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What Caliber Do You Use For Your Dragons?

Okay, I'm a sucker for dragon movies. My expectations for the new film *Reign of Fire* weren't real high, and I might have waited for it to come out on video, but fate intervened. We have been working very hard, and my boss declared the afternoon a mental health break. One group of my co-workers went white water rafting; those of us with an irrational fear of drowning went to the movies.

I am so glad that I ended up watching *Reign of Fire* on a Thursday afternoon—and then again on Saturday afternoon, with my wife and son. This was a much better, and much more thoughtful film than I would have ever guessed, especially from reading the generally negative film reviews. *Reign of Fire* can be enjoyed on many different levels: as adventure; as a metaphor for how the Western world confronts terrorism; and as a movie where guns—serious guns—are used in a socially responsible manner.

What *Reign of Fire* wasn't: it was **not** your typical action adventure film. Yes, people die. But there is no gore, and only a few snippets of language that I wouldn't use at church. There are heroes aplenty, and there is conflict, but the only really bad guys fly and breathe fire.

It was **not** your typical, "We spent everything on special effects, we had to hire some cocaine-crazed illiterate to write the script" movie. The special effects were actually a little disappointing the first time through. The second time I saw *Reign of Fire*, I was a little more pleased—and oh, the quality of the sets! (Burned out London will take your breath away.) Instead, they spent the money on a surprisingly literate script, some beautiful scenery, helicopters, tanks, and actors who actually seemed as if they were worried about being turned into barbecue on the hoof.

The manner in which the film portrays guns was both pleasing and disappointing. Rifles and submachine guns are everywhere: FN FALs, Thompsons, M16s, and a variety of hunting weapons. Of course, once the dragon hunter and his crew arrive, there are even more guns.

Not only are guns everywhere in the film, but the manner in which they are used is appropriate. Young teenagers are given rifles to carry, and they handle them responsibly. Perhaps I have become very cynical, but it gave me great pleasure to see guns portrayed as a good thing, without even one little negative remark.

On the other hand, all this firepower doesn't seem to do much good against the dragons. One might get the impression that the dragons find small arms fire annoying, but not much else. Even the .50 Browning machine guns don't seem to be much of a problem for the dragons.

For those of us who know something about guns, this just doesn't seem terribly believable. It is hard to imagine that even the toughest of flying critters wouldn't be brought down by a burst of .50 BMG. Of course, had this happened, the film would not have had the thoughtful and poignant conflict between the lead characters. *Reign of Fire* would also have been a great deal shorter film...so perhaps we should just accept this supernatural ability of dragons to soak up bullets without significant injury. The movie would also have lacked a powerful action sequence that I dare not spoil for you—but the adrenalin rush meant that neither my son nor I could sleep that night; it's *that* powerful, without being disturbing or particularly frightening. (I wouldn't take a pre-teen to see this film; it would be too intense for many children of 9 or 10.)

The greatest surprise about this movie is that it must have been made before September 11th, and yet I find that I am not the only person who saw this film as a metaphor for terrorism and how we respond to it. In some action films, the good guy goes off to kick some tail (long and scaly, in this case) while others cower in fear. The contrast between the warrior and others is high. The viewer is effectively told that the warrior is a hero, and those who avoid the fight are contemptible cowards. It's an easy way to tell a story--if you are trying to tell simple stories for simple people--but it doesn't tell us much about the real world, where heroes are few, and fortunately, when the chips are down, real cowards are also rare.

In *Reign of Fire*, there is a clear difference between Van Zan (Matthew McConaughey) and Quinn (Christian Bale). Van Zan is a somewhat deranged--but in a good way--American dragonslayer. Quinn is an Englishman traumatized by his childhood encounter with these creatures that should use liquid nitrogen for mouthwash.

Van Zan and Quinn as the yin and yang of the human response to a species with whom we *clearly* can't share this planet. (Finally, a creature that Earth First! might decide was a greater environmental despoiler than we are.) Van Zan is the warrior as the ultimate expression of masculinity; Quinn is a symbol of a nurturing sort of masculinity. In this world lit only by fire, women seem in short supply, and we see Quinn and another of the young men of this isolated community caring for the small children whom they are trying to protect. It is touching to see Quinn doing his best to care for these orphans that they have rescued from burned out villages.

So what is this American doing in Northumberland, England? We find out pretty quickly that Van Zan and his followers are a combination of U.S. Army and irregular

forces. They have cobbled together a C-5A, and flown it to England because this seems to be where the dragons come from that have destroyed the modern world.

The film never uses the word “militia,” but there is a memorable moment where Van Zan compares the battle against the dragons to an incident in the Old West, where an outlaw gang tried to rob the town’s bank. As Van Zan tells it, the authorities weren’t there to deal with the bad guys, so the townsfolk rose up and wiped them out. Quinn, fearful of this tough and fearless bunch, suggests that Van Zan and his heavily armed followers are the outlaws. Van Zan replies, “We’re the townsfolk.”

The book of Ecclesiastes tells us, “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: ...a time for war and a time for peace.” The viewpoint of *Reign of Fire*’s director is clear enough; for all Van Zan’s disturbing qualities, he is the man for the hour, and this hour is the time for war. He is a hero, flawed as real men must always be, but we forgive those flaws. As the “Star-Spangled Banner” observes, “Oh, thus be it ever when free men shall stand, Between their loved homes and the war’s desolation....”

Yet, Quinn, while he is not a warrior in the same sense as Van Zan, is not a bad person. Quinn’s desire to save the children rather than hunt down the beasts—even at the cost that the dragons may continue to rule the planet—is short sighted, but understandable. He is wrong, but he is not evil. He is a good man, doing his best to preserve what remains. Van Zan the warrior is taking a more aggressive, pro-active role towards that same end.

Near the beginning of the movie, Van Zan gives two memorable lines that capture well the conflicting emotions that many Americans felt watching New York City firemen

and police officers run into the World Trade Center to save lives. “Envy the country that has heroes. Pity the country that needs them.”

It should be obvious to all that there is a similar conflict at work today in the Western world. There are those who believe that Osama bin Laden and his dragons must be crushed completely, and there are also leaders, largely in Western Europe and at American universities, who are reluctant to pursue the outrage of September 11th all the way to the end. They believe that an accommodation with evil is possible, and that a fight to the finish will be too costly. We can see that these people are wrong—and I hope that this film, as it plays in the English-speaking world, will cause others to evaluate where they stand concerning evil, regardless of whether that evil breathes fire or hijacks airliners.

Gun owners have good reason to be suspicious of the entertainment industry. Overwhelmingly, it supports restrictive gun control by its contributions to political campaigns, or in films (the pro-gun control speech in *The American President*). Too many action movies portray guns in a manner that is irresponsible. All that gun play is exciting to watch; unfortunately, impressionable children watch these films, and the unstable ones seem to be encouraged to do stupid and criminal acts by what they see.

If we buy a ticket or rent a video that promotes gun control, or irresponsible gun use, we are funding our enemies, and contributing to the cheapening of our society. If you know that a movie is in this category, and you spend any money to see it, you are telling the producer, “Go ahead! Keep polluting our culture by encouraging brutality. Keep making guns into objects of evil.”

What should we do when a movie comes along that shows guns in a positive light, or that portrays kids using guns in a responsible and appropriate manner? What should we do about a movie that portrays the warrior's self-sacrifice in a positive light? We need to encourage the producer who makes a movie like that. Spending money to see a film such as *Reign of Fire* tells the producer that you approve of what he does—and you want him to make movies like that.

What is the right caliber for dragons? I won't spoil the film for you, but I can tell you this: you won't find it advertised in the pages of *Shotgun News*!

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