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Film Appreciation 1310

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“Passion in the Desert”

This film starts out by watching a soldier getting rescued in the desert and taken back to get mended. We see his arm getting cut off and are left wondering why. The movie then flashes back to the desert where we see this solder, Augustin Robert (Ben Daniels), attached to a French regiment of Napoleon’s Egyptian campaign. Robert is responsible for watching over painter Jean-Michel Venture de Paradis (Michel Piccoli). After a surprise attack and then a sand storm, Robert and Venture get lost in Egypt. They then run out of water and Robert ventures off without Venture. He gets into some trouble and escapes into some caves and ruins. There he meets and befriends a female leopard. Here the film explores the relationship between man and beast.

There were several sound techniques used in this film. First notable sound technique was used with the dialog. At the beginning of the film, we see a soldier stumble and fall in the desert. The screen goes black with the use of a dead screen which put emphasis on the music and possibly the hopelessness of the soldier’s situation. “The dead screen is used to put unusual emphasis on sound.” There is good use of synchronous and asynchronous sounds. For example, in one of the earlier scenes, the soldiers are around a campfire and the painter is telling stories of the spirits. The camera focuses on the speaker and their dialog. Then it cuts to another character while the speaker is still speaking. The audience sees non-speaking character’s reaction to the dialog. Also during this scene, the audience can hear the crackling of the fire, although we don’t always see it. Towards the end of the dialog about the spirits, strange desert sounds become more prominent off screen. The spirit/desert sounds and the campfire would be considered to be asynchronous sounds. “These are sounds not matched with a visible source of sound on the screen.” The Art of Watching Films describes these sounds as visible and invisible. The visible sounds are sounds we expect to hear from action on screen. The invisible sounds are sounds we don’t see from the action, but help tell the story. One effective spot in the film was where Robert is in the ruins or caves and it is his first night there and he doesn’t know what animals might be lurking in the dark (he can’t see into the caves). You can tell he is recalling the spirit stories told by the painter. Then off screen sounds are played which doesn’t clearly define any particular animal at first. Because of this, the viewer starts imagining the worst like spirits or ghosts. The effect was done nicely and quickly ramped up the tension in the viewer, I thought. The high point of the effects in that scene was hearing the chilling growl of the leopard. Overall, the sound worked well in this film. The only thing that bugged me was the dialogs’ disconnect with the main character who was supposed to be French and his American accent. I wonder if the movie would have been a bit more believable if the character had a French accent (and spoke English) or even used subtitles. For some reason, this constantly bugged me and I wasn’t able to fully believe the story.

The film itself, I thought, was well put together. It had won Special Recognition from the National Board of Review, USA “for excellence in filmmaking.” The filmmaking “is mesmerizing, almost otherworldly in its beauty and power.” The filmmaking was impressive. Many shots were visually stunning and did a fine job showing the story was taking place in Egypt versus Moab, Utah. The story itself seemed a bit odd. Roger Ebert describes the story as “deserving a certain respect, if only because it involves such a foolish and difficult story” There is a couple glaring issues which Ebert points out. What is the film maker trying to say with the man falling in love with the leopard?

``We seem to have misplaced the French army.'' No matter: ``How can you get lost in Egypt? You have the Nile and the sea.'' **Yes, but that isn't much help if neither is within walking distance.**

Ebert rated the film with two stars. Keith Breese felt differently about the film and story (he rated it four stars). Breese said the story isn’t supposed to make us believe Roberts is falling in love with the leopard, but “he’s fallen back in love with nature.” Really? If this was the case, why did Robert tie up the leopard when he decided he had to return to his French army? We saw what happened when he promised to come back for Venture. This would have killed the leopard if it was unable to free itself where it had no access to food or water. And then he killed the leopard because it turned on him and attacked him, much like he had turned on the leopard by tying it up and leaving it. Breese also comments about the message of the film, “Having made our way from the safety of the jungle branches into the cacophonous valleys of our high tech cities we’ve lost touch with our animal roots.” This can be backed up as we see Robert not happy with Venture for painting and drawing nature and then later befriends the leopard and seems to enjoy surviving in nature. If the point was supposed to be about leaving the safety of the jungle for the high tech cities and losing touch with our animal roots, the message wasn’t very clear in “Passion in the Desert.”

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