

The San Francisco International Film Festival - Part 6

Some older or lesser known films

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One of the pleasures of the San Francisco festival is the opportunity to see older films, many of which would be difficult to see in any other circumstance. The festival organizers find various pretexts to present such works, this program and that, but I think, at heart, they simply value the opportunity to screen rare and unusual works, and I am grateful for it.

The films of Czech filmmaker Gustav Machaty (1901-63) are a case in point. Machaty is best known for *Ecstasy* (1933), made notorious by shots of Hedy Lamarr (Hedy Kiesler in her pre-Hollywood days) swimming and running about in the nude. I don't know that any of Machaty's films are works of genius, but they are unabashedly sensual and occasionally moving.

Machaty was born in Prague, played piano in movie theaters as a teenager and appeared as an actor before his directorial debut in 1919. He went to Hollywood the following year, and legend apparently has it that, among other things, he worked for D.W. Griffith as an assistant. In 1926, having returned to Czechoslovakia, he directed a screen version of Tolstoy's *Kreuzer Sonata*. A year later he made *Schweik in Civilian Life*, based on the character created by the left-wing Czech novelist, Jaroslav Hasek.

The San Francisco festival screened *Erotikon* (1929), his next work and final silent film. The story is not so unusual. A salesman stops by an isolated cabin on a stormy night looking for a place to stay. The cabin's owner, an older man, invites him to stay the night. Of course he has a daughter (played by the appealing Slovene actress, Ita Rina). The old man, a railway stationmaster, goes to work, the two younger people are left alone. In separate rooms, they toss and turn. Before too long, they're in the same room. The camera goes wild as they do, whirling and spinning. Later, the girl is pregnant, abandoned and faces disgrace. She gets married, re-encounters her old lover, and takes up with him again! Her husband, aware of the situation, decides to wait and see what happens.

As Elliott Stein notes in the festival catalogue, one of the more extraordinary sequences is "the scene during which the stationmaster's daughter ... dreams of her lover as she gives birth, while the peasant midwife delivering her baby is a witness to the young woman's orgasmic reliving of the moment of conception."

I found *From Saturday to Sunday* (1931) the most intriguing of the three Machaty films screened. The director had some remarkable help on the film. It was co-scripted by Vitezslav Nezval, a founding member of the Prague Surrealist group, who helped sponsor André Breton's visit to that city in 1935. A seminal figure in Czech jazz, Jaroslav Jezek, wrote the score. Another collaborator on the film, Alexander Hackenschmied, gained subsequent fame, under the name Alexander Hammid, as a documentarist and experimental filmmaker. (Hammid married Maya Deren, with whom he directed, for better or worse, the "avant-garde classic," *Meshes of the Afternoon* in 1943.)

The opening sequence of *From Saturday to Sunday* concisely but artfully establishes the milieu and mood: a typing pool in Prague, 1931. In a camera pan we see telephones, typewriters, dictaphones, and also

shapely stockinged legs. Two young women are at work. One invites the other on a double date. Later in a club, the second, Maria, is offered a thousand crowns for her favors by an unpleasant type, who slips the money into her purse. She indignantly rejects the offer and takes off in the rain, with her purse. In a café she meets Karel, a sensitive typesetter who looks a little like George Raft. The skies have opened up, he lives nearby. They go to his apartment and one thing leads to another.

In the morning, he goes back to her place to fetch her a change of clothing. He meets her friend, who has a note for Maria: "Ervin wants you to return the 1,000 crowns." Karel is crestfallen, his new love, it seems, is a professional. When he returns home in this state, she says, "You can't believe...!" But obviously he does. She makes her way home, where she turns on the gas. Karel has a change of heart, picks up her purse and heads off to find her. Because he's carrying a woman's purse, however, the police pick him up as a thief. (The purse—alternately open, closed, then left behind, and held aloft by Karel as he runs through the streets—has a fairly clear and time-honored significance.) The distraught Karel finally convinces a police official to send a cop with him to her address. When they get there, they break down the door and discover Maria, unconscious.

In the final scene we are back at the typing pool. Maria is still alive and still taking, or ignoring, her boss's dictation. Karel is on the phone... *From Saturday to Sunday* is a lyrical and concrete half-sophisticated/half-naïve film.

Ecstasy (1933) struck me as a somewhat silly movie. Hedy Lamarr is a young woman married to a middle-aged and apparently impotent husband. When she meets a handsome young engineer, she can't resist her urges. A lot of the film is devoted to a study of Hedy's face as she achieves or fails to achieve sexual satisfaction. I don't know what else was at work in Machaty's life, but the film shows definite evidence of Soviet, and specifically Eisenstein's, influence.

The traumas of the century did not spare Machaty. He left Europe for the US as a refugee in the late 1930s, and managed to make only a few more films. He did some uncredited work on Sidney Franklin's *The Good Earth* (1937), based on the Pearl Buck novel. According to Stein, his best American film was *Jealousy* (1945), "a stylish psychological thriller." When it was broadcast on US television in the 1950s, so many of its cast and crew were well-known leftists, including Karen Morley (see below), that the credits were entirely removed. Machaty returned to Europe in 1951, and helped write G.W. Pabst's *The Jackboot Mutiny* (*Es geschah am 20. Juli*, 1955), about an attempt on Hitler's life. He made his final feature in West Germany in 1956 (*Missing Child 312*), before taking a position as a professor at the Munich Film School. He died in 1963.

American independent film director and actor John Cassavetes was a remarkable figure, as a viewing of *Faces* (1968) will verify. I welcomed the opportunity at the festival to see the film again after nearly thirty years. It retains, despite everything, its elemental force.

Cassavetes, born in New York City in 1929, is associated with what "amounted to a one-man crusade," in the words of one commentator, "to

establish the actor as *auteur* [film author].” Indeed his films suggest as a principle that the performer must be given absolute freedom to find human truths, whether he or she ultimately succeed or fail.

Cassavetes worked as an actor in television during its so-called Golden Age in the mid-1950s, appearing in some 80 productions in a four-year period. His first film, *Shadows* (1959), about racism and racial tensions, developed as an improvisational exercise at his actors' workshop in New York. After two studio productions, which no one was happy with, he returned to acting to finance his next film. (Cassavetes maintained this pattern, working in commercial films to help provide the wherewithal for his own, until his death.)

Faces was shot in Los Angeles, in 16mm, over a period of three years, with a group of actor friends. The original version ran six hours. Another two years was spent editing it down to 130 minutes and overcoming technical difficulties. The black-and-white film follows a group of people, whose lives messily intersect mostly at night, as they try to establish, for the most part unsuccessfully, some kind of human contact. At the center is a married couple (John Marley and Lynn Carlin), whose relationship is disintegrating. Various configurations of desperate people take shape and disintegrate in this particular journey to the center of the night. The cast includes Gena Rowlands, Cassavetes' real-life wife, as a woman who attracts, amuses, abuses and is abused by a number of men.

The film is not by any means entirely satisfying. Whole scenes seem pointless, diversionary. At times one is even bored. But the best moments are sublime, lacerating. “Cassavetes stays with his tormented, alienated characters,” wrote critic Andrew Sarris in December, 1968, “until they break through the other side of slice-of-life naturalism into emotional and artistic truth.” The actors are all extraordinary, especially Lynn Carlin as the middle class housewife, whose “happy life” suddenly turns nightmarish. Marley and Rowlands are fine, as is Seymour Cassel as an aging hippie Carlin picks up; Val Avery and Fred Draper are outstanding in smaller roles as middle-aged men at dangerously loose ends.

In my view, *Faces* and *Husbands* (1970)—about a trio of friends (Cassavetes, Peter Falk, Ben Gazzara) who fly to London for a weekend in a feverish attempt to find some kind of happiness—are Cassavetes' best films. A commentator was probably overstating the case when he asserted that those films “constitute as deep and detailed a picture of the well-to-do of middle America as the novels of John Updike” [this is also a misreading of Updike, whose characters have not primarily come from among the “well-to-do”], but there is something to the thought.

What combination of factors contributed to making Cassavetes' films less interesting from the mid-1970s onward I wouldn't attempt to explain in this limited space, but I think his decline is undeniable. *Minnie and Moskowitz* (1971), *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974), *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (1976) and *Gloria* (1980) all have their moments, but something has been lost. Cassavetes' died prematurely, at the age of 59, in 1989.

Sarris' overall evaluation of Cassavetes in 1968 seems relatively accurate, if a little harsh. He observed that the director “remains an unresolved talent, not entirely happy with the Establishment or against it. His direction, like his acting, hovers between offbeat improvisation and blatant contrivance. Somehow his timing always seems to be off a beat or two even when he understands what he is doing. Too much of the time he is groping when he should be gripping. At his best, however, he makes emotional contact with his material, and transforms his humblest players into breathing, feeling beings.”

Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa (who died only last fall) directed *Dersu Uzala* in 1975 in the USSR at the age of sixty. It recounts the experiences of a real-life figure, Vladimir Arseniev, a Russian military surveyor who explored remote regions of Siberia at the turn of the century. In the course of their grueling expedition, Arseniev and his men meet up with Dersu Uzala, a hunter and woodsman, who agrees to be their

guide. Dersu proves to be a man of unsurpassed modesty, honesty and integrity, who lives in remarkable harmony with nature. Arseniev comes to admire, even love him.

The film, unashamedly “epic,” more than two hours long and shot in 70mm and six-track stereophonic sound, is not made with a light touch. But that is Kurosawa. One might accuse him of wearing his feelings on his sleeve, but who would suggest that there is anything false or dishonest in his work? He worked away at the concept of heroism, examining the dilemmas human beings confront and always insisting that “the choice is to act morally, to work for the betterment of one's fellow men,” as one critic notes. There is no need, in this case, to be apologetic or defensive about a film that “is transformed into an (unfashionable) hymn to the human spirit.”

The San Francisco festival continued its admirable practice of honoring blacklisted directors and performers, this year paying tribute to actress Karen Morley. Born Mabel Linton in Ottumwa, Iowa, Morley began working in Hollywood at the age of 21. Over the next two decades, she appeared in some 42 films for a variety of directors, both artists and studio hacks. In 1931, her first year in pictures, she had roles in nine films, including two with Greta Garbo. The following year she received her first serious opportunity, as Paul Muni's combative love in Howard Hawks' *Scarface* (presented at the festival), a film that still astonishes. She appeared in a minor John Ford film (*Flesh*, 1932), Jack Conway's spirited *Arsène Lupin* and *Dinner at Eight* (George Cukor, 1933), before co-starring with Walter Huston and Franchot Tone in 1933 in *Gabriel Over the White House* (also screened in San Francisco).

Morley had significant parts in two other significant works shaped by the Depression years, King Vidor's famed *Our Daily Bread* (1934) and Michael Curtiz' remarkable *Black Fury* (also with Muni, 1935), about a coal miner's battle for justice against both the employer and the union. After appearing in a string of not terribly distinguished films in the late 1930s, she played Charlotte Lucas in Robert Z. Leonard's 1940 version of *Pride and Prejudice*, scripted by Aldous Huxley, along with Laurence Olivier and Greer Garson. Only four film roles came Morley's way in the entire decade of the 1940s (including, most distinctively, Machaty's *Jealousy*, 1945).

Ironically, she made her final screen appearance in a re-make of *M* (1951). The director of the first version in 1932, Fritz Lang, fled Germany not too long after making the film; Joseph Losey, the director of the second, took off for England, just ahead of the anticommunist witch-hunters, immediately after finishing the remake.

Morley had a history as a left-winger. She headed up a production group through which the United Auto Workers produced an educational film about racism and played an active role in the Screen Actors Guild. But, according to Morley, it was her role in supporting a studio workers' strike that got her into hot water with studio executives. She explains, “I helped organize a small but important group of actors who tried to convince Actors Guild members not to cross the picket line, and although we didn't win, this attempt to keep the actors on the side of the strikers cost the studios a great deal of money. And so they were mad at me. Hollywood had its own blacklist. I didn't need HUAC [the House Un-American Activities Committee] to do the trick.”

When HUAC zeroed in on the film industry, Morley was one of those most-often named. She says, “Everyone who was a stool pigeon named me first. They were given a list—‘Did you know so-and-so to be a Communist?’—and my name was always first.” Morley, married to another left-wing actor, Lloyd Gough, refused to name names and never worked in films again. A sad loss, because she was an extraordinary performer, elegant, self-sufficient, bright, sophisticated.

I didn't see *Scarface* again at the festival, but I highly recommend it. I did see *Gabriel Over the White House* for the first time—apparently it is not easy to come by—and what a revelation it proved to be.

Anyone skeptical about the depth of the political crisis that prevailed in the US before Franklin D. Roosevelt acted to save the American ruling class from itself, ought to view this work, directed by Gregory La Cava. Renowned as a comedy mind (W.C. Fields claimed it was the best in Hollywood, after his own), La Cava is best known for a number of comedies and melodramas he made between 1935 and 1941, *She Married Her Boss*, *My Man Godfrey*, *Stage Door*, *Fifth Avenue Girl*, *Primrose Path* and *Unfinished Business*. As scintillating as some of those films (or pieces of them) are, very little in them is likely to prepare the filmgoer for *Gabriel Over the White House*.

Walter Huston is a machine politician who has made his way to the White House through wheeling and dealing, making empty promises, lying to the public and so forth. Franchot Tone and Morley, who ultimately become romantically involved, are his assistants. Huston takes power under conditions of a terrible social crisis; unemployment is at record levels and hundreds of thousands of the jobless are preparing to march on Washington. Essentially social revolution threatens. But the new president has no answers to the crisis and avoids thinking about it as much as possible.

Some time after his inauguration, however, he sustains a serious injury in a car accident. Hovering on the brink of death, the president is visited by the (unseen) Archangel Gabriel, who works some kind of miracle on the unconscious politician. When he awakens, Huston is a changed man, possessed by the belief that he has a mission to lead the country out of the Depression. The screenwriters' vision of what the president of the United States needed to do is revealing, a bizarre combination of left-wing, populist and, in the end, outright fascist measures.

First, Huston agrees to meet with the unemployed marchers and proposes a vast public works project (not so unlike certain elements of the New Deal) that will provide work for millions. Subsequently, the president dissolves Congress and imposes martial law on the country. He organizes a special paramilitary unit, headed by Tone, to fight organized crime. Leading underworld figures are summarily dispatched by firing squads.

Turning his attention to world affairs, Huston's character arranges for the benefit of foreign dignitaries a demonstration of America's newest and most deadly secret weapon. This, he explains, we will use on each of your nations unless you sign this document establishing world peace! Immediately after successfully blackmailing the various heads of states into signing, Huston suffers a fatal attack of some kind and expires. The spirit that has infused him leaves his corpse in the form of a puff of wind.

The film has to be seen to be believed. Huston, father of director John Huston and grandfather of actress/director Anjelica Huston, is entirely convincing as a president of the United States, more convincing than some of those who have actually held the office. Despite its dizzying, almost hallucinatory character, the film has little of the feel of many Hollywood fantasies, sociopolitical or otherwise. Its grimness and deadly seriousness is deeply disturbing. No thinking viewer could mistake the sort of desperate conditions it emerged from.

It must be said as well, as a final footnote to this series of articles, that La Cava's direction puts to shame the vast majority of contemporary cinema. It is distressing to see a film made in 1933 that surpasses nine-tenths of what comes out of Hollywood studios today in fluidity, in camera movement, in lighting and in the coherence and force of its drama.



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