

FILM

Ship of Fools (1962)

Katherine Anne Porter

(1890-1980)

adapted by Stanley Kramer (1965)

ANALYSIS

“This film does help with the evaluation of the novel. The film can be placed in the context of films ...that look back at the rise of Hitler and its aftermath.... Porter, like other Americans, had long wrestled with the tragic events that led to World War II.... It is remarkable that a novel that outsold every other American novel in 1962 is not seen more clearly as a novel of its time.... The rarity of contextualized readings of Porter’s novel can be seen in contrast to the frequency of such readings of Kramer’s films.... Many people shrug off the complexity of history to embrace the simplifications offered by films....

Judgment at Nuremberg and *Ship of Fools* are companion pieces that allowed Mann [screenwriter] and Kramer to explore history from a distinctly liberal and progressive point of view.... The film reminds us of the relevance and timeliness of the story Porter created... Porter’s *Ship of Fools* merits continued study, and consideration of the film version may point to new directions for further study of the novel.... With few exceptions, the emphasis on the novel’s journey to completion has substituted for discussion of the novel as a literary product published in an historical and cultural context.... Many reviews tout[ed] its status as a long-awaited work by a highly acclaimed artist, but such statements may not fully explain its extraordinary popularity....

Porter published it in April of 1962, and sold the film rights to United Artists in the same month for \$400,000. The film opened three years later, in the fall of 1965, to an eager audience, one that had read the bestseller from which the film was derived... Porter could...be confident that Kramer and Mann would present capably at least one of the love stories at the heart of her novel.... The relationship between Dr. Schumann and La Condesa may be so powerfully presented in Kramer’s *Ship of Fools* because Kramer was returning to a kind of relationship that he had explored in *Judgment at Nuremberg*: a relationship of mature and dignified equals strongly attracted to each other but prevented by their positions from engaging in anything more than a brief affair.... ‘Their relationship dominates the movie in a way that it does not in the novel’.... Judge Dan Haywood and Mrs. Bertholt are a judge and a widow of a war criminal with a deep interest in the Nuremberg trials. Judge Haywood loses his lover because he stands up for what he believes is right, a decision that alienates him from Mrs. Bertholt.... Ultimately, Judge Haywood puts duty over love and morality over desire.

The very American and down-to-earth Judge Haywood and the very German and aristocratic Mrs. Bertholt are classic star-crossed lovers. The scenes in which they meet and come to respect and love each other despite their cultural and political differences are charged and poignant, as are the scenes between the star-crossed lovers in *Ship of Fools*.... Dr. Schumann...loses La Condesa...because he is unable to stand up for his beliefs and face the scrutiny of the other passengers.... After listening to the Captain cast aspersions on her, he tells the Captain that La Condesa is the only one on the ship with integrity, and that they are the fools, not she: ‘We are the intelligent, civilized people who carry out orders we are given, no matter what they may be. Our biggest mission in life is to avoid being fools. And we wind up being the biggest fools of all.’ Nevertheless, he watches her depart the ship and lets her go. Like Judge Haywood, he puts duty over love, but in his case, duty requires conformity.... ‘Although publicly [Porter] said that she was pleased with the adaptation of her novel, she actually was displeased with some of the changes,’ and she thought ‘the film bore the marks of Hollywood sentimentality’.... *Ship of Fools* was nominated for eight Academy Awards and won two...

Kramer shows knowledge of the foolish types in the early version of the allegory, including ‘a book collector who learns nothing from his books, a judge who supplements his income by accepting bribes, a priest who is even more corrupt than those he would save’... Kramer asserts [1997 autobiography] that Porter’s *Ship of Fools* is not so much a satire as ‘a saddening observation of humankind’s sorry condition and pending tragedy in 1933, when Adolph Hitler was coming into power without much resistance.’ Kramer emphasizes the pathetic rather than satiric nature of Porter’s narrative and Porter as observer rather than satirist.... [Film critic Pauline Kael] mocks [the] decision to recreate the character of Julius Lowenthal into a charming and sociable creature more German than Jew. ‘In their view the fools are those who do not see that Nazism is coming.... Their charming Jew, the waltzing Lowenthal, is a humorous, compassionate man whose failing is that he considers himself a German...’

The film ‘cleans up’ a scene of sickness and illness in the novel.... In the novel ‘sailors hose down steerage to clean up the filth from the writhing, seasick passengers’...but in the film the sailors hose down steerage because Dr. Schumann wants the passengers there to enjoy a cleansing shower, and the scene is a happy one that contributes to the portrayal of Dr. Schumann as a compassionate and moral man attentive to the public health needs of his ship. Kramer’s ‘cleaning up’ of this scene indicates his awareness of the provocative nature of Porter’s original scene of mass human misery and the impossibility of including it in his glossy star-studded Hollywood film, even in 1965 when Americans were slowly confronting the horrific images that accompanied their growing understanding of the Holocaust.”

Christine Hait
“*Ship of Fools* the Film: In Context”
*Katherine Anne Porter’s Ship of Fools:
New Interpretations and Transatlantic Contexts*
ed. Thomas Austenfeld
(U North Texas 2015) 128-29, 131, 133-34, 138-143

“Kramer...transformed negative German characters in Porter’s novel to more positive characters.... He thus sought to...offer a meditation on the relationship between Nazism and Germanness... As a Jewish-American and influential Hollywood filmmaker with a reformist agenda, Kramer wanted his film to appeal to the ‘mass audience overseas’ as well as at home. Therefore, he wished to make the German passengers aboard the *Vera* into vehicles of transnational identification ‘across cultural boundaries’.... Screenwriter Abby Mann transformed Porter’s bitter Jewish-German businessman into a kind, outgoing, liberal, and above all, patriotic character. Proud of his country and a decorated veteran of World War I, Lowenthal in the film cannot be convinced that Germany, with its magnificent cultural heritage, won’t overcome this current phase of anti-Semitism. He is even homesick for his country....

Kramer’s angle on the potential for transformation among the culturally and ethnically diverse passengers aboard the *Vera* was far more optimistic than was Porter’s, and he deliberately downplayed Porter’s more virulent depictions of German nationalism. Instead, he gave more voice to the perspective of the ‘Other’ by making the dwarf character, Karl Glocken, function as a chorus. Played by the American actor Michael Dunn, this character could mediate between different national interests, thereby transforming a German national issue into a transnational issue relevant across nations and cultures. Thus, the film opens with Glocken commenting on the foolishness of all aboard the *Vera*....

When the vessel..arrives at its destination in Bremerhaven in 1933, Glockden again directly addresses the viewers, ironically encouraging them to consider identifying with all they have just borne witness to on the *Vera*. The ship’s doctor has died of a heart attack; the Jewish salesman is warmly greeted by his family; the other passengers go their separate ways to the tune of a brass band. A swastika on the arm of a soldier picking up one of the passengers appears ominously as the film ends.”

Anne-Marie Scholz
“Transnationalizing Porter’s Germans in Stanley Kramer’s *Ship of Fools* (1965)”:
West and East German Responses”
New Interpretations and Transatlantic Contexts (2015) 151-52, 162

Michael Hollister (2017)