 Ibid, 220-221.
a similar shape. Marie I and Marie II’s sexuality in this film is most simply a way for them to get what they want from the men that they encounter. Their desired pleasure is not for sex, but for food. The men in the film, however, desire sex above all else, but all fail in their pursuit of the two Maries. The sexuality of the women in this film then is characterized by manipulative power, and the women’s debauched lifestyle could not be possible without their feminine charms. The women are granted independence through their abuse of their character and bodies. The sexuality of the men in the film is raging but impotent; the older men, just like those in Loves of a Blonde fail horribly at their attempts to win over these young women, showing their naïveté and inability to deal with this new kind of woman that is emerging in the 1960s throughout the industrialized nations of the world.

Milos Forman’s The Fireman’s Ball

Finally, we have come full circle, and return once again to Milos Forman, and the last film he completed in Czechoslovakia: The Firemen’s Ball. This film was conceived as Forman and a group of his constant collaborators were attempting to create a ‘sequel’, though not in the sense that we would understand it today, to Black Peter and Loves of a Blonde. Forman and his friends happened upon a real firemen’s ball in some small rural town and after a night of absurdities the men decided to scrap their original ideas and created Firemen’s Ball instead. This film, like Forman’s others, used nonprofessional actors; in fact, the cultural director at the shoe factory in Loves of a Blonde shows up here as well, this time in the guise of a fireman charged with protecting the raffle prizes. The film is rife with sexual situations and innuendo. The guests at the ball are drinking far too much and the hall is packed with everyone in their best attire, which always seems to be a recipe for rampant, random sexual encounters.

The women in the film, who are constantly being pursued, some happily, and some unhappily, have quite a bit of personal power. Though a couple of them let themselves be talked into participating in a ridiculous off-the-cuff beauty contest, five times as many reject the firemen when they are approached. The firemen are rather creepy, looking from a balcony to examine women’s breasts and from the floor to examine their legs in order to find the best contestants for the competition. All of the easy frontrunners turn the men down with blank, often drunk looking stares; as a result the beauty contest is dominated by awkward or mediocre looking young women and unwilling participants. The firemen, all middle-aged and none of them handsome, attempt to coach the young women on how to walk properly and how to act like a lady on stage. Their obvious excitement at having the young ladies attention and conceiving of an impromptu beauty contest is foiled by their own awkwardness. The men are aware of their unappealing looks though they seem to have some delusion that they have charm in the beginning of the film, being so bold as to approach completely uninterested looking beautiful women. Even the women who are at first convinced, one way or another, to compete in the competition revolt as soon as it is their time to come up on stage. Only one of the women ever makes it, and the rest quickly bolt for the women’s restroom on the second floor. The firemen race after them, but they will not enter the restroom to retrieve them. Instead, the firemen stand pleading futilely at the door, a visual manifestation of their weakness. When this occurs, all hell breaks loose on the dance floor and stage; men start picking women up and throwing them over their shoulders in order to enter them into the beauty contest. Both men and women laugh

hysterically. Eventually, a homely middle-aged woman is proclaimed queen of the dance, and everyone rejoices.

The sexual escapades of the guests are mostly implied, rather than shown. The only woman ever to make it to the stage for the beauty contest, however, does have a rather explicit encounter with a random young man under the raffle prize table, though the viewer is not privileged to see the whole scene. At first she resists, but she seems to decide the encounter could be fun and gives in to the man’s advances. Sexuality in this film is mostly for comic relief but is also in the service of humiliating and degrading the firemen. Flirtation and sexual encounters are portrayed as a commonplace interaction at this type of occasion. The politics, for there must have been some as the film was put on an indefinite blacklist in 1973 and was immediately questioned in Czechoslovakia, even before the Soviet Invasion of 1968, lie not only in the free expression of these desires and emotions but in the degradation of the firemen for their lack of success in all they attempt to do: control the crowd, impose order, and organize a beauty pageant.21

Conclusion

The use of sexuality in the Czech New Wave is prevalent, but not consistent. The way it is depicted, along with the issues that it highlights, are very different from director-to-director and film-to-film. In a way, this is what you would suspect, because like any complex part of our identity sexuality cannot simply be linked with one or even a handful of issues. What is personal is political, but sometimes, the personal is just personal. The personal can also point to larger problems or themes within society, and all of these elements, to greater and lesser degrees are present in these four films from the Czech New Wave.

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Bibliography
