History at the Movies: The Early Modern Years

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| ***Ridicule*** Film Review by Thomas Bourne  In pre-Revolutionary France, to laugh at someone who falls over at court is considered the height of gentlemanly conduct and a sure route to the favour of the king. But beware, it may cause you to be pissed on by your insultee – doubly embarrassing if you are too old to have the power of speech for a witty reposte. Patrice Leconte opens his 1996 film, Ridicule, with this suitably ridiculous scene. In fact, just in case anyone might have missed the subtlety, the plot is already given away – if you are in a hurry press stop there because you have ‘done’ this film pretty much. If not, I highly commend the ninety-eight minutes that follow as an entertaining and different experience of Ancien Regime France on film. I’ll admit it, I enjoyed this film and find it interesting that it has attracted such a spectrum of criticism from praise to the downright childish. Before I move on to what the critics have to say and what, if anything, can be drawn about the eighteenth century from this film – I’ll outline the plot.  After the bizarre opening, the action cuts to rural France where keen, but ailing, peasants are pulling fish from a swamp. Their lord, Gregoire Ponceludon de Malavoy, despairs at the malaria-ridden state of his people and gallops to Versaille to seek money from the king for an ambitious drainage project. Ponceludon is something of an amateur engineer and hopes to capture the scientifically minded king’s imagination with his plan. But the political and social labyrinth leading to Louis XVI is a windy one, and his various advisors as well as an array of stubborn courtiers stand in his way. His advisors are all too used to plans like this being brought before the king and have systematically blocked them: ideas like the Channel Tunnel and the mapping of India are mentioned as ideas that would drain the resources of the country. To guide him through the system of patronage at Versaille is the well-acted and charismatic Marquis de Bellegarde (Jean Rochefort).  The mechanism by which Ponceludon will get to the king, we soon discover, is wit. In fact, for the hard of hearing or plain stupid the words wit and ridicule are specifically mentioned almost every other line: “Wit opens every door, you have plenty of it,” “Honesty and wit are so rarely combined,” “We live under the tyranny of wit and genealogy,” “He could ridicule me in front of the king,” “We’ll serve a dish of ridicule to Ponceludon,” “We’d look ridiculous,” and so on. Anyway, Ponceludon, unfortunately for the established courtiers, is a ready source of wit and this, together with some tutoring on make-up application by de Bellegarde, stands him in good stead at court. He also attracts the attention of the court tart, the Countess de Blayac, who is renowned both for her closeness to the king and looseness of her knicker elastic.  Juxtaposed slightly too Hollywood-esquely is the beautiful, virtuous and progressive daughter of our hero’s mentor, Mlle Mathilde de Bellegarde. Predictably Ponceludon falls for her too and her budding scientific mind although he is slightly alarmed by her liberty of movement and speech. ‘Don’t worry,’ explains her father, ‘she was born in the same year as Rousseau wrote Emile’. Now, it may seem nit-picky but Mathilde is probably the absolute antithesis of Rousseau’s woman who existed solely for man and “has more facility to excite the desires than man has to satisfy them.” [1] Mathilde is, however, pretty much the perfect ‘90s lass - compare her to the woman in Nostradamus - and that will do for the purposes of this film. (She’s also very fit and has an amazing cleavage.) The problem of her marriage to a lecherous old rich man is disposed of when she falls whole-heartedly for Ponceludon and chooses him over riches and stability.  Ponceludon’s choice between de Blayac who means moral bankruptcy but certain royal patronage and Mathilde who is earthy, natural and honest is a classic Hollywood-ism but represents one of the themes of the film. The choice is something he finds difficult to reconcile fully until near the end. So thanks to his chat and the help of the randy Mme de Blayac he finds himself briefly next to the king talking about his project. Sadly the king’s interest is short-lived as a duel between Ponceludon and one of the king’s captains caused by, you guessed it: an insult, ends in the death of the captain. The dispirited young man returns to his swamps only to gain renewed vigour for his purpose.  On Ponceludon’s return to Versailles his courtly mistress learns of his love for Mathilde and seeks to disgrace him publicly. In one scene he is wearing Mathilde’s diving-suit, a ridiculous affair of canvas and tin that caricatures human features in the style of a World War II gas mask. The suit, at first seems to be as far removed from Ponceludon’s silk courtly suit as is possible. The next scene, the masked ball, proves this not to be the case. The ridiculous masks and over the top wigs are no better and the guests at the courtly ball, perhaps, are no different to the pond life that Ponceludon has been playing with in his girlfriend’s garden. In his arranged downfall, he is tripped up on the dance-floor and his enigmatic slow-motion scream is the precursor of a world of trouble. Immediately one of the other courtiers steps in with a standard jibe about someone dancing on their head and Ponceludon’s sense of humour, for once, fails him. He responds that “Children will die tomorrow because you ridicule me today. You envy Voltaire’s wit. Voltaire would weep. He was ridiculously compassionate [there’s that word again]. Who’s turn is it next? Who’s next in line for a barb of wit [and that one] that sends a family to ruin?”  Before you know it, the action has skipped ahead to 1794. The revolution has come and gone with no warning or elucidation. The sympathetic but fat and stupid Louis XVI has been executed, although we do not officially know that, and de Bellegarde has fled with other nobles to England. Citizen Ponceludon, we are told in writing at the end, has finally gone ahead with his project thanks to the benevolence of the revolutionary government. A happy ending to his tale, we guess, but what a load of rubbish as far as history is concerned: the concept of making a film about the French court between 1783 and 1794 without a single mention of the French Revolution is certainly a novel one. It’s no surprise to learn that this is Patrice Leconte’s first foray into the world of historical film. Tom Keogh puts it eruditely: “We never actually see the popular uprising or the destruction of Louis XVI’s court, but after meeting some of the twits who inhabit it, it’s easy to understand what all the violence was about.” [2] If this film were a social polemic, to call it one-sided would be as much of an understatement as to call Ponceludon’s jokes slightly bad. As Laura Miller observes, the notion of ‘wit as king’ is historically dubious – she says this misunderstanding would be “forgivable if Ridicule actually sparkled with cleverness and bon mots. Unfortunately the characters…banter crudely, trading insults like family members in a bad sitcom.” [3] The portrayal of the court is indeed sketchy: although it was a bear-pit of favour in which, latterly, familiarity with the works of the philosophes was fashionable this is a gross caricature it seems.  Mireille Rosello suggests that its historical inaccuracies should be put aside in favour of its universal truths. Leconte “invents a particular past to construct a particular present.” [4] Leconte himself denied that this was a film about the eighteenth century; “the modernity of it comes through treating the story as something universal, and why not –something of today.” [5] It is suggested that the idea of Ponceludon’s quest, which ultimately has a medical goal, to prevent the spread of malaria, brings to mind serious scandals about corruption in the funding for medical research in the 1990s in France. It is also suggested that the point that endures to modern times is the hegemony of language and wit, or in modern terms, the soundbite. The personal and political harm done to individuals by the power of words echoes both the issue of racism and homophobia (prejudice in general) and gesture politics and spin that deserves all the derision it gets. She finishes: “…an ambiguous heritage film, Ridicule redefines the genre by proposing to use a historical setting to ask very specific questions about our contemporary ways of relating to history, to words, to images, and, in the end, to the film itself.” [6]  **Notes**: [1] Rousseau, cited in Mireille Rosello, ‘Dissident voices before the Revolution: Ridicule.’ From French Cinema in the 1990s [2] [www.film.com](http://www.film.com) [3] [www.salon.com](http://www.salon.com) [4] Mireille Rosello, ‘Dissident Voices before the Revolution’ [5] Ibid, p 83 [6] Ibid, p 90 |

<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~histweb/scothist/brown_k/film/closed/reviews/ridicule.html>