

Black and White (Bianco e Nero)

Study Notes

Directed by: Cristina Comencini

Certificate: 15

Running time: 100 mins

Synopsis

Carlo and Elena have been married six years; they have a daughter and their married life has settled into a rut. Elena is a cultural mediator who manages an association against racism, whereas Carlo is a computer engineer who has little in common with his wife. Bertrand is Elena's colleague, and husband to Nadine, with whom he has two children.

The events of the film unfold after Carlo meets Nadine, a fascinating and elegant Senegalese, employed in the Senegalese embassy in Rome. The two are swept away by an unexpected complicity which becomes a clandestine relationship.

The expectations and prejudices of their two families come to the fore when their affair is revealed, and the new couple have to make important decisions.

Racism, Prejudice and Conditioning

Cristina Comencini, the producer, decided to embark on this project on her return from a working trip in Africa. The film originates from her friendship with African people, from an awareness of reciprocal prejudices and clichéd representations of mixed-race couples, and from the need to shoot a film that tells a love story totally new to Italian cinema. *'The film narrates an overwhelming love that will overcome the difficulties of an affair and the issues deriving from an inter-ethnic relationship.'*

Several factors interpose between the main characters' love, beginning with the reaction of their respective families (parents, sisters, brothers-in-law and children) and continuing with the established intolerance between the two communities – the Italian and the Senegalese. The film also represents a bilateral racism, shown by Elena after her husband's betrayal, which is seen also as a betrayal towards her carried out by Africa. At this point Elena, even knowing and esteeming Nadine, has to face up to her latent prejudices.

What we witness is a process of growing up, of the collapse of certainties, and of a perfection sought for a long time, at the end set aside in the name of a fragility that is human. Although she tries to make up for her family's complicity, Elena is a symbol of how some individuals can be racist without a precise consciousness of how; thus the film highlights the unspoken undercurrent of racism that still pervades Italian society. Fears and prejudices towards people from different ethnic groups are brought out in the film, in a way that they are not in society – by raising these issues directly the film seeks to bring these issues out into the open.

Nadine's brother-in-law gives voice to the Senegalese community, using violence when he orders Carlo to put an end to the affair with Nadine. His reaction is concerned not with the fact that Nadine is having an affair, but that the betrayal takes place with a white man.

The other face of diversity

Openly inspired by 'Guess Who's Coming to Dinner', 'Bianco e Nero' is the first Italian film to treat racism in an ironical key. The film arises from the producer's reflections, as she says it's unacceptable that '*...countries with an established history of black immigration, never made comedies about that topic.*'

The film narrates an anachronistic love story that could not exist today. As the producer explains, the film is about a love that should be placed in the 1970s, a period in which people from different social classes and backgrounds decided to stay together in marriage rather than separate because of their differences.

Because of the difficulties involved in treating this topic in an ironical way the screenplay was rewritten many times, in order to avoid an overworked political correctness. The intention was to play with the prejudices of Italians towards African people, and vice versa, opening up these ingrained stereotypes to gentle scrutiny through the film's humour.

The producer Cristina Comencini decided to utilise irony and invite the public to broaden their pre-conceptions of genre, to approach the film's issues from a new point of view, devoid of expectations and preconceptions. The meeting between two cultures re-energises relationships (after the betrayal, Elena looks at her husband with an admiration that she did not have before) and subverts roles, thus addressing cultural and social barriers.

The use of cliché, crucial to the development of the narration, is intended to amuse rather than to offend. The research into characters such as Elena's parents can seem excessive but is fundamental to the film's success. The figure of Elena's father, for example, represents the typical Italian, firmly convinced he is on Africa's side, but who puts into action an attitude based on stereotypes and deprived of any logic or sensitivity.

Review

The film's reviews weren't entirely positive. Some reviewers felt frustration that the film's premise didn't allow the shades of grey that were indicated in the trailer, and dealt too simplistically with the issues. Centring the narrative on two wealthy families also received strong criticism, as this representation moves the narrative away from the real world, with the African population of Italy remaining largely working class. According to many, the film would have been more educational if it featured two protagonists from a less privileged social class.

The couple would have faced more practical questions than the slight inconveniences we see in the film. '*The recourse to strained symbolism (the black doll against the blonde Barbie; Nadine mistaken for a waitress; Carlo pretending to be a waiter wearing a white glove) is symptomatic of a rather superficial approach to addressing issues of racism.*'

The social divides suggested by the film are far from the Italian reality: today in Italy there are different ethnic minorities that suffer marginalisation, whereas the African community is not ghettoised in Piazza Vittorio, as the film would have us believe.

A last and sadly telling fact of the production is that no Italian sponsor was willing to provide the French actors' clothes; this fact confirms that even today, racist attitudes persist in Italian society.

Questions

1. In Italy the racial integration issue is still open: starting from this premise, how do you respond to the reaction of Carlo and Nadine's families when they discover their affair?
2. Do you think that the producer's choice of the romantic comedy genre to represent a 'burning' topic like racism, compromises the film in any way?
3. Do you think the methods used by Elena and Bertrand in educating their children to adjust to their circumstances is effective? How do their children respond to these teachings during Giovanna's birthday party?
4. Nadine's discomfort expressed in her electronic diary gives an indication of some of the difficulties which can arise when people from different cultural backgrounds are thrown together. Would you say that prejudice still exists in UK society? What different forms does it take that you are aware of? What different ways of celebrating diversity, and tackling racism and prejudice, can you think of?