

FILM REVIEW

David Tosco's *The Face of Evil*
[First Run/Icarus Films, 2006, 51 minutes]

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It is disappointing when a film described as “a study of the physiognomy of evil” fails to deliver much that is new or compelling. There is such a need for films that help us understand the causes and power of evil in our culture.

The Face of Evil by David Tosco has a promising beginning, talking about our fear of the “Other” (those who do not look like us), but it fails to enlarge on that concept. It skims over the controversial fields of phrenology, eugenics, and anthropometrics without analyzing their merits or deficits.

The film draws heavily from the life of Bruno Ludke, a German who was allegedly a serial killer in the 1940s (presumably responsible for the killing of 51 women). Archival footage and comments by criminologists and historians attempt to point out the Nazi theory of “born criminals” with nude photographs of Ludke that supposedly show his degenerate nature. The experts are unconvincing in their testimony and fail to make the case for a hierarchical ranking of the “Other.”

Although the film was made in 2006, it has a dated look with the conventional “talking heads.” There is a scattershot approach to the subject and the film comes alive only when it shows excerpts from the acclaimed 1957 film by Robert Siodmak, *The Devil Strikes at Night*, a dramatization of the Bruno Ludke story. It is easy to become more interested in the Ludke case than in the film’s initial question, which asked whether we create images to match our preconceptions of those we fear.

Overall, the commentators and footage are pedantic, perhaps more suitable for a graduate class than for a commercial, non-academic audience. This is unfortunate because worldwide events in which those in power use techniques to isolate and demonize those who pose a threat are becoming more common. Rwanda, with its “measurement” policies separating tribes according to physical characteristics, is a recent example of the genocide cycle.

It is hoped that this film may encourage other filmmakers and scholars to produce engaging and dramatic films that expose the dangers in manipulating data and judging “Others” by their physical characteristics alone. The “face” of evil, if it exists at all, may well be in the eye of the beholder.

