The Wages of Fear and Post W.W.II Neo-Realism

The Wages of Fear, made in 1953 by the French director Henri Georges Clouzot, is an excellent example of the European cinema that emerged in the years following World War II as an alternative to the formerly dominant American film-making approach. Although the movie is set in South America, the rubble of post-war Europe is never far from the minds of the characters. The war has uprooted people, made them cruel and cynical, and placed proud Europeans in a world now dominated by American economic power. The Wages of Fear reflects this harsh reality with a painful intensity: (1) the scenes are shot on an outdoor location (in Spain), with deliberate attention to the squalid conditions of the oil boom town in Venezuela; (2) the characters are all dislocated wanderers and adventurers, many still traumatized by the war; (3) the emotional tone of the movie is one of desperation, in which the characters have lost all moral moorings and are reduced to the negative common denominators of lust, greed, and anger; there are no “good guys.”

By jettisoning all “noble” motives for the characters, the movie can then examine a variety of primal male relationships based on conflicts involving courage and fear, dominance and submission, caution and daring. Since no one is wasting any energy on “being good,” the above conflicts can be developed in really intense and sometimes surprising ways. These harsh conflicts show how strongly the film is influenced by existentialism. Coming from a Europe digging out from the horrors of the war and confronted by the moral nihilism of the Holocaust, the main characters have largely abandoned traditional sources of meaning and value and must create new ones for themselves. Mario, for instance, has created a “shrine” in his room, consisting of spicy pinups that surround a single Parisian train ticket. The ticket is his talisman, his symbol of the home that he left behind and wants desperately to recover at any cost. Existentialism as a philosophy focuses strictly on values in the here and now. There is nothing “beyond,” as the poignant final scene with Mario and Jo will demonstrate.

The Wages of Fear also clearly reflects the post-war European style of neo-realism. Neo-realism was both a pragmatic response to the conditions facing film-makers in Europe after WWII as well as an artistic statement. By using hand-held cameras, strictly location shooting, and no use of “stars” (some neo-realistic films even used regular citizens who were not trained actors), neo-realistic directors were not only responding to the privations of the post-war environment, they believed they were returning to a “purer,” more honest form of film-making. Neo-realism thus proved an excellent vehicle for expressing the existentialism of post-war Europe: gritty realism, amoral behavior by the characters, and none of the “happy ending” normalcy enforced by the American Production Code. True neo-realism was primarily an Italian phenomenon, and the bad conditions that had forced limitations on film-making had largely improved by 1950. Thus, The Wages of Fear is in fact a traditional film production, with a star, constructed sets, and sophisticated cinematography, but the action of the film is clearly guided by the concepts of neo-realism and existentialism.
The Plot

The plot could not be simpler. Four desperate men agree to a suicidal mission of driving trucks filled with nitroglycerin over bad roads to win enough money to escape the hellhole they have put themselves into. It's a standard “action-adventure” plot, but director Clouzot avoids falling into the clichés of the genre. First of all, he spends the first half of the movie entirely on developing the characters and their relationships, so that the audience knows the men well before they set out. Secondly, there are no heroes for the audience to become attached to; all of these guys are compromised in some way, and therefore the audience intuitively knows that none of them is “protected” by being the hero; any one of them could be destroyed at any time and the world would be no worse off. Finally, the resourcefulness shown by the men in dealing with the obstacles on the road is entirely realistic: no special effects; they get by using human ingenuity and the materials at hand.

International Characterization

One of the most instructive and intriguing aspects of The Wages of Fear is its cosmopolitan use of character and language. Although the film is a French production, there are five different languages used in the film: French, Spanish, English, Italian, and German. Also, the various main characters represent stereotypes of their national origins: Mario and Jo, the culturally smug and arrogant Frenchmen; Bimba, the stoic Dutchman who was tortured by the Nazis in the war; Luigi, the outgoing and open-hearted Italian; and Mr. O’Brien, the hard-boiled head of the American oil drilling operation. All of these nationalities are presented with a convincing degree of objectivity and subtlety. For instance, Mario, though French in nationality, is a Corsican (like Napoleon) from an island in the Mediterranean Sea between France and Italy. Therefore, he understands the Italian language and culture well enough to become friends with Luigi and cynically to exploit Luigi’s natural generosity.

The original version of the film distributed in this country (and the one which most people have seen on television) was heavily censored, not only to eliminate the (brief) nudity that was definitely out of line with the Hollywood Production Code, but also to diminish the emphasis on the exploitive, ruthless attitudes and behaviors of the American oil company. In addition, the crucial scene in which Mario rolls a cigarette towards the end was cut, presumably because someone might have thought he was rolling marijuana instead of tobacco. This version of the film we are seeing is uncut, though the subtitles are largely scrubbed of the French and Spanish vulgarities that litter the original script.

The Main Characters

Mario: Mario is the youngest of the characters, and the most physically appealing. (This role was a breakthrough to film stardom for Yves Montand, originally a French pop singer.) He’s quite the ladies’ man, siring around Linda, the barmaid at Hernandez’s tavern. He seems capable of some genuine affection for Linda and for his friend and roommate Luigi, but he is also insecure about his role as a man. Thus, when Mario’s countryman, the gangster Jo, arrives on the scene, Mario develops a hero-worshipping attitude. He apes Jo’s callousness, throwing over his relationships with Linda and Luigi. Once they are on the road carrying the explosives, facing the possibility of instant
annihilation at any moment, the relationship between Mario and Jo changes decisively. In many ways, Mario is a prime example of the anti-hero: charismatic and attractive, dynamic and capable, but motivated entirely by self-interest and operating according to his own code of behavior, which definitely does not include romance or self-sacrifice.

Jo: Jo is a French gangster who has been operating in Central and South America for at least 20 years. He’s as broke as anyone else in town, but his propensity for violence and threats gives him clout. Hernandez, the sleazy Venezuelan bar owner, treats him to food and drinks and indulges his whims to keep Jo in good humor. It is only when Luigi, angry over Jo’s having “stolen” Mario from him, confronts Jo in the bar that Jo actually shows his gun. He doesn’t actually have to shoot Luigi; instead he dares Luigi to shoot him. Since Luigi “is no murderer,” Jo then gains the upper hand. The falsity of Jo’s bravado, however, is shown on the road.

Luigi: Luigi has many of the positive qualities often stereotypically associated with Italians: he’s hardworking, family oriented, kindly. He’s also a sap whose naïveté makes him an easy mark for hustlers like Mario, bullies like Jo, and the exploitive Americans, who are literally working him to death for miserable pay on a construction job, corrupting his lungs with cement dust.

Bimba: Bimba is a Dutchman who spent three years of the war in a Nazi salt mine. The experience has left him emotionally empty and thoroughly cynical about human motives. He seems to have pride of place among the drifters. He’s the only one with steady work (for Hernandez) at the beginning of the movie, and he’s the first one chosen by O’Brien as a truck driver. As a driving team, he and Luigi are a study in contrasts.

Mr. O’Brien: One of the most intriguing elements of this movie is that we get to see how American attitudes and culture can also be presented stereotypically. The Americans are respected for their wealth and organizational abilities, but O’Brien and his company are presented as ruthless capitalists. O’Brien respects courage and is willing to pay a fair price for it, but he is brutally pragmatic. He has no interest in anyone’s health or safety if such considerations get in the way of extracting oil. His prior relationship with Jo also implies the fine line that can separate business executives from organized crime in unregulated third-world capitalism. O’Brien’s interactions with Jo are great “tough guy” confrontations, with the added spice of Jo’s really bad English and O’Brien’s equally bad French.

Hernandez: The Venezuelan bar owner, Hernandez, is a good example of negative Latino stereotypes. He’s slovenly, sexually abusive to his barmaid, greedy, and craven, but his bar is the only source of comfort anywhere around, and thus it is the social focus of the first half of the movie’s action.

Linda: The “half-savage” barmaid, Linda is a pitifully subjugated woman, sexually exploited by both Mario and Hernandez. Basically a decent person, though, she yearns for traditional values, making dresses to imitate models in ads and praying in her shrine in the garden. Like Luigi, she competes with Jo for Mario’s attention, ultimately without success. In a sense, she represents the positive virtues that Mario feels he has to leave behind in order to be “a real man.”