

## THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

### ***Friday Film Fest Series***



#### **Die Verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum - 1975**

##### **Credits:**

Directed by: Volker Schlöndorff and Margarethe von Trotta

Cinematography: Jost Vacano

Film Editor Peter: Przygodda

Written by: Volker Schlöndorff and Margarethe von Trotta from  
the novel by Heinrich Böll

Produced by: Willi Benninger, Eberhard Junkersdorf

Cast: Angela Winkler (Katherina), Mario Adorf (Inspector  
Beizmenne), Dieter Laser, Jürgen Prochnow, Heinz  
Bennent, Hannelore Hoger, Rolf Becker, Harald  
Kuhlmann, Herbert Fux,

#### **Precis – Allen Krumm**

Power is delicious and Louis XIV knew this. He had tasted power, chewed on it, digested it. He knew the joys of exercising power, employing the machinery of the state to bend his citizens to his will and mold or menace their lives as he saw fit. His political philosophy was summed up in his famous aphorism 'l'état, c'est moi'. Yet the Sun King could only dream of the power wielded by some of our present day Machthabers (electronic, elected or appointed). He had no clue what most of his good burgers were doing at any given time, and would have had a hard time finding out if he had wanted to know. Louis would have been awestruck by the auditing capabilities of the IRS and would have envied the power lately wielded by J. Edgar Hoover or more recently by John Ashcroft.

How he might have exploited the power of the modern press is open to fascinating speculation. Suffice it to say that after sufficient contemplation he would have had Geraldo Rivera drawn and quartered, and he would not have sat for a fireside interview with Barbara Walters (she would only have been allowed to fetch his chamber pot.) But he would have recognized and respected the power wielded by both these estimable members of the Fourth Estate, not to mention august institutions such as the New York Times and the National Enquirer and probing productions like 60 Minutes and Jerry Springer.

Louis would have been a bit baffled by Heinrich Böll's novel *Die Verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum*, had he somehow been able to procure a good French translation 300 years ahead of time. Nonetheless it would certainly have resonated deeply within him. He would have recognized the delicious dynamics of power mongering. He might have been perplexed by the claims of the Machthaber in the novel that they were only employing the mechanisms and technology of institutions and agencies against individuals and outgroups for the greater good of the people and the state. This would have puzzled Louis a bit. Why justify the use of power. That is what

kings do, and Louis had, as it was said, exhausted the possibilities of Kingship. After all, *Der Stat Bin Ich*.

The story should resonate with us as much as it might have with Louis, albeit for very different reasons. It should give all of us pause concerning the power of the state to control us and the role of the media in forming public opinion and perceptions. To paraphrase Marshall McLuhan, the Media is the Massage. If anything, the power of the press is greater now than in the seventies. If anything, the power of the state to invade, investigate and intimidate the individual is greater than at anytime in our history.

Although some might argue that the novel and the movie adaptation by Volker Schlöndorff have become virtual period pieces, by now merely quaint and amusing, the story continues to provoke unsettling reactions, because it is stubbornly relevant, emanating an unsettling contemporaneity. And indeed the story of Katherina Blum should provoke a searing resonance in anyone who has dealt with power structures in society. Which means all of us. Authority can be abused by anyone, anywhere, at anytime. By local authorities, by the national state, by the press; take your pick, the possibilities are endless.

Along with the afore mentioned use and abuse of power, there are several other tributary leitmotifs in Boll's story (skepticism towards authority, fear of institutional power, the dangerous synergy of duty and ambition) which converge to feed into a lifelong theme of Boll's: the continual need to defend the individual against such forces. In tonight's story, Katherina Blum is assaulted by a host of these forces simply because she meets a stranger at a party and spends the night with him. Or perhaps her actions on the night in question were not so simple. In any event, not only her loyalty, but her sexuality and identity as a woman, her integrity and her very sanity are called into question by circumstances beyond her control and attacked by an assortment of power players, some known, some unknown to her.

Boll wrote the novel much like a police report, inspired by his contempt for the tabloid publishing mogul Axel Springer and Boll's own experiences following his criticism of the newspapers for their irrational coverage of the acts of terrorism by the Bader Meinhoff gang, including subsequent false accusations of innocent people committing terrorist acts throughout Germany and the attribution of other non-related events to this terrorist group. As punishment for his criticisms, Boll's telephone was tapped, his apartment was searched and he was sent threatening letters. Springer allegedly tried to have the novel banned.

Contemplating Katherina's lost honor might give one pause concerning the Homeland Security Act, a reaction to terrorism in more recent times. But, many would argue, isn't it good to stop terrorists and extremists, whether they emanate from the right or the left of the political spectrum. After all, it is a question of "Good versus evil"; "if you are not with us, you are against us." And of course this is not meant to infer that anyone connected with the drafting and enactment of the latter legislation had less than the purest of motives.

In fact, the motives for the Homeland Security Act are certainly every bit as honorable and well meaning as those of Inspector Beizmenne in tonight's movie. When there is a threat, it must be dealt with. Nicht Wahr? So maybe in the end it is simply a question of achieving the right balance between such vexing democratic dichotomies as privacy vs freedom of the press and state security vs individual rights. Katherina, on the other hand, along with losing her honor, apparently lost her belief in the possibility of balance and nuance. That intrepid servant of the truth, Werner "call me Geraldo" Tötges, would vouch for this.