

Sand has the texture of skin, skin seen close enough that the grain of it is visible.

Sand shifts, takes over, has to be battled with constantly. It mediates between water and the lack of water, being simultaneously beach and desert.

Sand is both utterly tedious and utterly pure, both a figure for the waste of a life and that which provides in its rigor the sort of test that might justify a life.

Sand moves very gracefully, left to itself and the wind. If you dig into the base of a sand wall, the way it collapses is uniquely ugly.

"Boundless and bare, the lone and level sands stretch far away." Thus Shelley; but sand is never level, and is only deceptively lone: large insects burrow in it, and it may be more worryingly inhabited than one imagines.

Sand is profitable; damp, salt-polluted sand will rot the buildings it is used to construct, but can be sold on the black market for half price to greedy contractors. At the same time there is an inexorability about the movement of sand which mocks the very notion of profit.

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Woman in the Dunes comes up to all expectations, and yet is a great deal different from what I'd expected, much of the reason being the unfathomably ambiguous resources of its central image, the dunes themselves.

Frankly, I'd prepared myself for a powerful but depressing film, somewhat along the lines of *The Collector*, about entrapment and the hideous capacity of the human spirit to acquiesce.

Which is not what the film is like at all.

In *The Collector* the point—and a typically Western individualistic schmaltzy point it is—is that the man who traps the heroine is crazy. In *Woman in the Dunes* the woman who traps the hero is splendidly sane, operating from the best community and most realistic individual motives.

And her victim is no terrified, put-upon waif, but rather an attractive if petulant male chauvinist who as the film opens fully recognizes that no entrapment could be more complete than that of his day-by-day life in modern Tokyo.

So the sand which hems him in also preserves him; the sand which allows such a precarious existence to the village community it has en-

Films



WOMAN IN THE DUNES — The man tramps easily over the top while he's still free, but thinks it is more difficult once he meets the woman and things begin in earnest.

gulfed is the means of his findings at first grudgingly, something closer to community than anything outside can offer.

But I mustn't exaggerate this side of the film, since menace is constantly at hand, whether in the music or the villagers' sinister control of the situation or in the images of the sand itself, blowing, collapsing, filtering through the roof onto the sleeping bodies of those it nourishes and destroys.

Those bodies, incidentally, came together in two of the most powerful erotic scenes I've come across in the cinema, handled with exquisite control.

(Another wrong notion I came to the film with was that the *Woman* was ugly. Actually she possesses that sort of plainness which accumulates in the course of the evening a good deal more sensuality than is usually radiated by more conventional good looks.)

All in all, vastly more exciting than that departed mongrel *Ulysses*; that it was the latter movie which sold out says more about what publicity can do than about the films' respective merits.

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Sniping at one's critical colleagues is vulgar and usually pointless. However, last week was such a bad one for Mr. Westgate that I'm duty-bound to issue a couple of warnings.

First: disregard everything Mr. Westgate says about *Petulia*, since he misses every available point. To accuse the Doctor of seeking a loveless affair with *Petulia* is not to understand the narrative. Hence the bemused tones in which Westgate tries to convey at the same time a certain respect for and definite dislike of the film.

Second, and more important: disregard everything Mr. Westgate says about the merits of *Eric Soya's 17*. They're non-existent.

17 is as deplorable an exercise in fatuity as I've suffered through this season. In concerns the puberty-hangups of an apple-cheeked Scandinavian lad who looks less 17 than 35.

Situation follows situation with staggering predictability. Not a loss-of-innocence cliché but is trotted out in sickly-sweet color. And there isn't even any worth-while skin.

—John Thompson

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