

Perceptive vision of social myopia

Focus, directed by Neal Slavin, written by Kendrew Lascelles, based on the novel by Arthur Miller

J. Cooper
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Focus is a fable translated into film. It is a moving exploration of themes that American playwright Arthur Miller grappled with when he wrote the novel on which the film is based: perceived appearance; what seems and what is real; blind prejudice; finding one's true identity despite the way those around you might identify you. It is an alarming critique of a society spinning out of control and gripped by fear. On another level it is an examination of individual transformation and how those social conditions affect the choices and changes made by a very common man.

Miller wrote his only novel and first published work in 1945, at the end of World War II. Responding to the wave of anti-Semitism that arose within the United States during Hitler's annihilation of millions in Europe, Miller's story shows how ignorance and backwardness are breeding grounds for intolerance and prejudice. Miller takes a scenario that is reasonably possible under conditions of social tension to reveal a very ugly side of human relations. He raises social issues that are quite relevant today. Director Neal Slavin vowed 35 years ago to turn Miller's novel into a film, and while remaining true to the novel, he examines issues which are as relevant today as they were more than a half-century ago.

First-time director Slavin meticulously recreates the historical period, as well as the cinematic style of the time. Using low-angle shots and the chiaroscuro lighting techniques characteristic of the 1930s, the film brings to mind the work of Orson Welles and Alfred Hitchcock. The film is shot as an Expressionist allegory. Slavin is a photographer, and his images are dramatic, bold and clearly not meant to be naturalistic. The bright, surreal colors, the shadowy details of time

and place, the exaggerated characters, draw us into the chilling world of placid reality turned inside out by war and fear.

The opening scene is a dizzying series of blurry images that we slowly identify as a carousel with the horses whipping wildly around, the gears grinding and spinning; we can feel the fear of Lawrence Newman's nightmare. A very ordinary personnel administrator for a large corporation, Newman is a typically agreeable, malleable individual. Not a total coward, he resigns his position when asked to take a demotion. His boss feels that Newman's new pair of glasses make him "look Jewish," giving a bad impression of the company that advertises its "gentiles only" policy. Looking Jewish puts Newman in the same position as the Jewish shopkeeper on the corner of his street. He, like the shopkeeper Finkelstein (David Paymer), becomes the victim of fascist threats, is humiliated and attacked.

Remarkably played by William H. Macy, Newman is a man who wants to please—his mother, his wife, his neighbors. Newman is eager to show his anti-Semitic neighbors that he is really one of *them*. While he feels uncomfortable about joining their organization, which is revealed to be a fascist band called the Union Crusaders—led by his next-door neighbor Fred, played marvelously by Meat Loaf Aday—Newman acquiesces to their pressure and the hostility they show to Finkelstein. His glamorous, new wife (Laura Dern), also suspected of being Jewish, is a bit more feisty, but in the past had connections to the fascists through a former lover. Her fear of the thugs impels her to urge her husband to either join them or move. He gradually realizes that his neighbors' perception of him may in fact be closer to the truth: he isn't like them. He begins

to find them despicable.

In one of the most compelling and interesting scenes, Lawrence sits in a meeting surrounded by thick, fascist recruits—he is the only one wearing a suit, and the only one wearing glasses. His “Jewish appearance” makes him a symbol of intellect, a quality also lacking among this rabble. There is no dialog—only the monotonous sermon of a fascist priest. Through a series of camera shots, Newman becomes the object of suspicious stares, of hateful glances. Father Crichton (based on the real Father Coughlin, a fascist radio-evangelist of the period) is demagogically railing against the Jews, the Communists, the Enemy. The crowd turns on Newman, he is roughed up and thrown down the stairs.

The glasses as a metaphorical vehicle allow the truth to “come into focus.” Newman gradually sees that the Crusaders are a despicable lot and decides he must take a principled stand. He allies himself with the Jewish shopkeeper who is the only character with genuine courage and feeling. Together they fight the fascists with baseball bats. Lawrence Newman is no hero. It is in his development that he becomes a protagonist we can empathize with. It is unusual in much American cinema today to find a character that does actually change and grow.

It is also unusual to find a film willing to tackle the status quo. *Focus* is definitely a different kind of war movie than *Pearl Harbor* or *Saving Private Ryan*. It examines the insidious nature of jingoism as it feeds on the economic and social insecurity of lower middle class layers. While Hollywood producers are salivating over the opportunities to churn out propaganda blockbusters for the US government’s war drive, this modest film is a stark reminder that nationalism and patriotism are not far removed from racist and fascist violence. Under present conditions the film makes a bolder statement than perhaps the filmmakers even intended.



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