

Verfremdung/Entfremdung* and Modernism: "Pseudo-language" in *Dá viss

The introductory title frame of *La vis*, "**Djurnká Zstudio Presant**", points to the important role that *language* plays in this short comic film. Throughout the film Didier Flamand makes use of a well-known and frequently used comedy trope - that of *pseudo-language* (also known as *mock language*, *gibberish* and other words) to denote a language that sounds and looks like an existing language

For the viewer, about to watch a French *court metrage*, this title comes as a surprise - it looks more like the announcement from an obscure studio behind the Iron Curtain before 1989. The name of the studio looks Slavic, the spelling of Zstudio with a "z", however, might hint at Hungarian. The actors speak in a vaguely Central European-sounding gibberish with some intelligible words in various languages, like when K's wife says an Italian sounding "cocina" when he enters the kitchen, or the elevator ("Azentzor") operator proclaims "close de dor" and "next stop" in English and the engineers pronounce the slotless screw to be a German-sounding "gross problem", a polite inquiry at the desk is introduced with the Polish "prosze" (please) and, of course, the crux of the plot - "da viss" - sounding and looking like its French namesake "la vis" - a screw.

This kind of heteroglossia in comedy cinema is an established practice going back to Charlie Chaplin's first "talkies", *Modern Times* (1936) and his parody on Hitler and totalitarianism from 1940 - *The Great Dictator*. *Modern Times* is, of course, really a silent film with a musical scene to introduce Chaplin's voice to the audience. Hired as a "singing waiter" in a restaurant he is to sing an Italian song, he is afraid of not remembering the words, so Paulette Goddard writes it down on his shirt cuff. Making a grand entrance he flings out his arm, and the cuff flies from it. Looking desperately for it while the orchestra keeps repeating the introductory chords, he finally gives up and "wings it": *La spinach or la busho/ Cigaretto toto bello /Ce rakish spaghetto /Ce le tu la tu la trios! /Senora fila scena /Voulez-vous la taximeter /Le jaunta sur la seata/ Je le tu le tu le waah!*

It is a formidable success, which, in the nature of the Chaplin's character, does not last. It is, however, a good example of the comic qualities of nonsense language which he was going to put to serious use in his next film *The Great Dictator* (1940). In his impersonation of Adolf Hitler - here as Adenoid Hynkel, dictator of "Tomania" - Chaplin speaks what most

commentators have described as "gibberish", albeit clearly based on German. This actually led the film to being banned in Chicago in the German-American heartland (Daub 2009:453), although there are few, if any words, in Chaplin's "Tomanian" that have a direct resemblance to German language. Moreover, it appears that in the film Hynkel is the only person that speaks "Tomanian", and only while giving speeches (closely modeled on Hitler) and dictating letters. The two central speeches (or rants) were a result of Chaplin having seen and studied Hitler's "performances" in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* (1935). Intended as a satirical jab at Hitler during production, *The Great Dictator*, at the time of its release in March 1941, had lost some of its comic effect after the outbreak of World War II and Hitler's *Blitzkrieg*.

The use of pseudo-language for comic effect has since been used with by various actors in film and television, as in Andy Kaufman's character in the American sitcom *Taxi* (1978-1983), where he portrays Latka Gravas, an immigrant from a nondescript European country who, when he is stressed or agitated, breaks out in a monologue in a pseudo-language containing mainly nonsense words. Another, more recent example is to be found in *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006) where Sacha Baron Cohen portrays a viruently anti-semitic reporter from Kazakhstan, whose rants in "Khazak" turns out to be a psudo-language based on disjointed Polish and Hebrew (!) phrases.

So, how does Didier Flamand deal with this established trope in comedy in *La vis* ? One thing that strikes the viewer/listener is the fact that *everyone* speaks this "language", putting the audience at a considerable greater disadvantage than in *The Great Dictator*, where everybody except the dictator, speaks English. It is actually fascinating to listen to how Flamand manages to create a soundscape dominated by an artificial language, a soundscape that also emanates the feeling of strangeness so characteristic of the film. The protagonist wanders through a maze of often incomprehensible surroundings, events and sounds in his quest for the explanation of the slotless screw accompanied by a constant buzz of seemingly coherent, but, for the viewer/listener, incomprehensible words. The protagonist does not seem baffled by this - he is, after all, able to communicate in this language - and, like Jaques Tati's character Monsieur Hulot, takes one absurd episode after another in stride in his quest for the solution of the problem of the slotless screw. The overall effect on the film's audience is,

however, a feeling of strangeness for a world that may look like ours, but is uncannily different.

Another word for this uncanny strangeness, is *alienation*, which is a central concept in 20th Century modernity and modernism. When Karl Marx in the 19th Century sought to describe the troubled relationship between the workers and their societal environment, he used the German word *Entfremdung* for this concept (Marx/Engels: 37), but the alienation presented in *La vis* is connected to another form of estrangement. While the concept coined by Marx refers to the period we describe as *modernity*, the avantgarde in the arts and literature presented another form of dealing with the ossified forms of the bourgeois art establishment - *modernism*.

This movement may be seen also as a direct reaction to modernity, as Marshall Berman argues in his book *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, using a Marx citation as its title (Berman: 88-89). Moreover, two of the central theoreticians of modernism in literature (and theatre), the Russian Viktor Shklovsky and the German Bertolt Brecht both use the concept of *alienation* in a different way and differently from Marx' *Entfremdung*. Brecht talks of *Verfremdung* in describing his technique to counteract the manipulations of the Aristotelian drama, while Shklovsky uses the Russian word *ostranenie* for ways the author may introduce an element of surprise to the reader (Robinson: xii). Both *Entfremdung* and *ostranenie* may be translated as "alienation".

In this way, "making language strange" becomes a benchmark for modernist literature, from the nonsense language of the dadist Hugo Ball, to James Joyce's linguistic acrobatics in *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*. In *La vis* the pseudo-language is only one of several modernist markers, another is in naming the protagonist K. This is a clear allusion to what arguably can be described as the central literary work in modernism, Franz Kafka's *The Trial*. But in *La vis* the letter K also has another, and more linguistic, function in the final scene, where phonetics, represented with the sound "K" comes into play. When K.'s *Doppelgänger* is summoned to the direction in order to explain the problematic screw, he tries to formulate an answer by uttering almost inaudible glottal sounds that eventually evolves into a K and by repeating several times in the end becomes the French word for "nail" - "Clou!" before he hammers the supposed nail into the wall.

Language is only one of the effects we find in this film to place it solidly within the tradition of modernism: the use of black and white cinematography, the nondescript cityscape hinting at dystopian sci-fi landscapes, the absurdist happenings inside the Metallika-building are all markers of the alienation connected with modernism. However, it may be argued that the alienation represented by the pseudo-lingual "dialogue" in many ways is a cornerstone in the construction of this modernist and - to be more specific - absurdist short film.

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