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Catch the 9:06 to Oblivion. Review of Igor Sterk's 9:06

Posted on Thursday, December 31st, 2009 18:34:03 GMT by: [Rick McGrath](#)
Posted under: [movie review](#) [thriller](#) [drama](#) [foreign](#) [slovenia](#)

Year: 2009
 Directors: Igor Sterk
 Writers: Igor Sterk & Sinisa Dragin
 IMDB: [link](#)
 Trailer: [link](#)
 Review by: Rick McGrath
 Rating: 9 out of 10

9:06 is a fascinating and compelling study of psychological transformation, brilliantly represented in the movie's title, which at first glance may appear to be a sort of numerical half palindrome, but in actuality is a kind of upside down, twisted reflection of itself – and in this case, a potent symbol of how, under certain circumstances, one individual can be drawn into another.

It's also the time. Twice a day.

Lots of times to die.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. 9:06 is ostensibly a fairly simple police mystery story – a man is dead, foul play? -- which director/writer Igor Sterk has dressed up with a complete wardrobe of cool and clever ideas that transforms a death into a study of the amiss and suicide-seeking mind.

In a nutshell, a police inspector named Dusan, played to perfection by Igor Samobor, investigates the death of Marjan Ozim, who apparently has jumped naked off a bridge, leaving his clothes neatly folded on the front seat of his car. All the evidence points to a suicide, but the odd neatness of the act and the puzzle that is Ozim, intrigues Dusan, who sets about investigating the dead man's life when he's not fighting his estranged wife over visiting rights with his daughter.

Crazy thing is, the more Dusan discovers about Ozim, the more he seems compelled to mentally and physically transform into him. At the same time he gradually loses contact with his real life and, like suicides often do, cleans up any loose emotional ends before departing. OK, let's stick to theme: before transforming themselves from alive to unalive. You can almost see Freud's death instinct at work.

Let's go back to the clock and its numbers 9 and 6. Think of one number as Ozim, the other Dusan. If you can imagine one number rotating into the other, then you'll understand what Sterk does in this mesmerizing movie. Questions are: does Dusan find freedom from himself in becoming an ersatz Ozim, and does he go so far as killing himself? Confusing? It's supposed to be. Sterk's genius in this story, and you have to be alert to catch it, is the confusion over who's killing themselves and when.

Here's how Sterk has set it up: the first face we see is Dusan on the train tracks which run under one end of the bridge Ozim has leapt from. It's daylight, and he's placed a rock on the tracks. As the train approaches the rock jiggles off the track and Sterk immediately cuts to something small and round falling from the bridge's railing to the river far below. When I saw this I thought Dusan had caught the 9:06 to Oblivion and it was his head falling to the river below. Sterk then cuts to a shot of the empty bridge. A dark car arrives and parks in the middle. Emergency flashers are turned on. Cut again to a long shot of the car on the bridge. It just sits there. Cut to night and Dusan beginning the police investigation.

OK, let's play detective. What have we got? Two apparently separate scenes – one suggesting suicide by decapitation, the other by jumping. But there's no hard evidence. Here's the freaky part: the story ends with Dusan sitting in the dark car, which we now know is Ozim's. Dawn is breaking. The car clock clicks over from 8:59 to 9:00. Cut to a Beethoven concerto playing as the car leaves its vantage point above the bridge – the same vantage point Dusan used when he first arrived at the scene. Stern then cuts to virtually the same shot of the car driving to the centre of the bridge. We don't know who's driving. Cut to an underwater shot looking up at the bridge. Suddenly a baglike shape hurtles into the water and past the camera. It's not clear what it could be. We then cut to Dusan's daughter unwrapping a candy. She tosses the wrapper off



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her balcony. Cut to the paper fluttering away. Fin. You have to ask: what's going on here? Can't tell -- there is not enough information, and all the symbols can point to either death or freedom. Perhaps they're the same in the mind of a suicide. This uncertainty, which seeps into your consciousness the same way Dusan slowly refills the space Ozim left, adds a wonderful layer of enigma to an already puzzling story. Ultimately we're left with only ambiguity, as it's not completely clear that Dusan does kill himself at the end - the lump hitting the water is too small to be a body -- but it does echo the object falling after the train has passed. Is it Dusan's head? You're left to ponder -- is Dusan investigating Ozim's suicide, or investigating his own? Or, perhaps more meaningfully, is Dusan indirectly obliterating himself by immersion into another consciousness in order to find a way to kill himself?

Perhaps the clue is in the enigmatic title. What is very clever about 9:06 is the number of ways Sterk was able to fit this number into the film's most important scenes. It's the time frozen on Ozim's wristwatch when he hit the water. It's the time on a screensaver that pops up on Ozim's computer when Dusan is in his apartment. It's the time when Dusan first turns on Ozim's stereo in his apartment and listens to a Beethoven piano concerto. It's the time when Ozim's youthful hero, Yuri Gagarin, became the first man to blast off into space. It's the time when the mystery object is dropped off the bridge at movie's end. It's too bad Sterk didn't make the movie 90.6 minutes long. What does the number mean? I'd say it's a sign of transformation. It affected Ozim in some important way, and it deepens the trance Dusan enters, as each time we see the number some important psychic barrier is crossed in Dusan's transformation.

Another twist is the 6 to 9, life to death configuration. And there are many deaths. Dusan was driving and had an accident that killed one of his two daughters. His police partner killed himself with alcohol. Ozim apparently committed suicide. And then there is the one important death scene Sterk seems to emphasize, coming as it does just before Dusan begins to aggressively divest himself of his former life and fully immerse himself in Ozim. We're at a morgue. The nude body of Dusan's police partner lies on the cold metal of an autopsy table. He's drunk himself to death in a hospital. A smoking doctor turns to Dusan and remarks: "I had your classmate here the other day, from student years."

"Which one?" the inspector asks.

"Andrej."

"What happened?"

"He hanged himself." Pause. "Another puppet on a string." Pause. "How do you explain this: in English, people 'commit' suicide, which implies a sin of some sort, while in Slovene people simply 'make' a suicide, as if it was something completely normal."

Aye, there's the rub of this study of suicide. Ozim 'made' his death, worked it out as a personal ritual based on a number remembered from his childhood. It was planned. Precise. Almost polite. There are no reasons given, save Ozim's somewhat extreme lifestyle. Twist Ozim 180° and you have Dusan and his guilty, moral, right and wrong life. Why is Dusan so interested in Ozim? Perhaps it's because Ozim found a "normal" way to make a suicide, neat and unemotional, and Dusan has been trapped by thinking of suicide as a sin, of having to commit to the act, and the messiness of its emotional consequences on his family and friends. You can understand why it must have been a stunning mind trip for Dusan to enter the world of the homosexual, artistic, non-committal Ozim, to change personalities and lives and perhaps find the mindset that will free his own dreams of death and peace. Perhaps.

Is 9:06 "ballardian"? Certainly in the psychopathologic sense, as Dusan, the psychically damaged, guilty professional, does relentlessly follow his personal obsessions to some kind of enigmatic ending, which is a feature of JG Ballard's fiction. The not-quite-circular form of the movie is somewhat reminiscent of the structure of High-Rise, and the deliberate lack of enough information to complete the plotline is right out of the condensed novels of The Atrocity Exhibition.

As well as the absorbing story, 9:06 should also be commended for some outstanding cinematography by Simon Tansek, and some very imaginative, artistic direction by Sterk. Tansek is wonderful, conjuring up some incredible lightplay in what must have been some difficult situations. Sterk's direction is amazing, with endlessly amusing camera angles, some superb architectural set shots, great pacing and the kind of slo-mo, brief conversations that gives all that elusive artistic sheen.

I also have to mention the main set piece, a bridge on the river Soca in Solkan, the highest road bridge in Slovenia. This graceful arch of concrete begins and ends 9:06, and is in itself another symbol of the transformation Dusan experiences. It photographs beautifully, and Sterk uses it to maximum effect.

And finally, I'm reminded of the Jimi Hendrix song, "If 6 Were 9". It ends:

"Nobody know what I'm talking about
 I've got my own life to live
 I'm the one that's gonna have to die
 When it's time for me to die
 So let me live my life the way I want to."

Gee, Jimi died in the morning. I hope it wasn't at 9:06am.

Whoops... just checked my watch. It's 9:05... time to end this and get on with it. As for you - this is a great movie and if you can see it, do so. Go ahead, make some time.

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Now this is what I call an excellent analysis/review of an excellent movie. Congrats Rick McGrath. And yes, I think "9:06" is very ballardian in many ways. Mind as the scene of strange events, twilight as a state of consciousness, hidden guilt due to past events (real or imaginary), exchanging identities, perceptual time as a strange loop, dead astronauts... Don't miss 'Sudden Afternoon', a short story by Ballard...

Posted by: jesus olmo | December 31, 2009 06:48:57 pm | [permalink](#)



Fantastic work Rick. Finally got my hands on the film and will watch it soon. Sounds amazing.

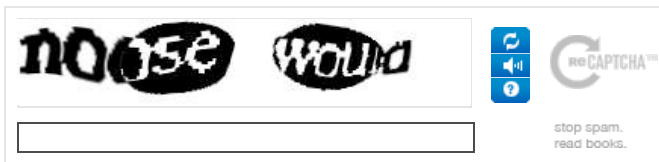
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