IRISH FILM

NEIL JORDAN & CAROLYN CARTER


Neil Jordan, the author of two novels, The Past and Dream of the Beast, began his film career with a half-hour documentary on the film director John Boorman ( Overnight, Deliverance). In 1982 he released his own first film, Angel (retitled Danny Boy in the States), scripted by himself and starring Irish actors, including Fionnula Flanagan and Honor Heffernan. Angel was extremely well received in Britain and Ireland. It is a visually powerful, metaphysical thriller set in Northern Ireland, and it cost less than a half-million pounds to make.

The Company of Wolves was released in Britain and Ireland in 1984 and it was a huge commercial success, despite having only a low 2.3 million pounds budget. Based on a short story by the British writer Carolyn Carter (from her collection The Bloody Chamber), it is an extraordinary unclassifiable film which mingle horror, fantasy, fairy tale, fantasy, and humor to produce a work of great beauty and originality. The film is a young girl’s dream. It begins in a classic horror setting of an old country house where a girl has fallen asleep, her face smudged in an attempt at make-up. The film follows her dream into a forest world full of standard fairy-tale features. There are clocks which run backwards and have mice in them, doll houses, and stuffed animals that come to life. The girl is pursued by wolves and cornered. Next we see her funeral: she is Alice, the sleeping girl’s sister. The main character now is Rosaleen who, like Little Red Riding Hood, goes to visit her granny, who lives deep in the forest. The granny, magnificently played by Carolyn Langbury, tells the young girl many scary tales of werewolves, lecherous pastors, traveling journeymen, and dangerous men whose eyebrows meet in the middle. These tales are visually explored in a piecemeal, loosely-related manner which gives the film much of its charm.

One of the main features of the film is the manner in which various people are transformed into wolves before the camera by means of powerful special effects, created by art director Anton Furst and supervisor Christopher Tucker. Although these images are initially disturbing, the mood softens as the film progresses, and the audience enters beneath the skin of the beasts, as it were. The tone shifts from malevolent to wondrous and awesome. From initial fear of the werewolves we are led to sympathy and admiration for their dual existence in this world and the other. In the final sequence the girl is seduced by the wild freedom of the beasts to enter into that world herself — the magic world of the dark forest.

What does it all mean? Under Jordan’s confident direction, many Freudian themes are introduced. We have the entrance of a young woman into the sexual world of the adult, forests which have phallic branches, garments “as red as blood,” animals that are lovers and menstruators and of course the continuous repressive influence of the world of experience (Granny) scaring the freedom of innocent exploration. Angela Carter’s fiction has been characterized as feminist, and her study The Savage Woman has been hailed as a new departure in feminist criticism. This a "maternal model," she has been reproached as calling it? On the other hand, some feminist critics have found the film to be a typical male exploration of a fantasized female world. Neil Jordan sees the film as a virgin’s dream, a dream of a series of old wives’ tales designed to terrify the girl into submission. The film is a frightening vision of the world of the wolf. But although the work is rich in symbol, Jordan feels that it should not be analyzed as making some form of systematic statement. Much of the symbolism is spontaneous and playful. Indeed, Jordan sees this playful film as a specifically "Irish" quality in the film.

The content of the film is, however, not Irish but European. The lore of the werewolf, the world of the forest, the once-upon-a-time fairy-tale village are all part of the European folklore tradition. Jordan sees his work as having moved in this direction for a number of years. He has an abiding interest in the late medieval world, the poetry of Dante, and the tradition of the Faublas in particular. He read a number of medieval bestiaries while writing The Dream of the Beast, and this film continues that exploration. His work is emblematic rather than symbolic, and it is for this reason that critics who are used to deciphering a coded structure may have run aground on The Company of Wolves. Perhaps in years to come it will be seen as the first of a new type of cinema, or else it may be classified a "children’s film," just as the Gothic novels of the 19th century have become children’s books.

Whatever the outcome, Neil Jordan is busy writing three film scripts — a children’s musical set in outer space called Lucky Stars, a study of a prostitute entitled Mona Lisa, and a film about the life of the Irish revolutionary leader Michael Collins. The Company of Wolves will be released in the States this spring.

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