

## Owners: Horror about what the Czech Republic is like today

A review by Dominika Švecová and Jan Čulík, published on 17<sup>th</sup> December 2019, two months before the beginning of the pandemic. [Here is the Czech original.](#)

(This is an automatic Google translate, with some minor editing changes, please tolerate. :))

If you have strong nerves, you should not miss Jiří Havelka's excellent film *Owners*, co-produced by Czech Television and CinemArt. Like most Czech films, perhaps to attract audiences to the cinema, the film is advertised as a comedy. In fact, it is a horror.

In a strongly metaphorical film, set for almost all of its ninety minutes in a single room, the apartment owners of an apartment building, participating in a "meeting of apartment owners", appear. However, the film is a warning, a very realistic picture of what it is like in today's Czech Republic. Individual types of owners quarreling around the meeting table can be interpreted as representatives of various social groups in today's Czech Republic. The unhappy Mr. Švec, who also votes on behalf of his elderly mother, who has just been taken to hospital, is a metaphorical representative of today's Czech pensioners, or simply ordinary people who vote one way or another, even though they have no idea what the voting is actually about and what their vote will actually cause. (Of course, the same today, for example, is happening in Britain or the USA.)

Does the film actually warn against democracy today? The condition for the functioning of democracy has always been quality education and quality media and a responsibly informed citizen. We don't have that today, so quite serious questions arise. This film raises these questions rather drastically.

Engineer Kubát is, in the words of another person present, the Slovak Nitra, a "fucking communist", and he is so: he is the former chairman of this tenement property, who constantly reminisces during the discussion how beautiful it was under the previous communist regime. Immediately after the fall of communism, Mr. Kubát took a number of steps to seize, at the expense of his fellow citizens, and by deceit, three flats in this apartment building. ("It was an event typical of the 1990s.") Otherwise, he blocks everything. He would only allow the owners' association to act actively only if they approved an incredible, criminal outrage for his benefit.

Kubát is a representative of the generation that took over power and property in the 1990s. Now these people are in their seventies, so they don't want to do much anymore, they just remember the past, but to relinquish their power and influence to people in their thirties or forties, no. "I own three apartments here, so I have the right to say no. I don't have to explain anything."

The film is a completely clear, and very carefully crafted, frighteningly warning metaphor of the situation in today's Czech Republic. (Note: After the arrival of the pandemic, the situation got even worse.) A young couple the Zahrádeks, the parents of three children with a fourth on the way, are aware that the apartment building in which everyone lives is on the verge of collapse. The roof is rotten, dry rot is raging, tiles are falling off the roof and the roof is leaking. The gas pipelines from the 1950s are rusted and are in danger of exploding. Therefore, the Zahrádek's propose to turn the attic spaces into new, modern flats, to sell them and to finance from the proceeds the necessary emergency repairs of an apartment building, which is in danger of falling into ruins or that everyone will die by a gas explosion. An exact metaphor of the current situation in the Czech Republic.

But the Zahrádka's fail to persuade the owners' during the more than ninety-minute debate to do anything at all. The first dozens of minutes of the meeting are wasted by bureaucratic excess - the legal "expert" Roubíčková insists hard on compliance with legal statutes, so long minutes are wasted on meaningless administrative procedures.

But even when the core of the matter finally starts being discussed, when Mrs. Zahrádková proposes that the loft space be converted and the building to be repaired from the proceeds, nothing is achieved. Participants indiscriminately swear at each other, arguing over irrelevant nonsense (who consumes more water), insulting the homosexual present, and attacking, in a racist way, the black tenants of one of the apartment owners. They swear at families who have children and need to build an elevator (you shouldn't have had children). "I have an apartment on the ground floor and I don't need an elevator, so I'm blocking its construction. Unless you pay me."

Warning for the Czech Republic: the house is falling apart before your eyes, you are arguing bullshit about nonsense and you are not able to agree on any solution. Almost all the protagonists are aggressive, vulgar and selfish. They promote their material interests brazenly and harshly at the expense of all others, they do not hesitate to reduce themselves to harsh insults and blackmail.

Fascinating is the mixture of brazenness, selfishness, vulgarity, but at the same time naivety and stupidity. The dialogues are copied from today's Czech reality exactly.

Interesting is the figure of the old professor Sokol, who sits with the book during the whole meeting, in the corner of the room, because he is not an owner, he has no voting rights. He only says something once: "You will need gas because you will have poison yourselves."

It was in the early 1990s that the communist Kubát deprived him of the opportunity to transfer his apartment, in which Professor Sokol lives, to his own private ownership, and stole it from him. The character of Professor Sokol can be interpreted as the current position of intellectuals and scholars in Czech society - they were excluded after the fall of communism - deprived of all influence. Power and property were taken over by communist oligarchs and by fraudsters. Members of the elite, experts have no power in Czech society.

Amid the dramatic, vulgar bickering of the "owners", the simpleton Švec receives a telephone message from the hospital that his mother has just died. He cries - with joy - and repeats, "So I'm finally an owner now!" Maybe it's just an attempt to cover up the pain of his mother's death with a euphemism, but maybe it signals how everything is interpreted in the Czech Republic today in terms of material goods.

The presence of a homosexual and a Czech with a pregnant Japanese wife at this meeting of owners is interesting, as is the existence of black students - tenants in one apartment of this apartment building. It is a sign that multiculturalism and today's open society, is now penetrating into a closed Czech society. However, but Czech society reacts to homosexuals and blacks with vulgar insults, and it cannot process the concept of being Japanese at all. "She's Chinese," everyone present says, although the girl keeps repeating, "I'm Japanese."

Towards the end of the film, Mrs. Zahrádková, the chairwoman of the meeting, and then her husband, in a rage, give up their posts in the committee and slam the door. Quite reasonably - it is simply impossible to work with these people.

But the "lawyer" Roubíčková tries to prevent the Zahrádka's from leaving the room - no one who has signed the attendance list must be allowed to leave. Does this mean that the Czechs are

inextricably linked to life in the Czech Republic? Can't they leave? Of course, some will break out of this bond.

Even more interesting - and more sinister - is the presence of two polite but clearly fraudulent businessmen, the Čermák brothers. The Čermáks have recently acquired an apartment in this apartment building from their deceased father - they lived abroad for a long time and own companies in the USA and Russia . What does this mean?

The Čermák brothers have a completely different approach than the other Czechs present at this owners' meeting. While the other Czechs swear and do underhand things, the Čermák brothers are friendly and polite to everyone present. They have brought them whisky. When someone rudely attacks them, they ignore the vulgarity of the attack and treat the attacker kindly. "Would you like a smoke with us?" During the meeting, they gain the trust of all those present. "You're swearing at me, I'm flattering you." That's the method. Why are they doing this?

So, at the end of the meeting, in emotional frustration, the Zahrádkas give up their posts and all initiative and leave, and the Čermák brothers suddenly offer to take over the management of the owners' association. It will not cost anyone anything, they will meet all legal expenses at the expense of their companies. Their friendly offer delights everyone and those present approve their magnanimous offer immediately - suddenly no complicated voting procedures are needed as at the beginning of the meeting.

However, as the new chairmen of the owners' association, the Čermáks will need a power of attorney from everyone present - just to speed things up. They do not have it pre-printed and there is no printer available. However, they have a whole stack of blank papers, so they suggest that those present sign these blank papers, the Čermáks will fill in the text of the power of attorney above their signatures later. - They want to "manage the tenement property like it was a firm". Doesn't that remind you of something? (This is a slogan frequently used by the oligarch Andrej Babiš, the current Czech Prime Minister.)

Of course, everyone present enthusiastically signs the blank papers - as we have said above, their aggression and selfishness goes hand in hand with incredible naivety. It is a warning about how citizens uncritically vote in elections for anyone who then intends to destroy them.

The only one who does not sign is the "lawyer" Roubíčková. She knows which train to jump on in time. At the end of the film, she drinks some wine with the Čermák brothers.

Otherwise, everything goes on as it did before. Nobody does anything about the dangerous state of repair of the tenement house - during this unsuccessful , futile meeting, gas explodes in the next apartment building - Professor Sokol silently walks home from the meeting past the scene of the accident - paramedics carry the wounded to ambulances. (Would this be Poland or Hungary?)

Nothing changes in the lives of the Owners. At the end of the film, they behave the same as before.

It's a horror movie.

The problem is, the movie is too intelligent. Excellently written and and excellently acted dialogues. So we fear, that the will only preach to the converted.

What about people who will reject this film? The film does not answer that question.