

For many businessmen of the war era, it was a tricky business to keep their business properly synced up with the fluid dynamics of wartime supply and demand, but for Walter Pelzer, that connoisseur of opportunism (“*immer ein Genie der Witterung*”) the *kriegswichtig* business of wreath making was booming. Demand was downright insatiable (“*Allein der amtliche Bedarf an Kränzen war enorm...*”) lacking any apparent relationship to the marginal utility of the product.

And in this unique setting we find Leni, the quintessential Böll character, a human being equipped with a somewhat naïve mind and a large and tender heart whose very nature is antithetical to the soul eviscerating strictures of institutionalized society and the crushing machinery of the state. She was *zu dreivierteln Waisenkind* (*Mutter tot, Vater im Gefängnis*), educated in a cloister, although eventually expelled for flunking religion.

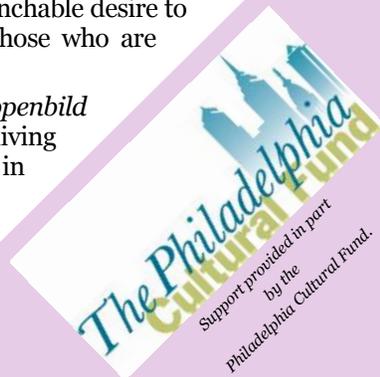
So in spite of Böll’s demotion of plot and his quasi documentary, investigative narrative technique, we have a hilariously apropos setting and an utterly captivating *Romanheldin*. Petrovic’s redeeming virtue is that he precisely plucks out the most pivotal and fateful incident in the entire novel and plops it down smack dab in the middle of his movie. Giving a bolshevik prisoner a cup of coffee is one of those tiny gestures possessed of enormous symbolic dimensions. Leni, for all her naiveté, is tuned in to such gestures. The gesture was at once her *Wiedergeburt* and her *Entscheidungsschlacht*.

This Bolshevik, a nice young man named Boris Koltowski who speaks fluent German and quotes Georg Trakl, albeit with a Baltic accent, becomes Leni’s lover and more importantly, the only man she ever managed to love completely. And upon his arrival at the *Kranzbinderei*, he even does his bit for state sponsored capitalism, suggesting that they just use first names on the wreaths so they can more easily be reused.

Boris doesn’t survive in the end. Leni loses him, although not before she conceives a son by him. It seems that no one Leni loves survives in the end, not her mentor the nun Rachel Guinsburg, whose Jewish bones the cloister is compelled to dig up and burn so no more roses will bloom on her grave; nor her father who resisted the Nazis by populating his phony building projects with authors and characters from Russian literature, nor her mother nor her brother, nor the cousin whom she might have loved completely if the war had not taken him from her as well.

Leni’s experience of loss epitomizes the experience of many Germans of her generation. Leni is simply distinguished by her response to such loss: her stubborn affirmation of life and her unquenchable desire to continue caring for and loving others, especially those who are truly ‘other’.

In the closing scene, Petrovic exhibits Leni’s *Gruppenbild* once more and allows us to listen to a chorus of the living and the dead who knew her. Some of them engage in pithy revelatory soliloquies on themselves and hence on the half century of history which provided the *Rohstoff* for their fates, while others among them indulge in fond final commentaries on Leni, who unsurprisingly is seen passing out cookies.



THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Friday Film Fest Series



Gruppenbild mit Dame (Group Portrait with a Lady)

By Aleksandar Petrovic

May 17th

• 6:30 PM •

Film, Food & Discussion

Donations \$15, Members \$12

The German Society of PA

611 Spring Garden St.

215-627-2332

Gruppenbild mit Dame

Director: Aleksandar Petrovic

Producer: Martin Hellstern, Hans Pfluger

Script: Jürgen Kolbe, Ginette Billard, Aleksandar Petrovic, Heinrich Böll

Cinematography: Pierre-William Glenn

Release Date: May 1977

Length: : 88 minutes

Cast: Romy Schneider (Leni Pfeiffer), Brad Dourif (Boris Koltowski), Michel Galabru (Walter Pelzer), Vadim Glowna (Erhard Schweigert), Richard Munch (Hubert Gruyten), Vitus Zepichal (Heinrich Gruyten), Milena Dravic (Sister Clementine), Rudiger Vogler (Boldig), Fritz Lichtenhahn (Dr. Scholsdorff), Wolfgang Condrus (Kremp)

.: *Commentary by A. Krumm* .:

Erst der Stoff

Romy Schneider had a formula for choosing projects: “Für mich funktioniert das so: erst der Stoff, dann der Regisseur, dann der Schauspieler.” Heinrich Böll’s task had been to produce the original *Stoff*. And he did, having written a *Gesellschaftspanorama* overflowing with *Stoff* where the main character was a woman “die die ganze Last der deutschen Geschichte zwischen 1922 und 1970 mit und auf sich genommen hat.”

No small task indeed, but no doubt Böll’s fascinating habit of creating a water color diagram of a work in progress was a big help in midwifing his *Meisterwerk*. He used this blueprint to visualize the structure of his emerging work and to see it at any given stage of development “auf einen Blick.”

Aleksandar Petrovic’s task was much more daunting. His task, to quote Leni Riefenstahl, was to “.... find a cinematic solution.” What for Böll was simply a *Kompositionshilfe* was in the nature of a finished product for Petrovic. He had to mine selected veins of prose from this sprawling experimental novel and smelt that textual ore into the shiny metal of cinematic drama. Perhaps he would have benefited from consulting Böll’s water color diagram in his search for a solution.

In any case, the critics were not kind to Petrovic’s rendition of Heinrich Böll’s *Gruppenbild mit Dame*. In sum, their verdict was that he had not found a cinematic solution. They attacked his script and his editing and his casting and pretty much everything he did. Then they piled on and blamed Romy Schneider for being Romy Schneider and criticized Brad Dourif for being an American and accused the nuns in the movie of being too pretty and finally they even threw in a few jibes at the French co-producers for being French and also at Heinrich Böll for having written a book which was apparently impossible to translate into film.

Romy Schneider’s task was to become the woman who was burdened by and bearing up that huge historical load. That woman, Böll’s charming protagonist, one Leni Pfeiffer, nee Gruyten, was the personification of *Unschuld*, believing devoutly in the “*Urkraft der reinen Liebe*.” Schneider found Böll’s *Stoff* difficult but pleasing and felt the Serbian Petrovic understood that *Stoff*, so she signed on, believing she had the right *Stoff* to pull it off. There may even have been intimations of a magnum opus of her very own lurking in her mind.



It should be noted that Romy Schneider became agitated and aggravated long before the critics weighed in. Her enthusiasm waned as her sense of Böll’s disinterest grew, and it shriveled further when she heard rumors that his original preference had been for another director (Volker Schlöndorff) and another actress (Angela Winkler). For good measure she engaged in quarrels with Petrovic.

Notwithstanding all these distractions and difficulties, the movie was indeed made, and Schneider even won an award for her role. As for director Petrovic, whether he simply failed to realize his vision or was just misunderstood by the critics, it is completely unfair to say he was mistaken in his method of searching for a cinematic solution.

Petrovic had presumably discerned that it is mostly mood doing the talking in Heinrich Böll’s work, with the narrative flow a river of pensive sadness fed by watersheds of acid outrage and sizable tributaries of hilarity. You float along in his stories, sometimes thinking angry thoughts in response to his piercing social criticism and often laughing at his mordant, laconic, excessively dry wit, while this main channel of gentle sorrow is lapping about, sloshing the sadness all over you.

Yet as a christian, Böll knew that the functional specifications he was working from presupposed a sound mind and good reasons for gladness. So although after twelve years of insanity a sanity check seemed to be in order and while Böll cataloged a good deal of the insanity over the course of his writing career, he never flagged in his quest to find reasons for a renewal of hope and gladness and in his search for all the innocence which had been lost amidst the drenching sadness and the gnawing guilt.

Such endeavors thus inclined him to relax the dictates of traditional structure and sometimes push such niceties as plot to the periphery. And if Heinrich Böll wasn’t overly concerned about such niceties, why should Aleksandar Petrovic have felt obligated to cinematically recapitulate what wasn’t really there to begin with. Instead, he focused on several illuminating albeit disparate episodes. Thus although the movie is lacking in the conventional rhythms one expects and is in some respects jarring and disconcerting, Petrovic accurately articulated the underlying motifs that animated Böll’s work.

He was able to do so because he shared the convictions from which those motifs stemmed. Those convictions included a fundamental antiwar stance, a contempt for materialism, a belief in the solidarity of ordinary people and local community as opposed to the claims of ideology and institutions, and an intense awareness that history, just like any human being, is never simple or univocal or entirely comprehensible. Thus one should not be surprised by Böll’s verdict on Petrovic’s work: “... Mr. Petrovic prevailed.”

Despite the unconventionality of both the book and the movie, there is a very distinctive setting in Böll’s *Gruppenbild mit Dame*. It is Pelzer’s *Kranzbinderei*.