

# The Daily Narrative of Menzel's Life Comedy

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**Abstract:** Along with the normalization of Czech society, the various literary bans gradually receded, freeing up social and cultural space. As a result, Jiri Menzel, who had been banned from making films for five consecutive years, was given the opportunity to create again, and the comedy of everyday life became the focus of his work. Since then, the everyday narratives pioneered by Menzel's comedies of life have been inherited and developed in contemporary Eastern European cinema, and have had a great impact on the world of cinema. In the comedy of life, Menzel believed that comedy was the feast of life and that humor was the Czech way of saluting life. The transcendence of nature, family life and ordinary reality, the display of human quarrels, games and festive gatherings are the content of the Comedy of Life. The poetic countryside, the carnivalesque dialogues, the chasing games and the ceremonial banquets are the core aesthetic features of the Comedy of Life, and the poeticization and glorification of real life are the main features of the Comedy of Life. "The poetization and celebration of real life are the sources of humor in the Comedy of Life, which form the daily narrative aesthetics of the Comedy of Life.

**Keywords:** Jiri Menzel; Rural-urban Dichotomy; Carousal; Life Comedy; Daily Narrative

## 1. Introduction

The contribution of the Czech Republic to the world's film art cannot be ignored, as the magnificent Czech New Wave film movement emerged here. As a master of the Czech New Wave film, Menzel's academic research mostly stopped at the two works of *Closely Watched Trains* (1966) and *Skylarks on a String* (1969) during the Czech New Wave period. After *Skylarks on a String*, Menzel was banned from filming for five consecutive years. "With the deaths of Stalin and Clement Gottwald in 1953,

and the events in Hungary in 1956, the Czechoslovak society, economy, and culture were profoundly affected, and there was a loosening of the literary scene" [1]. As Czech society entered a period of "normalization" and the ban on art and literature was gradually thawed, the greater freedom of social and cultural space did not in itself provide the substance for an aesthetic movement, and Czech cinema in the 1970s and 1980s was generally faced with a crisis of creative inspiration. When Menzel was once again allowed to create films, comedies focusing on daily life such as *Section Near a Forest* (1976), *Cutting It Short* (1981), *The Snowdrop Festival* (1984), *My Sweet Little Village* (1985) and *The End of Old Times* (1989) became his main direction of creation.

It is gratifying to note that these comedies of life, in terms of both the number and quality of awards received at international film festivals, are in fact no less important than the satirical Menzel's comedies of the New Wave period. In the *Comedy of Life*, Menzel considered comedy to be the feast of life, and humor to be the Czech way of celebrating life. The *Comedy of Life* continued the tradition of humor of the New Wave and turned to the portrayal of everyday life, showing human quarrels, games, and festive gatherings as the content of the *Comedy of Life*. Poetic rural scenes, carnivalesque dialogues, chasing games, and ritualized parties are its core aesthetic features, while the poeticization and glorification of real life is the source of humor in the *Comedy of Life*, which together form the everyday narrative aesthetic of the *Comedy of Life*.

## 2. Binary Opposition between Urban and Rural Areas

The "*Comedy of Life*" talks about everyday matters such as poverty, death and social problems such as the alienation of people in the process of urbanization, empty nests of the elderly and young people who are at a loss for what to do. In Czechoslovakia since the 1970s, the traumas of the Second World War and the

Stalinist totalitarian regime have become golden memories, replaced by the process of urbanization. The dichotomy between urban and rural areas is particularly prominent among the many comedic themes of the "comedy of life". In the process of urbanization, there are big differences between urban and rural people in terms of life concepts and ways of living, which create conflicts in certain situations, and in the face of these conflicts, the characters are always reconciled in love. In the urban-rural conflict, the townspeople are tolerant to the rural people who represent tradition, which shows Menzel's praise for the natural space of the traditional Czech countryside, his vigilance for the traditional natural way of life, and his deep nostalgia for the pure morality of the traditional culture and the sincere feelings between people. The tendency toward affection for urban and rural spaces has been evident in past Menzel films. *Capricious Summer* (1968) depicts a beautiful countryside of cabins, ponds, field houses, and lush greenery, *Crime in a Music Hall* (1968) portrays the city as a place of evil and calculation, and the dichotomy theme of the comedy of life is reinforced. As the urbanization of Czechoslovakia accelerated, with the rise of skyscrapers and the gradual migration of young people to the cities, changing their habits, the countryside began to look lonely, but the people still maintained the most natural way of life, and the comedy of life focuses on the clash between the urban and the rural concepts of life.

*Section Near a Forest* often uses close-ups and depth-of-field shots to portray the city, such as close-ups of traffic lights and depth-of-field shots of street scenes, passages of cars showing the crowdedness of the city, and cooler gray tones to accurately portray the depressing nature of the city. For the countryside, the use of mobile photography and large vistas, the color palette shifts to a golden yellow, and the soundtrack goes from low to high as the carts drive into the village. In audio-visual language, color and light are the most accurate in conveying the emotions of the characters, and the director's vigilance against urban civilization and his love for the countryside are clearly shown in the mirror language system.

Unlike *Section Near a Forest*, which tells the story of a city dweller going to the countryside, *My Sweet Little Village* tells the story of a rural man forced to go to the city. The film utilizes a lot of moving photography and large vistas to

capture the beauty of the countryside and nature, while using the doctor's mouth to express Menzel's feelings for the countryside directly in poetry: "Darkness wrapped around the mountains slowly rises and envelops the whole forest. In the flowery earth, the bright lake sleeps quietly, ripples on its surface, swirls and floats toward the shore, and finally disappears into the bright lake. Only the turtledove no longer sings to its lover, and on the silent shore the pine forest still rustles, the song of the painted lady floats far away, and the thriving trees stand on the rocks, and the green valleys, full of white flowers, attract the wild geese that fly over the forest to this place".

The city is dazzling and crowded. In front of huge tall buildings, the small and helpless Lakshnik appears to be alone. He can hardly be found on the bridge on the way to work. The main contradiction of the film focuses on whether Lakshnik can live in the countryside without selling his house. Despite his efforts, Lakshnik has always been embarrassed by his own stupidity. The truck driver, who represents the traditional rural people, finally accepted this foolish boy full of fear and helplessness in the city when the urban people were about to move to Lakshnik's house, expressing Menzel's vigilance against urban civilization, praising the feelings of mutual love in the countryside and caring in a humanitarian sense. In this sense, Menzel's life comedy's universal sympathy for human nature is consistent with Hrabal's novels. "The emotional taste of these two artists is consistent in many aspects, as reflected in Menzel's original works such as *My Sweet Little Village*" [2].

### 3. Construction of Czech National Portrait

There are heroes and classic figures as symbols of national spirit in the literary and artistic works of every country. Russia has Katyusha, the United States has Captain America, Japan has Miyamoto Musashi, and China has Confucius. For the Czechs people, Pabitel is their hero. Pabitel "are good at finding joy in the real life in front of them in a very romantic way, and are good at using humor, even black humor, to greatly decorate their every day, even the most tragic days. Their words are seen as unreasonable by rational people, and what they do is not something that respectable people would do. They kept talking incessantly, as if language had chosen him to see themselves

through his mouth and prove how capable they were” [3]. In other words, Pabitel is naive rather than utilitarian. He represents Czechs's cynical attitude and pursuit of freedom spirit, such as the endless paibin in life comedy, the poetic resident Kolemak and the mischievous Lacsnik. Under the wave of urbanization, rural and urban people represent Czech tradition and modernity, respectively. Urbanization is undoubtedly the mainstream of social development. In urbanization, most rural people move to cities, and traditional lifestyles seem out of place. At the same time, traditional Czech rural areas are disappearing. Life comedy, through the incompatible comedic images of rural bumpkins, makes the urban-rural conflict concrete at the level of human conflict.

Menzel's comedic characters are ordinary people with significant flaws, “They are also dreamers who fall while running, innocent victims of being teased, ideal chasers who stumble and fall in front of reality, and innocent dreamers who are maliciously watched by life. But they are first and foremost absent-minded people” [4]. The characters of Milos and Parville are reactionary and crazy. The suffering of the characters finally points to the social and institutional reasons. The simple pursuit of crazy sex in the suffering reflects the optimism and absentmindedness of the characters. In the life comedy, comedy characters such as Pippin, Comalec and Lakshnik are still optimistic, but their suffering is attributed to family and personal reasons, which has nothing to do with politics and system. While urbanization is developing rapidly, these small "townsmen" still live traditionally, and their personal living habits, speaking styles and moral standards never compromise the industrialized social environment, As “the slogan above the Prague Film Academy (FAMU) portal states, we must always stand on the free and ‘wrong’ side, never falling behind” [5].

### 3.1 Folk Storyteller

Cutting it short is adapted from Hrabal's novel *Postřižiny*, the novel is adapted from Hrabal's childhood, and the character is real, “Uncle Paibin, who used to be a shoemaker, is experienced, knowledgeable, humorous, optimistic, unrestrained, and has endless stories. He told the story vividly, rubbing the ‘he’ in the story with the ‘I’ in reality, plus the ‘you’ of the audience, so that you can feel the same, and rush

out of the suffering with the protagonist of the story, with joy, anger, sorrow and joy” [6]. He was the uncle of Hrabal. He came to his home when Hrabal was ten years old and became a storekeeper in the brewery. He lived there for more than 40 years until his death. Herabal once said that paibin was actually his spiritual father. Many years later, someone asked him, “if you can still meet people from the past, who would you most like to see?” he said without thinking, “Uncle Paibin”, which shows Hrabal's love for this character.

Someone once translated the pabitel characters in Hrabal's works, such as Paibin, into “Shenkan clan”. In the film, Paibin is a “Shenkan clan” who talks loudly and eloquently. He is knowledgeable, humorous, optimistic and energetic. Paibin is a symbol of spirit. His cheerful and optimistic character and his wonderful description of life awaken the poetic spirit of the mentally silent and dedicated workers' hearts, which makes his brother very uncomfortable, because this capitalized brother is dedicated to work all day and has no spiritual life to speak of, while his sister-in-law is very beautiful and likes to communicate with people every day. In the prototype of the novel, the brewery manager and the woman are Hrabal's parents, In Hrabal's memory, his father was a workaholic who wanted to drill a hole in the world and didn't want to do anything while his mother was a cheerful, cheerful, drama obsessed, well-dressed person who loved to be the center wherever he went. Under the strict requirements of his parents, Hrabal's frustration in learning when he was young made him disgusted with his parents' elite life, and he was well-informed Uncle Paibin, who spoke funny, became the spiritual pillar of his gray childhood. Jokes and magical language are the spiritual wealth in daily life and the poetic flavor of life. Paibin's storyteller's performance gives poetic flavor to ordinary life. In this sense, jokes and humor are an important way to realize Czech spiritual life.

### 3.2 Poetically Inhabited Colemark

Old Colemark represents the traditional Czech people forgotten by the rapid development of the city. Colemark has many good qualities, such as hard-working and simple, love of life, humor and open-minded. The biggest difference between the elderly and the city people is that they abide by the natural lifestyle, work at sunrise and return at sunset, never forget their

lost loved ones, and are full of enthusiasm for art and life. The elderly's lifestyle is almost Tao Yuanming's. The elderly hope to live with young people, but modern people just like the rural scenery, not the traditional way of life. In this sense, Colemark represents the Czech national character of advocating nature. The death of the elderly means that the Czech tradition has gradually disappeared in the process of urbanization.

### 3.3 Homesick Lachnik

In all of Menzel's films, Lachnik is the most typical clown image. He has buckteeth and is easy to turn when walking. When he sees people, he always giggles. He puts on his headphones and indulges in music. He even sleeps in a carriage that is about to fall down in the sand. The anxious master scolds him and helps the master watch the reverse. As a result, the master breaks the traveler's doorpost and loses 500 yuan. When eating, he dumps his meal on the master's seat, Childlike innocence makes this character cute, but it also embarrasses people around him. Although lachnik has been trying hard to keep up with his master, he always disappoints his master because of his stupidity. The characters in life comedies seem to be out of touch with the real world. They are short and failed in the real world. The kind-hearted laksnick is unwilling to kill pigeons. He is hardworking and docile, loves music, and occasionally plays pranks in life, and even looks at the dangers he has encountered before with a joking attitude. Laksnick represents the traditional Czech people.

These three typical comedic characters build up a spiritual portrait of the Czech national tradition from the language of humor, poetic attitude and rigid action respectively. In terms of their spiritual core these comedic characters point to the world of the free spirit, the Czechs, who grew up in the land of fairy tales and poems, may not be associated with greatness, they always run away or stop in the face of difficulties, "We Czechs are short and not so heroic, we can't be like Poles charging up on our warhorses to fight against the tanks" [7]. But their defense of human dignity and love of life in the face of difficulties are still worthy of respect.

### 4. Life Carousal and Great Feast

In the face of death, the most precious thing in the world is the time of life, which will eventually grow old, leaving everyone's

memories of what they saw, heard, heard and felt, and finally turning into golden yellow. This is undoubtedly the most precious spiritual wealth that every ordinary person has. After three rounds of wine and five flavors of food, with the music of the nation, ordinary people use jokes and exaggerations to make the most sincere emotional memories, this is the poetry of life. The most comic scenes in life comedy are banquets. There are family banquets and post funeral parties in section near a forest, pork eating parties in cutting it short, and many small parties under the grave and a large party in my sweet little village. From the perspective of phenomenology, film is the meeting between people. Although meeting is not equal to meeting, meeting does provide good conditions for meeting. Menzel is keen on describing the banquet. Like Hrabal, he is full of interest in the rich dialogue between various characters in the banquet. The whole film of the snowprop Festival is closely around the banquet.

Bakhtin put forward the concept of two kinds of life, "one is a conventional, very serious and frowning life, which is subject to the strict hierarchical order. The other is a carnival square style free life, full of double laughter, full of casual and informal communication with everyone" [8]. The banquet is the concentrated embodiment of the carnival spirit of the Czech people. When the Chinese see the snowprop Festival, they can't help thinking that Tao Yuanming might agree with this lifestyle if he lives in modern times. In the small town called kors, the green shade is lush, wild boars pass through the town, goats sit with people drinking and watching TV, people wake up on the apple pile, neighbors quarrel and care for each other, and the protagonist is perfunctory to the heavy work at home It is the banquet that lights up everyone's ordinary life as soon as there is a chance. The film starts with the banquet, runs through it, and finally the banquet.

The core plot of the film is that three people found a wild boar, and then three people chased the wild boar across the town with shotguns. In the process, more and more people joined them, and finally shot and killed the wild boar in the classroom at the border of the town. But because the wild boar was found in the hunting area of the next town, the people of the two towns attended the wild boar banquet together at the suggestion of the teacher, Men, women, young and old all participated in the banquet. Even

dogs and sheep attended the banquet. At the banquet, everyone took photos, played musical instruments, drank beer and ate pork together. The people of the two towns loved each other. The young people sprouted the seeds of love, and everyone bragged about their experiences and hobbies. Czech Republic is such a country that attaches importance to happy life. Although living in poverty, we can still get together optimistically. Although they can sit and drink beer with goats, watch TV, and take goats out for a trip in the midst of heavy labor, the dilemma is in contrast to people's optimism and openness. The dialogue between people has never been just for the simple exchange of information, but for the love of life and pride in their ordinary past. In the Czech Republic, Like Menzel, "the role of intellectuals (scholars, artists, scientists) is often crucial to the creation and preservation of a national identity" [9]. Film is not only a commercial art, but also a carrier of national culture, and the banquet, as a "meaningful form", symbolizes the culture of the Czech nation [10].

### 5. Conclusion

"The narrative tendency to put aside major historical events and heroes, and to focus on insignificant and ordinary people in history, and to show their daily behavior, especially the trivialities of family life" is Menzel's consistent style of creation, and is also an important source of poetry and humor in his comedy of life. Menzel considered his comedy to be a feast of life, and the humor to be a Czech salute to life, transcending nature, family life, and mundane reality. Showing human quarrels, games and festive gatherings is the content expression of his comedy of life. Poetic rural scenes, carnivalesque dialogues, chasing games and ritualized feasts are the central aesthetic features. Despite the fact that after the Velvet Revolution, Western cultural forces represented by Hollywood films entered the Czech Republic in a big way, and many Czech films were gradually

westernized in the process of marketization. However, the tradition of life narrative and nationalized image expression initiated by Menzel's "comedy of life" has not been abandoned, but has been continued in the films of the new generation of young Czech directors.

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