Rob Bauer

Robert West

Film Appreciation 1310

19 September 2009

“Witness”

“Witness” is a movie about a cop who must protect an Amish boy who has witnessed a murder, but the police department itself is corrupt and looking to eliminate the boy and anyone who stands in their way. The film’s setting is 1984 and starts out as a thriller. The Amish boy, Samuel (Lukas Haas) witnesses a murder in tough New York City. Harrison Ford plays John Book who is tasked with solving the case and ends up protecting Samuel and his mom. To do so, he takes them to Amish country. This movie is similar to “Three Days of the Condor” and “Bourne Identity.” All three movies have the bad guys as corrupt government departments looking to quash those who will expose them. They all have a hero who must discover why they are being hunted, must protect the girl, and must bring down the corruption. Of the three movies, I think “Witness” had the best story. I thought it was more believable and the story had a nice flow to it.

“Witness” has an interesting visual design to it. The movie starts out in peaceful Amish country and then quickly takes us to the hustle and bustle of New York City. Due to danger, the characters must escape New York City to return to Amish country to go in hiding. Samuel and his mom Rachel (Kelly McGillis) are plain and simple Amish and are a bit out of their element when in the hectic pace of New York City. The film shows passengers getting impatient with them as they hold up the line trying to ask for simple information. When John takes them by car to identify a witness, they see the shady and grimy side of New York City and do not approve of it. For John, this is not just normal; it is part of his work environment. The police department is corrupt and John discovers this when he is ambushed and shot at. He has to leave the city and take Samuel and Rachel with him. The Amish country proves to be an excellent hiding place. But John is used to New York life, not the simple and religious life the Amish lead. The film goes from the dirty grimy life of New York to the clean, airy, and wholesome life in the country. I think the settings were very well used. Rachel and Samuel are simple and naïve characters who are in their place in the country, but not in New York City. John on the other hand is at home in New York City and enjoys the bustle of the city. But when these two sets of characters swap settings, they must learn to cope and rely on the other set of characters for help and support. I think the settings reflect who the characters are, what morals they have, and how they live their lives.

Could this movie be done in black and white? Maybe. It would be unlikely the audience would have accepted it if it was in black and white. They are used to seeing other movies and TV in color (Boggs and Petrie, 92). The Amish believe in keeping things plain and simple and their dress seen in the movie was predominantly black and white. Even the farm house and cow barn was predimonently white on the outside and black in shadows on the inside. John and New York were both seen as dark, grungy, and brown. If the film was in black and white, the focus would be more on the story, which I feel the movie has a strong story. But losing the color information would have taken away the character information the scenes subtly give us. The lightning also helped support the use of colors and set the mode throughout the movie. It seemed like the scenes in New York used high-key lighting, which presents a lot of information to the viewer about the scene, but loses intimacy in return (Boggs and Petrie, 115). For the scenes in the country, especially when inside the house or other buildings, low-key lighting was used. This helped tell the romantic story in the movie as well as remind the viewer we were out in the country were life was simple and they still used gas lighting.

This movie is very cinematic. It uses all of the points of view. It follows the rules, going from an objective view point to a subjective view point to allow the viewer to see the scene, and then see what the character is seeing. For example, the scenes in the New York train station. The viewer sees the scene of Rachel and Samuel, and then a view of Rachel from Samuel’s perspective. Same goes for the gun fight scenes in the barn towards the end of the movie. The viewer gets to see the scene itself, and then the view as the character sees it. The camera moves around a bit as well. For example, the scene in the police station where John is taking Samuel and Rachel back to his desk. They are walking in the hallways of the station and the camera is in front of them looking back at them. The camera is wobbling around a bit like you would see as if you were walking backwards and watching the action. The use of cinematography effectively draws the viewer inside the story. Roger Ebert describes three elements of this movie as being the thriller part, the love story, and the Amish documentary, and he says (Ebert):

“But all three elements work together so well that something organic is happening here; we're inside this story.”

It was an interesting film. It turns out I had seen this film back in the late 80’s, I think. I don’t remember exactly when I had seen it. I know I had watched it in VHS format and not in a theatre. Strangely, I didn’t remember this film by its title, and it wasn’t really until the scene where some locals give the Amish a hard time and John stands up for them. Roger Ebert and Rotten Tomatoes rate this movie highly, with Ebert giving it 4 stars (Ebert) and Tomatoes giving it 96% (Rotten Tomatoes). It is clearly a successful and enjoyable film with 2 Oscars, 10 wins, and 25 nominations (Witness (1985) - IMDB - The Internet Movie Database). I liked the movie (both when I watched it the first time and in class), but for some reason, I had managed to completely forget I had watched it before.

# Bibliography

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