SILENT NOIR

The Informer (1929)

Monica Nolan

A policeman's shadow threatens wanted man Francis McPhillip (Carl Harbord) in *The Informer*

Calling the silent version of *The Informer* a proto-noir is a feeble way to describe this relentlessly gloomy tale of betrayal and death. The adaptation of Liam O'Flaherty's 1925 novel of Irish revolutionary infighting is such a complete compendium of noir elements that only the year of its release, 1929, prevents the film from being listed in the noir canon. From the chiaroscuro lighting to the claustrophobic *mise-en-scene*, the gritty milieu, and the doomed, dumb antihero, the film checks every noir box. The only item missing is hardboiled dialogue—although the terse intertitle "You've made a terrible mistake, you've killed the chief of police!" certainly packs a wallop.

Directed by German-American Arthur Robison for British International Pictures with an international cast and crew, this *Informer* has been overshadowed by John Ford's Oscar-winning 1935 film of the same name. Robison's version was also a casualty of the stampede to sound that occurred at the end of the '20s, leaving behind many films, which, like *Informer*, featured the supple, fluent language of silent filmmaking at its height. The film was further eclipsed when it was turned into a partial talking version, which according to

The police seem more disapproving than grateful as Gypo Nolan (Lars Hanson) tells them where to find McPhillip, sealing his former comrade's fate

historian Anthony Slide, was a dubbing disaster: "The working-class Irish spoke with cultured Oxford accents."

The British Film Institute's restoration of *The Informer* in 2016 precipitated a wave of attention and praise, but the film had already acquired some early, influential fans. William K. Everson, in a program note from 1974, called it "unquestionably a better film than Ford's…mainly because the script is so much better, with more depth, greater irony and a subtler plot construction." Anthony Slide, author of *The Cinema and Ireland*, dismissed Ford's "patronizing, false view of the Irish," and described the 1929 version as "superbly gripping."

Robison's film downplays *The Informer*'s Irish setting—and not just by casting a Swede and a Hungarian in the leading roles. Watching *The Informer*, it's easy to forget that this story of betrayal has any political context. Whether due to the trend in the late 1920s towards international films that played well in film markets around the world or fear of English censorship, the film makes no specific reference to Irish politics. It plays as an archetypal underworld story; the "Party" operates like a gang and the political meeting that opens the film is quickly interrupted by a gun battle.

From this first scene, the director gives notice that human psychology is the film's real subject. As Party chief (or gang leader) Dan Gallagher (Warwick Ward) expounds on the peace he's brokered with the police, the camera slides swiftly around the table, pausing briefly on each grim face before landing on Gypo Nolan (Lars Hanson), who's paying no attention to Gallagher's speech as he tries to make time with the beauteous Katie Fox (Lya De Putti). Katie is keeping company with Gypo's brother in arms, Francis McPhillip (Carl Harbord), but when Francis is forced into hiding after killing the police chief, Gypo replaces him in Katie's affections. Already, political loyalty is trumped by personal desire.

This is just the setup. It is Francis' return to the city that starts the real action, which takes place in one night, from dusk to dawn. It's a night filled with dance halls and clip joints, narrow streets lined with brick walls down which the characters scurry like rats in a maze. In one shot, Francis tears his photo from a wanted poster and a policeman's shadow looms up beside the torn sheet. For Robison, shadows were more than a stylistic flourish. In the director's seminal film *Schatten* (*Warning Shadows*, 1923), shadows act out the characters' subconscious desires. In the more realistic *Informer*, Robison uses shadows and mirrors to suggest the layers of conflicting impulses each character contains, as well as to hint at differences between reality and appearance. It is Gypo's inability to distinguish one from the other that leads to his fatal decision to turn informant.

Francis flees the cop and finds himself at Katie's door. But "things are not as they were," Katie tells him, just as he notices the table is set for two. When Gypo arrives, Katie hides her ex, fearing a clash between the two. Through a crack, Francis spies on Katie and Gypo as they embrace. Moments later, this sequence is repeated when Gypo spots Francis' still-smoldering cigarette on the table and spies Katie, reflected in a mirror, sneaking his rival out the back door. This pattern of mirrored actions is repeated throughout the film, each small betrayal gets doubled, then tripled, multiplying like echoes in a cave,

Left: Katie Fox (Hungarian actress Lya De Putti, usually typecast as a vamp) warns McPhillip of Gypo's jealousy; Right: Katie reloads for McPhillip in the opening gun battle

growing with each repetition.

Jealous, Gypo confronts Katie and the two exchange harsh words. When Gypo leaves, Katie's shadow pursues him, like the policeman's shadow pursued Francis. The three points of this romantic triangle roam the streets: Francis seeking escape, Gypo seeking confirmation of his jealous suspicions, Katie seeking to warn Francis of Gypo's rage. When Gypo makes the pivotal decision to inform on Francis, the camera tracks after him relentlessly as he pushes through the crowd and then moves in front of him to track backward, practically pulling him into the police station.

"Nearly every important aspect of film," writes Bryony Dixon in *100 Silent Films*, "its techniques, tricks and special effects, and its language—was established in the silent era." *The Informer* is film language at its most masterful, particularly in the way it combines cutting and camera work smoothly and unobtrusively, achieving the "invisible" editing style we associate with films from the classic Hollywood era of the 1940s and 50s. *The Informer* anticipates this style and in other ways prefigures a host of later noirs. The film's time structure, and its sweating, squirming antihero looks forward to *Night and the City*; the underworld army mobilizing to track down one man is reminiscent of *M*. The virtuoso rooftop chase sequence, when the cops hunt Francis down in an expressionist world of slanted angles and painted shadows, inevitably calls to mind *Vertigo*'s opening scene. One can imagine a young Alfred Hitchcock watching the film in 1929 and noting the shot where Francis clings to the roof gutter, hanging by his fingernails before plummeting to the street below.

Perhaps the most noir element of *The Informer* is its subject matter—the informer, the squealer, the turncoat. Films of the '40s and '50s are obsessed with squealing, simultaneously establishing it as taboo and in movies like *Kiss of Death* (1947), *Johnny Stool Pigeon* (1949), and *On the Waterfront* (1954) working hard to convince viewers that the films' heroes *need* to turn informer. HUAC's equation of informing with patriotism is probably responsible for this schizophrenic approach. *Kiss of Death*'s Tommy Udo expresses the taboo and justifies breaking it when he tells a woman in a wheelchair, "You know what I do to squealers? I let 'em have it in the belly," before pushing her down the stairs. In *Odd Man Out*, Carol Reed's more nuanced thriller from 1947, the code becomes a self-defeating prison. No one will squeal on wounded fugitive Johnny McQueen, but neither will anyone aid him as he stumbles through town leaking blood and looking for a place to hide.

The Informer is interested in the psychological fallout from informing. Robison establishes the anti-squealer code when the policeman chases Francis. A little boy points which way the quarry has gone and the boy's mother slaps his hand down. Later, at the police station, Gypo tries to refuse the reward for turning in his friend. "I didn't do it for the money," he protests. "Take it and get out," the cop replies with disgust.

Yet as the movie progresses and the double-crosses multiply, betrayal begins to seem an unavoidable part of the human condition. The lady of the evening who spots Gypo in the police station wants to sell her information to Gallagher and his henchman. Katie, who forgives Gypo when he confesses to her (briefly giving Gypo the faint, futile hope that he'll somehow survive this sorry affair), betrays her political loyalties by leading Gallagher astray to protect her lover. Gallagher himself is not the moral authority he first appears. He tells the Party boys not to shoot Gypo until they have proof, but when he sends Gypo to pay the Party's respects to Francis' grieving mother, he seems motivated as much by a desire to torment Gypo as to establish his guilt. Later, Katie suggests that, like Francis and Gypo, Gallagher has always desired her and his pursuit of Gypo is tainted with self-interest.

It feels like noir fate when Katie mirrors Gypo's betrayal and tells Gallagher where to find him. And, like Gypo, she is motivated by misguided jealousy and immediately consumed with regret. By this time, death is a relief for the battered Gypo, and he meets it with the fatalism of Burt Lancaster in *The Killers*. In its final moments, alas, the film abandons its noir style and turns camp, erupting into an over-the-top fantasia of heavy-handed Catholic imagery. The dying Gypo stumbles into a church chock full of halo-like lighting and crucifix-shaped shadows, finding last minute forgiveness from Francis' mother—and Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, too, no doubt.

We, in the audience, get no such facile redemption. *The Informer* has pulled us into its moral quagmire of conflicting loyalties and multiple betrayals, leaving us to wonder if we will do any better than Gypo or Katie in making our way through this world of shadows and mirrors. The Dublin night leaves an uneasy aftertaste. ■