

tive, or just professes it because it is the only allowable perspective to have about Germany's 20th century history if you do not want to be cancelled (both socially and professionally). What we do know is that Orson Welles' collaborator and partner for *The Trial* was Franz Kafka. Berger's collaborator and partner for *Im Westen Nichts Neues* was Netflix.

Like the protagonist of Remarque's novel, Wilfred Owen was actually killed in action near the end of the war (just a week prior, to be precise). In an unpublished note discovered after the war, he said of his poetry: " ... *this book is not concerned with Poetry. The subject of it is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity.*" Such pity is the only narrative lens one needs to perceive the nature of war. We will let Remarque have the last word: "*Dieses Buch soll weder eine Anklage noch ein Bekenntnis sein. Es soll nur den Versuch machen, über eine Generation zu berichten, die vom Kriege zerstört wurde – auch wenn sie seinen Granaten entkam.*"



THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Friday Film Fest Series



Im Westen nichts Neues

Directed by Edward Berger

September 15, 2023

• 6:30 PM •

Film, Food & Discussion

The German Society of Pennsylvania
611 Spring Garden St.
Philadelphia, PA 19123

In Western nichts Neues

Director: Edward Berger
Screenplay: Edward Berger
Lesley Paterson
Ian Stokell
Production: Malte Grunert
Daniel Dreifus
Edward Berger
Camera: James Friend
Length: 147 minutes
Cast: Felix Kammerer as Paul Bäumer
Albrecht Schuch as Stanislaus
Aaron Hilmer as Albert Kropp
Daniel Brühl as Matthias Erzberger
Moritz Klaus as Frantz Muller
Edin Hasanovic as Tjaden Stackfleet
Devid Striesow as General Friedrich
Sebastian Hulk as Major von Brixdorf
Adrian Grünwald as Ludwig Behm



Based on the book *Im Westen Nichts Neues* by Eric Maria Remarques

Commentary by Al Krumm

This third adaptation of Erich Maria Remarque's classic 1929 antiwar novel won 4 Oscars at this year's award show. These included best international movie, camera, music and set design. No German film ever won more Oscars than this one and it's only the 4th movie that won in the best international category after "Das Leben der Anderen" (2007), "Nirgendwo in Afrika" (2003) and "Die Blechtrommel" (1980).

The Proper Use and Odious Abuse of Jiggery Pokery

Jiggery pokery is not a bad thing in itself. In fact, a director can never totally avoid it. It comes in two varieties: technological jiggery pokery and narrative jiggery pokery. Orson Welles was not adverse to using either one in measured doses. But it could never be allowed to trespass against the spirit of a story. When Welles made his movie adaptation of Kafka's *The*

Trial, he said he wanted above all to avoid "bad visual rhetoric." He indulged in his share of both varieties of jiggery pokery and declared that "*The Trial* is the best film I have ever made."

When asked how his film related to the book, Welles said it was not about the book, nor based upon the book, but rather inspired by the book, referring to Kafka as "...my collaborator and partner..." Despite all his tinkering and rearranging, there was a sense of obligation on Welles part, an awareness of the indispensability of *werktreu*. This was his attitude about a fictional movie derived from a fictional book.

Edward Berger is all in when it comes to jiggery pokery but if his rendition of Eric Maria Remarque's classic novel *Im Westen Nichts Neues* turns out to be the best film he ever makes, he will deserve our deepest sympathy. Berger would probably endorse Welles' take on *werktreu*, but what his film actually transmits is a scarcely veiled version of officially sanctioned German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. In doing so, he also manages to crank out generous dollops of "bad visual rhetoric".

We should give Berger his due. The sometimes blunt, sometimes allusive images of the first ten minutes of the film viscerally convey the indifferent horror of industrialized warfare. He ensconces us within the demeaning filth and claustrophobic terror of the trenches and presents a panorama of the hellish death scape of No-Man's-Land, confronting us with the immense scale of the killing. The coffins and the corpses reiterate that indifferent horror.

Throughout the film, Berger occasionally achieves the type of visual rhetoric which Orson Welles would commend, with a few of the scenes verging on the beguilingly beautiful (calling to mind the searing insight of Wallace Stevens: "... Death is the mother of beauty..."). We see the vast night sky ascending from an ominously glimmering horizon while luminous *Lichtschirme* descend peacefully back to earth; we see the convoy of trucks moving inexorably towards the front and the column of soldiers trudging through a denuded terrain toward their firing position and a possible rendezvous with death. The haunting nature shots emphasize the insanity of the war going on in the midst of the natural world. The spasmodic intrusions of staccato drumbeats and the aggressively reverberating musical motif inject a stark foreboding that the 'mother of beauty' is soon to give birth again.

There are many segments of his rendition that emanate directly from the novel: the iconic episode in the bomb crater with the enemy soldier; the denuded dead men hanging from the branches of trees; the discovery of the young recruits who have succumbed en masse to a gas attack; the

idyllic camp scenarios including quality time at the latrine; the joyous camaraderie while feasting on a stolen goose. There are other such scenes we could mention, to Berger's credit. Both he and his team of technicians are very talented, in particular cinematographer James Friend.

Yet despite such visual virtues and the sporadic accuracy of his filmic storytelling, Berger ultimately fails to evoke the spirit of Remarque's depiction of the war. Berger's *Im Westen Nichts Neues* is in the final analysis, essentially propaganda. Ironically, in an interview concerning the making



of the film, Berger emphasized that " ... it has to be brutal otherwise it'd be a lie and it almost would be propaganda..." He was referring to the necessity of the explicit violence depicted in the movie. But most of the violence which he injects does not mitigate the propaganda, but rather exacerbates it. Fortunately Berger's propaganda is not very good

propaganda. High quality propaganda, as more than a few astute individuals have pointed out, must be subtle.

The scenes in the movie that depict the actual combat between the Germans and the Allies are quintessential bad visual rhetoric, verging on pure porno violence. There are ways to expose the essential evil of war (which is that it forces innocent young men to kill each other) but indulging gratuitously in gory spectacles is not one of them. Apparently the idea is that the more viewers witness such barbarity, the more repulsed they will feel about war. But if anything, the glossy, brilliantly choreographed violence (made possible of course by 21st century high tech jiggery pokery – far beyond anything Orson Welles could have imagined) will attract and even seduce a healthy percentage of any given audience.

The desperate hand to hand combat, spurting blood, splattering mud, dismembered bodies and jolting explosions are no different in their effect than any violence laced film, of whatever genre. There is an unavoidably lurid aesthetic quality to the violence. We don't want to admit it, but we are attracted to it, much as our eyes linger when we pass a horrible accident on the freeway. The violence is there to titillate us rather than teach us anything. It gives us a vicarious thrill. We will need to pause the streaming to get more popcorn before the next attack scene.

Beyond the bad visual rhetoric of this sort, Berger indulges in several key

pieces of narrative jiggery pokery that are beyond the pale. Ten minutes into the film, the school master gives a rousing patriotic speech to his students, entreating them in hyperbolic language to join up for the sake of the Fatherland. Likely there were some such speeches at that time in Germany (although it is hard to believe they would be that pompous and florid) but here is how Remarque describes the influence of the schoolmaster on Paul and his comrades:

Kantorek hielt uns in den Turnstunden so lange Vorträge, bis unsere Klasse unter seiner Führung geschlossen zum Bezirkskommando zog und sich meldete. Ich sehe ihn noch vor mir, wie er uns durch seine Brillengläser anfunkelte und mit ergriffener Stimme fragte: »Ihr geht doch mit, Kameraden?« Diese Erzieher haben ihr Gefühl so oft in der Westentasche parat; sie geben es ja auch stundenweise aus. Doch darüber machten wir uns damals noch keine Gedanken.



Remarque's description is entirely lacking in the 'in your face' brutal psychological intensity of Berger's version. Was there peer pressure? Certainly (and not just in Germany), but Remarque's depiction of that peer pressure was not as Berger portrays it. Remarque also says of his schoolmaster:

Man kann Kantorek natürlich nicht damit in Zusammenhang bringen; – wo bliebe die Welt sonst, wenn man das schon Schuld nennen wollte. Es gab ja Tausende von Kantoreks, die alle überzeugt waren, auf eine für sie bequeme Weise das Beste zu tun.

So who best retrieves the way it was for young men in those days in terms of institutional and social pressure, Remarque or Berger? Maybe we should cut Herr Berger a break and realize, when you make a film for Net-

flix, such hyperbole (coupled with all that bad visual rhetoric) is simply de rigueur.

In the last half hour of the film, Berger introduces us to some newly minted history, ostensibly impelled by the exigencies of his *Spannungsbogen*. History has its subjective side, but there are things we can know with a reasonable degree of certainty. What we know is that no German general ordered an attack on the Allied lines 15 minutes before the armistice was to begin. Even worse, the General is infused with all the quintessential characteristics of the *bad German* stereotype that has been in the ascendant in the media, in films, and in popular culture writ large, since the end of the Second World War.

Berger's General delivers a speech that, other than its rather nasty tone, might have been given by Colonel Klink in an episode of Hogan's Heroes. His harangue covers all the talking points of stereotypical German militarism. In his peroration he commands his soldiers to attack the allies with "...utmost force and vehemence" in order to prove that they (the Germans) are not cowards. Besides being an insulting invention, the scene is absurdly illogical. Having conceded that the war is over, the general nonetheless says "... we will end this war with a merciless strike ... "in order to ... make them see.... We were victorious...".



This pathetic version of a pre-game Prussian pep talk is an integral part of Berger's narrative. Yet there is a much more illuminating dialog in Remarque's 9th chapter that should have been used in place of the General's bombast, that being the debate Paul and his comrades have about how and why the war started. In the novel this dialog extends for several pages. Berger employs only a few decontextualized sentences of this dialog, obfuscating the import of the passage. Amongst the various insights

offered by the group, Kat demonstrates as usual that he is the wisest among the interlocutors: "... *Weshalb ist dann überhaupt Krieg?*« fragt Tjaden. *Kat zuckt die Achseln. »Es muss Leute geben, denen der Krieg nützt....*" In a film lasting 2 hours and twenty minutes, one would think that this incisive passage could have been squeezed into the script.

In the attack that follows, Berger's technological jiggery pokery goes into high gear. Actually he goes full tilt Hollywood, doing his best to outdo Sam Peckinpah and Quentin Tarantino. Paul Bäumer becomes a berserker, shooting, bayonetting and clubbing to death French soldiers as fast as he can. In between killing the enemy soldiers, he pants and growls like an animal. Eventually, in the French trenches, Bäumer engages in a death struggle with another French soldier.

In the best tradition of bar fights in Westerns, the struggle seesaws breath-takingly back and forth for a few moments, until finally, crashing into a side dugout, like two trapped and exhausted animals, they simply stare at each other. Then yet another French soldier comes up from behind and bayonettes Bäumer to end the struggle. The sequence where Bäumer falls to his knees and descends into his death throes is maudlin in the extreme. If the young actor who had to perform this scene watches it again in years to come, he might feel compelled to cringe.



As Paul sways on his knees, gulping and gasping, a French voice cries "Cease Fire, it is 11 AM." Who writes this stuff? According to the credits, it is Mr. Berger. Although Bäumer has been bayoneted straight through, he is able to walk back out into the main trench as the armistice takes effect. The French soldiers who a few seconds before were trying to kill him pay him no notice. Apparently we are supposed to have already surmised that Bäumer has been transmogrified into a ghost.

Here is how Erich Maria Remarque has Paul Bäumer die in his novel:

"Er fiel im Oktober 1918, an einem Tage, der so ruhig und still war an der ganzen Front, dass der Heeresbericht sich nur auf den Satz beschränkte, im Westen sei nichts Neues zu melden. Er war vornübergefallen und lag wie schlafend an der Erde. Als man ihn umdrehte, sah man, dass er sich nicht lange gequält haben konnte; – sein Gesicht hatte einen so gefassten Ausdruck, als wäre er beina-

he zufrieden damit, dass es so gekommen war."

Remarque gives us no frenzied killing spree, no melodramatic death struggle, no bloodlust, no pathetic attempt to shock and awe the reader. He says it was a quiet day. His death scene for Bäumer is the epitome of indirection and understatement. Remarque actually was a soldier in this war and although his novel is replete with gruesome descriptions of how men died in battle, he seemed to understand that the ultimate horror of war could never be directly communicated. As an artist, at key junctures of the narrative, he sensed that less is more, that what you leave out is often more important than what you put in. Berger's leitmotif herein seems to be, the more the better.

In another instance of manipulative narrative jiggery pokery, Berger reinvents the death of Kat. Remarque has Kat wounded in the shin while he is bringing food. They are obviously at the front, since Paul begins to carry him back to a dressing station and there is shelling going on through which they must slowly move. When Paul reaches the rear hospital, the medic coldly tells him that he has wasted his time, since Kat is already dead. Unbeknownst to Paul, Kat has been hit by another bullet or shell splinter as Paul carried him to the rear.

Herr Berger has Kat and Paul, early in the morning on the last day of the war, go on another foray to steal another goose. They fail in this attempt, but once they have run away from the angry farmer who is shooting at them, they stop to slurp up the eggs they did succeed in stealing, and then Kat decides to relieve himself. While he is doing so, the young son of the French farmer steals up behind Kat with a rifle. Kat senses he is there, and slowly turns around. The boy shoots him in the lower stomach, almost in the groin.

Paul hears the shot and comes running, and sees Kat collapse. Paul then struggles to walk and eventually carry Kat toward the dressing station. Along the way to the rear, two trucks full of German soldiers pass them, and despite Paul's pleas for help, the soldiers in the truck ignore them and pass on. Finally Paul reaches the dressing station, and as in the novel, he is informed by the medic that Kat is already dead.

The net effect of this alteration of how Kat died is to trivialize or even demean his character by having him be shot by a child while taking a leak after raiding the farmers goose coop. Kat is actually the most interesting character in both Remarque's novel and Berger's film and deserves a bit more respect. One also can readily infer that the purpose of the trucks that pass Kat and Paul and ignore them is to insinuate that such callousness was typical of German soldiers. Another example of an inexplicably de-

rogatory moment in the film is when the jolting of the train makes Matthias Erzberger pee on his foot. It is not evident what relationship this ribald mockery has to matters of war and peace.



In spite of the excess of off-putting negative jiggery pokery in the movie, one can only applaud the performances of the actors. Albrecht Schuch as Kat is simply outstanding. Daniel Brühl puts in his usual stellar turn playing Matthias Erzberger. This narrative thread concerning the efforts leading to the signing of the peace agreement is not in the book, but can be construed as a legitimate addition and reasonably accurate as history. Felix Kammerer carries the weight of the lead role admirably, all the more impressive since this was his first film role.

Nonetheless, the sum and substance of Berger's version of *Im Westen Nichts Neues* reduces to orthodox *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, a peculiarly German form of propaganda. It is peculiar because it is the default way in which Germans prefer to fool themselves. If others get fooled, well and good, but the main point is that Germans demonstrate that they are *good* Germans by swallowing and regurgitating this propaganda. Berger mediates it via the afore mentioned infotainment shock and awe porn violence, fortified with officially sanctioned stereotypes and tropes concerning Germans and German history.

Berger actually said in another interview that "Germany started two world wars." Christopher Clark (*The Sleepwalkers*) eviscerates Berger's facile assertion:

The outbreak of war in 1914 is not an Agatha Christie drama at the end of which we will discover the culprit standing over a corpse in the conservatory with a smoking pistol. There is no smoking gun in this story; or, rather, there is one in the hands of every major character. Viewed in this light, the outbreak of war was a tragedy, not a crime. Acknowledging this does not mean that we should minimize

the belligerence and imperialist paranoia of the Austrian and German policy-makers that rightly absorbed the attention of Fritz Fischer and his historiographical allies. But the Germans were not the only imperialists and not the only ones to succumb to paranoia. The crisis that brought war in 1914 was the fruit of a shared political culture. But it was also multipolar and genuinely interactive – that is what makes it the most complex event of modern times and that is why the debate over the origins of the First World War continues, one century after Gavrilo Princip fired those two fatal shots on Franz Joseph Street.

In terms of the Second World War, in *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* John Maynard Keynes prophesied how a 'Carthaginian Peace' would ineluctably lead to another world war.



If we take the view that for at least a generation to come Germany cannot be trusted with even a modicum of prosperity, that while all our recent Allies are angels of light, all our recent enemies, Germans, Austrians, Hungarians, and the rest, are children of the devil, that year by year Ger-

many must be kept impoverished and her children starved and crippled, and that she must be ringed round by enemies; then we shall reject all the proposals of this chapter, and particularly those which may assist Germany to regain a part of her former material prosperity and find a means of livelihood for the industrial population of her towns. But if this view of nations and of their relation to one another is adopted by the democracies of Western Europe, and is financed by the United States, heaven help us all. If we aim deliberately at the impoverishment of Central Central Europe, vengeance, I dare predict, will not limp. Nothing can then delay for very long that final civil war between the forces of Reaction and the despairing convulsions of Revolution, before which the horrors of the late German war will fade into nothing, and which will destroy, whoever is victor, the civilization and the progress of our generation.

Keynes wrote the foregoing in 1919. Famed military historian John

Keegan, writing in the 1990s, concurred post facto with Keynes' prophecy: "*The Second World War was the continuation of the First, and indeed it is inexplicable except in terms of the rancours and instabilities left by the earlier conflict.*"



In *The Origins of the Second World War* AJP Taylor (who despised Hitler and the Nazis as much as anyone) bluntly insisted that Germany was no more to blame for the Second World War than England or France. It should be obvious from such examples that there is no settled consensus on the cause of either world war.

Obviously, if you want more Netflix gigs in the future, as well as the approbation of 'right thinking people', you will be inclined to avoid considering such perspectives. We learn nothing about history or the nature of war from this movie, but are reminded of Orwell's apercu: "*Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.*" Henry Stimson, who served as FDR's secretary of war from 1940 to 1945, was thinking along the same lines in his memoir *On Active Service In Peace And War* when he commented: "*Unfortunately, I have lived long enough to know that history is often not what actually happened but what is recorded as such.*"

A film is not a book and should not even try to do what a book can do. Conversely, a film can do things a book cannot do. But there should be a prevailing element of fidelity in a film to the book from which the film emanates. The spirit of the book should be recapitulated within the boundaries of legitimate artistic license. While Welles succeeded in relation to Kafka, Berger fails in relation to Remarque.

The message Berger sends is not the message that Erich Maria Remarque sent in his famous novel. Remarque's message is a universal one, a condemnation of war, pure and simple. Berger's message, just beneath the boiler plate surface level '*war is terrible*' imagery, is a particular one: Germany has a unique and permanent burden of guilt in relation to war. He has said (in multiple interviews): "*England and America defended themselves, they were roped into a war and rose to the occasion. In Germany, there's shame, guilt, horror and also responsibility towards that same history.*"

This is the language of orthodox *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, propaganda that can be used for deception as well as self-deception. As with many Germans, it is difficult to say if Berger really believes this narra-