

Same Old Song or Different Tune? An Analysis of Ula Stöckl's *Das alte Lied*

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Cultural leaders from disparate institutions and disciplines have voiced concern about the importance and meaning of history. Industrialist Henry Ford commented that "history is more or less bunk." Philosopher George Santayana on the other hand warned that "those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it." Focusing on issues of hegemony, novelist George Orwell wrote that "who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past." As we enter the twenty first century, Germany is a country still haunted by its past; its artists and cultural leaders are still struggling with the legacy left by the National Socialists.

Cinema, the cultural phenomenon nurtured by the previous hundred years, favors the sentiments of Santayana, confronting, questioning, dissecting, satirizing and otherwise analyzing again and again Germany's last seventy years, poring over every detail, lest some fact be the one that condemns the country and its people to repeating the past. The films plead with us to learn from history.

What is it though that the movies admonish us to learn? Films such as Wolfgang Staudte's *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (1946) and Joseph Vilsmaier's *Stalingrad* (1992) portray the Germans of the Third Reich as expert executioners, locating the evil of the past in the actions of military officers. Other films, such as *Ich war 19* (1967) and *Mama, ich lebe* (1976) by East German director Konrad Wolf, suggest that the East has rooted out its guilty through reeducation. Regardless of which ideological system made the

films, though, their texts are unmistakable, "history makes us who we are," suggesting as subtext that "if Germans are perceived as cold, and, as a society, dysfunctional, individuals are not responsible, history is."

Yet, even as films present history and not the individuals who make history as the cause of disaster, the films never tire of giving us a warning about repeating the mistakes of our parents, as if we have ever learned from the past. Staudte's *Die Mörder Sind unter Uns* (1946), Paul May's *08/15* (1954-55), and Hoffmann's *Wir Wunderkinder* (1958) all end with ominous music and portentous speeches as they appeal to viewers to never again let happen what each film has just shown us. Considering all three directors made films for the Nazis, albeit harmless entertainment, perhaps we ought to take the warnings with a grain of salt.

But films of New German Cinema directors also admonish the collective body not to repeat the past lest the present suffer. R. W. Fassbinder's *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* ends with Germany's victory in the 1954 World Soccer Championship, an explosion, and a series of postwar West German Chancellors, reminding viewers of the reality of the past in Germany's present. The lead character in Helke Sanders-Brahms *Deutschland, Bleiche Mutter* relates the Märchen of the "Räuberbräutigam," a tale in which a robber and murderer is invited to marry into a fine house. Told against a backdrop of a factory with a high chimney that suggests a crematorium, and juxtaposed with the rape of the narrator by the war's victors, the film's Santayanan admonition lacks all subtlety. Finally, East German directors too exploit the past to remind viewers of why the present system is necessary, of why an East/West split existed. Yet while all the films warn against repeating the mistakes of the past, few suggest how to avoid the inevitable repetition.

Moreover, the films are so busy warning about the past that they fail to address how to live in the present.

In *Das alte Lied* (1991), Ula Stöckl shifts the focus of films about history from past to present. Although she too addresses Germany's past, expanded now to include not only Nazi Germany, she also and primarily centers on the 40 years of divided Germany that the Second World War precipitated. Stöckl's film though is not so much a warning about repeating the past as it is about changing the present. Developing a paradigm shift of German art cinema, introduced by Wim Wenders in *Himmel über Berlin*, she moves beyond stereotyped Nazis, capitalists and communists, eschews formulaic warnings about non-vigilance, and avoids portraying contemporary Germans as dysfunctional. She relocates our field of attention from worries about repeating the mistakes of the past to strategies for living successfully in the present. With at times harsh and at times soothing images, she offers respite from the flagellation of postwar German cinema without retreating into apologia.

At first, though, as the film opens, one might feel it offers little to no solace, at least for German viewers. For *Das alte Lied* begins with a prologue, *Rede nur niemand von Schicksal* in which actor Grischa Huber recites passages from Friedrich Hölderlin's *Hyperion*. Walking among the ruins of the Berlin wall that once divided the Germans, Huber describes Hölderlin's assessment of Germans: "Deine Deutschen aber bleiben gerne beim Notwendigsten, und darum ist bei ihnen auch so viele Stümperarbeit und so wenig Freies, Echterfreuliches. Doch das wäre zu verschmerzen, müßten solche Menschen nur nicht fühllos sein für alles schöne Leben, ruhte nur nicht überall der Fluch der gottverlassenen Unnatur auf solchem Volk." (Germans like focusing on that which is

most essential. That is why there is so much botched and so little free and genuinely joy-producing work in their midst. But the pain this produces could be endured, if these people weren't without feeling for everything beautiful life has to offer and if the curse of a godforsaken forced nature weren't everywhere among them.)

Through her positioning of Hölderlin, Germany's greatest romantic poet, as the film's spiritual center, Stöckl accomplishes a three-cornered hat trick. She removes the Nazi roadblock that often prevents an honest exploration of what is German; she relocates blame and guilt for any perceived dysfunction from the Nazis to the way Germans think about life, and with the title of the prologue "Do not talk of fate," she promises a solution.

By intoning in the prologue Hölderlin's lament that the Germans are cursed with unhappiness, Stöckl removes history alone as a cause of misfortune. Nazis did not create the misery in East Germany and the malaise in West Germany, just as the once-divided Germanys are not the cause of problems in post-unification Germany. The implication is that ignorance of true freedom and an absence of courage have created and continue to create dissatisfaction and unhappiness. For the remainder of the paper, I will look at how Stöckl moves beyond the past while never completely forgetting history. Moreover I will show how in so doing, she conveys her vision, through the women in the film, that reunified Germany has a choice between continuing to sing the same old song and singing one that is new.

For those of you unfamiliar with *Das alte Lied* I offer the following brief summary. Katherina, a 70-year old woman, her brother Rudolf, her quadriplegic son Karl, and his daughter Sophie return to Dresden after unification and during the federal

republic's election campaign. She hopes to reconcile with Alf, an old friend, with whom she was and still is in love, but who was her sister Ilse's lover. The story unfolds in a series of family gatherings between Katharina and her family from the West and Alf and his family, his granddaughter Johanna, a photographer, and his grandsons Stefan and Thomas, two students, one industrious, the other carefree. During one of the gatherings, Katharina confesses that Ilse is Karl's birth mother and that Alf is the father. The men are all angered by the revelation, some things are best left unsaid they feel. But Sophie is elated at having someone finally tell the truth, even if it hurts. The film ends as Thomas, Stefan, and Johanna drink coffee at an outdoor stand.

Ula Stöckl embeds this simple story in a complex structure that juxtaposes contradictory agendas, including historical, contemporary political, familial, generational, gender, and private. She contrasts past and present, West and East, old and young, male and female, and pragmatists and dreamers. The confrontations are reinforced through a visual style that includes a mix of realism, including cinema vérité sequences, and lyricism, including extreme formalism. The dual tone of the film as a reality-based documentary and a lyrical poem is introduced in the prologue, which confronts the issue of Germany present and Germany past. As Grischa Huber walks along the old no man's zone dividing the two halves of Berlin, she stops along the Berlin Wall in various stages of being dismantled. At one point she stands in front of a watchtower that remains from the old death strip of the border and confesses that "In der Tat, es war ein ausserordentliches Projekt durch eine Räuberbande ein Elysium zu pflanzen." (It was indeed an extraordinary project to have a band of robbers establish an Elysium.)

The title *Das alte Lied* comes from Die deutsche Nationalhymne the anthem composed by Haydn and Fallersleben. The hymn is introduced by an offscreen voice, apparently Ilse's, (Grischa Huber), the dead sister and lover who never appears in the movie except as memory, portrait, laughing voice, or remembered image. The voice sings the first of the hymn's three verses, and one of the two that is never sung at official functions. The verse calls for a bond that unites Germans of the nineteenth century Bund, singing of places "von der Maas bis an die Memel, von der Etsch bis an den Belt." The lines reference the farthest geographical points of the nineteenth century German Confederation, territories that are not a part of Germany but that for viewers bring up the expansionist policies of The Third Reich. The officially "never sung" first verse introduces a major thematic conflict into the film, the continuing presence of an unpleasant past in contemporary Germany. This past appears both in the personal history of the characters and in the contemporary images. For example, on a walk through her old neighborhood with her brother Rudolf, son Karl, and granddaughter Sophie, Katharina, who functions as a matriarch within the family, comes across her former home. Going up to the present owners, a young couple, she insists that the home is hers and wants it back. The young woman responds sarcastically, referring to Katharina's Western bourgeois manner. Her husband though threatens to call the police. The situation is diffused when Rudolf pulls Katharina away, reminding her and us, that she had purchased the home at a fraction of cost from a Jewish family that was being dispossessed and thus was never the rightful owner. The scene is a good example of Stöckl's own non-confrontational style. For the matter plays without rancor, melodrama and consequences. Its presence reminds viewers of Germany's Nazi past and once this

purpose is fulfilled, the matter is finished. In similar fashion, Stöckl introduces the theme of Dresden's destruction by the English through the dropping of incendiary bombs.

Throughout the film, Alf's granddaughter, a photographer from Berlin, walks among the city's ruins, filming them from low angles, through trees, and in shadow, accentuating their Friedrich-like romantic beauty. One such photographing sequence is followed by a scene of Katharina, Rudolf, Karl, and Sophie walking along the Elbe, as Rudolf describes living torches jumping in the river, a reference that eludes Sophie. Her uncle explains how the phosphorous bombs of the English set people aflame, who then tried to save themselves by jumping into the water. Katharina, lost in thought, looks at the river landscape remarking how beautiful it is, to which Sophie can only respond "not anymore."

Not quite midway through the movie, an off-screen voice, again that of Grischa Huber, sings the second verse of the National Anthem: "Deutsche Frauen, deutsche Treue, deutscher Wein und deutscher Sang sollen in der Welt behalten ihren alten schönen Klang, uns zu edler tat begeistern..." The fraternity bonding ritual at the center of the words, which express the Anacreon sentiments of nineteenth-century German *Burschenschaften*, seems out of place in reunited Germany. Yet somehow the spectacle of group sentimentality that the verse conjures up must be overcome.

The task of rescuing German culture from the anachronistic references to wine, women, and song falls to the women of the film, Katharina, Sophie, Ilse, and Johanna. Katharina carries a double burden of meaning in the film. On the one hand she is a strong woman, but in spite of her strength, is an appendage of a male dominated world. In this respect she is a descendant of earlier Stöckl women, whom film scholar Marc

Silberman described as "women who refuse to be treated as objects of male prerogatives but who nonetheless conceive of their own emancipation in patriarchal terms."

Katharina has sacrificed herself first to raising her son Karl, who, it will turn out is really her sister's illegitimate child, second to supporting her brother through university, and finally to raising her granddaughter after Karl's accident. Only now, as she nears her seventieth birthday during her return to Dresden, does she assert herself independently of the men. First unsuccessfully, as when her brother reprimands her desire to reclaim her old home, and then with success as she reveals that her son is actually Ilse and Alf's child, thus freeing herself of a lie that she has carried for forty years.

Ilse serves as counterpoint to Katharina. Capturing her essence, what it is to be Ilse, is the ultimate reward for viewers. Take her character away and the story may remain but the text of freedom disappears. Ilse appears in the film as the memory or perhaps ideal of a free spirit, of a woman who loved spontaneity and appears to have gained it only through death. We hear her laughter, view her painting, hear how Katharina may have denounced her and how Alf wanted one thing, to possess her in her red dress, which he finally does, only by buying a painting of her after she is dead. Ilse is a specter of freedom that haunts the older characters with "what if" but she is also a promise of freedom, as it is she who possesses no trace of Hölderlin's German *Unnatur*. Moreover, her spirit seems to live on in the women of the third generation, Johanna and Sophie, Katharina's (but really Ilse's) granddaughter.

Johanna is disengaged from all that occurs. She lacks any sort of affect that would compromise her freedom as an independent documenter of history. She has no agenda and indeed, until the end of the film, she never speaks, even though she is always

a presence. Sophie, on the other hand is engaged in all that goes on. But her involvement is also without affect. In discussions with her cousin Stefan, she reveals a belief that you can change the world slowly, working one on one, rather than trying to convert the masses with a system. Moreover, it is she who expresses one of the film's central ideas, that freedom is only possible if the truth is known. Unlike the men in the film, she is thrilled when Katharina reveals that Karl is not her son.

The national anthem recurs again at the end of the movie, but this time we hear the third verse, the one that is sung at official ceremonies. As the credits scroll by, the screen shows us in the background Alf's three grandchildren having coffee at an outside stand and in the foreground an auto filled Dresden street with a military vehicle waiting to turn. The words, again sung a cappella, speak of "Einigkeit und Recht und Freiheit für das deutsche Vaterland." The reference is ambivalent, more unsettling than reassuring. Ending the film as it began, with a hymn to German nationalism, Stöckl suggests circularity, indeed, even ominous similarity. Katharina's pronouncement at the beginning of the film that the family was coming back to the past seems to be borne out. Through the anthem the film has helped us reference first The Third Reich, then a divided Germany, and finally a united country. What has changed? Has the film given any hope that we are not hearing the same old song, that this is not the same old Germany referred to in the prologue? 'Es ist ein hartes Wort und dennoch sag ich's, weil es Wahrheit ist: ich kann kein Volk mir denken, das zerrißner wäre wie die Deutschen. Handwerker siehst du, aber keine Menschen. Denker, aber keine Menschen, Priester, aber keine Menschen. Herrn und Knechte. Junge und gesetzte Leute, aber keine Menschen -- ist das nicht ein Schlachtfeld, wo Hände und Arme und alle Glieder zerstückelt aufeinander

liegen, indessen das vergoßne Lebensblut im Sande verrinnt" (It's harsh to say so, and yet I will, because it is the truth: I can think of no people that is more torn than the Germans. You see artisans, but no people; thinkers, but no people, priests, but no people, gentlemen and servants, the young and the settled, but no people -- is this not a battlefield, where hands and arms and all extremities lie on each other dismembered, while the blood of life drains into the sand.

In spite of such pessimism, though, the sequence that precedes the singing of the last verse suggests, even if with not much promise, that perhaps the song will be different this time. As the last four minutes of the film begin, Alf and Rudolf are walking along the Elbe pushing Karl in his wheel chair. They talk of the past, Alf admitting that he does not know what he would have done if he had been ordered to do as Mengele and operate on children. Moreover he admits to having been afraid to desert the army, of always having to be good, and of his inability to be the free spirit that Ilse would have wanted him to be. As he refers to a report that he received of Ilse's death in a refugee camp, Rudolf and he leave Karl in his wheel chair behind as Rudolf remarks that reports don't always correspond with the truth. At which point Karl gets up from his wheelchair and walks off in the opposite direction. Karena Niehoff of the Berliner Tagesblatt reads the scene to mean that Karl is the only one to understand and he will no longer be a part of the battle victory, but his recovery could also suggest that healing is beginning. As a member of the middle generation, Karl has been "crippled" by the inability of the generation, Katharina, Rudolf, and Alf to tell the truth. Before his accident, his response had been to defend, as Katharina states, arsonists, terrorists, and drug addicts. After the accident, he has sat disabled in his wheelchair. Perhaps there is a third response.

In the last minute of the film, we see Alf's grandsons Thomas and Stefan standing at a coffee stand, intercut with a brief scene of a young man, Thomas dressed up with his hair neatly combed (he is otherwise fairly unkempt) walking into a casino. Thomas remarks as the scene returns to the brothers at the coffee stand that his project will be successful, Stephan rejoins that his will be also. The scene is again interrupted, this time by a quick glimpse of Grischa Huber standing at the railing of a ship sailing past a backdrop of Dresden's cityscape. As the scene returns to the brothers, they are joined by their sister Johanna, who when asked about her project, speaks her first words in the movie, "what project, projects, projects" and the National anthem begins.

Johanna, who has the final word in the film, and Sophie, who interprets for us what freedom really is, speaking the truth, provide the key to understanding the film as a new song, but with a caveat. The two young women connect past and present, Johanna by photographing the historical facades of Dresden and Sophie by videotaping the contemporary city. But the historical buildings, photographed mostly as ruins as a reminder of the war, exist also within the present, videotaped as streets, river, and people. The connection between past and present, remembered city and lived city, receives visual confirmation in a self-reflective scene that includes both women, Johanna photographing Sophie as she videotapes contemporary Dresden and Sophie videotaping Johanna as she photographs the historical city. Any solution, any hope for a successful future, must indeed include honest recognition of the past. In the end everyone seems to have gained by revelation of the truth. And yet, two young men stand drinking coffee talking about successful projects as the film cuts to Grischa Huber, who shortly before in the prologue of the film was heard saying "In der Tat es war ein ausserordentliches Projekt durch einen

Räuberbande ein Elysium zu pflanzen." Has the misery of the past and malaise of the present not been caused by such projects, whether Nazism, Communism, or Capitalism, projects that prevent true freedom? But when the last word is given to a chronicler who documents the pasts through photos, who as mentioned until now has spoken only through these photos, and who now questions the wisdom of "projects," perhaps the song is changing. Perhaps the "freies Land" called for in the prologue is a possibility and perhaps the Germans are not condemned to unhappiness after all.