

Dudley Murphy: Hollywood Wild Card, Susan Delson, (2006)

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DUDLEY MURPHY was a curious character. A long-time (though not always willing) denizen of the peculiar grey area between art and commerce, Murphy, in his remarkably varied film career, made avant-garde landmarks, by-the-numbers Hollywood programme pictures, several important (if controversial) films in which African American performers had lead roles, and even several instalments of an early, bargain-base-ment series of proto-music-videos. His life makes for a fascinating read, and Susan Delson has written an engaging, lively, admirably researched volume on its many ups and rather more plentiful downs.

In Delson's *Dudley Murphy: Hollywood Wild Card*, her subject comes across as both indomitable and somewhat misguided. His numerous stabs at bringing art to the masses generally come off as hopelessly naïve, largely because the other side of his brain kept telling him to watch the bottom line. Murphy was truly committed to making good, populist, artistic art but he was either too headstrong – too idealistic – or simply in the wrong place at the wrong time: it never really happened. The art/commerce split is Delson's narrative backbone, and it appears entirely apt. Murphy spent his entire career fluttering about the margins of Hollywood, occasionally landing a plum job but falling victim to poor reviews, poor box office or both.

Which is a shame because Murphy was a talented and terrifically interesting film-maker; Delson clearly enjoys and admires



many of his films, but maintains a scholarly distance that allows for even-handed and clear assessments of Murphy's works. Delson offers extended analyses of the production histories and aesthetics of the most important films of Murphy's career. Her detailed discussions of several of these are particularly welcome, especially because extant writing on these works is so scattered. Her section on, for instance, *Soul of the Cypress* (1920), Murphy's diaphanous, mysterious, erotic (in its unexpurgated version, downright ribald) first film, considers it within numerous germane contexts: its striking visual content, Murphy's sexual openness, the economic terms on which it was produced and distributed, and the unusual circumstances of its archiving and preservation. Similarly, Delson's chapter on what is likely Murphy's most important film, *Ballet Mécanique* (claims to whose authorship can, as Delson points out, be at least partially made for Murphy, Fernand Léger, Man Ray, George Antheil and even Ezra Pound), is a terrific work of film history and should become standard reading material on the subject.

The material on Murphy's minor projects and failures is just as interesting and well sketched: Delson's

subject offered no shortage of peculiar career turns. (Not to mention idiosyncratic sexual and romantic practices, a subject which Delson addresses but does not dwell on.) She examines films such as *St. Louis Blues* (1929, the only filmic evidence of the great Bessie Smith) not only within the context of Hollywood's first tentative dabblings into films for African American audiences but also with an eye for Murphy's distinctive visual signatures. In the discussions on the marginal Hollywood filler that he found himself making (e.g. *Confessions of a Co-ed* (1931), *The Night Is Young* (1935)), one can nearly feel Murphy's frustration as he is once again made to compromise his artistic vision by the bean counters. Murphy's love-hate relationship with Hollywood – it periodically kept him financially solvent, but its undermining of his best creative impulses left him in torment – is one of Delson's chief themes, and she uses it quite ably as a guide to understanding her subject.

Delson sees as the major turning point in Murphy's weird career *The Emperor Jones* (1935), the film version of the Eugene O'Neill play that provided the most substantial cinematic role for Paul Robeson. In typically insightful, clear prose,



Delson explains the importance of this film's failure to her subject's life.

[Murphy] started the project as a disgruntled cadet in the ranks of Hollywood studio directors. He finished as a self-declared independent, committed to turning out quality productions for the most discerning segment of the moviegoing audience, a segment that he paradoxically hoped would take on mass-market proportions. Even more unrealistically, he hoped that the film's success would win him acclaim and status in Hollywood, which, despite everything, remained his primary frame of reference. (p. 148)

Considered within the context of Delson's portrait of Murphy's life and career, such an assessment is difficult to dispute.

After *The Emperor Jones*, Murphy's relationship with Hollywood became all the more troubled and antagonistic. He managed to land jobs directing a number of marginal programme pictures, but each one seemed to intensify his ire toward the moneymaking machinery which, to him, militated against artistic experimentation. Murphy found himself relegated to directing a number of Soundies (short, low-budget films made to be played on a kind of video jukebox; Delson is apparently working on a book-length history of these fascinating – and prescient – curiosities, whose history she sketches briefly here). In a way, Soundies were the kind of film that Murphy should have been making all along: they allowed for the kind of low-cost visual experi-

mentation for which he demonstrated great skill in films such as *Ballet Mécanique* and *Soul of the Cypress*; they were specifically designed to showcase music using cinematic means, a life-long interest of Murphy's; and they had a strong popular appeal. Alas, they were short-lived, underfunded and exhausting to produce, and could not sustain Murphy financially. After some half-hearted attempts to make 'alternative' films in Mexico, Murphy's film career was effectively over; his late-life career as Malibu hotelier and restaurateur made him a node of the Hollywood gossip-wheel he so loved, but his artistic dreams ultimately went unfulfilled.

Dudley Murphy: *Hollywood Wild Card* is a fine biography, as well as a fine work of film studies; indeed, these two elements of the book reinforce one another. Through Delson's sketching of Murphy's character, we may better understand his films and vice versa. Murphy embodied

– at times, tragically – a great many conflicts: the stuff on which a biographer can build an engaging text. Not only was he plagued by the art v. commerce dilemma, but he lived nearly all of his life in the shadow of a stern, near-unappeasable father; and he was a restless sexual experimenter who could never find a balance among love, sex, companionship and marriage. His was a strange, relentlessly fascinating life that makes for excellent biography material, and Susan Delson has written an excellent biography. ●

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