

CINEMATIC MEMORY AND THE AMERICANIZATION OF THE HOLOCAUST

BARBARA A. NELSON

University of Bucharest

Abstract: Steven Soderbergh's *The Good German* (2006), while grounding itself in WWII, casts a wide net as it attempts to examine the role of memory, the difficulty of assigning guilt, determining justice, defining the past, and writing history. Its nuanced treatment of these issues is enhanced by its complex ethnic characterizations and its contextualization among a group of WWII American cinematic classics. This ultimately leads to a shift in viewer reception aimed at creating greater understanding and empathy.

Key Words: Film Noir, Jewish representation, identity, memory, WWII

The Good German (2006) by Steven Soderbergh grounds itself in film noir's World War II roots as it positions itself in the rubble of Berlin on the eve of the Potsdam conference (July 1945). There, Truman, Churchill, and Stalin meet to establish peace and to come to grips with issues of the aftermath of war. Soderbergh's film, largely overlooked, is a dense intertextual work, which addresses memory—private and public—in a time of trauma (deWaard 2010:107). Specifically, it deals with the Holocaust. Contemporary with Soderbergh's film are several other works which testify to the ongoing cultural interest in memory, particularly, as it relates to history. One is the two-volume edition of essays accompanying the “massive” exhibit on WWII by the German Historical Museum in Berlin in 2005 which brought together works by major historians of memory from twenty-five European countries and Israel. Another is Harvard Professor and critic, Susan Suleiman's *Crisis in Memory and World War II* (2006) and yet a third is Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang's *Trauma and the Cinema* (2004). While some critics claim the Holocaust and memory have become an overblown obsession, Suleiman argues we should be asking “how this recurrent interest in memory is best put to public use,” not “when will it fade?” (2006:8).

The far-reaching import of the Holocaust has been widely acknowledged by Andreas Huyssen: “[the Holocaust is] a powerful prism through which we may look at other instances of genocide.” (2003:14). Suleiman also claims the Holocaust “has become a template for collective

memory in areas of the world that had nothing to do with those events but that have known other collective traumas.” It is precisely the Holocaust as template that inspired Kaplan and Wang’s *Trauma and the Cinema*, which focuses on reconciliation efforts in international conflicts. “Putting to use” what we have learned from the “memory boom” of the last twenty plus years since Pierre Nora’s seminal study on sites of memory in France, *Les lieux de memoire* published between 1984 and 1992 is also a key concern of Suleiman. Her interest in effective political negotiating is apparent from her reference to the 2004 Harvard conference on “cultural citizenship,” and the problems that underlie this concept--“contested memory” or “conflicting narratives” (2006: 8). While focusing specifically on the Holocaust and the aftermath of WWII, Soderbergh’s *The Good German*, like Suleiman’s *Crisis of Memory and the Second World War*, casts a wider net.

The complexity which Soderbergh brings to his treatment of memory, history, and justice is particularly highlighted when considering his work in the context of two other American WWII film classics, which, in fact, are intertexts for his, namely, *Casablanca* (1942) and *Schindler’s List* (1993). Michael Curtiz’s *Casablanca* is a propaganda film designed by Warner Bros. to urge America’s support of the war, while Spielberg’s work--often cited as playing a crucial role in the Americanization of the Holocaust--immerses viewers viscerally into the horrors of war and specifically concentration camp life. The earlier film makes no mention of Jewish issues due to a complex blend of “economic insecurity, diplomatic isolationism, and anti-semitism” (Mazzenga 2009:2-3 and Birdwell 1999:78-82, 129). Spielberg’s brings the plight of the Jews, especially those who immigrated to the United States, on to central stage. It also contributes to the revision of the evil German stereotype presented in *Casablanca*, as the director focuses attention on the moral “bildung” of German businessman and profiteer Oscar Schindler. Soderbergh’s film, while participating in this American cinematic continuum, serves as a dramatic counterpoint--and much needed complement--to these two other World War II films. Having a Jewish voice at its center, *The Good German* seems, at first glance, to redress one of the commonly cited absences in Spielberg’s, whether justified or not, namely, the lack of a Jewish spokesperson--critics often focus on the sidelining in *Schindler’s List* of Ben Kingsley’s character, Itzhak Stern (Hansen 1997:147). Soderbergh, in making his central character a Jewish female who self-identifies as a German, also pushes beyond Spielberg’s in terms of gender issues.⁶

While both Curtiz’s and Spielberg’s film have embedded film noir elements, they remain essentially idealistic narratives that gravitate toward historical accounts in black and white that emphasize the life-affirming role of memory. *The Good German*, true to noir, exposes the underbelly of American idealism and exploits themes of duplicity, aiming for a more

complex perspective. Soderbergh's treatment of self and other-German and American, Jew and Gentile—good and evil are even more intricately intertwined. Curtiz's "we will always have Paris" and Spielberg's highlighting of the power of Jewish communal ritual and remembrance in the midst of attempted Nazi erasure in Krakow, contrast with Soderbergh's more sobering view of memory and war. *The Good German*, in fact, revises *Casablanca* (Nelson 2009), bringing historical nuances to Curtiz's earlier film. While Soderbergh shows "it is hard to get out of Berlin," as a mental site, his film focuses on the determination to try. History and justice are amorphous and slippery concepts, if paramount.

Central to *The Good German*, much like *Schindler's List* (Burgoyne 2008:104), is the integration of the story of a real individual and an encompassing narrative of World War II.⁴ Soderbergh's Lena Brandt (Cate Blanchett), based on Stella Goldschlag, is the major channel through which complex issues of memory, defining the past, assigning guilt, and determining justice and responsibility are explored. Yet what a controversial complement this voice is. Lena is not only Jewish, but German. The real model for Lena, Stella Goldschlag, later Kubler and Isaaksohn, was a "greifer," a Jew who informed on U-boats--other Jews living undercover in Berlin--often sending them to their deaths. The Lena/Stella story, which broke in 1992, opened up the field for new discussions of Jewish involvement in the war. It was launched by American immigrant/citizen, Peter L Wyden, a German-American journalist and a former classmate of Stella during her years at the Goldschmidt school in Berlin. Unlike Stella, Peter had successfully escaped Germany before the onslaught of the War (Wyden 1992:271). His investigation, perhaps stemming from survivor guilt, was an attempt to try to understand Stella's actions, a good starting point for Soderbergh's similar attempts to try to make sense of Stella and larger issues of justice.

Soderbergh, unlike Wyden or Spielberg, gives few graphic specifics of his main character's life during wartime. Wyden details the life of an attractive blond with Jewish cultural roots who considered herself nothing other than completely German and refused to wear the star except at work. She was caught by a "griever" and forced to acknowledge her Jewish roots, accused of passing as an Aryan, tortured by the Nazis for it and threatened with family deportations. Subsequently, she too became a "griever." In *The Good German* Lena's suffering is conveyed by her determination and desperation to get out of Berlin--a geographical location as well as a mental state--and by her bouts with self-loathing. Soderbergh's focus is on Lena's conscious choice to transform her identity, a action which is akin to that defined by Susan Suleiman as a "crisis of memory" (2006:113,134).

This apparently audacious recasting of the traditional femme fatale is obscured and complicated by Soderbergh's withholding of information about her role as "greifer" until the

denouement. He first presents a contradictory body of evidence, forcing viewers to participate in a complex moral evaluation which is fundamental to his film's thematics. This body of evidence includes not only background on the Germans, as the title of the film suggests, but also on the Americans. While Truman takes the high moral ground in his public rhetoric, stating America wants no material gain for itself, only peace, the reality of the American diplomatic core on the ground shows a group of military, judicial and diplomatic personnel working at cross-purposes, conflicting agendas and diverse ethnic and political allegiances. The chaos which results is magnified by the moral morass of the postwar situation in which bartering and hypocrisy abound. Structuring the film in this way allows for the intermingling of Lena's personal story with numerous others, thus illustrating the difficulties of assessing and writing history, especially during wartime. The film thus offers a new, more nuanced view of the German and American character and history, of self and other.

Moral Ambiguities

For Lena the process of getting out of Berlin is aligned with the desire to be a "good wife" to her husband, Emil Brandt (Christian Oliver), who is clearly targeted by her as the "the good German." He is an SS soldier who was the secretary/assistant to the infamous German scientist Franz Bettmann (modeled after Arthur Rudolph) the director of a slave labor camp, camp Dora, which produced V2 bomb technology. Thousands of Jewish workers were killed there and Bettman was directly responsible. Emil, being his secretary, has the documentation and/or memories crucial to understanding and assigning responsibility for the deaths. Without these there is no way to link Bettmann with the atrocities.

Emil is pronounced "good" by Lena partly because he has saved her—"a Jew married to a SS is not a Jewess," as she says. Emil is an idealist, like Victor Lazlo (Paul Henreid) of *Casablanca*, though he supports the opposite side. Lena's husband is devoted, not only to his wife, but his country and wants to do the right thing, to clear Germany's name and restore it to its rightful place in history. He wishes to do this by telling the "truth." Only in this way, he argues, can he redeem his country for "the future" --a phrase which takes on added valence in the film.

Despite the initial focus on Emil, Lena is central in giving voice to the phrase from which the title comes and it is Lena who is in possession of Emil's documents--history in the making. As is soon clear, Lena has a past as well, one waiting to be opened, one that will expose further the complexity of the good, bad, and the ugly. Emil's "goodness" seems infectious, challenging or inspiring Lena to redemptive action. In declaring her intention and duty to be "a good wife," Lena makes a conscious decision to get her husband to a place where

he can tell his story and redeem Germany which, in turn, has the potential to enable her to escape. This one good deed, she claims, is the only way out of Berlin.

More than half way through the film, viewers get a glimpse of the relationship of Lena and Emil. In order to do so, we descend into the bowels of the earth, into a womblike setting. Water images reflect off the walls. Sleeping at the core is Emil whom Lena describes as a little boy with numbers in his head. The visual scene reinforces his portrayal; Emil is depicted with a boy-like innocence. Lena treats him as a child, thus becoming a devoted mother. However, a mother's love can be blind and deadly in its own way. Lena's devotion is dangerous in that she will go to any lengths to protect Emil, which includes killing, thus exposing a basic dichotomy. The numbers Emil has in his head involve the working out of the calorie count needed to determine life and death. Lena never acknowledges this to be a problem. Even if Emil was ordered to do this job by Bettmann and even if a wife's devotion to her husband is noble, are we to assume they are without blame? Lena does.

The cause of Lena's initial guilt is not clear. At first it seems to be survivor's guilt. Her memory encompasses the horrors of war compounded by her Jewish identity: her entire family has been killed in concentration camps. She survives only to be raped by the Russians. Driven by starvation, she has become a prostitute who is subject to abuse. Her self-loathing is expressed by her statement: that "she knows what she has become." One of the few details of the dire conditions of her existence comes from the bartender who says he knew her during the early days when she would have "a go for a can of tuna." Over time she has become callous which is perhaps one of the horrors of war.

Getting out of Berlin as in "telling the truth," however--even apart from difficulties associated with postmodern ones--is a lot harder than one might expect. In trying to get out and getting her husband's testimony into the open, the film brings into focus the difficulty of judging guilt and the compromising nature of the moral world of those establishing the rules of justice, the Americans. It also exposes Lena's own moral shortcomings.

As said before, the American political team in Berlin is composed of persons with various backgrounds which problematize the moral mission of the US and the record of the past that will be re-membered. No one is innocent. Three main governmental investigators and one journalistic representative, are of chief importance. Their mode of operation is but a modified version of the larger postwar activity in Berlin open to marketeering and scavenging in which all are ready to prey, profit, compromise and revel in the power politics. It is a world in which everyone is "acting like the war is not really over."

Muller who is head of the military police, is in charge of security. In fulfilling his job he needs to get the best German scientific minds over to the American side, to keep them

from the Russians and to assure America's future. In carrying this out, he has stashed Franz Bettmann, the head of camp Dora mentioned earlier, in a safe house waiting to be transported to the U.S. He would also like to bring Emil. Muller is not concerned with who is responsible for the atrocities committed at the camps. Judging from an antidote he tells about a mule in military attire, a scientist's loyalty is to his profession, not to a political ideology. To him, Emil's documents and testimony represent an inconvenient truth which he needs to expunge.

Bernie is the chief U.S. officer in charge of deciding war crimes, an impossible task as he readily admits. He is not aware initially that the other members of the American team are hiding facts from him (e.g. Bettman's detainment). It is suggested that Bernie's ancestry, most probably Jewish American, may compromise his ability to carry out his mission in an unbiased way.

The third political representative is a Congressman from New York who has a large German constituency. He insinuates that Bernie may be too zealous in his pursuits, and thus verges on revenge rather than justice. He wants to make sure Lena and Emil makes the "right" decision, which is to give over the documents so they can be hushed. He tells Lena there are things the US wants to forget just as there are things Germans want to forget.

The fourth investigator is the reporter Jake Geismer (George Clooney), sent to Berlin to cover the Potsdam conference and/or any other worth-while stories. He represents the so-called traditional private dick of noir, yet he is definitely no Bogart. He is German by background and possibly Jewish American as well. He presents a threat to Bernie and Muller because he probes into their business, causing problems. Also, his previous love relationship with Lena can be a possible detriment. He, like Rick of *Casablanca*, is a romantic. But unlike Rick, he has no more insight than the audience. His ineptness is signified by the bandage he sports, which links him with the other Jake of *Chinatown* fame who is plastered with a huge nose bandage. Lena, whom he clearly still loves, is someone he wants to aid and protect. But to Lena's credit she seems not to want to take advantage of him.

Lena, realizing her limited options, finally turns to Bernie as the only one who will enable her husband to testify. Bernie, rather surprised, says she must trust and that he loathes Muller's hypocrisy, yet, he doublecrosses Lena by trading her secret regarding the whereabouts of her husband for the chance to bring to trial twelve bigger Nazi criminals. Then he betrays Muller. Jake tries to intervene to help protect the husband of the woman he loves. He does so by bashing in the head of a member of the American military police with a brick. Then he offers up Emil's documents for a transit visa for Lena to a destination of his choosing.

The Judgment

The last scene of *The Good German* replays the airport scene in *Casablanca* and, as in that earlier film, there is a surprising twist at the end. In the latter, Rick surprisingly announces to Ilse he is not accompanying her on the plane out of Casablanca; he will sacrifice his love for the larger cause, i.e., for the Resistance which her husband Lazlo represents. Ilse's support, Rick maintains, is vital to carrying out her husband's mission. However, when Jake meets Lena on the tarmac, in spite of his unquestioning love, he poses one last puzzling issue about her past. The inquiry addresses how she survived so long—up until 1943—before Emil could protect her. Her answer is shocking for both him and the viewers. She states she has informed on twelve Jews. With this, Lena turns and gets on the awaiting plane, alone, even though the plan was for her and Jake to leave together. Certainly this ending reinforces the notion of femme fatale with a vengeance.

What are we to make of such an ending, especially after we have been led to sympathize with Lena throughout the film. Are we meant to condemn her? Jake, by refusing to accompany her, certainly does. Yet idealism has misled Jake throughout most of the film. As Bernie says, in another context, "Jake you have been wrong every step of the way, why stop now."

Lena is not "killed off" like most femme fatales. Jans B. Wager, the author of *Dames in the Driver's Seat* would no doubt put Lena in the category of progressive femme fatales, together with Tarantino's Jackie Brown of whom Wager's approvingly states, "[she] drives off to the airport...not admitting what she did was okay, but that she did what she did to get by"(2005:154). Certainly, if rephrased, this could also fit the situation of Lena, if the context was not so blasphemously different: she flies off from the airport not admitting what she did was forgivable, but that she did what she had to do to survive." "Everything is to survive," as Lena says.

Lena is aware of "what she has become" which is manifested in her self-loathing and in her simultaneous resignation, indications of an exhaustion of the trauma she has undergone. She recognizes her need to make amends and attempt to be a better person, "a good wife." This is not because of political shifts. In fact, she risks her own life in the process, being, as she is, a "hunted" woman. However, she only succeeds in getting her husband killed. The irony of her failure is that her seemingly good-faith agreement to deliver her husband's testimony to Bernie is betrayed by those to whom truth and justice are entrusted, the Americans, who trade her information about her husband to get something they want more—bigger fish. The Americans, too, see survival as all important. As Muller shamelessly asks Jake, "What do you think this Postdam conference is about, who gets Poland?" To which he adds, "its about the future." By this he means getting the scientists for the future of U.S. bomb technology.

This context, while not exempting Lena, places her situation in a wider context of human behavior which casts a new light on it. If Lena is unable to deliver truth, as her husband knows it, she does, at least, speak out the truth about herself which she has been skirting throughout the film. This truth exposes not only her own situation, but that of others as well.

Lena perhaps questions why Jake doesn't follow her on the plane, as she did earlier when she left him to attend her husband, which suggests her desire for the old romanticism. The death of her boy-like husband, who also retained vestiges of that innocent past, already signaled its loss. Truth is now so traumatic, it cannot be processed. Betrayed once again by her American lover, Lena is rejected by Jake. However, she does literally get out of Berlin but doesn't perform the one good which in her eyes is a prerequisite for redemption and the alleviation of her moral torment represented by Berlin, through no fault of her own. Yet even if she had been able to deliver Emil, redemption would not have been forthcoming. All seem to bear witness to the fall of romanticism and the ruins of her post-war world.

How different this is from the sentiment evoked by "we will always have Paris" at the end of the Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca*, which Soderbergh refashions. How different it is, too, from the redemption of Oscar Schindler, the con-man with good intentions, at the conclusion of *Schindler's List*, and that film's celebration of survival of both victims and viewers, who have suffered a vicarious trauma.

Both Jake and Lena long for the old romanticism but "We will always have Paris," uttered by Rick, has no equivalent in Soderbergh's post-war Berlin landscape. Memory can not be so easily re-membered so as to become a source of comfort and joy; the memories of Berlin are traumatic, painful, and inescapable. Soderbergh's work gives voice to the unspeakable sins in which redemption is not possible and survival is a living torment.

The case of the real Lena, Stella Goldschlag, as detailed by Peter Wyden, while different in many ways from that of Soderbergh's figure, also reinforces it. Wyden places his character's story in a wider historical context, in which he recounts the numerous examples of others who assisted the Nazis in order to survive. Among these he considers the conduct of Jewish doctors and the Judenrat, in addition to examining the proceedings of the Jewish Courts of Honor, noting the few guilty verdicts delivered. Stella's suffering is also evoked as her daughter was forcibly taken from her by the Nazis. Although the Russian courts incarcerated Stella for 10 years, Wyden notes "Memories, notoriously selective in court proceedings, are also flawed by absence of context that by-gone era" (1992:248). His contextualization in *Stella* influences one's perception of her deeds. As Wyden himself says, "I couldn't rid myself of the feeling that there, in the defendant's chair, Stella Kubler...did not sit alone....There, invisibly, sits the entire system of a totalitarian state...Everybody mistrusted everybody else. Everybody

was frightened of the next person. Innumerable people were ready to sacrifice their neighbor in order to survive” (1992:253).

The suicide of Stella, which occurred soon after Wyden’s publication, indicates that she, like Lena, found it “hard to get out of Berlin.” Both Wyden’s and Soderbergh’s contextualizations of Stella’s/Lena’s stories attempt to reach some level of understanding of the committed actions and thereby create empathy. Soderbergh’s film differs, however, from others in the cinematic WWII trilogy mentioned previously. It alters its cinematic strategy: rather than inducing forgetfulness via a melodramatic cure like *Casablanca* or vicariously traumatizing viewers as in *Schindler’s List*, the film transforms viewers into witnesses (Kaplan and Wang 2004:9-10). In doing so, Soderbergh addresses Susan Suleiman’s recommendation quoted in the opening of this paper, a recommendation that readers and viewers ask how we best use the stories of the Holocaust which have come to the fore in increasing numbers in recent times.

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