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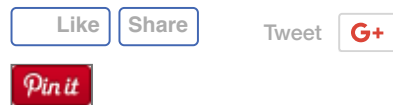


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## THE GOOD GERMAN

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By *Erica Abeel* ([Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93)) Dec 14, 2006



### Reviews

*The Good German*, adapted from the novel by Joseph Kanon, is a paean to the film vocabulary of '40's *noir*. It's also a lopsided affair: Style is the film's sole raison d'être, while plot and plausible characters bleed into the background whites. True, this valentine to old movies is a fascinating curiosity, offering further proof of director Steven Soderbergh's versatility (if any is needed after *Solaris* and *Ocean's Eleven*). But it will prove more compelling as a technical study for Film Studies majors than as an entertainment for a general audience.

In the confused, scattered opening, American journalist Jake Geismer (George Clooney) arrives in rubble-strewn Berlin to seek out his wartime mistress, Lena Brandt (Cate Blanchett). A tortured soul with a steamer trunk of dark secrets, Lena may be hiding her husband, the object of a frantic hunt by both the American and Russian military. Seems this "good German" plans to blow the whistle on some less blameless scientists the Allies are trying to whitewash and recruit. Adding to the intrigue, Tully (Tobey Maguire), an American soldier assigned to drive Jake around Berlin, is murdered by black marketeers, a subplot that serves only to further obscure an already murky story.

Soderbergh claims he hoped to duplicate the feel of "classical"-style movies by such '40s filmmakers as Michael Curtiz (and, in fact, the closing scene apes Curtiz's *Casablanca*). Using wide-angle lenses, Soderbergh recreates the deep-focus look of '40s films that place several characters together on the screen; he also recorded his sound using boom microphones--so dialogue is more "stagey"--instead of today's body mikes. The steep low-angle shots he favors turn Blanchett into a latter-day '40s siren--more than anything, the film is about her knife-sharp cheekbones. Archival shots of Berlin and Potsdam, as well as an eerie scene in an empty movie theatre, up the atmospherics-

though backgrounds and light objects are overexposed to the point of whiteness. Still, the film holds up as a pastiche of cinema past.

That said, the rest is almost laughable--and at the screening I attended, viewers tittered at such lines, delivered in *faux*-doom tones, as "You can never really get out of Berlin." The testosterone is laid on thick, yet after each slug-fest, Clooney emerges with only a bandaid. In a nod to the era, he wears his trousers high and short, but is otherwise busy just being cool, smirky George Clooney. That there's zero sense of Jake's erotic bond with Lena undermines the story's main action. As an ugly American, Tobey Maguire is woefully miscast. Only Blanchett, who can scarcely put a foot wrong, is convincing as a damned creature with a Dietrich-like allure and a better accent than Meryl Streep--though she might be acting in a separate movie.

I know Americans have famously short attention spans, yet the film goes overboard in giving us history-lite, as if the power plays between wartime allies Truman, Churchill and Stalin were occurring in some suburban high school overrun by rival cliques. The worst offense? The film blithely makes Nazi horrors the McGuffin of a tale about an overgrown boy with romantic delusions.

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