

War as Social Ritual in Frank Borzage's "No Greater Glory" (1934) and "The Mortal Storm" (1940)

In the early days of Hollywood, Frank Borzage, of Austro-Hungarian descent, was a well-known director whose films often emphasized the tragedy of romance framed in highly stylized settings which were studiously learned from the great master F.W. Murnau. But today, outside of Martin Scorsese's discussions of the Golden Age of Hollywood, there is not much talk of Borzage and his films.

As the child of immigrants from Europe, Borzage was often attracted to material that spoke of the dislocations and depredations of war. War had devastated the Continent in the 20th century and Borzage was anxious to find ways to portray its scourge and the nefarious ways in which it could take control of the human spirit.

In "No Greater Glory," his brilliant adaptation of Ferenc Molnar's novel about a group of young boys who play at war, Borzage connected with a fellow Hungarian who was also deeply concerned with the impact of the war mentality on the human spirit. Molnar, perhaps best known today for his work "Liliom" (filmed by Borzage in 1930 and Fritz Lang in 1934) which served as the basis for the Rodgers and Hammerstein classic "Carousel," certainly felt the sting of war and the ways in which it destroyed European society. It is worthy to note that Molnar's work extended all the way to Billy Wilder's 1961 Cold War classic "One, Two, Three" which looks at political conflict from an angle more akin to Screwball Comedy than to the serious tone of Molnar's World War I writings.

In "No Greater Glory" the audience is ushered into the story by a stark scene where an angry soldier makes an impassioned speech decrying the feelings and rationalizations that bring men to fight one another on the battlefield. After this brief but bracing speech, Borzage turns to a classroom where a teacher is giving his young students the very opposite lesson. Rather than decry and criticize patriotism and the way it turns social belonging into a form of mental derangement leading to violence and destruction, the teacher extols the virtues of nation and the power of fighting wars to protect one's native land. In the wake of the World War that had just passed, this short speech to the students acts as the prophylactic to the moral allegory which quickly unfolds.

The young boys are protecting their control of the empty lot where they play and the speech inspires them to set into place a military mindset where anyone outside their group, a group they have called "The Paul Street Boys," is deemed as an enemy combatant who is fair game to be destroyed.

Once he learns of their plan, the teacher tries to talk the boys out of the violent mentality that he has previously extolled, but to no avail. The boys have set up a very precise military mechanism to protect their turf. They have all bought military caps and grouped themselves into an army with captains and privates and all the rest of the elements that they have learned from the adults who have glorified war.

The boys have a leader, Boca, who is idolized by the weakest among them, Nemescek. Nemescek proves to be the fulcrum around which the film revolves. The other boys pick on him for his weakness; in spite of this he is determined to rise in their ranks and become “one of them.”

In this desire, he continues to implore the other boys to stop picking on him and give him more of a prominent role in their war plans. When a rival gang of older boys, “The Red Shirts,” decides to make a play for the same empty lot “belonging” to the Paul Street Boys, the fight is on. The two rival groups begin to set up the formal rituals of war in order to secure this small patch of land.

“No Greater Glory” allegorizes the formal rituals of war in a way that shows us not only the futility of war, but the absurdity of it. At no time do the boys ever consider the possibility that they can share the empty lot and play together as comrades.

Inevitably, the plot leads the boys to tragedy. But what is most significant about the way in which Borzage has chosen to tell this simple, yet troubling story is the emphasis that he places on the rituals that accompany the spirit of war and conflict. The movie clearly shows that children – as children inevitably do – play-act and that their war-like tendencies produce an inventory of rituals that fetishizes the matter of violence. The boys are driven to war by the ways in which social belonging is tied to symbols and conventions that are embodied in the trappings of war.

In the wake of the Great War, as it was then called, “No Greater Glory” provides us a valuable insight into the thinking that brings people to fight each other. From a simple story of children at play, we see that the very innocence of ritual behavior and social organization can be deployed to encourage violence and dysfunction leading to the inevitable tragedy of armed conflict. It is a powerful anti-War film that has lost none of its strength over the course of time.

Borzage also directed the classic 1940 anti-Nazi film “The Mortal Storm” which tells the story of a college professor played by the great Frank Morgan. Morgan is a professor of science whose views on race and blood are not in keeping with the ongoing Aryanization of his homeland. When non-Aryans are marked for social elimination, Morgan’s work leads to his termination from the university and complications for his family. His daughter, played by Margaret Sullavan is engaged to Robert Young who quickly becomes an enthusiastic member of the Nazi party, taking Sullavan’s two half-brothers along with him.

Strikingly, “The Mortal Storm” shows us the way in which Morgan loses control over his stepsons and how Sullavan drifts away from her fiancée whose enthusiasm for Hitler and the Nazis seems to know no bound. James Stewart, a stalwart anti-Nazi who is shown defying the new regime, soon falls afoul of Young and his buddies, eventually uniting with Sullavan as the two come to understand that they will have to flee their homes in order to survive. Tellingly, Stewart is a veterinarian whose compassion for animals

bespeaks his love of science and humanity which soon comes into conflict with the ideals of the new order.

Morgan is arrested and imprisoned for his scientific teaching and the fact that he is a non-Aryan, as is Sullavan – but not the stepsons. Tellingly, given the climate of the era, the film neglects to once mention the word “Jew” (ironic given the fact that the studio which made the movie, MGM, was run by the Jewish mogul Louis B. Mayer), leaving but a fleeting image of the letter “J” on Morgan’s armband while his wife visits him in jail.

“The Mortal Storm” is a powerful anti-Nazi drama that presaged America’s entry into World War II. Once again, as in “No Greater Glory,” Borzage examines the spirit of war from the standpoint of everyday human life. In “The Mortal Storm” we see a very average family which is paradoxically torn apart by the values of belonging and social acceptance.

As we now know, the great success of Nazism in Germany was ensured by the social mechanisms it used to unify the nation. The creation of “in-groups” and “out-groups” was tied to ethno-national fears and prejudices. Those Germans who did not become Nazis were deemed unpatriotic and traitors to their nation. The prejudice against non-Aryans and social deviants was thus ingrained into the national fabric. The film presents a number of examples of this deviancy which is clearly marked by a refusal to honor Hitler and the Nazi ideals.

Quite often the prosaic rituals of daily life are employed in the settling of scores between individuals. In the case of “The Mortal Storm” we see clearly the ruthlessness of “correct thinking” and the ways in which such thinking serves to corrode and destroy reason and science. The film presents us with a man of science, a university professor, who has spoken out quite plainly against the racial theories of the nation’s leaders and is forced to pay the ultimate price for that scientific knowledge. At a critical moment in the movie, an unfinished scientific manuscript written by the professor is confiscated by the Nazi authorities as it has been deemed seditious and a threat to the nation.

War is tied to nation in ways that transcend logic and science. Irrational emotion is deployed using the alluring mechanisms of the social and the ritual, and we see in the movie how ritual plays a determinative role in culture. In the film’s final act this important idea is precisely articulated by a Nazi official who states: “In service to the Third Reich, human relationships do not exist.” In the new order there is no humanity and no compassion for other human beings; all there we have is “duty” to the Reich and to its “values.”

It is a lesson in immorality that we should never forget as we lead our daily lives; lives which often provide us with challenges to conform to the “accepted” value system or to stand up for what we believe in.

Both of these films, “No Greater Glory” and “The Mortal Storm,” are passionate declarations of anti-War sentiment. They show the ways in which war becomes a significant part of our lives by emphasizing the social pressures that lead people to bond together against what they perceive as a common enemy. These social pressures are codified and actualized by means of rituals which mark off the nation as different from the “enemy.”

“We” are in possession of “our” flag and the other side wishes to take that flag from us; as in “No Greater Glory” where the rituals that comprise the military engagement are structured around the question of who possesses a flag. In “The Mortal Storm” the ties of love and family are no match for the deeper ties of the blood. Virtual communities are created which arbitrarily determine who is on which side and why we must fight given the cruel “logic” of war.

These films test our moral resolve in ways that continue to remain relevant. We are always tempted to blindly follow leaders and ideas that defy common-sense logic and the ethical values universal to all peoples. Under the film of such patriotic ideas and social pressures the individual is often brainwashed into a mentality that leads to moral myopia and ultimately to a blindness which denies the humanity of the Other.

The “war” children in “No Greater Glory” show us the power of an arbitrary idea and how that idea can take root at the expense of decency and civility. The boys are tied to the battle by the social hierarchy of their community and are pressured to conform to a system that, once in place, is deemed to be indestructible. There is no stopping the forces of war and destruction once we have subscribed to the values of patriotism-at-any-price.

In “The Mortal Storm” the meaning of this theme is deepened further: Once the Nazis establish their theory of Aryan supremacy, individuals become powerless to prevent the logical outcomes of the theory. Human life has no value and human dignity is lost forever.

This rejection of the principles of human dignity remains a constant throughout our history in spite of the warnings given to us by the great artists and thinkers who speak of peace, tolerance, and coexistence. Human beings seem to be naturally tied, not to their moral sense, but to the collectivist mentality that destroys individual self-respect and puts in its place the blind superiority of the nation – love it or leave it.

In these two classic films, films not much discussed today, Frank Borzage enriches our moral experience by dramatizing our fetish for war and the ways in which the social pressures to conform frequently bring us to reject the basic human values of kindness, compassion, and decency. We should all understand that in order to create stable and just societies we need to resist the temptation to have our social rituals undermine and subvert the best of who we are as human beings.

Just because society moves to affirm madness and hatred, does not mean that we should be forced to acquiesce to its herd-like mentality.

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