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Excerpt:

In August 1915, in the woods outside Marietta, Georgia, a mob of angry white southerners lynched a man for rape and murder. Neither the event—a well-planned act of vigilante violence—nor the inspiration—the alleged violation and murder of a white woman—was particularly unusual at that time and place in American history. What was unusual was the race of the man at the end of the rope. He was white. Stranger still, his fate was sealed not by his crime but by his religion. He was Jewish.

The victims—i.e., only use the plural here—were Leo Frank and Mary Phagan. As the title of Mervin LeRoy’s 1937 film about the matter prophesied of all those who learn of the case, “They won’t forget.” And indeed, few have. In some ways, though, the better question is: Why do so many still remember? Mary Phagan. As the title of Mervin LeRoy’s 1937 film about the matter prophesied of all those who learn of the case, “They won’t forget.” And indeed, few have. In some ways, though, the better question is: Why do so many still remember? Mary Phagan. As the title of Mervin LeRoy’s 1937 film about the trial and “at the hands of persons unknown.”

1913, and the lynching of Leo Frank in 1915 was just one of an estimated 2,500 black lynchings between 1880 and 1930. And this number pales in comparison to the estimated 2,500 black lynchings between 1880 and 1930. And this number pales in comparison to the number of white lynchings between 1882 and 1930. What befell Atlanta’s Jews in the trial’s aftermath is certainly unusual in the case itself. . . .

The Phagan-Frank case reflected and was shaped by many interlocking cultural tensions of the period. Mary Phagan came from a family of tenant farmers forced to move into the city to seek factory and mill work. The working conditions she and others found were what we today would call sweatshops. Such circumstances inflamed southern populists’ resentment of industrialization, modernization, and child labor. . . .

Gender played a role as well. The unfounded charge that Frank had attempted to rape Phagan played on commonly held fears about what vulnerable daughters faced when they left the safety of the family for the vipers’ nest of the city and factory. . . .

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The Phagan-Frank story is resistible to visual storytellers often proved too complex, contradictory, or ambiguous to be given their due. The case was a traumatic event in American history, and this is another reason why filmmakers keep returning to it. Any representation of trauma—or of history more generally—is an attempt to process and comprehend what is disturbing in human experience. The most recent and dramatic example of this dynamic is the appearance of television and theatrical films such as United 93 four years after the terrorist attacks on America of September 11, 2001. Yet whether the trauma in question is personal or national in scale, its representation is informed by rupture and gaps in the telling; its depiction always pushes against the limits of what can be represented—as critics and theorists of traumatic representation would have it, the portrayal of trauma involves dramatizing what cannot be expressed.

Featured Title

Screening a Lynching: The Leo Frank Case on Film and Television

Matthew Bernstein

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