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SENIOR PROJECT

Constructing an Anti-Fascist Narrative in *The Cremator*

A Rhetorical and Cinematic Analysis

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1. Introduction

The power of ideology lies in its ability to shape perception and reframe morality through language and aesthetics. Using rhetorical manipulation and visual spectacle to enforce obedience, totalitarian regimes rationalize violence, idolize purity, and erase individual thought. Cinema, used as both a tool of propaganda and a form of resistance, offers a unique means of exposing these mechanisms. Within this medium, *The Cremator* (1969) merges these two functions of cinema- propaganda and resistance- to construct a meditation and critique on indoctrination and the notion of ideological control. Set against the backdrop of rising fascism in Czechoslovakia, the film appropriates fascist rhetoric and visual codes only to expose the absurdity in the Nazi ego and its terrifying ideals.

The film's director, Juraj Herz, was born to a Jewish-Slovak family in 1934, just a few years before the era depicted in his film. During his childhood, he was imprisoned at the Ravensbrück concentration camp, an experience undoubtedly reflected in his artistic preoccupations with power and moral corruption. His films frequently explore the grotesque and the fragility of individual agency in the face of oppressive, depersonalizing structures.

Although Herz distanced his own work from the Czechoslovak New Wave, it nevertheless shares defining characteristics from the contemporary movement, such as the use of political allegory, unconventional narratives, experimental cinematography, and absurdism to challenge totalitarianism and reject the state's control over artistic expression. *The Cremator* stands out as one of the most politically daring and successful films of the era.

1.1 Film Summary

The Cremator is an adaptation of a novel by Lasislav Fuks set in 1939, during the annexation of Czechoslovakia by the Wehrmacht (the unified armed forces of Nazi Germany). It tells the story of Karel Kopfrkingl and his rise to power alongside his moral derailment. At first glance, Karel Kopfrkingl appears to be a paragon of moral rectitude, a compassionate family man dedicated to his work and loved ones. Meticulously groomed and soft-spoken, Karel works hard to project an idealized image of petite-bourgeoisie respectability, carefully crafted to uphold his standing within society. He seems obsessed with curating an image of purity and taste, though his arbitrary selections betray a hollowness in his being. The film critiques indoctrination and collaboration, positioning Kopfrkingl as an easily malleable figure working in an industry sought after by the Nazis, making him a prime tool for propagating their mission.

From the outset, the film announces itself as a gothic-grotesque surrealist masterpiece. Its disjointed title sequence–composed of collage-like images of body parts, wide-open eyes, and striking fisheye shots–forewarns the audience of an intratextual journey through blind conformism and indoctrination.

While the protagonist's outward habits reflect his upstanding life, the film's subjective approach uses the protagonists' unreliable lens to reveal his true passions. Early on, we perceive his egocentric tendencies and his fixation on reincarnation and Tibetan spirituality. Indeed, the majority of the film is propelled by Rudolf Hrusinsky's perverse performance, delivering monotone platitudes and monologues that require no response. He tells whoever will listen: "Death is a great blessing […] if it liberates a person from great suffering." To him, death is a gateway to transcendence, elevating his job from mere labor to what he sees as a divine calling.

Alongside this, a philosophy of purification is deciphered: one that is eventually inextricably linked to Nazi influence.

This is when an old war friend, Walter Reinke, re-enters his life. Recognizing Kopfrkingl's susceptibility to influence and his potential utility, Walter gradually manipulates him. As the film progresses, Walter's appearances increase, as does his influence: he preys on Kopfrkingl's desire for social acceptance and his fragile sense of self. Eventually, Kopfrkingl is convinced to betray even his own family. While unexpected at the start, in retrospect, this feels inevitable as his ideology progressively merges with Nazism. His character evolves from helping alleviate suffering to directly killing close ones.

After murdering his wife and son, Kopfrkingl experiences a series of disturbing visions that convince him of his sacred mission as "Rinpoche" ("precious one" in Tibetan). He even explicitly calls himself Buddha before being escorted to an awaiting car by Nazis, muttering to himself that he can save the whole world. The grotesque fusion of Tibetan ideals and Nazi rhetoric represents his ultimate delusion: a world purified through death, where suffering ceases and souls are freed. In aligning his fantasies with the dehumanizing machinery of totalitarianism, Karel becomes both an agent of its atrocities and a symbol of them. As such, *The Cremator* is a critique of totalitarianism through the case study of Nazi racial ideology, and endures as a reminder of the devastating consequences of blind conformity and delusion.

1.2 Thesis Statement

Although The Cremator received critical acclaim, most scholarly attention has focused on its literary adaptation from Ladislav Fuks' novel. Michael Brooke, a film historian, argues that the

Nazi indoctrination in the film is predictable (one could base this solely on the film title and its diegetic year), yet this predictability is what makes its critique so compelling: it reflects the inevitability of ideological manipulation when left unchecked.

While some analyses acknowledge its anti-totalitarian themes, few explore how the film systematically deconstructs fascist rhetoric through its own rhetorical and cinematic language. This study fills that gap by examining how *The Cremator* appropriates fascist rhetorical strategies in order to reveal the internal contradictions and absurdity of ideological violence through cinematic form.

How does *The Cremator* employ rhetorical and visual techniques to critique fascist ideology and reveal the process of indoctrination? The film shows how the language of purity justifies violence, while bureaucratic detachment and ritualized aesthetics reduce individuals to abstract categories- turning agents of seeming morality into obedient and emotionless functionaries. Kopfrkingl's megalomania illustrates the illusion of control of totalitarianism, while Herz's distortion and surrealism expose the psychological dissonance of ideological submission. By blending Nazi cinematic techniques with dark comedic intellect, *The Cremator* not only critiques ideology but also dismantles its methods of control.

This paper delineates Karel Kopfrkingl's ideological transformation by tracing how the film constructs purification, dehumanization, and authoritarian power through surrealist rhetorical and visual strategies. Drawing on a Burkean rhetorical framework alongside visual analysis rooted in propaganda theory and surrealist aesthetics, it closely analyzes three key scenes to map the progression from persuasion to alignment and moral disengagement. In doing so, this study not only repositions *The Cremator* within the field of rhetorical film analysis, but

also affirms its place in the Czechoslovak New Wave as a cinematic resistance to both fascist and communist dogma.

Before analyzing these mechanisms in detail, the following section will briefly contextualize the historical and political landscape in which the film was produced.

2. Historical Background

2.1 Czechoslovakia and the Czechoslovak New Wave

Following World War II, Czechoslovakia fell under Soviet influence through political pressure and ideological realignment. The 1943 Czechoslovak-Soviet Treaty formalized the relationship, and by the 1948 communist coup, Stalin had secured full control over the country (Bureš, 2018; Renner, 2023). The Soviet Union's role as Czechoslovakia's "liberator" was emphasized in state propaganda, justifying political and economic integration into the Soviet bloc. Rejecting the Marshall Plan and implementing mass nationalization, the Communist Party centralized economic control, prioritizing heavy industry at the cost of the consumer sector (Renner, 2023).

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, Czechoslovakia remained one of Eastern Europe's most rigidly Stalinist states, resisting the de-Stalinization trends seen in neighboring Poland and Hungary (Bracke, 2007). Under Antonín Novotný, the Communist Party maintained strict ideological control, suppressing dissent and overseeing a stagnating economy that had once been among the region's most advanced (Dyba & Svejnar, 1994). Although Stalin's death in 1953 triggered ideological shifts and varying censorship across the Eastern Bloc (Wallach, 1991), Czechoslovakia remained culturally repressed. As Havliček (1982) notes, there was no formal

censorship office, though it was heavily implied that editors operated under in-house implicit censorship, with an "auxiliary office of preliminary censorship" functioning secretly until 1966.

Despite these controls, ideological cracks began to form. The Khrushchev Thaw emboldened intellectuals, economists, and artists, many of whom pushed for liberalizing reforms. Soviet artist Ivan Chuikov's quip– "Big Brother is watching [in Eastern countries]" (Wallach, 1991)– captures the prevailing tension. Though state surveillance stifled overt political critique, underground currents of dissent circulated in culture and art (Cuhra, 2006; Gregor, 2000; Havliček, 1982).

In this climate, filmmakers sought to break from Socialist Realism, the state-mandated aesthetic doctrine, unambiguous and simple in its nature, that idealized communist progress (Owen, 2011). The Czechoslovak New Wave emerged contrastingly as a formally diverse and politically subversive movement that challenged ideological orthodoxy. It was largely driven by young filmmakers trained at the Prague Film School (FAMU), who used cinema to critique inefficiencies and hypocrisies within the socialist system (Hames, 2009; Hitchman, 2015). Influenced by avant-garde ideals such as surrealism, absurdism, documentary realism, and satire, the movement rejected Socialist Realism's didacticism and instead embraced thematic and aesthetic plurality (Owen, 2011).

Unlike other cinematic movements with clear stylistic manifestos, the New Wave's diversity became its strength. Semi-independent creative units at Barrandov Studios– the country's leading production company– enabled directors to make subversive, highly personal films despite the nationalized industry (Herzogenrath & Johnson, 2023; Szczepanik, 2023). Hames, one of the few English-language scholars to offer a unified account of the movement,

articulates it as a collective effort to form a more satisfying cultural alternative to ideological filmmaking. He expands the focus beyond major figures like Miloš Forman and Věra Chytilová to include many Czech and Slovak directors united in their rejection of state conservatism (Hames, 1985, 2005, 2009, 2013).

The movement flourished during the Prague Spring of 1968, a brief period of liberalization under Alexander Dubček. His vision of "socialism with a human face" loosened press restrictions, decentralized the economy, and allowed for greater artistic expression (Golan, 1973). Directors used this moment to explore themes of bureaucracy, personal freedom, and authoritarianism. They did so with a "you have to laugh mentality," aptly combining serious topics with often dark, sometimes grotesque, comedy (Hoyle, 2007). It was in this context that The Cremator (1969) was born.

This openness was short-lived. In August 1968, ‘Big Brother’ clamped down: the Soviet Union and other Warsaw Pact nations invaded Czechoslovakia, forcibly ending the Prague Spring and initiating the period of "Normalization" (Bracke, 2007; Wallach, 1991).

During Normalization (1969-1989), the regime reinstated strict ideological control over cultural production and was more repressive than within the Soviet Union (Wallach, 1991). Films that deviated from Socialist Realist ideals, those that featured surrealism, satire, or implicit political critique, were swiftly banned (Hames, 2013; Wallach, 1991). The Cremator (1969) was among the films targeted by censure. Though it had been one of the most critically acclaimed films of the year, its satirical use of fascist rhetoric and its surreal, grotesque aesthetic conflicted with the State’s demand for ideological conformity (Josef, 1971). While ostensibly about Nazism, the film’s exploration of dehumanization and authoritarian psychology was likely seen

as a broader critique of totalitarianism, making it politically dangerous. The re-imposition of Socialist Realism erased the experimental spirit that had defined Czechoslovak cinema in the 1960s (Stibbe & McDermott, 2022).

2.3 Juraj Herz & The Cremator

Juraj Herz occupied a complex position within the Czechoslovak New Wave. Unlike many leading figures of the movement, Herz did not study film at FAMU but rather at the Theatre Faculty of the DAMU (Academy of Performing Arts), where he specialized in puppetry, which influenced his stylistic choices (Košuličová, 2002). As a result, he often distanced himself from the movement, claiming he was not entirely accepted within its ranks (Hames, 1985). Nevertheless, scholars recognize that Herz's films, particularly *The Cremator* (1969), exhibit New Wave traits: surrealist aesthetics, absurdism, and political critique (Owen, 2018). Indeed, he described this era when he was allowed the most freedom as a “euphoric time” (Košuličová, 2002). His emphasis on psychological horror and the grotesque set him apart, yet this work remains firmly within the movement's thematic and formal concerns (Nemcová, 2018).

Owen (2023) examines Herz's relationship with the state-controlled film industry as paradoxical. While Barrandov Studios allowed him to make *The Cremator*, its release coincided with the 1968 invasion, leading to its banning. He had filmed an alternative ending explicitly linking Nazi atrocities to the Soviet occupation, but this version was never released (Lehmann, 2018).

As previously stated, much of the existing academic work on *The Cremator* comes from Czech sources and focuses on adaptation studies rather than film analysis (Hames, 1985).

Kapitolová (2011) and Kratochvíl (2018) examine how Herz translated Ladislav Fuks' novel into cinematic language, while Němcová (2018) and Kalivodová (2006) emphasize its metonymic nature and the protagonist's distorted perception. Lehmann (2018) offers a rare analysis of the grotesque in relation to Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil." Few studies explore the film's critique of fascist rhetoric or its engagement with authoritarian aesthetics. Adam Schofield goes so far as to say that, despite being mentioned in the foundational texts on Czech film, very little information is offered on Herz and his work, leaving a vacancy in discourse linking the film to the era (2007). Finally, because The Cremator's was immediately banned on release in 1969, and only re-released in 1990, it remains largely excluded from academic discourse.

3. Theories

To understand how *The Cremator* engages with the ideological tensions of its time, it is important to outline the political and philosophical ideas it draws on and responds to. The following section is a literature review that aims to introduce key concepts from political theory, rhetorical criticism, related aesthetics, and their subversion, which shaped the broader context in which the film was created and are reflected in its thematic and stylistic choices. These theoretical lenses help illuminate how *The Cremator* synthesizes historical trauma, ideological seduction, and cinematic form into a potent anti-totalitarian critique.

3.1 Totalitarianism

In her seminal framework, The Origins of Totalitarianism (1951), Hannah Arendt defines it as a system of total domination that surpasses both dictatorship and authoritarianism. While dictatorship alters political structures, and authoritarianism imposes order through centralized

power, totalitarianism goes further-- thriving on instability, surveillance, and propaganda, to ultimately change 'reality' itself. Arendt argues that it obliterates the distinction between truth and fiction, replacing reality with self-sustaining ideology- a process mirrored in *The Cremator*, where ideological conditioning reshapes Kopfrkingl's morality. Aschheim (1997) expands on Arendt's work, emphasizing ideological terror and perpetual motion but critiques her for overlooking Germany's unique trajectory, not only as a Fascist regime but also as the distinct case of Nazism.

3.2 Fascism

Unlike totalitarianism, fascism resists strict definition, functioning as an adaptable movement in response to the historical, economic, and political conditions that followed World War I, including the rise of liberalism, democratic weaknesses, and the emergence of socialism (Barker, 2012). Roger Griffin (1991) frames it through 'palingenetic ultranationalism:' the myth of national rebirth that justifies destroying the old order and purifying society of those outside the idealized community. This ideology appeals to popular desires for revolutionary scale change, unification, and economic stability (Barker, 2012). Griffin (1991) distinguishes between generic fascism, and Nazism, the latter integrating racial extermination into its ideology. He later argues that fascism is inherently revolutionary, aiming to replace liberal democracy with a totalitarian nationalist state (Griffin, 1995). Through force, rituals, and individual participation within the state across all classes, the all-embracing fascist state is unified under the charismatic leader. Mussolini, in *The Doctrine of Fascism*, wrote that fascism "aims at refashioning not only the forms of life but their content—man, his character, and his faith. To achieve this purpose, it

enforces discipline and uses authority, entering into the soul and ruling with undisputed sway" (in Baker, 2012, p.12).

Umberto Eco (1995) conceptualizes *Ur-Fascism*, listing 14 recurring traits, including the cult of tradition, rejection of modernism, perpetual warfare, and linguistic manipulation. Unlike Arendt's totalitarian model, Eco's approach highlights fascism's adaptability across time and context. Nazism weaponized these traits to create a self-sustaining ideological system.

3.3 Nazism

While Nazism shares fascist characteristics, it is distinguished by its anti-semetic racial core and radicalization within its nationalism, a movement infamously led by Adolf Hitler's totalitarian National Socialist party (NSDAP) from 1921 to 1945. Ian Kershaw (2004) emphasizes its 'cumulative radicalization,' the process by which Nazi policies escalate over time, including 19th and 20th century theories of social Darwinism, futurism, elitism, irrationalism and myth-making (Barker, 2012). Unlike Mussolini's Italy, which prioritized state power, Nazism fused nationalism with biological racism to uphold the 'Aryan' race. It depends on pseudo-scientific theories to justify a call to 'reasoned' targeting of 'inferior races,' primarily Jewish people, but also persecuting Non-Jewish Slavic peoples, the Roma, Sinti, Black, and mixed race people, considered 'racial enemies', as well as political opponents, notably communists, people with disabilities and gay people, considered threats to the 'Aryan race' (BBC Bitesize, 2023). Portraying the nation as an organic unity to be protected from contamination, extermination is an integral function of Nazi governance (Barker, 2012). Rather than being passive subjects, they mobilized the population as active enforcers of racial policies through propaganda, ritualized violence, and symbolic imagery, specifically through their language choices (Gregor, 2000).

In addition, the Nazi regime systematically rewrote cultural history to align with its volkish myths. As Erik Levi (1990) shows, even artistic expression was Aryanized: canonical composers were reframed as ideologically acceptable artists, their biographies sanitized and works politically reinterpreted to reflect a racially pure German spirit. This extended to the symbolic rewriting of Enlightenment-era artists as proto-fascist figures, with Nazi propaganda recasting their legacies in service of the regime's cultural myth-making (Dennis, 2002). Thus, rewriting artistic and historical memory became an integral tool of cumulative radicalization (Kershaw, 2004; Barker, 2012), exemplifying a broader politicization of aesthetics whereby all forms of artistic expression-- from music to visual culture-- were co-opted to naturalize fascist ideology and aestheticize power.

3.4 Politicization of Aesthetics

In the same vein, fascism exemplified the fusion of politics and aesthetics, making ideology a totalizing visual and cultural experience. Griffin (1995) emphasizes that fascism takes root through its ability to aestheticize politics, constructing grand narratives of national rebirth and national identity that make the ruling class's authority appear natural and immutable (Mandoki, 2022). This process was most fully realized in Nazi Germany, where artistic forms, architecture, and public spectacle were weaponized to appeal directly to emotions with charged images of unity and purity, bypassing rational discourse.

Susan Sontag's 1975 essay on Leni Riefenstahl relates to this, asserting that fascist aesthetics glorify surrender, exalt mindlessness, and glamorize death, transforming domination into spectacle and casting political obedience as a form of ecstasy. She identifies "a preoccupation with situations of control, submissive behavior, extravagant effort, and the

endurance of pain," along with the massing of bodies and stylized repetition of gestures around a hypnotic leader figure, as defining features of fascist visuality. This dramaturgy, she argues, enacts "orgiastic transactions between mighty forces and their puppets," choreographing power into beauty through pageantry and mythic symbolism (Sontag, 1975, p. 7). Fascist art, then, does not merely accompany ideology- it materializes as spectacle and collapses the distance between politics and performance.

The state's aesthetic ideal hides its brutality and conditions its citizens to appreciate the grandeur in their oppression. *The Cremator* uses these techniques of politicization and mirrors them to render Kopfrkingl's descent into fanaticism seamless. His transformation reflects how fascism aestheticizes violence and makes atrocity palatable.

3.5 Rhetoric of Fascism

Fascist rhetoric is a system of persuasion rooted not in reasoned argument but in affective manipulation and projection. Rather than presenting ideology through debate or dialectic, fascist language seeks to overwrite the critical faculties of its audience through simplicity, repetition, and emotional intensity (Koonz, 2003). As Neil Gregor (2000) outlines, Nazi rhetoric achieved this by merging symbolic communication, mass participation, and bureaucratic discourse into a unified mode of ideological transmission. Euphemism was commonplace: they transformed acts of exclusion and violence into moral imperatives, allowing atrocity to eventually be framed as national salvation. Phrases such as "resettlement" or "final solution" obscured the reality, and as Gregor (2000) and Koonz (2003) both argue, this reliance on coded language created a system in which citizens could become active participants in atrocities while maintaining a sense of moral righteousness.

Koonz showed how the Nazi regime embedded its rhetoric into a broader moral and emotional appeal. Hitler's ascetic and virtuous image allowed him to deliver radical messages disguised by language of ethical renewal, which *The Cremator* pastes onto its protagonist. Nazi rhetoric relied heavily on pathos, where violence was a redemptive act necessary for the restoration of the country's harmony. The regime's moral grammar enabled collaboration to appear righteous, and Koonz underscores how this language was embedded not only in official speeches but in education, propaganda, and cultural production (Koonz, 2003). The goal was not simply to persuade but to create a moral universe in which obedience felt virtuous in all aspects of life, especially for the general populace.

This rhetorical strategy was systematically developed and distributed. As O Broin (2016) illustrates in his study of the NSDAP's School for Speakers, the National Socialist Party professionalized its communicative tactics, emphasizing uniformity of messaging and the avoidance of intellectual complexity. Party speakers were trained to be clear, brief, and find resonance over factual precision. The aim was to build emotional agreement, often through rhythmic language, anecdote, and a carefully cultivated atmosphere of unity. Audiences were encouraged to feel a sense of belonging to a higher calling. The language of fascism thus functioned as indoctrination, shaping perception itself.

3.6 Counter-Fascist Movement

Anti-fascism started with socialist, communist, and Marxist critiques but englobed diverse democratic, anarchic, cross-national, and class ideals to resist the rising dominance of fascist political movements and ideologies in the 1930s (Barker, 2012). Its methods ranged in response

to the form of fascism dealt with, working across levels, from physically organized resistance to direct outspoken critique, to satire and art.

With the fascist ideal of unity standing opposed to the political and cultural heterogeneity of democracy in the early 20th century, art, cultural, and aesthetic representations are primarily concerned with images of unity and disunity (Barker, 2012). In Barker's seminal work *The Aesthetics of Antifascist Film: Radical Projection* (2012), she describes the essential artistic and cultural movements that influenced anti-fascist film in the early 20th century, notably modernism, expressionism, surrealism, Marxist realism, and montage. Evolving cinematic technologies and techniques, including editing, montage, and collage, raised questions on how media can shape meaning, subvert old ideas, and the capacity of film to convey heterogeneous reality, inherently critical of "the seductive beauty of an aestheticized politics" (Barker, 2012, p.6).

Since World War 1, Anglo-American censorship cooperation limited anti-fascist propaganda in film, aiming for the politically noncontroversial and especially avoidant of any depiction that could be offensive to Hitler and Mussolini (Cole, 2001). However, as the stronghold of fascism rose in Europe with the invasions of Austria and Czechoslovakia, filmmakers increasingly resisted censorship. Eastern European filmmakers employed cinema as a medium to critique the rise of fascism and authoritarian regimes. In Poland, Stefan and Franciszka Themerson's avant-garde short film *Europa* (1931) utilized surrealist techniques to convey a sense of horror and moral decline associated with fascist ideologies. In the Soviet Union, *Professor Mamlock* (Minkin & Rappapport, 1938), stands as one of the earliest films to directly address the persecution of Jews under Nazi Germany. Adapted from Friedrich Wolf's

play, the film portrays the tragic downfall of a Jewish surgeon who initially remains apolitical but ultimately becomes a victim of Nazi oppression. The film was widely disseminated in the USSR and served as a poignant anti-fascist statement. Additionally, the documentary *Unwanted Cinema* explores the experiences of Jewish filmmakers in Budapest and Vienna during the 1930s (2005, van der Let & Loacker). With intensifying anti-Semitic policies, many of these artists faced censorship and persecution which lead them to emigrate and continue their work abroad. In Czechoslovakia, the New Wave was the politically subversive movement which critiqued the totalitarian regimes that surrounded the country. Their stories underscore the broader challenges faced by Eastern European artists who resisted fascist ideologies through cinema.

In the West, Directors such as Charlie Chaplin exploited film "to make the world see its problems and their solutions from his point of view" as an anti-fascist "political idealist" and "natural propagandist" (Cole, 2001, p.142). Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940) is a renowned anti-fascist comedic masterpiece using satire to depict the dangers of the US and Britain's propaganda, isolationism, and appeasement policies in the 1930s (Cole, 2001). Chaplin's persuasive cinematic techniques rely on visual and sound imagery, provoking emotions and contrasting monotone characters to represent the duality of good and evil at play. This is supported by action-filled, violent visuals and a comedic framework that ridicules the villains while creating sympathy for the victims (Cole, 2001). The satirical impact of the film essentially depends on these juxtaposed visual representations, which create a disturbing dissonance between tragedy and comedy (Barker, 2012). Despite early criticism of its comedic treatment of dark subject matter, the film was a major success and significantly influenced propaganda techniques in later anti-fascist cinema. Aiming both to document and critique fascism, anti-fascist cinema interrupts, satirizes, and transforms the aesthetics of fascist political ideas

based on “wholeness, homogeneity, and pureness” and promotes a “radical beauty of fragmentation, heterogeneity, distortion, and loss” (Barker, 2012, p.20). *The Cremator* uses many of these techniques for its criticism of fascism.

Much academia and review of fascist writing, art, and diverse media have, throughout the 20th century, feared being labeled as sympathizing with the topic it treats, making much literature on fascism loudly anti-fascist (Barker, 2012). A call from Kenneth Burke’s famous 1939 essay, “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle,’” highlights the need to study fascist work structurally, without succumbing to pressure for superficial analysis that aligns with public opinion, as polarizing forces increasingly influence social and artistic spheres.

3.7 Buddhist Appropriation

Nazism also appropriated Eastern religious traditions to justify racial and mystical narratives. Angebert (1974) and Kurlander (2017) examine how Buddhist doctrines, such as reincarnation and purification, were distorted to align with Aryan supremacy. The swastika, originally a Buddhist symbol of auspiciousness, was repurposed as an emblem of racial destiny. Tibetan mysticism, particularly karmic cycles and suffering as purification, was twisted into eugenic and genocidal policies. Bhikkhu (2006) wrote about Buddhist conceptions of purity, writing about how liberation through death could only happen through suffering in life. In *The Cremator,* Karel Kopfrkingl adopts Buddhist rhetoric to rationalize mass murder. Rather than internal transcendence, he is obsessed with the suffering of others, portraying extermination as purification-- a direct inversion of Buddhist teachings. He showcases how totalitarian ideologies corrupt spiritual doctrines to legitimize their violence.

3.8 Surrealism

Born in the 1920s with Andre Breton's *First Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924), in the context of rising influence of Communism and Freudianism and the "moral, ethical, and religious vacuum left in the wake of the First World War," surrealism emerged to challenge the social order and expose the connection to pure, unconscious human needs, dreams, and emotions through absurdity and disorientation (Harper & Stone, 2007, p. 2-3). Surrealism in cinematography is an avant-garde, experimental aesthetic movement "about revolutionary and subversive ideas involving artistic creation as a way of life, and one's relationship with the world, with oneself, with others, and ultimately with society" (Moine & Taminiaux, 2006, p. 98). Although the surrealist film genre, in itself, is debated by authors such as Moine (2006) and arguably diluted over time with the oncoming Second World War as well as lack of funding (Chawla, 2024), the term is used to describe exclusively surrealist productions from the early movement, as well as to encompass a diverse array of works influenced by and interpreted in light of surrealist productions, often featuring "dislocated narratives, dissociated events and disturbing imagery," (Harper & Stone, 2007, p. 2-3) of which elements can be found in *The Cremator* to distort the fascist imagery it uses.

3.9 Research Gap

This study fills an essential gap by shifting the focus from adaptation studies to the film's rhetorical strategies in its critique of fascist ideology. While previous research has addressed *The Cremator*'s surrealist techniques and literary adaptation, my analysis will explore how the film actively subverts totalitarian rhetoric, employing grotesque aesthetics to dismantle fascist

linguistic structures. This thesis is therefore the first English-language analysis of *The Cremator* as a stand-alone film, situating it within the broader discussion of authoritarian visual culture and critique.

4. Methods

This research paper employs a dual-method approach, combining rhetorical analysis with visual analysis. The primary rhetorical analysis is grounded in a Burkean framework, drawing on his analysis of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (Burke, 1939). This approach will be complemented by elements of other methodologies, including Bakhtinian dialogism and other stylistic analyses. The visual analysis, on the other hand, will build on Rizti's (2014) study of cinematic propaganda, particularly her examination of *Triumph of the Will*, to explore how *The Cremator* manipulates Nazi propaganda techniques to subvert and delegitimize them. I will complement it with concepts from "The Iconography of Frame" to explain the subversion through discomforting frames that resemble surrealist techniques. This section outlines the analytical tools and theories that will be used to deconstruct the film's ideological subversion.

4.1 Rhetorical Analysis: Examining Fascist Indoctrination Through Language

Kenneth Burke's analysis of Hitler's rhetoric in *Mein Kampf* is visionary in its preemptive ability to decipher many of his more extreme narratives and his chosen methods of influence (1939). Burke identifies four primary rhetorical strategies in Hitler's writing: inborn dignity, projection device, symbolic rebirth, and commercial use. Inborn dignity creates a "medicinal appeal" and racial and ideological superiority, constructing a pure 'us' against an inherently corrupt 'them' (Burke, 1939, p. 195)-- a mechanism understood contemporarily as ingroup/outgroup dynamics.

The projection device externalizes societal and personal anxieties onto a scapegoat, turning societal internal problems into external punching bags (which, in The Cremator, is reflected in the protagonist's obsession with purity and liberation through extermination of suffering, or death). Symbolic rebirth offers ideological salvation by purging impurity, and commercial use rationalizes economic failures through racial and ideological lenses rather than material causes. This materialized racial scapegoating has a basic "medicinal appeal," allowing Nazism to remedy all societal ails through persecution of the evil outgroup embodying what contaminates society.

Beyond these core concepts, Burke identifies several additional rhetorical mechanisms that contribute to ideological persuasion, which this study will also apply. One of the most relevant is the use of sexual symbolism, in which Hitler feminizes the masses, positioning them as passive and in need of masculine leadership, while vilifying the Jew as a sexual corrupter. In *The Cremator*, Kopfrkingl is hypocritical in the sense that he has sexual impunity: he acts morally righteous while cheating on his wife throughout. Even the rejection of pluralism, which Hitler uses to frame democracy as weak and inefficient, can be found in the protagonist, who rarely lets those whom he sees as inferior speak to him. Finally, the use of repetition and sloganizing is emphasized. It is to be found just as regularly in the film, especially in leitmotifs and Bakhtinian dialogic forms, which will be defined subsequently.

4.2 Peripheral Rhetorical Analysis

Bakhtinian dialogism posits that meaning emerges from interaction between different voices and perspectives (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). Dialogue, in this sense, is not just linguistic but ideological-- our speech and thoughts incorporate the words of others, shaping our worldview

through exposure to authoritative discourse. Within the film, Kopfrkingl's ideological transformation is mainly mimetic as he borrows phrases and concepts from Walter, a figure of authority, as well as from his doctor and employees. His rhetoric shifts as he absorbs and repurposes Nazi ideology, mimicking its structures to rationalize his own evolving beliefs. I will be using dialogism as an umbrella term not only for Bakhtinian dialogism but also for Giles' Communication Accommodation Theory, in which individuals adapt their speech to align with dominant discourse (Giles & Ogay, 2007).

Bandura's theory of moral disengagement explains how individuals justify harmful actions while maintaining a sense of moral self-worth (Bandura, 1999). People often disengage from ethical self-sanctions through the use of euphemisms, the displacement of responsibility, and dehumanization. Kopfrkingl exemplifies progressive moral disengagement as he reframes increasing cruelty as acts of righteousness. By applying Bandura's framework, this study highlights how *The Cremator* critiques the psychological ease with which individuals rationalize violence under authoritarian systems.

To analyze the role of language in persuasion, this study draws on Ballard's (2017) work, which examines connotative language in ideological framing. Following this model, the study will identify how the film employs connotative words to dehumanize victims and justify violence (e.g. "poor souls" as a patronizing dismissal or "freeing souls" as a euphemism for extermination). As defined in the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms,* connotation refers to associations that a word or phrase implies, in addition to its dictionary meaning (Baldick, 2015). Connotations are shaped by "qualities, contexts, and emotional responses commonly linked to its referent " (p. 73-74). Additional stylistic devices from this text will also be referenced, including bathos-- the sudden collapse from the serious to the trivial-- and in conjunction, anticlimax,

where rising intensity drops into the mundane or absurd. Crucially, the definitions for the rhetorical canons and figures that are dispersed throughout the analysis will be taken directly from the "Silva Rhetoricae" website, and will be defined when they are first used (Burton, 2016).

Finally, in reference to the language of purification as a psychological and ideological mechanism, we will draw on Buddhist conceptions of purity, which frame purification as a moral and spiritual process achieved through suffering (Bhikkhu, 2006). As Kopfrkingl misinterprets the concept, the analysis will examine how purity discourse is repurposed for ideological ends. Hoffer's (2011) framework will be used to explore how individuals with pre-existing fixations (such as moral or spiritual purity) can be redirected toward ideological purification under the influence of authoritative figures, like the Nazi party leaders in the film.

4.3 Cinematic and Visual Rhetoric: The Aesthetic Critique of Fascism

The visual analysis is twofold, examining how *The Cremator* critiques fascist aesthetics rather than merely mirroring them. The first method compares Nazi propaganda cinematography with *The Cremator*'s visual language by drawing from Rizvi's study on *Triumph of the Will* (2014). In contrast, the second focuses on distortion and unsettling imagery as a means of undermining Nazi ideological control (DeNitto & Herman, 1975). By combining these two methods, as Herz combines the two kinds of images, one might assert that his intentions are anti-fascist to showcase the superficiality and absurdity of Nazi persuasion.

Drawing from Rizvi's (2014) study on *Triumph of the Will* (and *Battleship Potemkin)*, this approach identifies specific techniques used in propaganda films, which will be applied to *The*

Cremator. Nazi propaganda films constructed their ideological messaging through carefully orchestrated visual techniques that reinforced notions of power and unity. Framing techniques emphasized symmetry and geometric precision in films of crowds and parades to subconsciously reinforce order and discipline. Low-angle shots elevated Hitler and Nazi symbols, putting them in heroic perspective and magnifying their dominance. Imagery such as the omnipresent Nazi insignia, flags, and military regalia, ensured that the ideology saturated every frame. Conversely, high-angle shots of crowds from above reduced individuals to small, indistinct figures within an impersonal and obedient collective, visually reinforcing the subjugation of the individual to the regime.

The use of mass choreography further emphasized national unity, with soldiers, youth groups, and workers moving in synchronized formations, embodying the image of an efficient and disciplined state. Editing techniques, such as dialectical montage, intercut close-ups of Hitler with wide shots of adoring masses, presenting the leader and the people as inseparable components of a singular ideological force. Overtonal montage, as in layers of imagery-- marching troops, waving banners, and torchlight processions-- intensified and combined to create an overwhelming emotional experience, reinforcing Nazi ideals through rhythmic repetition. Other terms mentioning montage will be taken directly from Eisenstein's 1920s 'montage theory' (Gichuki, 2023).

Close-ups of smiling youth and enthusiastic soldiers created a personalized image of Nazi ideology, intimate and relatable, while wide shots of endless formations erased individuality, reducing people to mere components of the state. Finally, lighting and shadow played a crucial role in mythologizing figures of power-- dramatic lighting often cast Hitler in a divine glow, visually elevating him beyond mere human authority. Many of these specific techniques are

employed in *The Cremator*, and we will examine how they distort the inherent meaning they carry.

The second visual approach examines distortion as a critique of ideology. By leveraging grotesque and surrealist imagery, Herz visually fractures the Nazi aesthetic (which he includes sporadically) to reveal its inherent absurdity. This study draws on DeNitto & Herman's concept of the "Iconography of the Frame" (1975), which analyzes how the composition of a shot is inherently a meaning-making mechanism. Herz manipulates perspective, lighting, and mise-en-scène to create unease, contrasting sharply with the formalism of Nazi imagery. He uses extreme close-ups, warped lenses, and erratic cuts to destabilize the audience's perception.

The Cremator combines structured Nazi visual conventions with chaotic, unsettling distortions, in effect critiquing the superficiality and overambitious nature of Nazi persuasion techniques. Rather than simply deconstructing propaganda, Herz weaponizes cinematic language against fascism, transforming its own tools into mechanisms of subversion. Finally, a dual approach merges rhetorical and visual analysis to allow for a comprehensive study of the film's deconstruction of fascist indoctrination.

4.4 Process

To prepare for analysis, I began with a 20,000-word document of detailed notes on *The Cremator*, in which I annotated the film chronologically with thematic observations, scene descriptions, and interpretive reflections drawn from repeated close viewings. Using the rhetorical framework established in the methodology-- particularly concepts drawn from Burke, Bandura, and other relevant theorists-- I developed a matrix in spreadsheet form to organize the

data. This matrix had timestamps, page numbers from my notes, short scene descriptions, and columns for each rhetorical and visual key term, allowing me to systematically apply the theoretical concepts from my methodology and classify the film's rhetorical strategies. To maintain consistency and rigor throughout the process, I compiled a reference document containing definitions of all key terms, which I cross-checked regularly during analysis. After piloting this approach on the film's opening sequence, it was clear that the density of rhetorical and symbolic content in the film exceeded the scope of the project. Therefore, I selected three materially rich scenes that best demonstrate the film's rhetorical and visual progression. These scenes were subjected to in-depth, structured analysis informed by the prepared materials.

5. Analysis

This thesis examines the ideological metamorphosis of Karel Kopfrkingl across three key scenes in *The Cremator*. It is meant to be read with prior viewing. Each scene captures a distinct phase in his rhetorical and moral evolution-- from the seductive appeal of fascist aesthetics with Walter Reinke as its mouthpiece at the Nazi Ballroom Party (1:02:43-1:11:02), through ceremonial alignment and social ritual at Lakmé's funeral (1:20:43-1:23:52), to the final collapse of distinction between murder and salvation in the monologue with the Nazi in a Tuxedo (1:32:09-1:34:47).

5.1 Nazi Ballroom Party Scene

Karel appears seated at a Jewish celebration, quietly immersed in the "mournful tremolo" of the cantor's singing - gazing distantly, seemingly emotionally connected to the setting (1:02:35). However, this poignant moment is abruptly disrupted: Walter's disembodied mouth intrudes

from the upper-right corner of the frame (1:02:56), whispering conspiratorially, “They called the Führer a scoundrel and a rogue?” Initially, the reality of this intrusion is ambiguous-- Walter’s mouth, visually isolated and fragmented, resembles a devilish projection of ideological temptation. Despite Karel’s attempt to remain focused on the music-- “that cantor, those high notes”-- his spatial connection to the setting begins to erode.

This rupture initiates a surrealist transition marked by dialectical montage (Rizvi, 2014), wherein the spatial logic blurs as the setting subtly dissolves. Through a distorted side-zoom onto the vulnerable back of Karel’s neck- the peaceful Jewish gathering seamlessly morphs first into Walter’s living room, and then a lavish ballroom (1:03:15). This sequence operates as visual chiasmus (A–B–B–A), juxtaposing emotional registers and ideological contexts: communal mourning and introspection at the Jewish celebration (A) is replaced with conspiratorial paranoia in Walter’s living room (B), and ultimately transitions into the performative spectacle of the Nazi ballroom (B), which visually mirrors but emotionally inverts the initial communal scene (A).

Walter’s escalating rhetorical intrusions- “They said party members would be liquidated?” and “They said they’d bury Germany?”- construct a paranoid narrative, transforming cultural mourning into an existential threat through Burkean projection and scapegoating (Burke, 1939). Walter’s strategic repetition of the pronoun “they” reinforces the rhetorical construction of an ideological enemy, invoking an ingroup/outgroup dichotomy essential to fascist propaganda. Even Karel’s mild and unfocused response- “Yes, there was a crowd talking and eating”- reflects mimetic alignment, superficially echoing Walter’s paranoia without fully engaging with its substance (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014).

Yet Karel does not immediately capitulate; he remains captivated by the cantor's music, creating a moment of moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999). His aesthetic immersion serves as an emotional shield, distancing him from the ethical implications of Walter's accusations. This contradiction- affirming the cantor's emotional depth while passively echoing fascist paranoia-- illustrates a sort of visual antilogia- an internal contradiction within an argument (Burton, 2016)-- embodying a rhetorical and psychological split that highlights his ideological susceptibility rather than conscious resistance.

The cinematography reinforces Karel's shifting ideological alignment. The slow zoom into the back of his neck, thus far associated with his dominance (guiding his children and employees, predatory interactions with women), repositions him as subordinate, vulnerable to Walter's persuasive rhetoric. Walter's authoritative lean from above physically embodies Burke's (1950) rhetoric of hierarchy by asserting dominance through spatial framing. This cinematic staging captures the essence of Karel's gradual symbolic rebirth, where previous moral autonomy is incrementally surrendered.

Walter co-opts Karel's emotional vocabulary and sentimental tone, subtly reorienting Karel's affective associations. This rhetorical mirroring-- an instance of dialogic alignment (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014)-- begins to dismantle Karel's empathy and prepares him for ideological integration. As Hoffer (2011) articulates, mass movements exploit individuals who are emotionally adrift, seeking a sense of belonging and purpose. Karel's distracted affirmation-- "Yes, you're right"-- is delivered without conviction, signaling once again, emotional detachment from Walter's ideological accusations.

The decisive shift occurs with Karel's softened, almost dreamlike observation: "But it's like a paradise here" (1:03:45). His rhetorical pivot from passive agreement to active emotional engagement underscores the seductive power of aesthetics in fascist propaganda (Griffin, 1995). According to Hoffer (2011), displaced individuals find compelling comfort in such emotionally charged communal belonging. Karel's subsequent remark, "And no one's suffering here," accompanied by symmetrical, opulent ballroom visuals- uniformed officers, elegantly dressed dancers- encodes paradise through fascist ideals of exclusivity.

However, the cinematic juxtaposition of visual splendor with voyeuristic glimpses of bored, emotionally vacant women- groped and objectified- exposes a stark contradiction (1:03:52). This dialectical montage is ironic; paradise is selectively perceived, reliant on moral disengagement from female exploitation. His ideological rebirth thus entails replacing authentic empathy with selective blindness, a necessary moral detachment which will come to facilitate later atrocities.

Walter extends the rhetorical promise of paradise with strategic antanagoge- counterbalancing imperial ambition with humanitarian rhetoric: "Soon we'll end suffering everywhere-- Warsaw, Paris, London, New York." The deliberate inclusion of Karel's earlier empathy towards animals (00:17:55)- "Not even horses will suffer. The Reich's forces are mechanized, [...] automated. Just like your crematorium"-performs a threefold persuasive appeal (1:04:09). It evokes pathos by referencing wartime suffering- Karel's past lament over injured animals of the Great War, when they served together, while appealing to logos through the promise of mechanized efficiency. Most crucially, it flatters Karel's ethos by aligning his professional role with the Reich's broader ideological machinery: his work is not incidental, but exemplary. Walter is not only kairotic by exploiting Karel's relaxed state, but also employs

precisely Giles & Ogay's (2007) communication accommodation: he does not present new ideas. Instead, Walter reframes Karel's concerns with ethics by portraying fascist invasion as compassionate modernization to align him with the regime.

Blurred in a mirror behind, a woman adjusts her hair in a mirror, visually reinforcing the scene's incongruous sexual dynamics- an aesthetic subtext of disorientation and impunity. Walter repeats, "the Führer will create a paradise," making it sloganized (Burke, 1939), and exemplifying mimetic alignment (1:04:24). Its deliberate vagueness allows for projection, especially considering Karel's personal desires for beauty and purity.

Karel's physical turning toward Walter visually conveys his shift from observer to interlocutor. This embodied gesture marks his increasing susceptibility. Through subtle rhetorical coercion and aesthetic manipulation, Karel's symbolic rebirth continues to progress toward ideological complicity.

The mood shifts sharply with the theatrical entrance of the "nacista ve smokingu" ('Nazi in a tuxedo,' or 'nazi official'), brandishing champagne in one hand and a blonde woman in the other. His declaration-- "We have to drink to our victory!"-dramatically reframes the ballroom from decadence to ideological celebration (1:04:32). The explicit mention of March 15th, the historical date marking the German occupation of Czechoslovakia, provides a temporal marker that reinforces the symbolic act of toasting as national conquest. The champagne cork popping is a visual euphemism which suggests ejaculation, intertwining sexual symbolism with political dominance (1:04:37). This conflation reflects fascist ideology's overtly-masculinized conception of power, where territorial and sexual conquests might merge.

The camera captures the excess spill, through overlapping close-ups, visually representing unbridled consumption. This abundance contrasts starkly with the earlier Jewish celebration: the grief was shared, and its expression restrained. Here, indulgence is performative and exclusive-- highlighting the inborn dignity associated with the Nazi elite, whose privilege is constructed through deliberate wastefulness. As Bataille writes, "a surplus must be dissipated through deficit operations," since "luxury... presents living matter and mankind with their fundamental problems" (Bataille, 1988, p. 22). The spilling of champagne is thus not incidental-- it is a ritual act of superiority enacted through excessive waste.

Karel seems ambivalent: wincing at the cork's sound, he hesitates before accepting a glass, and looks toward Walter for implicit approval. Walter's subtle yet authoritative command- "sit down"- reinforces their hierarchical dynamic, with Karel immediately submitting (1:04:33). When others mock his abstention from drinking and smoking, Karel's embarrassment erodes his prior moral distinction (and ethos), pushing him towards compliance. This moment is especially striking given that Karel's abstinence has long been part of his self-image: he frequently asserts-- even unnecessarily to his own family-- that he neither drinks nor smokes, presenting it as a pillar of moral superiority.

He then qualifies his participation: "Perhaps just a symbolic glass" (1:05:07). The phrase functions rhetorically as antanagoge (Burton, 2016), strategically minimizing his moral concession. Walter's prior remark- "Today's an exception"- operates connotatively, providing permission for Karel's ideological compromise without overt moral conflict. In Burkean terms, the toast symbolizes another moment of entry into the in-group (Burke, 1939). His glance toward Walter before sipping embodies mimetic alignment (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014), underscoring Karel's submission through imitation rather than conviction.

Subsequently, the scene cuts rapidly and erratically to visually indicate elapsed time through rapid, irregular cuts. The ballroom atmosphere grows sluggish and drunken, mirroring Karel's emotional dissolution. Walter capitalizes with his masterful kairos, leaning in conspiratorially: "But we have enemies, Karel… including at your crematorium" (1:05:36). Walter's timing exploits Karel's literal and figurative intoxication, embedding political coercion within the space's ongoing erotic permissiveness. In the mise-en-scène, a woman playfully touches Walter's ear, and a blurred background depicts a man dragged off by women-- visual metaphors for unchecked sexual and political impunity. As Sontag (1975) notes, fascist art positions women as eroticized symbols of temptation, whose role is to affirm male dominance through their very passivity and disposability, saying that "[the woman] is always present as a temptation, with the most admirable response being a heroic repression of the sexual impulse" (Sontag, 1975, p. 8).

Karel, now contemplative, spins a glass of water- a visual metaphor for his internal turmoil (1:06:55). His ensuing denunciations follow a structured rhetorical gradatio: he begins with peripheral colleagues (Zajic, Fenek, Beran, Podzimkova, Pelikan), each shown in isolated close-ups as they react with confusion and pain, mirroring bureaucratic indexing of dissent (Gregor, 2000). His denunciations escalate to Liskova, whom he previously harassed, and culminate with the director. His statement, "I'm not sure he should go on being director," is tentative only in tone; it thinly masks his intention of commercial use (Burke, 1939), to advance his personal ambition . Karel's language becomes bureaucratically detached, evidence once more of mimetic alignment. His use of a possessive pronoun-- "my temple of death"-- indicates personal appropriation, subtly taking institutional control into his grasp.

Walter then re-appropriates Karel's earlier compassionate language ("poor souls," "mournful")-- "What about your poor unhappy Jews?"-- to isolate him rhetorically. The possessive pronoun "your" strategically alienates Karel, marking his residual emotional ties as ideological impurities and marking him as part of the outgroup.

Karel complies, immediately revising his defense of Mr. Strauss, "he's a decent, honest man…" with insinuations, "...though perhaps only for the money" (1:07:23). His shift aligns with antisemitic tropes of greed and frugality. His description of Dr. Bettelheim as having "infected" his nephew employs medicalized euphemism and signals contamination (1:07:42). Even innocuous figures like the maid, described as a "good old soul," become suspect through projection, recasting traits like kindness or nonalignment as signs of corruption, and ordinary traits as evidence of impurity (1:08:01). His rhetoric frames purity as total conformity, regardless of one's moral quality.

Visually, Walter dismissively pushes away a woman who playfully bites his ear (1:07:01), highlighting fascist gender hierarchy, where sexual freedom is permissible only within the boundaries of male dominance. Throughout this exchange, Walter occupies the right third of the frame, signifying soft power, while Karel addresses the camera directly, increasingly performative and conscious of his audience. Karel sips water hesitantly, followed by a significant glance toward Walter and a subsequent drink of champagne, a sequence that visually signifies submission and mimetic alignment.

The backdrop erupts into debauchery, as women are groped and undressed, staring blankly at the viewer, creating complicity. This surrealist moment exposes fascism's contradictions: its performative "paradise" is underpinned by gendered oppression. These visual

contradictions undermine the Reich's fantasy, seen through this unreliable lens as both seductive and incoherent.

Walter's generalizations and repetition of Karel's earlier semantic field of decay- "Jews are poison… a sad, wandering people"- reframes once more compassion as racial weakness (1:08:34). Karel's gaze, fixated on the Nazi in a tuxedo being sexually pleasured, juxtaposes erotic spectacle with Walter's chilling ideological analogy: "The Spartans killed their weak offspring… healthy for the nation" (1:08:43). This argumentum ad antiquitatem (or appeal to tradition) fallacy morally justifies future violence by citing historical precedent with utilitarian logic, foreshadowing Karel's eventual filicide.

Walter gradually tightens the noose, targeting Karel's household through cultural and familial references-- culinary traditions ("fish in sweet jelly"), linguistic practices ("you speak Czech at home"), and maternal lineage ("your Lakmé's mother was a Jew") (1:09:28). These seemingly benign markers become coded signs of ideological infiltration. These domestic references culminate in the line: "That's how they work: secretively. They start with families, with the children." This is more than projection-- it draws on a key theme of Nazi antisemitic propaganda. As seen in works like Der Giftpilz (1938), Jews were framed as moral corrupters who infiltrated the home, polluted culture, and misled youth. Walter's rhetoric deploys this exact logic: the political enemy is no longer abstract; he positions Karel's family as the enemy within, requiring action. Karel finally reacts when Walter reveals Lakmé's Jewish heritage: Karel would be a hypocrite not to acquiesce to the sacrifice of his wife.

The Nazi in a tuxedo explicitly sets forth the ideal of racial hierarchy: "Pure blood is a fundamental requirement," reinforcing inborn dignity through biological determinism (1:10:37).

His rhetoric creates a false dilemma, forcing Karel to choose between family loyalty and ideology. Karel attempts to refute with medical authority (“There’s no difference in blood. Even Dr. Bettelheim says so”). It backfires: Bettelheim is Jewish, and so Karel is ensnared by a bait-and-switch. His invocation of his personal doctor and friend is a red herring for the Nazis, redirecting the focus and discarding logic in favor of identity politics.

Pivoting towards the explicit, Walter’s statement "we must make sacrifices" is euphemism for the murder of Karel's wife (1:10:14). Here, Walter’s rhetoric employs commercial use for symbolic rebirth (Burke, 1939): Karel’s path forward requires him to relinquish his emotional attachments, proving alignment through personal loss. The phrase “Many hardships await her” (1:10:56) will be repeated in a different form at Lakme’s funeral, foreshadowing the impending genocide that awaits targeted minorities, signaling the importance of moral disengagement and dehumanization (Bandura, 1999).

The slow zoom into Karel’s conflicted expression visually enacts his ideological entrapment. His partial inclusion in the frame, relegated to the left third, reflects his incomplete assimilation. Karel’s memory of meeting Lakmé at the leopard cage resurfaces here, but this time with an addition: “in the predator’s pavilion” (1:10:12). The added phrase reframes the original memory, now cast in the language of domination. This is a rhetorical re-signification: Karel no longer recalls love, but conquest. It signals his acceptance as predator, foreshadowing the eventual murder of his wife.

Between the ballroom and funeral scenes, Karel begins to grasp the transactional logic of his rising status: compliance brings reward. After saluting the Nazis as they arrest the director, he sends his children away, already resolved to fulfill what is now expected of him. Named the new

director, he reciprocates by eliminating his “impurity”-his wife- calmly and decisively, having pre-mourned her in past-tense terms (“you at least loved music”). His descent into madness deepens as he imagines himself a monk, a personification of his ego. He now sees himself as chosen, exalted- a self-appointed Dalai Lama of death.

5.2 Funeral Scene

Lakmé’s funeral opens with a mourning string quartet performing a specially composed funeral march as the ceremony takes place (1:20:46). The classical piece functions as a prelude to Karel’s transformation. Composers of classical music, like Wagner and Beethoven, were revered by the Nazis as embodiments of Aryan cultural superiority. Here, the quartet’s harmony has the emotional register of a ritual while preparing the audience for a shared moment of grief. Karel exploits this mood rhetorically however, reframing the space as a moment for personal transformation. In Bhikkhu’s (2006) terms, true purification requires moral restraint and non-harm; yet, Karel not only murders his wife under the guise of a necessary sacrifice but also instrumentalizes the scene to elevate himself, violating the very ethos the music invokes.

A rapid establishing shot introduces the funeral attendees, arranged in deliberate symmetrical framing: two clean rows of recognizable figures in front, followed by a larger, less distinct group. The visual order is precise and hierarchical, enacting what Kenneth Burke (1950) refers to as the rhetoric of hierarchy, wherein social divisions gain persuasive power by appearing orderly. This idea is similar to the concept of inborn dignity that he finds in *Mein Kampf,* eleven years earlier (Burke, 1939). Those seated closest to Karel-- Walter, his wife, and the ‘Nazi in a tuxedo’ from the earlier Nazi Ballroom scene-- are framed as ideologically favored. Dr. Bettelheim, his wife, and grandson sit behind them, visually demoted. This is not

incidental staging but spatial rhetoric-- ideological allegiance mapped directly onto physical proximity.

Scattered among them are women with stereotypically Aryan traits: blonde, identically dressed, hands folded in near-perfect posture. The uniformity of their appearance evokes the kind of visual discipline that, as Rizvi (2014) argues in her reading of *Triumph of the Will*, supports fascist ideology through synchronized imagery and collective movement. Here, even in stillness, the women appear choreographed into the ideologically conforming model of femininity. Their uniform posture and accessories-- hats, purses-- perform alignment before anything is said aloud. Their makeup-- particularly the exaggerated lower eyelashes-- gives them the appearance of dolls, further objectifying and infantilizing them, stripping away power and authority. In contrast, the only brunette woman in the room, noticeably without such makeup, appears more human and emotionally present-- yet she is also the only one visibly disturbed by a man's touch as she watches Karel speak. Therefore, such presence visually constitutes a symbolic ingroup. Meanwhile, the Jewish characters remain hidden within the periphery, already set apart. Their placement anticipates removal; the scene performs fascism's purification logic before Karel ever speaks.

A high-angle shot of Karel's children seated in front of their mother's coffin visually subordinates them to their father, who is shot from a low angle. This cinematic arrangement, identical to Hitler's placement during his speeches in *Triumph of the Will* (Rizvi, 2014), also enacts the rhetoric of hierarchy, where power is legitimized by positioning and elevation (Burke, 1950). Karel, positioned above the mourners, is framed as more than a grieving parent: he appears as an officiant, a figure elevated by both space and speech.

His eulogy opens with: “It is sad indeed... that the first funeral at which I officiate as newly appointed director of this noble temple of death… should be that of my own heavenly wife” (1:21:27). While invoking personal loss, Karel’s language prioritizes ethos tied to institutional identity over mourning. His authority comes not from grief, but from role-- he speaks as director before he speaks as husband. The phrase “noble temple of death” compounds this positioning, casting the crematorium in spiritual terms. It mimics the language of purification, but without its ethical core. As Bhikkhu (2006) explains, purification requires the absence of harm. Here, Karel appropriates the aesthetic of transcendence, framed as release from suffering, but his intent is his own reinvention.

This moment also enacts Burke’s (1939) concept of symbolic rebirth: Karel’s speech reframes death as a transformative experience, both for the deceased and for himself. His elevated diction-- “noble,” “temple,” “heavenly”-- functions as euphemism, veiling the reality of cremation beneath metaphysical abstraction (Burton, 2016). As Hoffer (2011) notes, ideological movements often redirect spiritual language toward collective fanaticism. Here, Karel’s invocation of spirituality is less about liberation than it is about the masking of violence. It becomes an act of moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999), sanctifying his action rather than mourning its loss. As shown, her death is not a tragedy but an opportunity for him.

Describing his marriage as “happy” and “spotless,” Karel engages in an act of selective historical rewriting and myth-making (Dennis, 2002). By idealizing his relationship posthumously, despite infidelity, ideological betrayal, and eventually murder, he reframes their union as one free of contamination- unthreatening to the fascist value system he has internalized. As a funeral speech, it formally adopts the structure of an epideictic address, designed not to argue or persuade logically, but to evoke pathos and affirm the shared love and the moral order of

the speaker and their cause (Burton, 2016). Usually, this would mean musing about the deceased's life, but instead, Karel's rhetoric aestheticizes loss, repurposing personal tragedy as political capital-- what Burke calls commercial use (1939).

His next line, "Death… can be a great blessing," continues this logic by shifting the tone from mourning to justification (1:21:45). The statement exemplifies moral disengagement, once more allowing Karel to distance himself from his wife's murder by spiritualizing the act. It also operates rhetorically through euphemism and connotation (Burton, 2016): "blessing" casts her death as a transcendental release, while the phrase "terrors and woes" functions as an enthymeme. The unspoken premise-- left to the listener to supply-- is that her future under Nazi racial policy would be unbearable. The reference to "terrors" is not incidental: it functions as paralepsis, alluding obliquely to the looming genocide while disavowing explicit mention. By pretending to minimize the horror, Karel paradoxically reinforces it, encouraging the audience to infer the logic: death is a mercy when the alternative is extermination. This maneuver avoids responsibility while appearing both prophetic and compassionate.

An ironic rupture occurs with the mistaken entrance of the recurring bickering couple. The man's irritated exclamation-- "This is the last time!"-- and their swift retreat puncture the funeral's ceremonial solemnity, introducing a moment of tonal dissonance (1:22:11). This moment exemplifies a conjunctive use of bathos (or anticlimax): a sudden lapse from the scene's growing ideological intensity into domestic triviality, deflating the ritualized suspense with ridiculousness and dark humour (Baldick, 2015). As an instance of dialectical montage, the intrusion sharply contrasts private absurdity with public spectacle, breaking the persuasive rhythm of Karel's performance. His attempt to sustain the role of a unifying voice is briefly exposed as theatrical, disrupted by spontaneous, unscripted behavior. The moment also fractures

mimetic alignment: while Karel channels the elevated tone and cadence of fascist oratory, the intrusion reintroduces chaotic, everyday language, reminding the viewer of the thin line between political performance and absurdity.

Karel continues with: “You will return whence you came. Your soul will be liberated… and soar into the ether”(1:22:24). This line encapsulates symbolic rebirth, using spiritual language to render death redemptive. Drawing on ideas of Buddhist purification, the phrasing aligns with fascist rhetoric by making violence appear regenerative. Here, purification is rhetorical and not ethical (contrastingly to Bhikkhu’s definition). Karel speaks not to liberate, but to absolve himself through elevated language. Simultaneously, it enacts moral disengagement, framing cremation once more as a compassionate effort. Words like “liberated” and “ether” carry connotative weight: they obscure violence once more beneath metaphysical serenity.

A series of close-ups visually match the moment: Karel’s children are initially looking up at their father, but both avert their gaze by the end of the shot, signaling ideological alienation and unease. Their silent discomfort is a form of tonal montage-- not through editing rhythm, but through contrast (Rizvi, 2014). The emotional intensity of Karel’s spiritualized rhetoric is set against their quiet rejection of it, creating dissonance between what is spoken and what is felt.

The visual break aligns with his rhetoric: As Karel refers to his “dear friends, [...] the Germans of old,” the film shifts formally, deploying a fisheye lens to distort the geometry of the room (Denitto & Herman, 1975). This transition into surrealist imagery is a shift in narrative: what might have been a eulogy is an entry into fascist sermon. The lens warps perspective, visually embodying the absurd logic now emerging in his speech, and signaling the audience’s turn into an openly propagandistic register.

The audience's response confirms this shift: close-ups of Walter and the Nazi in a tuxedo reveal their expressions, moving from passive observation to quiet affirmation. Without speaking, they begin to acknowledge Karel not just as a figure to manipulate, but as one now aligned. This is more than imitation; it reflects what Coghlan and Brydon-Miller (2014) identify as mimetic alignment: the internalization of dominant ideological rhythms through repeated exposure and rhetorical modeling. Karel's cadence, lexicon, and even physical bearing now mirror the fascist aesthetic-- he doesn't just repeat the slogans, he embodies them. The "ultimate sacrifice" has already been made; all that remains is its recognition. Karel is no longer transforming. He is being received.

Karel's rhetorical shift is further marked by his physical movement: as he raises his head, lights reflect in his glasses. The moment carries symbolic weight, suggesting ideological enlightenment. Here, light signifies not moral truth, but narrative transformation (DeNitto & Herman, 1975; Rizvi, 2014).

His accompanying statement, "I say farewell, my angel… as director of this crematorium and as your loving husband," merges two roles into a single utterance (1:22:46). The tension lies in their order: institutional identity precedes the intimate, and his job now trumps his life. The statement reflects a form of antithesis, where opposing registers- official and personal- are juxtaposed, only for one to overpower the other. While the phrase gestures toward intimacy, it is filtered through the apparatus of state power.

In extreme close-up, Karel's face becomes almost unrecognizable, overtaken by theatricality. As his voice rises: "We must make sacrifices… Nothing is certain in life but death" (1:22:59). A line once spoken at the dinner table earlier in the film now functions as a slogan,

elevated from platitude to doctrine. The following phrase sloganizes it: “the Führer’s happy new Europe… and death [are the only two certainties in life],” antithesizes Nazi optimism with their war of annihilation, illustrating once more full moral disengagement (1:23:13). This follows Bahktinian Monologism, as they are merely statements of dogma, and Karel is merely merging his ideals with Nazism (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). As Karel grows into Hitlerian oratorical verisimilitude, as does his positioning in the frame and his tone: he grows physically and appears closer to the center. His presence now occupies more space, and he is positioned at the center in the remaining shots, symbolizing his integration into powerful rhetoric.

These words catalyze the physical division of the hall. The reframing prompts an immediate reaction: the Jewish guests rise as one and file out, a piece of mass choreography that starkly enacts their exclusion. Simultaneously, blonde women take their seats. The ideological reshuffling of bodies is choreographed, clean, and complete (Rizvi, 2014). The camera returns to a wide shot from behind the protagonist, now distorted through the fisheye lens, subtly re-centered. As Karel continues, the remaining men rise in synchronized salute, shouting “Heil!” (1:23:21). This is inborn dignity in action-- the visual and rhetorical creation of a purified ingroup. Their gloves and mechanical movement force theatricality once more: the hall becomes a fascist stage, emptied of authentic grief, cold with dehumanized ritual, one that the film critiques with the jarring surrealist moments of its excess.

The climax collapses with the ghostly return of a hallucinated young woman-- who represents his guilt, and may resemble Lakmé in her youth. She appears in a telephoto shot, visually unrooted, spectral. Her drifting behind the flowers punctuates the spectacle. As she blends into them, the film signals a start to the disappearance of Karel’s guilt. The flowers, already tied to ritual, begin to take on the weight of his emotional residue-- lingering signs of

intimacy or remorse that are visually obscured. Karel sees the woman, falters, and for the first time, loses his rhetorical poise. His pause and downward glance enact aposiopesis: a sudden break in speech where language yields to unresolved emotion (Burton, 2016). The humanity he has left remains hidden within her increasingly rare appearances. His shoulders slump, and he steps down from the altar.

His whispered line, "The flames can't hurt you now, my sweet," is hollow, condescending even, considering his actions (1:23:27). Here again, we have violence masked as tenderness. It also enacts a subtle antilogia, presenting contradiction in the guise of resolution: an intimate phrase that pretends to console while referring to an act of annihilation. Lakmé's burial and eventual cremation mark a submission of Karel's final emotional ties. The descent of her casket-- flowers and all-- visually affirms his ideological purification, while the rhetorical grandeur of the ceremony contrasts starkly with the violent reality it conceals. The flowers follow in disarray, epitomizing the artificiality of his obsession with purity, a moment recalling his desire for artificial flowers earlier in the film (00:28:45). This visual and verbal pairing enacts antithesis once more: elevation through fire, transcendence through annihilation.

As the funeral progresses, it becomes clear that the event is not about personal closure but Karel's formal induction into fascism. The presence of Nazi officials, the rigid arrangement of spectators, and the climactic mass salute all mark this shift from mourning to ideological alignment. Her death is reframed as the necessary condition for his symbolic rebirth. What appears as a spiritual purification is, in Hoffer's (2011) terms, a redirected spiritual fixation-- an ideological submission disguised as transcendence.

This transformation is rhetorical and transactional. Lakmé's death, presented as an act of spiritual compassion, exemplifies Burke's notion of commercial use: private grief is converted into public capital. She is no longer a taint on his purity, clearing the path for his social acceptance and eventual promotion, allowing him to step fully into the fascist order without emotional encumbrance. Indeed, as Hoffer explains, one must surrender oneself to become a prideful product of the regime- "The true believer [sees] himself as one of the chosen [...] destined to inherit [...] the kingdom of heaven" (Hoffer, 2011).

Karel is no longer a mourner but a speaker of doctrine- his voice amplified and his presence staged. At first, the empty space above his head keeps him visually diminished, an individual still on the threshold. But as his rhetoric intensifies and his ideological commitment solidifies, he rises to fill that void, centered in frame. The crematorium becomes an altar; his rhetoric, sacramental. The visual language-- a leader standing before a microphone, like a megaphone, framed from below, addressing a choreographed audience who respond in ritualistic unison- forms an uncanny reflection of Hitler's unifying voice, as described by Burke (1939) and Rizvi (2014). What began as mourning ends as affirmation-- not of loss, but of Karel's complete ideological absorption. In Hoffer's terms (2011), he has not found faith in a cause, but refuge from himself.

Between this scene and the next, we find camaraderie between the men: Karel is being treated as an equal by Walter now, he's in on the plans, and he's part of its perverse brotherhood. Now that he has killed his wife and affirmed his status publicly, he is fully aligned with the Nazi party values. Even his sexual preferences now conform to Nazi ideology, illustrating his desire to conform to the cult of superiority so clearly that he is putting it above his own identity. We move

on to Karel killing his son, which he treats like an animal for the slaughter (as he did his wife). They walk through the cemetery, and Mili is made fully passive. Karel even referencing Sparta here- a subtle nod to Walter's earlier innuendos. Once more, he is visited by his monk-ego, and his obsession with creating 'heaven on earth' increases.

5.3 Monologue with Nazi Official Scene

This scene starts with a distorted fisheye close-up of the Nazi in a tuxedo (1:32:09). The surreal distortion undermines the official's composed authority, signaling that it is from Karel's perspective. The following transition into a standard lens exemplifies the regime's attempts to impose institutional rationality over his madness, indicating a tenuous hold on control beneath the veneer of bureaucratic composure.

The Nazi official's phrase, "We must conduct certain experiments" (1:32:13), employs strategic euphemism to enact moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999), reframing genocide as scientific innovation. By casting mass murder as an experiment, institutional rhetoric neutralizes its violence, borrowing scientific authority to cloak moral atrocity (Gregor, 2000). Offering Karel the position of "technical supervisor" furthers this rhetorical strategy, presenting a role that contributes to genocide as career advancement-- an explicit instance of commercial use (Burke, 1939).

The repetition of the phrase "it's a secret," uttered three times in under twenty seconds (1:32:16-1:32:32), reinforces a climate of exclusive knowledge and privileged power. This establishes an ingroup dynamic and emphasizes secrecy as a valued ideological virtue.

Simultaneously, it embraces Karel into the regime's machinery while enhancing his sense of personal elevation.

This rhetorical shift is visually reinforced by the carefully constructed setting, which epitomizes the fascist obsession with symmetry and grandeur. The room's meticulous symmetry-- identical doors on either side, a polished table precisely bisecting the frame, and an ornate baroque stove rising behind the Nazi official- functions as visual propaganda. Rizvi (2014) highlights symmetry as central to fascist aesthetics, and here, it encodes authority and control. The polished surface of the table reflects and doubles the image, amplifying the sense of entrapment within fascist ideology. Central to this visual rhetoric is the hawk positioned precisely in front of the Nazi official, aligned with the fold of his suit, merging human and predator. This alignment uses fascist symbolism, showing us predatory and inherently dominating traits.

Beneath this rigorous symmetry lies an ideological contradiction between the two men, captured by distinct backdrops behind them: the Nazi official's ceramic stove is a concrete glorification for the architecture of extermination, effectively enthroning him, with its reflection, as a figure of Nazi order. Inversely, Karel stands in front of Bosch's looming triptych oil painting, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, dense with chaotic imagery of sin, punishment, and moral decay. The reflection elongates the infernal backdrop, hinting at Karel's disturbed mental state. Thus, while both figures inhabit symmetrical spaces, the stark visual opposition externalizes their subconscious divergence-- calculated bureaucratic control versus poetic (and hallucinatory) madness. Hannah Arendt's analysis (1951) regarding the division of moral labor in totalitarian regimes is relevant here: Karel's increasingly explicit enthusiasm for death and

purification marks him as uniquely suited for his horrific role, much like Walter was for his mimetic seduction. He does not see extermination as policy but as salvation and transcendence.

Walter, who has been standing silently behind Karel up until this point, is quietly dismissed when the Nazi official declares, “This calls for absolute secrecy,” marking a critical rhetorical and structural shift (1:32:28). His exit visually signifies the regime’s division of labor-- Walter's persuasive role is obsolete as Karel no longer needs convincing (Arendt, 1951). Karel’s subtle surprise at Walter’s departure visually acknowledges this shift, signaling his promotion from persuaded subject to active ideological agent.

Karel’s ensuing monologue begins solemnly, almost ceremonially: “To quickly incinerate the greatest number of souls… to free as many souls as possible from the fetters of this earthly existence” (1:32:41). His language recasts mechanized genocide as spiritual liberation. The use of “earthly existence” resonates explicitly with Bosch’s painting behind him, and “fetters” reinforces his belief that physical life is inherently corrupt and liberation must occur through extermination. This speech thus reframes mass murder as a metaphysical good, casting Karel as a perverse savior. His earlier recurring mantra-- “there’s no difference between ashes anyway” (1:33:40)-- underscores his indifference to the Jewish identity of his victims, but what matters instead is that *as many as possible* be incinerated in pursuit of transcendence- merging with bureaucratic logic. This phrase also encapsulates an internal dichotomy: equality, in Karel’s formulation, is attained through the uniformity of incineration. Initially, Dr. Bettelheim had reassured Karel that all blood is also alike-- an idea he briefly adopted, only to later abandon when ridiculed by Nazi officials in the party scene. But while he internalized the logic of blood purity, he clung to the idea of ash as a great equalizer. That logic permitted him to cremate his

son alongside an Aryan soldier, symbolically “purifying” his lineage. In this scene, the phrase functions as Karel’s safeguard: so long as all are rendered ash, identity is neutralized.

The visual dimension intensifies this transformation. Karel stands rigidly centered against Bosch’s infernal imagery, framed symmetrically by dark curtains and stark lighting contrasts that highlight his isolation and internal psychological confinement. As he raises his hands slowly into a ritualistic gesture (recalling the iconography of a certain passionate rhetor), the camera pans downward, gradually revealing his inverted reflection on the polished table surface (1:32:57). This inverted image symbolizes Karel’s complete ideological inversion: he sees himself as a divine liberator, yet the audience perceives him as grotesquely distorted, a prophet of mass death.

Karel’s language of “liberation” and “ether” recycles language previously used at family dinners and work, now entirely repurposed into Nazi mantras. The phrase “greatest possible number of souls” further abstracts human life into disposable units, embodying moral disengagement and crystallizing Walter’s earlier rhetorical work. Walter’s persuasion restructured Karel’s latent desires through moral reframing. His language accepted Karel’s views, in which cruelty was seen as a form of compassion and death as a moral duty. He provided Karel with a dialogical realignment by giving him a moral and ideological lens that reframed long-standing fantasies as ethically coherent. By accepting his 'extermination is liberation, death is sacred' narrative, Walter removed the barriers Karel that had internalized to function in a society that condemned those fantasies. Now, Karel needs no justification beyond the logic of his metaphysics.

This monologue represents a pivotal, or kairotic, moment. Once more, Karel is not the passive recipient of persuasion; he actively articulates Nazi doctrine back to them. The Nazi

official, now listening silently emphasizes Karel's shift from subordinate to technical adviser. Karels embraces systematic extermination, and he fuses bureaucracy with his fervor which positions him as an indispensable enactor of fascist ideology.

Karel's rhetoric is dominated by efficiency, employing quantitative metrics: "75 minutes," "10 minutes," "continuous operation," "hundreds," and "thousands" of bodies. This numerical rhetoric exemplifies commercial use (Burke, 1939), transforming lives into calculable outputs. His breath quickens, his voice swelling with constrained excitement, as he expresses his psychological catharsis. Karel's rhetoric thus transforms mass murder from atrocity to idealized efficiency, embodying the chilling realization of his lifelong, now ideologically empowered, fantasy.

The spiritual register persists-- terms like "liberated souls," "ether," and "dissolve" recur-- but their repetitive deployment throughout the film has stripped them of genuine meaning. They are slogans: theological remnants emptied of spiritual resonance and repurposed for fascist affirmation. The juxtaposition between this elevated rhetoric and the mechanized death it describes forms an antilogia. "In continuous operation" and "no one would come out alive" underscore this transformation, employing passive construction to present death as an inevitable outcome rather than a deliberate act, further distancing Karel from moral culpability.

His abstraction is matched by a surreal montage drawn from Bosch's nightmarish artworks. As Karel delivers his monologue, rapid, disjointed cuts and close-ups from Bosch's *Christ Carrying the Cross* and *The Ascent of the Blessed* disrupt narrative coherence. This montage contradicts Karel's claims: where he proclaims liberation, the visuals depict torment, punishment, and infernal suffering-- writhing bodies, sneering faces, and monstrous hybrids.

These juxtapositions are tonal montage and intensify the affective dissonance between the 'purity' of his rhetoric and the grotesque reality of his genocidal fantasy. What Karel frames as liberation, the frame exposes as hell.

The editing rhythm escalates through rapid overtonal montage, amplifying emotional tension. Fragments from *The Garden of Earthly Delights* flash across the screen, reinforcing the dreamlike logic of Karel's ideological hallucination. His recitation of Jewish acquaintances-- Prachar, Vojtik, Strauss-- is delivered methodically, without emotional engagement (1:33:52). This enumeration is nothing more than a bureaucratic ritual: Each name is systematically inserted into a schema of eligibility, establishing their 'impurity' as moral and existential justification for extermination.

Crucially, Karel's logic is not predicated on active threat or resistance (referring to Walter's paranoid, conspiratorial narratives: "They said they'd bury Germany?"); instead, it revolves around the victims' intrinsic incompatibility with Nazism's vision of purity. They are merely burdens obstructing the regime's pseudoracial fantasy. For Karel, their annihilation is spiritually profitable-- an example of moral justification where systemic violence is reframed as kindness (Bandura, 1999). He imagines offering comfort through the promise of reincarnation. Yet, the term "reincarnated," alongside others like "blessing" and "liberated," continues to function as a strategic euphemism, lacking compassion and serving to assuage systemic murder.

Visually, the film literalizes Karel's delusion through vivid hallucinations that merge his victims with Bosch's infernal iconography. Each fall is symbolically charged: Vojtik drops into a grotesque corridor of carnal indulgence, symbolizing moral condemnation; Strauss falls into a boiling cauldron surrounded by monstrous nuns and demonic witnesses, evoking an alchemical

fantasy of transformation through destruction. This allegorical fusion literalizes Karel's ideological gaze, where their 'punishment' is recast as a form of spiritual rectification.

The sequence culminates in a chaotic vortex of distorted limbs, reaching hands, and anguished faces-- figures who tumble through flattened space directly through the painted surface of Bosch's infernal landscapes. Here, visual depth collapses entirely; Bosch's paintings become literal screens onto which fascist logic is projected. The victims are transposed onto the representation of their destruction, transforming Bosch's moral warnings into an operational blueprint for genocide. Bosch's nightmarish imagery is an anti-propagandistic critique as it subverts the fascist promise of transcendence and purity by revealing its grotesque truth. The absurd juxtaposition between Karel's theological rhetoric and Bosch's infernal chaos exposes the idealistic delusion at the core of fascist purification narratives. Where fascism sells transcendence through order, Bosch's hallucinations offer only spiritual decay, dismemberment, and confusion-- laying bare the lie embedded in the aesthetic of perfection.

The final victims before the official's subsequent interruption are the blond women from the Nazi ballroom party, a flash of waving arms and anguished doll faces, revealing Karel's true indifference as to the identity of those he wants to cremate compared to the systematic, targetted Nazi agenda. The opportunities offered by joining the party give room to his true underlying fantasy to release "All humankind, the entire world, could be liberated" (1:33:47).

The more exalted Karel becomes, the more abject the images. His voice, trembling with excitement, mimics religious ecstasy. This is not the voice of a state functionary-- it is the voice of a zealot mid-revelation. His speech is not static; it unfolds rhythmically with the visual sequence, producing an overtonal montage of voice, image, and ideological climax. His breath

quivers, his eyes glisten upward. The tonal dissonance marks the extent of his assimilation, revealing a mental break where bureaucratic detachment has given way to devotion.

The scene's musical leitmotif furthers the dissonance between Karel's rhetoric and the horror it conceals. When he begins his monologue, the score builds eerily, pushed forth by ethereal female vocals and steady, ritualistic percussion, mirroring the priest-like cadence of his gestures and voice. This ominous tone settles into a droning calm as the camera reveals his inverted reflection, sonically underscoring his ideological inversion. When his speech shifts to numerical logic, the music swells with percussive bells and strings, reinforcing the mechanized horror of his vision. As Bosch's grotesque imagery interrupts, the score is punctuated by sharp surges and chilling clashes of a gong each time an acquaintance falls into its abyss. The Nazi official's voice finally punctures it- marking the rupture of his fantasy, ending the sequence in stunned, bureaucratic quiet.

The Nazi official calls out, "Mr. Kopfrkingl!" (1:34:16), interrupting Karel's hallucination and briefly destabilizing the regime's façade of control. The official's startled reaction to Karel's extremist rhetoric enacts a visual power reversal: the regime's agent, previously composed and dominant, now appears unsettled by the monstrous ideological creation he has helped foster. Karel, meanwhile, remains disturbingly calm.

Karel states calmly, "You know, it wouldn't really matter if they weren't quite dead," marking a pivotal psychological departure (1:34:24). Previously, Karel insisted on the sanctity of death as a moment of release. Even his wife and son were killed before being cremated-- death had to precede transformation. Here, however, that boundary collapses. His suggestion that cremation need not wait for death deepens his shift from facilitator to executioner. He no longer

sees any need to distinguish between the dead and the living when it comes to cremation. The disregard for whether victims are alive reflects the culmination of commercial use: human life is reduced solely to utility, fully aligning with the regime's mechanized genocidal aim.

Delivered completely detached, this proposition illustrates Karel's final departure from any pretense of moral restraint. Throughout the film, Karel positioned himself as a Charon-like figure, guiding "souls" with solemnity, delivering poetic platitudes on death, and framing his work as a spiritual duty. The cold, procedural language of industrial efficiency now replaces that register. The act of readjusting his tie symbolizes Karel's complete absorption into Nazi bureaucratic identity-- no longer mimicking its rhetoric, he now embodies and extends it.

In the final shots, symbolic hierarchies invert subtly: Karel, previously subordinate, now stands composed and commanding, positioned at the edge of the frame yet dominating through his quiet intensity. The Nazi official remains symmetrically centered but appears dwarfed by the decorative excess. What once enshrined his authority now renders him ornamental. Nothing has changed in the framing, but the hints of fear on the Nazi's face offer us this variance. The officials' final repetition-- "absolute secrecy"-- encapsulates Karel's ideological evolution: what began as hidden persuasion is now a shared secret of bureaucratic horror, one that Karel actively perpetuates (1:34:36). The match cut to Karel adjusting his daughter's hair seamlessly connects this ideological extremity with intimate domesticity: familial intimacy and ritual violence are indistinguishable.

This scene ultimately marks Karel's full transformation. What began as a hesitant euphemism ends as doctrinal fluency. His progression -- from cremation timing to mass logistics to the erasure of the death-life boundary -- follows a classical gradatio: intensifying his claims,

each being more unbound than the last. His final, subdued assertion, “you know…” pretending uncertainty while delivering horror-“no one would come out alive”- performs antanagoge. The horror is embedded in functional speech, buffered by a bureaucratic tone (1:34:27). Karel’s complete rhetorical and psychological sublimation into Nazi ideology epitomizes the terrifying capacity for ordinary rhetoric to become extraordinary violence-- exemplifying the very heart of the film’s critique of fascist propaganda.

6. Discussion

6.1 Transformation as a Rhetorical Process

Karel Kopfrkingl’s ideological transformation is marked by a clear rhetorical progression across the three key scenes. In the Nazi ballroom, he performs ritual submission by breaking his personal abstention, drinking a “symbolic glass” to affirm his place within the party-- his first public step toward belonging. In the funeral speech, he speaks with growing confidence, delivering a eulogy that fuses religious metaphor with fascist doctrine, signaling his shift from passive mimicry to active propagation. By the monologue scene, he reaches full doctrinal embodiment: he proposes that cremation need not even wait for death.

As demonstrated through the scene analyses, the protagonists’ transformation through meticulous and incremental realignment, from a seemingly harmless crematorium worker into an ardent visionary of Nazi atrocities. Although he initially presents himself as a morally upright figure, one who views cremation as release from suffering and speaks of “merciful nature” and “kind fate,” he also displays an obsessive fixation on purity and reincarnation. From the beginning, darker desires leak through: when he pauses to admire flowers, he remarks, “Too bad

they're not artificial. They'd bloom even in the snow," (28:35) revealing a longing for unnatural permanence, a fetish for control over time and decay, and a preference for the artificial over the natural. His susceptibility renders him particularly malleable for ideological realignment.

The key architect of this shift is Walter Reinke, an old war friend and a figure uniquely gifted in the art of persuasion. His rhetorical tactics mirror the historical deployment of charismatic manipulators within fascist movements- what Hitler simply called "speakers" (Koonz, 2003). Indeed, Hitler noted that a good speaker "can always see in the faces of his listeners what rouses them" (as quoted in Koonz, 2003, p. 17), much like a classical sophist or modern politician. These speakers, historically, even attended training courses in the 1930s to master the craft of reiteration of Nazi racial ideology and propaganda. Within this hierarchy of influence, Karel was targeted as a "willing executioner" (Kershaw, 2004, p. 253)- "prepared to do their bit, whatever the[ir] individual motivation." Walter's influence is slow and deliberate, gently nudging Karel towards Nazi collaboration. Though initially hesitant, Karel begins to recognize the potential for social advancement, and that recognition becomes the first crack in his moral foundation.

Walter's function within Karel's rhetorical realignment extends beyond persuasion; he acts as a facilitator of Karel's latent violence. He does not radicalize Karel in the traditional sense; rather, he carefully dismantles the social inhibitions that once masked Karel's deeper impulses. Walter does not possess Karel's enthusiasm for cruelty, nor does he match his fervor for death; his role is to grant permission, to remove the shame around such impulses. This follows fascist recruitment strategies, which sought not merely obedience but to monger existing resentments with ideological justification (Gregor, 2000, pp. 1, 239). Walter reframes Karel's preexisting metaphysical obsession with death as a sacred vocation, thus unshackling his

psychological constraints. His methods align with Giles and Ogay's (2007) Communication Accommodation Theory, adapting Karel's own spiritual vocabulary to lead him toward moral disengagement. By offering social elevation and existential purpose, Walter transforms Karel into a willing executor of fascist ideals, fulfilling what historians have identified as a hallmark of totalitarian mobilization: converting the banal into the monstrous through bureaucratic affirmation (Arendt, 1951). As Eric Hoffer (2011) writes in *The True Believer*, "It is not actual suffering but the taste of better things which excites people to revolt" (p. 42)-- or in this case, to ideological surrender. Walter provides that taste through subtle flattery, telling Karel, "You're an honest, sensitive, responsible man. You're strong and brave, a pure Germanic soul" (55:26). Eventually, he gives him a real taste of social advancement: helping Karel become the director of his noble temple of death.

Walter's rhetorical strategy depends on redirection and moral reframing. When Karel expresses pacifist longing-- "peace, justice, and happiness"-- Walter reframes these values as goals achievable only through struggle. He invokes the annexation of Austria as proof, echoing Nazi propaganda that promised national restoration through sacrifice and strength. As Burke (1939) and Koonz (2003) demonstrate, this promise of rebirth appealed to a demoralized postwar population, framing fascism as a form of redemption. Walter's rhetoric operates similarly: he casts Nazism as the moral path toward collective harmony necessary for a greater good.

Walter's influence also operates through mimetic alignment. Early in the film, Karel mirrors the language of figures he respects, such as Bettelheim and his crematorium colleagues. As Giles and Ogay (2007) argue, linguistic convergence signals deepening group identification; in Karel's case, it reflects ideological absorption as he grows closer to Walter and the Nazi elite and increasingly adopts their bureaucratic diction. His language becomes an amalgam of his

spiritual mysticism and their genocidal pragmatism. Mussolini himself declared that, beyond controlling behavior, fascism sought to "enter into the soul and rule with undisputed sway" (quoted in Baker, 2012, p. 12). Walter's role, therefore, is not simply that of an ideologue but a rhetorical facilitator. He speaks Karel's language before Karel speaks his. He has understood that allowing Karel to continue with his spiritual obsessions can only improve his co-option of ideology. This dialogic mirroring collapses resistance and eases Karel into ideological self-consistency. As Gregor (2000) explains, fascist movements succeeded because they mobilized individuals not as passive victims but as active enforcers-- through propaganda and, crucially, symbolic language choices. In *The Cremator*, this is visible in Karel's increasing ability to speak, think, and fantasize within the Nazi ideological register.

Throughout, a series of incentives and rhetorical permissions replace Karel's moral compass with the emotional appeal of belonging. Indeed, as Hoffer (2011) states: "The fully assimilated individual does not see himself and others as human beings... He has no purpose, worth, or destiny apart from his collective body... He must never feel alone" (pp. 82-83). Walter and the other Nazi figures exploit this principle with rhetorical precision. Karel is offered a place in something larger, and increasingly told that his full participation depends on personal sacrifice. Further, Hoffer's assertion that "faith in a holy cause is a substitute for the lost faith in ourselves" (p. 26) becomes increasingly relevant. Walter and the Nazi figures do not present fascism as an authoritarian imposition but as a sanctuary for men like Karel, who are emotionally displaced. He is told that he can "liberate" souls, "ease suffering," and "purify the world." This dynamic is not incidental-- it mirrors what Arendt (1951) describes as the totalitarian system's obliteration of "the distinction between truth and fiction" (p. 474). Karel's hallucinations intensify as he internalizes the regime's moral logic. In the monologue scene, he imagines mass

incineration as spiritual release-- “souls rising into the ether.” His psychological reality has been entirely reconstructed by belief. Arendt’s theory of totalitarian logic works in this context: the regime no longer needs to enforce its truth, its adherents experience it as real.

The speech reveals not only a personal delusion but also mirrors broader fascist practices of historical myth-making. In describing his marriage as “happy” and “spotless,” Karel engages in an act of selective historical rewriting, purging memories of infidelity, betrayal, and violence to present a narrative untainted by impurity. He follows Arendt’s concept once more of true-false obliteration (1951). This act parallels Nazi strategies of cultural revisionism, where composers like Handel and Mendelssohn were stripped of their Jewish associations and rebranded as racially pure symbols of German greatness (Levi, 1990; Dennis, 2002). As scholars have shown, the Nazi regime extensively manipulated historical memory, rewriting musical and cultural history to cleanse contradictions and sanctify the past in service of ideological purity (Dennis, 2002), and Karel's sanitized memory becomes a microcosm of this broader strategy.

As Karel's hallucinations intensify, particularly in the monologue scene where he envisions mass incineration as a form of spiritual liberation, the film captures not only the obliteration of truth (Arendt, 1951) but the grotesque normalization of horror. Lehmann (2018) extends Arendt’s concept of the "banality of evil," arguing that within the Nazi structure, monstrosity was not expressed through deviant appearance or excess but precisely through administrative normalcy. Karel does not see himself as a villain; his actions feel consistent, natural, even benevolent within the ideological frame he has adopted. This grotesque banality is key to Herz’s critique: the most horrifying transformations are not marked by sudden external changes but by a steady internal erosion of moral distinction. The surrealist ruptures-- Boschian imagery, inverted reflections-- visualize this collapse, suggesting that beneath the surface of

everyday bureaucratic language lies a boundless capacity for rationalized violence. Indeed, Gregor asserts that "the crimes of National Socialism were mass crimes not only in the sense that they claimed mass numbers of victims, but also in the sense that they were committed by a mass of perpetrators. The millions of ordinary people murdered under the National Socialist regime were not murdered by impersonal structures, but by many hundreds of thousands of other ordinary people" (2000, p. 10). In this framework, Karel's ultimate fluency in exterminatory logic is not a descent into madness but a grotesque completion of National Socialist coherence.

The logic of Karel's transformation is transactional. At no point is he coerced or threatened; instead, each moral surrender is rewarded with a corresponding increase in status. First, he sympathizes and is accepted. He denounces his colleagues and becomes director (Gregor, 2000). He murders his wife and earns full trust. He performs doctrinal fluency and is offered a central role within the extermination apparatus. Each step down morally corresponds with a step up socially. This pattern mirrors the fascist structure of reciprocity, where belonging is contingent upon progressive moral compromise.

By the final act, Karel no longer needs Walter. His indoctrination is so complete that even the Nazi official appears unsettled by the fervor of his beliefs. Karel speaks calmly of burning the living, of saving souls through death, and of scale and efficiency. The rhetorical and visual techniques employed throughout *The Cremator* reveal not only the horror of fascist ideology but the precise, step-by-step logic by which it takes hold: through persuasion, alignment, and the erasure of moral reality.

6.2 Geographic Materialization & Female Ornamentation

Karel's transformation is inseparable from the spaces he moves through-- each key setting in *The Cremator* mirrors Burke's idea of Geographic Materialization (1939). He noted that geography was central to shaping affective identification with power, especially as a "unifying center of reference for all" (p. 192). The film uses this principle structurally, mapping Karel's psychological descent through a series of codified spaces.

Although meant as a space of spiritual release, the crematorium undergoes a significant transformation in *The Cremator*. It becomes a sacred site of ideological purification, framed both rhetorically and visually as a locus of bureaucratic transcendence. Karel's monologue reconfigures the crematorium as an industrial temple where death is optimized. The building's symmetrical nature and Karel's explicit Nazi salute solidify its role as a fascist altar.

Through spatial and gendered dynamics, *The Cremator* articulates a vision of fascist power that is not only architectural but patriarchal. As Griffin puts it, "The female body belonged to the state and had to serve the national community" (1995, p. 77). As such, the film's spatial rhetoric is also gendered: its vision of fascist paradise is built on the ornamental subjugation of the feminine.

In the Nazi ballroom scene, fascist belonging is conveyed through lavish surroundings and eroticized performance, with women positioned as decorative objects within the space-- encoding the fascist fantasy of patriarchal indulgence without consequence. This visual structure is extended in the film's brothel scenes, both serving as affective mirrors of Karel's psychological realignment. The women-- first brunette, later blonde-- reflect Karel's aesthetic shift toward the Aryan ideal, reinforcing his internalization of Nazi purity codes, but their

presence has no interpersonal complexity in the film. Even Karel's wife is afforded little autonomy, rarely speaking; her eventual death, staged offscreen and rendered bloodless, is only a passive, transactional moment. The only woman with perceptible agency is the young apparition who seems to personify his guilt. Yet she is merely a vision, chasing Karel in the final scene, powerless and left behind. Her inability to alter his course encapsulates the film's treatment of women as aesthetic or moral echoes, never agents of change.

6.3 Merging Nazi Cinema with Surrealism to Reveal Inherent Absurdity

The Cremator constructs its anti-fascist message not only through language but through an elaborate visual strategy that first mimics and then dismantles the seductive grammar of Nazi propaganda. Drawing from the cinematic techniques codified in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935), Herz reproduces the formal aesthetics of fascist persuasion- symmetry, grandiose framing, choreography, and overtonal montage- only to distort them into grotesque absurdity. As Rizvi (2014) outlines, Riefenstahl's film relies on the dialectical synthesis of leader and masses, reinforced by rigid compositional order and rhythmic montage that induces effective submission. Herz appropriates these tools only to reveal the hollowness of National Socialism.

In the Nazi party and funeral scenes, low-angle shots and axial symmetry present Karel and his interlocutors in positions of mythic power. Geometric precision, glossy reflections, and centered compositions initially frame ideology as aesthetically coherent and spiritually ordered. This structure mirrors what Mandoki (2022) describes as the fascist "aestheticization of authority," but Herz quickly subverts this visual cohesion. In Karel's monologue, symmetrical tableaux collapse into dissonant montage: distorted Bosch paintings, fisheye close-ups, and the rhythmic falling of victims' bodies through the hellscapes. This fragmentation mirrors De Nitto

and Herman's (1975) notion of montage as a site of inferential excess, where meaning is created through juxtaposition rather than continuity, exposing internal contradictions through visual accumulation and rhythm.

This dialectical visual approach- seduce then disturb- draws on Eisenstein's montage theory, particularly dialectical montage, where contrasting images collide to produce psychological dissonance (Gichuki, 2023). In the film, the smooth continuity of fascist design collapses under the weight of its own horror. Camera distortions, such as the fisheye lens or sudden zooms, deform the seemingly rational frame, exposing the grotesque beneath bureaucratic order.

The analysis provides insights that enrich understanding of *The Cremator* in the context counter-facist film. Notably, it follows in the trajectory Chaplin helped define, but drives it radically further-- substituting optimism with dread, and moral clarity with dissonant surrealism. Where Chaplin's final speech calls for empathy and human dignity, Herz offers no such catharsis: his fusion of dark comedy, grotesque surrealism, and dissection of unemotional bureaucracy reveals the horror of fascist ideals and their psychological and aesthetic seduction. By doing so, the film implicates the structures of everyday life and perception that enable such ideology. As part of the Czechoslovak New Wave, Herz's film stands among European cinema's most radical counter-fascist critiques: formally inventive, politically charged, and unwilling to resolve horror into hope.

7. Conclusion

Herz's *The Cremator* constructs its critique of Nazism through both content and form, producing what might be termed a rhetorical inversion of propaganda. The film weaponizes fascist

aesthetics as seduction, only to reveal the horror concealed within. Surreal montage, like the hallucinated descent of his acquaintances into Bosch's infernos, undermines the propaganda structure by rendering its logical endpoint grotesque, as per DeNitto and Herman's (1975) interpretation of the grotesque as anti-authoritarian rupture. This subversion also engages the rhetorical mechanisms outlined in Burke's (1939) analysis of Hitlerian discourse: inborn dignity, symbolic rebirth, projection, and commercial device are all found, but made absurd through repetition, detachment, or visual exaggeration. Karel's transformation into an 'inverted divine liberator' who murders his family and speaks of burning the living depicts not only the efficient power of nazi persuasion reaching the endpoint of moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999), but the rational failure of ideology itself to remain coherent. Thus, Herz indicates the seductive mechanisms of facism-- its ability to offer meaning through simplification, beauty through brutality, and identity through historical fiction.

In examining these processes, this thesis has employed a dual-method approach: a Burkean rhetorical analysis of ideological transformation and visual analysis rooted in propaganda theory and surrealist disruption. Through this framework, *The Cremator* reveals how fascist ideology colonizes both language and perception-- convincing its subject not through logic but through myth, ritual, and repetition. The film's surrealist and grotesque strategies expose the architecture of this persuasion, revealing how rhetoric can rationalize atrocity and aesthetics can anesthetize horror.

This study contributes to the scholarship by focusing on the film's rhetorical function as a fascist critique-- especially within the underrepresented context of Eastern European cinema. This analysis situates the film as a structural deconstruction of totalitarian rhetoric. It also affirms the film's place within the Czechoslovak New Wave, as the rhetorical and visual strategies

examined here-- particularly its use of surrealist aesthetics, grotesque irony, and political subversion-- clearly align with the defining features of the movement. As noted in the introduction, scholars recognize these traits in Herz's work, and this thesis demonstrates how *The Cremator* not only exhibits them but uses them to dismantle fascist ideological systems from within.

However, several limitations remain. This analysis was based on translated subtitles, which inevitably flatten or alter the rhetorical nuance of the original Czech dialogue-- particularly significant in a film where language functions as a primary tool of ideological transformation. The thesis is also limited to a single case study, which narrows its comparative and transnational scope. A broader cultural or linguistic framework-- one that incorporates original Czech-language rhetoric or situates *The Cremator* alongside contemporaneous anti-propaganda films-- could offer a richer contextual understanding. Additionally, the scope of this project, constrained by time and scale, allowed for the close analysis of three materially rich scenes; a longer study might benefit from a broader selection. Finally, while the use of a fixed set of rhetorical categories has provided structure and clarity, it may also exclude other affective, symbolic, or stylistic elements worthy of deeper analysis.

Further research might take several directions. A study with a religious studies background could more deeply engage with the film's references to Buddhism, spiritual purification, and Karel's delusions of divine authority. Art history analysis might explore the symbolism of the crematorium's architecture, its resemblance to mausolea, and the recurring use of not only Hieronymus Bosch's iconography but of other artworks in the film. Historical contextualization-- particularly of Herz's work under repressive communist rule-- could enrich understanding of the film's subversive function and production conditions. A gender studies

approach could interrogate the film's representation of passive, aestheticized women as ideological markers within a patriarchal fascist order. Scholars might also trace the evolving representation of crematoria-- symbolically and practically-- in the history of cinema or memorial culture. Finally, comparisons to contemporary media could examine how the film's portrayal of ideological seduction through spectacle resonates with the re-emergence of far-right aesthetics in the digital age, where propaganda is diffused, exponentially faster, through spectacle and emotion. In such an era, Herz's film remains disturbingly relevant. Its power lies both in what it condemns and in what it reveals-- how language and image, unexamined, can erode moral clarity. To resist, as *The Cremator* suggests, is to see through the frame-- both the literal cinematic frame that presents distorted tableaus, and the rhetorical frame which makes ideology seductive. Recognizing these as constructed-- whether on screen or in speech-- is the first step in resisting their power.

Nevertheless, the findings suggest that Herz's film demonstrates the potential of cinema to interrogate the tools of ideological control. As Owen (2018) notes, Herz's films embody the surrealist absurdism and political critique typical of the Czechoslovak New Wave-- *The Cremator* is proof that cinematic language can not only expose fascism's violence but dismantle its aesthetic appeal. In this sense, the film does not merely depict indoctrination-- it performs it, only to fracture it from within. By tracing Karel's transformation through rhetorical and cinematic language, Herz builds a case against fascism, using the seductive frameworks that allow it to thrive: ritualized language, aesthetic control, and the comfort of coherent narrative. In dramatizing how ideology reconfigures perception and how language can be made to serve death, the film reminds us that totalitarian systems do not emerge fully formed-- they are built, piece by piece, through rhetorical suggestion, visual normalization, and the quiet replacement of

moral judgment with myth. Herz's film teaches us, above all, that in the face of such systems, seeing clearly is itself an act of resistance.

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