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DESIRE – VOJTĚCH JASNÝ

Peter Hames

Jasný was another of the directors castigated at Banská Bystrica and the first film maker of importance to emerge from the Prague Film School (FAMU). Together with a fellow student, Karel Kachyňa, he produced a notable graduation film with *Till the Clouds Roll By* (*Není stále zamračeno*, 1950), which was destined for early obscurity. Liehm writes: “That film had all the marks of the beginning of an epoch: it was socialist in spirit; it was strongly in favor of human endeavor; its basis was nonstudio reality. . . . But the film came into being at a time when it couldn’t establish an epoch.”¹ Between 1950 and 1954, Jasný and Kachyňa collaborated on a series of eight documentaries. Their last work together was the feature *It Will All Be Over Tonight* (*Dnes večer všechno skončí*, 1955), which preceded Jasný’s first solo feature *September Nights* (1957). Žalman describes it as nondescript and sees *September Nights*, adapted from Pavel Kohout’s satire on the army, as marking little more than the end of schematism. On the other hand, *Desire* (1958), made, like his previous features, with the assistance of a fellow FAMU graduate, the cinematographer Jaroslav Kučera, was heralded by Žalman as something of a manifesto. “Independence of thought goes hand in hand with independence of style. After long years of deliberate stifling of form, *Desire* resurrected in Czech cinema the film poetry once upon a time introduced to it by Rovenský, Frič, Vančura, and Vávra.”² The script was by Vladimír Valenta, who had previously worked on Krejčík’s *Conscience*; Valenta spent some years in a labor camp and celebrated his return with the new film.³

Desire consists of four contrasting stories, one for each season of the year and the four ages of men. The points made by the film are very obvious, but its strength lies in the style and sensitivity with which a new universality is given to some very old “truths.” The film has a cyclical structure moving through: (1) childhood (magic and wonder), (2) youth (love and illusion), (3) middle age (struggle and hardship), and (4) old age (loneliness and sadness). It concludes with the symbolic juxtaposition of death and birth.

The first two sections of the film best illustrate the way in which Jasný and Kučera produce great lyrical beauty from extremely simple ideas. The first story, “About the Boy who Sought the Edge of the World,” has a fairy tale quality, and the opening

sequence sets the tone for the rest of the film. It is important both for its establishment of mood and for conveying the immediacy and innocence of childhood experience. There is an extended tracking shot of small boys running across fields, then up a hill toward the camera. As they continue, the movement is intercut with shots of crows flying against the sky. Trees are individually silhouetted on the horizon against a skyscape of cirrus clouds. When the boys reach the skyline, they discover that there is no edge. The birds – large, black, cutout, unreal – fly on across another landscape against a background of more clouds. A jet aircraft flies overhead, linking the story to the present and emphasizing the existence of a wider world. The whole of the sequence depends heavily on Kučera’s feel for the texture of landscape together with the magical qualities of the flying crows.

The feeling of the opening is maintained throughout the story by adherence to extreme simplicity of content in sequences of both dream and reality. The boy’s mother has just given birth to a baby girl. He is told that a crow brought her, and as he moves about the farm, he associates the event with hatching chicks and a cat busy with a litter of kittens. The image of the crow enjoys a privileged position, isolated within the frame and given the emphasis and significance that would be felt by a child. A dream sequence is constructed from the boy’s recent experiences, combining the pursuit of the crows from the opening with the facts he has been given about the nature of birth (he imagines his sister jumping fully dressed from a giant egg). The overall effect is to suggest the unity of human life with nature and the seasons.

If the first story uses lyricism to convey a mood of magic and enchantment, the second employs it much more in the spirit of romantic pastiche. Entitled “People on the Earth and Stars in Heaven,” it focuses on the relationship between a young astronomer (Jiří Vala) and Lenka, a beautiful young girl (Jana Brejchová). He has buried himself in work because of his disappointment with life, but she still expects and demands “everything.” The story is concerned almost solely with the observation of their romance. Punctuated by stylized and stereotyped dialogue.

They begin with a bicycle ride, jingling their bells as they ride along the skyline. The camera tracks alongside and beneath them, takes in the passing trees overhead, and tilts up at them from the foot of a cliff as they kiss at the top. The pastoral setting as bicycles recall the François Truffaut of *Les Mistons* and *Jules et Jim*, but *Desire* was made the same year as the former and some years before the latter. This use of romantic cliché would have appeared less obvious in 1958 than it does now. Even today, the sequence is still carried by its panache—the rapid tracking movements, Svatopluk Havelka’s flowing music, and the smooth and rhythmic editing.

A scene by the river is given a mood of romantic exultation by Kučera’s recording of strong black and white contrasts in the swirling water. The relationship reaches its peak when the couple dance together on a woodland dancing stage, and Brejchová moves with the camera in a way reminiscent of a Viennese-style romance. Their parting provides an opportunity for shots of the lover left behind and the smiling Lenka leaning from her train window.

¹ Liehm, *Closely Watched Films*, p. 125.

² Žalman, *Film and Filmmakers*, p. 16.

³ In 1964, Valenta scripted *The Accused* by Kadár and Klos but is probably best known for his acting role as the stationmaster in Menzel’s *Closely Watched Trains* (1966).

The style of these first two stories is appropriate to both the themes and the ages of the characters. It contrasts strongly with the mature and analytical treatment of the third and fourth sections, both of which tend to support the young astronomer's gloomy response to the disappointments of life.

The third story, "Anděla," deals with the problems arising from the collectivization of agriculture. Anděla is a strong individualist who has resisted the pressures exerted on her to join the collective farm. The film harks back to Eisenstein's *The General Line*, the old and the new, the individual versus the collective. Like Helge in *Spring Breeze*, Jasný does not take sides, and his heroine undergoes no last-minute conversion.

We learn that during the period of collectivization, the collective had confiscated all her best fields and provided worse in exchange. When her father falls ill, the collective refuses to provide help, and she works on alone, save for the seasonal assistance of an itinerant worker. She says her prayers at night and kicks out the representative who comes to check on her production figures. Eventually she becomes seriously ill and is taken to the hospital.

Only then does the collective come to her aid. When she returns from the hospital, the tractor driver is told to give her some help if he finishes his work schedule ahead of time. At the end, she works on with her horse-drawn plough, ignoring the tractor that drives behind, already assisting her. The methods of the collective are shown as wrong, but the implications of the final shots are that it cannot be resisted.

The importance of "Anděla" lies in the honesty with which it depicts the human suffering caused by the dogmatic application of the policy of collectivization. Far from being an anachronism, Anděla is shown as a person with qualities of character and endurance for which society should find an effective use. The shots in which Anděla and Michal (her helper) reap in the traditional way against an impressive landscape of hills and sky are full of lyrical nostalgia for a positive way of life. When the collective experiences its change of heart, this runs counter to the story's main impetus. Whether imposed by censorship or Jasný himself, it is, in its context, a case of formal wish fulfillment.

The film's final story, "Maminka," is the most moving and marks a return to the simple observations of the film's opening while combining these with a more complex and adult theme. Concerned with the loneliness of old age, it is set in a remote village where Maminka is a teacher, living alone with her black Labrador dog. Her husband has died, and her two sons have left home to work in the city, leaving her alone in the family house. There is nothing unusual about her situation; it is merely a fact of contemporary life. The story is centered on a surprise visit by her son, Václav, and a second visit by both sons following her death.

The film is most effective in its portrayal of the small details of everyday life. On the evening of Václav's arrival, mother and son are shown alone together in a

beautifully observed scene of quiet familiarity. He plays the piano, the dog sits, she makes tea. It is full of the recapturing of past relationships, the dog functioning as a link with the times when the family was still together. When Václav leaves, her small black figure moving back toward the house is very touching, a handkerchief used in a small and unobtrusive gesture.

After Maminka's death, the dog searches for his dead mistress, runs from home to the school, back to the bus stop, through the town, and back to the classroom where a new teacher has taken over. The camera pans across the snow-covered village to the ringing of a bell. Jasný's understated treatment avoids the dangers of false sentiment but admirably conveys a sense of loss. This is combined with nostalgia in the penultimate scene where the two brothers walk in the orchard, talking of the past and followed by the dog. However, the whole film ends on an optimistic note with the birth Václav's son. The news is brought to him at work as was the telegram about his mother's illness. The circle is complete.

Desire reserves its emotional intensity for its first and last stories. The young love section is the least substantial while the story of Anděla is different in tone, dealing less with the eternal problems of middle age than a specific social situation. The predominant mood of the film is one of honest pessimism, but, like Jiří Menzel, Jasný asserts the common human values that make facing the problems worthwhile. This sympathy is clearly characteristic of a man who could announce from exile: "I don't care how socialist, or moralistic, or philosophical it sounds: I want to work toward people trying to be better, toward making things happen to help them become better."⁴

Although *Desire* established Jasný's importance inside Czechoslovakia, it was *Cassandra Cat* (1963), co-scripted with Jiří Brdečka,⁵ that attracted international interest when it won the Special Jury Prize at Cannes. Its theme was approached in an allegorical and fantastic fashion, giving Kučera plenty of opportunity for some of his early color experiments, and featured Jan Werich in a leading role. Žalman writes:

The worst evil detected by the Cat through his magic spectacles is the fruit of a dehumanised doctrine which, in trying to usurp a monopoly of truth, in fact deals genuine truth a death blow. People themselves are no longer capable of seeing through this moral chaos. It is only the Cat, with his spectacles which colour everyone according to his true nature, who has the ability. He unmasks the Big Lie and helps

⁴ Vojtěch Jasný, interviewed by S.Volný, *Text* (Summer 1971), reprinted in Liehm, *Closely Watched Films*, p. 137.

⁵ Jiří Brdečka was a leading writer, scenarist, and director of animated films. He co-scripted *The Emperor's Baker* and *The Baker's Emperor* with Jan Werich. Both were directed by Martin Frič in 1951. Apart from his many prize-winning short films, he also collaborated with director Oldřich Lipský on *Lemonade Joe* (*Limonádový Joe*, 1964), a western satire, and, more recently, *Adéla Hasn't Had Supper Yet/Nick Carter in Prague* (*Adéla ještě nevečeřela*, 1978).

people to become their real selves again. The fairy tale use of colour is an instrument of social criticism.⁶

According to an account in *Czechoslovak Film*, when

the cat fixes its eyes on a person who pretends to love someone, but is actually unfaithful, that person turns yellow. Those who feign to be what they are not turn violet. Those who steal are striped like zebras. Those who are truly in love turn red. The people who are envious of their fellow-men turn green. And those who do not change their colour when the tom-cat looks at them are good people who have only petty faults.⁷

Assuming the accuracy of Žalman's assessment of *Cassandra Cat* as an attack on a false, totalitarian monopoly of truth, and hence on Stalinism, it is not surprising that it can no longer be seen. Neither can *All My Good Countrymen* (1968), which also won the Special Jury Prize at Cannes and is regarded as a fitting conclusion to Jasný's work in Czechoslovakia. A lyrical tribute to the world of his youth, it questions the cost of revolutionary change. Žalman describes it

as his most extensive and at the same time most sincere work. For many years it had been the innermost part of his being; therein he expressed almost everything that he thinks and feels – above all his faith in the eternal course of Life and Nature that is for him the most objective of all realities and in which the essential certainties are birth, love, labour, and death. . . . These motives are treated in a way more lyrical than philosophical but with Jasný it is not for the first time that poetry substitutes for philosophy.⁸

It is clearly a logical development from the themes and inclinations already present in *Desire*.

In: Hames, Peter. *The Czechoslovak New Wave*. University of California Press, Berkley, 1985.

⁶ Žalman, *Films and Filmmakers*, pp. 17-18.

⁷ *Czechoslovak Film* (1963).

⁸ Jan Žalman, "Everyone a Good Fellow Countryman," in *International Film Guide*, 1970, ed. Peter Cowie (London: Trantivy Press, 1969), pp. 83-84.