

Old Worlds and
the New Vision:
The Ethnographic
Modernism of
Karel Plicka's *The
Earth Sings* (1933)

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Old Worlds and the New Vision: The Ethnographic Modernism of Karel Plicka's *The Earth Sings* (1933)

The Rural Face of Modernism

In a contemporary review of Karel Plicka's widely-known 1933 ethnographic documentary film *The Earth Sings* (*Zem spieva*), Jiří Jeníček, writing in *Fotografický obzor* (*Photographic Horizons*), informs us that this 'is not a film of the streets and of coffeehouse intellectuals, because this is a film about simple people, still living just as their ancestors had done centuries ago'.¹ As a characterisation of the film's content this is undeniably correct, for Plicka's film is a portrait of the seemingly-timeless customs and traditions of peasant life in rural Slovakia. Yet the constituency that best appreciated the film upon its original release would doubtless have counted 'coffeehouse intellectuals' among its numbers. As Martin Slivka recounts in his 1982 study of Plicka, *The Earth Sings* received an enthusiastic response from 'the artistic community' and the more 'erudite and well-informed critics', even as much of the rest of Czechoslovakia's viewing public failed to be enticed.²

Several laudatory notices from the Prague press contrasted Plicka's film with the films that *were* popular, 'the soulless products of good commercial practice' then packing in 'the cinemas of our metropolises'.³ *The Earth Sings* stood out above all others as proof of 'what cinema could be when the moving shadows are not simply a commodity'.⁴ Not only did Plicka's work have the distinction of being the first Slovak sound film (albeit one by a Czech director), it was also 'the first Czechoslovak film' that pursued a purely artistic end, 'without compromises or regard for public tastes and distastes'. In other words, *The Earth Sings* was upheld as a work at the forefront of national film art, one that exploited the rich possibilities of image and sound. References abound to the film's formal qualities, its range of photographic tones, and the matching of František Škvor's musical score to the wordless flow of images. It was common to liken the film to non-narrative art forms, to describe it as a 'symphony' or a 'film poem'.⁵ Such descriptions might suggest that Plicka had realised the ambitions of the Devětsil avant-garde a decade earlier to create a 'pure' cinema, a cinema that forsook narrative elements for poetic effects and 'lyrical associations'.⁶ Stanislav Ježek compared Plicka to French impressionist filmmaker Louis Delluc, an important theoretical influence on Devětsil.⁷

In view of these appraisals it seems consistent that Plicka, in *The Earth Sings* and his earlier film work, should have attracted attention from figures close to the Czechoslovak avant-garde, including the above-cited Jeníček, a proponent of progressive photography and later a pioneer of avant-garde army film.⁸ Plicka's earlier film account of rural Slovak life, *Over Hill and Dale* (*Po horách, po dolách*), was enthusiastically reviewed in *Index*, a journal linked to the Brno branch of Devětsil, where critic Petr Denk describes the film as 'a hectic dynamic of forms and colours,

a rhythmic discipline of movement' and, in later coverage of the revised version of the film, explicitly classes it among 'avant-garde films'.⁹

It is interesting to read these rapt reports of pioneering aesthetics and formal dazzle in the light of other (and latterly perhaps dominant) views that have tended to cast Plicka's work, at least in the realm of still photography where he more frequently employed his talents, as 'normally traditionalist' in subject matter and form, a standard against which one might measure the innovations of more experimentally-inclined photographers like Irena Blühová.¹⁰ Even the standing of *The Earth Sings* itself as an avant-garde work has been questioned in more recent analysis.¹¹ If nothing else, the contemporaneous reception of Plicka's films indicates the diversity of the material that avant-garde artistic circles could embrace and even find their own likeness in. Certainly, in many ways, a film like *The Earth Sings*—let alone the less 'artistic' and stylised *Over Hill and Dale*—are not Czechoslovak avant-garde cinema or culture as we know it. The Devětsil movement is known as a cult of modernity that celebrates the utopian possibilities of new technology and the enchantments of the twentieth-century metropolis, an attitude that underpinned the group's very preoccupation with the modern entertainment of film. The actual Czech avant-garde films that followed after Devětsil also tended to be visions of metropolitan life or paeans to the achievements of modern industry, sometimes directly functioning as industrial promotion (as in Svatopluk Innemann's *Prague Shining in Lights* (*Praha v záři světél*, 1928), a 'city symphony' made for the Prague Electric Company). By contrast, Plicka's work, as a return to the 'timelessness' of rural folk tradition, seems to signify a rejection of modern life. Yet Plicka realised his enamoured cinematic accounts of the pre-modern under the conscious influence of Vsevolod Pudovkin, Sergei Eisenstein and the political modernism of montage theory.¹² Moreover, *The Earth Sings*, as Plicka's most celebrated return to traditional life, was a voyage accompanied by the major Czech avant-garde filmmaker of the time, Alexandr Hackenschmied, who served as the film's editor.

Plicka was not the only artist, or the only filmmaker, from Czechoslovakia at this time to apply modernist or avant-garde aesthetics to rural settings and an interest in folk traditions. Michal Bregant has argued that the concern with rural life is a distinct feature of the Central-European version of modernism in the 1930s, a reverse side to the more familiar urban imagery exemplified by the city symphony films.¹³ Two examples that Bregant provides from the world of photography and film are the work of the important avant-garde photographer Jaromír Funke, who documented the wild landscapes and rural communities of Czechoslovakia's less explored regions in his photographic cycles *Primeval Forests* (*Pralesy*) and *Subcarpathian Ruthenia* (*Podkarpatská Rus*) (both 1937–1938), and a feature film by experimental writer and Devětsil founding member Vladislav Vančura, *Faithless Marijka* (*Marijka nevěrnice*, 1934), a blend of folk ballad, naturalism, and Soviet-style modernism also set among the Ruthenian community. Other examples come from the context of ethnographic exploration in which Plicka himself, whose initial professional standing was principally that of a folklorist and collector of folk songs, conducted his 'artistic' endeavours. Though the tradition of ethnographic film was still fledgling in Czechoslovakia in the 1920s and 1930s, this era saw several other striking, if now little-remembered works that also apply montage principles or formalist aesthetics to the documentation of rural environments: notably Tomáš Trnka's *Storm Over the Tatras* (*Bouře nad Tatrami*, 1932), another experiment in combining film and music, and Vladimír Úlehla's *The Disappearing World* (*Mizející svět*, 1932), which is part fictional narrative, part ethnographic musical study.¹⁴

While using Plicka's work and especially *The Earth Sings* as its main focus, this essay will also draw on the examples above to explore the relationship between the avant-garde and ethnographic films about rural life in interwar Czechoslovakia. I will address the common preconditions and preoccupations that enabled the worlds of ethnography and avant-garde art to coexist and interact with one another in this context. I will also analyse the presence of avant-garde aspects in relation to other, seemingly opposing generic labels that have attached themselves to ethnographic representation and to Plicka's work specifically. He has been characterised as a purveyor of idylls in the vein of German 'Heimat', or, alternatively, attacked for exoticising and

idealising the rural Slovaks who appear in this Czech artist's films and photographs. Are such claims accurate? Are any of these qualities consistent with, or even 'recuperable' within, an avant-garde project or sensibility?

Unknown Worlds: Ethnography and the Avant-Garde

As I shall explain in this section, the impulse to document folk culture in the Czech, Moravian, and Slovak regions was propelled by the onset of modernity and industrialisation, and then given further impetus by the experience of new nationhood in the wake of the First World War. Local ethnography of course shares such contexts and determinations with the rise of modernist and avant-garde movements, even if, in many obvious ways, the response to modernity by ethnographers and by avant-gardists went in contrary directions. At the same time, I will suggest that the ethnographic films discussed subscribe to what we might call an avant-garde culture of vision: a desire to expand the limits of the normally visible, an interest in visualising otherness, and a highly dynamic approach to representation. My examples here will be *The Earth Sings* and Vladimír Úlehla's feature *The Disappearing World*, films whose overtly avant-garde stylistic tendencies and at times self-reflexive qualities help to reveal wider and deeper affinities between the ethnographic and the avant-garde 'eye'.

It has been argued that the experience of industrial modernity has fuelled the aims and assumptions of ethnographic exploration as much as it has the visions and programmes of the avant-garde. Catherine Russell, tracing the connections between ethnography, avant-gardism, and the origins of cinema, described cinema and ethnography as 'two aspects of a colonial modernism', tied together by 'a logic of primitivism'.¹⁵ For Russell, primitivism is a 'construction of Western modernism' that arose 'in conjunction with an industrialized society that began to see itself in terms of a loss of innocence'.¹⁶ James Clifford has written in similar terms, arguing that the 'authenticity' sought by classical ethnography in 'primitive' cultures is a relational concept, defined by reference to the very modernity that seemingly endangers it.¹⁷ Russell even draws specific parallels between the ethnographic logic of a primitive innocence in need of 'salvaging' and Walter Benjamin's avant-garde notion of a lost pre-industrial 'aura'.¹⁸

The notion of 'colonial modernism', if it can be applied to the films discussed in this essay, must be qualified by the fact that these ethnographic projects, unlike much of the work examined by Russell or Clifford, were not explorations of distant lands but studies of cultural phenomena from within the same state borders, and sometimes within the ethnographer's own region (as is the case with the Brno-based Úlehla's explorations of rural Moravia). If these texts are guilty of 'colonial' exoticism—a charge that has been levelled at Plicka—then this is a colonialism turned inward. Helping to enable this self-exoticising view after 1918 was Czechoslovakia's specific identity as a new state composed of regions with very uneven levels of development, with the Eastern provinces of Slovakia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia then still predominantly agrarian regions.¹⁹ Yet, in this context too, the disciplines of ethnography and folkloric study grew from the same development towards modernity, as the social and economic upheavals of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries inspired, here as elsewhere, a romantically-tinged fascination with 'the people', folk culture, and rural life.²⁰ Particularly decisive was the epochal year 1848, when the abolition of serfdom across the Austrian empire impelled a new regard for the significance of rural culture and a trend towards collecting folk songs, stories, and proverbs.²¹

In the context of the nineteenth-century Czech and Slovak national revival and then of independent Czechoslovak nationhood in 1918, the investigation of indigenous folk culture took on added importance as part of the quest to discover and define the specific traits of a national culture and identity. In Slovakia, the project of nation-building gave rise to the founding of the Slovak Cultural Association (*Matica slovenská*), an institution that would support the documentation of local culture and, after its re-establishment in 1919, become an extensive sponsor of Plicka's work, including *The Earth Sings*.²² According to Hana Dvořáková, 'the social climate' in Czechoslovakia after 1918 set an emphasis on "national" culture' and thus provoked 'a wave of folklorism', of folk festivities and parades, across the new republic.²³ With specific reference to film, Lucie Česálková



Fig. 14.1. Karel Plicka, *The Earth Sings* (*Zem spieva*, 1933). Film still.
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wrote of the concern to capture 'national representativeness' that provided a framework for the production and exhibition of ethnographic studies, as evident in initiatives of the 1920s like the Film Commission of the Exhibition of National Development (Filmová komise pro Výstavu národního rozvoje), which sought to collate films and photographs portraying Czechoslovak life in all its diversity, from folklore to images of industry.²⁴

Plicka once wrote of his admiration for the 1929 Soviet documentary film *Turksib* (directed by Viktor Turin), describing its depiction of 'the encounter between the old and the new' as one of the qualities he found 'exciting' and close to his own interests.²⁵ Indeed, *The Earth Sings*, like Úlehla's *The Disappearing World*, are films framed by an awareness of Czechoslovakia as a land of old and new, of rural tradition and urban advancement. But where *Turksib* depicts the establishment of modern technology (the titular railway) in the Kazakh desert in positive and harmonious terms, Plicka and Úlehla's work is founded in a sense of the negative and destructive encroachment of modernity.²⁶ Úlehla tended to privilege folk traditions as the authentic expression of national culture, and hence deplored their imminent eradication: 'Our culture, that which is called folk art, its customs and experiences, is rapidly disappearing, as the countryside stops being the countryside and blindly imitates the city, which has virtually no life of its own, nothing that grows out of tradition.'²⁷ *The Earth Sings* directly incorporates this preferential opposition of country to city into its urban-based opening sequence (Fig. 14.1). The message rings clearer in the original version of the film, which features an introductory sequence shot in Prague (this was replaced, during the Occupation years, by a sequence shot in Bratislava). After an initial reverential survey of some of the city's well-known historical monuments, the film shifts focus to 'modern Prague', revealed as a disorienting bustle of cars and pedestrians.²⁸ As Martin Slivka writes, the 'musical accent' accompanying a shot of a female flower-seller isolates 'an intimate detail' from the fleeting, chaotic life of the city and evokes 'a secret desire for the beauty of more permanent values'.²⁹ This is the metropolitan throb familiar from the avant-garde city film, as witnessed by a less ecstatic eye. Yet while Plicka, or Úlehla, may thus look less fondly on the modern metropolis than their avant-garde counterparts, their ethnographic studies are also the product of modernity

in the most concrete and pragmatic sense: it is the inexorable expansion of modernisation that motivates the need to document and thus preserve a disappearing folk culture.

In spite of the cult of traditionalism of which both Plicka and Úlehla generally partake, *The Earth Sings* and *The Disappearing World* both contain tributes of a sort to the modern technology that facilitates the ethnographic endeavour. In *The Disappearing World* this is the phonograph technology used to record the songs of the Moravian village community among whom the film is set. The gramophone is revealed shortly after the arrival of the film's (fictional) protagonist Stana, an ethnographer from the city, who gathers the community in a village hall to demonstrate the functions of the unfamiliar technological device. As a moment of cultural encounter between the 'primitive' and the technologically-advanced, this scene is strikingly comparable to a famous (or notorious) scene from Robert Flaherty's pioneering ethnographic film *Nanook of the North* (1922), in which Nanook reacts with comic mystification upon hearing a phonograph play music. If Úlehla's scene has much less of a crudely 'colonialist' air, it remains a tribute to technological magic as revealed anew by the response of the pre-modern villagers, and amplified visually by close-ups that fetishise and defamiliarise the phonograph. In *The Earth Sings* the technology implicitly celebrated is modern transportation. If the automobiles of the city evoke a sense of transience and chaos, the train proves a means of deliverance from urban life, as, following the opening city scenes, Plicka's camera adopts the viewpoint of the train traveller and propels the viewer on a scenic journey towards the film's main subject matter.

In both cases these technologies can be seen to stand in for the modern, technological implement that is the ethnographer's film camera. The analogy is more literal and direct in *The Disappearing World*, not only because the gramophone, like film technology, is a means of recording and reproduction, but also because Úlehla was himself a collector of folk music: the recorded song in the scene just mentioned plays out to corresponding images of nature, a suggested alignment between Úlehla's different ethnographic activities, between the musicologist who preserves songs and the filmmaker who 'records' images. The analogy in *The Earth Sings* is more abstract but also more interesting. The train itself has barely any onscreen presence in the sequence mentioned, as though the film camera has fully absorbed its role as an agent of boundless mobility. The film camera does for perception what the train does for the physical body, liberating us from our 'human immobility'.³⁰ As the world opens up before Plicka's travelling camera, yielding a succession of images in which rockface looms above us and rivers swell below, in which industry gives way to farmland and wild mountain, this journey is a testament to the kaleidoscopic power of cinema, to the film camera as extension of human vision.

The idea of cinematic point of view as a new, omniscient form of perception, 'liberated' from the normal constraints of seeing, was most famously articulated in Dziga Vertov's conception of the 'kino-eye'.³¹ If Vertov's influence on Plicka's work appears to have been limited, simply one part of the overall impact of Soviet avant-garde film, the extension of vision seems in any case to have been a concern of the avant-garde in general, including in Czechoslovakia, and one of the qualities that attracted avant-gardists to cinema.³² According to Catherine Russell, traditional ethnography wielded the camera as a 'scientific instrument of representation', and in the milieu of avant-garde film this alignment is closer still: capable, as Vertov put it, of seeing 'that which the eye does not see', of making 'the invisible visible', the movie camera *is* a scientific instrument for penetrating reality, an idea fully literalised in Jiří Lehovc's film *The Magical Eye* (*Divotvorné oko*, 1939), an educational short, made within the avant-garde, that demonstrates a new microscopic camera lens by means of wondrous, defamiliarising close-ups of everyday objects.³³ To borrow Vertov's metaphors, the cinema is both microscope and telescope, a means to make manifest what was either present but hidden or absent and impossibly remote; as such the camera unites the aims of science and ethnography and puts both in contact with the avant-garde. As if in attestation of that natural unity, science, ethnography and the avant-garde were fused personally in the remarkable Renaissance-like persona of Vladimír Úlehla himself. Besides his ethnographic pursuits, Úlehla was a professor of botany at Masaryk University and a founding member of the Czechoslovak Society for Scientific Cinematography (*Československá společnost pro vědeckou*

kinematografii), an organisation that had links with the Brno Devětsil group and which at one point even took over the film activities of the artistic coalition the Levá fronta (Left Front).³⁴ As a maker of scientific films Úlehla had exploited the vision-extending properties of the camera-eye by utilising inherently cinematic techniques like time-lapse photography, used to portray the 'invisible' growth cycle of plants. But *The Disappearing World* is Úlehla's ultimate interplay of seen and unseen, of present and absent, a vivid presentation of an unseen culture produced in anticipation of its ultimate, total absence.

An undeniable part of the appeal of Plicka's cinema to the 'coffeehouse' audience mentioned at the beginning was the unfamiliarity of the hitherto-unseen world his films captured, the 'exoticism' afforded by Czechoslovakia's cross-regional diversity. Characteristic of the appreciative response to *The Earth Sings* in the Prague press is a review by Karel Čapek entitled 'Two Unknown Worlds'. Čapek tellingly compares Plicka's film to another, unnamed film released at the same time, a documentary about marine life. Having praised this latter film for 'bringing to the surface' the 'secrets' of the ocean's depths, Čapek remarks that Plicka's film, while lacking the popularity of the other, reveals the 'secrets of a land' that is 'no less mysterious'.³⁵ Čapek's status as an avant-garde writer is debatable, but his alignment here of a popular-science documentary and an ethnographic film as confrontations with a mysterious otherness is consistent with avant-garde perspectives and suggests the affinities both types of films had with avant-garde works, not least Surrealism. As James Clifford writes, common to Surrealism and ethnography was 'the belief that the other', whether manifested in the world of dreams or in pre-modern cultures, 'was a crucial object of modern research'.³⁶ The overlapping of avant-garde and scientific spheres of investigation, or the unifying concern with unknown worlds, is evident in other artists' work. Úlehla, the ethnographer and botanist, developed an unrealised film project exploring the surrealistic territory of dream life, while, in France, the marine biologist Jean Painlevé made films that consciously invested the ocean's 'secrets' with surrealistic and mythic overtones.³⁷

Stasis and Motion: The Aesthetics of the New Vision

The particular affinity between *The Earth Sings*, above Plicka's other film work, and contemporaneous film and photographic works of the avant-garde of course rests not only on the exotic novelty of its pro-filmic content, its expansion of *what* we see onscreen, but also on the way it controls our perception of the folk realities depicted, its artful manipulation of *how* we see. This marks a more precise point of connection, perhaps, with Vertov's kino-eye, which, after all, derived its aesthetics from the notion that cinema's capacity to capture an invisible reality, as described, required intensive re-organisation of the shot material by means of film's unique technical possibilities, from optical tricks to editing.³⁸ Plicka, in his own thoughts on cinema, rejected the idea that film must content itself with the mere description or reportage of reality, a tendency he mistakenly attributed to Vertov himself.³⁹ Aligning himself instead with Pudovkin's theories, Plicka insisted that a film should be an *artistic* record of reality.⁴⁰ Yet precisely in allowing the medium a certain autonomy to create its own reality, film reflects exterior reality all the more authentically. Indeed, for Plicka, the very beauty of form in a film like *The Earth Sings* had documentary value, as a mimetic reiteration of the world it depicts: a beautiful depiction of beautiful lives.⁴¹ In this section we consider the relation between cinematic form and ethnographic object in more detail.

The beautiful form of *The Earth Sings* is rooted in tradition and yet deeply unconventional, with the filmed footage structured into a depersonalised 'narrative' of the passing seasons, and then edited and scored to achieve that celebrated rhythmic and 'symphonic' form. As Plicka's most noted example of artistic stylisation, *The Earth Sings* is a clear departure from the more straightforwardly informative or descriptive model of 'culture film' (*kulturní film*) that his earlier film work had suggested. Roman Jakobson, in a short essay on ethnographic filmmaking, could even define the earlier *Over Hill and Dale* as scientific data while describing Úlehla, the scientist by profession, as the artist (a pair of judgements that have later tended to be reversed).⁴² Notwithstanding Karel Čapek's comments, the distinction of *The Earth Sings* was perhaps less in the novelty of its images than in the striking way this documentary material (which had in part been amassed prior to this



Fig. 14.2. Karel Plicka, *The Earth Sings* (*Zem spieva*, 1933). Film still. © Slovak Film Institute / National Film Archive.

specific project) had been arranged. Plicka himself was not slow to credit the final form of the film in large part to Alexandr Hackenschmied and his bravura editing work. In fact, Hackenschmied's involvement exceeded the traditional role of editor, and the marks of his intervention are clear if one compares *The Earth Sings* to other films on which he worked. It may be no coincidence that one finds an uncanny resemblance between the opening of *The Earth Sings* and that of Hackenschmied's Surrealist-tinged avant-garde short *Aimless Walk* (*Bezúčelná procházka*, 1930), which also begins with a train ride that takes the protagonist, and the spectator, from the city into the countryside (or at least to its edges), with the literal mobility of viewpoint again acting as prelude to an expanded vision of reality (though here the revelation is of psychological duality, the alien 'other' the protagonist's own double self).⁴³

To what extent, then, does *The Earth Sings* exemplify not only Hackenschmied's technical skills but also his own artistic vision? As both a theorist and a practitioner of film, Hackenschmied emphasised the medium's dynamism and fluidity: as Jaroslav Anděl puts it, through his varied film work of the 1930s and 1940s Hackenschmied exploited the potential of both camera movement and editing to create a highly 'dynamic conception' of 'film space'.⁴⁴ This cinematic aesthetic had been forged in Hackenschmied's exposure to the international movement in photography known as the 'New Vision'.⁴⁵ Quintessentially and self-consciously 'modern', the New Vision responded to the fast-paced urban and technological world with a proliferation of close-ups, diagonal compositions and unusual points of view, designed to approximate the 'dynamism' of the film image itself.⁴⁶ For László Moholy-Nagy, the influential artist who had coined the term 'New Vision', the 'defining feature of modernity' was 'the constancy of motion'.⁴⁷

The Earth Sings is itself a film of constant and conspicuous motion. Movement is made a tangible presence firstly through the emphasis on collective and repetitive motions such as the children's dances and games that occupy the particularly vigorous 'spring' sequences at the film's beginning and end (Fig. 14.2). The camera amasses large, coordinated units or 'blocks' of movement—the linked dancers, the laterally-spinning wooden pole to which the children cling, the line of girls holding up the sacrificial 'Morena' figure—and the shot sequencing adds an extra dynamism to this by cutting between separate movements going in the same direction, thus pushing the action towards an abstract impression of rhyming dynamic shapes, or else making these activities seem like various incarnations of some all-encompassing spirit of motion. While Plicka's film footage was produced with fairly primitive equipment that prohibited much camera

movement, Hackenschmied's editing creates a powerfully dynamic effect of its own through rhythmic cutting and the alternation of contrasting angles and distances. Is this a case of an aesthetic originally conceived in the euphoria of modernity simply being transposed to a bucolic setting? Is the film's ethnographic subject matter incidental to the pre-formed avant-garde sensibility of the versatile Hackenschmied, capable of turning his talents to a diverse range of assignments from documentaries to advertisements?

I would argue that the film's dynamic aesthetic language, for all that this was largely the work of Hackenschmied, does relate organically to Plicka's vision of Slovak rural life as a world of music, dance, and movement. The film is informed by ideas of movement down to its overarching structural conception, which follows the cycle of seasonal transformation, the governing 'movements' of nature. Movement is one of the principles that links humanity to nature, not only because both embody that all-embracing force of vitality—as the film emphasises with its cuts between human activity and the movements of clouds and streams—but also because it is natural movement that activates and directs human movement. Once the film's true, rural setting has been established, an intertitle reads: 'The sun awakens life—spring is joy and movement'. Spring is the privileged season in the film, the one with which the film introduces this folk world and the one to which all the other seasons lead, with a joyously lively finale that resumes and intensifies the dances and games of the beginning. For Plicka, joy, vitality, and musicality were clearly the qualities that essentially characterised the Slovak and Ruthenian rural cultures he devotedly documented, and thus movement was an important facet of the visual representation of these cultures, not only as a means to portray their vitality but also as a way to give physical shape to the music that defined these worlds, to approximate the aural flow of melody in images. As Plicka once remarked in interview, 'static photography does not respond to a musical line'.⁴⁸ He would even recall that his principal motivation in branching out from still photography into film was the appeal of making images move.

Thus, with *The Earth Sings*, Plicka, Hackenschmied, and composer Škvor created a perfect rural counterpart to the avant-garde city symphony, a work that is similar yet distinct, using the same aesthetic language to support different values and a different tone. This is not the frenetic, clamorous kineticism of the modern metropolis, but rather a harmonious and controlled display of movement akin to the choral harmonies of folk song. This sense of control is foregrounded in the film by shots of youthful 'conductor' figures cut into scenes of dance and game-playing;



Fig. 14.3. Karel Plicka, *The Earth Sings* (*Zem spieva*, 1933). Film still.
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in the closing example of this, the young boy is presented alone, seemingly standing at a higher point than his fellows and projected against sky and mountains, as he appears to direct the others' activities with vigorous cracks of his whip (cracks that are mimicked by the score for extra emphasis) (Fig. 14.3). In Plicka's world, moving spectacle serves a reassuring message of stasis. Just as the children spin round in relentless, dizzying motion while remaining in the spot, and as the flowing water of the streams is constantly replenished, so does the movement of the seasons always repeat itself, bringing us back to the same point. In this way the film successfully integrates its avant-garde aesthetics with its vision of a 'timeless' rural and traditional life. This fusion of style and subject is achieved more successfully than in *The Disappearing World*, whose flights of modernist technique appear less motivated and jar with the pedestrian 'Realist' style that predominates in the film's narrative sections. Yet if *The Earth Sings* has, rightly, proven aesthetically satisfying for many, this has not exempted it from criticism over the accuracy of its representations.

***Heimat*, Primitivism, and the Avant-Garde: From Kitsch to Myth**

Alongside the fulsome praise *The Earth Sings* received, from critics enthused by its aesthetic virtues or those metropolitan viewers thrilled by the exotic world it revealed, the film also met with numerous disapproving responses. As Martin Slivka has informed us, much of the hostility to the film came from Slovak critics, who objected to what they considered a vision of their native region as a backward territory, a place of 'poverty and primitivism'.⁴⁹ Plicka, it was argued, had given a misleading representation of Slovakia's rural areas that exaggerated their archaic character and banished any traces of modernity. One Czech critic, J. Tůma, even attacked the film for peddling 'folkloristic kitsch', likening it to an institutional display of preserved relics designed to evoke an 'idyll of past times'.⁵⁰ Tůma also described the film as an 'unintentional cartoon', a work that had turned its attention away 'from reality and from the contemporary life of a country that has no reason to sing'.

Such criticisms are, to a large extent, an overtly negative version of the established interpretations of Plicka's career as a whole, at least as regards his (more extensive) career as a still photographer. As Simona Béréšová revealed, Plicka's work is commonly associated with the genre of '*Heimat* photography' popular across Germany and other Central-European countries.⁵¹ *Heimat* connotes sentimental or idyllic representations of one's native countryside that seek to affirm national pride, traditionalism, and the virtues of simple, rural living. *Heimat* art is usually considered antithetical to the aesthetics and values of the avant-garde, even if its Slovak variant in photography has tended to lack the explicit association with *völkisch* ideology and right-wing politics that *Heimat* has had in Germany. Plicka has also been linked to the related but nationally specific mode that art historian Aurel Hrabušický has termed 'beautiful Slovakia photography' (*krasnoslovenska fotografia*), identified with the 'quiet celebration' of rural Slovak life.⁵² Generally speaking, then, Plicka appears as a staid and artistically-conventional presence in twentieth-century Czech and Slovak culture, his photographs lacking either the avant-garde's Formalist manipulations of the image or the Realist exposure of poor conditions as practised by Slovakia's social photography (*sociálna fotografia*) movement. Hrabušický explicitly distinguishes the bulk of Plicka's output from the avant-garde.⁵³

It is true that, in style as in other things, *The Earth Sings* is an exceptional work in Plicka's career and that Plicka generally did not try to apply the dynamic sensibility of the New Vision to the form of his photographs as he and Hackenschmied did with their 1933 film. An illuminating comparison could be offered with the photographs that Jaromír Funke took of similar subject matter in his *Subcarpathian Ruthenia* cycle. Funke's photographs infuse a sense of dynamism into the static form of the photograph through the diagonal compositions that were such a characteristic feature of Funke's work. Funke also adopts a 'snapshot' approach, capturing his human subjects in offhand moments, mid-speech or blinking at the camera. This imparts a sense of spontaneity, of moments arrested from the flow of life. Even speaking solely in aesthetic terms, it is harder to align such photographs with *Heimat* than is the case with Plicka's more conventional, more visibly posed compositions. But if, as we have seen, *The Earth Sings* does enact this 'avant-garde' dynamism,



Fig. 14.2. Karel Plicka, *The Earth Sings* (*Zem spieva*, 1933). Film still. © Slovak Film Institute / National Film Archive.

it also undeniably exhibits the primitivist and idealising qualities that have earned the labels of archaic kitsch or, in regard to Plicka's other work, *Heimat* and 'beautiful Slovakia' photography. For instance, the contemporaneous charge of exaggerating the archaism of the rural environments portrayed, to the exclusion of anything modern, is borne out by Plicka's decision to avoid showing much of the male population of these Eastern Slovak villages, who by the early twentieth century were already wearing modern clothes. In itself, Plicka's selective focus on women and children, with the latter especially given a privileged and symbolically-charged role, carries additional primitivist associations of an infantile and virginal state of pre-modern innocence (Fig. 14.4). The type of 'otherness' Plicka documented in Slovakia may of course differ from the further flung objects of colonial-style exploration, but his choice of subjects reveals a strange affinity with the exoticist or Orientalist strain in much classic European ethnography, for which 'the other' is often a 'feminized and childish' figure.⁵⁴ The emphatically-cyclical structure referred to earlier, which passes through the adult affairs of labour and mortality only to bring us back to the radiant springtime vision of childhood with which the film started, acts further to close off, or insulate, the film's subjects in a primitivist fantasy of 'mythic time', a condition of timelessness outside history. Through its emphasis on nature's eternal capacity for renewal, this structure also helps Plicka to idealise his subject matter, and while there are references to the arduous toil of cultivating the 'merciless earth', and to the men who have had to leave the villages to look for work, these seem like minor shadings, even stray notes, in a dominant tone of elation and affirmation.

Do these issues of representation disqualify *The Earth Sings* as an avant-garde work? Can the film exemplify the sensibilities of the New Vision and of *Heimat*? Can it be both progressive and primitivist? For Catherine Russell, such oppositions might to some extent seem false, as classical ethnography's fantasies of pre-industrial innocence and 'the alterity of the primitive' are seen to be shared by incipient 'experimental film practices' too.⁵⁵ The convergence of modernist or avant-garde aesthetics with the construction of primitivist rural idylls can also be found elsewhere in Czech ethnographic (or ethnography-related) films, as for instance in Vladislav Vančura's aforementioned feature film *Faithless Marijka*. This film has a high avant-garde pedigree as well as strong politically-progressive credentials, as a film originated by two members of Czechoslovakia's



Fig. 14.5. Karel Plicka, *The Earth Sings* (*Zem spieva*, 1933). Film still. © Slovak Film Institute / National Film Archive.

1930s Levá fronta, Vančura and scenarist Ivan Olbracht. The two artists' Marxist beliefs, together with Olbracht's expert, first-hand knowledge of life in Subcarpathian Ruthenia, help to root this film in the realities of poverty and economic exploitation that Plicka's film ignores. But if these political realities occupy one thread of the narrative, concerned with a cheating boss and a subsequent rebellion by the workers, the parallel story of young peasant woman Marijka and the affair she pursues while her husband is labouring in the mountains arguably still endorses the primitivist vision, constructing Subcarpathian peasant life as a world of primal passions. Marijka herself, for instance, is an image of guileless simplicity: a characterisation that carries over into the account Olbracht later wrote about the actress playing the role, a non-professional peasant woman actually from the region. During an official discussion in the film following a labourers' riot, a man laments that 'this land is still in the Middle Ages'. There is a cutaway to an ornamental sculpture of a wolf, an image of natural ferocity that hints in 'Orientalist' fashion at the region's fundamental alterity, its inhabitants' intractable and deep-rooted 'animal' passions. In an essay accompanying the published script of the film, Olbracht even demonstrated how a Marxist political consciousness and the construction of primitive innocence may go hand in hand, writing of the 'incursion' of 'capitalist civilisation' into regions of 'old orderliness and good, old morals'.⁵⁶

Like Olbracht in such fictional works as *The Bandit Nikola Šuhaj* (*Nikola Šuhaj loupežník*, 1933), Plicka can be seen as adopting a consciously mythic, archaising and archetypal form of representation. Like Olbracht, Plicka too was interested in legends and folk heroes: following the success of *The Earth Sings* he attempted to mount a feature film about the legendary Slovak bandit Juraj Jánošík, and would ultimately lend his ethnographic expertise, as well as casting assistance, to a separate production that actually was completed, Martin Frič's 1935 *Jánošík* (itself, like *Faithless Marijka*, a fusion of socially-conscious folk ballad and modernist technique, with clear debts to Eisenstein and Soviet montage).⁵⁷ Plicka's description of *The Earth Sings* as, 'above all, my song about a lost paradise' invites us to read the film at an archetypal, non-literal level rather than in documentary terms.⁵⁸ Catherine Russell acknowledged that primitivist representations, for all their distortions of actual cultures, can contain a utopian dimension, and Plicka's work, with its defiance of technological modernity, can be seen as an attempt at constructing redemptive myths

by reference to the 'primitive', folk traditions of Eastern Slovakia.⁵⁹ *The Earth Sings* presents a world of social and natural communion in which art is integrally woven into life, society, and work. Plicka's signature images of clumps of prepared flax, which form a pleasing, harmonious pattern as they stretch across the mountainside, can of course be critiqued for ultimately privileging visual beauty over the realities of toil (with this fetishisation of form more marked in the still photograph that Plicka produced of the same scene) (Fig. 14.5). Alternatively, such images may be said to represent a reconciliation of art and labour, beauty and necessity.

In this sense, too, *The Earth Sings* is both a contrast and a counterpart to the emphatically modern visions of the contemporaneous avant-gardes. To take a local example, the Czech Devětsil movement, as represented by its chief theoretician Karel Teige, also adopted a utopian perspective that claimed an integral and extensive place for aesthetic and sensual pleasures within the living of everyday life, even if Teige's visions were inspired more by circuses and slapstick comedy films than by folk art, and premised on technological innovation. Interestingly, Jennifer Jenkins has seen the concern to 'have art and life speak to one another'—articulated in the work of modernist but highly locally-embedded artists like Rilke and Heinrich Vogeler—as a key point of contact between avant-garde aspirations and a progressive version of *Heimat*.⁶⁰ One later example of avant-garde utopianism that invoked the pre-modern or 'primitive' other as a model is the ethnographic studies of Haitian voodoo rituals by American avant-garde filmmaker Maya Deren, exemplified in her documentary film *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (shot between 1947 and 1954 and 'completed' in 1981, after Deren's death). As fixated on dance as was Plicka's film, *Divine Horsemen* presents voodoo as a 'cohesive' force of community, 'a sacred energy connecting humans, sacrificial animals, and living gods through a sensuous choreography'. Similarly to Plicka's implicit rejection of the metropolis at the beginning of *The Earth Sings*, Deren opposes the 'thick, multisensory human choreography' of the Haitian ceremonies to 'the flat, disembodied life in industrial cities'.⁶¹

The Earth Sings is, as we suggested earlier, a work founded on a spirit of enquiry into the unknown, on that urge towards expanded vision that unites the traditions of ethnographic and avant-garde filmmaking from which Plicka's film derives. But if this is poetry as pedagogy, it is also 'scientific' investigation put in the service of myth, a visualisation of unseen dimensions of reality in which the kino-eye is trained inwards as well as outwards.

1 Jiří Jeníček, 'Zem spieva', *Fotografický obzor* 61/10 (1933): p. 156.

2 Martin Slivka, *Karol Plicka – básnik obrazu* (Bratislava: Osveta, 1982), pp. 132–133.

3 Stanislav Ježek, 'Zem spieva', *Lidové noviny* (27 September 1933): p. 14.

4 Josef Polák, 'A ještě Plickův film', *Lidové noviny* (8 December 1933): p. 14.

5 Miroslav Rutte and 'J. Hr.' [sic], in Slivka, *Karol Plicka*, p. 213 (no title given).

6 Jaroslav Anděl, 'Artists as Filmmakers', in Jaroslav Anděl, Anne Wilkes Tucker, Alison De Lima Greene, Ralph McKay, and Willis Hartshorn (eds.), *Czech Modernism 1900–1945* (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, 1990), pp. 167–169.

7 Ježek, 'Zem spieva', p. 14.

8 Alice Lovejoy, *Army Film and the Avant-Garde: Cinema and Experiment in the Czechoslovak Military* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), pp. 42–52.

9 Petr Denk, 'Slovenský film', *Index* 2/7 (1930): p. 54; Petr Denk, 'Nový slovenský film', *Index* 3/3 (1931): p. 31.

10 Aurel Hrabušický and Václav Máček, *Slovenská fotografia 1925–2000: moderna – postmoderna – postfotografia / Slovak Photography 1925–2000: Modernism – Postmodernism – Postphotography* (Bratislava: Slovenská národná galéria, 2001), p. 77.

11 Michal Bregant, 'Avantgardní tendence v českém filmu', in Ivan Klimeš (ed.), *Filmový sborník historický 3* (Prague: Československý filmový ústav, 1993), p. 164.

12 Slivka, *Karol Plicka*, pp. 220–221; Karol Plicka, 'Poznámky o filme', *Slovenské pohľady*, 48/9–10 (1932): pp. 594–595.

13 Michal Bregant, filmed commentary for the DVD release of *Marijka nevěrnice*. Filmexport Home Video, 2010.

14 This rural variant of modernism even outlasted the 1930s, enjoying a kind of renaissance in the 1960s with the emergence of a specifically-Slovak vein of ethnographic documentary. This vein was pioneered by Martin Slivka, who used overtly avant-garde elements, including 'Cubist'-style editing. A former student of Plicka and the author of various studies of his work, Slivka consciously placed himself in Plicka's legacy.

15 Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*. (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 35.

16 Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*, p. 35.

17 James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 12.

18 Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*, p. 7.

19 Frederick M. Barnard, 'Political Culture: Continuity and Discontinuity', in H. Gordon Skilling (ed.), *Czechoslovakia 1918–1988: Seventy Years from Independence* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 154.

- 20 Petr Farkaš, 'Nářeční prvky v českém hraném filmu 30. a 40. let' (MA Thesis, Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Karlovy, Prague, 2012), p. 10.
- 21 Farkaš, 'Nářeční prvky', p. 12.
- 22 Peter Petro, *A History of Slovak Literature* (Montreal & Kingston, London, and Buffalo: McGill-Queens University Press, 1997), p. 87.
- 23 Hana Dvořáková, 'Etnograf a filmař: Příklad Františka Pospíšila', in L. Fasora, J. Hanuš, J. Malíř, and L. Vykoupil (eds.), *Člověk na Moravě v první polovině 20. století* (Brno: Centrum pro stadium demokracie a kultury, 2006), p. 411.
- 24 Lucie Česálková, 'Kinematograf z fyzikálního ústav: Československá společnost pro vědeckou kinematografii aneb Popularizace vědy kinematografií a kinematografie vědou', *Illuminace* 20/3(71) (2008): p. 137.
- 25 Plicka, quoted in Slivka, *Karol Plicka*, p. 221.
- 26 Emma Widdis, *Visions of a New Land: Soviet Film from the Revolution to the Second World War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 105.
- 27 Vladimír Ůlehla, quoted in Lucie Česálková, 'Obraz venkovské idylly – Film Mizející svět Vladimíra Ůlehly', *Dějiny a současnost* 30/6 (2008): p. 35.
- 28 Slivka, *Karol Plicka*, p. 163.
- 29 Slivka, *Karol Plicka*, p. 163.
- 30 Dziga Vertov, quoted in Tom Gunning, 'Shooting into Outer Space: Reframing Modern Vision', in Matthew Solomon (ed.), *Fantastic Voyages of the Cinematic Imagination: Georges Méliès's Trip to the Moon* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), p. 98.
- 31 Widdis, *Visions of a New Land*, p. 73.
- 32 Slivka, *Karol Plicka*, p. 221; Anděl, 'Artists as Filmmakers', p. 171.
- 33 Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*, p. 12; Vertov, quoted in Christian Quendler, *The Camera-Eye Metaphor in Cinema* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), p. 54.
- 34 Anděl, 'Artists as Filmmakers', p. 171; Iva Gajdošíková, 'Avantgarda jako kritika, akce a politika: politická orientace brněnského Devětsilu – její projevy a důsledky', *Sborník prací Filozofické fakulty brněnské university* 2/2 (2005): p. 96.
- 35 Karel Čapek, 'Dva neznámé světy', *Lidové noviny* (5 November 1933): p. 7.
- 36 Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, p. 120.
- 37 Lucie Česálková, 'Filmuji sny. Sny rostliny Amicie! Téma vědecké kinematografie v nerealizovaném scénáři fikčního filmu Vladimíra Ůlehly *Amicia: zločin a věda*', in Pavel Skopal (ed.) *Kinematografie a město. Studie z dějin lokální filmové kultury* (Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2005), pp. 179–190; James Leo Cahill, *Zoological Surrealism: The Nonhuman Cinema of Jean Painlevé* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).
- 38 Herbert Marshall, *Masters of the Soviet Cinema: Crippled Creative Biographies* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2014), pp. 69–71.
- 39 Plicka, quoted in Slivka, *Karol Plicka*, p. 221.
- 40 Plicka, 'Poznámky o filme', pp. 594–595.
- 41 See the interview with Plicka in Martin Slivka's documentary *Národní umělec Karol Plicka* (1970).
- 42 Roman Jakobson, 'Mizející svět. Film umírajícího folkloru – Prof. dr. Ůlehla jako filmový režisér', reprinted in *Illuminace* 10/2(30) (1998): p. 91.
- 43 Felix Konrad Jeschke, *Iron Landscapes: Nation-Building and the Railways in Czechoslovakia, 1918–1938* (PhD thesis, University College London, undated), p. 192.
- 44 Jaroslav Anděl, *Alexandr Hackenschmied* (Prague: Torst, 2000), p. 13.
- 45 Anděl, *Alexandr Hackenschmied*, p. 7.
- 46 Anděl, *Alexandr Hackenschmied*, p. 13; Rainer K. Wick and Gabriel Diana Grawe, *Teaching at the Bauhaus* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2000), p. 135.
- 47 Hadas A. Steiner, *Beyond Archigram: The Structure of Circulation* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), p. 18.
- 48 Plicka, quoted in Slivka, *Karol Plicka*, p. 94.
- 49 Slivka, *Karol Plicka*, p. 132.
- 50 J. Tůma, quoted in Vlado Clementis, 'Je Plickov film folkloristickým gýčom?', *DAV* 6/10 (1933): p. 149.
- 51 Simona Běřešová, 'Die Slowakei in der Fotografie von Karel Plicka' (MA thesis, University of Vienna, 2014), p. 7.
- 52 Hrabušický and Máček, *Slovenská fotografia*, p. 15; Julia Secklehner, 'Capturing the Ordinary? Irena Blühová and Photographic Modernism in Slovakia 1926–1936', conference paper, 2015, p. 5, accessed 30 October 2019, https://euroacademia.eu/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Julia_Secklehner_Irena_Bl%C3%BChov%C3%A1_and_Photographic_Modernism_in_Slovakia-.pdf
- 53 Hrabušický and Máček, *Slovenská fotografia*, pp. 43, 77, 79.
- 54 Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, p. 161.
- 55 Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*, p. 20.
- 56 Ivan Olbracht, in Olbracht, Karel Nový, and Vladislav Vančura, *Marijka nevěrnice* (Prague: Odeon, 1982), p. 258.
- 57 Slivka, *Karol Plicka*, pp. 140–141.
- 58 Plicka, quoted in Slivka, *Karol Plicka*, p. 163.
- 59 Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*, pp. 76–77.
- 60 Jennifer Jenkins, 'Heimat Art, Modernism, Modernity', in David Blackburn and James Retallack (eds), *Localism, Landscape, and the Ambiguities of Place: German-Speaking Central Europe, 1860–1930* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2007), pp. 64, 71.
- 61 Massimiliano Mollona, 'Seeing the Invisible: Maya Deren's Experiments in Cinematic Trance', *October* 149 (Summer 2014): pp. 167–169.