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## Classifying Czech melodrama: Mrs. Morality sweeps through the protectorate

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### ABSTRACT

In 1998, the Czech National Film Archive (Národní filmový archive/NFA) classified sixty-seven feature-length fiction films produced between 1930 and 1945 as generic melodramas in their volumes of *Czech Feature Film (Český hraný film)*. This essay considers how this retrospective genre classification offers entry into understanding melodrama's aesthetic and cultural operations in Czech cinema. The focus is less on how the NFA defined the genre, than how these volumes, in bringing melodrama into critical view, reveal important assumptions about its cultural and historical affiliations with foreign co-productions. Starting by outlining some of the problems presented by the volumes of *Czech Feature Film*, this essay highlights some key questions that emerge in studying the complicated relationship between Czech and German popular film genres. In particular, it focuses on melodrama's relationship to films made during the Nazi occupation of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, when films were necessarily co-produced with the Nazified film industry. Through a close reading and reception study of *Saturday (Sobota, Václav Wasserman, 1945)* this essay considers how the perception of melodrama films as light entertainment during the Nazi occupation provided yet another opportunity for these films on Czechoslovak state television during the post-1968 period of normalization.

### KEYWORDS

Czech cinema; melodrama; genre; co-productions; Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia; socialist television

In 1998, the Czech National Film Archive (Národní filmový archive/NFA) classified sixty-seven feature-length fiction films produced between 1930 and 1945 as generic melodramas. It did so in the second of its five volumes of *Czech Feature Film (Český hraný film)*, which the archive compiled and distributed starting in the mid-1990s. The volumes aim to provide an “official guide” to Czech feature film in both the Czech and English languages, from the beginnings of cinema in 1898, through the establishment of the Czech Republic in 1993. In compliance with the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) Cataloguing Rules for Film Archives, each film title is supplemented with production information, including the original release date, production company, distribution company, cast, crew, shooting locations, and a brief narrative summary. More interesting for my purposes, however, is that each film is assigned a genre. Curiously, with the exception of one additional film from the 1950s, *Moon Over the River (Měsíc nad řekou, Václav Krška, 1953)*, and two from the 1980s, *Your Lovers are Notified (Oznamuje se láskám vašim, Karel*

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Kachyňa, 1988) and *On the Brigade* (*Na brigádě*, Tomáš Vorel, 1989), no films after 1945 are labelled as melodrama.<sup>1</sup> According to the NFA, the genre essentially disappears.

This essay considers how the NFA's retrospective genre classification offers entry into understanding melodrama's aesthetic and cultural operations in Czech cinema. My focus is less on how the NFA evaluated or named the genre, than how these volumes, in bringing melodrama into critical view, reveal important assumptions about its cultural and historical affiliations with foreign co-productions. Starting by outlining some of the issues presented by the volumes of *Czech Feature Film*, I argue first that the genre label melodrama provides a critical referent through which we can examine the complicated relationship between Czech and German popular film genres. This relationship was not only linked to the Nazi occupation of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, which rendered German co-productions a political imperative, but was also significantly informed by decades of collaborations, exchanges, and migrations throughout the region. Second, through my example of *Saturday* (*Sobota*, Václav Wasserman, 1945), I show how the perception that melodrama films served as light entertainment for domestic audiences not only proved useful during the Nazi occupation, but also inspired Czechoslovak Communist officials to reuse them in the 1970s during the period known as "normalization" that followed the reforms of the Prague Spring. In addition to original censorship and production documents, promotional materials, reviews, and trade journals, I look at those which appeared later in the 1970s, when *Saturday* and other "older Czech films" reappeared in cinemas and on television sets across Czechoslovakia.

## Problems of the retrospective genre classification

As an institutional catalogue, the volumes of *Czech Feature Film* serve as an important resource for the study of Czech cinema, but there is also every reason to be critical of them. For instance, what was the method by which the NFA approached genre? One searches both the "Foreword" and the "Introductory Note" in vain for any insight into the topic.<sup>2</sup> Why include the category at all? The volumes also withhold details about the research that went into the cataloguing of each film, opening up speculation about the historical work that went into naming and evaluating genre. Although a selection of primary and secondary sources can be found for each title, the volumes provide little indication of what materials informed these separate generic categories or if there was any consistency in their critical appraisal. The fact that the genre labels lack a clear historical or industrial basis does not, of course, mean that they are without cultural value. As Rick Altman reminds us, genres are almost always assigned ad hoc.<sup>3</sup> The process of naming genre, Altman notes, is generative, subject to changes and revisions over time.<sup>4</sup> Yet it is difficult not to take the NFA's genre labels as an afterthought.

Just as we need to discuss some of the problems arising from the NFA's approach to genre, so too must we question the ways in which they decided what films count as Czech. Despite aiming to provide a catalogue of all Czech feature films, including those that are no longer extant, some films are missing. The volumes notably fail to account for the films produced in the 1941 and 1945 period by Prag-Film, the Prague-based subsidiary of the German film company Ufa. As Klimeš (2013) notes, the volumes were informed by Jiří Havelka's postwar account of Czech and Slovak cinemas, and consequently inherited his biases.<sup>5</sup> Although Prag-Film shot their films in Prague's Barrandov studios—often with Czech actors, directors,

and other film workers— Klimeš says that Havelka did not consider these films as part of Czech or Slovak cinemas, for it was, in his words, a “Greater German Company.”<sup>6</sup> This anti-German rhetoric was not totally new but a variation of the national myth, echoing the nineteenth century Czech national awakening to support the rebuilding of the postwar state. Since there was no absence of Czech-German collaborations in the years prior to the occupation, Klimeš argues that the initiatives Prag-Film produced hardly constitute a definitive break with Czech filmmaking practices. Klimeš urges a reevaluation of our historical understanding of Prag-film, pointing to the NFA’s inclusion of the fifteen Czech-language films made by Ufa between 1933 and 1940. Most obviously, this calls attention to the existence of Ufa’s Prague subsidiary a decade before the occupation, suggesting that Prag-film may be recognized less as an anomaly than as an inherited condition. Less obviously, this raises the question of the “Czechness” of these Ufa films. What are we to make of the fact that two of these films— *While You Have a Mother* (*Dokud máš maminku*, Jan Sviták, 1934) and *Changing Wind* (*Jiný vzduch*, Martin Frič, 1939)—are classified as generic melodramas? Furthermore, what might this indicate about the relation of melodrama to German co-productions?

Finally, there is the question of why the NFA almost exclusively identified the genre melodrama with films made before 1945. Many of these films, coming from the very first decades of cinema, adapted popular nineteenth century theatrical and dramatic conventions. Others reflect the cosmopolitan endeavors of European film production during the 1920s and 1930s; or they were made under the auspices of the Nazi occupation, when Czech films were necessarily co-produced with the Nazified industry. In all such cases what the genre label reveals is not a historical explanation (like so many other moving image cultures, the word “melodrama” is missing from the contemporary discourse), but the transhistorical values that inform melodrama’s critical recognition. One might argue, for instance, that 1945 is an all too convenient moment for melodrama to suddenly fall out of style. So, while recognizing melodrama’s links to early cinema, particularly before the coming of sound cemented its national character, here I want to focus on the NFA’s alignment of melodrama with the 1930–1945 period.

Much is at stake in aligning melodrama with this historical period, since it is marked by the tail end of the interwar First Republic, the implementation of the Munich agreement and the short-lived authoritarian democracy of the “Second Republic,” and spans the entirety of the Nazi occupation, when the Third Reich assumed control over all film business in the protectorate. These large shifts and changes produced fundamental reconfigurations of cultural, political, and social life in the Czech lands, whose effects would be felt throughout the postwar period. And yet, the characteristically “low” genre of melodrama would seemingly bely these momentous occurrences. Moreover, melodrama’s critical associations with women suggests the desire to consign these films to female spectators, and thus to the domestic sphere, thereby ostensibly removing them from the highly charged realms of geopolitics and national politics. I would suggest here that the presumption that these films historically addressed the feminized domestic sphere has led scholars to neglect melodrama and generally ignore its socio-cultural and political functions—at least outside of its more overt propagandistic functions. I am particularly interested in the issues emerging from the circumstances of the Nazi occupation. If melodrama is aligned with this particular period, is it not because the bad reputation of the genre echoes the period’s own negative dimensions?<sup>7</sup> Or, perhaps the genre label merely represents the Communist

reaction against conceptions of bourgeois prewar culture coming from Hollywood and Western Europe?

### Melodrama's diverse genres

There is no doubting that melodrama has been a significant feature of cinema almost from the beginning, and yet it remains a particularly flexible concept that can be used to discuss a wide range of texts. In film and media studies, a notion stubbornly persists that melodrama is a bad object that must be reclaimed for good.<sup>8</sup> There is a degree of truth to this, considering that melodrama continues to be used, at least colloquially, to describe works that are clichéd, sentimental, or generally outside the bounds of good taste. Following the seminal interventions of Peter Brooks, Thomas Elsaesser, Christine Gledhill, and Linda Williams, among others, we can safely say that melodrama has been rehabilitated as an academically worthy pursuit.<sup>9</sup> Not only have these contributions established melodrama as Western modernity's dominant form; it has also encouraged scholars to examine melodrama's significance across global cinemas, prestige television shows, and various media forms. Melodrama is now an aesthetic, a cultural practice, an ubiquitous umbrella-genre, and a transhistorical mode—it is both limited and limitless.

But as Christine Gledhill (2002, 2012, 2018) points out, melodrama is not just a genre or a mode, it is also a “cross-generic modality” that negotiates the cultural work of ideological production and knowledge.<sup>10</sup> Gledhill argues that because melodrama's genres are “constellations” of “cultural, aesthetic, and ideological material,” each require contextual engagement.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, there is always a need to historicize melodrama's operations whether it be through institutional context (e.g., industrial and marketing categories, journalistic labels, critical and popular reception) or aesthetic and ideological effects. Recent work on moving image melodrama has not only reaffirmed melodrama's global pervasiveness but has also demonstrated its reach across different national cultures, local cinematic practices, and indigenous traditions. But while the transnational nature of the melodramatic mode is indisputable, the specificities of its genres are less apparent and demand closer analysis. In this respect, we might consider how the circumstances of the Czech case—and its status as a “small cinema” (to borrow a concept from Mette Hjort)—helps us to rethink the transnational, regional, and local dimensions of melodrama's genres.<sup>12</sup>

As I have already suggested, melodrama has not been a primary concept in the study of Czech cinema. With the exception of Pavlína Míčová's (2002) study of interwar film adaptations of the popular “women's novels” collectively referred to as the “Red Library” (“Červená knihovna”), little attention has been paid to melodrama's aesthetic, historical, or ideological operations in the Czech context.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the history of popular genre in Czech cinema remains in many ways unwritten, as does the history of popular cinema more broadly. This is especially true for films made before the nationalization of Czechoslovak cinema in 1945. However, if melodrama does not figure substantially into histories of Czech cinema, this is due not only to its retrospective categorization, but to its transnational dimensions, which have inhibited the discussion of its specificities.

Yet, as even the limited history of Czech cinema offered here should make evident, such transnational elements are not unique to the genre. On the contrary, it is symptomatic of the ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity of the Czech lands, which persisted after the establishment of the Czechoslovak state in 1918. Klimeš (2007), Johnson (2012), Szczepanik

(2011), and others have demonstrated the ways that the deeply rooted affinities between Czech and German cultures endured in cinema.<sup>14</sup> Under such conditions, co-productions and collaborations were a common practice, as it was for Czechs, Slovaks, Germans, Austrians, and others to work across industries.

Such practical collaborations, and the state-of-the-art facilities provided by Barrandov studios, gave the Czechoslovak film industry a significant position in the production of German-language films. The small domestic industry was economically dependent on the larger, more profitable German industry, relying on them for financial support, equipment, and access to a more expansive export market. Thus, in its first decades, Czech film production was characterized on the one hand by international exchange, collaboration, and co-production, and on the other by increasing concerns regarding the national character of the public sphere. This was further complicated by the highly visible presence of German films and German versions of Hollywood films in Czechoslovak cinemas, which Szczepanik (2007, 181) notes were second only to Czech films “not only because of their language, but more importantly because of their cultural affinities.”<sup>15</sup> In this context, the popularity of German films did not only provoke debates about the threat of German cultural hegemony; they also inspired Czech filmmakers to adapt genres, styles, and subjects from popular German films. This is not to assert, of course, that melodrama came from German cinema (or Hollywood for that matter), but rather that this shared cultural frame of reference would also extend to film cultures, giving birth to new manifestations of popular genres.

The question of what distinguishes melodrama in Czech cinema, in other words, cannot be separated from the question of what distinguishes melodrama in German cinema, for it owes as much to German film genres and traditions as it does to indigenous forms of expression. The links between Czech and German film genres are not straightforward, and historically tracing their respective traditions is beyond the scope of this essay. However, the idea that the two are fundamentally intertwined provides a compelling rationale for melodrama’s historical novelty and significance—especially, I would suggest, if one is looking to account for films produced in the period of the Nazi occupation. This connection is all the more significant given the scholarly awareness of melodrama’s privileged status within the cinema of the Third Reich.

## Melodrama in the protectorate

Czech filmmaking after the establishment of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia in March 1939 was inextricably linked to the ideological milieu of the Third Reich. Following the occupation, the Office of the Reich Protector assumed control of all Czech film business, and as Dvoráková (2018, 37) notes, immediately enlisted the local infrastructure to support the needs of German film.<sup>16</sup> In this context, Prague’s film studios, and the Barrandov studios in particular, played a major role in the production of Third Reich cinema, providing creative talent, personnel, and studio space for both Czech and German films. By the end of 1941, all of Czech film production was dissolved to create the monopoly Kosmos. The only inter-war companies kept intact between 1943 and 1945 were Nationalfilm and Lucernafilm, with the understanding that both would serve mainly as outlets for German-language cinema. During the occupation, Czech film production was heavily reduced and subject to highly regulated, Nazi sympathetic policies. At the same time, there was prevailing attitude about the need for Czech feature films to, as Klimeš (2007, 124) puts it, “foster a mood of



resistance.”<sup>17</sup> By speaking Czech and drawing from uniquely Czech material, Czech filmmakers sought to provide an alternative public sphere in which Czech national identity found expression.

Melodrama, scholars of cinema in the Third Reich have shown, was a particularly efficient tool for the promotion of Nazi ideology. In particular question is the privileged status of melodrama in the popular cinema of the Third Reich, whether the emphasis lies in its appropriation of genres from the Weimar period or dominant Hollywood models. For example, Stephen Lowry (1998, 125) suggests that, because Nazi films are full of “melodramatic clichés,” at first glance they appear to be “shallow, seemingly apolitical entertainment films,” and are therefore “less identifiable as propaganda.”<sup>18</sup> Lowry argues that the fascist nature of these films can only be distinguished through historical contextualization, since “in many respects, these productions hardly seem to differ from classical Hollywood fare.”<sup>19</sup> Or as Patrice Petro (1998, 43) puts it, “was Nazi cinema merely a vision of the classical Hollywood cinema?”<sup>20</sup>

Most studies of Third Reich cinema compare and contrast its aesthetic qualities and ideological functions with those of classical Hollywood. Typically, they argue that much like the Hollywood family melodrama, Nazi melodramas present stories of private life that indict the bourgeois domestic sphere—but there are some major differences. Laura Heins (2013) suggests that while Nazi melodrama films center on female protagonists who appear to directly challenge traditional gender roles, their narratives are not characterized by the “disruption” of the status quo, but by “compensation.”<sup>21</sup> To put it another way, the female protagonist is not motivated by the promise of liberation from the domestic sphere, but by the reward of an intensified experience outside of the home. Whether or not these films were framed as empowering or revolutionary, Heins suggests that they were actually conservative in their desire to recalibrate patriarchal ideology to fit the domestic within the expansionist goals of the Third Reich.<sup>22</sup>

The question then becomes was protectorate cinema merely a vision of Nazi cinema? Should these melodrama films be approached as essentially conservative or subversive? Surely the political interests of the Reich intruded upon and shaped the content and production of all protectorate films. They were, of course, made to be ideologically in step with the occupier. During the occupation, the Office of the Reich Protector had a vested stake in the Czech film industry. But it would be highly reductive to claim that all Czech films were wholly aligned with Nazi ideology—and equally so, to suggest that all actively sought to convey anti-fascist messages. Perhaps most telling, this perpetuates melodrama’s familiar tendency towards binary oppositions, as it positions these films as either apolitical entertainment or fascist propaganda. Besides reinforcing an oppositional understanding of collaboration and resistance, reducing these films to mere escapism or rejecting them as propaganda also obfuscates the socio-historical complexities that melodrama can address.

These competing factors make melodrama the ideal genre for this fraught historical moment. Melodrama should be viewed as a strategic site for protectorate cinema because it works within the constraints of socially legitimate discourse to conventionally represent what Gledhill (2002, 38) refers to as the “ideologically permissible.”<sup>23</sup> Melodrama, it would seem, negotiated between the two contradictory social imaginaries, so that films could articulate and reflect moral values which were explicitly applicable to the social politics of the German Reich, while implicitly expressing sentiments that would reinforce feelings of Czech national identity. But most remarkably, in making these gaps and hidden

contradictions visible, melodrama reveals the critical relationship between cultural materials and ideologies, offering important insights into the ways in which they sustain or subvert dominant social institutions and practices.

### “It’s not every day – Saturday”

To explore melodrama’s operations in Czech cinema, I turn to Václav Wasserman’s 1945 film *Saturday*. This film was not only released at the very end of the occupation but was re-released in the 1970s during normalization. In its depiction of a romantic scenario and popular domestic stars, the film is a paradigmatic example of protectorate feature film. It also was retrospectively identified by the NFA as a melodrama.

*Saturday* tells the story of Helena Málková (Hana Vítová), a young housewife, who is bored with her ordinary life. She is particularly dissatisfied with the fact that her husband Petr can only take her out on Saturdays. One Sunday after Petr leaves for a business trip, Helena decides to help her brother Jiří at his flower shop. There she meets the wealthy Richard Herbert (Oldřich Nový), an older “Don Juan” type. The naive Helena, is easily seduced by Richard, and soon leaves her husband for him. Unlike her distracted husband, Richard devotes entire days to her—that is, every day except for Saturday.

One Saturday, Helena joins her brother at a nightclub where she coincidentally runs into Richard and his wife Luisa. Though Richard is embarrassed, he still introduces Helena to his wife, and even invites her to their luxurious villa. It is here that Helena discovers Richard’s duplicity and decides to leave him. Newly independent, Helena goes on a job interview where she encounters Karla (Adina Mandlová), one of Richard’s former mistresses, who provides insight into his clumsy antics. The scorned woman tells Helena that Luisa patiently endures her husband’s every whim, forgiving his many affairs to keep their marriage intact. Though this breaks Helena’s heart, she returns to Jiří’s flower shop with her new friend Karla in tow.

At around this same time, Petr, who has returned from his trip, learns about Helena’s infidelity. But Petr reveals that he still loves his wife and welcomes her home with open arms. Finally cured of her foolish dream of romantic love, Helena returns to her husband. By the end of the film, there are three seemingly happy couples: the reunited Helena and Petr, the reconciled Luisa and Richard, and the newly paired-up Karla and Jiří. Rather than face any consequences, Helena, Richard, and the traditional home are simply restored.

With such popular Czech talent, it is no surprise that *Saturday* was highly anticipated by the public, as evinced by daily reports in the trade press.<sup>24</sup> However, in early January 1945, the Film Approval Authority (Úřad pro schvalování filmů) cancelled the film’s Prague premiere. Not only was the film’s star, Nový’s wife Alice of “Jewish origins,” but the celebrated film and theatrical actor also refused to identify himself as an “Aryan-Jewish sympathizer” by wearing the yellow star or divorce his wife and condemn her to deportation.<sup>25</sup> Šárka Gmíterková (2018), in her comprehensive study of Nový, notes that the Nazi authorities attempted to use the fascist press to spread the rumor that the actor rid himself of his Jewish spouse.<sup>26</sup> Looking at reports on the film’s production, it seems that they quickly pivoted to promote Wasserman’s directorial return after a six-year hiatus.

Nevertheless, when released unexpectedly in mid-January, *Saturday* was greeted with almost unanimous praise by Czech critics. Critics overwhelmingly agreed that *Saturday* provided an interesting look at contemporary social problems and served as a kind of



“mirror to society,” shedding light upon the “at-risk” institution of marriage. Describing *Saturday* as a “social comedy,” Jaroslav Matějček, in the popular magazine *Kinorevue* (*Cinema Review*), noted that it was a “tasteful film, [sic. with] mildly and quietly orchestrated well executed acting [sic. and] discrete salon wit.”<sup>27</sup> Matějček was not alone in highlighting its artistic merits. Similarly, a review in the weekly newspaper *Český dělník* (*Czech Worker*) noted that, “If lately Czech films fall into two categories for evaluation—films with true artistic values, and the so-called entertainment film—we see that *Saturday* stands on the boundary of both these areas.”<sup>28</sup> This suggests that even at the time of its release, reviewers grappled with the ways in which *Saturday* straddled the boundaries between art and popular mass entertainment, high and low culture.

Many reviewers noted that *Saturday* bore a strong resemblance to Martin Frič’s *Kristián* (1939). In *Kristián*, Nový plays Alois Novak, a travel agency clerk who escapes his life—his dull job and wife—by disguising himself as Mr. Kristian, a millionaire playboy. Once a month, Mr. Kristián seduces beautiful women at the Orient Bar with his knowledge of foreign lands (gleaned from travel brochures) and his velvety voice before disappearing into the night with one request: “close your eyes, I’m leaving...” One fateful night, Mr. Kristián meets Zuzana (Mandlová), and this encounter puts his true identity into jeopardy. Like Alois, Zuzana craves romance, however she chooses to pursue it outside the bar, leading to a complex web of lies, invented identities, and misrecognitions, all of which keep the couple in a comedic game of identity confusion. After Alois’ true identity is revealed, he returns to his proper place in society: he receives a promotion at work, and his faithful wife embraces him. In the end, both Alois and Zuzana “open their eyes” and abandon their foolish dreams.

Like *Kristián*, *Saturday* depicts the exploits of an aging Don Juan type, however, instead of asking us to sympathize with his romantic adventure, it asks us to empathize with the desires of a young housewife. The effect of this, Matějček noted, is that *Saturday* is like *Kristián* but “upside down.”<sup>29</sup> The critic also observed that both films convey the same moral lesson: in the end, the husband “opens his eyes” to the fact “his life did not end at the altar.”<sup>30</sup>

For the contemporary critics—and indeed for the NFA—*Kristián* was not a melodrama or a social comedy but a comedy. What, then, could a social comedy do that a comedy such as *Kristián* could not? To be sure, the two genres are closely related. But the grounding of “comedy” in the “social” suggests a gendering of genres, with “social” telling us it was about and for women. Similarly, a review in *Filmový kurýr* noted that *Saturday* was a “comedy with a serious plot basis,” pointing out that it “gives insight into the crisis of modern marriage.” The reviewer further praised the film for its “more complicated” take on the “overused theme” of the love triangle, which they noted “looks into the heart of the part of modern society that is chock full of levity, moral unreliability and social irresponsibility.”<sup>31</sup>

While some critics focused on *Saturday*’s comedic aspects, others emphasized its dramatization of serious social issues and inner dilemmas. For instance, *Saturday* was described as a “psychological film,” and “a psychological drama” with “serious characters, inspired by real life.”<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile a review in *Lidové noviny* (*People’s News*) highlighted its female protagonist, female perspective, and romantic scenario: “it is entirely a woman’s story with a pleasantly refined realism and generic psychology. Yet its scenes from married life and society are skillfully crafted to agree with popular conceptions and offer

the actors (and especially actresses) wonderful creative possibilities.”<sup>33</sup> Although the reviewer underscored its gendered perspective, they clearly regarded *Saturday* as a film worth paying attention to. Together, these reviews suggest that *Saturday* was significant because it addressed the everyday lives, interests, and needs of protectorate society at large.

### The “foolish dream” scenario

One might argue that *Saturday* is, at its core, a cautionary tale: a bored housewife leaves her patiently faithful husband for a disappointing romantic adventure, concluding with their reconciliation. But in focusing on individuals in the private sphere, *Saturday* confronts ideological dilemmas, making it a compelling case to unpack the conventional and subversive meanings of the status quo under Nazi rule. Consider here that Richard offers to liberate Helena from her unfulfilling marriage and modest life with the promise of romantic love and socioeconomic mobility. From our privileged perspective, however, we know that in leaving her husband for a new lover, Helena is merely exchanging one domestic trap for another. She may have traded her modest home for a luxurious apartment, but she finds herself trapped by yet another domestic space. Moreover, Richard’s promise to Helena is undermined by our knowledge that he is a compulsive adulterer. As such, we know he would never actually abandon his wife and class-bound family home. We also know that Helena’s suffering is inevitable. Her romantic desires should lead to her downfall. Interestingly, though, the film identifies Helena’s virtue not through her capacity for suffering, but rather through her flawed understanding of the dynamics of romantic love as they relate to the realities of everyday life.

What I am calling the “foolish dream” scenario, after the 1943 melodrama *Foolish Dream* (*Bláhový sen*, J.A. Holman), represents a primary moral dilemma for protectorate-era melodramas. These films frequently depict an individual trapped within the emotional and social isolation of the domestic sphere who breaks out to find self-fulfillment—typically through the expression of an obsessive desire for romance—only to be confronted with the emotional truths of their social reality. More often than not, this is a woman’s crisis, but not always. Here a distinction can be made: while the films that center on women emphasize the direct portrayal of the female protagonist’s psychological situation, the films featuring men use comedic action to counter the male protagonist’s selfishness and engender empathy. In almost all cases, the problems posed by the film’s dramatic conflict lead to the female protagonist’s emotional revelation—she comes to her senses—and her recognition forces the male protagonist to learn the error of his foolish ways and achieve marital happiness. Or, put another way, it is usually the female protagonist who serves as the narrative agent for the male protagonist’s resolution, which generally manifests itself as the necessity to conform to social conventions. The resolution to these films invariably reaffirms the status quo, even when it seems implausible. For example, in *Saturday*, Helena’s decision to leave Richard motivates his return to his wife. By the end, Richard promises to reward Luisa’s faithful behavior with his closing pronouncement “[that they will] go away together.”

Yet the foolish dream scenario presents a strange moral scheme insofar as it does not identify victims or villains using Manichean binaries. In this respect, *Saturday* sends contradictory messages about who is truly guilty and who is innocent. Richard may have been the one to first pursue Helena, but we still know her to be complicit in the affair. Although

Helena may not have sought Richard out, she ultimately leaves her husband for him. This means Richard is not alone in his moral delinquency. Interestingly, *Saturday* does not suggest that Helena is plagued by a guilty conscience, nor is her feminine virtue held to a higher standard. Both Helena and Richard pursue their romantic desires with little to no attention given to their equally unsuccessful marriages to equally dutiful spouses. Therefore, we can view their actions as equally immoral, or at least neither can truly be considered virtuous. But can we see this film as subversive? On the one hand, the film ultimately reinforces “correct” moral behavior, but on the other, it opens up a conceptual space for a female imaginary, thus challenging the male dominated public sphere.

Recall, however, that by the end of the film, both Helena and Richard are reconciled with their spouses in a happy ending. Despite the nature of their indiscretions, both are allowed to return home as if nothing unusual has happened. Consider here one of the conventions identified by film melodrama theory is the “false” happy ending, which provides a temporary solution for its narrative’s unresolved problems. As Laura Mulvey (1989, 53-56) asserts, “[it] raises along the road, a cloud of over determined irreconcilables, which put up resistance to being neatly settled in the last five minutes.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, we could argue, following Mulvey, that this is a particularly unsatisfactory resolution. We might, then, see the tacked-on couple of Jiří and Karla as commenting on the surface level in which the pre-existing couples neatly settled their marital conflicts. For their new relationship is not only a direct byproduct of Helena and Richard’s affair, but also declares itself in opposition to the two tainted relationships. Immediately, we find ourselves asking: Are the couples truly happy? And, will Helena or Richard eventually face consequences for their transgressions?

For protectorate audiences, this resolution, with its acknowledgement of the impossibility of achieving a truly happy ending, would surely have a deep emotional resonance. It is true that on the surface, *Saturday* makes no reference to the altered conditions of the outer world. But I would argue that even this alternative, fictional world is haunted by external pressures. The fact, for instance, that Helena and Richard capitulate to more powerful institutional forces evokes the national myth, and especially the rhetoric of Czech victimhood. Thus, the film still carries a vision of the world in which the annexation of the Sudetenland after the Munich Accords, the great betrayal by Czechoslovakia’s Western allies, resulted in their occupation by German forces. The ending, then, might be thought of as directly responding to external censorship by re-focusing the audience’s sympathies onto the domestic sphere. But other aspects would not be so easily overlooked.

Although in January 1945, the press did not publicize Nový’s real life, the public surely had some awareness of his situation. That month, the Nazis started transporting the last Jews exempted from deportation. In February 1945, Nový was transported to the Hagibor labor camp in the eastern suburbs of Prague and then to the Osterode-Harz concentration camp in lower Saxony before escaping in April.<sup>35</sup>

In retrospect, we can read *Saturday* for signs of subversion, however, it fits the conventions of other films from the era intended to promote Nazi ideology. Indeed, where some would see the rejection of Nazi values, others would see these very same values on display. Recall, for instance, that one of the main goals of Third Reich cinema was to promote a social order in which women existed purely within the domestic sphere; their sole purpose to produce and raise young fascists. In this context, *Saturday*’s reinforcement of the domestic sphere takes on less than desirable connotations. We might, then, see the foolish dream scenario not as subversive insofar as it reaffirms patriarchal order. In this sense, much like

Nazi film melodramas, this ending would seem empowering, but actually serve a highly disciplinary function.

In fact, in December 1944, *Saturday* reflected the desired moral and social values. The censors did not flag the film for social critique or any other potentially subversive qualities. Later, in the turbulent postwar years, this fact, coupled with the presence of actress Adina Mandlová, who was condemned as a Nazi collaborator, would become an indictment of the film.<sup>36</sup> It was a decisively collaborative effort, and consequently was not exhibited in Czechoslovak cinemas for some time.

### **A lifeboat in a “flood of German kitsch”**

Beginning in the immediate postwar period, it was common to see interwar and protectorate feature films advertised as “older Czech films” (“starší české filmy”), suggesting that, though a decade old at most, they were reminiscent of a distant past, artifacts from a long-vanished place and time.<sup>37</sup> In the years following 1945, the “older films” re-released had a clear social critique that supported the desired ideological perspective, and were generally prestige films with clear artistic and cultural value such as literary adaptations of national revival works or films considered aesthetically and socially progressive.<sup>38</sup>

By 1948, however, certain popular film genres, such as folk fairy tales, “Red Library” adaptations, and operettas were removed from circulation. As Petr Bilík (2014) suggests, after the war and communist rise to power, genre films were deemed too reminiscent of the bourgeois naivete of prewar productions and were quickly eradicated in favor of socialist realist mutations.<sup>39</sup> This, of course, changed significantly after the Warsaw Pact armies shut down the short period of liberalization inaugurated by the reforms movement that resulted in the Prague Spring. After August 1968, the Moscow-aligned wing of the Czechoslovak Communist Party slowly implemented the process of “normalization.” By 1969, the counter-reform policies of normalization took hold of the Czechoslovak film industry, introducing a new program that would align with the normalization of popular culture.

Melodrama films spoke to the project of normalization in a number of ways. First, on a pragmatic level, they were already-made products without any overhead production costs. While some needed minimal edits to remove unsavory actors or scenes, most required few changes. These films were thus cheap to circulate and exhibit. Second, with their cultural naïveté and moral appeal, melodrama films seemed to be blank slates that could easily reflect the correct ideological perspective. Any hint of Nazi ideology could be pushed to the margins, and the film could be made to reflect whatever the state needed. Furthermore, their romantic plots and overwhelmingly female protagonists encouraged the perception that they served as insignificant distractions from the overwhelming oppression of the Nazi occupation. Their long absence from cinemas meant that these films were fondly remembered by those who had seen them nearly twenty years prior. In this context, they could be completely divorced from any negative connotations, and introduced to an entirely new generation of cinemagoers who had not experienced the war.

On December 19, 1969, *Saturday* was advertised as the next “Czech film comedy” to be re-released in Czechoslovak cinemas.<sup>40</sup> It premiered in January 1970.<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, promotional materials and journalistic press from this re-release show that the conditions of its production were not hidden or pushed aside. *Saturday*, the evaluator noted, would be well received by the “middle-generation of audiences”—the middle-aged cinemagoers for

whom this film would evoke nostalgia for their youth.<sup>42</sup> For these audiences, *Saturday's* status as an older Czech film would provide an expanded context for emotional knowledge and thus could function as an experiential practice that fostered memory and reinforced national identity. This, of course, was early in the normalization, when cultural questions were fresh and acute.

Even its entry in *Filmovy prehled (Film Review)*, the periodical that provided cinema managers and operators with details about films in domestic circulation, explicitly states that *Saturday* was made in 1944:

[...] the film, made at the end of the Nazi occupation, has all the features of films produced in that period: the lightness, uncomplicatedness, superficiality with which all serious problems were passed off at the time, translated into a comedic note and ultimately serving as a momentary escape from oppressive wartime life.<sup>43</sup>

Despite noting that *Saturday* was “not excellent art,” the entry distinguished it from Nazi films of the era.<sup>44</sup> *Saturday*, it implied, provided Czech cinemagoers an important public space in which they could experience Czech values. It served as a lifeboat, allowing Czech cinemagoers a refuge in the “flood of German kitsch.”<sup>45</sup> This echoes earlier reviews: first, reminding us that *Saturday* is a women’s film that presents a sentimental romance reminiscent of the “plain calendar stories filmed en masse” during the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>46</sup> Then, reinforcing the comparison to Frič’s *Kristián* “but this time in a women’s gender.”<sup>47</sup>

Since *Saturday* was positioned as escapist entertainment addressed to female audiences, it was already understood to be de-politicized. The film was viewed as an everyday morality tale in which a woman is separated from and then returned to her home, reinforcing the status quo. These dominant values and attitudes could be linked both symbolically and affectively to Czech values, recasting images of family, safety, and continuity within the contemporaneous socio-political climate. The film’s simplistic moral lesson made it easy for those in power to exploit any contradictions or ambiguities and endow them with alternate meanings. For instance, the film’s ending, which returns its protagonists to their points of origin with little evidence of substantive change, could be easily recast with the desired narrative of normalization.

In addition to screening in cinemas, *Saturday* was first broadcast on Czechoslovak state television (Československá televize/ČST) mid-February 1969. In *Czechoslovak Television Weekly*, under a publicity still of Nový as the “modern Don Juan,” the editor stated: “Older Czech films are still very popular with the majority of television viewers.”<sup>48</sup> Its numerous broadcasts throughout the 1970s and 1980s suggests that the ČST recognized the value of older films, and thus the power of melodrama, for the public negotiation of cultural memory.

Paulina Bren (2010, 112) has analyzed the way in which television played a vital role in normalization politics, arguing that in the 1970s and 1980s, television offered Czechoslovakia’s socialist citizens “an acceptable site for negotiating the world of late communist normalization and for working out one’s relationship to the state.”<sup>49</sup> Stressing the reach of television, Bren acknowledges its value for “making, remaking, and unmaking meaning” for citizen viewers.<sup>50</sup> Television thus facilitated the everyday education of the socialist individual, shaping official public opinion, mediating national politics, and informing contemporary cultural imagining.

By 1973, the ČST started broadcasting “Films for Those Who Remember” (“Filmy pro pamětníky”/FPP) on Sunday afternoons and evenings. Initially, the film-cycle consisted of

twenty titles from the 1930s and 1940s—a mix of drama, comedy, and action films. In subsequent years, more were added, including melodramas like *Saturday*. According to a 1975 internal report, the FPP cycle was strategically formulated in response to the rapidly increasing influence of television over free time to promote the “social function of the new medium of mass communication.”<sup>51</sup> The reuse of “older Czech films” sought to inspire a “broad range of support from the ranks of television viewers,” and bridge the generational divide between those who had lived through the war, and those who had not.<sup>52</sup> Significantly, as Czechoslovak citizens gathered around their television sets to watch these older films within the depoliticized space of the home, they took on new, private meanings, even as they affirmed the official goals of normalization.

To take this title—“Films for Those Who Remember”—to evoke the subjectivity of the witness—suggests the desire for audiences with personal and lived connections to the war-time period, for whom these films would carry connotative echoes and experiential meanings. For those who did not have lived memory of this period, these films would enact emotions that would become a stand-in for memories they could never actually possess. In light of the historical period these films represent, it is suggestive that they are framed in terms of remembering and witnessing, concepts so deeply tied to the Holocaust and its traumatic effects. Yet the cycle has been and continues to be watched by a broad spectrum of generations over the years. In Raymond Williams’ terms, these films call our attention to the shifting “structures of feeling”—that is, the ways in which emerging, residual, and dominant practices and values from the past intersect and impinge upon the present.<sup>53</sup> Without diminishing the imprint of past uses and meanings, each generation brings new feelings and perceptions to these films, endowing them with new historicity and significance. Likewise, the critical recognition of melodrama highlights the ways in which differently situated audiences inscribed their knowledge of the past onto these films, producing, remembering, reworking, and revising meanings that respond to their own times and contexts.

## Conclusion

The NFA’s retrospective genre classification draws our attention to melodrama’s historical significance—even as it allows us to see the assumptions and values that inform its classification. Could it be that the genre label was nothing more than a vehicle to reject these films as kitschy, frivolous, and insignificant? Perhaps it was a way of dismissing their connections to the bourgeois tastes associated with German popular genres—or to subtly condemn a general complicity with the Nazified film industry? In hindsight, we can see how this would not only carve out a space for a true “Czech” cinema but would also position films not labelled as melodrama as works worthy of representing a serious national cinema. But these questions, in highlighting melodrama’s cultural and historical affiliations with foreign co-productions, only reveal the stakes of its critical recognition. What the genre label offers is not a fixed definition or historical origins but a way of engaging with these films in order to repose new questions. In particular it raises questions about how to approach the cultural shifts, institutional practices, and political imperatives that both shaped and obscured the genre’s position in histories of Czech cinema.



## Notes

1. An earlier version of this research appears in Rachel Schaff, "Home is Where the Heart Is: From Family to Nation in Czechoslovak Melodramas, 1930–1944." In *Central Europe (Re-)visited: A Multi-Perspective Approach to a Region*, edited by Marija Wakounig and Ferdinand Kuhnel. Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2015. 307–323.; Also see: Rachel Schaff, "Melodrama and Memory: Historicizing Pathos in Czech Holocaust Films" (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, MN, 2018).
2. Taňa Bretyšová, ed. *Česky hraný film II: 1930–1945* (Prague: Národní filmový archiv, 1998).; Taňa Bretyšová, ed. *Česky hraný film III: 1945–1960* (Prague: Národní filmový archiv, 2001); Taňa Bretyšová, ed. *Česky hraný film VI: 1981–1993* (Prague: Národní filmový archiv, 2010).
3. Rick Altman, "Reusable Packaging: Generic Products and the Recycling Process," in Nick Browne, ed. *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 35.
4. Altman, 5, 15.
5. Ivan Klimeš, "National Cinema in a Transnational Context: A Central European Experience," *Illuminace* 25, no. 4 (2013), 37.
6. Klimeš, "National Cinema," 37.
7. Furthermore, like the majority of Czech cinema, most of these melodrama films have not been subtitled or released abroad. There are few exceptions: prestige films with German-language versions such as František Čáp's *Night Butterfly* (*Noční motýl*, 1941).
8. Christine Gledhill, "Prologue: The Reach of Melodrama," *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures*, edited by Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), xix.
9. See: Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," in *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Women's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 43–69.; Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).; Christine Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation," in *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Women's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), Linda Williams, "Melodrama Revised," in *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 42–88.
10. Gledhill, "Prologue," ix–xxvi.
11. Christine Gledhill, "Introduction," *Gender and Genre in Postwar Cinemas*, ed. Christine Gledhill (Urbana, Chicago & Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 4.
12. Hjort, Mette, "Small Cinemas: How They Thrive and Why They Matter," *Mediascape: UCLA's Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* (Winter 2011). [https://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Winter2011\\_SmallCinemas.pdf](https://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Winter2011_SmallCinemas.pdf).
13. Pavlína Míčová, "Nanynčiny slzy v českém filmu 30. Let," *Cinepur* 11, no. 20 (2002): 32–33.; On melodrama's relationship to Czech television serials: Jana Jedličková, "Lásky z temného kraje. Melodramatizace české televizní krimi," *Cinepur* 28, no. 123 (2019): 64–67.; Kristýna Michaličková, "První republika v zajetí historie a protikladů. Kombinace televizních žánrů a jejich vliv na výslednou podobu seriálů," in *Film a dějiny 6. Post-komunismus: Proměny českého historického filmu po roce 1989*, eds. Luboš Ptáček and Petr Kopal (Prague: Casablanca, 2016), 155–169.
14. For example, see: Kevin B. Johnson, "Annexation Effects: Cultural Appropriation and the Politics of Place in Czech-German Films, 1930- 1945," (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2012); Ivan Klimeš, "A Dangerous Neighborhood: German Cinema in the Czechoslovak Region, 1933–45," in *Cinema and the Swastika: The International Expansion of Third Reich Cinema*, eds. Roel Vande Winkel and David Welch (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 112–129.; Petr Szczepanik, "Hollywood in Disguise: Practices of exhibition and reception of foreign films in Czechoslovakia in the 1930s," in *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity. New Perspectives on European Cinema History*, eds. Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby, Phillippe Meers (New York: Routledge, 2011), 170–171.

15. Szczepanik, 181.
16. Tereza Dvořáková, "Říše, Evropa, protektorát a film. Prag-Film v kontextu krystalizace a realizace nacistické filmové expanse," *Illuminace* 30, no. 4 (2018), 37.
17. Ivan Klimeš, "A Dangerous Neighborhood," 124–125.
18. Stephen Lowry, "Ideology and Excess in Nazi Melodrama: The Golden City," *New German Critique*, no. 74 (Spring-Summer, 1998), 125–126.
19. Lowry, 128.
20. Patrice Petro, "Nazi Cinema at the Intersection of the Classical and the Popular," *New German Critique*, no. 74 (Spring-Summer 1998), 43.
21. Laura Heins, *Nazi Film Melodrama* (Urbana, Chicago, Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 10.
22. Heins, 11.
23. Christine Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation," in *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Women's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 38.
24. "Central Film Rental, Distribution List, 'Saturday,' December 1970, Production Materials, National Film Archives Prague, Czech Republic. "Premiéry tohoto týdne 'Sobota,'" *Pressa* 7, no. 14. January, 1945.; Lr, "Dnešní premiéra filmu 'Sobota,'" *Pressa*, no. 8, January 1, 1945; "Filmová premiéra o dnešním manželství," *Venkov* 40, no.12, January 14, 1945, 4.; Ks, "První letošní filmová premiéra," *Lidové noviny* 53, no. 2, January 16, 1945, 4.
25. Šárka Gmíterková, "Kristián v montérkách. Hvězdná osobnost Oldřicha Nového mezi kulturními průmysly, produkčními systémy a politickými režimy v letech 1936–1969" (PhD diss., Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic, 2018), 76fn277.
26. Gmíterková, 52–53.
27. Matějček, "Sobota. Pokus o českou," 110–111.
28. Press book for *Saturday*, Page 1, 1945, in Promotional Materials, National Film Archive, Prague, Czech Republic.
29. Matějček, 110–111
30. Matějček, 110–111.
31. d, "Filmová komedie na etickém podkladu," *Filmový kurýr* 18, no. 34, August 25, 1944, 4.
32. Lr, "Zrcadlo společnosti ve filmu 'Sobota,'" *Kinorevue* 10, no. 46, September 20, 1944, 363.; d, "Filmová komedie," 4.
33. KS, "První letošní filmová premiéra," 4.
34. Laura Mulvey, "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama," *Movie* 25 (Winter 1989), 53–54.
35. Gmíterková, 54. Nový's wife Alice was transported to the Terezín ghetto where she spent the last months of the war.
36. After the war, Adina Mandlová was faced charges in front of an Extraordinary People's Court because she starred in German films and had publicized relationships with German men.
37. Jiří Havelka, *Filmové hospodářství 1951 až 1955* (Prague: Čs. filmové nakladatelství, 1972), 307–314.; For more on "old films" see: Lukáš Skupa, "Filmy, které nestárnou: Distribuce českých meziválečných a protektorátních filmu v letech 1945–1970" (Essay, Masarykova univerzita, 2008). I am grateful to Petr Szczepanik for pointing me to this essay.
38. For example, Hugo Haas' 1937 adaptation of Karel Čapek's anti-fascist play *The White Disease* (*Bílá nemoc*). O.K. "Návrat Hugo Haase," *Filmová práce* 2 no. 15, April 13, 1946, 4.
39. Petr Bilík, "The Sneaky Victory of Genre: The Story of One Czech Western," *Moravian Journal of Literature and Film* 5, no 2 (Fall 2014), 28.
40. "Saturday," December 19, 1969, 412/93975, Promotional Materials, National Film Archives, Prague, Czech Republic.
41. "Sobota," December 19, 1969, 412/93975, Promotional Materials, National Film Archives, Prague, Czech Republic.
42. "Sobota," December 19, 1969, 412/93975, Promotional Materials, National Film Archives, Prague, Czech Republic.
43. "Sobota," *Filmový přehled* 48, 1970.
44. "Sobota."

45. "Sobota."
46. "Sobota."
47. "Sobota."
48. Týdeník Československá televize," February 8–17, 1969, Czech Television Archives, Prague, Czech Republic.
49. Paulina Bren, *The Greengrocer and his TV: The Culture of Communism after the 1968 Prague Spring* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 112.
50. Bren, 8–9.
51. Bren, 5.
52. Bren, 5.
53. Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1975), 63.

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