12-7-2016

The House of Sand and Fog

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Recommended Citation

Available at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol8/iss2/18

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Abstract
This is a review of The House of Sand and Fog (2003).

This film review is available in Journal of Religion & Film: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol8/iss2/18
The House of Sand and Fog, directed by Vadim Perelman, is so suffused with atmospheric effects that they nearly overwhelm everything else on the screen. The constant rain, mist, and eponymous fog are meant to reflect the film's moods of anxiety and desperation; but since they are so rarely leavened by contrasting emotional tones, the film becomes one long dirge of existential angst.

Despite its depressing surface, this is a worthwhile film - especially for its insights into a type of spiritual vacuity common to America at the beginning of the twentieth century. Jennifer Connelly plays a young woman named Kathy Nicolo whose husband has, perversely, left her because of her desire to have children. She goes into such a deep funk that she fails to open her mail, and thus misses a notice from the county threatening to evict her for non-payment of taxes. One of the police officers who evicts her ends up falling in love with her, but the emotional help he provides is undone by his own deep character flaws.

When the house is put up for auction, it is purchased by a former colonel in the regime of the Iranian Shah, a straight-laced military man who is played brilliantly by Ben Kingsley. The colonel pays only one-fourth of the house's market value, and intends to sell it for a profit which will augment his family's diminishing wealth. Even after the eviction is shown to be a mistake (the taxes were never owed), the colonel has a legal bill of sale for the California seaside house and
refuses to sell it back for the price he paid. From this conflict over a house (built on sand?) the story proceeds.

Unlike figures in a Greek tragedy, the main characters in this film are not ambitious for glory or noble ideals. They are merely trying to survive. Once the conflict is set, everything they do is driven by a desperation that is always ready to erupt into anger. Even when the colonel is just hanging pictures on the wall, it is an attempt to hold on to a past that is irrevocably past. And when he prays at the end of the film, it is not the prayer of a truly religious man, but rather the deranged pleadings of a man who is drowning and gasping for breath.

In various parts of the film the Iranians are portrayed as being more spiritual and morally responsible than their counterparts, the frivolous and light-headed Americans; but this is ultimately countervailed by a deeper spiritual democracy of the lost, in which the effects of small sins and injustices are intensified and spiral out like Yeats' widening gyre. Moments of compassion and mutual empathy are swallowed up by the larger conflict, and the American dream of home, family, and a prosperous future is finally turned on its head.

Though there are degrees of difference, fools abound in this film. They are tragic fools, though, as opposed to comedic ones, on account of their inability to recognize their foolishness until it has ruined them. In short, there is something
ontologically wrong with these people. Due to their spiritual blindness, they push past the realm of redemption until they can only view their lost opportunities from a vast distance, or through the vale of a thickening fog.

Near the end of this particular tragic tale, Kathy realizes that the colonel and his wife might have been true parents to her if things had turned out differently. Unfortunately, it is too late at that point for her to live under their protective roof again. We are left with a hint that she has gained wisdom through her losses, but the specter of rain and fog is still present when the final credits roll.