



***Downfall* and Beyond: Hitler Films From Germany**

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Oliver Hirschbiegel's *Der Untergang* (2004) is a film of considerable historical importance and one which has generated controversy and lively debate. Readily available with supporting material (and subtitles if required) it is thus an excellent resource for teachers. Marketed as "der erste deutsche Spielfilm, der die letzten Tage des NS-Regimes und die Person Adolf Hitler in Szene setzt", *Der Untergang* is claimed to have finally broken a long-standing taboo. This article aims both to unpick this claim and to examine the significance of Hirschbiegel's film in the context of earlier representations of Hitler. From Brecht's *Der aufhaltsame Aufstieg des Arturo Ui* (1941) to Syberberg's *Hitler, ein Film aus Deutschland* (1977) German dramatists and filmmakers have resorted to a range of estrangement devices in their portrayal of Hitler, thereby sidestepping the empathetic strategies of mass entertainment. What is striking about Hirschbiegel's film is that it embraces these strategies and is unabashedly conventional in its narrative, *mise-en-scène* and cinematography. It represents, perhaps, a break with the Brechtian tradition of representing the *Führer*. The discussion in this article focuses on what might be termed adequate or legitimate representation – how can (or should) Hitler be portrayed in the so-called "post-memory era"?

1. 1 April 2005

When *Der Untergang* (*Downfall*, 2004), Oliver Hirschbiegel's dramatic reconstruction of Hitler's final days in the Berlin *Führerbunker*, opened in Britain on 1 April 2005 it had already received a ringing endorsement from the eminent historian and celebrated Hitler biographer Ian Kershaw. In his *Guardian* article Kershaw extols the film's "enormous emotive power", it is, he claims, a "superb reconstruction" in which the claustrophobic and macabre atmosphere of the bunker is "brilliantly captured" and "marvellously evoked" (Kershaw 2004).¹ Much of the credit, Kershaw continues, must go to Bruno Ganz who is "superb as Hitler"; the *Führer*'s legendary mood swings are "brilliantly played" and most "compelling" of all is the voice, which Ganz has "to near perfection" – it is "chillingly authentic". Kershaw admits he left the cinema "gripped by the film", "ready to congratulate Eichinger on his brilliant achievement". The film is, in summary, "a triumph – a marvellous historical drama".

As Kershaw rightly points out at the beginning of his eulogy, his backing for the film was not entirely unsolicited:

¹ All quotations from Kershaw are taken from the online version of his article at "Guardian Unlimited". For further articles and responses see: http://film.guardian.co.uk/Film_Page/0,4061,1410346,00.html.

It was a surprise to receive a phone-call from Bernd Eichinger, producer of the new film, *Der Untergang* (*The Downfall*), which is currently causing a stir in Germany, saying he very much wanted me to see it before it went on general release.

Eichinger's phone-call should hardly have come as a surprise – *Der Untergang* was, as Kershaw acknowledges, “causing a stir in Germany”: it had been seen by a total audience of over 4.5m and hotly debated across the media. Eichinger's long-cherished project had cost the equivalent of \$18m to produce, and the fortunes of his previously ailing Constantin Film production company had already been turned round by box office receipts at home. It is doubtless telling, if unintentional, that in his article Kershaw refers to Eichinger on four separate occasions but never actually mentions the film's director. *Der Untergang* is, as prominent film colleagues including Edgar Reitz have noted,² not so much evidence of a renaissance of filmmaking led by a younger generation of filmmakers as a testament to the tenacity of the generation of the New German Cinema. Born in 1949, Eichinger had produced a number of controversial films tackling recent and current history during the late 1970s and early 1980s, including Syberberg's *Hitler, ein Film aus Deutschland* (1977), discussed below, Wolfgang Petersen's *Das Boot* (1981) and Uli Edel's *Christiane F. – Wir Kinder vom Bahnhof Zoo* (1981). Indeed Eichinger's “Hitler film” itself was not a new project: he had intended to produce a film on the subject for many years, but it was only with the publication in 2002 of Joachim Fest's book *Der Untergang*, which was to give the film its title, and of Traudl Junge's first-hand account of the *Führer's* final days, that he finally found the source material he needed and could look for a suitable director.

This article sets out to examine the significance of *Der Untergang* in the context of earlier attempts to represent Hitler. These include a remarkable series of caricatures published in the magazine *Simplizissimus* in 1923, Brecht's satirical portrayal of the dictator-as-gangster in *Arturo Ui* (1941) and the “Hitler films” of Hans Jürgen Syberberg and Christoph Schlingensief. Reference will also be made to the representation of National Socialism in the post-war *Trümmerfilme* and GDR cinema, although it is beyond the scope of this article to offer a comprehensive overview of films on this topic. The discussion will revolve around the question of what might be termed adequate or legitimate representation - how can (or should) Hitler be portrayed

² On his 2005 visit to London to promote his own historical drama *Heimat 3*, Edgar Reitz was repeatedly questioned about his response to *Der Untergang*. His answer on each occasion was that the film was less evidence of new talent in Germany than confirmation that for Eichinger's generation Hitler remains Germany's best export product.

on screen in the so-called “post-memory era”? There can, of course, be no definitive answer to this question. However, by viewing the film within a tradition of cinematic *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* it may be possible to identify what, if anything, *Der Untergang* has to offer that is new to discourses on National Socialism. Does it, perhaps, “[make] you look at the Second World War with a fresh perspective and forgiving understanding” as the American journal *New Movies* put it (Jones 2005: 132)? Ian Kershaw himself lays no claim to being a film historian, and his remarks on the film’s uniqueness had to be followed up by a correction. In his original text he had noted: “I took the view that it was absolutely legitimate to make the film. It was, after all, not the first time the bunker story had been filmed; merely the first time by a German cast”. As well as pointing out that Ganz was in fact Swiss, *The Guardian* felt compelled to note:

Der Untergang (*The Downfall*) is not the first German feature film in which an actor plays Hitler. Syberberg’s *Hitler, A Film From Germany*, 1977, was discounted as a precedent, but the writer overlooked an undoubted forerunner in G.W. Pabst’s *Der letzte Akt* (*The Last Ten Days*, 1955).³

As we shall see, even this does not represent an accurate or complete account of the cinematic pre-history of *Der Untergang*. However, the notion that the film is a first – a milestone in German film history in finally and courageously breaking a taboo relating to the portrayal of Hitler – continues to be deployed as a marketing strategy for the film. The German “Premium Edition” of the film proudly and unabashedly asserts that “DER UNTERGANG ist der erste deutsche Spielfilm, der die letzten Tage des NS-Regimes und die Person Adolf Hitler in Szene setzt”.⁴

2. Teaching *Der Untergang*

The grand claims made for *Der Untergang*, together with the remarkable quantity (and at times the quality) of critical attention paid to it in the wake of its release at home and abroad, make the film a valuable resource for teachers in secondary and higher education. Not only is the film readily available, with and without subtitles, and

³ Correction published in *The Guardian*, 4 October 2004. See: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/germany/article/0,2763,1306491,00.html>

⁴ Oliver Hirschbiegel, *Der Untergang*, Premium Edition Constantin Film, 2005. Critics have noted that Pabst’s film is in fact an Austrian production; Schlingensief’s only deals with Hitler’s final hour.

accompanied by a plethora of extras, but there is already a wealth of writing on it, scholarly and otherwise, available on the Internet.⁵

Given the continuing centrality of National Socialism in general, and the personality of Hitler in particular, to debates about Germany both inside and outside education, this popular and hugely successful film offers excellent material for debate about the historical events themselves and the unstinting fascination they exert. The German Ambassador, amongst others, made his reservations about this “British obsession” abundantly clear in the wake of the premiere of *Der Untergang*, and these remarks are also well documented on the Net.⁶

In view of its length (a little over 150 minutes), the film may be best used in extract, a method made increasingly simple by the DVD format. The bunker conferences in particular, and the final scenes up to and including Hitler’s suicide, merit detailed study, bearing in mind that certain of the battle scenes on the streets may be deemed excessively violent for younger students (the film carries an 18-rating and contains “strong violence, disturbing images and some nudity”).⁷

3. Extreme Responses

Ian Kershaw’s article in *The Guardian* amounts to nothing less than a panegyric to *Der Untergang* penned by a distinguished scholar in the field of Hitler studies. The film did not, however, go unchallenged for long. In fact, as we shall see, the subsequent arguments for and against it – revolving around the question of its “humanizing” portrayal of the *Führer* – largely rehearse the positions taken up in Germany following the premiere of the film in Germany on 16 September 2004.

Of particular interest is a brief article by Professors David Cesarani and Peter Longerich of Royal Holloway College, University of London published in *The Guardian* on 7 April 2005, in which they contest claims that the film is historically accurate – cataloguing various distortions and fictions – and, more significantly perhaps, identify a political sub-text to the film which makes it, in their view, very much a product of its time:

⁵ The film has already been shown a number of times on British television (on Channel 4 and More4).

⁶ See note 1 above. The “Guardian Unlimited” site has useful links.

⁷ See <http://www.downfallthefilm.com/>.

The film *Downfall* has received terrific reviews in this country and has already been seen by four and a half million Germans. It has clearly struck a chord with the popular mood in Germany and feelings about the Nazi past. [...]

A self-pitying attitude has always been present in German attempts at “coming to terms” with the Nazi past, but it has been expressed with increasing stridency over the last two decades. It provides the key for understanding how history is massaged by *Downfall*'s makers. [...]

[The film's mission] is to depict the German people as the last victims of Nazism whose true defenders were a band of brave German soldiers, including SS men, who fought until overwhelmed by the Bolshevik hordes. [...]

The film's agenda echoes the *Historikerstreit* controversy in the late 1980s over interpretations of the Third Reich, and parallels the efforts of former Chancellor Kohl to allow Germans to feel comfortable with their past. [...]

Is the belligerent self-pity fostered by *Downfall* becoming a new form of German nationalism? (Cesarani; Longerich 2005)

In a discussion to coincide with the film's British premiere, and once again documented on *The Guardian*'s website, Cesarani and Longerich put their objections to Hirschbiegel directly, who appears to have stood his ground with recourse to the authority of Joachim Fest (Higgins 2005).

According to *The Guardian*, Hirschbiegel was further challenged by Sir Max Hastings during a panel discussion following a screening of the film in Soho, and called upon to reveal his “vision” in making it. The report claims that he could not come up with one even under repeated pressure and concludes:

this, at the end, is the weakness of the film. It is skilfully made, mostly very well acted, and as faithful as it possibly can be to the known facts about Hitler's final days. But it has nothing to say. [...]

So the film – gripping in its way, and especially in the performance of Ganz, who can't help seeming more charming than Hitler probably ever was – is really nothing more than another war film, though one that unusually seeks to promote truth and to avoid caricature.⁸

This article also demonstrates a telling facet of the debate surrounding the film which can be identified in early German responses as clearly as those in Britain. Critics and commentators have been almost excessively keen to engage with the film and the problems they perceive it to pose, but are frequently led to express frustration at its

⁸ *The Guardian* April 9 2005 (no author given). See: <http://film.guardian.co.uk/features/featurepages/0,4120,1454149,00.html> (accessed 8 January 2006). Here, and elsewhere, useful parallels could be drawn to Bernhard Wicki's famous 'war film' *Die Brücke* (1959).

moderation and reticence in matters political, ethical and, ultimately, aesthetic. In Germany this frustration was expressed particularly cogently by Jens Jessen in his review of the film for *Die Zeit*:

Lange galt das Tabu, Hitler nicht oder nur kurz oder nur von hinten zu zeigen. Mit diesem Film ist das Tabu gebrochen; aber zu welchem Zweck? [...]

Dass dieser Film sich von allen angreifbaren Interpretationen fern hält, ist nicht nur ein Akt asketischer Redlichkeit. Es ist auch ein Missverständnis. Darum ist der Film noch nicht dumm. Er ist aber auch nicht klug. (Jessen 2004)

One senses that many commentators on *Der Untergang* are almost willing the film to be more controversial than it actually is, reminding one of the lively debates which followed the broadcast on German television of the US television series *Holocaust* in January 1979, of Reitz's *Heimat* in 1985, Joseph Vilsmaier's *Stalingrad* (1992) and Benigni's *La vita è bella* (*Life is Beautiful*, 1998).

4. The German Angle

Two outspoken critical voices in Germany merit particular mention in the present context. In his review for *epd Film*, Georg Seeßlen (2004: 36) characterizes the film's style as "eine nur leicht stilisierte Form des psychologischen Realismus" and identifies in it a failure of nerve and vision: "DER UNTERGANG entwickelt hier Anteilnahme und dort Empörung, riskiert kaum den Bruch guten Geschmacks". Like Jessen before him, Seeßlen contends that the film lacks a sense of purpose and ability to reflect self-critically on its own image-making:

Der Film hat uns sicher geführt, auch über die eine oder andere Bilder-Falle. Aber wohin hat er uns geführt, abgesehen von der erleichterten Feststellung: Doch, das geht, den Menschen Hitler zeigen? (Seeßlen 2004: 36)

The film is a "Doku-Soap-Opera" offering:

das Hitler-Bild für die Post-Postmoderne, die sich weder mit Abstraktionen noch mit Analysen, weder mit doppelten Codierungen noch mit psychologischen Brechungen abfindet, sondern distanzloses Dabeisein verlangt. Hitler für die Kinder von CNN, Big Brother und Political Correctness. [...]

DER UNTERGANG schildert das Ende des Krieges nicht als Befreiung, sondern als tragische Abfolge von Selbsterstörung, Opfer und Wiedergeburt. Das ist eine große Lüge, selbst wenn sie aus lauter kleinen Wahrheiten zusammengesetzt ist. Der Faschismus hat keinen Untergang, der Faschismus ist Untergang. Von jenem Anfang an, dessen Ausblendung das Ende in falschem Schicksalsglanz leuchten lässt. (Seeßlen 2004: 37)

Clearly Seeßlen's attack on the film is comprehensive, and chooses to reject rather than engage with Eichinger / Hirschbiegel's brand of realism. The critique is significant in this context because Seeßlen speaks for many of the New German Cinema generation of filmmakers who, as we shall see, held that Hitler could only be approached with the tools of Brechtian (or Godardian) estrangement and within the framework of a critical, theoretical, predominantly socialist discourse.

Although less politically and morally outraged than Seeßlen, the expansive critique of Wim Wenders, published in *Die Zeit* in October 2004, and subsequently much quoted, also censures the film for what it does *not* show rather than critically examining what it does. Wenders challenges the film's premise (or rather absence of premise) and censures its reticence in showing the actual demise of the *Führer*:

Wie könnte ich das Fehlen einer Erzählhaltung anders begründen als mit dem schlimmsten Schnitzer dieses Films? Während nämlich dauernd Arme und Beine abgesägt werden, während Hunderte von Soldaten abgeschlachtet werden, während sich die Generalität die Kugel gibt und man die Leichen mit den Einschusslöchern herumfallen sieht und ein junger Volksstürmer seine Freundin erschießt und dann sich selbst, während all das ausgiebig gezeigt wird, beweist der Film dann doch zweimal ausgesprochene Pietät. Hitler bittet seinen Adjutanten Wünsche, er möge Benzin besorgen, "damit die Russen meine Leiche nicht zur Schau stellen können." "Ein schrecklicher Befehl, aber ich will ihn ausführen", entgegnet der Untergebene. Und was tut der Film? Er führt Hitlers Befehl tatsächlich aus! Alles sieht man in *Der Untergang*, nur Hitlers Tod nicht! Der Mann gibt sich (und seiner Eva) hinter verschlossener Tür das Gift und die Kugel. So wie Hitler sich abwendet, wenn seine Schäferhündin Blondie stirbt, so wendet sich der Film ab, wenn der Führer stirbt. [...] Warum auf einmal dieses dezente Nichtzeigen, warum die plötzliche Prüderie? Warum, verflucht noch mal!? Warum nicht zeigen, dass das Schwein endlich tot ist? Warum dem Mann diese Ehre erweisen, die der Film sonst keinem von denen erweist, die da reihenweise sterben müssen? (Wenders 2004: 50)

As a filmmaker, Wenders is clearly more sensitive to the mechanics (and tricks) of the film's construction than Seeßlen, and he provides some neat insights into its editing. This makes his critique valuable, despite its expansiveness. The kernel of Wenders's argument is, in effect, similar to that of Seeßlen and Cesarani / Longerich: *Der Untergang* manoeuvres the audience into a position from which they can comfortably identify with the perpetrators and empathize with them as victims:

der Mangel an Erzählhaltung führt die Zuschauer in ein schwarzes Loch, in dem sie auf (beinahe) unmerkliche Weise dazu gebracht werden, die Zeit doch irgendwie aus der Sicht der Täter zu sehen, zumindest mit einem wohlwollenden Verständnis für sie. (Wenders 2004: 50)

In line with many other critics, Wenders picks out what Sue Summers (2005) has termed the "rather queasy approximation of a happy ending" for particular censure in

this respect. It is, of course, the very process of identification and empathy itself which has been anathema to Hitler films prior to *Der Untergang*, a steadfast belief that “man im Grunde mit den Mitteln des großen Unterhaltungskinos über den Nationalsozialismus kaum erzählen kann” (Kürten 2004).

5. Hitler as Puppet and Gangster

In May 1923 the caricaturist Thomas Theodor Heine published a set of twelve images in *Simplizissimus* under the title “Wie sieht Hitler aus?” The first caption, “Ist es wahr, daß er in der Öffentlichkeit nur mit einer schwarzen Gesichtsmaske erscheint?”, refers to the fact that at that time Hitler strenuously avoided photographic representation of himself, to the extent of making sure that the lighting at meetings made it impossible for photographs to be taken and that press photographers who managed to get near him were bundled away. In Heine’s speculative “portraits” Hitler’s image is satirized feature by feature: “Das Charakteristische seines Gesichtes sind doch wohl die faszinierenden Augen?” reads the caption to an image with glaring eyes, followed by a distorted mouth, nose, beard, ears, chin, and skull; a fat Hitler is followed by a thin Hitler and a beautiful Hitler. A final “futurist” image bringing together a stein, dagger, pistol, bleeding heart and bolt of lightning is accompanied by the caption “Die Fragen mußten unbeantwortet bleiben. Hitler ist überhaupt kein Individuum. Er ist ein Zustand. Nur der Futurist kann ihn bildlich darstellen” (Herz 1994: 93).

Once the press photographer Georg Pfahl had managed to get a picture, on 2 September 1923, the self-imposed ban on images ended and the creation of the public image began in earnest. Hitler turned to the photographer Heinrich Hoffmann, sitting for portraits regularly between 1923 and 1939. The photographs show an array of different poses in different settings and different clothing. Bernhard Viertel wrote satirically in 1937 of a series of six postcards showing Hitler in various oratorical positions:

Schwer, über deutsche Schauspieler zu sprechen, seit der Eine sie alle zu Komparsen gemacht hat – er, der sämtliche großen Rollen der Geschichte und der Literatur verkörpert, von Christus bis Caesar und, vielseitig wie Zettel, der Weber, die heilige Johanna noch dazu. Er war der Trommler in der Nacht, der Deutschland zum Erwachen brachte. Der Gefreite mit dem Kanzlerhut im Tornister. Er war, wie verlautbart wurde, der Unbekannte Soldat. (Herz 1994: 109)

Hitler’s reputation for experimenting with poses, and the wide availability of iconic images of him, fed a rich vein of satire in the representation of the *Führer* by Weimar artists such as John Heartfield, who countered Nazi propaganda with biting satirical

photomontages. “Die Nation steht geschlossen hinter mir” accompanies an image of Hitler in uniform holding a chain around the masses; “Nur keine Angst – er ist Vegetarier” has Hitler the butcher sharpening his blade to slaughter a French rooster (Willett 1997: 158). Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (1940), inspired in part by footage of Hitler in Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph des Willens* (1935), can be seen in the context of this vibrant tradition of anti-fascist satire.

In the first draft of his parable on Hitler’s rise to power *Der aufhaltsame Aufstieg des Arturo Ui*, written in Finland in 1941, Brecht inserted numerous photographs of Hitler. In the sixth scene the Chicago gangster Ui meets with an actor to improve his public image. He works on walking, standing, sitting and finally speaking, reciting Mark Antony’s speech at Caesar’s grave from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, “Ein Muster der Volksrede, sehr berühmt” (Brecht 1988-2000, vol. 7: 54). In the draft a photograph of Hitler standing upright with his arms crossed appears next to the dialogue:

[Ui] stellt sich in Positur, die Arme über der Brust gefaltet.

DER SCHAUSPIELER Das ist
möglich. Aber gewöhnlich. Sie wollen nicht
Aussehen wie ein Friseur, Herr Ui. Verschränken
Sie die Arme so.

Er legt die Arme so übereinander, daß die Handrücken sichtbar bleiben, sie kommen auf die Oberarme zu liegen.

Eine minuziöse Ände-
rung, aber der Unterschied ist gewaltig. Vergleichen
Sie im Spiegel, Herr Ui.

Ui probiert die neue Armhaltung im Spiegel.

UI Gut. (Brecht 1988-2000, vol. 7: 51)

There is an unmistakable similarity between the poses practiced by Ui and the more extravagant photographs of Hitler taken by Hoffmann. On 27 February 1942, now in America, Brecht recorded in his *Arbeitsjournal* some thoughts on how Hitler should be portrayed on stage. Is he, as Lion Feuchtwanger and others claim, a mere puppet, a petty bourgeois figurehead manipulated by the *haute bourgeoisie*, who wield the real power? If so, Brecht reasons, he can only be portrayed as a minor character:

Das ist das “Hampelmännertum” Hitlers. Er ist ein “bloßer Schauspieler”, der den großen Mann “nur spielt”, der “Niemand” (“jeder andere wäre grad so gut”) der “Mann ohne Kern”, weil er eben das Kleinbürgertum vertritt, das in der Politik immer nur spielt (spielen ist hier acting *und* gambling). Für die Dramatik würde das bedeuten, daß *Hitler* nur als Charge (Galionsfigur) gestaltet werden könnte. (Brecht 1988-2000, vol. 7: 58)

Brecht argues this would be an inadequate characterization. The petty bourgeoisie might indeed be a class without power, but this does not make Hitler a “phony” or harmless.

Rather, he represents dangerous petty bourgeois aspirations and thereby merits the status of a dramatic protagonist. The following day, when Feuchtwanger comes round for supper, the question “Ist Hitler ein Hampelmann?” (Brecht 1988-2000, vol. 27: 63) resurfaces. Again Brecht argues that seeing Hitler as a plaything is historically inaccurate and politically dangerous:

Man bekämpft Hitler nicht, wenn man ihn als besonders unfähig, als Auswuchs, Perversität, Humbug, speziell pathologischen Fall hinstellt und ihm die andern bürgerlichen Politiker als Muster, unerreichte Muster, vorhält; wie man ja auch den Faschismus nicht bekämpfen kann, wenn man ihn vom “gesunden” Bürgertum (Reichswehr und Industrie) isolieren und “allein” beseitigen will. (Brecht 1988-2000, vol. 27: 63)

And again Brecht addresses the question of how to portray Hitler:

Aber auch eine tiefgreifende dramatische Darstellung z.B. scheint mir nicht möglich, wenn übersehen wird, daß er eine wirklich nationale Erscheinung, ein “Volksführer”, ist, ein schlauer, vitaler, unkonventioneller und origineller Politiker, und seine äußerste Korruptheit, Unzulänglichkeit, Brutalität usw. kommen erst dann wirkungsvoll ins Spiel. (Brecht 1988-2000, vol. 27: 63)

The issue for Brecht in 1942 is, of course, how to create effective counterpropaganda. After the war the issue changes radically. Hitler is no longer simply a political dictator, war mongerer and anti-Semite, he is guilty of genocide and crimes against humanity. Charlie Chaplin for one remarked that “he would not have made *The Great Dictator* had he known exactly what was going on in Nazi Germany at the time” (Geraldine Chaplin quoted in Mowe 2003). There is continuity, however, in the abiding problem of Hitler’s own use of the visual media to project an image of seductive and omnipotent power. Part of the appeal of that image is what Brecht describes as a popular respect for mass murderers, be they private or public individuals:

Dazu kommt, daß das Verbrechen selbst häufig Bewunderung auslöst. [...] Die Geschichtsauffassung der Kleinbürger (und der Proleten, solange sie keine andere haben) ist größtenteils romantisch. Der erste Napoleon beschäftigte die arme Phantasie dieser Deutschen natürlich nicht durch den Code Napoleon, sondern durch die Millionen seiner Opfer. Die Blutflecken stehen diesen Eroberern gut zu Gesicht, wie Schönheitsflecken. [...] Dieser Respekt vor den Töttern muß zerstört werden. (Brecht 1988-2000, vol. 24: 317)

On returning to *Arturo Ui* in around 1953, Brecht is at pains to point out that the performance style of the play should be exaggeratedly theatrical and mocking, diminishing respect for Ui: “Der ‘Ui’ ist ein Parabelstück, geschrieben mit der Absicht, den üblichen gefährvollen Respekt vor den großen Töttern zu zerstören” (Brecht 1988-

2000, vol. 24: 318). This, as we shall see, has by and large been the programme for those German filmmakers who have attempted to portray Hitler prior to *Der Untergang*.

6. Some Hitler films before *Der Untergang*

The seriousness of many responses to *Der Untergang* is demonstrated by the scholarly range of films cited as precursors, precedents or parallels. As many commentators have pointed out, Pabst's *Der Letzte Akt* (1955) is a primary source for Eichinger / Hirschbiegel's film.⁹ Pabst's film was, moreover, far from being the only one to address the Third Reich during the post-war years. As Rudolf Worschech suggests in a useful article on precursors to *Der Untergang*, this is a myth propagated by filmmakers and critics of later decades:

Es gehört zu den großen Mystifikationen der letzten Jahre zu behaupten, dass die Nazi-Zeit in Deutschland zwei Jahrzehnte lang totgeschwiegen worden wäre und erst die 68er Generation die Frage nach den Tätern und Vätern gestellt habe. Im Film jedenfalls ergibt sich ein anderes Bild. (Worschech 2004: 23)¹⁰

From the outset, many of the *Trümmerfilme* tackled the subject of National Socialism directly. Staudte's *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (1946), the first post-war German feature film, not only confronts the legacy of National Socialism in the figure of the war criminal and Himmler-look-a-like Ferdinand Brückner, but also includes flashbacks to the war itself. Kurt Maetzig's *Ehe im Schatten* (1947), Helmut Käutner's *In jenen Tagen* (1947) and Herbert B. Fredersdorf and Marek Goldstein's *Lang ist der Weg* (1948) are examples of films which not only tackle Nazism, but also deal specifically with the persecution of the Jews. Although the number of such films decreases in the Federal Republic after 1949, it is not possible even after this date to describe National Socialism as a taboo, as Pabst's *Es geschah am 20. Juli* (1955), Falk Harnack's *Der 20. Juli* (1955), Käutner's *Des Teufels General* (1955), Robert Siodmak's *Nachts, wenn der Teufel kam* (1957) and Staudte's *Rosen für den Staatsanwalt* (1959) testify. In the GDR *Antifaschismus* remained integral to DEFA and the ideological line followed by East

⁹ Interestingly, neither this film nor Pabst's *Es geschah am 20. Juli* was chosen by Eichinger for his series of remakes of classic films from the 1950s. It did, however, include (under his own direction) the 1996 remake of Rolf Thiele's satire on the Economic Miracle *Das Mädchen Rosemarie* (1958).

¹⁰ Rudolf Worschech's article reviews several new films set in the National Socialist period and two books on the subject of film and the Third Reich: Peter Reichel (2004) *Erfundene Erinnerung: Weltkrieg und Judenmord in Film und Theater*. Munich: Carl Hanser and Bernd Eichinger; Joachim Fest (2004) *Der Untergang: Das Filmbuch*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt which contains an essay on Pabst's *Der letzte Akt* and other Hitler films.

German feature films through the 1950s and beyond. Some of the more well-known examples include Kurt Maetzig's *Der Rat der Götter* (1950), Slatan Dudow's *Stärker als die Nacht* (1954), Konrad Wolf's *Sterne* (1959) and *Professor Mamlock* (1961), and Frank Beyer's *Nacht unter Wölfen* (1963) (See Zielinski 1980: 84). To these lists of feature films could also be added numerous documentaries in East and West and "the more or less apologetic war films, which enjoyed a veritable boom in the 1950s and 1960s" (Zielinski 1980: 84).

Worschech points out, however, that the feature films of the 1950s and those of the New German Cinema that addressed the theme of National Socialism generally either avoided representing Hitler at all or portrayed him only from a distance. Instead they frequently tackle such issues as the involvement of ordinary German civilians and soldiers in the Third Reich: "Es hat im deutschen Film sicherlich jahrzehntelang Berührungängste gegeben, Adolf Hitler selbst zu zeigen" Worschech (2004: 25) concludes.

In the light of this one might be tempted to interpret the fleeting appearance of Hitler's arm in Grass / Schlöndorff's *Die Blechtrommel* (1979), as the Führer is driven through cheering crowds in Danzig, as a comic reference to the reluctance to portray Hitler in person. This reluctance does not simply amount to an unspoken or unarticulated taboo, but is rather part and parcel of the debate on how to deal "appropriately" with the representation of Hitler.

7. The *Führerbunker* and the commodification of Hitler

7.1 *Deutschland Stunde Null*

It could be argued that the struggle mentioned by Brecht against romanticizing history – today, perhaps the struggle against history as tourist attraction – has proved a losing battle. There is a striking premonition of this in the scenes set amongst the ruins of the *Reichskanzlei* in Roberto Rossellini's Neo-Realist rubble film *Germania anno zero* (1947), where the bunker so successfully marketed by *Der Untergang* has already become an attraction and a market place. A group of Tommies is shown sightseeing amongst the ruins accompanied by a guide who explains "now that over there, the concrete building, is Hitler's air raid shelter. In front of this is where they burnt the bodies of Hitler and Eva Braun. Perhaps you would like to go and take a photo of it. I'll take a photo of you first now". The group poses and the guide takes a photograph. The

film cuts to a close-up of two soldiers looking around: “That’s the place Hitler was burnt”, says one of them. “What, over there?”, replies the other. “Yes”. Shortly afterwards two of the soldiers buy a record of Hitler delivering one of his speeches as a souvenir. As they check the record on a portable gramophone carried by one of the black marketeers, Hitler’s triumphalist speech echoes around the empty space and the camera records shots of the devastated city of 1947. In the *Reichskanzlei* scene Rossellini presents triumphalism and downfall as inseparable.

This scene merits detailed citation not only because it lucidly points to the commodification of Hitler – something he had himself enthusiastically engaged in – but also because it highlights the fascination of fascism. It is worth noting that 1947 also saw the publication of Hugh Trevor Roper’s book *The Last Days of Hitler*, to which Kershaw makes reference in his article. Eyewitness accounts of the final days in the bunker very quickly became part of the aura and fascination of Nazism and its “total war”, what Siegfried Zielinski (1980: 96) has termed the “commercial packaging of the Nazi mass murder”. Knowledge of these accounts is integral to the post-war store of information about the Third Reich, information that could be taken for granted and exploited by filmmakers.¹¹

7.2 *Hitler, ein Film aus Deutschland*

Hans Jürgen Syberberg’s *Hitler, ein Film aus Deutschland* (1977) is certainly a cinematic spectacle in which, as Susan Sontag (1980a: 152) put it in her commentary on the film, “information is assumed”.¹² It “carries without any condescension a vast legacy of information about the Nazi period” (Sontag 1980a: 152). This information is arranged as a collage rather than as a narrative, and subdivided into four feature-length parts.¹³ The juxtaposing of radio broadcasts, music of the period, projected and hugely

¹¹ Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (1979) is a paradigmatic example of this.

¹² See also Stewart 1992.

¹³ There are some striking similarities between Syberberg’s film and Heiner Müller’s play *Germania Tod in Berlin* (completed 1971) which contains a scene, entitled “Die heilige Familie”, set in the *Führerbunker*. With grotesquely comic references to Hitler’s vegetarianism and carpet gnashing juxtaposed with more surreal elements, such as the *Führer* drinking petrol and eating human flesh, common knowledge about Nazism is filtered through myriad (mis)representations and (mis)interpretations of the Third Reich and presented as a network of iconic images. Montaged together these images add up to a weird and horrifying theatrical spectacle rather in the manner of a panel depicting Hell from a medieval altarpiece.

enlarged images with staged action, artefacts, costumes and texts by and about Hitler presents a complex, bewildering and oppressive exposure to an excess of Nazi iconography, a “phantasmagoria” or “allegory-littered wasteland” (Sontag 1980a: 140f.). The therapeutic purpose of this excess, the “work of mourning” it represents, has been convincingly analyzed by Anton Kaes in his book *From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of History as Film* and Eric Santner in *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany*. Susan Sontag explains Syberberg’s techniques in terms of the avoidance of the pitfalls of narrative representation:

To simulate atrocity convincingly is to risk making the audience passive, reinforcing witless stereotypes, confirming distance and creating fascination. Convinced that there is a morally (and aesthetically) correct way for a filmmaker to confront Nazism, Syberberg can make no use of any of the stylistic conventions of fiction that pass for realism. Neither can he rely on documents to show how it “really” was. (Sontag 1980a: 139)

Instead, the figure of Hitler appears in many different guises: as a puppet, as an actor acting Charlie Chaplin acting Hitler, in the form of archive recordings, as the subject of the accounts written by historians, as Caesar rising from Wagner’s grave to explain and justify his life.

One of the many techniques used by Syberberg is the Brechtian “history from below”, the witness accounts given by employees who become part of the machinery of power. In an extended episode in Part 2, “Ein deutscher Traum ... bis ans Ende der Welt”, the destroyed *Reichskanzlei* is backprojected:

Weiter der Kammerdiener Hitlers in heutiger Kleidung, sich erinnernd. Geht durch die Räume der zerstörten Reichskanzlei, d.h. der heute nicht mehr existierenden Reichskanzlei in unserer Projektion. Wie zu einer Schloßbesichtigung [...]. (Syberberg 1979: 181f.)

Dwarfed by the massive projections, the actor Hellmut Lange recites incidents from Hitler’s private life based on the recollections of his valet Karl-Wilhelm Krause (1949), detailing the *Führer*’s wardrobe, his daily routines, the meals he takes, the shaving products he likes. This long monologue sustains a monotony of delivery and exhaustive detail as he explains difficulties such as providing clothing acceptable to the *Führer* as well as his public:

Obwohl ich schon jedesmal zu einem Straßenanzug 2 bis 3 passende Krawatten bereitgelegt, mußte ich feststellen, daß er sich doch aus dem Schrank nur die unpassendste herausgesucht hat. Frau Troost kritisierte ihn oft: “Mein Führer, unmögliche Krawatte.” Vorwurfsvoll schaute sie dann auf mich. Ich sagte dann, die passende liegt zu Hause. (Syberberg 1979: 186f.)

Syberberg's focus here is on the banality, or rather mundanity, of evil. However, the Brechtian framework of Syberberg's presentation of the minutiae of Hitler's daily routine constructs a critical distance which is very different from the use of the memoirs of Traudl Junge, Hitler's secretary, in *Der Untergang*, although the use of brief extracts from André Heller and Othmar Schmiderer's 2002 documentary *Im toten Winkel - Hitlers Sekretärin* to bookend Eichinger / Hirschbiegel's film is clearly intended to function as an estrangement device of sorts.¹⁴

7.3 Hundert Jahre Adolf Hitler – Die letzte Stunde im Führerbunker

Christoph Schlingensief shot his frenzied, slapstick "comedy" *100 Jahre Adolf Hitler: Die letzte Stunde im Führerbunker* in just 16 hours, starting at 9am on 28 November 1988, on a budget of 35,000DM and with a team of twenty participants. This was to be the first part of a German trilogy. It was followed by the reunification comedies *Das deutsche Kettensägenmassaker* (1990) and *Terror 2000: Intensivstation Deutschland* (1992).¹⁵ Schlingensief's film is almost an exercise in *cinéma vérité*, documenting the location, performances and conditions under which it was made. The film takes the figures of Hitler, Goebbels, Magda Goebbels, Eva Braun, Göring and others and mixes recognizable stories about the bunker with performance-art-style sketches and tableaux. In Schlingensief's film Hitler dies, maybe of a drug overdose, and instead of Göring taking over, Eva Braun pretends to be Hitler and marries Magda Goebbels. The style of acting and delivery is hysterical with incessant screaming, pantomimic acts of aggression, and childish pleasure in sexual transgression. In a review in *Die Tageszeitung*, appropriately entitled "Darf's noch ein Tabubruch sein?", Christa Thelen commented:

Als Filmmemacher hat Christoph Schlingensief das Grenzenüberschreiten zu seinem Beruf gemacht: Immer wieder erfand er neue Drehbücher, in denen man den Handlungsträgern beim Kotzen, Scheißen und Ficken zusehen durfte. [...] In seinem neuen Film *100 Jahre Adolf Hitler* beabsichtigte Schlingensief nun ein weiteres Tabu zu brechen. Frei nach der Devise: wir lachen über den Faschismus – entstand ein Film, dessen Atmosphäre irgendwo zwischen Performance-Theater und Bierzelt liegt.

¹⁴ In this film (released in Britain as *Blind Spot*) Junge at the age of eighty-one gives an account of her life. She describes Hitler as kind, considerate and paternal, stressing his charisma and indicating that his anti-Semitism was simply ignored by those around him. The account has also appeared in book form: Traudl Junge; Melissa Müller (2004). It is worth noting that André Heller also features prominently, as a narrator on screen, in Syberberg's film.

¹⁵ For more on Schlingensief's *Das deutsche Kettensägenmassaker* see Randall Halle's contribution to this volume.

Schlingensief's Ausgangspunkt: Damals im April 1945 um 17 Uhr zeigte sich Deutschland privat, ließ der Faschismus die Hosen runter. Es wurde gekotzt, gefickt und geschissen. (Thelen 1989)

Schlingensief, as a post-ideological disciple of Fassbinder, furnishes his film with a meta-textual discourse on cinema itself. Amongst those cited in his film is Wim Wenders, claiming that better pictures must be made in order to make a better world. For "authenticity" the location is a WWII bunker in Mülheim an der Ruhr, and the actors include Fassbinder regulars Margit Carstensen and Volker Spengler, together with cult star Udo Kier as Hitler. In true, or possibly ironic, *vérité* style the camera is visible at times, along with the clapper board and microphones, the music to the film plays on a record player and, with a knowing nod to Brechtianism, the actors make scant effort to impersonate their characters. "Kann man so mit dem Faschismus umgehen, ihn gar bewältigen? Belehrung, Analyse, Aufklärung, all das leistet der Film nicht. Und doch funktioniert er auf merkwürdiger Weise" was Wilhelm Roth's conclusion in *epd Film* (1989: 29):

Christoph Schlingensief, ein Nachgeborener, Jahrgang 1960, ein Naiver, ein Wilder, inszeniert einen Totentanz, so grell, so geschmacklos, so brutal, das einem das angängliche Lachen bald vergeht: Die Banalität des Bösen, hier wird sie zum Ereignis, und es ist dann völlig egal, ob das historisch in irgendeiner Weise stimmt. Ein Endspiel als Kasperltheater. Schlingensief's Leistung liegt nicht zuletzt darin, daß er seinen Protagonisten auch im Negativen jede Größe verweigert. Das ist kein Film der Legendenbildung für Rechtsradikale. (Roth 1989: 29)

Schlingensief's burlesque, scatological presentation of the Nazi elite takes us back to Brecht's reflections on how to portray Hitler:

Die großen politischen Verbrecher müssen durchaus preisgegeben werden, und vorzüglich der Lächerlichkeit. Denn sie sind vor allem keine großen politischen Verbrecher, sondern die Verüber großer politischer Verbrechen, was etwas ganz anderes ist. (Brecht 1988-2000 vol. 34: 316)

In incarnating the *Führer*, Syberberg and Schlingensief turn to extreme forms of estrangement to preclude empathy. What is troubling and challenging about *Der Untergang* is that it does not, aside from the brief documentary passages at its beginning and end, have recourse to the intellectual, moral and emotional reassurance of *Verfremdung*.

8. Conclusion: Fascinating Fascism

As Worschech points out, the Nazi has become a popular shorthand for the representation of evil in films which have little or nothing to do with National Socialism itself:

Wer sind eigentlich die Gegner von Indiana Jones? Na klar, die Nazis. Und sah nicht die Hühnerfarm in *Chicken Run* wie ein KZ aus, wo ständig der Schornstein raucht und der Stacheldraht oft ins Bild kommt? Die Nazis mit den schwarzen SS-Uniformen: ein simples Symbol für das Böse. (Worschech 2004: 22)

It is worth noting the common ground between the discussions of *Der Untergang* – including claims that it confuses entertainment with instruction and “humanizes Hitler” – and the debate initiated by Susan Sontag with her 1975 essay “Fascinating Fascism”. Sontag’s concern is not specifically the representation of the Third Reich *per se*, but rather the increasing attraction of the artefacts of Nazi Germany:

Nazi art is reactionary, defiantly outside the century’s mainstream of achievement in the arts. But just for this reason it has been gaining a place in contemporary taste. The left-wing organizers of a current exhibition of Nazi painting and sculpture (the first since the war) in Frankfurt have found, to their dismay, the attendance excessively large and hardly as serious-minded as they hoped. (Sontag 1980b: 93f.)

In her essay, which takes as its starting point Leni Riefenstahl’s coffee-table book *The Last of the Nuba* and a British paperback entitled *SS Regalia*, Sontag considers various aspects of the rise of interest in Nazism in the mid-1970s, including its use in the transgressive gay aesthetic of experimental filmmakers such as Kenneth Anger, the use of Nazi symbols and artefacts for shock effect in Pop Art, and the association between Nazi displays of power and fashionable sado-masochism: “The color is black, the material is leather, the seduction is beauty, the justification is honesty, the aim is ecstasy, the fantasy is death” is how the essay memorably ends (Sontag 1980b: 105).

A generation change is offered as a possible explanation for the “de-Nazification” of Leni Riefenstahl, by which Sontag means her rehabilitation as an acceptable artist in the eyes of the general public:

Nazism fascinates in a way other iconography staked out by the pop sensibility (from Mao Tse-tung to Marilyn Monroe) does not. No doubt, some part of the general rise of interest in fascism can be set down as a product of curiosity. For those born after the early 1940s, bludgeoned by a lifetime’s palaver, pro and con, about communism, it is fascism – the great conversation piece of their parents’ generation – which represents the exotic, the unknown. Then there is a general fascination among the young with horror, with the irrational. Courses dealing with the history of fascism are, along with those on the occult (including vampirism), among the best attended these days on college campuses. And

beyond this, the definitely sexual lure of fascism, [...] seems impervious to deflation by irony or over-familiarity. (Sontag 1980b: 101)

For Sontag the generation change and a lack of historical awareness or perspective also help to explain the fact that the continuity in Riefenstahl's aesthetic, and thus its perpetuation of the aesthetics of fascism, is overlooked or ignored:

The force of her work being precisely in the continuity of its political and aesthetic ideas, what is interesting is that this was once seen so much more clearly than it seems to be now, when people claim to be drawn to Riefenstahl's images for their beauty of composition. (Sontag 1980b: 97)

The fact that in the thirty years since Sontag's essay National Socialist iconography has become ever-more seductive and an increasingly debased (and profitable) shorthand does not by any means imply that new films about the Third Reich should be taboo, although Kershaw (2004) for one expresses a fear that *Der Untergang* might set off a new "Hitler-Welle". The issue, as ever, is the nature and purpose of the discourse. John Sandford has neatly encapsulated what is at stake:

It is partly a theoretical debate over the inseparability or otherwise of form and content, and it is partly practical: how *does* one put across one's ideas to a mass audience unless it be in a form to which that audience is accustomed? But what if that form implicates and reflects – and perhaps confirms – precisely the philosophy that one is trying to question? (Sandford 1980: 34)

There are clearly those who may feel that Eichinger / Hirschbiegel's film fails on this count. Eichinger himself has stressed that his film "was written for the next generation which will have to come to terms with Hitler's legacy for themselves" (Morrison 2004: 67). One of the key issues raised not only by *Der Untergang* itself but also by its marketing and success is whether the film provides them with adequate tools or an appropriate language for this engagement.¹⁶

In the case of Syberberg's *Hitler, ein Film aus Deutschland* and Schlingensiefel's *100 Jahre Adolf Hitler* the language adopted is a critical, Brechtian, anti-Hollywood aesthetic. Neither film offers a straightforward dramatization of Hitler's final days. Neither is cut to a commercial feature length – Syberberg's film is 437 minutes long, Schlingensiefel's 60 – and neither has a readily-identifiable narrative structure. Eichinger

¹⁶ In this context it would also be worth comparing *Der Untergang* with other, less well-known, "Hitler films" of recent years. These include the burlesque comedy *Gespräch mit dem Biest* (1996), written and directed by Armin Müller-Stahl (who also plays the *Führer*), and Aleksandr Sokurov's German-Russian co-production *Moloch* (1999), a meditative, painterly portrait of a day at Hitler's "Eagle's Nest" (Kehlsteinhaus) on the Obersalzberg.

/ Hirschbiegel's film is resolutely made to appeal to a mainstream, international audience. It broaches difficult, historical issues in a palatable, entertaining way, which is not to say it does not address them at all. Syberberg's and Schlingensief's films are demanding, "difficult" films seen by small, self-selecting audiences. *Der Untergang* has been a worldwide success at the box office and (at the risk of stating the obvious) it is clear that its very accessibility to a mass audience is both its strength and potentially its weakness.

The "private Hitler" is the figure that *Der Untergang* claims to have explored through its use of the accounts furnished by Fest and Junge. The use of Traudl Junge's memoirs, combined with the focus on a location that has a privileged status in the topography of the Third Reich, lends the film an appeal and claim to "authenticity" which inevitably draws on all the fascination of fascism. At the same time, however, by staking its claim (accurate or otherwise) to historical significance in breaking a taboo in its portrayal of Hitler it situates itself within a long-running debate about representation and realism. To echo Susan Sontag: the accent is accurate, the amputations are bloody, the aim is authenticity, the method is entertainment, the justification is education, the fantasy is understanding.

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