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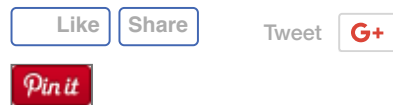


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VERTICAL RAY OF THE SUN, THE

PG-13

By *Erica Abeel* (<http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93>) Nov 1, 2004



Reviews

You could say that this third feature by the director of the critically-acclaimed *The Scent of Green Papaya* is about three sisters who conceal troubling truths beneath a smiling exterior; a movie concerned, in the manner of a conventional bourgeois novel, with keeping up appearances--and it's true, up to a point. But it's truer to say that *The Vertical Ray of the Sun* is more concerned with rethinking the art of filmmaking, and its real subject is form. Blending color, sound and mesmerizing images, it draws you into a luminous dream that unfolds with a hypnotic rhythm unique to Tran Anh Hung.

The actual story feels familiar, almost banal. Roving, unreliable men, the resilient women in their lives, an uneasy truce at the end, with rumblings of future trouble. The characters, based in Hanoi, form a community of artists--a writer, a photographer, an actor. Lien (Tran Nu Yen-Khe, Tran's wife, surpassingly beautiful and featured in all his films) plays the youngest sister, who shares an apartment with her actor brother and works as a waitress in the caf owned by elder sister Suong (Nguyen Nhu Quynh.) Lien seems more smitten with her handsome brother, with whom she flirts outrageously, than her sketchily drawn boyfriend. Suong is married to Quoc (Chu Ngoc Hung), a photographer who secretly keeps a second 'wife' and son in the country. (Suong has retaliated with an affair of her own.) The middle sister, Kanh (Le Khanh), is happily married to a writer and has just learned she's pregnant. The main drama probes the rifts in the two older sisters' marriages. Kanh's husband makes a trip to Saigon and is drawn to a mysterious temptress. He refrains, but his wife intuits his near-infidelity and the marriage begins to fray. And Suong's husband Quoc finally confesses his adultery to his wife (who has known all along), and after an anguished all nighter, they resolve to start over together.

The characters radiate a sweetness, delicacy and civilization (that makes all the more abhorrent American napalm not so long ago.) They revere family--the film opens with a memorial dinner for the sisters' mother and closes with one for their father, and they revere honor--the adulterous husband is torn in two by his duplicity. The sisters' closeness is conveyed by an overhead shot of their three dark, glossy heads bent over a task, bound together in complicity and laughter. And in a lovely scene, the two older sisters lie half-asleep in bed, while Suong semi-confesses her affair.

The star of the show, though, is Tran's use of color in a trance-like succession of images, each more gorgeous than the last one. The yellow/green/mauve tones of Tien's apartment invoke Bonnard (based in France since age 12, Tran has an esthetic that marries French to Asian); translucent green light through leaves could be the film's visual signature. And were walls ever this eye stopping? Tran likes them green/blue/aquamarine, usually with a splash of parrot-orange off to one side of the picture frame. Sometimes d.p. Mark Lee's camera reduces objects to pure color, as when a sunburst of yellow gobbles the screen--which turns out to be a duck readied for roasting. The purity and transparency of water is a visual refrain--characters washing; jade sea lapping against the hump-backed mountains of Quoc's country hideaway; and one show-offy close-up of water, black/blue/crystal splashing slo-mo in a bowl like frozen gems.

Though the film is quite reticent, the lush colors and foliage, Hanoi's heat and rain, and the beauty of the female actors combine to create a languor and sensuality that recall *The Lover*. The soundtrack adds to the atmospherics, combining the chirp of insects and birdsong with stoner music by The Velvet Underground and Lou Reed, with haunting Vietnamese songs and dissonant original compositions by Ton That Tiet.

Most arresting is the film's subtle narrative rhythm. Tran adopts a floating, somehow timeless all-at-once style, versus the more usual sequential approach of "This happened, then that, etc." It finds unity in recurring images (Tien and her brother waking up, flirting, doing their morning calisthenics) and twinned scenes--e.g., Quoc and his lover in the country is followed by a shot of his wife and her lover in Hanoi. Artfully placed jagged cuts shake things up. Tran never spells out, preferring swooping ellipses and abrupt transitions. When Quoc and his wife Suong reconcile at the end, we must do with a single potent image of the couple sitting propped against each other and asleep, exhausted by emotional strife.

Some Western viewers may prefer a more forward-driving style. Holes in the narrative fabric sometime make the plot points hard to follow. (On second viewing, the film's puzzle-pieces snap into place.) And Tien, though a figure of sinuous grace, feels underwritten--what is it with her and her boyfriend? But these are minor quibbles. Though Tran places special demands on his viewers, those prepared to enter his magical world will hunger to return.

--Erica Abeel

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