

MEDIA REVIEW

Danton, directed by Andrzej Wajda; Gaumont-Film Polski TFI Films Production-S.F.P.C., 1982; a Triumph Films Release, available on video tape (catalogue col V91053) through RCA/Columbia Pictures Home Video, 2901 W. Alameda Avenue, Burbank, California 91505, \$59.95.

After groping for years to find a way of bringing the human drama of the French Revolution to life for my students, I have finally found an effective tool--a feature film entitled Danton, directed by Andrzej Wajda. Because this film is so effective, I believe it deserves the same kind of serious consideration that we usually reserve for books.

For us Revolutionary specialists, the clash of ideas and personalities in desperate circumstances is easy to see when we look at the letters, speeches, and documents from the period. The mere mention of a name like Robespierre or Danton or Fouquier-Tinville triggers a host of exciting and intriguing images and relationships. But for our students these names are often just additions to a long list of confusing facts and dates to be memorized and recited in the proper order on examinations.

In many courses we can use novels to add depth and context to our students' understanding of what it was like to live in another time and place. But in the study of the Revolution, the choice of novels is limited. Certainly Anatole France's The Gods Will Have Blood is a better choice than the obvious A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens, which, unfortunately, has given most English speakers their vivid impressions of the French Revolution. Helpful as novels may be, they take hours to read and add hundreds of pages to reading lists without always providing intensity and immediacy for a generation weaned on visual imagery.

This film, on the contrary, runs just over two hours, is a feast for the eyes and ears, and strikes with the impact of the cold steel blade of the guillotine. Polish director Wajda may indeed have been making a statement about political conditions in his homeland in this 1982 release, and French film idol Gerard Depardieu may well have been seeking no more than a vehicle to display his talent, as critics have pointed out. But, as critics have also noted, their work is a tour de force in which excellent cinematography and sensitive acting have produced a masterpiece. At last here is a film that recreates the Revolutionary era in a way that is not only esthetically and intellectually respectable but historically accurate enough to be useful in the classroom. Beside it the available "educational" classroom films and Hollywood classics like The Scarlet Pimpernel and the film versions of A Tale of Two Cities pale into insignificance.

How accurate is Danton? Admittedly when I saw it the first time and recalled my dissertation research on Danton, I was sharply irritated by the uncertain chronology and dozens of usually small errors. The events between 20 November 1793 and 5 April 1794 are telescoped in such a way that the unwary may suppose that only a few days had passed; the guillotine is in the wrong location in Paris; Danton's exceptionally tall friend Lacroix is played by a short actor; and, most striking, the famously ugly Danton is portrayed by the handsome Depardieu. The specialist will be able to quibble on many points. But could any film dramatization that is likely to be made please most specialists? Danton does not pretend to be the fruit of scholarly research. It is based on the play L'Affaire Danton by Stanislaw Przybyszewska, though I suspect the filmmakers also resorted to J. F. E. Robinet's Le Procès des Dantonistes (Paris, 1879) and other familiar sources, because so many of the details are right. Danton's bride is not only small and blonde but could even pass for seventeen; Robespierre,

masterfully portrayed by Polish actor Wojciech Pszoniak, is as exhausted and feverish as he should be; Couthon's handcranked wheelchair looks authentic; the table cloth in the meeting room of the Committee of Public Safety is green; and the exotic young Saint-Just has an earring.

More important than such details, the tone and timbre of the film ring true to my conception of the Revolution most of the time. The food shortages, the pressure of the war, the crowded prisons, the deadly seriousness of purpose with occasional duplicity, the fear and hatred of police spies, the tense arguments over principles and methods, the boisterous sessions of the Convention, and the obviously political nature of Danton's trial are all creatively and effectively communicated. The best feature of the film is the striking contrast between Danton and Robespierre. Danton's sensual, pleasure-loving Robespierre carefully supervises the preparation of a gourmet dinner intended to please Robespierre. Then he passes up a political meeting to spend time with women of dubious morals. But he also bellows lovingly at Parisian crowds in terms they understand, manipulating them to his will and driving the Revolutionary Tribunal to distraction. Pszoniak's Robespierre is prim and fussy, an ideologue genuinely concerned about the welfare of the individuals around him. He asks David to remove Fabre D'Eglantine from the painting of the Tennis Court Oath because he has been arrested for corruption. But he agonizes over the loss of his talented revolutionary friends Danton and Desmoulins. Their discussions about the meaning and purpose of the Revolution are no more verifiable than Louis XIV's supposed quip, "I am the state," but they generally are just as accurate a reflection of what might have been said.

The most persuasive arguments in favor of using the film in a course on the French Revolution and Napoleon have come from my students. Although I sometimes suspect they like any film as a change of pace from lectures and discussions, they were unanimously enthusiastic about this film in particular. I thought they might be put off by the fact that the dialogue is in French (with subtitles), but they found that made it more "authentic" and "realistic." Their anonymous assessments of the value of the film in the course deserve a hearing. "The film has given me a better idea of the urgency of the Revolution and the blind confusion and desperation of the people involved" and "added to my understanding of what drove the leaders of the Revolution to do what they did and why they felt it had to be done." "It helped me to put people and events in proper perspective." "It makes you realize they were only men with human qualities and emotions, doing what they thought was right for the nation." "The problems the people faced and the constant threat of the Terror become real as you watch this movie. It is easy to see that anyone could become a victim, even those who began the Revolution." "This movie took a part of history and turned it from being just a page in a textbook into something that was real and experienced." "Students can study their brains out on black and white paper and forget it all within a few months. But when those words are associated with a person in a film . . . so I can see and hear what he looked and sounded like, those visions I can hardly forget."

Films and video tapes will never replace books, but the best of them can be valuable pedagogical tools when they are integrated with lectures, discussions, and readings in the primary and secondary sources. Wajda's Danton will continue to be part of my syllabus for The French Revolution and Napoleon, and I think it will prove useful to others.