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The elements of surprise

MORTON MARCUS - Sentinel correspondent

Article Launched: 06/04/2004 12:00:00 AM PDT

"Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter ... And Spring" is a great film. But what do I mean by a great film? The story is unusually simple and contains little dialogue. It concerns a nameless boy's growth to manhood in a floating Buddhist monastery on a remote mountain lake somewhere in the Korean wilderness. Each season reflects a different stage of the protagonist's growth and focuses on an unexpected dramatic, if not traumatic, event in his development. Furthermore, using the seasons as a device to represent different stages of human life has been employed so often, it has become clichéd. So what makes this a great film?

Many of us never ask that question. We think that films should entertain us, that a film is great if it titillates our senses, which are already overloaded with loud music, lurid sex, blatant references to toilet humor, gross behavior and sadistic violence, all of which we expect to see portrayed in films about super heroes, super villains, or horny high-schoolers racing cars through crowded city streets, blowing up buildings, teetering in terror on the rooftops of tall buildings, or plodding through their own excrement while accidentally electrocuting the family cat (these last two examples, of course, are supposed to be elements of comedy).

Great films, therefore, are in the eye of the beholder: what the viewer brings of his own experiences and expectations to the theater. For me, a great film is an experience that in some way quickens my sense of life, stimulates my sensibilities, and enriches my understanding of the human condition. The darkened theater becomes the inside of my head and what my eyes see invade my psyche as a reality I have chosen to enter after setting aside my own preconceptions of what reality is.

What makes that experience "great" is that I become part of the events I am watching which in some way enlighten me, move me to acknowledge, accept, and become aware of an aspect of my life and the human condition in general that will change my concept of existence or at least provoke my thoughts long after I've left the theater.

So why do I think "Spring, Summer" is a great film? The fundamental component of all the arts is to present what is familiar in surprising, unexpected or unfamiliar ways. In film this is accomplished not necessarily through storyline but mainly through photography and editing. So in the first "spring" section of the film we are familiar with the almost animal-like delight of the boy's discovery of the landscape in which he lives, but that landscape (which we see again and again throughout the film) is presented from a multiplicity of angles and perspectives which are joined together through editing in such a way that the landscape always seems new and even intriguing.

This unexpectedness, in fact, charges each shot with a dramatic intensity that holds us spellbound not just by the scenic beauty but by the uncertainty we experience in estimating what the next shot will be and how it will be presented. Add to this the shifting tempo and pacing of the shots through editing and narrative action and a further dimension of unexpectedness is added to the mix.

Uncertainty and surprise, in fact, are the hallmarks of the film's supposedly shopworn seasonal structure. Not only is the specific narrative event that occurs in each section unexpected but so are the reactions of the characters. We never know, for example, and await with increasing suspense, the reaction of the boy's master to each new crisis.

This fact is made all the more intriguing by the lack of dialogue, so we must sit stranded in ignorant expectation and growing apprehension from one scene to the next, waiting for the master's non-verbal responses. As we wait, however, we become more and more aware of the repetitions of the film's visual details, until they take on symbolic, parable-like qualities that, along with the narrative action, eventually create a profound vision of human existence.

For years I have maintained that a worthwhile film should be seen a number of times. Repeated viewings reveal an abundance of details and implications that initially are not apparent or elude our notice. "Spring, Summer" not only warrants such advice but demands it, becoming more meaningful, more provocative with each viewing, its surprises and unexpected turnings clearer and more profound.

So as not to be misunderstood on one point, let me add a word of caution to all film-goers and would-be artists, including filmmakers, who have had the wherewithal to read these words to this point. To portray the familiar in strange ways for the sake of strangeness is an exercise that produces nothing more than momentary titillation. But to present the familiar in fresh ways so the beholder's view of the familiar will be enriched, quickened, and charged with renewed meaning is the artist's ultimate goal.

The explosions and car chases, the macho heroes and barbie-doll heroines of mainstream Hollywood films are unexpected and surprising only in their grossness and outlandishness, and the fulfillment of those expectations and preconceptions in the viewer's eyes is the very meaning of cliché. Such grossness and outlandishness—surprise for its own sake—leads to titillation or immediate sensuous gratification as empty

of meaningful nourishment as the overpriced popcorn sold at a theater's candy counter.

In contrast, with each viewing the events on the floating monastery of "Spring, Summer," so far from Hollywood's car crashes and explosions, become as mysterious, yet as meaningful as the unfolding seasons of our lives.

Morton Marcus is co-host of the TV film review program Cinema Scene, which can be seen on Channel 27 every Thursday and Sunday at 8:30 p.m. He will discuss "Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter ... And Spring" this Saturday at The Nickelodeon, 210 Lincoln St., Santa Cruz at 1:20 p.m. The discussion is free.

If You Go

WHAT: 'Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter ... And Spring.'

WHERE: Nickelodeon 426-7500.

RATING: R: Sexuality. In Korean with English subtitles.

LENGTH: 1 hour, 43 minutes.

VERDICT: A.

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