

# The Stranger

Thomas Haroldson

1968

I have yet to read a really worthwhile movie review of “The Stranger,” and I’m not sure I can remedy the situation.

Like most film critics, I am tempted to write a long opinionated description of how well Albert Camus’s novel was transferred to the screen. I am even tempted to display my erudition, as many reviewers have done, by launching into a profound discussion of Existentialism.

However, either approach would be, and has been, a waste of time. If a lecture is to be delivered on these subjects, it should be done on the literary page, and not in a movie review.

Most writers have apparently forgotten that their first and most important task is to let the reader know something about the MOVIE—that is, the success or failure of the total film package must be considered before anything else.

As a starter, I can say without qualification, that “The Stranger” should be seen by every serious moviegoer in town. It is simply that good.

It is difficult to add much to this because, like many first-rate foreign films, “The Stranger” does not lend itself to a point by point evaluation. Its compact overall quality tends to discourage a really close critical dissection.

But a few outstanding characteristics of the picture can be pointed out. For one thing, it has a clear, and rather exciting, plot. Camus, like most Existential novelists, used conventional narrative techniques, and apparently did not believe in the freak-out devices employed by such writers as James Joyce and William Faulkner.

As a result, the movie is a straight story with a beginning, a middle and an end. The main character, Meursault (played by Marcello Mastroianni), is seen being drawn into one painfully absurd situation after another, until he finally cracks.

After he murders a man (for no good reason) there is a highly dramatic trial, which concludes with Meursault being sentenced to death. The reason why he must be executed is made explicitly clear by the court: “He did not weep at his mother’s funeral.”

Meursault must die because he refuses to play the game called humanity. When his girl asks him if he loves her, he answers, “No, I don’t believe I do.” When his employer asks him if he would like a promotion, Meursault tells him that he is satisfied with his present position. When his tough Arab cellmates ask him about his crime, he says, “I killed an Arab.”

He consistently refuses to fake emotions he does not feel. But he is not destroyed simply because he is a totally honest man in a totally dishonest world. His real crime is that he has no spiritual or emotional ties with the rest of mankind.

Therefore, the end of the picture, which seems to trouble some people, can be taken one of two ways. Just before being led off to the gallows Meursault finds the inner peace that he has been searching for. Either he finally realizes that he must be punished for being a dropout from humanity, or he sees that his public execution will connect him once again to the agonizing brotherhood that all mankind must share.

Of course there are other, and wider, interpretations of the story, but perhaps it's enough to point out that the theme is much more profound than a casual moviegoer might expect.

The film itself has a smooth, almost effortless continuity about it. The moderate tempo of the action is subdued, but never dull. The low-key color photography, which makes subtle use of back lighting and occasional overexposure, is itself a tremendous artistic achievement.

The acting is almost flawless, and the casting, in general, is just about ideal. The overall mood is sustained so well that the director deserves to win several awards for merely creating the "atmosphere" of the picture.

Since the mood is almost impossible to describe, I can only suggest that particular note be taken of the way in which the director conjures up the oppressive heat of Algiers. Of course, since the heat is symbolic of the pressures that are closing in on Meursault, it was extremely important that the audience be made to virtually feel its sickening

In conclusion, about all I can add is to say again that "The Stranger" is a movie that should not be missed.

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