



Eclipse 1914 – Promo Review

Category	Score
Concept	4 / 5
Storyline	3.5 / 5
Characters	3.5 / 5
Dialogue	3.5 / 5
Commerciality	3.5 / 5
Originality	4 / 5
Complexity	3.5 / 5
Production Value	3.5 / 5

There is often a strong case to be made for historical stories to help reflect the world in which we experience them. By which it could be said, if reading about a historical event from a perspective of 100 years or so distance, the benefits of hindsight only enhance the power of said event. This is possibly the reason that certain films (*United 93*, for example) are often chastised for coming too soon after the event, with the memory still raw in the minds of those who lived through it.

However, the best stories that are set in or around a world-changing moment in time are reflections of the humanity at the center of it or, in the case of, say, a story about Nazism, the lack of humanity.

ECLIPSE 1914 takes the classic narrative aesthetic of a real-life event, in this case a road race that took place in Tartu that spanned a number of days and took in different tiers, such as speed and endurance of the car, for a number of different prizes, and uses it as a conduit for not only a study of several different facets of humanity but also of a moment in time that will forever be cast in shadow.

But an event is not enough, at least in terms of reasoning behind telling a story of one. In the case of this feature film screenplay, the event in question was the third of such races and was also the last, as it came in precedence of World War 1, and the narrative that unfolds, while certainly embracing the stylings of an ensemble drama, with no one character taking the lead over another, also plays out the grim march of inevitability as the higher-up members of government, military, and society in general brace themselves for what they already know is coming.

It's a brilliant concept, and this screenplay, based on the screenwriter's own book on the subject, has moments of greatness amidst its 151 pages, showing us not only the event as a microcosm of decent people coming together for a moment but also that moment being perhaps the last great experience they will have as war approaches.

In that respect, the structure of the screenplay is two stories running concurrently: one in which we are witness to the series of races taking place and one in which we are privy to the many communications and letters and the many threats and rumors that war is imminent.

The screenplay, then, has something that it is building towards on both fronts, with us, the reader/audience, waiting to see who emerges triumphant in the race but also knowing that the ending will be bittersweet and, ultimately, futile.

This allows the writer to have their cake and eat it, to an extent, as there is a bleakness at the close of the story, but also a strain of hope, which, in the case of this story, comes in the form of a romance that blossoms between two characters, Maria, the widow of a German nobleman, and Johan, an engineer, who also works on his parents' farm. This is a classic class-divide romance, and it is handled beautifully over the course of the story, although it must be noted they are but one element of this ensemble of characters, which includes Grand Duchess Victoria (related to Queen Victoria no less) and Paasuke, a photographer and filmmaker who documented the race and who, as the script informs us by the end, didn't live much longer afterwards, with the film of the event sadly not surviving.

What is most significant in the way that the drama unfolds is the focus on class divide, but not in the way we are used to seeing it. There is a sense of camaraderie here, a sense that, during this race, all were equal, and the sense of decency (even with a few elements of sabotage to vehicles along the way) is palpable throughout, which is what makes the ending declaration of war so heartbreaking, as it feels like we are witnessing one of the last innocent moments of a community.

The screenplay itself does have some issues in execution, and it would be remiss not to mention that, with so many characters and so many subplots, it feels busy, which is where the pace also feels slowest, a problem when you consider that the story revolves around a race.

At 151 pages, it certainly takes its time, and some storylines are more engaging than others, while there is perhaps a tendency to overwhelm scenes with 'shoe leather' scenes that include too much detail, when you could be cutting to the chase, so to speak. In other words, never be afraid to enter a scene late and leave it early, as this refines what the details of each scene are and what each scene's purpose is within moving the story forward and the characters with it.

Admittedly, the very structure of the race itself was stop and start, with the cars finishing each day in a different place overnight, and it is within these pauses that the characters are allowed to be fleshed out.

It almost has the feel of a Robert Altman ensemble drama in that respect, as it floats from one subplot to the next, but none are as affecting as the Maria and Johan storyline, mainly because they provide a sweet respite from all the noise, and their arcs are the most relatable.

There is also a problem in that the action description here reads almost like passages from a book, and it is always good practice to think about what is written and what will be seen on screen in the finished film, as audiences won't have the screenplay in front of them.

For example, on page 1, there is an action description that reads "Sangaste village." *Farm of the parents of JOHAN Püvi, engineer of Sangaste manor, driver of the owner of the manor Count ERMES Berg on the upcoming ride. Johan is a warm-hearted and hardworking young man in his 20s from a simple family. He got a good technical education in England and France.*

But really, all that is happening in the scene is we are seeing the exterior of a farm, so all this information is not needed. We won't understand from a shot of the farm all this information and context about Johan, so this information needs to be given to the audience either through dialogue or another visual way.

This is where screenwriting differs from other writing, in that the specifics are everything, and one gets the feeling that, if one were to go through the script and eliminate all these similar moments of information, it would reduce the page count considerably.

The drama, though, is well considered, as is the character development, and while one would suggest that there is probably an argument to be made for narrowing down the focus a little in order to make the story tighter, more resonant, it does have an evocative atmosphere and some moments of genuine cinematic wonder, be it the instance when people think they are seeing two suns in the fog, which has an ominous, almost harbinger of doom quality, or a dreamlike moment that Maria appears to levitate, as these sorts of moments become signature beats within a story that manages to be part real-life story, part fable, even, as Maria says in her last scene, part fairy tale.

This, of course, leans into the European sensibilities of classic storytelling and of big bad wolves slowly approaching as a threat. Indeed, threat is never far off in this story, be it a blowout or a crash, or governments that have been backed into a corner and have no other choice but annihilation.

There is a quiet power to be found in the moments of silence in this story.

Overall Rating: 4/5

★★★★ = Strong script, minor improvements