

# Barbet Schroeder's *Amnesia*: The trauma of German history

By Joanne Laurier  
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*Directed by Barbet Schroeder; screenplay by Schroeder, Emilie Bickerton, Peter F. Steinbach, Susan Hoffman*

Barbet Schroeder's new film, *Amnesia*, made in 2015, has now been released in the US, in theaters and online. Set in the early 1990s, the film is an exploration of German historical memory and the legacy of the impact of Nazism on sections of the middle class after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Born in Iran in 1941, Schroeder is a Swiss film director, producer and actor who began his career in association with the French New Wave cinema in the early 1960s, working with directors such as Jean-Luc Godard and Jacques Rivette. His company, Les Films du Losange, which he set up at the age of 22, produced a number of significant films, notably Éric Rohmer's series of "Six Moral Tales." (Schroeder had the leading role in one of Rohmer's earliest films, *The Bakery Girl of Monceau*, 1963, a short.)

As a director, Schroeder's work ranges eclectically from early counter-culture films like *More* (1969), with Mimsy Farmer, to fairly conventional vehicles such as *Barfly* (1987), *Reversal of Fortune* (1990), *Single White Female* (1992), *Kiss of Death* (1995) and *Desperate Measures* (1998). He even managed to direct an episode of *Mad Men*, the television series, in 2009.

The location for Schroeder's quasi-autobiographical *Amnesia* is breathtaking Ibiza, an island off the east coast of Spain. German-born Martha (Marthe Keller), an inhabitant of the atoll for forty years, lives a quiet, sedate life, refusing to engage with anything German as an ongoing protest against the Hitler regime. Complete with a panoramic view of the magnificent coastline, her house has no fridge, electricity or running water. (The movie was shot in the home the director's mother purchased in 1951, where *More* was also filmed.)

Martha's self-imposed isolation is disrupted when 25-year-old Jo (Max Riemelt), a music composer from Berlin, seeking to take part in the nascent electronic music scene, becomes her neighbor. He aspires to be a DJ at a new club called "Amnesia." Immediately intrigued by her as she

is by him, Jo takes for granted that Martha's mother tongue is English. His ear must be a tin one since Martha has a heavy German accent. Furthermore, her anti-Teutonism is conspicuously German. ("The world is filled with Hitler's Beetles," she says, referring to the famed Volkswagen model.)

As Jo draws her into the world of techno music, Martha begins shedding her defenses. She explains that in 1945, "When I learned about camps, how could I speak that Nazi language again? ... I felt I owed it to the victims to be mad. That's the reason I didn't want to go back ... Everything is swept under the carpet ... [They are] rebuilding the nation by pouring concrete on the truth ... Staying mad for an eternity, that was the only thing I could do to fight it."

Soon, Jo's mother (Corinna Kirchhoff), a doctor and a believer in a "rebuilt" Germany (is she anticipating, following reunification, an improvement in wealth and lifestyle in a European economic powerhouse?) and his beloved grandfather (Bruno Ganz) visit the island. During the course of an elegant lunch at Martha's serene encampment, it emerges that Jo's grandfather was a guard at a Nazi factory camp, where he supervised the work of Jewish girls, standing aside in a cowardly manner when they all suffered a tragic fate.

In relation to these factory camps, Schroeder explains in his production notes, "These were similar to the one Bruno talks about in the movie that existed alongside hundreds of factories across Germany. These are rarely evoked in movies. One website has tried to compile a comprehensive list, so far numbering more than 150 locations that were both accessible to anyone and kept secret."

Jo's mother refuses "to wallow in catastrophe," and, afraid that Martha will discourage her son from returning to Germany, berates the older woman for living in a "bubble of righteousness," and being "as pure as an angel."

For Jo—and his relationship with his family and country—his grandfather's disturbing confession has created a "new reality."

Coming to grips with Germany's fascist past is an

enormous political and psychological-moral issue. It has inevitably preoccupied artists, as well as wide layers of the general population, since the full horror of the Nazi period came to light. Schroeder, with a Swiss father and German mother, came of age around the time of the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials (1963) and other revelations—although he lived in Paris and attended the Sorbonne. The crimes of the past played a substantial role in the emergence of the student protest movement in Germany in the 1960s.

Schroeder's *Amnesia* presents a few responses to this problem, concentrating on people, apparently like his mother, who were appalled but did not adopt a politically oppositional stance.

In the movie's production notes, the director states: "I have often asked my mother to tell me about Berlin in the 1930s when she was there as a girl, to tell me about her school, her Jewish friends who disappeared from one day to the next, about the public benches that were marked 'No Jews allowed' and so on. I asked her about how she managed after her father had died to convince her mother, a theatre actress in Berlin, to take a one-way ticket to Zurich in 1936. She settled there, did her studies and met my father, a man from Geneva who did not speak a word of German. He was a geologist and had to leave for work in Iran. She could not stand their separation and so she left Switzerland as the Second World War raged in Europe, and crossed a dozen countries on the train and bus to join him. And so I was born in Teheran."

Schroeder's description of these tumultuous and terrifying times has a genuinely poignant quality, but *Amnesia* is a very passive piece. The film legitimately expresses deep revulsion for fascism. The fact that millions of people were, and perhaps still are, ashamed of being German, is a real issue. But despite the filmmaker's own personal history—tied up as it was with traumatic events—not much is made of the consequences of the period.

Tellingly, in the same year the film was originally released, 2015, the German ruling elite was rapidly reorienting itself toward a much more aggressive foreign policy and militarism, determined to put an end to the country's "pacifist" postwar stance. Along with that, in academic circles, has come the relativization of Hitler and fascism's crimes.

Unfortunately, little of this registers in *Amnesia*, at least in a forceful or conscious manner.

Schroeder may not be in the most favorable position to include significant historical or social awareness in his work. His career has involved and intersected with interesting films and filmmaking at times, but he has never made a strong statement about the Nazi era or the postwar world except in rather abstract, moral terms.

About his first film, *More*, whose central character destroys himself with drugs, Schroeder commented, "If my film is against anything, it is against attachments, illusions, selfishness, alienation."

By aligning himself with Rohmer and Rivette, two talented filmmakers who paid as little attention as possible to political and historical issues, Schroeder presumably provided some insight into his own sensibility.

There were no doubt many who responded to Nazism like Schroeder's mother and Martha, but it is possible to be critical too, even of understandable reactions. Individualistic disgust and protest were clearly no match for Nazi barbarism, nor will they do much against the resurgence of German imperialist militarism.

In *Amnesia*, the characters seem all too intoxicated by the paradisiacal surroundings, glorying in a nature "without mankind, totally untamed and independent" (the film's production notes).

What dominates in *Amnesia* is a nebulous atmosphere largely devoid of historical concreteness. This void is deliberate. The production notes observe that a "sensual engagement and attention to nature imposes itself on the characters who are sometimes even lured by the beauty into a false sense of security and protection from the external world." While this may be a criticism directed against the protagonists, in fact, it *is* nature that appears to be the most active and deterministic force in the film.

How does one guard against or rid the world of fascism?

*Amnesia*'s final moments express more definitely what is suggested throughout the movie: letting sensuous nature and friendship set themselves up as barriers against an unpleasant, dangerous world may be the best solution there is. That's not much help.

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