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Woman in Gold

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Woman in Gold

Abstract

This is a film review of *Woman in Gold* (2015), directed by Simon Curtis.

Author Notes

Woman in Gold (2015), directed by Simon Curtis, represents the protracted legal fight over the painting *Mona Lisa of Austria*, Klimt's oil, gold and silver portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer, which was renamed and appropriated by the Nazis shortly after the Anschluss in 1938. This battle, which ended up requiring adjudication by the United States Supreme Court and Austrian arbitration, becomes a cinematic occasion for portraying the next stage of Holocaust memory for Jews and non-Jews alike.

Maria Altmann, expertly played by Helen Mirren, is the aging niece of Adele Block-Bauer who barely escaped Nazi-occupied Vienna. After burying her sister, she enlists Randy Schoenberg (Ryan Reynolds), a young, inexperienced lawyer, to help her repossess the masterpiece regarded as a national treasure by the Austrian art world and government. To her, however, the painting represents a beloved aunt and a reminder of a family and world extinguished by the Shoah.

The past and present intermingle throughout the film. As Maria makes her first trip back to Vienna more than half a century after fleeing for her life, she—and we as viewers—flash back to her wedding, an historic event that straddled the border between pre- and post-Anschluss for the Viennese Jewish community. Here her uncle gifts her with the necklace that Adele wore while posing for Klimt's painting, praising his niece for being “headstrong and inquiring” and declaring that within her lies “something of Adele's spirit.” Thus Maria is firmly established as the guardian for the legacy and memory of Adele, who was herself childless. Also

at the wedding, we watch Maria's uncle and father argue about whether to stay or go, a debate at its heart about whether Austrian Jews were truly Austrians and would be able to count on the support of their fellow and sister citizens. The wedding dance, which begins with elegant, celebratory orderliness and speeds up into chaotic mania is a stunning scene that symbolizes the historic answer to this question about belonging, and who would ultimately collaborate with whom.

Although the film restrains its use of the most violent Holocaust imagery and narratives (for example, the film does not chronicle or even suggest that Maria's husband, Fritz, spent time in Dachau), it does recreate footage of Austrian crowds cheering the arrival of the Nazis as well as the support received for forcing Jews to paint the word "Jud" on their own establishments. The strategy of religious humiliation is also shown on-screen as Nazi officers assemble religious Jewish men and cut off their *payesses* (sidelocks). In a further nod to the notion of living history essential to this film, one of the actors in this scene is the son of a Viennese Jewish refugee. During the sequence in which Maria and Fritz are escaping Vienna, both a pharmacist and a well-dressed woman alert the Nazis to their whereabouts. However, they are aided not only by a family friend who drives them to the airport but also by a woman hanging laundry who, with a nod of her head, provides them with an escape route and then shrewdly points their pursuers in the opposite direction. Although the national narrative is clearly one of active collaboration,

Curtis and screenwriter Alexi Kaye Campbell are careful to represent resisters and those who would become known as Righteous Gentiles.

The question of how Austrians will position themselves in relation to the past becomes central to the contemporary legal battle over the painting. Although an official of the Belvedere, Austria's national gallery, begs Maria to forego her artistic custody battle since he "cannot imagine Austria without her ['the Lady in Gold,' what the Nazis renamed the portrait to eviscerate Adele's Jewish identity]," the Austrian government's attorney refuses to acknowledge his nation's continued re-appropriation of the portrait. After Maria delivers testimony to Austria's Art Restitution Committee, she is verbally assaulted by a man who declares, "You people never give up, do you? Not everything is about the Holocaust." Thus the specter of contemporary anti-Semitism as well as the desire to whitewash history is on display along with Nazi-pilfered art. However, as the journalist Hubertus Czernin (Daniel Brühl), demonstrates, this is not a battle between Jew and Gentile but rather an intra-national debate. At the end of the film, just prior to the rendering of the decision that ultimately returns the painting to Maria, Hubertus reveals his motivation for being such a stalwart ally to Maria and Randy: his father was a "passionate follower of the Third Reich" and Hubertus has devoted his life to atoning for the "sins of the father."

Randy's shifting motivation for involvement in this historic art restitution case suggests that this film is, in part, a meditation about the transmission of

Holocaust memory as the generation of refugees, survivors, witnesses, bystanders and perpetrators dwindles. Maria trusts Randy with this case, despite his lack of professional experience, because of the “connection” of family and shared history: Randy is the grandson of the refugee Jewish Viennese composer Arnold Schoenberg. Initially, Randy disregards this legacy and views this case as a professional opportunity; however, his investment shifts as he realizes the disinterest of the Austrian art world and government in both history and justice and as he comes to understand that legal wrangling is a tactic to run out the clock on plaintiffs who, like Maria, are in their eighties. In Vienna, and especially at the city’s Holocaust Memorial, Randy fully experiences the connection that Maria had assumed; thus he pursues the case even after Maria has been beaten down. His arguing the case before the Supreme Court prevents him from being at his wife’s side as she gives birth to their second child; this narrative twist, as well as Randy’s attendance at a Viennese concert featuring the music of his grandfather, underscores that this film is fundamentally a matter of *l’dor v’dor* (from generation to generation).

Woman in Gold is the cinematic rendering of Holocaust material history, and this material turn in the representation of the Shoah makes sense as the saving remnant is in its death throes. However, Maria’s observation that the return of the portrait is ultimately not redemptive reminds viewers and scholars that the

restitutions of art cannot ultimately serve as a replacement theology for the historical losses of the Holocaust.