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Man Searches for Beauty and 'Death in Venice'
[Review of Luchino Visconti's film *Death in Venice*,
Downer Theater, Milwaukee]

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by Curtis L. Carter

Quite often a significant literary work is mutilated by translating it into film language. "Death in Venice," playing at the Downer Theater, is an exception. In many respects, Luchino Visconti's film is close to Thomas Mann's short story, "Death in Venice." However, the film is a success on its own terms and not because of its fidelity or lack of it to Mann's literary work.

The film is about an old man who has come to Venice, evidently to die. He is no ordinary man, but a learned one who has spent his life in the quest for beauty. As an artist, he has wrestled with the age-old conflict over whether beauty is some abstract-spiritual experience or is primarily an experience of the sense. For him, the quest has been a spiritual search.

In Venice, he experiences an awakening of the senses through his relation to a beautiful young boy. Visconti chooses to develop the homosexual aspects of the relationship quite beyond anything suggested in Mann's work. Homosexuality is there as a possibility, but the object of beauty in the old man's experience might just as well have been a girl. It is not important. For the major issue is the quest of ideal beauty and not necessarily in a relation of homosexuality.

The qualities of the young boy awaken the man to an experience of beauty in sensuous form. He is attracted to and possibly in love with the boy. At first, the experience greatly troubles him, because it contradicts his previous notions of spiritual beauty. Then he is pleased. It is apparent from his failure to respond overtly to the boy's inviting glances that he does not wish to physicalize the relationship. The experience he seeks is idealized beauty through love at a distance. The boy exemplifies the qualities of that perfect experience.

Decay is also a central theme of the film. It is evident in the central place of the dying man. A pestilence creeps in, destroying lives and marring the

beautiful face of Venice, reinforcing the theme of decay.

In the end we are not so sure that the search for ideal beauty ends in the discovery of sensuous beauty embodied in the boy. The boy is mauled in a quarrel with a boyfriend and his face is pressed into the germ-infested waters that carry the dreaded plague. Fallible, his beauty too will be marred. As the old man watches helplessly from the shore, the boy walks out into the water, symbolically pointing a raised arm into the distance, as if to say with Plato and Joyce that the perfection of beauty lies in something beyond.

Is it death, after all, which must show us the way? Events in the film suggest the possibility of this. Almost simultaneously with the boy's pointing, the old man dies. Before this, as if in preparation for death, he visits a beautician. Expertly, the beautician prepares him with elaborate make-up, hair coloring and the like just as a mortician might prepare the corpse for its exit into the unknown regions of death.

"Death in Venice" relies mainly on visual images to communicate. From the first we experience rich scenes incorporating the visual splendor of Venice with interpretive portraits of the characters. Especially interesting were the linear paths traced by the lens in the hotel scenes. At times the eye is led so that it literally zig-zags with the lens back and forth, scanning and connecting the events entirely through visual means.

There are some things which I did not care for in the film. The use of Mahler's Third and Fifth symphonies was often so contrived and overpowering that it detracted from the quality of the total experience. Also unfortunate was the translation of Mann's dying man, a writer, into the comper Gustav, obviously an allusion to Mahler, who, by coincidence, happened to die in 1911, the period of the film. A link between the music and the central character was an unnecessary contrivance which did not serve the many excellent qualities of the film.

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