

Stephen Daldry's *The Reader* in Chekhov's Mirror

Angelika Reichmann

HJEAS

After the major success and critical appraisal of *The Hours* (2003), in 2008, British director Stephen Daldry and script-writer Sir David Hare produced yet another adaptation, *The Reader*. By that time, Bernhard Schlink's elegantly slim volume (*Der Vorleser* 1995, English translation by Carol Brown Janeway, 1997) had not only become a bestseller, but also been translated into dozens of languages. The acclaimed novel—a major turn in Holocaust literature—had become compulsory reading in German schools, and today features widely on the reading lists of German literature courses all around the world (Johnson and Finlay 1). Its success, however, had its own drawbacks: once in the focus of attention, it gave rise to heated critical debates concerning both the representation of its central female character, Hanna Schmitz, a Nazi war criminal, and the alleged victimization of its narrator-protagonist, Michael Berg. A number of “literary” and ethical charges were raised against the novel, ranging from the improbability—or, rather, impossibility—of Hanna's illiteracy, through the author's purported attempt to exculpate her, to the unacceptable blurring of boundaries between the real victims, the Jewry all over Europe, and the Germans, who must bear the brunt of collective guilt.

These ethical debates, which are outside the scope of the present study, have also cast a long shadow over the critical reception of the film: its interpretations seem hardly able to free themselves from the shackles of the novel's readings—if at all.¹ It might be symptomatic that although the film was nominated for a number of Academy Awards, including those for the best film, best adapted screenplay, and best director, ultimately, it was only Kate Winslet who was awarded by the Academy for her astonishing performance. In an attempt to avoid the pitfalls of interpretation outlined above, this essay, while acknowledging the potentially privileged role of the well-known novelistic text in film viewers' understanding of *The Reader*, interprets Daldry and Hare's work primarily not as an adaptation, but as an independent product of visual arts in the context of another, Chekhovian intertext (cf. Genette 81-82). Since this reading is not based on a systematic comparison of the novel and its film adaptation, it will treat Schlink's narrative only as *one* of the film's intertexts, in agreement with Robert Stam's (201-12) and Brian McFarlane's (27) approach to adaptation (cf. Cartmell and Whelehan 3).

Indeed, both the novel and the film seem to call for such an intertextual approach. As a direct consequence of the story's thematic focus on reading, the novel presents a wide array of allusions to such works as the

Odyssey (for example, Schlink 40, 66), Schiller's plays (70), and Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (68)—to mention but a few.² The film introduces its own set of literary, cinematic, and theatrical references on the one hand, and, on the other, it retains some of the novelistic allusions but changes their relative significance: it foregrounds some through repeated visual references, while pushing others into the background by barely mentioning them once. As for the former group, the framed structure of the film narrative, which is markedly different from that of the novel, directly evokes Daldry and Hare's celebrated *Hours*, based on Michael Cunningham's novel (1998), which employs a similar device in connecting Richard and Laura Brown's plot lines. Thus, *The Reader* indirectly also evokes the typically modernist novelistic narrative of *Mrs. Dalloway*. In that sense, the film follows the narrative tradition established, among others, by Virginia Woolf: while it covers about a day in terms of Bergsonian objective time, it recounts the story of an entire life in terms of duration through a series of flashbacks, relived memories. In contrast with the relatively straightforward narration and classical allusions in Schlink's text, the connection with Cunningham's and Woolf's respective novels immediately establishes a (post)modernist interpretative paradigm for the film. So does the intertext in the focus of this study—one of Chekhov's many narratives pushing the limits of traditional realism in ever so subtle ways—which is a case in point for foregrounding in the film allusions not so significant in the novel. Indeed, one single and hardly noticeable reference to Chekhov's short stories in general in Schlink's text (182) gives rise to an entire sequence of scenes, which form an independent subtext or metanarrative in the film.³ The reading of Chekhov's "The Lady with the Little Dog" features in a sequence of so-called invented scenes (cf. Troost 84), which usually are most revealing about the director's and script-writer's interpretation of the "source text" in an adaptation.⁴ Its repeated occurrences at key moments suggest that "The Lady with the Little Dog" functions as the *mise en abyme* of Daldry and Hare's *The Reader*,⁵ with a potential to inspire multi-layered and emphatically ambiguous readings of its plot and protagonists—as it actually does within the film narrative for the characters themselves.

Chekhovian self-narratives

What has a turn-of-the-century Russian short story got to do with a Holocaust narrative? At first sight, nothing. Chekhov's well-known piece tells of an adulterous affair deepening into love, which comes as a surprise to both parties involved—a middle-aged womanizer called Gurov, who is also the focalizer of the narrative, and the child-like Anna Sergeyevna, the eponymous lady with the little dog. On second thought, the parallel immediately suggests

a shift of focus away from the historical context and towards the love intrigue, adding further emphasis to the life-long, inseparable emotional bond between Hanna and Michael. On closer inspection, Chekhov's story proves to be central to Hanna's self-understanding and, ultimately, to Michael's narrative of her—and himself. Let me first simply enlist some aspects of "The Lady with the Little Dog" which, as points of intersection between the two narratives, contribute to this effect.

First, the very title of the short story evokes a portrait, a commercialized stock image of a nameless upper-class woman, a picture that both suggests a representation of her identity and denies her that very identity by hiding her behind common nouns and a stereotype. This focus on a woman's representation, the play with her (self-)reflection and its very denial is underscored in the short story by employing Gurov as the focalizer and, thus, to a large extent, foreclosing Anna's perspective on the events and herself. The film operates along similar lines by references to the short story title, associating it with the central female character's self-understanding and quoting only the first sentence, which fixes her in the commercialized pictorial image through the male focalizer's—this time, Michael's—vision: "The talk was that a new face had appeared on the promenade: a lady with a little dog" (Daldry 1:43:50).

Second, the marked age difference between the protagonists, together with Anna's emphatic comparison to a schoolgirl and the equally emphatic mention of Gurov's school-aged daughter are strongly evocative of an oedipal, father and daughter relationship.⁶ In a superficial reading, this might be the most conspicuous parallel between the two narratives: at the time of their affair, thirty-six-year-old Hanna and the fifteen-year-old schoolboy are, indeed, a similarly odd "oedipal" couple, whose respective ages suggest the inversion of the Chekhovian paradigm. Their story, however, is not only a straightforward reversal of the gender and power roles implied by the Gurov-Anna affair. Equally relevant is Hanna's identification with schoolgirl-like Anna—for example, in her "going back to school" and learning to read and write as a, by then, middle-aged autodidact.

Third, the prohibiting double adultery and the large age difference between the lovers both point towards a dead end, an impasse in Chekhov's story; and the narrative, as Valeria Sobol aptly points out, is focused just as much on the characters' attempts at understanding themselves and their situation as on the events. That said, Sobol emphasizes that the discourses available for the protagonists—religion and science—are pronouncedly inadequate for such an understanding (228).⁷ Inseparable from that impasse and the inadequacy of available discourses is the authorial position of deep-

felt compassion, which is best exemplified in the tragic image of the protagonists as “a pair of birds of passage, caught and forced to live in different cages” (Chekhov, “The Lady with the Dog”). That, however, does not stop the short story from having an ambiguous outcome. Ostentatiously, the narrative ends on a note of optimism: Anna and Gurov give testimonies of their love and express their hope of discovering a solution for the deadlock situation in which they have found themselves. That open ending is preceded, however, by what is most conveniently called Gurov’s mirror scene, which suggests a totally different future and, to a certain extent, even reinterprets the story in hindsight. Looking into the mirror, he meditates on

[w]hy did she [Anna] love him so much? He always seemed to women different from what he was, and they loved in him not himself, but the man created by their imagination, whom they had been eagerly seeking all their lives; and afterwards, when they noticed their mistake, they loved him all the same. And not one of them had been happy with him. Time passed, he had made their acquaintance, got on with them, parted, but he had never once loved; it was anything you like, but not love.

(Chekhov, “The Lady with the Dog”)

Zsuzsa Hetényi reads this scene as the “real” ending of the short story, since it poses Anna and Gurov’s affair as just one episode in a strongly repetitive sequence in Gurov’s life. It predicts their future and Anna’s disillusionment therein (1284), which is most importantly rooted in the radical differences between her vision of Gurov and his “real” self, or, rather, as the very act of his looking into the mirror suggests, his own image of himself. Ultimately, it is this element of an impasse—concomitant with a very modernist focus on endless (self)reflection, the lack of verbal means of expression, and the impossibility of unambiguous resolutions—that, upon deeper analysis, will prove to be the most significant parallel between the Chekhovian short story and the film narrative. That is, in the film, a similar personal crisis also functions as the allegory of a grave historical moment: the trauma of so-called “second generation” Germans, the rude awakening which Germans born during or after World War II (Michael Berg) had to experience when they became aware that their parents, their teachers (Hanna Schmitz)—in a word, the people they loved and respected the most—belong to the generation of war criminals.⁸ Though the film offers literature—as opposed to law—as the discourse enabling the working through of that trauma, it also highlights its limited power and ambiguous results.

How does the Chekhovian intertext become so visibly central to *The Reader*? It clearly emerges as one narrative of Hanna's identity, which addresses the various traumas associated with her, by featuring in a sequence of scenes that complies with the Freudian pattern of repetition and working through so popular in Hollywood film narratives.⁹ The first allusions to "The Lady with the Little Dog"—its symbolically interrupted, unfinished reading—appear in the context of Michael and Hanna's break-up and are, thus, connected with a traumatic moment that requires repetition, which, in its turn, could occasion a corrective ending, a different outcome for the traumatic situation. It is Michael who suggests reading Chekhov on one of their dates—in fact, he takes the Chekhov volume to Hanna as a kind of atonement for a "sin" of his about which she does not even know: he has become interested in a girl of his own age, Sophie; he is late because of her, and he has just lied to Hanna about this (Daldry 38:41). Michael, however, is not the only one who deceives the other: Hanna will soon disappear from his life without ever telling him why—indeed, pretending that they will carry on for a long while yet. Though she never says so, this is what her behavior implies during their next meeting which, she already knows, is the last one. Consequently, she is unable to hear out the romantic love story of Gurov and Anna (Daldry 40:12); she provokes a quarrel instead, which she closes by declaring that they will give up the short Chekhov story and take up, in lieu, the four-volume *War and Peace*. Thus, the interruption of reading Chekhov's story becomes linked to a variety of traumatic intrusions and breaks: Sophie's eruption into Michael's life and the concomitant disturbance in his "innocent idyll" with Hanna through lies, Hanna's actual break-up with Michael without any explanation, and the sudden halt in a journey Michael seems to have begun towards grown-up sexuality. The interrupted reading of "The Lady with the Little Dog" functions as the most conspicuous trope of Michael's incomplete knowledge, interpretation, and action, which command returns and repetitions realized in his abortive relationships and failed marriage, just as well as in his ultimate return to Hanna by reading stories to her and—constantly—remembering her. It is, however, Hanna who is the first to achieve apparent completion through repetition.

The crucial turn in Hanna's career, her learning to read and write, is brought about in the film by repetition and completion connected to "The Lady with the Little Dog."¹⁰ Not only does the film show Hanna learning to read with the help of this text (Daldry 1:29:28-1:31:20), but, after her death, it also reveals a handwritten copy of the story's first page hanging on the wall of her cell in the company of oversized letters of the alphabet (Daldry 1:43:43). Presumably, she also learns to write with the help of this text because it is dear

to her heart: it leaves ample room for projective identification (cf. Alcorn 70-73) with a central female character even named similarly to her, and entangled in a love relationship reminiscent of her own affair with Michael. Accordingly, copying the beginning of “The Lady with the Little Dog” seems to be the closest Hanna ever gets to writing “her own” narrative and, thereby, making sense of herself and her own life—with a conspicuous bracketing of war, crimes, and guilt. The excerpt hanging on the wall of her cell operates as a posthumous message, as her last word from beyond the grave, which retrospectively provides an interpretation of her life and death (cf. Brooks 33). If imprisoned Hanna’s identification with Chekhovian Anna is central to her will to live, and her hopes are pinned on Michael, both must be shattered completely during Michael’s one and only visit. His coldness, his withdrawn hand (Daldry 1:37:20), his insistence on asking about her deeds in the war—and not about their shared past—all communicate that even the “profound compassion” Gurov feels for Anna in their closing scene is impossible for Michael, let alone love. If Hanna and Michael are, like Chekhov’s protagonists, “a pair of birds of passage, caught and forced to live in different cages,” it is clearly not the walls of her prison that separate them interminably. The completion—of reading and interpretation—Hanna achieves through repetition, therefore, yields a result of dubious value: her suicide is obviously, though not exclusively, motivated by the recognition of her mistake, her misreading, which, paradoxically, still produces a profound understanding of her actions, both during the war and at the end of her life.

The contradictions of her identification and self-interpretation, her reading, are inherent in the implications of the one sentence repeatedly read out from Chekhov’s story in the film: “The talk was that a new face had appeared on the promenade: a lady with a little dog” (Daldry 38: 47, 1:43:50). The portrait-like quality of the image Hanna identifies with suggests timelessness, but also death or immobility, the lack of change, a character frozen, as it were, in the very act of trying to achieve self-recognition—as if constantly staring into a mirror in an endless repetition of Gurov’s gesture of self-reflection. In contrast, the quality of the image she sees, or desires to see, holds out precisely the promise of change and revival: it is a “new face.”¹¹ But that promise, again, seems to be tainted with lies, misreadings, misunderstandings, deception, and misappropriation from the very start. Michael’s first reading of the story is a lie that unintentionally reveals a modicum of truth, since the very first line is an unconscious acknowledgement of his new love interest in Sophie, a *newcomer* in his class, with whom he has just been on a river bank, the closest analogy possible to “a new face on the promenade.” Michael offers the story to Hanna for the first time as a

deception and diversion, suggesting that she recognize herself in Anna—and appropriate the place he has unconsciously intended for Sophie. When he sends Hanna “The Lady with the Little Dog” again, during her prison years, as the one permissible token of his undying affection and a reminder of their idyll, he fundamentally repeats the same gesture: at a moment of personal crisis, right after his divorce, among unpacked boxes of books, the person he is really in search of while apparently “looking” at Hanna is himself. Thus, Hanna’s most authentic self-narrative is not only doubly (mis)appropriated, but is also doubly offered by Michael as a deception and a substitute, a gaze in reality directed at someone else: another woman or Michael himself. Even when she presumably speaks for herself, Hanna is still imprisoned by the gaze of the male focalizer, just like Anna by Gurov, and entrapped in the discourse of the male literary tradition.

Accordingly, these ambiguities of Hanna’s self-understanding through the readings and rewriting of “The Lady with the Little Dog” underscore the dubious value of her “development” in jail: a completion and working through with the help of literature, which fails to the extent that it culminates in her suicide. In Schlink’s novel, Hanna’s becoming a reader—both in the technical and metaphorical senses of the word—is emphatically the result of also reading Holocaust literature, novels and non-fiction alike: “Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, Tadeusz Borowski, Jean Améry—the literature of the victims, next to the autobiography of Rudolf Hess, Hannah Arendt’s report on Eichmann in Jerusalem, and scholarly literature on the camps” (Schlink 203). Somewhat didactically, the novel implies that she finally understands the horror of her own deeds from others’ accounts of the Holocaust and executes justice belatedly with her suicide. In contrast, Daldry and Hare remove all traces of such readings from the film and, as demonstrated above, assign special importance to one particular literary narrative in Hanna’s self-understanding. Thereby, they both supplement the motivation of historical and moral justice behind Hanna’s suicide in the novel with a highly credible psychological impulse,¹² and also give all the credit to, as well as put all the blame on, *literature* for her moral “development.” Because Hanna, regardless of the exclusively literary nature of her readings, finally does understand the full implications of her deeds, that much is beyond doubt in the film. As she puts it to Michael, “it doesn’t matter what I feel, it doesn’t matter what I think. The dead are still dead” (Daldry 01:39:31-39). The last drop triggering her decision to “execute justice” still seems to be her disappointment in Michael, which comes as a real shocker after “The Lady with the Little Dog” and all that story presumably means to her. In fact, one could argue that, in the film, Hanna’s self-

destruction is not the result of any kind of reading, but her reductive, romanticizing self-reflection in the mirror presented by the Chekhovian text.¹³

The Reader, however, confirms both indirectly and directly the ambiguous benefits of all interpretation and understanding which narratives might yield. On the one hand, when learning about Hanna's death, Michael, utterly shaken, reads out the first sentences of Chekhov's story in the cell and thereby both appropriates Hanna's self-definition—accepts “The Lady with the Little Dog” as her story—and rehabilitates their shared past to a certain extent. This is the point when he, too, completes the cycle of trauma and compulsion to repeat, by implication with similarly dubious results in terms of fathoming the truth about Hanna and the (historical) past as Hanna herself. If Hanna's understanding of herself is an act of misreading, it is clearly one that the entire film shares with her through its focalizer, who looks back at Hanna seven years after her death inescapably through the prism of the Chekhovian narrative. On the other hand, the very idea of understanding the Holocaust through literature is summarily dismissed by Miss Mather, a survivor: “My advice? Go to the theatre if you want catharsis. Please, go to literature. Don't go to the camps. Nothing comes out of the camps! Nothing!” (Daldry 1:49:30). Literature, and artistic representation in general, though offered as a counterpoint to law, is ultimately shown to have its marked limitations—just like religion and science in Chekhov's story—in its potential to facilitate the understanding and working through of a major personal and historical trauma, let alone providing a solution for such an impasse.

Chekhovian metanarrative

As their ultimately shared (mis)reading of Hanna's identity through “The Lady with the Little Dog” implies, Hanna Schmitz and Michael Berg are represented in the film as characters mirroring each other, and the hierarchy of their relationship is by far not as straightforward as it might seem at first sight. Actually, in contrast with the original German title of the novel, *The Reader*—though by a linguistic necessity—already suggests that much. The English language does not seem to have one single word to unambiguously express the concept behind *Der Vorleser*, “the person who reads out loud for someone else” and, thus, no one word that could have served as a novel (or film) title. Director and script-writer, just like translator Carol Brown Janeway before them, were left with *The Reader*, which, however, can equally mean the same as *der Vorleser*, and refer to Michael, or denote simply “a person who reads,” and thus include both Michael and Hanna in its scope. In other words, while its paratext implies that the German novel is a narrative about Michael, the title character, who is forced into a servile position, the English title posits

both Hanna and Michael as equally probable central figures, and replaces their presumably hierarchical relationship with that of potential equality. Similarly, as the film's metanarrative, "The Lady with the Little Dog," is a *mise en abyme* whose thematic and motivic parallels call attention to the possible interchangeability of the central characters and further ambiguities of the film narrative, through which Daldry and Hare's work resists readings based on (hierarchical) binary oppositions of various kinds.

One such central motif is the above-mentioned significant age difference between the lovers, which is evocative of an oedipal relationship in both stories. It applies as an interpretative paradigm to *The Reader* both as a straightforward and as an inverted parallel, thereby suggesting that the two protagonists are capable of exchanging roles, they metaphorically mirror each other. At first sight, *The Reader* most readily offers itself for interpretation as an inverted rewriting of the Chekhovian oedipally tainted love intrigue in terms of gender roles. Because of his youth and victimized, powerless position in their relationship, in the beginning, the schoolboy appears to play the innocent role of schoolgirl-like Anna in "The Lady with the Little Dog." His very first meeting with Hanna predestines Michael to playing a feminine role: he enters the space of the woman's desire—fantasy—by proving himself to be weak and desolate when soaking wet and thoroughly ashamed, having been just sick in public, he bursts into tears (Daldry 4:30). That is when Hanna first embraces him (4:44)—without any sexual overtones, yet. Later, reading out for Hanna also forces Michael into a subjugated position, on which his discovery during her trial sheds an especially gloomy light: in the scenario of reading out loud for Hanna, he occupies the same position as the Jewish women already deprived of all their rights and, soon, of their lives. While Michael is, to a great extent, "fixated" in this effeminate position when his affair with Hanna is traumatically interrupted, Hanna, in many ways, appears to be a highly masculine reincarnation of Gurov, the womanizer. Like Gurov, she enters into a relationship in the easy-going, irresponsible manner that anonymity implies, without ever wanting to learn her casual sexual partner's name, and, as a matter of fact, taken aback by his wish to learn hers (Daldry 18:45).¹⁴ Signaling her lack of emotional commitment, she declares to Michael, "You don't have the power to upset me. You don't matter enough to upset me" (24:35). She admits to having feelings for him only later, upon the boy's desperate begging, and even then, it is not a confession in words (26:53). She remains the dominant figure in their relationship, and the routine of their meetings is defined at her will—as Michael bitterly reproaches her once (40:53).¹⁵

Upon closer scrutiny, however, the straightforward parallel of the Chekhovian narrative in terms of gender roles is just as relevant, in fact, that is the one to appear first, in the film's frame narrative. The establishing shots show Michael as a Gurov-like man—in his prime, respectable, and highly detached—preparing breakfast with meticulous precision and care rather than engaging in any real personal contact with a woman he has presumably spent the night with. The ensuing dialogue suggests that he is a serial dater (“Does any woman ever stay long enough to find out what the hell goes on in your head?”), living enclosed upon himself in a forbidding black and white environment (0:40-1:51). If anything, the film implies that he has become incapable of sustained emotional commitment because of his traumatic relationship with Hanna, as is spelt out by Miss Mather at the end. His own “development” along those lines also begins, not surprisingly, with his first reading of “The Lady and the Little Dog.” When he offers the story to Hanna as a distraction from his being late and “cheating” on her with Sophie, his gesture positions him as a younger version of Gurov: though for a different reason, he, too, has entangled himself in an affair with the lightness and irresponsibility that namelessness provides, and now, having taken what he wanted, he starts to behave in the dishonest and indifferent manner of a womanizer. By the time of Hanna's trial, he seems to be unable to do anything else: inseparably bound to her, he demonstratively enters into sexual intercourse with a peer of his, only to find himself an emotionally uninvolved voyeur incapable of spending even one night in the same bed with his casual partner (1:18:20-19:15). His entire marriage is present in the film as a gap, and his wife seems to disappear into oblivion without a trace, together with his other fleeting affairs. The culmination of his masculine “development” is his turning into a man of the law not only by profession but also in private: during his previously mentioned one visit to Hanna in prison he—by now a figure in full power—takes upon himself the role of the inquisitive judge with relation to Hanna by asking her what she thinks about her past, that is, her war crimes, and what she has learnt (1:38:57-39:49). The parallel between Michael and Gurov, by this time, is supplemented by Hanna's identification with the traditionally feminine image of Anna.

Hanna and Michael's apparently shared ability to play both masculine and feminine roles in the Chekhovian context also draws attention to the presence of inverted gender markers in their representation which, otherwise, fall outside the scope of parallels with “The Lady with the Little Dog,” but also contribute to their mirroring each other. These include, for example, Hanna's masculine conductor's uniform, which so tragically reminds the audience at her trial of another, much less innocent outfit: the SS uniform she

wore in wartime (1:20:33). Added to that are her stereotypically masculine clothing and posture on the day of having their first sexual intercourse: after a hard day's work, while tiredly waiting for the boy to ascend from the basement, she sits at the table in her conductor's shirt and tie, loosed in a highly unfeminine way, without her jacket on, but with a glass in hand. The one detail to go against that stereotype is the milk in the glass—viewers might expect to see beer there (11:51). Neither does the effeminate, fragile, mortally wounded child ever disappear from Michael: it is there in his making breakfast for his one-night guest—cooking and feeding are traditionally associated with women—but, more importantly, in his silence and sudden retreats whenever he is confronted by a strong female character—be it his casual sexual partner, Hanna, the prison director, Miss Mather, or his own mother. The most telling shots in this respect are those featuring Hanna and Michael in front of their respective mirrors on the morning when Hanna's sentence is to be announced: both are adjusting their own ties with the same concentrated and demure look on their face (1:19:15-19:50). The shots are cut so as to show their alternating images and suggest—with a device well-known from *The Hours*, for instance—that they see each other as their own image in the mirror. What could more clearly express their complete interchangeability as interpreters, readers, and their utter interdependence in understanding themselves through each other?

This representation of the non-hierarchical relationship of the central characters through the mirror, the fundamental trope of Cartesian subjectivity, inevitably evokes Gurov's mirror scene from the Chekhovian context. Indeed, Hanna and Michael's story appears to be the compulsive repetition of Gurov's self-reflection in front of the mirror. That scene yields a significant insight to the protagonist of the Russian short story, as it momentarily shatters the illusion of the imaginary self his narcissism has created, and allows desire to surface in the symbolic, the subject to come into being (cf. Boothby 129-37, 151-58). In contrast, Michael seems to be denied that experience and, thus, is caught in an apparently endless cycle of narcissistic self-reflection—obsessively remembering his past with Hanna and Hanna herself. It seems to be so because the one revelation he gains is that his self-understanding is dependent on Hanna, on the one trauma he is unable to face and incapable of working through for a long time—he reads instead.¹⁶ No wonder: just like Chekhov presented crises but did not deem it to be the artist's task to offer solutions for the problems involved (qtd. in Chudakov 356), *The Reader* also represents a personal and historical trauma as the source of a crisis which, by definition, cannot be resolved. At least, Julia Kristeva suggests that only the symptoms of abjection—her term for a narcissistic crisis¹⁷—can be “treated”

by infinite semiosis, the generation of texts, not the crisis itself (14-18). Creating the story of *The Reader* is, indeed, what the novel offers—even if not as a resolution, but as a way of “making peace” with the events (Schlink 215). The film, by contrast, suggests that although both protagonists address their trauma by trying to create their respective stories, their attempts remain inconclusive as they yield no such *verbal* narratives in the narrow sense of the word.

Having discussed in detail how “The Lady with the Little Dog” functions as Hanna’s (mis)appropriated self-narrative never really told in the film, I turn briefly to the two instances when Michael actually speaks about Hanna and apparently takes major steps forward in working through his trauma in his dialogues with Miss Mather and his own daughter, Julia. The former evidently has a key significance: this is the first occasion when Michael breaks his decades-long silence about Hanna, as he himself points out. His words, however, are clearly meant rather to hide than to reveal the real significance of their relationship and, thus, represent it, and Hanna, yet again as a lack, a gap, an absence: his chuckling voice, his eyes in tears suggest a lot more than his unfinished sentence: “The affair only lasted a summer. But . . .” (1:48:05). Similarly, the story he tells Julia is interrupted just at the moment when Hanna enters the scene: “I was fifteen. I was coming home from school. I was feeling ill. And a woman helped me” (1:55:20). Were Michael able to put into words his experience with Hanna, it would imply that he has successfully worked through the trauma of her Nazi past. Strictly speaking, such a verbal representation is only held out as a promise in the visual medium of the film, but is never realized: the film narrative is presented as a series of Michael’s mental images and memory scenes. Satisfying the craving of Hollywood audiences for a happy ending, this promise of a verbal narrative seems to have roughly the same function as the optimistic words closing—and opening up—Chekhov’s short story (see Hetényi 1284): “And it seemed as though in a little while the solution would be found, and then a new and splendid life would begin; and it was clear to both of them that they had still a long, long road before them, and that the most complicated and difficult part of it was only just beginning” (Chekhov, “The Lady with the Dog”). One might only wonder to what extent the implications of an “analysis interminable,” which are conveyed by the “real” Chekhovian ending in Hetényi’s reading, could also be relevant to *The Reader*.

Daldry and Hare’s adaptation has been pejoratively called a “Hollywood” narrative (Donahue 186). Without the slightest intention to produce an apology for the film, I hope to have demonstrated that its Chekhovian intertext alone—as a *mise en abyme*—opens up an almost infinite

source of ambiguities concerning both the protagonists' self-narratives and the strategies of (mis)reading to be applied to the film as a whole. As a result, the film proves to be, undoubtedly, very close to the spirit of Schlink's text—to the complexities hiding behind its deceptively terse, simple-looking, far from technically innovative text. Indeed, one of the novel's final metafictional comments, pervaded by irony and presenting a laughable circular argument, draws attention to the multiplicity of narratives hiding behind Michael and Hanna's story and the impossibility of writing the true one—if it exists at all:

Soon after her death, I decided to write the story of me and Hanna. Since then I've done it many times in my head, each time a little differently, each time with new images, and new strands of action and thought. Thus there are many different stories in addition to the one I have written. The guarantee that the written one is the right (*richtige*) one lies in the fact that I wrote it and not the other versions. The written version wanted to be written, the many others did not. (Schlink 214-15; *Der Vorleser* 205)

So the book in the reader's hands is the right version because it has been written, and it has been written because it is the right one. As to what exactly is meant by "right" here—whether that the story is in accordance with moral norms or with facts, whether it is proper or convenient, and whether it is appropriate for a certain purpose—remains uncertain. But, as such, the story is only one of the many equally impossible and, therefore, equally mistaken representations of a fatally attractive, simultaneously loved and hated, guilty past. Just as Hanna's mirror image in "The Lady with the Little Dog" is only one of her (mis)reflections.

Eszterházy Károly University

Notes

The research was supported by the EFOP-3.6.1-16-2016-00001 grant ("Complex improvement of research capacities and services at Eszterházy Károly University").

¹ For a brief and objective overview of the debates surrounding the novel, see Bill Niven's "Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser* and the Problem of Shame" (381-82). As for ethical criticism on Schlink's *The Reader*, its leading voices include William Collins Donahue, who has been as good as conducting a public debate on both the novel and its film adaptation with Niven. The latest "episodes" in this "series" are Donahue's 2011 Schlink monograph, *Holocaust as Fiction: Bernhard Schlink's "Nazi" Novels and Their Films*, and Niven's response to it, his 2012 review of the book ("Holocaust as Fiction"). In the closing chapter of his study, Donahue describes Daldry and Hare's adaptation in terms of a "corrective reading" of the novel and bases his claim on the film's representation of Hanna's social background together with its emphasis on her being an oppressed social outcast (154-85). Nevertheless, he is quite cynical about the ending of the film, in his view, an effect of the compelling force of

Hollywood norms (186). Niven, in turn, argues that Donahue's Marxist bias leads him to overvalue the film ("Holocaust as Fiction" 183).

² Unless indicated otherwise, all Schlink citations are from the English translation.

³ Both Hare's and Ralph Fiennes's career—the latter features in the film as the adult and middle-aged Michael Berg—suggest that this innovation is far from accidental. Critically acclaimed dramatist Hare staged Chekhov's *Ivanov* in the Almeida Theatre (1997), with Fiennes in the leading role. The play was the first of its kind in British theatre history to be also performed in Moscow (Lefkowitz). Hare himself revealed in an interview that Chekhov was a formative influence on his career as a dramatist, which is also evidenced by his staging three Chekhov plays (*Platonov*, *Ivanov*, and *The Seagull*) at the Chichester Festival in 2015, and his publication of the same plays accompanied by an extensive introduction in the same year (Hare; Chekhov).

⁴ "Дама с собачкой" (*Dama s sobachkoy*) (1899) (Чехов [Chekhov] 301-19), first English translation by Constance Garnett. This Chekhov short story is well-known in English-speaking cultures, and has been published in various translations and with alternative titles since the 1900s. To the best of my knowledge, however, none of the four most widely published translations—Garnett's, David Magarshack's, Ivy Litvinov's, and Avrahm Yarmolinsky's—has the same English title, or starts with exactly the same sentences which are quoted/shown in the film (Daldry 1:43:50). Unable to detect the source of that translation, I use the story's English title consistently as it appears in the film, "The Lady with the Little Dog," and quote the body of its text from the film whenever it is possible and relevant, or from Garnett's translation, whenever it is not.

The scenes of reading this Chekhov short story are an invented sequence to the extent that although the stories Michael records for Hanna also play a fundamental role in her becoming literate in Schlink's narrative, "The Lady with the Little Dog" is not even mentioned in the book, let alone appearing as a prime mover behind events.

⁵ For an overview of the term based on Yury Lotman's approach, see Adrienn Szeekeres 161-71. For a typology of *mise en abyme* in postmodern metafiction, see Linda Hutcheon 53-56.

⁶ "As he [Gurov] got into bed he thought how lately she [Anna] had been a girl at school, doing lessons like his own daughter" (Chekhov, "The Lady with the Dog").

⁷ About the questioning of rational, scientific discourse in Chekhov and, as a counterpoint, about his turning to a method of representation close to the symbolist aesthetic, see Regéczi 23-48.

⁸ As Niven, among others, points out, the term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, that is, the attempt of "second-generation" Germans to work through the Nazi past of Germany, is central to the critical discussion of Schlink's novel ("Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser*" 389).

⁹ Here, and in the further analysis of this sequence, I rely on Sigmund Freud's theory of the compulsion to repeat (Freud *passim*).

¹⁰ I will not engage in the discussion of whether Hanna's illiteracy is verisimilar or not (Johnson and Finlay *passim*), and whether her inability to write equals her exculpation from her crimes (Donahue 155) in Schlink's novel, since even interpreters rather critical of *Der Vorleser*, such as Donahue, treat this element of the text as a metaphor, and emphasize that it also functions as such in the film (54). I share Niven's view that "the metaphorical force of illiteracy lies in the associative resonance of being unable to 'spell out' the basics of a moral language" ("Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser*" 383).

¹¹ The phrase "a new face" does not appear in any of the popularly known translations and with good reason: featuring as "новое лицо" (*novoye litso*) (Чехов

[Chekhov] 301) in the original, it is most appropriately rendered in this context as “a newcomer” (Litvinov 221), or “a new arrival” (Magarshack 264), and literally translates into English as “a new person” (Garnett; Yarmolinsky 412). Face as a body part is another meaning of the same Russian word, which—though metonymically it suggests the same—apparently does not come very naturally in this context in English. This marked difference from all four widely-known translations also lends special emphasis to the face (identity), its reflection, or portrait-like representation and, also, to self-reflection in the film.

¹² In various contexts, both Donahue and Niven acknowledge a double motivation behind Hanna’s suicide in the film: her recognition that the relationship with Michael is definitely over might play just as important a role in it as understanding her own crimes (Donahue 171; Niven, “Holocaust as Fiction” 183).

¹³ This aspect of the film is in accord with the novel’s implicit critique concerning the intention of “literary humanism . . . to domesticate human beings,” to which Niven calls attention quoting Stuart Taberner, and which results in Hanna’s “morbid self-rejection” (“Bernhard Schlink’s *Der Vorleser*” 392).

¹⁴ In her reading of Chekhov’s short story, Sobol calls attention to the significant role “the tempting thought of a swift, fleeting love affair, a romance with an unknown woman, whose name he did not know” (Chekhov, “The Lady with the Dog”) plays in Gurov’s fantasy in the beginning. In fact, he learns Anna’s name unwillingly, at a rather late point in the narrative. In Sobol’s view, this is part and parcel of a “name game” in which nothing less is at stake than acknowledging the subject status of the other, and which has severe epistemological and ethical implications (225-27).

¹⁵ In the light of Michael’s entire career, Hanna’s closest parallel in the Chekhov story is a minor character—Gurov’s wife. Sobol aptly characterizes the masculine-looking woman as a phallic, castrating mother figure (226). The phrase “Его женили рано” (Его zhenili rano) (Чехов [Chekhov] 301)—more appropriately in Litvinov’s translation than in Garnett’s, “He had been talked into marrying” (221)—implies that, at the prime of his life, Gurov feels entrapped in his early, probably half-forced marriage with a woman who now looks “half as old again as he” (Chekhov, “The Lady with the Dog”). Clearly, Michael feels imprisoned by his early and now shameful, but unbreakable attachment to Hanna in a very similar manner.

¹⁶ Michael chooses precisely those illusionary relationships which Gurov rejects under the influence of his own insight.

¹⁷ Hanna’s “morbid self-rejection” (Niven, “Bernhard Schlink’s *Der Vorleser*” 392) calls for a Kristevan reading in terms of the abjection of the self, while various aspects of her character posit her as Michael’s abject—as detailed in Reichmann 63-65.

Works Cited

- Alcorn, Marshall W., Jr. *Narcissism and the Literary Libido*. New York: New York UP, 1994. Print.
- Boothby, Richard. *Death and Desire: Psychoanalytic Theory in Lacan’s Return to Freud*. New York: Routledge, 1991. Print.
- Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984. Print.
- Cartmell, Deborah, and Imelda Whelehan. Introduction. “Literature on Screen: a Synoptic View.” Cartmell and Whelehan 1-12. Print.

- , eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007. Print.
- Chekhov, Anton. "The Lady with the Dog." *The Lady with the Dog and Other Stories*. Trans. Constance Garnett. 1903. eBooks@Adelaide, 2014.
- . *Young Chekhov: Platonov, Ivanov, The Seagull*. Adapted and introduced by David Hare. London: Faber, 2015. Print.
- Chudakov, A. P. "The Poetics of Chekhov: The Sphere of Ideas." Trans. Julian Graffy. *Soviet Semiotics and Criticism: An Anthology*. Spec. issue of *New Literary History* 9.2 (Winter 1978): 353-80. Print.
- Daldry, Stephen, dir. *The Reader*. The Weinstein Company, et al. 2008.
- Donahue, William Collins. *Holocaust as Fiction: Bernhard Schlink's "Nazi" Novels and Their Films*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Remembering, Repeating and Working-through." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*. Ed. James Strachey, et al. Vol. 12. London: Hogarth, 1958. 147-56. Print.
- Genette, Gérard. *The Architext: An Introduction*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. Berkeley: U of California P, 1992. Print.
- Hare, David. "How I Learnt to Love Adaptation." *The Guardian* 23 Jan. 2016. The Guardian News and Media Limited. Web. 5 Feb. 2016.
- Hetényi, Zsuzsa. "Csehov-csapongások, nabokovos nézőpontból." [Chekhovian digressions from a Nabokovian perspective]. *Holmi* 22.10 (Oct. 2010): 1277-87. *EPA*. Web. 5 Feb. 2016.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*. New York: Methuen, 1984. Print.
- Johnson, Sally, and Frank Finlay. *(Il)literacy and (Im)morality in Bernhard Schlink's The Reader*. Lancaster: Lancaster U, 1999. Print.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1982. Print.
- Lefkowitz, David. "Ralph Fiennes Taking his London *Ivanov* to Moscow." *Playbill—News* 10 Mar. 1997. Playbill, Inc. Web. 5 Feb. 2016.
- Litvinov, Ivy, trans. "The Lady with the Dog." By Anton Chekhov. *Anton Chekhov's Short Stories*. Selected and ed. Ralph E. Matlaw, New York: Norton, 1979. 221-35. Print.
- Magarshack, David, trans. "Lady with Lapdog." By Anton Chekhov. *Lady with Lapdog and Other Stories*. London: Penguin, 1964. 264-81. Print.
- McFarlane, Brian. "Reading Film and Literature." Cartmell and Whelehan 15-28. Print.
- Niven, Bill. "Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser* and the Problem of Shame." *Modern Language Review* 98.2 (2003): 381-96. *JSTOR*. Web. 5 Feb. 2016.

- . "Holocaust as Fiction: Bernhard Schlink's 'Nazi' Novels and Their Films." *Sbofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 30.4 (2012): 182-84. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 5 Feb. 2016.
- Regéczi, Ildikó. *Csehov és a korai egzisztenciabölcselet*. [Chekhov and Early Existentialist Thought]. Debrecen: Kossuth, 2000. Print.
- Reichmann, Angelika. "Hanna Schmitz Csehov tükrében: *A felolvasó*." [Hanna Schmitz from a Chekhovian Perspective: *The Reader*]. *Csehov-újraírások*. [Chekhov Rewritings]. Ed. Regéczi Ildikó. Debrecen: Didakt, 2016, 55-71. Print.
- Schlink, Bernhard. *The Reader*. Trans. Carol Brown Janeway. London: Phoenix, 2008. Print.
- . *Der Vorleser*. Zürich: Diogenes Verlag, 1995. Print.
- Sobol, Valeria. "Počemu zimoy ne byvaet groma?" [Why are there no thunderstorms in the winter]: Gurov, Job, and Chekhovian Epistemology in 'Dama s sobačkoj.'" *Russian Literature* 66.2 (2009): 217-33. *Science Direct*. Web. 5 Feb. 2016.
- Stam, Robert. *Film Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000. Print.
- Szekeres, Adrienn. "Raszkolnyikov gyilkosságának értelmezhetősége a 'kicsinyítő tükör' elméleti kérdéskörének fényében" [Interpreting Raskolnikov's Murder in the Theoretical Context of the Mise en Abyme]. *Ösvények Turgenyev és Dosztojevskij művészi világához. Párbeszéd-kötetek I* [Paths to the Fictional Worlds of Turgenyev and Dostoevsky]. Ed. Kroó Katalin. Budapest: ELTE Eötvös, 2004. 161-93. Print.
- Troost, Linda V. "The Nineteenth-Century Novel on Film: Jane Austen." *Cartmell and Whelehan* 75-89. Print.
- Yarmolinsky, Avrahm, trans. "The Lady with the Pet Dog." By Anton Chekhov. *The Portable Chekhov*. Ed. Avrahm Yarmolinsky. New York: Viking Penguin, 1977. 412-33. Print.
- Чехов, А. П. (Chekhov, A. P). *Повести и рассказы*. (Povesti i rassказы) [Stories and Tales]. Paris: Booking International, 1995. Print.