

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Der Vorleser (The Reader)

Director: Stephen Daldry

Writers: Bernhard Schlink, David Hare

Cast: Kate Winslet (Hanna Schmitz), David Kross (young Michael Berg), Ralph Fiennes (older Michael Berg)

Music: Nico Muhly

Cinematography: Chris Menges, Roger Deakins

Running Time: 124 minutes

Release Date: January 2009

Coping Mechanisms – Allen Krumm

In his original genre, with his first *Self*, Bernhard Schlink, a jurist by day, toiled in literary obscurity. Inspired by

another genre, he animated a second self and vaulted to prominence. Perhaps genre can make a difference. Perhaps genre, to quote another German writer who eventually, if posthumously, made it big, is key in determining “*how one becomes what one is*”. With *Der Vorleser*, Schlink became a certifiable literary luminary in his ultimate genre.

The book eventually gave birth to the inevitable film offspring. The latter, eager for profundity and intent on remaining faithful to the novel, struggles valiantly to avoid descending to the status of message movie. Whether it succeeds, probably hinges as much on the viewer’s contribution as on any technical or artistic quality in the film itself. In any case, while the reading public seems to have a healthy appetite for books of this genre, the viewing public seems to have an inexhaustible appetite for such movies.

Despite screenwriter Dave Hare’s assertion that this is an indefinable movie, both script and direction hew, albeit largely indirectly, to standard motifs in holocaust stories: utter uniqueness, unfathomable evil, and three species of guilt: collective, inherited and enduring. The story does not incarnate the usual mix of characters. Hanna and Michael are Gentiles, not Jews, and much of the story transpires before the links to the past are revealed. Yet despite such variations, and the rather implausible subplot of the secret Hanna so desperately wants to keep hidden from the world, atrocitology etiquette is not breached.

As director Daldry emphasizes, the audience is not invited, and given no reason to sympathize with Hanna, and as author Schlink has emphasized (and screen writer Hare concurs), in relation to the crimes of the German people there can be no possibility of redemption for characters like Hanna. In traditional circles this attitude might be seen as exhausting the possibilities of chutzpah, since redemption in such quarters has usually been regarded as the exclusive province of God. Schlink has apparently done considerable post graduate

contemplation of the tropes of *Leidensgeschichte* and the expected conclusions of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*

The context for Schlink's text was his own context. He is a lawyer, a judge, a writer, and, most significantly for him, a German born in 1944. Thus, he is a member of the first generation of post war Germans, a generation which, beginning in the 1960s, felt a need to develop coping mechanisms for dealing with the legacy of the Nazi era and of the lives and actions of their own parents during that era. Schlink makes no claim to objectivity, to a "view from nowhere", and if writers and moviemakers, Jewish or otherwise, can be forgiven a certain lack of objectivity, and at times passionate intensity when dealing with the Nazi era, Schlink's grappling with the aftereffects of that era for his generation should be seen in the light of this dispensation.

Some say memory is chosen, some say it is imposed. Schlink isn't explicit as to his view in this regard, but he affirms the flood of holocaust movies since the late seventies have honed the ability of his generation to remember: "*Heute sind so viele Bücher und Filme vorhanden, daß die Welt der Lager ein Teil der gemeinsamen vorgestellten Welt ist, die die gemeinsame wirkliche vervollständigt. Die Phantasie kennt sich in ihr aus ... und ... bewegt sie sich auch in ihr, nimmt nicht nur wahr, sondern ergänzt und schmückt aus.*" Der Vorleser is indeed a distinctly enhanced and decorated discourse on the dynamics of memory, guilt, law, and morals for that first post war generation.

Whether chosen or imposed, the only memory which has meaning and consequence in the public square is the acknowledged (whether through choice or imposition) collective memory. To assist in the packaging of the memory, a versatile vocabulary has been evolving over the past several decades: survivor's guilt, second guilt, intergenerational guilt, transferred trauma, hereditary hatred, new anti-Semitism, secondary anti-Semitism, children of survivors. Although he is too good a writer to rely on such jargon, Schlink self identifies as a member of yet another set: descendent of perpetrators.

The narrative is a triptych, with a prologue of passion and an epilogue of aborted redemption framing the centerpiece of moral grappling. That prologue introduces us to Hanna and Michael, an unlikely, if not one of the more odd couples offered up in recent literature. If, in 1945, Hanna might have been inclined to exchange sex for food, fuel, and cigarettes, by the late 1950s, perhaps due to the benefits of the *Wirtschaftswunder*, young Michael discovers that reading aloud has assumed its rightful place as a fungible commodity. Hanna and Michael present and attend simultaneous seminars, Michael holding forth on belletristics, while Hanna focuses more on application than theory in her course.

It is the central story of the trial which throws into relief the issues that suffused the political atmosphere of Schlink's generation: the nature of guilt, the nature of law, the validity of retroactive justice; the duty to explore the past, and the duty (or perhaps opportunity) to condemn the generation which had sustained or at least tolerated the Nazis. Surrounded by these dynamics, Michael is eager to participate in his class's assignment to observe and evaluate the trial, until he is confronted with the knowledge that Hanna is one of the defendants. Suddenly the political becomes personal, and the various duties agonies rather than abstractions.

In the final story, the middle aged lawyer reconnects to the aging woman in prison via a form of "*wortreichen, wortkargen Kontakts...*" Perhaps to stave off the disintegration of his own life, he begins reading aloud to himself, and then to Hanna, and the therapeutic power of the spoken word provides a healing of sorts for both of them. Yet Michael never speaks directly or personally to her. When a text ends, he presses the stop button.

When it is made known to Michael that Hanna will be released from prison after eighteen years, the need for personal *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* closes in upon him. For Michael and Hanna, like the past, "*konne, was sie mir war, nur in der realen Distanz sein.*" But toxin or tonic as she might still be to him, Michael agrees to help in her

reintroduction to life in the outside world. Although Hanna still prefers being read to, she makes her own decision about managing the past.

Der Vorleser is a textbook in Germany. The text seems straightforward, but the subtext works hard to guide the responses of the reader. The film functions in the same manner. That subtext, is, as Ralph Fiennes put it, "shaking." Although Stephen Daldry asserts that "in the telling is the understanding", a tenacious didacticism pervades both works. David Hare reveals a bit of his own philosophy of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* when he notes that "To explore and understand is a dangerous and volatile business, because you can cross a line you don't wish to cross."