Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the Film Director as Critical Thinker

Essays and Interviews

R. J. Cardullo (Ed.)

SensePublishers

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FOREWORD

Over the course his career, Hans-Jürgen Syberberg was consistently one of the most prolific and persuasive thinkers about modern German identity. In addition to his many films, the most important of which concern the problem of German identity and aesthetics reflected in characters ranging from Karl May and the mad king Ludwig II of Bavaria to Adolf Hitler, Syberberg produced a series of books that also address these themes. Syberberg's most acclaimed films, *Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland* (*Hitler, A Film from Germany*, 1977) and *Parsifal* (1982), each treat irrationalism, music, and Romanticism as the core of German identity and intellect. One of the most remarkable aspects of Syberberg's talent is his ability to synthesize major and sometimes complex and contradictory strands of thought about modern German culture into a consistent and relatively coherent whole. This is true both for his magnum opus, the Hitler film, which crystallized thinking about German identity in the late 1970s, and for his 1990 book *Vom Unglück und Glück der Kunst in Deutschland nach dem letzten Kriege* (*On the Misfortune and Fortune of Art in Germany after the Last War*), which did the same for the time of the collapse of the German Democratic Republic and German reunification.

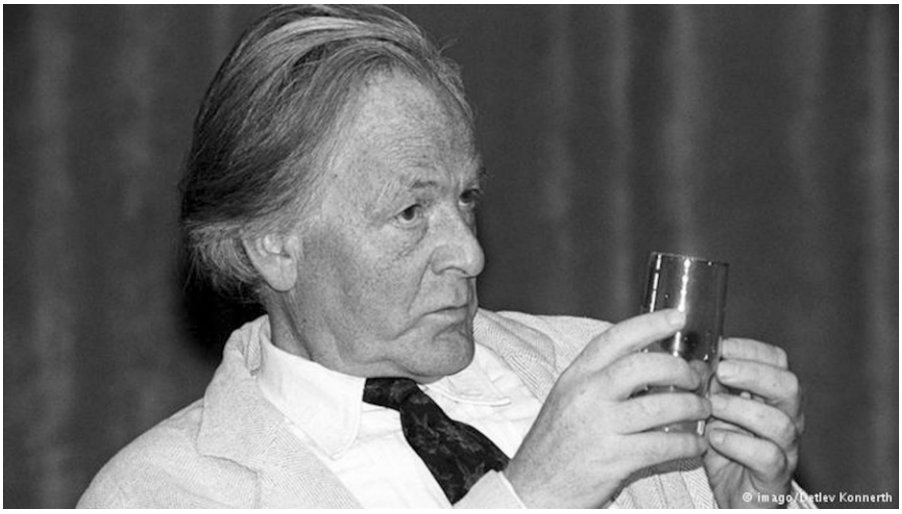
While Syberberg's output remained relatively consistent over the decades, it served quite different functions in the different social and political contexts in which it appeared. Not surprisingly, these and other works consistently met with more praise outside Germany than at home, in part because Syberberg deals with uncomfortable aspects of the German past more readily accepted abroad. In many ways the most classically German of the previous generation of German filmmakers, Syberberg nonetheless frequently refused contact with the German public and was in turn blasted by German critics and directors alike. One West German writer labeled him "a manic egocentric beset with a persecution complex, sniffing out conspiracies all over the place" (*Der Spiegel*, Oct. 30, 1978: 266), while his more sympathetic colleague Rainer Werner Fassbinder described him as a "merchant in plagiarism" who simply imitated Werner Schroeter's techniques and "competently marketed what he took from Schroeter" (*Frankfurter Rundschau*, Feb. 24, 1979: 21).

Syberberg's rapport with the American film industry was no less ambivalent. He regularly denounced Hollywood as "the great whore of show business," derided other German filmmakers (like Wim Wenders) for their successful manipulation of Hollywood formulas (*Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland* [Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1978], 47), and consistently made films antithetical in every sense to the traditional cinematic models. Yet, despite these belligerent stances, Syberberg's *Hitler* was received by American audiences with an enthusiasm rarely equaled by other contemporary German films, an enthusiasm concretized and encouraged by

Susan Sontag's glowing essay on the film. The message is clear: whether expressly or unintentionally, Syberberg's films have become demiurgic projections whose radical difference has generated much of their spectatorial fascination and whose extreme nationalism has been their most effective commercial ploy on the international market.

Thus it is no accident that the first critical collection about Syberberg should be published in English in the United States—and should include the aforementioned, justly celebrated piece by Sontag. *Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the Filmmaker as Critical Thinker: Essays and Interviews* contains eight of Syberberg's most provocative interviews as well as eight seminal essays on, or reviews of, his work. Also included in this excellent book are a helpful introduction and a reflective postscript, together with complete film credits, a comprehensive bibliography, and a number of well-chosen film stills. As meticulously edited by the highly experienced, widely published R. J. Cardullo, *Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the Filmmaker as Critical Thinker* is a significant contribution not only to the study of this important film director's *oeuvre*, but also to the study of German history and politics in the second half of the twentieth century.

Timothy Corrigan
University of Pennsylvania



Figures 1–2. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg in the 1970s

PREFACE

The films of Hans-Jürgen Syberberg (born 1935) are at times annoying, confusing, and overlong, but they are also ambitious and compelling. In no way is he ever conventional or commercial: critics and audiences have alternately labeled his work brilliant and boring, absorbing and pretentious, and his films today are still rarely screened. Stylistically, it is difficult to link Syberberg with any other filmmaker or cinematic tradition. In this regard he is an original, the most controversial of all the New German directors, and a figure who has long been at the vanguard of the resurgence of experimental filmmaking in his homeland.

Not unlike his (late) contemporary Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Syberberg's most characteristic films examine recent German history: a documentary, for example, about Richard Wagner's daughter-in-law, who was a close friend of Hitler (*Winifred Wagner und die Geschichte des Hauses Wahnfried von 1914–1975* [*The Confessions of Winifred Wagner*, 1975]). But especially 'historical' is his trilogy covering one hundred years of Germany's past, including *Ludwig: Requiem für einen jungfräulichen König* (*Ludwig: Requiem for a Virgin King*, 1972), which portrays the mad king of Bavaria who was the patron of Wagner and a builder of fairy-tale castles; *Karl May—Auf der Suche nach dem verlorenen Paradies* (*Karl May: In Search of Paradise Lost*, 1974), which deals with the life of the famous author of Westerns who himself had never seen the American West; and, most famously, *Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland* (*Hitler, A Film from Germany*, a.k.a. *Our Hitler*; 1977).

Seven hours and nine minutes long, in four parts and twenty-two chapters, *Our Hitler* effects a synthesis of Brecht and Wagner, of epic defamiliarization and operatic pathos. Brecht's influence began relatively early in Syberberg's artistic life: the latter's 8mm sound film of the Berliner Ensemble at work in the 1950s—a film blown up to 35mm and released in 1970 as *Nach meinem letzten Umzug* (*My Last Move*)—is the only record of that group during the Brecht period.) Syberberg's Hitler is painted as both a fascist dictator who could have risen to power at any point in time in any number of political climates, and a monstrous movie mogul (called 'the greatest filmmaker in the world') whose version of D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916) would be *The Holocaust*, with himself in the leading role.

Syberberg unites fictional narrative and documentary footage in a style that is at once cinematic and theatrical, mystical and magical. His films might easily be performed live (*Our Hitler* is set on a stage, and *Die Nacht* [*The Night*, 1985] was in fact performed live), but the material is so varied that the presence of the camera is necessary to translate the action thoroughly. Additionally, this director is perceptibly aware of how the events that make up history are ultimately comprehended by the public through the manner in which they are presented in the media. History is thus

understood more by catchwords and generalities than by facts; as a result, in this age of mass media real events can easily become distorted and trivialized. Syberberg demonstrates this in *Our Hitler* by presenting the Führer in so many (dis)guises that the viewer is often desensitized to the reality that was this mass murderer.

Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the Filmmaker as Critical Thinker: Essays and Interviews is the first edited book in English devoted to *Our Hitler* along with the rest of Syberberg's films, and includes all of his English-language interviews (together with one translated from the German) as well as some of the best English-language essays on his work, written by such noted critics as Susan Sontag, Fredric Jameson, Ian Buruma, and Stanley Kauffmann. This book also contains a complete filmography, with credits, and a comprehensive bibliography of English-language criticism devoted to Syberberg, as well as of Syberberg's own writings that have been published in English translation. *Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the Filmmaker as Critical Thinker* is thus a significant contribution not only to the study of Syberberg's cinematic *oeuvre*, but also to the study of German history and politics in the second half of the twentieth century.

R. J. Cardullo

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My deep gratitude goes out to all the contributors for their writings in this volume, and to their original publishers or editors for permission to reprint those writings. I am also grateful to my family—my wife, Kirsi, and my children, Kia and Emil—for listening to (or, better, putting up with) my long-running commentary on the cinema of Hans-Jürgen Syberberg.

Thanks, above all, to Syberberg himself for his cooperation on this project—and for his revisioning of contemporary cinema, as well as his contribution to our understanding of modern Germany.

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RUSSELL BERMAN[1]

1. INTRODUCTION

Hans-Jürgen Syberberg: Of Fantastic and Magical Worlds; A Career Review

Hans-Jürgen Syberberg was born on December 8, 1935, in Nossendorf, Pomerania, a region he would later characterize as the homeland of both the Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich and the iron chancellor of German unification, Otto von Bismarck. This vision of a historically rich landscape in which cultural tradition converges with the politics of German identity provides an important key to an understanding of Syberberg's cinematic *oeuvre*.

Having spent his boyhood in a classically conservative atmosphere and his adolescence in the East Germany of the Stalinist era, Syberberg missed the flood of postwar American influence after 1945 and therefore grew up, in his words, "without chewing gum and pinball machines." Instead he was introduced to the established canon of great artistic works and to the ideology of the war victors from the Eastern sector:

> My first impressions were really *Faust* and Brecht, unforgettable, while others [in West Germany] proceeded along very different paths…. While many [in the West] listed to their political ministers playing jazz, we heard Beethoven and Bach, *Carmen* too, and read "Diamat," dialectical-historical materialism … Thus an art education of high cultural heritage … until 1953 with the … socialist realism of Soviet origin.[2]

This background undoubtedly explains many of the features that distinguish Syberberg from other New German filmmakers: the constant references to a rich cultural tradition, particularly of the nineteenth century; his "whole German" (*gesamtdeutsch*) perspective not fixated on specifically West German issues; and finally his immunity from, or, better, antagonism toward Hollywood and the filmic tradition that has proved so attractive to several of his directorial contemporaries.

Syberberg spent his early years in the countryside, but in 1947 his family moved to Rostock, where his new urban surroundings offered opportunities for regular contact with theater, music, and film (largely Soviet works). During this period he began his own filmmaking, including 8mm versions of Chekhov stories as well as documentaries on public demonstrations and sporting events. In Rostock Syberberg also met Benno Besson of the Berliner Ensemble, and this led to an invitation from Bertolt Brecht to come to Berlin. There, in 1953, Syberberg was permitted to film

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Brecht's rehearsals for the Ensemble of *Mother Courage* (1941), *The Mother* (1932), *Herr Puntila* (1940), and Goethe's *Urfaust* (1775), footage from which was worked into his 1970 documentary *Nach meinem letzten Umzug* (*My Last Move*).

Figure 3. Nach meinem letzten Umzug (My Last Move, *a.k.a.* The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1970*

While Brechtian aesthetics profoundly influenced Syberberg during this period, he was equally fascinated by the French films he could see now, for the first time, in West Berlin, such as Jean Cocteau's *Orphée* (*Orpheus*, 1950) and *La Belle et la Bête* (*Beauty and the Beast*, 1946) and Marcel Carné's *Les enfants du paradis* (*Children of Paradise*, 1945). In 1953 Syberberg left East Germany for good, and, after completing school in Minden, traveled to France, England, Austria, and Italy; finally he settled in Munich in 1956, where he entered the university to study literature and art. Syberberg describes this environment as a "hell of artistic inactivity,"[3] and when he completed his studies in 1962 with a thesis on elements of the Theater of the Absurd in the plays of the Swiss dramatist Friedrich Dürrenmatt, he took work in Bavarian television, since no jobs were then available in the German film industry itself.

During the following three years, Syberberg turned out cultural reports on the Munich scene, topical films for various holiday seasons, and movies of regional

interest. The 185 films of this period varied in length from three to thirty minutes. These were years of apprenticeship for Syberberg, and he recalls making every effort to maintain control of all aspects of production—the shooting, the cutting, and the sound. Here one may discern the roots of his mature *oeuvre*: the technical mastery of the medium, the interest in cultural documentation, and, above all, the familiarity with the established culture industry that would later become the target of his bitterly radical criticism.

Figure 4. Fünfter Akt, siebte Szene: Fritz Kortner probt *Kabale und Liebe* (Fritz Kortner Rehearses Schiller's *Love and Intrigue*), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1965*

In 1965, still working for Bavarian television, Syberberg undertook his first major project, the documentary *Fünfter Akt, siebte Szene: Fritz Korner probt* Kabale und Liebe (*Fritz Kortner Rehearses Schiller's* Love and Intrigue). As in the case of the Brecht film, Syberberg directed his attention to a grand old man of the theater—this time at work on a realization of the climactic death scene, between Ferdinand and Luise, from a German classical drama. No outside financing was available, and the crew was therefore reduced to a bare minimum. Its task consisted of following Kortner onstage continuously in order to capture the development of the scene in the course of rehearsals. Even in this early film, the unique character of Syberberg's documentary work is apparent. For, unlike normal German television documentaries with their voice-over narrations and emphasis on behind-the-scene sensations, the Kortner film rigorously observes the artist at work without extraneous commentary or tendentious montage.

A short sequel to the Kortner film, *Kortner spricht Monologe für eine Schallplatte* (*Kortner Delivers Monologues for a Record*, 1966), depicts the actor in some of his most impressive roles, including Richard III and Shylock. Meanwhile, Syberberg was also working on a documentary on the actress Romy Schneider that had been

commissioned for German television. Although he initially intended to show her at a critical stage in her career, wavering between Germany and France, he was hindered by the demands of Schneider's manager, who was anxious to present a wholly German—and purely wholesome—image to the German public. Legal suits followed, and Syberberg withdrew his name from the finished film: *Romy—Portrait*

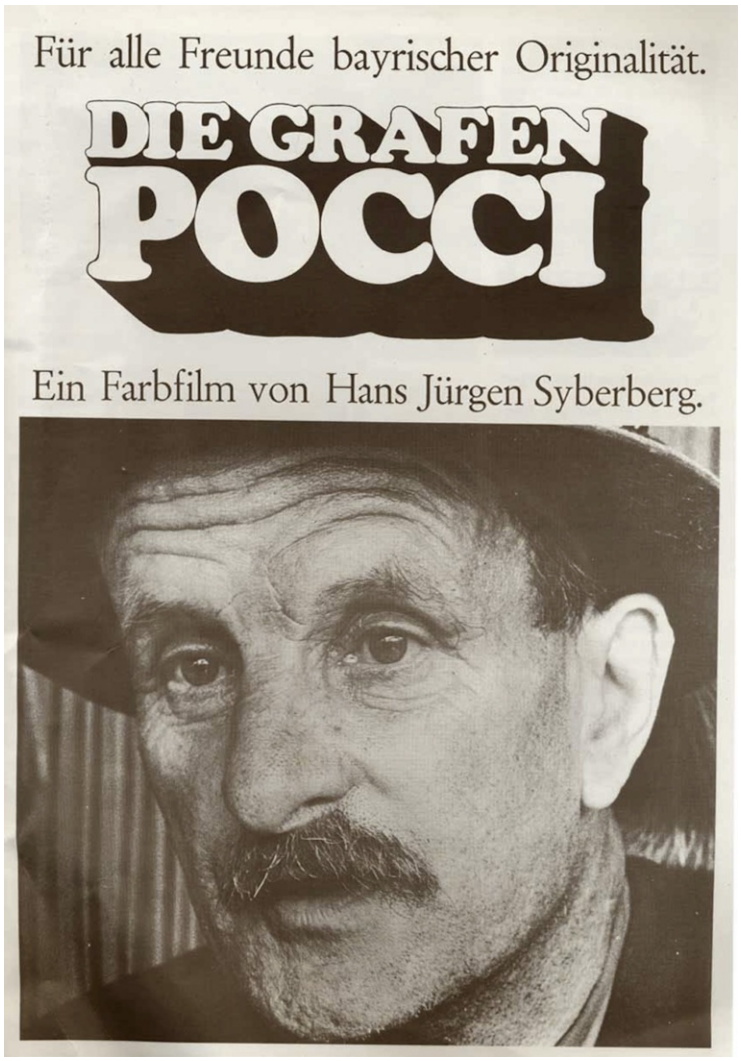

Figure 5. Die Grafen Pocci—Einige Kapitel zur Geschichte einer Familie (The Counts Pocci—Some Chapters on the History of a Family, *a.k.a.* The Counts Pocci), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1967*

eines Gesichts (*Romy—Anatomy of a Face*; made in 1965, released in 1967). This conflict represents one step in a series of confrontations with a culture industry motivated, according to Syberberg, only by profits and hostile to any aesthetic sensitivity in its products.

Syberberg continued his documentaries of cultural figures in 1967 with *Die Grafen Pocci* (*The Counts Pocci*). The Pocci family joined the Bavarian court in the late eighteenth century, and its most renowned member, Franz Pocci (1807–1876), a master of ceremonies and court jester for Ludwig I, created the famous figure of Kasperl for the Munich puppet stage. Syberberg's film traces the history of the Pocci family and its traditions by exploring the family estate, Castle Ammerland, while profiling the sixty-three-year-old Count Konrad. The thematic complexity, the division into a series of chapters, and the use of montage-cum-collage here anticipate formal features of Syberberg's later work. Similarly, the fundamental motif of *Die Grafen Pocci*—the wealth of a heritage in danger of extinction—would soon find an echo in Syberberg's major projects.

Figure 6. Scarabea—Wieviel Erde braucht der Mensch? (Scarabea—How Much Land Does a Man Need?), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1968*

In the final sequence, Konrad Pocci, seated at a hunting post in the forest, insists that he would never sell his land, since money could never replace the happiness provided by the nature he so deeply loves. Such Romantic anti-capitalism, a central theme in Syberberg's works, is coupled in this film with a search for the multi-dimensionality of a mystical vision.

These sentences by Pocci, taken seriously, would mean a revolution. A revolution in our activity, our thinking and spirit: no longer buying and selling everything … no longer modernizing as far as possible, cutting down trees, widening streets, covering kilometers with asphalt … for once tolerating secrets and riddles in pictures and sound … with respect for ancient myths, wisdom, and warnings.[4]

Syberberg's notion of an alternative to the world of banal modernization—the beach beneath the concrete of the metropolis, as it were—was nourished by the countercultural currents that would soon overflow in the European political uprisings of 1968.

Reminiscent of the closing ideas to be found in *Die Grafen Pocci*, Syberberg's first fiction feature, titled *Scarabea—Wieviel Erde braucht der Mensch?* (*Scarabea—How Much Land Does a Man Need?*, 1968), is based on a story by Tolstoy in which the devil tempts a poor peasant to seek ever greater land holdings. In the story, the peasant enters into an agreement with nomads from the Asian steppes: for a set sum, he may have all the land he can stake out on foot before sunset. Greedy as he is, the peasant overexerts himself, and, although he returns to the starting point just before dusk, he dies of exhaustion; a simple grave, six feet deep, is all the earth he then needs. Syberberg sets his film in Sardinia, replacing the Russian nomads with highlands bandits and the land-hungry peasant with a German tourist eager to gain possession of some promising coastal property. In the course of the day, however, the tourist's value system, based on investment and profit, gives way to a yearning for peace and a new life in the sensual constancy of the primitive South.

Syberberg has thus synthesized Tolstoy's fable with a traditional motif in German literature (the parallels to Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* [1912] are obvious), while updating the source material in order to criticize contemporary European culture. Less attention is paid to a coherent plot here than to a series of images with mythic associations: the noonday sun glistening on the water, mysterious caves, a festival replete with folk dancing and bloodletting. On a formal level, this de-emphasizing of a suspense-filled plot represents a rejection of the Hollywood cinema still predominant at the time in Germany. In fact, a parody of the prototypical Hollywood genre—the western—is inserted into *Scarabea*, such that the film itself becomes the battlefield for the opposing forces of civilization and myth.

Syberberg treats cinema, then, with all the seriousness of an aesthetic revolutionary, viewing it as the art form of the modern age, the new *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art)—in his words, "the continuation of life by other means." Film has the potential to provide the images of dreams and utopias otherwise banished from a by-now thoroughly rationalized everyday life. Yet, he argues, this cinematic potential has

rarely been realized because market pressures and profit motives, which operate throughout Western society, corrupt all the activities of the movie industry.

Art then becomes replaced by financially lucrative endeavors such as pornography, a problem that Syberberg investigated in his 1969 documentary *Sex-Business—Made in Pasing*. As in his earlier films, he records here the process of cultural production by following one figure at work, but Brecht and Kortner are now replaced by Alois Brummer, a director of Bavarian pornography films, as "the symbol of the inhumanly mercenary cinema."[5] Syberberg is interested, not in the sensationalism of the topic (Brummer himself makes a rather commonplace impression), but in its significance as a major component of the German film market. Consequently, he punctuates the picture with interpolated comments and statistics regarding the current state of the pornography industry.

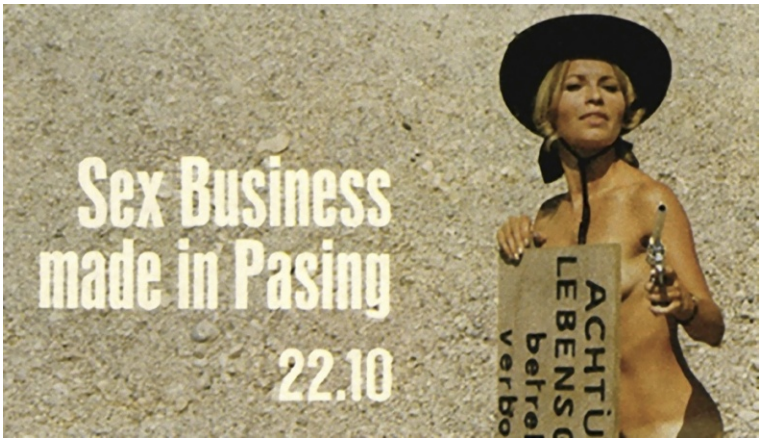

Figure 7. Sex-Business—Made in Pasing: ein Beitrag zur Filmsoziologie in Deutschland (A Contribution to the Sociology of Film in Germany), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1969*

Syberberg's increasingly profound criticism of commercial cinema (together with the financial losses incurred by *Scarabea*) led him to join other young German directors in an effort to avoid the established channels of distribution by establishing direct contacts with theaters. This strategy was intended to foster an autonomous film culture outside of, and hostile to, the predominant world of porno and *kitsch*, and Syberberg's first contribution to this organizational initiative on the part of the New German Cinema, *San Domingo* (1970), reflects the movement's sociopolitical agenda. Based on a novella by Heinrich von Kleist in which a mulatto woman feigns love for a white officer in order to detain him long enough for black rebels to arrive, the film was originally to be set in the former German colonies in Africa. However, because of financial difficulties and a desire to attract a larger German audience, Syberberg transposed the story to Munich. There, a naïve and idealistic middle-

Figure 8. San Domingo, *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1970*

class youth, anxious to run off to Africa, hesitates because of his attraction to the abandoned daughter of a black American G.I. Meanwhile, this young woman's accomplices, a gang of toughs, attempt to extort money from the boy's parents.

The choice of an unexotic setting parallels other neorealistic aspects of *San Domingo*: all the characters, except the central youth, are played by non-professional actors, and they speak in a heavy Bavarian dialect. In general, the film emphasizes the overwhelming influence of milieu by focusing on drug parties, motorcycle forays, and the connection between juvenile delinquency and radical politics. Syberberg himself considers *San Domingo* an early warning against terrorism, and it ends, in fact, with a dramatic quotation from Eldridge Cleaver on the danger of ignoring the alienation of contemporary young people.

With *San Domingo*, the initial phase of Syberberg's career drew to a close. Since the Kortner films he had developed a unique documentary style, a set of central thematic concerns, and, most importantly, an increasingly elaborate critical analysis of postwar German cultural life. In 1972 he commenced a series of five films tracing the roots of contemporary cultural life back to the politics, art, and myth of the past century. The three major works are built around key figures in modern German consciousness: King Ludwig II of Bavaria, the popular author Karl May, and Adolf Hitler. While these major films are often regarded as a closed trilogy, their production alternated with two other pictures: the first was devoted to Theodor Hierneis, a cook at Ludwig's court, and the second to Winifred Wagner, Richard Wagner's daughter-in-law. Important in themselves, these two works, as monologues of a kind, provide contrast with the sovereign epic sweep through a philosophical landscape that characterizes the three central films in this group of five.

Throughout the whole series, Syberberg's examination of taboo issues regularly provoked an often acrimonious public debate; that said, his investigative reporting

Figure 9. Ludwig: Requiem für einen jungfräulichen König (Ludwig: Requiem for a Virgin King), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1972*

is directed here, not at sensational political transgressions, but at the unsuspected conspiracy of ideas. This is a decidedly intellectual cinema whose rich imagery never overpowers language, and where illusion remains subordinate to enlightenment. "If film is to live," writes Syberberg, "and not merely as entertainment for a few pleasant hours, then we must work in that open space where politics and the search for truth border on each other."[6]

The title of the first film in the series of five, *Ludwig: Requiem für einen jungfräulichen König* (*Ludwig: Requiem for a Virgin King*, 1972), is intended to suggest less an atmosphere of mourning than the rigor and complexity of musical form. Syberberg's animosity toward the simplistic narrative films of the culture industry explains the formal structure of *Ludwig*: a series of nearly thirty Brechtian episodes tied to one another by content but not linked together within a sequential plot. Each episode is introduced by a title, often with an ironic undertone. The actors are placed within stylized tableaux whose backgrounds often consist of rear-projections of scenes from Ludwig's castles. Narrative continuity is further

interrupted by the casting of the same actor in several roles. This technique both prohibits any facile identification with the characters—another aspect of Syberberg's Brechtian legacy—and establishes connections by means of visual quotation: when Peter Kern appears as Ludwig's hairdresser, Hoppe, for example, and later as the SA leader Ernst Röhm, Syberberg's thesis of a continuity between Ludwig's vision and aspects of the National Socialist ideology is underscored.

Quotation is essential to Syberberg's overall use of montage, or the careful juxtaposition of heterogeneous elements on the levels of spoken text, image (including the rich sociopolitical iconography of each shot), and sound. Ludwig's complex historical relationship to Wagner, for instance, is echoed on the soundtrack: the film begins with the opening of *Das Rheingold* (*The Rhinegold*, 1869) and closes with *Götterdämmerung* (*Twilight of the Gods*, 1876); the frame of *Ludwig* is thus marked by the beginning and end of Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelungs*, 1876). Music and idea correspond similarly when Elisabeth of Austria's warning to Ludwig is accompanied by the music of Brangäne's warnings to Isolde from *Tristan und Isolde* (*Tristan and Isolde*, 1865). As a result, Ludwig's attraction to the mythmaker Wagner takes on an ominous coloration in which erotic overtones cannot disguise the shadows of impending doom. Thus music functions here as a component in a highly structured associative montage, where it is as important as other compositional elements such as props, settings, gesture, and text.

Ludwig describes a series of incidents associated with the Bavarian king in order to suggest that the problems Ludwig perceived—the evils of industrialism, the ambivalence of the German people to unification under Prussian domination, the

Figure 10. Theodor Hierneis oder: Wie man ehemaliger Hofkoch wird (Theodor Hierneis, or How One Becomes a Former Royal Cook, *a.k.a.* Ludwig's Cook), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1972*

erosion of myth in the modern age and its rebirth in frightening forms—were central to a cultural malaise that would eventually engender fascism. Yet Syberberg argues neither that Hitler fulfilled Ludwig's legacy nor that Ludwig somehow foresaw and rejected the Hitlerian possibility. Rather, Ludwig appears in this film as a helpless visionary, unable to prevent the rapid industrialization of Germany despite his awareness of the cultural crisis it would precipitate. A Romantic anti-capitalist, he searches desperately for the security of myth—finding his affinity in Wagner—but ultimately allows the forces of modernization to gain the upper hand. Eventually, of course, myth and modernization combine, in the case of Hitler, in a paradoxical catastrophe that releases the worst of both as the culmination of Ludwig's brightest hopes and darkest fears.

Theodor Hierneis oder: Wie man ehemaliger Hofkoch wird (*Ludwig's Cook*, 1972), the second picture in the series, is based on the memoirs of Theodor Hierneis, who began his culinary career as a cook's helper at Ludwig's court. This film is a long monologue in which the actor Walter Sedlmayr, as Hierneis, recalls his past and his views of Ludwig as seen from the kitchen. Hierneis appears here as the subject of a (fictional) documentary, but certain methods of distancing have been employed to prevent any placid identification with such a pedestrian hero. For example, while the bulk of his speech occurs in the first person, it begins and ends in the third person. Furthermore, the castle rooms described are often not shown, and the viewer, required to imagine them, is therefore forced to be both Hierneis's intimate interlocutor and his distanced observer.

The English title of this film, *Ludwig's Cook*, suggests the comic element inherent in the servant's view of the master, or the fantasy of Ludwig's Romanticism next to the down-to-earth experience of his cook. Thus Hierneis recounts how his sleeping quarters were located underneath one of the castle's artificial lakes, a bothersome leak from which forced him to take an umbrella to bed. The film's German title, however, captures another aspect, as revealed by its literal English translation: *Theodor Hierneis, or How One Becomes a Former Royal Cook*. After leaving Bavaria, Hierneis became a successful restaurateur who capitalized on his illustrious past. Tenaciously loyal to his former servitude, he thoroughly internalized the authoritarian mechanism of his own society. As a study in subjugation, the film thus captures both the cook's fascination with power and his reproduction of hierarchical attitudes as a restaurateur. *Ludwig's Cook*, which Syberberg describes as "chamber music," is certainly not as complex as the requiem *Ludwig*, but the central interests of both films converge in the examination of dominance and subservience, or subjugation, in mass society.

Like Ludwig, Syberberg's Karl May stands at the threshold of the twentieth century. Nostalgic about the vanishing world of Romanticism—hence the title of this, the third film in the series of five, *Karl May—Auf der Suche nach dem verlorenen Paradies* (*Karl May: In Search of Paradise Lost*, 1974)—he is also apprehensive about the age in the process of being born. For in this modern, rational world that has relentlessly eradicated myth, an attraction to the irrational unexpectedly recurs. And

the central figure here is well aware that the attraction to an irrational alternative to the modern order can easily lead to catastrophe. "Woe, if the wrong man comes," May warns toward the end of the film, and indeed, invited to speak in Vienna, he attracts the attention of the young Hitler. While Syberberg does not equate the two figures ideologically, he does suggest a proximity, within "the spiritual panorama of European people at the onset of the proletarian mass age,"[7] between aesthetic compensation and the aestheticization of politics, or between utopia and its perverter.

May is presented in the film, then, as "the last great German mystic in the age of dying legends,"[8] whose immensely popular novels provided utopian images set against the exotic colonial background of 1900. This particular novelist anticipates the development of film, which is for Syberberg the specifically modern form of fantasy production. The thematic relationship between such a popular author and the popular art of cinema explains the film's brief homage to the early French director Georges Méliès, whose magical works are still considered to be the epitome of cinematic imagination.

Figure 11. Karl May—Auf der Suche nach dem verlorenen Paradies (Karl May: In Search of Paradise Lost), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1974*

Similar considerations of cinematic history motivated Syberberg to select a cast for *Karl May* composed of German stars of the 1930s: Helmut Käutner, Lil Dagover, Kristina Söderbaum, Mady Rahl, and others. The choice of these actors had nothing to do with the Nazi nostalgia of the 1970s; instead, their presence constituted a

visual quotation implying a hidden affinity between May's imaginative fantasies and the aura of movie stars. For Syberberg, the erosion of traditional society initiated a "search for paradise lost" that ranges from May's popular literary visions to the images visible on a movie screen. Appropriately enough, passages from Gustav Mahler's *Resurrection* symphony (1895) dominate the soundtrack of *Karl May*.

In *Winifred Wagner und die Geschichte des Hauses Wahnfried von 1914–1975* (*The Confessions of Winifred Wagner*, 1975), the fourth in Syberberg's series of five films, this *auteur* continues his investigation of the interdependence of the Wagnerian tradition and the growth of National Socialism by returning to the documentary form of his earlier pictures. In 1915, Winifred Williams married Richard Wagner's son, Siegfried, and, when the latter died in 1930, she gained control of the Bayreuth Festival, over which she retained power throughout the Nazi period. Her friendship with Hitler began in 1923 before the Munich *putsch* and lasted until 1945; Winifred's continued unrepentant loyalty to the Führer, as recorded by Syberberg, resulted in heated public controversy as well as her family's repudiation of the film. The English title's connotation—a confession of guilt—is therefore inappropriate. The absence of any self-criticism or willingness to examine the past characterizes Winifred's account, the superficial objectivity of which is captured in the dry but precise original German title, the literal translation of which is *Winifred Wagner and the History of the House of Wahnfried, 1914–1975*.

Figure 12. Winifred Wagner und die Geschichte des Hauses Wahnfried von 1914–1975 (Winifred Wagner and the History of the House of Wahnfried, 1914–1975, *a.k.a.* The Confessions of Winifred Wagner), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1975*

The film is fundamentally a study of Winifred Wagner as she recounts her past, particularly her relationship to Hitler. In the West German context, her expression of unshaken loyalty to Hitler is a rare exception; however, her unwillingness to examine closely what she euphemistically calls his "dark" side is paradigmatic. This inability to reconsider Hitler's role or her own betrays a rigidity that is hostile to change and intolerant of contradictions. "Basically, I'm an insanely loyal person," Winifred remarks. "Once I develop admiration for a person, it remains through thick and thin. Well, I mean, then I simply stand by him [Hitler], but I don't stand up for his errors; as I have said, they just don't affect my relationship to him. I separate the two completely." Were Hitler to appear today, she adds, she would greet him as warmly as ever. Winifred's repeated assertions of this separation of personal and political dimensions and of her own fully unpolitical character rapidly become grotesque. When Syberberg asks about her reaction, for example, to the attacks on Jewish artists and the banning of certain works, such as the music of Gustav Mahler, she merely replies that she never liked Mahler's music anyway, and therefore the matter did not bother her at all.

The motifs of loyalty, stability, and steadfastness, which Winifred Wagner consciously invokes in the film, are part of the Wagnerian ideological heritage in which the wholesome, the homogeneous, and the pure (including the racially pure) constitute the opposite of the mixed, the differentiated, and the changing.[9] Winifred represents opposition to any change on principle, and Syberberg's film examines the relationship between such a frozen vision of the past and the morbid stability of the present. By uncovering the connection, he attempts to initiate a "work of mourning," or the confrontation with the past necessary if one is to achieve a liberated life in the present. Syberberg describes *The Confessions of Winifred Wagner* as "a matter of breaking a spell with cinematic means."[10] It is a biopsy of a conservative society that still looks askance at former opponents of Hitler, and in which Winifred is certainly not alone in her view that Willy Brandt's enlisting in the Norwegian army in order to oppose Nazi aggression was an unforgivable act of treason.

At the Wagner family's request, Syberberg agreed to an epilogue to the film in which Winifred could allow for errors of memory—but not for any critical distancing from the substance of her presentation. Syberberg wrote this epilogic disclaimer, which she reads in voice-over narration to a series of still shots. At the end, Winifred Wagner rhetorically explains why after thirty years she broke her public silence: "Why not?" Syberberg reports that she was amused by this ultimate gesture on his part—the agreeing to an epilogue—and described it as a "Jewish ending,"[11] by which she means that its openness and levity directly contrast with the inscrutable, remorseless loyalty that she herself upholds.

By means of Winifred Wagner's monologue throughout the film, which contains both fascinating and trivial information, Syberberg underscores Hannah Arendt's thesis concerning the "banality of evil" (propounded in her 1963 book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*), even using it as one of the quotations that divide *The Confessions of Winifred Wagner* into chapter-like sections. Otherwise

his film consists only of close-ups and medium shots of Winifred speaking, spurred on occasionally by the director's very broad questions. The slow rhythm of the camera follows the rhythm of her discourse, betraying in the process a non-polemical tenderness toward its subject. Syberberg has attempted to let Winifred Wagner speak without imposing a tendentious perspective on her words via the usual documentary methods: there is no voice-over narrator who explains Winifred's errors, for example, nor has the director introduced any extraneous material—footage of Nazi rallies or of concentration camps—as montage to contradict the spoken text.

Only in the final sequence has Syberberg included extraneous images, in particular shots of the early years of the National Socialist movement and of the Wagner family itself in 1923. Thus *The Confessions of Winifred Wagner* is no heavy-handed exposé, but rather a profound analysis that is radical because of its very sensitivity. The extraordinary length of the original version—five hours—indicates the director's unwillingness to muffle his subject's words. And ultimately, despite Winifred's efforts to de-politicize Hitler's attraction to Bayreuth, this garrulous woman confirms Syberberg's thesis that "the Hitler we hate and the Wagner whom we love are linked inextricably to each other, from the beginning and without end."[12]

After *Ludwig* and *Karl May*, Syberberg's examination of modern German culture and its relationship to its own politico-artistic legacy culminated in the 1977 magnum opus *Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland* (*Hitler, A Film from Germany*, a.k.a. *Our Hitler*), the fifth and final film in the series begun in 1972. Syberberg again makes no attempt here to provide a conventional documentary of historical events with the help of authentic footage and the instructional commentary of a narrator. The film is not concerned with the actual Hitler—the private person, the politician, and the dictator—but with Hitler as a figure of popular fantasy. Hence the emphasis in *Our Hitler* on the mass support behind the Führer's legal—and, as Syberberg underscores, democratic—accession to power.

Yet even more important to this film is Hitler as a fascinating figure *outside* Germany and *after* 1945: Chaplin's Hitler, Hollywood's Hitler, Hitler as the incarnation of evil in the popular mind. Such an emphasis on Hitler-as-image, implicit in the title of the work, evokes Syberberg's second theme in *Our Hitler*: film itself. The many motifs associated specifically with Hitler and National Socialism are intertwined here with references to the history of cinema, including Méliès, Thomas Edison, Sergei Eisenstein, Erich von Stroheim, the Expressionists, Leni Riefenstahl, and the Hays Office (responsible for enforcing the Hollywood Production Code).

These two thematic levels even converge in the monologues of Fritz Ellerkamp, Hitler's personal projectionist, who describes the Führer's addiction to movies. But the proximity between the two levels is less a matter of Hitler the film buff than a consequence of key elements in Syberberg's own thought. As he suggested in *Karl May*, the rationalized world of modernity suffers from a dearth of myth; and the fantastic images of cinema might offer a substitute, just as the utopian promises of an unscrupulous politician might mobilize the masses. Aesthetics or politics, film or

Hitler—Syberberg regards them as twin elements within the single historical context of the modern industrialized world.

Because of its highly political and emotionally charged subject, *Our Hitler* has met, over the years, with a good deal of opposition from critics who would have preferred a more traditional discussion of the specific background of National Socialism. Instead of describing Hitler as a lackey of heavy industry or a necessary result of German backwardness, the film treats him as a typically modern phenomenon, not unrelated to contemporaneous developments in Stalin's Soviet Union or in Hollywood's America. (In this regard, Syberberg is surely indebted to the critical theory of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno.)

Despite the provocative nature of *Our Hitler*'s arguments, one suspects that the fervor of Syberberg's critics stems largely from a hostility to the film's formal features. Constructed on a scale that dwarfs Riefenstahl and rivals Wagner, *Our Hitler*, more than seven hours long, is divided into four distinctly titled parts. These parts themselves are in turn divided into a total of twenty-two sequences similar to the chapter units in *Ludwig*; here, however, the chapters are not introduced by titles designed to orient viewers in their response to the rich and highly complex material. More importantly, Syberberg's tendency to downplay narrative continuity reaches a climax in *Our Hitler*. The biographical framework inherent in *Ludwig* and *Karl May* has been diminished in this instance; historical chronology gives way to the primacy of an intellectual argument that is carried out in the various layers of cinematic material. The very breadth of that argument, which concerns the relationship of Hitler to "the age of the masses," necessitated the development of a form less constraining than a simple storyline and closer perhaps to that of the modern novel. Thus, despite some humorous as well as profoundly moving passages, *Our Hitler* is a difficult film, not immediately accessible, that demands repeated viewing and reflection.

Figure 13. Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland (Hitler, A Film from Germany, *a.k.a.* Our Hitler), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1977*

Syberberg continues in this film to work with the tableau as collage of heterogeneous materials suggesting incongruous affinities or Brechtian contradictions. Each shot contains five formal elements: the projected background; the foreground (which can contain diverse elements); the music; noise on the soundtrack; and the spoken text (generally monologues, in keeping with the anti-realist nature of *Our Hitler* as a whole). For example, at one point an actor portraying the young Goebbels appears in a room full of mannequins, dressed and arranged in order to suggest an elite social gathering of 1923. In the background, we see a slide of the Venus grotto from Wagner's *Tannhäuser* (a.k.a. *Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg*; *Tannhäuser and the Singers' Contest at Wartburg Castle*, 1845); Syberberg intends thereby to refer both to the subject of this opera—erotic entrapment in an otherworldly utopia—and to his own *Ludwig* film, where the very same slide is used during the nightmare sequence. The soundtrack includes street sounds, machine-gun fire, political songs, a Hitler speech, contemporary popular music, and the spoken text itself, in which the actor portraying Goebbels recounts the excitement of his initial meeting with Hitler. Syberberg's point here is not that the fundamentally uninteresting private person Hitler was irresistibly convincing as the public Führer, but that within a specific cultural context the search for leaders who appear charismatic—and who can be misperceived as messianic—eclipses traditional political values.

As a corollary to this collage structure, Syberberg has relied on a complex system of quotation ranging from the aural montage of authentic recordings of Nazi speeches or Allied war broadcasts to cinematic parody—as, for instance, when Peter Kern in an SA uniform speaks the final monologue from Fritz Lang's *M* (1931). Similarly, the visual images are often quotations of important paintings, especially those of the German Romantics, and one of the key props is a large black stone modeled after an image in Albrecht Dürer's *Melancholia* (1514). Furthermore, the musical soundtrack in *Our Hitler* is itself composed of quotations from both popular and serious compositions.

The development of the soundtrack, then, is fundamental to the structure of the film. On one level, the montage of radio broadcasts generally proceeds chronologically, from the recordings of the early Nazi movement in the first part of *Our Hitler* to the Allied announcements of military victory at the end. This provides a weak but consistent timeline—heterologous to the biographical approach found in Syberberg's earlier films—around which the central themes of the film can be organized. More significantly, Syberberg uses excerpts from Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Wagner, and Mahler in a complicated fashion: not as background mood music but as precise citations within the associative complex of each tableau.

A brief description of this musical system can illustrate the key developmental lines of *Our Hitler*. Here, as in *Ludwig*, Syberberg has consciously employed a musical model by creating four semi-independent symphonic movements, each centered on a different problem or thematic question. The first part, with its emphasis on the rise of National Socialism, returns repeatedly to excerpts from *Rienzi* (1842), Wagner's opera about the populist Roman revolutionary. Syberberg underscores his point by

juxtaposing *Rienzi* with "The Horst Wessel Song" (the anthem of the Nazi Party from 1930 to 1945) and, later, with radio broadcasts of the book burnings in Berlin. The second part turns to the problem of utopian elements in the National Socialist vision; the key musical citations here include Wagner's *Parsifal* (1882) and, above all, the resurrection passage of Mahler's Second Symphony, which suggests associations familiar from *Karl May*.

As the radio reports shift to the military developments of 1944–1945, Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* is quoted in the third part of *Our Hitler*. Finally, in the initial passages of the film's fourth section, only brief references to *Rienzi* and Haydn's "Kaiserquartett" ("Emperor Quartet," 1799), with its nationalist connotation, are heard; otherwise, the realm of high culture seems to disappear from the soundtrack in this section, because, as Syberberg complains, business has replaced art in the modern world. Only at the very end does the promise of the resurrection of authentic art resound: through Mahler's resurrection passage, *Parsifal*, Tristan's plea for salvation—"O sink hernieder, Nacht der Liebe" (Descend upon us, night of passion)—from *Tristan and Isolde*, and the chorus from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony (1824).

This musical system demonstrates that the thematic centers of *Our Hitler* include resurrection, revolt, and defeat. Syberberg presents a theology of the modern world in which the gods have disappeared but not the yearning for paradise. Banished from the heavens, Lucifer, as in Dürer's engraving, may brood and plot, but he is nonetheless condemned to stare off in the wrong direction—toward hell. Syberberg's Hitler similarly takes on the guise of the devil, who is desirous of divine status and promises utopia while in reality fanning the fires of hell. In the context of this basic parable, many of the elements of the film thus take on particular significance: the brief, almost parenthetical reference to Thomas Mann's 1947 novel *Doctor Faustus* (from which Syberberg has otherwise borrowed a good deal); the Weberian call for charismatic leadership in the second section of *Our Hitler*; and the Biblical allusion to faith's moving of mountains in a 1943 Goebbels speech heard at the beginning of each of the last three parts of the film.

Finally, the interplay between musical system and spoken text in the film suggests the ultimate failure of Hitler's heaven-storming dreams. The cosmic motifs (reminiscent of Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*) that open *Our Hitler* and reappear at the end of each of the main sections are regularly accompanied by excerpts from Mozart's Piano Concerto in D minor (1785), but, within the coded system set up by the film, Mozart takes on a particular significance. In one of the most memorable sequences, Hitler, clad in a Roman toga, rises from the grave of Richard Wagner and reports from the afterlife that Mozart was the one spirit who refused to respect him. Thus Mozart, whose music fills the divine spheres, is set in contrast Hitler, the fallen angel, who may promise utopia to the godless masses of modernity but for whom paradise remains forever unattainable.

As controversial as the film's examination of Hitler's popularity is its theme of the legacy of National Socialism. One is reminded here of the proposition in Jorge Luis Borges' short story "Deutsches Requiem" (1946) that the defeat of Germany constituted, paradoxically enough, a necessary condition for the further spread of National Socialist ideology. Thus, in the important "dialogue that is really a monologue" between Harry Baer and the puppet of Hitler, we hear the latter laud the postwar world: "Praise from Adolf Hitler to the world after me. What is the short span of my human life compared with the eternity of my subsequent victory? Can I not be satisfied with immortality?" He then proceeds to recount those developments of which he approves: the thoroughly changed map of Europe under American hegemony, Stalinist terror and the persecution of dissidents in the East, the anti-Zionist resolution of the United Nations and the success of Idi Amin, torture in South America, the Berlin Wall, and West German terrorists. All this pleases Hitler and compensates for his posthumous unpopularity. If the list seems cantankerously eccentric, Syberberg has provided in an earlier section two visions of the "Hell around us" in which the cultural life of each of the two German states is attacked, in highly specific terms, as a perpetuation of the fascist catastrophe.

In general, Syberberg's understanding of Hitler's legacy focuses on the fundamental discrediting of idealism. By placing his mark on utopia, Hitler rendered it forever unpalatable. As André Heller (the Austrian author and singer-songwriter) complains in one of the final sequences of *Our Hitler*: "You have taken away the sunsets, the sunsets of Caspar David Friedrich. You are guilty that we can no longer see wheat fields without thinking of you. You have trivialized Old Germany with your simplistic pictures of workers and peasants." Hitler, then, has destroyed the legitimacy of any dignified human life and left only the pursuit of money as a possibility. Here, as elsewhere, Syberberg denounces the postwar world as the locus of unfettered capitalism: Hitler's most devastating bequest. Interestingly, this interpretation of postwar Germany is not extraneous to the West German Left's thesis concerning the continuity of class-driven society. However, whereas the left emphasizes problems such as ownership of capital, Syberberg suggests a broader notion of capitalist society that emphasizes its hostility toward authentic culture.

A high point of *Our Hitler* occurs in the fourth part when the mayor of Berchtesgaden and its director of tourism gleefully calculate the potential success of a German Disneyland at the site of Hitler's alpine home, replete with personal memorabilia, sensational facsimiles, and even stuffed models of Hitler's dogs. With the energy of vaudeville performers and a mercenary spirit worthy of figures from the plays of Henrik Ibsen, the two put forth their plan: "Business is the freedom of the democrat. And democracy is only possible with economic growth. Hitler is clearly the international top product, with real cash possibilities…. Nothing esoteric. Culture is extinguished. We want real popular taste." Despite complaints that the film lacks a critical perspective, in this scene Syberberg has masterfully described an affinity between capitalism and fascism with a keen, satirical hand: commercial

culture is construed, namely, as the legacy of Hitler and perhaps the very condition of his rebirth.

Syberberg's linking of the venal materialism of modern culture to Hitler's unbroken influence echoes an important dissident note in postwar West German culture—for example, Günter Grass's complaints that his compatriots had abandoned their ideals in exchange for the consumerist pleasures of the *Wirtschaftswunder*, or "economic miracle" of the 1950s and 1960s. The real source of this critique, however, was the controversial 1967 book by Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn*, which argued that postwar German consumerism represented a sublimation of the collective trauma of 1945; frenetic economic activity thus allegedly provided an alternative to a therapeutic confrontation with the Nazi past.[13] The Mitscherlichs, key figures in the establishment of West German psychoanalysis, used the term "mourning" in its full Freudian significance as the productive process of overcoming emotional loss. Freud labeled its alternative "melancholy," implying a pathological fixation on the loss and an inability to come to terms with reality.[14]

The "work of mourning," which Syberberg invoked at the close of *The Confessions of Winifred Wagner*, clearly still inspires *Our Hitler*, in which the emblems of melancholia represent precise symptoms of the postwar German ailment. Through cinema Syberberg hopes to heal—hence his antipathy toward an entertainment industry that destroys film's curative powers. Film, he insists, must be serious art in the grand tradition, and it is obligated to examine those traditions—political, social,

Figure 14. Parsifal, *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1982*

and cultural—that have led to national catastrophe. At its best, the cinema can unveil utopian forms in an otherwise melancholy world, where dreams have given way to pedestrian routine: in this way, film can help in the reappropriation of eroded ideals and become a projection, however tentative, of paradise regained.

None of Syberberg's later work has earned him the visibility, let alone the acclaim, of *Our Hitler* and other earlier films of his. After *Parsifal* (1982), his version of the Wagnerian opera that was his most widely seen work, he collaborated with one of that film's stars, Edith Clever. Their artistic ventures included a number of theatrical monologues, a few of which were videotaped or filmed. The series commenced with *Die Nacht* (*The Night*, 1985), a six-hour long examination of how an individual may act or what an individual may ponder deep into the night—the literal night as well as the figurative one that resulted from (among other events in the history of the West) the holocaust of the Second World War. As part of his series with Clever, Syberberg directed the following five films after *Die Nacht*: *Edith Clever liest Joyce* (*Edith Clever Reads James Joyce*, a.k.a. *Molly Bloom—Monologue*; 1985); *Fräulein Else* (*Miss Else*, 1986); *Penthesilea* (1987); and *Die Marquise von O. "vom Süden in den Norden verlegt"* (*The Marquise of O.*, 1989); and *Ein Traum, was sonst?* (*A Dream, What Else?*, 1994).

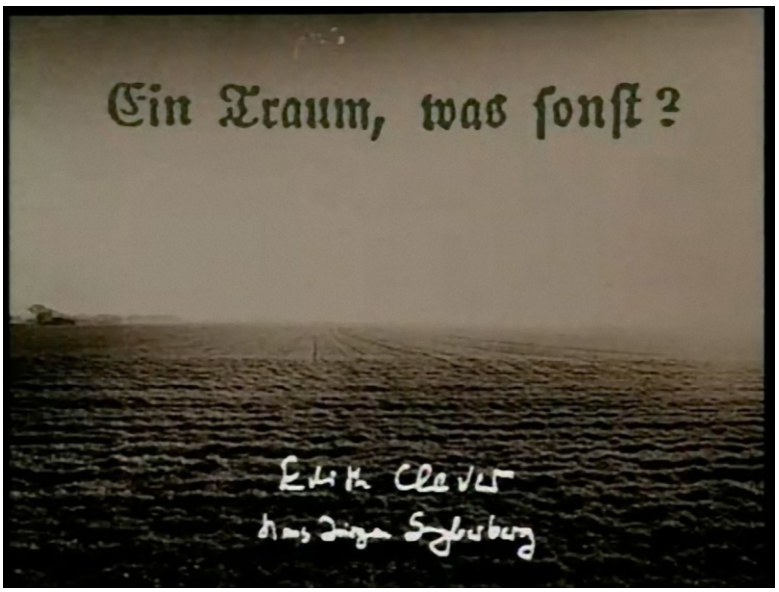

Figure 15. Ein Traum, was sonst? (A Dream, What Else?),
dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1994

Syberberg's last full-length work, a video installation titled *Höhle der Erinnerung* (*Cave of Memory*, 1997), itself continues to pursue his major filmic theme—Germany's

Figure 16. Höhle der Erinnerung (Cave of Memory), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1997*

collective remembrance, or repression, of things past—in addition to exploring the following important subjects that recur in his *oeuvre*: the relations between theater and film, and by extension among film, video, and computer-enabled digital technology; the relationship of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* to the particular arts of closet drama, literary fiction, and lyric poetry; and the juxtaposition of artistic "shadow worlds," in Plato's cave as in Syberberg's own films, with the material world of transitory reality, on the one hand, and the ideal realm of immutable eternity, on the other.

NOTES

1 Russell A. Berman, "Hans-Jürgen Syberberg: Of Fantastic and Magical Worlds," in *New German Filmmakers: From Oberhausen through the 1970s*, ed. Klaus Phillips (New York: Ungar, 1984), 359–378.

2 Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, *Syberbergs Filmbuch* (München: Nymphenburger Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1976), 307. Berman's translation, as are all other translations from the German in this introduction.

3 *Syberbergs Filmbuch*, 111.

4 *Syberbergs Filmbuch*, 310.

5 *Syberbergs Filmbuch*, 79.

6 *Syberbergs Filmbuch*, 109.

7 *Syberbergs Filmbuch*, 46.

8 *Syberbergs Filmbuch*, 39.

9 Cf. Richard Wagner, "Was ist deutsch?", in *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, Bd. 10 (Leipzig: E. W. Fritzsch, 1898), 36–53.

10 *Syberbergs Filmbuch*, 293.

11 *Syberbergs Filmbuch*, 285.

[12] *Syberbergs Filmbuch*, 263.

[13] Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern: Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens* (München: Piper, 1967). The American edition is titled *The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior*, trans. Beverley R. Placzek (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1975).

[14] Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *A General Selection from the Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. John Richman (New York, NY: Liveright, 1957), 36–53. Cf. Susan Sontag, "Eye of the Storm," *The New York Review of Books*, 27.2 (21 February 1980), 40.

MARCIA LANDY[1]

2. POLITICS, AESTHETICS, AND PATRIARCHY IN *THE CONFESSIONS OF WINIFRED WAGNER*

In *The Confessions of Winifred Wagner* (1975), Hans-Jürgen Syberberg has made a contribution to the history of film form and theory in his conception and execution of the film essay. He has also made a contribution to a theoretical understanding of the politics of culture by invoking the relationship between politics, aesthetics, and patriarchy. Through a close examination of Winifred Wagner's role as a woman and as a powerful public force in the German culture establishment, he elicits the common elements in the preservation and maintenance of the symbolic order in both the public and private dimensions of her life. Common to both spheres are the expressions of patriarchy as exemplified in the family, social roles, and artistic creation.

The Confessions of Winifred Wagner poses formidable challenges for its audiences. A work that can be dismissed as visually uninteresting and politically mystifying to those who are accustomed to established types of nonfiction films or to more direct forms of political statement, the film is difficult to view and raises, even if it does not answer, complex questions about art and politics. Without giving any direct information or examples of Richard Wagner's art, it taxes its audience to recollect, infer, and probe the role of that art and of Bayreuth as a dominant phenomenon in the perpetuation of German culture and, in particular, in the creation and triumph of Nazism. The audience is forced, moreover, to confront Winifred Wagner as an important agent in the preservation and transmission of that culture, and, through her, to confront the absent, though central, reality of Adolf Hitler and his influence on German art and politics from 1923 to 1945.

The audience is required to work hard at materializing, recalling, and re-creating in its imagination the events and people alluded to by Winifred Wagner. If one's expectations, derived from past cinematic treatments of German fascism, involve moral judgments, high rhetorical phrases, sentiment, visions of goose-stepping legions and extermination camps, one will be disoriented by the style of *Winifred Wagner*, which not only avoids documentation *and* affective treatment, but stresses the more personal, immediate, psycho-social and familiar aspects of German culture and character through this woman's narration. Her political power is ascertained through her own words, and the audience must work at documentation through exercising its memory.

R. J. Cardullo (Ed.), Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the Film Director as Critical Thinker, 25–40.

The film orchestrates its many and complex issues by focusing obsessively on the figure of Winifred Wagner. The camera holds her tightly in the frame, only varying from time to time by means of subtle adjustments in distance and perspective, by alternating medium and close-up, frontal and profile shots for punctuation and emphasis. Only at the end will the camera relinquish its hold somewhat. For most of the film, the audience is forced to situate itself with the interviewer, to make his questions its questions, and to struggle, as Syberberg must struggle, with his "subject." The only relief from Winifred Wagner's presence is through the connecting strips of black or white leader with their printed quotations, selected, it seems, to provoke a larger critical context for the interview. The quotations from critics such as Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, and Egon Friedell, as well as from Wagner, Hitler, Mahler, and members of the Wagner family, link segments of the interviews to each other, "document" some of Winifred's observations, more often provide an alternative point of view to hers, and provide momentary retreat from the claustrophobia of the visual frame.

The possibility of involvement and identification with Winifred is not a major problem in the film, since Syberberg's interview format, his use of printed text, his camera work, and his inclusion of Winifred's comments on the filming process consistently remind the audience of the concrete, immediate situation. The film style is thus at an opposite pole from a mythic, Romantic treatment. Syberberg permits Winifred to interrupt commentary and to utter banal statements such as having done enough for the day, and to express her personal concern about the public consequences of certain private revelations. He also demonstrates in the questions and length of time given to Winifred's answers, how much latitude he gives her to elaborate, retrace, or retract. We are dimly aware through Winifred's side-glances and comments in the direction of offscreen space that others are present on the sidelines, members of the family as well as the interviewer before her. The questions themselves are carefully "framed," focusing mainly on Bayreuth, Hitler's connections to the Wagner family, his support of Bayreuth, and Winifred's role as director of Bayreuth. In the process of discussing these issues, Winifred comments on her personal loyalties, her politics, and her desire to dissociate art from politics. The alert members of the audience, with the help of the interviewer, can contemplate more theoretical questions of patriarchy, authoritarianism, the role of women, family, loyalty, conformity, and deviance.

Thus Syberberg demonstrates that he was not interested in making a documentary in the conventional sense, nor was he interested in making a film biography of Winifred Wagner. Instead we have a film essay that uses the film interview, uses Winifred's responses to questions as a means, not an end, to explore thorny problems of aesthetics and politics.[2] In this respect, the film is roughly similar to Jean-Luc Godard's *Letter to Jane* (1972), which asks questions of Jane Fonda's photograph and of its audiences about the role film and photography play in determining political point of view. *Winifred Wagner* diverges from *Letter to Jane*, however, in its asking questions of the actual person while asking questions, at the same time, of the audience by indirection. In this manner, Syberberg is exonerated from objectifying

his subject and particularly of rendering a woman silent, since he, a man, potentially has control over the language of the film.

Syberberg's questions to Winifred are roughly similar, too, to Godard's questions of Jane Fonda's photograph: namely, what are the responsibilities of those who have access to the aesthetic media? Is it possible to divorce cultural production from politics? Will art that is divorced from ethical considerations become fascistic and totalitarian? How does this separation of art from politics occur, and what forms does it take? And, finally, but equally significant, how does the idea of politically neutral art relate to the problem of the "banality of evil" (and the "evil of banality")? A major difference in Syberberg's and Godard's treatments of these questions emerges in the level and nature of the analysis. Godard, who also eschews documentary footage, plunges directly into the actual practices of film, its language, its specificity, its popular appeal, its mystifications, whereas Syberberg probes more general cultural, historical, and psychological questions. While Syberberg's questions are directed mainly toward a German audience, the scope and nature of his treatment make it evident that similar questions can be asked of European and American audiences. In short, both filmmakers challenge their audiences to delve beneath the façade of cultural representations to uncover the political determinants of cultural production (and the determinations of cultural production).

Inevitably, as one views and listens to Winifred Wagner describing her cultural role in preserving Bayreuth with the help of Hitler, one thinks also of another woman who played an equally important role as a cultural intermediary in the development of National Socialist art—Leni Riefenstahl. *Triumph of the Will* (1935) not only utilizes Wagner's music, but the very scope and design of the film has much in common with the style and ideals of Bayreuth. Also relevant here are Riefenstahl's claims of simply making a documentary and denying her role in advancing Hitler's powers. Moreover, the Nuremberg rally, set up as an event to be filmed, was actually a theatrical spectacle.

Of Riefenstahl's films, Susan Sontag says "the trick is to filter out the noxious political ideology of the films, leaving only their 'aesthetic' merits."[3] Here Sontag, like Syberberg by his introduction of the Walter Benjamin quotation from "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936) early in the film, identifies the tendency of fascist art to aestheticize politics. The particular form this takes is to mythologize, ritualize, and particularly to enshrine certain ideals. For example, the ideals Sontag identifies are "life as art, the fetishism of courage, the dissolution of alienation in ecstatic feelings of community; the repudiation of intellect; the family of man (under the parenthood of leaders)."[4] As we explore Winifred Wagner's views on art, we will find echoes of Riefenstahl's practices, particularly as they are analyzed by Sontag.[5] Moreover, we shall have to ask ourselves whether there is not something to be learned from the fact that both of these dominant figures are women.

On the subject of art and politics, Winifred tells us, quite early in the interrogation and with some pride and restrained scorn, that she and others of her generation accepted a work of art uncritically (much as she regarded her personal loyalties).

She never "indulged" in much discussion of the work, and never tried to make it "topical." This habit of examining art intellectually grew up, she asserts, after World War II. She consistently resists any conjunction between politics and art. And even when confronted with evidence of obvious, not subtle, connections, she resists such an analysis. Thus the film opens with what according to Winifred seems to be a pragmatic issue: the question of a new production of *Parsifal* (1882), which actually "sets the stage" for the connections between Bayreuth and Hitler, and who was involved in the decision to select a new designer for the performance. Syberberg introduces as well the question not only of the form and content of given works of art, but of the selection and actual support of these works of art by those in power. He takes us behind the "performance" itself to give us a more particular and concrete sense of the people who were involved in the major political and cultural events of the time, not as public actors but as "private" persons no farther away from each other than the telephone. Winifred and her re-creation of the person of Hitler, coming to us in familiar terms, thus begin to appear comprehensible as people we can recognize and possibly comprehend, even though we are tempted to dissociate ourselves completely from them.

We are also able by means of memory to supplement Winifred's accounts of Bayreuth performances, and our memorial reconstructions clash with the film we are seeing. On the one hand, Winifred alludes to the rhetorical, heavily orchestrated, visually opulent, strenuously scripted and designed, costly form of art exemplified by Wagner's operas. On the other hand, Syberberg presents the audience with the stark simplicity, anti-rhetorical, visually and aurally limited film before us. The comparison between the present cinematic production and the absent spectacular performance exemplifies one dimension of the theoretical issues the film raises: namely, the nature of political art. Does the spectacular, highly formal, art form inhibit the asking of actual or implicit questions? Does it conceal important information and overwhelm the audience, rendering it passive and compliant? And in its refusal to confront political "topicality" (to quote Winifred's word), is it actually deeply political by coercing the audience through its shaping and dramatizing of myth and ritual, and through its very formal design? But the audience must also ask itself whether Syberberg's almost *cinéma vérité* presentation of Winifred's matter-of-fact recounting of events properly demystifies the political, economic, and cultural basis of fascism.

Winifred's reconstructions of her relationship to Hitler are crucial beyond the simple fact of documenting her political connections. They help us comprehend the immediate, concrete, even practical dimensions of the practice of power. Never inflated, never grotesque, her descriptions force us to confront Hitler's actual existence and the sources of his support. Winifred's relationship with Hitler began, she tells us, in 1923 and survived, in fact, until his death. Moreover, were he to "come back," she would still be delighted to see him, be loyal to him, and feel uninterrupted affection for him. The initial contact between the two was, indeed, political, not aesthetic. We learn how she and her husband, Siegfried, had heard

Hitler publicly and were deeply impressed by him and his ideas. They were invited to meet him, and Winifred recalls how she went, without her husband, to a reception and was profoundly impressed by Hitler's "appearance," his eyes especially, which she found "large and alive." Her "fascination" for him is unambiguous throughout her conversation.

She invited Hitler to Wahnfried because of his deep interest in Wagner, and she describes how Hitler visited Wagner's grave alone and spoke of wanting to "see to it that *Parsifal* is given back to Bayreuth." Winifred's commentary is interrupted by printed text, informing us that "Hitler made a religion of *Parsifal*." The printed text here functions as a Brechtian distancing device to call attention to contradictions and omissions in Winifred's narration. In particular, Syberberg in this fashion can introduce the question of the ideological role played by Wagner's music under National Socialism. We read on to learn that "what the Nazis want is contained in Wagner," and that Hitler acknowledged Wagner as a "predecessor." We return again to Winifred, who comments, as if responding to the quotations and corroborating them, that Hitler's deep love for Wagner began in Linz and continued unabated through the years. Hitler came, she says, to the Wagners as an "unpolitical enthusiast," deeply attached to Wagner and his work. Though she must have known that the Nazis made a religion of Wagner, she insists on the apolitical dimensions of Hitler's attraction to Wagner, and with great admiration describes how, after 1925, Hitler did not come again to Bayreuth until 1933, when he was Führer. His great "tact" is demonstrated by his refusal to return to the festival until "he could help, not hinder" Bayreuth, and he "kept his word." Winifred gives us little insight into the social and political conflicts surrounding Hitler. Instead, as in this example, she displays her loyalty, her veneration for tact, good taste, and honorable action, all of which qualities she finds exemplified in Hitler and his treatment of Bayreuth and the Wagner family. It is alien to her to introduce questions of political manipulation in relation to Hitler and the Nazis.

She herself was questioned at the Nuremberg trials (the "court," as she refers to them) about her "profiteering" from the Nazis, which she vehemently denied. Such questions must have seemed alien to her, given her ability to divorce political from artistic questions as well as private loyalties. Winifred describes how she told the "court" that she had only received 5,000 marks from Hitler for each performance and that the money was from his "personal fortune." She describes these performances as not being "linked" to Nazism, as being "purely artistic." In this same context, she acknowledges that problems about having "Jewish artists" arose, but that she was able to circumvent these difficulties. She has nothing to say about the political dimensions of the Jewish question, but concentrates on the circumscribed and pragmatic problems of staffing. In this fashion, Syberberg effectively brings out a crucial characteristic of apolitical thinking, namely its dissociative mechanism.

This dissociation becomes even more apparent in the discussion of the "War Festivals." The biggest challenge to the functioning of Bayreuth came with the war, due to conscription. The size of the audiences was diminished, and it became

difficult to get artists. (Again Winifred makes no comment about the war itself, but focuses on the artistic problems.) Winifred felt that Bayreuth should close, but Hitler, she says, insisted on keeping the show going, and developed the idea of the War Festival. He exempted artists from military service, and, for audiences, developed the idea of bringing soldiers, distinguished officers, nurses, and doctors who were served by the League of German Girls (BDM). The people came, were housed, fed, and entertained. Bayreuth became as much of a spectacle, it would seem, as the operas themselves. Thus the link is further established, through Winifred's own unreflective commentary, between the operas and the use of the festivals for propaganda purposes. The filmmaker does not himself intrude any "moral" or pointed comment to this effect, preferring rather to film a quotation from Richard Wagner on art and revolution that asserts Wagner's beliefs that the public should have free access to art, and that art should serve as the basis of all future institutions. The audience should connect this quotation to that of Hitler which acknowledges Wagner as his predecessor. It is not completely clear how the conjunction between Wagner and Hitler works here. Is Syberberg suggesting that Hitler took progressive ideas from Wagner and distorted them for his political ends, or is he emphasizing the pre-existence of conditions in German culture, prior to Hitler, favorable to the rise of Nazism? However, Winifred's discussion of the nature of the War Festivals is unambiguous; the conjunction of art and ideology is obvious to the audience, if not to Winifred.

In a sense, the audience is challenged to decode Winifred's narration, much as it must do with a "fiction" film. The major difference between this and a narrative film is that Winifred's "narration" is told, not dramatized, and the director provides his own means for distancing his audience to assist them in the process of analysis, by taxing their memory. He does this by forcing them to confront contradictions between what is said and omitted. Like Ophüls's two films, *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1969) and *The Memory of Justice* (1976), also based on interviews, *Winifred Wagner* provokes questions, and the moral questions are subordinated to the aesthetic, political, and psychological issues. However, following the sustained narration of one person provides Syberberg the opportunity to probe more deeply than Ophüls into the psycho-social dimensions of the public performance of politics.

Winifred's "narrative," her fiction, is nowhere more cogent than in the idyll she weaves around "Wolf," who was for her a great family figure: "He loved children," this "good uncle with a pistol in his pocket." (The latter quotation is from her children.) She tells, with great affection, how Hitler came frequently at night, talked for long hours with her, and came to the children's bedside. He also took the children for rides in his car. At times, he allowed Winifred to meet him and drive him to Wahnfried, in spite of his contempt for women drivers. She is proud that she offered him "family life" and that the bond between Hitler and her family was based on "admiration for Wagner." Out of her deep affection for and loyalty to Hitler, she waxes eloquent on how Hitler was "never the Führer to us. He was just a fascinating and interesting man." When asked whether she experienced any moments

Figure 17. Winifred Wagner und die Geschichte des Hauses Wahnfried von 1914–1975 (Winifred Wagner and the History of the House of Wahnfried, 1914–1975, *a.k.a.* The Confessions of Winifred Wagner), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1975*

of repulsion, she responds emphatically, "Never." What happened politically and publicly obviously still does not matter to her.

At this point in the film, Syberberg visually introduces a quotation from Erich Fromm, one that works in complex fashion to bind Winifred to Hitler, the filmmaker to his subject, and the audience to all three. The quotation asserts that even the most evil person is human, and that any contrary analysis is wrong and misleading. One could read Fromm's statements as an apology for Winifred, as Syberberg must anticipate only too well; but such a reading conflicts with the political questions the film raises as well as with Syberberg's cinematic treatment of these questions. The Fromm quotation is provocative because taken out of context as it is, it does not provide the viewer with much information about its meaning. One can infer from the film's treatment, however, that Syberberg seems to be suggesting that judgments based on sentiment, on reductive psychologizing, and on attributions of bestiality would not help the viewer to understand fascism. The quotation, like the film, seems to suggest that the audience must see Winifred in human terms in order to understand how she, and others like her, created and legitimized fascism.

The film's unrelenting and steady portrait-focus on Winifred, its avoidance of unusual camera angles, fast-paced and obvious editing, and juxtaposition of material external to its human subject, assists the audience in viewing Winifred in familiar, though not admirable terms. Self-consciously in the very style of the film, Syberberg

eschews any suggestion of the psychotic, the exaggerated, or the atypical in the sense of social "types." The way Winifred Wagner is filmed is congruent with the attitudes she articulates, attitudes that are only too familiar—deep loyalty to country and family, service to one's friends and to commitments, admiration and support of culture, contempt and mistrust of those who are different and threatening. What also becomes apparent is that without these virtues embedded in German culture, without "good" people like Winifred and her family, "Wolf" would have never succeeded in attaining power.

The Wagners welcomed Hitler as a friend, endorsed his political ideas, sustained him while he was in prison at Landsberg, and such support seemed natural given their personal predilections. Winifred describes with laughter how she sent Hitler writing paper in prison at his request, and how "Now people are blaming me for the existence of *Mein Kampf*." Several times, Syberberg's technique of moving the camera from a medium shot to a close-up helps to highlight certain statements such as this one. After a while, we become acutely conscious of certain mannerisms. For example, we become conscious of the points at which Winifred laughs, and they come to signal defensiveness. Moreover, the camera, which has delicately isolated such gestures, helps the audience to defamiliarize the person and the statement, thus advancing the potential for critical consciousness about Winifred's language. By means of the laughter here, we recognize that Winifred acknowledges but refuses to appropriate the idea that she perhaps did help to produce *Mein Kampf* (1925). Her laughter, isolated in this fashion, gives more away than any dramatic editorial comment.

Winifred's banality, her inability to hear what she says, is quite evident in her comments, typical comments to say the least, about having saved a few Jews and homosexuals. She describes how she passed on appeals in behalf of individuals to Hitler, appeals that often did not reach him. Some she could "save," others not. This remarkable "confession," presented in the most commonplace language, is, as is so much of her discussion, striking in what she does *not* say. She does not, even after history has documented the extent of the political and human destruction of this period, make any comment that would indicate that she has any doubt whatsoever about the inevitability or necessity of the political events that produce the atrocities. She does not make any criticism of the rounding up, trials, and torture of the Jews, does not comment on their treatment as an unusual, let alone reprehensible, phenomenon at all, though she does acknowledge positively her role in saving certain individuals. Nor is the notion of holding life and death in her hands, even more in Hitler's, acknowledged as an unusual exercise of power. Winifred presents herself, her actions, and her decisions in the same manner that she discusses the role of art. She reveals her preoccupation with performance, not content, action, not contemplation, personal and not political ties.

Occasionally, repressed attitudes break through, moments when Winifred Wagner reveals her bitterness and scorn for the direction Germany took in the postwar era. Her loyalty to Germany and to Hitler emerges most emphatically here. A good

example of this is the "Klaus Mann incident," which she is asked to discuss. She was interviewed by Mann, Thomas Mann's son, for the newspaper *Stars and Stripes*. Through her discussion of this incident, we learn that Winifred is British by birth, that she used her former language as a way of castigating Klaus Mann for going over to the Allies, by refusing to speak German with him, insisting on speaking English with this "pseudo American." Her attachment to her adopted country is demonstrated by her contempt for those who abandoned Germany. Again she focuses on formal behavior rather than on the reasons for Mann's (and Willy Brandt's) defection. Moreover, she states, with some pride, that Mann identified her in his article as being the sole person, an Englishwoman, who admitted to being a Nazi after the war. And she laughs.

We thus have a context to explore further her "reasons" for becoming a Nazi. Asked what she saw in National Socialism and why, she is silent for a moment, then she launches into the usual, again banal and unanalytic, reasons for the success of Hitler. She comments on the terrible conditions of poverty, inflation, and hunger that were prevalent in the 1920s. The usual images of bread lines, inflation, wandering armies of the unemployed—portrayed so powerfully by *Kuhle Wampe* (1932) and by newsreels of the period—are evoked by her narration in the memory of spectator-auditors, but we remain visually attached to Winifred at her table. The camera slyly moves to a close-up shot as she expresses her anti-communist attitudes. She cites, as examples of social decay, the role of the Spartacists and the existence of the Soviet Republic in Bavaria. She draws the conclusion that, as a result of these disruptive phenomena, it was necessary and inevitable that Germans should demand leadership. When Hitler appeared with his speeches, holding out promises of salvation, it was clear that "we" were unconditionally ready to join him.

She did not, however, become a member of the party immediately, and when she did, it was at the personal request of Hitler, who gave her a special badge of honor. She also cites the strong national awareness in her family as a reason for endorsing Nazism. Nationalism appears as a constant leitmotif from Richard Wagner to the Nazis. Winifred articulates her admiration for Hitler's ability to rebuild Germany, his attempts to "unite," to heal the rift between laborers and intellectuals (the leitmotif of anti-intellectualism is woven throughout her narration), his successful effort to get "young people off the streets," his solving of unemployment, and, particularly, his restoration of German prestige throughout the world. Behind these customarily cited reasons lurk unresolved issues, characteristic not only of Germany but also of Western society, of patriarchy, paternalism, authoritarianism, control of the masses, and the mystification of economic and social issues. Winifred's homespun reasons thus appear rather thin and superficial, given our knowledge of the means and the cost of the drive for German prestige and order.

When questioned about the means Hitler used to accomplish his social goals, including the liquidation of the Jews, she exonerates Hitler and also Richard Wagner. She explains Wagner's anti-Semitic attitudes by saying that he merely wanted a moratorium on "foreign influences." He never thought of physical destruction, and,

while she acknowledges "wrongs" done to the Jews by Nazism, she alleges that it was not Hitler but Julius Streicher who did this, adding that "we" were all against Streicher. Syberberg cuts away to more printed text, as he gives quotations from Hitler, such as "we can only be whole again when we have annihilated the Jews." The juxtaposition of Winifred's verbal apologies with the printed text makes its point.

Having established Winifred's historical and cultural connections to National Socialism, Syberberg shifts our attention to her as a "woman" and as a "manager." As in other areas of her life, Winifred's sense of her responsibilities is carefully orchestrated. She describes how her husband came first, even before her children. She sought to lighten his burdens, to keep unwanted people and problems from disturbing his work, to be his secretary. She never neglected her primary role as the "lady" of the house. Her role as "manager" is imbued with the same attitude as her domestic role, to minimize conflict and to be diplomatic. Of her contact with great artists such as Furtwängler and Toscanini, she describes how these "artists were like children," and she treated them as such.

One infers from her descriptions of her roles that Winifred's sense of service, loyalty, and maintaining order permeates even the interpersonal aspects of her life, and we can discern deep disjunctions between public and private spheres that she must repress, though in reality she often cites private reasons for public actions. Winifred rationalizes away personal conflicts much as she rationalizes public choices. But the conjunction of her roles as wife and manager heightens the viewer's sense of how totally she identifies with the ethos. Winifred's comments and behavior call to mind Julia Kristeva's discussion of the phallic woman as the creation of patriarchy. Kristeva states: "If to exist as such, every society needs to assume, if not to recognize, the symbolic parental function (not the real daddy, but a taboo, a law, a structure) … this function is assumed by women as well … [and] allows them, even when the demands of social and economic development oppress them to the point of slavery and martyrdom, to function as the most solid support of the social order, of its administration, of its reform, and even of its revolution."[6] Women only gain admission to the symbolic order through identification with the father, and, Kristeva appropriately notes, "it takes a Mozart to make a comedy out of this loyalty to the father."[7] Winifred is not at all self-conscious of the sources of her need to organize, serve, renounce, and negate her personal desires.

In her discussion of the rumor of a possible marriage between Hitler and herself, Winifred stresses that such a union was "unthinkable," though she does not say whether it was desired. The rumor was the result of Hitler's having brought flowers to her on the occasion of her children's confirmation, and the gesture was misinterpreted as an act of courtship. She tells us that Hitler never thought of marriage; it would have hampered his duties. Though the two were friendly, the notion of marriage was nonsensical. Moreover, her husband saw to it legally that she could only run Bayreuth as long as she did not marry. She had to remain "the queen," to carry on Siegfried's work after his death. Again the public, even the ceremonial, is stressed

over the private, the sense of duty over pleasure. It does not occur to Winifred to question or regret her husband's control over her actions. Central to the question of her choices is the necessity of managing and of preserving the past.

The rather long sequence in which Winifred discusses the lost Wagner manuscripts and her attempts to recover them provides more indirect documentation on the issue of her preservation of the past. The manuscripts, originally the property of the Wittelsbach family, were bought by an industrial concern and given to Hitler, who hid them away in a safe place, according to Winifred. After the war, the "safe place" was never located, and every attempt on Winifred's part to find them was frustrated. She contacted former Nazis, as well as numerous other individuals and agencies, including Interpol, but with no success. She utters no criticism of Hitler for not turning over the documents to the family, nor does she question their appropriation by German industrialists as a gift to Hitler. Her sole concern appears to be with the artifacts themselves, another instance, it would seem, of her extraordinary capacity for service and ability to repress affect.

The last session with Winifred is introduced with the title, "I hear the Wings of the Goddess Victory," and is followed by Winifred's brief discussion of her last meeting with Hitler shortly after the July 20th plot. She found his comment about hearing "the Wings of the Goddess Victory" strange, and deduced from his appearance and words that he was getting injections to "make him cheerful." As with so many of her statements, the viewer is struck by their theatricality, their sense of the dramatic. Hitler's "last" appearance seems thus enshrined as part of a performance.

A few other reminiscences reveal Winifred's lack of reflection, the presence of arbitrary judgments, and the absence of regrets. In speaking of her unwillingness to tolerate Mahler at Bayreuth, she states, simply and emphatically, that she did not like Mahler or his music. And commenting on the fabulous Alma Mahler, in particular, she dismisses her with scorn. She describes Alma as a woman who fascinated men, even Winifred's own husband, but Winifred's judgment of decadence filters through in her mockery of the woman. Just as "decadent" art never reached Bayreuth, thanks to Winifred Wagner, so Alma never penetrated or challenged Winifred's complacent sense of her world. Whether Winifred's comments on Alma Mahler involve questions of morality or the destruction of personal attachments, and hence a violation of the code of loyalty, is not clear.

But the final sections of the interview involve issues of loyalty. In an earlier session, Winifred, when asked why Hitler was known as "Wolf," had responded simply that it was a code name (Syberberg plays in the printed text with the linguistic permutations of the word). Later she informs us that after the war, the code name had now become "USA" (*unser seliger Adolf*, or "our blessed Adolf"), and she says this with some coyness. These code names reinforce the general sense of bonding, the existence of certain mysteries that are only available to those on the inside. In speaking with pride of her enduring, unalterable loyalty to her family and friends, of her capacity to overlook "drawbacks," deficiencies, even anti-social actions, Winifred comments that "outsiders" would not understand this phenomenon.

The interview format changes, and we are now given Winifred's voice but the camera is freed to roam over family photographs, then capture her alone at the table eating. In the voice-over commentary, Winifred reiterates that she is capable of separating the Hitler she knew from the Hitler who is accused of doing terrible things. She adds that if one of her sons were to commit murder, that would not change her relationship to him, and if Hitler returned, she would be glad to see him again. All that counts is "personal experience" and beyond that she will leave the issue "to the psychologists to decipher." Again, she laughs. The camera captures her at the table, first from behind, then frontally, and she appears alone and small in this large room, as she justifies herself as an "unpolitical person," again articulating her incredulity at "the court's" accusing her of being political.

Syberberg allows Winifred yet another opportunity to add information, and she reiterates the fact that her relations with Hitler reflect only "personal experiences." She describes her decision to talk about the past and about Hitler with the question, "Why not?" But Syberberg's "work through mourning" continues with shots of Wahnfried, more photographs, and with more printed text. Particularly, we are asked to see and to contemplate the idea that "there's no personal merit in not being born in a barbaric age when you're not tested to the limit. It's easy not to be a Nazi when there is no Hitler around." These observations are linked to Egon Friedell's dismal, almost Spenglerian observations on the "black cloud" hanging over Europe and the "new age" of progress and barbarism, observations that led Friedell to leap to his death in 1938. These last statements situate Syberberg's cinematic essay in the context of cultural criticism. By indirection, his work touches economic and class issues, but primarily Syberberg is interested in the German cultural establishment as exemplified by Wagner, Bayreuth, and particularly institutionalized by Hitler and Winifred Wagner, who helped to bring this "new age" into existence.

Commenting on his role as a filmmaker, Syberberg has described himself in the following manner: "I am an outsider … an irritant; an intellectual aesthete, which is a dirty word here. I am the antithesis of what life and values in Germany have become. My three sins are that I believe Hitler came out of us, that he is one of us; that I am not interested in money except to work with; and that I love Germany."[8] With the exception of his reference to himself as an outsider, Syberberg seems to be associating himself with the attitudes his film explores. He distinguishes himself as an "outsider" only in his emphasis on intellect; in other respects he shares the sins of his subjects, Winifred Wagner and Adolf Hitler. His use of the term "outsider" seems appropriate for several reasons. Winifred uses it explicitly or alludes to it in demarcating the inner circle from those without. Wagner embodied this idea in his excoriation of foreign influences, and Hitler apotheosized the idea in his treatment of the Jews.

Moreover, in its exploration of the politics of aesthetics, *The Confessions of Winifred Wagner* probes the very central issues of deviance and conformity, legitimacy and illegitimacy, which have dominated German art and culture. As an "intellectual aesthete," Syberberg is able to take the role of an outsider in relation to

the film in order to raise questions of complicity and, thus, to provoke his audience to respond intellectually. If R. W. Fassbinder wants his audience to think and feel about similar problems; if Werner Herzog makes the audience aware of its fear of deviance; if Wim Wenders makes the audience confront the rootlessness of contemporary "Americanized" existence, Syberberg makes the audience entertain anew questions of collective responsibility for which the answers are not simple. What Syberberg says of his most recent film, *Hitler, A Film from Germany*, is equally applicable to *Winifred Wagner*: "What is different about my film is that it hurts. I don't do this to be provocative. I do it because what is involved are horribly painful, totally unresolved conflicts that, until I made my films, had never been aired."[9]

He asks us to reopen the question of how Germany evolved as it did and what role and responsibility German high culture played in producing the barbarism of National Socialism. In probing connections, he uncovers a number of causes—economic unrest, German nationalism, a tradition of anti-Semitism, the traditional values of sacrifice, service, renunciation of pleasure, loyalty, the exaltation of heroic or exceptional individuals, and the vision of a purified community. The mythic, paternal, orgiastic, the intuitive, the charismatic, and the anti-intellectual are embedded in the art and culture of the Germans. These values, distilled in Wagner's life and art, perpetuated and augmented through Bayreuth, became an integral part of the spectacle of National Socialism.

Rejecting the notion of Hitler as a madman; rejecting, also, the idea that Winifred is, in any way, mad through presenting her to us in all her contradictoriness; rejecting, too, the idea that the German people were insane and monstrous, Syberberg pushes us to look more analytically at the meaning of the banality of evil. (He cites Hannah Arendt, the popularizer of this idea, in his list of credits at the end of the film.) He asks his audience to confront the fact that it must reexamine the politics of culture, in spite of Winifred's, and of contemporary culture's, unwillingness to read politics into culture by regarding each as inhabiting separate domains. Syberberg puts before the viewer all-too-familiar disjunctions, exemplified in Winifred's confessions, between the public and private spheres, the social and the personal, the familial and the social, which reinforce an uncritical acceptance of violence, cruelty, stigmatization, war, and economic exploitation as matters alien to aesthetic concerns and to one's own personal sphere of influence and action.

The ways in which such behavior is legitimized and perpetuated are also not grotesque or unfamiliar. They involve the traditional role of the family, with its emphasis on continuity. Winifred is exemplary in every way in upholding the traditional value of the family. And Hitler, too, pays much deference to the importance of the family, the Wagner family in particular. In her role as wife, Winifred displays what is considered in bourgeois society an exemplary sense of her responsibility to her husband and work, transferring this same sense of duty and loyalty to her Fatherland and to Hitler. She keeps peace among her obstreperous children, and bends in resignation to what she does not understand, and cannot control, to keep peace in her immediate family as well as among the family of artists she manages.

Even in her contempt for Leftist elements in German society, she reflects accepted patriotic and conformist sentiments, properly recognizing and eliminating elements disruptive to her family, her class, and her country. Thus far, Winifred herself appears all-too-familiar and typical. She also displays the appropriate amount of scorn and mistrust of intellectuals, those who question, analyze, discuss, and politicize. Anti-intellectualism, a hatred for or fear of the theoretical, a penchant for the emotional and the sentimental, are also commonplace and familiar dimensions of German bourgeois ideology and culture. Winifred is thus quite representative in this respect, too. Coupled to this anti-intellectualism is a fear of decadence, without the recognition of the actual decadence of traditional culture, and a mistrust of anything and anyone that would produce examination and change in the social world. Such mistrust or fear itself is made to appear familiar in the film. Winifred's persistent refusal to resolve existing contradictions is also typical, as she insists that certain matters were none of her "business."

Syberberg's film style, by underscoring the typicality, the representativeness of her attitudes, causes audiences to have an ambivalent response to Winifred Wagner. They deplore, on the one hand, Winifred's obtuseness, while admiring, on the other, her sense of responsibility, her managerial skills and her composure, if not "honesty." By extension a similar ambivalent response is also implied toward Hitler, who shared with Winifred a love of music, of Germany, of children, and of authority. The patriarchal ethos is exposed in its benevolent-appearing manifestations, being undercut through its familiar and accessible aspects rather than its malevolent underside, though that, too, is never absent from consideration. Thus, Syberberg wants the audience to look at itself, inviting examination of its own contradictory roles.

But the other side of Winifred's story involves the role, not of the family alone, but of the other social and cultural institutions that determine the production of art and the nature of that art, which, in turn, legitimizes and perpetuates the social and political order. It is here that the philosophic connections between the Wagners and Hitler become crucial. German idealism and Romanticism are consummated in Wagner. All of the themes in his work, so admired by Hitler, are, Syberberg suggests, present in German culture and politics: the high themes of love, death, and transcendence, the mystical community of Germans, the select and charismatic hero and savior, the epic grandeur of German history, the overpowering worship of instinct and irrationality, and the purity of sacrifice. Dependent on mythic characters, on sensual music, on spectacle, Romanticism refuses to confront the daily world, as it refuses to confront its potential for violence. The image of "the good uncle with the pistol in his pocket," captures, on a less grandiose level, the sense in which the external image, the appearance of benevolence, the displays of virtue, conceal and seal off the hidden dimensions of violence, self-interest, profit, and barbarism. In a very different way from the usual one, then, the audience is asked to look at the "good uncle" and what he represents. It is not asked to apologize, to perform public

penance as some have done, to glibly reiterate worn-out statements about collective guilt, but to confront its own link to that history in order to understand, and to resist repetition. This is where the idea of memory is crucial to the film; Syberberg asks us to recall, not in order to rehearse, but rather to avoid.

The film has problems as well as self-consciously presenting problems. A major difficulty is that by treating Winifred, her era, the role of art, from the vantage point of Wagner and of Bayreuth, we do not have access to the forces that opposed the dominant culture. Though we are asked to use our memories to fill in and correct the picture Winifred gives us, our images, alas, have also come from the dominant culture through the media and are therefore weak on the question of alternatives. The existing alternatives to the Hitler phenomenon are, thus, kept in the background as they have always been. We know that forces for change, radical elements in German society, were silenced and destroyed. Winifred tells us that, too, but we have no access to their reality. If history is repeating itself, is the implication here that the suppression of creative political alternatives is also being suppressed? This is ambiguous, though one is aware that Syberberg is commenting on the role of the past, its continuation in the present through his exposure of Hitler's fascination with Wagner, Winifred's fascination with Hitler, his own fascination with Winifred, and what this fascination means.

If in *The Confessions of Winifred Wagner*, Syberberg does not explore the second part of the Benjamin quotation, that communism responds to fascism's aestheticization of politics by politicizing art, he does amply explore the transformation of politics into aesthetics through the production of ritual. The War Festivals, cited by Winifred, document Benjamin's statement on how "all efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war."[10] Moreover, Syberberg documents the practices of fascist art, which "sees its salvation in giving those masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves." The public displays, the opportunities to reenact the heroic and to experience the mystical sense of community, are the form of that expression. Benjamin makes an important distinction between "expression" and "action": "The masses have a right to change property relations; fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property."[11] Syberberg's film exposes the practices of fascism; on alternatives it remains ambiguous, only suggesting that changes must come from new intellectual formulations.

Basically, the director shares with us, his audience, his questions and concerns, remaining more often on the level of interrogation. In part, he attempts to clear away uncritical conceptions as well as inflated images of fascism and its cultural expression. He seems to regard the cinematic medium as the proper arena for such an investigation, though he seems quite wary of positing answers and of articulating concrete alternatives. In this respect, Syberberg seems to be in the company of many recent filmmakers, who seek to demystify ideological practices in film content and, even more, through experimentation with film form. In assessing the psychological dimensions of social reality, he also seeks to develop the complex and heuristic

potential of film. The haunting questions that such film treatment evokes are: What are the implications of such an interrogative mode? What does Syberberg want his audience to do with these questions, assuming that they accept and internalize them as valid?

NOTES

[1] Marcia Landy, "Politics, Aesthetics, and Patriarchy in *The Confessions of Winifred Wagner*," *New German Critique*, 18 (Autumn 1979): 151–166.

[2] Gitta Sereny, in her discussion of Syberberg's recent film on Hitler, describes the film as "basically a trial, without courtroom and virtually without actors; it takes place in our minds—and our instructed minds at that," in "Hans-Jürgen Syberberg: Germany's Most Feared Filmmaker," *Saturday Review* (April 28, 1979), 32.

[3] Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," in *Movies and Methods*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976), 42.

[4] Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," 43.

[5] Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," 40–41.

[6] Julia Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, trans. Anita Barrows (London: Marion Boyars, 1977), 199.

[7] Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, 32.

[8] Sereny, "Hans-Jürgen Syberberg: Germany's Most Feared Filmmaker," 28.

[9] Sereny, "Hans-Jürgen Syberberg: Germany's Most Feared Filmmaker," 32.

[10] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Benjamin's *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1969), 241.

[11] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 241.

BEATRIZ SCHILLER[1]

3. HANS-JÜRGEN SYBERBERG: *OUR HITLER* AS VISUAL POLITICS

Hans-Jürgen Syberberg is a German filmmaker whose controversial *Hitler, A Film from Germany* is a seven-hour, twenty-two chapter film cycle divided into four parts. *Our Hitler*, as this film is also known, is the third part of a trilogy that includes *Ludwig: Requiem for a Virgin King* (1972) and *Karl May* (1974). This interview was conducted by Beatriz Schiller in January 1980. Ms. Schiller is the New York correspondent for *Journal do Brazil* in Rio de Janeiro.

Beatriz Schiller: The scenarios and images presented by you—Hitler, Goebbels, the German soldier, democracy, Nazism—whether technically sophisticated or not, were less ends than aesthetic tools for creating a total political picture in this film.

Hans-Jürgen Syberberg: You see, I was brought up in a generation that was told art has to do with politics. Sometimes I'm afraid of this, but art *is* politics. I don't want to politicize art. No. Art to my way of thinking is politics. It's proven in this kind of film, which not only represents Germany abroad and contemporary Germany's picture of the past, but also may in a political way cause a lot of changes, though not to the masses.

BS: Where do you expect the changes?

HJS: The audiences, I think. I don't know if it's the film or the time, or perhaps the film fixed to this time, but I think what we are talking about in the end is a very political fact.

BS: One of the characters, as I remember, mentions the impact that films had upon the dreams of heroism among the people. Hitler is mentioned as being fascinated with cowboys, a believer in the Hollywood philosophy "the more aggressive, the better" and "whoever draws first wins." Many sequences in your film present propaganda as the control of the mind through the production of superheroes and a visual politics. You even suggest that the German army looked like something out of a movie by Cecil B. DeMille. Overall there is an immense concern with a person's ability to think while being bombarded by visual indoctrination.

R. J. Cardullo (Ed.), Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the Film Director as Critical Thinker, 41–45.

HJS: It was a hard fight in my country, because they didn't want this film there. So I had to find my own tactics—a tricky way to insist on forcing the media's attention. My enemies in Germany are not so much the people, or established members of the universities and publishing houses, but rather the middle-class media and the establishment that calls itself "the left." My tactic was to go outside Germany for my experiences, my hopes, and, at last, in New York, my success—not as a person, but rather as an artist.

Hitler as subject of my film is not the Adolf Hitler who lived in Germany, but all Hitlers wherever they are. People think it's only an elite that will come and therefore it has nothing to do with the big problems of our society. But that is the opposite of what Hitler thinks—the Hitlers never think about a few people. They always want the masses. He wants the support of all people and talks only to them, because there he can have a big effect, a big success. Surely someone who speaks like that is very near to Hitler. One of my first thoughts after pondering the tricky ways of the Hitlers was not to want the masses and box-office sales, and not to go to the cinema openings and press screenings. I refused all that, if you like, like the Christs of every religion. They know they don't speak to all. They speak only to some. And if they are good or right, it spreads out.

BS: I think there is something very valid in your principle of opposing mass communications.

HJS: In a certain way Khomeini does it, too. He's created a new idea, and he did win against the weapons of the Americans, the money of the Shah, and the power of the CIA, with nothing, with bare hands and poor people. I hope I'll see the situation in a different way. I don't want to be a Khomeini or a Hitler. I only want people to see my film.

BS: Do you intend to use whatever power or political clout you have in the exposure of your ideas?

HJS: You see, that could never happen to somebody like me because every film I make is different. Even if I were to get power, which means people would follow my aesthetics, the next film would confuse them too much, because I always change my aesthetics, and my subject.

BS: It's almost a terrorist tactic.

HJS: If you really want power, or if you want to be elected and followed, you have to find positions and stay with them. But if you confuse people, you lose that. So I make it very difficult for my friends. *Ludwig* and *Karl May* were shown in France and London with success. They were much easier to understand. Now some of my friends from these films have come to join in this last, difficult film, *Hitler*. I'm astonished that they have followed, because I took the most difficult path.

BS: Maybe because all the signs of Hitler you show are so concrete and present now. You point out that there is a space for a new Hitler. Where do you think that Hitler is most likely to appear? Why do you think people say that your film is dangerous?

HJS: To make a serious film about Hitler has to be dangerous—otherwise it wouldn't be honest. This is a dangerous problem, and if you don't go to the center you lose your subject. A lot of problems are touched upon, for instance the problem of democracy. Hitler was elected by the rules of democracy. Germany was not an uncivilized country; you cannot say this is just a problem of history, because we are all living in a democracy.

BS: Do you mean the European countries?

HJS: Yes, and others. Imagine if somebody like Khomeini had the atomic bomb. Why not? He could have it. Today we could do nothing. In other times, in the time of imperialism, it was easy. They sent some ships and guns into the country and pushed the tyrant out of the way. The way we are living in the world now, it is impossible to do that. I think, in one hundred years, that all the Khomeinis will have atomic bombs. Every Khomeini will have the atomic bomb, and then we will not have to speak about fifty people imprisoned in an embassy, Iranian or otherwise. Then the Khomeinis of the world will threaten everybody at once. What will we do then with our system of democracy? If Hitler had possessed more possibilities, the world would not exist. At the end the new Hitler will blow up everything, as the old one tried to blow up Germany. His technology wasn't sufficient; the next Hitler's can be.

We dream that they won't use the destructive powers, that we have a certain equivalence of power. But that is only the situation today. Maybe in a hundred years, or a thousand years, we will have other bitter experiences—if there are any experiences anymore. Without wars, in peace, there are enough problems, as we know in the case of atomic energy. We don't need another war to examine the problems.

BS: In your film you question democracy, because democracy teaches people behavior geared to national interest before individual interests.

HJS: I don't like to say it, but … I am an intellectual. An intellectual is different from the majority of the masses, and therefore we are always afraid. Sometimes the intellectual does not show it, or even reacts in the opposite way. Because he feels guilty of being different, he praises the masses. If we are honest, a lot of intellectuals are profoundly afraid of the masses. We have had some historical experience of power working with the masses—there's Hitler, for instance, and the Soviet Union, and in a certain way here, in the Western world, the capitalist system, which also uses the masses, buying things, selling things.

It's not a problem that I as a filmmaker invented, nor did Hitler, Stalin, Lenin, or the capitalist system. It's a problem that goes with large populations and it is the

big problem of the future. As an intellectual and an artist, I can tell you this is the basis of the problems we have to deal with. One has to be responsible for the future and help people as much as possible to be individuals. Maybe this is a dream, but maybe it is possible to have a big crowd of different individuals. And this crowd of individuals is a better idea than the humiliation that we have known with fascism. I think the systems we know from history—either that of Hitler, or the Soviet Union, or Western society with its consumer ideas—do not want individuals. They want each being to sacrifice part of his substance. They want us to follow the lines of *only one idea*, of buying things, of the ideology of Hitler, Franco, Mussolini, Lenin, Stalin, or what follows.

BS: So what you are against in the masses is their single-mindedness, which can be so easily used by those who are more intelligent. In that sense you're afraid of manipulation.

HJS: On the one hand, it's a great idea to make sacrifices—for religion, for goodness, for a leader. In a certain way, it may be the basis of socialism, too, socialism as we know it today. But in reality, as we know, sacrifice can be dangerous and horrible.

BS: What is the alternative? What comes to your mind as the alternative political system, since you don't want to go back to any of these failed models?

HJS: You see, I'm not the leader of a new party or movement, and I don't want to create a new religion. What I do is write, or make films, or speak to you, or whatever. I do as I can. After showing a film about a subject such as Hitler, I try to persuade people to be ready, as much as possible, as individuals in a good or proper way. Therefore, when I make films like this, I don't want all the people who leave at the end to think in the same direction. That would be creating a new leadership to follow.

I am often accused of having too much ambiguity in my *Hitler* film. People are confused because they don't know what to think. They want to be led, especially in this subject. If I speak about something else, or make a film about love or marriage or another formulaic story, that doesn't matter to them. But when I speak about Hitler—which is the big problem and danger of our century, because he was voted in democratically—then they want to be advised, to know what to think or do.

The historical situation that created Adolf Hitler you would not find today. We have had a lot of tyrants in the history of mankind, but each one has had a different rise and fall. So, for instance, in East Germany today people are taught to be anti-fascist, but, as we all know, the whole country is surrounded by a wall. They use this historical enemy, Hitler, to put up a new kind of fascism with another color. Today we don't have the killing we had under Hitler, or concentration camps on the Nazi scale. Everything depends on the moment. If some country wants, it can immediately have another Stalin, with Gulags. The system is ready for that. I have to make people strong enough to avoid some comparable, similar danger. If it's not

called Hitler, maybe it's called Khomeini, or maybe it's something we don't know by name today. Whoever really understands and likes this film of mine will never be able to follow a Hitler, or a Stalin, or whomever.

BS: So you are presenting the things that go into making a "Hitler." This is the intention behind "a film from Germany," not "a film about Germany."

HJS: Yes, yes.

Figure 18. Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland (Hitler, A Film from Germany, *a.k.a.* Our Hitler), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1977*

NOTE

[1] Beatriz Schiller, "Interview with Hans-Jürgen Syberberg: *Our Hitler* as Visual Politics," *Performing Arts Journal*, 4.3 (1980): 50–58.

SUSAN SONTAG[1]

4. EYE OF THE STORM: SYBERBERG'S *HITLER*

Wer nicht von dreitausend Jahren
Sich weiss Rechenschaft zu geben,
Bleib im Dunkeln, unerfahren,
Mag von Tag zu Tage leben.

[Anyone who cannot give an account
To himself of the last three thousand years,
Remains in darkness, without experience,
Just living from day to day.]
(Translated by R. J. Cardullo)

– Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, from *West-östlicher Divan* (1819–27)

The Romantics thought of great art as a species of heroism, a breaking through or going beyond. Following them, adepts of the modern demanded of masterpieces that they be, in each case, an extreme case—terminal or prophetic, or both. Walter Benjamin was making a characteristic modernist judgment when he observed (writing about Proust): "All great works of literature found a genre or dissolve one." However rich in precursors, the truly great work must seem to break with an old order and really is a devastating if salutary move. Such a work extends the reach of art but also complicates and burdens the enterprise of art with new, self-conscious standards. It both excites and paralyzes the imagination.

Lately, the appetite for the truly great work has become less robust. Thus Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's *Hitler, A Film from Germany* (1977) is not only daunting because of the extremity of its achievement, but also discomfiting, like an unwanted baby in the era of zero population growth. The modernism that reckoned achievement by the Romantics' grandiose aims for art (as wisdom/as salvation/as cultural subversion or revolution) has been overtaken by an imprudent version of itself that has enabled modernist taste to be diffused on an undreamed of scale. Stripped of its heroic stature, of its claims as an adversary sensibility, modernism has proved acutely compatible with the ethos of an advanced consumer society. Art is now the name of a huge variety of satisfactions—of the unlimited proliferation, and devaluation, of satisfaction itself. Where so many blandishments flourish, bringing off a masterpiece seems a retrograde feat, a naïve form of accomplishment. Always implausible (as implausible as justified megalomania), the Great Work is now truly odd. It proposes satisfactions that are immense, solemn, and restricting. It insists that art must be

R. J. Cardullo (Ed.), Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the Film Director as Critical Thinker, 47–62.

true, not just interesting; a necessity, not just an experiment. It dwarfs other work, challenges the facile eclecticism of contemporary taste. It throws the admirer into a state of crisis.

Syberberg assumes importance both for his art (the art of the twentieth century: film) and for his subject (the subject of the twentieth century: Hitler). The assumptions are familiar, crude, plausible. But they hardly prepare us for the scale and virtuosity with which he conjures up the ultimate subjects: hell, paradise lost, the apocalypse, the last days of mankind. Leavening Romantic grandiosity with modernist ironies, Syberberg offers a spectacle about spectacle: evoking "the big show" called history in a variety of dramatic modes—fairy tale, circus, morality play, allegorical pageant, magic ceremony, philosophical dialogue, dance of death—with an imaginary cast of tens of millions and, as protagonist, the Devil himself.

The Romantic notions of the maximal so congenial to Syberberg, such as the boundless talent, the ultimate subject, and the most inclusive art—these notions confer an excruciating sense of possibility. Syberberg's confidence that his art is adequate to his great subject derives from his idea of cinema as a way of knowing that incites speculation to take a self-reflexive turn. Hitler is depicted through examining our relation to Hitler. (The theme is "our Hitler" and "Hitler-in-us"), as the rightly unassimilable horrors of the Nazi era are represented in Syberberg's film as images or signs. (Its title isn't Hitler but, precisely, *Hitler, A Film* …)

To simulate atrocities 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. Like its simulation as fiction, the display of atrocity in the form of photographic evidence risks being tacitly pornographic. Further, the truths it conveys, unmediated, about the past are slight. Film clips of the Nazi period cannot speak for themselves; they require a voice—explaining, commenting, interpreting. But the relation of the voice-over to a film document, like that of the caption to a still photograph, is merely adhesive. In contrast to the pseudo-objective style of narration in most documentaries, the two ruminating voices that suffuse Syberberg's film constantly express pain, grief, dismay.

Rather than devise a spectacle in the past tense, either by attempting to simulate "unrepeatable reality" (Syberberg's phrase) or by showing it in photographic document, he proposes a spectacle in the present tense—"adventures in the head." Of course, for such a devoutly anti-realist aesthetician, historical reality is, by definition, unrepeatable. Reality can only be grasped indirectly—seen reflected in a mirror, staged in the theater of the mind. Syberberg's synoptic drama is radically subjective, without being solipsistic. It is a ghostly film—haunted by his great cinematic models (Méliès, Eisenstein) and anti-models (Riefenstahl, Hollywood); by German Romanticism; and, above all, by the music of Wagner and the case of Wagner. A posthumous film, in the era of cinema's unprecedented mediocrity—full

Figure 19. Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland (Hitler, A Film from Germany, *a.k.a.* Our Hitler), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1977*

of cinephile myths, about cinema as the ideal space of the imagination and cinema history as an exemplary history of the twentieth century (the martyrdom of Eisenstein by Stalin, the excommunication of von Stroheim by Hollywood); and of cinephile hyperboles: he designates Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935) as Hitler's "only lasting monument, apart from the newsreels of his war."

One of the film's conceits is that Hitler, who never visited the front and watched the war every night through newsreels, was a kind of moviemaker. *Germany, A Film by Hitler*. Syberberg has cast his film as a phantasmagoria: the meditative-sensuous form favored by Wagner that distends time and results in works that the unpassionate find overlong. Its length is suitably exhaustive—seven hours; and, like the *Ring*, it is a tetralogy. The titles of the four parts of *Hitler, A Film from Germany* are: *The Grail*, *A German Dream*, *The End of a Winter Fairy Tale*, and *We Children of Hell*. A film, a dream, a tale. Hell. In contrast to the lavish DeMille-like décors that Wagner projected for his tetralogy, Syberberg's film is a cheap fantasy. The large sound studio in Munich where the film was shot in 1977 (in twenty days—after four years of preparation) is furnished as a Surreal landscape. The wide shot of the set at the beginning of the film displays many of the modest props that will recur in different sequences, and suggests the multiple uses Syberberg will make of this space: as a space of rumination (the wicker chair, the plain table, the candelabra); a space of theatrical assertion (the canvas director's chair, the giant black megaphone, the upturned masks); a space of emblems (models of polyhedron in Dürer's *Melancholia* [1514] and of the ash tree from the set of the first production of *Die Walküre* [1856]);

a space of moral judgment (a large globe, a life-size rubber sex-doll); a space of melancholy (the dead leaves strewn on the floor).

This allegory-littered wasteland (as limbo, as the moon) is designed to hold multitudes, in their contemporary—that is posthumous—form. It is really the land of the dead, a cinematic Valhalla. Since all the characters of the Nazi catastrophe-melodrama are dead, what we see are their ghosts—as puppets, as spirits, as caricatures of themselves. Carnivalesque skits alternate with arias and soliloquies, narratives, reveries. The two ruminating presences (André Heller, Harry Baer) keep up, on screen and off, an endless intellectual melody—lists, judgments, questions, historical anecdotes, as well as multiple characterizations of the film and the consciousness behind it. The muse of Syberberg's historic epic is cinema itself ("the world of our inner projections"), represented on the wasteland set by Black Maria, the tarpaper shack built for Thomas Edison in 1893 as the first film studio.

By invoking cinema as Black Maria, that is, recalling the artisanal simplicity of its origins, Syberberg also points to his own achievement. Using a small crew, with time for only one take of many long and complex shots, this technically ingenious inventor of fantasy managed to film virtually all of what he intended as he had envisaged it; and all of it is on the screen. (Perhaps only a spectacle as under-budgeted as this one—it cost $500,000—can remain wholly responsive to the intentions and improvisations of a single creator.) Out of this ascetic way of filmmaking, with its codes of deliberate naïveté, Syberberg has made a film that is both stripped-down and lush, discursive and spectacular. Syberberg provides spectacle out of his modest means by replicating and reusing the key elements as many times as possible. Having each actor play several roles, the convention inspired by Brecht, is an aspect of this aesthetics of multiple use. Many things appear at least twice in the film, once full-sized and once miniaturized—for example, a thing and its photograph; and all the Nazi notables appear, played by actors and as puppets. Edison's Black Maria, the primal film studio, is presented in four ways: as a large structure, indeed the principle item of the master set, from which actors appear and into which they disappear; as toy structures in two sizes, the tinier on a snowy landscape inside a glass globe, which can be held in an actor's hand, shaken, ruminated upon; and in a photographic blow-up of the globe. Syberberg uses multiple approaches, multiple voices.

The libretto is a medley of imaginary discourse and the *ipsissima verba* of Hitler, Himmler, Goebbels, Speer, and such backstage characters as Himmler's Finnish masseur Felix Kersten and Hitler's valet Karl-Wilhelm Krause. The complex soundtrack often provides two texts at once. Interspersed between and intermittently overlaid on the speeches of actors—a kind of auditory back projection—are historical sound documents, such as snatches from speeches by Hitler and Goebbels, from wartime news broadcasts by German radio and the BBC. The stream of words also includes cultural references in the form of quotations (often left unattributed), such as Einstein on war and peace, a passage from Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto* (1909)—and the whole verbal polyphony swelled by excerpts from the pantheon

of German music, mostly Wagner. A passage from, say, *Tristan and Isolde* (1865) or the chorus of Beethoven's Ninth (1824) is used as another kind of historical quotation that complements or comments on what is being said, simultaneously, by an actor.

On the screen, a varying stock of emblematic props and images supplies more associations. Doré engravings for Dante's *Inferno* (1317) and the Bible, Graff's 1781 portrait of Frederick the Great, the signature still from Méliès's *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), Runge's *Morning* (1808), and Caspar David Friedrich's *The Frozen Ocean* (1824) are among the visual references that appear (by a canny technique of slide projection) behind the actors. The image is constructed on the same assemblage principle as the soundtrack except that, while we hear many historical sound documents, Syberberg makes sparing use of visual documents from the Nazi era. Méliès in the foreground, Lumière was very much in the background. Syberberg's meta-spectacle virtually swallows up the photographic document: when we see the Nazi reality on film, it is as film. Behind a seated, ruminating actor (Heller) appears some private 8 and 16mm footage of Hitler—indistinct, rather unreal.

Such bits of film are not used to show how anything "really" was: film clips, slides of paintings, movie stills all have the same status. Actors play in front of photographic blow-ups that show legendary places without people: these empty, almost abstract, oddly scaled views of Ludwig II's Venus Grotto at Linderhof, Wagner's villa in Bayreuth, the conference room in the Reich Chancellery in Berlin, the terrace of Hitler's villa in Berchtesgaden, the ovens at Auschwitz, are a more stylized kind of allusion. They are also a ghostly décor rather than a "real" set, with which Syberberg can play illusionist tricks reminiscent of Méliès: having the actor appear to be walking within a deep-focus photograph; ending a scene with the actor turning and vanishing into a backdrop that had appeared to be seamless. Nazism is known by allusion, through fantasy, in quotation. Quotations are both literal, like an Auschwitz survivor's testimony, and, more commonly, fanciful cross-references—as when the hysterical SS man recites the child murderer's plea from Lang's *M* (1931); or when Hitler, in a tirade of self-exculpation, rising in a cobwebby toga from the grave of Richard Wagner, quotes Shylock's "If you prick us, do we not bleed?"

Like the photographic images and the props, the actors are also stand-ins for the real. Most speech is monologue or monodrama, whether by a single actor talking directly to the camera, that is, the audience, or by actors half talking to themselves (as in the scene of Himmler and his masseur) or declaiming in a row (the rotting puppets in hell). As in a Surrealist tableau, the presence of the inanimate makes its ironic comment on the supposedly alive. Actors talk to, or on behalf of, puppets of Hitler, Goebbels, Goering, Himmler, Eva Braun, Speer. Several scenes set actors among department-store mannequins, or among the life-size photographic cut-outs of legendary ghouls from the German silent cinema (Mabuse, Alraune, Caligari, Nosferatu) and of the archetypal Germans whose pictures were taken by August Sander. Hitler is a recurrent multiform presence, depicted in memory, through burlesque, in historical travesty.

Quotations in the film, or the film as a mosaic of stylistic quotations. To present Hitler in multiple guises and from many perspectives, Syberberg draws on disparate stylistic sources: Wagner, Méliès, Brechtian distancing techniques, homosexual baroque, puppet theater. This eclecticism is the mark of an extremely self-conscious, erudite, avid artist, whose choice of stylistic materials (blending high art and *kitsch*) is not as arbitrary as it might seem. Syberberg's film is, precisely, Surrealist in its eclecticism. Surrealism is a late variant of Romantic taste, a Romanticism that assumes a broken or posthumous world. It is Romantic taste with a leaning toward pastiche. Surrealist works proceed by conventions of dismemberment and reaggregation, in the spirit of pathos and irony; these conventions include the inventory (or open-ended list); the technique of duplication by miniaturization; the hyper-development of the art of quotation. By means of these conventions, particularly the circulation and recycling of visual and aural quotations, Syberberg's film simultaneously inhabits many places, many times—his principal device of dramatic and visual irony.

His broadest irony is to mock all this complexity by presenting his meditation on Hitler as something simple: a tale told in the presence of a child. His nine-year-old daughter is the mute somnambulistic witness, crowned by loops of celluloid, who wanders through the steam-filled landscape of hell; who begins and closes each of the film's four parts. Alice in Wonderland, the spirit of the cinema—she is surely meant as these. And Syberberg also evokes the symbolism of melancholy, identifying the child with Dürer's *Melancholia*: at the film's end she is posed inside a plump tear, gazing in front of the stars. Whatever the attributions, the image owes much to Surrealist taste. The condition of the somnambulist is a convention of Surrealist narrative. The person who moves through a Surrealist landscape is quixotic—hopeless, obsessional; and, finally, self-regarding.

An emblematic image in the film, one much admired by the Surrealists, is Ledoux's *Eye Reflecting the Interior of the Theater of Besançon* (1804). Ledoux's eye first appears on the set as a two-dimensional picture. Later it is a three-dimensional construction, an eye-as-theater in which one of the narrators (Baer) sees, projected at the rear, himself—in an earlier film by Syberberg, *Ludwig: Requiem for a Virgin King* (1972), in which he played the lead. As Ledoux locates his theater in the eye, Syberberg locates his cinema inside the mind, where all associations are possible. Syberberg's repertory of theatrical devices and images seems inconceivable without the freedoms and ironies introduced by Surrealist taste, and reflects many of its distinctive affections. Grand Guignol, puppet theater, the circus, and the films of Méliès were Surrealist passions. The taste for naïve theater and primitive cinema as well as for objects that miniaturize reality, for the art of Northern Romanticism (Dürer, Blake, Friedrich, Runge), for architecture as utopian fantasy (Ledoux) and as private delirium (Ludwig II)—the sensibility that encompasses all of these is Surrealism.

But there is an aspect of Surrealist taste that is alien to Syberberg—the surrender to chance, to the arbitrary; the fascination with the opaque, the meaningless, the mute. There is nothing arbitrary or aleatoric about his décor; there are no throwaway

images, or objects without emotional weight: indeed, certain relics and images in Syberberg's film have the force of personal talismans. Everything means, everything speaks. One mute presence, Syberberg's child, only sets off the film's unrelenting verbosity and intensity. Everything in the film is presented as having been already consumed by a mind. When history takes place inside the head, public and private mythologies gain equal status.

Unlike the other mega-films with whose epic ambitions it might be compared—*Intolerance* (1916), *Napoleon* (1927), *Ivan the Terrible* I & II (1944, 1958), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968)—Syberberg's film is open to personal references as well as public ones. Public myths of evil are framed by private mythologies of innocence, developed in two earlier films, *Ludwig* (two hours and twenty minutes) and *Karl May: In Search of Paradise Lost* (1974, three hours), which Syberberg treats as the first two parts of a trilogy on Germany that concludes with *Hitler, A Film from Germany*. Wagner's patron and victim, Ludwig II, is a recurrent figure of innocence. One of Syberberg's talismanic images—it ends *Ludwig* and is reused in *Hitler, A Film from Germany*—shows Ludwig as a bearded, weeping child. The image that opens the Hitler film is of Ludwig's Winter Garden in Munich—a paradisiacal landscape of Alps, palm trees, lake, tent, and gondola that figures throughout *Ludwig*. Each of the three films stands on its own, but insofar as they are regarded as comprising a trilogy, it is worth noting that *Ludwig* feeds more images to *Hitler, A Film from Germany* than does the second film, *Karl May*. Parts of *Karl May*, with its "real" sets and actors, come closer to linear, mimetic dramaturgy than anything in *Ludwig* or in the incomparably more ambitious and profound film on Hitler.

But, like all artists with a taste for pastiche, Syberberg has only a limited feeling for what is understood as realism. The pasticheur's style is essentially a style of fantasy. Syberberg has devised a particularly German variety of spectacle: the moralized horror show. In the excruciating banalities of the valet's narrative, in a burlesque of Chaplin's impersonation of Hitler in *The Great Dictator* (1940), and in a Grand Guignol skit about Hitler's sperm, the Devil is a familiar spirit. Hitler is even allowed to share in the pathos of miniaturization: the Hitler-puppet (dressed, undressed, reasoned with) held on a ventriloquist's knees, the cloth dog with the Hitler-face, carried mournfully by the child. The spectacle assumes familiarity with the incidents and personages of German history and culture, the Nazi regime, World War II; and it alludes freely to events in the three decades since Hitler's death.

While the present is reduced to being the legacy of the past, the past is embellished with knowledge of its future. In *Ludwig*, this open-ended historical itinerary seems like cool (Brechtian?) irony—as when Ludwig I cites Brecht. In *Hitler, A Film from Germany* the irony of anachronism is weightier. Syberberg denies that the events of Nazism were part of the ordinary gait and demeanor of history. ("They said it was the end of the world," muses one of the puppet-masters. "And it was.") His film takes Nazism at its (Hitler's, Goebbels') word, as a venture in apocalypse, as a cosmology of a New Ice Age, in other words as an eschatology of evil; and itself takes place at a kind of end-of-time, a Messianic time (to use Benjamin's term) that

imposes the duty of trying to do justice to the dead. Hence, the long solemn roll call of the accomplices of Nazism ("Those whom we must not forget"), then of some exemplary victims—one of several points at which the films seems to end.

Syberberg has cast his film in the first person: as the action of one artist assuming the German duty to confront fully the horror of Nazism. Like many German intellectuals of the past, Syberberg treats his Germanness as a moral vocation and regards Germany as the cockpit of European conflicts. ("The twentieth century … a film from Germany," says one of the ruminators.) Syberberg was born in 1935 in what was to become East Germany and left in 1953 for West Germany, where he has lived ever since; but the true provenance of his film is the extraterritorial Germany of the spirit whose first great citizen was that self-styled *romantique défroqué* Heinrich Heine, and whose last great citizen was Thomas Mann. "To be the spiritual battlefield of European antagonisms—that's what it means to be German," Mann declared in his "Reflections of an Unpolitical Man," written during World War I, sentiments that had not changed when he wrote *Doctor Faustus* (1947) as an old man in exile in the late 1940s. Syberberg's view of Nazism as the explosion of the German demonic recalls Mann, as does his unfashionable insistence on Germany's collective guilt (the theme of "Hitler-in-us"). The narrators' repeated challenge, "Who would Hitler be without us?" also echoes Mann, who wrote an essay in 1939 called "Brother Hitler," in which he argues that "the whole thing is a distorted phase of Wagnerism."

Like Mann, Syberberg regards Nazism as the grotesque fulfillment—and betrayal—of German Romanticism. It may seem odd that Syberberg, who was a child during the Nazi era, shares so many themes with someone so *ancien-régime*. But there is much that is old-fashioned about Syberberg's sensibility (one consequence, perhaps, of being educated in a Communist country)—including the vividness with which he identifies with that Germany whose greatest citizens have gone into exile. Although it draws on innumerable versions and impressions of Hitler, the film offers very few ideas about Hitler. For the most part, they are the theses formulated in the ruins: the thesis that "Hitler's work" was "the eruption of the satanic principle in world history" (from Meinecke's *The German Catastrophe*, written two years before *Doctor Faustus*); the thesis, expressed by Horkheimer in *The Eclipse of Reason* (1947), that Auschwitz was the logical culmination of Western progress. Starting in the 1950s, when the ruins of Europe were rebuilt, more complex theses—political, sociological, economic—prevailed about Nazism. (Horkheimer eventually repudiated his argument of 1947.)

In reviving those unmodulated views of thirty years ago, their indignation, their pessimism, Syberberg's film makes a strong case for their moral appropriateness. Syberberg proposes that we really listen to what Hitler said—to the kind of cultural revolution Nazism was, or claimed to be; to the spiritual catastrophe it was, and still is. By Hitler Syberberg does not mean only the real historical monster, responsible for the deaths of tens of millions. He evokes a kind of Hitler-substance that outlives Hitler, a phantom presence in modern culture, a protean principle of evil that saturates the present and remakes the past. Syberberg's film alludes to familiar genealogies,

real and symbolic: from Romanticism to Hitler, from Wagner to Hitler, from Caligari to Hitler, from *kitsch* to Hitler. And, in the hyperbole of woe, he insists on some new filiations: from Hitler to pornography, from Hitler to the soulless consumer society of the Federal Republic, from Hitler to the rude coercions of the DDR.

In using Hitler thus, there is some truth and there are some unconvincing attributions. It is true that Hitler has contaminated Romanticism and Wagner, that much of nineteenth-century German culture is, retroactively, haunted by Hitler. (As, say, nineteenth-century Russian culture is not haunted by Stalin.) But it is not true that Hitler engendered the modern, post-Hitlerian plastic consumer society. That was already well on the way when the Nazis took power. Indeed, it could be argued—contra Syberberg—that Hitler was in the long run an irrelevance, an attempt to halt the historical clock; and that communism is what ultimately mattered in Europe, not fascism. Syberberg is more plausible when he asserts that the DDR (East Germany) resembles the Nazi state, a view for which he has been denounced by the left in West Germany; like most intellectuals who grew up under a communist regime and moved to a bourgeois-democratic one, he is singularly free of left-wing pieties.

It could also be argued that Syberberg has unduly simplified his moralist's task by the extent to which, like Mann, he identifies the inner history of Germany with the history of Romanticism. Syberberg's notion of history as catastrophe recalls the long German tradition of regarding history eschatologically, as the history of the spirit. Comparable views today are more likely to be entertained in Eastern Europe than in Germany. Syberberg has the moral intransigence, the lack of respect for literal history, the heartbreaking seriousness of the great illiberal artists from the Russian empire—with their fierce convictions about the primacy of spiritual over material (economic, political) causation, the irrelevance of the categories "left" and "right," the existence of absolute evil. Appalled by the extensiveness of the German support for Hitler, Syberberg calls the Germans "a Satanic people."

The devil story that Mann devised to sum up the Nazi-demonic was narrated by someone who does not understand. Thereby Mann suggested that evil so absolute may be, finally, beyond comprehension or the grasp of art. But the obtuseness of the narrator of *Doctor Faustus* is too much insisted upon. Mann's irony backfires: Serenus Zeitblom's fatuous modesty of understanding seems like Mann's confession of inadequacy, his inability to give full voice to grief. Syberberg's film about the devil, though sheathed in ironies, affirms our ability to understand and our obligation to grieve. Dedicated, as it were, to grief, the film begins and ends with Heine's lacerating words: "I think of Germany in the night and sleep leaves me, I can no longer close my eyes, I weep hot tears." Grief is the burden of the calm, rueful, musical soliloquies of Baer and Heller; neither reciting nor declaiming, they are simply speaking out, and listening to these grave, intelligent voices seething with grief is itself a civilizing experience.

The film carries without any condescension a vast legacy of information about the Nazi period. But information is assumed. The film is not designed to meet a standard of information but claims to address a (hypothetical) therapeutic ideal. Syberberg

repeatedly says that his film is addressed to the German "inability to mourn," that it undertakes "the work of mourning" (*Trauerarbeit*). These phrases recall the famous essay Freud wrote during World War I, "Mourning and Melancholia," which connects melancholy and the inability to work through grief; and the application of this formula in an influential psychoanalytic study of postwar Germany by Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn*, published in Germany in 1967, which diagnoses the Germans as afflicted by mass melancholia, the result of the continuing denial of their collective responsibility for the Nazi past and their persistent refusal to mourn. Syberberg has appropriated the well-known Mitscherlich thesis (without ever mentioning their book), but one might doubt that his film was inspired by it. It seems more likely that Syberberg found in the notion of *Trauerarbeit* a psychological and moral justification for his aesthetics of repetition and recycling. It takes time—and much hyperbole—to work through grief.

So far as the film can be considered as an act of mourning, what is interesting is that it is conducted in the style of mourning—by exaggeration, repetition. It provides an overflow of information: the method of saturation. Syberberg is an artist of excess; thought is a kind of excess, with its surplus production of ruminations, images, associations, emotions connected with, evoked by, Hitler. Hence the film's length, its circular arguments, its several beginnings, its four or five endings, its many titles, its plurality of styles, its vertiginous shifts of perspective on Hitler, from below or beyond. The most wonderful shift occurs in Part II, when the valet's forty-minute monologue with its mesmerizing trivia about Hitler's taste in underwear and shaving cream and breakfast food is followed by Heller's musings on the unreality of the idea of the galaxies. (It is the verbal equivalent of the cut in *2001* from the bone thrown into the air by a primate to the space ship—surely the most spectacular cut in the history of cinema.) Syberberg's idea is to exhaust, to empty his subject.

Syberberg measures his ambitions by the standards of Wagner, although living up to the legendary attributes of a German genius is no easy task in the consumer society of the Federal Republic. He considers that *Hitler, A Film from Germany* is not just a film, as Wagner did not want the *Ring* (1876) and *Parsifal* (1882) to be considered operas or to be part of the normal repertory of opera houses. Its defiant, seductive length, which prevents the film from being distributed conventionally, is very Wagnerian, as is Syberberg's reluctance (until recently) to let it be shown except under special circumstances, encouraging seriousness. Also, Wagnerian are Syberberg's ideals of exhaustiveness and profundity; his sense of mission; his belief in art as a radical act; his taste for scandal; his polemical energies (he is incapable of writing an essay that is not a manifesto); his taste for the grandiose. Grandiosity is, precisely, Syberberg's great subject. The protagonists of his trilogy about Germany—Ludwig II, Karl May, and Hitler—are all megalomaniacs, liars, reckless dreamers, virtuosi of the grandiose. (Very different sorts of documentaries that Syberberg made for German television between 1967 and 1975 also express his fascination with the self-assured and self-obsessed: *Die Grafen Pocci* [1967], about an aristocratic German family; portraits of German film stars; and the five-hour

interview-film on Wagner's daughter-in-law and Hitler's friend, *The Confessions of Winifred Wagner* [1975].)

Syberberg is a great Wagnerian, the greatest since Thomas Mann, but his attitude to Wagner and the treasures of German Romanticism is not only pious. It contains more than a bit of malice, the touch of the cultural vandal. To evoke the grandeur and the failure of Wagnerism, *Hitler, A Film from Germany*, uses, recycles, parodies elements of Wagner. Syberberg means his film to be an anti-*Parsifal*, and hostility to Wagner one of its leitmotifs: the spiritual filiations of Wagner and Hitler. The whole film could be considered a profaning of Wagner, undertaken with a full sense of the gesture's ambiguity, for Syberberg is attempting to be both inside and outside his own deepest sources as an artist. (The graves of Wagner and Cosima behind Villa Wahnfried recur as an image; and one scene satirizes that most ineffectual of profanations, when black American G.I.s jitterbugged on the graves after the war.) For it is from Wagner that Syberberg's film gets its biggest boost—its immediate intrinsic claim on the sublime.

As the film opens, we hear the beginning of the prelude to *Parsifal* and see the word GRAIL in fractured, blocky letters. Syberberg claims that his aesthetic is Wagnerian, that is, musical. But it might be more correct to say that his film is a mimetic relation to Wagner, and in part a parasitic one—as *Ulysses* (1922) is in a parasitic relation to the history of English literature. Syberberg takes very literally, more literally than Eisenstein ever did, the promise of film as a synthesis of the plastic arts, music, literature, and theater—the modern fulfillment of Wagner's idea of the total work of art. (It has often been said that Wagner, had he lived in the twentieth century, would have been a filmmaker.) But the modern *Gesamtkunstwerk* tends to be an aggregation of seemingly disparate elements instead of a synthesis. For Syberberg there is always something more, and different, to say—as the two films on Ludwig he made in 1972 attest. *Ludwig: Requiem for a Virgin King*, which became the first film in his trilogy about Germany, pays delirious homage to the ironic theatricality and overripe pathos of such filmmakers as Cocteau, Carmelo Bene, and Werner Schroeter.

Theodor Hierneis (1972), the other film, is an austere Brechtian melodrama of ninety minutes with Ludwig's cook as its one character—it anticipates the valet's narrative in *Hitler, A Film from Germany*—and was inspired by Brecht's unfinished novel on the life of Julius Caesar as narrated by his slave.

Syberberg considers that he began as a disciple of Brecht, and in 1952 and 1953 he filmed several of Brecht's productions in East Berlin. According to Syberberg, his work comes from "the duality Brecht/Wagner"; that is the "aesthetic scandal" he claims to have "sought." In interviews he invariably cites both as his artistic fathers, partly (it may be supposed) to neutralize the politics of one by the politics of the other and place himself beyond issues of left and right; partly to appear more evenhanded than he is. But he is inevitably more of a Wagnerian than a Brechtian, because of the way the inclusive Wagnerian aesthetic accommodates contraries of feeling (including ethical feeling and political bias). Baudelaire heard in Wagner's

music "the ultimate scream of a soul driven to its utmost limits," while Nietzsche, even after giving up on Wagner, still praised him as a great "miniaturist" and "our greatest melancholic in music"—and both were right. Wagner's contraries reappear in Syberberg: the radical democrat and the right-wing elitist, the aesthete and the moralist, rant and rue. Syberberg's polemical genealogy, Brecht/Wagner, obscures other influences on the film, in particular what he owes to Surrealist ironies and images.

But even the role of Wagner seems a more complex affair than Syberberg's enthrallment with the art and life of Wagner would indicate. Apart from the Wagner that Syberberg has appropriated, one is tempted to say expropriated, this Wagnerianism is, properly, an attenuated affair—a fascinatingly belated example of that kind of art that grew out of the Wagnerian aesthetic: Symbolism. (Both Symbolism and Surrealism could be considered as late developments of the Romantic sensibility.) Symbolism was the Wagnerian aesthetic turned into a procedure of creation for all the arts: further subjectivized, pulled toward abstraction. What Wagner wanted was an ideal theater, a theater of maximal emotions purged of distractions and irrelevancies. Thus Wagner chose to conceal the orchestra of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus under a black wooden shell, and once quipped that, having invented the invisible orchestra, he wished he could invent the invisible stage.

The Symbolists found the invisible stage. Events were to be withdrawn from reality, so to speak, and restaged in the ideal theater of the mind. *("Instead of trying to produce the largest possible reality outside himself," Jacques Rivière has written, the Symbolist artist "tries to consume as much as possible within himself … he offers his mind as a kind of ideal theater where [events] can be acted out without becoming visible" ["Le Roman d'Aventure," 1913].)* And Wagner's fantasy of the invisible stage was fulfilled more literally in that immaterial stage, cinema. Syberberg's film is a magistral rendering of the Symbolist potentialities of cinema and probably the most ambitious Symbolist work of this century. He construes cinema as a kind of ideal mental activity, being both sensuous and reflective, which takes up where reality leaves off: cinema not as the fabrication of reality or life but as "the continuation of life by other means."

In Syberberg's meditation on history in a sound studio, events are visualized (with the aid of Surrealist conventions) while remaining in a deeper sense invisible (the Symbolist idea). But because it lacks the stylistic homogeneity that was typical of Symbolist works, *Hitler, A Film from Germany* has a vigor that Symbolists would forgo as vulgar. Its impurities rescue the film from what was most rarefied about Symbolism without making its reach any less indeterminate and comprehensive. The Symbolist artist is above all a mind, a creator-mind that (distilling the Wagnerian grandiosity and intensity) sees everything, that is able to permeate its subject; and eclipses it. Syberberg's meditation on Hitler has the customary overbearingness of this mind, and the characteristic porousness of the overextended Symbolist mental structures: soft-edge arguments that begin "I think of …," verbless sentences that evoke rather than explain. Conclusions are everywhere but nothing concludes.

All the parts of a Symbolist narrative are simultaneous; that is, all coexist simultaneously in this superior, overbearing mind. The function of this mind is not to tell a story (at the start the story is behind it, as Rivière pointed out) but to confer meaning in unlimited amounts. Actions, figures, individual bias toward décor can have, ideally do have, multiple meanings—for example, the charge of meanings Syberberg attaches to the figure of the child. He appears to be seeking, from a more subjective standpoint, what Eisenstein prescribes with his theory of "overtonal montage." (Eisenstein, who saw himself in the tradition of Wagner and the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and in his writings quotes copiously from the French Symbolists, was the greatest exponent of Symbolist aesthetics in cinema.)

The film overflows with meanings of varying accessibility, and there are further meanings from relics and talismans on the set that the audience can't possibly know about. For example, on Baer's table Syberberg put a piece of wood from Ludwig's Hundinghütte, the playhouse at Linderhof (it burned down in 1945) inspired by the designs for Act I of *Die Walküre* in the first two productions; elsewhere on the set are a stone from Bayreuth, a relic from Hitler's villa at Berchtesgaden, and other treasures. In one instance, talismans were furnished by the actor: Syberberg asked Heller to bring some objects that were precious to him, and Heller's photograph of Joseph Roth and a small Buddha can just be made out (if one knows they're there) on his table while he delivers the cosmos monologue at the end of Part II and the long monologue of Part IV.

The Symbolist artist is not primarily interested in exposition, explanation, communication. It seems fitting that Syberberg's dramaturgy consists in talk addressed to those who cannot talk back: to the dead (one can put words in their mouths) and to one's own daughter (who has no lines). The Symbolist narrative is always a posthumous affair; its subject is precisely something that is assumed. Hence, Symbolist art is characteristically dense, difficult. Syberberg is appealing (intermittently) to another process of knowing, as is indicated by one of the film's principal emblems, Ledoux's ideal theater in the form of an eye—the Masonic eye; the eye of intelligence, of esoteric knowledge. But Syberberg passionately wants his film to be understood; and in some parts it is overexplicit as in other parts it is encoded. The Symbolist relation of a mind to its subject is consummated when the subject is vanquished, undone, used up. Thus Syberberg's grandest conceit is that with his film he may have "defeated" Hitler—exorcised him. This splendidly outrageous hyperbole caps Syberberg's profound understanding of Hitler as an image. (If from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* [1920] to *Hitler,* then why not from Hitler to *Hitler, A Film from Germany*? The end.)

This also follows from Syberberg's Romantic views of the sovereignty of the imagination, and his flirtation with esoteric ideas of knowing, with notions of art as magic or spiritual alchemy, and of the imagination as a purveyor of the powers of blackness. Heller's monologue in Part IV leads toward a roll call of myths that can be regarded as metaphors for the esoteric powers of cinema—starting with Edison's Black Maria ("the black studio of our imagination"); evoking black stones (of the

Kaaba in Mecca, of Dürer's *Melancholia*—the presiding image of the film's complex iconography); and ending with a modern image: cinema as the imagination's black hole. Like a black hole, or our fantasy about it, cinema collapses space and time. The image perfectly describes the excruciating fluency of Syberberg's film: its insistence on occupying different spaces and times simultaneously. It seems apt that Syberberg's private mythology of subjective cinema concludes with an image drawn from science fiction.

A subjective cinema of these ambitions and moral energy logically mutates into science fiction. Thus Syberberg's film begins with the stars and ends, like *2001*, with the stars and a star-child. Evoking Hitler by means of myth and travesty, fairy tales and science fiction, Syberberg conducts his own rites of deconsecration: the Grail has been destroyed (Syberberg's anti-*Parsifal* opens and closes with the word GRAIL—the film's true title); it is no longer permissible to dream of redemption. Syberberg defends his mythologizing of history as a skeptic's enterprise: myth as "the mother of irony and pathos," not myths that stimulate new systems of belief. But someone who believes that Hitler was Germany's "fate" is hardly a skeptic. Syberberg is the sort of artist who wants to have it both—all—ways. The method of his film is contradiction, irony. And, exercising his ingenious talent for naïveté, he also claims to transcend this complexity. He relishes notions of innocence and pathos—the traditions of Romantic idealism; some nonsense around the figure of a child (his daughter, the infant in Runge's *Morning*, Ludwig as a bearded, weeping child); dreams of an ideal world purified of its complexity and mediocrity.

The earlier parts of Syberberg's trilogy are elegiac portraits of last-ditch dreamers of paradise: Ludwig II, who built castles that were stage sets and paid for Wagner's dream factory at Bayreuth; Karl May, who romanticized American Indians, Arabs, and other exotics in his immensely popular novels, the most famous of which, *Winnetou* (1878), chronicles the destruction of beauty and bravery by the coming of modern technological civilization. Ludwig and Karl May attract Syberberg as gallant, doomed practitioners of the Great Refusal, the refusal of modern industrial civilization. What Syberberg loathes most, such as pornography and the commercialization of culture, he identifies with the modern. (In this stance of utter superiority to the modern, Syberberg recalls the author of *Art in Crisis* [1948], Hans Sedlmayr, with whom he studied art history at the University of Munich in the 1950s.) The film is a work of mourning for the modern and what precedes it, and opposes it. If Hitler is also a "utopian," as Syberberg calls him, then Syberberg is condemned to be a post-utopian, a utopian who acknowledges that utopian feelings have been hopelessly defiled. Syberberg does not believe in a "new human being"—that perennial theme of cultural revolution on both the left and the right. For all his attraction to the credo of Romantic genius, what he really believes in is Goethe and a thorough Gymnasium education.

Of course, one can find the usual contradictions in Syberberg's film—the poetry of utopia, the futility of utopia; rationalism and magic. And that only confirms what kind of film *Hitler, A Film from Germany* really is. Science fiction is precisely the

genre that dramatizes the mix of nostalgia for utopia with dystopian fantasies and dream; the dual conviction that the world is ending and that it is on the verge of a new beginning. Syberberg's film about history is also a moral and cultural science fiction. Starship Goethe-Haus.

Syberberg manages to perpetuate in a melancholy, attenuated form something of Wagner's notions of art as therapy, as redemption, and as catharsis. He calls cinema "the most beautiful compensation" for the ravages of modern history; a kind of "redemption" to "our senses, oppressed by progress." That art does in sorts redeem reality, by being better than reality—that is the ultimate Symbolist belief. Syberberg makes of cinema the last, most inclusive, most ghostly paradise. It is a view that reminds one of Godard. Syberberg's cinephilia is another part of the immense pathos of his film, perhaps its only involuntary pathos. For whatever Syberberg says, cinema is now another lost paradise. In the era of cinema's unprecedented mediocrity, his masterpiece has something of the character of a posthumous event.

Spurning naturalism, the Romantics developed a melancholic style: intensely personal, the outreach of its tortured "I," centered on the agon of the artist and society. Mann gave the last profound expression to this Romantic notion of the self's dilemma. Post-Romantics like Syberberg work in an impersonal melancholic style. What is central now is the relation between memory and the past: the clash between the possibility of remembering, of going on, and the lure of oblivion. Beckett gives one ahistorical version of this agon. Another version, obsessed with history, is Syberberg's.

To understand the past, and thereby to exorcise it, is Syberberg's largest moral ambition. His problem is that he cannot give anything up. So large is his subject—and everything Syberberg does makes it even larger—that he has to take many positions beyond it. One can find almost anything in Syberberg's passionately voluble film (short of a Marxist analysis or a shred of feminist awareness). Though he tries to be silent (the child, the stars), he can't stop talking; he's so immensely ardent, avid. As the film is ending, Syberberg wants to produce yet another ravishing image. Even when the film is finally over, he still wants to say more and adds postscripts: the Heine epigraph, the citation of Mogadishu-Stammheim, a final oracular Syberberg-sentence, one last evocation of the Grail. The film is itself the creation of a world, from which (one feels) its creator has the greatest difficulty in extricating himself—as does the admiring spectator; this exercise in the art of empathy produces a voluptuous anguish, an anxiety about concluding. Lost in the black hole of the imagination, the filmmaker has to make everything pass before him; he identifies with each, and none.

Benjamin suggests that melancholy is the origin of true—that is, just—historical understanding. The true understanding of history, he said in the last text he wrote, is "a process of empathy whose origin is indolence of the heart, acedia." Syberberg shares something of Benjamin's positive, instrumental view of melancholy, and uses symbols of melancholy to punctuate his film. But Syberberg does not have the ambivalence, the slowness, the complexity, the tension of the Saturnian temperament.

Syberberg is not a true melancholic but an *exalté*. But he uses the distinctive tools of the melancholic—the allegorical props, the talismans, the secret self-references; and with his irrepressible talent for indignation and enthusiasm, he is doing "the work of mourning." The word first appears at the end of the film he made on Winifred Wagner in 1975, where we read: "This film is part of Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's *Trauerarbeit*." What we see is Syberberg smiling.

Syberberg is a genuine elegiast. But his film is tonic. The poetic, husky-voiced, diffident logorrhea of Godard's late films discloses a morose conviction that speaking will never exorcise anything; in contrast to Godard's off-camera musings, the musings of Syberberg's *personae* (Heller and Baer) teem with calm assurance. Syberberg, whose temperament seems the opposite of Godard's, has a supreme confidence in language, in discourse, in eloquence itself. The film tries to say everything. Syberberg belongs to the race of creators like Wagner, Artaud, Céline, and the late Joyce, whose work annihilates other work. All are artists of endless speaking, endless melody—a voice that goes on and on. Beckett would belong to this race, too, were it not for some inhibitory force—sanity? elegance? good manners? less energy? deeper despair? So might Godard, were it not for the doubts he evidences about speaking, and the inhibition of feeling (both of sympathy and repulsion) that results from this sense of the impotence of speaking. Syberberg has managed to stay free of the standard doubts—doubts whose main function, now, seems to be to inhibit. The result is a film altogether exceptional in its emotional expressiveness, its great visual beauty, its sincerity, its moral passion, its concern with contemplative values.

The film tries to be everything. Syberberg's unprecedented ambition in *Hitler, A Film from Germany* is on another scale from anything one has seen on film. It is work that demands a special kind of attention and partisanship; and that invites being reflected upon, re-seen. The more one recognizes of its stylistic references and lore, the more the film vibrates. (Great art in the mode of pastiche invariably rewards study, as Joyce affirmed by daring to observe that the ideal reader of his work would be someone who could devote his life to it.) Syberberg's film belongs in the category of noble masterpieces that ask for fealty and can compel it. After seeing *Hitler, A Film from Germany*, there is Syberberg's film—and then there are the other films one admires. (Not too many these days, alas.) As was said ruefully of Wagner, he spoils our tolerance for the others.

NOTE

[1] Susan Sontag, Preface, in Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, *Hitler, A Film from Germany*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1982), ix–xvi. (Orig. published as "Syberberg's Hitler," in her *Under the Sign of Saturn* [New York: Vintage, 1981].)

STEVE WASSERMAN[1]

5. INTERVIEW WITH HANS-JÜRGEN SYBERBERG

Hans-Jürgen Syberberg is the pariah of the New German Cinema. He has incurred the wrath of most German critics by his refusal to accept the popular view of Hitler as a lunatic aberration, and by his indifference to the by now canonized views of art proclaimed and practiced by such leading members of the German avant-garde as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Werner Herzog, and Volker Schlöndorff. Syberberg refuses to step beyond the shadow of German history. Unlike his contemporaries, he is haunted, even obsessed, by the Romantic ecstasy and intellectual vision that once were so much a part of German culture. For Syberberg, looking into the center of German culture today, however, is like staring into an extinct volcano. His film *Hitler, A Film from Germany* (1977) is an elegy not only for Germany, but also for all of Western civilization.

"When all is said and done," wrote Martin Bormann at the end, "The Führer is the Führer: Where should we be without him?" To Bormann's query, Syberberg responds with a more disturbing question: "Where would Hitler be without us?" Perhaps the most compelling aspect of Syberberg's seven-hour movie is his examination of the complicity of millions of Germans who, recognizing in Hitler both the prophet and the executor of their hidden ambitions and dark desires, followed him readily, even gladly, in his monstrous attempt to create a Teutonic utopia. Shot in 1977 in twenty days on a large sound stage in Munich for $500,000 after four years of preparation, *Hitler* has aroused controversy in France, England, Israel, and, of course, Germany. It is, as Syberberg himself says, a film about taboos.

Hans-Jürgen Syberberg is the son of a Prussian landowner who later owned a photography shop in Rostock, a small town near the Baltic Sea. Born in 1935 in Pomerania, now East Germany, Syberberg moved to West Germany in 1953 after having worked with Brecht in Berlin for two years. Unlike such West German directors as Fassbinder, Herzog, or Wim Wenders, he did not grow up listening to Chuck Berry on American Armed Forces Radio; instead his education was more traditional, more classically German with its emphasis on Schiller, Heine, and Goethe and the fascination with the German demonic. Syberberg grew up, accordingly, with a deep affection for the Romantic tradition in German culture. But his work with Brecht also inspired a modernist aesthetic. While the Romantic ideal of art as redemption or salvation is usually regarded as antithetical to modernism, which is suspicious of such a lofty goal, it is Syberberg's ambitious (and largely successful) synthesis of the Romantic and modernist ideals that gives his *Hitler* its immense artistic power.

R. J. Cardullo (Ed.), Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the Film Director as Critical Thinker, 63–73.

"Only the exhaustive is truly interesting," wrote Thomas Mann. The Wagnerian dream of an exhaustive *Gesamtkunstwerk*—the fusion of all the arts in one work, an alliance of word, image, and music—is also Syberberg's objective. But with a difference. Like Brecht, Syberberg rejects seduction; thus *Hitler* is always conscious of itself as film, as text and quotation. For Syberberg, whose subject (unlike Brecht's) is nothing less than humanity's quarrel with God and its place in the cosmos, the only artistic form appropriate to such discourse (as in Brecht's case) is the epic. His aesthetic achievement has thus been to redeem the Romantic ideal by wedding it to a modernist sensibility.

Syberberg is a man bursting with ideas. He is surprisingly soft-spoken, and almost languid in demeanor when one meets him. What follows is the edited transcript of a taped, six-hour interview that began in California and was completed at Syberberg's Munich home.

Steve Wasserman: Why make a seven-hour film on Hitler?

Hans-Jürgen Syberberg: Because Hitler represented utopia. He offered the future like Jesus, like socialism, but he did so as a cruel god who demanded sacrifices and obedience. And in a perverse way, Hitler delivered. And the people followed him. That's the cruelest aspect of the Third Reich to have to come to terms with. There were eleven million followers of Hitler in the Nazi party alone; many others subscribed to his policies, as well.

That's because Hitler was the greatest filmmaker of all time. He made the Second World War, just as he did the Nuremberg Party Congress for Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935), and he viewed the war's rushes every evening by himself, like King Ludwig attending a Wagner opera alone. It is very interesting that the only objects that remain from the Third Reich are fragments of celluloid; nothing else has survived—not the architecture of Albert Speer, not the extended borders of the German Reich of which Hitler dreamed. All that remains is the celluloid record of Hitler's existence and of the war. I play with this notion in *Hitler, A Film from Germany*. Perhaps it is all a grotesque joke, but underneath such a joke there is some horrible truth.

SW: Hitler is unquestionably the greatest enigma of the twentieth century. How do you explain him?

HJS: The question we have to ask is: When did his ideals, the utopia he had in mind, turn into a nightmare? When did this turning point occur? At what point did things get aggressive and go wrong? When did everyone see this yet not change it, not be able to change it? In every man's life there is a point where the desire to achieve something good goes horribly wrong; to recognize this moment is the most difficult thing in the world to do. And, of course, there is the question of what it was that drove Hitler to do what he did.

SW: What was it?

HJS: How can I answer this question simply? Even a film of seven hours is not long enough.

SW: Jean Genet once observed that "Fascism is theater." Do you agree?

Figure 20. Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland (Hitler, A Film from Germany, *a.k.a.* Our Hitler), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1977*

HJS: No, it is much more: Fascism is cinema. For example, Nuremberg is not theater, it is cinema. The Nazi Party Congress that took place there was designed for Leni Riefenstahl. And if you understand the Nuremberg of Riefenstahl, you understand Hitler. If you understand the *Olympia* (1938) of Riefenstahl, you understand Nazism. Hitler built an entire political system as a film. Of course, I speak about all of this not from a moral point of view, but only from the perspective of what happened.

SW: In your film *Hitler* you say that "Whoever controls film controls the future." What do you mean by that?

HJS: It is a play on the slogan used by evangelists like Billy Graham: "Whoever has Christ has the future." Hitler realized, as did the popes, dukes, and kings who went before him (and some who came after him), that when they vanish at the end, only the things they built will remain—the castles, cathedrals, and monuments. So Hitler wanted to build really big buildings with big walls that would last 1,000 years. But

nearly nothing now remains. In one generation, everything has vanished except the celluloid record of it all.

SW: Walter Benjamin once wrote, "The logical result of fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life." Was Hitler an artist?

HJS: I think that Hitler always thought of himself as an artist, similar to a painter or a composer. He thought of himself as someone like Richard Wagner, whose mission it was to put all the arts together, including cinema, the art form of our century. So, in my film, I take Hitler at his word. If he wants to be an artist, O.K., let him be that: a man who wants to make a political artwork of the masses. Hitler wanted to build the Reich itself as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, akin to a Wagner opera. But he made his masterwork as a film. Again, I am not speaking about the morality of such acts, only the fact of their existence.

SW: Isn't it dangerous to take such an approach?

HJS: I believe that if you are going to put somebody on trial, you must always be fair. To be fair, I had to give Hitler the opportunity to express what he really wanted to say. Taking him at his word was the prerequisite of fairness. And if we are right that he and the Nazis were wrong, there is no danger.

SW: Obviously, a seven-hour film has little commercial potential. How would you describe *Hitler, A Film from Germany* to those who are unlikely ever to see it?

HJS: That's a problem, because the film doesn't have a conventional narrative. One can, of course, describe the appearance of several figures and of some things you see and hear. But such a description would probably be boring. To understand my film, you must imagine what I had to do, what I was undertaking. There was this war, the history before the war, Germany as the intellectual center of Europe, fifty million people dead, in every family victims, the whole world—East and West—in flames. How do you describe that if you want to give equal coverage to everything? And not just describe it, but *get* it. And not only that: I also wanted to speak about people today, even more than about the Nazi period. How do you do that using the usual devices of cinema? It took me four years to find a way that I thought would work, and would be different.

SW: Despite your concern with history, the aesthetic of *Hitler* strikes me as anti-historical, even metaphysical.

HJS: Yes, that is correct. Without such an approach, one can't get to the center of things. Even Einstein, toward the end of his life, began to concentrate more on music and spiritual matters, on how music embodies spirituality. There is a point at which science and philosophy—and film and philosophy—meet.

SW: But by regarding Hitler as a kind of mythological figure, don't you distort history and thereby diminish our understanding?

HJS: Perhaps the legendary parts of history are truer than the real events. Perhaps through an understanding of such legends or myths one can penetrate better to the center of ideas than one could through an understanding of actual history. Very often in the film I don't follow the actual historical incidents and events; instead I try always to focus on the banality of everyday life, including the evil aspects. Today Hitler is, for the first time, part of the historical past and can be regarded as a kind of model, like Caesar or Napoleon. So my film is not just about Germany, Western Europe, or East and West; it's a picture about human conditions in the twentieth century and the turning point of our times, affixed to Hitler as a historical model.

SW: But isn't Hitler really the last great Romantic visionary of the nineteenth century? Wasn't Hitler's "achievement" the final destruction of the promise of that century?

HJS: Yes, I think, in a certain sense, that you are right. But Hitler was modern, too, especially in his use of propaganda and in his way of speaking about the masses. There can be no doubt that Hitler perverted the future in addition to destroying what remained of the past. In a strange way, he straddles both centuries, the nineteenth and the twentieth—making a mess of both.

SW: Over the last few years, there has been a revival of interest in the events of the Third Reich, in Hitler and the Second World War. Television docudramas such as *Holocaust* (1978) raise the question of how history is passed on to the next generation, how the historical memory of people is shaped. What do you think of such attempts?

HJS: I do not think it is necessary to show the killing of people, as *Holocaust* did. Why? To show how people are killed? To entertain with such scenes? To have the possibility to air advertisements on TV between the killings? Even if you want to educate people in a historico-political way, there's no reason to show how the guilty party killed the victims. What for? I believe that people are so nervous about these matters that they always resort to the easiest way of looking back at the hardest parts of history. I think we should be much more patient. I think that art, real art, can be a big help.

In *Hitler, A Film from Germany* I try to point out where East and West share a common inheritance. You see, I don't want to be elected and nobody asked me to run, and I don't want to teach somebody what to do and how to do it; I only want people to realize that we are *all* the inheritors of a certain legacy bequeathed to us by Hitler. For instance, to make money by using Hitler is not Nazism, but it is something

similar. Hitler always said, “They make money off everything.” In a manner of speaking, people now make gold out of the ashes of Auschwitz: for instance, the TV movie *Holocaust*. The Jews who lost members of their extended families to the Nazis—these same people now make money from the ashes of Auschwitz. How Goebbels would laugh! Of course people say, why not make money off Auschwitz? Even a lot of Jews in Israel argue, “Why not? We are living in a free-enterprise system where we make money off anything. So why not Auschwitz?” But what an idea! I can’t go along with it. Maybe I’m too German. But, naturally, these people are right; under the system in which we live, such commerce is quite normal. But if they are right, then we could also make money off a lot of other things, such as child pornography. Is that right, too? Is everything up for grabs, then, up for the taking?

SW: Don’t movies like *Holocaust* help ensure that future generations won’t forget the barbarity of fascism?

HJS: No, that’s not the problem. If you know that a lot of slaves were killed by the Romans, or you know that many people were slaughtered by Napoleon, it doesn’t help to know who’s guilty: that’s obvious. It’s a good, diverting story in the end—that’s why people still pay attention. But maybe it’s even a good piece of art; and only if it works as a piece of art does it possess the potential to help humanity. I’m speaking only of certain works of art, not everything. We know that Hitler and some of his people adored art, but it didn’t help their moral sensibilities. The aesthetic of my *Hitler* film is therefore opposed to the easy moralizing of Hollywood, with its cheap celluloid tales designed for mass consumption.

SW: Does your film condemn Hitler?

HJS: No. And, once again, I don’t think that’s the problem. It doesn’t help anything to condemn Hitler. If a child is killed in a car accident, what can you do with the guilty driver? Kill him? Will that bring the child back to life? What does it help to execute the driver? I sometimes think that Hitler was a poor little guy, much too small to achieve what he wanted. He was not a devil who seduced the German people. No, they *elected* him to do their dirty work; a lot of people subconsciously wanted this guy named Hitler. Of course they couldn’t have imagined in advance all of the war’s worst, most horrific crimes. These were simple or, better, simplistic folk, and Hitler was their genius.

SW: So the German people were to blame for Adolf Hitler.

HJS: What would Hitler have been without us? Without every German vote, and without the support later of all those who went to fight in Stalingrad, Hitler would not have been possible. We have to realize that this man was really desired by the people. Though there was a large Communist party at the time, and also a big Socialist party, they could do nothing against him. Hitler arrived like a storm, like an earthquake—

like Destiny itself. Of course, we cannot say that nobody knew who Hitler really was, or that no one did anything to oppose him. Some knew what was really going on and did a lot to oppose the Führer, and they paid for it: many intellectuals, for example. But none of them could prevent the phenomenon of Hitler. Even today we find ourselves often confronted by murderous leaders or dangerous situations that we are powerless to prevent. So I cannot point my finger and say that someone, somewhere, was wrong not to do this or even right to do that: in some cases, it doesn't matter what anyone does.

People get very angry when I talk about these matters because they are accustomed to thinking that human beings are the masters of their fate. It is a good idea to believe that we are the masters of nature and of politics, but we must always realize that there are certain moments when we will be confronted by evil, or sheer natural force, and there will be nothing we can do: we will be helpless to resist.

SW: Did you support the abolition of the statute of limitations in Germany for Nazi war criminals?

HJS: No. To take revenge is useless; what's done is done. The crimes of the Nazis, thirty-five years later, are still very cruel, especially for the victims. But I prefer to change mankind rather than to take revenge on the miscreants. We must be ready to invent grace again, and to dispense it.

SW: That's all very easy for you to say; but don't the millions who perished in the Holocaust deserve justice? Don't we—the living—have a moral obligation to honor their sacrifice by punishing those of their oppressors who are still alive?

HJS: I can understand revenge, but it never changes history. It never prevents such a tragedy from occurring again. Yet tragedies never happen twice in the same way; Hitler will never happen again. There are other problems today. Still, putting war criminals into prison doesn't help anything. You cannot change Rudolf Hess even if he stays in jail until he dies. You cannot change him; he is a poor, pathetic man. I believe that we are much more guilty to keep him locked up in a cage for more than thirty years. It doesn't help anything. It is wrong to regard the Nazis as barbarians, even those from the Waffen-SS who ran the concentration camps. Most of them were ordinary Germans: kind, bourgeois, even worldly. Most of them never saw a Jew, let alone got the chance to kill one. It is very painful for them to realize now that everything they did was wrong.

SW: How can you possibly make a film about Hitler, though, and hardly mention his victims?

HJS: It is unfortunately true that the most interesting aspect of a crime is the criminal, not the victim. Without a doubt, what is most interesting is the motive or psychology of the criminal. My *Hitler* film is an examination—a psychoanalysis, if you will—

of the victimizer. If one wants to understand the Roman empire of Julius Caesar, one must examine his life and way of thinking, not those of Spartacus. It is easy to understand the revolt of slaves, but it is difficult to comprehend the evil of tyrants.

SW: How do you account for Hitler's hold over the vast majority of the German people?

HJS: The totalitarian temptation is powerful precisely because it promises a future better than the present one and superior to anything known in the past. Under Hitler, husbands, housewives, and even children offered their lives for this future. In my film, I put the matter very clearly when I say, "If I offered in one hand the gold of speculators, the full beer belly of a government official, and material happiness along with all the playthings of the world; and, in the other hand, the legends and dreams of the imagination, a longing for paradise, and the music of ideas—then everybody would blindly choose paradise, even if it were a false paradise, greedy as people are for sacrificial blood and ready to offer the best in themselves, mixing their fondest hopes with the greatest cruelties for the benefit of the lunatic triumphs of the human soul."

History is largely the record of tragedies suffered in the attempt to attain utopia. Such utopian efforts sacrifice the present on the altar of the future. This idea is the basis of Christianity and, indeed, of most world religions: that now you must bear all manner of suffering and misfortune because later you will be rewarded in heaven. Even Marxism is based on this notion. And it gives us the power to destroy everything around us: political systems, people, art, even nature itself. We must change this way of thinking.

SW: How?

HJS: It is important to begin living for ourselves, not for others. It is the here-and-now, today, that we must be concerned with, with the ethics of daily existence. Why not take the chance, just once, to sacrifice the future for the present?

SW: One of the more provocative notions in *Hitler, A Film from Germany* is the suggestion that by eliminating European Jewry, Hitler ensured the success of Zionism. You also suggest in your film that by establishing the state of Israel, the Jewish people lost what was most precious about their Jewishness—their ability to act as a moral conscience for the world—and instead became philistines like everyone else.

HJS: When I was in Israel, I visited the Holocaust museum at Yad Vashem. When I saw all those horrible pictures and, at the same moment, young Israeli soldiers sporting machine guns as they stood in front of those very pictures of the Holocaust, I felt happy.

SW: You felt happy?

HJS: Happy, yes. My feeling has nothing to do with revenge, however. I felt truly happy to realize that the Jews are now like people everywhere: young ones and old ones and not-quite-normal ones, all standing in front of those Holocaust pictures. But, on the other hand, to see these laughing, handsome men and sometimes beautiful girls in uniform carrying machine guns in the museum and as they patrol the streets of Jerusalem, with poor Arabs all around them—well, it looks like a painting from ancient Rome when the Romans were the chiefs and the Jews were a colony of the Roman Empire. Very strange.

I am sure there are many powerful Zionist politicians who would agree that Hitler helped Israel to achieve legitimacy and power as a nation. In this context, perhaps Auschwitz was a needed sacrifice; it's like a cruel joke of history. Of course, there is no doubt that nobody wanted Hitler to do all of that just to help the Jews to establish Israel. It is only now, in retrospect, that one can consider such a possibility.

SW: What has been the reaction of Jews who have seen your film?

HJS: A lot of Jewish people come to see the film because Hitler is their problem, too. Hitler is their man, their "hero," their black messiah. Therefore, they always want to know how and why it could be. I remember that after a screening in Hamburg, a Jewish man, about my age, came up to me and said: "Now I know why I was in a concentration camp." He told me that there is always something secret between the criminal and his victim, and that for the first time he now understood what it was in his, and other Jews', case. You see, Hitler means nothing if he only represents the story of a single stupid man running around with a knife. No, Hitler's story is the story of Germany and its culture, and of the entire history of European occidental life. The film touches something very deep inside both Germans and Jews.

SW: What has surprised you about the reaction to the film?

HJS: I think the most astonishing thing is that I was able to make the film in the first place. I am very astonished that it even works; that people go to see it, that they stay through all seven hours of it, and that, at the end, they don't try to kill me.

Perhaps the most interesting reaction to *Hitler* came last year when I traveled to New York to show the film at Goethe House and then at the Filmex Festival in Los Angeles. While I was going through customs at Kennedy Airport, an official noticed the title of the film. Apparently concerned that it might be propaganda, he asked me whether the picture was for or against Hitler. How could I answer in only a few words? I assured this man that the film had nothing to do with propaganda.

Nevertheless, he confiscated it. And for the next forty-eight hours, I tried everything to get it back: telephoning the German consulate, the State Department, everybody I could. Each person I talked to denied knowing anything about the film,

only saying that it might take weeks and a great deal of money to get it out of customs. It was a horrible, really Kafkaesque situation. Finally, I received a call telling me that *Hitler* had been approved for release. I was curious to know on what basis they had determined the film was not dangerous, and was told that some poor official had screened thirty minutes and pronounced it "Surrealistic." Now I know why Surrealism was invented—if only to give such bureaucratic types the idea that art is harmless.

SW: Do you secretly admire Hitler?

HJS: No. Hitler was wrong, but to ask people—even people potentially like Hitler—to give their utmost is not wrong. If we really want to be the best of human beings, then we have to try again and again, even if in the past it went badly. We must trust people, trust *ourselves* to ask them for their best, and give them the freedom they need to achieve it. We have to penetrate to the essence of things and learn to discuss the problems of fascism, though never in a cheap way. Albert Einstein put the matter very well. He said that we have to think about human nature, think about our own individual task, about what each of us really wants, and then change accordingly—every individual in his own right. And if we are aware that we can change, then perhaps we can begin at a new point. The problem is not to fight power with power and then, after a war, to have winners, because perhaps the winners will be little better than the best of losers.

SW: Are you saying that to dream of paradise in the perverse way that Hitler dreamed of it is wrong, but that to give up the dream itself is an even greater wrong? That one should not stop dreaming just because one has had a nightmare?

HJS: Yes, absolutely. One must always try to dream. Otherwise, why live?

SW: How has Hitler affected the course of German culture?

HJS: Germans today are a people without passion, without inventiveness of their own. That makes me very nervous because, until now, we lived from such passion and imagination. German culture was strong as a result. Before Hitler, there was invention, even genius, in every aspect of life: in technology and science, in philosophy, in the arts, maybe even in politics. Today, Germans don't want to talk about the honor, much less the grandeur, of living; they want to discuss only the ugly aspects of life, as if they were taking a drug to kill thought. Today we Germans lead a debased life divorced from any vision, and to imagine my country without a vision is horrible! Today there is nothing; without a vision, Germany is nothing; and such a Germany is very dangerous because it is a vacuum.

I believe that a new German culture will arise when we have created a new German identity. Today, Germans are not proud of themselves; they feel guilty, not in a good way but in a bad one. You see, I can feel guilt and still be proud, in spite of

it. I can be full of energy *because* I am guilty, and I can devote my work and thoughts to exorcising that guilt.

SW: Do you think that art can help provide the redeeming vision to which you allude?

HJS: Yes. But the problem is that Hitler used politics as an art. And now the consternation is very great because no one wants to do that again. Today, politics is regarded like a business, not as an art. And today, even art is a business.

SW: What role can cinema play in all of this?

HJS: Film has a chance to be something more than entertainment or education. I'm not a teacher; and I'm not here to entertain people so that they can forget their lives. For me, the cinema is something more. To pose the question you have posed is to ask: Why art? Why? Because art is the only thing that remains behind once we are dead; the artistic fragments that remain are documents of our time. Art enables people to understand that there is something more to life than the dailiness of working and spending, eating and drinking and sleeping. I am not the founder of a new religion, a political party, or a social agenda. I have only made a film in *Hitler*, a piece of art based on life in our times. If I did it well, then I think it is already something that can help. The most I can do is try to construct a work of art—a little sliver of hope conjured up from the shitbowl of history.

NOTE

[1] Steve Wasserman, "Interview with Hans-Jürgen Syberberg," *The Threepenny Review*, 2 (Summer 1980): 4–6.

ROSWITHA MUELLER[1]

6. HANS-JÜRGEN SYBERBERG'S *HITLER*: AN INTERVIEW

What accounts for the apathy and indifference to Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's seven-hour film on Hitler on the part of the combined media of the country that is the subject and addressee of this work? In contrast, other contemporary films on the same topic have scored immediate successes. The Hollywood-produced narrative fiction film *Holocaust* (1978) was televised in the Federal Republic of Germany and produced a storm of audience response. Even more notable was the favorable reception of Joachim Fest's *Hitler—eine Karriere* (*Hitler, A Career*, 1977), which due to its "objective" documentary character was recommended as educational material in Bavarian schools. (In *Die Zeit* of August 5, 1977, Wim Wenders polemicizes against the so-called objective character of Fest's film by pointing out that Fest almost exclusively relied on images produced by Hitler's propaganda machine.)

Syberberg, however, has produced a fiction without its being a narrative and a document without claiming objectivity for it: a hybrid form without respectable parentage? The attempt to mix documentation with subjective interpretation and imagination with historical fact is as old as the genre of documentary film itself. Its reception has been controversial from the outset, as the fate of the Russian filmmakers Vertov and Eisenstein proves. Yet Syberberg's style raises questions beyond the immediate concern with genre. What is his justification for flaunting Brechtian techniques in cosmological Wagnerian garb? And if Brecht's judgment that Wagner did for the stage what Hollywood did for the screen is relevant, why attempt to couple such an unlikely pair?

Syberberg is aware of the scandal he provoked by shattering the neat contours of established aesthetic categories. At the same time he has done his best to contradict equally well-established interpretations of the particular political problem in question. First, and foremost, Syberberg counters emphatically the notion, widely acknowledged by the Left and certainly subscribed to by Brecht, that Hitler was a tool of the capitalist elite:

> It was a fundamental error and a concrete lie to represent Hitler solely as the instrument of capital, as the last step of capitalism, and imperialism and war as the necessary consequences of capitalist exploitation. Only materialists could think this up. (*Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland* [Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1978], 17. Trans. Roswitha Mueller.)

R. J. Cardullo (Ed.), Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the Film Director as Critical Thinker, 75–80.

Secondly, Syberberg's defense of the tradition of German irrationalism is directed against the orthodox Marxist view of the identity of fascism with the irrational trends in bourgeois culture. Insofar as the orthodox point of view in the Expressionism debate of the 1930s equated irrationalism with bourgeois decadence and modernism (see Hans-Jürgen Schmitt, *Die Expressionismusdebatte* [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973]), a point of view that still influences present debates, Syberberg's insistence on the irrational heritage of German culture has both political and aesthetic implications.

The following interview with Syberberg took place after the first showing of *Hitler, A Film from Germany* in Berkeley, California.

Roswitha Mueller: Would you agree that the perspective which links together your three major films—*Ludwig: Requiem for a Virgin King* (1972); *Karl May* (1974); and your recent work *Hitler, A Film from Germany*—is cultural criticism?

Hans-Jürgen Syberberg: Yes, but if you call it cultural criticism you will have to define culture as something more than the embellishment of everyday life. Art, for example, would have to be considered politics and criticism must be taken seriously as criticism of contemporary public life, because the Hitler film is actually a critique of our present time. I am using the case of Hitler in order to address questions that concern us here and now, to find the Auschwitz of today. Seen in this way, the film is cultural criticism in the sense that it is an inquisition of our times, and culture itself is considered to be an eminently political concern.

RM: You seem to be concerned with the phenomenon of Romantic imagination, which is a predominant factor in the cultural heritage of Germany. I see a parallel to Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* (1947), where this tradition of Romantic inwardness is criticized as political irresponsibility.

HJS: Some critics in Germany have expressed similar ideas in connection with my *Hitler* film. They commented that Hitler had realized the dreams of the German people and thereby destroyed those dreams. He had insinuated his ideas into the public and vice versa, giving rise to the slogan "Hitler is Germany and Germany is Hitler." He had pushed these dreams to an absurd and one-dimensional conclusion, and thus they were disproven in their very realization. Ludwig's case in *Requiem* is similar. Ludwig's failure, however, had consequences only for himself. Hitler, by contrast, was able to forge a unity of leader and people; he succeeded in making his own figure the symbol of the nation.

RM: Did he do this by an act of empathy, insinuating himself into the people's imagination?

HJS: Yes.

RM: Your portrayal of Karl May, of his attempt to re-create an entire universe out of his own mind, seems to take the possibilities of imagination to their limit.

HJS: Karl May relied upon himself. He was the principle of good and fought against evil, and in his books he usually won. The crisis occurred when this self-reliance became delinquent—as I showed in my film—and caused the whole system to break down. Ludwig, on the other hand, lived at the end of an epoch. He was the first in this trilogy, but at the same time the film was conceived as a requiem. He was forced to deal with a public that he did not accept, since he wanted to live only for himself. It was his punishment that after his death he fulfilled the dreams of the people as a *kitsch*-figure in their legends.

RM: Do you consider Hitler as in any way related to this burgeoning ingrown imagination?

HJS: No, if you mean that too much emphasis on the imagination can prove disastrous for a culture. Imagination has never had a chance in Germany. Our country has always been governed by bureaucratic and technocratic constructs, whereby rationality, correctness, law, and order have been highly esteemed, while people with imagination have not been taken seriously. At best they are considered crazy clowns, a luxury for the bourgeoisie. There is a long list of German artists—for example, Kleist and Hölderlin—who have failed because they were not taken seriously.

Figure 21. Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland (Hitler, A Film from Germany, *a.k.a.* Our Hitler), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1977*

RM: Your criticism, in other words, is not directed at Ludwig's or Karl May's inability to come to terms with a political reality.

HJS: No, I don't think that the lack of participation in public affairs and the anti-realistic stance of these characters are the objects of criticism in the trilogy. To the contrary, Hitler tried to incorporate aesthetics into state norms or operations. This represents a great challenge to us. We should ask ourselves why we don't do more for art and for artists. Artists in Germany do not shun public affairs. For the most part they are obsessed with a sense of guilt for not being workers and a feeling of obligation to intervene in politics. In contrast, the public and the politicians are indifferent to artists and cultural concerns.

RM: At the beginning of *Hitler* you describe the film as "fragments of an inner projection" and "film fantasies before our inner eye." Why did you choose this perspective and how can it be reconciled with the film's highly political subject matter?

HJS: These phrases are poetic expressions meant to describe the fragmentary character of the film. By projection I mean, literally, the technical process of projection in the studio or screening room—something that is partly fixed—and figuratively the projection of imagination and thoughts, a dialectic of feelings and questions that we confront. The film, therefore, has a hypothetical character. It is elusive and defies total analysis.

RM: In *Hitler* you are saying that the emergence of the "new man" is at the heart of the film and, at another point, that Hitler was the tempter of democracy, the Mephisto of the new Faust. As in Goethe's *Faust* (1808, 1832), the setting is cosmological: God and Mephisto are vying for Faust's soul.

HJS: Yes, at the beginning of the second section a mythological frame is explicitly established in which the gods are giving mankind a chance to try out their new forms and ways of life and to find their man to implement these reforms. Finally, there he is: the gray mouse. The gods resolve to remove themselves to a distant star if the experiment does not work out.

RM: The outcome, as I see it, is a victory for Mephisto, expressed in the phrase: "Hitler, here is your victory."

HJS: Yes, "Hitler, here is your victory" refers to our present time, the heritage. Einstein once said the following as a warning: "We have abolished the devil but adopted evil."

RM: Did Faust have a choice? In other words, is democracy negatively determined to result in fascism, in monopoly capitalism, or in some other form of totalitarian socialism? Is an alternative possible at all?

HJS: I think people can be educated for better or worse. I believe that people are happy when they are shown an alternative even if they have to sacrifice for it. Of course, this was also the trick of the tempter. Hitler did not give the people anything; on the contrary, he was very demanding, always asking for something. Their freedom was more and more curtailed for the so-called good cause. Hitler did not entice; he punished. He enticed through severity, which is far more ingenious. People, specifically German people, are quite ready to give up many comforts if they receive higher values in return.

RM: Your criticism of Wagner's total work of art in *Requiem* recurs in *Hitler* in the form of your criticism of Hitler's political "total work." How do you see this connection?

HJS: I had no intention of criticizing Wagner's aesthetics in this sense. I have placed him in proximity to Hitler, whom he has to account for since he provoked this affinity himself. But the principle of the total work of art as Wagner understood it has nothing at all to do with Hitler's approach to politics. The intention to create something all-inclusive is itself not to be rejected; naturally, it mostly ends in failure, since you either get everything or nothing. Wagner himself, however, reached the maximum in every respect.

RM: I see the same intention at work in your own films.

HJS: Yes, I see film as a possibility to achieve the maximum, but on a totally different level from what is commonly called melodrama, which has the same effect in its own way. The melodrama preferred by the film buff is foreign to me, since my work never fulfills anybody's expectations. I think it would be very hard, therefore, to use me as a cult figure. A general line is visible in my work, but each individual film is different and seems to be made by somebody else. Thus I understand, by the term "total work of art," not the production of intoxicating effects—this is what Brecht criticized in Wagner without, in my view, ever really doing justice to Wagner—but drawing on all the aesthetic and imaginative possibilities one has at one's disposal. Hence if you build a house or a palace, you add sculpture, painting, music, feasts, and ceremonies to complete a total construct. It is important, however, to understand each individual component and not to get swept away by the overall impact.

RM: In this sense you are very close to Brecht's conception of the total work of art. Generally, I find your filmic technique very close to Brecht's dramatic technique.

HJS: Yes, in *Requiem* and *Karl May* I am still using chapter divisions in the form of titles between segments. I stopped doing that in *Hitler*; it was still in the original script but I left it out of the film. Otherwise, the structure remains as I had intended it. Naturally the conscious destruction of the Aristotelian principle belongs to the Brecht heritage—no story or narrative in the traditional sense, placing things side by

side and behind or in front of each other. Yet, there are aspects of my work that are very different from anything in Brecht: the use of the *leitmotif*; associations that let you recognize elements from the past and the future, in manifold variation; built-in repetitions; the deployment of an increasing number of musical, lyrical principles; and, further, the use of a concept of pathos that Brecht did not know. The conscious and sometimes ironic reference to Wagner, as well as the mixture of Brecht and Wagner, is most characteristic of my work.

NOTE

[1] Roswitha Mueller, "Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's *Hitler*: An Interview-Montage," *Discourse*, 2 (Summer 1980): 60–82.

FREDERIC JAMESON[1]

7. 'IN THE DESTRUCTIVE ELEMENT IMMERSE': HANS-JÜRGEN SYBERBERG AND CULTURAL REVOLUTION

Had Syberberg not existed, he would have to have been invented. Perhaps he was. So that "Syberberg" may really be the last of those puppets of mythical German heroes who people his films. Consider this, which has all the predictability of the improbable: during the war a certain stereotype of the German cultural tradition ("Teutonic" philosophy; music, especially Wagner) was used by both sides as ammunition in the accompanying ideological conflict; it was also offered as evidence of a German national "character." After the war it became clear that: (1) the history of high culture was not a very reliable guide to German social history generally; (2) the canon of this stereotype excluded much that may be more relevant for us today (e.g., Expressionism, Weimar, Brecht); and (3) the Germany of the economic miracle, NATO, and social democracy constitute a very different place from rural or urban central Europe in the period before Hitler. So people stopped blaming Wagner for Nazism and began a more difficult process of collective self-analysis that culminated in the anti-authoritarian movements of the 1960s and early 1970s. This also generated a renewal of German cultural production, particularly in the area of film.

The space was therefore cleared for a rather perverse counter-position on all these points: on the one hand, the affirmation that Wagner and the other stereotypes of German cultural history are valid representations of Germany after all; and, on the other, that the contemporary criticism of cultural "irrationality" and authoritarianism—itself a shallow, rationalistic, "Enlightenment" enterprise—by repressing the demons of the German psyche, reinforces rather than exorcizes them. The Left is thus blamed for the survival of the fascist temptation, while Wagner, as the very culmination of German irrationalism, is contested by methods that can only be described as Wagnerian.

As Syberberg undertakes in his films a program for cultural revolution, he shares some of the values and aims of his enemies on the Left; his aesthetic is a synthesis of Brecht and Wagner (yet another logical permutation that remained to be invented). The Wagnerian persona is indeed uncomfortably, improbably strong in Syberberg: witness the manifestoes that affirm film as the true and ultimate form of the Wagnerian ideal of the "music of the future" and of *Gesamtkunstwerk*; poses of heroic isolation from which he lashes out at philistine fellow artists and critics who

R. J. Cardullo (Ed.), Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the Film Director as Critical Thinker, 81–97.

misunderstand his work (but who are, for him, generally associated with the Left); satirical denunciations in the best tradition of Heine, Marx, and Nietzsche of the anti-cultural *Spiessbürger* of the Federal Republic today, complete with a *sottisier* of the most idiotic reviews of his films.[2]

Meanwhile, Syberberg is both predictable and improbable in yet another sense: in a high-technology medium, ever more specialized and self-conscious, in which the most advanced criticism has become forbiddingly technical, he suddenly reinvents the role of the naïf or "primitive" artist, organizing his vision of the filmic art of the future not around the virtuoso use of the most advanced techniques (as Coppola or Godard do, though in very different ways), but rather around something like a return to home movies. What he produces is the low-budget look of amateur actors, staged tableaux, and vaudeville-type numbers, essentially static and simply strung together—all of which must initially stun the viewer in search of vanguard or "experimental" novelties.

Though initially astonishing, however, Syberberg's strategy is quite defensible. As in the other arts, the stance of the amateur, the apologia for the homemade that characterizes the handicraft ethos, is often a wholesome form of de-reification, a rebuke to the *esprit de sérieux* of an aesthetic or cultural technocracy; it need not be merely machine-wrecking and regressive. Nor is his seemingly anachronistic position regarding the German cultural past without theoretical justification: in the work of Freud, first of all, and the distinction between repression and sublimation that we have come to understand and accept in other areas;[3] in an orthodox criticism of dialectical reversals by which a binary or polar opposite (rationalistic Enlightenment forms of demystification) is grasped as merely the mirror replication of what it claims to discredit (German irrationalism), locked within the same *problematic*; in a perfectly proper reading of German history that defines imprisonment in essentially Jacobin, pre-1848 (*Vormärz*) forms of bourgeois ideology critique, for which Marx, Marxism, and the dialectic itself still remained to be invented, as the price that oppositional movements have traditionally had to pay for German political underdevelopment; in a new conception of cultural revolution, finally, which, drawing its inspiration from Ernst Bloch's aesthetics and his "principle of Hope," his impulse towards a utopian future, is not merely unfamiliar outside Germany, but has also—until Syberberg's own work—been untested as an aesthetic program for a new artistic language.

If the films were not worth bothering about, of course, it would be idle to debate these questions. But what would it mean to employ traditional judgments of value for something like the seven-hour *Our Hitler* (1977)? With what would we emerge except formulations such as the "not good but important" of a German newspaper critic ("Kein 'guter' Film, dafür ein wichtiger.")? The Wagnerian length involves a process in which one must be willing or unwilling to immerse oneself rather than an object whose structure one can judge, appreciate, or deplore. My own reaction is that, after some three or four hours, it might as well have lasted forever (but that the first hour was simply dreadful from all points of view). Perhaps the most honest appraisal is the low-level one that chooses the episodes one likes, complains

about what bores or exasperates. The dominant aesthetic of this film, which works to produce an "improvisation effect," seems, at any rate, to block all others.

This improvisation effect is clearly derived from the interview format of *cinéma vérité*. Against the composed and representational scenarios of fiction film, *cinéma vérité* was read as a breakthrough to the freshness and immediacy of daily experience. In the hands of filmmakers such as Syberberg or Godard, however, the illusion of spontaneity is exposed as a construct of preexisting forms. In Godard's films the interview is the moment in which the fictional characters are tormented and put to the ultimate test: full-face, head and shoulders against a dazzling monochrome wall, they reply with hesitant assent or inarticulate half-phrases to the demand that they formulate their experiences, their *truth*, in words. The truth of the interview, however, lies not in what is said or betrayed, but in the silence, in the fragility or insufficiency of the stammered response, in the massive and overwhelming power of the visual image, and in the lack of neutrality on the part of the badgering, off-screen interviewer.

It is in Godard's recent television series, *Tour de France* (1977), that the tyrannical and manipulative power of this investigative position is most clearly exposed. There the Maoist interviewer questions school children whose interests, obviously, are radically different from his own. At one point he asks a little girl if she knows what revolution is (she does not). If there is something obscene about exhibiting something—class struggle—to a child who will find out about it in her own time, there is, no doubt, something equally obscene about the Syberberg child

Figure 22. Theodor Hierneis oder: Wie man ehemaliger Hofkoch wird (Theodor Hierneis, or How One Becomes a Former Royal Cook, *a.k.a.* Ludwig's Cook), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1972*

(his daughter) who wanders through the seven hours of *Our Hitler* carrying dolls of the Nazi leaders and other playthings of the German past. These children can, however, no longer be figures of innocence. Rather they mark the future and the possible limits of the political project of these filmmakers, each of whom inscribes his work within a particular conception of cultural revolution. In Syberberg, then, a mythic posterity, some exorcised future Germany, its bloody past reduced to the playroom or the toy box; in Godard, the vanishing "subject of history," the once politicized public that will no longer reply.

Syberberg's documentary and interview techniques are developed in a whole complex preparatory practice that precedes his major films, from an early documentary on Brecht's production methods, through interviews with Fritz Kortner and Romy Schneider (and an imaginary one with Ludwig II's cook, Theodor Hierneis), to a five-hour "study" of Winifred Wagner. The background of a Syberberg interview, characteristically unlike the non-place of the Godardian wall (with its properly utopian colors, as Stanley Cavell has noted[4]), is generally a house or mansion whose monumental and tiered traces of the past gradually absorb the camerawork in such a way that what began as an interview turns into a "guided tour." This unexpected formal emergence is a stunning solution to the dilemma of the essentially narrative apparatus of film as it confronts the absences of the past and the task of "working through" what is already over and done with. So in the Wagner documentary,

> you come to see how the bourgeois utopia of private life turns into idyll, how the whole system breaks down without that music which the master was still able to bully out of himself and life. Without the music of Wagner, Wahnfried [the family estate] was doomed to decline and fall.[5]

The very primacy of the great house, as well as the form of the guided tour, is dictated by Syberberg's material and by the weight of the essentially bourgeois past of German cultural history as he conceives of it—from the nineteenth-century palaces of Ludwig II, or of Wagner, or Karl May's Villa Shatterhand, all the way to Hitler's Reichskanzlei, that is to say, to the ultimate destruction of those buildings and the emergence of the misty placelessness (better still, the scenic space) of *Our Hitler*. It is not easy to imagine anything further from the Parisian outer belt of Godard's films, with their shoddy high-rises, noise, and traffic; nor can one imagine Godard filming a documentary on Versailles, say, or the houses of Monet or Cézanne. Yet this effort of imagination, as we shall see, is the task that Syberberg has set himself, the form of his "estrangement effect": imagine Godard listening to Wagner! Or, to turn things around, imagine Syberberg confronting middle-class prostitution, the commodification of sexuality.

Similarly striking is the contrast between Godard's deliberate revelation of his interviewer's manipulations and Syberberg's sense of the *tendresse* and self-denial demanded of the maker of documentaries and interviews:

> The maker of such films must *serve* in the archaic, virtually monastic, sense; with all his heightened attention and his superior knowledge of the motifs and the intersections or lateral relationships of what has already been said and what is yet to come, he must remain completely in the background during the process, he must be able to become transparent…. You come to understand the grand masters of the medieval *unio mystica*…. and maybe that is why we get involved in such a suicidal business. It costs sweat and effort, often more than the kind of excitement one feels in realizing the fantasies of fiction film. You're completely washed out in bed at night, still trembling all over from having had to listen, comprehend, and direct the camera. You are directing from the score of another composer, but in your own rhythm.[6]

Yet it is perhaps this very conception of the self-effacing mission of the documentary artist that underscores the complacencies of *Our Hitler*, the lengthy indulgences that it allows itself. Such complacency is the consequence of a self-serving glorification of the artist and the overemphasis on the function of art in social life in general. It is characteristic of the auto-referentiality that informs modern art, a pathology that results from the instability, the effacement often, of an institutional role for the artist in modern, or more specifically, capitalist society. Artists working in a social system that makes an institutional place for cultural production (the role of the bard or tribal storyteller, the icon-painter or producer of ecclesiastical images, even the roles foreseen by aristocratic or court patronage) were thereby freed from the necessity of justifying their works through excessive reflection on the artistic process itself. As the position of the artist becomes jeopardized, reflexivity increases, becomes an indispensable precondition for artistic production, particularly in vanguard or high-cultural works.

The thematics of the artist-novel, of art about art, and poetry about poetry is by now so familiar and, one is tempted to say, so old-fashioned (the generation of '50s aesthetes was perhaps the last to entertain aggressively the notion of a privileged role for the poet), that its operation in mass culture and in other seemingly non-aesthetic discourses passes, oftentimes, unobserved. Yet one of the forms taken by a crisis in a discourse like that of professional philosophy is precisely the overproduction of fantasy images of the role and the necessity of the professional philosopher himself. (Althusserianism was only the latest philosophical movement to have felt the need to justify its work in this way, while the Wittgensteinian reduction of philosophical speculation marks a painful and therapeutic awareness of its loss of a social vocation.) It was thus predictable that the emergence of that new type of discourse called theory would be accompanied by a number of overweening celebrations of the primacy of this kind of writing. Yet the "alienation" of intellectuals, their "free-floating" lack of social function, is not redeemed by such wish-fulfilling reflexivity. Political commitment—for example, the support of working-class parties—is a more concrete and realistic response to this dilemma, which is the result of the dynamics

and priorities of the market system itself, its refusal of institutional legitimation to any form of intellectual activity that is not at least mediately involved in the social reproduction of the profit system.

In mass culture, popular music, through its content and its glorification of the musician, provides a most striking example of the workings of this thematics of crisis. The rapidity with which the role of the musician has become mythicized is particularly evident in the instance of rock music: first as a balladeer (Bob Dylan, for example), and then as a Christ figure, through the fantasy of universal redemption or individual martyrdom (as in The Who's *Tommy* [1969] or many David Bowie cycles). My objection to the overdetermined content of such works (which, it should be understood, have social and psychic resonance of their own, quite distinct from the supplementary fantasies about their own production) is a reaction to the tiresomeness of their continued and outmoded appeal. Surely the "hero with a thousand faces," let alone the Christ figure, excites no one any longer, is imaginatively irrelevant to the problems of consumer society, and is a sign of intellectual as well as aesthetic bankruptcy.

Yet this is precisely the solution to which Syberberg rather anachronistically returns in *Our Hitler*, spreading a panoply of mythic images before us. His conception of the mythic derives, it is true, more from Wagner than from Joyce, Campbell, or Frye, but it is no less exasperating for all that. (Even Syberberg's philosophical mentor, Ernst Bloch, has suggested that it would be desirable to substitute a fairy-tale—that is a populist, Wagner—for the official epic-aristocratic one.) Initially, however, the complacent and auto-referential developments in Syberberg seem to derive from the anti-Wagnerian tradition of Brecht, with whom he also entertains a "mythic" identification: the circus barker of the opening of *Our Hitler* surely has more in common with the street singer of *The Threepenny Opera* (1928) than with the nineteenth-century religion of art. Yet very rapidly the apologia of film as the Wagnerian "music of the future" and the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of our time, the loftiest form of artistic vocation, emerges from the populist framework. A miniature replica of the first movie studio, the little wooden shack that Thomas Edison called the Black Maria and in which he experimented with the "Kinetoscope," the ancestor of the movie camera, becomes the Holy Grail. And the quest, then, becomes the yearning for a well-nigh Lukácsian "totality," the impulse towards a Hegelian Absolute Spirit, the self-consciousness of this historical world and the place from which, if anywhere, it might hope to grasp itself through the medium of aesthetic representation.

The problem of totalization is surely a crucial one in a world in which our sense of the unity of capitalism as a global system is structurally blocked by the reification of daily life, as well as by class, racial, national, and cultural differences and by the distinct temporalities by which they are all defined. But the film goes beyond this crucial concern to make an outrageous proposal: we are not merely to accept the filmmaker as supreme prophet and guardian of the Grail, but Hitler as well. The conjunction of Hitler and film, the interest that he had in the medium, is, of course,

historically documented. Syberberg provides some of the most interesting specifics: He liked Fred Astaire and John Wayne movies particularly; Goebbels would not let him see *The Great Dictator* (1940), but screened *Gone with the Wind* (1939) for him as compensation—which he thoroughly enjoyed; after the first reverses in the East, he began to restrict himself to the viewing of newsreels and documentary footage from the front, to which he occasionally offered editorial suggestions. But by 1944 he had even stopped watching these and reverted to his old Franz Lehár records.

Syberberg, however, proposes that we see Hitler not merely as a film buff, nor even as a film critic, but as a filmmaker in his own right, indeed, the greatest of the twentieth century, the *auteur* of the most spectacular film of all time, World War II. Although interpretations of Hitler as a failed artist have been proposed in the past (and renewed by the memoirs of Albert Speer, himself the prophet of an unrealized architectural "music of the future"), they have generally been diagnostic and debunking, rejoining a whole tradition of analysis of political visionaries, especially revolutionary leaders, as failed intellectuals and bearers of *ressentiment* (thus, even Jules Michelet described the more radical Jacobins as so many artistes *manqués*). There is, indeed, a striking science-fiction idea (not so strikingly realized in its novel form, *The Iron Dream* [1972], by Norman Spinrad) in which, in an alternate world, a sidewalk artist and bohemian named Adolf Hitler emigrates to the U.S. in 1919 and becomes a writer of science fiction. He incorporates his bloodiest fantasies in his masterpiece, *Lord of the Swastika*, which is reproduced as the text of Spinrad's own novel: "Hitler died in 1953, but the stories and novels he left behind remain as a legacy to all science-fiction enthusiasts."

Syberberg's purpose, however, is a good deal more complicated and sophisticated than this and aims at no less than a Blochian cultural revolution, a psychoanalysis and exorcism of the collective unconscious of Germany. It is this ambition with which we must now come to terms. Bloch's own "method," if we may call it that, consists in detecting the positive impulses at work within the negative ones, in appropriating the motor force of such destructive but collective passions as reactionary religion, nationalism, fascism, and even consumerism.[7] For Bloch, all passions, nihilistic as well as constructive, embody a fundamental drive towards a transfigured future. This Blochian doctrine of hope does not moralize; rather it warns that the first moment of collective consciousness is not a benign phenomenon, that it defines itself, affirms its unity, with incalculable violence against the faceless, threatening mass of Others that surround it. The rhetoric of liberal capitalism has traditionally confronted this violence with the ideal of the "civilizing" power of commerce and of a retreat from the collective (above all, from the dynamics of social class) into the security of private life.

Bloch's gamble—and it is the only conceivable solution for a Left whose own revolutions (China, Vietnam, Cambodia) have generated a dismaying nationalist violence in their turn—is that a recuperation of the utopian impulse within these dark powers is possible. His is not a doctrine of self-consciousness of the type with which so many people, grown impatient with its inability to effect any concrete praxis

or change, have become dissatisfied. Rather, it urges the program so dramatically expressed by Conrad's character, Stein (in *Lord Jim* [1900]): "in the destructive element immerse!" Pass all the way through nihilism so completely that we emerge in the light at its far side. A disturbing program, clearly, as the historical defections from the Left to various forms of fascism and nationalism in modern times must testify.

In accordance with this doctrine, the vision of history that emerges in Syberberg's trilogy[8] is not simply one of the "road not taken," not simply a Lukácsian project to rescue and reinvent an alternate tradition of German culture. Syberberg's fascination with Wagner's royal patron, Ludwig II of Bavaria, results not from the identification of a moment of cultural choice, a historical turning point that might have changed everything. Although it is that too, of course, and he represents Ludwig as a form of artistic patronage and cultural development that he systematically juxtaposes against the commercialism of the arts and cultural illiteracy of the middle-class in Germany today. (Indeed, in one of his most interesting proposals, especially in light of the neglect of his own films within the Federal Republic, Syberberg imagines a "Bayreuth" for the modern film where special state theaters for avant-garde filmmaking would be supported by the various provincial governments.) Even more significant, however, is his representation of Ludwig II as the anti-Bismarck: the tormented and dilettantish, unheroic, and often ridiculous symbol of a non-Prussian Germany, of the possibility of a German federation under the leadership of Bavaria rather than that unified state under Brandenburg and the Junkers. Yet Syberberg's treatment of the "virgin king" in *Ludwig* (1972) is no less deliberately ambivalent than his treatment of Hitler, as we shall see.

It is the second film in the trilogy that most faithfully sets out on the Blochian quest for an earthly paradise, the search for utopian impulses within the contingent forms and activities of a fallen social life. This 1974 film takes as its theme the popular writer Karl May, who, as a kind of late nineteenth-century German combination of Jules Verne and Nick Carter, made the Western over into an authentically German form that was read by generations of German adolescents, including Hitler himself. The juxtaposition of Wagner's patron and this immensely successful writer of bestsellers is the strategic isolation of a moment of crisis in modern culture, the moment at which high culture and emergent mass culture began to split apart from one another and to develop seemingly autonomous structures and languages. This dramatic moment in the development of culture marks a break, a dialectical leap and transformation in capital, just as surely as, on the level of the infrastructure and of institutions, the coming into being of the monopoly form. Syberberg has, it is true, expressed this emergent opposition in what are still essentially unified class terms, for the villa of Karl May and the palaces of Ludwig can still be seen as two variants of a culture of the upper bourgeoisie, or, perhaps, of the high bourgeoisie and the aristocracy, but then only on the condition that Ludwig's "residual" aristocratic style is viewed as already infected with the *kitsch* of nineteenth-century middle-class taste.

Clearly the film's diagnosis transcends the individual writer and can be extended to all the national variants of the popular literature of nascent imperialism, of the mystery of these last "dark places of the earth" (Conrad) that suddenly become perceptible at the moment of their penetration and abolition—as in the novels of Verne or, in another way, of Rider Haggard (and even of Conrad himself), in which the closing of capitalism's global frontier resonates through the form as its condition of possibility and its outside limit. "Through its monologue form," writes Syberberg,

> the film presents the inner world of "the last great German mystic in the last moment of the decline of the fairy tale," and presents it as a monstrous kind of closet drama, developing according to the laws of some three-hour-long chamber music: "The soul is a vast landscape into which we flee." One can thus seek one's paradise, as the historical Karl May did, in so many trips and voyages to the real sites of his fantasies, thereby knowing ultimate failure, as May himself did in his breakdown…. Karl May transposed all his problems and his enemies into the figures of his adventures in the Wild West and in an orient that extended all the way to China. [In the film] we return them to their origins and see his filmic life as the projected worlds of the inner monologue. A man in search of paradise lost in the typically German misdirection, restlessly seeking his own salvation in an inferno of his own making. Job and Faust, combined, with a Saxon accent, his fanatical longing dramatized in a national hero for poor and rich alike, a hero both for Hitler and for Bloch, and acted out with all the familiar faces and voices of the UFA [the major German film company up to 1945], with Stalingrad music at the end that swells relentlessly out of history itself. It may be that other nations can rest at peace in their misery (perhaps also it is not so great as our own), but here we can see it percolating and seeking its own liberation as well as that of others.[9]

Nowhere, then, is the utopian impulse towards the reappropriation of energies so visible as in this attempt to rewrite the fantasies of a nascent mass culture in their authentic form as the unconscious longing of a whole collectivity.

Ludwig, however, presents a more complex and difficult vision, as we may judge from its delirious final image:

> After his resurrection from the scaffold of history, Ludwig throws off his kingly robes and in a Wagnerian finale yodels at the Alps or Himalaya landscape from the roof of the royal palace…. Even the bearded child-Ludwig from Erda's grotto is included, with his requiem-smile through the mist. The curse and salvation of the legendary life of the child-king spreads out our own existential dream- and wish-landscape before us in amicable-utopian fashion.[10]

The bliss or *promesse de bonheur* of this *kitsch* sublime, as glorious as it is, is deeply marked, both in its affect and in its structure as an image, by its unreality as the self-consciously "imaginary resolution of a real contradiction."

Yet such a moment will perhaps afford us a surer insight into the dynamics of Syberberg's aesthetic, and of his "salvational critique," than the narrative analysis we have hitherto associated with the "method" of Bloch (and in which the very shape of the story or tale, or the narrative form, expresses the movement towards the future). Since Syberberg's are not in that sense storytelling films (although they are films *about* stories of all kinds), a narrative or diachronic analysis does them less justice than the synchronic focus to which we now turn, and by which the movement of filmic images in time is grasped as the "process of production" of relatively static tableaux similar to this one of the Ludwig apotheosis. Such moments, so characteristic of Syberberg's films, can become emblems of the films themselves—as in the widely reproduced logo of *Our Hitler* in which Hitler in a toga is seen rising from the grave of Wagner. Such quintessential images, which share, certainly, in the traditions of Symbolism and Surrealism, are, as Susan Sontag has pointed out, more accurately understood according to Walter Benjamin's conception of the allegorical emblem.

Yet the originality of Syberberg's images, related as they are to his political project, his attempt at a psychoanalysis and exorcism of the German unconscious, advances beyond these historical references. The Surrealist image—"the forcible yoking of two realities as distant and as unrelated as possible"—and the Benjaminian allegory—a discontinuous montage of dead relics—each in its own way underscores the heterogeneity of the Syberberg tableau without accounting for its therapeutic function, since the Surrealist aesthetic aimed at an immediate and apocalyptic liberation from an impoverished and rationalized daily life, and the Benjaminian emblem, while it displayed the remains and traces of "mourning and melancholia," was not an active working through of such material; it was perceived as a symptom or an icon rather than, as in Syberberg, a "spiritual method."

Such a "method" may be characterized as a forcible short-circuiting of all the wires in the political unconscious, as an attempt to purge the sedimented contents of collective fantasy and ideological representation by reconnecting its symbolic counters so outrageously that they de-reify themselves. The force of ideological representations (and what we call culture or tradition is little more than an immense and stagnant swamp of such representations) derives from their enforced separation within our minds, their compartmentalization, which, more than any mere double standard, authorizes the multiple standards and diverse operations of that complex and collective Sartrean *mauvaise foi* called ideology, whose essential function is to prevent totalization.

We have, in American literature, a signal and programmatic enactment of this short-circuiting in Gertrude Stein's neglected *Four in America* (1947), in which Ulysses S. Grant is imagined as a religious leader, the Wright Brothers as painters, Henry James as a general, and George Washington as a novelist.[11] There is but a step from this "exercise" of a reified collective imagination to Syberberg's presentation of Hitler as the greatest filmmaker of the twentieth century. The force of his therapy depends on the truth of Syberberg's presupposition that the zones of high culture

(Wagner, Ludwig's castles), popular and adolescent reading (Karl May), and petty-bourgeois political values and impulses (Hitler, Nazism) are so carefully separated in the collective mind that their conceptual interference, their rewiring in the heterogeneity of the collage, will blow the entire system sky-high.

It is according to this therapeutic strategy that those moments in Syberberg that seem closest to a traditional form of debunking, or of an unmasking of false consciousness (as in the reports of Hitler's bourgeois private life), must be read. The point is not to allow one of the poles of the image to settle into the truth of the other that it unmasks (as when our sense of the horror of Nazi violence "demystifies" Hitler's courteous behavior with his staff), but rather to hold them apart as equal and autonomous so that energies can pass back and forth between them. This is the strategy at work in the seemingly banal monologue in which the Hitler puppet answers his accusers and suggests that Auschwitz is not to be judged quite so harshly after Vietnam, Idi Amin, the torture establishments of the Shah and the Latin American dictatorships, Cambodia, and Chile. To imagine Hitler as Nixon and vice versa is not merely to underscore the personal peculiarities they share (odd mannerisms, awkwardness in personal relations, etc.), but also to bring out dramatically the banality, not of evil, but of conservatism and reaction in general, and of their stereotypical ideas of social law and order, which can as easily result in genocide as in Watergate.

It is important at this point to return to the comparison between the different "cultural revolutions" of Syberberg and Godard. Both filmmakers are involved, as we have noted, in attempts to de-reify cultural representations. The essential difference between them, however, is in their relationship to what is called the "truth content" of art, its claim to possess some truth or epistemological value. This is, indeed, the essential difference between post- and classical modernism (as well as Lukács's conception of realism): the latter still lays claim to the place and function vacated by religion, still draws its resonance from a conviction that through the work of art some authentic vision of the world is immanently expressed. Syberberg's films are modernist in this classical, and what may now seem archaic, sense.[12] Godard's are, however, resolutely postmodernist in that they conceive of themselves as sheer text, as a process of production of representations that have no truth content, are, in this sense, sheer surface or superficiality. It is this conviction that accounts for the reflexivity of the Godard film, its resolution to use representation against itself to destroy the binding or absolute status of any representation.

If classical modernism is understood as a secular substitute for religion, it is no longer surprising that its formulation of the problem of representation can borrow from a religious terminology that defines representation as "figuration," a dialectic of the letter and the spirit, a "picture-language" (*Vorstellung*) that embodies, expresses, and transmits otherwise inexpressible truths.[13] For the theological tradition to which this terminology belongs, the problem is one of the "proper" use of figuration and of the danger of its becoming fixed, objectified into an externality where the inner spirit is forgotten or historically lost. The great moments of iconoclasm in Judaism and Islam, as well as in a certain Protestantism, have resulted from the fear

that the figures, images, and sacred objects of their once vital religious traditions have become mere idols and that they must be destroyed in order that there may be a reinvigoration by and return to the authentic spirit of religious experience. Iconoclasm is, therefore, an early version (in a different mode of production) of the present-day critiques of representation (and as in the latter, the destruction of the dead letter or of the idol is, almost at once, associated with a critique of the institutions—whether the Pharisees and Sadducees, the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, or the "whore of Babylon," or modern-day ideological state apparatuses such as the university system—that perpetuate that idolatry for the purposes of domination).

Unlike Hegel—whose conception of the "end of art," that is, the ultimate bankruptcy and transcendence of an immanent and figural language, foresees a final replacement of art by the non-figural language of philosophy in which truth dispenses with picture-making and becomes transparent to itself—religion and modernism replace dead or false images (systems of representation) with others more lively and authentic. This description of classical modernism as a "religion of art" is justified, in turn, by the aesthetic reception and experience of the works themselves. At its most vital, the experience of modernism was not one of a single historical movement or process, but of a "shock of discovery," a commitment and an adherence to its individual forms through a series of "religious conversions." One did not simply read D. H. Lawrence or Rilke, see Jean Renoir or Hitchcock, or listen to Stravinsky as distinct manifestations of what we now term modernism. Rather one read all the works of a particular writer, learned a style and a phenomenological world. D. H. Lawrence became an absolute, a complete and systematic world view, to which one converted.

This meant, however, that the experience of one form of modernism was incompatible with another, so that one entered one world only at the price of abandoning another (when we tired of Pound, for example, we converted to Faulkner, or when Thomas Mann became predictable, we turned to Proust). The crisis of modernism as such came, then, when suddenly it became clear that "D. H. Lawrence" was not an absolute after all, not the final achieved figuration of the truth of the world, but only one art-language among others, only one shelf of works in a whole dizzying library. Hence the shame and guilt of cultural intellectuals, the renewed appeal of the Hegelian goal, the "end of art," and the abandonment of culture altogether for immediate political activity. Hence, also, the appeal of the nonfictive, the cult of the experiential, as the Devil explains to Adrian in a climactic moment of *Doctor Faustus* (1947):

> The work of art, time, and aesthetic experience are one, and all now fall prey to the critical impulse. The latter no longer tolerates aesthetic play or appearance, fiction, the self-glorifications of a form that censures passions and human suffering, transforms them into distinct roles, translates them into images. Only the non-fictive remains valid today, only what is neither played, played out, or

> played away [*der nicht verspielte*], only the undistorted and unembellished expression of pain in its moment of experience.[14]

In much the same spirit, Sartre remarked that *Nausea* was worthless in the face of the fact of the suffering or death of a single child. Yet pain is a text. The death or suffering of children comes to us only through texts (through the images of network news, for example). The crisis of modernist absolutes results not from the juxtaposition of these fictive works with nonfigurative experiences of pain or suffering, but from their relativization by one another. Bayreuth would have be to built far from everything else, far from the secular Babel of the cities with their multiple art languages and forms of post-religious "re-territorialization" or "recording" (Deleuze). Only Wagner could be heard there in order to forestall the disastrous realization that he was "just" a composer and the works "just" operas—in order, in other words, for the Wagnerian sign system or aesthetic language to appear absolute, to impose itself, like a religion, as the dominant code, the hegemonic system of symbols, on an entire collectivity.

That this is not a solution for a pluralistic and secular capitalism is proved by the fate of Bayreuth itself, yet directs our attention to the political and social mediations that are present in the aesthetic dilemma. The modernist aesthetic demands an organic community that it cannot, however, bring into being by itself but can only express. Ludwig II is, then, the name for that fleeting mirage, that optical illusion of a concrete historical possibility. He is the philosopher-king who, by virtue of a political power that resulted from a unique and unstable social and political situation, holds out, for a moment, the promise of an organic community. Later, Nazism will make this same promise. Of Ludwig II also, then, it may be said that had he not existed, he would have to have been invented. For he is the socio-political demiurge, a structural necessity of the modernist aesthetic that projects him as an image of its foundation.

What happens, then, when the modernisms begin to look at one another and to experience their relativity and their cultural guilt, their own aesthetic nakedness? From this moment of shame and crisis there comes into being a new, second-degree solution that Barthes describes in a splendid page so often quoted by me that I may be excused for doing so again:

> The greatest modernist works linger as long as possible, in a sort of miraculous stasis, on the threshold of Literature itself, in an anticipatory situation in which the density of life is given and developed without yet being destroyed by their consecration as an [institutionalized] sign system.[15]

Here, in this contemporary reflection on the dialectic of figuration and iconoclasm, the ultimate reification of the figural system is taken to be inevitable. Yet that very inevitability at least holds out the promise of a transitional moment between the destruction of the older systems of figuration (so many dead letters, empty icons, or old-fashioned art-languages) and the freezing over and institutionalization of the

new one. A rather different Wagnerian solution may be taken simultaneously as the prototype and the object lesson for this possibility of an aesthetic authenticity in the provisory.

Bayreuth was the imaginary projection of a social solution to the modernist dilemma: the Wagnerian leitmotif may now be seen as a far more concrete, internal response to this dilemma. For the leitmotif is intended, in principle, to destroy everything that is reifiable in the older musical tradition, most notably the quotable and excerptable "melodies" of Romantic music, which, as Adorno noted, are so readily fetishized by the contemporary culture industry ("the twenty loveliest melodies of the great symphonies on a single long-playing record"). The leitmotif is designed, on the one hand, not to be singable or fetishizable in that way and, on the other, to prevent the musical text from becoming an object by ceaselessly re-dissolving it into an endless process of recombination with other leitmotifs. The failure of the attempt, the re-consecration as an institutional sign system, then comes when we hum Wagner after all, when the leitmotifs are themselves reified into so many properly Wagnerian "melodies," of which, as familiar known quantities, one can make a complete list, and which now stand out from the musical flow like so many foreign bodies.

It is not to be thought that a postmodernist aesthetic can escape this particular dilemma, either. Even in Godard, the relentless anatomy and dissolution of the reified image does not prevent the latter's ultimate triumph over the aesthetic of the film as sheer process. Godard's structural analysis—by which text is sundered from image, sound from sight, words from writing, in an implacable demonstration of the structural heterogeneity of such Barthesian "mythologies"—demands in some sense that the film destroy itself in the process, that it use itself up without residue, that it be disposable. Yet the object of this corrosive dissolution is not the image as such, but individual images, mere examples of the general dynamic of the image in media and consumer society, in the society of the spectacle. These examples—represented as impermanent, not only in themselves, but also by virtue of the fact that they could have been substituted by others—then develop an inertia of their own, and vehicles for the critique of representation, turn into so many representations "characteristic" of the films of Godard. Far from abolishing themselves, the films persist, in film series and film studies programs, as a reified sequence of familiar images that can be screened again and again: the spirit triumphs over the letter, no doubt, but it is the dead letter that remains behind.

Syberberg's "cultural revolution" seems to face quite different problems, for the objects of his critique—the weight of figures like Karl May, Ludwig, or Hitler himself as figures in the collective unconscious—are historical realities and thus no longer mere examples of an abstract process. Late capitalism has elsewhere provided its own method for exorcizing the dead weight of the past: historical amnesia, the waning of historicity, the effortless media-exhaustion of even the immediate past. The France of consumer society scarcely needs to exorcize De Gaulle when it can simply allow the heroic Gaullist moment of its construction to recede into oblivion

at the appropriately dizzying rate. In this respect, it is instructive to juxtapose Syberberg's *Our Hitler* against that other recent New York sensation, Abel Gance's *Napoleon* (1927). Even if we leave aside the proposed critique of Napoleonic politics in the unfilmed sequels, this representational reappropriation of the past is only too evidently ideological: the idealization of Napoleonic puritanism and law and order after the excesses of the Revolution and the Directory (read: the Great War and the twenties), the projection of a Napoleonic unification of Europe (this will come to sound Hitlerian in the 1930s and early '40s, liberal once more with the foundation of NATO and the Common Market). These are surely not attempts to settle accounts with the past and with its sedimented collective representations, but only to use its standard images for manipulative purposes.

Syberberg's aesthetic strategy presupposes some fundamental social difference between the Federal Republic of the social establishment, of the *Berufsverbot* (a "professional ban" that disqualifies the recipient from engaging in certain professions or activities on the grounds of his or her criminal record, radical political convictions, or membership in a potentially dangerous group) and the hard currency of the *Deutschmark*, and the other nation states of advanced capitalism with their media dynamics, their culture industries, and their historical amnesia. Whether Germany today is really any different in this respect is what is euphemistically called an empirical question. Syberberg's idea is that the German *misère* is somehow distinct and historically unique and can be defended by an account of the peculiar combination of political underdevelopment and leapfrogging "modernization" that characterizes recent German history. Still, there is some nagging doubt as to whether, even in the still relatively conservative class cohesiveness of the S*piessbürger* that dominates Germany today, the secret of the past may not be that there is no secret any longer, and the collective representations of Wagner, Karl May, even of Hitler, may not simply be constructions of the media (perpetuated and reinvented by Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, among others).

But this must now be reformulated in terms of Syberberg's filmic system and of what we have described as his political project, his cultural revolution or collective psychoanalysis. In order for his method to work, these films must somehow continue to "take" the real world, and his Hitler puppets and other Nazi motifs must somehow remain "referential," must preserve their links as allusions and designations of the historically real. This is the ultimate guarantee of the truth content to which films such as this lay claim. The psychodrama will have no effect if it relaxes back into sheer play and absolute fictionality; it must be understood as therapeutic play with material that resists, that is, with one or the other forms of the real (it being understood that a collective representation of Hitler is as real and has as many practical consequences as the biographical one).

Clearly, the nonfictional nature of the subject matter is no guarantee in this respect; nor is this only a reflection of the "textual" nature of history in general, whose facts are never actually present but constructed in historiography, written archives. Aesthetic distance, the very "set" towards fictionality itself, that

"suspension of disbelief" which involves an equal suspension of belief—these and other characteristics of aesthetic experience as they have been theorized since Kant also operate very powerfully to turn Hitler into "Hitler," a character in a fiction film, and thus removed from the historical reality that we hope to affect. In the same way, it is notorious that within the work of art in general, the most reprehensible ideologies—Céline's anti-Semitism, for instance—are momentarily rewritten into a thematic system, become pretext for sheer aesthetic play and are no more offensive than, say, Pynchon's "theme" of paranoia.

Yet this is not simply to be taken as the result of some eternal essence of the work of art and of aesthetic experience: it is a dilemma that must be historicized, as it might be were we to imagine a Lukácsian defense of the proposition that, in their own time, Sir Walter Scott's historical romances were more resonantly referential and came to terms with history more concretely than do these equally historical films of Syberberg. For the imperceptible dissociation, in the modern world, of the public from the private, the privatization of experience, the monadization and the relativization of the individual subject, affect the filmmaker as well, and enforce the almost instantaneous eclipse of that unstable situation, that "miraculous suspension," which Barthes saw as the necessary condition for an even fleeting modernist authenticity. From this perspective, the problem is in understanding Syberberg as the designation of a particular modernist language, a distinctive modernist sign system: to read these films properly is, as I have said, a matter of conversion, a matter of learning the Syberberg world, the themes and obsessions that characterize it, the recurrent symbols and motifs that constitute it as a figural language. The trouble is that at that point, the realities with which Syberberg attempts to grapple, realities marked by the names of such real historical actors as Wagner, Himmler, Hitler, Bismarck, and the like, are at once transformed into so many personal signs in a private language that becomes public, when the artist is successful, only as an institutionalized sign system.

This is not Syberberg's fault, clearly, but the result of the peculiar status of culture in our world. Nor would I want to be understood as saying that Syberberg's cultural revolution is impossible, and that the unique tension between the referential and aesthetic play that his psychodramas demand can never be maintained. On the contrary. But when it is, when these films suddenly begin to "mean it" in Erikson's sense,[16] when something fundamental begins to happen to our collective representations, to our very master narratives and fantasies about history itself, then the question remains as to which played the more decisive role in the process, the subject or the object, the viewer or the film. Ultimately, it would seem, it is the viewing subject who enjoys the freedom to take such works as political art or as art *tout court*. It is on the viewing subject that the choice falls as to whether these films have a meaning in the strong sense, an authentic resonance, or are perceived simply as texts, as a play of signifiers. It will be observed that we can say the same about all political art, about Brecht himself (who has, in a similar way, become "Brecht," another classic in the canon). Yet Brecht's ideal theater public held out the

promise of some collective and collaborative response that seems less possible in the privatized viewing of the movie theater, even in the local Bayreuths for avant-garde film which Syberberg fantasized.

As for the "destructive element," the Anglo-American world has been immersed in it long before Syberberg was ever heard from: beginning with Shirer's book and Trevor-Roper's account of the bunker all the way to Albert Speer, with sales of innumerable Nazi uniforms and souvenirs worn by everybody from youth gangs and punk rock groups to extreme right-wing parties. If it were not so long and so talky, Syberberg's *Our Hitler*—a veritable summa of all these motifs—might well have become a cult film for such enthusiasts, a sad and ambiguous fate for a "redemptive critique." Perhaps, indeed, this is an Imaginary that can be healed only by the desperate attempt to keep the referential alive.

NOTES

1 Fredric Jameson, "'In the Destructive Element Immerse': Hans-Jürgen Syberberg and Cultural Revolution," *October*, 17 (Summer 1981): 99–118.

2 See in particular Syberberg's two books, *Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1978) and *Syberbergs Filmbuch* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1979).

3 "Syberberg repeatedly says his film is addressed to the German 'inability to mourn,' that it undertakes the 'work of mourning' (*Trauerarbeit*). These phrases recall the famous essay Freud wrote during World War I, 'Mourning and Melancholia,' which connects melancholy and the inability to work through grief; and the application of this formula in an influential psychoanalytic study of postwar Germany by Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn*, published in Germany in 1967, which diagnoses the Germans as afflicted by mass melancholia, the result of the continuing denial of their collective responsibility for the Nazi past and their persistent refusal to mourn" (Susan Sontag, "Eye of the Storm," *The New York Review of Books*, 27.2 [February 21, 1980], 40).

The trauma of loss does not, however, seem a very apt way to characterize present-day Germany's relationship to Hitler; Syberberg's operative analogy here is rather with the requiem as an art form, in which grief is redemptively transmuted into jubilation.

4 In *The World Viewed* (New York, NY: Viking, 1971).

5 *Filmbuch*, 81–82.

6 *Filmbuch*, 85–86.

7 See the chapter on Bloch in my *Marxism and Form* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970). In a seminal essay, whose diffusion in Germany was surely not without effect either on Syberberg's own aesthetic or on the reception of his films, Jürgen Habermas attributes a similar method to Walter Benjamin; see Habermas's "Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism—The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin," *New German Critique*, no. 17 (Spring 1979): 30–59.

8 The trilogy consists of the following films: *Ludwig: Requiem for a Virgin King* (1972), American Zoetrope; *Karl May* (1974), Universal Life; and *Our Hitler* (1977), American Zoetrope.

9 *Filmbuch*, 39, 45–46.

10 *Filmbuch*, 90.

11 *Four in America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1947).

12 This is, I take it, what Sontag means to stress in her characterization of Syberberg's essentially Symbolist aesthetic.

13 See the chapter on religion in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*; Rudolf Bultmann's work is the most influential contemporary treatment of the problem of figuration in theology.

14 Thomas Mann, *Doktor Faustus* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1951), 361.

15 Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (London: Cape, 1967), 39.

16 See Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther* (New York, NY: Norton, 1958).

BETSY ERKKILA[1]

8. HANS-JÜRGEN SYBERBERG: AN INTERVIEW

"Cinema is the continuation of life by other means."

– Syberberg

The German director Hans-Jürgen Syberberg does not intend his seven-hour film cycle, *Hitler, A Film From Germany* (1977), to be shown in what he calls the "cinema around the corner." Rather, he chooses to travel personally with his film to cultural houses around the world, where the film, which was voted the Best Film of 1977 by the British Film Institute, has amassed a small, elite, but decidedly dedicated following. Regarded by some as the best director to come out of Germany in recent years, Syberberg views himself as a latter day Erich von Stroheim, who will not be forced by financial considerations to edit his seven-hour film down to more marketable size. By doing his own distribution, Syberberg hopes that his film, as well as his integrity as a filmmaker, will remain intact. In 1979 he traveled to the United States, where his Hitler film was presented in New York and San Francisco under the aegis of Francis Ford Coppola, who had recently acquired the film's U.S. distribution rights.

Syberberg resides in Munich, where he, like the late Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Wim Wenders, has become associated with the movement known as the New German Cinema. Like Fassbinder and Wenders, Syberberg has strong ties not only to cinema, but also to television and theater. In fact, his real roots are in television, where he learned film technology, and in the theater, particularly the theater of Bertolt Brecht. One of his earliest cinematic projects was a film of Brecht's Berliner Ensemble in performance in 1952. After completing college in 1963, Syberberg worked in television production for several years before he began making feature-length films.

His most recent film, *Hitler, A Film From Germany*, is part of a trilogy that includes *Ludwig: Requiem for a Virgin King* (1972), a film about Bavaria's mad, castle-building, homosexual king; and *Karl May* (1974), a film biography about the adventure-story writer who was adored by Hitler. The Hitler film is divided into four parts: "The Grail," "A German Dream," "The End of a Winter Fairy Tale," and "We Children of Hell." The first two parts explore the roots of Hitlerism in the European past; parts three and four focus on Hitlerism in the modern world. But the film has no narrative in the traditional sense. It is, rather, a complex collage of multifarious visual and aural elements: spare tableau and luxuriant image, extended monologue

R. J. Cardullo (Ed.), Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the Film Director as Critical Thinker, 99–112.

and musical quotation, puppet show and documentary footage, popular culture and historical fact.

Syberberg plays with the title of the film. The official title of the film when it is shown in Germany is *Hitler, A Film From Germany*, but when the film was shown in San Francisco, Syberberg (at Coppola's suggestion) changed the title to *Our Hitler, A Film From Germany*. Syberberg is pleased with the change; he believes the title *Our Hitler* reflects a willingness on the part of viewers outside Germany to see Hitler as part of themselves and not merely as a German phenomenon. "It's not a film about Hitler as an historical phenomenon," insists Syberberg. "It's a film about Hitler in all of us."

The theme of *our* Hitler—or "Hitler in all of us"—is central to the film's technique and theme. Beginning with the premise that Hitler was elected *democratically* by the masses and that he fell from power not because the German people repudiated him, but because they had been defeated in war, Syberberg presents Hitler not as a single man, but as a projection of the private dreams and needs of mankind through the ages. Through the use of a complex allusive structure that encompasses art and music, literature and film, history and politics, psychology and cosmology, Syberberg forces the viewer to see Hitler simultaneously from a number of different, and sometimes contradictory, points of view. To emphasize the multi-faceted nature of Hitler, all of the major actors play Hitler at some point in the film; in addition, Hitler is represented by a dog, a puppet, and documentary footage. In the course of the film, Hitler is related to the Grail cycle, Dante's *Inferno*, the myth of Paradise Lost, and the Faust legend; he is also linked with such historical figures as Nero, Caesar, Stalin, McCarthy, and Idi Amin.

Syberberg describes *Hitler, A Film from Germany* as a "hymn to cinema," and allusions to the cinema figure importantly throughout the film. At the very outset, against the backdrop of a projection from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), a little girl places a dog with the face of Hitler in a cradle. The connection suggested here between Hitler and the cinema is central to the film's conception and meaning. Not only does Syberberg, like Siegfried Kracauer in *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947), present Hitler as an outgrowth of the German Expressionist imagination, but he also suggests a parallel between the history of fascism and the history of film. Syberberg points up Hitler's love for the cinema and his belief that "Film is the future; whoever controls film controls the future." According to Syberberg, insofar as Hitler succeeded in shaping the world's stage according to his own design, the Nazi leader may be described as the greatest filmmaker in history. He directed not only the Third Reich but future political entities—and generations of people—from all over the world. Hitler was not only a director, however; he was also an actor. In the course of the film, Syberberg presents the Führer in the guise of several movie characters, including Charlie Chaplin, Frankenstein, and the Peter Lorre figure from Fritz Lang's *M* (1931).

Like the films of the German Expressionists and like the films made in Thomas Edison's first film studio, the Black Maria, Syberberg's *Hitler* was made entirely

in the studio. Although Syberberg spent four years writing the script, the film itself was shot in less than three weeks for $600,000. This *auteur* prides himself on the fact that, through the use of front-screen projection, he was able to re-create Hitler's entire world in a film studio. This technique, which Syberberg also used in *Ludwig* and *Karl May*, involves the use of a slide projector and a mirror to project images onto a background screen in front of which the actors perform.

Projection, as both technique and theme, is central to the meaning of *Hitler, A Film from Germany*. The theme of projection is summed up in the image of the Black Maria, which appears at the start and recurs as both set and symbol throughout the film Indeed, the entire picture revolves around the idea of projection: to what extent was Hitler a projection of the collective will of the people, and to what extent did he project his own will not only on the German population but on international populations of the future, as well?

Ironically, for all his concern with the filmmaking process, Syberberg does not make the most effective use of film as film. The main action of *Hitler, A Film from Germany* takes place before a series of projected tableaux, where the characters read or recite various verbal passages. Although it might be argued that Syberberg is a good Eisensteinian who sees the primary quality of cinema defined not so much by motion within the frame as by the processes of projection, editing, and montage, the German director's dependence on extended verbal passages to advance his meaning seems more appropriate to the theater than to film. At times, however, these lengthy recited speeches, when accompanied by appropriate visuals, can be quite stunning. In one brilliant sequence, for example, Hitler's valet (Peter Kern) reflects at length upon the minutiae of the Führer's private life; this monologue is delivered before a series of ever-changing background projections that provide a visual, and sometimes ironic, commentary on Hitler's rise to power. At another point, Himmler (Heinz Schubert) reflects upon the Nazi ideology and the long list of atrocities his racial convictions had led him to commit; he vents his tale of horrors while he lies bared to the waist, dutifully being pounded, kneaded, and rubbed by his masseur (Hellmut Lange).

Despite Syberberg's tendency in *Hitler* to rely on the aural rather than the visual properties of cinema, his film does command the total attention of the viewer. One cannot be a passive viewer of this motion picture. Like the theater of Bertolt Brecht, upon which *Hitler* is in part modeled, the film moves us to exercise our critical faculties. It is an artwork that provokes viewers to think, to analyze, and thereby to increase their understanding.

Betsy Erkkila: What kinds of film do you remember seeing as a youth?

Hans-Jürgen Syberberg: We saw no American films—actually, maybe one. Sometimes certain off-Hollywood films would enter, but they didn't stir us very much. I don't know which ones I saw; I remember some picture about New York blacks, a poor family, etc. But usually, at that time, I saw films from the new East

German government, sometimes not such bad ones. In a certain way, these pictures were based on the same aesthetic to be found in the UFA tradition as represented by *Young Hitler* (*Hitlerjunge Quex*, 1933).

BE: So most of the films you saw during this period were political?

HJS: Very political, of course: things about the past, the Hitler period, the Jewish sufferings, and maybe some other instances of colonial suffering under Hitler. Only some of these movies were good; most were stupid propaganda. And then we saw a lot of big Russian productions, either political propaganda films or films about the Russian literary and cultural tradition. But, aesthetically, none of this stuff was very interesting.

BE: How did you get started as a film director?

HJS: My father used to make 8mm films, and sometimes when he was absent I would make my own. These were the first movies I made.

BE: Did you make them commercially?

HJS: No, no, privately. But this early experience was important for me because one of the first things I made was an 8mm film of Bertolt Brecht's Berliner Ensemble, in performance during the 1952–1953 season. Now I have blown that up to a 35mm film titled *The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht* (a.k.a. *My Last Move*, 1970); but it was originally done as an 8mm film, as said, and I learned that technique from my father.

BE: Did Brecht ask you to film his plays?

HJS: Actually, I asked him, but he was pleased that I wanted to do this, so I did. In the very beginning, I also made some 8mm fiction films with people from the street, children, and the like; I was creating a little studio to do that. But then when I went to West Germany in 1953, I was not immediately able to fulfill my dream of becoming a filmmaker. I had to either go to work as a blue-collar type or go back to school and train for a profession. I decided, naturally, that I would go back to school. The whole process took about ten years, and during this time I was half crazy. The town where I lived was a horrible place, and I was not able to see any movies. But then, after I had completed my studies—it was something like a ten-year intermission from filmmaking—I immediately began to make films again.

BE: What kinds of films did you make after you completed your studies?

HJS: At that time TV was getting established, and I had the chance to work for television, making various films with lengths of ten to thirty minutes. For about three years, I made a lot of movies, and this increased my technical knowledge

of film: where you place the camera and for how long, how you focus, when you cut, etc. I also learned how to use sound and images in some kind of contrast; and I experimented with music and with addressing the audience directly. I also did a number of short films of dramatic rehearsals and new productions in the theater. I was always looking for a new way to produce these pictures; I tried to do them in an interesting or different way from other such works. Within my little group, I was quite original and soon became one of its better-known members; I became recognized for the unique style of my films.

BE: You have been quoted as saying that you consider Bertolt Brecht and Richard Wagner as your two fathers.

HJS: Yes. Brecht was a big influence. He was the big hero of cultural life in East Germany and in West Germany, as well. Even today he is very important. So it is not unusual that I came under his influence. Brecht's way of thinking and of developing his ideas onstage, as well as the way in which he established his theater—these were of great interest to me. And then, Wagner: but with him I had no contact until I made *Ludwig* in 1972. Wagner was not an easy "victory" because I was not particularly drawn to him. At first, I tried not to include Wagner in my film; but then I realized that if I were going to be fair and honest in my treatment of Ludwig, I would have to include Wagner. And I found that there were some very interesting aspects to Wagner's musical system: how he produced his work, how he developed his ideas in the theater, his position against the opera of his time, even his daily struggles. Of course, his music itself had its own kind of dramatic aesthetic. I'm sure that Brecht would not understand my interest in Wagner; nor would Wagner understand my interest in Brecht.

BE: You are often described as one of the best directors to come out of the New German Cinema. Do you consider yourself part of a movement in German cinema?

HJS: My films might be more easily compared to those of my German colleagues because we share the same background, the same suffering in the past, and the presence of that very past in our daily lives. But sometimes I think my films are closer to what is going on in the theater, both in Germany and internationally.

BE: Do you get some kind of financial support from the German government to make your movies? If so, does the government have any influence on the kind of films you make?

HJS: That's a very complicated question. On the one hand, the government gives German filmmakers financial support, and they are happy to turn out films like no other country in the Eastern Bloc has had a chance to do; and the West German directors are not forced to make propaganda films. On the other hand, producing art in a democracy is really difficult because there are no rules about how to do it.

We are living in a democracy that is based, not on the idea of quality, but on that of quantity. This means whoever gets the most votes—the majority—gets elected. And it is the same with art very often. The government committees vote but the votes are secret, so no one has to feel responsible in the end for this or that choice. Compared with the opera, the theater, and cultural museums in West Germany, the cinema is awarded very little money. And when you consider that, generally speaking, the theater is more traditional and the cinema more experimental, it is understandable why more money goes to the theater. Moreover, the government is anxious because many of us are making political films.

BE: Do you consider yourself a political filmmaker?

HJS: Yes, all filmmakers in Germany are more or less political; even if you don't see it directly, political thinking lies behind our films. We couldn't function otherwise because the audience for whom we make our films is itself political. Of course, the older, conservative people don't like this because our audience is normally Leftist. In some ways, I myself feel very much alone because I think I am the only one among the Leftists who takes a position of opposition. I see myself as opposition to the Left because I think that now we have a Leftist establishment of intellectuals, and whenever a group comes to power (including Leftists and intellectuals), there should be an opposition. But I am not speaking about opposition from the Right; I am speaking about somebody in opposition to the idea of power itself—the "fatness" of power, let us call it, no matter what its political stripe.

BE: What was your reaction to the fact that at the screening of *Our Hitler* in San Francisco, the American Nazi Party (complete with boots, helmets, and pro-Hitler newspapers) demonstrated outside the Palace of Fine Arts, while the Leftists delivered a protest inside the Palace? The reaction of the audience to the Leftists seemed to be a continuation of the kind of mass psychology you were presenting in the film. You yourself remained very calm. Nobody tried to heave the protesters off the stage, but the audience did become quite vicious. I felt as if I were experiencing the same kind of thing I was seeing in your movie.

HJS: Yes, that was all very stupid, the whole thing, because those who were making the declaration onstage had not seen the film; they were making political statements without any foundation, and for this reason there couldn't be any discussion.

BE: For what kind of audience did you intend *Our Hitler*?

HJS: Some years ago, I think I was the first one in Germany who realized that we have young people as a film audience. At that time, ten years ago or so, there was a certain breakdown in the New German Cinema; there were no distribution, no box-office success, certain mistakes that resulted in bad films, and general depression among new filmmakers. And I thought, what's going on, what's happening? We

don't need the big movie theaters. The young people are our primary audience, so we must go to the universities and build up new means of distribution—by distributing our films ourselves. We now write, direct, and produce our own films, so why not distribute our own films, as well? And so I became aware of the young audience; and today all the filmmakers know what I discovered. They do everything for the young audience, but now, I think, this has become a little dangerous. At first, of course, it is necessary to get whatever audience you can get, in order simply to survive; you begin with a small audience and you try to get these followers to fight for your artistic cause. But you can't remain in this position. You have to *begin* with the dictatorship of some-for-everyone, and then you have to try to get *everyone*. The danger today is that we are producing films only for a certain group of people.

I hope that my films can be seen and understood not just by a special group of educated people. By the same token, we have to realize that art in our time, especially if it's experimental or avant-garde, is not for consumption by the masses; and that means it will not be seen or read by a lot of people. The working class, in particular, is just not prepared to deal with avant-garde films. It's not my fault. Perhaps proletarians would be an ideal audience, but they don't care enough to come to see these pictures. They are tired; they have other interests; and there seem to be things that they do not want to have anything to do with or simply cannot comprehend. I can't change all that. I have always found, however, that if I show something like *Our Hitler* or *Ludwig*, sometimes people from other social classes—people other than intellectuals—come to see the film. And if they come in good faith, they are a very good audience. But, naturally, these people do not make up the majority of my audience.

BE: Has *Our Hitler* been shown widely in Germany?

HJS: I have only one print because I have no distribution. No distributor wants this film; and the movie houses do not want to show it. So, I show it as I did in San Francisco: in cultural settings or museums, with an admission fee, and only on certain days. I do not show the film in big theaters, but whoever asks for *Our Hitler* can show it, under certain conditions. That is, I cannot screen it for free because I cannot live on nothing.

BE: Do you foresee a larger distribution for *Our Hitler*?

HJS: In about six months, the film will be shown on German television. It will also be shown in Paris and other cities throughout France. And in America, as far as I can see, things look very hopeful. But this film will always be shown as a special event, not as the "movie around the corner."

BE: How are your earlier films *Ludwig: Requiem for a Virgin King* and *Karl May* related to *Our Hitler*? Do you see these works as a trilogy?

HJS: Yes, they have a special unity, but the center of this unity is Syberberg and not history. I put these films together and realized there was a special reason to do so. I think the German dream of the last 100 years, the roots of our power-grab and the world we changed forever, began as the sudden madness of one man, King Ludwig, who may have killed himself yet who managed to realize the long, hard dream of Wagnerian art. In spite of his being strange, in spite of his homosexuality, the German people adore this man, his castles, and his life. He hated the people, but they love him. And then there is Karl May, this adventure-story writer who did everything in his books for the masses; his was a quite unique kind of German dream, and the people adore him, as well. Now, in my latest film, there is Hitler, who himself is adored and who sent the German people, in reality, into his dreams. It's horrible; but they had to realize these dreams, *their* dreams, in the worst way that one can imagine, by following such a dream king. So, sometimes I think that the people made Hitler. It was not that Hitler needed them, but that they needed Hitler; they projected their wishes through this man. And, of course, Hitler seized the opportunity to guide them. In any case, all three men—Ludwig, Karl May, and Adolf Hitler—were very much adored by the German people. They were heroes: that's why I'm interested in them.

BE: One of the themes you emphasize throughout the film is that Hitler is show business and big business: Hitler sells. And yet, you seem to avoid some of the more sensationalist aspects of the Nazi era. For instance, the pairing of homosexuality and fascism has become a film cliché; the homosexual theme is used over and over, even in quite good films like Bertolucci's *The Conformist* (1970) and Wertmüller's *Seven Beauties* (1975). You, however, give no obvious emphasis to the homosexuality, violence, genocide, and sadomasochism that one usually finds in films about the Third Reich.

HJS: There was a girl at the showing of *Our Hitler* in Berkeley who was very angry about this. She stood up at the end and said, "I have paid my ten dollars, and there is no sex in this film!" I am aware, of course, of the money you can make with sex and violence. But, at the same time, if things get to an extreme point, what you really are doing is making softcore pornography. Sometimes I think works like *Jud Süss* (*Süss the Jew*, 1940) and *Der ewige Jude* (*The Eternal Jew*, 1940) those horrible Nazi films implicitly or explicitly calling for violence against the Jews, should be hidden away for no one to see. And some think that pornography—certainly of the hardcore kind—should be hidden away as well. But I do not want to hide anything in my film about the Hitler era; I seek to touch with my film, to bring about a catharsis in the audience. But if you look at the Nazi era—its signs, its films, Hitler himself—you realize that the sexual excitement and energy were always *hidden beneath the surface*. Sex was always there but it wasn't so obvious. The Third Reich may have been one big, really big, erection, but for the most part it was a political erection!

BE: Do you think that *Our Hitler* suggests this strong undercurrent of sexuality in the Third Reich?

HJS: Yes, I think it does, though I did not consciously conceive of the film in these terms. Again, the Nazis made use of sexual power and feeling, but not in an overt, aggressive way. Perhaps *Our Hitler* has this covert or indirect sexual appeal for the people who stay for the entire seven hours of the film. I always ask myself, "Why do they stay for so long?" The film has no hero; there are no good guys and no bad guys, the structure is very complex. There must be some tension there for viewers, and perhaps it's sexual. For instance, in the long monologue delivered by Hitler's valet, the valet enters a tunnel that might suggest a sexual dimension. But then he ascends to Hitler's mountain teahouse, he sits by the fire, and he takes a long walk through the ruins of the Reichskanzlei building. At the end of this long sequence, snow falls as the camera tracks slowly backward. Such a sequence gives you a feeling of quiet; *Our Hitler* does not provoke great excitement. Rather, it touches your feelings, your soul, your very being, by moving into you, through you, and away from you as the camera tracks forward as well as backward. Maybe the hard, cruel system of the Nazis—along with what I think was its hidden sexuality—had a similar effect on the German people.

BE: The scene between Himmler and his masseur also has a certain sexual dimension. The masseur strokes and massages Himmler, naked from the waist up, while the latter drones on about the atrocities and cruelties that his racial convictions have led him to commit.

HJS: This is a very common reaction to that scene. Even in Berkeley, when the girl said that there was no sex in the film, another said, "Oh, yes! There is the scene between Himmler and his masseur."

BE: Did you intend this scene to be sexually aggressive?

HJS: Perhaps this comes across because Hellmut Lange, who plays the masseur, is himself a homosexual; as an artist, he is very sensitive. Maybe there is something "special" in the way he gives the massage; but he does not do it in a way that one might find in pornography.

BE: What about the title of the film? The official title is *Hitler, A Film from Germany*, but when it was shown in the United States the film was advertised as *Our Hitler*. Do you plan to change the official title?

HJS: No, no. Francis Ford Coppola and his associates suggested the change. They offered to call the film *Our Hitler* in America.

BE: So the change is only for America?

HJS: Only for America, yes: it is a special title limited to the United States. I like the American title, but I myself cannot use the title *Our Hitler* in my own country. If I say Hitler in Germany, it *always* means "our" Hitler. I also cannot adopt the title *Our Hitler* for countries outside Germany. If a country wants to call the film *Our Hitler*, as in America, that is fine, but I cannot do it for them.

BE: What is the difference between the titles *Hitler* and *Our Hitler*?

HJS: The first title, *Hitler, A Film from Germany*, suggests something from Germany, a work of art to be viewed from a distance; the title *Our Hitler* suggests something more than just the generation of 1945—something that is still alive and with us today.

BE: How would you describe your film? Would you say that it is a film not so much about Adolf Hitler as a historical figure as about Hitler as a projection of the evil in mankind?

HJS: Yes. Although Hitler is a phenomenon of the twentieth century, his sources or predecessors may be found in earlier ages—in Rome, Britain, even Jerusalem. I do not know how it will be in future centuries, but in our century Hitler is central; he is the turning point for the whole system of political power in the world: how it is used, to what extent it is used, etc. He gave rise to both evil *and* good, it must be said. Of course, all of this might have happened anyway, but it would have taken much longer to come about without Hitler.

BE: You effectively suggest some of Hitler's historical roots in the scene where the Hitler character emerges out of a grave marked "Richard Wagner," wearing a Roman toga in the manner of Julius Caesar. Do you mean to suggest that Hitler is a product of both classical Rome and the German Romantic tradition as represented by Wagner?

HJS: The symbolism of that scene is obvious. I did not want to present Hitler through the glamorous performance of some actor, so I used different actors, props, and puppets to present him. But in this case—and it was the only moment in the film where this was possible—the significance of such a Hitler is that he never existed. The scene occurs, chronologically, before Hitler's rise to power. Though we now see his emergence from this hole as a day of darkness, the scene takes place in the context of a big party in 1923; here I use Hitler as the vision of another person who is in a trance and sees him coming. So this Hitler emerges, if you will, right out our imagination.

BE: Is your theme of Hitler as a projection of the collective imagination of the German people related to your use of the technique of front-screen projection in the film?

HJS: I used front-screen projection because I wanted to shoot the entire film in the studio. And then I thought, if we do the film in this way technically, why not seize on the idea of projection figuratively as well—the idea of projection from the people to Hitler and from Hitler to the German people? Indeed, since the persona of Hitler is central to the entire age of cinema, the whole idea of technical and figurative or spiritual projection became central to the film, where it is worked out in every possible way.

BE: In presenting Hitler as a product of the age of cinema, you seem to be making a direct reference to Siegfried Kracauer's similar vision of the Nazi leader in his 1947 book *From Caligari to Hitler*.

HJS: Yes, I make use of this view, but only in a limited way. At the beginning of the film, a little girl walks onto a set that displays a projection from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919); there are also projections from other early German films. Against this backdrop, the girl puts a toy dog with the face of Hitler into a cradle. As a child, she puts the Hitler-dog to bed, and simultaneously we hear Hitler's voice on the soundtrack from a speech delivered in 1932. So that is where *Our Hitler* starts, but this is only one of the ideas I play with in the film.

BE: You make a number of cinematic allusions throughout the film.

HJS: Yes, that's connected with the idea that Adolf Hitler could be the greatest filmmaker of all time. He was to the Third Reich what the director is to a film.

BE: What about your use of the paperweight with the snow scene inside it? Was that a conscious allusion to Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941)?

Figure 23. Karl May—Auf der Suche nach dem verlorenen Paradies (Karl May: In Search of Paradise Lost), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1974*

HJS: Yes, yes. I wanted to make use of this glass ball with a snow scene inside it in *Karl May*; I wanted to allude to the village of the main character's birth, but this was not possible. So I decided to use the idea of the glass ball in *Our Hitler*; but now it took on another meaning. Within the glass ball is Thomas Edison's Black Maria, America's first movie studio; and maybe it's even more than the first film studio, for what we see also resembles the world—and it is also rather like a grave. So I am trying to suggest several meanings here.

BE: In *Our Hitler* you also allude to the problems that Erich von Stroheim had in Hollywood with his seven-hour film *Greed* (1924). Do you see yourself in the person of von Stroheim?

HJS: Yes, if I were in Hollywood I would certainly share the fate of von Stroheim. I have great admiration for this man; as an artist, I am always interested in people like von Stroheim. They are sensitive people who refuse to compromise. They always cause a great commotion, and for this reason they have great difficulty getting hired to produce anything at all. Wagner had the same kinds of difficulty with government authorities.

BE: Do you ever intend to edit your film down from its current seven-hour length?

HJS: No, no, no, no!!

BE: Would you consider showing it in separate parts rather than in a continuous seven-hour screening? The film demands a kind of total attention—physical, emotional, intellectual—that I am not sure a lot of viewers can give for seven hours straight.

HJS: I would have nothing against that. It could be shown in two or three parts, like reading several chapters of a book at a time. In Paris, they always show *Our Hitler* over two days. But I very much like the idea of screening the film in one day, or one sitting, because I think people are up for it—it's a total experience.

BE: Your Hitler film has a certain similarity to some of the films of the French New Wave, particularly the later work of Jean-Luc Godard. I would cite, for example, your mixture of politics and cinema, your dialectical use of editing and *mise en scène*, and your use of characters who deliver monologues and lengthy political addresses to the movie audience.

HJS: One might think so by the use the New Wave directors and I both make of film. But of course everything is so available or "close" these days that it would be difficult to escape being affected by what goes on outside one's own country. When I first came to Berlin in the 1950s to see Brecht, French cinema was very much the vogue, particularly the films of Marcel Carné, Max Ophüls, and Jean Cocteau. I saw

these pictures, and, of course, I later saw the products of the French New Wave. The New Wave directors had a certain influence on my thinking at the time, but I always resisted them a little bit; their movies did not really excite me very much, though at times I found them intellectually stimulating. In any event, I never tried to follow these filmmakers or be like them or share their artistic point of view. The theater of Brecht was of much greater interest to me back then; he was more important to me than Godard, and perhaps it was Godard who took something from Brecht to use in his films.

BE: Some of the devices you use in *Our Hitler* might be more suitable to the theater. For example, your reliance on long monologues does not make the most effective use of cinema *as cinema*—as "kinema," or motion.

HJS: I think the whole film is one long monologue, with several parts for each actor. Sometimes plays in the theater work in the same way; in fact, all art has a bit of the monologue in it.

BE: Yes, this is exactly what I mean. Your monologues would work better in the theater, where there is a greater dependence on words rather than on visuals. In my view, your monologues do not make the best use of the visual and kinetic power of film.

HJS: That, I believe is a mistake or misunderstanding on your part. I have just seen Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and he makes effective use of modern sound technology in this film; you are surrounded by sound! In my own way, I am doing the same thing, but I do not have access to this kind of new technology. It's a pity; I would love to have had it for *Our Hitler*. You would then be surrounded by all these different levels of wonderful sound—something incredible just to think about. Such sound exists in my film only as an idea that is not technologically worked out, because I did not have the money to do so. But in *Apocalypse Now*, this idea is worked out technically to the fullest.

I first saw Coppola's film before all the dimensions of sound had been added; at this point, it was just a lot of noise in addition to being a large circus. Now the picture really works, and I know it took many months to do this. So, you see, there is a difference between *Apocalypse Now* in one dimension of sound-and-image and *Apocalypse Now* with the image accompanied by several dimensions of sound. *Apocalypse Now* has revealed to me how sound technology can change an entire film; Coppola's movie was really much less before the multi-layered sound dimension had been added. The sound in *Our Hitler*, by contrast, is of the old kind: it has only one dimension.

I strongly feel that sound in the cinema needs to be more fully developed, and it needs to be more fully experienced by the audience. Indeed, the future of film lies in the development of sound technology.

BE: What are your own plans for the future?

HJS: I will make more films, I hope! But, naturally, it's very difficult. The German government, or at least one of their arts commissions, decided not to give me any more money after I made *Hitler*. It is a kind of punishment for making this film. So I need to find new sources of funding …

NOTE

[1] Betsy Erkkila, "Hans-Jürgen Syberberg: An Interview," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 10.4 (1982): 206–218.

HANS R. VAGET[1]

9. SYBERBERG'S *OUR HITLER*, WAGNERIANISM, AND ALIENATION: A RE-VIEWING

I.

In the years since its first showing in London, Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's monumental 1977 film about Hitler has come to be regarded as perhaps the most ambitious and serious contribution by an artist to the debate about Hitler and German history. Not since Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus: Das Leben des deutschen Tonsetzers Adrian Leverkühn, erzählt von einem Freunde* (*Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkühn, Told by a Friend*, 1947) and Günter Grass's *Die Blechtrommel* (*The Tin Drum*, 1959) have we been made to look back at the "German catastrophe" of Nazism in such a provocative and imaginative manner.

The critical reaction to *Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland* (*Hitler, A Film from Germany*, a.k.a. *Our Hitler*) has been very mixed. Syberberg met with almost universal rejection in Germany and with much, at times enthusiastic, acclaim outside Germany, particularly in America and France, where his film was hailed as *Faust, Part III*. In the United States, Susan Sontag wrote a passionately partisan yet greatly illuminating essay about *Our Hitler* in *The New York Review of Books* (February 1980). She judged it a masterpiece of "unprecedented ambition." "After seeing *Hitler, A Film from Germany*," she writes, "there is Syberberg's film—and there are other films one admires." Those who have criticized or condemned this film have done so not only for what it appears to be saying about Adolf Hitler and the Germans' relationship to Hitler, but also for how the phenomenon of Nazism and the figure of Hitler have been cinematically realized. Much of the criticism was directed at the picture's excessive length (over seven hours and in four parts: *Der Graal* [*The Grail*], *Ein deutscher Traum* [*A German Dream*], *Das Ende eines Wintermärchens* [*The End of a Winter Fairy Tale*], and *Wir Kinder der Hölle* [*We Children of Hell*]), its unabashed Wagnerianism, its mania for quotations, parodies, and allusions, and, above all, its refusal to engage in any kind of sustained discourse on Hitler in sociological, economic, or moral terms.

It is indeed the form of *Our Hitler* that poses the most challenging questions for the critic. At first viewing one cannot help feeling bewildered. Syberberg treats us to a dazzling display of theatrical tricks involving puppets, ventriloquists, and actors as they take turns playing the key parts; he showers us with an unending, cleverly assembled collage of texts by and about Hitler; he provides a sophisticated montage of contrasting soundtracks ranging from Nazi songs and marches to Mozart, Wagner,

R. J. Cardullo (Ed.), Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the Film Director as Critical Thinker, 113–130.

and Mahler; and he overwhelms us with a complex system of pictorial quotations and cross-references such as have never before been seen on the screen. Yet many viewers and critics believe that Syberberg's efforts are self-defeating, since, it is alleged, he fails to come to grips with historical reality. This was, as Henry Pachter charged in *Cineaste* (April 1980), merely Syberberg's Hitler and not the Hitler of historians and sociologists—and, above all, not our Hitler. The point is absurd, I believe, because it fails to recognize that, appearances to the contrary, Syberberg's approach to Hitler is artistic and not documentary.

Our Hitler, like the studio in which the entire film was shot and whose existence we are not allowed to forget, creates an oppressive atmosphere. It launches us on a journey into the interior of the collective German soul such as Novalis (a.k.a. Friedrich von Hardenberg) undertook poetically—the same Novalis who is cited as an artistic precursor in the opening sequence of the picture. Consequently, the reality of Nazi Germany as we know it from newsreels, history books, and statistics is relegated to the background and subordinated to the logic of Syberberg's fictions-cum-conjectures about Hitler. Naturally, we are bound to wonder about the ideological implications of such a method. If it is the purpose of this film to make us remember what led to the rise of Hitler, that purpose seems to be ill-served, if not counteracted, by the artistic strategies employed here.

Indeed, why did Syberberg not make a more modest and "factual" film? Has the effectiveness of traditional cinema in treating the horror of Nazism not been proven by the success and impact of the *Holocaust* television series (4 parts, 1978)? Would it not have been more appropriate for Syberberg, artistically as well as morally, to focus on the victims rather than the killers? Why—to cite just one striking example—dwell for over half an hour on the face and belly of Heinrich Himmler, whom we see being massaged to alleviate the pain he feels from watching, and presiding over, the mass killing of Jews? Why make us listen to a long, obscene monologue by Himmler extolling the discipline, the decency, and the secret suffering of his henchmen, while their victims are kept silent, anonymous, and almost invisible? Such sequences cast a long shadow over Syberberg's intentions and integrity. The suspicion that he might merely be exploiting the Hitler boom, that he in effect glorifies what he intended to analyze, has been raised repeatedly. One can see why.

Nonetheless, such suspicions or insinuations are quite misleading; they indicate a misunderstanding of the film's extraordinary artistry and a lack of familiarity with the technique of alienation (a.k.a. estrangement or defamilarization) in cinema. This is not one of those well-intentioned anti-Nazi films overflowing with political moralizing, or a documentary in the manner of Joachim Fest's *Hitler—eine Karriere* (*Hitler, A Career*)—like *Our Hitler*, from 1977. Syberberg's picture marks a radical departure from those models, for he does not attempt to present a rational explanation for the sociological, economic, and ideological causes of Nazism. Instead, he tackles the more difficult task of reconstructing the irrationality that made the rise of Adolf Hitler possible.

Like Peter Viereck, who already in 1941 with the book *Metapolitics* was tracing the roots of the Nazi mentality back to the "irrationality" of German Romanticism, especially to Wagner, Syberberg places the Hitler-Wagner connection at the center of *Our Hitler*. And like Thomas Mann in *Doctor Faustus*, who used the Faust myth and the history of music as paradigms for interpreting history, Syberberg refers to the history of cinema and the myth of great, frustrated filmmakers like Eisenstein, von Stroheim, and, not surprisingly, himself, as the guiding factors in his interpretation of Hitler and Nazism. It goes without saying that such a "mythical" approach to Hitler is diametrically opposed to the Marxist theory of fascism. Following Thomas Mann, then, Syberberg focuses on the so-called superstructure and ignores the basis or foundation.

Our Hitler also attempts to identify another decisive factor in the rise of Hitler: a latent predisposition fostered by the German tradition of the mythical redeemer figure, the fulfiller of the archaic quest for the Holy Grail. According to Syberberg, much of that psychological predisposition, though by no means all of it, can be summed up with the name Richard Wagner. Syberberg views the creator of *Parsifal* as the Führer's spiritual father. More importantly, he takes Wagnerianism, both as style and ideology, as the model for the re-creation of Hitler's "work" in his own film. This may explain why the film wallows in Wagnerianism to a degree that prompted Susan Sontag to characterize Syberberg as the greatest Wagnerian since Thomas Mann. I agree with this view provided we understand, in the tradition of Mann as well as Nietzsche, that only a self-conscious and critical Wagnerian deserves the label "great."

There is no denying, however, that the avowed Wagnerianism of Syberberg's film only underscores the crucial question I raised earlier: are the artistic means employed in *Our Hitler* appropriate to its subject matter? Must not a Wagnerian film about Hitler necessarily result in an *apologia*, or an unwitting glorification, of the very same specter that it wants to exorcise? Here lies the central aesthetic crux of Syberberg's enormous undertaking, both from the point of view of the film's production and its reception. The problem he confronted, and ultimately solved, was a paradoxical one. If he wanted to be true to his Wagnerian conception of Hitler and simultaneously expose the role of Wagnerianism in the shaping of the Nazi mentality, Syberberg had to develop a strategy that was both Wagnerian and anti-Wagnerian at the same time. He had to re-create the psychological basis for the fanatical faith, ersatz mysticism, and uncritical devotion fostered by the dominant brand of vulgar Wagnerianism; but, in doing so, he also had to establish a critical perspective from which this type of Wagnerianism could be recognized as a vital source of Nazism.

We need now to narrow our focus in order to examine this fundamental issue in some concrete detail. I propose, therefore, to concentrate on one particular sequence in the second part of the film during which Hitler rises from the open grave of Richard Wagner. This resurrection, as I shall call it, must be regarded as the central pictorial metaphor of the whole film. A still from this sequence has clearly become

Our Hitler's trademark or logo. Syberberg chose this still as the cover illustration for his 1978 book on the film; it has also been used on posters and flyers and in much of the critical literature on the film. In it we can discover most of the artistic devices employed by Syberberg. Thus, to shed light on this sequence is to illuminate the entirety of *Our Hitler*. This I shall attempt to do by examining the artistic principles with which Syberberg has cinematically realized the Hitler-Wagner theory. What follows, then, will not be in exercise in cine-semiology; my point of view is primarily that of the literary and intellectual historian who wishes to examine *Our Hitler* in the larger context of the history of Wagnerianism.

II.

As in the sequence preceding the resurrection and the one following it, the setting is Wahnfried, Wagner's residence in Bayreuth. We are in the garden at Wagner's grave, which bears the initials RW. The floor of the film studio is covered with dead leaves—ubiquitous signs of decay and decline in *Our Hitler*. It is night; the tombstone of Wagner's grave is tilted upright, and from the pit, amidst smoke and vapors lighted by a hellish fire from below, Hitler (as played by Heinz Schubert) slowly rises. He is draped in a Roman tunic, his right armed raised in the Nazi salute, his left holding the tunic in front. The whole image is composed, rather self-consciously, after one of Gustave Doré's 1861 illustrations for Dante's *Inferno* (1317), and is presented as a macabre dream vision: the vision of a pale vampire rising from his subterranean mode.

This atmosphere also prevails in the following sequence. It presents a kind of *danse macabre* in which black G.I.s dance with German blondes around Wagner's grave while a voice-over recites Brecht's poem "Die Zeit wird sich erfüllen, / Wir Toten wachen auf" ("The time has come, / We dead awaken," 1920; Vaget's translation, as are all others in this essay). During the resurrection, however, we hear a speech by Hitler; actually, Syberberg has composed the text of this speech with quotations from Hitler and Shakespeare. Heinz Schubert delivers it as a theatrical monologue with the voice and the characteristic intonation of Adolf Hitler. On another soundtrack, we hear the familiar Overture to Wagner's little-known opera *Rienzi* (1842) both before and during Hitler's speech.

Why *Rienzi*? Why not a musical quotation from *Lohengrin* (1850), *Götterdämmerung* (*Twilight of the Gods*, 1876), or *Parsifal* (1882)—works that Hitler revered and from which Syberberg quotes copiously in other parts of his film? The answer is provided by the actual history of Hitler's relationship to Wagner. Contrary to popular opinion, his fanatical devotion to Wagner's work was sparked not by any of the later music-dramas but by the early, immature piece about Rienzi, which the later Wagner practically disavowed. The composer had based his "grand tragic opera," as it was subtitled, on Bulwer-Lytton's historical novel of 1835, *Rienzi: The Last of the Roman Tribunes*, and instilled it with much of his own anti-establishment

political sentiments. It therefore turned out to be the most openly political and the least allegorical of Wagner's works.

Hitler first saw *Rienzi* as a seventeen-year-old in Linz and instantly identified with its tragic hero, a fourteenth-century Plebeian leader of the Romans. We know this from a particularly lively account of Hitler's ecstatic histrionics after the performance of the opera in August Kubizek's memoir, *Adolf Hitler mein Jugendfreund* (*The Young Hitler I Knew*, 1953). According to Kubizek, Hitler "transferred the character of Rienzi … with visionary power to the plane of his own ambitions" and "conjured up in grandiose, inspiring pictures his own future and that of his people." Obviously, this was written with the benefit of hindsight, but there is also independent corroboration. That Hitler did indeed identify with Rienzi is demonstrated by a 1930 conversation with Otto Wagener (cited in Wagener's *Hitler aus nächster Nähe: Aufzeichnungen eines Vertrauten 1929–1932* [*Hitler, Memoirs of a Confidant*], 1978) in which he gave a concise, knowledgeable analysis of the opera, and by his statement to Winifred Wagner at Bayreuth in 1939 (quoted in Kubizek's memoir) to the effect that "it all began" with the *Rienzi* experience of 1906. This may explain why Hitler asked for, and received from Winifred Wagner, the original manuscript score of *Rienzi*; uncannily, and unfortunately, it disappeared with him in the bunker of the Reichskanzlei in 1945.

Appropriately enough, Hitler's statement about Rienzi is quoted in his monologue during the resurrection sequence. That monologue opens with another famous quotation, this time from Hitler's speech at the tomb of Wagner, in which he declares, "Here was forged the spiritual sword with which we won our victory" (*Hitler: Reden und Proklamationen, 1932–1945* [*Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations*], 2 vols., 1962–63). Evidently, Syberberg is suggesting that these two confessions by Hitler hold the key to an understanding of his fanatical belief in Wagner, or what he took Wagner to mean and represent. Supported by the visual and musical signals of this sequence, Hitler's monologue reveals that his Wagnerianism originated in an instantaneous mystical identification with the figure of Cola di Rienzi. In Hitler's mind, as read by Syberberg, it was this opera that supplied the spiritual sword with which Hitler and National Socialism won power. The sword is a Wagnerian symbol of power, but of course it is meant here not as a magical gift of the gods—like the sword Wotan provided for Siegmund in *Die Walküre* (*The Valkyrie*, 1870)—but rather as a political idea of earthly origin.

It is not difficult to reconstruct all this from the opera itself. *Rienzi* is based on the concept of a political leader who, being celibate and thus free to wed himself to the state, assumed the leadership of the people at a time of deep political crisis—so much of a crisis that his mandate rests on a sort of informal plebiscite. Rienzi's ambition is to restore the ancient greatness of Rome and to liberate the people from exploitation and suppression by the degenerate Roman nobles, who are seen as the most harmful parasites on the body politic. Their blood must be spilled if "Roma" is to be free and great again.

Figure 24. Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland (Hitler, A Film from Germany, *a.k.a.* Our Hitler), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1977*

We need not adjust this picture by very much to see that such a political vision fits Adolf Hitler, as well. We only need to substitute the mythical image of "Deutschland" for the equally mythical image of "Roma," and the Jewish people for the Roman nobility. Hitler apparently transferred his own racial prejudice onto the opera's social prejudice. No doubt he felt justified in this by Wagner's own vicious anti-Semitism.

At any rate, in view of the remarkable structural similarity between Hitler's and Rienzi's political visions, we may be entitled to describe the subject of *Our Hitler* as the birth of National Socialism from the spirit of Wagner—or, to be precise, its resurrection from the spirit of Wagner's *Rienzi*.

Hitler's identification with Rienzi becomes almost definitive when we consider the end of the opera and the demise of Hitler. Wagner depicted his hero as the innocent victim of the plottings of the superpowers at that time, the Catholic Church and the German Emperor. Ironically, Rienzi is killed by Adriano, the only friend he has among the nobility, who stabs him in revenge for the liquidation of the *nobili*. Rienzi dies on the steps of the burning Capitol in the arms of his sister and bride-substitute, Irene—cursing the city of Rome because it proved unworthy of the greatness he had envisaged for her. This finale bears some resemblance not only to the cataclysmic ending of Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* but also to the last days of Hitler himself. To be sure, he killed himself by taking poison, but before doing this he had given orders that he be burned together with Eva Braun, whom he married immediately before his suicide. Like Rienzi, Hitler cursed Germany for not having lived up to the greatness he had intended for her.

In view of the above observations, there can be no doubt about the historical and psychological authenticity of Syberberg's conception of Hitler as a Wagnerian. The use of the *Rienzi* Overture in the resurrection sequence and elsewhere is crucial to an understanding of Syberberg's *Our Hitler*. It also explains an otherwise incongruous detail of the resurrection sequence: the fact that Hitler rises from Wagner's grave dressed not in a brown shirt, as one might expect, but in the Roman tunic of the last tribune, Cola di Rienzi.

Pursuing the implications of the resurrection metaphor a little further, we soon realize that Syberberg views Hitler as a re-enactor of his own early identification with Wagner's Rienzi—comparable, perhaps, to Freud's interpretation of Napoleon on the basis of Napoleon's subconscious identification with the Old Testament figure of Joseph. This view makes plausible the pervasive use of other devices of re-enactment: the fact that Hitler is played by several actors as well as by a puppet; and the re-enactment of scenes not only from Hitler's personal life but also from famous films. At one point, for instance, Peter Kern re-enacts with complete faithfulness Peter Lorre's classic and emblematic plea for mercy in Fritz Lang's *M* (1931)—except that he is dressed in an SS uniform. Through this simple trick, the killing perpetuated by the Nazis and the killing of children by a psychopath illuminate, and comment upon, each other.

On yet a deeper level of the resurrection sequence, we find that Syberberg's Hitler re-enacts not only a Wagnerian character but also Wagner himself. This is made clear enough to the viewer by the fact that Hitler rises from Wagner's grave and not any other, and specifically through Hitler's monologue in which he refers to himself as an artist: "ich, der Künstler." Elsewhere in the film, Hitler's role as the new Wagner is illustrated by frequent quotations from *Parsifal*, *Das Rheingold* (*The Rhinegold*, 1869), *Götterdämmerung*, and *Tristan und Isolde* (*Tristan and Isolde*, 1865). It is

impossible to discuss all of these carefully selected musical quotations in detail here; the Prelude to Act I of *Parsifal*, however, is the most important and calls for some comment.

This prelude is the first and probably most frequently played selection from Wagner in all of *Our Hitler*. It is sounded immediately after the opening quotation from Mozart's D-minor Piano Concerto (1785), which accompanies the giant letters THE GRAIL that appear successively on the screen in different languages. This same GRAIL-sequence is used again at the conclusion of the film, where we see the word GRAIL crumble and disintegrate. In this primitive yet effective manner, we are made to understand that the historical period re-enacted in this picture was marked by a collective unconscious in search of a Grail of its own. Hence Syberberg's characterization of the Third Reich as "the Age of the Grail."

The question, of course, is whether such a characterization can yield a plausible interpretation of the rise of Adolf Hitler. Syberberg answers by quoting *Parsifal* again and again, or, to be precise, by recalling at many crucial points the motif from which the first part of the Prelude to Act I is developed: the A-flat major motif—a rising musical line of sophisticated simplicity and almost mystical luminosity—which in the context of Wagner's work represents the mystical love of the Grail. As always, Syberberg's choice of music is based on historical reality. Concerning *Parsifal*, Hitler is reported by Hans Frank, in his memoir *Im Angesicht des Galgens* (*Facing the Gallows*, 1953), to have said the following: "I have built up my religion out of *Parsifal*. Divine worship in solemn form … without pretenses of humility … One can serve God only in the garb of a hero." This admission helps to explain Hitler's ideology of heroism as well as the liturgical character of some of his public dramatizations, to whose Wagnerian roots it points.

Once we grasp the affinity between Hitler's program and Wagner's *Parsifal*, we can understand Syberberg's conception of "the Age of the Grail": it was characterized by Hitler's and, of course, Goebbels' instinctive appeal to the need for a solemn, quasi-religious hero-worship and by a willingness on the part of the masses, through their own secret desire, to believe in and abandon themselves to the mystical state evoked by Wagner's music. We can now understand the point made in the concluding quotation flashed on the screen underneath the word GRAIL. It speaks, in the hallowed words of St. Paul's epistle to the Corinthians, of something higher than faith: "And if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing" (I Cor. 13:2).

To return to the subject of Hitler as an artist, Syberberg certainly views him as one, or at least as a kind of artist. This concept extends beyond the well-known fact that Hitler was a frustrated painter, an artist *manqué*. It actually points to the whole intellectual climate of aestheticism and its pronounced tendencies toward immorality and nihilism—precisely the climate in which Adolf Hitler grew up. Nor is this whole concept an original one. It was Thomas Mann who in 1938 first referred to Hitler—in utter disgust but with the honesty of a passionate psychologist—as his brother (*Schriften zur Politik* [*Writings on Politics*], 1970). Syberberg quotes

this disturbing coinage by Mann as the culminating element in Hitler's monologue during the resurrection sequence. The Führer concludes by saying, "Auf ewig euer Bruder Hitler" (eternally your brother Hitler).

This borrowing from Thomas Mann is but a small indication of the large artistic debt that Syberberg's film owes to the author of *Doctor Faustus*, of "Germany and the Germans" (1945), of "In Defense of Wagner" (1940), and last but not least of "Bruder Hitler" (*Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 12 [*Collected Works*, Vol. 12], 1974). Syberberg does not conceal his dependence on Mann; he explicitly refers to *Doctor Faustus* on several occasions in *Our Hitler*. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that this film would be unthinkable without Mann's analysis of both the intellectual heritage and the psychological disposition of Adolf Hitler. Like *Doctor Faustus*—and this is perhaps the strongest kinship between these two works—*Our Hitler* proceeds from the conviction that we cannot overcome Hitler until we acknowledge the Hitler in ourselves: until, that is, we realize that Hitler was, if not an inevitable, at least a characteristic consequence of the German cultural heritage.

To Syberberg the filmmaker, the idea of "Bruder Hitler" necessarily took on an additional meaning, that of the fellow filmmaker—or rather of the "Grofäz": "der grösste Filmemacher aller Zeiten," the greatest filmmaker of all time (after German soldiers' derogatory acronym, directed at Hitler, for "Grösster Feldherr aller Zeiten," or Greatest Field Commander of All Time). Syberberg's Hitler is therefore cast not only as the re-enactor of a Wagnerian character and as an artist-magician re-enacting Wagner himself, but also, as it were, as a frustrated, derailed filmmaker. There is considerable evidence, some of it historical, for this rather controversial proposition: Syberberg's repeated references to Hitler's well-known addiction to movies; his suggestions that the Nazi rallies, Nazi architecture, and even the whole "production" of World War II were informed by a cinematic imagination; and the role played by Leni Riefenstahl's films, which are described in *Our Hitler* as the only documents of Nazism, apart from the newsreels, that will survive. All of these elements serve to substantiate the notion of Hitler the fellow cineaste.

As a result, Syberberg felt the need to place Hitler in the context of film history, as Siegfried Kracauer had already done in his famous book *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947). Hence the many allusions in *Our Hitler* to famous film directors and to other films. By far the most important device for locating Hitler in the context of film history is Syberberg's use of a model of the Black Maria, Thomas Edison's (and America's) first film studio. It appears in different sizes in countless shots and must be regarded as one of the central visual symbols of the whole film. Syberberg significantly defines it as "the black mother of our cinematic imagination"—the mother who has given birth to Hitler the cineaste as well as to this film about him.

At this point the question has to be raised once again whether such an interpretation of Hitler is historically defensible, or whether it does not instead owe its existence to Syberberg's narcissistic preoccupation with himself and his métier. Certainly no historian has ever interpreted Adolf Hitler as a frustrated filmmaker. Yet Syberberg's idea is actually a brilliant one and his method quite cogent. It is the film's central

resurrection metaphor that, in the last analysis, justifies this interpretation of Hitler-as-filmmaker. It could be argued that had Wagner lived in the twentieth century, he himself would have turned to the cinema as his proper medium. For, even more than opera, film is able to accommodate and even enrich the Wagnerian concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or "total work of art." This, in any event, is Syberberg's conviction: he considers film to be the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of our time.

In a certain sense, film has indeed become the successor to opera. Today only the cinema seems to be capable of realizing what opera, especially Wagnerian opera—and long before Wagner, the epic—accomplished in the context of national culture: the imaginative mutual illumination of history and myth. This is precisely the aim of Syberberg's film. His resurrection of Hitler is situated in that twilight zone between historical fact and made myth—the zone where the rise of Hitler actually took place, and which is the legitimate focus of the new cinematic *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

III.

In order to corroborate such an analysis of the resurrection sequence we must consider, at least briefly, some additional aspects of Wagnerianism contained in the structure of *Our Hitler*, as well as the aesthetic theory behind them. Only then can we return to our central question concerning the compatibility of the cinematic means employed in this film and Syberberg's analytical intent. Naturally, it is neither possible nor desirable to attempt a complete phenomenology of Wagnerianism in *Our Hitler*, but we must try to get a sense of the extent and the nature of Syberberg's orientation toward Wagner if we are to assess accurately Wagnerianism's role in the total concept of the film. It should be remembered that *Our Hitler* grew out of Syberberg's film on Winifred Wagner and the history of Wahnfried (*Winifred Wagner und die Geschichte des Hauses Wahnfried von 1914–1975* [*The Confessions of Winifred Wagner*, 1975]); in other words, the Hitler project arose from Syberberg's immersion in Wagnerianism and its political ramifications.

We can distinguish five categories of Wagnerianism in *Our Hitler*:

1. On the most obvious level of the film's macrostructure, it appears that the division into four parts is modeled after Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelungs*, 1876), just as its monumental dimensions recall the even more monumental proportions of Wagner's tetralogy. This should not lead us to believe that Syberberg intended any parallels on the so-called plot level. But it is significant that at two crucial points, the beginning and the end, *Our Hitler* recalls the model of Wagner's *Ring*. Part I bears the subtitle "Von der Weltesche bis zur Goethe-Eiche von Buchenwald"—"From the cosmic ash tree to the Goethe oak of Buchenwald." Syberberg thus designates the beginning of what he terms "the Age of the Grail" by referring to Wagnerian mythology and its earliest remembered event—the cosmic ash tree from which Wotan cut his spear as he implicitly renounced love in order to gain power. In other words, Syberberg

accepts Wagner's definition of original sin as the sacrifice of love for power. It appears that the presence of the cosmic ash tree at the start and in many scenes of the film is intended to remind us of this Wagnerian view of world history; in such a way, the ash tree serves a symbolic function similar to that of the model of Edison's Black Maria.

It is perfectly logical, then, that the end of *Our Hitler* also evokes the close of *The Ring*. Just as the symphonic ending of *Götterdämmerung* asserts the triumph of love, so the film concludes, as we have seen, with a quotation from the New Testament asserting the superiority of love over faith. Naturally, Wagner's concept of love is by no means identical with the Paulinian idea of *agape* (the love of God for man and of man for God), but what matters here is simply the similarity in the structure and design of the two tetralogies.

2. As in Wagner's *Ring*, the microstructure of *Our Hitler* is made up of a system of symbolic motifs. As Wagner had done with the sword, the spear, the ring, and the gold, so too does Syberberg repeatedly employ a small number of objects and construct an elaborate symbolic meaning for each of them. I can refer here only to the most prominent examples such as the Black Maria, the black stone from Albrecht Dürer's *Melancholia* (1514) engraving, Richard Wagner's coat, and the little girl's Hitler-faced toy dog, among many others. Diverse and incongruous as they may appear, all of these visual and musical motifs combine to create a web of internal correspondence that recalls the Symbolist dimension of Wagner's work.
3. One of the most striking characteristics of Wagner's music-dramas is their epic quality: that is to say, their use of purely narrative passages to evoke the past, as in Wotan's great monologue in Act II of *Die Walküre*. To the extent that *Our Hitler* could be described as one great evocation of "the Age of the Grail," Syberberg himself employs two narrator-figures and numerous set pieces of a purely narrative character, such as reminiscences by eyewitnesses, mournful meditations about the time before Hitler, or simply statements by survivors of the death camps and the Third Reich. But this technique in no way creates an overarching narrative line, as in Wagner; rather, it creates a pronounced contemplative atmosphere that invites an intellectual participation by the viewer rather than an emotional one. There is one principal difference, then, between the strategies of Wagner and Syberberg: whereas the narrative passages of Wagner are integrated seamlessly into the work as a whole and do not disrupt its unity, no such integration and unity are attempted by Syberberg despite his use of several narrative devices. On the contrary, the disjointedness of his film's parts is quite conscious and programmatic.
4. In its most advanced form, in *Parsifal*, Wagner's music-drama resorts to the rituals of a quasi-religious cult. Hitler understood this very well, as we have seen from his admission that his own religion, such as it was, derived from *Parsifal* and that he admired this opera's solemnity above all. In Syberberg's film the sinister, pompous religiosity of Hitler's Wagnerianism is recalled very effectively in the sound montages and documentary footage from the memorial services that the Nazis held for their martyrs and heroes. In those public memorial services,

Wagnerian theater was turned into a veritable cult of death, and thus helped to foster the type of mentality that made genocide itself appear like a solemn purification ritual.

5. Perhaps the most fundamental aspect of Syberberg's Wagnerianism may be seen in some of his aesthetic convictions. He is clearly harking back to the tradition of late Romantic aestheticism, which ascribed to art a mystic, redemptive power. To Wagner, as well as to Syberberg, art represents a counter-position to the world of rationalism and materialism, and it is ultimately through art that the wrongs of history and society will have to be redressed. This basic conviction of aestheticism lies at the core of the ambitious introductory essay Syberberg provides in his book on *Our Hitler*. Basing his ideas on a somewhat surprisingly old-fashioned belief in art, he declares that the "most important topic of our history"—Adolf Hitler—has to be treated in art because historical research and political theory are unable to penetrate to the heart of the matter. Only a film about Hitler can hope to lead to redemption from the oppressive curse of guilt inflicted upon Germany by the Führer. Undoubtedly, Wagner himself would have endorsed such a belief.

IV.

My analysis of *Our Hitler* up to this point has been not only sketchy but also one-sided, and deliberately so. For the sake of clarity, I have tried first to isolate the Wagnerian-Symbolist elements of Syberberg's method, reserving for the conclusion a consideration of those devices that counteract the film's Wagnerianism and prevent it from becoming affirmative and even imitative in the Wagnerian sense. I am referring to the film's many Brechtian alienation devices. They are employed concurrently with the Wagnerian apparatus, from which they are in fact inseparable. It is this unusual combination of Symbolism and alienation technique, or—in Syberberg's own terms—of Brecht and Wagner, that constitutes the most intriguing aesthetic innovation of *Our Hitler*. It also accounts for the film's phenomenal artistic success. And by success I mean the undeniable impact of such a film on our viewing habits, particularly on the intellectual and psychological defense mechanisms with which we try to cope with the disturbing phenomenon of Hitler, in the cinema as in reality. This film subverts them.

It is generally assumed that Wagnerian and Brechtian aesthetics stand in profound and total opposition to each other. The attempt to combine them must look like a hopeless, almost Don Quixote-esque, undertaking. No one has written about this combination of Brechtian and Wagnerian techniques in *Our Hitler* more perceptively than Susan Sontag. She is not entirely convincing, however, when she declares, in *The New York Review of Books*, that Syberberg "is inevitably more of a Wagnerian than a Brechtian." Her point concerns the function of the film's Brechtian devices, which, Sontag to the contrary, control our perception of the work and of Syberberg's Hitler in a really decisive manner. Sontag's view is contradicted primarily by the overall strategy of *Our Hitler*, which is decidedly anti-Aristotelian—very much in

the sense that Brecht conceived of his later plays as anti-Aristotelian theater. But how can cinema be anti-Aristotelian in Brecht's sense?

The main purpose of Brecht's "epic theater" was to bring about the realization, on the part of the audience, that socio-economic conditions were historically determined and therefore changeable. To that end Brecht developed a set of theatrical techniques and a style of acting intended to undermine traditional viewing habits and, with them, the fundamental tenets of Aristotelian theater (such as the unities of time, place, and action; mimesis, or the representation of reality; and empathy with the character or even identification with the role). Some of these are aesthetic positions to which Wagner still clung quite religiously; his whole reform of the operatic theater was intended to reaffirm their Aristotelian validity. But Syberberg, working in a different medium and a different genre, sets himself the same task as Brecht: to break up the traditional, "false" unity of the work of art and thereby subvert the basic conventions of Wagnerian theater.

Since the main vehicle of artistic unity in cinema is narration, Syberberg rejects the artificial unity bestowed upon film through narration. It is therefore quite impossible to summarize *Our Hitler* on the level of "storyline"; it defies any such attempt, since its design is non-narrative in a radical and systematic way. Not only is there no progression from the beginning to the end of the film, there is also no clear logic to the order of the individual scenes and sequences, since Syberberg's cutting technique aims at the creation of ironic contrast and contrapuntal structure. Thus the resurrection sequence, for instance, is not followed by a scene from Hitler's earlier period—as conventional narrative logic would dictate—but by a cut to a postwar scene with the American G.I.s dancing around Wagner's grave in Bayreuth. Yet, paradoxically, *Our Hitler* leaves the viewer with a strong impression of inner cohesion despite its anti-Aristotelian strategy. It is obvious, however, that this inner cohesion derives not from any overarching narrative line but rather from a carefully woven (if discretely apportioned) web of internal correspondence on the musical as well as visual plane—a web of correspondence for which the Wagnerian technique of leitmotif deployment and symphonic development clearly served as models.

We arrive at a similarly paradoxical assessment when we consider Syberberg's use of historical documents. He actually makes use of a great deal of what one might call documentary material to create the illusion of on-location shots and of historical authenticity. Syberberg takes us, for instance, into the Reichskanzlei, Hitler's official residence, and to Berghof, his weekend retreat. He shows us film clips documenting the mass hysteria surrounding the Führer, as well as pictures of concentration-camp victims. He also plays tapes of historic radio broadcasts and excerpts from Hitler's and Goebbels' speeches. In fact, most of the spoken text in *Our Hitler* has documentary status, since it was assembled from historical material. Yet Syberberg does not employ this material in the manner of conventional film—that is to say, for the purpose of authenticating the cinematic fiction. He quite intentionally lets us see that the apparently historical locations are merely slide projections, or background in the precise sense of the word. Nor does he conceal the fact that his elaborate

soundtrack is an artifice with several tracks often superimposed on one another, as he thus combines the art of Bachian counterpoint with Wagner's art of transition. The result of such procedures is striking and thought-provoking. For while the film does not even try to make us believe in its fictions, we are nevertheless moved to participate in the painful reconstruction of a past we would all prefer to forget.

The extensive use of projections functions very much as in the epic theater of Piscator and Brecht: it counteracts the illusion that whatever is being re-enacted on screen pretends to be an imitation of historical reality. Projection also paradoxically underlines the historicity of human emotions and interests, thereby achieving what Brecht demanded of all epic devices. Some other unmistakably Brechtian techniques can be identified. As in Brecht's theater, we are shown part of the (sound) stage machinery; Syberberg never pretends that *Our Hitler* is set anywhere else but in a film studio. Another well-known Brechtian device is the song that interrupts the action of the play and comments upon it. Syberberg carries this technique to great extremes by resorting to a whole array of "interruptive" set pieces such as musical numbers, puppet shows, cabaret sketches, guided tours, science-fiction scenes, fairy tales, and monodramas. They effectively prevent the emergence of any kind of narrative continuity and thus contribute to creating the kind of anti-Aristotelian cinema envisaged by Syberberg, the disciple of Bertolt Brecht.

The most memorable of Syberberg's Brechtian techniques can be seen in the imitation and amplification of what one might call the "Puntila effect." In essence, this effect derives from our shock of discovering the human side in an otherwise inhuman person, which leads us to ponder the easy compatibility of the inhuman and the human. Brecht's Puntila, landowner and exploiter, acts humanely only when drunk; yet it is precisely through his jovial, fraternizing mood that the depth of his inhumanity in his sober state is revealed. Syberberg plays with the master-servant relationship of Puntila and his servant Matti in those long sequences in Part III of *Our Hitler* involving Hitler's valet, Karl-Wilhelm Krause. This blissfully servile creature, who a few sequences later appears as a chillingly arrogant SS-officer, treats us with obvious pride to a pedantically detailed description of Hitler's early-morning and late-night routines, down to such trivialities as his puritanical eating habits, the type of underwear he wore, and the brand of his shaving cream. Through the valet's report, the commonness or banality of Hitler's private life is impressed upon us in unforgettable detail.

Such an impression, however, makes us wonder all the more about the reasons for the uncommon public appeal of this same person—an appeal of which we are reminded very vividly through radio tapes documenting the awe and frenzy that Hitler's public appearances aroused. Syberberg uses these tapes as a highly effective contrast to the low-key reminiscences of Hitler's valet. The two sides of Hitler evoked here seem hardly compatible until we grasp the simple point that Syberberg is making: Adolf Hitler's spell over the masses drew its force less from the uncommonness of his personality than from the qualities projected onto him by the common people.

There is another good reason for interpreting *Our Hitler*'s servant sequences in light of Brecht's Puntila model, and that is the existence of specific recommendations by Brecht as to how one could portray Hitler most effectively on the stage. The discussion of this question occurs in *Dialoge aus dem Messingkauf* (*The Messingkauf Dialogues*, 1939–42), which was written at the time Brecht was working on the play *Herr Puntila und sein Knecht Matti* (*Mr. Puntila and His Man Matti*, 1940). His general recommendation is to go against the expectation of the audience and to present the human side of Hitler: "We must observe him in situations … in which he appears as an ordinary human being; in which he would like us to simply view his actions as perfectly human and normal and to applaud him in our hearts" (*Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. XVI [*Collected Works*, Vol. 16], 1967). It seems to me that not only the servant sequences in Syberberg's film, but the whole treatment of Hitler and the Third Reich was conceived in the spirit of the foregoing dramaturgical recommendation. At least two sequences, both commented upon by me earlier, offer evidence to support this thesis: the "Massaging of Himmler" and the "Resurrection of Richard Wagner."

The basic trick of the Himmler sequence is to separate the human being from the inhuman Himmler, to focus on the human side and treat the inhuman one as counterpoint through background projections and superimposed sound recordings. The effect of this unmistakably Brechtian strategy is very disturbing, indeed. While the soundtrack and projections recall for us speeches of monstrous obscenity and actions of unspeakable horror, and while the funeral music from *Götterdämmerung* evokes for us the Nazi cult of sacrificial death, we are made to face the private "suffering" of Himmler as he seeks relief in massage. We hear of his revulsion at seeing someone step on snails and worms and of his intention to issue, after the final victory, the strictest laws for the protection of animals. We also hear of his selfless idealism, his passion for purity, and his secret suffering at having to carry out the dirty work of exterminating the Jews. This man states with complete sincerity that he is suffering more than his victims, and thus asks for our pity in plain view of the horror depicted in the background. Himmler's suffering as portrayed by the great Heinz Schubert (also, as previously noted, one of the actors who play Hitler) is unquestionably real, and so is the sincerity of his idealism—the idealism of a religious person who considered himself a Buddhist. As Brecht had envisaged, then, we begin to see more of the roots of Nazism's evil by examining its human side instead of focusing on its inhuman actions.

A particularly daring example of this technique—one that even goes beyond the "Puntila effect"—is woven into the resurrection sequence. Hitler's monologue, accompanied by the *Rienzi* music, proceeds from the acknowledgement of Wagner as his spiritual father to the assertion that he too is an artist, and that he too needs his anti-Semitism to be creative and assist him in the waging of war. Hitler actually expects to be remembered as one of the greatest men in history, like Leonardo or Michelangelo, Beethoven or Wagner. At the same time he knows, and accepts, that he might be damned for all eternity like …—at this point we expect a name but none

is given. Instead Hitler suddenly lapses into the famous speech of Shylock from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* (1605): "I am a Jew … Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? … If you prick us, do we not bleed?" (III.i).

The specific purpose of this baffling quotation is not immediately evident. Why should the most militant anti-Semite history has ever seen cast himself in the role of the best-known Jew the theater has ever produced? Is Syberberg's Hitler telling us that, should he fail, he will be cursed like the Wandering Jew and condemned to haunt the memory of mankind? Is he himself claiming to be a victimized outsider like Shakespeare's Jew? Or does he want to identify himself with Shylock's argument that he is merely exacting the revenge that others have taught him ("If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute …")? It appears that all these overtones and implications are intended to be evoked, since they are subsumed in the final assertion of Hitler's monologue that he is the realization of our most secret wishes, dreams, and nightmares.

The Shylock posture thus reinforces Hitler's earlier statement that he gave people what they themselves put into him, for this is also the position of Shylock as he insists on revenge or payback. In this light, the final words of Hitler's speech—"I am eternally your brother Hitler"—take on further uncanny complexity. It should be clear that this complexity of vision was arrived at by the amplification of Brecht's "Puntila effect," itself a technique of Brechtian alienation. It makes us view Hitler not only as our brother but even as Shylock, our brother Jew.

V.

In conclusion, the crucial point to be made is that to understand the aesthetics of *Our Hitler*, one must stress the equally central roles of Brechtian alienation and Wagnerian Symbolism and clarify the manner in which they are linked. It is unthinkable that Syberberg could have achieved his stunning audiovisual effects and disturbing artistic statements in this film had he used one without the other. In a sense, he has employed Brechtian alienation as an antidote to the seduction of Wagnerian emotionalism, just as he has used Wagnerianism to steer clear of Brecht's ambition to raise (or lower) art to the level of a scientific demonstration. The specific function of Syberberg's Wagnerianism seems to be to make us acknowledge, instead of suppress, the powers of myth and the irrational. His Brechtianism, in turn, serves as a brake, as it were, on the demagogic emotionalism unleashed by Wagner's apparatus, and as an intellectual contraceptive against the insidious seductiveness of Wagnerian ideology.

Syberberg understandably will have nothing to do with the political beliefs of either Brecht or Wagner. He is particularly explicit in his refusal of Brecht's Marxist interpretation of Nazism, which sees Hitler primarily as an instrument of Capital. In the film itself, he repudiates Brecht's view of Nazism as expressed in the plays

Der aufhaltsame Aufstieg des Arturo Ui (*The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, 1941) and *Furcht und Elend des Dritten Reiches* (*Fear and Misery of the Third Reich*, a.k.a. *The Private Life of the Master Race*, 1938); instead, Syberberg emphasizes the key role *Rienzi* and *Parsifal* should play in our understanding of Nazism. It should therefore be obvious that *Our Hitler* is not situated in an ideological no-man's-land; the ideological profile of this film is clearly marked by an aesthetic conservatism that puts Syberberg into the camp of Thomas Mann and not of Bertolt Brecht. Syberberg clearly endorses the so-called One-Germany theory (one Germany that, like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, has, or had, two identities: one good, the other evil) implicit in *Doctor Faustus*—a theory that sees Nazism as a characteristic result of German social and intellectual history—and he rejects the theory that interprets Nazism as the instrument used by evil, capitalist Germany to subjugate the other, good Germany.

In other words, Syberberg has taken the liberty in *Our Hitler* to separate the medium from the message. That he dared to combine Wagner and Brecht, accepting their artistic innovations yet rejecting their ideological baggage, may be the real "scandal" of this work. He has thus accomplished something that runs counter to the current aesthetic conviction that ideological content and artistic form are inseparable. In my view, it is precisely because of such separation that this film breaks through to new territory in the realm of art cinema. This new territory includes both the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of Wagner and the epic theater of Brecht. A French critic, Christian Zimmer, has characterized this new quality of Syberberg's cinema as "Brecht raised to a higher power" ("un Brechtisme éxaspéré"; *Cahiers du cinéma*, February 1980). From a different angle, one could just as well characterize *Our Hitler* as a "Meta-gesamtkunstwerk"—a film that pretends to imitate the Wagnerian model but actually places it at a critical distance by applying to it techniques of Brechtian alienation.

What exactly does Syberberg's film accomplish in the end? Or, when all is said and done, does it accomplish nothing whatsoever? Is it merely "a projection into the black hole of the future," as the end of the film declares in an almost defiant gesture of pure aestheticism? Echoing Hannah Arendt's view of Adolf Eichmann (as expressed in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* [1963]), Michel Foucault, in an interview published in *Cahiers du cinéma* (February 1980), has praised *Our Hitler* for making us see that horror is banal and that the banal contains a dimension of horror. Susan Sontag, on the other hand, less pessimistic than Foucault in her essay on *Our Hitler* in *The New York Review of Books*, terms Syberberg a "genuine elegiast" and his film a "work of mourning" in the sense that Freud and Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich have used the word *Trauerarbeit*. Syberberg himself is fond of applying this term to his whole cinematic *oeuvre*. Its connotations, however, are slightly misleading in suggesting a passive recognition of the horror that was Hitler. *Trauerarbeit* suggests little of what I take to be the most remarkable effect *of Our Hitler*: its liberating power.

For that reason I find more plausible and persuasive what Jean-Pierre Oudart wrote in his review for *Cahiers du cinéma* (November 1978). Oudart believes that

this film frees our censored memory and helps us overcome the taboo of fearing that Hitler might be in us. Extending this observation, one could add that Syberberg's *Our Hitler* marks a breakthrough and liberation on several fronts. It does indeed liberate us from the protective censorship imposed on our memory from without as well as from within, and makes us face what we thought we could not bear to see: Hitler and our own share in him. This film may therefore be thought of as a cinematic *éducation sentimentale* in that it educates our sensibility and our memory to confront Hitler and our attitude toward him without fear or self-deception. In the final analysis, then, *Our Hitler* seems to be inspired by a spirit of tactful didacticism. Far from being the aesthete he likes to pose as, Hans-Jürgen Syberberg seems to me to be at heart a discreet yet curious advocate of the Enlightenment—which itself is curious because he takes seriously the power of myth and the irrational. Yet Syberberg succeeds, finally, in reconciling the incisive lucidity of Brecht and his alienation technique with the Romantic magic of Wagner and his emotive music.

Figure 25. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg at the time of the filming of Our Hitler

NOTE

[1] Hans R. Vaget, "Syberberg's Our Hitler: Wagnerianism and Alienation," *Massachusetts Review*, 23.4 (1982): 593–612.

STANLEY KAUFFMANN[1]

10. MYTHS FOR SALE—REVIEWS OF *LUDWIG: REQUIEM FOR A VIRGIN KING* AND *KARL MAY*

Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's 1972 film *Ludwig: Requiem for a Virgin King* (which premiered in New York in July 1980 but was only recently seen by me) is, most immediately, a brilliantly realized study of the bizarre Bavarian monarch, the haunted Wagnerophile castle-builder of the late nineteenth century. Syberberg throws himself boldly into the controversy surrounding Ludwig's "madness" and "suicide," portraying the plot against the king to take away his crown as little more than a blatant grab for power. He thus most often presents Ludwig as a silly, rather pitiable figure more sinned against than sinning. Yet his sentiments are ambivalent, and Ludwig is occasionally depicted as the mawkishly Romantic buffoon he also was, slavering at the feet of the proto-Nazi, anti-Semitic Richard Wagner in the service of Art. One very powerful feature of Syberberg's skill is precisely his ability to modulate tonal nuances so subtly that it is often difficult to tell just where his sympathies lie.

Figure 26. Ludwig: Requiem für einen jungfräulichen König (Ludwig: Requiem for a Virgin King), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1972*

Perhaps more important than its status as investigation of the conspiracy against Ludwig, however, is its usefulness as a more humanly scaled (140 minutes) path of

R. J. Cardullo (Ed.), Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the Film Director as Critical Thinker, 131–138.

entry into Syberberg's later, magnificent 7½-hour ordeal known as *Hitler, A Film from Germany* (1977), which toured major American cities in early 1980. (Both films are distributed by Francis Ford Coppola's San Francisco-based Zoetrope Studio). Indeed, Syberberg considers them the first and third parts of a trilogy which is completed by a film just released in this country (and to be discussed below) called *Karl May: In Search of Paradise Lost* (1974), a study of Hitler's favorite novelist, a turn-of-the-century writer of wholly imaginary "Westerns" virtually unknown in America. In any case, for all his excess, *Ludwig* is finally a smaller subject than Hitler, and Syberberg's treatment of him is more "restrained" (if that adjective can be applied to any of his work), and thus perhaps more accessible.

The films are related thematically, especially in Syberberg's insistence on probing the wounds of the German psyche to the dismay of many of his countrymen, who would like to put the guilty past behind them. As he makes clear in *Our Hitler*, the Führer was not an historical aberration but rather the inevitable result of the darker side of German culture that found its perfect expression in the pan-German chauvinist Wagner and the super-heated *Sturm und Drang* (Storm-and-Stress) Romanticism of his music. The composer thus emerges as villain in both films: in *Our Hitler*, the Führer is shown orating in a toga as he stands in Wagner's open grave, while in *Ludwig*, the composer is alternately portrayed as a hermaphroditic black-clad angel of death and a somersaulting semi-retarded dwarf. *Ludwig* is, in fact, cast in the form of a parody of Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelungs*, 1876), opening with three whorish, past-their-prime Rhine maidens and punctuated throughout by soulful renderings of the Ring cycle's better-known arias, which, in this context, manage to sound both beautiful and grotesque at the same time. That particularly Teutonic brand of decadence known as *Liebestod* (love-death), which was so mightily to attract and repel Thomas Mann in *Der Zauberberg* (*The Magic Mountain*, 1924), reached its zenith in the famous duet from *Tristan and Isolde* (1865), Wagner's greatest opera.

Another of Syberberg's targets in both films is, baldly and thus reductively stated, the utter venality of present-day society. Thus, in *Our Hitler* he points an accusatory finger at the well-fed Bavarian burghers who open a Hitler museum and produce Hitler "souvenirs" for fun and profit, whereas in *Ludwig* he juxtaposes images of the intensely suffering king with home-movie footage of the hordes of American tourists tromping through his outlandish castles, Instamatics clicking all the while. We learn along the way that in spite of the immense costs incurred in the building of these wedding-cake fantasies (which provided his enemies "proof" of his insanity), over the years they have more than paid for themselves at the tourist ticket window. In both cases, we are left amazed at the power of bourgeois society to domesticate and normalize the greatest horrors and most private suffering in the interest of profit.

The truly exciting aspect of Syberberg's films, however, is that his overt historical and political themes merge effortlessly with his "formal themes" concerning the nature of film, art, and even perception itself. Naturally, the film is thoroughly

self-reflexive and utterly opposed to the illusionistic dramatizing of conventional narrative films. In the program notes, Syberberg calls the film "a declaration of war against the present forms of cinema dialogue and of 'boulevard' type cinema in the tradition of Hollywood and its satellites, … against psychological chitchat, against the action film, against a particular philosophy endlessly linking shots and reverse shots, against the metaphysics of the automobile and the gun, against the excitement of open and closed doors, against the melodrama of crime and sex…." Given this posture, some will undoubtedly find the film boring, but it is so in the way that Bresson is boring, or Godard, or any director who has tried to stretch the narrowly dictated boundaries of cinematic narrative.

Very early we are introduced to a startlingly effective juxtaposition that sets the tone for everything which comes after. In this shot, Ludwig, as a five-year-old boy, walks trance-like toward the camera past the Rhinemaidens—but he is already wearing the moustache and goatee of his later years. This blatantly artificial yet moving image is among the most haunting in the film and is repeated at the end. Throughout, the accent remains on the stylized, the theatrical: thus the entire film, like *Our Hitler*, takes place on a stage filled with props and people who exist on an equal footing. Behind the stage—which insists on its staginess and makes no concession to any Barthesian *effet de réel*—stands the gigantic screen for rear projection which Syberberg was later to use so imaginatively in *Our Hitler*. Its principal effect is that of most modern painting: to emphasize the flatness of the image, to prevent any easy recourse to Renaissance perspectival illusionism and, by extension, the proverbial willing suspension of disbelief demanded by conventional narrative. In *Ludwig*, it must be admitted, Syberberg is only feeling out the technique, and more often than not it is used rather statically, with slide after slide of the lushly *kitsch* interiors of Ludwig's castles alternating with steamy Romantic notions of exotic "Oriental" sets. Only once, in fact, does he project a piece of film on the screen, the very powerful clip of the American tourists mentioned earlier.

Throughout the film, Syberberg playfully pretends to take pains to establish a "realism" that he simultaneously exposes for the artifice it always is. So, for example, in the midst of a fully believable dramatic scene between Ludwig I (the grandfather of the film's subject) and one of his advisors, Syberberg has the former king attribute a quotation about the importance of art to Brecht, even though the scene is ostensibly taking place twenty years before the playwright's birth. (The irony is compounded, of course, by invoking the name of the inventor of the famous *Verfremdungseffekt* that Syberberg is so effectively making use of here.)

Syberberg gives full vent to "creative anachronism" and the alienation effect in an astonishing dream sequence that occurs about midway through the film. Various heroes of German history are introduced, accompanied by sound tracks from American pop culture sources that identify them with the Lone Ranger, Tarzan, and Superman, complexly echoing Wim Wenders' notion that the Americans have colonized the German mind, while at the same time deflating the Germanic reverence for the heroic. The mockery is intensified when the sound tracks are speeded up,

Figure 27. Ludwig: Requiem für einen jungfräulichen König (Ludwig: Requiem for a Virgin King), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1972*

resulting in chipmunky renditions of the familiar "Hi ho, Silver!" and "Who knows what evil lurks in the heart of man?" Ludwig's dream grows ever more bizarre as these Teutonic heroes career about on bicycles on the same stage as dark Fellini-esque motorcyclists and a comic Hitler who does a provocative tango with Ludwig's hairdresser, now dressed up as Ernst Röhm, the homosexual head of the Führer's private army. As such, the dream comes to have a more universalized significance as the neurotic collective unconscious of the entire German people, past, present, and future.

The Brechtian devices are clearly central to Syberberg's strategy in the film, for without them, he seems to be saying, a director could easily succumb to the temptations of a romanticized treatment the material so richly calls for, and which Visconti, for one, yielded to in his version. The other reason is that this film, like *Our Hitler*, is less about its ostensible subject than about itself. As such, it strongly implies that uncomplicated access to the past is an impossibility and that art is at best a highly problematic approach to the darkness that is history. Yet in spite of the preponderance of Brechtian alienation, the film is dramatic finally, even in the conventional sense, through the sheer power of the actors, especially Harry Baer in the title role, to create and project characters out of nothing, in the face of the stiffest opposition. We end up caring for Ludwig very much. Perhaps this represents Syberberg's acquiescence in the ultimate defeat of the Brechtian model in the face of the intransigence of human emotion and identification, or perhaps it comes about

against his will. I tend to think that Syberberg knows perfectly well what he is doing, and in fact has created a promising new variation on "traditional" Brechtian aesthetics that may very well serve to revitalize and bring it up to date. At the very least, his films are the most imaginative encounter between the theatrical and the cinematic in the history of either medium.

As noted above, *Karl May* is the second part of the "German trilogy" by Syberberg. The missing middle is presented by the Film Forum and Goethe House in New York, and inevitably it amplifies the intent of Syberberg's gigantic work. The title character here, virtually unknown in the United States, is one of the most famous authors in Europe. His life was as extraordinary as his output and success. Karl May (1842–1912) was the son of Saxon weavers, so poor they fed their family on potato peelings. He was blind for the first four years of his life. (Both the blindness and the recovery are unexplained.) In 1856 he got a scholarship to a teacher-training school, where he did well but was expelled for theft in 1859. He managed to continue his studies, earned a teacher's certificate in 1861, taught for a while in various places, then stole a roommate's watch and went to prison for six weeks He also served two additional terms for fraud between 1865 and 1874.

About this time, he changed; he began to write. He became a high-speed manufacturer of stories and sensational novels while he also edited magazines. His success exploded when he turned to adventure stories and began to pour out Westerns, mostly about an American Indian called Old Shatterhand, along with tales set in a languorous Middle East. He became very famous and very rich, bought an estate near Dresden that he called the Villa Shatterhand, and shortly after the turn of the century divorced his wife of some twenty years and remarried. (The film says he never left Saxony. Two encyclopedias say that, just before and after the turn of the century, he visited North Africa, the Near East, and the United States.)

A recent estimate is that 11.5 million copies of his books have been sold in Germany, and a Hungarian friend tells me that his books are still popular in her country. He has been translated into twenty languages—little, as far as I can tell, into English. His collected German edition of seventy-four volumes (including thirty-three travel volumes) was, as of 1976, not yet complete. In the years after World War II, a German film director named Alfred Vohrer specialized in adaptations of May's Westerns.

Karl May begins shortly after 1900 when, having achieved reputation and riches, having lived down the erratic episodes of his past, May became embroiled in disputes with a publisher. These led to lawsuits intended to rake up his past and to discredit him. The suits dragged on for years, but he died with his reputation restored. In 1912 he gave a lecture, his last, in Vienna, which was attended by the young Adolf Hitler, then living in a flophouse. Hitler was as impressed by the man as by the books. This fact may have been prime in Syberberg's perception that Karl May's life, compounded of fabricated mythology, personal disgrace, and dogged refusal to accept that disgrace as final, was essential to a portrait of the Romantic and grimly real Germany of the last 100 years.

Cinematically, Syberberg treats this professional mythmaker in a style quite different from that of the prior and succeeding films. In the first scene, May and a friend are in a stage setting of an Oriental garden; in the last scene, May lies dead in a glassless greenhouse, his wife sitting next to him, with a wigwam behind her and snow (Syberberg's snow!) falling gently. These two scenes are almost all that

Figure 28. Karl May—Auf der Suche nach dem verlorenen Paradies (Karl May: In Search of Paradise Lost), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1974*

relate visually to Parts One and Three of the trilogy, *Ludwig* and *Our Hitler*. The rest of *Karl May* is done in realistic drawing rooms and studies, bedrooms, courtrooms, offices, kitchens, terraces, and gardens. I assume that these are not settings, that they are relics of bourgeois Wilhelmine heaviness that Syberberg hunted up for his film.

All the principal characters are middle-aged or older. All of them are played by actors who are not only splendidly right for their roles but were, apparently, chosen for what the German public knew of them. Syberberg used actors who were prominent during the Nazi regime because, I infer, he wanted to correlate the delusory mythologies that May created with the mythologies that these actors had served. Helmut Käutner, who plays May, was a director and actor under Hitler. (He continued directing after the war and also worked in Hollywood.) Kristina Söderbaum, who plays May's first wife, was launched as a star in the late 1930s by her then-husband, Veit Harlan, a pre-eminent Nazi director. Lil Dagover, who dates from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) and who worked right through the Nazi era, plays May's second wife.

Figure 29. Karl May—Auf der Suche nach dem verlorenen Paradies (Karl May: In Search of Paradise Lost), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1974*

The cast, the settings, the meticulous sound track, the superb costumes (expensive fabrics for all, fur-collared dressing gowns for the men), the shrewd color photography by Dietrich Lohmann that exploits the crags and particularities of the men's faces, are all very much part of Syberberg's theme. In its visual and aural texture, this is Germany at its apex: victor in the Franco-Prussian War, self-adjudged master of the

world intellectually and culturally, possible ruler of Europe, a nation (as Nietzsche dreamed) capable of giving the West once again Dionysian spirit and Greek tragic stature. The sound of those resonant German voices, the almost overpowering articulation of those cumulative German sentences (whether or not we understand the language) enunciated like the unfurling of verbal banners, the pride even in legal formalities as still another proof of their civilization, the very intensity of the lamplight over dining-room tables, all combine to create a self-idolatrous society with, bitterly for the rest of us eventually, a good deal to be self-idolatrous about. Scene after scene, figure after figure, is like the early twentieth-century photography of that cruel master August Sander, here given color, motion, sound. Syberberg's Germany believes in its rank and destiny, feeds on myths, is furious at this mundane mythologist when he is suspected of being spurious, and is happy to celebrate him when he wins his law cases because then Germans can reinstate their faith in his fake heroisms.

A familiar tag about Syberberg is that he combines Wagner and Brecht. No Wagner here; instead, we get Mahler and Liszt. But, in architecture and ellipsis, much Brecht. The film is composed of many short scenes, each introduced by a title that foretells its content, each separated from the next by a "wipe." The effect is of a chronicle, stations on a journey. The first hour or so of the three-hour film is stubbornly slow. Then *Karl May* reveals *why* it has been slow, as the larger themes come clear. But Syberberg is always deft, scene by scene. For instance, note the scene near the end in which the ranting Hitler first appears, identified by the name on the locker door behind him, moves through the large barracks room of the flophouse still ranting about the need for will while the other men ignore or laugh at him, then comes back to the locker room, still ranting. The long arc of the camera movement inscribes theatrical gesture under his theatrical words.

The film has on added meaning, not specifically German. Karl May is one of the early figures in widely influential popular culture. Improved technology—in this case, printing—gave popular tastes, and caterers to those tastes, new force. Balances began to shift in the authority of high art, in the control of private fantasy. One function of art bas always been to disclose the impossible but desirable. Popular art brings the impossible nearer and makes it less strange. Karl May had something to do with the growth of pop art as facile ego gratification. He may not be well known in the United States, but the quality of daydream he helped to inspire is part of the secret life at its least demanding, its most flattering.

NOTE

[1] Stanley Kauffmann, "Myths for Sale: Reviews of *Ludwig*: *Requiem for a Virgin King and Karl May*," *The New Republic*, 195 (July 14 & 21, 1986): 26–28.

CHRISTOPHER SHARRETT[1]

11. SUSTAINING ROMANTICISM IN A POSTMODERNIST CINEMA: AN INTERVIEW WITH HANS-JÜRGEN SYBERBERG

Excoriated by various critics in the United States and Europe, Hans-Jürgen Syberberg has nonetheless seen his preeminence in the New German Cinema secured. His trilogy of films culminating in *Hitler, A Film from Germany* (1977), together with his rendering of *Parsifal* (1982), suggests that his sensibility, while dependent on Romanticism (and the consciousness of an intellectual who is versed in Brecht and Marxist aesthetics), offers a possible resolution to the crises of postmodern artistic practice. Syberberg's *oeuvre*, with its illusionism combined with conscious meditation on representationalism and the history of Western narrative tradition, inserts criticism into the artwork, redefining "self-reflexivity" in terms not of understanding "film as film," but of analyzing the mythic assumptions that for years have driven Western art and Western history itself. While Syberberg's filmic project seems to make his work representative of the tendencies of postmodernism, controversy continues to rage concerning his politics, as various critics have argued that a neoconservative, excessively Romantic, proto-fascist attitude informs his art. Such accusations have been modified only slightly over time, despite the evidence of Syberberg's assault on myth, his interest in polemics, his small-scale budgets, an association with the avant-garde tradition, and a genial manner that always projects an interest in dialogue.

One difficulty in addressing Syberberg's work is trying to understand clearly the extent to which the postmodern style represents a politically progressive artistic tendency. Although the postmodern work is prone to call attention to its own conventions and deconstruct itself, it is often laden with a "nostalgia mode" (Fredric Jameson's term) that removes its sense of affect and politico-historical dimension. Certainly Syberberg's films are too heavily devoted to critical analysis to suggest a lack of concern for historical context; the issue of nostalgia, however—of being caught between the worlds of presentation and representation—is the real focal point for Syberberg's critics. What is ironic is that this same nostalgia and concomitant philosophico-artistic dichotomy are also apparent in the work of Bertolucci, Fassbinder, and Godard, artists whose political stance is rarely seen as reactionary or in contradiction with their cinematic style. Far more problematic, though, is the general refusal to view Syberberg's art as progressive, even as he

R. J. Cardullo (Ed.), Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the Film Director as Critical Thinker, 139–146.

confronts forthrightly the postmodern condition of the West situated somewhere between mythic presence and historical materialist consciousness.

This interview took place at the Public Theater in New York after the premiere there of Syberberg's *Die Nacht* (*The Night*, 1985), a six-hour performance piece alternately referred to as a "swan song for Europe" and a "journey through the land of literature." This film, featuring the extraordinary Edith Clever alone on a dark set as she recites from Western literature, may lack the imagery associated with Syberberg's earlier work, but it does foreground acutely the impossibility of conventional narrative and illusionism in the current cultural atmosphere.

Christopher Sharrett: There seems to be a dialectic in your work between utopia and apocalypse, yet the overall vision in your films, from *Hitler* (1977) to *Die Nacht* (*The Night*, 1985), appears to be pessimistic.

Hans-Jürgen Syberberg: When you establish a form of art or create a certain vision, just as when a culture or society begins, there is a sense of hope, which itself is a manifestation of utopia, but the old paradox of death and destruction implicit in hope remains. There is the old story, you know, about someone planting a tree on the day before the world explodes. There is also the deeply affecting story concerning the era of Luther and the Thirty Years' War between Catholics and Protestants. People at the time felt that this was the end of the world, the apocalypse: the world was simply dying. An artist's outlook today must be similar, since the nuclear bomb can do to the world what that earlier war could do to a village. But the artist must nonetheless go ahead and plant the tree. My idea of art is something like that.

CS: Do you feel that there has been a fundamental change in the world since 1945? Again, your work frequently seems to have a Spenglerian cast in its profound pessimism.

HJS: In Spengler's cyclical view of epochs changing and power moving from one culture to another, he showed a particular historical vision that I don't think is relevant today. There is no longer a question of *Europe's* being threatened from forces inside or outside: it's the whole world that is now being threatened. And I do not see any kind of final victor in this contest. I don't see a black winner or an Oriental winner, or the Russians or the United States or any other culture as a victor according to the formulas and methods of the old historians. Our world today is very different from the one that inspired Spengler's vision. As far as the Spenglerian nature of my own ideas or vision, I have not read his work since I was a schoolboy in East Germany.

CS: Probably the most controversial aspect of the public's perception of your work is the tendency to characterize it, both in the U.S. and West Germany, as essentially conservative or neoconservative.

HJS: To speak only of my situation in Germany, I don't think it's a question of my being labeled conservative or neoconservative. This would make the problem much simpler than it is in reality. Let me give you some context. The parents of the postwar intellectuals were for the most part Nazis or otherwise associated with the Third Reich, so their children have become Leftists—but only in a limited, peculiar way, because they think, and have been told, that Hitler was exclusively a right-winger. I see a neo-Nazism among these young people in the sense that they are much closer to the attitudes of their parents than they would care to believe. And I think this neo-Nazism is present not only in the young but also in various other sectors of German society. It's a peculiarly German problem.

CS: So you think that the youth movement in Germany, although Leftist, has the quality of authoritarianism you associate with the old order?

HJS: Yes. These people react in a way that could not be described as free or democratic or enlightened. They are very much trapped, certainly unconsciously, by other systems or structures of thought. They are simply too close to their fathers.

CS: One of your artistic concerns is the trivialization of culture and the introduction of *kitsch*, which you associate with the death of European civilization.

HJS: With the Nazis, *kitsch* became the state culture of the masses. Everything that had been fought for in previous periods was turned into its opposite. And the real tragedy is that some people wanted the element of culture that they thought was good, but they were told in the end that it was bad: matters had thus reached an extreme state. I see an analogously tragic situation in the example of the young soldier fighting out of the belief that his cause and his ideals are good, then discovering that they are all bad.

This idea of a culture's being faced with such a shock and total reversal is no longer peculiar to Germany: it represents a problem for the entire West. This is the basis, I think, of the new irrationalism. Any sense of morality or order was lost with Nazism, with the phenomenon that certain virtues were permanently turned into their precise opposite. Germans—and, I believe, people throughout much of the world—began to think that everything previously believed in was worthless or dead. This is a real problem, in that everything you touch upon today that was previously associated with German traditions or those of Western culture itself—all of that is now seen as bad. People then do not want to seize on certain ideas about art or culture because these ideas might become tainted and lost *again*, and such thinking leads to bad irrationalism and a wrong kind of freedom. I say "wrong" because, ultimately, without a sense of culture and some specific kind of ideational foundation, people will give up and accept again a Hitler or another like him.

CS: David Bowie once remarked that Adolf Hitler was the first rock star, a facetious remark, but one that touches on a contemporary issue: namely, the pursuit within West Germany and the whole of Western society of pop stars as messiahs. Charismatic media figures in this way have replaced political leaders in the new cultural landscape. The film *Christiane F.* (1981), which features Bowie at one point appearing as himself in a large concert-arena in Germany, underlines this point. Do you have any thoughts on this subject?

HJS: Young people have pursued various pop figures … think only of the Beatles, but of course there have been others. To me this quest is pathetic. And after Hitler, there has always been doubt about the validity or purpose of such a quest, which makes it even more pathetic.

CS: Your work projects a strong sense of the need for myth and of the death of myth, as if it were the death of a common language that provides cohesion to society.

HJS: I think here of Freud and his use of Oedipus and other ancient myths to explain a new science, that of psychology or, better, psychiatry. This process gave us a new, contemporary myth, but it destroyed another one. So today we must find our own way, with the knowledge of the new sciences, but we have to be aware at the same time that there is always the need for something *secret*: something unknown, mysterious, dreamlike. In art such a characteristic must exist, otherwise it's not art. To deny this means the death of art. Even a discussion such as our present one plays a role in the repudiation of myth. But, yes, without some sort of mythology there is a danger, and here I am at the opposite end from some ideological thinkers, because with the total end of myth I see, not liberation, but a kind of imprisonment. I see the victory of the world's political leaders. And in all of this I see the final death of Western culture, which is really the only culture at present, since it has penetrated every other culture on earth. Western culture is so central to the world that its end would mean the end of the world as we know it. We don't need a nuclear bomb; the dangers without it are already so obvious. We have museums, yes, we have theaters that have become museums, but this is not *art*, as it is no longer vital. It is a new example of tourism or a kind of archaeology, or maybe it's even a form of science, but it is not art. For art has something to do with the creation of the new in order to give *spiritual* life to society.

CS: Is this the basis for your use of the Theater at Delphi at the opening of *Die Nacht*? Is it your intention to present the image of this theater as an artifact, or, perhaps, as an abstraction representing the removal of theater in general from the notion of communion and the vitality of art?

HJS: Not precisely. I was quoting the legend of the last woman, a Greek, who stood before a Roman emperor and said that it's all over, it's *gone*. Greek culture was gone;

Figure 30. Die Nacht (The Night), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1985*

it had all gone over to the Romans. I was quoting this moment. After Greece *and* Rome were gone, something else happened, much of it north of the Alps: in France, Poland, Russia, England, and Scandinavia, with Dostoyevsky, Tchaikovsky, Ibsen, and Shakespeare. This meant the invention of something new. It was no longer Greek or Roman culture; that joint culture was taken over and changed into something else. But Graeco-Roman culture itself was gone.

But now? I don't know. I don't see any transition taking place. In previous times the change was sensible and could somehow be sensed. Perhaps there will be a transition to a new force in Western culture, like the change in emphasis to European music. Beethoven, for example, could never have been a Greek. At this point I don't see any new tendency or movement in culture. In previous epochs we could speak of cultural traditions in terms of different climate, different terrain, different language, etc. But today we are all mixed together, and culture has become blurred. We all speak English; other languages are only dialects. And this, too, spells the end of Western culture, of words, thought, and acting, of narratives of diverse origins. Perhaps that culture will appear somewhere else, in new form.

CS: I would like now to address the issue of the convergence of Brecht and Wagner in your work. Given your interest in the preservation of a certain kind of mystical consciousness, *à la* Wagner, how do you reconcile this with your use of Brecht, which is a strategy geared toward bringing the audience to a historical consciousness

and away from the mythology supported by the shot-countershot program of Hollywood—a mythology whose adoption by some of your peers you have attacked.

HJS: Brecht and Wagner fought for new types of theater, for new and very deliberate views of reality. I don't see a future for either theater; I believe at the moment that, given my way of thinking and doing, neither view—Brecht's or Wagner's—represents the way for me. I like much more the idea of being part of the movement of time, which is an area where I have perhaps been misperceived. I don't wish to lead a school of aesthetics with all that it entails. Of course I think, I write my essays, but I am not fighting the fight of Brecht or Wagner. This is not only my personal concern; it is a question of our times. I would prefer something … *smaller* than what these two men did. Again, I don't see myself at the head of a great debate. I like the idea of coming to a place like the Public Theater in New York, to a smaller place—and not at the start of my career, but after *Hitler* and *Parsifal* (1982) and the other films. I like being able to present *Die Nacht*, a film that is six hours long, here at the Public with a limited number of screenings, and maybe just for one person at each showing. We got our money for this film, we were able to pay for the cameraman we wanted, we were able to pay our crew. Then, finally, we put on film a quotation from a woman living 360 years after Christ: a line spoken to a Roman emperor is now heard by a group of ninety people in New York. How marvelous! This is enough. We don't need a new school of thought to do such things. If such a school should come along, I might by that time be somewhere else in my thinking.

CS: I am interested in the idea that in *Die Nacht* you simply use the dark set and one actress rather than the puppetry and the background images we associate with your work. Indeed, in this new film you suggest an end to the whole notion of projection.

HJS: First of all, I had to get rid of my old techniques. At times I find myself fixed on one technique. But actually, I am not especially interested in technique; my aesthetic is not limited to one possibility. If you look and analyze, however, there is the idea in *Die Nacht* of projection onto this one figure, this woman, this lone actress: projection by the author, by the director, by—I don't know—the world, the audience. All of it takes place in darkness, though, not on a screen or in an image *per se*, but rather on her face and in you. The images are first words, which become images in the mind, in the manner of projection. So you have moving images, but not a *movie*. The images move within the woman herself and within the audience, like words as a score through which you listen to music. The image is less fixed in this sense; you try to catch it, but it is already somewhere else. The image in *Die Nacht* is finally reduced to one human being. But what more is the world?

Everything in this film is as before in my work, but the approach is different here. The matter is the human being. In Europe there is a phrase referring to the perception of the world through European eyes. In my film you have a kind of *human centrismus*, seeing the world through the eyes of a human being. Yes, what else can

I do? I cannot speak for a tree or a cat. Yet being aware of my human-centrism, I have a duty to speak for the tree and the cat, in order, I must say, to fight for their rights. This is an old European tradition. Of course, there are contradictions here. The American Indians were exterminated by European culture; the Indians truly saw their own centrality but in a different way, and they were much more able to speak for the cat and the tree than I am or we are. This is a big dialogue that has yet to take place. The destruction of the Indians has been talked about by various groups and in some small Hollywood movies, but it has never become art in the sense that it becomes something that honors us—and them. There must be an expression of the true nature of how we and they lived and struggled, and how Indian culture was lost.

European culture has taken things away; our art now must attempt to put them back into the minds of human beings. When an American Indian killed an animal, he asked for forgiveness. If you do this, you are already involved in the making of art. This would also mean Europe's *Trauerarbeit*, or mourning, for the dead victims of its culture. How different this would be from culture, the realm of art, in our century! It would mean much more than the Christian myths mean for us today. This is the tragedy of a culture that extinguished another one and now itself is ending in tragedy, through a consciousness of the very genocide by which the American Indians entered into history and hence into us, only there to survive. This we have done to, and for, them, which may be the highest form of union with them that we can achieve.

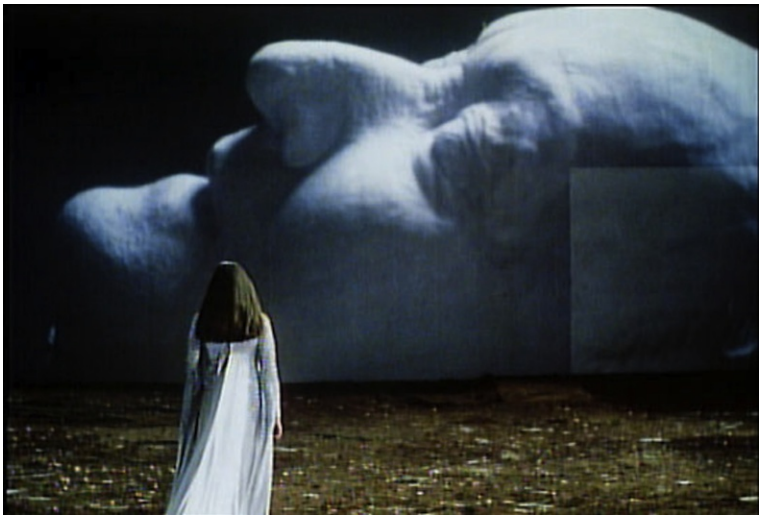

Figure 31. Parsifal, *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1982*

CS: On the subject of your imagery again, there appears to be not only a decrease in images from *Hitler* to *Die Nacht* but also a pessimistic strain to the imagery you

retain. We see Marx and Nietzsche under the sheets of plastic in *Parsifal*, and we also see the crucified figure of Wagner. The dark, barren space of *Die Nacht* recalls the work of Samuel Beckett, who is actually quoted in the film.

HJS: But there is a *woman*, therefore birth and life. There is a reduction going on here, but for me also a new energy, a new creativity. In *Parsifal* we already had the idea of everything taking place inside the head of a human being, but this turned out to be Richard Wagner's death mask. And this means something. It was the *fantasy* of projection, based on an older idea of utopia into which the audience had to incorporate its own ideas. Now I have replaced everything with a single figure, who is alive and standing right in front of us. We start, that is, with a woman, so things are not so dark after all.

NOTE

[1] Christopher Sharrett, "Sustaining Romanticism in a Postmodernist Cinema: An Interview with Hans-Jürgen Syberberg," *Cineaste*, 15.3 (1987): 18–20.

DIE ZEIT (*TIME*)[1]

12. 'THEY WANT TO KILL ME': AN INTERVIEW WITH THE FILMMAKER AND THEATER DIRECTOR HANS-JÜRGEN SYBERBERG

Time: What is written about you, in Germany, is rarely friendly. You are referred to as megalomaniacal and paranoid, in short as crazy.

Hans-Jürgen Syberberg: This has always surprised me. I don't see myself as defined in these terms. But of course they have their effect. They want to kill me: that is their goal. I am dependent on public funds, which are managed by upstanding officials in suits and ties. And these people do not give their money to a man who is accused of being an idiot or a madman.

T.: Can it be that the attacks on you also contain some truth?

HJS: I wonder. I wonder what their roots are. Where do their arguments come from?

Figure 32. Parsifal, *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1982*

R. J. Cardullo (Ed.), Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the Film Director as Critical Thinker, 147–164.

T.: After your film *Parsifal* (1982), it was said that now no one could any longer bear to see opera on the stage.

HJS: What I intended was that such things as you see in my film are not feasible on the stage. But this is a completely different argument.

T.: When once asked about your favorite movies, you cited your own.

HJS: I would not say so today.

T.: Why not?

HJS: I have turned away from many things that seemed important to me earlier. My position in public was characterized by conflicts that I have described as bloody. I have fought for recognition. I do not do so anymore.

T.: Have you become wise?

HJS: No, this has nothing to do with wisdom and age, but with the realization that the fight is not worth it because the people are not worth it. So, too, did Heinrich von Kleist come to the same conclusion. He had thought he would win the crown, be garlanded with a laurel wreath, but two years before his death, he realized that he actually did not want it.

T.: Nevertheless, he killed himself.

HJS: Yes, because the thought of suicide had always been part of his make-up. But this is totally alien to me. I will continue. Therein lies the only illogicality that could prove who I am. I can do my work, although I do not believe in a world to come of people who would be sympathetic to it or me. People are already so unsympathetic to me, it is appalling. If one just thinks about what is happening today to Kleist on the stage, it's like describing maggots on a corpse! The idea that my work could come into the hands of such an incompetent as Hans Neuenfels is horrible.

T.: Might this simply be a case of indifference toward your work?

HJS: On the one hand, yes, and, on the other hand, I look for the things that concern me, wherever and under what circumstances I might find them. That is the contradiction. I'm building an alternative world in art, and I hope that these things will remain after I am gone. Kleist was much more logical. He burned everything. What was left of his work is preserved only through a few copies.

T.: You can spare yourself through such burning, because with the disappearance of your own world, so too does your counter-world disappear.

HJS: It does not disappear; it reappears at an even higher level.

T.: How can you be so sure?

HJS: Because I just happen to think that it’s over, and not only for Germany or Europe, but for the whole world. The daily news proves my point. One can no longer swim in the lakes. The forests are dying. The cities perish. The changes in a place like Austria’s Bad Aussee, which I love and have visited for thirty years, are enormous. Were Freud, who so often went there, to see the marketplace today and compare it with what he once knew, he would have the feeling that the world is dead.

T.: But in reality, the situation is reversed. Freud is dead and Bad Aussee lives.

HJS: No, it does not live: it stinks, it is noisy, the houses have been destroyed, the people also. Doomsday lies not in the fact that people drop dead. That comes later. First, the culture dies. The terrible thing today is not only that is dirt produced that kills life, the animals and the plants, but also that such dirt, figuratively speaking, pervades art. What someone like Neuenfels does with Kleist is dirt, just as the North Sea and the Mediterranean Sea are now just dirt. We are at such a low point in the history of art, of common culture, that I call it evil. This is now clear and overwhelming, all over the world. You think your evil was defeated in 1945? So it was, from a democratic point of view. People may lie and cheat today, but at least they are not Nazis. I would argue that evil is now much worse, because it lacks the capacity for suffering.

T.: Did Adolf Hitler suffer?

HJS: Quite secretly, yes. Otherwise, he could not have gone to see artworks. He was seduced, even by his own persona, but he was also among those who became more aware. Someone who can grasp Wagner must know what it means to suffer.

T.: Yes, Wagner! But to Wagner, Hitler brought hardly anything of intellectual or aesthetic note.

HJS: Well, that was a matter of struggle. That’s more preferable to me than the tired, cheap pluralism se see today, something that now has a corner on everything. Hitler and his people at least wanted something. Today I see so many who no longer want anything, who are no more than merely naughty and who are incapable of suffering. They have everything, you see: they have enough to eat, and they are warm. The politicians tell them they are freer and richer than ever before. But in truth, they are the poorest and the most unfortunate people who have ever lived. Not to say this, not to describe the situation as it really is, is the cardinal sin of those concerned with art in our time. For me, they are all part of a system that has run us into the ground.

T.: That Hitler wanted or even knew what was happening, through him and his program—this is very questionable.

HJS: Yes, in that he was brilliant.

T.: In what?

HJS: In his role as a medium. I keep going back to how tremendously interesting he is as a phenomenon. In Hitler, the prevailing trends converged. He expressed them. But that could only work because many people participated in his experiment, and to be sure willingly. So there was a will and thus there was also the possibility of suffering. The downfall of the German empire was accompanied, in my view, by a long train of suffering. I find it nowhere today. People grow old, fly everywhere, take on the whole world with the push-button devices in their homes, lie there, drink here, yet achieve just the minimum. They live as if they were in paradise, but in them there is still a small flame that says that they actually want something else. They dare not say it out loud, however.

T.: Is all of that not connected to suffering?

HJS: No, this is not suffering. Depression, yes, but not suffering.

T.: But even depression is unpleasant.

HJS: Yes, but it does not constitute suffering. In a beggar or disabled person one can still detect some degree of suffering. Today's so-called sufferers, though, are so paltry in their self-expression. One goes to a psychiatrist. One swallows tablets.

T.: That's enough, isn't it?

HJS: Not for me.

T.: A creative person might try to turn such a situation into a poem.

HJS: Yes, but what comes out of it? That's no longer any art for me. I think that much of what is produced today has nothing to do with art. What is displayed in documents is not art. What is called modern music is just noise.

T.: This doesn't help us to move forward.

HJS: What?

T.: This blind rage against everything that is new.

HJS: Look, I just read that they have replaced the real fire in Bayreuth with laser beams. This is hailed as a victory. But what does it mean? It represents a mutilation of all our natural qualities. We have lost touch with the elements. He who no longer boils water or lights a fire cannot comprehend art. This modern cult, which is driven in today's theaters by lamps, is sheer madness. In the former royal box now sits the head of lighting, watching a television and monitoring a computer. That must all be removed from the theater. On stage, I want to see crafts, people, and things, not gadgets.

T.: Would you like to direct at Bayreuth?

HJS: It was once was in my thoughts, but Bayreuth missed this opportunity and now I am no longer interested.

T.: Was anything ever offered to you there?

HJS: No. Since my film *The Confessions of Winifred Wagner* (1975) I have been a *persona non grata*—that's how it goes.

T.: Have you been banned?

HJS: Not specifically, but I do not get tickets. Once, years ago, I wanted to see *Parsifal* at Bayreuth. I thought the directing of Götz Friedrich might be interesting, which was probably a mistake. Believe it or not, I heard the premiere of the first portable radio in the canteen there. Meanwhile, my involvement with Wagner has come to an end, because he is so dominating a figure that he nearly crushes me.

T.: Today Kleist is your topic.

HJS: Yes, but that is not taken notice of by the critics.

T.: But your staging of Kleist's *Penthesilea* (1808), as a one-person piece with Edith Clever in all the roles, has been highly praised.

HJS: Edith Clever was praised, I was not. They swept me out of the picture. I was wiped away. This is a whole new combat situation for me. The critics wrote about the production as if no one had directed it. The truth is that every movement by Clever, each sound she spoke, was choreographed by me. Then there is the spiritual dimension, about which no one wrote, either. What I showed, through the example of a person who, out of love, breaks the law of the Amazons, is the sacrifice of Prussia, and from every possible social angle. Today, with my help, Germany is once again visible as a world standard for art and morality—a status that was indeed denied the country by Hitler.

Figure 33. Penthesilea, *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1987*

T.: Wrongly?

HJS: Of course, wrongly. It was a scandal.

T.: Do you want the kingdom with its old borders to return?

HJS: I do not mean what I have said in a political sense. But you cannot deny that this country was a model spiritual and moral one, and not only for Europe. The rural culture of Prussia was of particular importance. I've never experienced it in the same way since. My father was a landowner in Pomerania: that's where I grew up.

T.: You mourn for the lost paradise of your childhood.

HJS: Such a paradise it was not, but it *was* human. Work was still connected to sweat because it was done by hand: the mowing, the raking of the hay, etc. We had day laborers. They gladly did the work. For me it's a question of attitude. We worked not so much for money as because the cow had to be milked. Today, you have nothing but concern for profit, business, and consumption on the highest scale. One has taken the real gold away from the workers and given them fool's gold in its place. This may ultimately arouse the primitive instincts in them.

T.: Who has done this?

HJS: Certain people who make us dependent on a "replacement system." This has been constructed so skillfully that now you cannot do without certain things. It is argued that this or that should be bought, and eventually re-bought, because it is more convenient, cheaper. In the end you do not need it any more than you do a car. Evil today manifests itself not in the fact that you have built a concentration camp,

but in the fact that you have built a monument to consumerism. They promise the masses happiness, but this is only a substitute happiness. What should concern us today, then, is the grand delusion of democracy. In democracy lies our downfall.

T.: Do you drive a car?

HJS: Of course I drive a car, and I would also like to drive very fast. But I do not drive even at a hundred kilometers per hour, because I know that I can then easily go up to 180 kilometers and pollute the forest. So it is the case that I, too, am dependent. But I suffer not least among all others. When I see a plastic chair, for example, I go mad. Why does everything have to be made out of plastic in a coffee house? It is exasperating. Sometimes I feel a kind of insane hatred in situations like this. I hate the café owner, the waiter who goes along with the owner, the customer who does not refuse to sit in such a chair.

T.: And where does all this lead?

HJS: It leads to a situation where I often walk alone for days on the street, because I cannot stand the people inside their gray houses, their empty desires, as they gradually destroy everything. There are people who can no longer be called human, you know, because they are spiritually dead already.

T.: At the end you are the only survivor.

HJS: Not the only one.

T.: Who else is there?

HJS: Oh, dear God, there could still be those in whom something could be awakened. I experienced something very strange through the production of *Penthesilea*. I received letters that showed me that, in some people, everything of a moral, spiritual, and aesthetic nature was still in place. That was quite amazing. This is not to say that these people are suddenly so different; the decline will not stopped by them. But they will suffer more.

T.: Don’t you have any hope?

HJS: No, the situation hopeless. But if there were many such “awakened” people, if I had my own house, so to speak, like Wagner, where the effect of my pieces could spread like wildfire to conquer the world, then I would be speaking differently. Alas, this is not the case, it should not be, and it is also not important. Think of people like Beckett, Heidegger, Cioran, and Jünger, who also said let everybody make his own dirt. I don’t want anybody to convert. I don’t fight anymore, not because I’m so smart, but because the others, unfortunately, are all lost.

T.: Nevertheless, one question: What would happen if you could determine public policy in Germany?

HJS: That's very theoretical.

T.: What would happen?

HJS: It would be terrible. Nothing would be left. Everything would have to be taken away: cars gone, sneakers replaced by proper footwear, nude swimming forbidden because it is an insult to have to look at such shamelessness. People should go somewhere private if they want to be naked. So there would be a lot of change at first. In ten years the situation would be excruciating, maybe even in three. But then people would be happy, I guarantee you. They would have less, but they would be happy. That a certain wealth does not make you happy, this is ancient knowledge. It has been dramatized by Nestroy.

T.: But in what you have said, what is lacking is a sense of mission.

HJS: I do not have one.

T.: You give the impression that you do.

HJS: That is just a mind game.

T.: In your published book *Die freudlose Gesellschaft—Notizen aus dem letzten Jahr* (*Notes from Germany*, 1981), you write about revenge, which, for you, goes so far that you would shoot any opponent if you had the opportunity to do so.

HJS: Yes, where revenge is concerned, I am dangerous. If someone wants to destroy my work, which was so difficult to produce in the first place, then mentally I become a monster. I just want to kill. Kleist was the same.

T.: Whom did Kleist want to kill?

HJS: Goethe, for example, to whom he sent several quite nasty epigrams, because Goethe had messed up his play *The Broken Pitcher* (1808) in its production at Weimar. Or Iffland, who, despite repeated entreaties, did not read Kleist's *Katherine of Heilbronn* (1808). Iffland was a homosexual and, in the theater, a very powerful man. So when all of Kleist's entreaties did not help, he wrote that it was a pity that Katherine was not a boy.

T.: But that's harmless.

HJS: That was not harmless. Iffland was exposed to all for what he really was.

T.: You yourself want to destroy, then.

HJS: But I do not do it, actually. The greatest victories come from the reconciliations in which blood enemies can approach each other again. To me now come some critics, who for years behaved shabbily toward my work, but who say today that they really thought like me yet did not dare to write it. Then there is one's wife who stands nearby and simply nods, in neutrality. This is so touching yet so outrageous, because it shows that our age lives with a fundamental lie. Something that everyone knows, and that should be said, is not said. Earlier it was *someone* who did certain things or made certain statements—like Galileo, who was ruined because he told the scientific truth. Today, we may live in liberal, democratic societies in the West, yet there are certain things that cannot be said, certain subjects that cannot be openly discussed.

T.: They may yet be said and discussed.

HJS: But what would be the consequences?!

T.: You would have to suffer those yourself.

HJS: For my next project, Kleist's *The Marquise of O.* (1808), I'm trying to find a theater and investors. But there's nothing available to me: no space, no funds. I have to beg, write letters, eat humble pie, yet every day I'm told that I am the greatest. It is atrocious.

T.: Perhaps there will be a reward in the Hereafter.

HJS: In such a thing I do not believe. When I'm dead, it's over. Only earth remains.

T.: But contaminated!

HJS: Yes, bad, right? You see what that means to me. I have nothing against the fact that man has broken down like an animal. But the fact that man has been mixed in with everything that lies beneath the ground—this is terrible! Any worm is dearer to me than such artificiality.

T.: Did you get a Christian education?

HJS: There was a Protestant church in our village. We went there. My father prayed every night. The rituals of faith for me were certainly decisive, although already as a child I was skeptical, in an almost frivolous way, about the Christian understanding of God. I do not believe in the Christian God, but I acknowledge that this system, after nearly two thousand years, is working very well. The pagan rulers figured out that it was to their advantage to make this God their, and our, own. The result was a strange

Figure 34. Die Marquise von O. "vom Süden in den Norden verlegt"
(The Marquise of O.), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1989*

symbiosis of power and the early Christian ideas of poverty and subordination—very clever, very culturally adept.

T.: And very cruel.

HJS: Naturally. This must be quite obvious by now. Injustice, cruelty, blood—they have never been a hindrance for the arts. Actually, there should have been great art

under Hitler. Why there wasn’t, that is the question. I think the reason is that Hitler himself wanted to elevate his nation to the level of a work of art.

T.: He thoroughly failed to do so.

HJS: Well, maybe his artistic aim was unconscious destruction. But surely he would have wanted something other than what he finally got. To me the greatest perversion of the devil, in his will even more than in his anti-will, is this dully driving, diminishing self-aggrandizement as practiced by people today.

T.: Which people?

HJS: I mean no one in particular.

T.: But you cannot speak so all-inclusively of the people.

HJS: I’m talking about a majority who, in their evil impulses, are supported by those who govern.

T.: Do you want a dictatorship?

HJS: You could say a monarchy.

T.: In an earlier interview you said you wished a Khomeini on the Germans.

HJS: This is what I meant: it would be necessary for someone to apply fundamentalist thinking to the situation in which we find ourselves here in Germany, but thinking that is based on our socio-political foundations, not on those of Mr. Khomeini.

T.: What would such a person do?

HJS: I have already answered that question.

T.: Would there be a ban on skinny-dipping?

HJS: For example.

T.: And anyone who opposes such a ban, gets gassed?

HJS: But I say to you, the King of Prussia was not yet Hitler, and of course such a ruler would not be tolerated today.

T.: There will never again be a Prussian king.

HJS: No, such an opportunity has been squandered.

T.: By Hitler?

HJS: Yes, but I don't want to talk about him anymore. Now I'm interested in other things. Hitler occupied me every day for ten years: you can have another look at my *Hitler, A Film From Germany* (1977, a.k.a. *Our Hitler*) if you want to see the evidence.

T.: Hitler occupied you as a role model?

HJS: No, not at all, but as the possibility for a closer approach, on my part, to the masses, which on a fundamental level are entirely foreign to me. Through Hitler, I could understand the concept of the masses. This was a painful process. I have lived, once again, through what happened under the Nazis, have had a look at the faces of the torturers, have visited the Nazi-widows, have listened to everything, read everything because I wanted to understand the perpetrators, their conflicts, their willpower.

T.: Was that so strong?

HJS: Initially, yes, because it was necessary to fulfill a principle, to overcome one's weaker self, as they say. One was not permitted to be soft on the ramp at Auschwitz.

T.: Do you admire such willpower?

HJS: No, but I can understand both sides of it: the side that violates principles so as to act in a humane manner, and the side that says that those principles adopted must be carried out no matter what. Sartre has illustrated the problem using the example of the French Revolution. You had to follow certain principles back then also. There is a line that one has to cross, and once it is crossed, things get easier The people who today kill the male chicks in their cages because they need only the hens, no longer remember that they are destroying life because it has become a habit.

T.: On the other hand, even you are not immune.

HJS: Certainly not. In order to live, you must kill something for food. This could be the mouse that is eaten by the cat, or the plant that we eat as a vegetable. Therefore, I say, art, like ancient sacrificial rituals, has the task of atonement by default, of indirectly absolving us of guilt, which we take upon ourselves merely because we exist. I'm not saying, like Adorno, "No more poetry after Auschwitz," but only *poems*, only works of art. The atonement through art is my only goal. I'm not doing this for myself. I'm doing it for others, even if they know nothing about it.

T.: Then you are a martyr.

HJS: How so?

T.: Because you are suffering on behalf of others.

HJS: Suffering is part of what I do, yes. Nevertheless, I actually do gratifying work, too. Dirty work is what the guy does who works at a slaughterhouse. I do not mean that he is cruel, but of course he does the worst kind of work, which we have to forgive, while I’m doing the most distinguished kind, in this sense. And I do not want to change places with the butcher.

T.: He probably does not want to change places with you, either.

HJS: Just so. One does this, the other that. Not everyone can be an artist. I am against the confusion of realms. There are distinctions that must be made.

T.: But not the distinctions of old Prussia.

HJS: Of course not. Distinctions are constantly being redefined, as is the earth itself. After death, the earth remains, to arise anew out of one’s ashes. But if the earth goes to pieces, then nothing can rise up. That spells the end of things, the end of the world.

T.: Not the end of the world.

HJS: No, but the end of man. We are only a tiny part of a large process.

T.: As a boy, what idea did you have of your later life?

HJS: I wanted to become a photographer.

T.: A famous one?

HJS: Well, yes. This had to do with Prussian traditions: to want to furnish the world with a moral principle, to be brave, a respectable man before whom people would take off their hats and stand up. Inside me there was something almost warlike.

T.: But you’ve never been a soldier.

HJS: No, I was too young.

T.: Did you regret later?

HJS: I have often thought about it. That, weapon in hand, I would confront an enemy and cut him up or otherwise myself be dispatched into the afterlife—this is inconceivable to me. On the other hand, I think it’s bad that, as far as we Germans

are concerned, wars can no longer be conducted. We live in a peace that makes us think everything is fine, but this just pushes conflicts—internal as well as external—to another level. To take an example from the past, the expulsion of Germans from the Polish eastern territories represented something for which one actually had to go to war. There are sometimes injustices that cannot be solved otherwise.

T.: But it would be unfair to operate in such a way, as one would be in a constant state of war.

HJS: So must it be, then. Otherwise life would be a lie.

T.: Do you not think it's time to move the idea of fighting to the intellectual field?

HJS: This would only tame the spirit temporarily. Such a cheap peace I find horrendous. But I'm obviously split. I hesitate because I'm very fond of the Poles, but prefer the Russians since Gorbachev. I contradict myself. On the one hand, I'm like Kleist, who could not bear that the Germans took up common cause with Napoleon, the enemy; on the other hand, I say thank God that war is no longer possible.

T.: What do you think your function would be if war were to break out between Germany and another nation?

HJS: I do not know. Alexander Kluge once said that we'd all be staff filmmakers and would sit around discussing Nietzsche and Beethoven. Even Kleist, although he wanted war, never fired a shot.

T.: Only at you.

HJS: Yes, as it were.

T.: And at Henriette Vogel, poor thing.

HJS: Well, that was something else. I mean, please do not be so quick to declare your pacifism, but just think of what it means to stand up for something with one's own body, as Ernst Jünger did. Because it means, in case of emergency, that to my mother and to my daughter, nothing shall happen, but to me …

T.: And what will happen to Alexander Kluge?

HJS: We'll see.

T.: For Kluge you would not risk your life?

HJS: On the contrary. But I also have a lot of friends abroad, against whom I would not fight in any event. Nevertheless, I can envision some very substantial people

whom I would have to exclude from this list of untouchables—I do not mean for the purpose of war, but by saying publicly, for example, that they should not be in power. This kind of courage no one has today, because everyone fears for his career.

T.: You do not?

HJS: No. But you can see how I go against all currents.

T.: At the same time you complain about your lack of success.

HJS: But then there is always an Edith Clever who comes my way.

T.: It seems almost as if you are making a virtue out of your predicament. Since you fail to get the desired result, you style yourself the rebellious lone wolf.

HJS: I don’t think so. My way of doing things is so different from everything that obtains today, my system of values so radically against artificiality and fakeness, that I have no chance in this world. It is simply amazing to me that I make films because film is so plastic. This is confusing, of course. Throughout my work with Edith Clever I pointed to this contradiction. She is the theater woman. I am the movie man. She accepted me, and I violated her by means of the plastic art.

T.: Was it difficult to win her over?

HJS: It was a struggle. I met her at the Berlin Schaubühne, and she appeared to me to be a female battleship our time. This theater, moreover, was precisely the embodiment of what I did not want. So I had to solve these twin problems, intellectually as well as artistically. Peter Stein was initially neutral and watched with a gracious toleration that made my problem something of his own. But that changed quickly when he realized that I was dangerous to him. My play *The Night* was planned as a production at the Schaubühne, and this led to the break. Stein went to Paris, got seven hundred thousand marks for an already planned staging of Genet’s *The Blacks* (1958), and we were unloaded of each other. The production of *The Night* was saved only because Edith Clever and I decided to waive our fee. It was a humiliation.

T.: War Stein jealous?

HJS: Certainly he was! Someone, an absolute nobody, a pariah comes and pulls from his harem this gem named Edith Clever. He was her host. You always think that in theaters matters are handled democratically, but in truth there is enormous power exerted. One of my biggest disappointments was to see how Stein dealt with people, with his workers, including the acting ensemble—horrible! Out of all of this came a confrontation with an earlier, important partner of mine. I had adored him for a long time. But then he behaved in quite a filthy manner, and Edith Clever the opposite.

She was supposed to work with this man on a guest production in Rome, but was in the middle of rehearsals for our piece. He forced her to go to Rome. She followed him this one time, but never again. Shortly thereafter, this individual left the stage.

T.: You mean because of you?

HJS: I do not want to speculate. But, to speak only of Peter Stein, someone like him, this flagship of the establishment left, is naturally hard to bear, and something of a relic to me. Since duels are no longer the order of the day, he had no other choice, in his conflict with me, than to cede.

T.: Now you are the winner.

HJS: I did not experience this as a triumph.

T.: Edith Clever says that working with you is the only thing that gives her joy.

HJS: I did not know at the moment what I'd do without her. It would have been very bad to lose Edith. After this, only *Our Hitler* occupied me: some people remain so attached to the major subject of their lives.

T.: It's still better than never to begin anything.

HJS: Yes, ten years ago. But now it's too late. One cannot rummage about forever in that time, which was great only because blood flowed and because there were victims. I would ban any preoccupation with Hitler today. I can see that now this is only business, a whetstone for careers. It is no longer an issue of suffering and death and principles, but simply one of proving that you are on the right page. It would be much more interesting to show how to get back to the starting point again. What I resent, in any event, about the victims, as well as the perpetrators, is that they are not able, on the basis of suffering, to do something new, to go on in a spiritual sense.

T.: Go where?

HJS: Such a phenomenon is visible, for example, in *Penthesilea*. This woman loves. And thus she redeems Prussia.

T.: This is your very personal interpretation.

HJS: Yes, but you can also see *Penthesilea* in a completely private way, as a love story. I have nothing against that.

T.: About your relationship with women, well, we have not yet even broached that subject.

HJS: I’m determined not to say much about it.

T.: Did you love your mother?

HJS: My mother left the house soon after my birth. There was a stepmother, actually the estate administrator’s wife, whom my father made his concubine. He was a man who considered it honorable to have many women. I’m not like that. On the contrary, I find it terrible. Still, I liked him. He was a generous, almost cordial man, although he could be very strict.

T.: Were you ever beaten?

HJS: Yes, with a whip, and quite severely.

T.: For what kind of behavior?

HJS: I threw small cats into the water to see if they could swim, and I hatched the eggs in birds’ nests by myself, all the while watching to see if the mother was coming. I knew that I would be punished. But I could not help myself. It was an uncontrollable impulse.

T.: So you showed your demonic traits very early!

HJS: I could tell you more.

T.: Did you also torture people?

HJS: No, an animal. I was already married at the time, a grown man. This is very embarrassing to me. I was living in a castle in the countryside, because I had worked there. It was evening. A bird came flying into the room, and because he was so high in the air, I threw a pillow at him. I wanted to catch him. He fluttered this way and that, from corner to corner. Then suddenly, thump, he was on the floor in front of me, dead. I was plunged into despair.

T.: You wanted him alive?

HJS: Yes, for sure. I wanted to hold him in my hands, nothing more. I didn’t intend any evil.

T.: You may not have intended it, but you did it.

HJS: My wife knows nothing about this. It will kill me if you include this bit in the published interview.

T.: But your abysses go much deeper than the killing of an errant bird.

HJS: You're right. Sometimes, when I walk down a street where there are many people, such a rage grabs hold of me, so merciless a desire to destroy, that I get worried about myself. But this has its reasons. Recently I was in Valladolid in Spain. Nowadays there is in every Spanish restaurant, every bar, what they call elevator music, as if each African tribe had been supplied with bikes, and now all its members were going about on wheels—this is the kind of disparity I am talking about. I thought I was going crazy. Some of these places have radio and television on at the same time. It was so bad that I got to the point where I said, "I'll kill them all." How can people live like that? Why have they exchanged their human voices for plastic tones?

T.: To find that out, you would have to talk to the people themselves.

HJS: With them you cannot talk. They are just so lazy and fat and stupid and degenerate, not only stupid in a naïve sense—naïve people are O.K. if they are poor or totally uneducated—but no, these people are comfortable, overfed, loud, ugly. Oh, how "beautiful" people can be, how adorable! I do not hate people as such, but what has become of them. Once I went to a beer hall in Munich. There was a bandstand there with instruments. But what did the musicians do? They played into the microphone. What madness! What need was there for a microphone when the instruments are already so loud? I do not understand. My response is that I will stay at home. For years now I've only sat crying in my apartment, even screaming like a wounded wild animal.

T.: Are you afraid?

HJS: Yes, I have a fear of being touched. When that happens, I stay very still, and as calm as possible, for a long period of time, uttering not a single word. People think, oh, he is so kind, with him you can say or do anything you want—yes, until you get to a certain point. Then someone is going to get killed. Then I'm going to have to smash in a couple of faces.

T.: For God's sake!

HJS: Yes, indeed. Is all that on tape? I'm afraid I may have carried on for too long.

NOTE

[1] "'They Want to Kill Me': An Interview with the Filmmaker and Theater Director Hans-Jürgen Syberberg," by the Editors, *Die Zeit* (*Time*), Sept. 30, 1988. Translated by R. J. Cardullo.

IAN BURUMA[1]

13. THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE *HEIMAT*: NAZISM AND THE WORK OF FILM DIRECTOR HANS-JÜRGEN SYBERBERG

1.

East Berlin, October 1990: Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the grand master of cinematic *kitsch*, walked into the old conference room where the German Communists founded their state. He had just seen part of his film *Hitler, A Film from Germany* (1977) for the first time in years. "My God," he said to a gathering of people that included Susan Sontag, the actress Edith Clever, and various East German cultural worthies who smiled a lot and drank vodka. "My God, I was really provocative! If only my enemies had realized…. I am surprised I'm still alive!" Whereupon the artist stroked his beautiful tie, smoothed his superbly coiffed head, and looked around the table like the cat who had just eaten the canary.

Two days later, we met once again in the former government building, now the Academy of Arts, to hear Syberberg, Sontag, Clever, and other members of a distinguished panel discuss his works, in particular the Hitler film and his recently published book of essays, which has caused a big fuss in German literary circles. Syberberg began the proceedings by saying that only here, in the former Communist capital, could he openly express his views, unlike in West Berlin, where the Academy was controlled by his left-wing enemies.

Syberberg's delivery was remarkable: an almost silky tone of voice alternating with what can only be described as a theatrical tirade: a tirade against the filth, the shamelessness, the soulless greed, and vacuous idiocy of contemporary (West) German culture, corrupted by America, by rootless "Jewish Leftists," by democracy. Syberberg also believes that the pernicious legacy of Auschwitz has crippled the German identity that was rooted in the German soil, in Wagner's music, in the poetry of Hölderlin and the literature of Kleist, in the folk songs of Thuringia and the noble history of Prussian kings—a *Kultur*, in short, transmitted from generation to generation, through the unbroken bloodlines of the German people, so cruelly divided for forty years as punishment for the Holocaust.

Well, said some of Syberberg's champions on the panel, shifting uneasily in their seats, these opinions may be absurd, even offensive, but he's still a great artist. Then an elderly man got up in the audience. He had seen the Hitler film, he said, his voice trembling with quiet rage, and he thought it was dreadful. He was left with the

R. J. Cardullo (Ed.), Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the Film Director as Critical Thinker, 165–174.

impression that Syberberg actually liked Hitler. And although he was a Polish Jew who had lost most of his family in the death camps, he could almost be tempted to become a Nazi himself after seeing that film: "All those speeches, all that beautiful music …"

Then followed a remark that stayed in my mind, as I tried to make sense of Syberberg, and of the literary debates raging in Germany this year, in the wake of November 1989: "Why is it," the Polish Jew said, "that when a forest burns, German intellectuals spend all their time discussing the deeper meaning of fire, instead of helping to put the damned thing out?"

I thought of Günter Grass, who, with the lugubrious look of a wounded walrus, complained night after night on television that nobody would listen to him anymore. His constant invocation of "Auschwitz" as a kind of talisman to ward off a reunited Germany had the air of desperation, the desperation of a man who had lost his vision of Eden. His Eden was not the former German Democratic Republic, to be sure, but at least the GDR carried, for Grass, the promise of a better Germany, a truly socialist Germany—a Germany without greed, Hollywood, and ever-lurking fascism.

I thought of Syberberg, who gloomily predicted that the awesome spectacle of a newly unified German *Volk*, his vision of Eden, would soon be replaced by the rancid democracy of party politics. And I thought of Christa Wolf, who made a speech in East Berlin exactly a year ago. The revolution, she said, had also liberated language. One of the liberated words is "dream": "Let us dream that this is socialism, and let us stay where we are."[2]

Syberberg, Grass, and Wolf: they would seem to have little in common, apart from being earnest German intellectuals who loathe "Hollywood." But they all bring to mind something the wise old utopian, Ernst Bloch, once wrote:

> If an object [of political belief] appears as an ideal one, then salvation from its demanding and sometimes demandingly enchanted spell is only possible through a catastrophe, but even that does not always come true. Idolatry of love is a misfortune that continues to cast a spell on us even when the object is understood. Sometimes even illusionary political ideals continue to have an effect after an empirical catastrophe, as if they were—genuine.[3]

2.

In her famous essay on Syberberg's film *Hitler, A Film from Germany*, Susan Sontag makes much of the multiplicity of voices and views expressed in his work: "One can find almost anything in Syberberg's passionately voluble film (short of a Marxist analysis or a shred of feminist awareness)."[4] It is not that she ignores those aspects of Syberberg that upset many German critics—the Wagnerian intoxication with deep Germanness, for example—but she sees them as single strands in a rich combination of ideas, images, and reflections. They are not to be dismissed, she thinks, but they also should not be allowed to obscure the genius of his work, which cannot be

reduced to certain vulgar opinions, to the quirks one almost expects of a great and eccentric artist.

Figure 35. Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland (Hitler, A Film from Germany, *a.k.a.* Our Hitler), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1977*

It is a respectable view, which, however, is not shared by the artist himself. As he made clear in his essays, as well as onstage at the East Berlin Academy of Arts, Syberberg does not separate his political, social, and aesthetic opinions from his art. Indeed, they are at the core of his creative work.

His ideas, expressed in films, theater, and essays, are certainly consistent. In the collage of images and sounds that make up his Hitler film, which, as Susan Sontag rightly observes, is a kind of theater of the mind, there is never any doubt in whose mind the action takes place. It is not Hitler's mind, even though Syberberg salutes the dictator as a demonic colleague, a man who saw his destruction of Europe as an endless, epic newsreel. Hitler, in Syberberg's opinion, was "a genius, who acted as the medium of the *Weltgeist*." But it is Syberberg's mind, not to mention his *Geist*, that has shaped everything in the spectacle; and the fascinating thing is that Syberberg's philosophy, if that is what it is, is articulated most clearly by a ventriloquist's dummy in the shape of Hitler.

This monologue, in which Hitler, as a melancholy puppet, talks about his legacy to the world, comes at the end of the third part of the four-part film:

> Friends, let us praise. Praise the progress of the world from the other world of death. Praise from Adolf Hitler on this world after me…. No one before me has changed the West as thoroughly as we have. We have brought the Russians all

> the way to the Elbe and we got the Jews their state. And, after a fashion, a new colony for the USA—just ask Hollywood about its export markets. I know the tricks better than any of you, I know what to say and do for the masses. I am the school of the successful democrat. Just look around, they are in a fair way to take over our legacy…. People like me want to change the world. And the Germany of the Third Reich was merely the Faustian prelude in the theater. You are the heirs. Worldwide.
>
> On November 10, 1975, the United Nations resolved by a two-thirds majority, quite openly, that Zionism is a form of racism…. And in the United States? Nothing about gas at Auschwitz on American TV. It would damage the American oil industry and everything having to do with oil. You see, we did win, in bizarre ways. In America…. Long live mediocrity, freedom, and equality for the international average. Among third-class people interested only in the annual profit increase or a higher salary, destroying themselves, relentlessly, ruthlessly, moving toward their end and what an end.[5]

It is disturbing to hear condemnations of Zionism, let alone sneers about "third-class people," through the mouth of Hitler, even if he is just an effigy, a dummy transmitting Syberberg's voice. But the message is not new. The rantings about America's being the heir to Hitler's projects would hardly surprise if they came from the pen of, say, Allen Ginsberg in full flight (Christa Wolf I shall leave until a later date). And the offensive trick of defusing German guilt by equating Hitler with Zionism also has a familiar ring. As for blaming democracy, Hitler's first victim, for its own demise (as Syberberg puts it in one of his essays: "Electoral democracy logically leads to Hitler"), that is a favorite ploy of antidemocrats everywhere. But Syberberg's disgust with the third-class postwar world goes further than that; it has turned his misty mind toward a dark and exalted vision of the German *Kultur*, which makes many of his countrymen squirm.

Syberberg believes in Germany as a *Naturgemeinschaft*, an organic community whose art grows from the native soil. Art, he writes, was once "the balsam on the wounds of the 'I,' which was identical with the native land," whereas now art has lost its meaning, for the postwar Germans have lost their identity as Germans, have severed their umbilical cord with the soil that nurtured them. Postwar German art is "filthy and sick." It is "in praise of cowardice and treason, of criminals, whores, of hate, ugliness, of lies and crimes and all that is unnatural."[6] It is, in other words, rootless and degenerate. German art can only be elevated from this stinking swamp by dedicating itself once again to beauty, the beauty of nature and the *Volk*. Like many attempts to make a cult of beauty, Syberberg's art often plummets from its exalted heights into *kitsch*: Wagner booming away on the soundtrack as a tearful Viennese aesthete reads Syberberg's poetic vision of impending doom.

A German journalist once did the obvious thing: he showed Syberberg a tract written in the 1930s by Alfred Rosenberg on degenerate art and compared it to Syberberg's words. Syberberg admitted there were similarities, but argued that just

because Rosenberg said the same thing, this didn't mean it was wrong. Thank God, he said, he hadn't thought of Rosenberg, for then he might not have stated his honest opinion, for such is the terrible taboo left by the Nazi past on German aesthetic traditions.

But who has imposed this taboo? And why have German art and society "degenerated" to such a low point? In Syberberg's new book of essays, *Vom Unglück und Glück der Kunst in Deutschland nach dem letzten Kriege* (*On the Misfortune and Fortune of Art in Germany after the Last War*, 1990), we get to the nub of the matter:

> The Jewish interpretation of the world followed upon the Christian, just as the Christian one followed Roman and Greek culture. So now Jewish analyses, images, definitions of art, science, sociology, literature, politics, and the information media dominate. Marx and Freud are the pillars that mark the road from East to West. Neither is imaginable without Jewishness. Their systems are defined by it. The axis USA-Israel guarantees the parameters. That is the way people think now, the way they feel, act, and disseminate information. We live in the Jewish epoch of European cultural history. And we can only wait, at the pinnacle of our technological power, for our last judgment at the edge of the apocalypse…. So that's the way it looks, for all of us, suffocating in unprecedented technological prosperity, without spirit, without meaning.

The indictment continues in Syberberg's strange, ungrammatical, baroque style: "Those who want to have good careers go along with Jews and Leftists," and "the race of superior men [*Rasse der Herrenmenschen*] has been seduced, the land of poets and thinkers has become the fat booty of corruption, of business, of lazy comfort." Over and over, the message is banged home: the real winners of the last war are the Jews, who have regained their motherland, their ancient *Heimat*, the very thing the Germans have lost. And the Jews had their revenge for Auschwitz by dropping the atom bomb and atomizing the *Kultur* of Europe through their barren, rationalist, rootless philosophy.

The old man who stood up in the East Berlin Academy was wrong, of course: Syberberg does not like Hitler. Like Ernst Jünger, an author he often quotes, he sees Hitler as a megalomaniac, who vulgarized and distorted ideals that should have been kept pure, beautiful, in the custodianship either of rough and simple peasants, the purest representatives of the old *Volk*, or of aristocratic *Feingeister*, such as Jünger and Syberberg, the true heirs of Hölderlin, Kleist, and Wagner. Hitler's greatest crime was not to kill six million Jews—an act of which Syberberg does not approve—but to destroy the *Herrenvolk*, or, rather, the culture of the *Herrenvolk*, by tainting it with his name, by making, as Syberberg often puts it, *Blut und Boden* (Blood and Soil) a taboo.

Syberberg is not so much a crypto- or neo-Nazi as a reactionary dandy, of the type found before the war in the Action Française, or in certain British aristocratic circles (whose spirit lives on in *The Salisbury Review* today). Like T. S. Eliot, Ernst Jünger,

Charles Maurras, and Curzio Malaparte, he is a self-appointed savior of European *Kultur* from the corrupt forces of alien, often Semitic, barbarism. And culture, in his mind, is associated with an ideal community, always in the past, before the expulsion from Eden, a *Gemeinschaft*, where the *Volk* was united, rooted, organic, and hierarchic. "German unity, Silesia, beauty, feeling, enthusiasm. Perhaps we should rethink Hitler. Perhaps we should rethink ourselves."

As the examples of Malaparte and even Jünger show, this is not a matter of being left or right: it can be both. It is certainly anti-democratic, for the institutionalized conflict of interests, without which democracy cannot exist, is deeply offensive to those who dream of organic communities. In Syberberg's case, his politics are in fact as Green as they are tinged with Brown. He worships nature in a way only a man who holds people, as opposed to the People, in contempt. His ideal view of the *Naturgemeinschaft Deutschland*, comprises "plants, animals, and people," in that order.

Figure 36. Die Marquise von O. "vom Süden in den Norden verlegt" (The Marquise of O.), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1989*

Yet, for this most dandified of aesthetes, it is not so much nature itself as the idea of nature that appeals, the anti-urban ideal of a natural order. His work in theater and cinema is anything but natural, or organic, or raw, but, on the contrary, highly artificial. If Syberberg had a sense of humor, his art would be camp. When Edith Clever ends her monologue in the recent Berlin stage production of Kleist's *The Marquise of O*. (1808; directed by Syberberg), she turns around, and in a gesture that is supposed to denote deep melancholy, stretches her arm and releases a dead oak leaf, which flutters slowly, like an arid butterfly, to the ground. She just, but only just, gets away with it because she is a great actress. In lesser hands this moment of supreme "beauty" would be more like something out of Charles Ludlam's Theater of the Ridiculous.

It is not for his aesthetics, however, that Syberberg has been attacked, but for his politics. The strongest criticism of his book was published in *Der Spiegel*, the liberal weekly magazine.[7] Syberberg's views, wrote the critic, were precisely those that led to the book burning in 1933, and prepared the way for the Final Solution of 1942. In fact, he went on, they are worse, for "now we know that they are caked with blood…. They are not just abstruse nonsense, they are criminal." The *Spiegel* critic compared Syberberg to the young Hitler, the failed art student in Vienna, who rationalized his failure by blaming it on a conspiracy of left-wing Jews. Syberberg feels he is an unappreciated genius, and he too blames it on the same forces.

Frank Schirrmacher, the young literary editor of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, and the scourge of woolly thinkers of all political persuasions, is equally opposed to Syberberg and draws similar parallels with the 1920s and 1930s. And like the critic in *Der Spiegel*, he singles out for special censure an interview with *Die Zeit* in which Syberberg claimed that he "could understand" the feeling of the SS man on the railway ramp of Auschwitz, who, in Himmler's words, "made himself hard" for the sake of fulfilling his mission to the end. He did not admire this feeling, but he could understand it—just as he could understand its opposite, the rejection of principles to act humanely.

No doubt Syberberg, who genuinely does not regard himself as a Nazi sympathizer, sees such attacks as further proof of his claim that a taboo is blocking an honest appraisal of German history. As soon as one talks about anything that smacks of mystical ties with the German soil, or anything that suggests identification with certain aspects or people of the Nazi period, out pops the Nazi bogeyman, and one is immediately called a fascist or a Nazi. There are, of course, some good reasons for this.

Nonetheless, Syberberg, despite his self-aggrandizing paranoia as a persecuted genius, has a point. It is true that it is difficult to be an admirer of German Romanticism these days without being reminded of its perversions. To talk seriously about the ties of Blood and Soil in Germany is impossible without thinking of the consequences of such ideas in the past. It is also true, however, that anti-fascism has become reified, to use the phrase invented by the great Jewish Leftist himself, Karl Marx. It was not

something you could argue about. Anti-fascism was the state religion and historical alibi of the *ancien régime* in the eastern half of Germany, and it gave the Leftist intellectuals of the Federal Republic a kind of moral stick with which to beat off all challenges from the right.

One can easily understand why anti-fascism should have become an obsessive concern of the liberal German intelligentsia, and why the more prominent "antifa" spokesmen have cloaked themselves in the moral mantles of a higher priesthood. It has to do with collective guilt, with the fact that many collaborators with Nazism continued to occupy important positions in the West German judiciary, in business, even at the universities. It is also because until the 1960s Nazism was a guilty national secret in the Federal Republic, something one didn't discuss in polite circles. Those that did were often precisely the people Syberberg accused of robbing the Germans of their precious identity: returned refugees from Hitler, such as Theodor Adorno and Ernst Bloch.

A reaction was bound to come and it emerged in the 1980s, when historical revisionism and neoconservatism became popular everywhere, from Chicago to Frankfurt to Tokyo. Some of the reaction, not only in Germany, came in the form of a neo-Romantic critique of rationalism and liberalism. Matthes & Seitz, the publisher of Syberberg's *Vom Unglück und Glück der Kunst in Deutschland nach dem letzten Kriege*, played a part in this. One of this press's authors, Gerd Börgfleth, launched an attack on "the cynical Enlightenment." Like Syberberg he blamed the "returned Jewish left-wing intelligentsia" for "wishing to remodel Germany according to their own cosmopolitan standards. In this they have succeeded so well that for two decades there has been no independent German spirit at all."[8]

At the same time several British writers in the *Salisbury Review* began to celebrate a mystical reverence for the English spirit, and historians cast doubt on left-liberal interpretations of recent history. As anti-anticommunism went out of fashion, anti-antifascism gained respectability. But it was one thing for, say, Roger Scruton to celebrate the Blood and Soil of England. It was quite another for Germans and Japanese to behave in a similar way; they could not respectably get around the war. Anti-Semitism, an old tradition in European nationalism everywhere, cannot possibly be separated from German *Blut und Boden*. Hence the acrimonious tone of the "Historians' Debate" in Germany, which has been discussed at length in the pages of *The New York Review of Books*,[9] hence the bitter controversy around Syberberg. And hence the strong emotions unleashed by the chauvinistic aspects of the 1989 revolt and the process of unification that followed.

Earlier this year a radical right-wing journal published a tract by Börgfleth, entitled *Deutsches Manifest*. Like Syberberg's essays, it was inspired by the 1989 revolt in East Germany: "The people's movement in the GDR was the *real* Germany, which the West Germans have betrayed—betrayed to a capitalist-liberal economic epidemic, which devoured the body of the *Volk*, betrayed to the cult of technology, which is destroying the land, and to cosmopolitan lies, which are intended to complete the destruction of the German national character."[10]

This is more or less identical to Syberberg's view, but what is more remarkable is its similarity to some of the opinions held by such "antifa" prophets of the left as Günter Grass, or the East German playwright Heiner Müller. They, too, have a horrific vision of the destruction of the *Volk* by D-Marks and technology. They also believe that the People have been betrayed by the West. It is indeed an old conceit of both right-wing and left-wing Romantics to believe that the soul of the people was preserved in a purer and more innocent state under the old Communist regime.

3.

It is interesting that Syberberg has a fascination for Kleist and the German Romantics. Could it be that in his quest for utopia—in Syberberg's case a kind of *kitsch*, de-Nazified vision of Blood and Soil—there is more at work than a loathing for America and messy liberal democracy? Does he miss, perhaps, the heady sense of idealism of his youth, which he has tried to re-create, in his own way, ever since? This makes him rather anomalous in a nation that is distinctly lacking in idealistic fervor these days, but it is precisely why Syberberg uses every opportunity to vent his misanthropic disgust with the modern world and the people who live in it. He is an intellectual forever in search of the ideal community.

The common enemy of many intellectuals, in East and West, of left and right, is the industrial society of machines, contracts, of contending political parties, where the imagination is not in power, where intellectuals and artists are outsiders, tolerated, often well paid, even lionized, but nonetheless on their own. Nazism and socialism promised solidarity, a family state, the unity of the *Volk*. There was a role to play for idealists; they could be prophets of the new order. Hence the kind of fear displayed by Syberberg: the fear of being ignored, of preaching to deaf ears, of losing the prophet's mantle.

The *Heimat* is also a childish fantasy, a fantasy of order, security, and power, or the ideal conditions of infancy. Syberberg lost his *Heimat* twice; he was expelled from Pomerania at the end of the war and left the GDR in 1953. And he has been pining for the *Volk* ever since, for the banners of solidarity, the smell of the native soil, the sacred poetry of the German bards, the ruined castles of the ancient kings, and so on. Because this ideal community is an imaginary one, he must invent it, through the *kitsch* of his childhood: Hitler's speeches, Karl May's adventure stories, and echoes from Bayreuth. Which may be why his film sets look like gigantic toy stores, with Syberberg, as a monstrous child, rummaging through the props of his imagination.

NOTES

[1] Buruma, Ian. "There's No Place Like Heimat: Nazism and the Work of Film Director Hans-Jürgen Syberberg." *New York Review of Books*, 37.20 (Dec. 20, 1990): 34–43.

[2] Christa Wolf cited, in a somewhat different translation of her public remark ("Imagine there was socialism and nobody ran away!"), in Stephen Brockman, *Literature and German Reunification* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 199), 49.

[3] From Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, translated by Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (MIT Press, 1989), 128.

[4] Susan Sontag, "Syberberg's Hitler," first published in *The New York Review* (February 21, 1980), reprinted in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980).

[5] The full script was published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in 1982, entitled *Hitler: A Film from Germany*, translated by Joachim Neugroschel.

[6] These quotations are from Syberberg's book of essays, *Vom Glück und Unglück der Kunst in Deutschland nach dem Letzten Kriege*.

[7] The review in *Der Spiegel* was by Hellmuth Karasek.

[8] *Konkret*, October 10, 1990.

[9] See Gordon Craig, "After the Reich," *The New York Review*, October 8, 1987 and "A New, New Reich," January 18, 1990; István Deák, "The Incomprehensible Holocaust," *The New York Review*, September 28, 1989.

[10] *Konkret*, October 10, 1990.

MARILYN BERLIN SNELL[1]

14. GERMANY'S HEART: THE MODERN TABOO; INTERVIEW WITH GERMAN FILMMAKER HANS-JÜRGEN SYBERBERG

Hans-Jürgen Syberberg is a filmmaker, dramatist, essayist, and consummate cultural critic. Syberberg is the man German intellectuals and politicians love to hate. His works include *Hitler, A Film from Germany* (1977) and *Parsifal* (1982). *NPQ* Senior Editor Marilyn Berlin Snell met with Syberberg on a rainy Munich afternoon to discuss his views on the essence of the current social and political crisis in Germany.

New Perspectives Quarterly: Much of your work has been devoted to celebrating German culture and reclaiming its lost purity—an essence that was coopted and soiled not only by Hitler, but, according to your views, by the entire Enlightenment project and by the seductions of a soulless material culture. As a longtime interpreter of the German *Zeitgeist*, how do you explain the dark renaissance of anti-Semitic and anti-foreigner violence in Germany today?

Hans-Jürgen Syberberg: First, I have to tell you that no German would ever ask me this question. I hold a very special position here. For twenty-five years now, German intellectuals have treated me as if I were an enemy. They do not want to hear about what I believe lies at the heart of German identity. This is a real problem, and not just for me. It is emblematic of a general tendency for Germans, especially German intellectuals, to repress important aspects of our history—political, artistic and cultural—which has only succeeded in nurturing the growth of an ugly, right-wing street underground.

NPQ: What is it exactly, to your mind, that has been repressed?

HJS: After the war intellectuals stood on the tradition of the Enlightenment and a hegemonic rationalism that focused on the head at the expense of the heart. But the heart of Germany, like that of Russia, for example, is very special, very different. Culture is built from the light on the trees, the way the heavens look at night from a particular plot of land. The light and the heavens are different here from elsewhere. Our perspective, our feelings, therefore, are different.

Yet we have felt compelled in postwar Germany to repress this uniqueness. We feel safe excelling in mathematics, physics, business. Our people, dominated by facts and figures, are satisfied to dance around the golden calf of materialism. We are very

R. J. Cardullo (Ed.), Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the Film Director as Critical Thinker, 175–184.

efficient and methodical. But where is the heart? This has been my artistic project: to focus on the heart, the modern German taboo. And I see that the repression of this aspect of the German identity has cultivated a very negative reaction.

I have warned in the past of the dangers of "repressed irrationalism." Right-wing extremism in Germany today is indeed the result of repression, but I would now revise my terminology. Today, though I use the word "rationalism" to characterize the postwar intellectual tradition, I do not mean that the contrary is necessarily "irrationalism." The distinction between the "head" and the "heart" does not translate to "rationalism" versus "irrationalism." The artistic and intellectual form this took in Germany in the past was idealism, as opposed to the later materialism of the nineteenth century.

As to the question of the right-wing uprising on the streets, I see it resulting from a kind of postwar democratic repression. These youths represent the German wound. They are very vulgar, ugly, and sometimes just banal. But in the end they are merely a function of our postwar democracy. In history, haunting Erinyes are never nice or beloved. Let me give you an example of what I mean by "democratic repression." Recently, after a right-wing leader appeared on a late-night television show, the entire country went into an uproar over the fact that this man was given a platform to air his views.

Every newspaper, large and small, editorialized about how right-wing views should not be allowed, with the argument that he spoke too cleverly. And now, popular opinion—or should I say official media opinion—has it that this man and his viewpoint should be silenced. Yet we cannot eradicate our little Hitlers by refusing to give them the microphone. If people want a Hitler, one cannot prevent them from having him. And, in fact, the repression of those views may only increase their seductiveness among those who feel left out of society already.

In a historical sense, Hitler interests me because he came out of the heart of the German people. A man without a heart, this was the tragedy for them. But this awareness does not help me with the current crisis in the streets. The man I just mentioned, the right-wing extremist who will no longer allowed to speak his views publicly, does not spring from the heart of the people. Rather, he is the product of democratic repression. The threat he poses, however, is no less great for this fact.

This is a new era for Germany, with new dangers. Certainly we must be concerned about the extremists that burn down the houses of foreigners; and we must be concerned with a justice system that reacts too slowly and too late. But we must also go beyond these symptoms of the postwar German wound and get to its cause.

When people support neo-Nazi leaders today, they are not necessarily supporting the message. These people are wounded, and they see that their pain and their fear are better represented by extremist leaders than by German politicians and intellectuals. But frankly, I don't think these young men are really interested in following anybody. They have no ideology, neo-Nazi or otherwise. They only make fire. Violence is their form of anarchic expression. We should ask ourselves what they are expressing. What went wrong?

Our political leaders can try to extinguish these flames with laws and decrees. They may succeed in putting out a few small fires, but we know from personal and historical experience that it is very unwise to stifle expressions of discontent. Psychoanalysis and Weimar should be our guides here.

Every society constructs its antithesis, and in certain revolutionary moments it bursts upon the scene. In our society today, where money is so central, where the minister of finance holds a position of importance the defense minister held in times past—in a time where money has such incredible power—we would be well-advised to pay attention to what springs up where there is no money or where there are no business interests.

What today is finding success with the young generation has nothing at all to do with money. The make music, called "Oi," whose sale is prohibited in stores; they have concerts that can't be advertised. They don't make money; they don't spend money. They just gather, and the gatherings are getting larger. They are part of a real underground, like the early Christians in the catacombs in Rome.

And the German media are going crazy. They are saying that this trend is worse than Hitler and Himmler combined! But does the German press just want to please people abroad with this kind of coverage?

NPQ: Isn't it disturbing to you, as well?

HJS: It's a wound. And because it has been covered up, suppressed all this time, it has now become infected and is oozing its infection out into society. But this is a reaction to something else; it is not springing fully formed from the heart of the German people.

NPQ: But you are describing the phenomenon of racist extremism as though it were somehow healthy for Germany—a healthy reaction to the soulless market culture that now prevails here.

HJS: No. This extremism frightens me, too. These youths are bloodthirsty, aggressive. When one see clips of them on television, their faces are contorted like wild animals. But there they are: the new German underground. It's really like the first Christians, in the belly of the golden calf.

Moreover, my role as an artist is not to judge but to discover how and why it is happening. There is something wrong with my country. Maybe these youths don't understand who Hitler was. Maybe they don't know history; they only use Hitler for shock effect. I want to know what is in the air that nourishes this behavior. It's not just because these young men are poor and without work. And it's not just a violent protest against their fathers, against capitalism or democracy. There is something more.

What permeates the air in Germany also exists in Poland, Italy, Hungary, France, Scandinavia, and elsewhere. It has the odor of anti-Semitism, in part. After Auschwitz,

the Jewish position was a moral one, which developed over time into a kind of moral hegemony: it eventually engenders resentment on the part of the weaker player. People don't like to be told over and over that they are morally inferior. They bear it for a certain time, but then there comes a point when the children refuse to continue paying their fathers' debts. European culture has reached this breaking point. Not the intellectuals, of course. They are professionals at maintaining their equanimity. But that is not the case in the streets. The rebellion does not come from the head, but from the gut, and in all countries of Europe. It is a rebellion of the Erinyes—ugly, brutal. The Greeks depicted them in mythical images as something barbaric.

But this said, there is also another picture of Germany: thousands taking to the streets—the majority; one sees them on television, in the newspapers. They are shocked. Never before have so many in Germany declared their support for foreigners, and so selflessly. They show their solidarity for the foreigners in Germany, just as they did last winter for Russia or for Yugoslavia—in numbers greater than in any other country in the world. Those who lay the fires are a fringe group of a special kind.

NPQ: Your analysis has the effect of transforming victims into antagonists—culprits in their own victimization.

HJS: People are always very quick to make that argument. But in this historical moment the Jews are not victims; they are victors, morally speaking. This has been the case since the end of the war. And not only in Jerusalem or in Germany but worldwide. Yet we cannot freeze historical moments. History moves. Fifty years after Hitler, a whole new generation has taken the stage. They behave differently from their guilt-ridden parents. They don't see the young Jew as a victim. They see in him someone like themselves.

What one is concerned with now is finding a new definition: The cards of world history have been reshuffled since the fall of the Wall, since the ending of the East-West conflict. People are looking in history, in the future, and in art for new identities. This is the case for people in other parts of Europe, in the United States, and in Germany—and, one hopes, this is also the case for the Jews.

The reason I defend my position in Germany so vehemently may, I believe, be found in the fact that my enemies today would in many cases have been my enemies in the Nazi era, too. Just as they are yes-men today, so they would have been collaborators under Hitler. I am, therefore, doing battle for their souls, and I do so with a certain sadness. I see the way they behave, so loud and righteously as democrats, and yet I recognize in them anti-democrats possessing the same characteristics I knew during my school days in eastern Germany under Stalin. My work, then, is a labor of mourning, and is aimed at present-day symptoms of the "ugly German," as Hölderlin once described him, or as Thomas Bernhard from Austria describes him today.

So, one should not be so quick with judgments. It would be more productive just to look at and attempt to understand what is happening. My personal concern is where art moves now. For too long, art has been regressing, stuck repeating an old postwar aesthetic.

NPQ: So much of your theater and film work has been discussed in terms of its fragmented presentation; its commands of a "post-histoire" aesthetic of pastiche; its ability to refer to the past without being a literal representation. How have you managed to refer to history without becoming mixed in it?

HJS: It's been over fifteen years since I did *Hitler, A Film From Germany* (1977). Since then I have worked mostly on films and theater projects with very small budgets and only one actor, Edith Clever. I have been searching all this time for a new aesthetic.

After the Hitler film, I focused my attention on the heart of things German, and especially things Prussian—with the works of Kleist at the center, the interpretation of whom, for me, has become much clearer since the war. I have wanted to use him to find a way back to our spiritual home. But the road is strewn with a lot of pain, ugliness, and contaminated imagery—thanks in no small part to Hitler.

Through this effort, an *oeuvre* of stage works, films, and writing was created. In its early stages it was dedicated to the redemption of the guilt of the nation through art. Subsequently, it attempted to realize what had again become possible as a result of this act of self-liberation, on the basis of both old and newly acquired opportunities and virtues in the arts. Constantly warded off or shunned by my fellow countrymen, in accordance with the rules of censorship in times past—and with less acclaim from the public at large than goes to Riefenstahl when she is shown in art film theaters—I found possible to realize these works only with financial support from abroad. And it has been with this financial support that I have been able to investigate just what art is capable of today, particularly when one has purged one's guilt and made room for old and new strengths—and when one wishes to gain new experiences that are not related purely to politics and the economy. I have felt in this project like Antigone, who invited death upon herself by defying an edict that consigned her brother's body to the ravages of dogs and vultures.

Germany has been left in the postwar world to be picked at by vultures—both internally and abroad. I again use the example of Kleist, whose plays have been consistently misinterpreted in postwar Germany. For instance, in one of his plays the actor can say either "dirt" or "pain," at a very important moment in the piece. Today, the writing is always interpreted as "the dirt of my heart" rather than "the pain of my heart." It is instances such as this that underscore Germany's postwar aesthetics of polemics, self-flagellation, and ugliness.

Ugliness exists and that fact should not be avoided in art. But my solution has been to place the ugliness in a larger universe, so that it doesn't consume the moment.

Indeed, the noblest goal is the elevation of reality, which is precisely what I wish to achieve in art of my own creation.

I find that my colleagues in stage or film too often roll themselves in ugliness, but in doing so they betray the function of art, which is to move through the facts of the world to another point—to travel through. And in Germany, the artists are guilty of something else as well. There has been a certain demonization of the purely aesthetic as something tainted by fascism. This, of course, is part of Hitler's legacy. His aesthetic, which was a reaction against the German Expressionist art of the prewar period, celebrated German myth and glorified rural life as the embodiment of German Blood and Soil. In effect, Hitler coopted the beauty of German myth and history. Part of Hitler's Blood-and-Soil aesthetic is also his curse of scorched earth, which he wanted to leave behind. And that has been tragically accomplished in the burned-out hearts of my generation.

NPQ: Is it possible to retrieve what has been despoiled by Hitler's legacy?

HJS: Yes. But it is very difficult, not least because of the way Germans use democracy to stifle discussion of these issues—both in politics and in art. My strength, if I have one, is that I understand that the truth lies on the other side of the past. I want my art to pass through it, to overcome the ugliness that so much of postmodern society and art dwell upon. I think that's what art should do.

NPQ: Ralf Dahrendorf has made the argument that liberal democracy is government by conflict. In the U.S., though many may not like it, the Ku Klux Klan has a right to march in the street and proselytize its racist philosophy. Germany, on the other hand, legislates against discord in politics and, from what you have been saying, strongly discourages it in art. Why do you think this is the case? Are Germans somehow uniquely unqualified to maneuver in the chaotic, uncomfortable, and often uncontrollable structures of liberal democracy?

HJS: The problem is that Germans are too well organized for the messiness of liberal democracy. We attempt to organize democratic opinion, to keep the system running smoothly and efficiently. When something disrupts the system, or doesn't fit where it's supposed to, there are problems.

The concentration camps also belong to this chapter of German thoroughness, of starting from basics, thinking radically, totally, absolutely, getting to the very root of things. Expressed in vulgar terms, this means that German orderliness, security, cleanliness, or industry is capable of transforming itself in everyday life into something bureaucratic, ideological, racial; or it finds itself realized in the concrete form of a perverted political "work of art" (Plato) that matches Kafka's vision.

Other peoples in Europe are also familiar with this tendency toward obliteration in pogroms; but it was allotted to Germany to carry it out with thoroughness.

NPQ: The philosopher Ivan Illich spoke about the earthly or earthy virtue of soil—his form of *Heimat* perhaps—of tradition and community and memory …

HJS: … Hitler talked about soil too—Blood and Soil …

NPQ: That's the point: Is it possible to have a notion of regionalism—the kind that *Heimat* celebrates—without its devolving into nationalism and anti-modernism in Germany?

HJS: First, why is *Heimat* experiencing such a renaissance in contemporary Germany? *Heimat* was one of the aesthetic subjects that were forbidden territory after the war. But fifteen million people came out of the Eastern German provinces that now no longer exist, and they have a strong feeling of *Heimat* because they have lost their homeland. People need food and shelter, but they also need love, community, a home. This is part of the natural function of being human.

Instead of being worried about making the neighbors nervous, we should rather be taking a look at ourselves. We behave like postmodern animals in a cave of our own denaturalized creation. We are afraid to sing our grandfathers' songs; we are afraid to appreciate Wagner, even to mourn the theft of our myths and fairy tales by history. We live in cities with fouled air, water, and soil—completely detached from ourselves and our cultural heritage—and become these neurotic beings.

Contrary to popular opinion, I think that the urge to retrieve what it is we have lost—water we can drink, fresh corn out of own garden plots, our songs, our Teutonic fantasies—is healthy. This longing for *Heimat* is not a longing for Hitler. Germany is capable of benign nostalgia. But we must be allowed to long.

These are the wounds of Germany. When you look into the face of the nineteen-year-old who threw the firebomb in Moelln you see that he's not working for himself, or on behalf of a political agenda, but something else. He's really the victim of a certain situation.

NPQ: But what about individual responsibility? Maybe that young man is a victim of something, but he killed three people.

HJS: Yes, of course. However, my point is that we should not be focusing on what propelled the firebomb but on what propelled the man. He is not yet part of that group that cannot be changed. This is not 1933, but post-1945! After the war, popular discontent went like the ghost of the world into the grave of our culture, but I don't see it like that now.

In a letter written in 1850, Flaubert said of his time that "the thought of the future torments us, and the past is holding us back. That is why the present is slipping from our grasp." This seems to be the curse of the Germans—in art as well in politics and morality. Part of the problem is that Germany cannot free itself from the dialects of guilt, atonement, and resentment, while the Jews cannot escape the backlash that

arises from their moral hegemony. We are fixed to each other like two sides of the same coin.

Germany became the nostalgic venue of the culture of the emigrants and their children, as Jerusalem was once for German Christians. The only question is: which Germany? I believe that if those who go to see my films or stage projects or who read my writing were to perceive the reality of Germany today, they would be extremely disappointed. In the end, however, Germany's self-flagellation just becomes a sordid form of big business. The German artist who touches Auschwitz or Hitler in the appropriately chaste way immediately finds open doors worldwide. There is something sickening about this.

But I can only see this changing through some sort of catastrophe. What we see in the streets now are just little catastrophes, which only tie us more tightly to the past. I think art could play an important role in untangling the death grip of the German and the Jew. But today, unfortunately, all real art is demonized, while this subject in particular remains taboo.

I am still concerned with the question of how Auschwitz could happen in a society like that of Germany. My answer is that it could only have happened with cultural effort. Hitler never saw the Final Solution as the pure project of politics. It was a cultural project. And he was proud of it. My comrades in art would like to forget the extent to which "cultural activities" figured in Hitler's plan.

The things Hitler did in fighting a campaign on behalf of good against evil—as presented and interpreted by him with the mechanical facilities of radical racial ideology, right down to the absoluteness of German thoroughness in realizing the Final Solution—were intricately bound up with the history and nature of Germany's past, to which was added the assignment of a *Zeitgeist* that was supranational. And that is what makes it all so painful to us today.

In such a situation only the strong side of the legacy helps—and that means the good elements, the most noble and exalted parts, not the weakness and ugliness or the garbage of history that occupies so much cultural space today. If politicians today give so much money to the arts, in order that these cultural activities may exculpate politics—like a medieval transaction in which absolution from sin could be purchased through indulgences, before the intervention of Protestantism—we must guard against becoming collaborators in this spiritual bribery. We are aware of the onerous nature of responsibility, of the now-degraded culture of German correctness and thoroughness. What was once a rich asset has now become a burden. The painstaking accuracy of Albrecht Dürer's and Lucas Cranach's pictures and faces becomes distorted in the face of the deadly machinery of the Final Solution.

So, too, Germany's absence from the process of finding international solutions to conflicts—as, for example, in the ex-Yugoslavia—eliminates a potentially honest judge and helper from a situation in which others evade responsibility where moral issues are concerned; where courage is called for, not business acumen, in the face of so many violated women; where a man like Hans Dietrich Genscher, whose reputation is beyond reproach, was acclaimed as a true servant of freedom by those

affected. We know why Germany may not intervene, may not proceed any further. But as long as Germany is not in a position to do these things, something will not be in order in Europe—at its heart.

If, in the past under Hitler, all those horrors were perpetrated in the name of some higher ideal, today anything that is strictly committed to higher values and quality in the purity of a work of art is regarded with suspicion. In this way, our very culture becomes a victim of Hitler; and the loss of purity means the victory of ugliness—not merely before our eyes, but within us. This is something we have all had enough of; yet it is also something that always gains a response if it is rewarded or paid for from outside.

NPQ: How do you think integration will affect the artistic project in Europe? Will it allow for autonomous local expressions of art or will it lead to the homogenization of culture?

HJS: I hope the future of art in Europe is not an international film in English with actors from every country speaking lines they can't understand. That is not a good film and not a good Europe. I would hope that the integrated Europe of tomorrow is just like the Europe in the year immediately following 1989–90. The future was open then; European politicians came together in Paris and really worked at creating new, viable political structures. Unfortunately, I don't see today's European Community technocrats as being capable of the same sort of project. I don't think Maastricht—the Maastricht Treaty responsible for creating the European Union—is the right way to go.

The future will not lie in capitalism or communism, both of which have formed the basis of a materialistic interpretation of the world dating from the nineteenth century. But we are still waiting, in Germany at least, to see whether the relevant impulses for a new beginning will be generated—as they were after the Seven Years' War, under Frederick the Great, when he brought foreign colonists from France, Holland, and Austria into the country and created special regulations and conditions for them; or after Napoleon, when the reforms implemented under Stein-Hardenberg in the political field, or under Humboldt in the universities, or under Clausewitz in the realm of warfare, were of great importance. Or we are waiting for new impulses themselves, as we did after 1945 in Germany.

My other fear for Europe is that it will become like American films, which use American actors who are then dubbed with German voices. If this becomes the case, we cannot speak of a flourishing economy here, because everyone will simply be employed as a well-paid puppet or well-behaved slave in the service of foreign inventions, alien spirits. Under such conditions, where would Kleist fit in?

Certainly there should be dialogue between cultures; but not as part of some multicultural ensemble where everyone speaks a different language and where no one understands anyone else—except the foreign director, who gains personal advantage from this story that is no longer our own. German artists must put their thoughts

into an investigation of the German identity. The more blood that has flowed, the more art will be necessary: as catharsis, for atonement. And what the contemporary practitioners fail to achieve, the children will have to continue trying to achieve: for the sake of purification, as a ritual.

This is a goal that cannot be set too high. And the only artists and artworks that will survive in history are those that are capable of achieving this goal.

NOTE

[1] Marilyn Berlin Snell, "Germany's Heart: The Modern Taboo; Interview with German Filmmaker Hans-Jürgen Syberberg," *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 10.1 (Winter 1993): 20–25.

ROBERT SHANDLEY[1]

15. HANS-JÜRGEN SYBERBERG AND THE STATE OF THE GHOST

A specter haunts Europe, the specter of communism."[2] Marx's opening of the "Manifesto" is a projection into a future. The spectral field that haunts Europe in general and Germany in particular no longer confines itself to a future tense. It is no longer a question, as Jacques Derrida put it, of a ghost that stands in front of us, but also of one that is behind us.[3] And Marx's revolution does not occupy this spectral world alone. For fifty years generations of inquirers in German studies and related fields have fascinated themselves and occasionally others with the ghost stories of Germany.

The metaphor of the specter is always used to summon up a particular death in order to serve as a sort of universal moral lesson to the not-yet dead. As such, ghosts are embodiments of historical memory. The ghost figure is one who, while having suffered a physical death, refuses the symbolic one. One particular ghost, that of the victims of the Holocaust, has haunted the field of German studies for the last fifty years. It was not always a metaphoric condensation (6,000,000: 1), nor was it necessarily a metonymic spiritual transferal (ghost: 6,000,000 victims). Indeed, this specter is in part the product of fifty years of postwar German studies. When, then, did we stop dealing with the particularity of the victims of the Holocaust? Did we ever start? What is at stake in this shift? The ghost of the exterminated Jew at Auschwitz has metamorphosed from being situated firmly within the frontiers of a specific history, into a metahistorical metaphor available for the almost universal appropriation of victimhood. It sometimes calls upon people to remember the destruction of lives and histories wrecked by the Nazis in the name of the ghost of the Holocaust, for purposes less sincere.

The metaphors placed in the service of understanding and aestheticizing the German past have changed over the past fifty years. In the immediate wake of the war, sublime metaphors such as "catastrophe" and "disaster" were employed in the reconstruction of the recent past. These were metaphors connoting universal suffering and, at the same time, no agency. As that past receded and another generation of critics and artists began to address the personal history of their fathers and mothers, a new set of signifiers emerged. Among these, two metaphors of history gained currency. One was that of the angel of history. Drawing upon Walter Benjamin, the metaphor of the angel induces the image of the horrified, ahistorical subject who looks at history as a pile of rubble at which one can only stare in horror. This finds its

R. J. Cardullo (Ed.), Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the Film Director as Critical Thinker, 185–191.

most obvious manifestation in Wim Wenders' film *Der Himmel über Berlin* (*Wings of Desire*, 1987), where melancholic angels are confined exclusively to observing the painful unfolding of human history. They can only observe; they cannot engage. And yet, the more troubling and enigmatic metaphor is that of the ghost. Unlike the angel, the ghosts of the past were actors and are now always threatening. They are a threat that forces the haunted subject to act out. Rather than merely calling a person to the memory of loss, this remnant of the past often attempts to regain or recoup some lost wholeness.

Perhaps the most disturbing and polemical attempt to suture the gaps of history in Germany is to be found in Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's book-length, aphoristic chain, *Vom Unglück und Glück der Kunst in Deutschland nach dem letzten Kriege* (*On the Misfortune and Fortune of Art in Germany after the Last War,* 1990), in which he makes the less-than-subtle argument that postwar German art has been plagued by a dogmatic adherence to the Leftist, Jewish aesthetics of "the small, the dirty, and the sick."[4] Many critics who had endorsed Syberberg's *oeuvre* in the 1980s, especially his Hitler film, as an effective theorization of imagery and the German past, saw this book as a betrayal. Syberberg's blunt anti-Semitism, Prussian provincialism, and eco-nationalism have been met with a remarkable silence in German critical circles. Perhaps that is the most appropriate response. Yet his diatribe against what he calls the loss of German cultural identity touches upon such a plethora of issues that an investigation of the stakes may well shed some light on the direction of the cultural identity that Syberberg embraces. The value of this book lies not in the author's petty and bitter analysis but in his conjuring skills. Syberberg calls up not only the usual spectral suspects (Hitler, Wagner, or Karl May), but also a list of cultural icons ranging from Kleist to Kiefer, from Schinkel to Adorno—all of whom continue to haunt German culture.

Indeed, a modern specter haunts Syberberg. Much of his text can be read as a debate with Theodor Adorno's critical *oeuvre*, in particular the *Aesthetic Theory* (1970). More specifically, Syberberg's book can be read as, among other things, an absolute refusal to read Adorno. That fits in well with the history of anti-Semitism as a refusal to even familiarize oneself with one's Other. The reason for this, as I shall attempt to explain, is that Syberberg treats Adorno as a thief, the killjoy of postwar aesthetics who has stolen Germany's enjoyment of art.[5]

The phantomic metaphor is valuable insofar as it helps us to locate enjoyment as the object at stake. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603), as the hegemonic spectral trope, functions as a template for my reading of Syberberg. It certainly seems to fit into his fantasy of innocent loss and loss of innocence. Let us look at Syberberg as a distraught Prince of Denmark plagued by the phantom of the *Vaterland*. In fact, this hermeneutic stretch accurately portrays the position into which Syberberg puts himself in this book. As his thoughts return to his home, or *Heimat*, he discovers that the national throne has been usurped. Convinced that he must avenge the death of the *Vaterland*, our Königberger Hamlet sets out to find the killers. The *dramatis personae* show the evil stepfather as being played by those immigrants who return to Germany

after the war to impose their aesthetic *Wiedergutmachung* on a defeated Germany, while the aesthetics of feminism appears complicitous with this usurpation, filling in the role of the two-timing mother. Syberberg accuses both the immigrants and the feminists of having purloined his patriotic pleasure.

The term "haunt" is important for my reading of Syberberg because it refuses the linearity that a verb such as "inform" would connote. None of these ghosts spooks Syberberg more than Adorno and, I will argue by extension, the feminists. In the case of the latter, it is conceivable that he does not even recognize the threat. Why Adorno the ghost and not the more empirical texts of the Frankfurt critical theorists? Because in both cases Syberberg's fantasy depends upon a vague and unspecific threat; hence his is not a rigorous critique as much as it a phantasmagoric projection. His treatment of Adorno is bland and, by now, clichéd. While Syberberg may, at least, mention Adorno as the thief and neglect to mention feminism, ultimately his treatment of the former indicates almost as much blindness as his exclusion of the latter.

Syberberg's first non-reading of Adorno occurs within a few paragraphs of the beginning of the work. It does not take long for Syberberg to betray his own sentiments. Referring to Adorno, Benjamin, and the crowd at the Frankfurt School as the founding fathers of German postwar aesthetics, Syberberg notes: "There were those who made a career by allying themselves with the Jews or with the Leftists, and it did not necessarily have to do with love or understanding, or even predisposition. How could the Jews stand this? It is as if they [the Jews] only wanted power."[6] Syberberg's transgression here lies not so much in the claim that people made careers of identifying with Leftist Jews (as if people did not also make careers out of alliance with cold-warrior ex-Nazis). He asks of himself whether or not he did the same. The offense is in the rhetorical twist, which turns these observations into a conspiracy to degenerate German culture.

Syberberg goes on to call this an "unholy alliance for an art without a *Volk* or, even more base, a comfortable, quicker disposable art such as punk, pop, or junk, which now stands in our way."[7] Read closely, the unholy alliance that blocks "us" is a refusal of the nineteenth-century German notion of *Bildung* ("self-formation"). I would not be the first critic to note that *Bildung* has served as one of the oldest anti-Semitic devices. Syberberg deploys it here *de facto* as synonymous with the "soul" of culture that has been lost. This loss of *Bildung* is the grounding of the xenophobia that pervades his text, one that hardly needs to be excavated. What I continue to find peculiar, however, is how this vilification of the banality of art in postwar Germany sounds much like Adorno himself. The mass *Volk* is being deceived by the vulgar, everyday pop culture, and is thus being kept from redemption through beauty. This is, of course, not quite Adorno himself, but a sort of uncanny ghost of Adorno: the version most proliferated in the wake of the 1960s. Syberberg admits as much, but, as Eric Santner has put it, "he seems incapable of conceiving of fantasy except in deeply anti-Semitic terms."[8] Why is that?

Syberberg's comments reveal an obvious if unarticulated anxiety, namely the fear that an enjoyment is being or has been stolen. For fifty years, according to Syberberg,

a cadre of political and cultural forces—including the "Jewish" Frankfurt School, the Allied occupation forces, and many witting and unwitting German collaborators—have combined to steal from Germany the enjoyment of its nationhood, its national consciousness, and its cultural heritage. This consciousness and heritage are reduced down to the figure of Prussia, the lost eastern province that Syberberg reads as having been stolen from Germany. The contradictions in his argument are obvious and unproductive at this point. What remains interesting is the social field in which he imagines that these thefts to have taken place. To whom does he imagine himself speaking? How does he imagine retrieving this lost enjoyment? Why must this field be anti-Semitic? What happens to that social field if you remove anti-Semitism? Is it possible? If so, is it possible to imagine a productive discussion and understanding of German community and cultural heritage that does *not* focus on loss and theft—that is, on simplified versions of "lack"?

Most current work on the cultural forces of the nineteenth century (that era of high Prussianism which Syberberg nostalgically re-invokes) is, at some point, attentive to the degree to which German cultures are almost always caught up in a negative dialectic with varyingly violent forms of anti-Semitism. The events of the Holocaust demand of intellectuals, in its wake, to take note of the painful relationship between Germany (Europe) and its internal others. At the risk of being overly polemical, one would have to note in the case of Syberberg that, in his desire to recover a lost nineteenth-century culture, he would wish to have it replete with its anti-Semitic components.

The question that Syberberg poses so ineloquently is whether or not Germany will ever be allowed to enjoy itself as such: namely, in its dialectically constructed *Bildungsbürgertum*-self. Maybe it is a fair question. That which he sees as standing in the way of such enjoyment is an aesthetic void. Syberberg thus seems unable to think outside pre-modernist aesthetics. He is either paralyzed or stubborn in the face of the possibility of "the new." Whether that inability is intentional or strategic, Syberberg fails to think through the logic of the aesthetic that he sets out to oppose. For him, postwar cultures (whether popular, elitist, or fused) are merely criminal; they are culprits who have stolen the enjoyment of the national body.

More than proving an obvious and relatively uninteresting contradiction, this reading suggests the extent to which the ghosts that haunt Syberberg are so difficult to exorcise. More than the Adorno (and Horkheimer) of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), the Adorno of the essay "Cultural Criticism and Society" (1951) or the Adorno of *Aesthetic Theory* spooks Syberberg.[9] What is the gesture of the *Aesthetische Theorie* that is such a crime to Syberberg? As I have been suggesting, it is the void, the emptying out of the image. He opposes the beginning of an aesthetic by clearing the slate.

This is where a certain version of feminism fits in, specifically the Anglo-American one of the 1970s and early 1980s. After showing what damage prolific imagery can do, Laura Mulvey, for example, sets about removing the image from the picture, with the express purpose of disrupting enjoyment of the image. Adorno

pursues the same gesture, removing enjoyment from the field until we can investigate what it is based upon. In both cases, the beginning of the new can only start with the removal of (unnecessary) ornamentation. When he calls upon Adorno, Syberberg is eschewing the real, i.e., the textual body for the phantasmagorical one. Curiously enough, the latter body is, above all else, a Jew. Why does Syberberg need a Jew to steal his enjoyment? The answer may be found in Gertrud Koch's important work on Adorno.[10]

Were this an actual reading, Syberberg would not be the first scholar of late to read Adorno's Jewishness back into his work. Koch has rendered astute observations of Adorno's modernist aesthetics within the context of the Old Testament's *Bilderverbot* ("anti-graven image commandment"). The premise of Koch's monograph on the visual representation of Judaism is that the *Bilderverbot* inherent in the Second Commandment's prohibition of graven images belongs to the central ideas of Adorno's aesthetics. To be sure, Adorno refers to the *Bilderverbot* often in his own modernist aesthetic. But Syberberg takes the Jewishness well beyond its theological grounding. All of a sudden the taboo against graven images mushrooms into a list of grievances, categorized by Syberberg as a result of living in a Jewish age under the conditions of Jewish aesthetics. The blame for everything from the atom bomb (Einstein) to the obsession of modern literature with petty ugliness (Kafka) is placed squarely upon the shoulders of the Jews.

Syberberg reserves most of his polemic for the loss of the aesthetic of beauty in postwar German art. In fact, he divides it more neatly (and along Adornian lines): art has been replaced by aesthetics. Art is the genuine experience of the beautiful for Syberberg, while aesthetics, specifically Adorno's modernism, is the conceptualization and advocacy of the ugly and the vulgar. Aesthetics for Syberberg is not so much the ghost of art as it is the exorcism of it, the spectral conjuring of a lost object.

Along with the "work of mourning" (*Trauerarbeit*) that Syberberg performs on other fronts, he is mourning what he perceives as the loss of art: "What is at stake here is an art that declines after 1945, a sacrifice of those twelve years before." Indeed, art is the ghost … but of what? Art as the ghost of art? In the Syberberg text, art is the ghost of Prussia: Prussia/Art, without which, according to Syberberg, the Kantian aesthetic subject (Kant as Ur-Prussian) cannot be articulated. This is the heart of Syberberg's argument: namely, that the problem with art in postwar Germany is that it has not recovered from the loss of the "quarter of our provinces, the most outspoken … that gave us fame, sense, and the power of representation of our identity."[11]

It should be noted that this entire aphoristic diatribe was written during the fall of the Wall, known as the *Wende*. Syberberg ends it by taking issue with that overgrazed and seldom understood dictum, namely Adorno's "After Auschwitz, it is barbaric to write a poem" ("Ein Gedicht nach Auschwitz zu schreiben ist barbarisch").[12] Since Syberberg sees the postwar period as one driven by Jewish aesthetics without art, and consequently poetry, he sees the events of 1989–1990 as a call for a "departure

… from the grandfathers [*Uberväter*] of emigration"—that is, from Adorno *et alia*. Of course, in mentioning emigration he follows yet another dubious tradition of Germans who criticize and delegitimize the experiences of those who left Germany during the war—yet another accusation of the betrayal of the Fatherland. His is a call for an exorcism from that ghost which keeps him from his beloved Prussia, the missing pieces in the "total work of art" (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) of Germany.

If Syberberg is nothing but spooked, that is, if my choice of metaphors is accurate, why respond to these distasteful and ill-founded claims at all? Do we only give more currency by reacting? It is never wise, I would argue, to ignore attacks on intellectualism and cultural diversity, either in Germany or elsewhere. More importantly, Syberberg's argument contains many of the problems that confront German cultures in general. They embody in many instances the state of the specter in Germany. Thus, they serve as much more than just a straw man against which we can prove our moral fortitude. If it were the ghost of Adorno that haunts Syberberg, the real, textual corpus of Adorno would serve as the best starting point for a response to the narrow cultural agenda Syberberg has set out for himself.

One of the best counters to the endless and often tired set of questions Syberberg dredges up is to be found in feminist scholarship. My argument is that a genealogy of thought leads from Adorno's emptying out of the image to Laura Mulvey's call in the 1970s for an end to the baroque treatment of the image of women in films. In her 1974 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"[13] (still canonical reading in film studies), Mulvey traces the necessary sadism of cinema and proposes that the only solution is the removal of the image of woman from cinema. That is, as in Adorno's case, this invocation of a *Bilderverbot* or "image ban" (for Adorno, a *Poesieverbot* as well) is a polemic from which Mulvey later will retreat. The more radical gesture is nonetheless the one that, in both cases, sticks, in part because it is itself a response to excessive representation.

So, where do Mulvey and Adorno confront the Syberberg text? Feminism is absent from Syberberg's polemical attacks. Given that he has taken potshots from the Prussian woods at nearly every other political and intellectual force in Germany, this absence is curious, even more so given Syberberg's cultural position as, among other things, a filmmaker. For it is really in feminist filmmaking in Germany that much of what Syberberg decries has been done, and done quite well. The cultural forces of feminist filmmaking, both informed by and contributing to the theoretical constructs articulated by Mulvey and others, counter the cultural pessimism and nostalgic sense of loss invoked by Syberberg. Retrograde cultural preservationists like Syberberg tend to call upon the rhetorical strategy of myopia—that is, he chooses the easier and less traumatic ghost. It is significant that anti-Semitism is less of a risk for Syberberg than would be the blatant misogyny that would necessarily follow from his naming his other true enemy.

In closing, let me suggest the possibility that Syberberg's rhetoric is merely intended to be provocative, for I find it to be that much, to say the least. Indeed, it would be nice if it were no more than that. It would then make some of his conjuring

more productive. And I would not want to make of the Frankfurt School a sacred cow, untouchable by contemporary criticism. But Syberberg's book comes off merely as a virulent diatribe against the "Jewishness" of the Frankfurt School and not an honest exchange with its work. In the historical context in which *Vom Unglück und Glück der Kunst in Deutschland nach dem letzten Kriege* was written, namely the tumultuous events of 1989–1990, a much more serious, levelheaded discussion of the ramifications of the ongoing *Wende* would have been more effective. Syberberg's work is an unfortunate non-contribution. For new ways of articulating a German culture, a careful consideration of both its past and future continues to be necessary.

Working with the Syberberg text, then, has also led me to the realization of how much of what scholars do in the field of contemporary German studies is so intimately tied to the same ghosts that haunt him. But demonizing and ignoring the most ethical voices in the culture do not help us to find our way out of the haunted house.

NOTES

1 Robert Shandley, "Hans-Jürgen Syberberg and the State of the Ghost," in *German Studies in the Post-Holocaust Age: The Politics of Memory, Identity, and Ethnicity*, ed. Adrian Del Caro and Janet Ward (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2000), 140–147.

2 Karl Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York, NY: Norton, 1972), 473.

3 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: Mourning, The New International, and the State of the Debt* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994).

4 Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, *Vom Unglück und Glück der Kunst in Deutschland nach dem letzten Kriege* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 1990), 38. Referring to Grass's *The Tin Drum,* Syberberg states, "The fact that the central figure of the best known postwar novel in Germany is a dwarf characterizes this observation" (39; all translations are Shandley's own unless otherwise noted.)

5 For a lucid articulation of the notion of enjoyment employed here, see Slavoj Zizek's "Eastern Europe's Republics of Gilead," *New Left Review*, 183 (l990): 50–62.

6 Syberberg, *Vom Unglück und Glück,* 14.

7 Syberberg, *Vom Unglück und Glück,* 14.

8 Eric L. Santner, "The Trouble with Hitler: Postwar Aesthetics and the Legacy of Fascism," *New German Critique*, 57 (Autumn l992): 5–24.

9 Theodor W. Adorno, "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft" ("Cultural Criticism and Society"), in Adorno's *Prismen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1955), 7–31. Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970).

10 Gertrud Koch, *Die Einstellung ist die Einstellung: Visuelle Konstruktion des Judentums* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992).

11 Syberberg, *Vom Unglück und Glück,* 127, 161.

12 From Adorno's essay "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft," in his *Prismen*, 31.

13 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in Mulvey's *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), 14–26.

R. J. CARDULLO[1]

16. 'ADOLPHE APPIA AND ME': A DISCUSSION WITH HANS-JÜRGEN SYBERBERG

The following interview took place in June 2008 in Munich, Germany. With Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's permission and approval, it was translated from German into English by R. J. Cardullo.

R. J. Cardullo: It seems to me that in your films, at least up to *Our Hitler* (1977) and *Parsifal* (1982), there is a certain affinity with the work of Adolphe Appia. The question is, just what is that affinity?

Han-Jürgen Syberberg: In *Our Hitler*, it could be seen as the empty space lighted by the projection of a few symbolic objects, which in *Parsifal* became one symbolic object: Richard Wagner's death mask. (This space was, of course, economically outfitted with stairs as well as workable or usable scenery and props.) The case for my affinity with Appia should more likely be made, however, in the realm of ideas, seeing Appia in the context of history; for I myself make (of should I say "made"?) films, after all, and Appia was a man of the theater.

RJC: But you also became a man of the theater, didn't you?

HJS: Yes, I have directed my own scripts (*The Night*, 1985) as well as those of others (Kleist's *Penthesilea*, 1987) in the theater—that is, in live theaters—instead of for film. This has resulted for me in the necessary adoption or better, in the necessary detachment, of an artistic personality that looks to history for guidance, even when grappling with projects, from my own era. And that's where Appia enters the picture and, through him, Richard Wagner, the great influence on his thinking.

RJC: Could you speak a bit about the historical context of Appia's work?

HJS: When Adolphe Appia was thinking, writing, and trying to realize himself as an artist, he first had to do away with the theater dominated by historicism, which was allied with naturalism. Electric light presented new possibilities for the theater, though a retrogressive profession by nature (take Heiner Müller), and for film, which was competing against theater just as photography was competing against painting. Both were calling into question other art forms, were asking what their unique possibilities were and were not. Was art still to be regarded in the old sense,

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with photography and film united against it in a sudden, egotistical dictatorship of the masses, who would no longer have any need for qualitative hierarchies? Film began in Germany in the cinematographs. What has become of it? That is, how have film and theater differentiated themselves from each other as separate expressions of the same longing? How have they influenced each other: fruitfully or faithfully?

RJC: One could easily ask the same questions about theater and film in the United States.

HJS: In America, as I see it, the theater is dwindling into mere entertainment, with an interest in nothing but the marketplace. Similarly, American film has for decades been turning itself into a huge factory of boulevard theater, with its time-tested mixture of *kitsch* and commerce, the most popular example of which is what I call the throwaway melodrama, intended for the mentality that demands little more satisfaction form a show than a customer does from a visit to a brothel. In Germany, by contrast, Expressionistic film arose out of the Expressionistic theater and in accordance with old artistic traditions. But after the war such continuity disappeared.

Under the influence of the American (film) occupation, the public theater of today originated—that mixture of ideology, state subsidy, high pretentiousness, and quickly changing fashion. Alongside this public theater sprang up such events as happenings, environmental theater, performance art, and theatricalized works of art containing frozen figures and objects. Josef Beuys should be mentioned in this connection, as should your own Robert Wilson. Along the way there have been several influences, as on any intellectual movement: Wieland Wagner, Fritz Kortner, Bert Brecht. But were Leni Riefenstahl's films and Albert Speer's cathedral of light also influences, in that they were attempts to mirror the aesthetic side of the *Volk* in its adherence to the Führer's will? The living reflection of the masses was the art of the *Volk*-become-classicism on the screen. Consider, too, the Blood-and-Soil films of UFA under the Nazis and the neorealist cinema of postwar Italy. All this, I have to say, is very much in accord with my current interests, projects, problems.

RJC: Like the work of Appia, right?

HJS: Oh, yes. I would so much like to be a student again, possessing Adolphe Appia's intellectual intensity, and studying his textbook of the modern theater modeled on the work of Richard Wagner; learning how Appia attempted to make the music embedded in a text manifest, through the translation of that text's inner rhythm into an intellectual-spiritual body of gesture and movement; how he attempted to clear the stage, to free it from all the constraints of obstructive technology and the pseudo-wealth of management's budget, as well as from the aesthetic fashions and ideologies of scenic discourse. Coming from film, however, I pursued my own course (which in recent years has escaped American viewers). I still very much stand by my previous ventures, both as a writer and a director (even to the point of letting those films

be seen on videotape in other countries, if that is what people want). There was a mixture of theater and film in that work, and it showed itself to be an absolute in its rejection of the status quo as was Adolphe Appia when he envisioned his new stage.

RJC: But you subsequently departed from that mixture now, didn’t you?

HJS: Yes, that’s absolutely true. And therefore a few remarks may help to explain what happened, may serve for friends of my work as an intimate reminder of that which they once knew and as a distant report on what became of it. Adolphe Appia had something to do with my change in direction.

After *Parsifal*, doubtless the last film of mine seen by American audiences, I decided to clear the studio, to make it into an empty stage—to free my work of

Figure 37. Parsifal, *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1982*

projections and meticulous editing and, more and more, of those layers that had previously characterized my films and given them density as one of their qualities: music, sound effects, words, and images, themselves uniquely layered. As it happened, my next work, *The Night*, originated both in theater and on film, but without the characteristic qualities of my films up to that point. And if until now my films have been different from those of other directors, in that they were an expression of my inner worlds, were counterworlds to the world as it exists and to the world as it is ordinarily portrayed on movie screens and theater stages, then what I was presently creating would also be different.

RJC: How so? What's different about it?

HJS: Well, I abandoned the character from *Parsifal*, called Kundry by Wagner, and played by Edith Clever, who at the beginning and the end defined the limits of my film's cosmos, who contained it in herself, and yet who, when everything is over, will still be what she had been before it began. I chose instead a single human being to embody all the possibilities of expression, to express that for which in my films I needed design, music, words, and sound effects. In this human being, herself a different score for each of several texts, worlds were originated and expressed that contained those texts, on stage as on film.

This was more realistic than any reality, but it was realism of the inner sort, expressed through the face and through movement, whose various manifestation represent the coordinates of the spiritual realm; through light changes, through the eyes, and through the props and the gestures otherwise necessary to the performance, Everything in one human being: cutting and close-ups and long shots of landscapes; ubiquity of place and simultaneity of time; stairways and doorways, chases on land and chases on sea, heroes and beasts, nightmares and fantasies: all the images and the figures that populate the arts, with which we fill our films and plays. The same goes for rivers and walls, stones and trees, clothes and the elements, for everything form a storm to deadly silence: it was all able to be encompassed in a single human being.

RJC: Isn't this what is often described as cinematic in books—the cutting to a close-up and then back to a full shot, which creates a corresponding emotional effect in the viewer, mining his psychic depths through the manipulation of two-dimensional space?

HJS: Precisely! But all of this is created here by one human being, by the story contained in that human being's body and face. And if light helped in this process, it was not the kind that illuminates an area of the stage, but rather the kind that illuminates the play of spiritual forces on the face and over the body, as they move, figuratively speaking, from light into darkness and from darkness into light, either

directed or in a roundabout way. Thus as aesthetic system developed for something that required untraditional means for its expression. I was using a text that would be deemed unrepresentable or transmittable, as it were, just as I had used *Parsifal*, that most difficult of operas.

RJC: What was the subject of *The Night*, and what work followed it in your career?

HJS: The subject of *The Night* was the world of conflicting scenarios produced by the devastation of Europe during World War II. Then came work based on the character of Molly Bloom, from Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) and on Fräulein Else, from Arthur Schnitzler’s 1924 novella of the same name. Then, at last, I found Kleist’s *Penthesilea*, the Prussian tragedy of a sacrificial love so absolute in its expression that it shames the gods into rescinding their own flexible, murderous laws. (Interviewer’s note: Syberberg refers, in this sentence and the previous one, to the following films of his: *Edith Clever liest Joyce* (*Edith Clever Reads James Joyce*, a.k.a. *Molly Bloom—Monologue*, 1985), *Fräulein Else* (*Miss Else*, 1986), and *Penthesilea*. After directing Kleist’s play *Penthesilea* [1808] on film as well as onstage, in 1989 Syberberg adapted Kleist’s novella *The Marquise of O.* [1808] to the cinema. This novella had previously been adapted to the screen by the French director Éric Rohmer in 1976.)

Figure 38. Edith Clever liest Joyce (Edith Clever Reads James Joyce, *a.k.a.* Molly Bloom—Monologue), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1985*

RJC: Why do you say "at last"? I share what appears to be your esteem for this relatively unknown play by a playwright who deserves to be better known; still, I'd like you to expound.

HJS: Certainly I will. This work succeeded where others had failed in eliciting a certain kind of visual response from me. That is, it stimulated me to express my inner worlds and thoughts and configurations in images and tones from another artist's work. And again it stirred me to defy the existing order: the real world, which resists its immortalization in art, and its art forms, which instead of doing justice to the world's complexities devote themselves to chronicling its ever-changing superficialities.

I would defy the existing order, moreover, in a form whose richness was not an artistic substitute for material wealth or religious surety, each of which sells itself as the ultimate answer to life's difficulties. I would create my art for the sake of human life, whose ancient nature has led to its ruin. I mean ancient in the simplest sense: human. And as if for the first time, to the few who were still in a position to bear its sight, I would present the human as it incorporates the whole of mankind in every aspect and particular.

RJC: Wasn't it after returning from your "journey" with *Penthesilea* that you read Adolphe Appia for the first time?

HJS: That's right. I read, in Richard C. Beacham's 1987 book on Appia, of Appia's struggles and his pronouncements, as close to me as they were far away. "Scenic illusion is the presence of the living actor." And also, "Again he underscores the primacy of the actor who alone provides the key to the *mise en scène*: 'It is imperative that we base a production on the presence of the actor, and in order to achieve this that we clear the stage of everything that is in conflict with him.'" Here we see the primacy of the actor in the master's blueprint for the stage, which he empties in order to enhance the actor's powers. And the man who uttered those words had to work with amateurs, who obviously did not have the talent of the great actors of his time, and with a poorly outfitted stage apparatus. But he also knew about music and its power once it took hold of someone who could respond to it. I read, then, of one of those revolutionaries whom you simultaneously push to the side and start curiously taking nibbles at, the heritage of whose experiment will produce great new riches.

RJC: Surely you must also have read of light as the soul of direction.

HJS: Yes, but I also read that even at that time the electric light had produced a technical revolution whose wires and switches and lamps threatened to engulf the stage. And I read Appia's thoughts about the three-dimensional versus the two-dimensional representation of a forest onstage: for him the question really was, did you try to create a two-dimensional representation of a human being in that

forest? (This question doesn’t apply to film, of course, which in its two dimensions can record the real world.) I read, in addition, how to use objects and stage levels, together with light changes, to reveal the meaning of this facial expression or that body movement. And I thought of the cradle of dramatic representation, the ancient theater, which was set in the earth and under the sun instead of in some cave in the city, where our plays are staged. I thought of the self-knowledge that the ancients achieved through their plays, and of how hard it is for us to do the same. And the music beneath the surface of the scripts I’ve read lately tells me that out of the fragments into which our world has split—a fragmentation of atomization of which film is one expression—we must build the world up again, we must take it whole; and we can do this through renewed emphasis on the living actor, to the exclusion of everything on stage that does not bear on his art and his revelation.

RJC: In Appia’s day, as you have pointed out, there was an attempt, aided by the advent of new lighting techniques, to cleanse the theater of historicism by clearing the stage and concentrating on essences. There were also clashes between the theater and the new medium of film—clashes that were not taken seriously because film wasn’t recognized as an art form.

HJS: Today, however, as we live under the threat of the world’s destruction, we will have to decide whether we want an aesthetic of protest that lives by the soiled and lame ideology of technical supply and demand, or whether we want once again to clear the stage, to concentrate our thinking on what enhances nature, not on the technological consumption and the ideological colonization that destroy it. It will take very little to complete this destruction.

RJC: Well, knowing how much has been lost already, an artist must find it difficult to carry the burden of protest on his shoulders.

HJS: Yes, but whether the burden is carried by the film’s succession of flat images or the theater’s three-dimensional stage, by pictures or by words, by music or by the human beings who make it, isn’t the most important thing, finally. What is, is the point at which the imitation of nature starts thinking of itself as a substitute for nature. This practice should be avoided. Nature will achieve immortality only through art that is true to itself: that stands out authentically from the density of the whole and acknowledges the tragedy of our time; that stands fast and takes root in the firm knowledge of whence it has come and where it is headed, to what heights it is striving.

So, we have the old confrontation between audience’s desire for realism and art’s guilty longing for immortality, which its descendants alone can grant it in the very process of continuing the species, which is to say, mankind. And we have the confrontation between artists themselves: between the ones whose ritual is dying out and the ones whose new ritual will replace it.

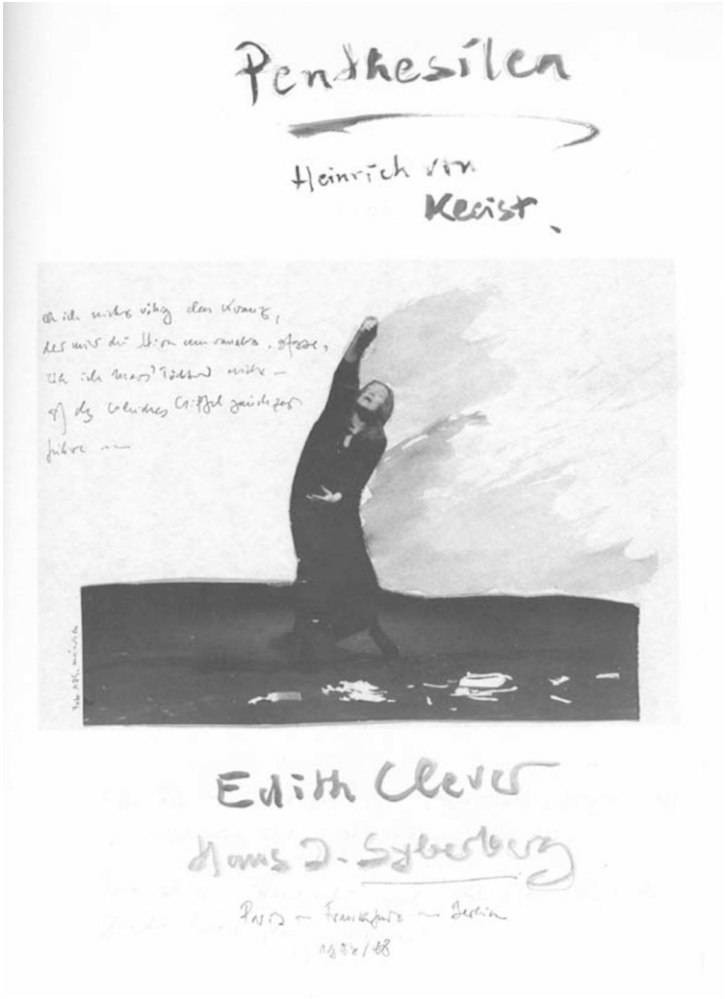

Figure 39. Penthesilea, *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1987*

RJC: In the early twentieth century, this was a struggle between old and new forms of theater.

HJS: For me, it was already a struggle between old and new kinds of film. In that sector of Europe's subsidized theater that is committed to art, the struggle lies elsewhere: it is a headlong, absolutely destructive struggle between the community of intellect and the forces of the banal, the obscene, and the trivial over whether the genuinely serious stage, which always seeks ideal truth, shall be permitted to

survive. We can call this theater utopian, paradisiacal, or Arcadian if we want, but we shall endure as a civilization only so long as we take up the mandate, issued to us by a protean reality, to find ourselves in art, in the high art of the theater as well as the other forms. If we do not, our culture’s decline will be mirrored by our own. We can angrily tear the mandate up, if we wish; or, in frustration, we can just walk away and refuse to acknowledge its existence. On the other hand, we can zealously urge it on the public. But first it must at least be formulated as an expression of society’s better judgment, if only to be consigned to our unconscious. For without such a mandate for art, society is dead, and in the time even its echo will die.

RJC: Adolphe Appia clearly did his part in this struggle.

HJS: Appia fought in art’s behalf, and his successors have done so, too. We have come quite far, but we have unintentionally run up against the business of art and its museums for tourists. Still, in our refusal to collaborate with the merchandisers, we do not run the risk, like Appia, of never realizing ourselves in the practice of our art. Like the late Glenn Gould, like the monks of old, we are still able to employ our skills to the extent that our memory will be preserved, that future generations will know why he lived.

RJC: Whether or not Appia realized himself in the practice of his art, one can regard the rebirth of electric light in his theater as the event that made possible the fusion of all visual elements, into an artistic whole, with the director as its overseer.

HJS: But one can also regard this rebirth of electric light as the event that ultimately made film possible: film, the form that shined light on celluloid and thereby gave rise to the mass-produced living *image*—in contrast with the unique occurrence of *live* theater—the form that though the easy availability of its prints (its color prints, eventually) was mass-consumed in the movie house, and then was mass-consumed in the isolation of the home, first on television and then on videotape.

RJC: Moreover, film’s disciples greeted the theater’s loss of aura as a victory over its obscurantism of the soul, its obscurantist metaphysic of the avant-garde.

HJS: True, but in reality the theater’s “death” was the birth of *dead* light and *dead* images, the birth of a plastic art on film that split the nucleus of the world into a series of views and angles, much as scientists split the atom, and thus disturbed the world in ways we all know. Only the human spirit, like an echo of cultures past, has been able to cohere in the face of environmental destruction and the threat of nuclear holocaust.

RJC: Even with a bad production in the theater, as well all know but which we must recall, one is still guaranteed the sight of human life—be it evil, miserable, or ordinary.

HJS: Unable to present us firsthand with the grace of pure life, film has become, by contrast, evidence for the death of culture. Film's play of dead light represents the destruction of the world, the director as demiurge without the power to love and without the power to create, who has turned the stage into a studio where the dark light of the image is more important than the living light of human beings. And this same director, in a television studio for the taping of a show, become preoccupied with nothing so much as the lamps over and among the heads of his live audience, which in this era of network audience-shares achieves only a symbolic existence for its trouble and its finally dispensable, like the king at his court theater. The consumers of the media are the new audience, and they confirm the death of the old, live one.

RJC: Like the death of certain kinds of light in the theater.

HJS: Yes, exactly. Light belongs in the theater just as fire belonged on the altars of the ancient gods. One can even say that theaters exist for the purpose of letting light shine. The ordinances in Germany that, in the name of democracy, proudly prohibit the use in our best subsidized spaces of certain kinds of light in favor of the other, more technically advanced kids, and do so without any inkling of the mountain of official decree. They are signs as well of the extinguishment of the human spirit, which for centuries in Germany has had the freedom to challenge and to extend itself. These ordinances seal off our theaters from life and even from death, from the risks attendant in art—an art that is replaced, as a result, by protest ideologically founded on the Promethean gift of fire, that wellspring of life out of which art itself is fashioned. The loss to our stage of such domesticated fire as the living light of candles and gas signifies yet another gain for the cult of bureaucracy.

RJC: And what about the light that film took from the theater? Can film give the theater something in return?

HJS: Good question. Let me follow it with another: Could this gift be the very forbidden fire from which films live, and could it be in the form of a metaphor for the radiant or electronic impulses printed on those artificial substances, celluloid and videotape? That is, can film's visual freedom and its visual provocation—the ability that it has to set free in the viewer's unconscious a quiet profusion of images that flow unchecked into the depths of his heart—can these qualities be adapted to the theater, where they would become only one more leaf on the tree of artistic knowledge.

RJC: How would that happen? The offstage events reported in the theater by messengers, for example, are realized on film in action.

HJS: Film does cut up these dramatic word-pictures into a kaleidoscope of sights and sounds and deeds from all over the world. But these can themselves be transformed back into the palpable motion of imagined worlds in the monologue of

the representational self, the single human being onstage who become synonymous with the world and taps the selves of his spectators. The ancient dream of the poet would thus be fulfilled: the write poetry for the stage and have it realized there, this time is rhythms borrowed from film—the same rhythms that lend meaning to what otherwise would be an empty succession of images.

RJC: So film in this instance would be sacrificing itself to the theater, not the other way around?

HJS: Yes, the film must learn that it is art which sacrifices itself, in the end, to civilization. Yet, living off its own demise, as it were, art continues its celebration of civilization. Is it possible that it does so as never before?

RJC: Yes, if you’re speaking in terms of the sheer quantity of artistic production throughout the world.

HJS: Well, Mr. Cardullo, it turns out that I am more hopeful or optimistic in this regard than you, which surprises me. Thank you for a stimulating discussion.

RJC: Thank *you*, Mr. Syberberg.

NOTE

[1] Bert Cardullo, “Theater and Film, or ‘Adolphe Appia and Me’: A Discussion with Hans-Jürgen Syberberg,” *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 38.1 (2010): 5–15.

R. J. CARDULLO[1]

17. THE THEATER-OF-FILM OF HANS-JÜRGEN SYBERBERG: *PARSIFAL* AND *DIE NACHT*

Two works by Hans-Jürgen Syberberg best exemplify what I describe in my title as the "theater of film": *Parsifal* (1982) and *Die Nacht* (*The Night*, 1985). Let's begin with the earlier picture, whose subject should be no surprise if one knows Wagner's *Parsifal* (1882) and if one has seen Syberberg's *Our Hitler* (1977; a.k.a., *Hitler, A Film from Germany*). (The connection between Wagner and Hitler is the fact that the Führer venerated Wagner's works and saw them as embodying true German ideals.) No, you should not be surprised by Syberberg's choice to make a film of Wagner's work; nor should you be surprised by this director's general approach to his subject. But this *Parsifal*, among its fascinations, does have a surprising new aspect—to which I shall return.

Syberberg's obsession with Wagner has long been familiar. The first film of his to be shown in the United States, *The Confessions of Winifred Wagner* (1975), was a 104-minute condensation of the five-hour interview, made for German television, which he conducted with her. Wagner, musically and otherwise, is present in several other Syberberg films. And one of the most vivid images in postwar German cinema occurs in *Our Hitler*: the toga-clad Hitler rising from a grave that has a stone marked "RW." In Syberberg's view, then, *Parsifal* must be the most representative of Wagner's works, the most beautiful but silly, exalted yet pretentious, noble at the same time it is vicious—all the contradictions that Syberberg patently finds in German character and behavior.

Wagner himself, of course, is prototypical of a great deal that both repels and fascinates about Germany. On the one hand there is Wagner, the maniacal, blood-and-iron, anti-Semitic Teuton. On the other hand, there is Wagner, the titanic genius whom the young Nietzsche saw as the new Prometheus restoring Dionysian flame to a pallid civilization. (And the older Nietzsche never really recanted. As Thomas Mann remarked, "Nietzsche's polemic against Wagner pricks our enthusiasm for the composer rather than tames it.")[2] Eric Bentley, in that masterwork *The Playwright as Thinker* (1946), goes as far as to pair Wagner with Ibsen as one of the two great modern exponents of tragedy. Yet this is, inseparably, the same Richard Wagner who inspired Adolf Hitler, and whose anti-Semitism is sometimes seen as Syberberg's own.

Wagner's score for *Parsifal*, which (I think) Syberberg uses uncut, is a succession of marvels that coalesce into a gigantic marvel; yet the libretto, or poem as Wagner

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called it, is itself less than completely cogent. The atmosphere may be as spiritual as anything in Wagner, but he explicitly intended the work as an Aryan, anti-Semitic allegory. (Admittedly, the first conductor was a Jew.) Moreover, it is an allegory that idealizes (again) Wagner's view of male innocence beset by the temptations of woman: as in Tannhäuser's enslavement within the Venusberg in *Tannhäuser*; or in Siegfried's cutting open the armor of the sleeping Brünnhilde, in the third part of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelungs*, 1876), and exclaiming naïvely, "Das ist kein Mann!" Be that as it may, the Parsifal-Kundry encounter in Act II is still one of the most perceptive sexual rites of passage in drama. (Kundry entices Parsifal by speaking of his mother—more than a decade before Freud.) Writing from Bayreuth in 1889, Bernard Shaw had this to say on the subject: "And that long kiss of Kundry's from which [Parsifal] learns so much is one of those pregnant simplicities which stare the world in the face for centuries and yet are never pointed out except by great men."[3]

Figure 40. Parsifal, *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1982*

No wonder, then, that Syberberg, only one of a number of German artists who have simultaneously loved and loathed their country, should respond to *Parsifal*. Nonetheless, a question persists. Not the question of Syberberg's alleged anti-Semitism or ultra-nationalism, the political nature of which does not interest me. The question that persists is an *aesthetic* one, and one that leads to the surprise mentioned earlier. Why did he film a work that was already famous in another medium? His previous films had been entirely his own creations. Why this co-creation? Here, Syberberg did begin with a new recording of *Parsifal*, but, except for bits of music rehearsals under the credits and a few snatches of random voices after the finish, he simply supplied visuals to accompany that recording. Again, why?

The answer begins to be suggested by the following statement of his:

> Just as the composer [Wagner] was inspired by a legendary evocation of the Middle Ages in his desire to express ideas that were of his own time, I am basing my approach on the fact that the work is one hundred years old and that I can therefore describe its significance through time.[4]

Ascribe the hubris of that last phrase to the energy that an artist needs in order to do anything serious at all—no one knowingly creates just for next week—and Syberberg's approach becomes clearer while we watch the film. This view of *Parsifal*, as a classic text chosen by a later artist for contemporary definition, puts his film in a *theater* tradition, not a cinematic one. That is the surprise. And his film derives, fundamentally, from Adolphe Appia.

Appia (1862–1928), the Swiss theatrical designer and visionary, had revolutionary views of production that have hugely influenced Western theater in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—particularly non-illusionistic dramatic practice. In such writings as *The Stage of Wagner's Musical Dramas* (1885), *Music and Stage Setting* (1899), and *The Work of Living Art* (1921), he emphasized the role of light in fusing all of the stage's visual elements into a unified theatrical whole. Since to him light was the visual counterpart of music, which changes from moment to moment in response to shifting moods, emotions, and action, Appia wished to orchestrate and manipulate light as carefully as a musical score. Attempts to implement this theory, which require control over the distribution, brightness, and color of light, have led to many of the developments in modern stage lighting. Not only did he emphasize the role of light, but Appia also argued that artistic unity requires one person to be in control of all the elements of production, and in this way he helped to strengthen the role of the director (especially what has come to be known as the "concept" director) in the theatre.

Appia's strongest love was for Wagner; for the whole of his professional life, in fact, he worked on designs for Wagnerian productions. Few of them were ever realized—he participated in only six actual productions of any kind during his entire career—but they changed the theater's way of seeing. Appia was shocked by the old-fashioned staging and design at Bayreuth, which had been prescribed by the composer. He wrote that

> Wagner made but one essential reform. Through the medium of music he conceived of a dramatic action whose center of gravity lay inside the characters and which at the same time could be completely *expressed* for the hearer…. But he did not know how to make his production form—his *mise en scène*—agree with his adopted dramatic form.[5]

Though Appia never stopped dream-designing for a theatrical revolution of Wagner that would fit the revolution in the music, he did get three Wagnerian production chances, half of his whole practical career. One of them was *Tristan und Isolde* (*Tristan and Isolde*, 1865) for Toscanini at La Scala in 1923, and neither of the

others was *Parsifal*. But his unrealized designs for *Parsifal* figure prominently in the treasury of his work.

Figure 41. Parsifal, *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1982*

Syberberg's film of *Parsifal* does not in any detail come from Appia, but ideationally it is the result of an intent that began with Appia and has since flourished. To wit: Appia was the first conceiver of productions who re-created the inside of his head on stage, rather than reproduce the world outside realistically, classically, or even Romantically. What he wanted to reify on the stage was his imaginative response to a work of art. And that, exactly, is Syberberg's basic intent in *Parsifal*, though of course his response is his own—nothing like Appia's.

Syberberg puts before us, then, not just a film of the opera, however symbolic or impressionistic, but absolutely everything that *Parsifal* evokes in him, about art and politics and history, about theater and cinema, about the possible exorcism of the demon Wagner himself. While Wagner's rich, almost extravagant music floods our hearing, Syberberg feeds our eyes with as much as he can crystallize of what that music—that music's very existence—has done to him. To be sure, the *Parsifal* story gets told well enough, but this is not a consistent "eccentric version," as a modern-dress or science-fiction adaptation, for example, might be. What we are really watching, in addition to the *Parsifal* narrative, is a cascade of connections, the play of associations hauled out by other associations in Syberberg's mind.

Some of the elements in his film are easily understood, perhaps too easily. When Gurnemanz leads Parsifal to the castle in Act I, for instance, they go backward

through German history as represented by an alley of flags, beginning with the swastika. Behind Klingsor in Act II, the watchtower of a concentration camp can be seen. The waxworks-museum heads of Marx, Nietzsche, and Wagner himself are sometimes part of the décor; so is a three-dimensional facsimile of André Gill's famous caricature of Wagner—inside a human ear, hammering away. At one point Parsifal is even seen against a ridge that turns out to be Wagner's face in horizontal profile. Amfortas's wound, moreover, is an entity quite separate from his body, so that it seems to be a possession more than an affliction. Syberberg represents it by a thick, folded napkin on a pedestal next to the ailing king's couch: the bleeding gash is in the napkin. (It suggests a vulva, and thus the wound, which he got from Kundry, may be a figure for carnal seduction.)

Most of the film's actions and details, however, must be taken only as phenomena that affect us or don't—not as elements to be explicated. For one thing, most of the roles are mimed with lip-synch. (Two of the performers we see happen also to be singers on the soundtrack; the text is naturally sung in German, with subtitles.) That in itself is neither novel nor troublesome. But Syberberg goes further: he chooses to have Parsifal mimed first by a stripling, adolescent boy and, then, after Kundry's kiss, the role is mimed by an even younger girl, with Reiner Goldberg's strong *Heldentenor* coming out of the mouth of each Parsifal in turn. At the end, the boy and girl embrace chastely.

I don't believe that this device "means" anything; it's intended to jar preconceptions and provoke new response, not to fill out any pattern, Freudian or otherwise. As is the device of dolls that are suddenly used as characters and then discarded. Or the one of the Flower Maidens posed immobile, against rocks, while they sing of caressing Parsifal. The penultimate image itself is of a skull, crowned with a bishop's miter, lying on the ground. The last image is of Kundry, her arms and long hair embracing or entwining a small wooden model of what I take to be the Bayreuth Festspielhaus. And much more, all of it intended only to represent Syberberg's visions, or visionary response to *Parsifal*—for us to absorb, to use, if we can and will.

Contrapuntally, as in *Our Hitler*, Syberberg insists on a kind of Brechtian candor throughout, to keep us aware that fabrication is part of his process. Everything is played against a black cyclorama, on which slides are often projected. (Compare this device, used here on a sound stage as it was in *Our Hitler*, with the use of theatrical backdrops in Syberberg's *Ludwig: Requiem for a Virgin King* [1972], where such scenery crystallizes the theatricality of Ludwig's life and the "performance" of that life, his passion for the theater as well as his devotion to Wagner.) The lighting of a scene often changes while we watch. And almost all the scenery is meant to look like scenery. Sometimes, for example, we see the floorboards of the film studio. Near the end, projected on the cyclorama behind one scene, there is even some film footage of the conductor, Armin Jordan, shot during the recording session. (Jordan, who has conducted in many European opera houses, here leads the Monte Carlo Philharmonic Orchestra and the Prague Philharmonic Choir.)

Yet, in the midst of this torrent of images combined with Syberberg's "exposé" of image-making, most of the performances are quite traditional. The Gurnemanz here is much younger than usual, but he is nonetheless the poem's Gurnemanz, beautifully played by Robert Lloyd. (Lloyd also sings the role beautifully; the other singer who appears on screen is Aage Haugland, the Klingsor.) Amfortas is feeling, mimed—by the conductor himself, to the accompaniment of the good baritone of Wolfgang Schöne. And Yvonne Minton sings Kundry powerfully, while that miraculous actress Edith Clever mimes this problematic role with an intensity that holds its tensions in fiery focus. (The recording, by the way, is fortunately in Dolby stereo, but, spatially speaking, Syberberg elects to use the "old" screen size, which is one-third wider than it is high.)

Figure 42. Parsifal, *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1982*

The most significant previous film of an opera was made only eight years before *Parsifal*—Ingmar Bergman's *Magic Flute* in 1975—and a comparison of this work with Syberberg's own reveals a paradox. To Bergman, Mozart's opera was a *cinematic* challenge: by means of the camera, he therefore combined a conventional stage performance both with the presence of an audience and with backstage data to create a purely filmic locus for the work. By contrast, Syberberg, who had never worked in the theater until *Die Nacht*, strives in *Parsifal* to make film into theater.

Distant from Appia yet evolved from him, Syberberg puts his "definitive" theatrical production on film because, in several senses, it would not be possible in an actual theater. Aided by designers of exceptional talent, he has created a

sweepingly personal, expansively idiosyncratic vision of *Parsifal* that nonetheless places his film in a venerable theatrical line: a director's "statement" of a classic. In spite of a camera that is almost always slowly moving in or away, panning or traveling, this work, then, is much less like pure cinema than a superb (television) film of a production in a hypothetical (but oversized) theater.

Syberberg's final—or perhaps first and foremost—"comment" on *Parsifal* is that he filmed it at all. For *Parsifal* has a unique history: beginning with its première at Bayreuth in 1882, it was zealously guarded as a sacred work, to be performed only in the hallowed atmosphere of Bayreuth, not on profane stages elsewhere. And except for some concert versions, this "edict" was carried out for twenty-one years. Then the Metropolitan Opera in New York took advantage of inexact international copyright law to produce *Parsifal*, despite German cries of profanation, on Christmas Eve, 1903. (A chartered Parsifal Limited train came from Chicago, while *The New York Evening Telegram* produced a *Parsifal* extra.) Other "profanations" followed in other cities, in the United States as well as abroad, until 1914 when the Bayreuth copyright expired and *Parsifal* became unrestrictedly available to every opera house throughout the world.

And then, one hundred years after *Parsifal*'s original production, Syberberg makes a "mere" film of it—something that can be shown anywhere, at any time. But this fact, too, holds a contradiction. By making his film, and making it in his particular way, Syberberg has utterly destroyed any remaining fake pieties about *Parsifal*. At the same time he has tried, through belief in the pertinence of his vision/version of the work, to consecrate it anew for the present-and-future, protean theater of film.

In this way, Syberberg gives the lie to those scholars and critics who still see theater and film as inherently separate. Indeed, he seems to call for a new notion of the relationship between film and theater, and to argue that any such notion must be based not only on the history and theory of these two intertwined media, but also on the contributions to them of artists (like Appia) who have turned out to be the most influential; on the idea that any inherent distinctions between the two media provide different aesthetic options but do not predetermine what kind of film or theater can be created; and, finally, on the presumption that there can be no single "idea" to answer the question, "What is the relationship between theater and film?" Rather, there is a multiplicity of answers, and the artist's journey toward a particular answer will ultimately be personal, depending on the "lens" through which he or she views both media. And Syberberg's own lens, as his work and words make clear, is decidedly bifocal.

A true adventurer in film, Syberberg pressed on after *Our Hitler* and *Parsifal*—which teemed with images and characters and devices and fantasies—with *Die Nacht*, which is mostly set in one place and, through all of its six hours, has only one performer. Yet—another contradiction—this film is not a whit less adventurous than the earlier two and, through different modes and stimuli, teems just as plentifully. However, unlike *Our Hitler* and *Parsifal*, *Die Nacht* had fewer theater showings in North America: several in Chicago, some in Montreal, and then four in New York

(where I saw it). No regular theater showings followed, then or now, which is a sadness I'd rather not dwell on here.

Die Nacht consists of a prologue and two sections, with an intermission after Part I. Following the prologue, of a half hour or so, the credits appear, a number of authors are listed, some album pages turn, and then we move to Part I and the only setting used thereafter. Part II begins with a similar listing of authors, some album pages, and a return to that same setting. (The prologue is in pale colors, as shot by Xaver Schwarzenberger; the rest is in black and white.) From the authors whom he names, Syberberg has culled, touched up, and interwoven—with some autobiographical material—a skein of language intended to circumscribe the night of his title: the long night of Western culture.

That he includes more than Europe in this night is patent from the start. The prologue, spoken in a large, rubble-strewn room in a battered Berlin building, is the speech of the American Indian chief Seattle when he signed a peace treaty with Washington, D.C., in 1855. His words envision the end of his people and their ways, but Seattle warns the white man that, though the Indians may disappear from view, their spirits will continue to inhabit the land. Syberberg dabs this speech with present-day (mid-1980s) references that ensure topicality and ensure also that the words apply to Europe as well as the United States. The speaker is the great German actress Edith Clever, clad in a simple dress and holding a dark, rough cloth about herself. Only then do the credits come—after Clever finishes speaking.

We now move to a placeless place: a floor of gleaming black gravel, a white circle of light at its center and a small white cloth in the light, with a cloak of darkness surrounding everything. In the light, acutely varied by the cinematographer Schwarzenberger, Clever spends the next five-and-a-half hours close to us or with the camera at differing distances and angles, her body statuesque or sinuous depending on the angle and the light, her torso curved away from the camera-eye into architectural form, her body self-caressed in recollections of Eros, her presence immediate, her presence godlike, as she speaks, intones, sings, mourns, and eulogizes through the medium of the text that Syberberg has prepared. As far as the film reveals, Clever, or Clever's character, is the sole survivor of a long, glorious, *and* atrocious history, and before she too disappears into the black all around her, she offers a threnody.

The text, often accompanied by sections of Bach's *Das Wohltemperierte Klavier* (*The Well-Tempered Clavier*, 1742) in Sviatoslav Richter's hands, moves through literature that is mostly German—Hölderlin, Goethe, Heine, and Nietzsche, as well as Schiller, Kleist, Novalis, and Heidegger—but with minglings of other cultures translated into German. (Prospero's farewell to his art, from *The Tempest* [1611] but in German, is transfixing.) The tone ranges from Wagner's crawling pleas for help from his patron Giacomo Meyerbeer, to his slimy spewings to King Ludwig about "Jewry in Music"; from the sight of a child's toy in Clever's hand to her sublime reciting of a poem in which humankind asks Jesus if his father is still alive, to which the son of God, his eyes streaming with tears, replies that we are all orphans now.

Courage is one hallmark of Syberberg's film work, and that hallmark is visible in *Die Nacht*. He wants to burst through order and plunge into the unknown, the possibly chaotic, there to forge a new aesthetic order. Since he did this differently in his previous two films—*Our Hitler* and *Parsifal*—no fixed criteria will help the spectator to navigate Syberberg's artistic ventures. Sometimes, I must admit, *Die Nacht* escaped my powers of attention during my sole viewing of it. For the film doesn't aim at a relentless, concentrated march toward spiritual nakedness and existential nullity like *Acropolis*, the titanic theater production by Jerzy Grotowski from the mid-1960s (first production, 10 October 1962), which conducted its own requiem. (*Acropolis* took the concentration camp at Auschwitz for its setting, and, for its "plot," the building by the prisoners there of the gas chamber in which they will be consumed.) *Die Nacht*, six times as long, does not march and only fitfully exalts.

Principally, the film *remembers*, but its memories wander in addition to both fondling the past and grieving over it. Certainly it has passages that repeat notes already heard. Certainly, too, it vibrates more fully for someone familiar with German literature in German. But even such a person would not find every moment in *Die Nacht* tense and fraught with meaning: I, for one, did not. Yet it is a facet of Syberberg's experimental daring—not an excuse for avant-garde idling—that, instead of shaping a drama, he has in effect enclosed a preserve or park, of time, in which to linger and remember and even nod in the last remaining light. One factor in this film, however, did sustain me through its length, and it was surely a part of Syberberg's design from the beginning. *Die Nacht* must have been conceived, that is, with the prospective collaboration of Edith Clever in the principal—and, it's worth repeating, the lone—role.

Clever is known in the United States chiefly through the films *Die linkshändige Frau* (*The Left-Handed Woman*, 1978; written and directed by Peter Handke) and *The Marquise of O.* (Éric Rohmer's version, 1976), and, as previously mentioned, through Syberberg's *Parsifal*, where she mimed Kundry so intensely that, although it was not her singing voice we heard, it seemed to be. What is not known in North America is her theater career, mostly with the Schaubühne in the former West Berlin. I have never seen Clever on stage, but I know that she has played leading roles in Schiller (*Kabale und Liebe* [*Love and Intrigue*], 1784), Goethe (*Torquato Tasso*, 1790), Middleton and Rowley (*The Changeling*, 1622), Ibsen (*Peer Gynt*, 1876), and Aeschylus (*The Oresteia*, 458 B.C.), as well as in Gorky, Brecht, and Botho Strauss. In 1983 she played Gertrude in *Hamlet* (1603).

I cite all of these instances prior to Clever's work in *Die Nacht* because they are quite clearly the sources of her spiritual or imaginative endowment (not to speak of her physical resources), the simple majesty with which she makes her very first movement, utters her very first word in this, Syberberg's eighth film. I know of no better actress or actor in the world than Edith Clever, and few are her peers; but *Die Nacht* is not a display vehicle, a "one-woman show" where the woman herself, or generic "woman," is the focus. Clever is completely and wondrously in union

Figure 43. Die Nacht (The Night), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1985*

with what is happening in the film. So much so that her art *in itself* is as much a manifestation of the culture that *Die Nacht* embraces and indicts, as much both an exhilarating triumph and a profound grief, as any of the words in the text.

Clever performed *Die Nacht* a few times in a small Paris theater in 1984, and in an unpublished conversation I once had with Syberberg, I asked if it had been planned as a theater piece, then filmed. No, he responded, *Die Nacht* had been planned as a film, but when this Paris theater offered to produce it (after its initial production some years before at the Schaubühne in Berlin), he accepted. The stage setting was much like that of the film, and French subtitles were projected high above, on the dark wall behind Clever. The production was done in two evenings—three-and-a-half hours, then two-and-a-half hours—each evening without intermission. "And," said Syberberg proudly, "although there was a prompter there, Edith never needed him, she never faltered." I replied that I supposed the stage darkened from time to time—if only to give Clever a momentary breather—in the way that the film goes to black and then resumes at a different angle or distance. "No," said Syberberg, "the pauses in the film of *Die Nacht* are there only because the film runs out in the camera-magazine."

That Paris engagement was Syberberg's first theater work, and it underscored that, volitionally or not, he was further exploring—on screen as on stage—what I earlier called, in reference to *Parsifal*, the "theater of film." Two passages in the film of *Die Nacht* especially mark this exploration: two Wagnerian excerpts, one from Isolde's

"Liebestod," the other from Brünnhilde's "Immolation Scene" in *Götterdämmerung* (1876). In both instances, we hear a full orchestra playing as Clever sings. She has nothing like an operatic voice; she merely sings pleasantly. (Syberberg did tell me, however, that a Wagnerian conductor he knew was struck by the accuracy of her entrances and tempi and phrasing.) The point is that, with her modest singing voice, Clever acts those excerpts in a manner that illuminates them as never before.

Wagner himself asked the impossible: wonderful singing *and* wonderful acting. A major Wagnerian production gives you the first, plus passable acting. Clever, who could not possibly do the first, supplies what is always missing from the second. As I watched her perform in *Die Nacht*, I suddenly wanted to see a Wagnerian "theater of film" in which Clever would give us, in this manner, the missing dramatic element to add to our memory of musically great Isoldes, to name just one heroine—which is not the same (if you think about it) as her miming a character, however convincingly in the case of *Parsifal*'s Kundry, to the accompaniment of another woman's operatic voice.

All of the above is to emphasize that Syberberg is seeking new empowerment for the arts he inherited in the arts he practices: theater and film, or film and theater. What persists after the long filmic threnody of *Die Nacht*, as after the enduring theatrical conceptualization of *Parsifal*, is that Syberberg's search, in tandem with Clever, is the expression of an austere hope (but nonetheless a valid one) not only for the rebirth of the culture he is mourning, but also for the consecration of a theater of film. Why a *theater* of film? Because the filmmaker Syberberg paradoxically believes, as he said to me in an interview I conducted with him, that film represents "the birth of *dead* light and *dead* images, the birth of a plastic art on film that split the nucleus of the world into a series of views and angles, much as scientists split the atom, and thus disturbed the world in ways we all know."[6] Only the human spirit can cohere in the face of such a disturbed world, ever veering toward environmental destruction and nuclear holocaust. And that spirit, that "grace of pure life,"[7] as Syberberg put it, can still be found—whole, shining, and undisturbed—in the living theater.

NOTES

1 R. J. Cardullo, "The Theater-of-Film of Hans-Jürgen Syberberg: *Parsifal* and *Die Nacht*," *Germanic Notes and Reviews*, 44.2 (Fall 2013): 28–36.

2 Thomas Mann, "Sufferings and Greatness of Richard Wagner," trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter, in Mann's *Essays of Three Decades* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), 314.

3 George Bernard Shaw, "*Parsifal* in Bayreuth," *The Star*, 7 August 1889.

4 Syberberg cited by Stanley Kauffmann, *Field of View: Film Criticism and Comment* (New York, NY: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1986), 30.

5 Adolphe Appia, *The Work of Living Art: A Theory of the Theatre*, trans. H. O. Albright (Miami, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1960), 85.

6 See Cardullo's interview with Syberberg on p. 201 of this volume.

7 See Cardullo's interview with Syberberg on p. 202 of this volume.

JONATHAN BOWDEN[1]

POSTSCRIPT

Hans-Jürgen Syberberg: Leni Riefenstahl's Heir?

The following text is a transcript of a lecture by Jonathan Bowden first given at the 14th New Right meeting in London on April 5, 2008, and revised especially for this volume by the editor, who received permission from Mr. Bowden to do so before the latter's untimely death in 2012.

This presentation of mine is about a filmmaker called Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, who's not a household name, it has to be said, even within contemporary Germany. In "Hans-Jürgen Syberberg: Leni Riefenstahl's Heir?" I want to concentrate on a figure who is contemporaneous, who is alive and amongst us now (unlike Riefenstahl, who nonetheless did not die until 2003, when she was over 100), who survives in this most difficult, most liberal, most democratic, most egalitarian of eras, an era that is in every sense postmodern after the fall—perceived in every possible way—of 1945 and thereafter.

Syberberg is a filmmaker who, at this moment in time, is probably one of the loneliest cultural figures, if not the loneliest, in the modern unified Federal Republic of Germany. He's most famous for a film called *Hitler, A Film from Germany* (1977), which lasts seven-and-a quarter hours. Seven-and-a-quarter hours! I saw it when I was nineteen at the National Film Theatre in London, and it's one of those events that brought to mind something Richard Nixon once said: You need a cast-iron behind to read law, but you really needed some vitamin C to watch this film for seven hours, just physically to sit there. Because when you come out after having sat for that length of time, you really are sort of rigid.

Syberberg's an East German, essentially, and he was born in 1935 of minor aristocratic and upper-class parentage. He lived in Rostock until 1945. He was too young to have gone through, or have had to go through, the de-Nazification process as a focused individual, but, of course, he went through everything that happened later. Indeed, he experienced the beginnings of the Communist statelet in the occupied east. When he came west there was a large reception for him from the cultural apparatus of the new federalized West German state, yet he made some equivocal remarks at the time about the Communist regimes of Walter Ulbricht and Erich Honecker. He talked about the fact that East Germany was one of the first countries to build a wall to keep its people in. "But simultaneously," he said, "they managed to teach nearly all of us to read and write, which you over here in the postwar West don't seem to quite master." There was then a slight pulling in of the

welcome carpet, and people realized that Syberberg was in a sense a man who said what he liked, and this isn't liked in contemporary Germany or most other countries. Indeed, Syberberg was always—and is now, because he's still alive though quite elderly—a controversialist, in every sense.

He began with a thesis on the playwright Friedrich Dürrenmatt and the Absurd, which seemed to chart him out for a regular academic, non-artistic career. But he always had a yearning for total art, for the total art form of Wagnerian vintage of the late nineteenth century: the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. This is the idea of an integrated form that combines all others: speech, higher poetic speech, song, dance, movement, the visual image of the human, of nature, and the two together, of narrative or story, of action and drama, and so on.

And when you think about it, film or the use of film, particularly by radical and authoritarian governments of the twentieth century, is the total artwork for this era, as Leni Riefenstahl knew and discovered and made use of, which is why she became the greatest female filmmaker of the twentieth century, also the most vilified cultural propagandist, as she then was seen (and continues to be seen by many): forbidden to make films in the postwar period.

Interestingly, some years back Mel Gibson was asked about Riefenstahl in the enormous brouhaha of controversy that blew up around his 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ*. He said that he would have given her some tens of millions of dollars, because he had that sort of money then, to make some of the films that she wanted to make in the postwar period (although she did make *Lowlands* in 1954). This is because the amount of money that you needed to start up production for a film was so great prior to the arrival of digital, high-definition cameras in the last ten to fifteen years that but for very large amounts of capital in reserve you could be completely stymied. Even if you managed to find the money to make your movie, most films before the Internet, if you couldn't disseminate them, became instances of the vanity form of all vanity forms. And, *mutatis mutandis*, that's what faced Riefenstahl after World War II.

If you go to Germany today much of it looks like a picture-perfect tourist postcard, but that's because everything has been lovingly rebuilt after it was smashed, not just a little bit, but to pieces, to atoms, so that one brick hardly remained on top of another. North, south, east, and west, Allied bombing, primarily British bombing, smashed city after city after city, so that there was nothing left: *nothing*. Every urban area was like Grozny in Chechnya now, where, I believe, even after the present clique have been in power for quite a few years, only one street in the center of the city has been rebuilt.

Syberberg's career began a few decades later with two relatively short films made for television in the mid-1960s. One thing he wanted to do after the destruction of Germany was to go back to many of the great actors and actresses who were nearing the ends of their lives in the '60s and put them on the screen for the last time: as sort of an addendum, a memorial, a thank-you note. These were short films shot on quite primitive equipment, and in black and white. The first one was called *Romy*—

Figure 44. Romy—Portrait eines Gesichts (Romy—Anatomy of a Face), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1967*

Anatomy of a Face, made in 1965 but released only in 1967. Rather unusual, this was: a film about a woman's face. It's a film about this great German actress-beauty from the past—the near past, in Romy Schneider's case, since she was born in 1938 (and died prematurely, in 1982). The theatrical bone structure was obviously still there, and the whole film is essentially about her face. It's rather interesting, isn't it? Because there are certain modern theories about the contemporary face: its weakness and its flabbiness and its absence of structure. And that's what Syberberg is hinting at in this little film. Here's somebody whom people still remember today—and not just in small German groups or sects—and she was called the Countess, and in fact she was once asked about the modern face, about which she made remarks akin to what I have just described. People were appalled.

But what Syberberg's doing with this apparently very small idea is indicating that people didn't always necessarily look as they do today, and the sensibility that he articulates indicates that 1945 became a year zero for us, all with nothing before, and we've all reinvented ourselves subsequently, so that now we're all postmodern and reflexive and think every possible thought at every other possible instant. In other words, there's something maybe classical that prefigures the postwar period.

But *Romy—Anatomy of a Face* is a television film and didn't get too much attention. In 1965–1966, Syberberg also dealt with Fritz Kortner, who was a very well-known actor, particularly of Shakespearean drama in Germany. He was quite elderly then. This film, *Kortner Delivers Monologues for a Record* (1966), consists only of scenes of him rehearsing; it's almost a radio picture in a strange sort of way, as Kortner just goes through the motions. His great performance in German theater was his Shylock from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* (1605), and Syberberg has him possibly in his last-ever performance, because the point of film, as these

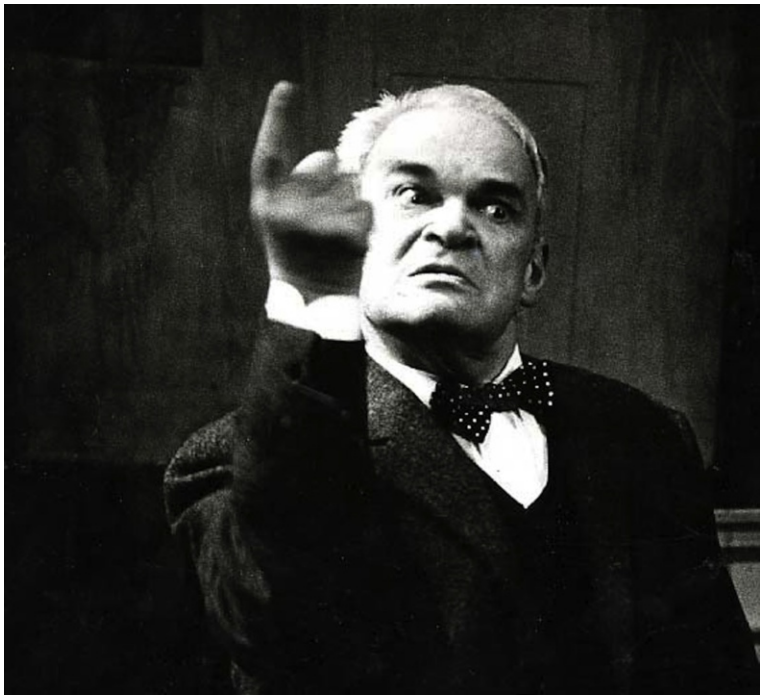

Figure 45. Kortner spricht Monologe für seine Schallplatte (Kortner Delivers Monologues for a Record), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1966*

elderly actors realized, is that it memorializes them. Who would remember these people now, if there weren't a film there of them? Kortner's an old man who's quite clearly suffering from various illnesses that will take him away a year or two after the filming in '65-'66. But Syberberg nonetheless finally gets him to articulate a superhuman or even inhuman scream of revenge: Shylock's desire for revenge against the Gentile world.

A sort of primal scream, Kortner gives. Remember in the '60s there was that therapeutic cult called Primal Scream, as put forward by the American psychologist Arthur Janov. You could go into your unconscious and draw all the bad stuff all out, get rid of it all through a big scream. That cult didn't last. But it's been replaced by something else. Nevertheless, Kortner gives this scream in Syberberg's film … and then it ends. There's another little vignette of what's coming later on in this German filmmaker's career: a picture, from 1965 and also made for television, in which Kortner and others rehearse a scene from Schiller's *Love and Intrigue* (1784). But at this moment Syberberg was just dismissed as a mildly eccentric academic making some odd revivalist films about previous German cultural figures: inoffensive stuff, at best.

Before I move on, let me note the rise of the Romantic and *völkisch* movements in Germany in the nineteenth century, as their visual art and some of their religious ideas were taken up by the *Wandervogel* (wandering or hiking bird) movement of the same century, during which large numbers of youths would move around the countryside. It was almost like an alternative society, much of which prefigured German involvement in the Foreign Legion, in paramilitary organizations, in the enormous volunteering, across the German-speaking parts of Central Europe, for the Kaiser's army in 1914 and thereafter. It's quite clear that this is the area of culture that Syberberg himself wished to concentrate on, partly through Richard Wagner.

He did a now famous documentary, in 1975, about Winifred Wagner—the English-born wife of Siegfried Wagner, the son of Richard Wagner—who ran the Bayreuth Festival after her husband's death in 1930 until the end of World War II in 1945. Syberberg's film caused enormous problems for the Bayreuth Festival and enormous problems for Winifred Wagner's family, because Syberberg kept the microphone on after the interviewers had left—but he did it with Wagner's consent because the microphone is right in front of her. And she talks and she talks and she talks, then after a certain gap she starts talking about Adolf Hitler. And she talks about Adolf Hitler for four hours without a break, quite a lot of which found its way into what would become the final cut of the film, titled *The Confessions of Winifred Wagner*. The family went utterly berserk when this film was distributed, and Syberberg was

Figure 46. Winifred Wagner und die Geschichte des Hauses Wahnfried von 1914–1975 (Winifred Wagner and the History of the House of Wahnfried, 1914–1975, *a.k.a.* The Confessions of Winifred Wagner), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1975*

consequently blackballed. He was never allowed to attend the festival again. All of this was a scandal to a degree, although the scandal was slightly undercut by the fact that Syberberg was regarded as a revealer of something that had been widely known anyway: that is, that Winifred Wagner was extremely sympathetic to Hitler, and that he had once told her that Wagnerism was his religion, or the nearest he'd ever come to one.

Our Hitler, as *Hitler, A Film from Germany* came to be known in English, cost £100,000 to make in 1977. Today you can get it on the Internet. It takes *ages* to download, because it's over seven hours long, and for this reason most people just give up, but it is there. The BBC partly financed it, which is truly extraordinary in certain respects, but this is because of the disjunction between West German culture and the rest of the West, even the rest of the NATO West, of which West Germany was indisputably a part at that time—and because of the disjunction between the Anglophone world within the West and Germany proper, West *and* East. So, from the English or BBC viewpoint, the Germans were living an unmastered past. No one would talk about this material, but here is a man who was prepared to make almost an eight-hour film about it! Therefore, the BBC gave him some money: £50,000. This was quite a lot of money in the 1970s, but not an unbelievable amount for a state broadcaster. It's true, though, that in the '70s very few people, especially Germans, would deal with any of this material at all. Indeed, Syberberg was so short of actors that in the final sequence—the fourth quarter of the film because it's divided into four pillars, the fourth of which is called *We Children of Hell*—puppets appear. When somebody asked him why he used puppets, Syberberg replied, "Well, I'd run out of actors."

The thing about this film is that it's quite extraordinary visually, even though it takes place only on one set. If you've ever seen Derek Jarman's film *Caravaggio* (1986), which is in Latin, it also takes place on one set, which of course means that you can keep costs to an absolute minimum, and you can also film, say, for a month, seal the set up, come back three months later, and, in some respects, everything will still be there, *in situ*.

Henri Langlois, the French film archivist, had a lot to do with the set, using props and designs from the Cinémathèque Française that had originally been used for a film called *Der Film—Die Musik der Zukunft* (*Film: Music of the Future*). It's noticeable that a lot of rear projection is used, as this is a very theatrical film. For a long time, *Our Hitler* was treated as an essentially avant-garde and modernist piece because it's not narrative-based: it's episodic. It's also slightly mannerist. Indeed, Syberberg's film superficially appears to be very "anti-," whereas its real crime is its neutrality about matters that you can't be neutral about—not in the contemporary or postmodern Federal Republic of Germany, in any event.

However, Syberberg's in love not with a particular government between 1933 and 1945, but with the aesthetics from which it originated. He's a sort of Germanic race-soul artist, really, of that sort of yearning, transcendental, and instrumental spirituality that you sense the Germans, as possibly the primary, central, originating

character-reference for all Europeans, possess above everyone else. Syberberg wants to go to those areas that contemporary Germany has cast away as off-limits to almost all of its artists and writers since the war. Why is this important? It's important because, as Ezra Pound said, genuine creators are the antennae of their entire populations. If you want to find contemporary art, art in the broadest of sense—I mean creation that has a reflective or social dimension—in a society that's deracinated or broken down or self-questioning, that doubts everything about itself, doubts everything about its past, which is why it doubts its present moment, you'll find the sort of art that's epitomized by something like the Turner Prize in Great Britain. By contrast, if you look at the sort of art that Syberberg is dealing with, you see a more communitarian, more organic, more restorationist art. This is artistic work that's closer to representational fantasy in the mind and beyond it.

Figure 47. Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland (Hitler, A Film from Germany, *a.k.a.* Our Hitler), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1977*

Dream is extraordinarily important to Syberberg, because he believes that, in a sense, the real truths are deeper than reason, which is why he is a quasi-religious artist, whatever his actual statements about religion may be. Actually, we know quite a bit about his actual views—something that many artists don't put on record either because they don't have such views in a formal way or because, if they do, they do not want to reveal too much, for that might make it difficult to get funding. We know a lot about Syberberg's actual views because he wrote a book in 1990 called *On the Misfortune and Fortune of Art in Germany after the Last War*. Now

this is a remarkable book, but we need to discuss *Our Hitler* in detail before we come to it.

The film stars an actor named Heinz Schubert. It also stars Syberberg himself in the fourth quadrant and his own daughter, various puppets, and minor figures. The first section deals with Hitler's personality cult. The second section deals with *völkisch* Romanticism in the nineteenth century. The third part deals with the Shoah or Holocaust, particularly as it's seen from the perspective of Heinrich Himmler. The fourth part deals with the aftermath of the war and the generation that feels it with incredible acuteness, because, of course, Syberberg's generation mentally comes of age in the immediate aftermath of all these events. So, for them, the year zero for Germany is the beginning of adult consciousness in an occupied society that's divided hemispherically in accordance with the two world blocs and superpowers that exist at the time.

A related matter: there is a collection of short stories written by a young German named Wolfgang Borchert, who died relatively soon after the war, which Calder published in 1966 as *The Man Outside* (originally published in Germany by Rowohlt in 1956). It consists largely of the stories of people scampering about in the wake of war, surviving by living in cellars, shooting rats, and the like; there's no water, no electricity. During these three years between 1945 and 1948, at least two million Germans died because there was very little food. Parts of the Morgenthau Plan [as proposed by then United States Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, Jr.] were implemented in certain sections of the American zones of occupation, it's true; but other American commanders were completely opposed to that plan and subverted it. So, it was a mixed picture. And, at least according to the contemporary German historical record, two million Germans perished during this time period. And these were almost all people liberals say they care about the most: the weakest, those most ill, the oldest, women, children, the disabled, and so forth.

Syberberg's mental space of reference, if you like, in terms of maturation—his immediate adolescent-to-adult beginnings—may be found here. Yet he is an anti-realist and a luscious Romantic of the most extreme and German type, in a way that almost strikes the slightly ironic attitude that the English always have in part toward things that are very Teutonic, almost overbearingly serious or pietistic.

But back to *Our Hitler*. The first section involves all kinds of scenes, some taken from circus and vaudeville, some drawing on Weimar culture, some drawing on what inevitably replaces it. The first part also involves the use of dolls, sets that are lit in red, a lot of flame, a lot of seemingly occultistic Thule or Gothic imagery. The aim is to create something of a sensibility concerning the nature of German biological Romanticism, quintessentially a Central European artistic sensibility that was completely voided by governmental dispensation in the postwar period. The second section adds into the general mixture a significant, if somewhat intoxicated, filmic history of nineteenth-century German art: a sort of pictorial art.

One of the more outrageous ideas to come out of all of this is that the entire experience of the Third Reich—to someone who came culturally of age, who was

mentally born, if you like, just after the war—has become so extreme, so devastating, that Syberberg's way of coping is to internalize it and view it as a film. That's why he calls this work *Hitler, A Film from Germany*. So, he actually sees the past as a film. Now, many people, particularly people who are not especially artistic, would consider this to be a *non sequitur*, a dis-privileging of reality, the sort of thing that artists do to deal with life, or whatever. But in actual fact, for someone of Syberberg's sensibility, it's because he privileges these matters more than anything else that he's prepared to make a film of them, for he has an essentially spiritual view of art. He doesn't see this as a moneymaking exercise or a fake authentication or (God knows) a trivialization, or, for that matter, as an attempt to please others so as to gain admiration for one's self, or even simply as something to do with one's time between birth and death. Syberberg actually sees art of this kind as a form of spiritual and moral transcription.

The third section of *Hitler, A Film from Germany* is very interesting because it is about the Shoah, which is totally accepted as a fact in this part of the film—and a fact for which there is no apology. This is the interesting thing about it. The Holocaust is dealt with in a tone and with a briskness that's almost identical to the way Menachem Begin describes the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in his autobiography, called *The Revolt Outside* (revised edition, 1977). When asked about these events, Begin said, "We did what we had to." Let there be no talk of morality! There is only the necessity of action and vigor—that's it. Let 'em talk all they want about everything else.

And that's the sort of attitude that you get in the third section of *Hitler*. I think that a few worrying bells went off when this section was seen because, ironically, it does not even take, in any way, a revisionist or, God help us, a pre-revisionist view toward the past. Again, the view that you get subliminally from this section is that if Germany is to ever have a future, it has to master Syberberg's view, filmically if in no other way, of the consequences of all these events. In some ways, he's preaching what Nietzsche called self-overcoming, whereby you say "yes" to life, you accept even the most unpleasant things, you absorb them just as rubbish and trash are absorbed in a fire. You step over them to other things and to other glories. It's the creative use of destruction or the refusal to be imprisoned by the consequences of the destructive urge, which is seen as part of human potentiality. In other words, this is a non-dualist view of morals from an explicitly non-Christian viewpoint, but not belabored as such.

In the fourth section, *We Children of Hell*, Syberberg talks, with his daughter and Heinz Schubert—who remains ubiquitous as a varied sort of presence and trickster throughout the film, wearing multiple hats and playing multiple parts, including that of Himmler—about the legacy of what it means to be German in the modern world. This film deals very bluntly and very explicitly, then, with the fact that for almost all people outside Germany since 1945, whenever a German is presented to them they have an almost implacable urge to ask him or her about the events surrounding World War II. Indeed, I remember I was at some party or other event when I was about eighteen, and some German students turned up and various people made a

bee-line for them, and the first thing that they were asked, beyond how they were and what the weather was, was, "What's your view of what happened between 1933 and 1945?" And, of course, most contemporary Germans want to make money, they want to get away from these years as much as possible, they want to redefine the nature of who and what they are, and so on. They don't even want to discuss the matter.

Syberberg himself has become almost a cultural non-person, although people know he's there, and he lives on as an old man in today's Germany. His dilemma is that he's not a politician. He's not a political partisan; he's a German partisan. He's a partisan for German culture, and therefore his perspective is that you cannot have German artistic culture with this voltaic energy, this kind of condenser battery with its ever-stormy center, removed from the circuit. The energy, even to rebel against it, of what it is to be German comes from this vortex. Therefore, to dis-privilege it is to cut it out everything, completely. It's like Elizabethan tragedy without the example of the Greeks in the past or Seneca to follow, as a low Roman version of which Shakespeare was well aware. You have to have that primary fodder, that primary material, fossil fuel upon which to feed. If you can't have it, because it's been denied to you in a particular era, then you can't express nationally who and what you are.

This is the real thesis of *Our Hitler*, which people saw in the '70s and thought, "Eh, interesting critique, by a German fringe director, of the fact that Germans won't mention their past." This is how the film was first regarded. Syberberg's in a sense going straight for that heart of darkness, in Joseph Conrad's sense of the term. He's going straight there, without equivocation but with artistry. Because he knows that if you don't, in a way, bring this material to the surface art in postwar Germany, with morally truthful creativity, things are eventually going to get impossible. You see this in many careers, actually. Look at the famous Leftist-to-Green novelist Günter Grass, who, initially seen as a sort of Center-Left, social-democratic stalwart of the Adenauer postwar government, then suddenly became exposed, right at the end of his cultural trajectory (almost by the time of his last book), as someone who had served when he was a teenager, even if only for a fraction of time and even though he had no choice, in the Waffen-SS (Schutzstaffel, or Protective Squadron)—and how this almost led to a perspectival altering not just of one book or one incident in Grass's career, but of his whole life. In other words, we are truly talking here about the unmastered past. Because, to be blunt, this is what Syberberg has been dealing with since the very beginning—not just at the end, after he'd written a shelf-load of books to prepare for the event—as the first step on the path to dealing with the possibility of the last moment.

Hitler, A Film from Germany had a reasonable success and was shown in art cinemas all over the world. It was shown extensively in the United States, where it was seen as an elegy *and* an indictment—you know, that sort of thing. Susan Sontag wrote extensively about it, in one essay called "Fascinating Fascism" for *The New York Review of Books* (6 February 1975). Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, the reasonably well-known French critic, also wrote a review of the film. Far too artistic

and obscure for many people, *Our Hitler* included some very complicated German whose English translation, in subtitles, was too terse, although the English-language version actually isn't so bad because the BBC got some expert German linguists to assist, since they had half-financed the thing in the first place.

After *Our Hitler*, Syberberg moved on—in his last major fictional work—to do a film of Wagner's opera *Parsifal* (1982), which is an attempt at what Bertolt Brecht would have called epic theater and also what Wagner had wanted with his idea of total art and high opera, which obviously would have lent itself to the idea of total film, total theater, total art. Syberberg has always been very pro-Brecht: not ideologically, but because of Brecht's desire to make great statements that are great German statements. Indeed, Syberberg's views of Brecht became quite unfashionable once Brecht went East and became almost a sort of privileged puppet-master of the Berliner Ensemble, where all the members said they were oppressed but in actual fact loved every minute of it. Brecht himself had his own chauffeur and limousine, private flat, guards: you know, the whole works.

Syberberg went to the East and in 1970 did a film about Brecht and his legacy, because he thought this playwright-director was a great German. Again, you almost sense that equivocal element in Syberberg, as well as the pride of an Easterner. Because, as we all know, there is a distinction between East and West German sensibilities, which has been exaggerated and exacerbated by the fractured nature of their experience in the postwar period. Even politically today, there's a disjunction between the amputated limb of the East that's been put into something like cryogenic storage and the repositioned part that's been put back on the rest of the trunk.

Syberberg's film of *Parsifal*, to get back to it, is a truly extraordinary opera (and features an extraordinary performance in the leading female role, Kundry). That opera, which essentially preaches not just total art but total redemption through love and through the creation of a Germanicized Christianity (a sort of dejudaized Christianity in many ways), is a chance for Syberberg to luxuriate—his critics would say fetishistically wallow—in Germanicism and in culture of a deep linguistic Romanticism that is outside politics, but that permits a type of extreme politics to grow from it. The thing about this type of work is that there is no distinction in it, as there usually is in any work of art or history, among political statements, aesthetic statements, ideological statements, and philosophical ones. They're all merged here into … if not a total attitude towards the world, a sort of *Weltanschauung*, then a total attitude towards art, because for Syberberg art *is* the world. It's his view that such creativity, at its highest level, is more important than life and death. To most people this is just highfalutin nonsense, but Syberberg believes it with a passion, and this has made him, particularly considering the material that he wishes to deal with, very, very unfashionable.

After about 1990, Syberberg found it increasingly difficult, certainly in the Federal Republic of Germany, to raise money to make films. Possibly, he'd come to the end of his trajectory after making movies about Hitler, the Wagner family, Parsifal, Ludwig II, and Karl May. In 2004 he was in a philosophical, narrative-based, yet

largely linguistic film where people—including some famous elderly German actors—discuss their ideas. It was called *The Ister*, and Syberberg has a producer role in it as well as a performance role as one of the philosophical spokesmen. Since then he's not done very much, or been allowed to do too much, in film, which always costs money if you're going to have it disseminated with any public prominence beyond the Internet.

Syberberg did publish a book, however, in 1990—the one to which I've already referred—called *On the Misfortune and Fortune of Art in Germany after the Last War*. This created an enormous culture war, as they're called, in Germany at the time. It's largely forgotten now, but some of its protagonists have not quite been forgotten. Many people who were associated with Syberberg until this point dropped him after the release of this book, and its publication certainly contributed to his status as a non-person. In *On the Misfortune and Fortune of Art in Germany*, he says that contemporary Germany is in essence culturally rotten, has destroyed itself, is self-hating, and, ironically in relation to everything connected with the past, is philo-Semitic—excessively so. I remember that Michael Walker of *Scorpion* magazine, who I think had become a German citizen by then, wrote in one issue of that publication that Syberberg had better know what he was doing, because the way things were going he wouldn't be making too many films in the future.

After German unification, there were quite a few articles about Syberberg. There was one well-known one by Diedrich Diederichsen and Peter Chametsky called "Spiritual Reactionaries after German Reunification: Syberberg, Foucault, and Others" in the journal *October* (Fall 1992). Many people, of course, saw a great danger in the nationalisms, as petty and futile as some of them were, that were released when Communism went under, and there was lots of *angst*-building in allegedly quality journals all over the world about the dangers of this and that. So, one can understand how Syberberg had his moment with his book in 1990.

But, for me, Syberberg's politics is less important than the spirituality of the artistry that he represents. As with all extremely visual artists, describing what he has done makes a lot more sense if your audience has actually seen the material, but of course very few people are entirely aware that this material even exists. Thus even the well-meaning ones don't understand what he's really doing. In fact, Syberberg has positioned himself to be the repository of the sort of sensibility—which didn't come to an end in 1945—of which even certain forms of German classicism are not particularly redolent. For that matter, there are certain forms of German medieval art that don't really relate to it. There's something rather quasi-Catholic and trans-German or German in the European sense—in Nietzsche's sense of being European as against German—about Syberberg. And, from a strictly aesthetic point of view, there's not very much about his art that's Protestant. But he is the repository of the Romantic *völkisch* sensibility, which people know is quintessentially German yet is ideologically denied in contemporary Germany.

What people want are endless novels of guilt and expiation and anti-Romanticism and existentialism and writers like Robert Walser, Elias Canetti, and the like. "We've

destroyed ourselves, and we deserved it!" This is the sort of stuff we get, endlessly. It's what is wanted, needed, required: expiation even before the possibility of a primary statement. It's also the view embodied by Angela Merkel, that one should never be proud to say that one is German without first delivering an enormous screed of apologetics, which has to be read out loud before you can even get to the moment where you begin to enunciate something else in a quiet voice. Now, the truth is you can't create anything in a culture like this, in one that does not possess an element of fire-in-the-belly or at least some element of prior authentication.

It's also very important, in this context, to consider Syberberg's class position, in a strange sort of way, in postwar Germany. Here's the sort of Germany he came from: his father managed estates on behalf of other people, and was partly related to the people who owned them, partly not. That type of class background was destroyed several times over, really: destroyed by the collapse of the second empire, finished off by the First World War, with any savings pretty much decimated by inflation (which is probably why Syberberg's father was later managing other people's estates), these people saw the Weimar period as a sort of interregnum that they just barely survived. Then there was a quasi-authoritarian, semi-militarist government between 1930 and 1933, and Hitler's chancellorship thereafter, after which the German world seemed to have come to an end, with every city and every town in complete steaming rubble and tens of thousands of corpses under the rubble, so that when the sun came up in the summer there was an incredible stink from all the carrion. First you had to get all the stone up, then you had to bury the bodies in lime pits and that sort of thing. And this was before you could rebuild—in accordance with what would later be called the German Economic Miracle—that which had earlier been destroyed. Everything thus becomes a sort of simulacrum, a version, a film, a virtual version, a virtual reality of what had previously existed. It's sort of like the British science-fiction television series *Thunderbirds* (1964–66), you know: you blow it up, but it's still there. And that's why Syberberg sees everything as a film.

The most outrageous thing of all, as Susan Sontag worked out long after she wrote her essay "Fascinating Fascism," is that maybe Syberberg regards the Holocaust itself as a film: a film from Germany; a film from Israel; a film from Palestine; a film from Germany. Of course, a film is a fiction, but it can be truer than fact and more important than fact, as a great religion is more important than fact because it can move millions of human beings to behave in ways they would never do otherwise. One man with an idea and certainty is worth fifty other men.

So, when you look at the artistic bases and the methodological premises of Syberberg's cultural practice, as contemporary Marxist cultural-studies types would call it, you suddenly see that there's something actually slightly insidious about it. But my view of his work is that it's less conscious than semi-conscious, because Syberberg is someone whose total focus in life is artistic. In a very German way, he's totalitarian about art—in a way someone like the painter and printmaker Otto Dix was, for example. Syberberg possesses that desire not just to penetrate to the core in the manner that the Elizabethans in their own dramaturgy liked to do, but to actually

go to the limit of what it is possible to say in a given trajectory. And Syberberg's trajectory would be what Wikipedia calls "the dark side" of German Romanticism.

Is he, or can he at all be described as, Leni Riefenstahl's heir? First, the idea of making anything comparable to the cinema that she made in postwar Germany is utterly unthinkable. It's unthinkable. Therefore, all that could ever be done is to approximate the sensibility that Riefenstahl displays in her films even before *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and *Olympia*, parts I and II (*Festival of Nations* and *Festival of Beauty*, 1938). Her first movies were mountain films and films of extreme Aryan wistfulness set in a kind of icy permafrost. She was a dancer before then. The penultimate film Riefenstahl made, *Lowlands* (to be followed by *Underwater Impressions* in 2002), is a threnody for the body and for opera/operetta and again a return to that which she knew best: when blocked, you go back.

Always with her you sense this transcendentally idealist yearning and desire to attain archetypal perfection, visually. She's an extreme visualizer and an extremely feminine visualizer, which is artistically unusual, which is why Hitler chose her to make *Triumph of the Will* in the teeth of all sorts of party opposition. Goebbels couldn't stand the idea initially that a woman would make the film but was overruled, because Hitler wanted his movement seen through the religious eye of a female artist. And it's very rare for the male world, for an extreme version of part of the male world, if you like, to be viewed by the female artistic eye from without—and with technical ability, editorial skill, and artistic genius, to boot.

This, I feel, is the comparison that can be made between Syberberg and Riefenstahl. With him, likewise, there's a technical search for perfection given his monetary or budgetary limitations, and there's also a idealist yearning, which exists in many cultures but which I quintessentially associate with Germanic forms of art and with the German sensibility, without which, north, south, east, or west, there can't really be a center. It's not that we're all Germans, really, although English people are primarily Germanic; it's that they're at the core of the European identity, which can have many outer chambers but, without the Germanic core, doesn't exist.

Despite the fact that we British fought against them savagely two times in the twentieth century, this is actually less important, in my view, than the spiritual damage that has been done to the country since the Second World War: the degradation of Germany and of things German in British parliaments and American congresses, and degradation much more subtle than that at every level: from the mass-cultural level, in things like graphic novels, to modernist opera and back again. At every level there has been this attitude of not just cynicism or disrespect but deconstruction, and willed and vigorous and emotionally violent deconstruction at that.

Unless contemporary Europeans can, in the coming years, get beyond this, there will be a hole right in the heart of the European identity, and right in the hull of Caucasian identity. That is because our identity without German culture is essentially inconceivable: without its art, without its literature, without its music, without its philosophy, without its, at times to the English spirit, ponderous seriousness, without its fanatical attitude towards ideas, that streak of virulence that's part of the Germanic

nature and of which they've now been taught to be afraid. In this way, Syberberg's work is an artistic attempt to wrestle with what it is to be German and, more than that, to be a German artist who's not just making schlock for television. What he's actually trying to do is articulate a vision of life.

There is no nationality in Europe, even in Russia under Communism, which is more difficult to bring off or even to deal with than the German nationality, the German identity. Because even the Bolshevik Revolution didn't so dis-privilege the very idea of what it was to be Slavic or Russian from the inside out, as the idea of being German was dis-privileged after World War II. The Bolsheviks destroyed artworks and blew up churches; I think every musician but Dmitri Shostakovich at the Moscow Conservatory in one particular year was shot: every one of them, on Stalin's orders. And when Shostakovich asked, through party officials, why he'd been spared, Stalin responded, "Shostakovich can write film music. We need film music. Because we need film. Because with film we can go straight into the mind of the masses!" There's this Czech novel called *The Engineer of Human Souls* (by Josef Škvorecký, 1977), and this title itself was a Stalinist term. We are the engineers of human souls, according to Stalin, and we need men who can write the music for films, where we can go straight into the brains of the masses.

With film you can go straight into the front cortex, because that's what visualization does. Before you hear a sound, before you hear the music, you see the image, an image gone straight into the mind. That's why film is the form of the twentieth century. It's where representational art went in the twentieth century. That's why radical governments have used it in every way. That's why the Chinese use film extensively with the masses, but, of course, it's also used in all other cultures—in India, for example, which is now very much on the rise economically. From a reverse angle, in the United States, the whole dream factory of film was created with the basic consolidation of the Hollywood studios, as an industry, in the 1920s.

It's interesting, just as a side note on American cinema, to think of what's happened to D. W. Griffith's films like *Intolerance* (1916) and above all *Birth of a Nation*, parts I and II (1915). The Directors' Guild of America used to give the D. W. Griffith Award up until 1999. Of course, for those who don't know, in *Birth of a Nation* the Ku Klux Klan are the heroes—not a film that would be made today. In the 1990s, certain Black Nationalists started complaining, and the D. W. Griffith prize … well, they didn't get rid of Griffith himself, because he's crucial to the development of American as well as world cinema. So it was a bit difficult to completely put this Shakespeare of the cinema into the closet, but at this point in time, around fifteen years down the line, the D. W. Griffith prize is no longer awarded.

That's Hollywood, which over time and at particular times has had certain genuine European features, yet over time it has also changed to the degree that the amount of European sensibility left in contemporary Hollywood is quite small. The amount of it that was there in 1920, by contrast, was quite significant. Indeed, there have always been many Hollywoods, and, as Mel Gibson discovered with his film about Jesus Christ, if you make half a billion dollars in personal profit, criticism dries up.

John Wayne, for his part, opposed racial desegregation; he gave money openly to the Klan in the 1960s. He was such a big star, though, he was left alone: because he was also a big brand, and you want them. But there's a degree to which the *sensibility* that Wayne represented couldn't appear on screen too often—and, well, the Hollywood moguls just made sure it didn't. That's how it's done.

Syberberg himself is not a right-winger, in my view; he's a conservative nationalist of a mild sort. But he *is* an aesthetic German. And his real premise is that Germany is in all of us, and without its cultural inheritance as something to use and step beyond, we cannot have a coherent Europeanness. And without such a trajectory, it is not possible to survive. So, I would ask you, next time you've got an hour or so to browse on the Internet, put Hans-Jürgen Syberberg into Google or one of the other search engines and bring up what you can and see what you make of it. Because he's somebody who is obscure, but he's obscure not because he is no good and not because he needs to be obscure, or has been accidentally kept so, but because he's slightly dangerous. And in this era of standardization and of dumbing down and of conformity, there is a great need for those, like him, who are prepared to stand up for the inner lives of their own peoples. Again, Syberberg is still alive—and he needs to be.

NOTE

[1] Jonathan Bowden, "Hans-Jürgen Syberberg: Leni Riefenstahl's Heir?" http://www.jonathanbowden.co.uk/

FILMOGRAPHY
(WITH CREDITS FOR ALL FEATURES, DOCUMENTARIES, AND SHORTS)

***Fünfter Akt, siebte Szene: Fritz Kortner probt* Kabale und Liebe (*Fritz Kortner Rehearses Schiller's* Love and Intrigue; documentary), 1965**

Director:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Screenwriter:	Friedrich Schiller, Act V, scene vii from his play *Love and Intrigue* (1784)
Cinematographers:	Kurt Lorenz, Konrad Wickler
Editor:	Barbara De Pellegrini
Sound:	Detlev Günther
Running time:	110 minutes
Format:	made for television, in black and white
Cast:	Christine Hörbiger (Herself/Luise Miller); Helmut Lohner (Himself/Ferdinand von Walter); Fritz Kortner (Himself)

Figure 48. Wilhelm von Kobell, *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1966*

***Wilhelm von Kobell*, 1966**

Director:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Screenwriter:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Running time:	16 minutes
Format:	made for television, in black and white

***Kortner spricht Monologe für seine Schallplatte* (*Kortner Delivers Monologues for a Record*; documentary), 1966**

Director:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Cinematographer:	Kurt Lorenz
Editor:	C. Oldenburg
Running time:	71 minutes
Format:	made for television, in black and white
Cast:	Fritz Kortner (Himself); August Everding (Voice-over Narrator)

***Die Grafen Pocci—Einige Kapitel zur Geschichte einer Familie* (*The Counts Pocci—Some Chapters on the History of a Family*, a.k.a. *The Counts Pocci*; documentary), 1967**

Director:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Cinematographers:	Martin Lippi, Kurt Lorenz
Running time:	92 minutes
Format:	35mm, in color and in black and white
Cast:	Konrad Albert Graf Pocci (Himself)

***Romy—Portrait eines Gesichts* (*Romy—Anatomy of a Face*; documentary), 1967**

Director:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Screenwriter:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Cinematographers:	Klaus König, Kurt Lorenz
Editors:	Michaela Berchtold, Barbara Mondry
Running time:	90 minutes
Format:	made for television, in black and white and partly in color
Cast:	Romy Schneider (Herself, Narrator/Leni/Julie Kreuz); Hans-Jürgen Syberberg (Himself, Narrator); Jean Chapot (Himself); Gunther Kortwich (Himself); Jean Penzer (Himself); Anthony Perkins (Josef K.; archival footage); Michel Piccoli (Himself/Werner Kreuz); Akim Tamiroff (Bloch; archival footage); Orson Welles (Albert Hastler, The Advocate; archival footage)

***Scarabea—Wieviel Erde braucht der Mensch?* (*Scarabea—How Much Land Does a Man Need?*), 1968**

Director:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg (his first feature-length fiction film)

Screenwriter:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, from the 1885 story by Leo Tolstoy
Cinematographer:	Petrus R. Schlömp
Editor:	Barbara Mondry
Music:	Eugen Thomass, Gerd Müller
Running time:	130 minutes
Format:	35mm, in color
Cast:	Nicoletta Machiavelli (Scarabea); Walter Buschhoff (Herr Bach); Franz von Trueberg (The Count); Karsten Peters (The Director); Norma Jordan

***Sex-Business—Made in Pasing: ein Beitrag zur Filmsoziologie in Deutschland* (*A Contribution to the Sociology of Film in Germany*; documentary), 1969**

Director:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Screenwriter:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Cinematographer:	Christian Blackwood
Running time:	96 minutes
Format:	35mm, in black and white
Cast:	Bruno Arnold (Himself); Roland Beyer (Himself); Alois Brummer (Himself); Sissy Engl (Herself); Atze Glanert (Himself); Günter Hendel (Himself); Ricci Hohlt (Herself); Ursula Holstein (Herself); Alois Kammerloher (Himself); Gerda Kammerloher (Herself); Hans-Jürgen Syberberg (Himself); Rinaldo Talamonti (Himself); Rolf Vogel (Himself); Rita Weinberg (Himself)

Figure 49. San Domingo, *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1970*

***San Domingo*, 1970**

Director:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Screenwriter:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, from the 1811 novella by Heinrich von Kleist
Cinematographer:	Christian Blackwood
Editor:	Ingrid Fischer
Music:	Amon Düül II
Sound:	Jürgen Martin
Running time:	138 minutes
Format:	35mm, in color
Cast:	Alice Ottawa; Michael König (Michi); Alice Ottawa (Alice); Wolfgang Haas (Hasi); Hans-Georg Behr (Schorschi, poet and drug dealer); Carla Egerer, a.k.a. Carla Aulaulu (Michi's mother); Peter Moland (Michi's father); Siegfried Schmidt (Blues); Peter Dorfner (Möraer); June Berman, Sigi Graue, Gerhard Vestner, Peter Tode, Heinz Koderer, Hans-Georg Behr

***Nach meinem letzten Umzug* (*My Last Move*, a.k.a. *The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht*; documentary on Bertolt Brecht's plays in production with the Berliner Ensemble during the 1952–53 season), 1970**

Director:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Screenwriters:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg and Hans Mayer
Cinematographer:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Editor:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Running time:	91 minutes (1993, digitally restored as *Syberberg filmt Brecht* [*Syberberg Films Brecht*]); original, 72 minutes
Format:	35 mm (blown up from 8 mm), in black and white and in color; digital, 1993 version
Cast:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg (Himself); Hans Mayer (Himself); Curt Bois (Puntila; archival footage); Bertolt Brecht (Himself; archival footage); Norbert Christian (Mephistopheles; archival footage); Erwin Geschonneck (Matti; archival footage); Angelika Hurwicz (Marthe; archival footage); Regine Lutz (Eva; archival footage); Käthe Reichel (Gretchen; archival footage); Helene Weigel (Mother Wlassowa; archival footage)

***Ludwig: Requiem für einen jungfräulichen König* (*Ludwig: Requiem for a Virgin King*), 1972 (1st part of the "German Trilogy")**

Director:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Screenwriter:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Cinematographer:	Dietrich Lohmann

Editor:	Peter Przygodda
Costume Designers:	Barbara Baum, Chris Wilhelm
Music:	Richard Wagner
Sound:	Heinz Schürer
Running time:	140 minutes
Format:	35mm, in color
Cast:	Harry Baer (Ludwig II); Ingrid Caven (Lola Montez/ Cosima Wagner/First Norne); Balthasar Thomass (Ludwig II as a child); Oskar von Schab (Ludwig I/Karl May); Edgar Murray (Kainz/Winnetou); Peter Kern (Lackey Mayr/Court Hairdresser Hoppe/Röhm); Gerhard Maerz (Richard Wagner, I); Anette Trier (Richard Wagner, II); Ursula Strätz (Bulyowski/ Singer/Third Norne); Hanna Köhler (Sissi / Elizabeth / Second Norne); Johannes Buzalski (Emmanuel Geibel/Hitler); Peter Pryzgodda (Bismarck); Stefan Abendroth (Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm); Rudolf Waldemar Brem (Professor von Gudden); Gert Haucke (Baron Freyschlag); Günther Kaufmann (Count Holnstein); Peter Moland (Prime Minister Lutz); Rudi Scheibengraber (Prince Regent Luitpold); Fridolin Werther (Kaiser Wilhelm I)

***Theodor Hierneis oder: Wie man ehemaliger Hofkoch wird* (*Theodor Hierneis, or How One Becomes a Former Royal Cook*, a.k.a. *Ludwig's Cook*), 1972**

Director:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Screenwriters:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg and Walter Sedlmayr, from the 1953 memoir by Theodor Hierneis titled *The Monarch Dines*
Cinematographer:	Hermann Reichmann
Editors:	Ingeborg Ewald, Eva Kohlschein
Sound:	Manfred Haessler, Klaus Hoffmann, Kurt Hütti
Running time:	84 minutes
Format:	16mm, in color
Cast:	Walter Sedlmayr (Theodor Hierneis)

***Karl May—Auf der Suche nach dem verlorenen Paradies* (*Karl May: In Search of Paradise Lost*), 1974 (2nd part of the "German Trilogy")**

Director:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Screenwriter:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Cinematographer:	Dietrich Lohmann
Editors:	Ingrid Broszat, Annette Dorn
Production Designer:	Nino Borghi
Costume Designer:	Astrid Six
Music:	Eugen Thomass

Sound:	Christian Lechner, Karl Schlifelner
Running time:	187 minutes
Format:	35mm, in color
Cast:	Helmut Käutner (Karl May); Kristina Söderbaum (Emma); Käthe Gold (Klara); Attila Hörbiger (Max Dittrich); Willy Trenk-Trebitsch (Rodolf Lebius); Mady Rahl (Pauline Münchmeyer); Lil Dagover (Bertha von Suttner); Rudolf Prack (Saxon Justice Minister); Rainer von Artenfels (Adolf Hitler); Leon Askin (Klotz-Sello), Wolfgang Büttner (Ehrecke von Moabit), Peter Chatel (Horace Herzfelder); Erwin Faber (Napoleon Krügel); Harry Hardt (Wessel von Charlottenburg); André Heller (Robert Müller); Peter Kern (Georg Grosz); Peter Moland (Sascha Schneider); Stephan Paryla (Dr. Euchar Albrecht Schmid); Gerhard von Halem (Friedrich Ernst Fehsenfeld); Fritz Veigl (Brant-Sero)

***Winifred Wagner und die Geschichte des Hauses Wahnfried von 1914–1975* (*Winifred Wagner and the History of the House of Wahnfried, 1914–1975*, a.k.a. *The Confessions of Winifred Wagner*; documentary), 1975**

Director:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Cinematographer:	Dietrich Lohmann
Editor:	Agape von Dorstewitz
Sound:	Gerhard von Halem
Running time:	104 minutes; original, 302 minutes
Format:	35mm, in black and white
Cast:	Winifred Wagner (Herself); Gottfried Wagner (Himself); Hans-Jürgen Syberberg (Himself)

***Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland* (*Hitler, A Film from Germany*, a.k.a. *Our Hitler*), 1977 (3rd part of the "German Trilogy"); in four parts: *Der Graal* (*The Grail*), *Ein deutscher Traum* (*A German Dream*), *Das Ende eines Wintermärchens* (*The End of a Winter Fairy Tale*), and *Wir Kinder der Hölle* (*We Children of Hell*)**

Director:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Screenwriter:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Cinematographer:	Dietrich Lohmann
Editor:	Jutta Brandstaedter
Production Designer:	Hans Gailling
Costume Designers:	Barbara Gailling, Brigitte Kuehlenthal
Running time:	442 minutes
Format:	35mm, in color and in black and white (archival footage)
Cast:	Heinz Schubert (Adolf Hitler); Harry Baer, Peter Kern, Hellmut Lange, Rainer von Artenfels, Martin Sperr, Peter

	Moland, Johannes Buzalski, Alfred Edel, Peter Lühr, Amelie Syberberg, André Heller

***Parsifal*, 1982**

Director:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Screenwriter:	Richard Wagner, from the libretto for his 1882 opera *Parsifal*
Cinematographer:	Igor Luther
Editors:	Jutta Brandstaedter, Marianne Fehrenberg
Music:	Richard Wagner, from his opera *Parsifal* (1882)
Production Designer:	Werner Achmann
Costume Designers:	Veronicka Dorn, Hella Wolter
Running time:	255 minutes
Format:	35mm, in color
Cast:	Armin Jordan (Amfortas); Robert Lloyd (Gurnemanz); Martin Sperr (Titurel); Michael Kutter (Parsifal 1); Edith Clever (Kundry); Reiner Goldberg (Parsifal, voice); Aage Haugland (Klingsor); Karin Krick (Parsifal 2); David Luther (Young Parsifal); Yvonne Minton (Kundry, voice); Wolfgang Schöne (Amfortas, voice)

***Die Nacht* (*The Night*), 1985**

Director:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Screenwriter:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, from works by Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Martin Heidegger, Heinrich Heine, Heinrich von Kleist, Plato, Friedrich Hölderlin, Novalis, Friedrich Nietzsche, Eduard Mörike, Richard Wagner, William Shakespeare, Samuel Beckett, and Chief Seattle
Cinematographer:	Xaver Schwarzenberger
Editor:	Jutta Brandstaedter
Production Designer:	Manfred Dittrich
Sound:	Michael Stöger
Running time:	360 minutes
Format:	35mm, in black and white and in color
Cast:	Edith Clever

***Edith Clever liest Joyce* (*Edith Clever Reads James Joyce*, a.k.a. *Molly Bloom—Monologue*), 1985**

Director:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Screenwriter:	James Joyce, from his novel *Ulysses* (1922)
Cinematographer:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg

Editor:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Sound:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Running time:	180 minutes
Format:	made for television, in color and in black and white
Cast:	Edith Clever

***Fräulein Else* (*Miss Else*), 1986**

Director:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Screenwriter:	Arthur Schnitzler, from his 1924 novella of the same title
Running time:	120 minutes
Format:	made for television, in color
Cast:	Edith Clever

***Penthesilea*, 1987**

Director:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Screenwriter:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, from the 1808 play by Heinrich von Kleist
Cinematographer:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Running time:	243 minutes
Format:	made for television, in color
Cast:	Edith Clever

***Die Marquise von O. "vom Süden in den Norden verlegt"* (*The Marquise of O.* "Transposed from the South to the North"), 1989**

Director:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Screenwriter:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, from the 1808 novella by Heinrich von Kleist
Cinematographer:	Hans Rombach
Sound:	Norman Engel
Running time:	225 minutes
Format:	made for television, in color
Cast:	Edith Clever (Marquise von O.)

***André Heller sieht sein Feuerwerk* (*André Heller Watches His Fireworks*; documentary), 1991**

Director:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Screenwriter:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, from a 1984 summer gathering of 50,000 spectators at the Reichstag building in Berlin to admire a fireworks spectacle titled "World and Counter-

Figure 50. André Heller sieht sein Feuerwerk (André Heller Watches His Fireworks), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1991*

	World, or Diving through Dreams," by André Heller, the Austrian artist, poet, singer-songwriter, and actor
Running time:	60 minutes
Format:	made for television, in color

***Ein Traum, was sonst?* (*A Dream, What Else?*), 1994**

Director:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Screenwriters:	Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, from *Faust* (1808, 1832); Heinrich von Kleist, from *The Prince Homburg* (1811); and Euripides, from *The Trojan Women* (415 B.C.)
Cinematographer:	Dieter Gessl
Editor:	Michael Trnka
Costume Designer:	Eva Höbel
Sound:	Reinhard Prosser
Running time:	132 minutes
Format:	made for television, in color
Cast:	Edith Clever (Sibylle von Bismarck)

***Nietzsche/Weimar*, 1994**

Director:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg (a video installation of several self-made films)
Screenwriter:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg

Figure 51. Nietzsche/Weimar, *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1994*

***Höhle der Erinnerung*: 1. *Von letzten Dingen* (*Cave of Memory: Final Matters*), 1997**

Director:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg (a video installation of 31 projections/ documentaries/self-made films, in two parts)
Screenwriter:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Running time:	60 minutes
Format:	video, in black and white

***Höhle der Erinnerung*: 2. *Aus der Höhle der Erinnerung* (*Cave of Memory: Plato Cave Memory*), 1997**

Director:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg (a video installation of 31 projections/ documentaries/self-made films, in two parts)
Screenwriter:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Running time:	59 minutes
Format:	video, in color

***Hommage for Einar Schleef*, 2002**

Director:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg (a video installation of 12 self-made films, including *Nietzsche Ecce Homo*, a 60-minute film from 2000)

***The Ister* (documentary), 2004**

Directors:	David Barison and Daniel Ross
Screenwriters:	David Barison and Daniel Ross
Cast:	featuring Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, as himself

Figure 52. Hommage for Einar Schleef, *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 2002*

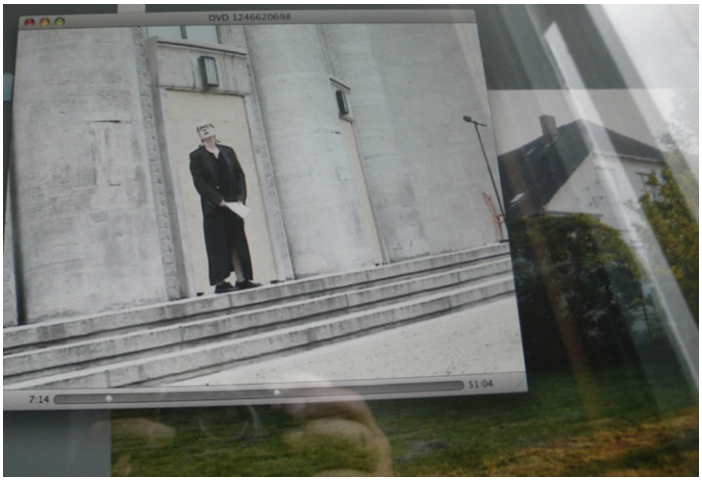

Figure 53. Hölderlin, Mnemosyne Edith Clever, *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 2009*

***Hölderlin, Mnemosyne Edith Clever*, 2009**

Director:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Screenwriter:	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg
Running time:	10 minutes
Cast:	Edith Clever

Figures 54–55. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg in the 21st century

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