

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 26. 7. 2022

# The Return of the Prodigal Son

There are moments in life when people have doubts. About the meaning of the life they lead, are leading and could be leading. Sometimes, the doubts spread out and become a new *modus vivendi*. It seems useless to invest energy into something else than a decision that cannot be reversed. No Czech film was able to portray the feelings of loss of purpose and faith in one's own existence as good as *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (Návrat ztraceného syna, 1966) by Evald Schorm. Schorm based this psychological drama belonging to the same introspective category as Bergman's and Antonioni's existentialist studies on his own story. He collaborated with theatre and literary critic and film dramaturge Sergej Machonin and consulted it with MUDr. Milan Morávek who plays a psychiatrist in the film. An impulse to make the film was the high suicide rate in the former Czechoslovakia and an increased willingness to deal with this topic in the public discourse. The individual in existential crisis, whose diagnosis Schorm uses to portray the entire society in his second feature film, is architect Jan Šebek (Jan Kačer). To solve his dissatisfaction with the utter indifference and hypocrisy of others, he chose to commit suicide. He didn't succeed and now he must unwillingly integrate in the society which doesn't understand him and he has no understanding of it either. He is helped in this process by his wife Jana (Jana Brejchová), her parents and the doctors of the Bohnice Psychiatric Hospital, where most of the film was shot.

No minor character in the film acknowledges a relation between their behaviour and Jan's deed. They see themselves mostly as victims hurt by the man's expression of disagreement. The parents look for a reason in work problems, the employer in the family. No one considers the pressure of the environment forcing an individual to take on a role he doesn't agree with. It's easier to brand the suicide attempt as a deed of

sick man than to accept it as a symptom of sick society and admit one's own share of guilt.

Jan committed an offence against the absurd social requirement of "normality" and was labelled insane. He defied conformity and stopped being comprehensible for others. His expression of individual freedom ironically helped to restrict his freedom. After his suicide attempt, others watch him more closely and want to have him under control. As if it stripped him of the right to make decisions regarding his innermost things.

Schorm's meditation on the environment that forced a person to attempt suicide explores similar motifs as his previous film with the same leading actors (Jan Kačer and Jana Brejchová) *Courage for Every Day* (Každý den odvahu, 1964). This time, the hero refusing to resign and accept the total value and moral crisis isn't a manual labourer but an intellectual person who can reflect his situation much deeper but does so only when asked. Otherwise, he is silent, realising the insufficiency of words in communication with people inhabiting diametrically different ideological spheres.

Jan must come to terms primarily with himself, with the necessity to make compromises in life, with the Sartre-esque condemnation to freedom. He slowly realises that he can't find the solution in the outer world, but only in himself. He tells the doctor that he would like to act according to his conviction and not look back on the consequences. Accepting suicide as a natural possibility to freely deal with one's life can be considered an extreme expression of this strategy. But are there less extreme and fatal expressions of the same?

The hero of Schorm's film suffers the consequences of having a personality preventing him to be content with the world, the people in it and even himself. He cannot find his place in an insincere society requiring insincerity, he doesn't feel needed. In the context of art Schorm used for inspiration, we can perceive him as a prototype of useless person known from classic Russian novels. Psychological perspective offers a more prosaic interpretation – Jan suffers from inferiority and severe depression.

The whole film is structured as a long therapeutic dialogue between Jan and his doctor and basically also with himself. This conversation is interspersed by

contrastive voices of his parents, in-laws, and Jana and her lover. Jan's deed didn't inspire them to reflect the quality of their own lives. They avoid dealing with their own conscience by asking the same question as the protagonist – why did he try to kill himself? In an effort to understand the cause, they ignore the person and thus logically can't find the answer.

But not even Jan knows the answer. When he says to the doctor that a person isn't happy when they're alone, isn't he just saying what the doctor wants to hear? Isn't he just reacting to social norms he refused to conform to? Does he truly believe that loneliness can be overcome by love? His relationship with Jana apparently doesn't make him happy. He rightfully feels dispensable and replaceable by any other man, for instance Jana's lover (Jiří Menzel). Marriage doesn't provide the freedom he's looking for; he can't be himself. Or does the problem lie in Jan who is too incomprehensible for others to love him sincerely?

Theatrically austere and distant direction, revealing Schorm's experience with sociological documentaries in the scenes from the mental institution, emphasises the ideas which are superior to images. It doesn't mean, however, that the *mise-en-scène* doesn't convey anything. The withdrawnness of the main hero is manifested by his black turtleneck and sunglasses he uses to hide his face. Forced by the need to fill their lives with at least some activity and to distract themselves, the characters repeatedly grab various objects and play with them during dialogues. Their fixation on easily comprehensible material objects provides a momentary escape from their thoughts.

In *Return of the Prodigal Son*'s final scenes, the protagonist is hunted by an angry mob thinking he's an escaped murderer. The people assume it to be true and think they're in the right because of their numbers. A person guilty of problematising what others accept as given, becomes a hunted culprit. Others are unable to accept him. He reminds them of the limitedness of life based only on the need to be well-off. With a wife, kid, job and mom's cake. Jan refused to accept this and thus became undesirable.

Schorm's prodigal son has nowhere to return and run. In the end, he asks the same question he did at the beginning – “What did I do wrong?” Doubts and the feeling of

uprootedness endure. It may be the inevitable curse of a man who cannot be happy, but definitely isn't indifferent.

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**The Return of the Prodigal Son** (Návrat ztraceného syna, Czechoslovakia 1966),  
director: Evald Schorm, screenplay: Evald Schorm, Sergej Machonin, director of  
photography: František Uldrich, cast: Jan Kačer, Jana Brejchová, Jiří Menzel, Milan  
Morávek, Dana Medřická, Anna Lebedová, Antonín Lebeda, Jiřina Třebická et al.  
Filmové studio Barrandov, 99 min.