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Eastern Europe does not exist

Arendt and the Politics of the Everyday in *Loves of a Blonde*

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In this article I propose to show that film can challenge some of our political and geographical common sense. The article will be about Eastern Europe, while arguing that Eastern Europe does not exist. To illustrate what I mean by that statement, I will will begin with a conversation I had a few months ago with a friend. We talked about the German novelist Günther Grass and I said that I didn't much appreciate his writing in the *Tin Drum*, because it is so rooted in East Germany. By that I meant the flat planes of Eastern Prussia. My friend, who thought that I referred to the DDR, said, "Yes, but Günther Grass was a West German author." I replied, "That is true, and he was born in Gdańsk." So at stake in this nice example of miscommunication was the use of the term 'East': is this a *geographical* or a *political* term?

The object of this study is the film by Miloš Forman *Loves of a Blonde* (*Lásky jedné plavovlásky,* 1965) and its political significance in the context of rival conceptions of politics and of Eastern European history. I will set out by presenting a perspective on Eastern Europe grounded in liberal political theory. Then I will oppose that perspective to a realist perspective focused on a conception of *individual initiative*, which is derived from the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt. I shall further analyze Forman's film in the context of a Czech poetic and cinematic tradition. Through these lenses I hope to show how a *politics of the everyday initiative* is played out in this film, a politics that is in tune with the political perspective offered by Hannah Arendt and which is indifferent to political ideology. This notion of a politics of everyday initiative is in conflict with the conception of Eastern Europe in which all individual initiative would seem to have been overshadowed by state discipline.

Eastern Europe

In their dense and well documented historical work on ‘Eastern Europe’, Geoffrey and Nigel Swain begin with a disclaimer, saying that the topic of their book, the Soviet satellite states in Europe, would soon be obsolete, as the Soviet Union had ceased to exist. Their historical premise is thus clear and explicit. By ‘Eastern Europe’ we are to understand a geo-political structure that came into being with the partition of Europe after 1945. This structure results from the subsequent Stalinization of all the political regimes throughout the Soviet dominated region, stretching from Gdańsk to Dubrovnik. There is no doubt that, from the point of view of Soviet foreign policy history, or Cold War geo-political history, this is an appropriate classification.

A difficulty with the term ‘Eastern Europe’, is that words rarely stay safely within the context of use that they were originally assigned to. Words are like administrators. They always want to go beyond their remit. What begins as a historical, political or geographical term of classification can migrate into a moral realm and become a depreciative term, a term of discrimination. It is a question of authority and of who uses which words about whom. Someone may say about you that you are a ‘rampant neo-liberal’, but it is rare that someone says of himself that he is a rampant neo-liberal. There are many words that are difficult to claim for oneself, not just because they refer to a negative quality, but because that negative quality requires a judgement, which lies very far outside of the context of action that the person belongs to. It would be rare, for instance, to find someone saying of himself that he is ‘extremely corrupt’, not just because ‘being corrupt’ is thought to be a negative quality in our culture, but more importantly because the judgement of what counts as corrupt always relies on an external observer.

The term ‘Eastern Europe’ is like the term ‘corruption’ in the pragmatic conditions of its use. A Pole can say, truthfully, that he is a Pole. If you are from former Yugoslavia you will normally chose one of the new states as your nationality and say that you are either Serbian or Croatian. In neither case would it be very natural to say of yourself that you are Eastern European, or from Eastern Europe, when asked of your identity. This is first of all because the geographical denomination is asymmetrical, since *people rarely apply such a term to themselves*. This asymmetry is further grounded in a historical condition that has given rise to a particular language use when referring to Europe.

There is, in fact, in the common use of the term ‘Eastern Europe’ a conflation of three properties, which are partly logical, partly political and contextual. First, ‘Eastern Europe’ is a more general term, than terms usefully functioning in naming one’s own identity. Second, ‘Eastern Europe’ is a useful term for those whose outlook is supported by an implicit power base which makes the entire region relevant as a domain of politics – and this power base would typically be external to ‘Eastern Europe’, since within this region one would relate either to neighbors, to the Soviet Union or to the West. Third, the historical origins of the

term – Stalinization, the creation of Soviet satellite states invests the term with negative connotations.

Western Europe can just as well be called Europe, just as the US can be called America (although geographically America would include also Latin America and Canada). Eastern Europe has no short hand. The only shorter forms relevant of Eastern Europe, and which are not dictated by a boundary drawn by others – in this case, by the victors of the two world wars – are long term historical terms. We can talk of the Balkans, the former Habsburg empire, former Ottoman territories, the Baltic region. Some of these terms involve hierarchy and domination: the Austrian Empire, the Ottoman empire. The term Baltic is purely geographical, since there never was a Baltic empire. As Mark Mazower has shown, the term 'Balkan' is a largely Western and derogatory term, a term of diplomacy where the 'Balkan question' could figure alongside the 'Great Game' as an arena of competition between foreign powers.

All these terms, however, have the very great advantage in truthfulness over the term 'Eastern Europe' that they refer to relatively long term historical processes – covering at least the last three centuries. 'Eastern Europe' is by comparison an ephemeral denomination. It is further normatively charged, that is, it is by no means neutral. When I used the analogy with corruption before, that was not a coincidence, since corruption figures in that asymmetrical geopolitical vocabulary with which Western (European and American) politicians and bureaucrats defend their foreign policies and their pursuit of self-interest in, or towards, 'Eastern Europe'. It is very handy, for instance, to be able to point the finger at, say, Bulgaria for being 'corrupt' since this gives a leverage for meddling in their affairs and violating their national sovereignty. 'Eastern Europe' is thus an umbrella term, or we may perhaps say: an 'umbrella program' for all manners of negative normative descriptions. This language use has become so entrenched within academic habits that it is considered normal, and good practice, in history and political science, to describe citizens of Soviet satellite states, between the late forties and 1989, as consisting largely of passive victims. The most sharply formulated version of this type of political analysis is probably the police centered interpretation of Stalinization offered by Anne Applebaum.

In her book, *The Iron Curtain: the Crushing of Eastern Europe 1944-1956*, Applebaum impressively shows how successful the Soviet regime was in installing police terror organizations akin to the GRU/KGB in all the satellite states as early as the period 1948-53. The rule by terror, and ubiquitous fear, would have homogenized, as she argues, these otherwise extremely diverse countries. Yet, with this police-centered analysis of Stalinization, she portrays the citizenry of this entire region as uniformly subjugated, dwarfed by one uniform, terroristic policy. Thereby, she is not making a distinction between what sorts of self-expression were *de facto* impossible – and which kinds of self-expression were proscribed, yet latent. By focusing on repression the

whole, immense, region of the repressed, appears inevitably uniform, cast in the shadow of the machinery of repression, which is itself both uniform and homogenizing in the fear that it elicits. This dialectical implication of uniformity is in Applebaum and others buttressed by a liberal philosophy, which, because of the formalist nature of liberalism, is ill equipped to articulate historical and geographical specificities in cultural freedom and political aspiration.

Only by understanding the latent level of self-expression and participation in society can we understand *what it is that oppression oppresses*. Liberals of the kind of Applebaum or Archie Brown (*The rise and fall of communism*) tend to take a generously universalist view on citizen self-interest: people want what people want. People want prosperity, free speech, justice, in short, democracy – and it would be difficult to claim that such public goods as these would not be universally desirable. The *relative weight* of those desirables may on the other hand vary a great deal depending on historical circumstance. Different historical and geographical conditions will give different weight, for instance, to such goods as national self-determination, freedom of religion, economic prosperity or the right to speak a local language. The configuration of freedom is always historical, always specific, even if it unfolds within the general frame of universal liberal goods and rights, like freedom of speech, fair elections and equality before the law. *It is on the level of the concrete configuration of freedom that liberalism is at stake* and it is on this level of long-standing grievances and aspirations that self-expression is latent: this is what oppression oppresses.

Czech Aesthetics

In its migration through various genres of discourse, the term ‘Eastern Europe’, and the conception of citizens in Soviet satellite states as passive victims, can easily color also our perception of Czech art and literature. We must, however, be reminded of the extraordinary power and originality of Czech avant-garde art and its ongoing resonance with literature and film in the Soviet period.[1] Common to avant-garde writers like Holan and Hrabal is in fact a use of virtuoso poetic structures to refer to very basic, and commonly shared, human sentiments and desires.

> And those who dare to map desire
>
> are at their ease, though their bad temper
>
> shows that the brute is always with us…
>
> Nature is a sign

which, if not mute,

denies itself. And the male of the species,

that opener, feels dumb simply because

the spirit always moves forward

while everything closes behind it…

This quote is from Vladimir Holan's *A Night with Hamlet* written in the aftermath of the war. Intellect is here set up in a battle with desire, whose nature escapes us. The poem is written out of a very intimate, and even earthy, sentiment of doubt and self-loathing. Hrabal's prose on the other hand develops surrealist imagery from everyday objects, but retains from those everyday objects a sense of the familiar and also of a kind of confinement: if the flight of the mind can take off only with banal things like a street lamp, these avant-garde texts produce the impression that our feelings and our imagination, in fact the entire life of the mind, and with it the existence and personality of the individual, are as if glued to everyday things.

The Czech writer Milan Kundera in his advocacy of the novel, *The Art of the Novel*, speaks of Hrabal's position in Czech literature as that of a role model, as someone who showed more daring ways to write novels. Kundera says this in an essay organized around the idea of the everyday, or the 'lifeworld', the world that we are familiar with, and which is not the province of any science. Also the Czech *New Wave* filmmakers, although not working in proximity with writers, sought to come close to such an everyday lifeworld while retaining poetic devices from Czech surrealism. Their methods of work were very different, but they were all inspired by the international *New Wave*. This movement began in France and had parallels in English New Cinema and in films from Sweden, Poland and Hungary. These were all films, which sought to incorporate documentary elements into film narration in order to break with a dramatic type of narrative construction, which was defined by clearly drawn characters, elaborate dialogue and sharply defined conflicts.

Within Czech cinema, between 1960 and 1968 (after which, with the Soviet invasion, everything became impossible), Forman, Němec, Passer and Menzel approached the question of a non-dramatic representation of everyday reality in quite different ways. Němec employs avant-garde techniques reminiscent of absurd theater. Menzel develops a lyrical style with surreal touches. Passer treats his characters as sociological case studies. Forman for his part is the most encompassing and also the most popular of the group. He makes comedies with a broad appeal, as they deal with sex and contain a gentle satire of the regime and of patriarchy within the regime. *Fireman's Ball* for

instance is a visually subtle but also burlesque erotic comedy.

Loves of a Blonde (*Lásky jedné plavovlásky*) on the other hand is a tender psychological portrait of a young woman. It is set within very specific social circumstances. In his depiction of these social conditions, in all their material detail, in tracking how characters move, interact and seek to fulfill their desires, within narrow physical and social boundaries, Forman finds his own cinematic equivalent to Kundera's novelistic 'lifeworld'. Forman's lyrical and social realistic style, dwelling on objects but also on public spaces, narrow and large, in fact echoes the literary preoccupation of Hrabal: the effort to distill from the physical world a range of sentiments that belong to the characters who live in that physical world.

This does not follow a melodramatic path of using, say, landscape to symbolize mood. Neither does it belong with political allegories such as Bertolucci's *The Conformist*, where the protagonist, an intellectual and a member of the Italian fascist party, sees the stakes of his choices aggrandized before his eyes in the form of opulent party offices. The lyricism of objects and spaces in Forman is not symbolic and it does not involve dramatic emotions, large scale, clear-cut feelings. It describes grey areas, ambivalent feelings, awkward situations, mixed moods and small attempts by characters to pursue their erotic ambitions. These mixed emotions are expressed in situations, which are partly private, partly public, situations in which individuals struggle to assert their individuality.

This is mirrored in the dramatic style of the film. Using documentary techniques, Forman films groups of people where only some will stand out and become characters in the story. Some are completely anonymous and some hover in between; they are on the way to becoming characters, but remain anonymous, examples of young people caught within a typical social situation.

Everyday Social Reality

Let me stress that this problem of asserting one's individuality against group pressure, and within the context of group pressure, in not essentially a political question. It is not specific to a socialist regime or to the exercise of authority within such regimes. If one would 'read' *Loves of a Blonde* as a 'document about life in Eastern Europe,' on the other hand, one might be tempted to look for signs of socialist authority, which are really absent from the film. On the other hand, examples of this dramatic, and moral, problem can be found in European literature in every country. There is for instance an excellent French/Spanish war novel by Michel del Castillo, *Tanguy*, from 1957, describing life in a Spanish boarding house for homeless and delinquent boys, a disciplinary institution run by uneducated clerics during the early period of the Franco regime. The novel analyzes in detail the loss of individuality

experienced within such an institution.

Forman's film does not describe such a *total loss* of individuality. The film does not describe authority exercised within the small interactions of everyday life. It describes a provincial social world in which individuals pursue modest dreams of happiness. The political reality that the film thereby indirectly and obliquely addresses is of course the communist regime and the kinds of collective and latent self-expression that it oppresses. This oppression amounts to an opposition between a will to happiness on the part of ordinary people and the discipline imposed by the regime. In Forman's film we see only one side of this opposition, however: the timid search for happiness on the part of people who have neither money nor status nor power. The obstacles that they encounter are social rather than directly political – I come back to this distinction later.

The dreams and desires of these characters are sociologically general but for each one of them their dreams are their own, of course. The tone of the film ironically and affectionately switches between these two points of view, the *sociological*, generalizing point of view that shows these desires to be common, and simply part of youth, and a *narrative* point of view, following the woman protagonist, *Andula*, played by Hana Brejchová. The viewer is invited to have a double point of view upon her as well, to empathize with her ambition, to see her from a distance. The pun on *blonde* and *love* in the Czech title (*lásky*=love, *plavovlásky*=blonde) brings out this irony: love is individual for the woman in love, but *to be* blonde, and to be referred to as *a* blonde, entails a third person perspective, the point of view of appreciative men or envious girlfriends.

From this double point of view, the characters appear always within a very limited action range. Very small steps towards the achievement of an erotic goal become important actions. This small scale perspective is itself ironic and ambivalent. It places the viewer within the horizon of the characters' desires and social confinement; it also slightly mocks the characters or puts them in a comic, rather than melodramatic romantic setting. This less than melodramatic setting is in turn reinforced by the typically Czech lyrical materialism that I mentioned before. Some of the most beautiful and haunting scenes in the film metaphorically condense physical micro-situations, in which the whole of a person's freedom and desire seems to be at stake – but at stake in relation to mundane physical obstacles like a door, or the narrowness of a room.

Arendt's Realism

Theorists of the everyday as a political field such as Michel de Certeau have thought of the sphere of action that is 'everyday' in terms of improvisation. This thought provides a very valuable insight and I will here try to take that further in light of Hannah Arendt's analysis of action.

Arendt's theory of action focuses on our concrete, present tense relationships with power and authority. Within the field of everyday reality, which she analyzes only indirectly, I believe we can more generally say that our relation to authority and ideology is part of a relationship between our individual desires and a set of surrounding opportunities and obstacles that we may be more or less aware of, more or less lucid about. As we try to navigate the world in order to fulfill our desires we meet obstacles and try to transform them into opportunities. This effort and this initiative involves a kind of rationality that is not that of *justification*. The German philosopher Michael Frede coined a term to define such a type of reasoning. In describing the rationality of Homer's cunning and traveling hero Ulysses, he characterizes reasoning in this case as *figuring things out and the like*. This phrase is remarkable for being attuned to the everyday and for not implying a need for theoretical justification. The end of the phrase 'and the like' is important. It suggests a continuum from cunning and tactics to more abstract forms of problem solving. This is reasoning in the present tense, but it may, alternately, tackle abstract, concrete or political questions. This phrase is also a very good entry point into the philosophy of Hannah Arendt.

One of the central questions that Arendt's writings encircle is that of *initiative*. What makes an individual into a citizen who is able to take initiative, and to engage herself in political questions of general interest? Arendt's route towards an answer to this question is not theoretical. It follows a track of experimentation, of trial and error, in which she is solicited by a range of very different political questions. These questions are of different scale. They range from the personal to problems involving large political and historical processes. Driven by the specific configuration of each question she develops different sorts of account, different kinds of conceptual framework. But in each case she is concerned with *motivation*. What are the motivations for evil, for complacency, for political commitment? This interest in motivation is then pursued by her in writings that are either personal or philosophical, but in any case not directly engaged in political analysis. For instance, in her intellectual journal the *Denktagebuch* or in her last theoretical treatise *Life of the mind*, she explores questions of philosophical psychology that could underpin our understanding of individuals having specific motivations for action in the political sphere.

There is a hiatus in philosophical and writerly style between her political interest and this psychological interest in motivation. The two however overlap. Eichmann, one of the organizers of the extermination of Jews during the Holocaust, was in her analysis a dim bureaucrat who, out of an exaggerated version of normal mediocracy, failed to understand the implication of his actions. Her biography of Rachel Varnhagen, a Jewish woman who held a successful 'salon' at the height of German romanticism, equally focuses on a person's reasoning and motivation. Varnhagen's search for a place in the world, her intellectual wit, her marriage plans. These motivations are analyzed

by Arendt in relation to her social condition, her ambiguous status as a Jewish woman who was outside of the established social order but therefore also free to move between bourgeois and aristocratic circles. This condition in turn is held up as an objective mirror to the 'character' Varnhagen in order for Arendt to measure and to judge her insight into her own condition. Thus in the historical individuals Eichmann and Varnhagen Arendt finds examples of 'characters' whose motivations are inseparable from a kind of insight and reasoning, a degree of political and social self-understanding.

This notion of self-understanding is the key to *initiative* in Arendt's thought. It is only through self-understanding that one is able to act. If one acts from any other motive, from a theoretical motive, say, or from material self-interest, one does not seek to 'figure things out and the like', one does not navigate an archipelago of opportunities and obstacles, but, instead, one abdicates some of one's own individuality, pretending to speak, not in one's own name, but in the name of others. One speaks in the name of members of one's class. Or one speaks in the name of those who, in the future, will benefit greatly from the application of a theory of which one is the mouthpiece. The notion of speaking in one's own name again brings us back to Homer. In the beginning of the *Illiad* the clan leaders negotiate whether to go to war. Each speaks to the others in his own name. Each speaks to the question that is of common concern. In modernity we are tempted, Arendt thinks, not to do this and instead to hide behind general ideas and principles: ideas of progress and rational organization, for instance. The kind of rationality that she demonstrates in her writings is of the Homeric kind defined by Frede: rationality consists in *figuring things out and the like*. She seeks to figure out how political motivation works in different situations. It is important to her that the theory of motivation that she relies on should not be a theory in the sense that the individuals involved in a process of action could think of a theory: it should not be a *normative script* for action which could then later be applied.

Political ideologies are normative theories of this kind. Her thinking in the shadow of authoritarian rule makes her a fierce opponent of authority in a very particular sense. She opposes not external authority but *internal* authority: the authority that one gives to oneself when one claims to speak, not in one's own name, but in the name of a theory or an ideology. Arendt's conception of authority is quite original, and distinctly different from the picture we get in political ideologies like liberalism, socialism or anarchism. Liberals are skeptical of the authority of the state in matters of individual belief. Socialists oppose the authority embedded in class relations. Anarchists seek to undermine the very principles of hierarchy and delegated power. None of these questions are central to Arendt. She is neither concerned with the remit of state power, social justice or the overcoming of hierarchy. She is concerned with the authority that one can oneself claim as a rational being. Thus we get from Arendt a perspective that is skeptical of ideology and realist in the Machiavellian sense of situating agency and freedom in the context of highly specific historical and

material conditions and obstacles.

Politics of the Everyday

What I try to do in this paper is to extend this Arendtian realist and materialist (non-ideological) political perspective to the personal sphere of individuals *seeking to gain a purchase on their immediate life circumstances*. I emphasize this last part of the previous sentence, because this is the most important theoretical claim that I make in this article: even though Arendt seems scornful of the pursuit of individual happiness as an overriding motive of action – she finds Rachel Varnhagen lacking in political lucidity for instance – the focus throughout Arendt's writings on sudden and unexpected initiatives that people can take (but mostly do not take) in order to address their life-circumstances is also relevant to the sphere of everyday political agency. This takes place in a context where the individual has to confront, or negotiate, concrete manifestations of power. The powers that we confront in everyday experience can alternately be described as *political* or *social*. Power is social when it is embedded in institutional or family hierarchies. It is political when it is, ultimately, grounded in state power, or in a power replacing the state. In our confrontation with everyday powers, which can be obstacles or facilitators, it matters less for us as individuals whether these powers are social or political. It matters on the other hand very much whether we can move and act with them, or *next* to them, without our actions being completely blocked. We can do so by 'figuring things out and the like' and *by taking initiatives that are always also improvisations*. They are not grounded in principles.

The nexus that binds power, happiness and eroticism tightly together in everyday life is this: the power of the individual to pursue happiness through the channel of desire is a movement into the world – and this movement is bound to meet obstacles and limitations. Arendt herself did not analyze erotic freedom, but the problem and the structure of erotic freedom in the everyday social world has much in common with political freedom in her writings: it has a material base and an ideal horizon of significance. On the cusp between the two, between, on the one hand, the material reality of desire, sex and the space in which sex is concretely possible and, on the other, the ideals of love and of happiness gained through love, Forman's film constructs its ironical and subtle perspective on its heroine. The ironic tension that I mentioned earlier between *love* and *blonde*, between 'lásky' and 'plavovlásky', is a tension between the first person perspective of the woman in love and the third person perspective of a distant observer who sees the blonde as a sexual type. This ironic tension is amplified in the film by the clash and overlap in many scenes between personal aspiration and material obstacle.

Returning to the film, the plot is heavily over-determined by a social and geographical set of circumstances, which immediately orients the story

towards erotic comedy: in a small provincial and working class town all the men have left to work elsewhere and the women are therefore left without men. With a view to remedy this situation somewhat a ball is arranged in the local community hall, which is, conveniently for the comic plot of the film, attached to a boarding house for women. The participants in the ball are women working in the town and a group of invited guests, soldiers who have been brought in by train. We follow an awkward courtship slowly unfolding between these shy but eager young men and women. In their midst, we discover the protagonist, Adula who immediately stands out as prettier and livelier, more graceful and poised than the others. She flirts with a handsome young man playing in a band. He exudes an air of sweet and cosmopolitan kindness. He is a musician from Prague and so brings with him the double erotic prestige of the city and of bohemianism. With vague promises of love, he manages to get into bed with her in her austere boarding house room. The bed is so narrow and so uncomfortable that even being together sensually is difficult, and the gestures of love become entwined with the effort to fight the physical environment.

Whereas in other parts of the film this precise evocation of the material conditions for human interaction can be comic, here it is poignant, standing as a metaphor for a cramped space of self-expression. This claustrophobic mood is a counterpoint to the romantic cliche of the opening scene where the protagonist lying in bed with her best friend shows her a ring from her fiancé. In that scene we already see an ironic mixture of romantic and material aspiration, but the mood of the scene is tender and the mood of the heroine is hopeful. In the later scene when Adula tries to make love to the musician, the tension between her ideal aspiration and their material confinement evokes a more somber and prosaic mood.

Nevertheless, she does fall in love with him and follows him to Prague. That is, she turns up on the door step of his parents with a little suitcase in her hand. This scene is both comical and romantic – it is romantic in a life affirming sense, as it suggests a total openness and recklessness on her part, a readiness to believe in this one-night affair to the point of leaving everything else behind. (This attitude is echoed in Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, where the heroine, seduced by the intellectual air of a visitor to the spa town where she works as a bar maid, tracks him down in Prague and seduces him in turn.)

He is not at home and his dour and downtrodden parents won't let her in. In one of the most impressive and poetic scenes of the film, we watch the downthrodden father, wearing his undershirt and a beaten demeanor, retreat to a dimly lit kitchen where he sits down with his wife, in order to slowly bicker about *that* girl – and about their son. The space of the kitchen as living room is emblematic of many stories from communist countries, but here the kitchen is not the hopeful space of intellectual talk and dissident discussion. It is a very

common family space – but at the same the sense of this dark kitchen being the only place to talk attaches a weight to these characters. They seem chained to their kitchen, which appears as the center of their world: this is the only place where it is natural for them to sit down and talk about such complicated topics as their son's relationships with girls.

Following this scene comes another metaphorical shot. The heroine denied entry to the flat tries to leave the building, but cannot because the door leading to the street is locked. Facing the obstacle of an enormous door, the scene evokes Kafka: the material manifestation of an absolute block of desire (see Deleuze and Guattari: *Kafka: pour une littérature mineure*). But whereas in Kafka such scenes are allegorical and metaphysical, Forman's lyrical sensibility emphasizes the sensuous, concrete situation of the individual who is physically confronting a limit to her desires.

Conclusion

The politics of the everyday is an ongoing negotiation between initiative and obstacle, entrenched authorities and the imagination. This is not a dreamy imagination, but the capacity to maneuver and find ways to put one's desire into the world by 'figuring things out and the like'. Forman celebrates and analyzes this everyday politics through the lens of a lyrical materialism rooted in a Czech poetic and artistic tradition. In so doing he locates the problem of freedom at a micro-level, below the official level of discourse and ideological articulation. Freedom is not a matter of state authority, political systems or ideological concepts in this film. Freedom is what is at stake in the clash between individual desire and the social world. In bringing the problem of freedom down to this local and physical micro-level of very specific interactions, Forman also, at the same time universalizes the problem of freedom and de-contextualizes it from the historical particularities of Soviet ruled Czechoslovakia.

The micro-politics of desire and obstacle is indeed universal, but not in an allegorical, idealistic sense. The film does not present us with an idea of freedom, but with the reality of desire within a material social world.

The lifeworld that Kundera theorizes as a province of the novel is certainly also a province of film. But whereas the novels of, say, Broch or Musil, would explore this lifeworld as invested with reasoning and reflection, film can portray the everyday world as an arena of very concrete politics. In the case of *Loves of a Blonde* this is a politics of desire that is played out within oppressively physical conditions.

Returning to Applebaum and Arendt, I would like to say in conclusion that Arendt invites us to engage with political situations and with aesthetics in a

realist way. This realism entails a non-ideological, non-theoretical map: one looks at concrete circumstances, obstacles, initiatives. Extended to the field of everyday micro-politics, this perspective allows us think about erotic initiative as a personal political project.

With reference to Forman's film, to pursue the thought of such a personal politics also throws a different light on the social reality of communist Czechoslovakia. This perspective is different especially from one that could be derived from a top down theoretical approach of the kind practiced by Anne Applebaum. In her account, agents and their actions make sense and become intelligible to the extent that they can be categorized, that is, made to fit into a map provided by a general interpretation of history – in this case a police centered interpretation of Soviet satellite states. In Forman's film, by contrast, we find no such map. The reality of his characters' dreams and challenges is simply human. The film describes a dialectic of aspiration and disappointment, initiative and obstacle. This universal humanist narrative draws poetic nourishment from Czech reality, from the everyday world of social conditions and from the aesthetic and cultural tradition of Czech material lyricism.

References

This is emphasized by Derek Sayer in his book: Prague, Capital of the Twentieth Century, A Surrealist History.