

*The Reader: a psychoanalytic approach*

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***The Reader*** (*Der Vorleser*) was first an award winning novel by German law professor and judge and detective story writer Bernhard Schlink. It was published in Germany in 1995 and in the United States (translated into English by Carol Brown Janeway) in 1997. Transformed into a narrative film, it sets up a discourse on the troubled life of Hanna as viewed through Michael, her former younger lover. Schlink constructed this novel in the form of a “noir” film with a woman at the center; the genre employs a central character with some form of psychic disturbance and criminality in her past while the time frame implicates World War 2. In addition to being an independent sexual woman (another “noir” requirement), seemingly friendless, the nature of her “learning” disturbances and her secret Nazi past, serve both as her “damage” and as the dynamism of the film as it moves toward its resolution. Most compelling and understated is Hanna’s moral ambiguity which sets up emotional conflicts in Michael and the audience regarding her trial and the cinematic resolution. Viewers should be cautioned to not view Hanna as a real person.

The narrative presents in the guise of a failed love story between generations, the moral difficulties which the Post-Holocaust German generations had in comprehending the events, personal responsibility and guilt following the atrocities in the war; specifically, whether a sense of the origins of the Nazi Republic, the magnitude and inner personal conflicts following the war can be adequately conveyed between generations solely through written and oral media. This question is increasingly at the center of Holocaust literature in the late 20th and early 21st century, as the victims and witnesses of the Holocaust die and its living memory begins to fade. Schlink, the book author, admitted in his internet available Charles Rose interview that one of his “favorite teachers” was found to be a Gestapo informer causing a personal moral quandary for him. My own recent work about the hierarchical group killing behavior of the Nazi Roth

unpublished paper, Bion in Boston 2009) organization framed by Hanna in this movie about one of its working class representatives drawn into the killing groups: someone at the bottom of the hierarchical Nazi chain. A so-called “ordinary”, not from primary German stock, harkening to other controversial books on Nazi’s. These Nazi groups were “Hate” groups and knowingly killed tens of thousands of victims.

Schlink's book was well received in his native country, and also won several awards. The novel was a departure from Schlink's usual detective novels. It became the first German novel to top the New York Times bestseller list, and US television mogul Oprah Winfrey made it a selection of her book club in 1999. It has an evocative and ambiguous quality about the character that resulted in its being translated into 37 languages. It has been included in the curricula of college-level courses in Holocaust literature and German language and German literature. The plot also contains a number of visual images of historical significance that have particular meaning in terms of the Holocaust history but then may be lost to the American audience and perhaps the American director of this film: they form a visual matrix to project meaning into. German directors have attended to the aftermath of the Nazi regime a number of times and I will address how this film fits into the historical genre after describing this film.

#### The narrative plot

The narrative plot is told in three parts in different time frames by the main character, Michael Berg as both observer and participant. First as an adolescent and later as an adult during Germany's economic recovery from the war and finally after Hanna's imprisonment.

Part I begins in the city of Heidelberg, West Germany in 1958. After 15-year-old Michael becomes ill on his way home, 36-year-old tram conductress Hanna Schmitz notices him, cleans him up with a brusque manner, and sees him safely on his way home. He spends the next several months absent from school battling (hepatitis in the book) scarlet fever in the movie ....

When he recovers he visits her for her help and realizes he is attracted to her. Embarrassed after she catches him watching her getting dressed, he runs away, but returns days later. After she directs him to retrieve coal from the cellar when he returns

he is covered with coal dust. She watches him bathe and seduces him. He returns eagerly to her apartment on a regular basis, and they begin a heated affair. They develop a ritual of bathing and having sex, before which she frequently has him read aloud to her, especially classical literature, such as *The Odyssey* and Chekhov's "The Lady with the Dog". Both remain somewhat distant from each other emotionally despite their physical closeness. Michael is able to experience a feeling of wholeness and masculine confidence during the relationship, but without explanation the feelings are not sustainable due to his youth and innocence. Hanna, seemingly is also wrestling with her own unexpressed inner conflict, is at times possessive and physically or verbally abusive to Michael.

Months later, Hanna suddenly leaves without a trace although it later becomes clear that she fled for unknown reasons facing a promotion. The distance between them had been growing as Michael had been spending more time with his school friends and noticing younger girls. He assumes he is guilty and believes it was something he did that caused her departure adopting a self punitive defense. His memory of and feeling for Hanna taints all his other relationships with women suggesting some deeper psychic cause to his seeking out an older woman.

In Part I, eight years later, while attending law school, Michael is part of a group of students observing a war crimes trial. A group of middle-aged women who had served as SS guards at a satellite of Auschwitz in occupied Poland are being tried for allowing 300 Jewish women under their ostensible "protection" to die in a fire locked in a church that had been bombed by allied forces during the evacuation of the camp. The incident was chronicled in a book written by one of the few survivors, who immigrated to America after the war; the sole survivor is the star witness at the trial.

To Michael's stunned surprise, Hanna is one of the defendants, sending him on a roller coaster of complex internal and unexpressed emotions. Among his feelings is guilt for having loved a remorseless criminal and at the same time he is mystified at Hanna's willingness to accept full responsibility for supervising the other guards despite evidence proving otherwise. She is accused of writing the account of the fire. At first she denies this but then in panic admits it in order to not have to give a sample of her handwriting.

Michael, horrified, realizes suddenly that Hanna unbelievably has a secret she considers worse than her Nazi past — she is illiterate. (agraphic)

Michael's realization explains many of Hanna's actions after his realization that she cannot read: her refusal of an earlier promotion that would have put her in the position to kill these people directly and also her shame and panic the rest of her life over being discovered. During the trial, it comes out that she took in the weak, sickly women and had them read to her before they were sent to the gas chambers in an earlier eerie precedent to Michael's reading and a near duplication of her rescue of Michael. Michael decides sympathetically she wanted to make their last days bearable; or wonders did she send them to their death so they will not reveal a deeper secret. She is convicted as a scapegoat of her group and sentenced to life in prison. He could have taken action of some sort and revealed her secret to spare her that but even with his professor's help he cannot talk to her and cannot master his unexpressed emotions and act in her behalf. Interestingly the audience is required to assume (project) what he is emotionally experiencing as very little is openly revealed by word or gesture

Part III: Michael, trying to come to terms with his complex feelings for Hanna, begins taping readings of books and sending them to her without any correspondence while she is in prison. Years pass, Michael is divorced and has a daughter from his brief marriage and Michael continues the taping. Hanna begins to teach herself to read, and then write in a childlike way, by borrowing the books from the prison library and following the tapes along in the text. She writes unknowingly to Michael, but he cannot bring himself either to reply or reveal himself. After 20 years, Hanna is about to be released, he agrees (after hesitation) to find her a place to stay and employment, visiting her in prison. On the day of her release in 1984, though, she commits suicide and Michael is heartbroken. Michael learns from the warden that she had been reading books by many prominent Holocaust survivors, such as Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi, Tadeusz Borowski, and histories of the camps. The warden is angry with him for not communicating with Hanna in any way other than the audio tapes. Hanna left him a death bed assignment: give all her money to the survivor of the church fire.

In a dénouement, Michael visits the daughter of the surviving Jewish woman now living in an elegant home on Park Ave in New York who wrote the book about the winter death march from Auschwitz. She can empathically feel his terrible conflict of emotions about Hanna and he finally tells of his youthful relationship with Hanna. The unspoken damage she left to the people around her hangs silently in the air. He reveals his short, unloving marriage, and his distant daughter. The woman, comprehending but unable to act out of her own loss of family, refuses to take the savings Hanna had asked Michael to convey to her, saying, "That would mean giving absolution, which I cannot do". She asks that he donate it as he sees fit; he chooses a Jewish charity for aiding illiteracy in Hanna's name. The woman does, however, take the old tin tea box in which Hanna had kept her money and mementos, "to replace the similar tea box which was stolen from me as a child in the camp"—a small gesture of acceptance towards her former guard, and healing her own mourning.(she later places this next to her family photo) In a scene not in the book returning to Germany, Michael visits Hanna's grave for the first time with his daughter wiping the snow off her gravestone, allowing us all to become readers of her name. He then begins to tell his daughter about Hanna.

#### An Uneasy Analysis

I have spent a considerable amount of time trying to understand this complex film beyond its manifest fictional tale, and here proffer what I have learned through the presentation of certain "selected facts". The expression or concept of a "selected fact" was borrowed by Bion (1970) from the French mathematician Henri Poincaré to refer to the particular element that makes it possible to give coherence to a group of scattered data; this, for Bion, was the effect of the analyst's interpretation. This collection of selected facts by the audience lends multiple determinations to the film, illustrating both its visual and narrative complexity and its creative stimulation. David Hare transformed the self descriptive personal story into an interactive dialogue between Michael and his movie co-players, capturing both the adolescent mood and simplicity of the story without being able to "show" Michael's reflective mind "and singular point of view. He has almost shot the scenes as a two person movie in which the only crowded scenes are in the court and yet while there are usually only two people in the camera frame there is a visual absence of felt emotional intimacy within the entire movie. The simplicity and

directness of the narrative style also translates awkwardly into the this kind of framed movie leaving more than usual voids to be filled in about the characters personality by the audience's projections. Hare, a stage play writer, seems to have struggled with the structure of Michael's aloofness and was more successful constructing a visual animated character with Hanna. However "Hollywood Noir Films' also suffer from ambiguous characterizations creating a double problem for the audience to project good and bad.

In offering an uneasy understanding of the film I am influenced by my work on the "Killing Groups" in the SS and concentration camps and will use some of that research to fame these remarks and understand Hanna. Many who "killed" civilians in the war were part of psychological shadows in the post war period. No longer protected by uniforms and authoritarian ideology their personalities seemed immature and empty. This German film explores their social/psychological context through Hanna and will be interpreted within that context. Repetition and reversal are also a common thread through the narrative. For example Michael is taken in to the protection of Hanna sick and vomiting as a duplicate of Hannah's behavior in the camps. When he returns to thank her she initiates the curious and vulnerable boy into sex first by sending him for coal, to make him both dirty and subservient and then to clean him and seduce him. The Germans sent POW's to the Polish coal mines and coal has a symbolic overlay to Germans. As well after the War women considerably outnumbered the men because of the male casualties making Hanna 'aloneness" not unusual. Bathing is a repeated theme for Hanna but there are more comfortable places to read so its meaning is unavailable beyond the seeming pictures of the two of them in a tub that fill the screen. Michael and Hanna represent a confrontation not only between male and female, in a reverse oedipal pattern; it is also a confrontation between Michael's middle class Bourgeoisie home style and Hannah's lower class directness and ignorance. Many of the Nazi's and particularly the concentration camp guards came from the lower classes and were lower echelon people at the Killing Sites "doing the menial tasks" associated with killing and disposal. In order to be with Hanna, Michael has to be dirtied then cleaned in a tub. Throughout their sexual encounters Michael is the reader and Hanna the listener, regressively duplicating (I assume) the role of a child being read to by her

mother. So Hanna's working class background is invoked by Michael being able to read, his High School <sup>1</sup>'boyish' choices of books to read and the envy that Hanna has for the middle class and scorn for her own (maternal) deficits. Michael is unaware of her history and seemingly unconcerned; a position he continuously maintains. Hanna's lack of education also evokes the symbol of Hitler, who hated the idea of school and managed to persuade his mother to allow him to leave without secondary education qualification.

The confrontation in the movie between the educated middle class and the lower classes had been present in Germany before the rise of Hitler: education was reserved for the upper and middle class. The rise of Nazi-ism in the 1930's prevented the ascendancy of the middle class and along with the elimination of the Jews from the social-legal network and competition; middle class values associated with education and morality were also attacked and disappeared.

In the movie there are a series of symbolic Germanic confrontations and the first is between Michael and Hanna. Michael is the middleclass burgher destined for college and a professional career while Hanna is limited and held in the prison of her class and her symbolic illiteracy. Her illiteracy is best understood as a metaphor, at least for her inability to think and to mentalize as Fonagy might put it.. As well we must consider it a social-psychological symbol for ignorance; a person who knows and values through actions. We have then a boy, the same age as many in the SS during the war in a relationship with a woman who cannot read and think. She acts by leaving abruptly without explanation after Michael continues his ardor and seemingly rejects his educational opportunity for his sexual drive and education.

On trial later, with Michael again as observer and witness, both Hanna's reactive simplicity and shame are revealed. Her defense is that of the identity impaired without age appropriate moral development that she couldn't release the trapped prisoners because it would create "chaos". Her solution; to simply follow orders ! This is a group defense of no small significance for the Nazi organization relied on people willing to accept The Furher's orders and fantasies without questions. To psychologically identify

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<sup>1</sup> Uncle Tom's cabin , The Odyssey

with the Furher's sadistic wishes and malignant fantasies, and as a group, to never be able to question their allegiance to both him and the state. She is the symbol, like many other Nazi's, of the person who derives her identity from a group. Importantly what is required in this identificatory bond is "blood cement"; a bonding through killing that requires a withdrawal of empathy from the targeted part of society and acceptance of the representation of leaders (even if individuals were previously known) as less than human. In terms of "blood cement", a term of bonding in the SS, the scapegoating of Hanna by the other female guards represents a post war attack on this form of violent group bonding.

This image of Hanna as a killer is at odds with their first meeting when she aids the ill Michael and seemingly has other needs. Michael, on the other hand, by choosing to be a lawyer is accepting himself as someone able to make his own just (moral) decisions, to learn and think, mentally represent and act on his own ideas. Yet, he seems unable to make a choice, he is either paralyzed to act to save Hanna or placed in the same situation as she was as he chooses to "enact" being both an observer of her fate ( as Hanna did with the fire) and a reader. He chooses not to speak after the trial and this time it is she who chooses to die.

In this film we have no inclination of Hanna's inner world as it grows from reading and are only informed after her death that she has read Holocaust authors and we are required to surmise that reading has brought not only awareness of what she and others have done but has cast a more painful shadow of guilt/shame upon her by making her victims real. Reading the Holocaust literature brings awareness of the other as real and through the other initiates shame and guilt (she symbolically stands on the books to kill herself where other earlier Nazi suicides were to avoid punishment)

In many ways this is a narrative story of repetitions and conflicts hinted between generations who were in the war and those born after the war but whose substance is never explicated in words. For example, the use of the burning church has similarity to Jan Gross book " The Neighbors "( 2001) in which Poles collect and burn the Jews from their village yet the image is transformed by the fire being started by allied planes. Most

of all this is a German story and German film. And the audience never really knows if Hanna believes it is Michael sending her books.

### A German Film

German films emerge from a different tradition than American films and represent cultural conflicts symbolically and culturally embedded within their narrative structure. In the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, the German film industry, absent Jewish members, staged a substantial recovery that is often referred to as the New German Wave of films that were shown in Europe and the United States. This recovery was spearheaded by directors who could utilize small budgets to create intimate personal films shown in the United States and in Europe. This movement included Werner Herzog (1979, *Nosferatu: Phantom der Nacht*), Wim Wenders (1987, *Wings of Desire*), and Volker Schlöndorff (1984 *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum*). One of the most intriguingly received films of this era was Wolfgang Peterson's *Das Boot* (1981), the most expensive film in German history. It was distributed throughout the world in dubbed and subtitled editions and was later nominated for six Academy Awards. The fascinating reception of this film was that the audience often openly identified with and hoped for the German U boat to escape the allies. Currently in Germany, there is a film based on the memoir of "rape" of German women by Russians after the fall of Berlin; (*A Woman in Berlin*.2009) that is stirring all kinds of discussions regarding morality and war. The continued discussions reveal that while the war is more than 50 years old, the emotions and conflicts aroused are still deep and powerful

I believe that the deeper part of the film can only be understood by taking Hanna as representing Nazi Germany and Michael as representing the German people prior to the War. The German people ill after the First World war are vulnerable to the Tale's of "ignorance" and begin an affair with the Nazi's much like the Germans had an "affair" with Hitler The affair brings many manly pleasures and male confidence but ends leaving the German people bereft and unable to be "whole." and moral.

The War generation consciously or unconsciously banned all questions about their participation in the war. One social fact is that only after the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem and the Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt did the post war children begin to ask

questions. In the film the response to the trials of Nazi's (all women and all survivors) for their crimes may stand for this social departure. It openly reveals both their bickering about casting blame and their rigid ignorance and acceptance of authority through "obeying orders" while denying the cohesion of the SS. (Schutz-Staffel) which translated means the "protective squadron" through "blood cement" (the bonding of group members through killing). These people were bound together through sadistic acts and fear that if their loyalty was challenged they would be eliminated while their children viewed them as "the Auschwitz generation"

Visiting Germany before the Eichmann trial Hannah Arendt offered "Everyone notices that there is no reaction to what has happened, it is hard to say whether that is due to an inability to mourn or ... a genuine emotional incapacity." (P83 Kaes, A 1989) Michael's emotional paralysis, his emotional inability to respond and reclaim his participation in the love affair visually represents this German attitude toward the Nazi's described in Arendt's quote. But there are other hidden tropes in the absence of a reflective voice, an indication of a capacity to observe and reflect and the nearly complete absence in both Hanna and Michael of any supportive family connection. While Germany recovers economically they appear isolated and abandoned. From yet another perspective the film's trajectory is the dual journey of Hanna and Michael, hers is picaresque in its accidental meetings, sudden partings and unexpected and reunions. The unpredictability and directionlessness of her behavior determines the outcome of the story while placing women in the center of the film. Michael as the new generation German is abandoned and reactive until the very end when he begins a new dialogue with his daughter

The symbolic inclusion of the trials of Nazi's (all women) for their crimes also reflects the importance of the criminal trials for Germany. At the same time that it reveals both their bickering about casting blame and their rigid ignorance through "obeying orders." it denies the male cohesion of the SS. (Schutz-Staffel) which translated means the "protective squadron" making an ironic point of the Jewish woman being under the guards protection.. These people in uniform and in groups were bound together through sadistic acts and fear that if their loyalty was challenged they too would be eliminated.

Michael's emotional paralysis, his emotional inability to respond to the plight of his former lover and reclaim his participation in the earlier love affair also may be interpreted as symbolically representing the German attitude toward their own history and their emotional reaction to the historic trials of the Nazi's as first reported by H Arendt, There is a symbolic emotional triangle between love, murderous violence and silence. What remains after the war, for Michael and his emerging country, is an inability to act without an identity lost, an identity lost in the war and not supplied by any image of a supportive family. Full of silent neurotic uncertainties about understanding his own actions, he remains unable to change through either insight or action until Hanna kills herself. In this film perhaps only emotional distance from memory is personally safe and this can only lead to a struggle to have an empathic understanding of the Nazi in the German and German history. Hanna's suicide reveals this ...as both the warden and Michael seems emotionally unprepared for it, revealing both their lack of understanding of who the Nazi was and has become.

From this perspective the denouement in New York after Hanna takes her life, can be thought of symbolically as standing for the continuance of Jewish success, in comparison to German struggles. After the war, Israel would not exist except for the Holocaust. The survivor on Park Ave embodies the continued sentiment about the Holocaust with the constant reminders of the presence of mourning (putting the tea tin next to the picture of the Jewish family) that distinguishes a people that mourn from a people who cannot. The final scene in the film is the most compelling; Michael starting to speak to his daughter about his affair. It is again the authors requirement of dialogue between generations as Michael must tell his child of his love affair with the Nazi In this final statement, it took me a long time to understand, is the solution. There is no solution in suicide, nor in asking for forgiveness, there only understanding in the deeper psychological integration and acceptance of the love affair with the Nazi's. Yet it is only with Hanna's loss can this solution occur.

## Films

Max Färberböck; ( 2009) *A Woman in Berlin*

Werner Herzog (1979) *Nosferatu: Phantom der Nacht*

Wolfgang Peterson (1981) *Das Boot*

Volker Schlöndorff (1984) *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum*

Wim Wenders (1987) *Wings of Desire*

## Books

Bion, W.R. (1970). *Attention and Interpretation*. London: Tavistock Publications.

Jan Gross, Jan T. (2001) *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*. Princeton University Press. Princeton New Jersey

Kaes, Anton (1989) *From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of History as Film*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge Mass.

Schlink Bernard, *The Reader* (1998) Carol Brown Janeway