

Film Re-Vision

Revolution and Counterrevolution in Two of Paul Muni's Films

Luis Veramon

September 17th, 1938

IN all countries – except Spain – cinema obeys social reality. Cinema is the reflection of the society that makes it. The State prevails over cinema. In Russia, the only country in which the experiment of social cinema has been made, cinema lives in the shade of the red dictatorship and unswervingly serves the interests of the Communist Party. In Germany, Goebbels, minister of Propaganda of the Reich, has already said: “Cinema will sing of valor, of force, even of violence, in so far as this serves the patriotic ideal. It will be this, or it will be nothing.” And indeed, German cinema – rather, Nazi cinema – with Leni Riefenstahl, Hitler’s lover, as its principal figure, has set out to serve the interests of the State. This is also happening in Italy, France, England, and especially North America, although the White House has not officially attacked Hollywood. But all we know that the N.R.A. [National Recovery Administration] and its social reforms has an active agent of propaganda in cinema. And although Yankee cinema appeals to a soppy sentimentality wrapped up in a superficially dynamic life, relying on images of a physically perfect youthfulness while promoting, also in appearance only, puritan concepts, its real use is as a justification for submission to the State. And one doesn’t have to dig very deeply to see how it is compromised by the social characteristics of those who direct it.

For that reason, when films arise from the American “studios” that try to expose or raise the issue of a social reality, we must analyze them thoroughly and try to discover what is hidden behind their arguments so that they have been distributed to European markets. Not that we deny that Yankee production has created revolutionary films. Indeed, this very column in UMBRAL has highlighted some of them; and in today’s column, there appears a revolutionary film whose exhibition impassioned the entire European public. The work that we have undertaken has a purpose: that of orienting the public and defending it from a facile campaign against counterrevolutionary films.

PAUL MUNI, FACE TO FACE

“I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang” and “Black Fury”

The harshness of the penitentiary regime in the State of Georgia, the terrible cruelty of the penalty of the chain gang, the punishment of those who have been beaten down; the perennial

anguish of the innocent man submitted to brutal laws. "I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang" [1932] indicates the rebirth of Yankee cinema, submerged in a predominantly frivolous and gray atmosphere for four long years.

We are not going to now investigate the causes of this decadence. The interesting thing is that, with this work by Merwyn Le Roy, American cinema comes to receive impulses of humanity that soon obliterate the memory of the fleeting frivolity.

"I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang" is a revolutionary film, a film whose context corresponds to a real fact. It is the case of Robert Elliot Burns, an American citizen, a citizen of the bourgeois type, who lives comfortably, who does not understand the rights for which workers struggle, who is sure that American justice is perfect. And one day, this citizen commits a misdemeanor and is condemned to ten years of forced labor in a chain gang of prisoners, in which abound vulgar criminals and warped minds, in which life is continual torture. On this basis, Merwyn Le Roy constructs his magnificent cinematographic work of social content, which will pass into the history of revolutionary cinema. He constructs a film full of beautiful images, of great artistic values, in which each scene hurls a violent, terrible and shameful accusation against the American authorities, a bold accusation against a social system that must disappear, and creates one of the most profound dramas of democratic North America.

But here Paul Muni must face Paul Muni. Witness "Black Fury" [1935]. Michael Curtiz against Merwyn Le Roy. With the same actor, one foments revolution and counterrevolution. For "Black Fury" is indeed a counterrevolutionary film. Joe Radek (Paul Muni), the constantly exploited miner, has no class consciousness. He is in agreement with his destiny and only aspires to marry the beautiful Ann and buy a little house near the mine. The strike does not matter to him. Ever since she became the fiancée of a mine guard, he does nothing but drink. And he is drunk when she enters where the strikers are gathered. And the workers, who, according to Michael Curtiz, have neither culture nor class consciousness, make the drunkard Radek its president. And since there is no strike committee, the new president goes to the tavern to continue drinking. And, finally, he is brought to the mine for sentimental reasons and foments the strike with dynamite. But he does this unconsciously, for in this film, it is demonstrated that the American miners and bosses want to be as brothers, and if not for outside agitators who wish the ruin of the workers, the American miners and their bosses would spend their holidays together.

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