

## The Nasty Girl - Comedy, Local Knowledge, and Revisions of the Shoah Revisited

**Holger Briel**

Associate professor  
University of Nicosia  
Cyprus

In the 1990s and in the wake of German (re-)unification, discussions in/on Germany, the Shoah and the Nazi past were once again taken up again with renewed interest.

One of the reasons for this renewed interest back then, was the so-called **Historikerstreit** [historian's debate], an intra-German debate on the comparability or non-comparability of the Shoah to other genocides, most notably the Stalinist regime of terror (cf. Historikerstreit, 1987). With the advent of (re)unification of the two Germanies, the discussion continued; this time, the issue originated already in the name: reunification (implying a return to an imperialist Nazi past) or unification (implying the possibility for something new); the former was chosen. And one could also point to the role of east Germany, which had refused to acknowledge any guilt in the Shoah, since it saw itself as the institutionalized heir of the resistance movements during Hitler's regime (cf. a special edition of *New German Critique*, 52, (Winter 1990).) Although the making of The Nasty Girl goes back to about 1987, when a unified Germany was still bordering on fantasy, the film reverberates with concerns of anti-Semitism and unwillingness to deal with this particularly horrid part of the German past. Nasty Girl was viewed by about 250,000 people in Germany, an unusually large number; it's availability on DVD multiplied this interest by a large factor. It won the Best Director category for Michael Verhoeven, age 53, at the 1990 Berlin Film Festival and the Best Foreign Film Actress Award for Lena Stolze at the 1991 Chicago Film Festival. In the USA it received strong reviews and played in over 40 cities.

Postwar film in Germany has come a long way from such films as Bernhard Wicki's Die Brücke, a film which I was required to watch, as did probably most other sixth graders between 1966 and 1971 (This excludes Anja Rosmus (b. 1960), on whose character The Nasty Girl is based, who states in an essay in the *New York Times* (Oct. 21, 1990) that she never got to see any of these Anti-Nazi films; the reason for this might be that I grew up in Hesse, a state considered more liberal than Rosmus's home state, Bavaria. In Germany, education and its contents are mostly handled by the various states.) As has been noted, the sixties and the student revolts brought with them a change in the **Vergangenheitsbewältigung** (overcoming the past) in Germany (Santner, xii). It was the first time the postwar generation asked the ominous question of their parents: "Where were you between 1939 and 1945 ?," the same question which opens, this time as graffiti on a church (sic!) wall The Nasty Girl, but adding a second part to this question: "Where are you now ?" and insisting on the combination of both. This change in German film, from either non-treatment or a rigid, brutal and over-generalizing NO to Nazism to a more differentiated negative view of Nazism raises questions in regard to the formal and contextual aspects of these films, most notably so in regard to the usage of the two aspects of the film I would like to discuss here, irony/comedy and local knowledge/**Alltagsgeschichte** [history of everyday life.]

In this essay I will attempt to demonstrate how The Nasty Girl deviates from previous attempts at examining the German Nazi-past in cinema and why I believe that it is successful in doing so. I would like to start out by quickly referring to a recent incident which highlights the problematic involved. In January 1992, the German council on Oscar nominations voted not to enter the German film Europa, Europa [Hitlerjunge Salomon] for the Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Film, a film about the experiences of a Jewish boy who due to some mishaps is selected to enter an elite Nazi military school. It was the conviction of the council members that this film was making light of the Shoah and should therefore not be entered in an international contest despite the fact that it had won a Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Film on January 18, 1992. It was furthermore decided not to enter any film at all because none were deemed worthy of international recognition. The German press concurred. Both *Die Zeit* and also the *Tagesspiegel* found Europa, Europa to be superficial and implausible.

In the meantime, a petition was circulated by top German directors, including Wenders and Schlöndorff to change this decision, yet without results. Over the last 10 years or so, the topic of the Third Reich has received sort rift, with two notable exceptions: internationally, *Inglorious Bastards* (Quentin Tarantino, 2009), which brought updated resistance issues into the fore, but of course with a decidedly Tarrantino-esque angle; and in Germany, with Michael Klonovsky *Anonyma* (2010), which deals with the rape of German women by the winning Red Army. A few years ago, both films would not have been possible; Tarrantino's, because he made light of the plight of the Jews and used their history as a means to show off his action prowess; Klonovsky's, because it touches upon several national taboo – the rape of German women and making Germans into the victims..

Here we are already touching on several issues at stake, issues that address any treatment of the Shoah in literature, fine arts, film, or any other cultural artifacts; one is making the Shoah comparable to other genocides by covering it (up ?) in as a critical analysis of a cultural artifact (and nolens volens I am guilty of this even in speaking here today); another is the question of how a film/text should/can speak about the Shoah; and, finally, the question whether the usage of comedy is proper in constructing a cultural representation of the Shoah. If yes, as I argue, then this warrants the Kuhnian term of paradigm change in German film, since this had not been considered "proper" before; in Germany most people still view Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* as comedy (for children) only and not as a valid critique of the fascist state and its subjects; and I fear that Art Spiegelmann's *Maus*, mostly due to the medium he chose, the comic book, will share the same fate. Only in Andreas Huyssen's work can one find an attempt to account for the critical capabilities of mass media such as TV (and, implicitly, also comic books) in shaping critical (mass) consciousness. This he does, for instance, with the TV Mini-Series *Holocaust*<sup>1</sup>. In regard to the genre of comedy I will even go further and suggest that a certain amount of comedy, despite a whole history of anti-comedy writing, beginning with Plato's *Republic*, is necessary for the cathartic function of mourning to be successful. All of the above concerns have to be addressed; however, I will only be able to sketch some responses to these challenges in my presentation.

One of the most yielding texts that has been published in regard to German post-war cinema is Eric Santner's *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory and Film in Postwar Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990) in which he treats Edgar Reitz's *Heimat* and Syberberg's *Our Hitler*. My text then will also be an **Auseinandersetzung** with Santner's work. In his text, Santner points out that the analysis of fantasy production, such as film, might provide more insights than a merely political and/or economic study, because films are able to tap into and create, in a very loose sense, public sub-consciousness (33). Santner attempts to make fruitful Freud's notion of "Durcharbeiten" [working through] which means working through the affect whose absence it is that creates trauma. Freud's "Durcharbeiten", as opposed to "working out", suggests the continuation of this process, without stopping, the keeping open of the question. What I mean by "keeping the question open" can be illustrated by the ending of the film in which Sonja rejects the honors the city wants to bestow upon her with the words "You don't really want to honor me, you just want to shut me up!" and runs to a tree outside (sic!) of the city, a tree that is known as the "Tree of Grace".

The final shot is Sonja fearfully peeking out between the branches of this tree. One critic, Clifford Terry, reacts to this ending as follows: "Only an unsatisfactory, ambiguous ending prevents this Academy Award foreign-film nominee from achieving its fullest potential as it deftly explores the timeless concept of good people doing nothing." On the contrary, I would maintain that it is this "ambiguous ending" which is able to question both the notion of "good people doing nothing" (are they really good?) further by commenting deictically on the ambiguity of their act of honoring Sonja and the notion of pointing to the toll this radical inquiry took on Sonja herself, possibly culminating in an arguably mild case of paranoia. In this connection it is also important to scrutinize the film title a bit closer. The German title is *Das Schreckliche Mädchen*, which has been translated into English as *The Nasty Girl*. The German "schrecklich", however, has more than this one meaning "nasty". It refers to terror or fright [Schrecken], to make people fearful, to scare them; and this is the implied meaning here: people who are afraid of Sonja, either because they have sublimated the terror they had to live through during the Third Reich, or they are fearful because they themselves were responsible for such acts of terror.

But the ending also highlights the personal price Sonja has to pay for her inquiries. At one point, close to giving up, she exclaims: "But I want to grow old just like my grandmother!", her self staking the claim of survival against a threatening surrounding.

However, this wish for a life similar to that of her revered grandmother reminds her that her grandmother was one of the people who did not become guilty in such an extent as did other members of the community; thereby her grandmother's example spurs her on not give up. The same is true for another one of Sonja's role models, the old communist; he is also not willing to relent, despite the fact that it was in his modest home that Sonja gets attacked by Neo-Nazis, leaving open the possibility of another attack, this time on his life.

In his work on mourning, Freud furthermore makes the distinction between mourning and melancholia. For Freud, melancholia occurs when an object is lost that was the mirror of one's own self and power, whereby there are no hard edges between the I and the object. Mourning, on the other hand, occurs when an object has been lost that somebody had loved for its intrinsic values and the subject-object relationship had been more clear-cut, the subjective investment in the object limited. It is against melancholia that The Nasty Girl is employed within the constraints of mourning. If it is necessary for the self to work through a traumatic episode in the past, the critical distance of mourning is needed. It seems to me that comedy is such an element which would, paradoxically, foster mourning and prevent melancholia and possible trauma. To this end The Nasty Girl engages various comical elements without distracting from the seriousness of the matter. Apart from several situations which might fall under the rubric "comic relief" (the feigned confusion at the beginning of the film over the photograph of the German president, seminary boys attempting to sneak a view of Sonja's mother's breasts as she bends over Sonja's pram, the sexual tension between the boys' school and the all-girl-school, the first lesson on friction electricity by the male teacher to Sonja's class, her relationship to him, her future husband, etc.), there are more serious matters that are being discussed. And it is this connection that seems to have gotten lost in the reception of the film here in the United States.

When Richard Corliss entitles his review of the film in Time Magazine "History with a saucy smile" and states, "Sonja wants to be Joan of Arc, but she's really Nancy Drew, doggedly sleuthing until she cracks a dark mystery", he misses the deeper usage of comic elements for the process of mourning. Several examples might help to prove this point. For instance, the usage of the Bavarian dialect throughout the film instead of proper Hochdeutsch. High German, evokes some comic reaction in the audience (at least outside Bavaria); but it also points to the fact that the real-life events which prompted Michael Verhoeven to make this film take place in Passau, a city in Bavaria, which is traditionally the most conservative and catholic of all of Germany's states.

At another point in the film Sonja, the nasty girl, interviews an elderly lady at a nursing home. Upon returning to the nursing home two weeks later, all she can do is observe orderlies carting out the old woman's corpse. While this contains strong elements of the detective genre and film noir, it also comments on the fact that the perpetrators, and those able to give information on them, are dying out. Santner contends that it is this fact that necessitates the analysis of memory even more, since, shortly, there won't be any eyewitnesses left.

Other formal aspects of the film also point in this direction; the most striking example being the use of a main narrator, Sonja, who tells her story in flashbacks. Occasionally, other people are also allowed to speak: Sonja's husband, Dr. Juckenack (the film's main perpetrator), an attorney. There is also a sharp differentiation between fore- and background; oftentimes actors and several objects which are easily recognizable as mere stage props, are in the foreground against a backdrop of black and white historic scenes from the town's past. Incidentally, the town's name, Pfilzing is a play on words with the German "Filz", denoting nepotism and preferential treatment by politicians for some prominent members of the community; it also refers to the all-too-close contact between the Catholic Church and Hitler and the overwhelming influence the church still holds in stout catholic Bavaria. Also Sonja's last name, Wegmus, is another speaking name, meaning "having to leave". However, it is not quite clear who is leaving, where he/she/they are going or for what reason. Is it Sonja who can't stand the hypocrisy of the town? I don't quite think so, since when her husband goes to Munich, she elects not to follow him, saying "I have been born here, this is my home." (The real Sonja still lives in the real Pfilzing, Passau). Or is it perhaps a certain attitude of, if not complicity then at least complacency, of the townspeople with their past which must be let go. In either case, the ambiguity of the proper "speaking" name points to the necessity of change, a change that might occur on a micro-level, an individual change in attitude rather than on a macro-level of, for example, government politics. And it is this microlevel that this film is about.

I promised in the beginning that I would deal with two elements in the discussion of this film; one, the usage of irony and comic elements; and two, the depiction of **Alltagsgeschichte** as a register in which knowledge of the past can be shaped and disseminated.

I would like to take a detour toward this second topic by looking at new historicism, an approach to culture which would favor the usage of **Alltagsgeschichte** over other "old" historicist devices denoting an organic past. One way new historicism promises to do this is by connecting seemingly irrelevant episodes of everyday life rather than focusing on the *grand récit* (Lyotard) of History with a capital H. It was Stephen Greenblatt who inaugurated this approach with his Shakespearean studies in the early 1980s and fostered its influence on literature studies further by cofounding the periodical *Representations*. Greenblatt's "cultural poetics" attempt to describe a certain time period by interconnecting bits and pieces of day to day life rather than writing history "wie sie wirklich gewesen" (Ranke), as old historicism was prone to attempt. Greenblatt thereby is able to create a certain, to use a Benjaminian/Adornoean term, constellation or configuration of events. It seems to me that Verhoeven is aspiring to fulfill a similar task with his film. It is very clear from the beginning that this is not positivist historicism; there is a very forceful anchoring in the present via the main narrator, Sonja. And even then she doesn't recount events from the Third Reich, but rather events that led up to her research on this topic.

This is her story about a story. The various recollected presences are then related against the backdrop of faint black and white newsreels or photographs, insisting on the ever stronger slipping away of the memory of these years. At one point early in the film, while Sonja is just positioning herself in front of her old all-girl high school, a group of contemporary German high school students walk by the camera, making derogatory comments about the commercialism of German TV ("Scheiß Deutsches Fernsehen"), affirming the present in and for the film with the intention of trying to give a glimmer of hope that such Nazi oppression would be impossible with today's youth. However, analysis of these years remains as important as ever; this becomes evident when one listens to statements of other German youths, as the one printed in a review of the film by Marc Fisher: "The Nazi Past is over and you should forget about it," says Hermann Haydn, a student who recently completed military service. "If you think about it always, you get very depressed and that's no way to live. Anna Rosmus overdoes it." It is statements like this one that bring home the need for this film.

Michael Verhoeven's background also ties in here, both as somebody who grew up in Bavaria during the 1950s and as somebody who started out making documentaries; as a matter of fact, he made a documentary about Anja Rosmus for German TV before he made the semi-documentary movie. One of his earlier movies, *Die Weisse Rose* (1981), also dealt with the Third Reich and a group of student resisters led by the Scholls. This interconnecting of then and now has been commented on, for instance by Rita Kempley, in her review of the film. She calls it a "history of pieces and patches." Unfortunately, she repeats at the same time the penchant of some American reviewer for valorizing only the comical aspects of the movie and calls the character of Sonja an "overgrown Heidi" and a "junior Valkyrie". One wonders how they come up with such flowery, yet crass misnomers. But the "history of pieces and patches" is certainly justified; and I believe that Verhoeven is also able with his visual text to circumvent a certain position for which new historicism has been faulted on several occasions. This is what Walter Cohen has called the "arbitrary connectedness" of new historicism (Thomas, 179), the subjectivity of the selection process for the parts of the constellation. Verhoeven avoids this by the mixing of facts (?) and fictions, by transgressing genre typologies, by fracturing the auctorial voices, by using methods of estrangement such as surrealist color combinations and by what I would call, following Wolfgang Iser (Thomas 202), "Darstellung".

The English "representation" does not do justice to this German word because it implies the presentation of an already existing reality; it is better described by "presentation" which denotes a performative level. This is fitting for film in general, since there are actors performing a text, and their performance is then in turn a part of the audience's performative act of reading cinema. For *The Nasty Girl*, this means that a constellation of/in history is "dargestellt", performed for and by the audience, ideally as an open-ended interpretative strategy. Although Verhoeven starts out by connecting details, they form a semiotic supra-sign in the constellations they evoke in the audiences, thereby moving beyond a mere representation of some historic event. And, keeping in mind Clifford Geertz' revalorization of "local knowledge" as a tool against totalisation/totalitarianism, *The Nasty Girl* is able to demonstrate that this notion of local knowledge also has a dark side, i.e. how local knowledge as a universe unto itself (Pflizing) can be as totalitarian on a micro level as other totalitarian systems can be on a larger level. This, in turn, puts emphasis on the necessity for communication between various universes of discourse which are all per definition in need of constant correctives. Verhoeven's *The Nasty Girl* wishes to contribute to this process.

## **Notes**

1 in Huyssen 1987. I believe that Huyssen has a point here; however, I am not quite convinced that the shaping of critical mass consciousness is as successful as Huyssen would like it to be. In his postmodern turn away from elite art to mass art he is overlooking critical concerns in regard to electronic media, concerns that, of all people, Baudrillard points to in his early work on the ambiguity of television by coining the phrase *simulacrum* (Baudrillard 1983.)

## **References**

- Baudrillard, Jean. The Ecstasy of Communication. in: Foster, Hal (ed.) *The Anti-Aesthetic*. Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983:126-134.
- Corliss, Richard. History with a saucy smile. *Time*. Oct. 29, 1990.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From Moore to Shakespeare*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- Fisher, Marc. The 'Nasty Girl' and the Nazi Past. *Washington Post*, Dec 7, 1990.
- Huyssen, Andreas. *After the Great Divide*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1987.
- Kempley, Rita. The case of Collective Amnesia. *Washington Post*, Dec. 7, 1990.
- New German Critique* 52 (Winter 1991).
- Piper, Ernst Reinhard (ed.). *Historikerstreit*. München: Piper, 1987.
- Santner, Eric. *Stranded objects: Mourning, Memory and Film in Postwar Germany*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990.
- Terry, Clifford. A hometown in the Third Reich. *Chicago Tribune*, March 8, 1991.
- Thomas, Brook. *The New Historicism and Other Old-Fashioned Topics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.