

Negatives: “suggestions of the unspeakable”

Film review

Dennis Raymond

1968

Remember “Mademoiselle,” the Tony Richardson-Jean Genet collaboration in which lovely Jeanne Moreau raced around the French countryside in stiletto heels heaping destruction on a poor little town, and all because of sexual repression? Then there was Jules Dassin’s 10:30 p.m. “Summer,” the agonized tale of a traveling menage a trois.

Well now we have another one of those ludicrously lurid sexual dramas to howl at, “Negatives,” from England.

“Negatives” is about a young man, Theo, and his mistress who can reach sexual fulfillment only when they act out the fantasy of a notorious Edwardian murderer and his wife. It is only this perverted sexual compatibility that keeps the couple together.

Enter Reingard, a super-chic German photographer; but we immediately know she has more on her mind than snapping pictures because she slinks around like the daughter of Fu Manchu. Reingard disrupts this perverse relationship by introducing Theo to a new fantasy: she tells him that he resembles the World War 1 flying ace, The Red Baron (honest!).

The ending is predictably preposterous as Theo slugs his mistress, and then fantasizes his escape in a German fighter plane. “Oh no,” you think, “they’re not going to do that”...but they do! It’s just that kind of movie. So up and up he soars, through the clouds, where he encounters enemy aircraft. Of course there’s a ferocious dogfight in which Theo is shot down and plunges to earth in flaming technicolor. Lawdy, it was gaudy.

Peter McEnery is much too young to be convincing as Theo, and Glenda Jackson gives a very actressy performance that puts me off. It’s Diane Cilento’s Reingard, then, who becomes the pivot of this picture.

Like some ravenous sex-obsessed witch, Cilento becomes the embodiment of a grandiose male fantasy: too-much Woman. In drag-queen dialect, she croaks lines like “Steel, she might be splendid in bed,” and almost transcends her material by playing it for laughs.

“Negatives” tries very hard to be erotic—so hard that the film and its characters become ludicrous. The sun is hot, the liqueur is strong, and everyone feels so sexy.

In one scene, however, “Negatives” does succeed. When Reingard offers to photograph Theo and his mistress as they play out their fantasies, the brutal editing, the use of sound, and camera movements achieve a sexual tension that is the high spot of the whole film.

Movie-watching today requires a kind of sex education neither dad nor the phys-ed instructor ever provided. “Negatives” is loaded with all sorts of suggestions of the unspeakable: lesbianism, sadism, masochism, voyeurism, exhibitionism, and just about anything else you can label.

Though the sexual revolution has scarcely found its way onto the screen, and movies rarely deal with the simplest kinds of heterosexual life in our time (as in “Faces”), they’re already tackling bisexuality et al—like the kids who are smoking pot and discussing the merits of LSD before they’ve had their first beer.

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