

FILM REVIEW

Diegetic Labor History

Bisbee '17 (Film, directed by Robert Greene, 2018).

Robert Carson

Peabody Institute, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, USA

doi:10.1017/S1537781419000562

The sidelining of American labor history, both in school curricula and in popular discussions of social justice, is a common complaint for people interested in class and labor. It is no secret that the middle term of the triad, “race, class, and gender” is often given glib lip service or elided altogether in politically committed accounts of American history. For doing its part to teach the public about a vivid moment in labor history, *Bisbee '17* is a refreshing, flawed, and welcome intervention.

Robert Greene’s documentary film looks back at the small border town of Bisbee, Arizona, where on July 12, 1917, a deputized posse of some 2,000 men violently rounded up thousands of copper miners, Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) activists, and actual or suspected sympathizers. Corralled in a ballpark at gunpoint, they were encouraged to renounce a strike called by the IWW on the Phelps Dodge Mining Corporation. About 1,200 didn’t back down—mostly Mexican and Eastern European—and were forced onto cattle cars and sent to the New Mexico desert and abandoned. (The film’s opening titles say they were “left to die,” but they were in fact retrieved by New Mexico and military officials, given brief refuge, and dispersed.) The Bisbee Deportation, as it came to be called, was roundly condemned, but no member of the police, posse, or mining companies was ever tried for any crime. As part of a broader effort to suppress the radical IWW (or “Wobblies”) and other confrontational elements of the labor movement, the deportation was successful.

In large part, *Bisbee '17* is a documentary about the town of Bisbee’s reenactment of the deportation on its centennial—the culmination of a long, difficult campaign for historical memory. This documentation is the occasion for the film’s summary of the deportation itself. *Bisbee '17* lacks a single narrator, and no academic experts appear. Save for a few passing references to “recent” deportations, there is no overt bid for timelessness; no such attempt is necessary. The names of Donald Trump and Joe Arpaio are everywhere, but not spoken.

Greene documents both the rehearsal and performance of the deportation. In this way, *Bisbee '17* follows in the path of his 2016 *Kate Plays Christine*, which depicts the actress Kate Lyn Sheil in her preparations to play the real-life newscaster who killed herself on live television in 1974, Christine Chubbuck. In *Bisbee '17*, there are uncanny moments when it’s hard to tell when people are *speaking* as their present selves, *voicing* free indirect discourse from their assigned historical figure’s point of view, or *acting* their historical figure’s role. This provocative slippage is familiar to actors and historical

reenactment enthusiasts. For viewers of *Bisbee '17*, it produces a classic Brechtian *alienation effect*, highlighting both the reenactment's and the documentary's artificiality, through which both aim to tell the truth.

Importantly, this effect occurs exclusively with those who play or are descendants of the company men and police. Some are sympathetic to their motives, even if they admit that the deportation itself was wrong. The most common plea made on the union-busters' behalf is that they "believed in" what they were doing. It's tempting to mock this reasoning, like contemporary apologia for the Confederacy. Crucially, Greene withholds any such comment, and instead offers the deportation as an object lesson in ideology: doing what's wrong for reasons that seem very right—or at least *felt* right to someone, sometime.

Indeed, being on the "right" side of Bisbee history now is not an easy matter of seeing through the union-busters' rhetoric; their hostility to the strikers was well-reasoned. The IWW held that class solidarity trumps racial and ethnic difference, denied any common humanity between workers and employers, and threatened industrial sabotage in order to bring the United States out of the Great War and into a wholly new political order. The Wobbly syndicalist ethos would have only been emboldened by any concessions from Phelps Dodge, not placated; negotiating would not have brought the prosperous labor peace envisioned by current-day progressive audiences. (In fact, the IWW proscribed the kind of union legitimacy sought by the American Federation of Labor (AFL)—things like contracts, dues check-off, and participation in electoral politics. AFL unions were often complicit in the suppression of the IWW.) The deportation is also not *reducible* to "ethnic cleansing" on behalf of Anglo-Saxon whiteness, as one member of the Bisbee Deportation Memorial Committee eagerly concludes. Greene leaves this statement, like all attempts at analysis, neither affirmed nor repudiated.

What is missing from *Bisbee '17*? While we get indulgent accounts of how police and company men personally felt the political motives of their crimes, less imagination is exercised for the striking miners who were deported. How did they feel about the IWW's political ambitions in relation to their local demands and struggles? What is it like to "believe in" a syndicalist strike? We never find out. In other words, what is missing in a documentary about the Bisbee Deportation is any unionist comprehension—whether of the IWW or AFL variety—of literal class warfare. Only passing mention is made of the pattern of violent labor disputes in the period, neglecting a very similar but smaller deportation of Wobbly miners *two days previous* in Jerome, Arizona.

Aside from some set-piece rabble-rousing, our exposure to the IWW's views comes through its distinctive songs. Just as one of the townspeople asks if the reenactment "trivializes" the deportation, one might ask: Does singing trivialize political conviction and argument? Greene's answer is no.

The most memorable singing is from Fernando Serrano, a young man playing a Mexican miner. Serrano shares the story of his mother, who was deported when he was seven and imprisoned in Mexico for eleven years for drug-related offenses. He sees the disturbing resonance between his mother's deportation and the miners', but his comments stop there. Instead, as the film progresses, his performance suggests with quiet, subtle intensity just what sort of fortitude the strike demanded.

He initially stumbles with the unfamiliar word "solidarity" while reading aloud, later joins a chorus of "Solidaridad pa' siempre," and finally, in a menacing solo to the camera, sings: "Workers of the world, awaken! / Break your chains; demand your rights! / All the wealth you make is taken / by exploiting parasites. / Shall you kneel in deep

submission / from your cradles to your graves? / Is the height of your ambition / to be good and willing slaves?" How did playing a Wobbly miner affect Serrano's feelings about his mother and her fate? Greene errs on the side of discretion here, as he does with the personal experience of radical politics in general.

The songs, however, are *just* enough to keep this sharp, uncomfortable story of class warfare from being dulled by easy condemnation of the Bisbee Deportation's xenophobic character. In its self-conscious blending of documentary and theatricality, *Bisbee '17* manages to be serious without being earnest, and enlightening without being righteous.