

The Fifth Horseman is Fear

Film review

Karen Knorp

1968

“The Fifth Horseman is Fear” is a relevant work of art. It is relevant in all its parts, almost in spite of the fact that it deals with Nazism in occupied Czechoslovakia. Its statement is relevant in the way that any statement about fear is particularly and personally relevant in our time. It is a work of art in the true sense, as it engages the viewer in a cathartic experience and involves him actively in its own transformation.

Zbynech Brynych is the director, and it is his unerring sense of economy that makes this film work. Every sound, every expression, every shot of the camera contributes significantly to the total work. Nothing is wasted.

The theme is dealt with straight-forwardly and adequately. There is no mystery about what the film is about. And yet the viewer finds himself in a state of real physical tension before the first credits appear on the screen, a tension which is not relaxed, but kept just at the level of tolerance until the film is finished and begins again.

Brynych’s use of sound in “The Fifth Horseman” deserves special mention, for it is invaluable in creating and sustaining this mood. Indeed, it is the constantly ringing telephone, and the baby’s cries that keep the audience squirming in anticipation of the real or suggested horror to come. Traffic noises, snatches of a soccer game, laughter, unfinished pieces of discordant music are put to maximum use, both in creating physical tension, and in delineating the alienation of the protagonist.

Brynych also amuses himself with several subtle deceptions in plot. During the most apparent of these, the protagonist, an aging Jew, is looking for his sister in a Nazi brothel. All through his lengthy tour of the house we find ourselves searching the face of each suffering girl, wondering which one is indeed his sister, and she is none of them.

The truth is a trick, handled almost defiantly by the director with a sudden lengthy close-up of the old, homely cleaning lady as she greets her brother. That one of the girls is later revealed to be the daughter or wife of another character comes as no surprise, for we have already seen them all through the eyes of a close relative.

Miroslav Machecek gives a fine performance in the lead role, and some questionable relief is provided by supporting characters who are all portrayed adequately, if not shrilly. But the real brilliance of the film rests with the interplay between sound, setting, lighting and camera work, and it is here that “The Fifth Horseman is Fear” succeeds magnificently.

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