**Danton Film Reviews**

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Nearly thirty years have passed since Andzrej Wajda’s Danton, starring Gérard Depardieu as the insouciant revolutionary, opened in Paris and Warsaw. The film, a Franco-Polish collaboration featuring a transnational and bilingual cast, focuses on the political elite of the French Revolution in the spring of 1794. Danton takes as its subject the conflict between two flawed leaders: Georges Danton– gregarious, indulgent, confident — and Maximilien Robespierre –ill, ascetic, and portrayed as looking considerably older than his 35 years. Played by a Frenchman and a Pole, respectively, Danton and Robespierre argue over who can claim to be the voice of the people. In their conversations about the direction of the Revolution, they quite literally do not speak the same language – a fact that the (French) dubbing and (English) subtitling obscure. The film culminates in Danton’s trial before the Revolutionary Tribunal, in which Depardieu makes impassioned appeals to the camera before his character is silenced by a decree of the Committee of Public Safety. The film’s final scenes, which take place at the public execution of Danton and Camille Desmoulins and in the private apartment of Robespierre, force the viewer to confront the question at the heart of the movie: what role did personal friendships and enmities play in creating the political tragedy of the Terror?

In mixing the personal and the political, and in juxtaposing the private spaces of revolutionaries’ lives with the public spaces of the Revolution like the Convention floor, the Tribunal, and the Place de la Révolution (present-day place de la Concorde), the film has stood the test of time, both as an engaging narrative of the Terror and as a classroom tool. In the 1980s, much was written on the background of Polish Solidarity against which this film was written and produced, and in France, criticism focused on the apparently counterrevolutionary stance of Wajda, whose depiction of the Revolution is framed by the looming image of the guillotine. In fact, these criticisms of Danton could serve as a site for thinking through the legacies of the Revolution and the ways in which it has been appropriated and re-narrated by later political groups. Paired with Robert Darnton’s essay, “Danton and Double Entendre,” the film and its reception remind us of the continuing battles over the legacy of the Revolution in twentieth- (and one may suggest, twenty-first) century France.

But it is not merely, or even primarily, its role as a contested revolutionary myth that makes this film such a useful addition to the classroom. It is highly successful in evoking the details of the revolutionary moment. The figure of Georges Couthon in a wheelchair, the grumbling in the bread lines of wartime Paris, the Phrygian caps:  all these permit a visualization of revolutionary culture that texts alone could not convey. The chilling scene in which Danton, Desmoulins, and their fellow prisoners have their collars and hair cut off to expose their necks is a graphic illustration of the bodily transformation imposed by the guillotine. Even the factually problematic scene in which Robespierre demands that Jacques-Louis David remove Fabre d’Eglantine (who would not have been present at the Estates-General) from his unfinished painting of the Tennis Court Oath expresses a political and artistic reality: David did constantly revise this painting to accommodate the changing political climate, and art – especially his art — was both a handmaiden of and a catalyst for politics. If the revolutionary government needed to “prepare public opinion,” as Couthon declares in a Committee of Public Safety meeting in the movie, then art offered a powerful mechanism for fomenting revolutionary ideas.

What is more, despite the passage of nearly thirty years, the issues raised in the film remain highly relevant given recent revolutionary historiography that treats the Terror as an intimate and emotional event. Critics of the film have focused on the fact that Wajda’s Terror takes place in a vacuum, stripped of all its precipitating causes. War is hardly mentioned; the émigrés – like the flight to Varennes – become the namesake of a dish at Danton’s elaborate dinner for Robespierre, but are colorful period details as opposed to historical agents and counter-revolutionary threats.   Likewise, Danton’s political infelicities – the suspicious circumstances in which he accumulated his newfound wealth, for example – are reduced to personal vices: Depardieu’s Danton drinks too much, is prideful and over-indulgent. Indeed, the pivotal scene in the movie, in which Robespierre dines (or rather, chooses not to dine despite a lavishly prepared meal) with Danton in a private suite, only to witness Danton’s descent into inebriation and finally slumber, makes Robespierre’s political turn against Danton seem to be rooted in personal, rather than political, disapproval.  The Terror in Wajda’s retelling becomes a mere power grab, where spite is as significant as the desperate attempt to hold on to power.

As a result, within the film’s narrative, there is something inexplicable about Robespierre’s sudden spiral into dictatorial ambitions in the wake of the fateful dinner with Danton. Robespierre voices reservations throughout the film about the direction which the Revolution is taking; he speaks with Saint-Just of his desire to end the carnage of the Terror, defends both Danton and Desmoulins against their detractors early in the film, and speaks with ominous regret after Danton’s execution. But it is only after the tête à tête in Danton’s private chambers that his doubts give way to decisive action. It is after the dinner that his fellow Committee of Public Safety members accuse Robespierre of acting like a monarch; later, he circumvents the law to ensure a sympathetic jury at Danton’s trial. It is as if Danton’s fate is sealed by his overindulgences and his ad hominem attacks on Robespierre’s asceticism, and not political necessity or even ideology. This causal mechanism is, perhaps fittingly and intentionally, dissatisfying: surely, the viewer thinks, Danton is not sent to his death for petty personal grievances; surely Robespierre does not abandon law and justice out of spite and disgust.

And yet, as Marisa Linton has recently demonstrated, the Terror was, in fact, sometimes tragically intimate.  Friendships mattered in the behind-closed-doors machinations of the revolutionary government, and in the procurement of government positions for trusted individuals; they also mattered in identifying conspirators who too often met in private.  It is no historical error that in Wajda’s evocative representation of the Revolutionary Tribunal, one of the first questions Fouquier-Tinville asks of Danton’s fellow defendants is whether or not they are friends. As Linton writes, “The legitimate venues for the conduct of revolutionary politics were places to which all citizens might have access: the revolutionary assemblies, sections, and committees, and the clubs for which membership was open – at least in theory – to everyone who could pay the fee.” Personal relationships that developed beyond the public gaze could render one potentially suspect.

What is more, personal vices and private behavior did matter in judging character and political affinities during the Revolution. As recent historiography has argued, the period of the Terror in particular emphasized the need for transparency between private emotion and public action. The 1793 Law of Suspects, after all, condemned “those who, by their conduct, associations, comments, or writings have shown themselves partisans of tyranny or federalism and enemies of liberty,” and individuals “ who have not constantly demonstrated their devotion to the Revolution.” Inappropriate associations and improper emotions were condemnable crimes. While Danton does not portray the politicization of emotion that historians have recently stressed, it does depict the Jacobins’ (here metonymized in the figure of Robespierre) idealization of a personally and politically virtuous figure. “You want men to act like the heroes of novels,” Danton replies to Robespierre’s condemnation of revolutionary profiteers. In its elision of the personal and the political – and in its portrayal of the Revolutionary Tribunal, one of the only such cinematic depictions I am aware of  — Danton should not only generate a vigorous conversation about the causes of the Terror, but should also allow for reflection on revolutionary justice and definitions of criminality.

Finally, in his emphasis on the personal relationships and private motivations driving the Terror, Wajda echoes the opinion of some of the victims themselves. In a letter written from prison to his wife, Camille Desmoulins stated: “I do not conceal from myself that I die victimized for a few pleasantries and for my friendship with Danton.” Desmoulins attempted to make sense of what seemed nonsensical – his death at the hands of his friend Robespierre and his indictment for betraying the republic he had served devotedly – by tracing it to personal, rather than political, motives. In Wajda’s film, we see the same process at work. The personal is political, and the only way to make sense of Robespierre’s turn against his fellow revolutionaries and, in the case of Desmoulins, dear friends, is to stage a confrontation between two powerful but incompatible personalities.

In the final analysis, therefore, there is something satisfying about the movie’s unsatisfying causal narrative for Robespierre’s spiraling megalomania. I would be less likely to trust or recommend a movie that offered a fully convincing or simple causal explanation for the Terror, an event that challenged the comprehension of its contemporaries as well as generations of scholars ever since. It is instead the sense of tragic bewilderment with which the movie concludes that makes it one of the best representations available of the tumultuous Year II. The closing scenes – the gruesome images of Danton’s head being raised to the revolutionary crowd while his blood soaks into the hay beneath the scaffold, followed by Robespierre listening to a young boy’s recitation of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen –  make that sense of sorrowful confusion all the more poignant: what, the audience is left to wonder, can possibly link the former with the latter?  It is hard to imagine a better site for beginning, or ending, a classroom conversation about the Terror, than the struggle to make sense of that tragic juxtaposition.

**Vincent Canby**  
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**WAJDA'S 'DANTON,' INSIDE THE FRENCH REVOLUTION**

COMPARED to the massive scale of the Russian Revolution, the French Revolution of 1789-95 seems almost to have been a chamber piece. Though armies supporting Louis XVI crossed France's border seeking to save the Bourbon monarchy, and though all of France eventually become involved in the bloodshed, the most decisive battles of the Revolution were fought in Paris, in the political clubs and on the streets.

In Paris, the Revolution's leaders, with the backing of the angry mobs, set policies that the rest of the country, left to their own devices, would probably have disowned, at least initially. The course of the Revolution was shaped by a small group of extraordinary men, all young, who started out as idealists, then became comrades and close friends, godfathers to one another's children. Within four years, they had split into factions as mortal enemies. Men did not hesitate to send to the guillotine former boon companions, now branded as traitors to the fatherland.

This peculiar, dreadful intimacy of a handful of remarkable personalities is vividly dramatized in ''Danton,'' Andrzej Wajda's fine, comparatively ascetic historical film that will be shown at the New York Film Festival at Lincoln Center today at 9:30 P.M. and tomorrow at 6:15 P.M.

Chief among these personalities are Georges Danton and Maximilien Robespierre. Danton is the passionate, vulgar, not entirely honest man of the people, a hugely popular leader of the Revolutionary left who becomes increasingly moderate as the Revolution adopts policies of extermination. Robespierre, called ''the incorruptible,'' is the small, fastidiously dressed, rigorously moral lawyer from Arras who, being convinced that Danton's moderation is a betrayal of the Revolution, engineers his trial and execution. ''Robespierre, you will follow me within three months!'' the furious Danton screams as he is hauled off to the guillotine and, as things turned out, he was absolutely right.

''Danton,'' a Franco-Polish co-production, was directed in France by Mr. Wajda from a screenplay by Jean-Claude Carriere, based on a stage play by Stanislawa Przybyszewska. Gerard Depardieu, who is, of course, a French actor, stars as the sympathetic Danton. Wojciech Pszoniak, a Polish actor, shares star billing as the thin-lipped voice of reason, Robespierre. That the Robespierrists, all of whom are seen as fanatics, some slightly less opportunistic than others, should be played by Polish actors, while the earthy, hearty, mostly honest Dantonists are played by French actors, is just one of the possible reasons why the Polish Government has not yet seen fit to release the film at home.

Without stretching things too much, I suppose, Mr. Wajda presents us with a Danton who is the articulate conscience of the Revolution, someone, perhaps, not entirely unlike Lech Walesa, the popular spokesman of Poland's Solidarity movement. On the other hand, Robespierre is seen as being completely removed from the practical needs and real feelings of the people, a stern father-figure of a dictator, a man who doesn't hesitate to approve the murder of thousands of people for the fatherland's ultimate good.

In an interview in Le Monde, Mr. Wajda denies all associations between 18th-century France and 20th-century Poland, though he does say that Danton represents the West and Robespierre the East.

Whether or not these associations hold true are beside the point of the film. ''Danton'' brilliantly illuminates one of the most fascinating periods of the French Revolution - those early months in 1794 when Danton, having been in self-imposed retirement in the country, returned to Paris to attempt to stop the Terror. Louis had been beheaded in January 1793. By October 1793, the Terror was picking up momentum, with the execution of Marie Antoinette, the liberal-thinking Duc D'Orleans, the chatty, letter- writing Madame Roland, and the leaders of the Girondists, the Revolution's moderates. In returning to Paris instead of fleeing the country, as his friends advised him to do, Danton knew he was leaving his head exposed to the guillotine.

In keeping with the chamber-piece nature of this Revolution, ''Danton'' is played out in a series of mostly small, intimate, beautifully defined confrontations between the robust, commonsensical Danton and the steely Robespierre. It's to Mr. Carriere's credit, as the screenwriter, that these scenes should be so truly dramatic and understandable, even, I suspect, to someone who has no special knoweldge of or interest in the course of the Revolution.

It's to Mr. Wajda's credit that though his sympathies are clearly with Danton, played with all stops out by Mr. Depardieu, it is Robespierre, played with silky neuroticism by Mr. Pszoniak, who emerges as the film's most arresting, possibly tragic figure.

Not so effective are those scenes that attempt to place the personal- political drama in the context of a city and a nation in rebellion. There is something as perfunctory as there is obligatory about the crowd scenes. They remind me, in fact, of those Hollywood mobs, led by Blanche Yurka as Madame Defarge, that were out to get Charles Darnay in the 1935 ''A Tale of Two Cities.'' It also doesn't help that the French dialogue of the Polish actors, including Mr. Pszoniak, has not been especially well post-synchronized with the movements of the actors' lips.

Mr. Wajda and Mr. Carriere haven't exactly cleaned up Danton's reputation, but the bad things remain offscreen. There are references to the taking of bribes, to his love of women and property, and he himself asks forgiveness for having formed the notorious Committee of Public Safety, the body through which Robespierre came to control the country. Not emphasized at all is Danton's part in the September 1793 massacre in which mobs were encouraged to ransack Paris prisons and, without discrimination, murder everyone they could lay hands on as agents of the feared monarchist counterrevolution. Danton was not as clean as a hound's tooth.

What the film does most effectively is dramatize his later conviction that the Revolution's fury was itself a betrayal of the Revolution, as he says so eloquently in the trial that is the film's climax.

In addition to Mr. Depardieu and Mr. Pszoniak, the excellent cast includes Patrice Chereau as Danton's journalist-friend, Camille Desmoulins; Angela Winkler as Lucille Desmoulins, Camille's wife who followed him to the scaffold; Boguslaw Linda, as Saint Just, and Roger Planchon, who is partciuarly good as Fourquier Tinville, who prosecuted Danton and his associates in a rigged trial.

''Danton'' is a major work from this major film maker. Ah, Those French!