



## Modernity and Tradition *Film in Interwar Central Europe*

A film program offered in association with the exhibition *Foto: Modernity in Central Europe, 1918 – 1945* at the National Gallery of Art, Washington

## Film Program **Modernity and Tradition: Film in Interwar Central Europe**

### Avant-garde Shorts

June 24 at 2:00

#### LECTURE

*Between Surrealism and Constructivism: Avant-garde and Film in Central Europe in the 1920s and 1930s* Marcin Giżycki, senior lecturer, Rhode Island School of Design

#### FILM PROGRAM FOLLOWS

*Vormittagsspuk* (Ghosts before Breakfast) by Hans Richter (1927/1928, 16 mm, silent, 6 minutes, Germany)

*Buty* (Boots) by Jerzy Gabrielsky (1934, 35 mm, Polish with subtitles, 12 minutes, Poland)

*Dziś Mamy Bal* (There Is a Ball Tonight) by Jerzy Zarzycki and Tadeusz Kowalski (1934, 35 mm, silent with music track and subtitles, 7 minutes, Poland)

*Przygoda człowieka poczciwego* (The Adventure of a Good Citizen) by Stefan and Franciszka Themer-son (1937, 35 mm, Polish with subtitles, 8 minutes, Poland)

*Na Pražském hradě* (At the Prague Castle) by Alexandr Hackenschmied (1931, 35 mm, silent with music track, 11 minutes, Czechoslovakia)

*Silnice zpívá* (The Highway Sings) by Elmar Klos (1937, 35 mm, Czech with subtitles, 4 minutes, Czechoslovakia)

### Homeland, Homeland: My Country

June 30–July 7

June 30 at 12:30

*A magyar falu* (The Hungarian Village) by László Kandó (1935, 35 mm, Hungarian with English intertitles, 15 minutes, Hungary)

*Hortobágy* by Georg Höllering (1936, 35 mm, Hungarian with subtitles, 82 minutes, Hungary)

July 1 at 4:00

*Zem Spieva* (The Singing Earth) by Karel Plicka (1933, 35 mm, silent with music track, Czech and English intertitles, 133 minutes, Czechoslovakia)

July 7 at 1:00

*Das Blaue Licht* (The Blue Light) by Leni Riefenstahl (1932, Digital Beta from 35 mm, silent, German intertitles with translation, 79 minutes, Germany)

July 7 at 2:30

*Tavaszi Zápor* (Spring Shower) by Pál Fejós (1932, 35 mm, French and Hungarian with subtitles, 66 minutes, Hungary)

July 7 at 4:00

*Kujawiak* (Kuyaviak) (from Polish Dance Series) by Eugeniusz Cękalski (1935, 35 mm, English, 7 minutes, Poland)

*Marijka nevěrnice* (Faithless Marijka) by Vladislav Vančura (1934, 35 mm, Ruthenian, Slovak, Yiddish, and Czech with subtitles, 76 minutes, Czechoslovakia)

*Píseň o Podkarpatské Rusi* (The Song of Ruthenia) by Jiří Weiss (1937, 35 mm, Czech with translation, 11 minutes, Czechoslovakia)

### The Most Important Art

July 15 at 4:00

*Im Schatten der Maschine* (In the Shadow of the Machine) by Albrecht Viktor Blum (1928, 35 mm, silent, German intertitles with translation, 20 minutes, Germany)

*Mutter Krausens Fahrt ins Glück* (Mother Krausen's Journey to Happiness) by Piel Jutzi (1929, 35 mm, silent, German intertitles with translation, 104 minutes, Germany)

*Mir Kumen On* (Children Must Laugh) by Aleksander Ford (1935, 16 mm, English narration and Yiddish spoken with subtitles, 56 minutes, Poland)

### Celluloid Myths and Celluloid Dreams

July 22–July 29

July 22 at 4:00

*Das Wachsfigurenkabinett* (Wax-works) by Paul Leni (1924, 35 mm, silent, French intertitles with translation, 83 minutes, Germany), with live piano accompaniment by Ben Model

*Divotvorné Oko* (The Magic Eye) by Jiří Lehovec (1939, 35 mm, Czech with subtitles, 10 minutes, Czechoslovakia)

July 29 at 4:00

*Der Dibuk* (The Dybbuk) by Michał Waszyński (1937, 35 mm, Yiddish with subtitles, 123 minutes, Poland)

## City Films

August 4 at 1:00

*Praha u září světél* (Prague at Night) by Svatopluk Innemann (1928, 35 mm, silent, 24 minutes, Czechoslovakia)

*Bezúčelná procházka* (Aimless Walk) by Alexandr Hackenschmied (1930, 35 mm, silent, 20 minutes, Czechoslovakia)

*Žijeme v Praze* (Living in Prague) by Otakar Vávra (1934, 35 mm, silent with music track, 13 minutes, Czechoslovakia)

August 4 at 2:30

*Berlin: Die Sinfonie einer Großstadt* (Berlin: Symphony of a Big City) by Walter Ruttmann (1927, 35 mm, silent, 65 minutes, Germany)

*Großstadt Zigeuner* (Urban Gypsies) by László Moholy-Nagy (1932, 35 mm, silent, 11 minutes, Germany)

*Budapest fürdőúváros* (Budapest, City of Baths) by István Somkúti (1935, 35 mm, silent with music track, 14 minutes, Hungary)

*Jewish Life in Kraków* by Shaul and Yitzhak Goskind (1938 / 1939, 16 mm, Yiddish with subtitles, 10 minutes, Poland)

*Jewish Life in Lwów* by Shaul and Yitzhak Goskind (1938 / 1939, 16 mm, Yiddish with subtitles, 11 minutes, Poland)

*Jewish Life in Warsaw* by Shaul and Yitzhak Goskind (1938 / 1939, 16 mm, Yiddish with subtitles, 10 minutes, Poland)

## The Popular

August 18–September 2

August 18 at 1:00

*Der letzte Mann* (The Last Laugh) by F. W. Murnau (1924, 35 mm, silent with English intertitles, 90 minutes, Germany)

August 18 at 3:00

*Címzett ismeretlen* (Address Unknown) by Béla Gaál (1935, 35 mm, Hungarian with subtitles, 88 minutes, Hungary)

August 25 at 1:00

*Maskerade* (Masquerade in Vienna) by Willi Forst (1934, 16 mm, German with translation, 100 minutes, Austria)

August 26 at 4:00

*Hej rup!* (Heave Ho!) by Martin Frič (Jiří Voskovec / Jan Werich) (1934, 35 mm, Czech with subtitles, 99 minutes, Czechoslovakia)

September 2 at 2:00

*Der Blaue Engel* (The Blue Angel) by Josef von Sternberg (1930, 35 mm, German with subtitles, 106 minutes, Germany)

Introduced by Peter Rollberg, chair, department of Romance, German, and Slavic Languages and Literatures, George Washington University

The following film series will also be shown in the East Building Auditorium at various times between May and September 2007.

## Czech Modernism

1920–1940

May 12–June 17

## New Romany Cinema from Hungary

June 30

## New City Symphonies

August 5

## Lech Majewski

August 11, August 12, August 19

## New Austrian Experimental Cinema

September 1

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Films are shown in original format in the auditorium of the National Gallery's East Building at Fourth Street and Constitution Avenue NW. Seating is on a first-come basis. To ensure a seat, please plan to arrive at least ten minutes before showtime.

Programs are subject to change. For current information, visit our Web site, [www.nga.gov/programs/film.htm](http://www.nga.gov/programs/film.htm), or call (202) 842-6799.

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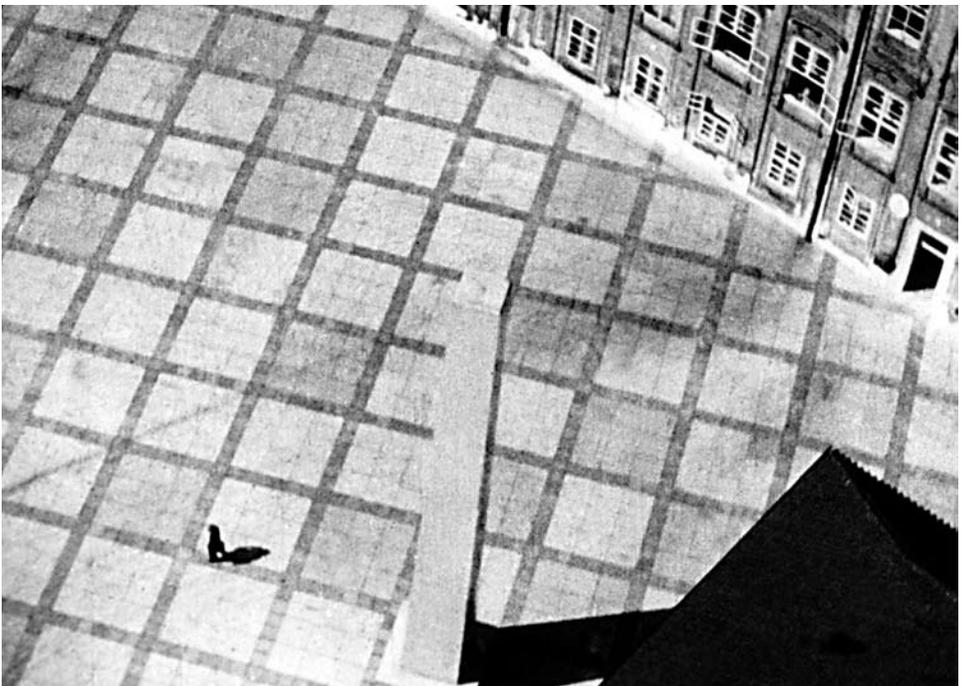
National Gallery of Art  
Fourth Street and  
Constitution Avenue NW  
Washington, DC

In the cinemas of interwar central Europe, innovation and cultural tradition did not merely clash but often coalesced to create the unique cinematic language of the region.

The film program *Modernity and Tradition: Film in Interwar Central Europe* explores this complex conjunction through a thematic presentation of the region's diverse film production, from *The Popular* to *Avant-garde Shorts*, from urban environments (captured in *City Films*) to the countryside (expressed in the theme *Homeland, Homeland: My Country*), and from the social engagement of *The Most Important Art* to the otherworldly universes of *Celluloid Myths and Celluloid Dreams*.

Essential to the medium's maturation in the interwar period was an emerging film theory and criticism that addressed the cinema's aesthetic specificity and, increasingly, its significance within social and political structures. Czech avant-gardist Karel Teige, leader of the group Devětsil, noted in his essay "Foto Kino Film" (1922) the power of cinema as a universal

language and heralded its central role in modern civilization, ideas he developed in book form in *Film* (1925). Through his writings, Teige stressed the medium's dual function of "pure poetry" and "functional form," central to the artistic endeavors of Devětsil. During these years as well, Hungarian-born Béla Balázs published several essays and one book, *The Visible Man*, which stands as a key contribution to film theory. Balázs emphasized the uniqueness of film's visual language, which through specific forms— notably the close-up—stressed human physiognomy, making visible man and his soul. Though a Marxist, his romantic views on cinema opposed the science-inflected theories of Soviet cineasts who considered montage—the juxtaposition of images—the essence of filmic meaning. Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, for example, responded to Balázs with his inventively titled essay *Béla Forgets the Scissors* (1926), in an exchange that indicates the international dimension of much early writing on film. In Poland, by contrast, theory was shaped by artists and intellectuals, largely outside of international discussion and the struggling Polish film industry.



At the Prague Castle (Národní filmový archiv / National Film Archive, Prague)



*Masquerade in Vienna (Photofest)*

Karol Irzykowski's now canonical work *The Tenth Muse: Aesthetic Problems of Cinema* (1924), which contained ideas analogous to Balázs's publication, remained unknown in its day outside Poland.

In Germany, intellectual discussions about cinema's legitimacy developed within the framework of the *Kino-Debatte* in the 1910s. These centered in the 1920s on Hollywood, which increasingly dictated the norm for popular production and consumption, matching the widespread influence on international popular culture fearfully known in central Europe as Americanization. One German critic defined this inexorable trend in 1926 as "the new world militarism approaching... more dangerous than Prussian militarism." It was the classless appeal of the Hollywood film, its independence from "high culture" that worried the German conservative elite. While structures of Hollywood production were adopted by the German production giant Universum Film AG (Ufa), artistic sensibility and technical subtlety remained

a priority and hampered commercial success. *The Last Laugh* proved an exception, creating not only a financial triumph, but also a following in the American film industry. Other successes produced by the increasingly conservative Ufa, notably *The Blue Angel*, warned against the destructiveness of modern lifestyles.

With the crumbling of empires, Germany's neighbors in the region formed new national cinema corporations as well. Coming of age in the 1930s, these often reflected the heightened political situation. The distinct sound of the Viennese accent came to characterize the *Wien-film*, a musical film genre offering exotic yet familiar melodramas that proved easily exportable to the vast German market, which at the time extended to most countries in central Europe. *Masquerade in Vienna*, for example, presents a decadent yet enchanting vision of fin-de-siècle Vienna, masking the country's imminent annexation by Nazi Germany. The romantic sound comedies of Hungary in the 1930s, a time known today as the "Dream Car Decade" (after

an initial box-office success), were mostly set in the surroundings of their intended audience, the contemporary Hungarian middle class. The films propagated a modern look and conservative content, at times overlaid with nostalgic allusions to pre-1918 Hungary.

In the Czech lands, modernization, through the foundation of the massive Barrandov studios, allowed for technological progress and an increasingly international film production. The thriving Prague avant-garde eagerly engaged this trend, culminating in the films of the duo Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich (V+W), who successfully transposed the essence of their antifascist stage productions onto film. Influenced by American slapstick comedy and dadaism, their barbed humor sabotaged bourgeois values ingrained in Czech society. V+W also took apart their own avant-garde milieu: *Heave Ho!*, for instance, includes a sequence parodying Soviet montage.

Whether in jest or in earnest, filmmakers responded strongly to Soviet cinema. Lenin proclaimed film “the most important art” for its power to instruct the masses; he assigned the

medium a central role within the Soviet propaganda machine and encouraged the development of a major filmic avant-garde. Thanks to the German Left, Soviet films such as Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* were screened despite strong censorship, thereby contributing not only to the political, but also to the aesthetic development of German film. Prometheus Film, a company created under the aegis of the German Communist Party, did produce a number of popular feature-length films, among them *Mother Krausen’s Journey to Happiness* (1929). A conventional melodrama using formal elements of Soviet agitation-propaganda, it expressed the dual need of German leftist cinema to educate and entertain the masses, as it adapted the predefined (capitalist) structures of popular cinema.

In Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, leftist cinema was produced by individuals and small independent groups. The documentary fund-raiser *Children Must Laugh*, underwritten by the Polish Jewish Labor movement, is a rare surviving example of a Yiddish political film propagating social progress. Decidedly modernist in its endeavor, the film utilizes mass com-



*Mother Krausen's Journey to Happiness* (Deutsche Kinemathek)

munication and the dramatic narrative power of staged reality to plead for improved living conditions for impoverished children.

Moving beyond the confinements of narration and the commercial film business altogether, a pure cinema was formed through experimentation by the artistic avant-gardes. Beginning with the formally abstract “absolute films” in the early 1920s, German filmmakers Hans Richter and Walter Ruttmann gradually shifted toward figurative film language. Richter sought to go beyond mere aesthetic progressiveness, largely influenced by the Soviet and French avant-garde. *Ghosts before Breakfast* (1927–1928) plays with innovative film technique, including the use of stop-motion animation and other special effects for subtle political subversion as the film shows objects in rebellion against their daily use.

The *Film und Foto (Fifo)* exhibition of 1929 in Stuttgart marked the apogee of modernist photographic and filmic tendencies in the region. The film section, organized by Richter, included a variety of international works, ranging from “masterpieces of world production” to experimental shorts. Richter believed audiences could be guided toward art films, which would eventually become the popular norm. This modernist

optimism drove his publication *Film Enemies of Today, Film Friends of Tomorrow* (1929).

The primacy of theoretical and artistic concerns over the production process characterized the early Czech and Polish avant-garde, and this attitude was shared by avant-garde groups internationally. Cinematic experimentation in Poland appeared within constructivist and futurist publications in the form of film scripts and “cine-poems,” which adapted the formal dynamics of the moving image to print. Influenced by yet unaffiliated with any of these art movements, Stefan and Franciszka Themerson merged such endeavors with experiments in movement and light, incorporating into their films photographic elements as well as photomontages and photograms. At times, artists replaced film projections with “screenings” of photomontages. For them, montage in any form became the equivalent of cinema. These activities materialized extensively in the context of film cooperatives fighting for an alternative to the ailing national film industry, as well as for the exhibition of foreign films (notably from the Czech avant-garde) to the Polish public.

*Fifo* was instrumental in stimulating young artists around the region. Exemplary is Czech artist Alexandr Hackenschmied, who initiated film and photography groups and also created a number of “independent” films—a term that, according to him, fit a broader scope of production than the “avant-garde.” Thus Hackenschmied welcomed commercial production, for instance in his inventive advertisement shorts made at the Film Atelier of the Baťa shoe and rubber factory. One such short, *The Highway Sings* (1937), follows the lively journey of a cheerful Baťa tire rolling by itself from its place of manufacture and then on to the car it is destined to serve.

The vibrant, rapidly growing urban visual culture in the early twentieth century embraced film. Movie palaces and advertisements increasingly defined the urban landscape, in which largely working-class masses flowed to the cinemas. László Moholy-Nagy’s unrealized project *Dynamics of a Big City* was the earliest to link the visual whirl of machines, people, and neon city



*The Blue Angel* (Photofest)



Berlin: *Symphony of a Big City* (Deutsche Kinemathek)

lights to the medium of light, movement, and technology. Moholy-Nagy made less abstract city films later in his career, among them *Urban Gypsies* (1932). This film, which captures gypsies, significantly, on the city's periphery, effectively utilizes dynamic images but maintains traditional associations of the Roma as temperamental, music-loving outcasts from central European urban life. The first true city film, a genre that captures metropolitan rhythms through documentary images, was Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Big City* (1927). While internationally influential through its use of symphonic montage, the film was condemned by the leftist intelligentsia of the time for failing to explore the city's sociopolitical structure, providing links that "at best connect[ed] . . . through fictitious transitions . . . void of content," as Siegfried Kracauer noted in his review of 1928.

Metropolitan Prague also became the subject of filmic examination. Hackenschmied's first film, *Aimless Walk* (1930), does not follow a strict city film structure, though it fits the genre in its subjective exploration of the urban environment. The tumultuous city landscape is not simply registered here through the eager eye of

the camera, as in Svatopluk Innemann's *Prague at Night* of 1928. It is also experienced as a spatial phenomenon, fragmented and interpreted through the "aimless walk" of a detached protagonist through Prague's suburbs.

Lost titles, such as *The Pulse of Polish Manchester* (1932), a film on the city of Łódź and its textile industry, indicate that Polish filmmakers were also drawn to the association of urban progress and the filmic image. By contrast, the Jewish travelogues of Polish cities intended for an American Jewish audience emphasize film's traditional documentary role and introduce contemporary urban life side by side with symbols of Jewish and Christian history.

Throughout central Europe, filmic modernity enriched traditionalism as it interpreted the diverse visions of rural landscapes essential to national identities across the region. The dichotomy of city and country, progress and tradition was explored in such films as *Faithless Marijka* from Czechoslovakia and *Hortobágy* from Hungary. These two in particular are comparable in their establishment of symbolic oppositions between the rural environment and obtrusive elements of modernization. Both

films emphasize the use of nonprofessional actors and filming on location, thus stressing their authenticity and message of social change. *The Singing Earth*, a documentary by ethnographer Karel Plicka, presents a city symphony in reverse; scenes of contemporary Prague preface the viewer's journey toward lyrical images of the Slovak countryside. The montage of images (by Hackenschmied) attuned to the flow of the musical soundtrack is a notable innovation in editing procedure.

Pál Fejős' *Spring Shower*, by contrast, views the Hungarian rural milieu through a Hollywood lens, such that narrative and visual impact overrule the real. A tourist town frequently visited by native and foreign photographers and filmmakers for its accessible yet seemingly genuine settings was used as the location for the film. Pál Fejős's vision of pastoral life transformed by modern developments ironically remains one of the few "authentic" filmic records of Hungarian folklore.

In Germany, country landscape was prominently featured in the mountain films of the 1920s, a genre characterized by melodramatic mountaintop narratives and cutting-edge cinematography, emphasizing the striking quality

of these imposing landscapes. Leni Riefenstahl, the lead actress in many of these films, acted in and directed *The Blue Light* (1932), in which a modern-day prologue and coda frame a seemingly timeless mythical tale set in the Dolomites. Premiering one year before the Nazi takeover, the film prefigures the synthesis of romantic ideals and technological progress essential to national socialist culture.

From its beginning, cinema combined technological developments with the appeal of magic and imagination, otherworldly creations and dream visions. In post-1918 Germany, a mix of the commercial and the mystical came to typify a small group of so-called expressionist or stylized films, marked by pioneering set design, creative use of light and shadow, and a narrative stressing psychological states of being. While these films represented only a fraction of popular film production, they played a disproportionate role in creating a visually consumable expression of the German soul on celluloid.

Polish-Yiddish film production was formed as a secular commercial industry, often addressing questions of dislocation between the old world and modernity, and relevant to Jewish



Hortobágy (Magyar Nemzeti Filmarchívum / Hungarian National Film Archive)



*The Dybbuk* (The National Center for Jewish Film)

American audiences as well as secular Jews at home, who had left their shtetls behind. The dramatic value of mythical visions of ancient traditions was well-suited to the eerie expressionist film aesthetic, as in *The Dybbuk* (1937). Originally a play inspired by ethnographic findings in eastern European villages, the film became a cinematic mass spectacle for modern audiences in the hands of popular filmmaker Michał Waszyński. The film was to be the last major production of Polish-Yiddish cinema before World War II demolished or uprooted the once-thriving central European film communities.

Finally, transnational migration had been a constant theme in central European film history, impelled by socioeconomic and political challenges and the appeal of working at Ufa, which was an essential stepping-stone on the road to Hollywood. Those central European émigrés and exiles who succeeded in America's dream factory did so, at least in part, by looking back, in self-mythologizing or subtly ironic visions, at the Old World, in ways that were eagerly embraced by the New World.

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COVER IMAGE Stefan and Franciszka Themerson, contact strip of *Przygoda człowieka poczciwego* (*The Adventure of a Good Citizen*) (detail), 1937, vintage gelatin silver prints mounted on card stock, Ubu Gallery, New York & Galerie Berinson, Berlin