What Can the Criminal Want after the Crime?
Volker Schlöndorff’s Ninth Day

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On February 15, 1942, a Luxemburger priest, Jean Bernard, who had been imprisoned in Dachau concentration camp since the previous May, was “freed” for a nine-day period, which he spent with his siblings at home in Luxembourg. On February 25 he returned to the camp, and on August 5 he was finally released for good. In 1945 he published Pfarrerblock 25487 (The Priests’ Block 25487), a diary-like account of his camp experiences, including his strange nine-day “furlough.” The official reason for his temporary release was the death of his mother, but it was also used as an opportunity to ask him to collaborate with the Nazis, a deal that he immediately turned down. The producer Jürgen Haase, who came across Bernard’s memoir in 1996, used this strange holiday for a film project that was originally to be directed by Krzysztof Zanussi. However, after Zanussi fell out with the production team, Volker Schlöndorff took over as director, and, with his preferred actors (Ulrich Matthes and August Diehl) in the main roles, he made the film The Ninth Day (2004), a fictional drama about a concentration camp prisoner and priest, Henri Kremer, and the head of the Luxemburger Gestapo, Untersturmführer

This article originally appeared in Das Böse im Blick: Die Gegenwart des Nationalsozialismus im Film, ed. Margrit Frölich, Christian Schneider, and Karsten Visarius (Munich: edition text und kritik, 2007).


New German Critique 102, Vol. 34, No. 3, Fall 2007
Gebhardt, who offers to release Kremer if only he will betray his religious convictions. The film premiered at the 2004 Locarno International Film Festival, with its general release in Germany planned for early September that year. The timing was crucial because Schlöndorff particularly wanted to prevent viewers from seeing Matthes in the role of Joseph Goebbels in Oliver Hirschbiegel and Bernd Eichinger’s *Downfall* (2004) before seeing him play the priest in *The Ninth Day*. The fear was that the alternative sequence of appearances might lead the audience to wonder, “What on earth is Goebbels doing in a concentration camp?” However, the distributors postponed the release until November 11, with Schlöndorff’s film finally hitting cinemas a full two months after *Downfall*. As a result, *The Ninth Day* was overshadowed by Eichinger’s large-scale production, which, of course, had inevitable repercussions for *The Ninth Day*’s success with the filmgoing public. Nevertheless, in terms of its aesthetic morality it was well able to keep up with the widely discussed media event that was *Downfall*, if it was not in fact superior to the latter in this key respect. The considerably smaller scale of Schlöndorff’s production made it much easier for him to tell a coherent story, so the viewer of *The Ninth Day* is less likely to ask what the point of the film is.

The external circumstances show an overlap or collage of real history, media history, and reception history at work in *The Ninth Day*. The two contrasting, if not diametrically opposed, yet collateral roles played by Matthes bring about a mixing or combining at the level of aesthetic perception that has long characterized mediated representations of the history of National Socialism. This practice of intermixing constantly tests the art of differentiation beyond moral and political consent. Indeed, Schlöndorff’s fears about the timing of his film’s release reveal misgivings about the public’s capacity to distinguish between the staging and the staged, between the role and the historical figure, or between (film) image and reality, or at least about the public’s ability to distinguish these different levels sufficiently. This lack of faith in the audience (shared by many media pedagogues) is inversely proportional to belief in the power of film, in the power of moving pictures to influence or even determine the public’s ideas about historical reality.

The lack of faith in the audience, on the one hand, and faith in film’s power, on the other, intensify the moral burden that dealing with National Socialism (as a fundamental aspect of German society and its self-image)

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2. The idea of “real history” and the term are taken from Fredric Jameson’s essay “Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review*, no. 146 (1984): 59–92, where real history is contrasted with the pseudohistorical depth of emphatic intertextuality.
already carries with it. Moreover, German films about National Socialism are always subject to speculation about whether they provide insights into the “collective soul.” But it says a lot about the nature of the debate that no one saw in the two roles played by Matthes, first Nazi propaganda minister and then concentration camp victim, a split or double identity of the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde variety and an equally peculiar (perhaps concomitant) identification on the audience’s part not only with the victims but with the perpetrators. Of course, nowadays the portrayal of figures from the Nazi period is less a moral decision than a question of artistic professionalism. In an interview about The Ninth Day Matthes himself compared his role change to the mundane experience of any theater actor required to slip into different characters on different evenings. In fact, according to Matthes, the psychological tension he experienced in preparing for the two roles came much more from the simultaneous reading of Goebbels’s and Victor Klemperer’s diaries, an experience that gave him a sense of almost unbearable contrast between the exercise of power and suffering at the hands of power.3

If Matthes brings to both roles the same striking physiognomy; the same angular, almost emaciated face with prominent cheekbones and mouth muscles; the same deep-set eyes with their large, almost black pupils, his performances could not be more different. The Goebbels of Downfall is like an empty shell, a lifeless ghost doggedly repeating the same rhetoric. He has become the final victim of his own propaganda, ending his life in a stiffly performed double suicide with his wife, Magda. In contrast, Matthes’s Kremer seems lost in a fathomless inwardness, remote from “normal” life, with eyes that have seen too much and therefore always seem to look far beyond his immediate surroundings, in which his siblings struggle to survive and his political opponents struggle to further their careers. Kremer’s face, according to Andreas Kilb, “takes on the features of the horror that surrounds him. It becomes a landscape of torment.”4

The film begins with a twelve-minute sequence of images from the concentration camp. Or, to be more accurate, it begins with a blackout against which we hear the sound of a train, a prisoner transport heading for the camp. Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah (1985) made this motif the symbol of that journey into the unimaginable, into that region beyond representability. By using the same motif in The Ninth Day, Schlöndorff is referring to the long debate

3. Interview with Ulrich Matthes, bonus material included on the DVD Der neunte Tag (Concorde Home Entertainment, 2005).
about Holocaust representability and its taboos, a debate to which he feels indebted. One strand of this debate considered that only documentary footage such as that found in Alain Resnais’s *Night and Fog* (1955) (which Schlöndorff had seen while a student at a Jesuit boarding school in France) could convey anything approximating the reality of the concentration camps. Schlöndorff long agreed that staged scenes could never rank alongside such documentary evidence and, as such, that this material was off-limits to the feature-film director. Along with the various concentration camp films that have been made since then, from Marvin J. Chomsky’s television series *Holocaust* (1978) and Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993) to Roberto Benigni’s anticomedy *La vita è bella* (1997), it was Bernard’s writings that finally persuaded Schlöndorff to break the taboo defended by his generation of (not only) German directors. The soberness and precision of Bernard’s descriptions, which, according to Schlöndorff, were already written from “a cinematic perspective,” allowed the director to translate the camp experience to film accurately.\(^5\) The camera angles, lighting, and coloring are evidence, however, that he remained conscious at all times of the otherness of camp reality: high- and low-angle shots alternate with extreme close-ups, overlit shots with low-light shots, and the dominant brown tones with gray blue.

The title, white on a black background, interrupts the first shots and disrupts the sense of narrative continuity. Newly arrived prisoners are harassed along, blinded by the sudden exposure to light after the darkness of the cattle trucks in which they arrived. They drink water greedily from a bucket to quench the thirst endured on their train journey. “Praise be to Jesus Christ,” mocks a uniformed guard, who receives the unexpected response “Now and forever, amen.” The man who dares to respond as a pious Christian is distinguished from the others by his black, broad-brimmed priest’s hat. A fist, an insult (“Down with the egghead,” a reference to his domed priest’s hat), and he is knocked to the ground, and the water bucket, the focus of all his attention, is kicked over. The reassuring “Henri!” of a fellow prisoner finally brings the fallen prisoner to his senses. We then cut to prisoners on work detail, struggling with a heavy cart. One of them hands his own cup to Kremer through a fence. Later we learn that this is Nansen, Kremer’s bunkmate in the barracks. Another cut: the Priests’ Block is celebrating Mass, and the song

“Wir lagen vor Madagaskar” (“We Lay Off Madagascar”) is being sung to distract attention from what is really going on. An SS officer appears and commands them to “keep on singing!” Grabbing a Polish priest (a Priester-sau, or “priest pig,” in the dehumanizing camp jargon) who is only moving his lips because he does not know the song well, the officer keeps time to the music by bashing the priest’s skull in with a poker. Despite the elliptical portrayal that only hints at the brutality, the scene lodges firmly in the mind.6 The sadistic tormentors think up special tortures for the imprisoned clergy: a cross is erected, and a man with a crown of barbed wire cutting into his scalp is hung on it by the hands, which have been tied behind his back. As his joints break and his muscle fibers and blood vessels tear, he becomes crazed with pain. “Where is your god now?” the torturers ask. Through the barracks’ window, the prisoners watch the barbarous deed and sing a hymn. Whoever keeps on singing will be next, shouts an SS man, jumping onto his bicycle. Kremer thinks that he will be next. He is in the barracks scrubbing the floor on a cold February day when his number is called. Expecting another imitatio Christi, he approaches the cross. But instead he is summoned to collect his belongings prior to release. He is told that thirty marks and a few pennies should be enough to get him to Luxemburg. This thirty recalls, of course, the thirty pieces of silver that the Pharisees paid Judas to betray Christ. For Kremer has been called not to imitate Christ (which, from the perspective of Christian humility, would, in any case, involve the sin of pride) but to imitate Judas.8

With the fade-in of the title The First Day, the film creates a caesura between the quasi-documentary opening in the camp, where the scenes are largely based on Bernard’s testimony, and the start of the fictional drama in

6. The song can also be seen as an encoded ode to resistance (“We had the plague on board, / in the barrels the water was stagnating, / and every day another man overboard”). In Bernard’s report, there is a similar scene (Pfarreblock 25487, 39), but in this case without the Mass. Moreover, in his version the element of resistance is missing, too. To the contrary, the only comment on camp singing is the following lapidary statement: “We were forced to learn the camp songs, ludicrous rubbish” (ibid.). The celebration of the Mass is described by Bernard elsewhere, and he notes, “The whole thing is not so much allowed as tolerated, and at any time something could happen” (ibid., 57). During his imprisonment conditions in the camp became worse, and demonstrations of religious behavior by the prisoners were suppressed with increasing vigor.

7. This torture was known in camp slang as “tree.” The prisoners were hung up using iron hooks. On one particular Good Friday, sixty members of the clergy were punished in this way for an hour. Many of them died (ibid., 44). The film transposes this scene to a day in winter, but the cross and crown of thorns still evoke Good Friday.

8. The Judas theme is also missing in Bernard’s memoir. Thirty marks just happened to be the sum that he was carrying on his person (ibid., 101). The film, however, develops this into a motif of considerable importance.
which his testimony merely inspired the screenplay. Schlöndorff himself described the screenplay as a “nine-round fight,” a description that emphasizes the dramaturgical character of the film and its borrowings from the traditions of entertainment cinema. Kremer’s opponent in the Big Fight is the Luxemburger Gestapo chief and SS officer Gebhardt, played by Diehl. Like Bruno Ganz as Hitler in *Downfall* (and Alexander Held in a lower-profile performance as the Gestapo official Robert Mohr in Marc Rothemund’s *Sophie Scholl—the Final Days* [2005]), Diehl, one of the strongest and most striking German actors of his generation, invests the role with all his charisma and moves away from the cinematic stereotype of the Nazi thug. Schlöndorff deliberately sought a young and attractive actor for this role, which he had conceived as that of Nazi seducer. He also gave Gebhardt a discursive ability that allowed him to function as Kremer’s intellectual equal in their conversations. The character of Gebhardt reminds us that not only dunces but also high achievers became loyal Nazis.

The two protagonists first meet on the street. On his way from the station, a car stops beside Kremer and an SS man orders him to get in, whereupon he is driven home. During the ride the stranger introduces himself as “SS-Sturmführer [sic] Gebhardt” and orders Kremer to appear at the Villa Pauly, the Nazi headquarters in Luxemburg, at ten sharp the following morn-

9. During his furlough Bernard was questioned by the Gestapo only once. The film plot is based on the following short passage: “‘How are your colleagues doing? Will they have had enough soon? Don’t they want to go home?’ [asked Criminal Police Secretary Friedrichs]. Suddenly, I understood what he was trying to get at. What a propaganda coup it would be: six Luxemburger priests return reformed from Dachau! Was this the real reason for my bizarre furlough? Perhaps I held, even if only for a moment, my friends’ lives in my hand? . . . ‘You’d need to ask them that,’ I replied. It took a moment for the Gestapo official to come to terms with this defeat” (ibid., 108–9). For some inexplicable reason, in the film Kremer’s return to Luxemburg takes place on “Sunday, January 15, 1942.”

10. “It turns violent, with one round going to one, the next to the other. But up until the ninth day, no one really knows who is going to be knocked out” (Volker Schlöndorff, press release about *The Ninth Day*, Progress Film-Verleih, n.d., 7).

11. “[Gebhardt] is a tempter, a devil, who leads him into temptation. And, in my opinion, a tempter must be attractive, and must have convincing arguments. He has to burn with idealism. This can’t be a classic SS man. After all, this is fiction” (ibid., 6). Confusion about Diehl’s status in the film extends to the makeup: were the moles on the actor’s face and the deep indentation that shows him to be an erstwhile monocle wearer just covered up before, or were they specially painted on for his role as Gebhardt? It is impossible for the viewer to tell. Be that as it may, in Gebhardt’s face the extremes of beauty and flaws are united.

12. The dynamics of Norbert Gansel’s film *Napola* (2004) also work through juxtaposing the superficially attractive aspects of the Nazi system (the training of a future Nazi elite at a special school) with the inhumane practices of the same system. However, in Gansel’s film, intellectual (and aesthetic) sensibility remains, as is traditional, the sole province of the outsider (and eventual victim) who remains outside the Nazi collective.
ing. Their driver, who has been watching Kremer in the rearview mirror, whispers to him at the door that he will say a prayer for him—he is clearly a fellow Luxemburger and recognizes Kremer. This incident hints at the real political purpose of Kremer’s furlough, which we learn more about subsequently: the bishop of Luxemburg has refused to deal with the Nazi authorities and has withdrawn from public life, but, as a sign of resistance, he has the church bells rung every day, and this bell ringing, as the driver’s behavior indicates, is having its intended effect. So the Nazis want to use Kremer, a protégé of the bishop, to persuade him to cooperate with them.

Even during the first big confrontation between Nazi criminal and victim in the Villa Pauly—deviating from the real chronology of the days, there are five such face-to-face confrontations—Gebhardt pulls out all the stops, in terms of both his powerful position and his native abilities, while Kremer remains silent, offering nothing but his bodily presence and his gaze as resistance. Perfect politeness—a handshake in greeting, condolences expressed for Kremer’s mother’s death, the offer of chocolates and cigarettes—establishes the operating framework as one of bourgeois conventions with the protagonists meeting as equals. Diehl in the role of Gebhardt walks a fine line between reserve and bonhomie. The cynicism in his question when he asks Kremer if he has “recovered somewhat” from his journey is almost imperceptible. Diehl’s telephone conversation with Dachau, which is intended to be overheard by Kremer, informs the latter of the true nature of his circumstances. Contrary to his certificate of discharge, he has only nine days’ parole. Should he escape in this period, Gebhardt informs the camp administration, all Luxemburger priests in the Priests’ Block will be shot “without exception.” Diehl’s expression of regret about the “mix-up” over Kremer’s release papers, his attempt to distance himself from the orders to execute the prisoners in the Priests’ Block (allegedly orders from Berlin), and the common decency of allowing Kremer to say good-bye to his mother make for a strange admixture of brutality and “human” respect. Referring to a passage from Kremer’s last letter to his mother (a letter added, of course, to his case file), Gebhardt asks, as though it were a matter of personal interest, “Why does one necessarily have to become a Lager­schwein?” This term, coined by camp prisoners, expressed the perverse fact that prisoners must submit to the systematic dehumanization of the camps to stay alive in them, and hence inevitably became Lagerschweine, camp swines. The consummate official, Gebhardt presents Kremer with the reasons

13. He is actually an Untersturmführer. Both terms equate to the rank of lieutenant, but Sturmführer is an SA rank, while Untersturmführer is an SS rank.
for his imprisonment—supporting the Resistance and attempting to sabotage the German occupation of Luxemburg—and accepts a nod from Kremer as affirmation of the charges. Finally, he comes to an article by Kremer objecting to the Nazi race laws. Gebhardt is complimentary about the piece’s eloquence but tries to undermine its central thesis: “Of course, you are quite correct when you point out that Jesus was himself a Jew. But he was one who made every effort to overcome his inherent Judaism. . . . It is through him, therefore, that we know what it is that we need to protect ourselves against. Namely, the tendency to Judaism in each and every one of us. And only in resisting this Judaism can I do the work of the Lord.” Outside the Villa Pauly, Kremer, who has been temporarily excused, gives the chocolate forced on him to a small girl.

In terms of the condensation of several elements into a single scene, this is a showpiece: an impersonal, bureaucratic obsession with the idea of enforcement combined with the bourgeois habitus, an enjoyment and consciousness of power, and Nazi ideology. The film uses this constellation to create a complex perpetrator profile that is essential to the dramaturgy of the “duel” and its plausibility.

Gebhardt’s comments above open up a debate on the relationship between Christianity, the Catholic Church, and National Socialism, a complex relationship reflected in the very different moral and political attitudes represented by brave resistance in the Priests’ Block, official neutrality in the Vatican, and legitimation of the war and Nazi dictatorship among Christians using Christian arguments. In the very next scene, a conversation between Gebhardt and Gauleiter Simon explains the general religico-political background and also sheds light on the tactical thinking behind Kremer’s temporary release. Because the intention is to use him to induce others to change their minds by his example, Kremer is to be persuaded to adopt an officially pro-Nazi stance, challenge the influence of the recalcitrant bishop in occupied Luxemburg, and encourage the pope and the church generally to cooperate. “Herr Gauleiter, there are rumors that the pope is going to make a more explicit statement about the Jewish question soon. We should prepare ourselves,” Gebhardt warns Simon. The Gauleiter replies, “Every year so far Pius has sent the Führer greetings on his birthday, addressing him as ‘our esteemed Mr. Adolf Hitler.’ And recently he has even criticized Allied bomb attacks on German cities. I, for my part, can’t really complain about the Vatican.” And this is followed by the jovial threat that, if Gebhardt’s plan should fail, he will be transferred to a “camp in the East,” and he should know only too well what that means. After all, places like that need competent young officers, too, says Simon. This dialogue reveals two aspects of Gebhardt’s character in passing—first the personal
ambition and career-mindedness that underlie and inform his dealings with Kremer, and second his active knowledge of camp conditions and the planned annihilation of the Jews, which is related to his rhetorical argument that we should “fight the possibility of Judaism in ourselves.” His demand that we get rid of the “Judaism in ourselves” is revealed, conclusively if a little formulatively, to be a desire to immunize the self to moral compunction. By this logic, conscience and humanity are vestiges of Judaism in Christianity, preventing its complete triumph. The film thus touches on the question of a consistently anti-Semitic Christian faith.

In Gebhardt’s second conversation with Kremer, this transhistorical speculation is related specifically to the war on the eastern front. On the mantelpiece Gebhardt has an orthodox icon of the Virgin Mary that the Nazis recently “salvaged.” Showing Kremer black-and-white slides with images of murdered priests and sacked churches to prove his point, Gebhardt claims that the German army is on a religious crusade in Russia, fighting a holy war against bolshevism in which the church has a duty to become involved. And Kremer should not neglect to play his part in this mission of global historical importance. His experiences in the small “simple” world of the camp have, Gebhardt tells Kremer, blinded the priest to the greater and more complicated world of political conflict. Arguments strikingly like these inform the rhetoric of the Cold War as well as of the “war on terror.” Indeed, such arguments are used whenever we are asked to believe that personal sacrifice needs to be made in the name of some greater cause, be it nation, institution, or enterprise. Schlöndorff and his screenwriters were concerned less with historical authenticity than with making the film relevant to a modern audience without resorting to crude comparisons. To the contrary, their evident pedagogical intention was to identify elements in the experience of modern, particularly young, viewers that would give them a point of access to the experiences of young people at that time. And, by extension, that past experience is portrayed not as totally alien, remote, and foreign but as a real possibility in our own time. If the maxim of German postwar society, “Never again!” has any meaning, it cannot be understood to exclude the possibility of recurrence. Career-mindedness and vanity, enthusiasm and hubris, obedience and opportunism are some of the (predominantly psychological) elements underlying an unwelcome feeling of intimacy with Gebhardt, the Nazi. Indeed, the film will add other elements to this list.

But Kremer is not fooled by Gebhardt’s maneuvers: he remains unimpressed by the icon and steadfastly loyal to his companions in the camp. Any viewer not entirely devoid of sensitivity will sympathize with him because
both political consensus and the logic of the film itself lead to identification with Kremer, just as they prevent identification with Gebhardt. The camp scenes have a continued effect and are deliberately recalled by certain significant details in the noncamp scenes. Thus, for example, we are shown Kremer’s sister washing his swollen, blood-encrusted feet, so damaged that they no longer fit into his shoes. Similarly, with no regard for middle-class table manners, we see Kremer gulp down his soup and take a chunk of bread with him into his bedroom, driven by hunger instilled in him by the camp. For the same reason, he avoids the soft bed, lying on the floor instead and using his rolled-up coat as a pillow. In his dreams the torturous thirst of the camp revisits him, a thirst so intense that he greedily shook and sucked on a rusty, dripping water pipe. Better than any arguments could, these images deflect the maneuvers and tricks with which Gebhardt attempts to persuade him. It is not by dialogue but by montage or editing that the arena for the confrontation between Gebhardt and Kremer and their respective politico-moral positions is created. And appropriately so—it was, after all, not a question of intellectual superiority that determined whether one admired or loathed Hitler, tolerated or fought against him.\footnote{Discussing his role, Diehl remarked that “it is precisely the intelligent who find the gaps, openings, shortcuts that allow them to defend their positions. This is in fact the hallmark of intelligence” (Schlöndorff, press release, 23).}

The thirst and water motif of Kremer’s nightmare introduces a theme that deepens the film’s central moral conflict. The theme is guilt. As one of the screenwriters, Andreas Pflüger, confirms, the inclusion of this element was inspired by the well-documented complex of “survivor guilt,” perhaps most memorably described in Primo Levi’s memoirs.\footnote{Ibid., 13. In Bernard’s description, the tortures of hunger are described in detail, but thirst is never mentioned. In fact, often the watery soup that the prisoners were given to eat, together with advanced stages of starvation, led to edema. Bernard experienced this. The motif of survival guilt occurs in Bernard’s text, where he describes the happiness felt at the death of a bunk companion because the smell of his wounds would no longer have to be borne (Pfarrerblock 25487, 174).} Flashbacks and a letter of confession that Kremer leaves on his mother’s grave reveal this part of the plot. Kremer, working as part of an external labor commando, discovers a rusty water pipe from which he manages to drink a few drops of water, unnoticed by the others. At the earliest opportunity he returns to the pipe to drink again but is tormented by the thought that he should have told his fellow prisoners about the find and allowed them to share the precious liquid. A warning that the Kapo is looking for him tears him away from the pipe, and wordlessly Kremer follows his savior. For the sake of condensation, the film...
allocates the role of warner to Nansen, the man who at the start shared his water with Kremer. “At that moment,” Kremer’s offscreen voice tells us, “I knew that I was guilty. That I was nothing but a miserable common criminal.” A few nights later Nansen commits suicide by throwing himself against the camp’s high-voltage electric fence. The confession that Kremer leaves in the flowers on his mother’s grave and that describes this water episode gives new impetus to Gebhardt’s arguments. He thinks that the letter reveals Kremer’s Achilles’ heel. Triumphanty, he confronts Kremer with his own admission of guilt. Back in the camp he chose his own survival over that of others. Now it is his duty, Gebhardt tells him, to give the life he saved a purpose. “Write letters to the living rather than the dead!” Gebhardt says that any priest imprisoned in Dachau who cooperates with the Nazis will be released immediately. Gebhardt proves himself well versed in theology, too. Just two days before his ordination, in an act of “personal rebellion against God,” he decided to join the SS instead. According to Gebhardt, this was his chance to alter the course of history. Judas, whom he sees as the indispensable tool of God’s plan for humanity’s salvation, is his favorite New Testament figure and the subject of many lengthy theological excurses by Gebhardt. Kremer draws the conclusion toward which Gebhardt’s arguments have led: “Without Judas, there would have been no universal church.” In the meantime, according to Gebhardt, he has returned to God “inwardly,” and his faith gives him the strength to fulfill his “task.” The film’s conflation of theology and the youthful rebellious wish to change history provides food for thought. Sure of his victory, Gebhardt gives Kremer the task of composing a call for cooperation between the church in Luxemburg and National Socialism. He certainly wins this round, at least. Incidentally, this scene contains one of the nicest comebacks of the entire film—Gebhardt compliments Kremer on his theological dissertation on the Australian Aborigines, which demonstrated that there was only one god. He is, Gebhardt says, also supposed to be something of a master in the art of boomerang throwing. “A philosophical sport,” Kremer replies. Boomerangs, in other words, like both deeds and arguments, inevitably return to their originator.

One of the film’s unpredictable but inevitable returns can be found in the side plot involving Kremer’s family, his sister, brother, and brother-in-law. Afraid for his life, his sister, Marie, in particular encourages him to use his nine-day furlough to escape. His brother, who is in the steel business and is involved in trade between Paris and the Reich, tries to bribe Gebhardt, who rejects the attempt out of hand. Then the brother tries to convince Kremer to be driven to safety in Paris or Geneva, but the plan has to be aborted,
this time because of Kremer’s intervention—he simply refuses to go. Kremer accuses his brother of aping those opportunistic camp prisoners who instinctively know how to increase their own survival chances at the expense of others. By this stage the SS, following Gebhardt’s orders, have searched the Kremer family home and, discovering that Kremer has gone, arrested his sister. However, Kremer’s return interrupts the arrest and prevents worse consequences. The failure of these spontaneous rescue attempts shows the inadequacy of human help in the face of totalitarian repression. Notwithstanding Kremer’s self-satisfied accusation that his brother is an opportunist, the film concludes that, under inhumane conditions, humaneness can survive only if one accepts its very inadequacy. A wild snowball fight between Kremer and Marie on the last and decisive day of his “holiday” suggests, nonetheless, that there has been a reconciliation between the siblings.

While Gebhardt might have been convinced that his provocative intellectual arguments would impress Kremer, Kremer’s ambivalence in questions of faith and the church actually comes to the fore in his meeting with the bishop. He is brought to the long-refused meeting by the secretary to the bishop, Vicar General Mersch, who acts as an intermediary between the church and the German authorities. But the bishop begins the interview by saying that he will not give Kremer any advice, as Kremer must follow the dictates of his own conscience. Kremer, who has been hoping for spiritual counsel and the church’s backing, does not disguise his disappointment, telling the bishop bitterly that “in the place I’ve just come from, there is no God.”16 And when he is reminded of the loyalty he owes the church, he adds that while he has not lost faith in the church, he sometimes feels that he has lost faith in the pope. In response to the implied criticism of the church’s policy of neutrality, the bishop reminds Kremer of the public protest by Dutch bishops to which the Nazis responded with even more draconian repression. Attentive viewers will notice that the film commits a solecism at this point: the protest to which the bishop refers, after which forty thousand non-Aryan Christians were deported from Holland, took place in mid-1942.17 Schlöndorff does not resolve the questions posed in this scene: whether protest is worth the sacri-

16. Bernard’s memoir, written in 1945, contains no hint or sense of the experience of being abandoned by God. In fact, faith and liturgical practice provided him an unassailable sense of refuge even under concentration camp conditions. Unlike Bernard, whose knowledge of the Dachau concentration camp is limited to the years 1941–42, the film cannot bracket our knowledge of the death camps and the full extent of the Holocaust. The dramatic nature of this statement in the film can be interpreted as an effect of the much broader historical perspective of the film.

17. I am grateful to the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com) for this information.
fic of thousands of lives and whether a priest should under any circumstances allow himself to be made into a Judas. When he is leaving, the secretary to the bishop, in violation of the confessional seal, reveals to Kremer the important information that Gebhardt has visited the camp in an official capacity and knows perfectly well what is happening there. On this occasion, the bishop’s secretary, who openly accuses himself of cowardice, manages to overcome this failing.

The sharpest criticism of the film focused on this aspect of ecclesiastical history. The critic in question was Georg Seeßlen, whose condemnation appeared in a 2004 article about the recent “wave” of German films about the Nazi period. Although he positively contrasts Schlöndorff’s “rigorous . . . morality play” and “respectful representation” of the suffering in the concentration camps with the “mythological goo” of Hirschbiegel and Eichinger’s Downfall, he concludes that while Schlöndorff touches on the theologico-historical dispute, the criticism of a cowardly church, which, when it was not being eloquently silent, was endangering human lives, remains purely rhetorical. The secondary narrative objective, a revisiting of Rolf Hochhuth’s Stellvertreter [Deputy], stands in the way of the morality play. The solution here, as there, is a return to the individual: the priest has to decide alone. . . . As for the criminals and victims: we are supposed to look at their personal stories because we no longer believe in the political.¹⁸

One could add to his criticism the use of Christian symbolism and iconography in the style of what Seeßlen calls a “mystery play,” which, by relating Kremer’s experience to the Passion and the way of the Cross, attributes to the concentration camp experience a traditionally Christian significance. Examples of this are the Communion and crucifixion in the camp, the motifs of temptation and compassion (on the train journey the boy shares his bread with Kremer), and the washing of Kremer’s feet. A religious rather than a politico-historical reading of the film is also promoted by an autobiographical fact from Schlöndorff’s own life. In the press release for The Ninth Day, he explicitly relates his time at a French Jesuit boarding school to the film, explaining that this formative experience “still influences me and my work today. And, as such, this film is among other things an homage to the old priests without whom I never would have made a film.”¹⁹

Seeßlen’s criticism is too well founded to be ignored. However, the film does admit of another interpretation, which is supported by two important motifs in the final scenes. At this late juncture, the viewer is still unsure what Kremer will decide. On the eighth day, at a soiree in the Villa Pauly, Kremer meets Gebhardt for the last time; seeking him out, he hands him an envelope. Gebhardt, both relieved and triumphant, opens the envelope, only to find that it contains a blank sheet of paper. The last words are Kremer’s. Throughout his time with Gebhardt he had asked himself why he and not the bishop’s secretary (“a clever man”) had been chosen to act as the Nazi’s tool. Then comes the decisive sentence: “He [the secretary] was lacking something—he was never in a concentration camp. What can the criminal want of the victim—after the crime?” Instead of answering him, Gebhardt points a revolver at him, but he cannot bring himself to shoot. It is a showdown that he has already lost a long time before. In the absence of an answer in the film, the viewer must respond to Kremer’s question, a shift of responsibility in keeping with the didactic intention of Schlöndorff’s “morality play.” Whether the answer to Kremer’s question is absolution, forgiveness, or understanding, this proleptic question ties the postwar debate in all its facets to the issue of how the Germans dealt and continue to deal with historical guilt. Thus the figure of Gebhardt casts a long shadow into the future. Kremer’s question links the film forward to our questions today about such matters as responsibility, guilt, decision making, and the tendency to place career advancement ahead of moral concerns.

Back in the barracks after his return to the camp, Kremer parcels out a sausage he has smuggled in, using the sharpened handle of a spoon to cut it. The sharing of mundane sausage forms part of the film’s Last Supper motif, although in this case there is no liturgical accompaniment. Kremer is back in the place where there is no God, as he had defined the camps before. And therefore the only part of the religious ceremony that remains is the purely human ritual of the meal. However, one can still argue that the sharing of the sausage has its roots in Christian ceremony. At any rate, Schlöndorff’s film does not avoid the issues of the silent God of Christianity and the quarrel with his church.

Translated from the German by Rachel Leah Magshamrain