JONATHAN OWEN / 22. 9. 2020

Fear and Attraction: Selling Zbyněk Brynych's The Fifth Horseman is Fear in the USA

Zbyněk Brynych's film *The Fifth Horseman is Fear* (*...a pátý jezdec je strach*, 1964) was one of a number of films from Czechoslovakia to receive US theatrical distribution in the 1960s. The story of a Jewish former doctor in Nazi-occupied Prague who risks his life to assist a wounded resistance member, this tense, artfully crafted drama of persecution and regained dignity may now be relatively obscure among English-speaking film enthusiasts, but at the time it earned unanimously excellent reviews from many of the most prominent American critics and had a modestly successful theatrical run across the country. At New York's Baronet Theatre, where the film had its US opening on 6 May 1968, it played for two months and, according to *Variety*, took almost $100,000 during its first six weeks.[1]

The relatively high visibility Brynych's film enjoyed exemplifies the vogue for foreign art films in America at this time, as well as the international success of the Czechoslovak New Wave. At the same time the film's international release illustrates the compromises faced by a state-socialist country newly attracting – and courting – the interest of Western distributors. Finally, the modification and promotion that the film underwent for international distribution offer a telling snapshot of the art film market in its 1960s heyday, with its strange proximity to the world of exploitation film.

As with several other widely renowned Czechoslovak films of this era, *The Fifth Horseman is Fear*'s international exposure was mediated by the famed Italian producer Carlo Ponti and his Greek-born associate and representative Moris Ergas. Ponti's interest in Czechoslovak cinema had been aroused by the successes both of Miloš Forman's *Black Peter* (*Černý Petr*, 1964) – which won first prize at Locarno,

beating one of Ponti's own productions – and of Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos's *The Shop on Main Street* (*Obchod na korze*, 1965), the first Czechoslovak film to win a foreign language film Oscar.[2] The Italians' commercial relationship with Czechoslovak film began when Ergas bought a number of films as a cheap 'package deal' and sold them to the New York-based CBK Film Enterprises, principally for television broadcast.[3] Ergas and Ponti started to distribute films theatrically too, and in January 1968 an agreement was closed with Československý filmexport that gave the two producers sole distribution rights, within their designated world territories, to all Czechoslovak features made between 1967 and 1969. The relationship also expanded into a number of planned Czechoslovak-Italian coproductions, though most of these either went unrealized – as with Brynych's project *Mother Colonel* (*Matka plukovník*) – or ended in acrimony and dispute – as with Forman's *The Firemen's Ball* (*Hoří, má panenko*, 1967), from which Ponti notoriously withdrew his support.[4]

By the mid-1960s, international export had become an increasing priority for the Czechoslovak film industry. In a 1966 report the leaders of Československý film (Czechoslovakia's central state film body) emphasised their concern to set 'Czechoslovak culture on a commercial basis'.[5] Exports to the West were particularly important, economically speaking, in view of the much-needed foreign currency to be gained. However, as Ladislav Kachtík, the former director of Filmexport, argued in 1968, Czechoslovakia lacked the means to promote its films effectively on the international market.[6] The involvement of a figure like Ponti could thereby be justified by the Italian producer's long experience of selling to the coveted but unfamiliar American and West European markets, his canny understanding of film promotion, capitalist-style.

However, the various arrangements with Ponti and Ergas provoked distrust and criticism from the filmmaking and critical community. Much of this controversy was economic in nature, focused on the perceived monopolisation of distribution rights or on the purchase of films for fixed prices rather than on a percentage basis.[7] It was noted too that Ponti's promotional material tended to play fast and loose with the films' credits: in a short commentary on the American release of *The Fifth Horseman*, Jaroslav Brož observes with dismay that the US poster for the film neglects to mention the names of its director, actors or even country of origin, while the legend 'A Carlo Ponti Presentation' appears below the film's title – a further monopolisation

at the level of billing.[8]

Ponti's involvement also provoked ire for its perceived artistic harm. Particularly vociferous was the noted liberal critic Antonín J. Liehm, who attacked Ponti for his commercialising influence, which, as Liehm claimed, had already 'buried' Italian cinema.[9] In the case of the Czechoslovak films they acquired, Ponti and Ergas's commercialism was manifested, most notoriously, in their request for new, risqué material to add to the films and thus make them an easier sell abroad. Such naked commercialism, so to speak, may seem at odds with Ponti's simultaneous pursuit of Western institutional prestige, evident in the way he 'intentionally and systematically' guided Jiří Menzel's *Closely Watched Trains* (*Ostře sledované vlaky*, 1966) towards its 1968 Oscar win.[10] However, as Barbara Wilinsky points out, the prestige of winning awards proves yet another means of enhancing 'economic potential'.[11]

Czech and Slovak filmmakers responded to the demand to 'sex up' their (usually already completed) films with varying degrees of cooperation. Forman refused to add female nudity to both *Loves of a Blonde* (*Lásky jedné plavovlásky*, 1965) and, later, *The Firemen's Ball* (where the absence of eroticism – or the right kind of eroticism – was one of the 'official' reasons for Ponti's hostility towards the film).[12] Juraj Herz was happy to travel to Rome to shoot erotic scenes for his debut feature *The Sign of Cancer* (*Znamení Raka*, 1967), though by Herz's account he was simply restoring material that had previously been vetoed by the Czechoslovak assessors.[13] Brynych was yet another filmmaker who acquiesced, adding a newly shot sequence to *The Fifth Horseman is Fear* three years after the film's original completion. Asked about the additional sequence in the journal *Záběr*, Brynych pragmatically responded that this was the condition for the film's international release and that he was happy to see a film that had had no commercial success at home 'brought back from the dead' abroad.[14]

Thus, a spectator catching *The Fifth Horseman* upon its 1968 American or Italian release would have seen a new and, in Josef Škvorecký's words, 'incomprehensibly long' – actually nine-minute – sequence set in a 'Nazi military brothel'.[15] The sequence begins with nude women washing themselves in a communal shower room, into which the protagonist Braun (Miroslav Macháček) accidentally wanders while looking for his sister, a cleaner at the brothel. Braun's quest then takes him amid

hordes of boorish, carousing German soldiers. In another room he discovers the corpse of a girl who has slashed her wrists, unable to bear the ordeal of forced prostitution. Braun finally locates his sister and asks if she can help get him morphine, to abate the sufferings – and telltale screams – of the resistance fighter he is treating. The hunt for morphine thus provides the tenuous means for Brynych to connect the new sequence to the rest of the film, even if its raison d'être is all too plainly its titillating and sensational appeal.

Brynych (who allots himself a brief cameo here as a soldier who drunkenly intimidates Braun) devised the sequence together with the film's screenwriter and source novelist Hana Bělohradská. According to Brynych there was no further intervention from the distributors' side, though it is tempting to suspect their hand behind a fleeting, redundant appearance by Olga Schoberová, an internationally popular actress in whom Ponti had shown commercial interest.[16] As was usually the case with the other Czechoslovak films, the film's modification seems to have been supervised entirely by Ergas, functioning as Ponti's 'right hand'.[17] The sequence was filmed in Rome, probably during the second half of 1967, and attracted the interest of Italy's press and politicians. Concerns were voiced in Rome's Chamber of Deputies about the need to prevent such interferences and ensure the 'integrity' of foreign films released in Italy.[18] Interestingly, the Italian version of the film (released through Ergas's company Zebra Film) reveals itself as even more 'compromised' than the American one, having been further supplemented with an introductory voiceover (and accompanying stills) to explain the film's historical context and then cut down to a shorter runtime than either the Czechoslovak or the American versions.[19]

The Fifth Horseman was acquired for the US market by Sigma III, a small distributor (and, from 1967, a subsidiary of Filmways) that specialised in foreign films, especially from Eastern and Northern Europe, and had long connections with Ponti.[20] Brynych's film was picked up along with several other Czechoslovak films: *Closely Watched Trains*, Chytilová's *Daisies* (*Sedmikrásky*, 1966), Němec's *The Party and the Guests* (*O slavnosti a hostech*, 1966) and Schorm's *Courage for Every Day* (*Každý den odvahu*, 1964). These films, together with eight other features and 15 shorts, were first shown at the Festival of New Czechoslovak Cinema, held at New York's Lincoln Center between June 29 and July 11, 1967. At this point *The Fifth Horseman* was presented without the added sequence. As Jindřiška Blahová reveals, the ground for

the acquired titles had been prepared by several previous Czechoslovak successes in the US, including the aforementioned Oscar for *The Shop on Main Street* and the Oscar nomination for *Loves of a Blonde* the following year.[21] One factor that may have helped *The Fifth Horseman* win full theatrical distribution (in contrast to the isolated festival screenings of other excellent works like Jaromil Jireš's *The Cry* [*Křik*, 1963]) was that it shared its theme of wartime oppression and implicit Holocaust backdrop with Kadár and Klos's great success. Indeed, the owner of the theatre where *The Fifth Horseman* had its Los Angeles opening specifically promoted it by reference to both *The Shop on Main Street* and the no less successful *Closely Watched Trains*.[22]

More generally, the appearance of all these Czechoslovak films in the USA was enabled by what Tino Balio calls America's postwar 'foreign film renaissance' – that remarkable boom in the appearance of foreign (especially European) art films in America that lasted from the late 1940s to the early 1970s. In an article in *Box Office* from April 1968, James M. Watters notes that the foreign-language film was by now 'an accepted part of the movie industry', with the potential to be a 'hot box-office attraction in almost any U.S city'.[23] The visibility of foreign films, at least in America's metropolitan centres, was sustained by a mix of contextual factors that include 'the subsidiary distribution set-ups of the major companies, the multitude of independent importers and distributors', the pioneering US film festivals established in the late 1950s and '60s, and the plethora of 'big city cinemas…patterned after the original concept of the art house'.[24]

As Andrew Sarris was later to comment, 'the fashion for foreign films depended a great deal on their frankness about sex. At a time when the Hollywood censors imposed twin-bed strictures on American movies, foreign films were daringly adult.' [25] A more explicit approach to sex and nudity thus gave foreign films a kind of generic identifier as well as an attractive selling point. By the time *The Fifth Horseman is Fear* started playing in American theatres, Ergas and Ponti's interventions had brought it into line with this dominant, commercially advantageous image of the European art film.[26]

A look through Sigma III's press-book for *The Fifth Horseman* gives us some insight into the institutional identity of the foreign film in America at the time, an identity

that might now seem peculiar in its blend of sexual sensationalism and high-art respectability, prurience and prestige. The posters and ads contained in the press-book draw heavily on stills taken from the brothel sequence, though equally prominent is the use of text, quoting reviews from major critics who refer to the film's 'artistic' and 'creative' qualities. The dominant design integrates the enlarged figure of a nude woman from the shower scene into an angular, expressionistic, near-abstract composition in which a faceless figure creeps down a large corridor or passageway, dwarfed by looming walls and shadows. These latter aspects of the image accurately capture the film's paranoid, Kafkaesque tone and its severe, modernist visual register of precisely framed images and enclosing architectural structures. Mark Betz, in his survey of US press-books for European art films released between the 1940s and the 1960s, reveals a widespread merging of the 'culturally legitimate' and illegitimate, a collapsing of 'clear-cut distinctions' between high and low culture in which the sexualised display of female bodies plays a prominent and recurrent role.[27] The US marketing of *The Fifth Horseman* thus places itself in a longer tradition of film promotion that fuses the traits and tokens of both high-art and exploitation worlds. These promotions here noticeably differ from the Italian ads and posters for the film, which rely more straightforwardly on titillating imagery, with much less attempt to evoke the film's stylistic qualities or vaunt its 'artistry' and critical standing (that said, the extant Italian posters do at least display the names of the creative talents involved).

The widespread critical praise that the film indeed received in America was little affected by Ergas and Ponti's interventions. John Simon, who had seen the film in its original version at the Lincoln Center and knew the reason for the added material, did judge the brothel sequence a lapse into 'sensationalism'.[28] *The New York Times*' Renata Adler, on the other hand, ranked the sequence as among the film's most impressive and moving elements.[29] Several commentators seized on what they saw as the grimly metaphorical aspect of the shower scene. Erazim V. Kohak, discussing the film in a political essay in *Dissent*, described the sequence as 'surrealistic' and referred to its 'gas-chamber showers'.[30] One of the most interesting responses to the film appears not in a review but in a novel, Uwe Johnson's mammoth experimental text *Anniversaries* (1970-1983). In this New York-set fictionalised diary, a work itself haunted by memories of Nazism, the protagonist catches a screening of the film at

the Baronet, giving Johnson a chance for an impressionistic account in which 'ordinary-looking shower nozzles…suddenly transport the audience to the ones in Auschwitz'.[31] Johnson expands upon the detail actually given in the sequence, identifying the women in the brothel as Jewish 'daughters of the middle class' for whom '[t]he alternative is being sent to the gas.'[32]

The existence of the film's 'export version' has spawned some confusion among later critics and commentators. In 2006 the Chicago-based cinematheque and retailer Facets released what is to date the only English-subtitled DVD edition of the film. Facets' release, which comprised the original Czechoslovak version, provoked complaints on online review sites and blogs regarding the 'incompleteness' of this version and the 'exclusion' of the brothel sequence. A 2007 blog review downgrades its star rating of the DVD from four stars to three for 'omit[ting] a full reel of major content and what is arguably the most striking sequence in the film', a sequence of 'crucial and interesting visual symbolism' that raised the protagonist's quest to a journey of 'debauched, Boschian dimensions'.[33] The confusion has been compounded by a broadcast of the 'export' version on the American television network Turner Classic Movies (TCM) in June 2008. TCM's own website notes that '[i]n some prints of the film, the brothel sequence has been edited out' and that '[t]his censored version robs the morphine sequence of its three-part structure and leaves out important information about Braun's family'.[34] In an interesting and ironic reversal, these assessments promote the compromised, commercialised Ergas-Ponti cut of the film to the superior and integral version.

Critical responses to the sequence both past and present may be said to attest to Brynych and Bělohradská's skill and resourcefulness in creating something compelling and substantial from a commission imposed by commercial considerations rather than any artistic or internal logic. But the praise for the sequence can also be seen to suggest the difficulty of separating the artistic from the exploitative, the surrealistic from the sensationalistic. To some extent this is a matter of the interpretive strategies we are invited to bring to a text. Is the sequence's eruption out of nowhere – flouting the tone and style of the rest of the film – to be interpreted as exploitation-style clumsiness or surrealistic disruption? Is the onscreen debauchery sensationalising or 'Boschian'? How much of this is metaphor for unseen and unspeakable realities, and how much the thrill of the flagrantly visible and literal?

At the same time, the aesthetic and tonal disparities resulting from the added sequence highlight a conflict between subtlety and excess that is, perhaps, internal to the art film itself. At one end of this polarity there is the restrained menace of the original Czechoslovak version, where the violence and horror are usually only suggested and the Gestapo officers are anonymously besuited figures who display little overt aggression. In the added material, by contrast, violence is made explicit in the coercion and manhandling of women, in the lacerated wrists and blood of a naked corpse, and the German soldiers are stereotypical, uniformed Nazi brutes who orgy to the sounds of 'Lili Marleen'. These scenes evoke (and anticipate) the representation of Nazism or fascism seen in Italian art films like Visconti's *The Damned* (*La caduta degli dei*, 1969), Cavani's *The Night Porter* (*Il portiere di notte*, 1974) and Pasolini's *Salò* (1975) – films that translate the horrors of fascism into spectacular scenarios of 'depraved' and abusive sexuality. While the material that Brynych himself shot in Italy is, for sure, much tamer than those films, it shares their conflation of political oppression and sexual violation, their fusion of sex and death, and their stimulation of a visceral response through explicit and transgressive spectacle. (Such 'visceral pleasures' were of course soon enthusiastically co-opted by the exploitation sub-genre of 'Nazisploitation', though in large part under the inspiration of those taboo-busting art films.)[35] Sara Horowitz, who again deploys a metaphorical reading of the added sequence, even situates the shower scene in a wider trend towards 'eroticization of the female Holocaust victim' that includes prestigious mainstream fare like Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993).[36]

The case of *The Fifth Horseman*'s international distribution thus provides a glimpse into the sensational side of 'highbrow' 1960s film culture. There is even something in the particularly meddlesome manner of the film's export, in the inorganic, tacked-on way Brynych's film was adapted and repackaged for international consumption, that foregrounds the 'impurity' at the heart of classic art cinema, an impurity that often infused its content and certainly sustained its success abroad. Of course, now that the export version of the film has become more difficult to see than the original, we should not get too carried away by the romance of the missing, lost or elusive film sequence. Whatever the export version may tell us about art cinema, the original remains the better reflection of Brynych's cinematic art.

Note:

Certain sections of this article have previously appeared, in modified form, in my article ‘Exploatácia na export: Carlo Ponti, Moris Ergas a distribúcia filmov československej novej vlny’, published in Slovak in the journal *Kino-Ikon* (1/2019). These sections reappear with kind permission of the editors.

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[1] See J. Brož, ‘Je to tak docela v pořádku?’, *Kino*, vol. 23, no. 12, 1968, p.12. Also notable, among the many other cities where the film played, is its three-month run at Boston’s Symphony Cinema.

[2] Miloslav Novák, ‘Barevná komedie, v níž se tancuje, krade a hasí’, *Film a doba*, vol. 58, no. 4, pp.183-184; Pavel Skopal and Francesco di Chiara, ‘Příliš kruté pro Američany: Carlo Ponti, česká nová vlna a barrandovské koprodukce se západní Evropou’ in *Hoří, má panenko*, ed. Anna Batistová (Prague: NFA, 2012), p.74, n.45.

[3] ‘Zpráva Jitky Markvartové pro Aloise Poledňáka’, 17.5.1966. NFA, ÚŘ ČSF, R12/BII/2P/8K

[4] Skopal and di Chiara, op. cit., p.75.

[5] Jindřiška Bláhová, ‘České hubičky na vývoz: distribuce a recepce *Ostře sledovaných vlaků* v západní Evropě a v USA’, in *Ostře sledované vlaky*, ed. Lukáš Skupa (Prague: NFA, 2014), pp.66-67.

[6] Ladislav Kachtík, interviewed by Ljubomír Oliva, ‘Tak co, Čs. filmexporte?’, *Filmové a televizní noviny*, Vol.2, no.16, 1968, p.5.

[7] Eva Filová, *Eros, sexus, gender v slovenskom filme* (Bratislava: SFÚ, 2013), 101; ‘Smlouva s pány Pontim a Ergassem’, *Zprávy československých filmových a televizních umělců FITES*, no.8, 1968, p.4.

[8] Brož, op. cit.

[9] ‘Zpráva Ústředního ředitelství Československého filmu o komerční a vyrobní spolupráci s italskou kinematografií ze dne 21.5.1966’, NFA, ÚŘ ČSF, R12/AI/1P/7K

[10] Bláhová, op. cit., p.79.

[11] Barbara Wilinsky, *Sure Seaters: The Emergence of Art House Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p.38.

[12] Novák, op. cit., p.185.

[13] Juraj Herz and Jan Drbohlav, *Autopsie (pitva režiséra)* (Prague: Mladá fronta, 2015), pp.165-166.

[14] Zbyněk Brynych, interviewed by Oldřich Adamec, 'Rozhovor se Zbyňkem Brynychem o filmu *Já, spravedlnost*', *Záběr*, vol.1, no.3, 1968, p.8.

[15] Josef Škvorecký, *Všichni ti bystří mladí muži a ženy: Osobní historie českého filmu* (Prague: Horizont, 1991), p.224.

[16] Brynych, op. cit. Skopa and di Chiara, op. cit., p.75, n.51.

[17] Herz and Drbohlav, op. cit., p.165.

[18] I am indebted to the reviewer 'F.F.' on amazon.ca for uncovering this parliamentary document: https://www.amazon.ca/Fifth-Horseman-Fear-Amos-Gitai/dp/B000FMGTR6 (retrieved July 20 2020)

[19] This information is based on the VHS release of the Italian version (Editori riunuti, 1990), where the film runs 85 minutes. The American print (as seen on digital transfer at UCLA's Film & Television Archive) runs about 99 minutes 30 seconds, while the original version (available at the Czech Národní filmový archiv) is just over 94 minutes.

[20] Bláhová, op. cit., p.78.

[21] Ibid., pp.78-79.

[22] 'Stress Brotherhood for "Horseman"', *Motion Picture Herald*, vol. 238, 1968, p.30.

[23] James M. Watters, 'Increasingly Important Role Seen for Foreign Films', *Box Office Magazine*, 1 April 1968, p.54.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Andrew Sarris, in Tino Balio, *The Foreign Film Renaissance on American Screens, 1946-1973* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2010), p.277.

[26] Bláhová, op. cit., p.79.

[27] Mark Betz, 'Art, Exploitation, Underground', in *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste*, ed. Mark Jancovich, Antonio Lázaro Reboll, Julian Stringer and Andy Willis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p.210.

[28] John Simon, *Movies into Film: Film Criticism, 1967-1970* (New York: Dial Press, 1971), pp.280-281.

[29] Renata Adler, *A Year in the Dark: A Year in the Life of a Film Critic, 1968-1969* (New York: Berkley Medallion Books, 1971), pp.140-141.

[30] Erazim V. Kohak, 'Requiem for Utopia: Socialist Reflections on Czechoslovakia', *Dissent*, vol. 16, no. 1, January-February 1969, p.45.

[31] Uwe Johnson, *Anniversaries: From a Year in the Life of Gesine Cresspahl*, Volume One, trans. Damion Searls (New York: New York Review Books, 2018), p.984.

[32] Ibid.

[33] 'Some Cinematic Odds and Ends', *Gravy Bread*, November 8, 2007 https://gravybread.wordpress.com/2007/11/08/some-cinematic-odds-and-ends/ [retrieved 30 July, 2020]

[34] Doll, Susan, 'The Fifth Horseman is Fear', *TCM: Turner Classic Movies*, undated, http://www.tcm.com/this-month/article/200129%7C0/The-Fifth-Horseman-Is-Fear.html [retrieved 30 July, 2020]

[35] Sabine Hake, 'Art and Exploitation: On the Fascist Imaginary in 1970s Italian Cinema', *Studies in European Cinema*, Vol.7, no.1, 2010, p.15.

[36] Sara R. Horowitz, 'But Is It Good for the Jews? Spielberg's Schindler and the Aesthetics of Atrocity', in *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler's List*, ed. Yosefa Loshitzky (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), p.129; Caroline Joan S. Picart, 'The Documentary Impulse and Reel/Real Horror', in *A*

Companion to the Horror Film, ed. Harry M. Benshoff (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2014), p.540.