'Pawnbroker' Offers Best In Houston Now

By CHARLE DEMITZ

Certainly the most competently made film now showing in Houston is 'The Pawnbroker,' with Rod Steiger, Brock Peters, and Jaime Sanchez. Taken from the book by Edward Wallant, 'The Pawnbroker' examines the problem of the individual's recognition of evil.

The pawnbroker, Rod Steiger, is an aging Jewish refugee from Auschwitz, the concentration camp. In the camp he lost his wife and his two children. In reaction, he has cut himself off from communication with humanity.

The rationale behind his rejection of man is the conviction that all attempts by people at large to conduct themselves in a moral, humane fashion are founded in ignorance.

To Steiger, who has seen humanity reduced to animality, striving to act upon ethical standards is stupid and unrealistic: animal does not relate ethically to animal. Steiger treats his clients accordingly.

The film is staged around a Harlem pawnshop in a series of confrontations coupled with haunting flashbacks to Steiger's treatment at the hands of the Nazis.

In his shop, Steiger meets a cross-section of Harlem: thieves, a junkie, a derelict, an unwed mother, a social worker. Fuller treatment is given to the local racketeer (Brock Peters), Steiger's assistant (Jaime Sanchez), and his girl.

The film opens with the anniversary of the death of Steiger's wife. As his day wears on, Steiger is reminded, meeting his customers, of the days in the concentration camp. He reacts by feeling even less sympathy for those around him.

He treats them not with hatred, but with a refusal to consider them more than economic entities.

As days pass, the reminiscences grow stronger and more haunting. Such memories are all the more troubling to Steiger because of their origin; how can the people of Harlem remind him of Auschwitz when he has spent the last two decades convincing himself that Auschwitz (not Harlem or anything else) is the only true reality of the human condition.

The resolution comes after Steiger's realization that the man from whom he takes payoffs (Brock Peters) is a wholesale dealer in prostitution and dope.

As violence follows violence at the end of the film, Steiger is forced to see that what he had considered the ultimate human reality, isolated in time at Auschwitz, is in fact universal but not ultimate.

The people whom he had judged fools for their ignorant attempts to find human values, he sees, are in fact not ignorant: even more than Steiger, they are aware of evil, for they deal with it every day.

Finally, Steiger realizes that, in treating people solely on the basis of the horrors of Auschwitz, he has himself helped to perpetuate similar horrors.