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FILM



Senseless combat: Keitel and Carradine in *The Duellists*

Living Landscapes, Livable Rooms

Rob Baker

Dersu Uzala
Baronet
The Duellists
Neighborhoods

Akira Kurosawa made *Dersu Uzala* in 1975, following a crisis period in his own life and career, during which he suffered what we in the West so coyly term a "mental breakdown," including a suicide attempt. It is significant (and far from surprising) that the film is one of the most eloquent ever made on the subject of human frailty and survival.

Dersu Uzala is an old Chinese man who has spent most of his life hunting and trapping in the wild countryside of the Ussuri River region between Outer Mongolia and far Eastern Siberia. Almost 40 years

before, he watched his wife and two children die of smallpox, then burned all traces of that former existence, becoming an eccentric loner for the rest of his days. His relationship with nature — the land, the forest, the animals and plants — is almost uncanny. Nature is his best friend as well as his arch-enemy: he understands it and fears it, uses its secrets to survive. Dersu is a man who listens to trees, hears voices in the wind, talks to tigers.

We see Dersu (magnificently played by Maxim Munzuk) through the eyes of a Russian surveyor (Kurosawa based the film on the real life journals by this man, Vladimir Arsenyev) who's come from the West to chart the territory for his government at the time of the Russo-Japanese War. A bond of friendship grows between the two through two long expeditions, and when Dersu appears to have grown too old

Survival: *Dersu Uzala*

to hunt, after shooting a tiger (an animal sacred to his gods) in yet another attempt to save his city-bred counterpart's life, Arsenyev offers him a room in his home back in the world where people work at desks, can't shoot guns in public or sleep in the open air, and charge money for firewood and water. Dersu can't survive there, of course, and returns home to die, mysteriously, but one can't help but suspect (even against the logic of the authorities), by his own hand.

Just as nature itself is alive for Dersu, Kurosawa's landscapes live and vibrate, tantalizing us with their simplicity and their secrets. It's rare that art is so wedded to subject matter as this, revealing layers of meaning through sheer visual impact. A labyrinth of green trees, a forest of shimmering icicles, a river gone wild all speak volumes. And one scene is utterly unforgettable: Dersu and Arsenyev (Yuri Solomin) come through a field of scraggly golden grain to lose themselves in the hypnotic calm of a panorama of white drifting snow over gray-blue ice on a frozen lake. In the blank, dense off-white of the sky, an occasional ray of sunlight is trapped, transfixed by a light spill on the camera lens (one of the few instances in movie history where technique calls attention to itself and yet makes perfect sense, thematically, at the same time). Then suddenly the sun sets and the winds rise, as the two men struggle frantically to cut enough grass to make a shelter to survive the night.

Kurosawa has used a kind of color stock that looks curiously flat and pale, never lush or "spectacular." The tone suits the film perfectly, reminding us that colors are always no more or less "real" than our own perceptions, our own attitudes towards nature. There's also one extraordinary scene where Arsenyev snaps photographs of Dersu, fixing the animated face and body of this constantly living moving little man into the colorless artificiality of frozen time and space. Susan Sontag couldn't say it better.
