

# THE ARCHETYPAL IMAGE OF CHRIST AND ITS NARRATIVE ASSIMILATION IN THE MODERN CINEMA OF EVALD SCHORM

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## *Abstract*

This article attempts to analyse and interpret the archetype of Christ in the cinematographic work of Czech director Evald Schorm in the decade of 1960. Throughout the investigation the fact that all of Schorm's protagonists prefigure Christ will be showcased as a symbolic motif he uses to articulate a series of films reflecting on modernity's tendency towards the alienation of the individual, the loss of ideals and the moral decadence of his time; concepts that link him with the cinematographic modernity of the fifties and seventies. Nevertheless, and in stark contrast to other authors who had a great reception in the international scene, Schorm's cinema hardly made itself known outside Czechoslovakia. It is this article's objective to delve into the reasons why one of the most relevant filmmakers in Czech cinema was led to isolation.

## *Keywords*

Christ; Evald Schorm; symbol; Czechoslovakian new wave; cinematography.

## ***LA IMAGEN ARQUETÍPICA DE CRISTO Y SU ASIMILACIÓN NARRATIVA EN EL CINE MODERNO DE EVALD SCHORM***

## *Resumen*

Este artículo trata de analizar e interpretar el arquetipo de Cristo en la obra cinematográfica realizada por el director checo Evald Schorm en los años sesenta. A lo largo de la investigación, iremos viendo como todos los protagonistas de sus tramas son una prefiguración de Cristo. El cineasta se sirve de este motivo simbólico para articular una serie de películas que reflexionan sobre la tendencia a la alienación del individuo, la pérdida de ideales y la decadencia moral de su tiempo; conceptos que lo vinculaban a la modernidad cinematográfica de los años cincuenta y sesenta. Sin embargo, a diferencia de otros autores que tuvieron una gran acogida en el panorama internacional, el cine de Schorm apenas logró salir de Checoslovaquia. Trataremos de indagar en los motivos que condujeron al ostracismo a uno de los cineastas más relevantes del cine checoslovaco

## *Palabras clave*

Cristo; Evald Schorm; símbolo; Nueva Ola Checoslovaca; cinematografía



## Introducción

The purpose of this article is the development of an interpretative analysis of the main full-length films of Evald Schorm. Carl Gustav Jung's theories on archetypes and symbols shall serve as a starting point for such analysis, which pursues a deeper dive into the religious essence of Evald Schorm's work. Remarkably, this essence connects his filmography with the international cinematographic modernity of its time, characterized by a preoccupation with spirituality, the individual's introspective journey and alienation<sup>1</sup>.

The spiritual component and the abundance of characters trapped within the depths of profound crisis of values bring his cinema close to the European filmmaking scene in the fifties and sixties, together with Ingmar Bergman's 'silence of God' trilogy, which comprises *Through a Glass Darkly* (*Såsom i en spegel*, 1961), *Winter Light* (*Nattvardsgästerna*, 1963) and *The Silence* (*Tystnaden*, 1963); as well as Robert Bresson in feature films such as *Diary of a Country Priest* (*Journal d'un curé de campagne*, 1951), *A Man Escaped* (*Un condamné à mort s'est échappé ou Le vent souffle où il veut*, 1956) and *Pickpocket* (1959). Nevertheless, Schorm never achieved the level of international recognition that many of the other Czech New Wave authors, staying at the national level. It is of interest to delve on the reasons of the international ostracism of a filmmaker who achieved a precise condensation of his introspective moral preoccupations together with the cinematographic modernity adapted from abroad.

Regarding the article's relevance, our subject matter is a filmmaker that has hardly had any projection outside his country's borders, so a more profound exploration of his filmography implies the possibility of exporting the study of his work to other spaces within academia, as well as work to assign the value deserved to a key author of the Czechoslovak New Wave that is unjustly downgraded to a mere mention in most texts outside the Czech Republic, and more specifically Spanish-speaking academia as happens in José Luis Sánchez Noriega's *Historia del Cine: Teoría y géneros cinematográficos, fotografía y televisión*, whilst two paragraphs go in much further depth on Milos Forman and Vera Chytilova respectively. Such is also the case in the most New Wave-oriented work to be published in Spanish, *El nuevo cine checo: revolución cinematográfica en los '60* by Cristina Gómez Lucas, where Milos Forman, Vera Chytilova, Ivan Passer and Jan Nemeč are given exclusive attention and Evald Schorm is present in name only.

For this reason, most bibliographic references used, be they books or articles, are of genuine Czech origin, such as Jan Bernard's *Odvabu pro všední den* (1994) and the theses of Barbora Cihelková (*Duchovní dimenze ve filmech Evalda*, 2014) and Ondřej Coufal (*Nepohodlný individualismus Evalda Schorma*, 2012). As to the English bibliography a source of note is the book *The Czechoslovak new wave* by Peter Hames, wherein a section is dedicated to Evald Schorm. Nevertheless, this author also fails to portray Schorm's relevance as a component of the Czech New Wave in his book *Czech and Slovak Cinema: Theme and Tradition*, given most of the few mentions of him are relegated to his role as actor in *The Party and the Guest* (*O slavnosti a hostech*, 1966).

On the other hand, invaluable first-hand information was readily available thanks to Josef Škvorecký's *All the Bright Young Men and Women: A Personal History of the Czech Cinema* (1971), as he got to work for Evald Schorm as a screenwriter for *Farářův konec* (1969). Regarding the more interpretative part of the investigation, the works *Answer to Job* (2010) and *The psychology of rebirth. In The archetypes and the collective unconscious* (1970).

Throughout this investigation the four full-length feature films that compose the main body of Evald Schorm's work will be analysed. These are *Everyday Courage* (*Kazdy den*

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<sup>1</sup> Bálint Kovács, 2007:43.

*odvahu*, 1964), *Return of the Prodigal Son* (*Návrat ztraceného syna*, 1967), *The End of a Priest* (*Farářův konec*, 1969) and *The Seventh Day, The Eight Night* (*Den sedmý - osmá noc*, 1969). The only one of his longer films that shall not be analysed is *Five Girls Around the Neck* (*Pět holek na krku*, 1967), as being an adaptation of Iva Hercíková's book it lacks some of the identifying traits of the director in question.

As the investigation goes forward, the tight relationship between these four films and Catholic religion, especially its formulation of the figure of Christ, will be unveiled. Additionally, it will be shown how these religious components are presented in a subtle manner that avoids preaching or imposing a dogma in favour of contemplating the unconscious and symbolic. This serves the author's purpose of elaborating a discourse that leads the spectator to moral questioning in regards to the upcoming reality of the society he lived in.

The article shall serve to provide a new point of view to interpret the Czech bibliography, as well as give the researchers in English-speaking countries the opportunity to be interested in this director and even begin its investigation in other countries, achieving in this way the rightful placing of Evald Schorm as the moral and contemplative keystone of Czech New Wave cinema. In this sense, Evald shares a role as the 'conscience' of the New Wave with Věra Chytilová, who addressed moral concerns regarding life under socialism from the perspective of the female gender. Such expectation exists in hopes of rectifying the reductive image that has been exported to other countries that portrays Czech filmography as a cinema that redounds on themes of grotesque comedy, youth drama and historical revisionism of the Second World War. It suffices to say that this portrait of the Czech New Wave has a greater wealth of facets and the work that better portrays this might well be Evald Schorm's, as its ability to represent the more coarse aspects in a society obfuscated by idealism and in the process of reconfiguring its principles in the formulation of 'Socialism with a human face', more akin in many subjects to the policy of western democracies than the Moscow-led party line and unpreoccupied about the unexpected but looming Warsaw Pact invasion that would end his epoch.

### Some biographic notes

Since childhood, Evald Schorm forged an unbreakable bond with Catholicism (Šrajter, 2016 a) that he would maintain with time and develop into one of the pillars of his work. As the policies of collectivization were enforced in Czechoslovakia, the Schorm's family farm they inhabited was confiscated by the state, so they had to move west of Prague to Zličín (now an affluent suburb of the Czech capital). From then on, the young Evald would make ends meet by jumping from a range of temporary jobs such as accountant, construction worker and tractor driver. These experiences would bring Evald closer to the life of common worker, with whom he would sympathise as he enters cinema school (FAMU) in 1956 and creates his first short documentaries. Although he initially desired to be an opera singer, having done his first steps towards the musical career in the army's art company during his mandatory service, he ended up focusing on cinema as he was accepted in the FAMU rather than the drama school he had wished to enter in the first place (DAMU).

Having entered FAMU, he would share his youth with Jiří Menzel, Věra Chytilová, Pavel Juráček and Antonín Máša, future directors and screenwriters that would configure the development of Czech New Cinema. The latter of these classmates would also be the screenwriter for Schorm's bachelor work, *The Tourist* (*Turista*, 1961), where his interest in uprooted characters that serve as paradigms of a society blindly wandering through the foggy trails of the future begins to show. Václav Hrdlička, the film's protagonist, lives on a tight rope as he lacks a family, inhabits a dank bedroom and borrows for a living. His acquaintances

mock him, calling him a ‘tourist’ in allusion to his unstable livelihood. In a certain time in his life, a lass named Věra shows up and presents an opportunity to finally settle down. However, he ends up disappointing her and she breaks up with him. Filled with hopelessness, Václav sees no choice but to leave his hometown by train, where he reveals his intimate and unfulfilled desires when he lies to a female passenger by claiming his second son has just been born.

After graduating, Schorm began committing fully to the documentary genre. His greatest desire was to portray the worker at his toil and show the human side of the individuals that do the hardest labour for society. With this approach he would immortalise the miners in *Země žemi* (1962), the lumberjacks in *Stromy a lidé* (1962) and the railway workers in *Železničáři* (1963). The way in which these documentaries are filmed closely resembles cinema verité, a similarity that is common in the fellow filmmakers of his generation, who as Kóvacs notes also engaged in similarities in style with Italian neorealism. From said desire of worker’s portrayal Schorm would transition into his first full-length fiction, *Everyday Courage* (*Každý den odvahu*, 1964). From this work onwards, Schorm’s characters would harbour within them a component of critical thought about reality, with protagonists trapped in existential dread incited by the vertigo of modern life. All of his protagonists are in search of something more, of a substance to their lives that will provide spiritual order. While Schorm’s cinema has Catholic religious components such as these as keystones to structure his narratives, his work is especially interesting because it never makes these components explicit or use them to cast judgement. This allows his films to be ambiguous enough for the spectator to project his own interpretation onto the character’s journey.

### **Christian tradition and modernism in Evald Schorm’s work**

As an adept of the Christian theological imperative to question the good within the evil to keep oneself in eternal doubt, Schorm does not intend to give the viewer a sermon in his films. Quoting Jung regarding Christian morality:

“We are called upon to be alert, critical, and self-aware, so as not to fall into temptation [...] so that we may recognize the mistakes we make [...] These obligations inevitably sharpen our understanding, our love of truth, and the urge to know, which as well as being genuine human virtues are quite possibly effects of that spirit which “searches everything, even the depths of God”<sup>2</sup>.

It is precisely for this reason that Schorm is so critical of the society he inhabits, as he feels as if nobody truly stops to question the reality of what is happening through the internal dialectic he seeks to promote and save from extinction in his movies.

To achieve such a goal, Schorm makes use of the archetype of Christ, that Jung considers inexhaustible in its capacity to express and not constrained by the passing of time due to the fact that “the psychic life of the archetype is extemporaneous”<sup>3</sup>. Schorm’s characters are configured around this archetype, specifically in its constant questioning of his actions and the deepening of inescapable existential crisis. In the face of such a dilemma, one has no choice but to accept the burden of doubt and traverse its shadowy valleys until a final action leads to either redemption or the loss of all hope.

Evald Schorm's filmography differed noticeably from that of his generation. First of all, he had a great predilection for sober *mise-en-scène*, which he inherited from his passion for the theatre, and gave pride of place to the performance of the actors over the other elements of the film. This approach also allowed him to focus on the spiritual component of his films, in a manner similar to that of the French filmmaker Robert Bresson. On the other hand, another

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<sup>2</sup> Jung, 2010: 659.

<sup>3</sup> Jung, 1949:54.

major difference with his contemporaries was the exclusive use of professional actors in his films, while directors such as Miloš Forman, Věra Chytilová and Jiří Menzel opted to include non-professional actors in their films, seeking a certain freshness and naturalism in their performances. Schorm opted for a different path that brought him closer to internationally successful directors such as Ingmar Bergman and Michelangelo Antonioni.

Despite this approachment, Schorm did not succeed in bringing his films to the international scene unlike his peers. This was probably due to his career's discontinuity in genres. Although Schorm maintains a great thematic consistency, deepening his moral and theological concerns, the author decides to try very different approaches in his films. Thus, we have a first bloc made up of his first two feature films in which he explores modernist drama, in the footsteps on Antonioni, Bergman and Bresson; to then give way to a second bloc in which he opts for grotesque comedy, starting with the short film *Dům radosti* and continuing with the feature film *Farářův konec*. Finally, at the end of his career, he turned to allegorical nightmares in *Den sedmý - osmá noc*.

This evolution did not do him much of a favour in terms of making him internationally known, because one of the key features of the auteurs who explored modernism was the preservation of great authorial coherence, something observable in the three filmmakers previously mentioned. It is up to speculation that, if Schorm had continued along the path he started with *Každý den odvahu*, his first and most awarded film, he would have enjoyed great international recognition. Throughout the text, we will discuss the reception his films received and try to extract the other reasons that prevented him from becoming an international filmmaker.

### **Moral crisis in the modern world as told by *Everyday Courage (Každý den odvahu, 1964)* and *Return of the Prodigal Son (Návrat ztraceného syna, 1967)***

Evald Schorm's first full-length project originates in proposition by Novotný-Kubala, a group of creatives organized in the top down, centrally planned form of production that characterized Czechoslovak state film production<sup>4</sup>, to make a film about young men in a small town<sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless, Schorm and his co-screenwriter Antonín Máša went on a very different direction, as in my interpretation they had a desire to portray the clash between the idealism of the Stalinist era and the nihilism professed by the new generation. This assessment is shared by authors Mira Liehm and Antonín J. Liehm, who point out that Schorm "brought together the most varied sources of modern inspiration with traditional elements to create a truthful picture of the disillusionment of the postwar political generation"<sup>6</sup>.

*Everyday Courage* tells the story of Jarda Lukáš (Jan Kacer), a class-conscious and involved worker that had been tightly knitted to politics and the ideals promoted by the government. However, after Stalin's public figure collapses, Jarda finds himself in crisis, as he observes how what he spent his whole life fighting for stopped making any sense. The protagonist fulfils the role of a martyr confronted in doubt and submerged in uncertainty. Jarda must observe as a new generation takes up the mantle he left in his youth, but seems to do so by inertia and in an absolute lack of ideals.

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<sup>4</sup> Szczepanik, 2013:115.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Šrajter (2016 a): *It is all far more complicated. Evald Schorm*.

<https://www.filmovyprehled.cz/en/revue/detail/its-all-far-more-complicated-evald-schorm-i> (consulted on 17/10/2023).

<sup>6</sup> Liehm/Liehm, 1977:288.

The film opens with a quote from *Ashes and Diamonds* by Polish author Jerzy Andrzejewski that sets us into the moral plane of the film's protagonist:

“Everyday we face great love and great grievances. And if, for just a minute, you start to lose what you really love, then you must face the fact that what you are losing is a part of your life, that a light hidden within you is vanishing.”

Throughout the movie Jarda attempts to hold on to the illusions of his youth unsuccessfully, as he starts to understand that the past, he idealises never existed in the first place. Jarda's search, much like Christ's, seems to have taken up a path of doubt and sacrifice. The choice of the figure of Christ as character background allows the author to elaborate a portrait that is at the same time local a thematic but universal, since not unlike Jung reveals us “[Christ] constitutes the supposed unconscious of all humankind, its life evidently reveals the secret and unconscious yet fundamental life of any individual, that is, what marks Christ's life happens always and everywhere”<sup>7</sup>.

In the last parts of the movie, the protagonist is seen losing all he had left when his girlfriend Věra breaks up with him because she considers herself incapable of handling Jarda's crisis for any longer, which makes him turn to alcohol for refuge. In a moment of drunkenness, he accuses a co-worker of betraying the Revolution, and when a policeman comes to establish order Jarda sentences: “Look at the way all of you live. All you do is eat and drink beer”. This is an allusion to the state of a generation lacking any ambition or illusion that has abandoned the desire to change the world. In this sense, Schorm sees the youth of the 60's with pessimism, as a generation lost to nihilism and incapable of introspection. This gives the author a vision worthy of an unique filmmaker that stands out from his generation, who often sweetened the experience of their youths while critiquing their parents’.

Whilst films such as Milos Forman's *Peter and Pavla* (*Cerný Petr*, 1964) and *Loves of a Blonde* (*Lásky jedné plavovlásky*, 1965) portrays an unilateral perspective of the struggle and rebellion of the youths, Schorm lies in between generations, trying to expose the awful situation both



Fig. 1. Frame from *Everyday Courage* (Schorm, 1964) and *The Flagellation of Christ* (Giuseppe de Ribera, 17th century, Girolamini, Naples).

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<sup>7</sup> Jung, 1949:53.

of them are a part of and suggesting an origin of the problem in the loss of spiritual values common to modernity that is testified in the more sociological reading of his filmography proposed by Martin Šrajcer that observes common themes in his movies the likes of “dying ideals of building socialism, rising number of suicides, the weakening influence of religion”<sup>8</sup>.

All of this is done with a distinct subtlety that will eventually give way to a more direct communication in his following films. Jarda meets his end among fellow workers as they severely bludgeon him, a sacrificial act alike Christ’s passion<sup>9</sup> in the hands of soldiers and the Jewish people. The way in which the scene is conceived references Baroque iconography, whose interest was to show “the grandeur of the suffering of a God made man”<sup>10</sup>. Both in the film and in the example of Ribera's painting, we see the face immersed in a half-shadow, a feature that in Baroque paintings revealed Christ's dual nature, human as well as divine. After the beating, Jarda smiles in the ground as if he has just had a revelation; an epiphany<sup>11</sup> that has shown him the bitter inner workings of the world he inhabits.

As a counterpoint to Jarda, the film presents us with the character of his young co-worker Bořek (Josef Abrhám). A charismatic and comical individual, Bořek acts as the leader of the other youths, and as such repeatedly confronts Jarda. However, his complexity as a character does not fully develop until he has an encounter with Jarda’s girlfriend. In it, both characters discuss their life and Bořek reveals the emptiness and inertia that he knows to be the main driving force of his life. The character states “I’m scared of life, of people. They are the source of all evil”. Such emptiness will eventually be Bořek’s end as he kills himself in a drunk motorbike accident to entertain his friends as they dance to the beats of Western music. Through this death Schorm appears to make his sceptic position towards the youth’s nihilism, which he considers to only lead to self-destruction. In a brief summary, it’s as if he tries to tell us that every human being needs something to believe and fight for.

Regarding Věra, Jarda’s girlfriend, she is also immersed in an existential crisis related to the fear of aging and death. Věra looks at the elders around her in fear and ridicules them, as they seem incapable of leaving a vicious circle of idealized remembrance. Her crisis peaks when her landlord’s brother dies. She is so profoundly touched by this that, when speaking to Jarda, she realizes it is impossible to reason with him, as his ideals absorb him too deeply. She then ends her relationship with the protagonist, frustrating both character’s search for meaning and showing the impossibility of avoiding the clash between individualities and the eventual loss of communication. This can mark a relationship between Schorm and the cinema of Italian filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni in works such as *The Night* (*La notte*, 1961) and *The Eclipse* (*L’eclisse*, 1962). The cinematographic modernity of both authors portrays the inability to create relationships in a society of alienation and individualism that leads to loneliness and conflict.

*Everyday Courage* was not well received in its time, finding tough criticism among the specialized press, and was prohibited from screening for a whole year as president Antonín Novotný disliked it<sup>12</sup>. Nevertheless, when these obstacles were surpassed, it got the critic’s award at the Pésaro film festival. Moreover, the Italian communist newspaper *L’Unitá* stated

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<sup>8</sup> Martin Šrajcer (2016 b): *All is vanity. Evald Schorm*.

<https://www.filmovyprehled.cz/en/revue/detail/all-is-vanity-evald-schorm-ii> (consulted on 17/10/2023).

<sup>9</sup> Cihelková, 2014: 46-47.

<sup>10</sup> Labarga, 2016: 301.

<sup>11</sup> Coufal, 2012:46.

<sup>12</sup> Hames, 2009: 82.

on the topic of the movie “Schorm, passionately and free of prejudice, tackles the problem of the human consequences derived from what is habitually resumed under the term ‘Stalinism’<sup>13</sup>. The movie was also awarded the youth jury prize in Locarno, Switzerland (1966). Together with the fact that Schorm was among the Czech filmmakers that skilfully adapted their style to resemble European international modernism, one would expect that his cinema would have great international success, and although initially this would be the case, as shall be seen in further chapters his reach would begin to decrease until he would be hardly known outside his country after 1969 with *Farářův konec*.

With *Return of the Prodigal Son*, Schorm would continue to explore his moral concerns, becoming to a large extent the conscience of his generation, the New Wave, as he was one of the few filmmakers to approach his subjects from a realistic-critical perspective, determined to come to terms with the reality of a society that closeted its preoccupations.

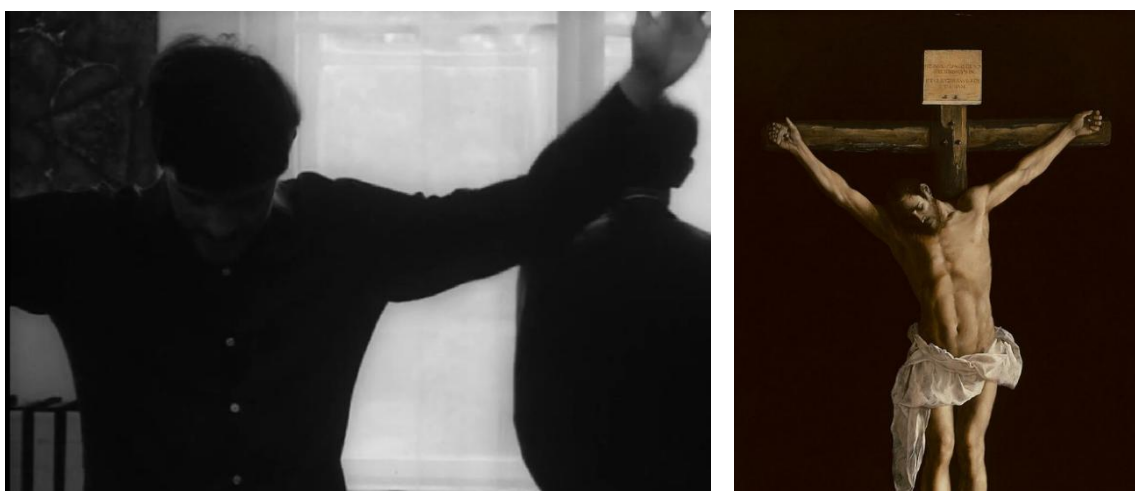


Fig. 2. Frame from *Return of the Prodigal Son* (Schorm,1967) and *Cristo en la cruz* (Francisco de Zurbarán, 1627, Art Institute of Chicago).

Interestingly, Schorm once again casts actors Jan Kacer and Jana Brejchová in the lead roles, in keeping with the continuity of his work, which always delves into the same issues from different angles. In this instance Schorm showcases an intellectual who has everything, but enters a crisis that leads him to attempt suicide. The film begins with the protagonist Jan (Jan Kacer) already in a psychiatric hospital and being interrogated by his therapist. From the very beginning Jan’s strong repulsion towards existence is made apparent. He goes so far as to declare: "I have everything and it poisons me like an idiot". One of the striking features of Jan is that he never takes off his black sunglasses, a symbolic manifestation of the wall he has built between himself and the world, of his disparity with it. This is an element that is also used anachronistically in Andrzej Wajda's 1950s Polish cinema classic, *Ashes and Diamonds* (*Popiół i Diament*, 1958), in which the protagonist, played by Zbigniew Cybulski, confesses to wearing them as: "a reminder of my bitter love for the fatherland". Both films utilize this detail as a distancing motif between the protagonist and his environment.

From an iconographic perspective, the motif also reveals a religious meaning. The Catholic religion, like many other organized religions born on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, has a cosmic and solar heritage. There is a close relationship between the figure of Jesus Christ and sunlight<sup>14</sup>. In this way, the dark glasses fulfil a narratological

<sup>13</sup> Škvorecký, 1971: 144.

<sup>14</sup> Esteban Lorente, 1990:177.



function as they signal to the spectator that the protagonist's destiny is to pass through a dark valley of doubt and mortification, far from the clear-sighted light of divinity.

Jan personifies Christ once again, and his aim is to reintegrate himself into a world that keeps rejecting him. Throughout the film, the character continually breaks out and is systematically sent back to the psychiatric hospital, the prison that society has built for those who are different, for those it considers deviant. In this respect, the title alludes to the famous parable of Jesus that Jan himself hears from a catechist on one of his escapes, in which he explains how a father with two sons gives his part of his inheritance to the youngest, who asks for it, and the latter decides to go to a distant country to spend his life as a libertine, squandering the money. When he finds himself at a loss, he decides to return to his father, who welcomes him with a great celebration. The older brother, perplexed, asks him why he favours the prodigal son, who has caused him nothing but trouble. To which the father replies: " It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found " (Luke 15:11-32). Undoubtedly, these words serve to define the meaning of the film, sustained by a character constantly swinging between perdition and homecoming



Fig. 3. Frame from *Return of the Prodigal Son* (Schorm,1967) and *El retorno del hijo pródigo* (Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, 1667-1670, National Gallery of Art, Washington D. C.).

Although never confessing it directly, the film constantly puts Jan to the test and prevents him from reintegrating into society because he has accepted his spiritual sacrifice. None of the material pleasures that life offers appeal to him because his destiny is strongly linked to the transcendental. In one of the final scenes, Jan is being chased by peasants who mistake him for a murderer who had been in the news. Jan experiences his own particular Calvary in these moments, just like Christ on the cross. Here the protagonist reaches the point of no return, symbolized in the loss of his glasses, thus dissolving the wall he had built to protect himself against the aggressions of the world.

In the film's last minutes, Jan inquires: "What did I do wrong?", which, as Barbora Cihelková rightly points out, implies a clear parallel with the last words of Christ on the cross, who exclaims: "God, why have you forsaken me?"<sup>15</sup>.

On the flipside, the character of the wife, played by Jana Brejchová, shows her unhappiness as she sees how her husband is progressively drifting away from normality. To cover up her sadness, she engages in an affair with a family friend, Jiří, played by Jiří Menzel, a classmate of Schorm's generation and known worldwide for his film *Closely Watched Trains* (*Ostře sledované vlaky*, 1966). Instead of keeping this affair a secret, Jana keeps it public and is even accepted by Jan's parents. Nevertheless, Jana remains in love with Jan and when he returns home, seemingly rehabilitated, she decides to break off the affair and start over with Jan. But she observes, as in the previous film, that communication is impossible and that Jan has begun a process that alienates him from everything. Jana goes so far as to say to him: "It's easy for you, you always run away from everything. Everyone thinks of you as a saint. Everyone takes special care of you. "

The type of spiritual crisis suffered by the protagonist is similar to that suffered by the characters in the films of French filmmaker Robert Bresson. Bresson uses the metaphor of prison, derived from Christian mysticism, to generate a cinema of great spiritual depth. The prison is an element that generates disparity between the character and his environment; it can be a physical prison as in the case of *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé* or *Le vent souffle où il veut* (1956) or a purely internal one as in the film *Diary of a Country Priest* (*Journal d'un curé de campagne*, 1951). The latter is particularly relevant, as it shares many elements with *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. The young priest in *Diary of a Country Priest* proves unable to relate naturally to his parishioners, and his alienation increases when he discovers that he is suffering from stomach cancer. All this, coupled with his tendency towards asceticism, alienates him from the world, a disposition that leads him to spiritual elevation, for as Paul Schrader notes: "The priest is the frail vehicle of an overwhelming passion which in the context of *Diary of a Country Priest* is called the Holy Agony (*la Sainte Agonie*). Little by little, as if moving down the Way of the Cross, the priest comes to realize that he carries a special weight, a weight which he finally accepts"<sup>16</sup>.

Similarly, in Schorm's film a morally ill man is displayed. His illness leads to his separation from the world and to his placement in a psychiatric institution, which functions as a metaphor for prison. But this prison manifests itself not only externally but also internally. Jan's character will suffer a similar fate to that of the young priest in Bresson's film, since both embody the archetype of Christ and are forced to bear the same redemptive burden.

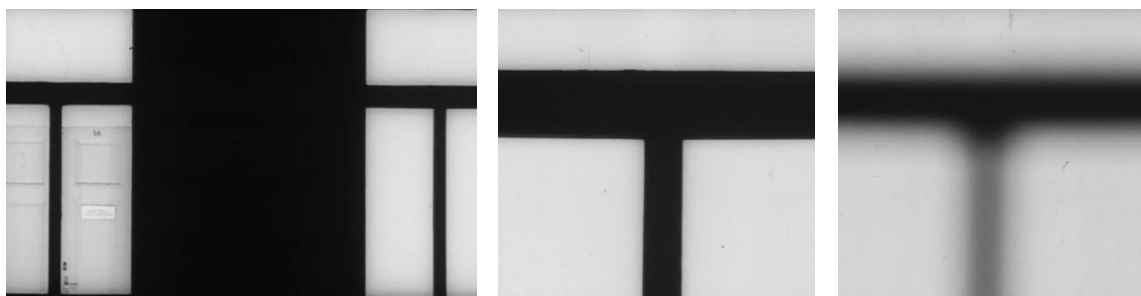


Fig. 4. The hospital windows evoking the cross of Christ. Frames from *Return of the Prodigal Son* (Schorm,1967).

<sup>15</sup> Cihelková, 2014:49.

<sup>16</sup> Schrader, 2018:100.

The film ends with Jan exclaiming the words mentioned earlier: "What did I do wrong?" This is followed by a shot of Jana and the therapist's wife talking about Jan's condition. To conclude, the film closes with a scene of the windows of the psychiatric hospital, which symbolically evoke a cross, pointing out the parallel between the sacrifice made by Christ and the one made by the film's protagonist.

The international reception of this film was much less passionate than his first feature film in 1964, receiving only the Swiss Critics' Prize at the 20th Locarno Film Festival ex aequo with Glauber Rocha's *Terra em Transe* (1967). Still, many critics praised the audacity of his thematic choice, chief among them Claude Sambaïn, who said of the film's concept: "To purify yourself, you have to sink to the bottom. Only there, at the bottom, where everything seems hopeless and unsolvable, can change take place. If one perseveres in one's quest to the end, one succeeds and finds in oneself the strength to continue"<sup>17</sup>.

### **Towards the building of Christian Comedy in *House of Joy* (*Dům radosti*, 1966) and *The End of a Priest* (*Farářův konec*, 1969).**

This short film was included in the collective film *Pearls of the Deep* (*Perlický na dne*, 1966), which served as a kind of manifesto for the members of the Czech New Wave. Schorm shared space with the filmmakers Jaromil Jireš, Jiří Menzel, Jan Nemeč and Vera Chytilová, all of whom had been students of the second generation of FAMU. In this film, the filmmakers each set out to adapt a short story by the writer Bohumil Hrabal, who would become a point of reference for New Wave filmmakers, as they shared his enthusiasm for everyday stories, the heroism of the common man and grotesque humour. Schorm chose to adapt the story *Dům radosti*, about two insurance agents who pay a visit to a primitive painter. Schorm went out of his traditional reliance on professional actors when he decided to have the role played by the real primitive painter who had inspired Hrabal to create the story, Václav Žák<sup>18</sup>. The short film aims to show the inability of communication between the insurance agents, guided by conventionalism, and the artist, the bearer of creative singularity and thus stranded from the behavioural norms of society.

Religious motifs are constant in the short film. Right from the start, the music chosen is that of a church organ, which lends a mystical quality to the painter's dialogue and actions. The two agents try to sell him a death insurance policy, and when they enter the house, they find a dead goat hanging in the main entrance. The agents ask him if he is ever afraid of such a macabre image, to which the painter replies: "Sometimes. That's why I want to paint it. I used to tell my mother that I would like to bring the goats. At least the bucks I have killed, back to life". Then a slow motion, almost dreamlike scene of the painter with a knife trying to kill the goats is shown while the sacred music of the organ plays again. It is important to note that goats played an important role in the Bible, as they were considered clean for sacrifice. In fact, for one of the sacrifices on the Day of Atonement, goats were to be used exclusively:

"Then shall he kill the goat of the sin offering, that is for the people, and bring his blood within the vail, and do with that blood as he did with the blood of the bullock, and sprinkle it upon the mercy seat, and before the mercy seat: and he shall make an atonement for the holy place, because of the uncleanness of the children of Israel, and because of their transgressions in all their sins" (Lev.16:5-28).

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<sup>17</sup> Bernard, 1994: 58

<sup>18</sup> Hames, 2005:97



Fig. 5. Frame from *Dům radosti* (Schorm,1966) from the film anthology *Pearls of the Deep* (*Perlický na dne*, 1966).

After that scene, the painter tries to explain that his paintings, which cover the whole house, originate in his dreams and fantasies. In these scenes, close to a documentary, the different motifs painted by the artist are shown. Among dwarves, lions, horses, boys and girls, there are also religiously inspired images such as: General Jan Žižka, a key figure in the Hussite wars; St. Wenceslas, patron saint of the Czechs; and various depictions of Christ on the cross.

When he finally decides to sign up for insurance, his mother appears and tells the two men that her family cannot afford insurance. The mother is just as eccentric as her son, but she is more aware that they are trying to swindle them. She claims that Jesus Christ is watching everything they do and then closes a door on which hangs a painting of a large crucified Christ. What follows is a fast motion flashback in which the way they have obtained the metal plate on which the Christ is painted is shown. The mother is seen painting with chalk the silhouette of a child who is lying down. Next, mother and son hang the Christ from a cross near the road and the painter does his work there. This is followed by a series of car accidents as drivers are surprised by the sudden appearance of the figure. In another of the dreamlike images, the painter is transformed into a priest, giving communion to a group of girls, while he moves from one side to the other in a bizarre way and drops a bible on the ground.



Fig. 6. The artistic creation of the primitivist Christ. Frames from *Dům radosti* (Schorm,1966) from the film anthology *Pearls of the Deep* (*Perlický na dne*, 1966).

Faced with this absurd situation, the insurance men are increasingly unable to cope and decide to leave, arguing that "some things are better left as they are". The short film, like the rest of Evald Schorm's filmography, delves into the idea of sacrifice. In this case, the artist figuratively sacrifices himself to offer his art to the world. This idea comes from the Renaissance, when it was established that the artistic work possessed a divine character, thus dignifying the artist who became an exemplar of *Imitatio Christi*<sup>19</sup>. However, this sacrifice is not merely tragic but serves instead as a piece of grotesque comedy, as is the whole short film towards the bizarre relationship between the artist and his mother in its use of contrasting elements such as the presence of comical motives intertwined with heavy organ music and Christian imagery.

Reattempting the comic tone of *Dům radosti*, Schorm embarked on the development of the feature-length comedy *The End of a Priest*. On this occasion, he worked closely with the writer Josef Škvorecký, who was to write the screenplay. In the words of the writer himself:

"[This project was] a realisation of an older promise that Evald and I once gave to Jana Brejchova, and her husband, the actor Vlastimil Brodsky (her second husband after Milos), that I would write a comedy for them, which Evald would direct [...] I had read it in the papers sometime in the fifties: an adventurer passed as a priest for about eight months in a mountain village in Eastern Bohemia. He lived entirely off the generosity of the unsuspecting parishioners, who were happy to have a Father, at a time when a disproportionately large number of priests worked at digging of ditches and in the uranium mines"<sup>20</sup>.

The plot opens with a prelude that speaks on the peculiarities of a clumsy sacristan (Vlastimil Brodský) who likes to disguise himself as a priest, as he dreams of occupying this dignified position, which he idealises and finds unattainable. On one of these occasions, pretending to say mass, he is interrupted by a woman carrying a child in her arms. Mistaking him for the priest, the woman asks him to baptise the child, as he is very ill, and, although he initially tries to resist, he ends up being forced to baptise him, and when the false father pours water over the child, he cries again. The grateful woman sees this as a miracle and tells him that he should one day visit her village, which does not even have a priest.

As a result of this encounter, he has the idea of going to the village to pass himself off as the village priest. As luck would have it, when he arrives, an old woman who is fed up with her state of reclusion decides to fake her death so that the village will listen to her. The false father comes to give her the last rites and she shouts to the villagers that she is no longer dying and that the priest has worked a miracle. It is then that the antagonistic character of the schoolteacher (Jan Libíček), a convinced atheist and pro-communist, comes into the picture by standing against the miracle hoax. To such insinuation the priest replies: "it is the power of sincere prayer that has rehabilitated the old woman", and the teacher maintains his opposition by pointing out that he calls it "the power of suggestion".

The main conflict of the film is born out of this clash of ideals. The teacher begins to take action when he notices how all the children decide to go to mass instead of attending class. At first, he tries to trick the priest by pointing out that their philosophies are not so different, but it soon becomes clear that their ideas are not reconcilable, when the teacher tells the priest that he is working with children who will be the leaders of tomorrow, to which the priest replies that they are all going to the same place. At this point, the teacher excitedly says: "Yes, the future!", while the priest says: "Yes, death". Gradually, the town opts for the church due to the

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<sup>19</sup> Checa Cremades, 2003: 110.

<sup>20</sup> Škvorecký, 1971: 150-151.



intervention of the parish priest, who unwittingly and by chance manages to perform acts that the common folk believe to be miracles.

The professor, seeing his influence over the village lost, decides to join forces with the secret police to destroy the prestige of the parish priest. This is where all the film's Christian imagery begins to unfold. The priest, like the protagonists of Schorm's previous films, becomes a transcript of Christ, while the communist professor ends up playing the role of Judas as he betrays the protagonist. The parallels with other biblical characters do not end there, with figures such as Jan (Václav Kotva) prefiguring St. John the Evangelist. The character, like his biblical namesake, is presented as young and beardless to emphasise his purity and virginity<sup>21</sup>. In numerous scenes of the film he can be seen grieving, something that alludes to the representation of Saint John in the medieval carvings that recreate the Calvary, in which it is common to see him with his hand resting on his cheek, as a sign of sadness or with a handkerchief in his hand to wipe away his tears<sup>22</sup>. The young Jan will begin to follow the parish priest everywhere and will be in charge of reading the events as passages from the Holy Scriptures. A good example of this is when, on one occasion, the priest talks to the teacher and Jan elucidates that it is about the temptation of the devil in the desert.

In another scene, too, the character of Mary Magdalene is embodied in the promiscuous young Majka (Jana Brejchová). Like the saint, she is presented with blonde hair<sup>23</sup> and leads a licentious life until she discovers her devotion to the priest. At one point, the villagers harass her because they learn that she has slept with a young married man. Then the priest appears and utters the famous biblical words: "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone" (John 8:1-7); by which he succeeds in ending popular unrest towards her. Interestingly, this biblical passage was chosen despite bearing no relation to the story of Mary Magdalene, but to the episode of the woman taken in adultery<sup>24</sup>. According to author Gertrud Schiller, the motif was especially depicted in "German book illustrations of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries", but above all it was used for instructive purposes during the Baroque period<sup>25</sup>.

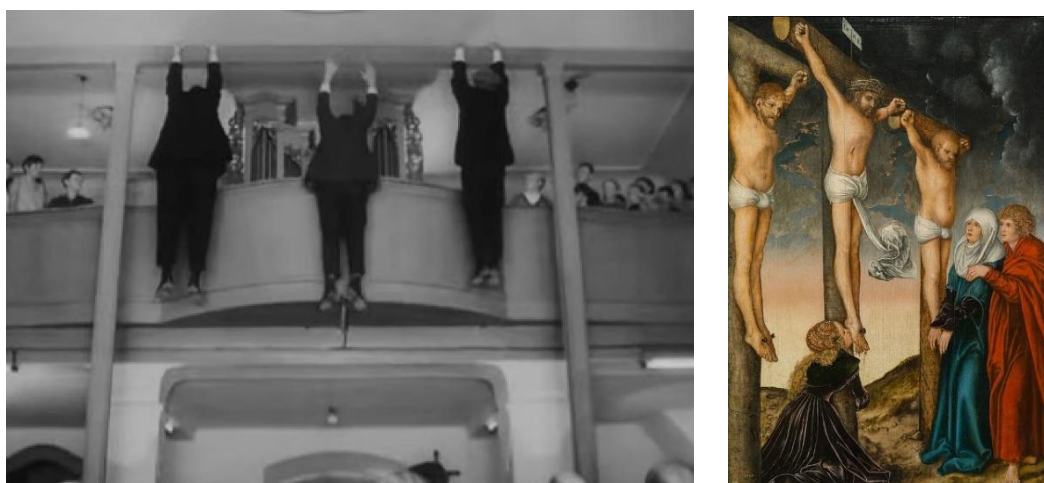


Fig. 7. Frame from *Farářův konec* (Schorm, 1969) and *Christ on the cross between the two thieves* (Lucas Cranach the Elder, 1515, Pushkin Museum, Moscow).

<sup>21</sup> Carmona Muela, 2003: 234.

<sup>22</sup> Ferrando Roig, 1950: 156.

<sup>23</sup> Carmona Muela, 2003: 313.

<sup>24</sup> Ferguson, 1961: 81.

<sup>25</sup> Schiller, 1971: 161.

Late in the plot, the priest's farce is discovered by two bishops who arrive in the village. The priest is determined to accept the punishment, after which he wants to be ordained as a priest. The rogue's newfound spirituality is revealed in his own words: "I was not much of a believer, but I have come to see how much we all need faith and relief".

The film concludes with a chase by the secret police and the teacher. Both chase the false priest until he is forced to flee, holding on to one of the beams of the church. Finally, he is trapped on both sides of the great beam, with the teacher on one side and the police on the other. In a way, the scene portrays the biblical crucifixion of Jesus Christ between the two thieves. Finally, the rogue priest falls and dies. A grief-stricken Majka holds his corpse and embraces it, an image that iconographically represents the classical depiction of Mary Magdalene during the Passion. She is traditionally depicted as showing her grief at the death of Jesus with her arms raised, embracing the cross or kissing the feet of Christ after the descent<sup>26</sup>.

The death of the protagonist closes the sacrificial circle of the film. This will be Schorm's only feature film in which the character acting as a transcript of Christ dies in a non-figurative way. By establishing these correspondences, Schorm is, uninterruptedly, reflecting on the continuity of Christ's sacrificial work in man, who necessarily has to repeat his story, even if the background varies. This is made possible by the duality of the Christ figure, who is both human and divine, for as Jung points out: "Christ is the perfect symbol of the immortal that is hidden within mortal man"<sup>27</sup>.

The film marked Schorm's definitive departure from the international exhibition circuits, as it was not well received. It was sent to the 1969 Cannes Film Festival, together with Vojtech Jasný's *Vsichni dobří rodáci* (1969), both representing Czechoslovakia. While Jasný's film was a triumph, winning the important prizes for best director and the technical prize, Schorm's film failed to win any prizes. It is safe to assume that Schorm's move into comedy, a genre that is difficult to export, was the cause of the director's international decline. Although Jasný's film also had humorous elements, it was essentially a dramatic story, which succeeded in combining this facet with great visual lyricism.

The film only managed to see success at an exhibition of Czech and Slovak films in Sorrento (Italy) in the same year. Its success could have been due to the fact that it adopted a model that was already familiar and admired by Italians, as the film was clearly influenced by Julien Duvivier's *Don Camillo* (1952)<sup>28</sup>, a comic film that narrated the confrontations between the parish priest Don Camillo (Fernandel) and the communist mayor Peppone (Gino Cervi) in a small village on the banks of the river Po. Such was the success of the film in Italy that it was followed by several sequels: *The Return of Don Camillo* (1953), *Don Camillo's Last Round* (1955), *Don Camillo: Monsignor* (1961) and *Don Camillo in Moscow* (1965).

### **Apocalypse: The end of a decade in *The Seventh Day, the Eight Night* (Den sedmý- osmá noc, 1969)**

With this last work, Schorm intended to elaborate his personal vision of the malaise of Czech society after the invasion of the Soviet troops. The script was hastily written by the director himself and screenwriter Zdeněk Mahler. This pressure and urgency to make the film stemmed from the fact that the authors were aware that they had very little time before the harsh regulations imposed by the Soviets came into force.

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<sup>26</sup> Carmona Muela, 2003: 314.

<sup>27</sup> Jung, 1980: 19.

<sup>28</sup> Whyte, 1971: 108.

The film is virulent about the state of paranoia into which a society falls when a major crisis occurs. It is set in a small Czech village, where the inhabitants, due to a rumour, fall prey to fear, unleashing their most primal instincts.

The film begins with the camera observing the village from above, followed by a screeching sound. It is my speculation that this could be either God judging the village or a figurative 'Soviet eye' spying on them. Once in the village, the mean neighbours are seen taking items from the home of a boy named Josef (Jaroslav Wagner), whom they consider the village idiot. Josef allows his furniture to be plundered because he claims he will not need it, having had a prophetic, apocalyptic vision of a great crisis about to happen. The inhabitants scoff at this prediction and decide to pay no attention to him. After this, a troupe of actors arrives in the village to put on a play about the life of Christ, but in the middle of the performance there is a strange power cut that leaves the village in darkness. The evil character, known in the film as the Prankster (Jan Libíček), takes advantage of the general chaos to spread a false rumour that something terrible is happening. This situation becomes more unstable when some citizens arrive at the train station and discover that the train driver has disappeared. In addition, unknown train carriages are found on the tracks. This unreasonable situation plunges the town progressively into a state of madness.

Schorm is setting out an allegory of the terror that came with the invasion of the country and how some influential people took advantage of it to further destabilise the situation. The director is also critical of the actions of the citizens, who prefer to be driven by fear rather than face the situation. The disappearance of the train driver happens to strike a great similarity the kidnapping of President Alexander Dubček by the Soviets, an event that served as the trigger for mass hysteria.

Continuing the movie, the Prankster takes the opportunity to make the people believe that only those who get on the mysterious wagons will be saved. Everyone starts spying on each other and a committee, led by a chairman, is appointed to decide which of the townspeople should be saved and which should not. In this crisis, the more violent citizens begin to blame the strange situation on the actors for their arrival at the time of the blackout. They take their anger out on them, mistreating the actor playing Jesus and throwing him into the river. This Jesus is depicted half-naked, according to the researcher Tomás Miguel Cabrera Mimblera: "Saint Sebastian and Christ crucified were the only representations of nudity allowed by the Church"<sup>29</sup>.

As for the actress playing Mary Magdalene, she has an even worse fate, being raped by the group of townspeople. Schorm shows how even the most sacred symbols are not safe when such a critical situation arises.

Schorm also shows his distrust of intellectuals in the figure of the schoolteacher (Jan Kacer), whose only concern is to try to explain the new reality that is taking place, falling into increasingly absurd conclusions. The situation comes to a head when the teacher meets the train driver, realising that it has all been a misunderstanding. But unable to change the position he had taken on the new state of affairs, he decides to murder him, so that no one will ever know.

While this is going on, the elected members of the village are climbing into the wagons. Among them is the joker who laughs and lets them know that it was all a joke, but no one believes him anymore. After this situation of maximum crisis, in the next scene the wagons become empty and the village disappears, without any explanation. The only one left is the

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<sup>29</sup> Cabrera Mimblera, 2022: 232.



supposed village idiot, who seems to be aware of the presence of the eye-camera. This character celebrates his discovery as if it were an authentic revelation of a spiritual order.

As seen, Schorm shifts from his usual perspective of one main character and several supporting characters to create a collective subject, describing the actions of different characters in the village, thus increasing the allegorical representation of the film. Unsurprisingly, the film failed to get a release and was declassified. It entered the dreaded category of films banned forever, along with Jan Nemeč's *The Party and the Guests* (*O slavnosti a hostech*, 1966) and Miloš Forman's *The Firemen's Ball* (*Horí, má Panenko*, 1967). It also led to the author being banned from working in cinema, to which he would only return for commissioned work.



Fig. 8. Frame evoking divine ecstasy from *Den sedmý, osmá noc* (Schorm, 1969) and *Ecstasy of Saint Francis* (El Greco, 1580, Muzeum Diecezjalne, Siedlce, Poland).

## Conclusion

But the question still does arise: how did a filmmaker so close to the international cinematic sensibility of his time fail to achieve greater success outside the borders of his own country? Although there are no definitive answers as to what it is that determines why some directors achieve international success and others do not, it could be theorized that it may be because Evald Schorm's films form sharp, critical commentaries on Czech society at the time, something with which many viewers on the other side of the Iron Curtain would not be too familiar. In fact, one of the few countries where it found some success was Italy, which had a strong communist tradition shaped by anti-Stalinist intellectuals and was therefore a culture that was very interested in what was happening in the Soviet bloc countries. On the other hand, looking at the Czech New Wave films that achieved international success, such as Jiří Menzel's *Closely Watched Trains* (1966) or Miloš Forman's *Loves of a Blonde* (1965), these were films that dealt with the problems and interests of youth<sup>30</sup>, a theme which, after the emergence of the French New Wave, had a more than proven chance of international success, as it appealed to the young audiences who filled the cinemas

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<sup>30</sup> Sánchez, 2002: 419.

in the 1960s and were so close to the sensibility of the time, and which also had the approval of the critics.

Precisely at this time of sensitivity towards the theme of youth, Schorm made his feature films with adult characters, who are prostrated in the face of great inner moral dilemmas. This is something that can also characterise Bergman and Robert Bresson. But it must be beared in mind that these are directors who made their debuts in the 1940s and 1950s, and by the 1960s were already sufficiently established.

Schorm became more important among members of his generation as he exemplified cinematic coherence and moral commitment for his peers, who often paid tribute to him by offering him small roles in their films. Without a doubt, Schorm was a committed filmmaker whose stories manage to elaborate accurate commentaries on the society of his time and, at the same time, composes a spiritual cinema of the first order, which uses the archetype of Christ as the ultimate symbolic figure to narrate the inner sacrificial processes of his protagonists.

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