

THE MOVIES ON MY MIND:

The Duellists, directed by Ridley Scott

Capitaine Conan, directed by Bertrand Tavernier

HE THAT DIED O'WEDNESDAY

"Honor pricks me on," proclaims the feckless Falstaff in his famous catechism of Henry IV, and then -- "how if honor prick me off when I come on?". He concludes: "Who hath honor? He that died o'Wednesday..."(1) The Duellists and Capitaine Conan take military honor as their cue, interrogating the warrior's code with Falstaffian irony, yet with implicit respect for its virtues under mortal, morally equivocal circumstances.

Quarrel In A Straw

Throughout Hamlet, Shakespeare deploys the minor character of Norway's bellicose Prince Fortinbras as a foil for the hero's indecisiveness about revenging his father's murder. Fortinbras is so unambivalently pugnacious, so jealous of his honor that he will "seek quarrel in a straw", violently contest "a patch of ground that hath no profit in it but the name."(2) While Hamlet admires Fortinbras' perennial ripeness for dispute, Shakespeare also intimates an unwholesome obsessiveness in his quest after the bubble reputation. Ridley Scott's first feature film, The Duellists (1976), adapted from Joseph Conrad's The Duel, comprises an intriguing gloss on the Hamlet/Fortinbras polarities.

The narrative traces the intertwined fortunes of two French cavalry officers, D'Hubert and Fauraud, across the rise and fall of the Napoleonic empire, commencing with their lieutenancies at a rural garrison in the early 1800s. A scion of the old aristocracy, D'Hubert is a promising aide on the general staff; he radiates cool competence; possesses a dry and self-effacing wit. The swart, truculent Fauraud probably comes from humbler origins. He serves in the field; is contemptuous of

any who do not; owns little humor, few words, none of the virtues of his rank save brute valor, and all the vices -- including an deeply unrepentant stupidity, and a penchant for taking ferocious offense on the slightest provocation. He's a Fortinbras avatar whose notion of honor, stoked by rampant narcissism and nurtured by a macho warrior culture, verges upon rank paranoia.

After Feraud skewers the town mayor's nephew in a grossly unequal -- and illegal -- duel, D'Hubert is dispatched to place his colleague under house arrest. Feraud takes instant umbrage at D'Hubert's mission; scornfully mocks him as a "staff poodle" and demands an apology -- precisely for what, the puzzled D'Hubert cannot tell. But in the face of Feraud's outrageous affronts, honor finally leaves D'Hubert no choice but to take up his challenge. Their skirmish ends with Feraud knocked senseless, and D'Hubert savaged by Feraud's mistress. D'Hubert, himself now summarily rebuked for duelling, awaits vindication at an official inquiry. He cannot otherwise reveal the truth and clear his good name, in what the stringent military social code he, no less than Feraud lives by deems a "private quarrel".

The regiment is suddenly called to combat, and the court of inquiry never is convened. Over the next twenty years Feraud keeps doggedly hunting D'Hubert down and calling him out. The two fight with every edged weapon conceivable -- rapier, sabre, broadsword -- on foot or horse, in brilliant sequences which in effect provide a short course on the duello. Wounds are honorably exchanged; D'Hubert repeatedly declares himself satisfied, but nothing short of his death will requite the imagined injuries to Feraud's hypertrophic self-regard.

Eventually the original casus belli fades into myth. To his dismay and amusement, D'Hubert acquires the reputation of a bloodthirsty duellist, even as he struggles mightily to elude Feraud by any justifiable strategem the code allows; in this case distant assignment, or promotion - - since officers of unequal rank are not permitted to duel.

D'Hubert is clearly no coward by ordinary standards. He's quite as skilful at arms as Feraud when put to the test. But he's restrained by acute awareness of the absurdity of Feraud's claim upon

him. Unlike his opponent, he views life as far too precious to throw away on a trifle. Furthermore, he is quite sensibly frightened by Feraud's sinister tenacity -- this at no small cost, one guesses, to his own prickly self-esteem.

The antagonist's clashes are played out against a broader historical canvas, as they follow Napoleon's fortunes; ascend the ladder of command to general rank; experience glory, then devastating defeat. During the disastrous Russian campaign, Feraud compels yet another duel amidst the multitude of their dead and dying comrades. Their confrontation is broken off to make common cause against murderous partisans. The scene is all the more mordant for Feraud's icy refusal to share D'Hubert's offer of a celebratory tipple afterwards.

With the restoration of monarchy, D'Hubert declares for the king's side. The decision is dictated by prudence, as much as conviction. Feraud predictably remains a staunch Bonapartist, escapes execution owing to D'Hubert's secret interventions, and is instead condemned to exile. D'Hubert's motives in saving the man who lives only to slaughter him constitute an ambiguous mix typical of Conrad -- pity, residual guilt at his defection from the Emperor's cause, perhaps even a curious admiration for his blockheaded nemesis.

D'Hubert enjoys a late blooming love for a neighboring nobleman's daughter. They marry, she becomes pregnant, happiness and peace seem at hand -- and then Feraud's grizzled seconds arrive to taunt D'Hubert for deserting Napoleon, and avoiding Feraud's renewed challenge. Perhaps Feraud dimly comprehends he is incapable of the intimacy D'Hubert has found. Perhaps he is stirred by envy as well as ancient grievance.

Feraud and his company have illegally returned to France, but D'Hubert rejects the convenient -- to him ignominious -- solution of having them arrested. I will not reveal the ploy by which he absolutely satisfies the demands of honor, while ridding himself permanently of Feraud's ferocious persecutions.

Ridley Scott came to The Duellists after a successful career as a commercial and television director, hence this is no novice work. The film's sumptuous beauty reflects Scott's considerable acquaintance with the art and artefacts of the period. Lovely evocations abound of late 18th and early 19th century Continental landscapes: Friedrich, Constable, Corot and Courbet spring to mind. The meticulous pacing, persuasive authenticity of costume and mise-en-scene, nuanced lighting also owe an honorable debt to Kubrick's Barry Lyndon (1975). Keith Carradine and Harvey Keitel are unexpectedly forceful as D'Hubert and Feraud, roles which one would have thought lay beyond their scope and interest (although Keitel still never ceases to surprise on both scores). The admirable supporting cast includes Tom Conti, Robert Stephens, Diana Quick, and Edward Fox.

Compared with The Duellists' accomplished mediation of complex ideas and characters through compelling action, Scott's GI Jane (1997) palls and appalls. Its profane heroine overcomes her fellow soldiers' disdain by shedding hair and sensitivity, pumping herself into a nasty macho caricature -- a Fortinbras cruder and crueler than Feraud. A generation after The Duellists, its director unfortunately opted for Feraud's decerebrate, phallic narcissism over D'Hubert's thoughtful humanism.

### Conan the Barbarian

The brilliant French auteur Bertrand Tavernier is chiefly known on this side of the Atlantic for 'Round Midnight (1986), his poignant chronicle of the final days of a played-out emmigre jazz musician. Although critically esteemed, Tavernier's films chiefly appeared in art houses in the past; now go virtually unseen in America. Always engaged on the Left, Tavernier draws upon the generous humanism of Thirties and Forties masters like Jean Renoir, the stylistic fluidity of the French New Wave, and tropes of classic mainstream cinema -- notably, the relay of larger cultural and ideological issues through individual crises, but without facile Hollywood resolutions.

Tavernier's oeuvre is situated across several centuries; features an eclectic assortment of heroes and anti-heroes: the perverse anti-Dreyfusard jurist of The Judge and the Assassin (1976), who conspires to have a demented serial killer declared sane and sent to the guillotine in aid of advancing his repellant reactionary agenda; the complacent bourgeois of The Clockmaker (1973) in Sixties' Lyon, who is awakened to angry protest by his son's imprisonment for the murder of a company stooge; the indolent colonial cop of Coup De Tournon (1982), who decides to rid his parish of corrupt hypocrites by summary execution.

These diverse characters share an ornery individuality and quirky intelligence; a skeptical, when not downright anarchic view of the status quo; and an engrained if unvoiced loneliness. They are often acutely aware of moral choice, even though they may ultimately opt for evil over good -- like the nobleman/regent of Let The Party Begin (1973), who acknowledges the iniquities of pre-revolutionary France, but is too sunk in debauchery to redress them.

Capitaine Conan (1996) is set at the end of World War I in mountainous Balkan territory, where a hundred thousand French troops had engaged in bloody skirmishing that went virtually unreported, compared with the glorious slaughters at the "real front" of the Somme and Argonne. To this godforsaken backwater comes a band of seasoned irregulars lead by Conan, a shopkeeper in civilian life, who has found an unexpected vocation for close combat. Cunning, fearless, efficiently brutal, he asserts that his savage commando raids do more to demoralize the enemy and win the war than the inept wholesale slaughters of the generals.

An hard-drinking brawler and exuberant womanizer, Conan is idolized by the men he would give his life for; respected but disliked by most of the colleagues he disdains -- saving two: De Sceve, a principled aristocrat who has chosen to serve in the infantry when he could have quickly risen in command elsewhere; and Norbert, a sensitive scholar drawn to Conan, and one of those unlikely friendships bred out of shared hard knocks.

Armistice is declared and the troops who fought in the European theater are sent home. But the Balkan regiments remain mobilized in cheerless garrison towns as a deterrent to the perceived new Bolshevik menace stirring across the border (shades of the Cold War). Months pass without incident; discipline deteriorates inexorably. The state of dreary limbo wears particularly hard on Conan's guerillas. Unlike the warweary majority, they've acquired the taste for blood, and now lack the justification to slake it.

Despite Conan's warnings and his own better judgement, Norbert agrees to become the regimental legal officer. He unexpectedly proves a skilful attorney -- a lenient advocate of lesser offenders and a determined prosecutor of crimes against civilians. Conan angrily repudiates him after he gains a conviction of several commandos who murdered two women while robbing a local bistro. The friends are reconciled after Conan testifies on behalf of a callow deserter Norbert is defending. Against De Sceve's steely insistence upon the death penalty, Conan asserts that the fault lies not with the accused, but with those who in their avidity for cannon fodder failed to weed out such egregiously uneducable cowards.

Shortly afterwards, the regiment is swept into a furious clash with Russian partisans. There is little redemptive in the French victory beyond a global discharge of frustration. Tavernier concludes the battle upon the frozen howl on Conan's face. It's predictive of a devastating post-traumatic state, compounded out of the atrocities he's both witnessed and perpetrated, as well as the indifference of his country to the sacrifice of his soul (for a 2009 viewer, resonances to our respective debacles in Vietnam and Iraq are inevitable).

The heartbreaking coda -- in which Norbert visits Conan after the war -- underscores Conan's utter ruin of spirit, his enduring unfitness for any occupation other than warrior. Clinical experience indicates that such men receive but cold comfort from the rationale that they have acted, however barbarously, to save life and serve country according to their idiosyncratic notion of honor.

Tavernier has always excelled at creating extraordinary scenes of unenforced intimacy, in which -- borrowing David Magarshak's felicitous observation on Chekhov -- "one gets the impression of holding life itself, like a fluttering bird, in one's cupped hands."<sup>(3)</sup> In Capitaine Conan these privileged moments are interpolated with sweeping action sequences unprecedented in Tavernier's career. By his report, the virtuoso combat footage -- indeed the film's prevailing mentalite -- were much influenced by John Huston's suppressed World War II documentary, The Battle Of San Pietro [1945].

Reminiscent also of Isak Babel's harrowing Red Cavalry Stories, the director's transparent discursive style captures the ever shifting fortunes and faces of war with immense cumulative power: the prolonged stretches of boredom in which foraging for grub is the main order of the day; the sudden wrenching terror of attack; the curious hypervigilance to detail alternating with sleep-deprived indifference; quiet conversation over a cherished cigarette; the small tokens of affection for a comrade who could be gone tomorrow; the petty rivalries of the officer's mess.

Capitaine Conan joins that short list of works which unsparingly illuminate the savage countenance of war without ponderous sermonizing or jingoist wretched excess -- inter alia, The Battle of San Pietro, The Big Picture (1925), The Cruel Sea (1952), Ashes and Diamonds (1958), The Red and the White (1967), and many episodes directed by Robert Altman for the Combat television series. To which honorable company one now can add Katherine Bigelow's The Hurt Locker (2009), a riveting depiction of an American bomb disposal unit's daily unreflective heroism amidst the Iraq conflict's dispiriting amiguities.

#### FOOTNOTES:

1. Shakespeare, William. Henry IV, Part I. The Arden Shakespeare: Editor, A.R. Humphreys; New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 145.

2. Ibid. Hamlet. The Arden Shakespeare: Editor, Harold Jenkins; Surrey: T. Nelson and Sons, 1997, p. 346, 344.

3. Magarshak, David. Introduction to Anton Chekov: Lady With Lapdog And Other Stories, New York: Penguin Classics, 1982, p. 7.