

Whose Hi/story Is It? *The U.S. Reception of Downfall*

David Bathrick

Before I address the U.S. media response to the film *Downfall*, I would like to mention a methodological problem that I encountered time and again when researching this essay: whether it is possible to speak of reception in purely national terms in this age of globalization, be it a foreign film or any other cultural artifact.

Generally speaking, Bernd Eichinger's large-scale production *Downfall* can be considered a success in America both financially and critically. On its first weekend alone in New York City it broke box-office records for the small repertory movie theater Film Forum, grossing \$24,220, despite its considerable length, some two and a half hours, and the fact that it was shown in the original with subtitles. Nationally, audience attendance remained unusually high for the following twelve weeks, compared with average figures for other German films made for export markets.¹ *Downfall*, which grossed \$5,501,940 to the end of October 2005, was an unequivocal box-office hit.

One major reason for its success was certainly the content. Adolf Hitler, in his capacity as star of the silver screen, has always been a sufficient

This article originally appeared in *Das Böse im Blick: Die Gegenwart des Nationalsozialismus im Film*, ed. Margrit Frölich, Christian Schneider, and Karsten Visarius (Munich: edition text und kritik, 2007).

1. The only more recent film to earn equivalent revenue was *Nirgendwo in Afrika*.

attraction in America to guarantee major turnouts. But more important, this time the audience was shown a feature film in which the Nazis, particularly the *Führer*, spoke a genuine garden-variety German rather than an overly sophisticated Oxford English. Alec Guinness's *Führer* in the 1973 film *Hitler: The Last Ten Days* (dir. Ennio De Concini) and Anthony Hopkins's portrayal of Hitler seven years later in the HBO film *The Bunker* (dir. George Schaefer), which covered his last hundred days, were both too tame and reserved. In contrast, Bruno Ganz, partly because of his (at times incomprehensible) high-decibel vocal gymnastics, finally provided audiences with an appropriately gutturalized and hence bona fide Hitler.

Also contributing to the high turnout were the many positive reviews that the film received in the popular press, coupled with an Oscar nomination. Many reviewers praised the film's realistic style, the decidedly stage-quality acting (particularly by Ganz, Corinna Harfouch, and Ulrich Matthes), the special effects in the battle scenes that rivaled those of Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, and, most of all, the Hollywood-style dramatic tension that the film brought to this apocalyptic collapse. The *Hollywood Reporter*, the Bible of many Academy members, raved that this was "one of the best war movies ever made. . . . A film that will set new standards in the art of committing history to celluloid."²

Of course, there were also critical reviews, some mixed and others that were harsh, even damning. However, most evaluations of the film and its broader issues were not substantially different from the media discussions in Germany. Should the Germans be allowed to make Hitler films at all? Is it acceptable to portray Hitler as a "normal" human being? Should Hitler be portrayed realistically? Is it permissible to portray the German people and the Nazis as victims rather than perpetrators? These were the most frequently asked questions in both countries, although the American press was, on the whole, more willing to concede the project's legitimacy.

One possible reason for these very similar national media responses is the rapid transnational spread of the film industry's production and marketing conditions. In the United States (and in the United Kingdom), a series of communication practices influenced the reception of *Downfall*, blurring any clear distinction between the country of production, Germany, and the country of reception, the United States. Often it turned out that American critics were completely familiar with the German press response or had availed themselves of the advertising material and other information from the Inter-

2. Eric Hansen, "Downfall," *Hollywood Reporter*, September 16, 2005.

net. For example, Julie Salamon quoted extensively from the scathing review in *Die Zeit* in which Wim Wenders had written, “The lack of narrative position alone takes the audience into a black hole in which they are led, almost unnoticeably, toward looking at this time through the eyes of the perpetrators, thereby generating a kind of benevolent understanding of them.”³ Salamon was by no means the only one who adopted Wenders’s standpoint—without, to be sure, being aware that the German filmmaker was a “68er” (part of the German 1968 movement), in other words, that he was at the opposite end of the political spectrum from Eichinger (the film’s producer), Oliver Hirschbiegel (its director), and the writer Joachim Fest in the German debate about the film. This lack of awareness is the real danger of borrowing without contextualization.

For their part, Eichinger and Hirschbiegel courted foreign journalists, historians, and other opinion makers to influence the reception process in and outside Germany. The Hitler biographer Ian Kershaw, for example, wrote the following sentences at the start of his review of *Downfall* for the *Guardian*: “It was a surprise to receive a phone-call from Bernd Eichinger, producer of the new film, *Der Untergang* (The Downfall), which is currently causing a stir in Germany, saying he very much wanted me to see it before it went on general release. I was very glad to have this opportunity to form a judgment for myself on the film’s qualities.”⁴ The result: Kershaw wrote a totally uncritical review of *Downfall* that simultaneously appeared in that day’s *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

I am not insinuating that anyone in the above-mentioned cases behaved wrongly or inappropriately. The problem is simply that publications take part in an international discourse whose epistemological, aesthetic, and historico-philosophical premises are part national and part transnational in structure, with the result that all the various nationally based debates increasingly resemble one another.

At this point I would like to return to the first part of my title and leave the now-deconstructed question of national reception temporarily to one side. The signification *Hi/story* is intended to emphasize the common root of stories and histories, which is much more evident in German, where the word *Geschichte* means both. So, slightly reformulated, my question also

3. Wim Wenders, “Tja, dann wollen wir mal: Warum darf man Hitler in ‘Der Untergang’ nicht sterben sehen? Kritische Anmerkungen zu einem Film ohne Haltung,” *Die Zeit*, October 21, 2004. (I have used Julie Salamon’s translation of Wenders’s comment from her article “Hitler, That Fellow with the Nice Little Dog,” *New York Times*, February 20, 2005.)

4. Ian Kershaw, “The Human Hitler,” *Guardian*, September 17, 2004.

becomes: Whose *story* is this? By this I mean, Who is the main object of the narrative in *Downfall*? Whose history or histories form the main plot or provide the focal point? Related questions might be: Who is telling or writing this hi/story? What or whose perspective predominates in the film? And is the narrative perspective a unified one?

In a review of *Downfall* by the star critic of the *New York Times*, A. O. Scott, who, to my knowledge, did not converse with either Eichinger or Hirschbiegel beforehand and whose contribution is often cited in German discussions as an example of a scathing review, we read the following: “But of course, millions of Germans—most of them ordinary and, in their own minds, decent people—loved Hitler, and it is that fact that most urgently needs to be understood, and that most challenges our own complacency. Accordingly, the real subject of ‘Downfall,’ Mr. Ganz’s intriguing, creepily charismatic performance notwithstanding, is not Hitler at all, but rather his followers: the officers, bureaucrats and loyal civilians who were with him at the end.”⁵

Scott touches on issues that were critical for discussions of the film in Germany and also for some reviewers in the United States. The first is the film’s main concern. Is *Downfall* *sensu stricto* a “Hitler film,” or is it, in the final analysis, about much more than this? The view that *Downfall* is a Hitler film comes in part from the marketing-cum-legitimation strategy of the conglomerate of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Fest, Eichinger, and Hirschbiegel, and in part from expectations abroad and in Germany, whereby pre-programmed fears about the reaction to a first “humane” German cinema portrayal of the *Führer* phantom led to a fetishized interpretation of *Downfall* as a *Führer* film.

Two weeks before the world premiere in Toronto on September 14, 2005, an article from London about “British fears” appeared in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, providing a comprehensive account of British media reactions to the forthcoming film. The daily newspaper the *Telegraph* emphasized that Eichinger was the son of a *Wehrmacht* soldier and quoted Eichinger as saying that the film was an “emotional release” for many Germans still traumatized by World War II.⁶ In a similar vein, the *Daily Mail* ran a sensationalist headline on its front page, “Has Germany Finally Forgiven Hitler?” The article mentioned German critics of the film who warned that Eichinger wanted to rehabilitate Hitler in the German psyche. However, press of this kind, which

5. A. O. Scott, “The Last Days of Hitler: Raving and Ravioli,” *New York Times*, February 18, 2005.

6. Kate Connolly, “Germany Breaks the Hitler Taboo,” *Telegraph*, August 8, 2005.

reared British clichés about Hitler and Germany, was more the exception, since the British media by and large refrained from evaluating the film prior to the premiere.

As mentioned above, one main factor contributing to the view that this was a Hitler film was the advertising campaign by the producers, by which I also mean Fest. In an interview with Frank Schirrmacher in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Eichinger summarized the entire production process of the screenplay—which reads like an awakening—in very revealing terms:

At some point, my interest focused more and more on the person [Hitler] and shifted away from the systems of terror. But I never thought I could make a film about that; it was unthinkable for me. Then I read the galleys of Joachim Fest's *Der Untergang*, which deals with Hitler's final sixteen days. . . . And there I found my dramatic starting point: to portray in this concentrated period of time all that had happened in the past twelve years, to revisit all the mechanisms, the entire structure, the way of thinking and the belief system, the attitude of compliance.⁷

In other words, the demise of this pathological group of washed-up individuals was supposed to represent the “downfall” of the entire mechanism of the Nazi power apparatus. It should come as no surprise that Fest himself also emphasized this aspect as the core concept—not only in his 2002 book but also as an active participant in the film's advertising campaign. To quote from the interview materials accompanying the sale of the German DVD: “The end of the Third Reich unites in a concentrated, intensified manner all the aspects that made up the Hitler regime, and, in this sense, one can have no better introduction to the history of the Third Reich than this film.”⁸

Fest and Eichinger are not the first, nor, unfortunately, will they be the last, to see in the “tragic” story of the bunker the ontological core of the Third Reich. I consider this thesis highly questionable and will return to it later. What apparently did happen in the bunker in factual historical terms was made known in Hugh Trevor-Roper's 1947 book *The Last Days of Hitler*.⁹ Thus it

7. Frank Schirrmacher, “Kino Hitler spielen,” interview of Corinna Harfouch and Bernd Eichinger, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 22, 2004.

8. The European English-language booklet to the DVD does not have an equivalent passage, just a quote from Eichinger that amounts to the same thing: “The final days tell us a lot about how the mass fanaticism functioned in the regime's earlier years and how it continued to reign until the bitter end.”

9. Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Last Days of Hitler* (New York: Macmillan, 1947).

comes as no surprise that the first Hollywood film about the downfall took its story line from Trevor-Roper. *Hitler: The Last Ten Days*, an Italian-English coproduction with Guinness in the leading role, found its legitimization, as did Eichinger's *Downfall*, in the constant referencing of historical material: aside from Trevor-Roper's endorsement at the start of the film, the bunker memoirs of *Rittmeister* Gerhard Boldt, whose book *Die letzten Tage der Reichskanzlei* (*The Last Days of the Reich's Chancellery*) inspired the screenplay by Maria Pai Fosca and Wolfgang Reinhardt.¹⁰

The choice of Guinness, England's great film comedian, to play the *Führer* might seem to promise a riff on Charlie Chaplin's *Great Dictator*. Sadly, nothing could be farther from the truth. With carefully studied imitations of the by-now-iconic grimaces and gestures of Hitler, Guinness attempted a realistic, even documentary, portrayal of the *Führer* figure fighting to the bitter end. However, the result as it appeared on the screen was a strange admixture of opera buffa and, if not exactly Chaplin, then certainly a befuddled Jack Benny as Hitler in Ernst Lubitsch's *To Be or Not to Be*. What made the whole sorry affair even sorrier was the director's attempt to incorporate history into the film in the form of montage cuts from the *Deutsche Wochenschau* (German wartime newsreel), Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, and documentary photo and film material of the Holocaust.

In the invasive montage cuts, juxtaposing the horror of the Warsaw ghetto with the triumph of the forty-four-year-old Hitler in Nuremberg borders on the absurd. The documentary shots expose how misplaced the fictional imitation is, even if the documentary part is also staged, as in the case of Riefenstahl, or has become a universal icon, like the famous image of the poor child with his hands up in the ghetto. The lesson here is an important one. Every fictional Hitler portrayal must absolutely and consistently generate its own reality, even if this reality is, in the end, an invention.

In his 1973 review of *Hitler: The Last Ten Days*, Roger Ebert, the film critic for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, analyzes the producers' efforts to legitimate their film by citing its historical sources. The point he makes is relevant here: "I have a rule of thumb about historical movies, and it's this: Always beware if the producer starts telling you how accurate his facts are. Accuracy is almost always a cop-out in these matters; it means the director and the writers have failed to find an artistically satisfying point of view toward their material. Facts mean nothing compared to truth. And truth, as always, is as elusive as artistry."¹¹ It is

10. Gerhard Boldt, *Die letzten Tage der Reichskanzlei* (Zürich: Europa, 1947).

11. Roger Ebert, review of *Hitler: The Last Ten Days*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, May 22, 1973.

indeed striking how conceptually and even rhetorically similar these two film versions are—the one by Guinness and the more recent *Downfall*—despite the many historians, eyewitnesses, and screenwriters who, since the Nuremberg trials, have made their individual contributions to this overresearched part of the (equally overresearched) field of Hitler studies. Yet if one compares the main historical sources in question—Trevor-Roper for Guinness and Fest for *Untergang*—then it becomes clear that little of any substance has been added to the now-iconic foundational narrative, which is precisely what Kershaw pointed out in his review.

Thus we have a preliminary answer to the question of whose story is it. Trevor-Roper's account is foundational when compared with Fest's journalistic rehash. For it was already clear in 1947 for Trevor-Roper that the peripeteia of this Aristotelian tragedy of the bunker occurs on the evening of April 22, when Hitler loses control in a despair of Shakespearean dimensions, knowing now that all is lost:

Hitler flew into a rage. He shrieked that he had been deserted; he railed at the army; he denounced all traitors; he spoke of universal treason, failure, corruption, and lies; and then, exhausted, he declared that the end had come. At last, and for the first time, he despaired of his mission. All was over; the Third Reich was a failure, and its author had nothing left to do but die. His doubts were now resolved. He would not go to the south. Anyone else who wished might go, but he would stay in Berlin and there meet the end when it came.¹²

But, as we also know, foundational narratives and historical accounts are only there to be rewritten anew as part of a critical dialectic. So, does *Downfall* as Hitler film offer us anything qualitatively new, if not in terms of the story's historico-dramatic structure, then perhaps in terms of its dramatic representation? Hirschbiegel tells us that *Downfall* “opened up a whole new territory,” that the film’s “new approach to history” had avoided the mistakes of previous interpretations by completely dispensing with normative judgments.¹³ We have to “get beyond guilt,” for there and only there lie “the facts.” He emphasizes that the film’s creators were “led only by real events, a policy which also defined the structure of [Fest’s] book.”¹⁴ In other words, the film’s message is: this is exactly how it was!

12. Trevor-Roper, *Last Days of Hitler*, 88.

13. Oliver Hirschbiegel, press conference for the opening of *Downfall*, *Berliner Zeitung*, September 11, 2004; Hirschbiegel, interview with Anke Westphal, *Berliner Zeitung*, September 11, 2004.

14. Hirschbiegel, interview with Westphal.

Unlike Guinness, Ganz created his character completely realistically, working from empirical data. Guinness, Hopkins, Derek Jacobi, and Alec McCowen, all classically trained British actors, had created their Hitler characters by recalling personal experiences, thereby calling forth a suitable and coherent identity that they could use to “impersonate” the *Führer*.¹⁵ In contrast, Ganz begins on the outside, as it were, with the “facts.” In a *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* interview he explained why: “The phenomenon [of Hitler] cannot be grasped, the core cannot be revealed [*entblättert*]. He obviously went to great lengths to hide himself. And I am gradually coming to the conclusion that this effort was, in large part, an attempt to conceal a fundamental void.” And how does one represent a void? “I built it up piece by piece, so to speak. Apart from a few elementary characteristics [*Charakterzüge*], I have had to gather the rest together.” For Ganz, a behavior-oriented method actor like Marlon Brando, to gather means to embody by imitation, for example, by observing individual patients with Parkinson’s disease in a Zürich ward. To reproduce the Austrian-tinged speech patterns peculiar to Hitler, Ganz used a five-minute tape recorded in 1942 in Finland, where Hitler, uniquely, was recorded speaking in a “normal conversational tone of voice [*in einem normalen Kaminplauderton*].”¹⁶ Otherwise, there was a great deal of film material from which Ganz could copy the facial expressions and gestures. Hirschbiegel described his collaboration with the actor as that of “two historians, filing away at the nuances [of the role].” One doesn’t see Ganz, only Hitler. “There is no danger in this authenticity, because we are not inventing anything. I don’t show anything that he didn’t do: Everything is confirmed [*verbrieft*], everything is historically documented. Everything is absolutely authentic.”¹⁷

At the core of this fetishized notion of authenticity, which Hirschbiegel, Fest, and, particularly, Eichinger repeat like a mantra, lies a methodological contradiction that lends the film a strange kind of dissonance, if not downright schizophrenia. On the one hand, the intention is to play Hitler “three dimensionally,” to depict him as a rounded person, to make him human. Hitler’s furious outbursts, his tenuous grip on reality, and, most of all, his unbridled hatred of the German people are shown. There are in fact five scenes in which he calls, in various ways, for the annihilation of the German people. This evil Hitler is contrasted with the nurturing (*fürsorglich*) “Adi”: Hitler

15. Peter Bradshaw, *Downfall* [review], *Guardian*, April 1, 2005.

16. Bruno Ganz, “Ich muss das Böse in mir entdecken” (“I Must Discover the Evil in Me”), interview with Andreas Kilb, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 22, 2003.

17. “Interview with Oliver Hirschbiegel,” *Downfall*, bonus DVD (Constantin Film, 2004).

with dog and ersatz family. The kindly uncle with the Goebbels children on his lap; the tender bridegroom, kissing his increasingly ecstatic bride on the mouth for the first time publicly; the concerned father figure, who cares about the welfare of his innocent young secretary, Traudl Junge. No longer are we presented with a one-sided ranter, a monodimensional monster, but with a complex, multifaceted human being . . . like you or me.

On the other hand, for the sake of “historical” authenticity, we find a screenplay consisting primarily of meticulously researched table talk, notes, documents, speeches, memoirs, and a great deal of trivia—all of it stuck together so disjointedly as to resemble a pastiche. To be sure, Ganz’s micromimetic performance lends individual scenes a certain brilliance, resulting in a truly affective cinematic spectacle. But it is authentic only in the sense of a verifiable representation of statements and behavioral patterns; furnishing no insight into what makes Hitler tick, it denies us any insight into the history for which this character is alleged to have been fundamentally responsible.

Thus the main problem with this production lies in the naive assumption that dispensing with normative judgments (perspectives) in favor of unadorned facts (how it really was) constitutes a “new approach to history.” Historicism as a method was already foundering at the end of the nineteenth century for the same reason that, a hundred years later, this film founders: it attempts to obliterate its own perspective “objectively” in the name of an all-knowing, historically verified representation, which empirico-scientifically, or in this case aesthetico-realistically, “gets beyond guilt.”¹⁸

But why should there be such fear of the guilt question, such reluctance to bring any perspective into play—as though it were ever possible to avoid having a point of view in the case of any representation? To answer this question, we need to return to my initial question, namely, whose story or history is being told in this film? The answer can be couched negatively or positively. In negative terms, it is the story of a group of post-68 filmmakers who, aided and abetted by Fest and distancing themselves from the 1968 generation, believe that in their films there should be no heavy-handed moralizing to make the audience feel guilty rather than informed. In an interview with Schirrmacher for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Eichinger was outspoken in his criticism of a particular attitude to history that he associated with the student movement generation: “I despise many of these so-called 68ers because of

18. For discussion about historicism in *Downfall* see also Alexander Ruoff, “Die Renaissance des Historismus in der Populärkultur: Über den Kinofilm *Der Untergang*,” in *Filmri:ss: Studien über den Film “Der Untergang*,” ed. Willi Bischof (Münster: Unrast, 2005), 69–78.

their dishonesty—all they ever offered were rehashed political slogans. Nothing useful ever came of it at all. Moralizing should be left out of it. Moralizing never did anyone any good at all. Morality is important for social behavior to the extent that one is moved to respect one's fellow human beings."¹⁹

Programmatically, what we have at various levels here is a fundamental alternative to the dominant cultural politics or *Aufarbeitungspolitik* (the political policy of coming to terms with the Nazi past) of the 1970s and 1980s: instead of seeing aesthetically and politically provoking possibilities in the production of a historical film, in which a possible interpretation is presented and the public is invited to grapple actively with the material at hand, these "historicists" simply present history as it "actually" was. They automatically view any attempt at "interpretation" or "perspective" as "interference" and "arrogance." To quote Eichinger once again: "I believe that if a film is to have value, it should make no value judgments."²⁰

My task now is to confront this attitude by showing to what extent the filmmakers' allegedly neutral representations do implicitly contain a moral perspective—and a very old one, at that. After all, the story of this film, particularly from the point of view of perspective, is the standard question of who are the victims and who are the perpetrators. But instead of pursuing this question through the German debates about the film, I would like to use the remainder of this essay to return to American discussions and to trace similar problems and critical issues there.

I begin with the American elite press's efforts to decide the extent to which *Downfall* is a Hitler film.²¹ The Hitler role was brilliantly (creepily, perfectly, sinisterly, acutely) portrayed by an unarguably masterful actor, it is said, but what for? Do we, for all that, really understand Hitler? The almost unanimous response was no. Understanding requires a plausible social or psychological entity. David Denby, critic for the *New Yorker*, goes a step further in his criticism of this aestheticized twilight of the gods, in which, he says, the debacle, as it plays out in the chamber theater of the bunker, was stylized into a kind of megatheater: "You long to mock these solemn, murdering Nazi 'idealists,' female as well as male. The movie errs in treating even the most grotesquely sordid episodes as tragedy (accompanied by Purcell's most dignified music)."²²

19. Schirrmacher, "Kino Hitler spielen."

20. Ibid.

21. When speaking of the cultural press in the United States, I include such publications as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Village Voice*, the *New Republic*, the *New York Review of Books*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New Yorker*, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, and the *Boston Globe*.

22. David Denby, "Back in the Bunker," *New Yorker*, April 14–21, 2005, 260.

Another common response was that despite Ganz's acting achievement, which because of the inevitability of the outcome becomes irrelevant, the film's actual theme is, in Scott's words again, "not Hitler at all, but rather his followers: the officers, bureaucrats and loyal civilians who were with him at the end." This displacement of identification is, according not only to Scott but also to Stanley Kauffmann, Jim Hoberman, and Stephen Hunter, problematic for several reasons.²³ First, one must understand "followers" to mean, as far as their relationship to and involvement in the Nazi state apparatus are concerned, a spectrum of politically responsible, even criminally liable functionaries. Scott pointedly comments on the unease of (American?) viewers as they become increasingly aware of this displacement:

The most disturbing aspect of "Downfall" . . . is the way it allows the audience's sympathy to gravitate toward some of these characters [such as Waffen-SS General Wilhelm Mohnke, Professor Ernst Günther Schenck, Albert Speer, Traudl Junge, and Eva Braun]. Next to the Goebbelses, and to Hitler, many of the others don't look too bad. In part, this is a result of the conventions of film narrative, which more often than not invite us to identify with someone on screen, even if nobody is especially admirable.²⁴

The fairly clear distinction in the film between absolute evil (Hitler, along with Magda and Joseph Goebbels) and the seemingly non- or not-so-evil others not only prevents any understanding of the gray zone of the Nazi everyday but also, as the story progresses, makes most of the followers—whether bystanders, fellow-travelers (*Mitläufer*), SS soldiers, generals, assistants, or ministers of the Reich—into war victims.

As has already been mentioned, the filmmakers claim a neutrality for themselves that they cannot defend through either their own rhetoric or their aesthetic practice. Though Eichinger and Hirschbiegel state that they wanted to make a film that passed "no judgment" and simply stuck to the historical facts, their rhetoric reveals how much the current historico-political climate influenced the *Downfall* project. "We decided," writes Eichinger, "to make this film in German with German actors and a German director. Why? . . . I think that it is high time that we tell our own story ourselves with the means that we have at hand to do so and that we have the courage finally to bring

23. Stanley Kauffmann, "Last Acts," *New Republic*, February 21, 2005, 21; Jim Hoberman, "Sixty Feet Under," *Village Voice*, February 14, 2005; Stephen Hunter, "Hitler in the Berlin Bunker," *Washington Post*, March 11, 2005.

24. Scott, "Last Days of Hitler."

the main agents in this story to the screen.”²⁵ Hirschbiegel is even more explicit: “When all is said and done, we have all not grappled enough with our history. But this is precisely what we must do if we are ever again to say without shame or peculiar aftertaste: I am proud to be German.”²⁶ These manifestos make clear the extent to which their ostensible objectivity actually goes hand in hand with quite concrete value judgments. Allegedly, this film had no point of view, had no perspective, had no goals—other than to overcome cinematically the guilt and shame propagated by the 1968 generation, and all in the name of restoring a sense of national self-confidence.²⁷

But how does this particular perspective express itself aesthetically in the film? Wenders convincingly argues that, in formal-aesthetic terms, *Downfall* has no perspective. This, he says, is evident in the absolute lack of any consistent narrative stance. The perspective alternates randomly among those of Junge, Peter Kranz (the little Hitler Youth member), the SS chief physician Schenck, the *Reichsminister* Speer, and, indeed, the omniscient historian Fest; in so doing, it is more or less effectively negated as the underpinning of the story or as historical perspective. To quote Wenders again: “*Downfall* serves the purposes of neither the capital G nor the small G. Fundamentally, the film has no opinion about anything, particularly not about fascism or Hitler. It leaves it up to the viewers to take a stance that it itself does not take, or only pretends to take.”²⁸

My question is, is it not possible to develop a certain perspective whose link to any single character or narrator is simultaneously collective in origin, coming from a group of like-minded people? In answer to my own question, yes, such a perspective is possible, but only if the center of the diegesis exists outside the parameters of the bunker family. Where “facts” played an over-determined role for Hirschbiegel and Eichinger when it came to Hitler and Joseph Goebbels, the same thoroughness was lacking for other key players in the *Führer’s* entourage.

In his review of *Downfall* Scott demonstrates why in the confines of the bunker the development of any coherent alternative perspective was all but impossible. The mechanisms of character identification, which have been

25. Interview of Bernd Eichinger, www.der-untgang.de/bernd-eichinger.php3.

26. Oliver Hirschbiegel, “Ohne den erhobenen Zeigefinger,” interview with Frank Schliedermann, *Stern*, September 8, 2004, 56.

27. See Jan Weyand, “So war es! Zur Konstruktion eines nationalen Opfermythos im Spielfilm *Der Untergang*,” in Bischof, *Filmri:ss*, 39–68.

28. Wenders, “Tja, dann wollen wir mal.” By “capital G” and “small G” Wenders refers to the use of the word *Geschichte* to mean “history” and “story,” respectively.

an indispensable part of tragedy since Aristotle, play a crucial part here. The more Hitler (and Goebbels) ruthlessly call for eradicating the entire German people, the more we sympathize with the hapless bystanders in the bunker and the more convincing they seem—despite their various pasts—as victims. In the moment of absolute destruction—whether in the cauldron of the *Nibelungenlied* or in Stalingrad—the nuances of the everyday utterly disappear. Under the compulsion exerted by the mechanism of identification, war criminals like Speer, Schenck, and Mohnke are recast as Hitler’s opponents.²⁹ *Mitläufer* such as Junge and Braun turn into normal, likable, and naive young women, accidentally sucked into the vortex of events: their pasts become irrelevant, their futures known. For historians such as Fest and Eichinger, this is all part of the tragedy of German history.

In response to Wenders, I would like to explore certain visual and acoustic strategies employed in *Downfall* that have contributed to the emergence of a perspective that, while grounded nonnarratively, nevertheless establishes itself in the film as dominant. I am speaking of the gradual formation of a community of perpetrators among those who survived. This is a group that, in contrast to the Nazis primeval (Hitler, Joseph Goebbels, Hermann Göring) and on the basis of its traumatic bunker experience, appears to have been exonerated of any political accountability or shared guilt.

I offer as one example Schenck, who as a figure in the film has been described as someone who “simply forgot about his high office as inspector of food supplies and attended to those in need”:³⁰ treating wounded civilians, rescuing sick patients from cross fire, resisting the haphazard executions of the SS death squads by coming to the defense of helpless civilians, and so on. He emerges out of the midst of destructive brutality a guardian angel in the world of Thanatos. Were Schenck merely a fictional character in a fictionalized bunker story about the end of the Third Reich, then the good SS man, to be sure the exception rather than the rule, would be a moving indication that not all of his kind had to take the same path.

However, *Downfall* is not just another fictionalized war film but a docudrama whose task is, as Hirschbiegel and Eichinger never cease to remind us, to present us with historical facts and authentic history. It seems that a necessary fixture in this historical narrative would be dramatic exposition of a

29. For a synopsis of the biographies of those in the bunker besides Goebbels and Hitler see Hannes Heer, *Hitler war's: Die Befreiung der Deutschen von ihrer Vergangenheit* (Berlin: Aufbau, 2005), 15–21.

30. *Ibid.*, 14.

prehistory of the various individuals in Hitler's bunker, instead of simply a reenactment of what they said or did during the last ten days. Without such prehistories those less-known dramatis personae of the bunker legend are turned into people "who have stumbled into a hopeless situation and are forced to act in accordance with their inner strengths and weaknesses."³¹

Thus, for example, the uninformed movie patron might learn that Schenck was a fanatical Nazi who, as doctor, scientist, and university professor, carried out hunger experiments on prisoners in the concentration camp in Mauthausen, Austria.³² Here I do not want to suggest that the "historical" Schenck would not have been capable of heroic or humanitarian deeds at the moment of total collapse. The same could be said for the nurturing behavior of Speer, Junge, Braun, or even Hitler. And precisely there lies the dilemma of an ahistorical representation of historical figures. For a historically authentic treatment of the bunker family means not only a minutely detailed dramatization of individual behavior at a moment of crisis but, at the same moment, a portrayal of the deeply anchored complicity *to the bitter end* of this same Hitler clique. Looked at from another angle: as a cinematic strategy and in the name of authenticity, it is simply not legitimate to turn these people into anti-Nazis. To do so is particularly problematic because the "documentary" information about their behavior, as was the case for Schenck, Speer, and Junge, is drawn from the sanitized presentation of their own memoirs after the war.³³ However, my concern here is not putting the spotlight on a few survivors of Hitler's bunker to *ex post facto* unmask them as evil villains but focusing on the question of representation. To what extent do the perspectives of individual characters or of groups as a whole in the film itself—above all in its sound and editing techniques—undermine the highly contradictory moral and political stance of their role as conspirators in this historical catastrophe, contributing thereby to a one-sided image of heroism and suffering?

Certainly the highly praised film music by Stephan Zacharias functions most effectively in this regard. "Devoid of exaggerated pathos," writes a typi-

31. *Ibid.*

32. Stefan Reinecke, "Der Arzt von Berlin: Der gute Geist im Führerbunker; Doch wer war Ernst Günther Schenck, wenn ihn nicht Bernd Eichinger und Oliver Hirschbiegel zeichnen?" *Tageszeitung*, September 15, 2004. See also Christoph Kopke, "Heil Kräuter: Der gute Mensch in Hitlers Bunker? Die Rolle des Arztes Ernst Günther Schenck im *Untergang*," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 20, 2004; and Michael B. Oren, "Pass the Fault," *New Republic*, July 4, 2005, 10.

33. Ernst Günther Schenck, *Das Notlazarett unter der Reichskanzlei: Ein Arzt erlebt Hitlers Ende in Berlin* (Neuried: Ars Una, 1995); Traudl Junge, *Bis zur letzten Stunde: Hitlers Sekretärin erzählt ihr Leben* (Munich: Claasen, 2002); Albert Speer, *Erinnerungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 1969).

cal critic, “no Wagnerisms, simple language, nevertheless rich dramatically.”³⁴ Zacharias himself describes his musical efforts as “symphonic, peaceful, tentative, actually classical in orientation” and emphasizes that it “was not meant to comment on, or in any special way intervene dogmatically in, the dramaturgy of the film.” The producers’ explicit intention was, as stated in the press materials, “that we did not want to copy the Americans, that we didn’t want to have any exaggerated expressions of affect.”³⁵ What absolutely was not wanted was any pathos-laden proto-Hollywood Wagnerism or, conversely, the dissolution of the conventional musical language of late Romanticism and its replacement by atonal, dissonant film music such as Hanns Eisler himself employed for Alain Resnais’s pathbreaking documentary film *Night and Fog*.³⁶

Zacharias’s major achievement was indeed creating “a consistently sustained musical understatement” throughout the work—most strictly observed when it came to representations of Hitler, whose appearances were not underscored musically, not even once, during the entire film.³⁷ In addition, theme music, leitmotifs, and other sound collages that in any way might be perceived as “gripping” were absent. Instead, we find numerous musical bridges and transitions that were less noticeable and, coupled with the prevailing editing strategy in the film, all the more effective.

In this context one must mention above all Zacharias’s reworking of the aria “When I am laid to earth,” from Henry Purcell’s opera *Dido and Aeneas*, invoked no fewer than a dozen times at decisive high points as instrumental background music. The choice of this baroque work is important both symbolically and thematically as well as for its construction of character networks that transcend the diegesis.

Thematically, Dido’s song of lamentation is concerned with her own death from a broken heart over her husband’s leaving. By not using the female lead singing voice for the aria, Zacharias tones down the lament’s tragically individual dimension while retaining a sense of something more universally elegiac that no longer plays such a dominant role. In *Downfall* this version of Dido’s lament accompanies, for example, Speer’s final leave-taking from Hitler; a crosscut longer scene in which Braun and Magda Goebbels each

34. See this review at www.amazon.de/exec/obidos/ASIN/B0002WUGAK/303-8270856-7538646.

35. “Interview mit Stephan Zacharias,” www.cinematographe.de/i_stephan_zacharias.html.

36. See Theodor W. Adorno and Hanns Eisler, *Komposition für den Film* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1976).

37. “Interview mit Stephan Zacharias.”

write their final letters; Schenk's long walk through the hospital bunker that, in the words of the film script, "resembled a vision of Hieronymus Bosch. Hundreds of badly wounded, dying soldiers, and civilians are lying in cots or on the floor";³⁸ the hopeless suicide of the flack helper Inge, who asks to be shot in the head by her commanding officer, who in turn puts a bullet through his own head; finally, the moment when the voice of General Helmut Weidling announces over a loudspeaker the order for "the immediate cessation of all resistance," because the war has ended.³⁹

It may be that Zacharias's reworking of Purcell's music led to "pumping up the absolutely most grotesque scenes into tragedy,"⁴⁰ but in my view that occurred only occasionally, for example, when the Goebbels children were poisoned. Otherwise there prevailed a notable reticence that lent a certain dissonance to the emotionally laden narrative as a change of pace. Yet it was precisely the continually flickering up of the partly lamenting, partly symphonic music from *Dido*, coupled with the crosscut editing, that bound together certain members of the bunker into an increasingly definable community of the good ones.

Coda

In and of themselves, the facts and the unity of time, manner, and place provided by those final days in the bunker furnish ideal material for a screenplay. Thus it is no coincidence that Trevor-Roper's original text, which remains today the exclusive basis of all the screenplays, was all ready to go back in 1947. It is also no coincidence that it is always this text that is filmed and refilmed, because in the final analysis the bunker story, as it is portrayed there, is a story with a happy ending, and as such it has become a trivialization (*Verharmlosung*). The representation of Hitler himself is not a trivialization but the obsessive acting out of the same grotesque *Kammerspiel*, motivated as it is by a pathological drive to find the ultimate truth of the Third Reich *in nuce*, nestled in the bunker story—at least that is what Fest seems wont to have thought possible.

*Translated from the German by
Rachel Leah Magshamrain and David Bathrick*

38. Joachim Fest and Bernd Eichinger, *Der Untergang: Das Filmbuch* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2004), 299.

39. *Ibid.*, 381.

40. Denby, "Back in the Bunker."