Where Are My Children: Crash Course Film Criticism #4

Crash Course: Film Criticism
https://youtube.com/watch?v=gOp7tYFk-38
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/gOp7tYFk-38

They make movies about all kinds of things these days, from superheroes saving the universe and women of color using math to win the space race, to the brutal horror of something like the human centipede. But there are some topics that filmmakers shy away from, even today. While movies can take bold stands on controversial issues, they usually root stories in safer territory. In fact, back in the 1910's in the heart of Hollywood a director named Lois Weber found a lot of success making films about the most pressing social issues of her time, and one of her signature films is a drama from 1916 that took on one of the most contentious subjects in American life: abortion.

Lois Weber was kind of an anomaly in the early days of Hollywood. She was an extremely successful filmmaker in an industry that's dominated by men. Weber began her film career in the transitional period of cinema history around 1907-1913 when mainstream movies started to look like movies today. They were feature-length fictional narratives, told with traditional film grammar, and supported by a star system.

A big name associated with the time is D.W. Griffith, who used sophisticated tools of film grammar, things like close ups, cross cutting and subtle performances, to involve audiences in the emotions of his characters. Collaborating with her husband, Phillips Smalley, Lois Weber made a series of wildly successful films that also experimented with film grammar to engage people.

She pioneered some unusual techniques from split screens to superimpositions. She was one of the first filmmakers to experiment with synchronous sound, and she was the first female director to own her own film studio. Not only that, but all of her early films tackled hot-button issues more directly than the work of most of her peers.

With titles like *Shoes*, *The People Vs John Doe*, and *The Devil's Brew*, she took on subjects like child labor, capital punishment, and temperance. In 1917 she made a film called Is A Woman A Person? released as The Hand That Rocks the Cradle. It was about Margaret Sanger's real life arrest for spreading information about birth control.

Weber was quoted at the time saying, "My close study of the editorial page has taught me that...it's effect is far reaching upon thousands of readers. I feel that, like them, I can...also deliver a message to the world...that will receive a ready and cheerful response from the better element of the big general public."

One reason she was able to grapple with these social issues so directly is that she was making her films before 1930. That's when Hollywood instituted the Motion Picture Production Code, also known as the Hays code, which we covered in Crash Course Film History with Craig. Besides prohibiting things like nudity, sex, violence, and drug use, the Hays codes said that films couldn't directly address controversial issues. Filmmakers had to rely on subtext and innuendo instead.

So Lois Weber's films can be kind of startling for us to watch nowadays. We're used to old black and white movies feeling restrained or stuffy, not confronting social issues that are still relevant even still today. And one of the best examples of her work comes from 1916.

Where Are My Children dives straight into the controversial topic of abortion. The film combines Weber's sophisticated grasp of cinema, her deep desire to explore social issues, and her sometimes flawed point of view. There are a couple of ways to dissect *Where Are My Children* and first we're going to look at it through a historical lens, in terms of social issues, as well as film techniques.

Where Are My Children tells the story of a district attorney named Richard Walton, played by the imposing Tyrone Power Sr, and his wife, known only as Mrs. Walton, played by Helen Riaume. The couple is childless, and the film goes to great lengths to show how much Mr. Walton wants kids. We see him looking wistful, enjoying the neighborhood children, and fawning over his sister's baby.

Mrs Walton, we discover, would rather play with her puppy and hang out with other high society women than raise children. When one of Mrs. Walton's friends confides in her that he's pregnant, Mrs Walton brings her to Dr. Malfit, a physician who has performed abortions for Mrs Walton and many of her friends. Also, Dr Malfit? I mean, they could have just named Dr Malfit Dr Badguy or Dr Evil, but whatever.

As the film progresses Mrs Walton has a change of heart and decides that she is ready to start a family, and then we're told that her history of abortions has left her unable to have children. Meanwhile, her lecherous brother comes to visit and seduces her housekeeper's young daughter, leaving her pregnant. The young woman seeks help from Mrs Walton, who sends the girl to Dr Malfit. This time the procedure goes badly, and the young woman dies.

Enraged, Mr Walton attacks his brother-in-law, and prosecutes Dr Malfit, who is sentenced to fifteen years hard labor. Before the doctor is taken away he warns Mr Walton to examine his own family before he starts casting blame. In the doctor's ledger Mr Walton discovers his wife's name, along with many of her friends. He confronts them and accuses his wife of murder.

In the film's final moments we see the Waltons sitting by the fire, visited by the spirits of the children they never had. It's a remarkable effect that keeps unfolding as the Waltons grow old before our eyes and their now grown children fade into and out of the shot one last time. Not exactly a happy ending.

Now, this film grapples with tough ideas like reproductive rights, which isn't an easy conversation to have, but if you look closely at what the movie's trying to say, what at first seems like a progressive stance ends up being a bit self-contradictory. Early in the film Mr Walton somewhat reluctantly prosecutes a man for distributing pro birth control literature, which at the time was illegal. During man's testimony we flash back to his work with the poor, their homes filled with disease, domestic abuse, and even suicide.

The defendant argues that if these women had access to birth control, there would be less suffering in their communities. When the jury, which is clearly made up of only men, vote to convict the defendant, Mr Walton seems trouble by the verdict. So, at face value, *Where Are My Children* seems to be advocating for more access to birth control, or at the very least more access to information about birth control.

However, its argument is based on a notion that we now recognize as deeply flawed, eugenics. Eugenics was a pseudo-science popular in the early 20th century. Essentially, it's the idea that controlling which humans can have babies could increase so-called "desirable" genetic and behavioral traits across a population. It was an incredibly racist and classist movement. Proponents of eugenics like Karl Pearson of the University of London argued that the relatively high birthrate among the poor was a threat to civilization.

Taken to its logical extreme, eugenics was practiced by the Nazi regime in German in the 1930s, paving the way for the Holocaust. And while Weber's film does argue for access to birth control for poor women, the wealthy women are punished for seeking abortions. They're subjected to Mr Walton's fury, Mrs Walton can't have children anymore, and the housekeeper's daughter dies.

In general, the film portrays the women of the elite class as selfish and irresponsible, basically shaming them for not wanting to be mothers. That's reinforced by Mr Walton, who's presented as a noble and ultimately tragic figure, because he never gets the family he wanted. So, while it's cool that this film directed by a woman grapples boldly with controversial subject matter, it's important to recognize that it also falls victim to some grave misconceptions and prejudices of the time.

We an think critically about this film as a sort of cultural time capsule because of our current understanding and discussions of these complicated ideas, but we can also evaluate this film through a technical point of view, and through that lens it's a remarkably sophisticated work for being made just twenty-one years after the birth of movies. At key moments throughout the film Weber uses close ups to great effect. Remember that camera technique and language were still being developed alongside actors' performances.

When the housekeeper's daughter realizes she's pregnant Weber cuts to a closer shot to register her conflicted emotions. Or when Dr Malfit is sentenced to hard labor, we get a close up to see his desperation. And that moment lead to Weber's most sophisticated use of dramatic irony, which was also pretty new to cinema at 1916. Dramatic irony is where the audience understands the full significance of a moment or action, but the characters in the story don't, yet.

After Mr Walton has read Dr Malfit's ledger and found the names of his wife and her friends he returns home to confront them, but doesn't speak right away. We know what's about to go down, but Mrs Walton and her partying friends don't and that suspense makes the eruption of anger that much more effective.

Now, other filmmakers of the time were good at special effects and Weber had skills, too. The film opens with a title card announcing "the great portals of eternity" followed by a special effects shot of a huge gate opening to reveal pillars, angels, and celestial clouds. She's using forced perspective, superimpositions, and smoke to create an impressive heavenly effect.

But Weber also used special effects to get us to feel for the characters. She found ways to trick our eye and affect our heart. Twice when characters discover they're pregnant Weber superimposes a little cherub into the shot, as though an angelic, unborn soul is whispering to the would-be mother. It's an impressive way to give us important plot information, especially in a silent film, but this also helps us empathize with the character's conflicted emotions.

In the final shot of the film, where the aging Waltons are visited by the spirits of children they never had, is undeniably moving. No matter how you feel about how the filmmakers portrayed the characters and the idea of abortion, this shifting image illustrates the pain and regret that can come with thinking about roads not taken.

So, *Where Are My Children* is a landmark acheivement representing a director at the height of her power combining technical mastery with a deep understanding of complex human emotion, and it's Lois Weber's time capsule that tackles a social issue so controversial that most modern mainstream filmmakers hesitate to touch it today.

Next time we'll travel across the globe and ahead in time to an equally heart-breaking story of social taboos and unrequited love from a contemporary master of cinema, *In the Mood for Love*, directed by Wong Kar-Wai.

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