

BETSY ERKKILA<sup>1</sup>

## 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

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

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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.

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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?

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*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?

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*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

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*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.

B. ERKKILA

*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

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