Film:


Core Reading:


An assessment of Russell Merritt’s analysis of D. W. Griffith’s *The Musketeers of Pig Alley*

Merritt’s article views *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* as a culmination of D.W. Griffith’s work on over 400 previous projects; a “masterpiece”(Merritt, page 159) brought about by the acquired skills and refinements in technique that come with sustained movie making. He also credits the film’s ability to capture the attitude of the working class in relation to the anxiety over gangland warfare, while latterly praising Griffith’s “optical sleights of hand”(165), as the piece moves further from the film and closer to the director. Merritt’s strengths and his most interesting analyses focus on the recreation of contemporary tensions, through directorial and cinematographic techniques, and the significance of Snapper Kid, played by Elmer Booth.

Merritt fails to go into the haunting detail of Griffith’s famous close-up of Booth, but it is this act of cinematography which dissolves the arrogant, gangster facade of Snapper and introduces the terrified, realistic man, stricken suddenly by his mortality and desperately on edge. Merritt goes into more detail when discussing the fascinating setting of the film, in particular the extras which inhabit it and create “the graceful, almost ethereal quality”
through being “eerily quiet”(160). While he may fail to emphasise the significance of the iconic shot of Booth; both in terms of the development of Snapper Kid’s character and film production as a whole, Merritt correctly assesses the claustrophobic, congested, dirty location as crucial to the film’s tone. He acutely assesses the silence of the extras and their “ricochet of glances and averted gazes” as depicting a society of people “weighted down”(160), an analysis accurate in the sense that people are weighted down by their personal concerns, fears and problems, and literally weighted down and trapped by the social system they occupy. Merritt pinpoints Griffith’s most obvious depiction of the suffocating, crowded street as having the sister of Lillian Gish play a woman who bumps into her(160). He talks of the echoing effect which creates “contradictory tensions of stillness, isolation, and bustle”(160). It is these tensions which characterise the films eerie backdrop, with Merritt’s points about Griffith’s skill and experience revealing the conscious effort to which the director went to ensure such a supplement to his central character, Snapper Kid.

Merritt highlights that unlike characters such as Tom Powers, Michael Corleone and Henry Hill, Snapper Kid does not show “ambition or enterprise”(160), instead he is a more moralistic character operating in a narrative which “takes on the aura of an urban folk tale”(160). The dark quality fundamental to his successors is dissipated by a “comic swagger” and “bravado”(162), while his “basic chivalry”(162) undermines a criminal status. As a result, Snapper provides a deeper and more rounded character than those usually seen in early cinema. The comic tradition is maintained, but it is contrasted with a dark, violent profession to the extent that Booth’s puffing out of elbows and chest in the final scene is almost sad. His comedic attempts are dissipated by his “signs of nerves”(161) in puffing out cigarette smoke and “cat-like caution”(161) as his gang are hunted. Merritt
correctly identifies Snapper as “a multi-faceted character”(161), but one not in the mould of later gangsters. Snapper is a product of his surroundings in a film marketed as a “social exposé”(163) depicting the social glass ceiling of America’s working class and the everyday corruption and crime which is its product, Merritt highlights the film’s events as being “part of a recurring routine”(160). Snapper’s character is key to this interpretation for Merritt as he is “envy[ious] of characters like Paget and the musician for their polished manners”(162), and so is an example of the class of people exploited and entrapped by the social system in which gang culture thrives. Consequentially, Snapper’s gangster character is induced by the concept of ‘Pig Alley’, “the perfect Griffith expression of urban values and restraints”(161), but this is proved just to be a facade when “the resolute, poised hunter, panics”(162), thus, in Merritt’s opinion, distancing him from now archetypal gangster characters and Musketeers from the films they occupy.

Merritt states that he sees the film as being “remote”(160) from later films based upon organised crime as, like the Musician and the Little Lady, Snapper ends where he began, albeit without his gang. However, such a loss is not to be underestimated as, while the final scene sees the paying of the protection money and the continuation of his criminal life, Snapper is left without his gang and potentially in danger of the ‘big boss’ or any associate of the rival gang leader seeking retribution. Such a situation draws immediate comparisons to Tom Powers of The Public Enemy, while Snapper’s innate chivalric nature and amiability draws comparisons to both Powers and Michael Corleone of The Godfather, as all three are often perceived to be inherently good people who become corrupted. While the good nature of Snapper maintains, it often fails in the successive films of the gangster genre, however this point of difference does not justify the “remote”(160) description Merritt applies. While his querying of the term “Musketeer”(164) is interesting, the
suggestion that Griffith takes the “improbable point of departure [from] the chivalric romance”(161) is questionable. Snapper is unquestionably chivalric, but Musketeers is far more akin to the gangster films it inspired, with the deep set corruption and criminality drawing more obvious comparisons to Goodfellas, than any chivalric romance. Merritt is correct to point out the absence of “speeding cars and blazing machine guns”(160), but the criminal sphere is otherwise inherently the same “dark dead-end world”(163) then and now.

Merritt highlights the novel depth and intricacies of Snapper Kid’s character, while crediting the expert skill of Griffith in recreating gangland life. He often goes into minute detail about Griffith and his other films, more than enough to give context, though that is understandable considering he was writing for a book on the director. His historical context is fascinating, but by focusing on Snapper Kid and the dense, silent, eerie setting he articulates a multitude of fascinating points about both Musketeers and D.W. Griffith.

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Works Cited


Articles for Further Research


