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THE BARON OF ARIZONA

David Pirie

If someone were to write a detailed historical analysis of the Gothic Cinema—as opposed to horror films, which need not, obviously, contain any Gothic elements at all—then *The Baron of Arizona* would well deserve fairly close analysis. Without touching even remotely on a supernatural theme, it nevertheless contains, especially in its first hour, much of the content and situation of a 19th Century 'tale of terror'.

James Addison Reavis (who actually existed, but Fuller's script remains almost entirely fiction) is a black-cloaked unscrupulous forger, who sets about systematically creating an utterly erroneous inheritance for a small Indian girl. Played excellently by Vincent Price, Reavis is shown setting up false tombs in an old graveyard, painstakingly writing inscriptions on rock in wind and rain, and working for years as a monk in an ancient Spanish monastery to alter their records. He is in fact a kind of Super anti-hero, who wishes to invade and alter, not merely the present or future, but the past. His picaresque adventures in Europe contain all the essential Romantic ingredients, including a flight from the monastery in black habit on a cart drawn by dark horses, (the film is superbly photographed by Wong Howe) and the seduction of a beautiful gipsy queen. But what is even more





interesting is the way in which this carefully established atmosphere relates to the central plot.

There is no need, now, in view of the widespread availability and popularity of Mario Praz's book *The Romantic Agony*, to elaborate on the close link between the Gothic idioms I have been discussing, and the abnormal sexual descriptions and suggestions, which so often accompany them. Very few scholars would seriously deny that the Gothic style is one of those most closely and directly related to the subconscious and the mechanism of repression, although the precise nature of this relation still remains obscure. Thus, it is fascinating to note that, on his own admission, what attracted Fuller to the story of *The Baron of Arizona* was the relationship between an elderly man and the child, who he eventually marries. Fuller claims, in the same interview, that he was unable to do all he wanted with the idea because of censorship, but the relationship as it emerges in his film is worth examination.

For some unspecified reason, Reavis has picked out Sophia as the orphan, through whom he can achieve his ambitions. But from the beginning it is clear that he will have to marry her, and he trains her, in a rather brutal way, not just to be a Baroness, but to be his wife. His domination could certainly be classed as sadistic in its intensity, and she accepts his offer of marriage, just as she has accepted all his instructions up to that time. In the surrealistic atmosphere of Fuller's film, the audience finds no difficulty in accepting what is certainly rather a taboo situation here. Symbolically, at any rate, Sophia is Reavis's daughter: "You brought life to Sophia", says one of the characters. Now he is marrying his own creation, and it is difficult not to find it dramatically appropriate that, after the wedding violence openly begins to threaten the marriage's tranquility.

The rest of the film includes, besides the eventual exposure of Reavis's forgery, a

development in his relationship with his wife to the point where Sophia becomes dominant, and the unnaturalness of the marriage is overridden. She is responsible for his confession, and, in the last scene, where Reavis comes out of prison to find her waiting for him, there is a momentary conflict of wills, which summarizes the psychological development of the whole film. "I thought I told you to leave me", he says. She replies from her carriage by simply issuing an order as he used to: "Get in."

This is only one of several themes, which Fuller develops in his material, but it is probably the most satisfactory, for it is so well suited to the overall style. In Europe's gloomy monastery and exotic gipsy camp, Price's decadence is completely in control; he blends ideally with the landscape. But in Arizona's vastness, and among rough simple ranchers, his charm appears tawdry and it is his wife who begins to gain in stature. Occasionally, the clash between the European and American sensibility in the film is reminiscent of Henry James. "That's not for America, that's for Europe," says an irate rancher to Reavis, who is stressing the benefits of his Barony.

The Baron of Arizona is, in some ways, a slight film, but, bearing in mind that he is largely responsible for the story, it amply testifies to Fuller's range and ability as a director. Marred by certain things, like the commentary for which he was not responsible, and some clichéd dialogue, it stands up as a curious and compelling hybrid of a movie with a great deal to recommend it.