

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



The Good German - 2006

Director: Steven Soderbergh
Producer: Frederic Brost; Ben Cosgrove
Screenplay: Paul Attanasio (based on the novel by Joseph Kanon)
Music: Thomas Newman
Cast: George Clooney (Jake Geismer); Tobey Maguire (Tully); Cate Blanchett (Lena Brandt); Dominic Comperatore (Levi); Dave Power (Lt. Schaeffer); Tony Curren (Danny); Ravil Isyanov (General Sikorsky); Beau Bridges (Colonel Muller); Robin Weigert (Hannelore)

Precis – Allen Krumm

Any number of philosophical ramifications might be drawn from the grammatical distinction between the definite and indefinite article. The New Oxford English dictionary curtly declares that the indefinite article may mean “one, some, or any.” The definite article is given greater scope in “...designating one or more persons ...already mentioned or known, particularized by context or circumstances, inherently unique, familiar, or otherwise sufficiently identified...”

Whether definite or indefinite, a relentless presupposition lurks behind either variation: “*a good german*”...“*the good german*”. The phrase has been in circulation in English for more than 60 years, and anyone hearing it grasps the implication: whether in terms of quantity (one, some, or any) or in terms of unique and sufficient identification, being good and being German comprises a rare convergence.

Steven Soderbergh recycles the phrase with the definite article, as did the book by Joseph Kanon from which his film is adapted. Soderbergh would have us know several things beyond mere philosophy: that times were very tough in post-war Berlin; that such times brought out the worst in human nature; and finally, that there was a lot of nasty behind the scenes pushing and shoving going on between the Russians and the Americans. Among other things, they were jousting and jostling over the brain trust of the fallen Third Reich, in particular over the rocket scientists who had developed the dreaded V-2 weapon.

Soderbergh’s sometimes rather convoluted plot boils down to this: Franz Bettmann is one of the rocket scientists whom the Allies want to bring west to work on future weapons. His secretary, Emil Brandt, who served with Bettmann at Camp Dora, is hiding in Berlin. He wants to testify before a de-nazification court and bring Franz Bettmann to justice for his crimes. Emil Brandt is being hidden by his Jewish wife Lena. Jake Geismar, a

journalist for the New Republic, comes to Berlin to cover the Potsdam conference. He and Lena had been lovers before the war, and she had been a stringer for him and the newspaper which employed him.

Lena is once again a working woman, practicing a very old profession to survive and support her hidden husband. She is also being courted and occasionally pimped by her young American GI lover Corporal Tully. The Americans want Lena to lead them to Emil Brandt so they can silence him. They do not want any irksome legal proceedings to hinder their plans to employ Franz Bettmann's technical skills as they begin to build the weapons of the future.

Curiously, although Corporal Tully's excess greed and curiosity eventually prove fatal, *Herr Haupt-Protagonist* Jake Geismar keeps putting two and two together and staying alive. But that is a good thing in the end. How else would we follow the convoluted plot? Sometimes Lena assists with the omniscient narration, and we get such gems as "...he's a good German, he wants to tell the truth."

So what can we learn from Soderbergh's movie? That he studiously employs all the shopworn psychological tropes of the Nazi movie genre? That is entirely unexceptionable. His historical allusions, although a bit shaky at times, have some merit. Dora, a.k.a. KZ Mittelbau-Dora, was without question a nasty place. After the Allies bombed Peenemunde into smithereens, production facilities were geared up in the tunnels of the Mittelbau-Dora site near Nordhausen in Thuringia, where slave labor was mercilessly employed to boost production of the V-2.

The vague character of Franz Bettmann suggests any number of possibilities. Is Bettmann supposed to represent Werner Von Braun, or Arthur Rudolf, or a composite? It is hard to say. In any case, Soderbergh is more or less accurate in his portrayal of the US leadership's cynical indifference to matters of so called justice, as long as they could harvest the brainpower they wanted. The war crimes trial for Mittelbau-Dora was held

at Dachau in 1947. The Ordnance Rocket Branch of the US Army which had whisked von Braun and over 100 of his key co-workers to the US was not, to say the least, eager to cooperate with the investigators.

The approach adopted by the US military worked. In the 1950s, the von Braun-lead rocket research group at the Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville Alabama developed the RedStone and Jupiter missiles (both capable of carrying nuclear weapons) and culminated their efforts in the 1960s with the development of the massive Saturn V rocket, which put the Apollo astronauts on the moon. So did these German scientists who greatly accelerated the US's technological progress in the post-war period become "good Germans" by virtue of their efforts for America? Were the American leaders who eagerly solicited and employed their services "good Americans"?

Perhaps Soderbergh would have done well to produce a double feature; leading off with *The Good German*, and following up with a feature entitled *Femegericht* to tell the story of Nuremberg, where the west's tradition of the rule of law shown forth in all its glory. By that time most of the useful German scientists had already been safely ensconced within the US military's research programs.

The worldview of Colonel Muller, and the US hierarchy which he epitomized, is really quite similar to that of Lena; like her, they could justify everything in the name of survival. For her part, Lena had already learned that in adopting such a philosophy she had become "particularized by context or circumstance" and had become a good deal like those whom she despised. Whether "one, some, or any", it is not evident that anyone of Colonel Muller's set, then or now, has ever come to this realization.