

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***Coup de Grace* 1976**

### Voelker Schloendorff 1939-

#### STORY

Schloendorff, as often, turns here to an historical novel, Margaret Yourcenar's *Le Coup de Grace* (1939), for his inspiration. Also as usual, he turns to the materials of history for his raw materials: in this case the 1919 action in the Baltic region of Eastern Europe (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) at the time just after WW I and the Russian Revolution, a period during which social settling down was being heavily jostled by power plays among the cultures fighting to dominate Eastern Europe. From the beginning of the film we meet Erick and Conrad, as they return from the German front to their family mansion, a noble structure caught in the conflict between the Red and White Russian armies—the forces competing for the areas of establishment of the new Soviet to be. Both men are anti-Bolshevik aristocrats.

**Mansion.** Katorwice, the family mansion, is at this point inhabited by Conrad's sister Sophie (played by his wife, a major film director) and an aunt Prascovia, a brilliantly played fixture and eccentric value giver to the family. (There is also a small garrison of troops, for minimal military protection, stationed at Katorwice.) The daily action of the film transpires in the mansion, where an ongoing effort is made to preserve protocol, but where the real issues confront the conflicts and conjunctions among the characters assembled under one roof.

**Developments.** Within the mansion, where the compelling action is, we are caught up in efforts of the three—Erick, Conrad, and Sophie—to live according to the traditional guidelines of the region's social aristocracy. Erick has little understanding of the conflicts which are threatening the old ways of life, while his friend, Conrad, is far more forward looking, and is thinking of ways in which Katorwice can be converted into an arts center, which will draw widely on the creative resources of the people of the region. Sophie, the most complex of the group, is provocative, mannish, and indomitable, as she tries to face down the power of the ages to demolish the aristocratic retreat in which she has been born and nourished.

**Conflict.** The meat of the tale is the conflict among the three scions, over how to handle the cruel passage of time, and the ensuing drama is crystallized around a family Christmas Eve party, during which the participants attempt to restore the ancient mistletoe tradition. A bugler strikes up the dance, shortly before Midnight, and Sophie finds herself 'under the mistletoe' often enough to amuse the regiment of kissing young men, who are stationed in the mansion, but far too often to amuse Erick, who feels she is betraying everything the family dignity stands for. When Erick appears in the doorway, descending from a reading sulk in the upstairs bedroom, he is stunned to see the midnight ritual, and races up to slap Sophie to the ground. Sophie soon brings this furious interchange to a dying fall, by sleeping with a common soldier, and in the presence of Erick.

**Treachery.** Within this fallen aristocratic mansion, then, there follow the waves of gossip, nostalgia, and dread which belong to historical downfall; it is Schloendorff's skill to lay out this inevitability with simple black and white historicity. Innuendo finally breaks the back of the community. A soldier, whom Sophie has refused to marry, returns from war with the news that Conrad and Erick are lovers; an imputation which disgusts Sophie, who takes off into the countryside with Bolshevik comrades, to whom she has found herself drawn, after her own retreat from the family mansion. This breach of propriety, indeed this treachery, end by casting her into the role of outlaw; she is captured by the army Erick is leading, told of the death of Conrad, and offered escape from the execution which in the normal course of things would follow on her capture as a traitor. Instead of accepting escape, Sophie asks that Erick should be the one

to put the pistol to her head. He does so, but (we suspect) without satisfying her wish for vengeance, for Erick is cynical enough not to fret too greatly over the assignment.

## THEMES

**Aristocracy.** The action of the film is driven by aristocratic nostalgia, the memories of Erick, Conrad, and Conrad's sister Sophie. For these three, an aristocratic Baltic childhood represented the period before the Bolsheviks had brought revolutionary change to central Europe.

**Homosexuality.** Sophie is appalled to learn (by the gossip route) of the homosexual love of Erick and her brother Konrad. This shock is enough to drive Sophie away with Bolshevik friends, and to drive her to treachery against her family.

**Revenge.** Sophie insists that Erick be the one to put the pistol to her head, and to shoot her as punishment for treachery. She hopes, we think, to instill in Erick a sense of remorse, but this complex and cynical comrade is not to be relied on for expected emotions.

**War.** The atmosphere of the film is bathed in war, and in the painful social transitions it produces. The background conflict is pitting pre-Nazi Germany with the forces of the Bolsheviks in Russia. At the same time, the cultures accompanying those two world views are inevitably expressing themselves in armed conflict.

## CHARACTERS

**Sophie,** the sister of Conrad, inhabits the family Baltic mansion; soldiers are stationed there, and she is living with an eccentric relative of Tsarist days, Aunt Prascovia. Sophie is herself a mannish and provocative scion of aristocracy, glad at first to welcome the return of her brother and his friend, but in the end too rebellious to remain part of the bizarre family clan.

**Conrad,** Sophie's brother, is both an aristocrat and dreamer, who supposes that he can recreate Kratowice as an artist and writer colony, in which the old humane cultures can bring people together.

**Erick,** Conrad's close friend, with whom he returns to Kratowice, is the lover of Conrad, we discover, and at the same time of Sophie. He is a complex, and cynical, aristocrat.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### SOPHIE

**Character.** The main character is Sophie, Conrad's sister, who is living in Kratowice when her brother and his friend return to the family mansion. Sophie is a mannish, and yet obstreperously daring figure, flirting with the soldiers who are encamped at the mansion, reckless in her contempt for the love between Erick and Conrad, and strong enough to refuse exemption from the gunshot she is owed, for running away at the end with her Bolshevik friends.

**Parallels.** One thinks of powerful ladies, buried deep in ancestral homes, and awaiting the return of prodigal or otherwise straying men: there is Clytemnestra, in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, waiting for Orestes to return and justify her; of Lavinia in O'Neill's *Mourning becomes Electra*, waiting for the dark curse of the family to strike; or of Nora, in Ibsen's *The Doll's House*, slowly boiling her revenge on a husband who refuses to understand her.

### Illustrative moments

**Attracted.** From the start of the film, Sophie is attracted to Erick, the friend of her brother, who has returned with him. Sophie gradually realizes that Erick is putting her off, though subtly and gently, in part

at least because of his own homosexuality. Hurt by this rejection, Sophie acts out with the men of the garrison stationed in the mansion.

**Kissed.** During the Christmas Eve mistletoe ceremony, Sophie makes herself abundantly available for kissing. One by one she lets the soldiers kiss her, hard and heavy, until Erick appears in the hall and slaps her to the ground.

**Promiscuous.** Sophie represents, from the start, a freer attitude toward life than do the army officers who join her in the house. We are not shocked when Sophie, in the presence of Erick—who has rejected her—gives herself up to be screwed by a common soldier.

**Shot.** After taking off with Bolshevik friends, permanently abandoning the mansion at Kratowice, Sophie is captured, and found guilty as a traitor. Erick offers her an opportunity to save herself from the firing squad he heads, but she refuses, and in fact requests that Erick should be the one to shoot her—which he does.

### **Discussion questions**

Has Schloendorff an attitude toward the historical panorama he deploys? Is he on anyone's side? Or is he trying simply to sketch the portrait of a segment of history, and not to comment further on it?

What special advantages (and limitations) are to be found in film, when it comes to the 'portrayal of history?' Clearly film provides the visual side of history—which, as an example, you do not get in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Or do you get the visual, in *War and Peace*? Do you 'see' Pierre and Princess Kuragin? Do you 'see' Napoleon on the battlefield? How successful are historical films in basing their material on already written fictions, as Schloendorff did with the work of Yourcenar?