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THE ART FILM

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CLARENCE BROWN'S (*INTRUDER IN THE DUST*)



INTRUDER IN THE DUST

Direction	Clarence Brown
Screenplay, based on the William Faulkner novel	Ben Maddow
Photography	Robert Surtees
Music	Adolph Deutsch

CAST

Lucas Beauchamp	Juano Hernandez
Chick Mallison	Claude Jarman, Jr.
Mrs. Habersham	Elizabeth Patterson
Mr. Gowrie	Porter Hall
Chick's Uncle	David Brian
Sheriff	Will Geer

(An MGM production: running time 87 minutes)

INTRUDER IN THE DUST

by
Pauline Kael

Lucas Beauchamp, the "stubborn and insufferable" hero of INTRUDER IN THE DUST is very much like another modern example of pride, isolation, and intransigence--De Sica's great Umberto D. Both men, in their insistence on their rights and dignity, alienate themselves from the community that does not want to be reminded of their existence. Umberto is old, Lucas is black--a black man who enrages the white people of Mississippi by his refusal to play "nigger" for them.

If the movie had been produced in Europe, it would probably be widely acclaimed among American students of the film as a subtle, sensitive, neo-realist work. It was, in fact, made under the same type of conditions: it was filmed in Faulkner's home town, Oxford, Mississippi, with the inhabitants playing the bit parts and the crowd scenes. The authenticity of the backgrounds does not, of course, necessarily confer any truth on the foreground action; but INTRUDER IN THE DUST is astonishingly honest and faithful to its subject matter. "All in all I think it is a good movie", William Faulkner said at the premiere in 1949. When you consider how novelists generally react to screen adaptations of their work, this may be considered a cry of hosanna. It is a good movie--so good that you may be puzzled that you haven't seen it before. Hardly anybody seems to have seen it: it came at the end of a cycle of melodramas about Negroes (HOME OF THE BRAVE, LOST BOUNDARIES, etc.), and few people seemed to realize that INTRUDER IN THE DUST was in a different class, that it was a work of integrity and depth. In England, Paul Rotha wrote that it "is the first film to portray honestly the dilemma of Negro-White relations in the United States." In this country the advertising campaign didn't help to differentiate it from any other movie: "It's Sensational... the Picture You'll Never Forget... From the Moment You See the Gaunt Figure of a Mysterious Man... Silhouetted Against the Hot Sky... To the Last Flurry of Bullets... When a Bloody Man-hunt... Flushes the Killer... the Picture That Dares to Tell the Truth... Tearing Asunder the Veils of Hate and Persecution", etc.

INTRUDER IN THE DUST is sensational, but in a completely different way. Instead of the good Negro (Poitier is his prophet) it presents the maddening Negro: in both novel and film inflexible Lucas is conceived--beautifully conceived--as a focus of white ambivalence. He refuses to accept condescension or patronage, he insists on his right to be no better than a white man, and what is truly intolerable--he acts as if he were a white. The other central character, Chick, the white boy who has made the wretched, stupid mistake of treating Lucas as a Negro by offering him money as payment for hospitality, is so humiliated by Lucas' stony refusal that he writhes in impotent fury at himself and at Lucas. He isn't the only one who is upset about Lucas: "He was to learn every white man in that whole section of the country had been thinking about him for years, 'We got to make him be a nigger first. He's got to admit he's a nigger. Then maybe we will accept him as he seems to intend to be accepted.'"

When Lucas is arrested for killing a white man, the townspeople get their chance to turn him into a "nigger"; they couldn't teach him, but they can lynch him. But Chick, still suffering from the debt he has been unable to discharge, finds his opportunity to pay Lucas back-by saving him from death. Melodrama, yes. But melodrama that serves as a framework for an ironic study of the dignity of man. Chick is trying to get back his pride, trying to restore the balance of his relationship with Lucas; Lucas, even at the risk of burning alive, never risks his pride.

Had INTRUDER IN THE DUST been directed by a young unknown, it might have been acclaimed as a masterpiece. But it was directed by Clarence Brown, a man whose sensibility and taste have been less publicized than his ability to handle stars. He's scarcely even referred to in serious film journals, yet his career has been extraordinary. Some of his most famous and successful films have been artistically atrocious; others have been surprisingly good. If you think back on the big MGM films, chances are that he directed most of what you remember. Here are some of the titles: THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS (1920), THE EAGLE (Valentino, 1925), THE GOOSE WOMAN (1925), KIKI (Mary Pickford, 1926), FLESH AND THE DEVIL (Garbo and Gilbert, 1927), A WOMAN OF AFFAIRS (Garbo, 1928), ANNA CHRISTIE (Garbo, 1930), INSPIRATION (Garbo, 1931), A FREE SOUL (Gable, Shearer, 1931), POSSESSED (Crawford, 1931), EMMA (Marie Dressler, 1932), LETTY LYNTON (Crawford, 1932), NIGHT FLIGHT (1933), ANNA KARENINA (Garbo, 1935), AH, WILDERNESS! (1935), WIFE VERSUS SECRETARY (Gable, Loy, 1936), CONQUEST (Garbo, Boyer, 1937), IDIOT'S DELIGHT (1939), THE RAINS CAME (1939), EDISON THE MAN (1940), THE HUMAN COMEDY (1943), THE WHITE CLIFFS OF DOVER (1944), NATIONAL VELVET (1944), THE YEARLING (1946), SONG OF LOVE (Hepburn, 1947), INTRUDER IN THE DUST (1949), PLYMOUTH ADVENTURE (1952), THE BIG COUNTRY (1952).

INTRUDER IN THE DUST bears no resemblance in directorial style to the bulk of Brown's glamorous, star-ridden productions. But surely it is his years of range and experience which have given him control of the medium--a control so calm, sure, so--apparently--easy that he can make a complex story seem simple and straightforward without any of that straining for effect or vulgar over-emphasis which is Hollywood's usual approach to a "classic" (for example, the way Richard Brooks overloads ELMER GANTRY with gigantic sets, enormous crowds, fires and riots and human stampedes). As Karel Reisz pointed out in his analysis of INTRUDER IN THE DUST in Manvell's anthology, THE CINEMA 1952, Brown's "deliberate, unspectacular direction" often extends and sharpens the impact of the novel by capturing in a single image the effects that Faulkner had to catalog one by one; but, of course, the movie simplifies the internal conflicts, the long passages of minute analysis of motives and reactions. As Reisz says, "This, perhaps, is inevitable. But it means that the novelist's most sensitive instrument of perception has been lost." It is evidence of Brown's solid craftsmanship that he achieved in a single take the sequence which most impressed European critics: the gathering of the crowd in the town square--expectant, waiting for the lynching.

The performances Brown gets are truly astonishing--although no doubt his years of pulling emotions out of the great ladies of the screen constituted monumental training. Many will recall that, in his NATIONAL VELVET, the child Elizabeth Taylor gave what is still the finest performance of her career, and that, in THE YEARLING (his last location production before INTRUDER IN THE DUST), he not only got marvelous results from the two boy actors, but even managed to coax something out of Jane Wyman). Juano Hernandez' interpretation of Lucas deserved its two European festival awards; Claude Jarman, Jr., who had already demonstrated his fine responsiveness to Brown in THE YEARLING, plays Chick. Two of the vanishing race of American character actors perform with great skill and even beauty: Porter Hall as the murdered man's father and Elizabeth Patterson as the little old lady who believes in doing what's right.

Only at the very end is a false note struck in a few lines of explicit comment delivered by David Brian--"It will be all right, as long as some of us are willing to fight--even one of us" and the ultimate cliché--"Lucas wasn't in trouble; we were in trouble". It's the movie that gets in trouble. Fortunately, the character of Lucas is so dominating that what we have witnessed cannot be reduced to such commonplaces: we know that Lucas has won, that the sheepish, guilty townspeople will now have to accept him on his own terms, that, as Faulkner put it, Lucas is "now tyrant over the whole county's white conscience."