Forum

Facing Hitler

German Responses to Der Untergang

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First Cut: Generalities

Commercial films are straightforward. They visualize a particular narrative, shaped by a written script and a director's intentions, which is then promoted through various media so that viewers will hear about it and then pay to go see the result. Viewers' responses can be shaped as much by the "supply side" (the quality of the script, the director's vision, the cinematography, how the film is promoted, etc.), as by the "demand side" (the genre of the film itself, its assumed entertainment value, the themes addressed, the reputation of the director, word-of-mouth advertising, etc.). Depending on which side one thinks more important, one could either argue that it is the director's intent and follow-through that matter, or that a film's success ultimately rests on how and to what audiences respond.

Nevertheless, such a supply versus demand, or intent versus perceived content characterization leaves out the dynamics that are more usually at work and that make the success or failure of a commercial film so difficult to predict. Audiences may stay away from films whose scripts they find poor, or they find a film just quirky and appealing enough to make an unexpected hit out of it. The intent of a director may be unclear or too difficult to pull off on screen, or it may perfectly capture the zeitgeist. The cinematography can undermine the themes ostensibly addressed in a film, or it may enhance it.

A film ultimately may appeal only to one age group, or it may resonate across the entire age spectrum.

To rely only on the fortuitous congruence of directorial intent and audience response is not enough, or rather, an audience does not necessarily know what it demands until it sees what it has been supplied with. This may be a reason why we so often have movie sequels or formulaic Bollywood productions nowadays: producers seem to think that having an audience delightedly consume one dessert must mean another dessert much like it will be equally desirable. They are not always wrong. Yet, they are not always right either–movie directors like Robert Altmann or John Sayles show that it is possible to build a successful career by not repeating oneself.

All of this is meta-commentary, because it is equally impossible nowadays to confine oneself only to an examination of the intersection between a particular director and a fickle audience. One also needs to take the reviewers into account–and not just because they serve to encourage or discourage audiences from going to see a particular film. They also provide context and interpretation of a kind that may well have occurred neither to director nor audience. As such, they act as conduits, giving voice to or criticizing both what a director is doing and what an audience will be seeing. For this reason, the following analysis first examines directorial intent, followed by audience response, and finally the more complex matter of what reviewers have said.

Second Cut: Specificities

Making a commercial film with Hitler as the central character is paradoxical. The subject itself is so thoroughly visually and historically known–or, if one prefers, iconic–that it can seem as though the only real choice left is how to light what are predetermined scenes. The dramatic imagination and cinematography needed for a comparable film about, say, Genghis Khan or Suleiman the Magnificent, is far greater simply because our visual and historical documentation is so much poorer. In the case of Hitler, the fact versus fiction problem is acute, and directors must decide whether to opt for scrupulous realism or for a telling suffused with more imagination. In this particular case, producer Bernd Eichinger, who in 1978 had produced a film heavy on

symbol and meaning (Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's very long *Hitler: A Film from Germany*), opted for ultra-realism in producing *Der Untergang.*

This is a relatively easy choice compared with how to address the historical-evaluative axis, or in other words, the question of what the "appropriate" stance towards the past should be today. The problem is not merely to decide which of a number of schools of interpretation should be favored. The problem is also that Hitler is the embodiment of questions about national identification, or more specifically, stands for what is now regarded as an "abnormal" past as compared with the "normal" present. That past is also quite alien to most Germans, 75 percent of whom alive today were born after 1945. *Der Untergang* is thus being shown to a population in which historical accounts are rapidly supplanting personal narration and memory–neatly shown in the film, which after a long historical account ends with an interview with an eyewitness to the events in Hitler's bunker, and that eyewitness subsequently has died.

Still, the Nazi era is not a period of history anyone living in Germany is permitted to forget or even be oblivious to. The reminders are everywhere: in architecture, in the school curriculum, in print, on television, even in everyday conversation. It is so relentless, some are now saying, that awareness of those twelve years of the Third Reich is swamping the rest of German history. The growing sentiment is that two generations after the downfall of that Reich, it is becoming time to put an era now sliding out of active memory into its historical context and to live more normal lives–without forgetting that shadow.[1]

My thesis about *Der Untergang*–the first full-length commercial and dramatic film made in Germany in fifty years to feature Hitler in the starring role, and one that focuses only on the last days of the Third Reich in Berlin, and more specifically on Hitler in his bunker–is simple. Though he and the Third Reich will not and cannot be forgotten in Germany, he is being starkly, realistically, and humanly, portrayed precisely in order to more fully and finally lay him to rest.

The Producer's Intentions

Though *Der Untergang* was directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel, it has been interpreted very much as an Eichinger film. Bernd Eichinger is

primarily a producer, though in the more than sixty films with which he has been associated, he occasionally acts or directs–in this case, he was the scriptwriter. Rather than being associated with any one genre, his films have ranged from the socially critical (*We Children from Bahnhof Zoo*, 1981) through comedy (*Wrongfully Accused*, 1998) to horror (*Resident Evil*, 2002). A number have been popular successes, and he has become particularly well-known for his adaptations of best-selling books, including *The Never-Ending Story* (1984), *The Name of the Rose* (1986), *The House of the Spirits* (1993), *Smilla's Sense of Snow* (1997), *Nowhere in Africa* (2003), and *Perfume* (2006). Eichinger's films are often in English, but not this time:

> We undertook to make this film in German, with German actors and a German director. Why? If one shines a spotlight on the greatest physical and psychic collapse of an entire civilization, namely our German nation, then it should–must–also be possible for us to tell this story. Many other projects focusing on Hitler are in production or have already been completed by the Americans, the British, and others. Past productions with great actors, whether with Anthony Hopkins or Alec Guinness in the role of Hitler, have tackled this topic. I think it is time that we, with the means we have, tell our own story and have the courage in what we show to finally bring the main protagonist to the screen.[2]

Eichinger's interest in a specifically German approach to Hitler was of long standing. As a twenty-nine year-old in 1978, he had produced Syberberg's *Hitler: A Film from Germany*, a didactic production in which "Hitler" often appeared as a marionette. Syberberg saw Hitler as inevitable, a projection of latent social forces: "a mirror of our desire and of our dreams of the power of our community … everything led to him … he was Germany and Germany was he in the twentieth century," the film narrator at one point heavily intones.[3] Unsurprisingly, German audiences showed little interest in sitting through seven hours of this.

That was not the only vision Eichinger with which was dissatisfied. He was also worried about interpretive hegemony being usurped by non-German, and particularly Hollywood or Anglo-American television productions. One can even read into his words a certain quiet pride that a German production will simply tell the story–our German story for which *we* are responsible, Eichinger might have said–better, or more accurately.

At the North American premiere of *Der Untergang* at the Toronto Film Festival in September 2004, both Eichinger and Hirschbiegel responded with some heat to an American reporter's question: this film was not at all about trying to absolve Germans from their responsibilities. In another context, Eichinger had said the approach of the film was "relating rather than commenting,"[4] indicating he was more interested in "*Geschichten*," the relating of stories, than in "*die Geschichte*," or what it is historians provide as commentary about the past. With respect to older icons of German historiography, one could then see Eichinger as closer to Leopold von Ranke, who wanted to relate history "as it really happened," than to Friedrich Meinecke (or Syberberg) in their judgment that much was due to a particular German destiny or even to Hitler's "demonic personality."[5]

A number of well-known English-speaking actors, including Derek Jacobi, Ian McKellan, Alec Guiness, and Anthony Hopkins, have played Hitler in past decades, and both *Hitler–The Last Ten Days* (1973) and *The Bunker* (1981; made for television) focused on Hitler's demise. Eichinger thus had various English-language models to work from. Yet, the only direct precursor film, in the sense of a full-length dramatic film about Hitler in his bunker made in German with German actors, was G.W. Pabst's *Der Letzte Akt* (1955). Only after Bruno Ganz, the Swiss actor who plays Hitler in *Der Untergang*, had seen Pabst's movie was he convinced he could actually sustain the role.

Still, for Eichinger to say "we [should] … have the courage … to finally bring the main protagonist to the screen,"[6] is self-serving, implying that other German filmmakers have been holding back, but Eichinger will not. It also suggests that the supposed taboo–to only show Hitler briefly in films, and then from the side or from behind–has been broken, or that other protagonists have been brought to the screen while Hitler waits in the wings. To the extent that they increase pre-release hype or publicity, these are self-serving implications because they do not address whether any such claims are accurate.

Eichinger's larger intent was to use the bunker as a capsule, a metaphoric summary of the twelve years of the Third Reich in sped-up form. Part of the film, inside the bunker (inside the system), was about: "a sense of needing to fulfill one's duty. You were a traitor if you gave up, back then. You didn't give up; you just didn't. You

didn't complain, you just accepted, for that was your duty–it is that obedience to authority that is more the German virtue or vice."[7] The tragedy is how everyone waited for everyone else to put an end to it, to have the courage to flick off the lights in that bunker, pull the curtains on that regime. No one did. To the bitter end until that final downfall, others believed in Hitler's reassurances (or in miracles), the end only finally coming when the chief protagonists put an end to themselves.

The other part of the film, playing outside on the streets of destroyed Berlin, is a different kind of downfall. The system, the infrastructure, has collapsed and there is no food or electricity, just ruin and rubble, with last-ditch but hopeless resistance against the hated Russian invaders, symbolized by pressing children into adult roles as city defenders and thereby sacrificing them. Amidst this breakdown of civilization, Eichinger wanted to show what ordinary people would to do to survive and to help others, performing courageous and heroic acts amidst utter chaos. Eichinger did not want to portray this with grand pathos, but through utter realism, hewing as closely as possible to pictures from that place, that era, forcing the color imagery on screen to conform with the black-and-white documentation. "I've asked myself for twenty years…how it could have come to such mass madness among people who otherwise functioned quite normally," Eichinger has said,[8] and these outdoor shots might be taken as an effort to continue to believe in normalcy amidst madness. This contrast between abnormal and normal might be said to be the leitmotif of the film.

While Eichinger's experience in film meant he had an enormous range of possible styles to choose from, in the end he opted for a conventional linear format for the film–to tell *Geschichten über die Geschichte*, stories about historical events–of the last days of Nazi rule in Berlin, inter-cut between interior, bunker scenes and exterior, city action. The main protagonists are in the bunker, shown with obsessive, scrupulously accurate attention to historical details, and they act out a drama of self-delusion and self-destruction–though a few (the young, the innocent) do survive, in the end shown even a little redeemed or at least headed for a better future.

Eichinger's major problem was how to deal with the main protagonist himself, and numerous options were available: Hitler as

psychopath, insane, mentally ill; or as a monster; or demonic; or then as a "crazy genius;" or a mystically hypnotizing Messiah.[9] In Eichinger's view, Hitler possessed enormous criminal and destructive energy, yet remained of completely sound mind right to the end. "Of course Hitler was a human being," Eichinger said, "but he wasn't humane. He could be friendly, even courteous. But he utterly lacked human characteristics."[10] Understanding this "unperson," as he is sometimes called in German, seemed impossible–particularly in the absence of any of his own self-reflective diaries. *Mein Kampf* was a programmatic statement from twenty years earlier, thus similarly unhelpful in fully portraying the man. Many of the accounts of those closest to Hitler (such as Albert Speer's) were exercises in exculpation or self-justification. It would only be with the publication of the eyewitness account of a then-young secretary and the republication of part of an earlier work by the historian Joachim Fest that Eichinger found what he called "a dramaturgic key" to unlock his portrait of Hitler.[11]

Third Cut: The Film Librarian's Contribution

By focusing so exclusively on the final days of Hitler in his bunker, Eichinger chose *not* to focus on a variety of other aspects: the segregation, degradation, and elimination in the concentration camps of those deemed "undesirable," and the accompanying Nazi ideology (or its attractiveness at the time), the question of "followership" (including the bureaucratic "banality of evil")–and the more general relationship of followers to leaders, the absence of widespread resistance, the wider conduct of the war and the resulting death and devastation, and so on. One could argue that many of these aspects were well known to the public or prospective audiences already, or that other dramatic films about this era that have had wide circulation–*The Diary of Anne Frank, Sophie's Choice*, *Jacob the Liar, Schindler's List, The Pianist*, etc.–address precisely these themes. Yet, these are not dramatic films made by German directors and producers–or even made in German.

The question of how to portray Hitler on film also presupposes that one should do so at all. Hitler himself wanted no rivals on the

screen during his lifetime, instructing the German film industry to show him only in newsreels and documentaries.[12] Attempts to control Hitler's image on screen in foreign movies were apparently also made. By Charlie Chaplin's own account, a high Nazi official complained to the U.S. Motion Picture Association that Chaplin's plans to portray Hitler in *The Great Dictator* (1940) would "naturally lead to serious troubles and complications."[13] There was certainly plenty of documentary footage of the real Hitler available. It is even arguable that Leni Riefenstahl had already provided so much, or such excessively dramatic mise-en-scène in *Triumph of the Will* that to German directors, doing anything more on film seemed superfluous.

Yet, an extensive compilation of the German "Cinematography of the Holocaust" prepared by the Fritz Bauer Institute in Frankfurt contains no films that deal directly with Hitler. Dramatizations in popular feature films made outside of Germany, including the more light-hearted treatments, have tended to focus on victims and their families. The tormentors or perpetrators shown in such films are implementers rather than policy-makers. The face–or, because it makes the point so much more obviously, the dress–of the Nazi in such films is that of the storm trooper, the Gestapo man, the mid-level Wehrmacht officer, the camp guard. At most, one sees Hitler's portrait on the wall in an office, a shadowy, distant presence.

West German feature films made shortly after the war's end, but seen by very few in Germany due to limited distribution, tried to show the conflicts and tensions of the day, including anti-Semitism (*Zwischen Gestern und Morgen*, 1947) and the mistrust shown towards remigrants (*Der Ruf*, 1948/9*)*. In East Germany, critique of who knew what (*Die Mörder sind unter uns*, 1946; *Der Rat der Götter*, 1949/50), and later, the failures of the West (*Der Prozess wird vertagt*, 1958) were more the order of the day.[14] By the 1960s, several films did use concentration camps or the Auschwitz trial as a back story (*Zeugin aus der Hölle*, 1965; *Mensch und Bestie*, 1963; *Das zweite Gleis*, 1962), but the proper integration of the Nazi past into German feature films actually only began after the American television miniseries *Holocaust: The Story of the Family Weiss* was aired in 1978-9. The German answer to that came in 1984 with the first part of Edgar Reitz's monumental *Heimat–Eine deutsche Chronik*.

Intermission: Audience Response

Press reaction months before *Der Untergang* opened was intense, not just because the film was about Hitler but also because of its starring cast and, for a German movie, its enormous expense. The popular magazines *Der Spiegel* and *Stern* devoted cover stories to it, numerous editorials appeared in influential newspapers, both Eichinger and Hirschbiegel gave long television and radio interviews, there were extensive Web discussions, and even the *Bild Zeitung*, the country's major tabloid newspaper, ran a series of articles about the film. Potential viewers heard a clear message: this was a film one had to go and see.

The response was intense, with 4.5 million people flocking to see it in the first three months of its 2004 run. Three months later, the worldwide gross was five times the cost of making the film, and many German schools have already made it part of their history curriculum.[15] Audiences at the premieres, including the press corps, were stunned, with many leaving the movie theater in silence, moved or pensive. Most disturbing for many Germans was their feeling they were facing Hitler–as Bruno Ganz plays him, physically imploding but still capable of towering rage when he hears what he does not like, and yet also capable of being kind to his naïve secretary. This *was* Hitler, the real human being that you were facing, intimately and at eye-level.[16]

Individual viewer responses are captured occasionally in newspaper articles or can be read on the Web, but there is little by way of more general information. A FORSA poll was conducted soon after the film opened, and found 69 percent of those surveyed agreeing it was "all right to show Hitler's human sides in a cinema film." A rather different piece of evidence comes from a recent study of attitudes about German history undertaken by Prof. Manfred Schmitt at the Universität Koblenz. It included 400 ninth and tenth graders at six schools. The results were clear: students who had seen the film saw Hitler in a more human light and had less of a negative reaction to him than students who had not. Girls generally had more negative reactions to Hitler than did boys, as did those attending the less academic *Hauptschule* as compared with the more academically rigorous *Gymnasium.*[17]

German public attitudes about Hitler are, in any case, complex. Polls from the 1950s-70s asking: "which great German, in your opinion, has done most for Germany?" found virtually no support for Hitler, as compared with, say, Chancellor Adenauer or Bismarck.[18] Yet, polls in the same period that asked the more suggestive question: "would you say Hitler was one of Germany's greatest statesmen, had it not been for the war?" found a third of the respondents agreeing.[19] Lest one think this historical, a 1989 study found that in towns of up to 4,000 residents, "47 percent of those questioned considered Hitler one of Germany's greatest statesmen if it hadn't been for the war and the persecution of Jews; in major cities, the figure was 32 percent."[20] A 2004 poll among 2,500 respondents, found 17 percent in the West (7 percent in the East) of those without a *Gymnasium* education, and 10 percent in the West (3 percent in the East) of those with one, agreeing with the statement: "Had it not been for the extermination of the Jews, Hitler would be regarded as a great statesman."[21] Other polls consistently indicate that "almost nobody would vote again for a man like Hitler" if given the same choice again, yet when asked the more suggestive question: "Do you think Nazism was a good idea that was badly implemented?" 26 percent of those in a 1994 poll said it was.[22] While this is a vast improvement over the immediate postwar era when more than 50 percent agreed, this 1994 finding is also no different than that of 1977. In other words, a not small part of the population is willing to give credence to some aspects of the Nazi state, perhaps in conjunction with not thinking so badly of Hitler himself.

Andrei Markovits and Simon Reich have argued that Germans since the 1990s have dealt with National Socialism in four interrelated ways: as victims (self-legitimating, exculpatory), as perpetrators (admitting at least tacit complicity, or then identifying with sufferers), with indifference (amnesiac, silent), or with approval, and it is in this last group that one finds the "fine idea, poorly implemented" attitude.[23] Yet, it is probably more appropriate to note that the image of Hitler cannot be disentangled from Nazism itself: "a terrifying combination of populism and technocracy with inhumanity, Social-Darwinistic imperialism, and almost nihilistic amorality," as the *Dictionary of World History* defines it.[24] Outside of Germany, many still agree with Winston Churchill who, when Germany invaded

Russia in June 1941, thundered, "Hitler is a monster of wickedness, insatiable in his lust for blood and plunder!"[25] or see him as a murderer, a bigot, or as evil incarnate.

Fourth Cut: The Evil Hitler

Evil is the intent to bring about harm or pain to others. Intent matters, and in Anglo-American law, a prior intent to bring harm or pain aggravates the severity, and therefore also the penalties, of the offence committed. Hitler clearly had evil intent, which he plainly, openly and repeatedly articulated. But, whether it helps to portray him as evil or demonic is a different question–for it then increases the sense of his inhumanity, and makes it far harder to see him as accountable, as an ordinary human being, for his actions.

It is also convenient, even comforting, to equate Hitler with evil, because it avoids having to think about the "Hitler in our selves," as Max Picard entitled his postwar book.[26] "Much as we recoil at the notion," one recent film reviewer noted, "the quintessential hate-figure of the 20th century was a man, not a monster, and if we are to put his crimes in the dock, then all that we mean by 'humanity' must be hauled up there, too."[27] An evil monster, in other words, one can dismiss as beyond the pale, outside the norm, not fully human. A fully human man, however, who behaves in ways monstrously outside the norm, is far more difficult to handle.

Hitler's evil intent had to be carried out by others, including those willing to inflict a great deal of pain on others. As we know from Stanley Milgram's work, that can potentially mean 60 percent of a given population, even 85 percent in a German replication study.[28] Experimental work shows that it can take as little as a person pretending to be in authority, or an arbitrary distinction drawn in a homogenous group between "prisoners" and "wardens" in a quite artificial setting, for perfectly ordinary people to behave in ways that in real settings would bring pain, even death, to others. It comforts us to cast this as a question of how inhibitions can be overcome in experimental settings.

The possibility that this is not the case, and that those who "do evil" actually have a sense of continuing moral integrity, is a

different and far more disturbing matter. If a person behaves "within the framework of contemporary normative paradigms, academic teachings, military conceptions of duty and canonized definitions of honor … and contemporary definitions of 'decency,'"[29] why should they feel guilt, shame, or qualms about their acts afterwards? For Germans today, the thought that at least some of their ancestors felt they were doing the right thing may be one of the most difficult, rarely articulated, legacies of the Nazi project. It is not much comfort to know that there are those in Rwanda, Cambodia, ex-Yugoslavia, the Congo, and other places, who since 1945 have also thought their similarly heinous acts were fully justified.

The Critics Weigh In

The Long Shot

For a number of critics, *Der Untergang* dangerously left out aspects that they were expecting to see. To some, it was yet another example of an "irritating desire for uninhibitedness" many in the arts had been displaying since Unification in their search for a "normalized" German national identity. That search was irritating for its painful naïveté, for its mix of kitsch, heroization and ignorance.[30] A normal national identity, by implication, was not something that existed in Germany, and those twelve years of the German past needed to be treated in deadly earnest, not trivialized. As another critic wrote, films and television now "quarry the past ever more openly for melodramatic entertainment. Eichinger's film casts an astonishingly cool eye on German guilt, and opens out a space for long disapproved-of [national] identification."[31]

Hitler was not to be made into entertainment–a point with which he himself likely would have agreed!–for films about that part of the German past are to have pedagogic, if not didactic intent and content. If they did not, it might look as though they were celebrating what most decidedly should not be, and sending entirely the wrong messages. The difficulty, however, lay in the nature of visual media themselves, as they indiscriminately pulled everything into their orbit. Hence, when they portrayed fascism, they "staggered between blasphemy and ideology, and between minimizing and monstrousness."[32]

As the same time, sophisticated contradictions are at work here. On the one hand, contemporary audiences lack a sense of that era any more. The things associated with it–swastikas, flags, Nazi salutes, and so forth–have become ciphers lacking referents, used in so many other contexts, and rhetorically cited in so many ways, that they have become disembodied icons.[33] The point here is near-semiotic: we still have the signifiers, but the signified has become unclear. On the other hand, Eichinger was being subtly pernicious, because in his extremely scrupulous attention to detail, despite it being a dramatic film, he had crafted an impossibility–an "authentic myth."[34] As a result, his account or storytelling was more believable than reality could have been, and as Bruno Ganz plays him, paradoxically, he seems even more real and authentic than Hitler himself.[35]

One of the most sharply worded critiques, however, came from fellow film director Wim Wenders. He had been annoyed twenty years previously by a documentary produced to accompany Joachim Fest's earlier Hitler book, arguing that the weak voice of the historian was no match for "the power of these infectious Nazi images." *Der Untergang*, also based on Fest, was even worse:

> The film has no opinion about anything, especially not about fascism or Hitler … [In the final frames describing their fates], Himmler and Göring are shown no differently than all the other war criminals, put on the same plane as the other nice people, the Traudls and little Peters, so by the end seducers and victims are unified by an arbitrary lack of attitude … Viewers are led into a black hole in which they are (almost) imperceptibly brought to see this era from the point of view of the perpetrators, or at least are asked to bring a certain understanding for them.[36]

In short, Eichinger was manipulating his audience, asking viewers to identify if not with the Nazi project, then at least with an ageing, frail Hitler. The film seemed "to collaborate with its subject."[37] And that was unacceptable, not least because this is a film not about the tragedy of the murder of Jews and other "undesirables," but instead the telling, as tragedy, of the downfall of the Nazi project.[38]

The Close Ups

It is worth remembering, amidst these weighty and convincing analyses, that Eichinger was not engaged in a philosophical discourse about the nature of the German national soul, but was rather

making a feature film. Feature films need to portray drama and tension, and for Eichinger, the situation of the last days of the Reich was drama enough.

"*Untergang*" is a word that can describe a sinking ship or a setting sun. In this case, it is applied to the collapse of an authority-driven, duty-bound, hierarchical society in a *Götterdämmerung* of Wagnerian and cataclysmic–or to take the film term, blockbuster–proportions. Hitler, Eichinger himself argued, was engaged in his own staging, directing the last act of the Third Reich in a manner that would have his own personal demise pull down everyone else. Those Germans, he thundered at the end, who had let him down, given up–they deserved to die, the whole pack of them.

That is terrifying and horrific–making those subordinates trained to obey orders quail at the thought that they, too, will be the next ones to be taken out and shot. Against that, the film goes to considerable lengths to emphasize Hitler's all-too-human frailties, and in the process drains away some of the monstrousness and the demonic out of his image. Many commentators saw this contrast–the de-demonized demon, the monster with the human features, Hitler as one of us–but that is not quite the point, or not the most important one.

This is not a portrait intended to rehabilitate the dictator, in the manner one might want to make Frankenstein seem more human by making him wear a suit. Rather, it is an effort to shorten the distance to the past, give a sharp sense of the atmosphere, the milieu, the claustrophobia and boredom in the bunker as everyone awaits the end, with documentary-style clarity. Into it, right into the middle of it, you are "invited for tea with the monster,"[39] who proves to be a man who flies into towering rages but also jokes with his secretary and eats his meals. As Ekkehard Fuhr perceptively noted, this was "not still another effort to exorcise Nazis from the German soul, but rather to depict a drama that could not be filled with more suspense, utter consternation, and to a certain extent could not, truly, have been invented."[40]

Last Act

Appropriately enough for Germany, this film fairly invites dialectical analysis. It is a dramatic film made to look like a documentary, filled with fictitious re-enactments of very real events. It shows "normal" social interactions in a highly artificial, "abnormal" wartime and

bunker setting, but they are also of an "abnormal" set of political leaders, at least when seen in contrast to today's "normal" politics. Flashes of humanity are shown under appalling conditions seemingly devoid of humanity. It is a film that wants to relate rather than comment, and yet the very form of the relating is itself a comment. Of course, it is also a film with a leading character who has been looming offstage, unforgotten, for half a century.

The appropriate comparison for *Der Untergang* is, in fact, Edgar Reitz's *Heimat*, by now grown to a fifty-three-hour epic–that film follows the gradual transformation of rural life among several families in the Hunsrück area of the state of Rhineland-Palatinate where Reitz grew up. When the first part was broadcast in 1984-85, it was in direct response to the "cheap rot," as Reitz himself put it, of the American *Holocaust* television miniseries.[41] In *Heimat*, most political movements, including the Nazis, are treated as transitional, marginal to the everyday concerns and experience of the family members.[42] Reitz says there was an innocence to the idea of *Heimat*, a romantic clinging to what was "always a landscape of the soul" that was ambivalent, fragmentary, and fear-ridden at the same time. As a filmmaker, he wanted to let sentiment reign a little, and did not want to stand there like a priest trying to channel those feelings into a preordained orthodoxy.[43] Reitz had to listen to criticism from abroad that there was not enough about guilt, or that his film seemed to justify the acceptance of Nazism rather than condemning it.[44]

Much of this sounds like it could apply to *Der Untergang* as well. It suggests that one of Eichinger's aims was to avoid complex and ordained interpretations of how Germans *ought* to respond to their history, and instead to try to reduce matters down to the everyday back then, the peculiar last act of a dreadful system collapsing. Yet, in the everyday of today, of audiences watching the film in 2004, there is also a good deal of ambivalence. Some of it was identification–with an idea like *Heimat*–with aspects of the German past). Some was appalled rejection of all *Heimat* stands for, of all the Nazis stood for–as symbolized by the utterly chilling scene in *Der Untergang* in which Magda Goebbels kills all six of her children, unwilling to see them live in a world without National Socialism.

Heimat or *Der Untergang* are films made for heirs, for generations that did not live through those times or have to make choices, and as

such serve as reminders of past worlds. They raise the question to what extent heirs are responsible, or need to pay, for the sins of their ancestors–or have a right to not have the past determine their lives. For sixty years, Germans have treated the Third Reich as a heavy responsibility, their particular burden to carry, to atone for, to thoroughly address and extensively remember. But, they are also reaching a point where, though they cannot and will not forget that era, they also consider that there may be such a thing as a social or cultural statute of limitations on just how much, or what, they are forced to remember.

One can be superficial about it, as Polish newspapers were in commenting on the "impermissible emotionalization" with which *Der Untergang* engaged.[45] One can be arch, humorous, and incorrect, and dismiss the film as a ritual exercise: "every decade or so … the dictator has to be hauled out of the grave, propped up, and slain again, just to make sure he's dead."[46] One can be measured, as the *New York Times* was in its assessment–that because Hitler has become good enough to become mass entertainment, it shows Germans now are able to banish their ghosts.[47]

Ultimately, these only partly make the point. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg said it was good *Der Untergang* did *not* show Auschwitz:[48] the unfinished remainder of the thought was "so that we can come to terms with Hitler instead." The actor Armin Mueller-Stahl put it differently when he said that he himself had engaged in a "frustrated effort to rid myself" of Hitler.[49] For it has been very difficult to know how to approach Hitler, Germans having first loved and supported him, then hated him for letting Germany down.[50] Dealing with Hitler is all about dealing with one's own connection to that past. "It is precisely the knowledge that National Socialism was a criminal system that claimed millions of victims," a recent study of exculpatory family discourses in Germany has argued, "that leads to the need among the successor generations to construct a past in which their own relatives appear in roles that had nothing to do with such crimes."[51]

A film like *Der Untergang* makes heirs grateful they have been spared certain choices, while reminding them that their families were not, and suggests this chapter can and will never be entirely closed. But, the film also, in passive voice, says that these things happened in Berlin and to Germans, and audiences passively watching

are relieved such terrible things have been spared them. And after the film is over, one critic savagely wrote, audiences will "head for the pub and praise Bruno Ganz's artistry, and how good Corrina Harfouch still looks at age fifty. And then they'll change topic and worry about the crisis plaguing the Bayern München soccer team."[52] In other words, return to what they hold to be the normal, everyday, German world.

The hope with which the audience is left–the German audience for whom this film was made–is the knowledge that this time it *did* come to an end, and that what died was Hitler, along with his worst henchmen, and (hopefully) all they believed. How they themselves feel about Hitler today, what their connection is to that time, what the collective responsibility of the nation as a whole is–all that is not addressed by the film. Instead, the audience comes to bury Hitler, not to praise him.

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Notes

1. One side of this not forgetting–note the recent dates of publication–is starkly evident in the literature produced by the children of perpetrators, including Niklas Frank: *Der Vater. Eine Abrechnung* (Munich, 2005); Richard von Schirach, *Der Schatten meines Vaters* (Munich, 2005); Ingeburg Schäfer and Susanne Klockmann, *Mutter mochte Himmler nie. Die Geschichte einer SS-Familie* (Reinbek, 1999), or Matthias Kessler, *Ich muß doch meinen Vater lieben, oder?* (Frankfurt/Main, 2002), based on the reminiscences of the daughter of the Plaszow concentration camp commander Amon Göth, made famous by *Schindler's List.* The more general desire to "end discussion of the past" (sometimes under the rubric of the *Schlußstrichmentalität*) has been assessed repeatedly in public opinion polls–sometimes in terms of whether to cease prosecuting Nazi crimes, sometimes with reference to the passage of time. In thirteen polls conducted from 1958 to 1990, the average approval for ending such discussion was 49 percent, ranging from 31 percent in 1983 to 67 percent in 1969. Werner Bergmann and Rainer Erb, *Anti-Semitism in Germany: The Post-Nazi Epoch since 1945* (New Brunswick, 1997), 230. In five polls from 1986 to 1994, 65 percent of West Germans agreed with the statement "we should finally put an end to discussion of the past" forty years after the end of the war (Ibid., 233). East German respondents in 1991 and 1994, at an average of 43 percent, were of a decidedly different opinion. Bergmann and Erb summarize this by saying that "there is a widespread aversion to continued discussion of the Nazi past and the Holocaust" (233) and in the accompanying footnote, "this aversion appears to have increased over time" (266). The desire to close that chapter, they pointedly note, "contrasts with the increasing scholarly and public attention being paid to Nazism, the persecution of the Jews, and attempts to cope with these issues in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany" (233). The counter-spin, as seen in the works of Christoph Cornelißen and others, focuses instead on what is now called *Erinnerungskultur*, and it is to those kinds of reminders–or rather to the contrast between this culture of remembrance and the desire to end discussion–that I refer.
2. Dirk Jasper, Interview mit Bernd Eichinger (2004) at: http://www.djfl.de/entertainment/stars//b/ bernd_eichinger/bernd_eichinger_i_04.html. This is part of the Dirk Jasper FilmstarLexikon, also accessible at www.filmstar.de. The same interview text can be found at: http://www.der-untergang.de/bernd-eichinger.php3.; accessed 19 February 2007.
3. Gordon Craig, *Germans* (New York, 1982), 71.
4. Roberto Dzugan, *Der Untergang*, (2004); http://www.critic.de/index.pl?aktion=kritik&id=7.
5. Craig (see note 3), 63-4.
6. Eichinger said: "Ich finde, es ist an der Zeit, dass wir unsere Geschichte mit den Mitteln, die wir haben, selber erzählen und den Mut aufbringen, in dieser Erzählung auch endlich die Hauptdarsteller auf die Leinwand bringen." (See note 2).
7. Jasper (see note 2).
8. Eichinger said: "Ich hatte mich seit über 20 Jahren mit dem Dritten Reich beschäftigt. Wie konnte es überhaupt zu einer solchen Hysterie in der Ära des Dritten Reich kommen? Wie konnten sich Leute, die sonst ganz normal funk-

tionierten, plötzlich so hinreißen lassen? Wie konnte solch ein Massenwahnsinn überhaupt entstehen?" (see note 2).

9. Wolfgang Benz, ed., *Rechtsradikalismus: Randerscheinung oder Renaissance?* (Frankfurt, 1980), 41, 47-8.
10. Frank Rauscher, *Der Untergang*, (2004); http://www.chiemgau-online.de/kino/filminfo.
11. Traudl Junge, *Bis zur letzten Stunde* (Munich, 2002); Joachim Fest, *Hitler– Eine Karriere* (Berlin, 1973); Joachim Fest, *Der Untergang. Hitler und das Ende des Dritten Reiches* (Berlin, 2002).
12. Lynn Rapaport, "The Three Stooges vs. Hitler," *San Diego Jewish Journal*, March 2003. http://www.sdjewishjournal.com/stories/mar04_5.html.
13. Judith Doneson, *The Holocaust in American Film*, 2nd ed. (Syracuse, 2002), 31-3.
14. Tim Gallwitz, 'Was vergangen ist, muss vorbei sein!' *Die Vergangenheit in der Gegenwart: Konfrontationen mit den Folgen des Holocausts im Deutschen Nachkriegsfilm* (Munich, 2001),10-20.
15. Sabine Etzold, "Hitler harmlos," *Die Zeit*, 10 November 2005.
16. Ekkehard Fuhr, "Auf Augehöhe," *Die Welt*, 25 August 2004; www.welt.de/data/2004/08/25.
17. Etzold (see note 15).
18. Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, *The Germans: Public Opinion Polls 1967-80* (Westport, 1981), 109.
19. Bergmann and Erb (see note 1), 248.
20. Ibid., 97, ft. 50; See also Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller, and Karoline Tschuggnall, 'Opa war kein Nazi.' *Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis* (Munich, 2002), 206.
21. Reported in *Der Spiegel*, 31 January 2005.
22. Bergmann and Erb (see note 1), 246, 247-9, 346.
23. Andrei Markovits and Simon Reich, *The German Predicament: Memory and Power in the New Europe* (Ithaca, 1997), 36-7.
24. *Dictionary of World History* (Edinburgh, 2000), 575.
25. From a speech Churchill gave on BBC radio on 22 June 1941 in which he said: "... Hitler is a monster of wickedness, insatiable in his lust for blood and plunder. Not content with having all Europe under his heel or else terrorized into various forms of abject submission, he must now carry his work of butchery and desolation among the vast multitudes of Russia and of Asia. The terrible military machine which we and the rest of the civilized world so foolishly, so supinely, so insensately allowed the Nazi gangsters to build up year by year from almost nothing-this machine cannot stand idle, lest it rust or fall to pieces. It must be in continual motion, grinding up human lives and trampling down the homes and the rights of hundreds of millions of men. Moreover, it must be fed not only with flesh but with oil. So now this bloodthirsty guttersnipe must launch his mechanized armies upon new fields of slaughter, pillage and devastation." http://www.aec.at/europa-in-sicht/en/churchill.html, accessed on 19 February 2007.
26. Max Picard, *Hitler in our selves* (Hinsdale, 1947). Picard was inspired by Ernst Troeltsch and Soren Kierkegaard, and his orientation was theological, but some of his observations here were quite sociological, perhaps inspired in part by his having been a student of Heinrich Rickert,
27. Anthony Quinn, "At home with the Führer," *The Independent*, 1 April 2005.

28. Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (New York, 1974), 170-71. Milgram writes: "Moreover, when the experiments were repeated in Princeton, Munich, Rome, South Africa, and Australia, each using somewhat different methods of recruitment and subject populations having characteristics different from those of our subjects, the level of obedience was invariably somewhat *higher* [ital. in original] than found in the investigation reported in this book. Thus, David Mantell, in Munich, found 85 per cent of his subjects obedient." See David M. Mantell, "The Potential for Violence in Germany," *Journal of Social Issues* 27, no. 4 (1971): 101-12.
29. Harald Welzer, "Mass Murder and Moral Code: some thoughts on an easily misunderstood subject," *History of the Human Sciences*, 17, no. 2/3 (2004): 29,
30. Katja Nicodemus, "Eine kleine Polit-AG," *Die Zeit*, 23 September 2004.
31. Christoph Dallach, et al., "Patriotische Bauchschmerzen," *Der Spiegel*, 29 November 2004.
32. Georg Seesslen, "Das faschistische Subjekt," *Die Zeit*, 16 September 2004.
33. J. Jenssen, "Was macht Hitler so unwiderstehlich?," *Die Zeit*, 23 September 2004.
34. Seesslen (see note 32).
35. Harald Welzer, "Der erratische Führer. In 'Der Untergang' wird Hitler zum tragischen Helden," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 18 September 2004.
36. Wenders, W. (2004) Tja, dann wollen wir mal, *Die Zeit*, 21 Oktober 2004.
37. Nicodemus (see note 30).
38. Welzer (see note 29).
39. Claudia Schmöders, "Zum Tee beim Monster. 'Der Untergang' als Zerreißprobe in den Erinnerungskulturen," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 25 September 2004.
40. Fuhr (see note 16).
41. John Ardagh, *Germany and the Germans*, 3rd ed. (London, 1995), 345.
42. Charles Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge, 1988), 118.
43. Thomas E. Schmidt, "Ich bewundere Treue, die auf nichts spekuliert," Interview with Edgar Reitz, *Die Zeit*, 16 December 2004.
44. Ardagh (see note 41), 349.
45. Piotr Dobrolowski, "Oliver Hirschbiegels Kino-Schlager 'Der Untergang' wird vom Kritik zerrissen: Polen lehnen Hitler-Film ab," *Wiener Zeitung*, 23 November 2004.
46. David Denby, "The Downfall," *The New Yorker*, 15/21 February 2005.
47. Lars-Olav Beier and Ruth Reichstein, "Dicker als Fondue," *Der Spiegel,* 27 September 2004.
48. Stefan Reinecke, "Hitler und Häppchen," *Die Tageszeitung*, August 2004; http://www.hagalil.com/archiv/ 2004/08/hitler.htm.
49. Lars-Olav Beier and Stephan Burgdorff, "'Hitler Loswerden.' Der Schauspieler Armin Mueller-Stahl über die Nazi-Zeit," *Der Spiegel*, 50 (2005), 180-2.
50. Stefan Reinecke, "Vergesst Hitler!," *Die Tageszeitung*, 19 September 2004.
51. Welzer, Moller, and Tschuggnall (see note 20), 207; See also John Bendix, "The Lived Analytic: layers of meaning(fullness) in the context of the Holocaust," *History of the Human Sciences*, 17, no. 2/3 (2004): 125-45.
52. Reinecke (see note 50).