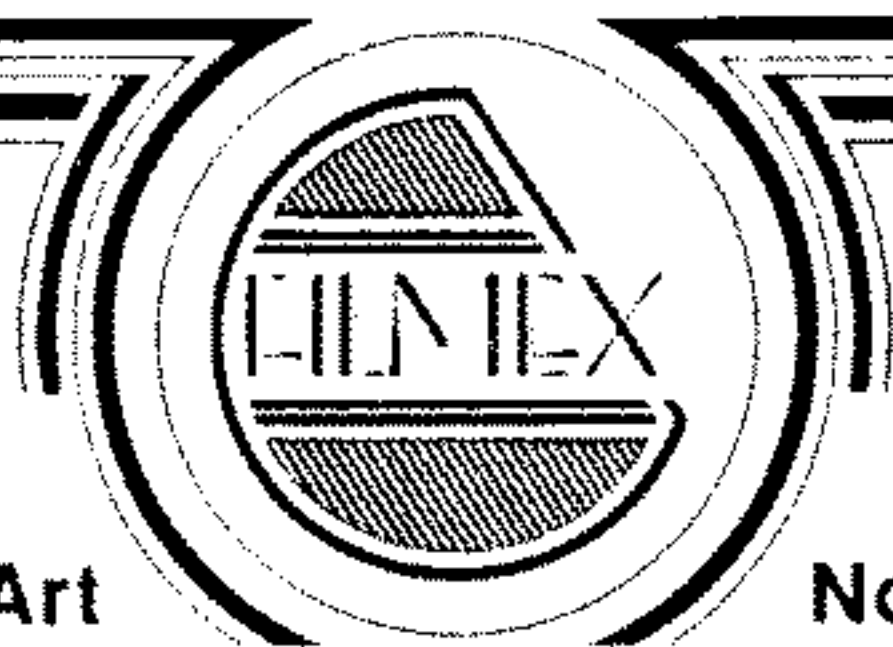


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THE GREAT AMERICAN FILMS



Los Angeles County Museum of Art

November 15—December 16, 1973

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THE INFORMER

An RKO-Radio Picture released in 1935, 91 minutes

Directed by John Ford; Produced by Cliff Reid; Screenplay by Dudley Nichols, from the novel by Liam O'Flaherty; Edited by George Hively; Cinematography by Joseph H. August; Music by Max Steiner; Art Direction by Van Nest Polglase and Charles Kirk; Set Decoration: Julia Heron; Costumes by Walter Plunkett

Cast: Victor McLaglen (Gypo Nolan), Heather Angel (Mary McPhillip), Preston Foster (Dan Gallagher), Margot Grahame (Kattie Madden), Wallace Ford (Frankie McPhillip), Una O'Connor (Mrs. McPhillip), J. M. Kerrigan (Terry), Joseph Sawyer (Bartley Mulholland), Neil Fitzgerald (Tommy Conner), Donald Meek (Pat Mulligan), D'Arcy Corrigan (The Blindman), Leo McCabe (Donahue), Gaylord Pendleton (Daley), Francis Ford ('Judge' Flynn), May Boley (Mrs. Betty), Grizelda Harvey (An obedient girl), Dennis O'Dea (Street singer), Jack Mulhall (look-out), Robert Parrish (Soldier), Clyde Cook, Barlowe Borland, Frank Moran, Arthur McLaglen.

Awards: Academy Awards -- Best Director (John Ford), Best Actor (Victor McLaglen), Best Screenplay (Dudley Nichols), Best Music (Max Steiner)

New York Film Critics Award -- Best Director

* * *

"The Informer" is one of the major milestones of movie making in the United States. While the statement of John Gassner in "Theatre Arts" (1951) that "this film has been unequalled as an American screen creation since the advent of talkies" is probably somewhat overly enthusiastic, there is universal agreement that "The Informer" is one of the most important contributions to film since sound. It is quite remarkable that the history of this major Hollywood masterpiece ran counter to all the accepted Hollywood cliches on how to make a successful film. Around 1930 John Ford, who had been directing Hollywood films for 16 years, became interested in the story. However, it took him more than five years to get his studio's approval for making it. Even then, Ford and his screen writer, Dudley Nichols, all but sneaked the film into production on their own. Its total cost was \$243,000, a small sum even by the standards of those days. The picture was shot in three weeks and Ford declared that it was the easiest film he had ever made. Also, the completed picture runs to 8,000 feet, and Ford's original footage was only 8600 feet; rarely did any film need so little cutting, certainly no film which has the artistic eminence of "The Informer."

The original novel by Liam O'Flaherty, while being one of the better novels by this Irish writer, certainly has never been considered by anyone to be a literary masterpiece. "The Informer" is a classic example of how, by carrying a story from one medium to another, it is possible to raise the artistic level of the same raw

material . The film has not only more depth than the novel, but it is also more dramatic, more richly documented, and gives an even more terrifying impression of the 1922 trouble in Ireland. Gypo Nolan (the hero) gains in reality through being presented in terms of direct action rather than in the diffuse Dostoevskian interior monologues of O'Flaherty. Tools of the novelist, such as internal monologue and literary figures of speech, are all but impossible to translate to celluloid, yet the real texture of prose must be rendered in cinematic equivalent. This is solved in "The Informer" by devising an elaborate set of symbols which function both on literal and analogical levels. These symbols are in turn supported by a careful arrangement of visual and aural renditions of Gypo's subjective conflict. Two examples of this use of symbolism are the all-pervasive fog, and the poster which follows Gypo along the street.

Hollywood executives had reason to be astounded about the Oscar for the performance of Victor McLaglen who up until then had been known for his stereotyped "sez-yu" parts. John Ford's direction and Dudley Nichols' script all won Academy Awards and the New York Film Critics' Award. "The Informer" defied practically all of Hollywood's other conventions. It did not cost much; it did not have a sex queen; the hero, though physically powerful, did not repel whole armies of Indians, Arabs, or other associated "natives" with his little finger. The hero's woman was unmistakably a prostitute. The hero's romantic dreams remain unfulfilled. It openly criticized the Irish, arousing, therefore, the wrath of a powerful group in the United States. This led, incidentally, to a spirited controversy in several Catholic intellectual magazines.

The total mood, the emotional ambience surrounding the theme, and the subject, is created and sustained particularly by the use of lighting -- a uniform semi-darkness splotched here and there with the sinister glow of the street lamps or the brisk lighting coming out of opened doors. Not only does the darkness through which people and objects are glimpsed intensify the atmosphere of hushed terror, but it also serves to reflect the miasmic confusion of Gypo's guilt-laden conscience. By this means, inner and outer world are interfused. But it is not only by lighting alone that Ford has built up this unity of effect which makes this film so remarkable. He also uses musical accompaniment recalling Gypo's second voice or voice of conscience. Most significant is Ford's rediscovery of the uses of silence. Employing some of the best techniques from the old silent days, about one-third of the story is told without sound, and in general, not only is the dialogue reduced to a minimum, but is sometimes blocked out entirely for the sake of pantomime.

--from U.C. Santa Barbara's "Film Society"

35mm print courtesy of Janus Films (Bill Pence)

The Music before the Film: Symphony No. 3 by Arthur Honnegger