

# *Sympathy for the Devil: Cinema, History, and the Politics of Emotion*

Johannes von Moltke

Die Psychologie der Bunker ist ein unerforschter  
Ort unserer Geschichte [The psychology of  
the bunker is an unexplored place in our history].

—Alexander Kluge

## ***A Feeling for History***

“A new discourse on feeling is afoot in historical Germany [*Geschichts-Deutschland*]. The emotions are returning to history.” This is the opening statement in a relatively recent conversation between the historian Ernst Nolte and the editors of *Ästhetik und Kommunikation*, a venerable critical journal on the left under newly rejuvenated editorship. The issue is titled “Geschichtsgefühl” (“Feeling for History”), a term that we owe to Martin Walser. In a speech on the anniversary of the end of World War II, and by invitation of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, Walser had defined his “feeling for history, regarding Germany,” as “the store of all experiences I have made with Germany.” He insisted on applying the notion of feeling to this experience because, he claimed, we do not experience our belonging to history as knowledge but first as “a sensation [*Empfindung*], a feeling.”<sup>1</sup>

1. Martin Walser, “Über ein Geschichtsgefühl,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, May 10, 2002.

Walser's romantic nationalism and his less-than-romantic opposition of feeling and cognition may be troubling, but his reclamation of feeling and emotion resonates with recent phenomena (not only) in *Geschichts-Deutschland*. The double issue of *Ästhetik und Kommunikation* tracks the new feeling for history through interviews with historians and philosophers, suggestive photographs, and articles on literature, music, theater, and architecture. But the editors seem to have missed the obvious in taking stock of the renaissance of feeling in Germany: with a few exceptions,<sup>2</sup> there is nary a mention of the audiovisual media. This is all the more surprising as these media—both film and television—arguably take pride of place in the production of a diffuse but distinctly new feeling for history. From TV docu(melo)dramas such as *Die Luftbrücke: Nur der Himmel war frei* (*The Airlift: Only Heaven Was Free*, 2005; SAT 1), *Dresden* (2006; ZDF), and *Die Flucht* (*The Escape*, 2007; ARD) to Sönke Wortmann's film *Das Wunder von Bern* (*The Miracle in Berne*, 2003) and Oliver Hirschbiegel's *Der Untergang* (*Downfall*, 2004), the media have supplied a stream of historical representations characterized by strong affect and emotion.

Take the case of *Das Wunder von Bern*. When Wortmann's film about Germany's "miraculous" victory at the 1954 soccer World Cup premiered in October 2003, it was an immediate success. Recouping its unusually high production costs in the opening weekend alone, the film appeared to have hit a nerve with the German public. Or rather, it tapped an emotion. "Audiences came and cried buckets," wrote one reviewer; "even Chancellor Schröder supposedly shed a tear along with his sodden masses."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Schröder freely confessed that he had "bawled"—and this after the film's director had already reported back proudly from a private preview screening, noting that the chancellor had in fact cried three times. Speaking candidly about his emotional reaction at the star-studded premiere in Essen (the film's working-class locale), Schröder urged his fellow German males to "loosen their macho inhibitions and join him."<sup>4</sup> In hindsight it looks as though Schröder's tears were as important a part of the event that was *Das Wunder von Bern* as the

2. See esp. Wolfgang Engler's characteristically insightful text "Dämonendämmerung und Aasgeruch: DDR-Vergangenheit zwischen literarischer Archäologie und medialem Schlußverkauf," in "Geschichtsgefühl," ed. Jens Hacke, Alexander Cammann, and Stephan Schlak, special issue, *Ästhetik und Kommunikation*, nos. 122–23 (2003): 131–38.

3. Peter Preston, "Miracles Do Happen: Even the Chancellor Cried Watching the Story of His Country's 1954 World Cup Win," *Guardian*, November 14, 2003.

4. Richard Bernstein, "Berlin Journal: Germany's Grief and Glory, Wrapped Up in a Soccer Ball," *New York Times*, November 10, 2003.

film itself. In this sense, the chancellor's well-publicized reaction transcended the emotional investment of a single viewer, flagging a broader currency of cinematic affect in post-Wall Germany. The object of that affect is German history; its preferred generic form, as signaled by the discourse on crying, is melodrama. The question raised by the event is the one that centrally concerns me here: what are the emotional logics that govern the intersection of historical representation with cinematic form?

The audiovisual production of a "feeling for history" takes place against the backdrop of a growing body of critical and scholarly texts that trace the vagaries of history, memory, and *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coping with the past) after unification. German cultural studies in recent years has pointed to new configurations of perpetrators and victims in German culture, as memories of the war and the immediate postwar years have become infused with images of German suffering.<sup>5</sup> While I certainly join that diagnosis in the present essay, my goal is to reconnect the debate to an analysis of cultural forms. Focusing my inquiry on a central "text" in the shifting discourse on German history, I trace new forms of cathexis that are linked, in turn, to a profound shift in foundational narratives for postunification Germany. At a micro level, I investigate the specific textual forms in which the new *Geschichtsgefühl* is mediated. In other words, if the current popular "feeling for history" is overwhelmingly cinematic and televisual, then we need to link considerations of history and form and inquire into the specific strategies that produce historical feeling as an audiovisual emotion. To speak of *Geschichtsgefühl* means not only to trace particular historical "constellations" of affect but also to ask how affect is "cued," "solicited," even "structured" in aesthetic texts. This happens not simply at the level of particular plots but, just as important, on the deeper levels of film form. This analysis demands a conceptual framework that takes into account the specificity of

5. See, among many others, Ute Frevert and Aleida Assmann, *Geschichtsvergessenheit, Geschichtsversessenheit: Vom Umgang mit deutschen Vergangenheiten nach 1945* (Stuttgart: DVA, 1999); Robert Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Lothar Kettenacker, ed., *Ein Volk von Opfern? Die neue Debatte um den Bombenkrieg, 1940–1945* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2003); Dagmar Barnouw, *The War in the Empty Air: Victims, Perpetrators, and Postwar Germans* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Barbara Beßlich, Katharina Grätz, and Olaf Hildebrand, eds., *Wende des Erinnerns? Geschichtskonstruktionen in der deutschen Literatur nach 1989* (Berlin: Schmidt, 2006); Bill Niven, ed., *Germans as Victims: Remembering the Past in Contemporary Germany* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); and Laurel Cohen-Pfister and Dagmar Wienroeder-Skinner, eds., *Victims and Perpetrators, 1933–1945: (Re)presenting the Past in Post-unification Culture* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006).

film as a medium for producing and negotiating affect. Fortunately, several scholars have been working on such frameworks in the wake of what some have described as an “emotional turn” in cinema studies.<sup>6</sup> Though far from unified, this scholarship provides ample leads for conceptualizing the affective force of audiovisual media in the contemporary German context.

On a macro level, the new forms of emotional address in films about German history index not only an ongoing transformation of German cinema after unification but also a profound generational shift. As the history of the Holocaust and the Third Reich recedes from collective into cultural memory and the witness generation dies out, the period’s historical valence changes—as do the politics of representation. This has less to do with the ostensible overcoming of much-touted representational taboos (such as the representation of the *Führer* as a fictional character or of the Holocaust in the mode of comedy) than with changing forms of cathexis, and of empathy in particular. If generations define themselves, among other things, through the emotional relationship to particular “generational objects,” as Habbo Knoch has argued, then the shifting role of the Holocaust, Hitler, and Nazi Germany as such objects reveals a putative change of the generational guard, which we might think of as a shift from “1968” to “1989.” While this shift may be traced across various realms of contemporary culture,<sup>7</sup> we should be wary of its totalizing claims, its largely oedipal logic: a generational transition of this kind—which, as Sigrid Weigel has pointed out, may be conceptualized much more precisely as a form of *Ver-schachtelung* (telescoping)—need not come at the expense of earlier insights, which end up displaced or repressed, at best.<sup>8</sup> In other words, even if we recognize the ineluctable shift from one regime of representation to the next, the overwriting of “1968” by “1989” in recent cultural production represents an ideological construct in need of careful scrutiny. We will have to evaluate what is gained but also what is lost with the emergence of cultural forms and representational politics that generate empathy with victimized Germans, if not with German perpetrators, only by violently repudiating earlier forms of historical representation and emotional cathexis.

6. See, e.g., Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror; or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Steve Neale, “Melodrama and Tears,” *Screen* 27, no. 6 (1986): 6–22; and Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1991): 2–13.

7. It certainly defines the emergence of *Popliteratur* as a phenomenon, but it can also be traced in the shifting representations of RAF terrorism in recent cultural productions, for example. Cf. Ilka Rasch, “The Return of the RAF: German Tales of Terror” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2007).

8. See Sigrid Weigel, “Die ‘Generation’ als symbolische Form: Zum genealogischen Diskurs im Gedächtnis nach 1945,” *Figurationen*, no. 0 (1999): 158–73; for an English version see “‘Generation’ as a Symbolic Form: On the Genealogical Discourse of Memory since 1945,” *Germanic Review* 77, no. 4 (2002): 264–77.

### *Emotion Pictures*

With its power to move mass audiences to tears or laughter, to make spectators shrink in horror or shiver with suspense, the cinema has long been recognized as a uniquely affective medium. Hugo Münsterberg insisted as early as 1916 that “to picture emotions must be the central aim of the photoplay.”<sup>9</sup> Münsterberg noted the actor’s role in portraying emotions but was more concerned with the psychology of film form, relating the medium’s properties to the spectator’s mental operations.<sup>10</sup> Picking up Münsterberg’s interest in film and psychology almost a century later, Ed Tan discusses cinema as an “emotion machine,” arguing that “the awareness provided by a motion picture is an emotional one in the first place.”<sup>11</sup> Like other film scholars of recent years, Tan investigates spectatorial response as a form of mental processing of audiovisual cues, albeit emotionally inflected. Arguing from a cognitivist perspective that has come around to recognize the role of emotions *in* cognition, scholars such as Tan, Murray Smith, Carl Plantinga, and Greg M. Smith have studied the complex mechanisms behind the production of cinematic emotion; their ever-more-nuanced investigations of different types of emotion, of the interplay among emotional “elicitors” and “conditioners” or of the relation between “mood” and emotional arousal, have helped us understand the emotional effects of film form—what we might call the “affect” of form—at a high level of specificity, and they have provided broad and useful models for studying this affect in different contexts.<sup>12</sup>

Many scholars working on film genres share this fundamental assumption of the medium’s affective power, and their work on the philosophy of horror, the power of melodrama to make us cry, or the somatic impact of what Linda Williams calls “body genres” has shown how genres cue particular emotions or engage spectators affectively.<sup>13</sup> In particular, the substantial work on melodrama in film and cultural studies since the 1970s, in drawing

9. Hugo Münsterberg, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

10. Cf. also J. Dudley Andrew, *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976).

11. Ed Tan, *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film: Film as an Emotion Machine* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1996), x.

12. See Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995); Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith, eds., *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Greg M. Smith, *Film Structure and the Emotion System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Matthias Brütsch, Vinzenz Hediger, Ursula von Keitz, et al., eds., *Kinogefühle: Emotionalität und Film* (Marburg: Schüren, 2005); and Alex Neill, “Empathy and (Film) Fiction,” in *Post-theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 175–94.

13. See n. 6.

on everything from psychoanalytic to neoformalist criticism, has offered some important accounts of how and why cinematic fictions can move us to tears. Much of this work has centered on gender, tracing the conflation of tears and femininity in the so-called woman's film, or "weepie." Along with the gender logics underpinning the cultural functions of melodrama, other issues such as the cultural investment in pathos, melodrama's role in articulating what Peter Brooks calls the "moral occult," and the link between repression and melodramatic "excess" are equally important to my present concerns.<sup>14</sup>

Yet, despite their contributions to our understanding of the medium's emotional power, these studies tend to elide questions of history. Explorations of cinematic affect, especially cognitivist explorations, are often conducted either in universalizing psychological terms or on formal grounds, generally without considering the historical or cultural situatedness of spectators or individual films. Rarely do scholars set out to explain how the politics of emotion in the cinema interface with broader questions about historical representation—both within the cinema and in the cultural contexts of film. Conversely, historians have produced a substantial body of writing on film, even if it often seems nervous about the implications of the medium for historical scholarship. A flurry of special journal issues, monographs, and anthologies in the 1980s and 1990s brought film roundly into the discipline of history.<sup>15</sup> But we are still short of a genuinely interdisciplinary dialogue on the issue.<sup>16</sup> Particularly on questions about the ideologies of historical representation, the historiographical implications of film, or cinema's "historical

14. Cf. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); and Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001). A locus classicus for the discussion of melodrama and repression remains Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "Minnelli and Melodrama," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 70–74.

15. See, e.g., "Historians and Movies: The State of the Art," pts. 1–2, special issues, *Journal of Contemporary History* 18, no. 3 (1983), and 19, no. 1 (1984); Charles Musser and Robert Sklar, eds., *Resisting Images: Essays on Cinema and History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); Robert A. Rosenstone, ed., "Forum," *American Historical Review* 93 (1988): 1173–1227; and Rosenstone's two influential volumes, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) and the edited collection *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

16. Though I come at the issue from a somewhat different disciplinary angle, I join Scott Spec- tor in his incisive review of some of the desiderata for truly interdisciplinary work at the intersection of film and history: "Was the Third Reich Movie-made? Interdisciplinarity and the Reframing of 'Ideology,'" *American Historical Review* 106 (2001): 460–84.

imaginary,”<sup>17</sup> historians remain uneasy about the way such approaches appear to prioritize interpretation over data, the writing of history over historical sources, narratives over chronicles, discourse over the archive. Even Robert A. Rosenstone, a historian who has done as much as anyone to advance our knowledge on the relationship between film and the idea of history, still harbors reservations about the way film scholars approach this issue. If we look to film for our history, and to film scholars for historiography, Rosenstone fears that we will end up with a “history that cares about how the past means without caring about the things which happened in the past that give rise to the meaning.”<sup>18</sup>

Of course, we cannot make claims on historical meaning without any reference to past events. But neither is it possible to care about things in the past without making assumptions about how they mean. Whether we make them explicit or not, theories of meaning, of ideology, and of culture (including, I suggest, generational cultures of affect) direct our gaze on the past, make our vision alight on certain “things which happened,” and lead us to overlook others. Broadly speaking, such claims are now familiar enough from different accounts of the linguistic and visual turns across the humanities and the social sciences. Thinking about history and cinema is merely a way of making those claims more explicit: films have the power to direct our gaze quite literally, imbuing versions of the past with the ostensible immediacy of vision and using aesthetic devices such as narrative, costume, editing, and cinematography to bring particular aspects of the past into focus while hiding others.

This is where the power of cinematic emotion intersects with broader issues on the relation between film and history. For just as writing on cinematic affect tends to short-circuit some of the pressing historiographical issues, so writing on film by historians tends to miss the specific implications of cinema’s emotional appeal, let alone the formal dimensions in which that appeal is generated. The crucial question, particularly for explaining the current *Geschichtsgefühl* in German cinema, is how cinema charges its audiovisual histories with an affective force that can significantly shape our understanding of historical events. Ideally, an answer to this question would involve mapping the terms of cinematic affect and the emotional impact of specific films along with a broader history of the emotions; an interdisciplinary approach of this kind

17. Thomas Elsaesser, “The Historical Imaginary of the New German Cinema,” in *Framing the Past: The Historiography of German Cinema and Television*, ed. Bruce A. Murray and Christopher J. Wickham (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), 280–307.

18. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 10.

would help us better understand film's place in a historically specific "structure of feeling" (Raymond Williams). For the purposes of this essay, I aim merely to exemplify what is at stake in raising this issue of film, history, and affect by way of a case study, in which I hope to show how strategic choices about cinematic form inflect not only spectatorial response but ultimately the perception of history itself. Nowhere have the stakes for such an investigation been higher in recent years than in the grandiose claims of one film to provide "a new approach to history" by re-creating Hitler's last hours in the bunker.<sup>19</sup>

### *Sympathy for the Devil; or, Engaging with Hitler*

Billed as "the first German feature film to stage the last days of the NS regime and the person Adolf Hitler," *Der Untergang* was marketed as "a unique project in the history of German film."<sup>20</sup> As claims about the film's plot, such statements are historically shortsighted at best, willfully misleading at worst, and probably just good marketing. In fact, the historical events depicted in *Der Untergang* have inspired numerous films to date, among them G. W. Pabst's *Der letzte Akt* (*The Last Ten Days*) from 1955.<sup>21</sup> Subsequently, the Italian director Ennio De Concini directed *Hitler: The Last Ten Days* (1973), and Anthony Hopkins took an Emmy in 1980 for his role in the Franco-American TV production *The Bunker* (dir. George Schaefer). Like *Der Untergang*, these three films all draw on the same books by Michael A. Musmanno and Hugh Trevor-Roper that Joachim Fest used for his much-touted "historical sketch," *Der Untergang*.<sup>22</sup> In other words, the material is nothing new, and if *Der Untergang*, the film, did break new ground—let

19. "Daher kommen wir: Der Regisseur Oliver Hirschbiegel über seinen Film 'Der Untergang,'" interview with Anke Westphal, *Berliner Zeitung*, September 11, 2004.

20. Vera Conrad, ed., *Der Untergang: Materialien für den Unterricht* (Munich: Clever! Verlag, 2004). The electronic version is available on the film's official Web site, [www.untergang.film.de/index2.html](http://www.untergang.film.de/index2.html) (accessed July 19, 2007).

21. While this was of course a German-language production, Pabst's Austrianness was stressed at the time; claims about the uniqueness of *Der Untergang* in German cinema now capitalize on this difference, implicitly "Austrianizing" a director who in other respects (e.g., as the director of Nazi fare such as *Paracelsus*, let alone such classics as *Pandora's Box* or *The Threepenny Opera*) is unproblematically "German." For an excellent overview of the different versions of Hitler's last days that preceded *Der Untergang* in cinemas see Michael Töteberg, "Hitler—eine Filmkarriere," in *Der Untergang: Das Filmbuch*, ed. Joachim Fest and Bernd Eichinger (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2004), 405–25.

22. Michael A. Musmanno, *Ten Days to Die* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1950); Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Last Days of Hitler* (New York: Macmillan, 1947); Joachim Fest, *Der Untergang: Hitler und das Ende des dritten Reiches; Eine historische Skizze* (Berlin: Fest, 2002). For a critique of the recycling of historical material see Hannes Heer, *Hitler war's: Die Befreiung der Deutschen von ihrer Vergangenheit* (Berlin: Aufbau, 2005).



alone any taboos—it did so more through the director’s and his overbearing producer’s formal decisions than through the subject matter itself. In my discussion of the film, I wish to trace the implications of these formal decisions in terms of their affective impact, which I propose to read, in turn, for its broader political implications. What is ultimately at stake in our shifting “feelings” toward (cinematic representations of) Hitler is not only a profound realignment in our general historical coordinates but also an assault on the “culture of affect” linked to 1968.

*Der Untergang* was marketed from the start under the cachet of authenticity. Both the director, Hirschbiegel, and the producer, Bernd Eichinger, have taken every opportunity to claim that their film is “more authentic than any other” and that anything that could not be corroborated was simply not included.<sup>23</sup> Just as often, this stance has been criticized, deconstructed, and ridiculed by historians, film scholars, and critics. Ian Kershaw’s glowing endorsement of the film notwithstanding, the film does little to allay the fundamental questions that Hirschbiegel and Eichinger’s promotion raises about their representational politics and their notion of historical accuracy.<sup>24</sup> As critical viewers, we have to contend not only with the necessary fictionalization involved in transforming historical sources into an audiovisual performance but also with the suspension of disbelief required for taking the bodies of well-known stars as those of historical figures. Finally, there is also the representational problem of turning events, historically transmitted actions, and stenographic notes into dialogue for those well-known stars. But as we see the events in the bunker unfold over 156 minutes of screen time, a different aspect of historical fiction comes to the fore: we begin to watch the action with varying degrees of emotional involvement. As history becomes “reconstructed into a stage for feelings,”<sup>25</sup> the film links historical events and characters, including the suspense built up by a constrained environment, the confusion elicited by the switches from inside to outside, from below to above ground, and our

23. “Wir machen einen großen epischen Film fürs Kino. Allerdings halten wir uns dabei streng an die Dokumente. An Stenogramme der Lagebesprechungen und an die Aufzeichnungen von Zeitzeugen. Was historisch nicht belegt ist, kommt nicht vor. . . . Ich denke, unser Film wird authentischer als alle vorherigen” (We are making a big, epic film for the cinema. But we are sticking strictly to the documents: stenographic reports of war conferences and writings by witnesses. Whatever is not historically proven does not appear in the film. . . . I think our film will be more authentic than all the others that have preceded it) (“Ich halte mich an die Geschichte,” interview with Bernd Eichinger, *Der Spiegel*, April 19, 2003, 153).

24. “I could not imagine how a film of Hitler’s last days could possibly be better done” (Ian Kershaw, “The Human Hitler,” *Guardian*, September 19, 2003).

25. Heer, *Hitler war’s*, 23.

shifting empathy with different characters. Though I consider the spatial and narrative construction of suspense, as well as the *mise-en-scène* of confusion and chaos, highly significant for the film's affective "shape," so to speak, I want to focus here on the question of empathy. For clearly, this particular form of engagement with cinematic characters has broader relevance in the case of a film like *Der Untergang*—especially where it attaches to a character whom we are supposed to take for the "authentic" *Führer*.

As a relatively classically constructed film, *Der Untergang* solicits an empathetic viewer most notably through the introduction of Traudl Junge at the very beginning of the film and through the figure of Peter Kranz, a young boy who appears lifted out of neorealist classics such as Roberto Rossellini's *Germania anno zero* (*Germany Year Zero*, 1948), as he navigates the havoc of Berlin in the spring of 1945. Together with the doctor Schenck, these are among a group of "good and healthy" characters who appear in a "particularly sympathetic" light.<sup>26</sup> The script uses each strategically to draw in the spectator. While much of the narrative is focalized through Traudl, Peter is at the center of a heart-wrenching family melodrama that leads from the blindness of the young Hitler Youth in the *Volkssturm* to the death of his parents. In terms of the film's overall emotional address, it is only fitting that the final scene should pair Peter and Traudl as they bike off into the sunset: viewers are eased out of the pandemonium of "the last ten days" through the two figures who have served as emotional touchstones throughout the narrative. Both young and wide-eyed, a woman and a child among warmongering men, Traudl and Peter are what Vinzenz Hediger calls "avatars of innocent feeling" who anchor the spectator's emotional relationship with the diegesis.<sup>27</sup>

The other anchor, of course, is the figure of the *Führer* himself, brought to life by the critically acclaimed and broadly naturalistic performance of Bruno Ganz. Emulating Hitler's pathologies down to the smallest detail, Ganz

26. *Ibid.*, 14. Heer details the deliberate "extinguishing of history" that the film performs in imbuing these characters with positive traits. To take but one among Heer's many detailed examples: the "good doctor" Schenck, a heroic figure in the film, was in fact a "fanatical Nazi who played a decisive role in Nazi health politics as a doctor, researcher, and professor. His career was boosted by nutritional experiments that he led on a plantation at the Dachau concentration camp and in the laboratory at Mauthausen. More than one hundred of his trial patients are said to have died. In 1940 the SS named him 'nutritional inspector.' When he returned as prisoner of war from the Soviet Union in 1955, the Bavarian Ministry of Culture prohibited him from taking up a post as university professor due to his experiments with humans" (*ibid.*, 16; my translation).

27. Vinzenz Hediger, lecture delivered at the conference "Audiovisuelle Emotionen," Universität Hamburg, December 2006.

creates a screen presence critical to the film's claim to authenticity—a claim that Hannes Heer rightly links to its overall sentimentality.<sup>28</sup> Ganz's naturalist approach includes Hitler's well-known speech patterns, his rants as well as his Parkinson's disease. But in addition to the tirades whose patterns—though not their semantics—had been famously satirized in Charlie Chaplin's *Great Dictator*, Ganz and Hirschbiegel deliberately modulate the performance of the *Führer* to include notably “softer” moments.<sup>29</sup> Far from merely pacing the film's narrative, these moments orchestrate the spectator's emotional relation to the principal character.

Within the film's overall construction of Hitler as a character, one such scene stands out with respect to this issue of empathy. That scene begins with Albert Speer's return to the bunker for a farewell visit and a little confessional moment. The dramaturgy of this visit up to Speer's final encounter with Hitler himself is worth noting: Speer first comes across the Goebbels children at play, then checks in with Magda Goebbels, who is sick in bed; finally Speer heeds Eva Braun's invitation to see him before he takes leave of the *Führer*. By aligning a beneficent Speer with the innocence of children, a sick woman, and the incorrigibly naive Braun, the film solicits our moral allegiance with Hitler's secretary for armament and war production. Various inserts, close-ups, and point-of-view shots cement the alignment with Speer's empathetic view of the unfolding “tragedy” in the bunker: we see a little doll through his eyes; when Speer picks up one of the Goebbels children, the camera frames this benign paternal gesture in a close two-shot; a close-up of Speer taking Magda Goebbels's hand charges the scene with erotic tension; and a similar close-up of Braun laying her hand on Speer's increases the depth and “intimacy” of the narration leading up to the encounter with Hitler.

When Speer enters Hitler's room after this buildup, we first see Hitler from a certain distance, standing with his arms crossed in a static low-angle

28. “The impression of authenticity is reinforced by the sentimentalizing of events. The persons no longer appear as the executors of the project of global conquest or the annihilation of the Jews, or as the representatives of German national chauvinism or a master race; they simply present themselves as humans who have ended up in a situation that allows no escape and who respond to this dilemma according to their character. . . . The actors show feelings, and they elicit feelings in the spectator, who is touched or shocked, feels pity or rejection, but who always takes an emotional interest. This sentimentalization, which is achieved by using all possible cinematic means, produces something that knowledge cannot offer: personal proximity and emotional identification” (Heer, *Hitler war's*, 23; my translation).

29. This again in the name of authenticity; cf. the repeated mention, in interviews and tertiary materials, of an archival tape of Hitler speaking in a “normal” voice to a Finnish delegate—a principal source for Ganz's performance.



Figure 1. "Scene of Empathy"

medium shot, framed internally by a doorway in the immediate foreground. In the ensuing exchange, this camera setup is repeated three times, ultimately framing Speer on his own after Hitler has taken a seat offscreen, as if to prepare the viewer for the separation of the two characters. The bulk of their conversation, however, follows a far more conventional shot breakdown, working with tight singles in a fairly consistent shot–reverse-shot pattern. A seemingly pensive Hitler begins by telling Speer that he “had great plans for the German people” and, in a rare reference of this film to the Holocaust, that he “at least fought the Jews openly.” He ruminates about the “eternal peace” that follows suicide and, when Speer asks him to spare the German people, notes that “if my own people failed this test, I could not shed a single tear.” When Hitler explains that he sees the potential demise of the German people as an incidental casualty brought on by the people themselves, Speer haltingly confesses that he has stopped following Hitler’s orders. At this point the editing, which has been favoring reaction shots over shots of the speaker, reframes Hitler in a medium shot that reveals his upper body, turned away from Speer. While his gaze registers no reaction to Speer’s “treason,” his hands betray the tension as he snaps a pencil without uttering a response. Speer gets up to leave, extends his hand for a final farewell, but, when Hitler fails to return the gesture, leaves the room. The camera, however, lingers on Hitler, now framing him again in tight close-up to show a tear trickling down his right cheek (fig. 1).

This scene stands out for two reasons: first, though it is not the only close-up of Ganz by any stretch, it is certainly the only moment in which we see a tear stain Hitler's face.<sup>30</sup> Second, and more important, this is the only moment in the film that shows us Hitler on his own, however briefly. Asking us to focus exclusively on Hitler's emotional state, and highlighting the importance of this moment through acting, cinematography, and shot duration, the film offers us what Plantinga calls a "scene of empathy":

The narrative momentarily slows and the interior emotional experience of a favored character becomes the locus of attention. In this kind of scene, which I call the *scene of empathy*, we see a character's face, typically in closeup, either for a single shot of long duration or as an element of a point-of-view structure alternating between shots of the character's face and shots of what she or he sees. In either case, the prolonged concentration on the character's face is not warranted by the simple communication of information about character emotion. Such scenes are also intended to elicit empathetic emotions in the spectator.<sup>31</sup>

Plantinga lists a number of criteria that allow us to speak of an effective scene of empathy: first, the film must focus our attention on the character's facial expression; second, the "duration of the shot (or scene) must be sufficient to allow for the response"; third, the narrative "must lay the proper foundation for empathy to occur" by ensuring that the characters' faces cannot be misread, by providing sufficient information about the character, or by making the situation private and putting the emoting character "in a situation where he or she believes no one is observing"; fourth, different aspects of film technique need to work together to produce what Plantinga calls "affective congruence," that is, to give the scene a consistent "feeling tone."<sup>32</sup> All of these criteria are clearly fulfilled by the scene just described: we are attentive to Ganz's facial expression; the scene is long enough; at its close, Hitler is shown in a private moment—the only such moment in the film—and nothing jars the emotional tone (on the contrary, the muted gestures and voices reinforce it).

It is Plantinga's fifth criterion that raises stickier problems. As Plantinga puts it, "Allegiance to the character whose face is presented in part determines

30. The irony that Hitler refuses to cry for his people only minutes before he reacts to Speer's betrayal with tears is hardly coincidental.

31. Carl Plantinga, "The Scene of Empathy and the Human Face on Film," in Plantinga and Smith, *Passionate Views*, 239.

32. *Ibid.*, 249–55.

the degree of contagion and empathy.”<sup>33</sup> This is the point at which the historical figure of Hitler, which exists outside the realm of the fiction, is clearly liable to intervene: barring a full-fledged neo-Nazi subject position, allegiance to and emotional contagion by Hitler are *prima facie* unlikely to shape our affective response. Precisely because this is so, we must ask, with some insistence: Why did the filmmakers strive to bring us into a relation of allegiance with Hitler? Why do all the specifically cinematic strategies—from shot scale to editing to music—conspire to elicit an empathetic relation with Hitler in this scene, even if we resist that emotion because of extracinematic, social, and historical “conditioning” factors?<sup>34</sup> If Plantinga is right, and scenes of empathy go beyond the task of communicating information about a character and his or her feelings to elicit a response that aligns us emotionally with that character, what is the ideological purpose of such alignment and the allegiance it aims to produce? Why should the viewer be not simply told or shown that Hitler felt betrayed but actually asked to feel that the *Führer* felt betrayed by Speer at the very end?<sup>35</sup>

Before I explore some answers to these questions, it is important to recognize that, while the scene with Speer may be the only one to qualify as a “scene of empathy” in Plantinga’s strict sense, the strategic choices that underpin that scene are systematic and determine the portrayal of Hitler in various other ways as well. A comparison with Pabst’s 1955 version of the film, which also depicts Hitler alone but undercuts the construction of “affective congruence” through its expressionist approach to lighting, performance, and *mise-en-scène*, would be instructive.<sup>36</sup> In addition, careful analysis of the film’s dramaturgy—in particular as it relates to Hitler and his secretary—reveals a systematic attention to viewers’ emotional investment in putatively “likable” and “unlikable” characters alike. I would like to illustrate *Der Untergang*’s systematic investment in empathy by turning briefly to the film’s beginning and looking at how the opening sequence engages its spectator.

33. *Ibid.*, 250.

34. On the distinction between conditioners and elicitors of emotion see Susan L. Feagin, *Reading with Feeling: The Aesthetics of Appreciation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 25–31.

35. “Neither empathy nor the affective congruence on which empathy depends require[s] that I experience the *same* emotions I imagine [the character] does. Congruent emotions are sufficient for empathy” (Plantinga, “Scene of Empathy,” 245).

36. *Der letzte Akt* features a direct parallel to what I am describing here as the “scene of empathy,” but Pabst undercuts the “emotional tone” of that scene by using voice-over and heavily “presentational” acting, in addition to expressionist lighting throughout.

Hitler, the film's male lead, is not introduced right away. Instead, we meet other characters who serve as gateways to the narrative world and thus prepare us for our first encounter with the protagonist. After a brief clip from *Im toten Winkel: Hitlers Sekretärin* (*Blind Spot: Hitler's Secretary*, 2002), André Heller's documentary about Hitler's secretary, the first images show a group of five women who, like the spectator, try to get their bearings in a night setting. Through close-ups and point-of-view shots, the film singles out one of them, who will play a crucial role in the film's overall "structure of sympathy."<sup>37</sup> During the first few minutes we recognize her as the fictionalized reincarnation of Hitler's secretary, Traudl Junge, seen in the documentary prologue preceding the credits. But as the mode switches from documentary to fiction, the function of that character shifts as well. Whereas the opening clip from the conversation with Traudl generated a historical, distanced, reflexive take on the Nazi past, the as-yet-unmarried young Traudl Humps, played by Alexandra Maria Lara, places us in media res. Far from reflexive, her point of view is uncertain and unstable—an impression reinforced by the leers of two male soldiers in a brief close-up. Only after we have begun to familiarize ourselves with the opening location of the film through Traudl's eyes do we join her and the four other women in their nervous anticipation of Hitler—or rather, of Ganz playing Hitler: all five women, seated on a bench at the right side of the frame, lean forward toward the middle of the image, where, after a cut to an empty doorway, Hitler emerges from his office.

Of course, the encounter with Hitler in this film was prepared metatextually. Whether in Germany or abroad, both the film in general and Ganz's performance of Hitler in particular had been prepositioned discursively through reviews, interviews, and advance publicity. Like the historical Hitler, this predisposition affects emotional engagement with the film later on—raising the same questions I raised above. For now, however, I am interested simply in the formal construction of this opening sequence and its role in the phenomenology of character construction. For as Ganz rightly points out in an interview, "Selbst wenn so viel Geschichte im Spiel ist, geht es doch auch darum, dass es emotional dicht, differenziert und lebendig gespielt ist. . . . Maßgabe ist erst einmal das Drehbuch" (Even if this much history is involved, it is also important to act in an emotionally coherent, differentiated, and lively way. . . . What counts to begin with is the script).<sup>38</sup> In other words, even an overdetermined

37. Smith, *Engaging Characters*, 74–109.

38. Christiane Peitz, "Ich halte die Hand über ihn," interview with Bruno Ganz, *Der Tagesspiegel*, September 9, 2004.

fiction such as the one constructed in *Der Untergang* tends to work according to cinematic conventions of character construction, suspense, and even genre. How, then, is the historical figure Hitler introduced *as a film character*?

When we review the film's opening with this question in mind, two aspects stand out: first, the spectator's curiosity is aroused through classic suspense built around a series of delays, or retardations; second, through character construction, editing, and narration, the film generates intimacy designed to draw in the spectator. As Wim Wenders points out, this is a cinematic construct befitting any number of "classic" beginnings. Wenders, who (much to his credit) has entered into a lasting feud with Fest, provides a good description of the film's opening: "Die Kandidatinnen kommen bei Nacht und Nebel an, klar, es ist Krieg, sitzen dann in einer Reihe im Warteraum und sind aufgeregt. Alle schauen sie schließlich auf die sich öffnende Tür (und wir im Publikum mit ihnen), und dann tritt, höchst kinowirksam aufgebaut, Hitler auf. Da ist er!" (The candidates arrive in night and fog—well obviously, there's a war on—and then they sit next to each other in a waiting room and are nervous. Finally, they look at the opening door [as do we in the audience], and then, with carefully calculated cinematic effect, Hitler appears. There he is!).<sup>39</sup> Aside from referencing the classic, or *kinowirksam*, buildup of the main character, Wenders's description is relevant because of his eye for the audience. When the five women lean forward, "und wir im Publikum mit ihnen," the editing and the acting both work toward an emotional engagement known as "mimicry." This engagement can take the simple form of a motor reflex that makes me lean forward when the women do, but it can also involve so-called affective mimicry, in which I share the characters' emotional tension (possibly by way of reflexively emulating the physical act of leaning forward and evaluating or adopting it as an expression of emotional tension).<sup>40</sup>

39. 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. The above-mentioned "feud" dates back to Wenders's outraged reaction at Fest's first venture into film with *Hitler—eine Karriere* from 1977. See Wenders, "That's Entertainment," in *Visions and Voices: West German Filmmakers on Film*, ed. Eric Rentschler (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988), 126–31.

40. In a study of suspense in Hitchcock, Christine Noll Brinckmann has advanced an intriguing, related notion of "somatic empathy" to describe the way the film experience calls on and implicates the body ("Somatische Empathie bei Hitchcock: Eine Skizze," in *Der Körper im Bild: Schauspielen—Darstellen—Erscheinen*, ed. Heinz B. Heller, Karl Prümm, and Birgit Peulings [Marburg: Schüren, 1999], 111–21). Vivian Sobchack's work on the phenomenology of the film experience likewise offers rich leads for pursuing this dimension, though from a different philosophical angle. See esp. *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).



But whatever my level and form of engagement with the characters, it is not simply a matter of “identifying” with Traudl, as Wenders claims. In his empathetic take on the film’s opening sequence, Wenders suggests that when the other four women rejoice with Traudl and embrace her at the end of that sequence, so does the spectator: “Der [Kinobesucher] hat sich gerade, ob er will oder nicht, mit der netten und liebenswerten Traudl identifiziert. Und wird das die nächsten zwei Stunden über so tun” (Whether he wants to or not, the cinemagoer has just identified with nice and lovable Traudl. And will continue to do so for the next two hours).<sup>41</sup> We should object to this description first because we are unlikely to embrace anybody in the movie theater when Traudl gets the job with Hitler. More to the point, we need to question Wenders’s notion of identification, which he extends willy-nilly to the film’s entire duration. Murray Smith has provided an eminently useful model by which to revise this familiar but imprecise notion of identification, a model that allows us to differentiate and substantiate Wenders’s otherwise justified doubts about the narrative stance of Hirschbiegel’s film. Exploring the various spectatorial dispositions lumped together in the more familiar notion of identification, Smith delineates a complex “structure of sympathy” to account for the different forms in which we engage with fictional characters.<sup>42</sup> Following Smith, we should begin, for instance, by differentiating between alignment and allegiance—that is, between the way a film aligns me, the viewer, with a given character, on the one hand, and the way it solicits my allegiance for that character, on the other. Provided that I recognize the figures on-screen *as* filmic characters in the first place, the question is, which of these characters are particularly suited to enable my access to the narrative world, to the settings and events that belong to the story? Here, the young, wide-eyed Traudl undoubtedly plays an important role: small signs draw the viewer’s empathy toward her, including her worried face when she passes the barrier to Hitler’s compound, her startled reflex when she almost trips on the way to the bunker, and her gesture of anticipation when she leans forward with the other women from Berlin after they have been announced to the *Führer* (fig. 2).

Shot in close-up, each small gesture invites the viewer’s affective mimicry and provides an emotional cue for engaging with the narrative. If the notion of identification glosses over the finer points of this opening sequence, we can nonetheless specify some key aspects of the emerging relationship between character and viewer: to gain our bearings in the fictional (i.e., historical) world

41. Wenders, “Tja, dann wollen wir mal.”

42. Smith, *Engaging Characters*, 74–109.



Figure 2. "Apprehension"

of the film, we follow Traudl's lead, reading her somatic and physiognomic reactions. Hardly identifying with her in the sense of imagining ourselves in her shoes, we do recognize her anxiety, and we reflect on possible reasons and solutions for it. This alignment, which is at once cognitive and emotional, is reinforced by the so-called primacy effect, which causes us to give the first character we encounter the benefit of the doubt and to follow her (emotional) lead more readily than that of all characters introduced later. If we add to this the documentary frame that already introduced us to Traudl in an interview situation, then we have every reason to expect that the early alignment will lead to a far-reaching form of allegiance, which, on one level, is precisely what Wenders means by identification.

But what does the film do with this double investment of alignment and allegiance once Hitler appears after the appropriate *kinowirksam* buildup? Having stoked Traudl's anxiety and our curiosity, the film produces Hitler in a deliberately staged dramaturgy of intimacy. After he has been announced, we see the *Führer* almost exclusively in close-ups or medium close-ups that emphasize Ganz's facial expressions. We encounter a quiet, thoughtful, and affable man whose mild manner Ganz portrays with a voice to match and a sparkle in his eye. But more than the acting, it is arguably the editing that solicits our emotional investment here. The shot breakdown of the scene integrates Hitler into the flow of images by beginning to construct formal parallels between the dictator and the young secretary. The shot–reverse-shot breakdown of Hitler's first conversation with Traudl not only works with identical shot distances (as is to be expected) but also emphasizes how the characters' gestures mirror and complement each other in a relationship of proximity, mimicry, and intimacy (fig. 3).

When Traudl fails in her first attempt at the typewriter a few moments later, the film not only places the two characters next to each other but provides a shared point-of-view shot of Traudl's garbled typing (fig. 4). Narratively, these four shots seal the deal between Hitler and his newly hired secretary, but pragmatically, they seal the opening of the film, which has led us from an alignment with Traudl to a double alignment with her and Hitler, in whose mutual gaze we now participate. And just as Hitler has been able to allay Traudl's fears, the film asks us to lay aside our worst fears about a Hitler movie by inviting us to align ourselves with the benign figure of the fallible employer. The intimacy of the setting and among the characters provides a model for the viewer's *moral orientation* toward the male lead. In terms of the formal construction of the film's opening, Hitler ends up far more emotionally "legible" and thus less threatening, for example, than the two soldiers who grin and stare at the women in a relatively unmotivated earlier shot outside the bunker.



Figure 3. "Mimesis"

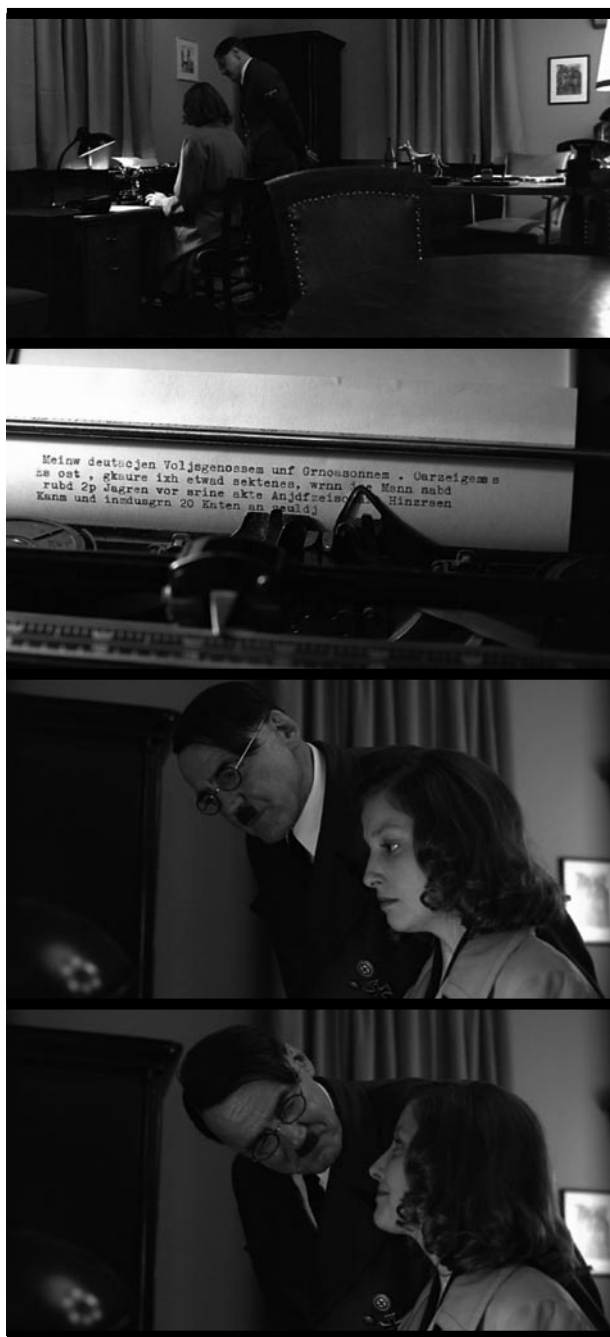


Figure 4. “Shared Point of View”

### *The Politics of Emotion*

As Christine Noll Brinckmann rightly points out, the “preconditions for developing empathy are fundamentally more favorable in the cinema than in reality.”<sup>43</sup> Hirschbiegel’s film exploits this fact, appealing to our various ways of relating, cognitively and emotionally, to cinematic characters, including that of Hitler. This means also that *Der Untergang* tweaks our predisposition and recasts our moral orientation, which is precisely what I have been arguing the film does—leaving us with the crucial question of why. What is gained, what is lost, and what is elided by shifting our putatively normal priorities of response to Hitler onto the new moral ground of empathy? And, in immediately related terms, what is the import of melodramatic revisions of German postwar history in films like *Das Wunder von Bern*? How, in other words, are we to read the distinctly emotional tones of Germany’s current audiovisual output and the aesthetic forms of the contemporary *Geschichtsgefühl*?

In defense of Hirschbiegel’s film, we might draw on a long tradition of stressing the cognitive and social value of empathy, dating back to Aristotle’s understanding of catharsis. As opposed to a view that reflexively dismisses empathetic emotions as “dangerous” (or theorizes them away in favor of more “distantiated,” rational responses to more “epic” notions of performance and representation in the Brechtian sense), Alex Neill argues that “our empathetic responses to [cinematic] fiction can be invaluable in understanding and learning from works of fiction [and in providing] increased understanding of ourselves and others.”<sup>44</sup> While we may wonder if this understanding is historical in the sense recognized by scholars of history, this is clearly one way of reading Eichinger’s and Hirschbiegel’s intentions: if empathy leads to understanding, empathetic reactions to Ganz as Hitler have to be viewed as productive contributions to the historiography of Nazism. As Kershaw puts it in his review, “Making such a film is a part of the continuing, gradual, but inexorable process of seeing the Hitler era as history—even more important, feeling it to be history.”<sup>45</sup> An even more favorable reading of the film might suggest that the structural investment in empathy with Hitler that I have aimed to demonstrate finally brings full circle the dominant narrative on *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in the Federal Republic: if, as Alexander Mitscherlich and Margarethe Mitscherlich famously argued, the Germans’ inability to mourn

43. Christine Noll Brinckmann, “Die Rolle der Empathie oder Furcht und Schrecken im Dokumentarfilm,” in *Kinogeühle: Emotionalität und Film*, ed. Matthias Brütsch et al. (Marburg: Schüren, 2005), 337.

44. Neill, “Empathy and (Film) Fiction,” 192.

45. Kershaw, “Human Hitler.”

had its roots at least partly in their refusal to own up to their collective emotional investment in the figure of the *Führer* and to their grief at the loss of this figure, then producing such investment through film could be read as the *ex post facto* therapeutic gesture that this analysis called for.

In the abbreviated version sketched here, however, such a reading clearly overreaches in its speculative character—both for reasons already inherent in the Mitscherlichs' analysis (their often-criticized reliance on notions of a collective soul, now pushed to an even further remove as the generation of perpetrators and bystanders begins to be replaced on the historical stage) and because it overvalues the film itself, which remains deeply flawed on many levels. What I aim to suggest by bringing up the discursive logics of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, rather, is the need for returning from the minutiae of formal analysis to the larger discursive context of this film. As Kershaw's comments on our shifting perspective on the Third Reich already suggest, however, the specific emotional charge carried by this or any film is in need of historicization itself. If *Der Untergang* can, and indeed should, be counted among the contemporary wave of "nostalgia films," we must aim to understand the affective charge of this wave within a broader cultural history of emotion in postwar Germany. In terms of the analysis offered above, this also implies that we need to broaden our view of cinematic affect to include not only textual or cognitive processes but also more broadly historical, ideological ones. Murray Smith gestures to this broadening of our interpretive framework when he argues that his model of character engagement might "facilitate rather than conflict with a historical approach."<sup>46</sup> For this purpose, Smith's notion of the co-text is extremely important. Smith uses this notion as a conceptual mediator between a wholly antimimetic structuralism (where everything, including questions of morality, is internal to the text) and an overly mimetic stance that would translate everyday values into the act of reception without making adjustments for textuality, dramaturgy, character construction, or cinematic style—in other words, for precisely the elements that I have sought to foreground in my analysis. By contrast, "the co-text is the set of values, beliefs, and so forth which form the backdrop to the events of the narrative—the context within the text, as it were." Our various ways of engaging with fictional characters, and these characters themselves, Smith points out, "only have a determinate moral valence within the terms of the text's 'co-text.'"<sup>47</sup>

46. Smith, *Engaging Characters*, 65.

47. Ibid., 194. Cf. also Anton Kaes, "Cultural History and the Study of Film: Ten Theses," *New German Critique*, no. 65 (1995): 47–58.

In the case of a mainstream, popular film about Hitler, that co-text is at once self-evident and diffuse: it involves generic assumptions about narration, suspense, and melodrama, as well as broadly discursive frames such as the ongoing debates about history and memory in Germany; these, in turn, involve generational patterns that have direct bearing on a film scripted by Fest (b. 1926), produced by Eichinger (b. 1949), and directed by a comparatively young Hirschbiegel (b. 1957). What unites these representatives of three generations is their disinterest, if not outright disdain, for the generation only “numerically” represented by Eichinger in the making of the film—the so-called generation of 1968, which first took up the Mitscherlichs’ analysis as the basis for its cultural productions and other political interventions. Clearly, this is a structuring absence in the production context of *Der Untergang*, and to place the film discursively would mean to reconstruct a generational narrative about history, memory, and emotions in postwar Germany. For as Knoch and Weigel, among others, have argued, generations define themselves, among other things, through shared emotional flashpoints—which are often (audio)visually coded as images that provide “generational containers of feeling [*generationelle Gefühlscontainer*].”<sup>48</sup>

While this terrain has arguably been charted less comprehensively than the theory of empathy more broadly speaking, we might usefully gain our bearings here by harking back to an earlier moment of national empathy in the 1980s. I am referring to the television broadcast of *Holocaust*, which captivated the nation and moved the massive TV audience as few attempts at treating the history of Nazism had done before. Though we should be mindful of the methodological pitfalls of juxtaposing audience response to the soap-operatic treatment of Jewish victims of the Holocaust, on the one hand, with the similarly melodramatic mise-en-scène of the central locus of Nazi power in its final days, on the other, there is something to be learned from revisiting the emotional watershed of that earlier moment. Writing on the heels of the heated debates about the film, Andreas Huyssen argues forcefully for taking seriously the aesthetic and political implications of the miniseries form. The key problem with critical appraisals of *Holocaust*, for Huyssen, lies in their “common assumption that a cognitive rational understanding of German anti-Semitism under National Socialism is *per se* incompatible with an emotional

48. Habbo Knoch, “Gefühlte Gemeinschaften: Bild und Generation in der Moderne,” in *Generationen: Zur Relevanz eines wissenschaftlichen Grundbegriffs*, ed. Ulrike Jureit and Michael Wildt (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2005), 300–301. Cf. also Weigel, “Die ‘Generation’ als symbolische Form.”



melodramatic representation of history as the story of a family. Left German critiques of *Holocaust* betray a fear of emotions and subjectivity which itself has to be understood historically as in part a legacy of the Third Reich.”<sup>49</sup>

Huyssen, in other words, interprets the empathetic response of German viewers to the melodramatic portrayal of Jewish suffering as a watershed in postwar historical consciousness, pointing to “broader aesthetic and political problems which we are only now beginning to explore.”<sup>50</sup> Those problems have resurfaced in the new German discourse on feeling, but the emotional landscape has shifted radically. With empathy now attaching to victimized German protagonists, let alone to Hitler himself, we will have to reevaluate the function of emotions and subjectivity once more. For that reevaluation, Huyssen’s reading of *Holocaust* remains useful as a reminder of the potentially productive value of empathy as a complement to rational, theoretical, or scholarly discourse.

But this recognition does not excuse us from evaluating carefully the politics of emotion or of the current *Geschichtsgefühl* in Germany. One distinction that immediately stands out as we compare reactions from the 1980s to the affective logics of *Der Untergang* relates to the generational question raised above: if Huyssen’s analysis of the response to *Holocaust* ultimately aimed to reconcile the rationalizations of cultural productions of the 1960s (however deficient they may appear in Huyssen’s revisionist critique) with the emotional investments unleashed by *Holocaust*, *Der Untergang* gains its purchase only through violently rejecting the 1960s—witness the symptomatically enraged tone of Eichinger’s comments that the “so-called 68ers” were a bunch of “liars” who did nothing but generate “political phraseology.”<sup>51</sup> But witness also the iconoclastic attitude that preceded the production and accompanied the discourses through which it was promoted, that is, the claim that here was an unprecedented look at the history of National Socialism and that Germans were finally taking into their own hands a history that had been

49. Andreas Huyssen, “The Politics of Identification: ‘Holocaust’ and West German Drama,” in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 95.

50. *Ibid.*, 114.

51. “Ich verachte viele dieser sogenannten 68er, weil sie verlogen bis in die Knochen waren, weil sie nur noch politische Phrasen gedroschen haben. Da ist nichts, aber auch gar nichts Gescheites dabei herausgekommen” (I despise many of these so-called 68ers, because they were mendacious to the core, because their talk was nothing but political hot air. This led to nothing of any value, nothing at all) (“Hitler spielen: Schauspielerin Corinna Harfouch und Bernd Eichinger, der Produzent und Drehbuchautor, über ihren Film ‘Der Untergang,’” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, August 22, 2004); cf. also David Bathrick’s essay in this issue.

expropriated until today. A second note of caution attaches to the function of emotion as a totalizing response—whether to a particular film or miniseries or to historical material in general. This is exactly what Walser vindicates in privileging “feeling” (*Gefühl, Empfindung*) over “knowledge” (*Erkenntnis*) in the way that he relates to (his) nation: emotional investment may always involve cognition, but it is synthetic, not analytic; in other words, to charge a nation, a film, or a historical moment emotionally means to subsume its various aspects, and even its contradictions, under the totalizing grasp of an affective response—whether that response is sorrow, empathy, pity, guilt, or anything else. While Huysen is right to emphasize that cultural texts can be productive precisely through their emotional appeal, the actual function of the latter remains to be analyzed. Where that appeal bathes the atrocities of historical perpetrators in the revisionist light of compassion, it is fundamentally misplaced.

With these caveats in mind, let me return one last time to the place of *Der Untergang* at the intersection of film and history. Ultimately, the film’s investment in empathy has to do with the text’s pragmatics, addressing viewers who expect Hitler the monster. In this sense, the opening can be said to acknowledge the existence of Hitler, if not as a historical person, then at least as a popular or media figure whose genealogy we would have to trace back to both Chaplin and Leni Riefenstahl. But overall, the film also works hard to make us forget this distinction, both through suspense and through the film’s alleged accuracy. Consequently, this is where analysis must begin: to account for the film’s structure of sympathy, we have to map the tension between formal cinematic choices and various forms of popular, textual historical knowledge, or between the “elicitors” of emotions and their extracinematic, meta-textual “conditioners,” to reappropriate Plantinga’s terminology. To maintain this tension means to insist on the *filmic* construction of Hitler as a cinematic character. In this respect, talk of the “humanization” of Hitler in Hirschbiegel’s film is entirely misleading—after all, we are watching not a human but a screen character portrayed by a human actor embodying a historical figure. A film such as Hirschbiegel’s biopic involves at least two Hitlers, if not more: as Jean-Luc Comolli suggests with regard to historical fictions more generally, there is potentially a “body too much”—that of the historical Hitler and that of the actor who, in a “naturalist” aesthetic, tends to hide behind the former.<sup>52</sup> For the

52. Jean-Luc Comolli, “Historical Fiction: A Body Too Much,” *Screen* 19, no. 2 (1978): 43. For a recent German example see Eric Rentschler, “An Icon between the Fronts: Vilsmaier’s Recast Marlene,” in *The Cosmopolitan Screen: German Cinema and the Global Imaginary, 1945 to the Present*, ed. Stephan K. Schindler and Lutz Koepnick (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 206–22.

purpose of analysis, however, we need to produce *both*—the mediated and the historical body.

This is emphatically different from claiming that the historical Hitler overwhelms the textual Hitler or from trying to ascertain the historical accuracy of the cinematic representation. Michael Wildt describes *Der Untergang* intriguingly as a “historian’s trap”: it asks us to investigate its relationship to history, yet it is a “historical” film merely to the degree that *Mutiny on the Bounty* is a historical film.<sup>53</sup> *Der Untergang* uses generic cinematic idioms to tell a suspenseful story that happens to have a historical referent. To analyze only its representation of history is to miss its generic and emotional appeal; to analyze merely its generic appeal would be to willfully disregard the fact that the film is saturated with historical reference: damned if you do, damned if you don’t. Rather than resolve this impasse, I want to argue for locating our emotional engagement precisely in the constitutive tension between text and context, between a film with formal properties of character construction and spectator engagement, on the one hand, and the historical reference points—both in the Third Reich and in the *Geschichtsgefühl* of contemporary Germany—on the other. The new “nostalgia film” would seem to necessitate this dual perspective with special force, particularly where an understanding and evaluation of their “structure of engagement” is at stake. Only if we locate emotions at the crossroads of cinema’s aesthetic devices and of historical knowledge can we begin to talk in any meaningful way of *Geschichtsgefühl*, or a feeling for history.

53. Michael Wildt, “‘Der Untergang’: Ein Film inszeniert sich als Quelle,” *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* 2, no. 1 (2005), [www.zeithistorische-forschungen.de/16126041-Wildt-1-2005](http://www.zeithistorische-forschungen.de/16126041-Wildt-1-2005).

Copyright of New German Critique is the property of Duke University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.