VIVA LA MUERTE

Hailed as a work of a genius by John Lennon.

"A SURREAL SHOCKER" - San Francisco Examiner.

"INESCAPABLY A MAJOR WORK!" - N.Y. Times.

“A paroxysm of anguish, a scream for liberty and probably one of the most ferocious, violent films ever made.” - Amos Vogel, Village Voice.

VIVA LA MUERTE (Special Edition) DVD review
By: Todd Doogan (Digital Bits)

90 mins, NR, Letterboxed widescreen (1.85:1), 16x9 enhanced, Amaray keep case packaging, single-sided, single-layered, video interview with writer/director Fernando Arrabal, lobby card gallery, theatrical trailer for I Will Walk Like a Crazy Horse, 6-page liner note booklet, film-themed menu screens with sound, scene access (18 chapters), languages: French and Spanish (DD 2.0 mono), subtitles: English

As a fan and scholar of art history, I think the one movement that has always fascinated me the most is Surrealism. I appreciate the imagery and the style, but mostly it's because it's the one movement you can't really replicate without having your own agenda. It's true and honest to itself - everything art should be about. Anyone can throw color at a canvas. Anyone can paint a horse or a still life. Some better than others obviously, and I'm not knocking those types of art at all. It's just that anyone could create a painting of a the Virgin Mary - crawling out of a peach, holding a bible in one hand and a copy of The Joy of Sex in the other - and it would look freaky. But it wouldn't truly be Surrealist unless you yourself were saying something about the image. Surrealism is conversation through media. The Surrealist movement came out of commentary about the world, politics and religion, and, unlike most movements in art, Surrealism was able to almost immediately unfold off of the canvas and into many other types media, like stage plays, literary works and... most successfully... film.

To me there are three perfect surrealist films: Un Chien Andalou, El Topo and this one, Viva La Muerte. To the uninitiated and uninvolved, these films are all a big "huh?" But for those who enjoy being stimulated, and aren't lying to themselves, these films offer a unique look into the minds and agendas of the filmmakers and artists who made them.

Viva La Muerte begins with a stylized, yet crude, drawing of a world turned upside down. Consumption, sex, violence and religious images swirl around in the style of Bosch. Yet, what we hear is a children's song playing in the background. If you think the images look familiar, and you're thinking the drawing looks like something that fell out of the Fantastic Planet production design folder, you'd be thinking in the right direction. Those are indeed Topor images.
We then jump into a world seen through the eyes of a young boy named Fando, whose father - a Communist and atheist - was arrested by Fascists at the tail end of the Spanish Civil War. Told that his father died in prison, Fando acts out his father's unseen life with a crude theater in his bedroom, starring wooden dolls representing his father and mother. During one of his daily adventures, Fando comes to learn that it was his mother that turned his father over to the government. And if that weren't enough, there's a possibility that his father may still be alive.

So that's what the film is ABOUT. But that's not exactly what you'll see, thanks to Fernando Arrabal's brilliant surreal commentary. I think the most important thing to know about this film going in, is that it's basically a true story. Arrabal, a famed Surrealist playwright and devoted atheist, actually lived through these events before moving as a young boy to France. His father was taken by the Fascists under Franco, his mother did turn him in, he did hunt for his father (and never found him) and, as Fando experiences at the end of the film, Arrabal also suffered from TB. Knowing that the story is "real," and knowing that Arrabal is saying something about his life, makes the film that much more intriguing and watchable. Out of context, the film is a whole lot of senseless images of violence, sexual depravity and child's point of view. But knowing that the child in front of and behind the camera is the same, and that these images were actually seen by and affected the artist, it makes what YOU see have that much more of an impact.

And don't think that any of this is gratuitous. The artist's devotion to the subject is so intense that he got his actors (from the children to the women) to do some pretty incredible things... things I don't think many people would be able to do. The hauntingly beautiful Nuria Esper (who plays Fando's mother) really shows some pain in a scene where she dances around in the blood of a freshly butchered cow. You can't fake the look on her face and the tremors of shock going through her body. But the fact that she's there, doing what she does, shows how dedicated she was to Arrabal's vision. An image like this has weight when you consider the mind showing it. Arrabal doesn't consider this image violent. And I agree. If Nick Zedd gave us this image, it would be for mere shock value. But coming from Arrabal, the meaning is emotional. As he says in the interview accompanying this film on the DVD, he always wanted to crawl back into his mother's womb and create his art, but obviously was never allowed. That's not a sexual thought; it's an honest comment about the safety of our mothers. And this scene with the cow represents that quite well.

On DVD, Viva looks surprisingly good. That's shocking for me to say considering I'm not a big fan of the work put into the Cult Epics line. If this represents an official turn-around, then they might be on a good track. The colors are very nice, blacks are solid and the details are well defined. It's not perfect by any stretch, but compared to previous releases, it's a nice jump. The anamorphic picture is pleasing, even if the sources - both 35mm and early video sourcing - are slightly flawed. I really have no complaints considering the company, the film and the original material used. The sound is pretty standard - there's the original French and a Spanish track, both in 2.0 mono. There are pops and hisses, most likely from the source. It's not a grand sound field, but it's certainly not trying to be Star Wars either.

Now... the extras are interesting. Instead of a running commentary, which the film really needs (preferably from an expert on Arrabal), we get an interview with Arrabal himself. This is a very odd (and must see) event. When talking stream-of-consciousness about his work, he twirls a chair upon his lap. Then when that gets boring, he takes off his shoe and smells it... the interviewer gets audibly sickened (it must be a very ripe foot indeed). Frankly, I don't know much about what was said, but how it was said, and the environment it was said in, is worth seeing the piece for. Actually, it was what I expect any interview with a true Surrealist would be like.
Also on the disc is a lobby card gallery and a trailer for Arrabal's follow up film. There’s also a six-page booklet about the film inside the case. It's not a whole lot of material, but all of it is worth checking out. And it's more than you’d expect for an MIA bit of classic, Surrealist cinema.

Some of you will blink and stare at the screen, while others will be very pleased. But for me, I'm just glad that another great piece of cinema is finally on DVD where it belongs. Take it however you want to: as a biography, a work of art or simply trash. Viva La Muerte is here for you to see and judge as you will. And that's all that really matters.

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