

Sydney Film Festival

Teaching stories and empty posturing

Dora Heita and Beau Travail

Mustafa Rashid
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The experience of seeing a film can be loosely categorised as internal and external. The internal experience is the one that most filmmakers aim for. This refers to what we experience when a film takes us deeper into ourselves, so to speak. To a varying extent we identify with the protagonist or some other character. We know, understand and even feel the character's state. We want something similar to what the character wants, and, as the plot thickens, we anticipate whether or not they will get it. This is the proper plot structure for a drama as set out in Aristotle's *Poetics* and in the 20th century has been adopted as the standard by which most people measure films. *Beau Travail*, the new film by Claire Denis falls into this category, as do most films of the Hollywood model.

The positive aspect of these films is that, at their best, they can be effective and moving. They can motivate, stimulate and inspire the viewer, and they can even influence opinion, private and public. *Beau Travail*, however, reminds us how often such films exploit the fact that, while identifying with the hero's aspirations and noble intentions, we also identify with his or her prejudices, stereotypes and limitations.

The external experience is the aim of a minority of filmmakers, and therefore not so common. This refers to what we experience when a film takes us outside ourselves, making us aware of global perspectives and contexts, and through this reveals new layers of understanding.

In my opinion films made by Luis Bunuel, Sergei Eisenstein, Michelangelo Antonioni, Andrei Tarkovsky, Akira Kurosawa, Chris Marker and others fall into this category. These films do not rely on the audience to identify with a particular character. Instead, we identify with the film itself, that is, with the filmmaker's line of thought.

The giant transnational entertainment corporations regard many films in this category as commercially unacceptable, thus all non-linear narrative devices have been marginalised as “experimental” while the so-called “teaching stories”, that are so common in Eastern (and used to be common in all traditional) storytelling, have almost become extinct.

Teaching stories are used in the education and training process and are designed to make one think in a new way, or to understand a mental, political or philosophical concept in a more effective way. These stories do not aim to represent literal, human, day-to-day behaviour. Directors who make this sort of cinema are not just

filmmakers but philosophers and thinkers who use film as a medium. Their art is not created for the sole purpose of pleasing an audience. Of course, some situations require that the audience is indeed pleased, but other lessons are better demonstrated by causing the audience temporary discomfort, fear or distress, or by making the audience work hard to find a meaning.

Dora Heita, the latest film by veteran Japanese director Kon Ichikawa, is aimed at an external experience and is also a teaching film. In fact, it could be described as a Samurai training film and therefore very different from most films about Samurais.

Ichikawa, who was born in 1915 and has been making movies for over 50 years, has earned his place as a master filmmaker and teacher. Since his debut feature *A Girl At Dojo Temple* (1946), which was banned by the occupying US military administration, Ichikawa has directed a wide range of films—from Hollywood style comedies to serious dramas. His most famous works are *The Burmese Harp* (1956), a painfully beautiful anti-war film, and *An Actor's Revenge* (1963), set in the world of Kabuki theatre. *An Actor's Revenge* is also considered a significant social document: the Ichikawa family has been one of the most famous kabuki families since the 17th century, and Ichikawa directed the film with the confidence and authority of an insider. *Dora Heita* has the same feeling of authority.

Philosopher and sometime Samurai Hayashi Razan (1683-1657) opposed doctrines that preached acceptance and tolerance in the name of an existing “human nature”, arguing that this led to injustice and corruption. He taught that humanity has an obligation to force ethical justice onto the earth. This process began, according to Razan, with the purification of one's own mind to deal with an onslaught of disruptions, diversions and confusions. Another Samurai philosopher, Suzuki Shosan (1579-1655), taught that the only way to do this was to “practice death”, that is to engage in exercises that involved imagining oneself in various situations that involve death.

Dora Heita, which concerns the fortunes of Koheita Mochizuki (Koji Yakusho) a Samurai magistrate sent to clean up a corrupt, crime-ridden town, teaches its audience about these processes. Prostitution, gambling and other illegal activity dominate the town and three Samurais, sent to sort out the problems have mysteriously disappeared. Nicknamed “Dora Heita” or “alley cat”, a creature no less cunning than the human ego, the magistrate

cleverly cultivates a reputation for being lax, interested only in drinking and other debauched activities. He does not show up at his office, leaving his secretaries waiting, recording their wait every day in the official paperwork.

But sure enough, Dora Heita's lack of ego and pureness of mind pay off. His visits to the town's gambling houses and brothels provide him with ample information about the gangs and, more importantly, the political figures in the council behind the rackets. One by one his enemies begin to expose themselves. The fearless Dora Heita has many enemies and many opportunities to practice death in several battle scenes, extraordinary not only for the magistrate's strategies, but also for Ichikawa's masterfully clear and simple choreography and stunning camera work.

On one level, Ichikawa's film has the clarity and poetry of a committed, practical and humorous discourse by a wise teacher. It is full of grace and severity, yet friendly and patient. On another level, the film, like all good historical works, can be appreciated for its cutting parallels with the internecine faction fighting and wheeling and dealing of contemporary Japanese political life.

And, since Kon Ichikawa loves to entertain, he also provides lots of action and gags for those who only want to appreciate the film on that level. One wonders what *Dora Heita* would have been like if Ichikawa had made the film in 1969, when the script was originally conceived with Akira Kurosawa, Keisuke Kinoshita and Masaki Kobayashi. Finally realised thirty years after it was written, it is a timely and relevant statement: a reminder of an approach to art that often seems on the verge of extinction.

Beau Travail by Claire Denis is a film about training but very far from being a training film. Instead, it is in the “gritty stories of trial by fire” genre. In this case, the specific circumstances relate to the experiences of members of the French Foreign Legion.

The plot concerns the relationship between Galoup (Denis Lavant), an officer, and Sentain (Gregoire Colin), a new Legionnaire. Galoup, who is jealous of Sentain's popularity with other members of the squad and another officer, decides he will psychologically and physically break the new recruit, as part of his training. There is little need to relate any other details from *Beau Travail*'s plot, except to mention that the film is set in Marseilles and Djibouti, the harsh and arid French outpost on the Red Sea in North East Africa, a place where different rules apply, a place where “men must be men” and so on.

Denis, whose father was a French civil servant, was born in 1948 and spent the first 14 years of her life in Africa. She made her first feature, *Chocolat* (1988), also set in Africa, after working as an assistant director to Jim Jarmusch on his *Down by Law* (1986) and with Wim Wenders as art director for *Paris Texas* (1983) and his assistant director on *Wings of Desire* in 1987.

In *Beau Travail* Denis seeks to impress her audience with intense scenes of primal purification rites and raw, “drunken” male energy. Marseilles is where we see Galoup taking a break from the Legion, and these scenes are designed to show us his other, “sober” side. It is as if Marseille is the “real world” and Africa is some kind of looking glass or strange drug trip.

Without doubt, Denis's subject matter would have been an interesting foundation on which to explore many themes. The French Foreign legion has a very real presence in Africa and is a

symbol of imperialist oppression on many different levels. But, instead of exploring these issues, Denis seems to have become completely mesmerised by the images she has created of men acting out a strange and almost formally choreographed fantasy in the desert. She does not attempt to question, decode or offer an analysis of what is going on and ends up producing a somewhat embarrassing glorification of the brutal, and brutalising, life inside the Foreign Legion.

And by aiming at a purely internal experience the film relies exclusively on our interest in what the characters are doing. But here, too, the film does not succeed: the actors are all playing types, formally mouthing lines to illustrate their rather obvious characters. Denis's film is professional enough: there is nothing wrong with the work of cinematographer Agnes Godard, whose images are occasionally striking, and the film's soundtrack is probably worth mentioning. But these qualities require little intellectual effort and are generally found in most TV commercials.

Chocolat, a more interesting film by Denis, focused on the emotions of a French woman remembering her childhood on a farm in colonial Africa. In her new film, Denis approaches Djibouti in a similar but even more dispassionate way with the stark and barren land, and its inhabitants, as an exotic backdrop. In *Chocolat*, all the Africans were servants. In *Beau Travail* they are onlookers with no identity. It's not that the director approves of this. In fact, she no doubt sincerely intends to criticise it. It's just that she does not do it and limits herself to representational filmmaking. *Beau Travail* weaves and explores and pokes its nose around a bit. It stages some complex and challenging situations but provides nothing but stereotypes and clichés. It lacks two important qualities of a good teacher: wisdom and humour.



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