

“Poor Cow”

Film review

Thomas Haroldson

1968

To get some idea of what “Poor Cow” is like, one need only imagine what “Elvira Madigan” would have been like if it had been filmed in the slums of London.

The two pictures are remarkably similar: both deal with impractical young lovers; both use the same impressionistic film techniques; both employ many short, carefully composed scenes; and both follow a visual, rather than a narrative, plot line.

But, of course, it goes without saying that they are not identical. Modern London, and the people who live in it, have little in common with the beautiful world of “Elvira Madigan.”

Apparently, in an effort to get his point across, the film begins with what the ad freaks are calling “an actual birth scene” (WOW! YOU MUST BE 18, etc., etc.). But the scene, despite the hokey ads, does serve the purpose of immediately establishing the tone of the picture.

It makes it explicitly clear that there is a very real (and often very brutal) world being portrayed beneath the low-key color photography.

“Poor Cow,” however, does more than merely photograph the agony of existence through an arty cinematic veil. Surprisingly enough, it is a highly optimistic “message” film that sets out to prove that grinding poverty really isn’t very grinding after all.

It’s no wonder that some English critics found the picture objectionable. To say that the London slum dweller is really happy is comparable to saying in this country that “it’s kind of fun to be a Black when nobody is looking.”

But there’s not much a social reformer can do for a girl like Poor Cow. In addition to being virtually indestructible, she is irrepressibly optimistic—a happy creature who follows her heart instead of her head and seldom, if ever, has any regrets.

When her husband, a dull incompetent thief, is sent to prison, she takes up with another thief, equally incompetent, who in turn is locked away for twelve years.

When she’s not near the man she loves, she loves the man she’s near. However, Poor Cow is not a prostitute: “Getting paid would take the fun out of it,” she tells her girlfriend.

Her gentlemen friends include the skinny guy who delivers bread to her flat, the man at the cleaners, her lawyer, a bachelor in a studio apartment, etc.

Between her casual romantic interludes she works in a pub, models nude for a bunch of dirty old men, and continues to be an excellent loving mother to her child.

This is about all one can say about the plot. The picture doesn’t have a real ending, because the life that Poor Cow leads will simply go on. Like her aging aunt, and the old women in the pub, she will remain hopelessly romantic and optimistic for as long as she lives.

If you enjoyed “Elvira Madigan,” you will probably enjoy “Poor Cow,” but I wouldn’t want to bet on it. It’s the kind of movie that will probably irritate about half the people who go to see it.

In addition to being a bit slow, it has a tendency to become rather cute at times.

For example, every once in awhile silent movie titles are flashed on the screen in order to illustrate Poor Cow's melodramatic thought process.

The hidden camera technique is used far too frequently, and really never comes off satisfactorily. In fact, every time the film attempts to be extremely clever, it fails. The documentary episodes and Poor Cow's "curtain speech" are outstanding examples of this.

However, despite its many shortcomings, "Poor Cow" is a "good" picture. The photography is excellent; some of the scenes are great (the camera club episode is a masterpiece); and the acting is so good that the other fine performances fade in comparison.

In short, "Poor Cow" is a high quality motion picture that would have been even better if it had managed to avoid the pitfalls of its own cleverness.

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