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Theodore Poor

"The Girl in the News" (Fem-British, 1910) Directed by Carol Reed; produced by Faye Black. Screenplay by Sidney Gilliat from an original story by Roy Vickers; Camera: Otto Kantuck; Art Director: Yethie; Motion Director: Louis Levy; S reels
With: Margaret Lockwood, Barry K. Barnes, Roger Livesey, Eunina Williams, Margaretta Scott, Basil Radford, Wynne Goldie, Irene Handel, Mervyn Johns, Betty Field, Kathleen Harrison, Felix Aylmer.

Casting was quite impressive in Carol Reed's career, after "The Man in the News" and "Night Train to Munich" had established him as a major director, but before he launched him into his big prestige vehicles, "The Girl in the News" is an interesting companion piece to "Bank Holiday" (to be seen in the current MFA British cycle) and "A Girl Must Live" (which can be seen at the Halt on November 22nd.) It's a typical British movie adapted from an equally typical British mystery novel of the period. There's never much doubt about the outcome and there's never much mystery about the villains; but there's comfortable and consumable suspense in wondering how it will all be brought about. A gentle and civilised thriller - far more so even than "The Hound of the Baskervilles" - but it lacks the characterisation and acting than its plot values, which don't even have the intriguing "puzzle" quality of so many other genteel British mysteries such as "The Franchise Affair." Nevertheless there was a definite movie and literary market for this kind of fare at the time, and it's pity that such simple yet solidly satisfying minor films are no longer commercially feasible. Incidentally, one reason that the film has been out of circulation for so long is that the few extant prints all have quite bad sound. This particular print is brand new, with the sound quality worked on rather carefully to improve it as much as possible. It still has harem areas, but it is certainly the best print around - and is likely to remain so.

"Crime and Punishment" (Columbia, 1915) Directed by Josef von Sternberg; produced by B.F. Schulberg Screenplay by S.K. Leauren and Joseph Anthony from the novel by Fyodor Dostoyevsky; Camera, Isaac Ballard; S reels

The cheerfulness and grim social comment of Dostoyevsky's novel has been made him an uniquely source of inspiration for Hollywood. "Crime and Punishment" has always been done in a modernized version, and even if it is only the clothing that makes it contemporary, and this may be considered a gesture towards the timelessness of the story, Sternberg carefully avoids automobiles, restaurants, theaters, posterny, that might unduly stress a modern locale.

The two subsequent versions - "Fear" and "Crime and Punishment USA" were not even official versions. Since that leaves only The Brothers Karamazov as a major Hollywood attempt at "Crime and Punishment," one can I suppose accept this "Crime and Punishment" as the "best" Hollywood translation of his works - but it's only a comparative best, and still falls far short of Pierre Chenal's "Crime and Punishment" with Blanche and Baur, or Chep's "The Brothers Karamazov," or the French version of "The Idiot" with Gerard Philippe. However, these three films probably represent the heaviest influence and the most successful filming of that very difficult author, through one's negative attitude towards Wienne's "Baskinov" is based on reputation only, and we'd give a lot to see it.

This "Crime and Punishment" falls primarily because it is so inconsistent. Lorre's motivation seems entirely weak, the role as a whole quite unsympathetically conceived, and only spasmodically affective when Lorre reverts to the pathological style of his killer in "FP." The writing is pure Hollywood, though some of the essence of the original does creep into a little of Edna May, Arnold's dialogue, and the characters - at least initially. But once Gene Lockhart has been disposed of, this aspect seems to improve - and the film does get better as it progresses and concentrates on fewer characters. Elisabeth Risdon's brief hysterical scene is unexpectedly - telling. Next to "The Blue Angel," it's the only really heavy and ponderous work that Sternberg attempted, and one feels that he has less inherent interest in it that he had in the earlier film. Virtually it has such typical Sternbergian flare - the shimmering desolate reflections, the obligitory fishnets - but the overall pictorial style is too attenuated to malachite, its shadows and sets recalling "FP" and the British Hitchcock films, too excited in themselves to catch the rather forced breathing intensity of the film. The musical treatment is equally uncertain, ranging from soft music of Beethoven to standard "B" picture mysteries. Oddly enough, a stage version that I saw in London in the 40's - with Peter Utinev as Pervoz, John Gielgud as Raskolnikov and Edith Evans as his mother - had much more atmosphere and an unremarkable version of Sternberg film than does this rather uneven mixture.

The erudite gets things off on rather the wrong "set too, with a typical Hollywoodian explanation of the Dostoyevsky as - an explanation that is rather cavalier in the way that it teases Mr. Tesla and aside. Nevertheless, with all its shortcomings, it's one of the most interesting later Sternbergs, and an ideal vehicle for Lorre and Arnold - even if the writing doesn't make the most of their unique suitability for their roles.

William K. Everson

Review: in writing the above, I found myself totally forgetting that I had seen Wienne's "Baskinov" obviously the impression it made was not an overpowering one, and on the whole I find myself rather agreeing with the unflattering reviews it received.