

I. Introduction

When on Feb 28th, 1962 twenty-six young german film-makers officially rejected the 'cinema of their fathers' and advocated a move towards social relevancy in their medium, the groundwork for the New German Cinema was laid. As Pflaum puts it:

They were brought together by the desire to depict the reality of the Federal Republic and to criticize it through depiction; the cinema served as a means of raising social consciousness. Its themes were taken for the most part from everyday life and presented average people. In the conception of films, the directors were less concerned with preconceived aesthetic ideas and stylistic considerations: authenticity took preference over perfection, and the documentary element assumed a significant role in these films.¹

This new philosophy would go on to permeate the german approach to film making and in the process help it to return to the bosom of international respectability. Coupled with this new approach was the concept of the medium as a personal canvas on which the filmmaker could exercise his "right of self expression"². The 'Autoren' film, as this genre became known as, gave the filmmaker complete control over all aspects of his film; Wenders, Herzog, Fassbinder were the most notable practitioners of this 'dictatorial' method.

Almost thirty years after Oberhausen the concepts of 'self-expression' and 'social responsibility' ,still play an important role in german film making. In order to show that elements of what film historians now label as the 'New German Cinema' have survived well into the late 80's, we will examine Michael Verhoeven's **Das Schreckliche Maedchen (The Nasty Girl)**. Released in 1989, its main theme is the idea of the 'collective guilt' as it exists in W. Germany almost forty-five years after the end of the war. The action centres around the life of Sonya Wegmus who stirs

1 Taken from Hans Guenther Pflaum, Germany on Film (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1990) p.16.

2 Thomas Elsaesser, New German Cinema (New Brunswick N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1989) p.43.

up her sleepy bavarian home town of Pfilzing when she starts investigating its third Reich History³. By using the image of an outsider looking in -- in this case the character of Sonya -- Verhoeven uses a symbol that has gained prominence in post-war cinematic and literary tradition: Herzog's **Aguirre** and **Fitzgerraldo**, Borchert's Draussen vor der Tuer, Frisch's Andora, Grass' Die Blechtrommel are just a few prominent examples of post-war artists using the image of the 'Sonderling' as a provider of basic, fundamental truths about the society in which they exist.

In the context of post-war Germany cinema these truths are generally not narrowly directed at one person or one event. Instead, leaning on the spirit of Oberhausen, they are geared at the german population as a whole. As Verhoeven puts it in the preamble to his work: "Es geht mir nicht um die Geschichte einer Stadt in Deutschland, sondern es geht um die Wahrheit aller Staedte in unserem Land". The reaction of the people of Pfilzing to Sonya's inquisition should thus be viewed as a microcosm of the general behaviour of the german population, as perceived by the film-maker. Whether or not Verhoeven's depiction is accurate will not be discussed here. Instead, the focus of the remainder of this essay will be on the nature of the accusations he levelled at the people, followed by an examination of the cinematographic devices he used to get his message through. In using this approach I hope to show that the elements of the Oberhausen 'revolution', as summarized above, are still very much present in contemporary german film making.

3 Verhoeven's Film is loosely based on the passauer schoolgirl Anja Rosmus's experience, giving the film somewhat of a docu-drama status. Still, as Verhoeven points out in a pre-amble to the film, only the core of the Rosmus' experience has been kept- most of the film is pure fiction.

II. **Das Schreckliche Maedchen** : The Individual vs the Collective

i) Themes

The statement Verhoeven attempts to make seems, at first, to be a rather obvious one: the issue of German war guilt is still alive in the eighties mainly because Germans as a whole have failed to deal with it in an honest and open manner; political pragmatism, i.e. the Americans need for a stable W. Germany to combat the Communist threat, is depicted as one of the main reasons for this tendency. Still, his work can and should be viewed on a more complex level, for Verhoeven clearly attempts to delve more deeply into the German psyche; as the movie progresses the dichotomy between individualism and collectivism, manifested in the battle between Sonja and the inhabitants of the fictitious Pfilzing, is revealed. For the filmmaker there appears to be two sides to the German equation: the individualistic, courageous hero, immortalized by the old legends or by poets such as Schiller and Goethe -- Goetz von Berlichsen comes to mind -- whose actions seem to be diametrically opposed to those exemplified by the German nation during the war years⁴. This duality becomes apparent from the opening moments of the Verhoeven's work: as a prologue to the actual film we are confronted with a passage of the *Nibelungenlied*, reproduced here in its English translation:

We are told in tales of old
Many wondrous things
Of old heroes and their valour

4 Although, the events surrounding the second world war, i.e. Hitler's rise to power, epitomized what, here, is labelled as the German trend towards collectivization, the roots for this tendency can, at least on a literary level, be shown to be tied to earlier epochs in German history. In Zuckmayer's Der Hauptmann von Koepenik, for example, Germany's unquestioning reverence of Prussian militarism is well documented. Also, for a superb example of the collectivization phenomenon as it appeared in Hitler Germany, turn to Hannah Arendt's Eichmann in Jerusalem.

Of great deeds and labours
Of joys and celebrations
Of tears and lamentations
And the clash of warriors bold
May you hear these wonders told.

Juxtaposed to this passage is the opening shot focusing on the graffiti smeared on a church wall that asks the questions: " Wo wart ihr zwischen 39-45? Wo seit ihr jetzt? "; as the credits role the graffiti is being painted over by city workmen. The startling contrast in form and content between the lines of the old epic and the crass scribbling on the walls will be mirrored in the themes of Verhoeven's work; for, the contrast between the heroic individual and the subservient, opportunistic masses is not only mirrored in Sonja's struggle against the town of Pfilzing but also in some of the minor themes of the film, one of which, the role of the church, we will now examine.

Given the Bavarian context of the film, it is easy to see why Verhoeven chose the church as a Leitmotive for his work; historically the catholic church has played an important even domineering role in this part of Germany. Thus, the church can stand as a symbol for much of the society that surrounds it. That Verhoeven means to show us this connection is substantiated by examining the character of Professor Juckenack. With him, Verhoeven has created a figure who not only links the church directly with other aspects of society -- Juckenack was a priest during the second World war who after leaving the priesthood teaches at the local University while at the same time serving as the director of church archives and chief editor of the Pfilzinger newspaper -- but who also portrays the burden of guilt carried by the church for its activities under Hitler: before the start of the war, Juckenack while still serving as a priest had denounced a jewish merchant to the Nazi authorities, claiming that the latter, through the use of supernatural

powers, had tricked him into buying 100 pairs of undergarments. Further, purporting after the war to have been a resistance to Hitler, documents discovered in Sonja's search show that he had actually published papers in which he argued that "the German people are fighting for their racial integrity and their Arian purity, and their Lebensraum". The figure of Juckenack, then, should be viewed on a number of levels: first, his dual activities, religious and secular, reinforce the link that existed between the two domains; secondly, by making him a priest during the second world war, Verhoeven highlights the church's extensive collaboration with the Nazi regime. More importantly, Juckenack stands as the quintessential symbol for all that had gone wrong with Germany : opportunistic and cowardly during the war, Juckenack subsequently cloaks himself in a mantle of respectability which he uses to cover up his guilt. In essence, he becomes a part of that passive collective described in the opening paragraphs.

Yet Verhoeven is careful not to paint a purely one dimensional picture of church activities during the Nazi reign. In order to highlight the opportunistic behaviour of most church organizations, he juxtaposes the figure of Juckenack with that of father Schulte, a priest executed by the Nazi's for preaching against their racial policies. In Schulte, the filmmaker creates the figure of the hero who embodies not only those teutonic qualities described in the *Nibelungenlied*, but also the strength of character demonstrated by the figure of the saint upon which much of Catholic mythology and belief is founded . Interestingly enough, Verhoeven, in a manner reminiscent of T.S. Eliot in his "Murder in the Cathedral", questions the nature of heroism, itself: examining a picture of Schulte, Sonja wonders whether he had sacrificed himself for purely narcissistic reasons. Still, Schulte must be seen as a counterpoint to the character of Juckenack -- his courage must serve as an example for the new Germany.

The figure that most clearly represents this type of courage in Verhoeven's work is that of Sonja Wegmus, the young student who searches for the truth even when faced with attacks against herself and her family. In her the filmmaker has combined a number of elements, traditional and nontraditional, that form a composite of what he perceives as the modern germanic⁵ hero. The nature of these elements will be discussed next.

One set of symbols that keep appearing throughout Verhoeven's film is that of nature. Keeping in mind the rich traditions in german art and literature that underlie this motive, the filmmaker's reasons for tying his protagonist to this realm become clear: when Sonja at the beginning of the film utters: "die Natur bedeutet mir alles" she aligns herself with those traditional germanic heroes, most notably Goethe's Faust, whose identity is closely linked to the pantheistic realm. Sonja's association with nature, furthermore, reinforces the dialectical main theme of Verhoeven's work, for while the heroine is connected with the natural realm, the forces she is fighting are associated with civilization, namely the city . The symbols of nature, i.e. the oak tree which appears in every scene critical to Sonja's development, must, therefore, be viewed as an integral part of Verhoeven's overall statement.

Other, more generic hero characteristics, are also incorporated in the character of Sonja; concepts such as 'seeker of truth', courage under pressure, visionary -- all are traditional traits of the hero persona. Most importantly, she is socially and psychologically isolated, allowing for a simplified, didactic world view to be expressed by the filmmaker. How this isolation is brought on in Verhoeven's work is interesting in itself, for it is an essay contest which guides the

5 The use of the adjective 'germanic' should be read with care. Implied, here, is not an argument for the existence of a quintessential germanic hero figure. Instead, the term is used solely to create a subjective, conceptual link with the legendary heroes of Germany's mythological past.

protagonist to the truth about her home town. Much like in Faust, then, it is the process of learning and studying what has not been studied before -- a process which by its nature is already an isolating activity -- that allows the heroin to objectify her world, which in turn leads to the truths that will eventually isolate and elevate her from the 'collective'.

What then is the nature of this 'collective' and what criticisms are being levelled against it? As mentioned in the introduction, with this work Verhoeven takes aim at those segments of German society which still have not dealt with the war and its greater moral implications. The anti-heroes in the new Germany take on a great variety of shapes: there is the grandson of a Nazi industrialist who produces chocolate covered tanks, a professor who teaches about Nazi atrocities while having been a Nazi himself, a former judge of the Volksgerichtshof who claims that he only did his job. Further, there are the politicians who are more concerned about preserving the image of the city than about the truth about its past, and bureaucrats who eagerly aid them in covering these truths using a labyrinth of paperwork to ensure that they remain hidden. This list is far from complete since Verhoeven systematically targets all levels of post-war society. Yet if one had to single out three tendencies observed in most of these stereotypes (for they should be interpreted as such) they would be tendencies towards cowardice, opportunism, and complacency. These, then, are the traits that not only led to the war crimes committed under Hitler, but that were and still are hindering a national process of self-examination, needed for some form of historical reconciliation. Verhoeven also points out the danger of not going through this process: the image of masked, violent neo-Nazis re-appears throughout the film. To show what such a process entails the filmmaker takes us through Sonja's voyage of self-discovery, a journey that demands courage and sacrifices.

ii) Cinematographic Devices

Verhoeven's use of cinematic devices is clearly geared towards complementing his work's main thesis. Since the themes discussed were geared at German society at large, Verhoeven delocalizes the action using a number of approaches, most notably the use of still photography: throughout the movie scenes shot in the interior of public places (e.g. the church, the town archives, the courtroom) he uses a black and white photograph as a backdrop for the live action. Thus, the viewer does not observe one particular church, but instead is shown a church that can exist anywhere in Germany. The action is thereby removed from the fictitious Pfilzing and placed into the backyard of every German.

Another interesting device appears when the action shifts to the Wegmus' living room, for here Verhoeven takes a scene that should be relatively static and enlivens it by superimposing it on a moving background. In both cases the actual scenery through which the living room 'travels' is the city of Pfilzing itself. The reasons behind this approach can only be speculated on here but since in both cases Sonja and her family are discussing the uncovered history of her town it is likely that Verhoeven intends to advocate a new openness towards the subject. Another possible explanation rests on the fact that the moving backdrop shows typical small town scenes which would then once again point towards the national relevancy of these particular scenes; in other words, the history that Sonja discovered in Pfilzing could be uncovered anywhere else in Germany. Still, this particular device is of an ambiguous nature and will need further analysis if it is to be fully understood.

A brief examination of the general structure of Verhoeven's work will round off this section of

the paper. The film is made up of a series of flashbacks framed by Sonja's narrative. The viewer is thus continuously transported from present to past. The use of this particular approach complements the main theme of the work on two levels: first, it connects the past to the present in a way that highlights the lack of change that has taken place in Germany after the war; secondly, the use of the narrative forces the viewer to observe the world through the eyes of the protagonist, creating a 'Verfremdungs' effect which in turn is useful for starting the process that Verhoeven advocates. Clearly, then, the structure chosen for this film cannot be separated from the message of the film.

III. Conclusion

Verhoeven's **Das Schreckliche Maedchen** is a work that can be analyzed on many levels. Still, whether it is viewed as a straight criticism of post-war behaviour or whether it is seen as a statement about complex social and historical forces, one observation can be made with assurance: given the didactic nature of the work it is obvious that the forces unleashed in Oberhausen thirty years ago still exert a strong influence on contemporary German film-makers. Verhoeven's work, then, should not be viewed in isolation. Instead it must be seen as another cog in the wheel of the New German Cinema.

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