

The Cinephile

Shirley Hamburg

1967

Joseph Strick's film adaptation of *Ulysses* is rather like a high-minded comic-strip version of *Stephen Hero* or *Dubliners*.

On the few occasions when a bit of genuine Joycean complexity is allowed to survive in the midst of all that jolly, naturalistic Irishry, it strikes one as self-conscious and out of place. To make the film less expensive to produce, it has been updated, so that all the Celtic Twilight and Irish revolutionism had to be dropped, and much that is left (like the references to England being taken over by a Jew) is out of keeping.

To make the film more accessible, almost every "difficult" reference has been omitted. To make it conform to present tastes, the sex angle has been broadened (e.g. the masturbation in the Nausica sequence) but the anti-Catholicism discreetly soft-pedaled.

The photography is consistently second-rate, the music dull, the direction unimaginative. Not even the topography of Dublin, so vivid in the book, survives, and the movements and crisscrossing of the characters, so scrupulously worked out by Joyce, become jerky, arbitrary, incomprehensible.

Stephen, who in the novel is all intellectual stream of consciousness, is here reduced to being hardly more than a bit part.

Even Bloom is translated into basic English and Molly Bloom's monologue loses a good deal by being fully acted out rather than a luscious verbal tapestry for the eye and inner ear.

Bloom's and Stephen's father-son relationship is almost entirely lost; the Homeric parallels, entirely, and with them the mythic, universal quality of the book. The secondary characters are thinned out to shadows, and even an episode that is relatively uncut, such as the hightown sequence, is vulgarized down from a surrealist Walpurgisnacht to a series of burlesque skits reminiscent of Strick's appalling movie of *The Balcony*.

If ever a novel demanded to be left alone by the adapters, *Ulysses* is it. Its beauties and meaning lie almost exclusively in its form: in its musical interweaving of themes, in its cerebral texture of allusions and parallels, in its linguistic constructs, and, not the least, in its topographical appearance. The film-maker can either pedestrianly transpose what is literally transposable or invent daring cinematic equivalents. Either way the particular grandeur of the novel is betrayed. It may be that Strick, through sheer lack of imagination, betrayed and raped it less completely. But rape, like virginity, is not easily divisible—it is, in fact, quite Kierkegaardian in its either/or.

In any case, only a very crude sensibility could conceive of taking bits and pieces out of this enormous and difficult book, stringing them together and calling the whole thing either an illumination of the original or a tribute to its author. Shoddy as it is, even the generally acceptable performances cannot make it much of a film in its own right.

Its chief purpose, I imagine, is to give those who haven't read the book (whether or not they can follow the film) an excuse for never reading it; and those who have, an occasional pleasant reminder of something in the novel. But to have to pay \$5.50 for an aide-memoir is an outrage.

No amount of pious invoking of Joyce's name can disguise the fact that a cheaply produced film is being sold at exorbitant prices so that someone can make his boodle off "culture."

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