

Scud Films 2

Let us live for the beauty of our own reality.

Permanent Residence (2009)

As I note elsewhere¹, Scud himself did not have sole responsibility for his first film, *City Without Baseball*: technically he wasn't the director, though he wrote and produced it. Here he is also the director, with sole responsibility for the visuals, and it shows. He uses single takes where he can, and he has a way of leaving the shot running for it to make its fullest impact; and in general his images, which always remember are moving images, have more artistry, more power, more expressivity, than those of the previous film, and Teddy Robin Kwan's music lends powerful support. Otherwise, thematically, as with *City*, the film is primarily about love, and as such, again as with *City*, it will be a narrative of disappointment. But a secondary theme, concerned with death and with life after death – what I am generically calling 'the transcendental' – is also a central concern, and I shall look at each of these separately. But first we must meet our protagonist.

The Early Years

Genre wise the film is a birth to death life story, a biography if you will, bringing with it its own structure, which provides what you might call the skeleton of the movie, though it's a good deal more than a skeleton. (There are suggestions that the film is autobiographical, but I am simply treating it as a narrative, whether 'true' or fictional. I leave the autobiographical to others.) The film opens with shots of the pages of a diary flicking over, followed by a rapid montage of images from the movie that we are about to see, ending on a shot of a clock:- clearly, amongst other things, the film is going to be about time and the passage of time. We open in black and white, with shots of undergrowth through which a small boy emerges to tiptoeing musical accompaniment. He is Ivan, our protagonist, and he will provide the voiceover for the movie. There follows a rapid montage of shots of the outside of a house lit from within, and we cut to Ivan waking up in bed in a rush, presumably after some kind of a nightmare. It's a puzzling sequence which will only make sense at the end of the movie. Whatever the particular significance of the house, as we proceed we realise that effectively we have just seen Ivan's birth. The next sequence shows us his life as a small boy, beautifully realised by Scud visually: he is framed by narrow cracks in the floorboards as he listens to his parents talking about him, he is framed by the narrow staircase and bounded by the yard as he goes down to talk with his grandma. It is a black and white world, both visually and metaphorically, as he searches for simple answers to complex questions. In addition he tells us in voiceover that when he was young his grandmother took him to a fortune teller who predicted that he would die before he was 30, for which reason, we learn later on, his parents decided it wasn't worth their while to send him to university, though it is said that he is a clever boy. Luckily he is a favourite of his grandma's, and is able to talk to her about everything, and he spends a lot of time with her until his baby brother is born and he has to babysit. The film's title, 'Permanent Residence' follows as we move into color and skip 10 years. The family are off to Hong Kong, Ivan in tears, he is leaving his grandma, and his home, his first 'permanent residence'. They send him to Mission

¹Also on this website: www.sarland.com

School where we gather that he works hard, and makes good progress, proving to have a flair for IT. Intertitles inform us of events in the wider world – (1987: *Wall Street Crash*; 1987: *Mike Tyson becomes world heavyweight champion*; 1991: *Homosexuality decriminalised in Hong Kong, etc.*) which Scud uses to move the time frame along, and we now find him a student, already seemingly with a job, his co-workers commenting on how hard he works, always staying late. Next time we see him working he is in a collar and tie job in an office with secretaries at his beck and call. At the purely material level he is now successful and independent. Scud has handled his material progress with remarkable economy – the shot of him as a student working, and the shots of him in an office with secretaries tell us all we need to know. In the meantime, however, he has got his own apartment, his second ‘permanent residence’, and now we do see more of him – in more senses than one – as he strips off his clothes and leaps around the place like a new born lamb, commenting that he is now unfettered, with no-one to order him around; that he has lost his fear of death and feels unencumbered by any attachments or social expectations. To be naked in a Scud movie is always to be free, (and I may add that in this particular case one couldn’t hope to set eyes upon a more beautiful young man no matter how long one tried – but I digress!) Ivan himself comments in voiceover that he thinks that he is something of a narcissist, an exhibitionist, and he proceeds to demonstrate the latter by standing naked in his window exercising with his dumbbells. The focus of the film changes at this point, and Ivan’s love life moves to centre stage, but just to very briefly finish his bio while I am on the subject, later on he will move to Australia, but then begin to lose interest in IT and start to make films, which will then necessitate his finally moving back to Hong Kong.

Love (and Sex)

Ivan’s success as a young entrepreneur brings him to the attention of the media and he finds himself being interviewed on television, along with another successful young man, Josh, an Israeli, who also works in IT. Out of the blue Josh asks him if he’s gay. Ivan is taken aback: he has gay friends, but no – though he seems uncertain. As may be gathered, like Ron in *City Without Baseball*, as far as sexuality is concerned this is another of Scud’s ‘I’ll let you know when I find out’ protagonists. Anxious to assert his masculinity – he tells us in voiceover that he doesn’t want to be seen as a sissy – he joins a gym, though we may note that in the steam room the visuals tell us that he is certainly interested in observing the bodies of his fellows, and in the locker room starts chatting with one of them, Windson, who practices Tai Kwon Do, and who has clearly caught Ivan’s eye. Ivan congratulates him on how fit he looks, and Windson returns the compliment. Windson also works in IT, so there is a bond there, and a friendship is born and before we know where we are they are driving each other around town, arm wrestling on the bonnet of the car, going to the beach to practice Tai Kwon Do, and generally spending a lot of time together. Scud has spent almost no time establishing the friendship as such, but he has shown us enough for us to get the whole picture. It seems to be being a whirlwind romance and Windson starts to question the nature of their relationship. He asks Ivan if it is a gay relationship but at this point Ivan himself doesn’t seem to know. Meanwhile Eva, a colleague at work has taken to throwing herself at Ivan. She wants a dance partner, and takes him to a dancing teacher who will teach him all the moves. The said dance teacher is very camp, and Ivan is uneasy, particularly when the teacher pairs up with him, asking if he wants to be the man or the woman. Afterwards, back at her flat, Eva virtually assaults him and he makes a run for it. Later in the bath he has distraught images of her crying because they haven’t had sex, and wonders why he himself isn’t distraught for the same reason. Later she confesses to him that she is a lesbian, and

wanted a relationship with him as cover. (In passing we might speculate that she herself is in the process of coming to terms with her own sexuality.) Finally he goes to a gay bar where he finds Josh and they do have sex, and in voiceover he recognises in that one act everything has changed – he has ‘discovered’ his sexuality. Is Josh going to be a more permanent sexual partner though? He is not sure. Maybe a lover, maybe just a good friend, and indeed the latter is what he turns out to be – a friend for life. We find them in the supermarket when Ivan gets a phone call from Windson, Windson wants to meet up again. Josh encourages Ivan to go and meet him, and in his haste Ivan gets jammed when tries to get out of the supermarket turnstile the wrong way – again the symbolism is not difficult to read: he wants to pursue the relationship but there will be obstacles in his path. More to the point, and from a reverse perspective, we may ask what Windson’s feelings for Ivan are? Is he in love with him? Windson is certainly encouraging the relationship. They meet up on the beach again at night: more Tai Kwon Do. They go skinny dipping and end up wrestling and then just talking on the diving platform. Daniel Jones’ song *Truly, Madly, Deeply* plays underneath the action:– “I’ll be your dream, I’ll be your fantasy, I want to live like this forever.” The words say it all, but on top of which it’s a beautiful song – check it out on YouTube if you don’t believe me² – and it provides a powerful emotional undertow to the scene. You cannot but watch the scene without realising that Scud is telling us that the two men are totally in love with each other.

The scene cuts to the interior of Ivan’s apartment the next morning, Windson has stayed overnight, together with his girlfriend, who lurks at the back of a couple of shots and who to all intents and purposes might as well not be there. Windson is naked and they are on line to Josh in Israel on the computer – Ivan introducing Windson to him. Josh takes one look and declares that Windson is ‘hot’, but Ivan tells him that he is his brother and is straight. As for Windson himself, as they joke around and while Josh is still on line he ends up complimenting both Ivan and Josh on their good looks. Windson may be ‘straight’ but he would certainly seem to be happy sending out mixed messages. The next day Ivan and Windson are chasing around the beach yet again, this time in broad daylight and again both naked. An older passing couple comment: the man disapproving but the woman commenting that is lovely to see two people so much in love with each other. They collect sand and fill a sausage shaped – very phallic! – red punch-bag which they hang in Ivan’s apartment and share – at one point Ivan holding it while Windson pummels it – the words ‘displacement activity’ do rather come to mind! Windson loves the apartment and gets to stay over, but there is only one bed and Ivan sleeps in the nude. Not a bit abashed Windson does too, but insists upon no touching. Ivan wakes up in the middle of the night and masturbates in frustration and we see that Windson has heard him. Again we feel that, though he wants to, at this point Windson cannot quite bring himself to cross the line. Unsuccessful so far, Ivan tries a different approach. It is clear, he argues (a somewhat dubious argument it must be confessed) that gays are superior to straights, and by a process of mutation and natural selection will become the dominant members of society. Scud has prepared us for this in a blink and you miss it moment when we see the words ‘mutation’ and ‘evolution’ on a blackboard when Ivan is at the Mission School, and briefly comments in voiceover that he has learned a lot there: which is also, in passing, a nice example of the way in which what initially seems just to have been part of the mise-en-scene turns out to have narrative consequence later in the movie. As for reproduction in this new society of Ivan’s, cloning could well be possible, and there are after all test tube babies, so who needs heterosexual men? Dubious the argument may

² Daniel Jones / Savage Garden.

be, but the underlying pressure that Ivan is applying is clear enough. In voiceover Ivan tells us that his desire for Windson has become unbearable, but that Windson is ‘accommodating’ and, first of all on a gay beach, then back at the apartment in the shower, they do make love. Ivan asks him if he came and he tells him that he did, though as far as we can see – and we can see – he didn’t. He is clearly not happy: when Ivan takes pictures of him lying naked on the bed he turns his back, telling him not to put the pictures up on the internet, and stalks off. Circumstances intervene, Windson has to go to China for work. Ivan visits him there, they relax in the hotel pool, Ivan suggests sex. Windson compares the feel of Ivan’s body with that of his girlfriend, but although he can raise the interest he cannot deliver the goods. Nonetheless, though Windson may have moved on, it is still clear that he still loves Ivan just as much. I should add that the film requires close attention at this point to pick all this up. They take a walk. It comes across as a fond farewell scene, a lyrical scene, with the film cross fading as they walk out of the hotel, across a river bridge, through a tunnel, where they pause to look back – at the past? – and then forward – to the future? – and finally walk out into sunlight full of cherry blossom. Ivan comments that it’s like a scene in a movie, which of course is exactly what it is. The visuals are beautiful to look at and Kwan’s music offers strong support, and again the whole sequence delivers a considerable emotional punch. This, however, is not the final farewell scene. That follows a bit later after Ivan has learned of his grandmother’s death (see below) and Windson informs him that he’s proposing to get married. He loves Ivan just as much but he wants the settled family life of convention, complete with a couple of kids. It’s done in one of Scud’s characteristic single takes – in this particular case it’s a two shot: an interior, subdued lighting, the sound of the sea in the background, the camera tracking slowly to finally frame Windson as he walks out of the scene. The shot leaves Ivan on his own, contemplating the double sadness – his grandmother’s death and Windson’s departure – that has now entered his life. Scud may make movies that are beautiful to look at, he also makes movies of considerable psychological and emotional insight; and he does it with such economy too, as here, in a single take, which of course adds to the intensity.

Ivan goes home and sees the punch-bag, which of course he associates with Windson himself. He pulls it down violently only for it to hit the floor and burst open at the end, ejaculating sand in the process: Scud frames it in such a way that there can be little doubt about the interpretation. Afterwards Ivan goes up onto the roof and sits on the edge looking down, we must presume contemplating suicide, but he’s saved by a phone call from Josh inviting him to visit him in Israel. Windson, in the meantime, gets married – though only after his girlfriend got pregnant; Ivan keeps in touch with him by proxy as it were, by looking after his, Windson’s, ill mother, paying for her treatment, etc – she has cancer.

Postscript: It is 6 years later and Ivan is in Australia³ and seemingly by the sheerest coincidence there’s Windson. Windson’s marriage hasn’t lasted. He has children, but he has no idea how or what to teach them about life, and when Ivan asks him about his wife, Windson turns on him and tells him that he, Ivan, was always his true wife. Ivan shows him his high rise

³ It’s a big time jump and feels somewhat arbitrary. The film as I have it runs at just under 2 hrs (116 mins) but in the course of writing this analysis I found evidence on line of a director’s cut running at 138 mins, which was ‘not available’. My copy comes in a box set from Breaking Glass Pictures which is the one that is advertised on Scud’s own website: <https://www.scudfilms.com/> so I guess that this is the cut that has Scud’s approval? A subject for further research maybe??

apartment in which there is a photo of the two of them mounted in a clear plastic block – Ivan has kept the memory alive. They arm wrestle again, again accompanied by the song and clearly reminding themselves of the relationship they had in the past. Then there's an extraordinary series of diagonal wipes as they stare out of the windows of their respective apartments, a series of wipes that places them back to back in the frame, and again the musical accompaniment is particularly effective. They may have been in love all their lives, but they have been facing in opposite directions the whole time. The scene is followed by a shot of Windson on his motorbike driving off the end of a pier into the sea, which freeze-frames. What is he feeling? Perhaps at the deepest level, that he will never be able to resolve the internal conflict between his love for Ivan, and the impossibility of being able to transform that into physical desire, and he is left in the limbo of the freeze-frame. And as a postscript to a postscript, further interpolated titles follow, this time announcing a future in which disease will sweep the planet, the birth rate will plunge, cloning will occur, and the gays will get their chance – Ivan's predictions will come true.

The Transcendental

As noted above, the film opens with the turning pages of a diary concluding with a shot of a clock. As I suggested, time itself is part of the subject matter as Ivan reflects upon the brevity of his life span and upon what will happen to him after he dies. Is there an afterlife, and what will happen in it? Will he be remembered by those who survive him, by later generations who will come after him, and if so, how will he be remembered? Very early on he tells us in retrospective voiceover that he doesn't like to sleep because when he sleeps he loses time, time that he could otherwise devote to living; and he hopes/speculates that in a hundred years' time there will be computers that will be able to save memory and inject it into the new born of succeeding generations. Back in real time, i.e. back in narrative order, he asks his grandmother about death itself. Is she going to die? Everyone has to. Where will she go? To Hell, to meet Ivan's grandfather she suggests, (though quite why he is in hell we never quite find out.) Why can't she live forever? She doesn't answer directly but tells him that maybe, before she dies, she can teach him a way for him to meet her after death. His other grandmother, however, is a beggar, deaf and dumb. He takes her food every day, then one day she isn't there anymore, and he finally understands about death. Later in his mid-teens at mission school he discovers the resurrection story at the heart of Christianity, and prays to be rescued from everlasting death. He remembers the prediction of the fortune teller, that he will die before he's 30, and if that is the case then he realises that more than half his life has gone by, so he buys enough diaries to see him out in the hope that when he is dead someone will be able to reconstruct his memories and that in that way he will become immortal. Note also that he tells us that he finally loses his fear of death along with his other inhibitions in the scene when he strips off and leaps around in his new apartment. He may have lost his fear of death, but that doesn't mean that he has lost his interest in it, and he starts discussing it with Windson in the beach scenes. Windson wants the conventional good life, married, with a couple of kids and to die content, though even he, seemingly, has an expectation of an afterlife, telling Ivan that all his friends are swimmers and that he would like to be buried at sea: in that way he could meet up with them again. Ivan is more philosophical. Why does the universe have no beginning and no end? Why is our life span so short by comparison, just a few decades? How can we get the best out of such a limited life. Alternatively, in the earlier beach scene when they are on the diving platform, he wishes he could freeze frame the moment, be naïve like Windson, and in the words of the song, 'live like this forever'. In the course of his

entanglement with Eva her sister dies in a plane crash and Ivan reflects that life is short. Other comments follow in the same vein: a car journey in the middle of the night, not knowing where they are going, is like life itself. An intertitle informing us that Ayrton Senna died in a car crash in 1994 causes Ivan to ask whether the talented always die young. He visits his grandmother who has dementia, who thought that he was already dead and who tells him that he had a bad death. She will die a bit later and, viewing her body, he tells her that she never did teach him a way to reach her after death. In conversation with her carers they tell him that she could always predict his visits, and that now that she is dead her power will be even stronger, she will live every time they think about her. He has to deal with death directly when he is looking after Windson's mother who knows she's dying and who tells him that she has worked hard all her life only to get cancer and be faced with death when she stops, again reminding him that life is brief when compared with eternity. They bond, she commenting that she has found a replacement son, and Ivan commenting that he has found a replacement mother. She tells him of a case in the paper where a girl has committed suicide because she has broken up with her boyfriend – such a stupid thing to do – but of course we know that Ivan has contemplated doing the same after breaking up with Windson. She eventually dies; and we then have shots of Ivan driving around the city after the funeral in floods of tears. (Never have I seen an actor crying more convincingly on screen.) What is he crying for? Clearly for the loss of the auntie⁴, his replacement mother, of whom he has become very fond, and we may also speculate that he is also crying for the loss of his last link with Windson. We return to the subject when Ivan visits Josh in Israel who shows him the 3,000 yr old cemetery at the foot of the Mount of Olives. The dead who are buried there will be the first to be resurrected at the end of time. When his brother gets married and has a baby, he tells Ivan that he too should have a child – that way his genes will be passed on. Six years later, when Ivan is in Australia, a long slow circular pan finds him looking at the ocean. He reflects that people say that the ocean is like life, but for him it is like death – a transcendental state with no beginning and no end. We are born when we are washed ashore from the ocean of that transcendental state and after a brief sojourn in the 'real world', are then returned to it. Back in Hong Kong he shows friends around his apartment, where he has his coffin already installed, and at the end of the film, now a doddering old man, he climbs into it – his final 'permanent residence' – and we cut back to the house from the beginning of the movie, the house of his 'nightmare'. We hear his parents and uncles and aunts talking about whether he has arrived yet, and we realise that they are waiting for him in the afterlife, and we realise too that the house itself is the gateway between the ocean of the transcendental and the 'real' world of our brief life here on Earth. Josh attends the funeral, and the undertakers hand him a note that Ivan has left for him telling him that he, Ivan, is lucky to have had such a good friend throughout his life, and that he is dying to see him again in the afterlife – the double meaning is clear enough. End titles run over shots of coffins on the seashore, waiting to enter the same said ocean. A reprise of the Daniel Jones / Savage Garden song, the love theme of the movie, plays on the sound track. What more could you ask for?

By Way of a Conclusion

As I hope I have demonstrated, the film is rich in meaning, meaning that resides in the visuals as well as in the dialogue: visuals upon occasion of extraordinary cinematic inventiveness, as in the case of the wipes sequence. And the more you watch the film, the deeper you realise is

⁴ I gather that the older generation in Chinese culture get to be called the Chinese equivalent of 'Auntie' and 'Uncle'.

Scud's emotional and psychological insight into the lives of his characters. Strength is given to all of this by the use of those longer single takes which, as always, serve to increase intensity, particularly in dialogue; and the music and the very structure of the story add to its emotional impact (it had me in tears more than once!) It deserves a shot by shot analysis, but that would fill a book – this little essay constitutes only an appreciation: so suffice it to say that I just think it's a beautiful film, and so, I hope, will you.

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