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The Finnish Knife

“He’s got a Finnish knife and a film club card in his pocket,” sings Vlastimil Třešňák in one of his songs. In the 1960s and 1970s, this was a standard for young Czechoslovaks. At the very least, the man in question also carries the knife in his pocket – the same man who, at the beginning of Zdeněk Sirový’s second feature film, comes into conflict with a pair of teenage brats. They had been spying on him while he was making love to his girlfriend. A fight ensues, at the end of which the man with the knife is stabbed. The young voyeurs are convinced they have inflicted a mortal wound and flee in terror. They will be running for the rest of the film.

Neither twenty-year-old Tonda (Karel Meister) nor Honza (Jaromír Hanzlík),^[1] who has yet to turn eighteen, is actually being pursued by anyone. Only their conscience and fear chase them. That is why it does not matter how far they go – whether all the way to Poland, as they plan, or just to their hometown, where they eventually end up. Likewise, the new clothes they later acquire cannot change anything. One cannot run away from oneself. *The Finnish Knife* (Finský nůž, 1965), just like *Diamonds of the Night* (Démanty noci, 1964) which premiered a year earlier, is an abstracted depiction of the absurdity of human existence.

The film does not provide insight into Tonda’s and Honza’s backgrounds or pasts. We do not know the environment in which they grew up, nor what might have determined their criminal behaviour. Contemporary critics faulted the film for this “insufficient integration of the story into life.”^[2] However, in the context of other Czechoslovak films of the New Wave (which Sirový was also part of, at least by age) and in light of the era’s popularity of existential philosophy, this omission appears to be intentional.

The protagonists voluntarily become outlaws. They corner themselves, convinced that if they stop, punishment awaits. Much like some of the characters written by Kafka, with whom the screenplay co-author Pavel Juráček strongly identified,^[3] they submit

to an extraordinary situation. They allow it to define who they will be and where they will go. In the film's opening scene, before the central incident, they play with a kitten in a café and flirt with the waitress. They are ordinary young men at a crossroads.

They only go astray after the knife attack that gives the film its title. Convinced that they have already broken the law, they commit further transgressions. After a theft in a canteen, they are nearly caught. They also become more and more aggressive to each other. Yet no matter how strained their relationship becomes, no matter how often they try to separate, they are unable to go their own way. Perhaps it is not fear of being exposed; perhaps they do not want to separate from the other because, without the other one, they would cease to mean anything, to be someone.

It is the presumed murder that, in a sense, pulls these young men without family or past out of indifference and awakens them to life, giving them something to relate to. When they are together, they remind each other of what they have done; they are mirrors for one another. They may hate and reject what they see and what they try to escape from, but at least through this, they become aware that they exist.

Compared to his previous film *Wranglers* (Handlíři, 1963), which dealt with manipulations of collective farm property, in *The Finnish Knife* Sirový focused on the universal, timeless dimension of an individual's moral failure – beyond the social and political coordinates of a specific era. The transformation of a person ripped from the ordinary course of events is therefore captured in detail and medium close-ups by Jan Čuřík's camera – Čuřík co-wrote the technical screenplay with Sirový. The mise-en-scène is sparse and desolate. Backgrounds often serve merely as neutral area for playing.

In a film that otherwise strives to get as close as possible to the characters' inner lives and attune to their subjectivity, the harsh opening fight stands out stylistically. It is filmed mostly in long shots and through various objects that obstruct the view of the actors, creating the effect of documentary observation. The realism of this pivotal scene, from which everything else will be derived, is further enhanced by the sudden cessation of music. We hear only blows, sighs, and groans. Bare facts, no introspection.

The soundtrack, composed by the talented Slovak composer Wiliam Bukový, accompanies almost the entire, roughly ten-minute-long opening sequence. Its mood constantly shifts: from a gentler melody in the café to a more dynamic composition in the adjacent park (exteriors were shot in Mariánské Lázně and Prague). The changing instrumentation captures the instability and inner uncertainty of the protagonists who lack grounding and a firm sense of identity: guitar, flute, followed by brass and percussion...

The unevenness of the individual sequences and the abrupt transitions between them, criticized by another contemporary reviewer,[4] can also be understood as an attempt to convey how the young men experience the tense situation. Most of the dramatic action takes place in their minds, and the situations in which the screenplay places them correspond to their psychological state.

The immaturity of the protagonists is further emphasized by the performances of both actors. Jaromír Hanzlík captures Honza's growing instability through rapid speech, restless glances, and boyish poses, the fragility of which reveals that the underage youth is merely faking his courage to match the more self-assured Tonda, played with confidence by Karel Meister. Yet neither of them is ready for life. The greater their despair, the more evident it becomes that they are incapable of responding constructively to the crisis or building a relationship upon it.

The most pointed contemporary criticisms concerned the dramaturgy, or rather the pacing of the narrative. As A. J. Liehm notes in his strict but informed review for *Literární noviny* (The Literary Newspaper), the film "abandons the entire Prague sequence, as we knew it from the screenplay, and jumps from the disproportionately extended second third straight to the conclusion, thereby seriously disrupting the balance of the story's structure." [5]

Liehm was also among a number of critics who found the film's ending problematic. However, Zdeněk Sirový was aware of this himself, reflecting on *The Finnish Knife* in his memoirs: "What we wanted, and why we wrote *The Finnish Knife*, appeared only in the first version of the screenplay," [6] he notes bitterly. Sirový acquiesced to the comments of the group dramaturgy, and in the final version, unlike in the original screenplay, it is revealed that the boys committed no crime. Instead of the intended

thriller, Sirový admits, the result became “almost an anecdote with a violent happy ending.”[7]

It is debatable to what extent this harshness toward his own work was influenced by negative reviews. Nevertheless, *The Finnish Knife* – although not among the peak achievements of Sirový’s filmography – represents a remarkable contribution to the wave of existential Czechoslovak films about the human condition: a person who runs, does not know where, is afraid, yet cannot stand still, for to do so would be to cease to exist.

The Finnish Knife (Czechoslovakia 1964), director: Zdenek Sirový, script: Zdenek Sirový, Jan Brandýs, Pavel Juráček, cinematography: Jan Čuřík, music by: Wiliam Bukový, starring: Karel Meister ml., Jaromír Hanzlík, Karel Engel, Jitka Zelenohorská, František Hanzlík, Jan Schánilec, Jan Kotva, Miroslav Rataj, Mahulena Kulendíková, and others. Barrandov Film Studio, 72 min.

Notes:

[1] Sirový discovered Jaromír Hanzlík, a student at the twelve-year school in Hellichova Street in Prague, in Pavel Kraus’s family film *Taková loď* (*Such a Boat*, 1961).

[2] Gustav Franci, Finský nůž. *Kino* 20, 1965, no. 15, p. 7.

[3] Juráček is not credited as one of the screenplay’s co-authors in the film titles. His contribution to *The Finnish Knife*, however, is indicated, for example, in his diaries, where he writes in connection with the film: “I needed money, and Zdeněk Sirový, moreover, relied on our friendship.” Pavel Juráček, *Deník: 1959–1974*. Praha: Národní filmový archiv 2003, p. 413.

[4] J. G. Finský nůž. *Československý voják* 14, 1965, no. 17, p. 45.

[5] AJL, Finský nůž. *Literární noviny* 14, 1965, no. 39 (25/09), p. 8.

[6] Zdenek Sirový, *...není zač, řekl Bůh: vyprávění filmového režiséra*. Praha: Český spisovatel 1996, p. 89.

[7] Ibid, p. 90.