
Cleopatra - Life, Rule & Death - Queen of The Land of The Sun and The Sands

Screen incarnations of the romantically foolish, politically astute Egyptian Queen, Cleopatra, are plentiful as her legend would prove a reliable resource of revenue for Hollywood.

In 1934, Paramount released "Cleopatra" with Cecil B. DeMille at the helm. The movie was marketed as an epic romance: "The stirring human story of a queen whose two great loves changes the course of history." If this is true, if change can be applied, the evidence isn't present here.

Instead, we are given a domestic costume drama. A fallacious retelling of Cleopatra's saga as a love-triangle, she's conflicted between her sovereign responsibilities and her two paramours. Authenticity is a subsidiary in DeMille's epic; we're asked not to take Cleopatra's role as a queen seriously. She's naïve and kittenish. She takes solace only in its materialistic perks. The film would have us believe she despised her status: "Think of Egypt? Always of Egypt!"

The politics only encourage the characters to surrender to their throbbing biological desires. Released prior to the "Hays Code" being implemented into Hollywood, a self-censoring codes of ethics devised by the Catholic Church, "Cleopatra" would benefit from its lateness. The characters are satyrs and nymphomaniacs. Premarital sex in America was on the rise, and as a result, the film is replete with avaricious and lustful debaucheries.

For the next thirty years Hollywood's fascination with Cleopatra cooled. World War II came and went. America emerged triumphant and unscathed, and with it a 'bigger is better' philosophy. Hollywood's penchant for creating incalculably massive period dramas resurged. In 1963, 20th Century Fox released "Cleopatra".

One possible reason was that post-war America could accept an ironic parallel between themselves and the empires that once reigned supreme; showcasing their home-grown hedonisms redressed in antiquity, perhaps to deflect suspicions away from their own front door.

Most period films will distinguish themselves between past and present, but the opening shot, a transition of Roman art from representation to reality, suggests the contemporary is a recreation of these fictionalised facsimiles. It's fair to say that "Cleopatra" was used as a commentary of the ongoing Civil Rights movements in 1960s America and to reflect John F Kennedy's presidential election, who served as hope for change and global peace.

One particular scene worthy of note is between Cleopatra and Caesar at the tomb of Alexander. Their dialogue reiterates the speeches of JFK and Martin Luther King Jr. It's in this where the foundation of their relationship is built, not upon lust, but upon their shared political agendas, on their dream of a unified world.

In an uncanny and incredible prediction of JFK's death, Caesar is assassinated by his own people. At the end of the film, Cleopatra is driven to suicide, suggesting that the historic world (and the contemporary) will silence those who challenge the imbalanced status-quo.

Cinema's psychological manipulation isn't a new concept, whether it is to encourage socially or promote politically. Filmmakers can take advantage of Cleopatra's versatility and the ignorance of antiquity, even if the film says more about the hubris and excess of old-time Hollywood thinking than the burnished glories of an ancient world.

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