

CRIMSON TIDE (1995)

by

H. Arthur Taussig, Ph.D.

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Crimson Tide. Directed by Tony Scott. Hollywood Pictures, distributed by Buena Vista Pictures, 1995.

A Russian ultra-conservative, ultra-nationalist military rebellion captures a missile base and threatens the United States with nuclear attack unless America continues its foreign aid (?). In response, an American nuclear submarine takes a defensive position in the middle of the ocean. Captain Frank Ramsey (Gene Hackman) receives a message to launch the missiles. While the countdown progresses, a Russian submarine attacks, damaging the radio in the middle of receiving another message about the impending launch. Executive officer Ron Hunter (Denzel Washington) believes that the launch should be delayed until the whole message can be received in case it rescinds the launch command. Ramsey believes that the last complete command received should be the one followed. The remainder of the film is an ongoing battle between the two men which escalates into mutiny and counter-mutiny. In the end, of course, the radio is repaired, and the launch halted just in the nick of time.

One of the traditional devices to slowly increase the tension in a film is to gradually narrow the physical space in which the conflict takes place. A good example of this is *Star Wars*, where there are battles first in the vastness of outer space and then in tiny, constricted places. A battle between spaceships is followed by one in a trash compactor; a space battle with the gargantuan death star begins in open space but winds up skimming down a narrow trench. An older film, *The Big Carnival* [1951] (AKA *Ace in the Hole*), uses this device with a little more subtlety. Kirk Douglas, playing a corrupt reporter exploiting a mining accident to make a name for himself, commutes between the outer world where he seems like a nice guy and the narrow underground cave (in which a man will die because of his negligence) where his own

innards are not only revealed to be corrupt, narrow, but also closing in on him.

This is the advantage of submarine films – ready-made claustrophobia. The disadvantage, clearly demonstrated in last year's *The Hunt for Red October* [1994], is that the audience must watch dozens of men staring at circular TV screens while listening to ping-ping-ping sounds for two hours. Marvelously, this does not happen in *Crimson Tide*. This film is everything but static. Once the boat is submerged, there is non-stop action, even when nothing in particular is happening. The pace, the drive, and the rhythm of the film's structure (with a big boost from the music) envelope the viewer in an excitement of almost manic proportions. Unfortunately, much the pacing consists of short, choppy cuts of people running up and down stairs – the latest version of staring at circular video screens. Director Scott's favorites are here in surfeit – back-lit images of sprays of water, sparks, and sweat. And with *Crimson Tide*, as with so many other cleverly crafted adventure films, the adrenaline rush of the action tends to obscure not only the messages, but how those messages are delivered. And, of course, that is what we are interested in here.

There are many nice symbolic/psychological touches in this film. For instance, immediately after the boat is submerged, there is an explosive fire in the kitchen. Kitchens, of course, the places of transformation and nourishment. They are the places of alchemy. Here, however, a man is killed and Captain Ramsey, as soon as he hears of the kitchen fire, orders a missile launch drill. We can easily conclude that everyone's means of transformation just went up in smoke; no one will change (and this is, indeed, a major

weakness of the film – practically no character development), and that what should be nourishing (and protecting the country from destruction) will actually lead to death.

Another, less obvious mythological reference is a side light to the big “race against time” to get the radio repaired at the end of the film. The technician repairing the radio was wounded earlier in the film and has a large gash above his eye with bits of tape on it. His post seems to be located a long way from the center of the boat where the captain commands. It never ceases to amaze me how many of the "miracle fixers" of technology, like Geordi of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, are rooted in the archetype of Hephaestus – the lame wizard inventor of the Greek Pantheon.

Still another mythological reference is that the conflict is between two men of ages where one could easily be the other's father – shades of Oedipus. In this militaristic, masculinist version of the myth, the subject of their conflict is not the mother/wife, but the submarine itself. There is not much difference, is there? However, this "mother" has her destructive side; in the hands of the father, she can destroy the world while in the hands of the son she protects the world. It is not difficult to see here the two major aspects of the mythological Great Mother – nurturing and destruction.

The nature of the evil in *Crimson Tide* – right-wing militarists, ex-communist Russians – seems to fit in well with Hollywood's post-Cold War search for villains. (With Irish terrorists and Islamic terrorists, can mid-western Militia terrorists be far behind?) It has been a long time and a lot of political water under the bridge since comedies like *The Russians are Coming*, *The Russians*

are Coming [1966] gave us much needed comic relief. Now, the Russians are back, the Russians are back with virulent nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy thinly disguised as Vladimir Rodchenko. *Crimson Tide* could well be subtitled *The Return of the Red Menace*.

In reality, the Russians have little to do with this film; the real Cold War is between the officers on board the submarine. Is this film, then, really about middle-management stress about a fuzzily transmitted message from the boss? Indeed, this film is so much about the role of middle management running world affairs that they are symbolically lionized. At one conference on board the submarine, the officers sit around a long table. But in the middle of the table are many coffee cups, upside down, arranged in a careful circle – these are the new knights of the round table with coffee cups as their emblems. One can also ask, is this film about an African American middle manager up against a glass ceiling learning to shut up in a white world after being told that it is his duty to speak up?

Yet the “Big Question” (to launch or not to launch) is both a red herring and quite interesting. It is, of course, a device that makes all the action possible (what Hitchcock called a “MacGuffin”). At the same time, the question of who is right – the father or the son, the white man or the Black man, the aging Senex or the youthful intuitive – is important and is worked out in interesting ways with fascinating consequences. At one level, the film says they are both correct. Ramsey (whose name indicates that he plays the symbolic ram, he represents traditionally masculine values) is right by the letter of the law. His is the way to the typical masculine Senex. His view is narrowed to encompass

only his own experiences – what he has not touched he does not know. Hunter (whose name indicates that he is a seeker) is right, too. Yet, it is a radically different rightness; it is a rightness of intuition, of reaching beyond what one knows personally, of confidence that there is a world beyond the narrowness of self.

At the level of the text of the film, Hunter prevents a nuclear holocaust and is therefore seen as more right than Ramsey. Is the film rooting for intuition over intellect, for sensitivity over obedience? A strange argument to find in the confines of a film that is about the military playing alluringly with its finest toys. Yet, as odd as this may at first sight seem, there are several symbols used in the film that would support this position.

The first is Ramsey's dog. It is upon the dog's approval that Hunter is taken on as the Executive Officer. Clearly the dog represents Ramsey's intuition. (Dogs symbolizing intuition has a long film history. The classic example is *The Wizard of Oz* [1939] where Toto gets Dorothy into exactly the right kind of trouble at exactly the right time to help her grow up.) The film makers go to great lengths to take the dog on board the submarine – a little absurd if one gives it a moment's thought. During the mutiny, the dog growls at Ramsey indicate that Ramsey is wrong, and Hunter is right – a least at the level of the unconscious. We then realize that indeed the dog is Ramsey's intuition, but over the years he has become separated and alienated from it; his intuition leads an independent life. What is still more interesting is that on land, in the world of the conscious, Ramsey readily takes the dog's advice. Yet

underwater, in the world of the unconscious, he ignores his symbolic intuition. This speaks reams in explaining Ramsey's psychic processes.

The second symbolic argument against Ramsey and for Hunter is the Weps' (Viggo Mortensen) first name, Peter. Hunter's friend Weps is the junior officer central to the rebellion first against Ramsey and then against Hunter. Considering the other symbols surrounding the antagonists, we should feel comfortable taking Weps' name as a reference to Peter who denied Jesus three times before the cock crowed in the same way that Weps denies the world-peace loving Hunter. Since *Crimson Tide* does not quite have the scope of the gospels, Peter Weps denying Hunter once is sufficient. The reference is reinforced when Ramsey slaps Hunter several times to get him to agree with Ramsey's philosophy and Hunter literally turns the other cheek.

In many ways *Crimson Tide* is unlike most of the Save-The-World-From-Soviet-Hatched-Nuclear-Apocalypse movies that are clearly the foundation upon which it builds its edifice so hopefully. For an action movie, it is not very physical – about the most physical it gets is when the hero is punched in the face – twice. I am not sure that the film ever does make up its mind which side it is on. This is seen in the bizarre climax where the villain and the hero have a nice, quiet chat while someone else decides their fate. But then again, the film begins with a magician pulling a very symbolic white dove out of a hat.

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