



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *The first need: hunger in Jan Němec's Diamonds of the Night*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/136375/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Article:**

O'Key, D orcid.org/0000-0002-2833-4999 (2016) The first need: hunger in Jan Němec's Diamonds of the Night. *Studies in Eastern European Cinema*, 7 (2). pp. 102-113. ISSN 2040-350X

<https://doi.org/10.1080/2040350X.2016.1155263>

---

© 2016 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group. This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* on 2 Mar 2016, available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2040350X.2016.1155263>

**Reuse**

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

**The First Need: Hunger in Jan Němec's *Diamonds of the Night***

Dominic O'Key  
University of Leeds

This article analyses the semiotic 'grammar' of food (Barthes 1997) in Jan Němec's surreal film *Démanty noci/Diamonds of the Night* (1964). After first locating *Diamonds* within the Czechoslovak New Wave and a tradition of Holocaust literature and cinema, I explore the film's representation of hunger and thirst. My analysis synthesises the film alongside Primo Levi's (1987) evocative meditation on the victims of the Holocaust, arguing that Němec's protagonists become a form of 'living hunger', and enter into a 'condition of pure survival'. The film thus comments on the totalising Nazi mission and its attempt to desubjectify its victims by laying claim to their bodies.

Keywords: Czech cinema; Jan Němec; hunger; Holocaust; Czechoslovak New Wave

Writing in a short essay on food consumption in the early 1960s, French polymath Roland Barthes notes that food is 'the first need' (Barthes 1997, 22). What may seem a rather conspicuous claim is in fact tied up in anthropology and semiotics: Barthes' mission here is to tease out the 'highly structured [...] system of differences' that make up the 'communication' of food. This communication, what Barthes confidently calls a 'veritable grammar' (Barthes 1997, 22), has fascinated theorists ever since, and has led to the founding mantra of the *Food and Foodways* journal: 'eating is as much a cultural and social as a biological activity' (Counihan 1985, 1). These studies, however, are almost

exclusively concerned with a timeless image of society; rarely do they attempt to analyse how the grammar of food changes in times of crisis. The Holocaust is one such crisis, a phenomenon that has been described – albeit problematically – by German historian Dan Diner as a *Zivilisationsbruch* (1988, 1), a rupture or break with civilisation. It is no surprise that this rupture radically altered people's relation to food: historical narratives and survivor testimonies abound, and it is uncommon for aesthetic representations of the Holocaust to shun the opportunity to dwell on food's role, or, in many cases, its absence. In *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993), arguably the most globally popular fictional portrayal of the Holocaust, food is never far away: the Nazis' lavish lifestyle of wine and caviar is painfully – and to an extent even predictably – contrasted with the starving victims; in the ghettos, Jewish families push jewellery into morsels of bread, swallowing them before round-ups; upon liberation at the film's close, Nowak dryly says 'we could use some food.'

In this essay I want to pay close attention to the representation of hunger and thirst, and to how food's 'veritable grammar' is represented cinematically. To do this I will closely read Jan Němec's *Démanty noci/Diamonds of the Night* (1964), arguing that its protagonists become – to evoke Primo Levi (1987, 80) – 'living hunger'. Levi's memoirs serve as a fascinating backdrop to any critical interpretation of the Holocaust, and I would first like to explore and linger over Levi's phrase 'living hunger'. In *Se quest è un uomo/If This is a Man*, Levi writes the sentence *Il lager è la fame: noi stessi siamo la fame, fame vivente* (Levi 1989a, 126), translated as 'the camp is hunger: we ourselves are hunger, living hunger' (1989b, 80). The Italian *vivente* is worth pausing over, particularly seeing as it implies the present-tense. In Levi's works – as in so many other survivor narratives – the camp is a space of desubjectification, one that strips the inmates

to a point of Agambenian 'bare life' (Agamben 1998, 10). 'Fame vivente', then, situates the desubjectified victim precisely within the present moment, a moment that is at once a moment of life *and* death; the inmates are slowly dying of hunger, yet it is this very hunger that propels them into Being, making them disturbingly aware of their being-alive. It is this complicated but compelling paradox of corporeality and subjectivity (as Nietzsche put it, 'the body is a more astonishing idea than the old "soul"' [1967, 349]) that interests me about *Diamonds*, a film that depicts two protagonists who face uncertain futures and so always *live in* the moment. I will first situate the film as part of the Czechoslovak New Wave's post-Holocaust cinema tradition, after which I will closely read the chronology of *Diamonds* from three interconnecting angles: thirst, hunger and capture. Each of these focuses poses interesting developments and contradictions in how representations of somatic desire are fundamentally affected by being placed within the Holocaust.

### **The Czechoslovak New Wave: an *apéritif***

Emerging from the post-Stalinist political thaw of the 1950s and 60s (cf. Liehm 1974; Iordanova 2003; Hames 2005), the Czechoslovak New Wave was a 'frequently oppositional and subversive' (Owen 2011, 9) movement that rejected the state's demand for socialist realist cinema. Utilising surrealist and avant-garde aesthetics, its directors often produced films replete with lyricism and Kafkaesque levels of futility (Hames 2005, 140). The New Wave's key concern, as Dina Iordanova (2003, 44) argues, is a 'dialectical interplay with history', fusing the subject's existential and psychological concerns with historical events as the backdrop. The Holocaust became one of Czechoslovak cinema's major filmmaking themes, with works such as *Romeo, Julie a*

*tmal/Romeo, Juliet and Darkness* (Jiří Weiss, 1960) and *Obchod na korze/The Shop on Main Street* (Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos, 1965) attracting global attention at international film festivals. Iordanova (74) points towards the New Wave's preoccupation with the Holocaust as a way to reconcile or grapple with the Nazi regime's most brutal atrocities, most of which took place across the countries of East Central Europe. While Iordanova's historicising is correct, it nevertheless fails to address how the New Wave was attentive to the Czechoslovak state's role as both victim *and* perpetrator: for many Czechs and Slovaks, the Nazi invasion and occupation was in fact not resisted but welcomed. As Ewa Mazierska (2008, 34) argues in her monograph on masculinities in Polish and Czechoslovak Cinema, there are in fact two overarching trends in the New Wave's representation of the Holocaust: on the one hand there are films of resistance, such as Jiří Menzel's *Ostře sledované vlaky/Closely Observed Trains* (1966), in which ordinary people stage small acts of rebellion against the Nazi mission; and, on the other hand, there are films of cowardice and collaboration, in which the Czechoslovak state's war 'sins' are exposed. Mazierska neatly summarises the complicated and multitudinous artistic representations of the Holocaust: 'combining collaboration with resistance [...] became a Czech speciality' (34).

Mazierska catalogues *Diamonds* as part of the latter field, that is as a film dealing with Czechoslovak society's 'cowardice, conformism and indifference' to the plight of the Jews (34). While I agree that this is certainly true of the film's third and final act, I also suggest that it provides a much more complicated portrayal. Indeed, Němec's *Diamonds* is in many ways the epitome of the New Wave's interplay with the Holocaust, combining both collaboration *and* resistance within its short 63 minute running time. *Diamonds* primarily locates itself within the psyche of the victim, hence offering a study

of subjectivity and somatic desire in times of crisis; it plays with and alludes to French avant-garde cinema on numerous occasions, mixing gestural *Cinéma Pur* hallmarks with a historical framework;<sup>i</sup> and finally, it resists the more sentimental and clichéd narratives of hope that so often accompany Holocaust cinema.<sup>ii</sup>

It is surprising, then, that while Czech critics such as Antonin Liehm have paid particular attention to the film, it has drawn little sustained critical commentary from English-speaking scholars (Hames 2005, 167).<sup>iii</sup> Iordanova (75) briefly discusses *Diamonds* as a 'masterpiece' that 'explores the psychological state of the [Holocaust's] victims' (2003, 75). Peter Hames (167), perhaps the most eminent British scholar on Czech and Slovak cinema, provides a more developed close reading of the film in *The Czechoslovak New Wave*, citing Němec's controversial rejection of realism as a method for universalising its plot. Hames is right to contend that Němec resisted the objectivity of historical realism, particularly so if we want to take the director himself at his word; in an interview with the late novelist Josef Škvorecký, Němec claims that 'the director must create his own world [...] a world independent of reality, as it appears at the time' (1970, 10). Hames' analysis places too much emphasis on the 'independence' of the film's reality, so much so that in his more recent work Hames also labels *Diamonds* a 'hallucinatory dream world' (2009, 103). Focusing in on the surrealist elements over and above its historical resonances, Hames' conclusions ultimately detract from the film's visceral quality as a Holocaust escape narrative.<sup>iv</sup> It is important to remember, too, that Němec's only previous work, a short film called *Sousto*, translated as *A Loaf of Bread* or *The Morsel* (1960), is also set during the Nazi occupation. *Sousto* is in many respects a cinematic preface to *Diamonds*, metonymically representing the wider themes of its feature length sister: both *Sousto* and *Diamonds* are dedicated to representing the

intersections of the Holocaust and hunger. Consequently, for Hames to situate *Diamonds* within a 'dream world' is to judge it not by its whole but its parts, wrenching the film away from its Holocaust setting and depoliticising it in the process. Most recently, Jakob Ladegaard uses *Diamonds* as a way to anchor and then illuminate his own analysis of Jerzy Skolimowski's *Essential Killing* (2010) and Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995). Ladegaard's references to *Diamonds* accurately position the film as representing the contested sites of global politics and the 'individual human instinct for survival' (2013, 182). All of this serves to bolster an argument constructed around critiquing US ideology and the generic capabilities of Westerns, and hence treating *Essential Killing* and *Dead Man* as anti-Westerns. My essay, however, is concerned with reading *Diamonds* rather than merely *using* it; I thus return to the film itself, avoiding its descendants entirely, in order to stage my discussion of hunger.

*Diamonds* opens with a black screen and the faint sound of tolling bells. The bells continue ringing for two minutes, spaced apart by long silences. The titles slowly fade in and out of the darkness. Suddenly we are on the outskirts of a forest, and two teenage boys – played by Antonín Kumbera and Ladislav Janský – burst onto the screen. The establishing tracking shot captures them running from left to right, falling into a dirty stream, regaining their balance and then sprinting on. In the background are the deafening sounds of a chugging train, the screams of 'Halt! Halt!' and the firing of rifles. Miroslav Ondříček's shaking handheld camera follows the action, tilting on its axis and zooming so closely that it almost becomes a third participant (Hames 2005, 168). There is a momentary glimpse of the train's carriages as they trail into the distance (Figure 1). Automatically, then, these first ten seconds identify – or at the very least hint towards – the Holocaust as the film's historical frame.<sup>v</sup>

If the train and the screams of German are not evocative enough then the boys' coats certainly are. 'KL' is painted in large and bold capital letters on their backs, branding them for identification: *Konzentrationslager*, concentration camp. In a symbolic gesture, they throw off their coats while running and hide in the dense forest. *Diamonds* thus opens as an escape and survival narrative that focuses on the interplay of subject and history. Unconventionally, however, the issue of survival is not about the future, about what the boys will do after they have escaped. Instead it is about the present, the very *now* of surviving. This present tense survival brings the needs of hunger and thirst to the forefront as their most immediate concerns, as what Barthes termed 'the first need'.

### **Thirst**

After escaping into the forest, Němec slows the film's pace with long takes: the boys breathe and wheeze, spit and cough, and slowly wander through the trees. Coming to a stream, they throw water over their faces and crane their necks to drink from the source (Figure 2). The purity of the water serves as a shock juxtaposition to their excretions of the previous scene. No words are spoken, nor have they been for the film's previous seven minutes; there is only the overdubbed diegetic sound of slurping and swilling. Writing in her avant-garde testimony *Auschwitz and After*, Charlotte Delbo describes the painful experience of thirst in the camps:

There is the thirst of the morning and the thirst of the evening, the thirst of the day and the thirst of the night. Upon awakening in the morning, lips move but no sound comes out. Anguish fills your whole being, an anguish as gripping as that of dreams. Is this what it means to be dead? Lips try to speak but the mouth is paralysed. A mouth cannot form words when it is dry, with no saliva. (1995, 70)



The mouth's purpose is twofold: it is a place of consumption and production. Delbo's writing illuminates this idea, arguing in part that a healthy, working mouth needs to consume in order to produce: 'a mouth cannot form words when it is dry, with no saliva.' Language, therefore, is at the will of thirst, and it is the very same in *Diamonds*; it is only after they have drank from the stream that the film's first dialogue occurs: 'Come closer to me', one says to the other. This attests to the sparse dialogue throughout *Diamonds*, totalling no more than 17 lines between the two boys over the entire film's duration. They are indeed rendered mute by thirst. Utterances are mostly short, monosyllabic and declarative ('I'm cold', 'Sit down next to me', 'Wait for me'), with questions such as 'Are you asleep?' never being answered. Without satisfying their thirst, the boys live without the ability to speak; they are consumed by thirst, driven only to satisfy their somatic needs. As Delbo chillingly confirms: 'I can think of nothing else but drinking' (73). The 'nothing else but' of hunger and thirst is integral to the idea of 'living hunger', negating all experience outside of their somatic desires.

Nicholas Chare's recent work on the abject and the Holocaust develops an astute reading of Delbo's experience of thirst, providing by way of similarity an informative approach to the 'living hunger' of *Diamonds*. Chare describes thirst as an 'unmediated encounter' in which 'drinking becomes *you*, until there is nothing else but swilling and gulping, water, lips, tongue, throat, stomach. [...] This is drinking at Auschwitz' (Chare 2011, 111; Chare's emphasis). The film's subjects are consequently in a process of becoming. Through being subsumed by thirst they *are* thirst, living thirst; they become thirst and thirst becomes them. In one of the film's most visually stunning scenes, Němec uses a shock cut to juxtapose children sledging down a hill with the boys standing in a

rain storm (Figure 3). In the snow, the happy screams of children ring out while large family homes sit on top of the hill. In contrast to this imaginative scene of play, the escaped boys are alone and soaking wet. Yet there is a hint of ecstasy here. They stare upward, open mouthed, drinking whatever drops they can. With arms up and palms facing the sky, this is a surrender to both nature and the body. For Hames, this scene, more than any other, most intimately represents the boys' physical condition, showing how their needs 'are directly linked to [the] natural world' (Hames 2005, 168–9).

Němec's following match cuts bolster this argument, mirroring the static shot of the boys with close-ups of other metonymic parts of the forest: tree-stumps, branches, puddles and leaves. The textures of the scene therefore draw a visual simile between the boys and nature. The cinematic close-up, as Mary Ann Doan argues, 'embodies the pure fact of presentation, of manifestation, of showing – a "here it is"' (2003, 91). And there they are, and there it is; in a forest, trees surrounding them.

In their degraded state, compared to elements of the forest and responding only to instinctive behavioural drives, the boys call to mind Martin Heidegger's (1996) conception of animals and plants as being poor in the world, or *weltarm*. Their free will as world-forming (*weltbildend*) humans is compromised by their becoming-thirst. Thirst and hunger are forms of poverty (*arm*), an impoverishment that fractures human subjectivity. Consequently, the Holocaust is represented as an event that strips away the human and can even be said to puncture Heidegger's distinction between man and animal. The Nazi's totalising mission lays claim to the bodies of its victims, represented here through the characters' starvation. The camera remains at a distance, less obtrusive than it was in the opening section and accommodating the nature into the scene. The sound of rain grows increasingly louder over the scene's two minute running time and

ecstasy turns to distress. If the boys rely on nature then they are also at its mercy, writhing under the heavy rain like animals clambering for shelter, holding onto a nearby tree with their faces covered.

## **Hunger**

As Barthes implies, thirst and hunger sit side by side as humanity's 'first needs' (Barthes 1997, 22). Levi lists these somatic desires as essential to the 'condition of pure survival' (1989b, 33) that he entered during his time in Monowitz-Buna. This condition is intimately linked to his 'living hunger'. If the boys are always in a process of becoming-thirst, then they are also becoming-hunger. Directly after the rain storm, they hide behind trees and watch as a woman walks across a field. She hands a farmer, presumably her husband, a flask of soup and a sandwich. The camera cross-cuts back and forth, over and over, alternating the close-ups between the farmer and the boys (Figure 4). As the farmer takes a bite, the camera returns to one of the boys for a reaction shot: he gulps numerous times, eyes fixed on the food, his head shaking and dripping with raindrops. The purity of his lived hunger renders him momentarily paralysed, statue-like as he swallows air. Branches obstruct the vision of the camera as it tracks-in on his face. A horse-drawn plough runs through the soil, elevating the ideas of nourishment and fertility as the farmer eats. The camera pans from left to right, following the plough and stopping to focus on the bags of food. Again, it cuts to the boy who takes another gulp. The repeated simulation of swallowing shows a somatic desire that overrides and consumes all. His eyes widen, invoking Delbo's recollection of the camp's hungry men and their 'wolves' eyes' (21).

Subsequently the camera even becomes their eyes in a memorable point-of-view shot, and it then follows the woman as she walks back to the farmhouse. The boys wait outside the barn, swallowing repeatedly while she feeds her dog and chickens. Hunger has led the boys to their first human encounter of the film, and the need to eat therefore simultaneously increases and decreases their chance of survival: eating is essential for their *present* hour-to-hour survival but, of course, the prospect of human contact risks recapture, the *future* of their survival. As the boy breathes heavily, the camera looks around the farmhouse from his perspective: a plate, a table cloth, a wallpaper, with a clock ticking in the background. This comfortable existence is placed in direct opposition to the boys' experiences. A sign proclaiming '*Mit Gott*' ('with God') hangs on the wall, aligning the house with the infamous slogan *Kinder, Küche, Kirche*. In one of the film's most violent and hallucinatory moments, the boy imagines different ways in which he can get the food, all the while the woman looks back at him with a blank gaze. He springs forward and clubs her over her head, taking the food and running. This happens four times; on each occasion her skirt is slightly higher up her thighs as she lies on the floor. A violently sexual – and sexually violent – hunger, then, is conflated with their food hunger: here, desire seems to take control of the body, with the conflation foregrounding the importance of desire in Němec's work.

The woman cuts three slices of bread and places them on the table, where the boy snatches them up. When they try and eat the bread, however, their mouths are too dry. 'Nothing goes down if you have no saliva in your mouth', Delbo writes (73). Němec places an intense emphasis on evoking physical sensation; their mouths are cut by the bread, and the blood bubbles from their tongues (Hames 2005, 168). 'She must give me some milk', one of the boys implores as blood runs down his chin. Walking past the

barking German Shepherd, he returns to the farmhouse and opens his mouth to the woman, revealing the blood (Figure 5). What does it mean for the woman to not only give them bread but also milk? Writing again on food as cultural phenomenon in *Mythologies*, Barthes (1993, 60) contends that 'milk is cosmetic, it joins, covers, restores. Moreover, its purity [...] is a token of strength, of a strength which is not revulsive, not congestive, but calm, white, lucid, the equal of reality.' For Barthes, the wounds of hunger and thirst are joined up by the restorative power of milk, and it is this scene of eating, half way through the film, that contains a fleeting moment of calm. However, the boys leave before their food is finished. The symbolic rupture of the Holocaust means that their hunger can never be satisfied, and that attempting this itself jeopardises their freedom.

Up until this point, the film's narrative posits its protagonists as the subjects, and in the silent meeting of woman and boy there is a confrontation between subject and other. In the setting of the Holocaust, however, this encounter pierces the subject/other boundary. The boys, of course, are the negated and desubjectified others of the totalitarian Nazi mission. They remain nameless throughout the film and have been simply called 'First' and 'Second' in critical commentary, echoing the tattooed number identification procedure of the concentration camps. The French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, whose work has a strong relationship with the Holocaust, argues that subjectivity itself is formed in and through our subjection, or 'proximity', to the other. The woman, therefore, has her subjectivity confirmed by the face-to-face encounter with the hungry boy (cf. Levinas 1985). The giving of food (and hence, life) is a charitable gesture of self-confirmation as well as an acceptance of the other. Levinas' work on Being frequently uses bread as a metonym for comparable charitable actions of

‘sensitivity’; giving bread is to ‘give oneself in giving it. [...] Giving to the other the bread from one’s mouth is being able to give up one’s soul for another’ (1981, 72–9). The boys’ hunger reaches out beyond them, placing a Levinasian ethical demand on the woman.

## Capture

In this final section, I will close read the boys’ capture using Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1984) notion of the banquet. The closing act of *Diamonds* is signalled by the woman in the farmhouse who pulls her headscarf tight. When vacating the scene, she exposes behind her an out-of-focus painting of Christ, perhaps a sly comment on the twisted Christianity of Nazi Germany. Němec then cuts to a group of men with rifles. Surprisingly, though, it is not a group of Nazi soldiers tasked with tracking down the missing boys. In fact, it is a band of senile old men. These are presumably *Sudeten* Germans, the beneficiaries of Hitler’s annexation of former Czechoslovakia in 1938. During the chase, the old men stumble up the hill, many of them resting on their walking sticks as they try firing shots at the boys. It is an absurd scene and, as Michael Brooke comments, ‘the contrast between the ages of the boys and their captors is impossible to ignore: [...] these decrepit old men would seem to have more of a future [than the boys]’ (Brooks 2010, DVD). Attempting to simulate military procedure, the men stand in line according to rank and slowly enclose on the hobbling protagonists. Yet this slow and absurd chase scene bears more similarity to an elaborate fox hunt than it does a military exhibition.

Once captured, the boys watch on as the men, further resembling a hunting party, sit down together and banquet (Figure 6). The camera focuses closely on a man eating sausage and bread; the sound of him slurping is intrusively loud. The camera then cuts

back to the boys, lying down in defeat, before revealing all the old men eating sausages and bread. This oppressive hierarchical situation is Kafkaesque in tone, and the feast echoes Mikhail Bakhtin's chapter on banquet imagery in the works of Rabelais:

The official feast asserted all that was stable, unchanging, perennial: the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions. It was the triumph of a truth already established, the predominant truth that was put forward as eternal and indisputable. (1984, 9)

The official banquet, therefore, is the affirmation of victory, reinstating the stability of the Nazi Holocaust mission; the hierarchy of totalitarianism is restored with the capture of the escapees. The men sing songs, drink beer and dance while the boys contemplate their fate. In Bakhtin's theory, food has the potential to create a 'triumph over the world' (281), and as such the hunters' feast is a symbolic triumph of the existing hierarchy – there can be no carnivalesque transgressions here. 'Man's encounter with the world in the act of eating', Bakhtin posits, 'is joyful, triumphant; he triumphs over the world, devours it without being devoured himself. The limits between man and the world are erased, to man's advantage' (281). The absurd joy of the hunting party is counterposed with the captured boys who are turned away and facing the wall.

For Bakhtin, eating can signify the 'interaction with the world; the body transgresses here its own limits: it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world's expense' (281). And yet by being made to turn and look away, the men shut off the boys' interaction with the world; our protagonists are denied the possibility of rending the world apart. Consequently, the *Sudeten* men avoid the Levinasian face-to-face encounter that calls for an ethical responsibility towards the

other. The boys are deprived of this interaction with the world, and are hence soon to be devoured themselves.

The film ends with an increase in flashbacks, all of which serve as important reminders of the 'living hunger' that the boys have become. Throughout the film, 'flashbacks and fantasy are used to create a continuum in which past, present and future comprise a single reality' (Hames 2009, 156). This 'single reality', therefore, is of a thirst and hunger that consumes the protagonists, existing over the film's entire running time. In the closing scenes of *Diamonds* the flashbacks become increasingly focused on somatic desire, revisiting the boys drinking at the stream while – in the present – the old men tear apart a cooked chicken. The banqueting triggers the boys' memories, and the dynamic cutting reveals their innermost thoughts, counterposing their ecstatic devouring of nature with the hierarchical victory over the world of the *Sudeten* captors. The diegetic sound is loud and invasive, and when one of the men breaks into song, he sings in a slurred Bavarian tone: 'Let us drink brothers / let us live without troubles. / Let's have some kummel, / let's have some rye, / let our women get furious with rage.' This ritualistic song, in combination with the banal lyrics that equate masculinity and consumption, confirms the Bakhtinian official hierarchies at work. The old men desubjectify the boys through their own eating and drinking.

### ***Digestif***

The victim's body is a contested zone, caught within the (bio)political machinations of the totalising Nazi mission. If *Diamonds* achieves just one thing, it is its bringing-to-presence of the complexities of subjectivity and corporeality as filtered



through the Holocaust. Its protagonists echo the bodily claims of other Holocaust survivors, testifying to the 'living hunger' of Primo Levi. Their struggles, chronologically plotted throughout the film, amass to provide a cinematic grammar of food, of hunger, of Being-in the Holocaust. While the cinematic grammar speaks for itself, the victims are permanently rendered mute by the absence of food. Their mouths (their subjectivity) cannot produce *logos* without the joining, covering and restorative (Barthes 1993, 60) acts of consumption. Instead, it is the boys who are consumed: consumed with hunger and thirst, and violently consumed within the Bakhtinian hierarchies of their captors. This consumption reaches its nasty conclusion as the film ends: the boys are taken outside and shot.

---

<sup>i</sup> *Diamonds*' visual imagery is oftentimes reminiscent of avant-gardist French filmmakers such as Henri Chomette and René Clair, and it evokes European surrealist film on many occasions: one particularly striking example is when a small colony of ants gathers on top of one of the boys' hands. The image lingers over the still hand as the ants crawl, neatly speaking back to Buñuel and Dalí's *Un Chien Andalou* (1929).

<sup>ii</sup> Sentimental Holocaust cinema abounds: *La vita è bella/Life is Beautiful* (Roberto Benigni, 1998) *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) *Sophie's Choice* (Alan J. Pakula, 1982); and more recently, *The Reader* (Stephen Daldry, 2008), *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (Mark Herman, 2008) and *The Book Thief* (Brian Percival, 2013).

<sup>iii</sup> In addition to Liehm, Jiří Janoušek (1964) has also paid particular attention to the film. A more recent book, the co-authored *Démanty všednosti/Diamonds of the Everyday* (2002), has similarly given some space to *Diamonds*.

<sup>iv</sup> Similarly, *Diamonds* has been called 'a timeless story almost completely rid of historical details' (Košuličová 2001).

<sup>v</sup> The train, for instance, is one of the most haunting and familiar cinematic images of the Holocaust (Zelizer 2001: 1). Cf. *Pasażerka/Passenger* (Andrzej Munk, 1963), *Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann, 1985), *Europa/Zentropa* (Lars Von Trier, 1991), *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993), *Train de Vie/Train of Life* (Radu Mihăileanu, 1998), among others.

## References

- Agamben, Giorgio. 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1984. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Barthes, Roland. 1993. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. London: Vintage.
- Barthes, Roland. 1997. "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption." *Food and Culture: A Reader*. Edited by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik. New York: Routledge: 20–27.
- Brinkema, Eugenie. 2014. *The Forms of the Affects*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Brooks, Michael. 2010. Commentary booklet enclosed in DVD. *Diamonds of the Night*. Second Run.
- Chare, Nicholas. 2011. *Auschwitz and Afterimages: Abjection, Witnessing and Representation*. London: I. B. Taurus.
- Counihan, Carole. 1985. "English Editorial." *Food and Foodways: Explorations in the History and Culture of Human Nourishment* 1: 1–2.
- Counihan, Carole, and Penny Van Esterik, eds. 1997. *Food and Culture: A Reader*. New York: Routledge.
- Delbo, Charlotte. 1995. *Auschwitz and After*. Translated by Rosette C. Lamont. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Diner, Dan, ed. 1988. *Zivilisationsbruch: Denken nach Auschwitz*. Fischer: Frankfurt am Main.
- Doane, Mary Ann. 2003. "The Close-Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema." *Differences* 14 (3): 89–111.
- Hames, Peter. 2005. *The Czechoslovak New Wave*. 2nd edn. London: Wallflower Press.
- Hames, Peter. 2009. *Czech and Slovak Cinema: Theme and Tradition*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1996. *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude and Solitude*. Translated by William McNeill and Nicholas Walker. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Iordanova, Dina. 2003. *Cinema of the Other Europe: The Industry and Artistry of East Central European Film*. London: Wallflower Press.
- Janoušek, Jiří. 1964. "Démanty noci". *Tvár* 1: 33.
- Košulíková, Ivana. 2001. "The Free Expression of Spirit: Jan Němec's Conception of 'Pure Film' in his Post-1989 Works." *Central Europe Review* 3 (17). Accessed 11/11/2014. [http://www.ce-review.org/01/17/kinoeye17\\_kosulicova.html](http://www.ce-review.org/01/17/kinoeye17_kosulicova.html).
- Ladegaard, Jakob. 2013. "On the Frontier of Politics: Ideology and the Western in Jerzy Skolimowski's *Essential Killing* and Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man*." *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 4 (2): 181–197.

- Levi, Primo. 1987. *If This is a Man and The Truce*. Translated by Stuart Wolf. London: Abacus.
- Levi, Primo. 1989a. *Se quest è un uomo*. Turin: Einaudi.
- Levi, Primo. 1989b. *The Drowned the Saved*. Translated by Raymond Rosenthal. London: Abacus.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1981. *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1985. *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Translated by Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Liehm, Antonín J. 1974. *Closely Watched Films: the Czechoslovak Experience*. New York: International Arts and Science Press.
- Mazierska, Ewa. 2008. *Masculinities in Polish, Czech and Slovak Cinema*. London: Berghahn Books.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1967. *The Will to Power*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale. Edited by Kaufmann. New York: Vintage.
- Owen, Jonathan L. 2011. *Avant-Garde to New Wave: Czechoslovak Cinema, Surrealism and the Sixties*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Škvorecký, Josef. 1970. "The Birth and Death of the Czech New Wave." *Take One* 2 (8): 1–12.
- Zelizer, Barbie, ed. 2001. *Visual Culture and the Holocaust*. London: The Athlone Press.