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The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Pabst and Bunuel: two obscurities from the 60's

Luis Bunuel and O.W. Pabst are perhaps not among the foremost "giants" of cinema, the word, like "classics" and "masterpieces", is much over-used today. Griffith, Eisenstein, Murnau, Stroheim, Welles, Dreyer -- these certainly are giants, beyond dispute, even though such cataloguing is somewhat pointless. But the next plateau, with its harmonious welding of the artistic with the commercial, is a richly rewarding area. Hitchcock, Lang, Sternberg, Vidor, Clair, Hitchcock -- quite certainly Pabst and Bunuel. Tonight's films, we cannot stress too strongly, are offered only to fill gaps in our knowledge of these directors' works; at their best, they can be considered sufficiently "neutral" not to tarnish the reputation of their directors; at worst, neither is by any means representative of their weaker work. Unfortunately you are seeing them at a disadvantage in that both are (probably) dubbed for U.S. television release; but since it is the only way we are now likely to see them, we must be grateful to see them at all. Both films are from the 50's, and both are French-based co-productions; both are basically commercial programmers -- that phrase being used in a descriptive rather than derogatory sense -- so that they do have several elements in common, and seeing them side-by-side, aware of both their shortcomings and their disadvantages, may be quite interesting.

"THE VOICE OF SILENCE" (Italian/French, 1952) Directed by O.W. Pabst

Original story: Cesare Zavattini; camera: Gabrio Poggi; 9 reels

With Jean Marais, Alido Papini, Daniel Galin, Costanza Greco, Rosanna Fodesa, Eduardo Cinellari, Frank Villard, Paolo Stoppa, Antonio Cresti.

Despite a rather ominous opening, which suggests that the film is going to be a paean to religious faith, "The Voice of Silence" rather quickly adopts the format of "If I Had a Million" -- a little more sex, psycho logical self-torturances and social criticism, but within its self-imposed seriousness, the same kind of variety in its short stories. Perhaps too much variety is one of its weaknesses; perhaps it limits the possibilities of the film. But with a lot of Joyce in it, visually it is consistently and emotionally moving, and there's just a little bit too much of everything for it all to ring true or for the really interesting segments to be developed properly. Nevertheless, from a period when Italian cinema was trying hard to be commercial and to retain the world-wide respect which it had won just after the war (and was rapidly losing) it's a surprisingly worthwhile film. Much of it recalls the Pabst of old, the interesting way of reality and deliberate stylisation in the sets, and in the imagery of the transitions to the flashbacks, often bringing to mind moments from "The Grand Illusion" or the films of Jean Renoir. Visually it is consistently worthwhile, dramatically at least, splendidly and interestingly written. Its major drawback, of course, is no fault of Pabst's -- the flat and unimaginative dubbing. Exciting Italians are but one of the many curses inflicted on us by the housing of sound, and the Italian cinema tended to indulge them too much, as though they were quaint and an insufficient contrast to the world-image of the Italian. But a dubbed exciting Italian is akin to a fate worse than death, since he doesn't even have the dubious distinction of being real or believable!

"FEVER MOUNTS IN EL PAO" (French/Mexican, 1959) Produced and directed by Luis Bunuel

Scenario by Bunuel, Luis Alcoriza, Charles Dorat and Louis Sapin from the novel by Henry Castillon; camera: Gabriel Figueroa; music: Paul Miressi; Associate Producer: Raymond Borderic; Assistant Director: Jean-Louis Bunuel; a Group of the Four Production, distributed by Les Films Corona; 9 reels

With Gerard Phillipps, Maria Felix, Jean Servais, M.A. Ferriz, Raoul Dantes, Domingo Soler, Victor Jesse.

Bunuel's prolific output since 1950 has been largely divided into three groups: the films for which he had great personal enthusiasm ("EL") and which carried his bizarre and often surrealistical stamp throughout; those, like "Robinson Crusoe", which seemed to interest him less but which still aroused him to individual bravura sequences; and a rather large (and generally unknown, despite Mexican and Spanish theatre exhibition in this country) group which show constant care and craftsmanship, but little personal inspiration. Tonight's film is typical; every so often it approaches a typical Bunuelian bang of fireworks, but alas, the fuses are never lit. So highly surprised. The plot is one of those typical existentialist-styled, Sartre-derived stories about political oppression in a tropical police state, in which the right things happen for the wrong motives -- or the wrong things from the right motives. As always, its handsome Figueroa photography is worth watching, and Maria Felix is exotic; the minimal sex scenes, with the restraint of the 50's, are still more erotic than the totally uninhibited fare thrown at us from all sides today.

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