

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



The Name Of The Rose

Director: Jean-Jacques Annaud

Screenplay: Andrew Birkin, Gerard Brach, Alain Goddard

Cinematography: Tonino Delli Colli

Music: James Horner

Producer: Bernd Eichinger

Spieldauer: 126 minutes

Cast: Sean Connery (William of Baskerville), Christian Slater (Adso of Melk), Helmut Qualtinger (Remigio da Varagine), Volker Prechtel (Malachia), Michael Lonsdale (The Abbot), Feodor Chaliapin (Jorge de Burgos), Valentina Vargas (Peasant Girl), William Hickey (Ubertino da Casale), Ron Perlman (Salvatore), Michael Habeck (Berenger), F. Murray Abraham (Bernardo Gui)

...by any other name...

Allen Krumm

Jean Jacques Annaud's adaptation of Umberto Eco's novel *Il Nome Della Rosa* opens with two hooded monks astride their horses, trekking along a forlorn ridge among foreboding mountains. The scene presages the engaging visual style of this film, and the world weary voice of the narrator simply heightens the brooding, disturbing atmosphere which pervades the story.

There are flaming torches and flickering candles giving and taking light and shadow in the interior shots, rendering a near Rembrandtian radiance which suffuses the decidedly non-pretty faces of the predominantly unknown actors. There is tension inducing music, culminating repeatedly in a rushing ripple of bells. There are solid silences and the sudden sounds of monks scurrying feet and victims anguished cries. And there is the spooky blue light of the nocturnal scenes.

Annaud had a grand vision for this film, and he realized much of it. He engenders, sustains and modulates a mood which perfectly complements the story. His pacing never falters. His avoidance of a star studded cast was pure inspiration. Other than Sean Connery, F. Murray Abraham and a few lesser known European actors, the rest of the cast (including Christian Slater) is composed of unknown regional actors and sometimes even amateurs.

Annaud's ensemble works. Prettiness was not pervasive in the middle ages and as the director asserts, the faces of these unknowns are fabulous and fascinating. There is certainly something medieval about them, and the cumulative effect of the cast serves to focus one's gaze on the story. Sean Connery fits easily among them as William of Baskerville, Eco's fictionalized rendering of a cross between William of Ockham and Sherlock Holmes.

Umberto Eco injected a good bit of philosophical rumination into his 1980 novel, later wryly paraphrasing Wittgenstein: "... those things about which we cannot theorize, we must narrate." Essentially his novel was an experiment in the techniques of storytelling, a narrative about narrative. Judging by the sales figures and the

subsequent translation into over thirty languages, the Italian professor of Semiotics achieved his goal. Annaud said he wanted to make viewers feel the Middle Ages, not just see them. Aesthetically and psychologically he indeed gives us something lovely and exciting. Yet in preparation for his admirable attempt to achieve a *Rankean wie es eigentlich gewesen war*, he should have read Umberto Eco's own *The Limits Of Interpretation* and the *Medieval Essays* of Christopher Dawson. The former might have softened his certainty and induced him to leave his film a bit more "open" just as Eco left his text "open" for the reader, and in Dawson he might have found the essence of the medieval *Zeitgeist* he sought to convey.

The film would profit from an injection of the erudite skepticism that Eco wears so easily (including about his own views) and lacks the imaginative sympathy which the devout Dawson gained through a lifetime spent exploring the medieval *Hinterlassenschaft* which gave birth to modern Europe. Annaud seems vulnerable to a secular minded naivety toward the dark middle ages, as they were not the middle of anything and the darkness was most often pierced by light emanating from innumerable monasteries.

Yet a film is not a book and one should applaud legitimate artistic license rather than seek to revoke it. Suffice it to say that it is intriguing to watch a movie which foregrounds the willingness of educated people in the high middle ages to believe or accept truth based merely on the statements of those in authority. Most scholars concur that there is no evidence that the lay people of the early 14th century ever believed the Pope's repeated assertions that the Franciscans were hiding *Massenvernichtungswaffen*.

Brother William has come to the monastery as an envoy of Louis IV of Bavaria to participate in a dispute over doctrine between a group of Franciscans and representatives of the Pope. Upon arrival, he is confronted with a request by the Abbot to investigate a murder, and then, to his unruffled consternation, an escalating series of murders. Eco's protagonist is a nominalist par excellence, and we must be content to tag

along on Brother Williams relentless forays into what Umberto Eco terms "abductive" reasoning.

Annaud touchingly exploits the master-disciple relationship of William and Adso, using their regular strolls about the abbey grounds and their bedtime colloquies to provide commentary which allows us to better follow the dynamics of plot and understand the contours of character. In the end, the object about which everything revolves seems to be a book on laughter which may or may not exist.

In the meantime, Annaud cinematically animates the spirit of 14th century thought and life through iconic monastic *mise en scenes* with a lens more than a little smudged with a 20th century *Weltanschauung*. We are also privileged to witness Adso's fall from grace at the hands of a decidedly lovely peasant girl. His doe eyed innocence climaxes in this scene as his fledgling spiritual fortitude resists her carnal favors for at least several milliseconds. In the world of film, erotic ambushes are apparently *de rigueur* even in monasteries. Brother William, as usual, knows all, and, more or less, forgives all; after all, "even monks have pasts."

Brother William's chief dialectical interlocutor is the blind *Seelsorger*, Jorge of Burgos, who fiercely espouses an exegetical method popularized in more recent times by the feminist theologian Geraldine: a tendency to cast most of the blame on the devil. He knows better, as did Geraldine, but he only wants to prevent the busy body Brother William from uncovering things which are best left covered.

If this is a flawed film, it is also a very good film, one that will resonate for a long time. It probably caused more than a few people who had not done so to read the novel. Annaud obviously had a sincere passion for his subject and a profound respect for the achievement of Umberto Eco, who caused countless readers to ponder the rose for which we have only a name. And that name? Memory, history, faith, knowledge, love, loss ... only the one to whom the story is told knows for sure.