The German Society of Pennsylvania

Friday Film Fest Series

Der rote Baron
(“The Red Baron”)
By Nikolai Müllerschön

May 18th 2012 • 6:30 PM •
Film, Food & Discussion
Donations $15, Members $12
The German Society of PA
611 Spring Garden St.
215-627-2332
Der Rote Baron

Director: Nikolai Müllerschön
Drehbuch: Nikolai Müllerschön
Producer: Thomas Reisser, Dan Maag, Roland Pellegrino
Cinematography: Klaus Merkel
Special Effects: Rainer Gombos
Music: Stefan Hansen, Dirk Reichardt
Release Date: April 2008
Spieldauer: 106 minutes
Cast: Matthias Schweighöfer (Manfred von Richthofen); Maxim Mehmet (Friedrich Sternberg); Til Schweiger (Werner Voss); Hanno Koffler (Lehmann); Joseph Fiennes (Capt. Roy Brown); Lena Headey (Käte Otersdorf); Axel Prahl (Gen. Ernst von Hoepner); Volker Bruch (Lothar von Richthofen); Ladislav Frei (Emperor Wilhelm II)

Commentary by A. Krumm

On The Origin of Species ...

There is a good bit of speciation within the genus War Hero. There is the self-deprecating type: asked by a small boy during his 1960 campaign how he became a hero, John Kennedy replied: “It was easy, they sank my boat.” Then there is the “up close and personal” specimen, à la Audie Murphy: “They were killing my friends.” There is moreover the mystical kind who sees something beautiful in war, epitomized by Robert E. Lee’s remark: “It is well that is so terrible - we should grow too fond of it.” Ernst Jünger wrote about this beauty and the euphoria it induced in In Stahlgewittern.

And then there is the most alluring species of war hero, the “I have a rendezvous with death” branch. One is easily tempted to categorize Baron Manfred von Richthofen as an instantiation of this variety. In popular lore he is certainly seen as such. According to the orthodox metanarrative, for such an individual death is the dialogue partner and although this type of hero knows that at some point that pale partner will abruptly and rudely terminate the conversation, he perseveres in the dialogue.

The mechanized fighting of the First World War certainly made individual heroics difficult, if not impossible. At least in aerial combat the human virtues literally did have some space in which to express themselves, if not to flourish. Maybe it was the stark disparity between the mass slaughter in the mud of the trenches versus the sense of individuality and freedom in the air that made so many young men long to become pilots, particularly those from an aristocratic background.

Richthofen, born in Breslau 1892, came from a Junker family. He entered a military school in Wahlstatt at the age of eleven, and later attended the Royal Prussian Military Academy at Lichterfelde. He was commissioned in 1911 and began his military service in the cavalry. He actually led a cavalry unit briefly on the eastern front when the war broke out.

Given the gusto with which generals were embracing tanks and machine guns, it was obvious the cavalry was no longer a growth industry, so in May of 1915 Richthofen transferred to the German Army Air Service. By Christmas he had qualified as a pilot, and was a fully fledged Jagdflieger of Oswald Boelcke’s unit by September 1916.

By January of 1917 he had been awarded the Pour le Mérite and was a national hero. It was also around this time that he decided to start painting his various planes a bright inorthodox metanarrative, for such an individual death is the dialogue partner and although this type of hero knows that at some point that pale partner will abruptly and rudely terminate the conversation, he perseveres in the dialogue.

The mechanized fighting of the First World War certainly made individual heroics difficult, if not impossible. At least in aerial combat the human virtues literally did have some space in which to express themselves, if not to flourish. Maybe it was the stark disparity between the mass slaughter in the mud of the trenches versus the sense of individuality and freedom in the air that made so many young men long to become pilots, particularly those from an aristocratic background.

Richthofen kept flying after recuperating from the severe head wound in July 1917. He kept flying as the allied air forces began to achieve regular numerical superiority, and he kept flying as the enemy aircraft became technically superior to those being produced by Germany. He kept flying, obviously a creature in thrall to the habits of his species. He kept flying, apparently, in deference to his rendezvous.