The Films of Tod Browning
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pg. 88

categorization and emerge as pivotal, troubling works that are irreducible to tried and true generic formulas. By the time we reach an analysis of the "Adventuress"—the woman "who uses prostitution to escape from boredom and frustration, to explore her own psyche, to fulfill her sexual desires and fantasies," Luis Buñuel's *Belle de Jour* (1967) provokes a salutary critical impasse. Buñuel's film proves troubling inasmuch as it embodies a "profound ambiguity...are we in the presence of a an authentic female subjectivity, or is the depiction of Séverine—and of the Adventuress in general—yet another instance of a prostitute figure being invented and exploited by male desires?" In the light of Buñuel's esthetic radicalism, there is of course no valid definitive answer to this perfectly legitimate question. There is something a little timid, perhaps even politically correct, in Campbell's attempt to establish the film's feminist rectitude—the biases of the male director and screenwriter are placed on the debit side of the ledger while the enthusiasm of female critics augments the credit accrued to this surrealist masterpiece. Buñuel's radical fusion of Sade and Marx is beguilingly slippery and, in the final analysis, Campbell's only choice is to point out the attendant critical roadblocks and avoid excessive moralism. Interpretive contortions aside, it's at least refreshing to learn that he's genuinely flummoxed by Buñuel's esthetic provocations.

A somewhat less productive theoretical impasse rears its head early in the book. Campbell cites, and ably summarizes, the two primary feminist positions on prostitution—the prostitutes rights' movement exemplified by groups like COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics) and PONY (Prostitutes of New York) and the radical feminist stance which insists that "...the prostitute, far from being a rebel against the values of male-dominated society, is in fact conforming to one of the subordinate roles allocated to woman under patriarchy..." It's incontestable that elements of both positions can be located in various films made by women; Lizzie Borden's *Working Girls* (1986) is closely allied to the prostitutes' rights movement while Dutch filmmaker Marleen Gorris's *Broken Mirrors* (1984) accurately reflects many strands of the radical feminist 'prohibitionist' argument. Be that as it may, the critical vacillation that followed organically from a consideration of *Belle de Jour* seems more than a bit wishy-washy when weighing the respective merits and drawbacks of these two irreconcilable camps. The feminist libertarians are faulted for having too much "in common with the 'unofficial' pro-prostitution patriarchal line and with the liberal/civil rights argument of contemporary bourgeois ideology." Gorris and the radical feminists are, conversely, found to have "paradoxical affinities with the 'prostitution is a bad thing' stance of 'official' patriarchal ideology."

Negative capability is a useful tool when dealing with the intricacies of film and literature. It is less useful when dealing with tangible political realities and the sneering linkage of prostitutes rights' groups with "bourgeois ideology" is a somewhat lefter-than-thou assertion that neutralizes the vivid testimony of activist sex workers. If antiauthoritarian radicals embrace the credo of the First International—the "emancipation of the workers should be achieved by the workers themselves," shouldn't a consistent radical evince solidarity with the sex workers themselves rather than their oppressors—even if those oppressors are so-called radical feminists instead of fundamentalists? It might also have been useful for *Marked Women* to at least consider some of the livelier film criticism produced by working girls in the trenches. Some years ago, the ex-call girl Tracy Quan upset respectable opinion by merely pointing out in *salon.com* that *Pretty Woman* (1990) "was a hit with prostitutes." Quan explained that, "(W)here *Working Girls* tried to debunk some popular fantasies about prostitutes, *Pretty Woman* popularized the fantasy of many a real-life working girl." "Right-thinking" (i.e., conventionally left-thinking) academics might finds these musings unfashionable or even scandalous. But if academic historians pay homage to the oral histories of industrial workers, shouldn't the views of sex workers, fashionable or not, be accorded an equal amount of respect? (To be fair, Campbell recognizes the enormous appeal of *Pretty Woman* for female viewers, if not prostitute audience members. In a consideration of the complex nature of "female spectatorship," he insists that the success of the "re-romanticization of the prostitute in *Pretty Woman*" demonstrates the "commercial advantages that accrue on appealing to a female as well as male audience.")

These minor quibbles aside, the comprehensiveness and overall incisiveness of *Marked Women* left me slack-jawed with admiration. Campbell disowns any claims to being "encyclopedic," and being familiar with venomous critics who assail authors for neglecting to include their favorite films in books tackling similarly enormous subjects, I would certainly refrain from nitpicky complaints concerning the absence of so-called 'seminal' films in this voluminous study. Some minor films are understandably overlooked but, from my vantage point at least, it is more of a tribute to Campbell's resourcefulness than a jibe to wonder how he might have assessed some of the few glaring omissions that come to mind— Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971) as well as Mikio Naruse and Seijun Suzuki's chronicles of feisty Japanese prostitutes. Other commentators will doubtless take up the slack and apply Campbell's approach to these and other films. The impressive depth and breadth of *Marked Women* makes any such lacunae insignificant indeed.—**Richard Porton**

The Films of Tod Browning

Edited by Bernd Herzogenrath. London, Black Dog Publishing Ltd., 2006. 238 pp., illus. Paperback: $45.00.

The Films of Tod Browning features a very campy Bela Lugosi as Dracula on its front cover. The chapter headings have carnival-like visual configurations, the numerous macabre photos are provocative, eight full-color reproductions of lobby posters evoke the special glitz of the Hollywood studio era, and the dust jacket copy has something of a barker's pitch. All this suggests that the particular talents of Tod Browning are going to be well served by an editor and authors who understand Browning's populist flair. Such is not the case. Despite the playful graphic come-ons, the prose is deadly academic. This reverses the usual carny pitch that sought to lure the public into a tent of pedestrian fare with pseudo-scientific, polysyllabic verbiage.

Editor Bernd Herzogenrath sets the tone of the collection in his introduction and in his essay on *Freaks* (1932). He focuses on the idea of the body as spectacle and considers Browning to be a maker of films that extol disability. The majority of other essays also use the Browning films to support various theoretical propositions rather than being examined on their own terms. They read like graduate papers written for a culture theory class. In fact, the first essay by Vivian Sobchack begins, "The following essay was written over 30 years ago in 1974 as a research exercise for a graduate seminar at UCLA in American film history." Her essay reports on various contemporary reviews of Browning's work and scholarly takes up to that point in time. Inexplicably, editor Bernd Herzogenrath did not think it necessary to ask for an update to include the succeeding thirty years of scholarship.

Herzogenrath's essay on *Freaks* begins with a casual acceptance of the usual thesis that one of the film's objectives is for viewers to see the sideshow "freaks" as humane and to see "normals," such as the strong man and trapeze artist, as inhumane or the true "freaks" of nature. Herzogenrath then proceeds to write at great length about the Lacanian ideas that truly interest him. Considerable word play revolves around terms like the "Body/Politic." Evoking Thomas Hobbes and Sigmund Freud as well as Jacques Lacan, Herzogenrath speaks of the body in general and the bodies in *Freaks* as "bonded territory" and "the nation body" and "the state body." Considerable discussion is offered on the circumstances of how Siamese twins were first presented to the public in the United States. The various missing limbs in the film are linked to Lacan's notion that "in order to gain entry into society, we have to accept castration, the loss of unlimited

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individuality." What Browning may have had in mind is not addressed.

Some critics, of course, argue that what the creative artist intends is irrelevant, but Herzogenrath believes his reading is more than just an imaginative take. He confidently writes that, "*Freaks* itself was mutilated, cut, censored because of its *obvious opposition* [emphasis added] to wholeness, unity, and 'clean-limbed-ness.'" He speculates that Herman Mankiewicz, one of the scriptwriters "was likely" familiar with Freudian concepts as he was been born in Berlin in the 1920's. Doing some research on Mankiewicz and his work on this particular film to see if this indeed was the case seems not to have occurred to the writer. Nor is there much detail about the hostile public reaction that resulted in the film's de facto banning, its odd history of becoming a kind of carny attraction, and the circumstances of its reemergence in the 1950's as an art-house favorite. Even basic questions such as Browning's own feelings about his cast and his treatment of them off and on screen are ignored. Also unexamined is whether Browning was just exploiting his film subjects or if he was genuinely empathetic with them. What did he think he was saying about their lives? Where did he find them? Were they well paid? What did they think of the film?

Tod Browning with one of the carnival performers of *Freaks* (1932) (photo courtesy of Photofest).

The absence of Browning in this essay is paralleled in the others. Some of the writers provide interesting commentary on popular entertainment such as the tradition of slapstick comedy, the impact of P.T. Barnum, and the nature of the Grand Guignol shows, but Browning's specific connections to these phenomena remains vague. Rarely does an essayist even note whether or not Browning wrote the script of a given film or what sources Browning drew on for his ideas. Little concern is given to Browning's relationship to his producers, especially what restrictions were demanded or if he was forced to make certain films against his will. To what degree was he free to alter scripts? Browning was the producer of a number of his own films, including *The Unholy Three* (1925), *The Black Bird* (1926), *The Freaks, Mark of the Vampire* (1935), and *The Devil Doll* (1936). Are these films markedly different from his other work? As a producer, to what degree did he indicate to his screenwriters what kind of script he wanted? As a producer and/or director what was his artistic interaction with such famed cinematographers as Karl Freund and James Wong Howe? The account of these and other issues in David Skal and Elias Savada's *Dark Carnival: The Secret World of Tod Browning* are far more rewarding. In his filmography, Herzogenrath frankly notes that he has not been able to add to their findings in regard to disputed or unknown production data. Nor does he offer any discussion of the Browning films that have been lost or are only available in fragments. Also absent are author identifications for any of the essayists.

Nicole Brenez writes about the collaboration of Lon Chaney and Tod Browning on eleven films. Chaney, not Browning, is her major interest. Her detailed readings of various Chaney roles touch lightly on the actor's relationship with his director. Her analysis implies Browning just went along with Chaney in the manner of a contract director working with a creative star. We do not learn if there was any antagonism in the relationship. Like most of the other writers here, Brenez leaves the impression of being less interested in films, much less Browning's films, than in how films illuminate some aspect of a psychological theory. She ends her essay by saying Chaney's "most famous and most beautiful characters... depict how the body assails the self; they tell us, each in turn, and in their own way, of a terrifying event: how embodiment can only be disastrous."

Matthew Solomon's "Staging Deception" is much more focused on the special qualities found in Browning's work. He observes how Browning's temperament is different than that of a conventional magician like Houdini. Browning performs visual tricks on screen and often has his characters performing tricks, but unlike a magician, Browning often reveals how the trick was done. Solomon gives examples from several films. In *Blackbird* (1926) he notes that we see both sides of a cloth as a magician performs and in *White Tiger* (1923) we have two sequences that expose the secrets of a chess playing machine. In similar fashion Matthew Sweeny discusses Browning's tell-all proclivity in his essay on the making of *Mark of the Vampire*. At the film's conclusion after all the tricks have been revealed, Bela Lugosi, in his one and only speech, tells the audience, " Did you see me? I was greater than any real vampire." In this sense, Browning is like the carny guy who charges us to see a phenomenon and then for a second charge is willing to reveal his tricks. This playfulness is part of the Browning charm. However morbid or surrealistic a plot element may be, we somehow get the sense that we are at play. This is 'make believe' time. Browning constructed the vampire stereotype in one film and deconstructed it in another.

Long before the current apotheosis of the director, Tod Browning was recognized as a director who placed a distinctive creative stamp upon his films. He is one of those filmmakers too easily dismissed as simply being quirky. His hyperbolic plots and characters often are a means to explore very typical human behavior in a beguiling manner. As a director, writer, and producer, he was able to create memorable films in both the silent and sound eras. His *Dracula* images have become internationally iconic, his *Freaks* a cultural legend, and his Lon Chaney collaborations a genre of their own. Just what unites a body of work that includes some sixty films (not including his work as an actor) requires considerable thinking not only about the director but the entire production system in which he operated. Concerns of this kind are largely absent from these essays. Browning is reduced to a name associated with the films rather than the creative force that shaped them.—**Dan Georgakas**

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