

Programme of Danish Film Screenings at the Danish Institute at Athens 2019

"Aspects of Danish Cinema".

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Screening on the 9th of May 2019.

A fortunate man (2018)
Directed by Bille August

We round up this year's Danish Film screenings with a masterful endeavour: the adaption of the great and emblematic novel by Henrik Pontoppidan "Lykke Per" (1870)* to the big screen. The movie carries the stamp of Bille August, the internationally acknowledged and Oscar awarded Danish director.

*Published in 8 volumes

Each time a novel is adapted into a movie, different issues arise. In the movie as well as in the novel, a variety of narrative techniques are applied. This is the common element even though in cinema a great amount of different codes play a role: picture, sound, montage, scenery, hypocrisy, music. As underlined by Stam, Burgoyne and Sandy Flitterman Lewis (2010): "when a novel is adapted into a movie, the surface texture changes completely while the narrative form maintains its perceptible form".

A very interesting element in this cinematic procedure is the element of *interior speech*. According to Boris Eikhenbaum, the observation of a movie always co-exists with a constant procedure of internal speech, during which picture and sound is displayed in some sort of verbal screen, functioning as the background of meaning (Stam etc.: 2010,121).

One of Bille August's greatest challenges, when making this movie, was not only the transmission of the powerful ideas of the novel into the screen but also the extent of the story covering a long life-period of its heroes. The fact that the director chose to make a movie exceeding the normal two hours can be seen as manipulative as well as courageous.

One of the director's greatest achievements is the handling of time. He chooses to reflect essential moments of the story with dramatic intensity and depth (eg. the confrontation between Peter Andreas and his vicar-father, the family reunions of Salomon, the protagonist approaching Jakobe, the conflict with the authoritarian colonel and the rejection of the drafts by the young engineer, played by Esben Smed, and the seduction of Jakobe). The rest of the story is briefly reflected.

By embracing direct classic narration, the director succeeds in a coherent reflection of the essential parts of the story while simultaneously observing the mental transitions of his heroes. He uses a *close up* approach to facial expressions and thereby captures the secret thoughts of the actors.

One of the most powerful scenes in the movie is when Jakobe defends freedom and social justice in her own forceful and sensitive way at Salomon's table. All through the movie, Jakobe expresses values like elimination of prejudice, the right to freedom and justice and the eloquent project of modernity. She represents the idea of human eloquence - deciding to marry out of love but also by expressing a powerful and progressive spirit and sentiment. In my opinion, the role of Jakobe (excellently played by Katrine Greis Rosental) is the most fulfilled and dramatically complete character in the movie.

Another powerful female character in the movie is the mother of Peter Andreas, who conveys her ideas and values, especially in the letter that her son reads after her death. This loss proves to be catalytic to his maturing and to the development of the story. Bille August stresses the importance of the mother's death by not actually showing it in the movie.

By constantly changing the setting, there is a flow in the narration and it never gets monotonous. The reproduction of the poor neighbourhoods of Copenhagen with the barefoot children running around is outstanding and immediately takes the audience to the world of Dickens. The variation between this and the cosmopolitan and exclusive restaurants and rich residences of the bourgeoisie, emphasizes the intense social contrasts that will finally lead to a conflict between values and people.

The lonely and strong willed character of the young talented engineer is poetically reflected in the setting of the snowy and deserted Austrian Alps. This is where we see ὑβρις (hybris) - the stoning by Peter of the crucified after his love confession to Jakobe.

All through the movie, the expression "You are so lucky" is repeated to the protagonist and this is highlighted when he seems to have fulfilled his goals: the acceptance of his project from the joint venture of the powerful financial factors and the perspective of a marriage into wealth with a woman that he adores. Nevertheless, Jakobe's uncle predicts the opposite: "Success is the root to evil. Arrogance leads to decline". The ideas and the philosophical beliefs of the characters in the movie are in balance with the novel, similar to the configuration of happiness/success and personality/identity.

The final scene of the movie leaves the audience with hope that through the process of torturing self-awareness, true love and affection is actually possible independent from class, religion and other separating borders - a true catharsis!

Bibliography

Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne, Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *An introduction to Film Theory*, introduction by Sotiris Dimitriou, translated by Irini Stamatopoulou, research by Christos Dermentzopoulos, Metaichmio 2010, Athens.

Ben Kenigsberg, Film critic in New York Times:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/02/movies/a-fortunate-man-review-a-danish-engineer-strives-for-success.html>

Lykke-Per plot summary <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8436026/plotsummary>

The movie can be seen on Netflix