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And the Fifth Rider Is Fear

One of recurring themes in Zbyněk Brynych's filmography are Nazi crimes. Three of his films from the 1960s are set during the Second World War, which, according to him, affected a whole generation. With intervals of two to three years, he made acclaimed films *A Convoy Leaving Paradise* (Transport z ráje, 1962) *And the Fifth Rider Is Fear* (A pátý jezdec je strach, 1964) and *I, Justice* (Já, spravedlnost, 1967). The middle film of the loose trilogy set in occupied Prague during the aftermath of the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich is an adaptation of writer Hana Bělohradská literary debut *No Beauty, No Collar* (Bez krásy, bez límce, 1962). Her psychological novella describes the tension in of Prague's tenement houses caused by the presence of a wounded resistance fighter seeking shelter.

The script, written by Brynych and Bělohradská, diverts from her story in several respects. Originally, the story was seen from the perspective of multiple characters, but the film shifts the focus only on Jewish doctor Armín Braun (Miroslav Macháček). Unlike the novella, he's not a resigned old man, but a middle-aged man full of strength able to resist evil. The plotline with the wounded resistance fighter on whom Braun does surgery in a makeshift infirmary is much more tense in the film. Also the film's ending is different and the resistance fighter is denounced. Although the film's theme follows up *A Convoy Leaving Paradise*, its portrayal is much more stylised, adapted to the deformed perspective of the lonely protagonist in an exhausting struggle with his own conscience. Unlike *A Convoy Leaving Paradise* with its collective hero and several storylines used to compile a mosaic-like portrayal of the Terezín Ghetto, *Fear* is a portrayal of a ghetto that paralyses and takes restricts the freedom inside a man. After the introduction of Nazi race laws, Doctor Braun is unable to practise his medical profession. At the beginning of the film, he works in a synagogue that also serves an entirely different purpose than it should. It serves as a storage of seized Jewish property. As a liquidator, Braun is tasked with their inventorying. The

opening sequence with rooms filled with seized a systematically categorised property can be interpreted as a visualisation of his anxious mind where he, just like Kafka's heroes, gradually loses himself.

Piled cases, books and wall clocks labelled with inventory numbers represent terrifying symbols of their Jewish owner reduced by the Nazis to mere objects for mass liquidation. The somewhat grotesque overflow of various props reaching far beyond what we see on the screen will define the *mise-en-scène* for the remainder of the film. In atypically composed wide-screen images shot by Jan Kalíš, objects of everyday use become sinister and abstract items that press on Braun from all sides and try to devour him and make him a part of them (just like they try to devour the viewers).

This time, Brynych and his crew, including, among others, graphic designer Ester Krumbachová (who co-wrote the technical script and designed the costumes), were not interested in external Protectorate life, but rather in internal emotional reality of people and place. The stylisation and symbolism of places through which Braun feverishly wanders, be it the central tenement house, a decadent night bar or a depressive psychiatric hospital, drew significant inspiration from expressionism. Contrast lighting, camera angles and also unnaturally amplified sounds and noises and discontinuous editing evoke a claustrophobic and paranoid atmosphere of a city where no one trusts anyone and the only thing uniting people is fear.

'For instance the scene in a bar will be shot in an unrealistic environment attempting to portray the last refuge before extinction. Or a basement. Or using a police commissioner whom Braun encounters at every turn. And moving trucks. In each street, there is one moving truck and one 'civilian' from whom there is no escape. And when Braun closes his eyes and opens them again, everything is gone. He must have dreamt it because he was thinking about it so hard,' Zbyněk Brynych explained his artistic concept in an interview. ^[1]

Jiří Sternwald's disharmonic score corresponds with the psychological discomfort of the protagonist, whose inner decay intensifies after he takes care of the wounded resistance fighter. As Braun collapses under the pressure of fear, he concurrently realises that if he won't take a stand against evil, no one will. While older films about

the Holocaust (not just those made in Czechoslovakia) usually depicted the stereotype of Jewish passivity, in Brynych's film, it's the Jewish protagonist stripped of his basic rights and freedoms, who decides to act and thus becomes the only one to keep his moral integrity, even if it costs him his life. His final act is primarily an expression of overcoming the fear of death.

Brynych perceived his film as a parable influenced by, in addition to Kafka, the Biblical *Revelation of St. John the Divine* reflecting heroism, cowardice and indifference.^[2] To the four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, he added a fifth one – Fear penetrating people and influencing the society-wide atmosphere. For Brynych, Fascism is a type of mentality rooted in human stupidity and cowardice. In addition to scenes portraying the hustle and bustle of contemporary Prague framing the story^[3], the timelessness of the theme of oppression of individual freedoms and the clash of an individual with power, is highlighted by abstracted decorations and deliberate anachronisms such as costumes and hairstyles that do not correspond to the Protectorate Era.

After all, *Fear*, wasn't shot exclusively in Prague. Brynych took up the offer of Czechoslovak Filmexport's contractual partner Carlo Ponti and shot half of the film in Rome. The contract with Ponti subsequently opened up worldwide distribution channels. The atmospheric, psychologically penetrating probe into a society where weak, unscrupulous people destroy the lives of exceptional personalities was successfully screened in the United States and won awards at festivals in Mar del Plata, Helsinki and Cuneo, Italy. Czechoslovak reviews were also generally favourable. According to Jan Žalman, Brynych searches for a glimmer of hope in a world gripped by institutionalised evil and discovers that it is the human spirit, which, in Žalman's eyes makes *And the Fifth Rider Is Fear* 'the most beautiful apotheosis of intellect that Czech film industry has ever known.'^[4]

And the Fifth Rider Is Fear (A pátý jezdec je Strach, Czechoslovakia 1965), director: Zbyněk Brynych, script: Hana Bělohradská, Zbyněk Brynych, cinematography: Jan Kališ, music: Jiří Sternwald, cast: Miroslav Macháček, Olga Scheinpflugová, Jiří Adamíra, Zdenka Procházková, Josef Vinklář, Ilja Prachař, Jana Prachařová, Jiří Vršala, Tomáš Hádl and other. Film Studio Barrandov, 97 min.

Literature:

Jiří Brdečka, Raději strach než STRACH. *Divadlo* 16, 1965, no. 6, pp. 68–69.

Jiří Pittermann, „...a pátý jezdec je Strach“. *Kino* 20, 1965, no. 5, p. 7.

Hana Kalousová, Exteriéry pokračují. *Filmové novinky* 3, 1964, no. 9, o. 14.

Galina Kopaněvová, Zásah do času. *Film a doba* 11, 1965, no. 6, p. 139.

mn, Na otázky odpovídá režisér Zbyněk Brynych. *Filmové informace* 15, 1964, no. 14, p. 9.

Agáta Pilátová, Pátý jezdec zkázy. Rozhovory a úvahy nad filmem ...a pátý jezdec je Strach. *Kino* 19, 1964, no. 11, p. 3.

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Jan Žalman, *Umlčený film*. Praha: KMa 2008, p. 222.

Notes:

[1] Agáta Pilátová, Pátý jezdec zkázy. Rozhovory a úvahy nad filmem ...a pátý jezdec je Strach. *Kino* 19, 1964, no. 11, p. 3.

[2] Hana Kalousová, Exteriéry pokračují. *Filmové novinky* 3, 1964, no. 9, p. 14.

[3] For instance the Letná Tunnel was opened in 1953, 12 years later than the film is set

[4] Jan Žalman, *Umlčený film*. Praha: KMa 2008, p. 222.