

Sexuality And Society

In

Le Empire De Sens

by

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Le Empire De Sens is a film about the failure of two lovers' attempt to secede from the communal realm of society into an isolated, private "realm of the senses." Through composition, dialogue, and imagery, the film ultimately suggests that sexuality does not (and cannot) exist separate from society, but that it exists within society, and, more importantly, is dominated by society.

In the opening shot of the film we see a prostitute named Sada resisting the advances of another girl. Sada is lying on her side in the foreground of the shot, with her back to the other girl. The other girl is also lying on her side and facing the camera, but our view of her is partially obstructed because she is behind Sada (in the background). The other girl says to Sada: "Don't you like women?" Sada does not answer, but her facial reaction (she is facing directly into the camera), as

*during  
reaction*

well as her physical resistance to the advances of the other girl, indicate an affirmative response. The UNCLEAR composition of this shot is important because it (along with the first line of dialogue), embodies the entire theme of the film. Sada has her back to, and is resisting another prostitute, who represents that realm of society in which Sada exists. This first scene is completely different from any of the other scenes in the film. It is a scene of resistance rather than a scene of submission (or engagement). The realm of society is what is being resisted.

In examining this more closely, one must first note that almost the entire film takes place inside a huge bordello. Like the castle in Story Of O, the bordello is a society, a society of women. When, at the outset of the film, two girls begin to fight with one another, the madame breaks up the fight and says to all of the girls, "You must all work together." This scene exhibits the order (rules & regulations) that must be maintained if the bordello-society is to function properly. A high-angle shot of the entire group of girls together emphasizes the collectivity of this society. Keeping this scene in mind, it becomes clear that the initial scene of the film introduces us to a girl (Sada) who is not interested in being a member of this society--

both the composition and the dialogue of the scene reinforce the problematic idea of personal desire versus societal pressure (and responsibility), an idea which is worked out during the remainder of the film in the following way.

A man named Kichi-San comes to the bordello and engages Sada. After their first liaison, the two are inseparable. Kichi-San satisfies Sada more than anyone she has ever had. In order to satisfy her own sexual appetite, Sada ignores her responsibilities as a prostitute. The cinematic reinforcement of this is the imperceptibility of film time. The couple is entering "the realm of the senses." But, as we shall see, the deeper into this realm the couple goes, the more open to the realm of society they become.

Out of a desire to more fully "possess" one another, the couple gets married. The marriage scene, which consists of Sada and Kichi-San copulating amongst ~~adst~~ a group of women, exemplifies one of the most important aspects of the entire film, which is directly related to the notion of societal domination of sexuality: the total absence of privacy. It is suggested that marriage, rather than making the relationship between two people more private, actually makes their bond more public; marriage, then, is seen as a construct which reinforces

societal domination of sexuality.

After the couple is married, there are many scenes in which the couple is interrupted while making love (which is what they do in every scene). The interesting thing is that the couple is never bothered by these interruptions. The couple has no conscious notion of privacy. Paradoxically, the anti-social behavior of the couple (all the scenes take place in their room) suggests that Sada and Kichi-San are attempting to isolate themselves from the rest of the bordello-society. The rationale for this behavior is unending sexual desire. Desire, then, becomes something which is dangerous to society. Indeed, the very function of the bordello as ~~as~~ a construct of the larger, outer society, is to control desire. The couple's attempt to separate themselves from the bordello-society is emphasized by the composition of the shots, which creates a division between inside and outside via the use of vertical lines and doors, which always seem to be open. Paradoxically, the open doors suggest exposure.~~to the outer~~

This paradox is further realized in that as the couple's Eros gets more and more intense, their activities become more and more noticeable to the rest of the bordello-society. In one of the many scenes in which a girl brings

Sake to their room (interrupting them, as usual, in the middle of the sexual act), the girl says to the couple, "everyone thinks you are perverts because she never stops sucking you." Their activities are in full view of "everyone," and open to commentary. The deeper into the realm of sexuality the lovers go, the more open they become to the scrutinization of society.

This notion of the non-existence of privacy is strongly suggested in a scene which takes place outside of the bordello, in the "real world." In this scene, the couple is walking on a seemingly deserted street. It is nighttime. Sada desires Kichi-San. Kichi-San says, "we can be seen here." Sada replies, "does it matter?" Sada exhibits a profound insight into their situation--it really doesn't matter, because wherever they are, they are totally transparent; privacy does not exist. By having this particular scene take place outside of the bordello (in the city), the film is attempting to transfer the idea of the non-existence of privacy from the realm of the microcosmic, metaphorical bordello-society to the realm of the macrocosmic, "real" outer society. The fact that the bordello is a functional construct of the macrocosmic, outer society, reinforces the idea of societal domination of sexuality.

The ending of the film is the most powerful (and

most ironic) image of this socialization of sexuality. After killing her lover (for her, the most intense act of passion), Sada cuts off his penis. The final shot of the film is an extreme high angle looking down on both of the lovers; he is dead and she is sleeping, holding his penis in her hand. This type of shot implies total exposure from an "olympian" perspective, the perspective of society. The subtitle over this shot says the following:

"She carried his cock around the streets of Tokyo for four days. Once arrested, she was shown compassion, and even achieved a strange sort of popularity."

The image of Sada carrying Kichi-San's castrated penis "around the streets of Tokyo for four days" is symbolic of the inclusion of the realm of sexuality within the realm of society. This symbolism is reinforced and finalized by Sada's seemingly ironic achievement of public "popularity," which is a metaphorical image of the societal domination of sexuality, a total and final domination from which the two lovers were never able to escape.

Up to this point everything is more or less plausible in your interpretation, but the final actions of the plot still seem strange given what you say. It sounds as though there are even more

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which the social individual  
dislike is only one, at best  
at the end of the film. But  
of course it is difficult for me to  
judge, not having seen the film.  
Still, this is a good  
piece of work. A