

HIPPODROME silent film festival

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WEDNESDAY 22 MARCH - SUNDAY 26 MARCH 2017

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Sunday 26 March | 13:30 The Informer

Dir. Arthur Robison | UK | 1929 | 1h 41m
With: Lars Hanson, Lya de Putti, Warwick Ward

Performing Live: Günter Buchwald (violin) & Stephen Horne (piano and accordion)

Presented in partnership with the Goethe Institut Glasgow and the British Film Institute

"Film noir is a claustrophobic genre. There's no escape in film noir. There's a point in Miller's Crossing where John Turturro's character is under the gun, and he says, 'Let me go, I'll leave, I'll go out of town,' and you wanna say, 'There is no out of town in film noir! There's only this closed system'..." John Sayles

The 1929 film of Liam O'Flaherty's *The Informer* has all the hallmarks of a classic Hollywood *noir* – just a decade too early and an ocean away. It was a top-class production by British International Pictures. It was typical of late 1920s European film as although it was filmed in Britain, it was made with a very international team - a German director, Arthur Robison, who had made expressionist classic *Warning Shadows* (1923) and German cameramen Werner Brandes and Theodor Sparkuhl (the latter being a key figure for the noir 'look' spanning German expressionism, French poetic realism and classic American noir). For the stars, the film boasted the Swedish Lars Hanson and the beautiful Austro-Hungarian actress Lya de Putti, best known now for *Variété* (1925). It was made during the transition to sound film in part talkie and silent versions. Both the quality of the recording and the inappropriate accents undermine the power of the sound version but the silent film is a very superior production. But what of its noir credentials?

The story was based on a 1925 novel by Irish writer Liam O'Flaherty and concerns a group of working class Dubliners who were members of a revolutionary party in the newly independent Ireland of 1922. One of their number, Francis, kills the chief of police in a shoot-out and goes on the run. The Party gives him money to flee to America but he is tempted to return to Dublin to say goodbye to his mother and to his former lover and fellow revolutionary Katie Fox, leading his erstwhile friend Gypo to inform on him with tragic results. It is Gypo that has to come to terms with guilt, and though he attempts to redeem himself, events conspire to drag him back into the Party's deadly grasp. So the film has several trademark noir components: doomed antihero [check], femme fatale [check], pursuit by nemesis [check], mean streets [check], chiaroscuro lighting [check] use of close-up and mid-shots to create claustrophobic tension, overwhelming sense of fatalism and tragic redemptive acts [check, check, check].



Instead of organised crime the story revolves round an underground political cell, which serves the same purpose – if you go against the organisation they will hunt you down. Otherwise the only thing missing is the hard boiled dialogue. So like Josef Von Sternberg's *Underworld* (1927) and Tomu Uchida's *Policeman* (1933), I think *The Informer* stands up well as a silent proto-noir film.

Liam O'Flaherty's expressed intention for his novel, the source for the film, seems to align particularly well with noir values. He comments in his autobiography *Shame the Devil*:

"I worked out the plan for The Informer determined it should be a sort of highbrow detective story and its style based on the technique of the cinema. It should have all the appearance of a realistic novel and yet the material should hardly have any connection with real life. I would treat my readers as a mob-orator treats his audience and toy with their emotions, making them finally pity a character they began thinking a monster."

It is interesting that he should mention the detective story in conjunction with the technique of the cinema and that he should articulate that particular quality of reality and hyper-reality that is such a feature of the noir film, as well as describing the dilemma of identifying with the anti-hero in a narrative. Perhaps this is why the novel was adapted so readily for the screen and why it was adapted again by John Ford (O Flaherty's cousin) in 1935. *The Informer* was adapted again as *Uptight* in 1968, relocated to the black American community of Cleveland - by noir director *par-excellence*, Jules Dassin.

The silent version best captures the essence of the novel although the film inevitably makes changes – Katy is not portrayed as a prostitute and her romance with Gypo is enhanced for narrative effect but the atmosphere of a world without possible escape, the 'closed system', is well realised. In filmic terms this is signaled by a real noir moment when Francis, just arrived back in Dublin, is staring at his own 'Wanted' poster when the silhouette of a patrolling policeman falls across the wall. And later in a masterly scene, we see fate creep up again, using Gypo's better nature against him to drag him back to his doom. He is at the train station ("Let me go, I'll go, I'll leave town") almost clear when he is called upon to help an innocent escape with the blood money he received for informing on his friend. *Almost* got out... but there is no out of town in film noir.

These notes adapted from *The Shape of Noir to Come*, Bryony Dixon, *Sight & Sound* Nov 2016

Bryony Dixon is Curator of Silent Film at the British Film Institute National Archive



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