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Reality is always deeper and more complicated. Evald Schorm's documentaries

The tendency in the 1950s to use Czechoslovak documentary films as tools of political propaganda led to the negation of the very method and purpose of documentary film. It wasn't until the turn of the 1950s and 1960s when a more direct perspective on reality without any distorting dogmas and patterns took over.

The connection to international trends and the regeneration of documentary films as a creative and philosophical search for purpose is owed both to graduates of the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU) in Prague (Pavel Hobl, Bruno Šefranka) and established makers of popular science films (Miro Bernat, Rudolf Krejčík).

A significant contribution to the new form of documentary film evolving beyond a mere report, testimony or agitprop in order to present its own opinion and inspire thought, was made by Evald Schorm, who saw documentaries as a medium to explore the mysteries of human existence. "Both are exploring the same thing, but from two perspectives. One is factual (evidence), the other is fabrication (fantasy)," responded Schorm in 1966 when asked what documentary and live action film is to him.^[1] In both fiction and non-fiction, he was interested in extreme and crisis situations of a person and society and used such situations to create an initial point of reflection of what we take for granted. In such situations, emotions are bare and concentrated, motives tense, and chances to find answers higher.

In his survey film *Why* (Proč?, 1964), Schorm focused on the pressing issue of abortions and a decreasing birth-rate; in *Reflection* (Zrcadelní, 1965), he asked

terminally ill patients how they perceived their lives and where they get strength to go on and rejoice from life's gifts. Also his portrait of poet, photographer and outsider Josef Sudek, *My Life to Live* (Žít svůj život, 1963), is a contemplation on how to live despite indifference and disapproval.

Schorm made his first documentary film during his studies at FAMU. His second-year exercise, titled *Block 15* (Blok 15, 1959), celebrates the hard work of concrete layers in the construction of the Orlick dam. The 8-minute-long artistic report is narrated by Vladimír Goldmann. His commentary is as poetic as the film's baroque organ score by Jan Malý.

The documentary depicting a single workday and a task (laying concrete in block 15) is framed with a story of a dispatcher overseeing the fulfilment of the plan. After dynamic close-ups of the workers' construction efforts, probably inspired by the work of Soviet montage masters such as Alexandr Dovzhenko and Dziga Vertov, there is time for peace and a well-deserved reward in the form of beer (the dispatcher drinks only milk). The film poem full of pathos was awarded at a competition held to commemorate the 15th anniversary of the liberation of Czechoslovakia.

In parallel with his graduate live-action film *The Tourist* (Turista, 1961), Schorm made a documentary titled *Jan Konstantin, Meritorious Artist* (Jan Konstantin zasloužilý umělec, 1961). The portrait of the National Theatre singer is composed of footage taken during his performances (in the National Theatre and in Moscow) and footage filmed at his cottage in Hojsova Stráž near Železná Ruda, where Konstantin engages in activities such as wood carving. By using these parallels, Schorm emphasises that intellectual and manual work can be equal as long as you approach it with the same passion and honesty.

After graduating from FAMU, Evald Schorm joined the Studio of Documentary Film, where he gradually turned from a co-author of news films to a director of short documentaries. Not long after celebrating concrete layers, he also paid tribute to stone breakers and mine drifters from Ostrava. His film *Earth to Earth* (Země zemi, 1962) was his first collaboration with cinematographer Jan Špáta and composer Jan Klusák.

Once again, the film depicts a single working day – this time, it focuses on a group of stone breakers from the gravel-pit Kališák and mine drifters from the Paskov mine. We follow the workers during their working hours and afterwards, when the absorbed expressions on their faces are replaced by smiles. This romanticising depiction of work was screened at the International Leipzig Documentary and Short Film Week and won an award at the 13th Workers' Film Festival. In his later documentaries, Schorm continued with his examination of how work fulfils people and helps to form their identities.

Trees and People (Stromy a lidé, 1962) was originally commissioned by the Ministry of the Agriculture. But Schorm elevated the instruction video about logging into a poetic essay about the beauty of nature, simple joys of life, and the passage of time. While shooting, Špáta fully utilised the widescreen cinemascope format: noble footage of trees alternates with civil details of human work.

In his first colour film, *Railwaymen* (Železničáři, 1963), Schorm once again proved his capability to depict a certain environment and its impact on a working individual. The everydayness of the railway workers is evoked by images and rapid cuts representing the frantic tempo of work at the railways – just like in the famous British documentary *Night Mail* (1935). While various footage emphasises the complexity of mechanical operations, austere commentary by Richard Honzovič presents technical information. The tempo slows down when the railwaymen rest and talk. The film, in which methods of reports and survey are enhanced by experimental usage of music and colour and lyrical cuts, won the Bronze Medal at the 14th International Festival of Documentary Films in Venice.

From 29 July to 6 August 1962, Helsinki hosted the 8th World Festival of Youth And Students. The festival organised a three-day seminar for film universities. FAMU sent Evald Schorm, Sheila Ochová and Miroslav Bergl. They were unfortunately accompanied by no cinematographer. The documentary *Helsinki 62* (1962) for the sixth edition of the *Mezinárodní přehled* magazine is therefore made of footage provided by the Polish Film Chronicle and footage made by Czechoslovak Television's Jiří Volbracht.

We see the opening and closing ceremonies, athletic competitions, dance performances, and the visit of cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin. But the Polish filmmakers also filmed the hustle and bustle of Helsinki streets during the day and during the night, including a fuss made by a group of young men who have to be pacified by mounted police. The footage is accompanied by a humorous commentary which at the same time stresses the film's central theme of peace and brotherhood among nations.

Schorm returned to artists' portraits in his melancholic documentary *My Life to Live* (*Žít svůj život*, 1963). To introduce the work of Czech photographer Josef Sudek, Schorm uses not only his photographs, but also footage stylised in line with Sudek's work filmed by Jan Špáta. We watch the photographer working in his studio but also navigating the chaos of city streets and the countryside where he takes his pictures. It is this confrontation of inner peace and outer commotion that seemingly gives birth to inspiration and idea.

The film's visual style, with cinematography expressing the photographer's hidden feelings, conforms to Sudek's muses and sensibility. "We didn't want to make a historical excursion, but rather give an idea about the spirit of his life and work," [2] Schorm said of his method. The film, which once again defies the conventions of explanatory documentaries of previous years and is a captivating audiovisual poem rather than a conventional portrait, was screened for instance at the Days of Short Film in Tours, France.

The highlight of Schorm's documentary career is the aforementioned sociological survey *Why?* (*Proč?*, 1964), which won the Trilobit Award. As we find out in the film, between 1958 and 1963, some 500,000 abortions were carried out in Czechoslovakia. In the film, Schorm and Špáta interview newlyweds, women, railwaymen, and seniors on the streets of Prague, in factories and in households in their quest to find out why the birth-rate is so low. They used a direct cinéma vérité method to capture their spontaneous responses, period atmosphere and living conditions. The answers suggest possible transpersonal reasons – lack of housing and preschool facilities, exhaustion of working mothers... The authors don't dispute the respondents and give the same weight to every answer. The viewers have to answer the titular question by themselves.

Schorm continued to make documentaries even after his live-action debut, *Courage for Every Day* (Každý den odvahu, 1964), ranked among the most remarkable examples of the Czechoslovak New Wave. In *Reflection* (Zrcadlení, 1965), he used a similar approach to *Why?*. The meditative contemplation on death, leaving and never-ending doubts about one's own existence thematically complements the previous film. "I was sick one day and read a poem by Holan titled *Reflection*, and it was very close to my heart. Then I wandered through some hospitals and prepared a part of the script in advance. The second part was made on the hunt," [3] Schorm said of what preceded the creation of the film.

In the footage filmed in the Bulovka Hospital and the Bohnice Psychiatric Institution, we see seriously ill patients without any hope of recovery, along with doctors, nurses, and suicidal youths. Each of them offers their own perspective on the fundamental questions of life. It seems there is no universal answer. People are too complicated beings and Schorm too contemplative a filmmaker for that. To him, documentaries and live-action films were primarily an art of questions and constant seeking, a thought-provoking art. In addition to interviewed social actors, we hear music by Jan Klusák, excerpts from beautiful symphonic compositions and the words of the aforementioned poem by Holan (read by Jan Kačer). In addition to the Trilobit Award, *Reflection* won the Bronze Medal at the 16th International Festival of Documentary Films in Venice, the Jury Award at the 7th Days of Short Film in Karlovy Vary, and the Grand Prize at the 3rd International Festival of Short Films in Krakow.

The second half of the 1960s brought a certain stagnation. The truth, revealed by sociologically and philosophically framed documentaries, was too gloomy for the keepers of order. The rules tightened, and documentarists, just like their colleagues from live-action films, had to resort to allegories or use footage filmed in other countries to draw attention to the situation in Czechoslovakia.

Schorm made *Reflection* in the same year as *Legacy* (Odkaz, 1965) and *Psalm* (Žalm, 1965). The first film was commissioned by Czechoslovak Airlines to popularize Greek destinations. Footage of modern Greece, its tourist attractions and street cats are accompanied by a commentary recounting the country's cultural heritage and ruminating how democracy isn't a given and needs to be revived often. These provocative deliberations survived the check of the censorship committee as they are

mostly paraphrases of ideas of ancient poems and philosophers.

Psalm, on the other hand, shows footage from old Jewish cemeteries and Prague's Old New Synagogue and has no commentary (the score includes only string melodies and Jewish prayers and psalms read by Jan Kačer). Schorm surpassed the commission by the Committee for Film Propagation Abroad and made a rumination about the disappearing world of Jewish faith and rituals. The film represented Czechoslovakia at the 12th Days of Short Film in Oberhausen.

Quails (Křepelky, 1969), a mosaic from the life of textile workers, was officially screened as the work of cinematographer Přemysl Prokop. But its actual author was Evald Schorm, who had at that time been proscribed. The socially critical documentary follows Věra Chytilová's *A Bag of Fleas* (Pytel blech, 1962) and Miloš Forman's *Loves of a Blonde* (Lásky jedné plavovlásky, 1965) by focusing on the dreams and hopes of young, often naïve, working girls living in a boarding house.

Their spontaneous and energetic demeanour in their free time is put into contrast with their doubts and disillusion brought about by strict and mindless working rules. They have their freedom in the countryside, surrounded by trees. The film is accompanied by a dialogue between Iva Janžurová and Hana Smrčková discussing their experiences and expectations of the future, of which they seem rather sceptical.

A 30-minute-long documentary titled *Confusion* (Zmatek, 1969-1990) has a very unusual copyright. It was edited from footage filmed by Stanislav Milota, Jiří Macák, Josef Ort-Šnep and Ivan Vojnár after the arrival of the invading Warsaw Pact forces. The commotion in the streets of Prague alternates with footage from the emergency 14th Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in Vysočany. In collaboration with Vlasta Styblíková, Schorm edited the film to match the rhythm of waltzes from *Swan Lake*. The film was saved thanks to the director of the Barrandov Film Studio, Vlastimil Harnach, and the director of the film archive, Myrtil Frída, who stored the reels in Štěchovice as a discarded "void" material. The first public screening could be held in 1990 when the film was finished and subtitled.

Evald Schorm made his next documentary to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the Czechoslovak Philharmonic in 1976. It marked his return to directing after a forced hiatus of several years. *Essay on Rehearsal* (Etuda o zkoušce, 1976) is a portrait of

conductor Václav Neumann. After the opening sequence depicting musicians preparing for a rehearsal of the first movement of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* and the conductor's contemplation on the purpose of music, Schorm shows a 10-minute sequence of Neumann conducting. This personal and authorial confession of an artist was Schorm's last attempt to explore a creative search. The film won the Jury Award for Best Short Film at Berlinale.

Just like Věra Chytilová, Evald Schorm was a filmmaker with a firm moral stance. But he was more a thinker than a moralist. He realised that the search for the nature of things cannot be successful, but it's still necessary to attempt over and over again. Not because of a goal we cannot reach in our lives, but because of the journey. And because of the necessity to constantly doubt what we are presented. Schorm's sociological, poetic and philosophical documentaries are fuelled by this desire to understand the world in context. "Context not as in the purpose of causes and effects, but context as in understanding, sense of the suspected nature of things, and the journey towards it. Even the most careful effort to give a faithful depiction must be useless because reality is always deeper and more complicated." [4]

Literature:

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Petr Sadecký, Interview with E. Schorm. *Filmové informace* 14, 1963, no. 43 (23rd October), p. 12.

Notes:

[1] Pavel Branko, Zrcadlení? Interview with Evald Schorm. *Film a doba* 12, 1966, no. 9, pp. 469–470.

[2] Petr Sadecký, Interview with Evald Schorm. *Filmové informace* 14, 1963, no. 43 (23rd October), p. 12.

[3] Jan Zvoníček, Pět holek na krku v plzeňské Moskvě. *Film a doba* 13, 1967, no. 12, p. 644.

[4] Jiří Janoušek (ed.), *3 a 1/2 podruhé*. Prague: Orbis 1969, p. 19.