

JAKUB EGERMAJER / 9. 1. 2026

Desire

Desire (Touha), an anthology film about “the four seasons, the four stages of human life,” can be considered the first full-blooded expression of Vojtěch Jasný’s poetics – a style the originality and maturity of which did not go unnoticed even at the time he created. The film met with success and, despite the hostility of certain functionaries of Czechoslovak cinema, was sent to the Cannes Film Festival, where it won the award for the Best Youth Film. It is remarkable not only as one of the harbingers of the “Czechoslovak film miracle,” but also as perhaps Jasný’s most personal work.

In the context of the mild cultural liberalization that took place in the mid-1950s, the nationalized film industry underwent decentralization, leading to the creation of relatively autonomous production groups. The head of one such group, Bohumil Šmíd, decided to give Jasný free rein after the warm reception of the filmmaker’s solo debut *September Nights* (Zářijové noci).

Despite his professional success, the young director was going through difficult times in his personal life. In 1954, his mother passed away, and a few months later another tragedy struck him and his wife, the producer Miroslava Jasná: their baby was stillborn. Not long after, his wife was diagnosed with cancer, to which she succumbed in the spring of 1959 at the age of thirty-one.

Jasný later recalled that the blows of fate led him “to the conviction not to work along any party-required schematics, but to strive to film truthful stories about life” – and “above all, human ones.” Together with his co-writer Vladimír Valenta, a recently released political prisoner, the director therefore more or less abandoned the conventional dramatic structure in the four stories presented in his film. The tales – of a boy waiting for his mother and newborn sister to return from the maternity ward (*The Boy Who Searched for the End of the World* – *O chlapci, který hledal konec světa*); of a summer romance (*People on Earth and Stars in the Sky* – *Lidé na zemi a hvězdy*)

na nebi); of a strong, proud, and sorely tested farmer who refuses to join the agricultural collective (*Anděla – Anděla*); and of an old teacher and her son (*Mum – Maminka*) – are devoid of both plot twists and pronounced character development. They present finely drawn figures and never let the audience forget that these are but fragments of long human destinies. The film's deep focus on the individual – characteristic of Eastern Bloc cinema of the time yet brought to an unprecedented level – is masterfully reinforced by Jasný's regular collaborators: cinematographer Jaroslav Kučera and composer Svatopluk Havelka.

In all four stories, Jasný draws inspiration from his own memories, his family, and his native Moravian town of Kelč. In the final story in particular, he comes to terms with his recent painful experiences.

Despite Šmídá's persistence, the approval of the screenplay for production dragged on for nearly a year and a half. Jasný first filmed *Anděla* as a test — a story considered controversial at the time not only for the chosen artistic approach but also for its political undertones. The result convinced the authorities.

However, there was a certain tension surrounding the film even after its release at the end of December 1958. At the notorious Banská Bystrica conference in February 1959, the official representatives harshly criticized the “negativist” tendencies present in several recent films, which subsequently disappeared from the programs of the Czechoslovak cinemas. Despite the fact that *Desire* aligned with the dogmatic expectations of the regime to an even lesser degree than the condemned works, it reportedly escaped criticism only because it had inspired enthusiasm among Soviet filmmakers. The film even received an honourable mention at the 1st Festival of Czech and Slovak Films, held in conjunction with the conference. The path to international success was thus opened.

The relation of *Desire* to the rest of Jasný's filmography is best illustrated by the director's own recollections. Upon hearing the screenplay, his teacher, Karel Plicka, remarked: “You want to approach filmmaking as if you were a hundred years old.” The young man replied that he had already lived through enough tragedies to feel that old. Plicka warned him that after such a film, he would have nothing left to say to the audiences. And Jasný replied: “Then I'll start making comedies.”[1]

Desire (Czechoslovakia 1958), director: Vojtěch Jasný, script: Vojtěch Jasný, Vladimír Valenta, cinematography: Jaroslav Kučera, music: Svatopluk Havelka, cast: Jan Jakeš, Václav Babka, Věra Bublíková, Vlastimil Brodský, Vladimír Menšík, Jana Brejchová, Jiří Vala, František Vnouček, Otto Šimánek, Věra Tichánková, and others. Barrandov Film Studio, 92 min.

Notes:

[1] Vojtěch Jasný, *Život a film*. Praha: Národní filmový archiv 1999, p. 25.