WRONG MOVE:

BRAD PRAGER examines the sort of love that develops between a woman and a rapist in this little seen recent German drama.

WHO COULD EVER FALL FOR THEO, the compulsive rapist at the centre of Matthias Glasner’s The Free Will (2006)? Not only does Theo (played by Jürgen Vogel) initially appear as a blemished and overstuffed rage machine, but he already engages in an execrable act of sexual violence moments after the opening credits have ended. This first violation—of both a young woman and the audience’s trust—unfolds at a painstaking pace and is presumably intended to separate those who can handle this particular type of cinematic intensity from those who cannot. The film is hardly for the faint-hearted and this sequence is particularly unforgiving. But Theo, with whom we are ultimately meant to identify and with whom Nettie (Sabine Timoteo) is fated to fall in love, seems like a child drowning in the presence of his inner monsters. Something inside of him knows right from wrong and he is presented to us as a victim in an internal struggle.

Nine years and four months later, Theo is released from an institution. His efforts to hold a job and pass the hours in the working world now and again recall films such as Ulu Grosbard’s Straight Time (1978). Daily life in the city of Mülheim is flat and profoundly empty. The film makes us wonder whether Theo will go straight (and whether the director will put us through another
excruciating rape scene). Theo is a habitual sex criminal, what Germans call a *Triebtäter*, and he is engaged in constant conflict with his instincts. Glasner trades on the suspense that comes from watching Theo stalk a woman at a tram station. Some of the film’s pacing owes a debt to Fritz Lang’s *M* (1931), in which the protagonist is likewise victimised by uncontrollable urges. In one scene, Theo stands in a dark corner of a sleeping saleswoman’s bedroom, embroiled in an internal debate. We’re not privy to his process, but we would have a similarly tough time imagining a lion choosing not to devour its prey.

The presence of so many demons attracts Nettie to Theo. On their aborted fiasco of a first date she quickly blurts out, ‘I don’t like men’, to which Theo responds, ‘I don’t particularly like women either.’ His answer forces Nettie to confront the fact that Theo intrigues her. In a signature gesture she purses her lips, battling against better judgement, and decides to pursue him. Holding out hope that Theo might resist his urges and make it in the world is one thing, but falling for him is another. To be fair, Nettie knows nothing about Theo’s history, although it’s not as if Vogel has hidden his character’s pathology beneath a charming exterior. On their second date, the two decide to go to a movie because all attempts at pleasant conversation have come to nothing. Like magnets – and just as inarticulately – the two are drawn together. Glasner develops their stories in parallel and takes care to show us that Nettie’s life is as flat and repetitive as Theo’s. She’s been caring for her father and it seems that their relationship is more or less incestuous. Her father holds her far too close, which has apparently incubated her contempt for men. Nettie is uncomfortable with all this anger and hides her eyes beneath a mop of hair.

Sabine Timoteo has played opposite Vogel elsewhere, as his charming sidekick in Sebastian Schipper’s light-hearted comedy *A Friend of Mine* (2006). The two films would make an unlikely double feature. Here, she is a victim of her own wretched judgement, but it is hard not to sympathise. She can’t be blamed for what happens insofar as she finds herself sharing common ground with Theo. Their most fulfilling date takes place in a karate studio, and begins with Theo instructing Nettie, ‘OK, you choke me’. He encourages her to hit with gusto. She hits him hard, but is afraid of being open with her anger. We feel the force of the contradiction in her face and fists. Glasner shoots the scene with a handheld camera, and it feels, like Nettie herself, loosed from moorings, at once liberated and out of control.

In this way, Theo might not be the wrong man for her, at least not at first. The two manage to build a domestic life that seems safe, but in our minds, knowing what we know, and what Nettie has yet to discover, their intimate space resembles the apartment that serves as a haven to Maximilian and Lucia in Liliana Cavani’s *The Night Porter* (1974). There are sweet scenes in which love is confessed and in which she whispers confidences to him in the bathtub. Theo loves her with no apparent ulterior motive, and it seems for the best that they’ve let one another in. But this is an illusion; Nettie has made the wrong move. History is sure to repeat itself.

The film gives scant attention to psychology – we never learn what brought Theo to this point – but it does take time to develop parallels between a compulsive abuser and someone who has been abused. Nettie’s efforts to understand Theo cause trouble for her. It may not be news that following the footsteps of a rapist is an unsafe path. She ultimately finds herself stalking Theo, trailing him into a streetcar and elsewhere, exactly as he had done to his victims. Glasner’s film is as much about her – and why she would follow him to the edge of deep waters and beyond – as it is about him. Their story does not end happily, but we could have known that from the outset. Nettie appears to have had little free will of her own; her heart wanted what it wanted, and she would have been happier had she paid it no heed. ■

Braid Prager is the author of *The Cinema of Werner Herzog: Aesthetic Ecstasy and Truth*.
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