From *Hitler to Heimat*

The Return of History as Film

ANTON KAES

*Harvard University Press*
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To Bettina and Peter
who know little as yet about German history
but have often wondered
how someone can spend so much time on it
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The further the past recedes, the closer it becomes. Images, fixed on celluloid, stored in archives, and reproduced thousands of times, render the past ever-present. Gradually, but inexorably, these images have begun to supersede memory and experience. All of us, whether or not we have lived through the Hitler era, have partaken of its sights and sounds in a host of documentary and feature films. Cinematic representations have influenced—indeed shaped—our perspectives on the past; they function for us today as a technological memory bank. History, it would seem, has become widely accessible, but the power over memory has passed into the hands of those who create these images. It is not surprising that in recent years we have witnessed a virulent struggle over the production and administration of public memory.

The vehement reactions to Ronald Reagan’s visit to the military cemetery of Bitburg in May 1985, expressly staged as a television spectacle; the heated debates about the function of two new museums of German history in Bonn and Berlin; the acrimonious dispute among West German historians about the place of the Holocaust and the Third Reich in German history—all these examples not only attest to the lack of a national consensus about German history but also demonstrate an increased sensitivity to matters of collective memory and national identity.

For more than a decade and with growing intensity, attempts have been made to rewrite German history, to fit the atrocities of the Hitler period into a tolerable master narrative. Since the mid-1970s countless books and articles, academic conferences, exhibitions, and
television programs have focused on the discontinuities in German history and the lack of a national identity, trying to fill what is perceived as a vacuum. No other country has more politicians, journalists, academics, artists, and writers preoccupied with the history and identity of their homeland, their “Heimat.”

Filmmakers play a special role in this undertaking. Their feature films—most of which have been shown, even repeatedly, on television—not only reach a much larger popular audience than, say, speeches, conference papers, or books; they also tend to move and manipulate spectators in a more direct emotional way. Moreover, films—as complex fictional constructs—offer ambivalent perspectives and contradictory attitudes that resist simple explanations and call for multiple readings. Fictional films are able to unlock the viewers’ hidden wishes and fears, liberate fantasies, and give material shape to shared moods and dispositions. Films can thus be seen as interventions in cultural and political life. For example, Syberberg’s 1977 filmic essay about Hitler or Edgar Reitz’s sixteen-hour film chronicle Heimat of 1984 triggered debates that went far beyond the films that initiated them. The same holds true for the West German reception of the American television series Holocaust of 1979, which broke through thirty years of silence and left an indelible mark on German discussions of the Holocaust. But even films like Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s Die Ehe der Maria Braun (The Marriage of Maria Braun, 1978), Alexander Kluge’s Die Patriotin (The Patriot, 1979), and Helga Sanders-Brahms’s Deutschland, bleiche Mutter (Germany, Pale Mother, 1980) became “discursive events” that emerged in response to specific concerns and took a position in the debates about German history and identity. It is this dynamic interplay between fiction, memory, and the present that will be explored here.

The title of my book alludes to Siegfried Kracauer’s 1947 study, From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film, which begins with the following sentence: “This book is not concerned with German films merely for their own sake.” I have adopted this perspective for my own project as well. Yet I do not share Kracauer’s intention to expose the “deep psychological dispositions” or some natural German propensity toward fascism, as he tried to demonstrate for the period 1918 to 1933 by using fictional films which, in his mind, foreshadowed Hitler’s rise to power. Kra-

cauer’s trajectory from the fictional tyrant Caligari to the all-too-real Hitler is a bold and problematic construct, manifesting his strong belief in the social power of the cinema to influence perceptions and mold opinions. In contrast, From “Hitler” to “Heimat” traverses only a fictional space; Hitler has become today, literally, Hitler, a Film from Germany, and “Heimat” can exist only, some would argue, as memory evoked in a film. Still, Kracauer’s resolve to study all art, especially film, as a fundamentally communal enterprise has undoubtedly influenced my work. I am therefore less concerned with reading the films as autonomous artifacts or as individual expressions of idiosyncratic artists than with situating them in the cultural, social, and political ambience from which they issue and within which they function. Seen in relation to the dominant discourses of their time and place, the films begin to resonate with various voices, with diverse political convictions and aesthetic traditions. Unlike Kracauer, who in his book pursued a single thesis, I will strive to focus on the complexity of the films so that they begin to tell not one story but many.

The films I selected deal with some of the most crucial and pressing debates in Germany over the last ten years: Hitler and the Holocaust, German identity and “Heimat.” These debates are translated into filmic discourses that encode history in radically different ways, from the relatively traditional narratives of Fassbinder, Sanders-Brahms, and Reitz to the postmodernist films of Syberberg and Kluge. But despite their formal dissimilarities, all these films have one thing in common: they prefigure by several years, in one way or another, the ambiguities that surround current revisionist attempts by Germans to come to terms with their past—a past that will not go away precisely because its representations are everywhere.

This book is an adaptation, not a literal translation, of my German book, Deutschlandbilder. Die Wiederkehr der Geschichte als Film, which was published in 1987 by edition text + kritik, Munich. I have rearranged the chapters, changed emphasis, added sections, and updated the notes and bibliography. I am grateful to Ruth Crowley for the original version of the translation, and to Inter Nationes for a generous subsidy that made the translation possible.

My thanks go also to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for a research fellowship that enabled me to work on this project in
Berlin, where the consequences of the German past are more tangible than anywhere else. I also wish to thank the Institute of International Studies at Berkeley and the German Academic Exchange Service for short-term research grants. A list of all those colleagues, students, and friends, both at Berkeley and in Berlin, with whom I discussed the book would be too long; let me thank at least those who read one or more chapters and made suggestions for improvement: Edward Dimendberg, Miriam Hansen, Robert Holub, Martin Jay, Friedrich Knill, Barbara Kosta, Roswitha Mueller, Hans Helmut Prinzler, Hinrich Seeba, and Siegfried Zielinski. I recall with pleasure the long and spirited discussions I had with Leo and Susanne Lowenthal about the films analyzed here. This book owes more than can be expressed to Eric Rentschler, colleague, friend, and collaborator, who was involved in every aspect of the project. His generosity in sharing his knowledge of German cinema is well known and has been instrumental in making the study of German film an exciting undertaking in the American university. I am also very grateful for the unfailing enthusiasm with which Patricia Williams of Harvard University Press supported this project from the beginning. Mary Ellen Geer did a splendid job of editing the manuscript.

Finally, I want to thank my students of the Interdisciplinary Summer Seminar in German Studies at Berkeley from 1982 to 1984 for their interest in discussing German films in cross-disciplinary and “new historicist” ways that took films seriously as multi-leveled texts that signify within larger discourses; many of the ideas presented here were first tested in the classroom.

Earlier (and much different) versions of three chapters have been published previously: Chapter 3 in Persistence of Vision 2 (Fall 1985) and in German Film and Literature, ed. Eric Rentschler (London/New York: Methuen, 1986); Chapter 4 in Text + Kritik 85 (1985); and Chapter 6 in Augen-Blick: Marburger Hefte zur Medienwissenschaft 1/2 (1985). Portions of the book were given as lectures at various American and European universities.

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IMAGES OF HISTORY

Postwar German Films and the Third Reich

“We do not have the right to judge, but we have the duty to accuse.”
—Hildegard Knef and Ernst Wilhelm Borchert in The Murderers Are among Us
It is certain that the cloak of silence in which, for political reasons, Nazism was enshrouded after 1945 has made it impossible to ask what will come of it in the minds, the hearts, the bodies of the Germans. Something had to come of it, and one wondered with some trepidation in what shape the repressed past would emerge at the other side of the tunnel: as what myth, what history, what wound?

MICHEL FOUCAULT

The Politics of Representation

In the winter of 1944–45, while the Thousand-Year Reich was crumbling and life in Germany was moving underground to bunkers and air-raid shelters, Veit Harlan, star director of the Third Reich, finished shooting an epic war film in color about the famous battle of Kolberg. Commissioned by Joseph Goebbels, the film was to evoke the memory of the citizens of Kolberg who stood firm in their hopeless fight against the French in 1807; the example of their courage and bravery was meant to inspire an increasingly desperate German population to persevere. Despite shortages everywhere during the last year of the war, no expense was spared to make Harlan’s Kolberg the most elaborate film production of the Hitler regime.¹ Some 187,000 soldiers were reportedly called back from the front in 1944 to serve as extras in the battle scenes—more than actually fought in the battle of Kolberg. Harlan’s request for an additional 4,000 marines was at first denied, but after a telephone call to Goebbels these men, too, were made available. The shooting of the film turned out to be cumbersome because the ongoing real war interfered repeatedly with the simulated battles staged for the camera; the grim reality of the foreseeable German defeat slowed down the production of a filmic fiction showing a German victory.

The premiere of Kolberg took place in the besieged Atlantic fortress of La Rochelle on January 30, 1945, on the twelfth and final anniversary of Hitler’s rise to power and just a few months before Germany’s surrender. When it was shown in one of the few movie houses left standing in Berlin, in February 1945, its call to arms was lost in a hail of bombs. Today, Harlan’s Kolberg has become an emblem of
the Third Reich's unshakable belief in the demagogic power of images. In Paul Virilio's words, Kolberg is the most impressive illustration of the "osmosis between war and industrial cinema."²

On April 17, 1945, after a private screening of Kolberg, Propaganda Minister Goebbels spoke to his staff about the future, using the vocabulary of a film director: "Gentlemen," he said, "in a hundred years' time they will be showing a fine color film of the terrible days we are living through. Wouldn't you like to play a part in that film? Hold out now, so that a hundred years hence the audience will not hoot and whistle when you appear on the screen."³ Goebbels's challenge to his officers not to disappoint the audience in the film version of their own history is a symptom of a political system that relied until its complete breakdown on appearances, histrionics, and simulation.

The "Third Reich" as film: Germany as the location, Hitler as the producer, Goebbels and his officers as directors and stars, Albert Speer as set designer, and the rest of the population as extras. Some of the lesser actors may have wondered what film they were really playing in, but most did not see the light until the film ripped. They had received too many promises and made too many sacrifices, had already paid too high a price, to sneak out before the end, even if they could have. The more questionable the staging of Germany's struggle and power became, the more dependent people grew on the deceitful images produced by Goebbels's propaganda machinery, which dangled the promise of German victories and triumphs before their eyes up to the very last day before the capitulation.

The production of images proceeded without interruption for twelve years, from the first days of Hitler's regime to the liberation by the Allies. Every commercial film, every documentary was examined for its ideological usefulness before being approved by the Reich's Film Bureau. Every movie house was required to show weekly newsreels; in the early, "successful" years of the war these would often last a full hour. Every week Goebbels himself, cynically aware of the newsreels' lies and distortions, appraised them with regard to their propaganda value; he even helped edit them.

No other film industry in the world has ever been so subservient to government propaganda; no other government has ever represented itself so obsessively on film. Yet the Propaganda Ministry made sure to conceal the political and pedagogic function of its films.

Speaking before the Reichsfilmkammer in 1941, Goebbels said: "This is the really great art—to educate without revealing the purpose of the education . . . The best propaganda is that which, as it were, works invisibly, penetrates the whole of life without the public having any knowledge at all of the propagandist initiative."⁴ Goebbels knew what he was doing when he called for "apolitical" entertainment films that would cajole the public into (day)dreaming and implant in them indirectly, often only by insinuation and subtle allusion to autocratic rulers and authoritarian rules, the basic principles of National Socialist ideology. Mass culture and militarism went hand in hand. According to the film critic Karsten Witte, the spectacular revue films made by UFA, the famous 1920s film production company that became part of the Propaganda Ministry in 1933, and such opulent Nazi propaganda films as Leni Riefenstahl's Triumph des Willens (Triumph of the Will, 1935) complemented each other: "The enormous closing tableaux of revue films from Premiere to Die grosse Liebe are a continuation of Triumph des Willens, translating its ritualized expression into popular film genres. The overwhelming experience of the German masses, who had encountered themselves on the terrain of Nuremberg, had to acquire continuity in everyday production."

The National Socialist propaganda film aimed to overwhelm the spectator by its monumentality, its dynamics and sheer massiveness. Sets, dramatic structure, and editing all follow this principle. In Triumph of the Will (generally regarded as the archetypal fascist film) cameras are constantly in motion, circling and moving, creating a compelling energy in the tightly composed spaces and around formations of masses of people, animating even buildings and monuments. The film uses symbolic lighting to produce a pseudoreligious, archaic, and mystical atmosphere and alternates between long shots and close-ups, between swaying masses and the static figure of the Führer in the center, shot from a low angle against the sky. Images such as these have become part of the public memory in Germany.⁵

"Never before and in no other country have images and language been abused so unscrupulously as here, never before and nowhere else have they been debased so deeply as vehicles to transmit lies."⁶ These comments were made by the German director Wim Wenders in 1977 on the occasion of a documentary film that used these very images to illustrate Hitler's "career." The film, two and a half hours
long, was Hitler: Eine Karriere (Hitler: A Career), directed by Joachim C. Fest, the influential editor of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, and Christian Herrendoerfer. Based on Fest’s highly regarded and widely read thousand-page biography, Hitler (1973), this documentary film intended to show the fascination that Hitler aroused in the German public. A new image of Hitler, inspired by curiosity and nostalgia as well as commercial interest, had emerged with the publication of Albert Speer’s diaries in 1968. No longer was Hitler the demonic criminal, the psychopathic monster, or the incarnation of evil, as he had usually been portrayed until then. Now he appeared as a complex, contradictory, and ultimately fascinating figure who radiated an attraction capable of captivating even intellectuals like Speer. If we assume that, morally speaking, Hitler was a criminal, then, according to Fest, we must ask how Hitler was nonetheless able to win over so many people and exploit them for his purposes; how he convinced his contemporaries, broke down their resistance, corrupted them, and suspended their value systems; how he was able to overpower a state, to put a worldwide system of peace out of commission, and still make Germany one of the two great ideological centers of power in the thirties, the other being the Soviet Union. Yet most of Germany still holds on to an image of Hitler characterized by moral outrage without further inquiry. That is an image of Hitler for the politically naive.

Film was the obvious medium for promulgating this new image of Hitler. Visual images, more immediate and intense than the printed word, became the most effective means of demonstrating the fascination and the demagogic power that Hitler exploited to hypnotize millions. To evoke this fascination and power, Fest and Herrendoerfer released a flood of images like those employed in the National Socialist propaganda films. They took clips from the propaganda films, synchronized them with sound effects (boot heels clicking, bombs exploding in stereo), enhanced the visual quality of the images, and edited them according to modern conventions. By using shot/countershot, they established the union between the Führer and the people as both pseudoreligious and erotic: masses of women listen rapty at the dictator’s feet as he exhausts himself, fulfilling their libidinous, ecstatic desire to submit themselves. The carefully choreographed propaganda images of parades, public speeches, and party congresses radiate an opulence and a suggestive power that clearly overwhelm Fest’s voice-over commentary, which is supposed to explain the pictures. In the cinema, visual pleasure always triumphs over critical resolve: what we see, not what we hear, is primary. Fest’s commentary is limited to the person and the myth of the Führer: “History on occasion loves to realize itself in a single person,” a voice-over claims at the beginning of the film. The commentator sometimes even argues from Hitler’s own perspective. We see little of the social, intellectual, and historical conditions that made Hitler’s “career” possible. And with few exceptions, we are not shown the fears and suffering of the population, the suppression, torture, and murder in the concentration camps, or the persecution and resistance of dissidents. The documentary approach prides itself on using only historical film material, but that very approach undermines the critical intentions of the filmmakers. Since crime, suffering, and opposition were not documented by the Nazi propaganda films, they cannot be shown and are, according to the logic of this film, justifiably left out: whatever was not filmed does not exist. What Hitler: A Career in fact does is to pass off a reality produced by the Propaganda Ministry as an authentic documentation of the time. The film thus replicates, intentionally or not, fascist aesthetics and recycled, once again, an arsenal of deceptive and demagogic images.

Fest’s film on Hitler shows Hitler and the Third Reich as they wanted to be seen. “Scores of cameramen constantly surrounded him. Their pictures stylized him into a monument.” Despite this critical voice-over commentary, Fest remains within the boundaries of the original images, as though Riefenstahl’s manipulative and contrived shots imparted a true picture of National Socialist reality. “The ‘career’ that Fest and Herrendoerfer wanted to investigate,” Wenders says in his polemic against the film, “was above all possible because there was a total control of all film material, because all of the images of this man and his ideas were made in a clever manner, were chosen skillfully and used tactically. As a result of this thoroughgoing demagogic treatment of images, all of those people in Germany involved with the conscientious and equally competent production of film images left this country.”

Wenders is thinking of Fritz Lang and more than fifteen hundred other directors, cameramen, technicians, actresses, and actors who were forced out of Germany or went voluntarily into exile because
they did not want to conform to the Nazi line. He remains painfully aware of the disastrous long-term consequences of this mass exodus for German film culture:

I speak for everyone who in recent years, after a long drought, has started once again to produce images and sounds in a country which has an unceasing distrust of images and sounds that tell its story, which for this reason has for thirty years greedily soaked up all foreign images, just as long as they have taken its mind off itself. I do not believe there is anywhere else where people have suffered such a loss of confidence in images of their own, their own stories and myths, as we have. We, the directors of the New Cinema, have felt this loss most keenly, in our own persons in the lack, the absence of a tradition of our own, as a fatherless generation, and in the spectators with their perplexed reaction and their initial hesitation. Only gradually has this defensive attitude, on the one hand, and this lack of self-confidence, on the other, broken down, and in a process that will perhaps take several years more, the feeling is arising here again that images and sounds do not have to be only something imported, but rather can be something concerned with this country that also comes out of this country.14

The legacy of the National Socialist film—an instinctive distrust of images and sounds that deal with Germany—has deeply preoccupied the younger generation of German filmmakers for the past quarter-century. How were they to find and create images of Germany and German history that deviated from those of the National Socialist film industry? The disjointed German film tradition caused Wenders to look to American directors like John Ford for his stylistic inspiration. Werner Herzog placed himself in the tradition of German Expressionism of the 1920s. Volker Schlöndorff went to France to learn filmmaking. An uncompromising rejection of the National Socialist film tradition has in fact become the secret unifying force of the New German Cinema since the 1960s.

The break with the film of the Nazi past became visible in 1962, at the Eighth West German Short Film Festival in Oberhausen. Twenty-six young filmmakers and journalists, among them Edgar Reitz and Alexander Kluge, published a manifesto declaring the death of the old German cinema and vowing to create “the new German feature film.”15 The authors of the “Oberhausen Manifesto” wanted to break with the film of their “fathers” in every respect: in matters of production, content, form, and style. The films of the New German Cinema had artistic aspirations that were not seen in the commercial films of the 1950s. Taking their cue from Godard, Truffaut, Chabrol, and other auteurs of the French New Wave that began at the end of the 1950s, German directors also wanted their films to bear the unmistakable signature of an “author.” The manifesto explicitly rejected the ideological and commercial exploitation of the film medium, seeking a new beginning both aesthetically and politically. The Oberhausen group wanted above all to serve as a critical voice in the life of the Federal Republic, as a filmic counterpart to the group of writers assembled in the influential “Gruppe 47.”16 This desire corresponded to a new interest by the young filmmakers in questions rarely even broached in the cinema of the Adenauer era, questions about the most recent German past and its persistence in the present of the Federal Republic. Not surprisingly, the first two productions of the “Young German Film,” as the New German Cinema was called in the 1960s, emphasize this troubled relationship of Germans to their past.

Alexander Kluge’s 1966 debut film became the first feature-length film of the New German Cinema to win an international prize. Its title reads like a slogan: Abschied von gestern (Farewell to Yesterday; in the English release, Yesterday Girl). Set in the mid-1950s, the film depicts a young Jewish woman from the German Democratic Republic who, after fleeing to the West, is unable to find a home in the Federal Republic. Her past catches up with her again and again. The film demonstrates that there can be no escape from the past: “No abyss separates us from yesterday, only the changed situation,” proclaims the opening title. Like many later films of the New German Cinema, this film stresses continuities in German history where it seems most disjointed. Volker Schlöndorff’s Der junge Törless (Young Törless, 1965–66), based on Robert Musil’s 1906 novella of boarding school life, looks to the prehistory of the Third Reich. The film tells the story of a student who watches, half fascinated and half repelled, as two other students torment a fellow student of Jewish descent. The story is used to reflect the history of the many intellectual conformists during National Socialism who stood by silently as atrocities were committed.17

The films of Kluge and Schlöndorff are quite different in the formal treatment of their subject matter. Nonetheless, they share an interest in the causes and consequences of National Socialism—an interest
that distinguishes the New German Cinema from the old. The new directors no longer considered German history taboo; they subjected contemporary West German society to critical scrutiny; and they gradually overcame their lack of ease around images depicting their own country. In the early 1960s, the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem and the Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt publicized the atrocities committed in concentration camps around the world. The German intelligentsia’s collusion, whether passive or active, with the reign of terror finally became the subject of public discussion. The time seemed ripe for films with a critical attitude toward Germany’s most recent past. There were few models.

The Flight from Memory

How does memory function? Our knowledge—incomplete and contradictory in itself—insists that a basic mechanism is at work according to the system of gathering-storing-recalling. Furthermore, the first, easily erasable track is said to be recorded by the cells’ biophysical action; whereas storing, the changeover to long-term memory, is probably a matter of chemistry: memory molecules, fixed in permanent storage . . . By the way, according to the latest research, this process supposedly takes place at night. In our dreams.

CHRISTA WOLF

When the Allied Forces took over the German film industry in 1945, the National Socialist production of images came to an abrupt halt. The few German films made in the first years after the war were subjected to a complicated licensing system that differed in each of the four occupation zones. The Western allies considered films above all a form of commercial entertainment. Their main concern was to regain and secure West Germany as a market for their own films; they were not particularly interested in reconstructing a native German film industry. They also had a healthy distrust of the German film industry, which had served as an effective arm of the Ministry of Propaganda for twelve years.

The Soviets, on the other hand, soon began systematically to use film in their zone as a weapon in the fight against fascism and as an effective tool for reaching the masses in the ‘struggle for the education of the German people, especially the youth.’ DEFA (Deutsche Film-AG) was founded under Russian license in 1946. Early on it produced a large number of films dealing with the psychological and social roots of National Socialism, excoriating those characteristics—subservience, obedience, political apathy—that allowed fascism to develop in Germany. From Erich Engel’s Affäre Blum (The Blum Affair, 1947), Kurt Maetzig’s Ehe im Schatten (Marriage in the Shadow, 1949), Falk Harnack’s Beil von Wandsbeck (The Axe of Wandsbeck, 1949), and Slatan Dudow’s Stärker als die Nacht (Stronger Than the Night, 1954) through Wolfgang Staudte’s films Rotation (1949) and Der Untertan (The Subject, 1951) to historical works by Konrad Wolf including Lissy (1957), Professor Mamlock (1961), Ich war 19 (I was 19, 1968), and Mama, ich lebe (Mama, I Am Alive, 1977), the films of the German Democratic Republic were profoundly concerned with the causes and effects of National Socialism, specifically with war, fascism, the persecution of Jews, and the resistance movement. These historical films, most of which follow the doctrine of Socialist Realism, served as a warning aimed at preventing a renewed alliance of fascism, capitalism, and war.

Wolfgang Staudte’s film Die Mörder sind unter uns (The Murderers Are among Us, 1946) was the first DEFA film (the French and the Americans had refused to license the script) and the first German postwar film that dealt with the most recent past. It was nonpartisan. The film did not analyze the economic and political roots of fascism, but instead raised the questions of guilt and atonement. Dr. Mertens, an embittered war veteran, returns home and is unable to find a foothold in the ravaged present. When he learns that his former battalion commander, Brückner, lives in Berlin, he dreams of revenge. Mertens believes that Brückner must atone for his war crimes, for he is a “murderer among us.” In a flashback to Christmas Eve, 1942, we see Brückner ordering hostages shot in Poland. The film, which is based on the belief that the crimes committed during the war must not go unpunished, presents one man’s fantasies of revenge and seems to suggest they are justified until, at the last moment, they are converted into a demand for legitimate state justice. At the end of the film Mertens’s friend, who has herself just been released from a concentration camp, says, “We do not have the right to judge, but we have the duty to accuse, to demand atonement on behalf of millions of innocent people who were murdered in cold blood.”

This appeal to the legal system of the state makes little impression primarily because it does not inevitably follow from the film’s dra-
matic structure; it seems tacked on. Staudte uses a film vocabulary that consciously rejects the intoxicating style of National Socialist propaganda and instead adopts the expressionistic style of the Weimar Republic, decried as degenerate by the Nazis, as well as elements that recall Italian neorealism. Distorted camera angles, strongly outlined silhouettes, diagonal lines, and heavy shadows—familiar from such films as Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari (The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, 1920)—symbolize the inner distress and turmoil of the protagonists.

Staudte’s The Murderers Are among Us is the best known of the so-called Trümmerfilme ("rubble films") made between 1946 and 1948. These films tried to come to grips with the recent past against the still contemporary background of ruined cities. The films made in the Western occupation zones also exhibited the humanistic and existentialist mood of the immediate postwar years. The first feature film made in the American zone, Josef von Baky’s Und über uns der Himmel (And the Sky above Us, 1947), describes the stages of a soldier’s transformation from a life of hunger, poverty, and black marketeering to a moral and ethical existence. The story is strongly emotional and forward-looking: “For the heaven above us will not let us perish.” Images of the devastated landscape and the black market document the loss of old values and serve as a foil for a depoliticized appeal to a new humanity.

Helmut Käutner’s film, In jenen Tagen (In Those Days, 1947), licensed by the British, offers a sympathetic reading of German history from 1933 to 1945. In seven episodes, noble but powerless individuals are destroyed by fascism, seen as fate, because their very humanity makes them vulnerable. The film aims to show that even under the reign of terror, humanitarian behavior existed. The film is motivated by an ideology of self-purification—a retrospective attempt to lend meaning to senseless events, which explains its sentimental visual symbolism (the last shot is a close-up of a spring flower amidst the ruins of a building). Against the background of authentic ruins, fascism is mirrored in private conflicts; political implications are glossed over. The metaphysical question “What is a human being?” seems more important than an investigation into what human beings were actually capable of just a few years before.

The trauma of defeat and the resulting “political quarantine” under which the occupation powers placed the Germans in 1945 inhibited an open political analysis of the conditions, mechanisms, and consequences of National Socialism. Questions about right and wrong, guilt and atonement were evaded by the adoption of a predominantly existentialist-humanist approach, obscured by the psychology of love stories, or diverted into appeals to Christian forgiveness. The German people appear as the passive and suffering victims of Nazism, while Hitler and his entourage stand as the guilty ones—a view inadvertently strengthened in the public’s mind by the Nuremberg trials, where the guilty supposedly found their just punishment. After the war the Germans were in fact more passive observers of their own fate than active participants. The reality of “denazification” was such that most Germans once again assumed a submissive role; they followed orders while others were making policy for them. Pent-up energies surfaced with all the more force in the politically unthreatening free zone of culture, the sole arena in which German identity could express itself. Goethe was revived to represent the “other,” humanistic and spiritual Germany, which became all the more vital with the destruction of the political Germany. Friedrich Meinecke, in his 1946 book Die deutsche Katastrophe (The German Catastrophe), suggested that German identity be renewed by the spirit of German Classicism and that the moral rebirth of the nation be promoted by hours set aside each Sunday to celebrate Goethe.

As the debris was cleared away, the visible signs of the past were removed as well. Soon grass grew over the ruins and people began to build the foundations of new houses in bomb craters. In order to avoid another false commitment, people shied away from politics in general: once burned, twice shy. The Germans seemed particularly demoralized and stricken with apathy in matters of national identity. In Leni Riefenstahl’s Triumph of the Will, which documented the Nuremberg Party Congress in 1934, Rudolf Hess shouted out into a crowded arena, “Germany is Hitler and Hitler is Germany!” But Hitler was dead; was Germany too? German identity, as it was defined by the Führer, was destroyed; the rhetoric of German supremacy proved absurd by the pitiful end in 1945. With surprisingly little resistance the Germans accepted their division into two states in 1949, just as they had earlier accepted denazification, their “reeducation” by the Western Allies, and the outrages committed, primarily against women, by American and Russian occupation soldiers.

In 1945 Germany was a nation without state sovereignty or political power, a burnt-out crater of world politics. Paradoxically, in the early postwar years the Nuremberg war trials,
the denazification program (satirized as early as 1951 in Ernst von Salomon’s Der Fragebogen [The Questionnaire]) and Allied control of all public media and institutions did more to impede than to promote free discussion among Germans about their own past. It seemed as if even the German past were now under the jurisdiction of the Allies; it was their business. Since the Germans had not liberated themselves from Hitler, they were held to be incapable of acknowledging their crimes. Moreover, the Allies seemed to believe that the Germans possessed an incorrigibly fascistic national character. The sociologist Sven Papcke argues that this blanket suspicion corresponded to an equally universal hardening of conscience on the part of the German populace.26 The mounting resentment against the conquering powers could not, however, be articulated in the immediate postwar years. Just like the Hitler era itself, this resentment had to be repressed. It did not surface until thirty or forty years later, in debates about the crimes committed by the occupation troops and in obliquely political films of the late seventies. The negative view of the American occupation in some of the films discussed here must be seen in this light.

During the 1950s repressed political and psychological energies were channeled into the physical reconstruction of Germany. With initial help from the Marshall Plan and the currency reform of 1948 (which irrevocably separated the Soviet occupation zone from the rest of Germany), the West German economy flourished and soon outdid most of the nations that had won the war. With such a promising future ahead, it was easy to forget the past. Looking back would have numbed the Germans—so thought the majority—and slowed down their progress. Nor could the twelve million refugees from the former German territories in Eastern Europe afford to think much about the past if they wanted to survive and succeed in the new achievement-oriented society. It was the role of mass culture to make up for the resulting emotional deficits and spiritual deformations.

The cinema of the Adenauer and Erhard era functioned as a dream world fulfilling the desires for a healthy Germany, for beautiful German landscapes and naive but noble German people.27 Countless stories of star-crossed couples, reunited in the inevitable happy ending against a background of the Black Forest, replete with music and color, present an illusory image of German reality and history that indirectly points up the repressions, self-deceptions, and collective wishes that were at work. The characters move about as if they were in an Arcadia of trivial myth where evil obtrudes only in the form of an outsider, typically someone from the city. More than 300 of these so-called Heimatfilme (“homeland films”) were made in the 1950s, with more or less uniform narrative structures and similar images. Products of a typical German tradition, they can be traced back to the mountain films of Arnold Fanck, Luis Trenker, and Leni Riefenstahl in the late 1920s and 1930s, with their idealization of nature. They also derive from the Nazi “blood and soil” productions, which glorified the rural life as the mystical embodiment of German blood and German soil. The Heimatfilm of the 1950s became a genre that (like the American western) shows imaginary spaces, pure movie lives, and a strong moral undercurrent. As a refuge from dirt, debris, and poverty and as a compensation for the many deprivations of the postwar era, these movies fulfilled real collective needs: in 1951, no fewer than 20 million viewers saw Hans Deppe’s Grün ist die Heide (Green is the Heather), one of the classics of this genre. It was no secret that these Heimatfilme of the 1950s also tried to impart a new feeling of home, of “Heimat,” to the millions of refugees and exiles who had lost their homelands. These films, which painted an unabashedly idealized, nostalgic picture of Germany, may indeed have helped all those who were made homeless (heimatlos) by the war to identify with West Germany and accept it as their new Heimat. The German homeland: at once movie dream and trauma.

Among the popular film genres attacked by the Oberhausen filmmakers in 1962, the Heimatfilm of the 1950s received particularly harsh criticism. Its cliché-ridden, Agfa-colored images of German forests, landscapes, and customs, of happiness and security, appeared to the young directors to be deceitful movie kitsch. They also took offense at the continuity of themes and forms from the thirties to the fifties. Many of the successful Heimatfilme were indeed remakes of films from the Hitler era. Most of the well-known Heimatfilm directors, such as Hans Deppe, Paul May, and Rolf Hansen, were seasoned professionals who had learned their craft—the commercial entertainment film—at the UFA studios in the 1930s and 1940s.28 Under Hitler the Heimatfilm was an arch-German film genre, with all its negative connotations: national chauvinism, “blood and soil” ideology, and overwrought emotionalism. Nevertheless, despite their con-
tempt for the genre, young German filmmakers considered it a challenge to tackle the Heimatfilm, which was, after all, one of the few indigenous film genres. From the “critical homeland films” of Peter Fleischmann (Jagdszenen aus Niederbayern [Hunting Scenes from Lower Bavaria], 1968), of Volker Schlöndorf (Der plötzliche Reichtum der armen Leute von Kombach [The Sudden Wealth of the Poor People of Kombach], 1971), and of Reinhard Hauff (Mathias Kneissl, 1971) to Edgar Reitz’s highly ambivalent adoption of the genre in Heimat (1984)—all these films work with, and rework, images and narratives that focus on Germany as homeland, as Heimat, both hated and loved.

The war films of the fifties were just as popular—and just as burdened with a negative tradition—as the homeland films. In the wake of the rearmament debate these films generated particular interest in the Federal Republic because they showed a direct relation to the propaganda films of the Nazi past. Here, too, we find directors who had made films under Goebbels. Alfred Weidenmann, for instance, who directed the Luftwaffe film Junge Adler (Young Eagles) for the Hitler Youth in 1942, won prizes for his (anti)war film Canaris in 1954. Continuities can be seen particularly in the choice of images and the narrative presentation of war. Although these films differ from Nazi films in their professed antiwar attitude, they undermine such a resolve in their naturalistic evocations of battle scenes: the images overpower any critical intentions; moral messages evaporate when up against visual pleasure and spectacle. Even films as different as Paul May’s three-part version of Hans Hellmut Kirst’s bestseller, 08/15 (1954–55), and Helmut Käutner’s Des Teufels General (The Devil’s General, 1954), based on Carl Zuckmayer’s play, show the upright, duty-conscious soldier as the powerless victim of a mad Führer and a merciless general staff. The soldier as the hero pitted against criminal and crazy authority: this tried-and-true narrative war-film formula still works in Wolfgang Petersen’s film Das Boot (The Boat, 1982) and may account for its international success.

The power structures and relations of dependency shown in these films remain irrational and inexorable. They thus succeed, indirectly and perhaps unconsciously, in valorizing and rehabilitating the old military virtues like “manly” courage and heroism, obedience and honor, martyrdom and unquestioned love of the fatherland. Even such a widely respected antiwar film as Bernhard Wicki’s Die Brücke (The Bridge, 1959) retains a political ambivalence. The film shows the senseless death of a group of young boys charged with defending a strategically useless bridge against advancing American tanks. The ambivalence derives from Wicki’s concentration on the fate of the German child-soldiers as victims, who are as innocent as they are apolitical.

The arsenal of images from World War II was taken up and used again only five years after the end of the war, not only in the Federal Republic but also in the United States. Indeed, more than half of the 224 war films shown in the Federal Republic between 1948 and 1959 came from the United States. The best-known titles, Henry Hathaway’s The Desert Fox (1951), Fred Zinnemann’s From Here to Eternity (1953), and David Lean’s The Bridge on the River Kwai (1957), all shown in dubbed versions in West Germany, deal with the “great themes”—life and death, tortured conscience, pitched battle, and the test of manhood—against a background of exotic landscapes. These themes had much in common with the National Socialist image production during World War II; in the petit-bourgeois social welfare state under Adenauer, they served to vent frustrations and compensate for deprivations. These films fueled nostalgic fantasies about adventures in exotic lands and the heroic life on the front. They also distinguished between the honest soldier and the unreasonable, despicable regime, and thus succeeded in intensifying already prevalent apologist tendencies.

The Cold War brought a premature end to the denazification program, and this fostered the growing view, strongly held in the 1950s, that the past should be laid to rest. Even Konrad Adenauer felt moved to launch a categorical protest against this tendency as early as in 1952:

A dynamic person forgets the past too easily and perhaps with relief, especially when the past is not as he would have liked it. That presents a great danger, because the past is a reality. It does not disappear, and it continues to have an effect even when we shut our eyes to it . . . When I think of the nameless misery that was visited on our fatherland and the whole world largely through the fault of Germany, I am outraged at the glorifying descriptions of the truly guilty and truly responsible parties of that time which appear time and again in certain of our newspapers. The fact that it was possible to lead a considerable portion of the German
people down such a fateful path must open serious, very serious questions for every thinking person, especially the question as to how it was possible in the first place. We must ask these questions in order to devote all our strength to preventing the return of such a deep and disastrous fall.  

This is the official, unmistakable discourse of West German politicians with respect to the past, a discourse of admonishment that has not changed much between the early fifties and the present. Most of the population, however, considered Adenauer's questions about the “fateful path” and “how it was possible” less urgent. They went to the movies, more popular in those pre-televising days than they ever were, to be entertained. In addition to the escapist homeland films and the nostalgic war films, there were costume epics (the Sissi series, based on the life of the Bavarian princess Elizabeth who later, as the wife of Franz Josef, became the Austrian Empress), comedies (many starring the popular Heinz Erhardt and Heinz Rühmann), melodramas, and thrillers. Films that took a critical view of the past (particularly in its relationship to the present) were the exception in the 1950s. The German cinema of the fifties had no one like Heinrich Böll, who in all of his writings made it his mission to confront Germany with its own past.

In 1962 Jean-Marie Straub andDanièle Huillet based their first film on a short story by Heinrich Böll. A decade after Adenauer's speech, they tried to provide a serious response to his query about the “fateful path” and its causes. They provoked enraged attacks, not least because they introduced a new way of treating history in film. Straub was born in Alsace and had lived in the Federal Republic since 1958; he and his co-director were pioneers who greatly influenced the new German Autorenfilm because they rigorously separated the medium from the sphere of commercial entertainment and repositioned it in the realm of avant-garde literary art. Politically, too, Straub and Huillet were ahead of their time.

In Machorka-Muff (1962), a short film following Böll’s satiric Hauptsständisches Journal (Bonn Diary), Erich von Machorka-Muff, a former general under Hitler, fulfills a dream of his youth by founding an “academy for military memories.” Here soldiers from the rank of major up can write their memoirs in peace. The title of his first lecture, “Memory as a Historical Task,” points not only to the nostalgic tendencies of the old military men who were speaking openly once more but also to the collective amnesia in the era of the economic miracle. The film, says Straub, dealt with the “rape of a land that had the chance to be free of the military. Machorka-Muff was a kind of didactic piece. Germany missed out on its revolution and did not free itself from fascism. For me it is a country that moves in a circle and cannot free itself from its past.” The film begins with a title, “An abstract dream of images, not a story,” but it is as if an awakening occurs at the end, in the last sentence, when the general asks, “Opposition? What’s that?”

Straub and Huillet’s radical film adaptation of Böll’s novel Billiard um halbzehn (Billiards at Half Past Nine), with the revealing title Nicht versöhnnt oder Es hilft nur Gewalt, wo Gewalt herrscht (Not Reconciled; or, ‘Only Violence Helps Where Violence Rules,’ 1965) is even more overtly political. Through sudden unmarked flashbacks, the film conjoints the fascist past with the West German present. The film focuses on a Catholic architect’s family over three generations as it builds and destroys a monastery, only to rebuild it again. The youngest son is “not reconciled” with his present, which exists without a sense of its guilty past. Böll’s literary texts provided only a point of departure for both films: in Machorka-Muff Straub and Huillet added excerpts from newspaper articles about rearment; in Not Reconciled, they incorporated a short documentary segment as part of the fiction. In keeping with Brecht’s theory of the epic theater, Straub and Huillet are concerned with the relative independence and separation of the various filmic elements: images, sound, acting, dialogue, and written text on title cards, which in the tradition of silent films interrupt the flow of images. Instead of blending these diverse enunciations into a coherent narrative that effaces all traces of its making, they want the spectator to have access at all times to the process of constructing meaning in filmed fiction. For only if the viewer is always aware of fiction as fiction, that is, as something staged and constructed, can enlightenment and learning ensue, rather than further obfuscation. In strict opposition to the opulent images of the Nazi cinema, Straub and Huillet maintain an almost ascetic relation to images, which seem bleddry in their early films: the camera usually remains static, the dramatic structure limited to bare essentials; gaps, leaps, and ellipses abound. Straub and Huillet prefer nonprofessionals as actors, who follow Brecht’s method and do not “become” the fictional characters
but instead “quote” them. In order to document the act of filming in the film itself, Straub and Huillet leave the originally recorded soundtrack unchanged. In short, their films violate nearly every Hollywood convention. The spectator is activated, forced to see differently, and—in the tradition of modernism—invited to reflect critically on the very construction of filmic images; identification with onscreen characters is often interrupted and visual pleasure frustrated.

According to Straub and Huillet, the truly political film must not treat political subject matter in a conventional narrative; rather what is needed is a revolution in the filmic representation itself. They insist that the representation of history in film poses special problems that cannot be solved with traditional strategies of narration. As their film Geschichtsunterricht (History Lessons, 1972) makes clear, it is not so much the story as the very act of representing the story as history (and history as story) that is at stake. History Lessons is based on Brecht’s fragmentary novel Die Geschäfte des Herrn Julius Cäsar (The Business Affairs of Mr. Julius Caesar), which Brecht wrote during his exile in Denmark in the late 1930s. Like the novel, Straub and Huillet’s film challenges historical representation by eliminating both narrative continuity and naive referentiality; it calls attention to the impossibility of recapturing the past in the present by way of simplistic reconstruction. Brecht’s own film of 1932, Kuhle Wampe oder wem gehört die Welt? (Kuhle Wampe or Who Owns the World?), with its calculated mixture of cinematic enunciations (images, titles, music, sound, documentary as well as staged parts), served as a model. Straub and Huillet’s translation of Brechtian principles into film exerted a strong influence not only on the aesthetics of Alexander Kluge and Rainer Werner Fassbinder but also on the judgment of such authoritative film critics as Enno Patalas and Frieda Grafe. Straub and Huillet’s avant-garde renderings of Böll’s texts won numerous prizes in foreign film festivals. In the Federal Republic, however, audiences reacted to their films either with hostility or, more often, with indifference.

Straub and Huillet were part of a small group of West German film directors in the early 1960s who were dissatisfied with the state of the film industry as it turned out film after film, uninspired and provincial beyond belief. But the “Young German Film” was not a movement, nor was it a school. The individual temperaments and stylistic interests of its members were too varied. Like the New German Cinema that succeeded it in the mid-1970s, Young German Film became distinctive in the international scene primarily because of the conditions of production under which it arose (and still operates to this day). These conditions to a large degree reflect the willingness of the state to fund selected films through an elaborate system of subsidies, loans, advances, prizes, and awards. From the 1970s on, German television increasingly functioned as a co-producer. This economic independence from the marketplace allowed the directors of the Young German Film as well as the New German Cinema to see themselves from the beginning as “counter-cinema,” and almost on purpose, these filmmakers never gained a mass following. And they never really needed to gain one, because from the beginning they could rely on government support. In his critical survey, “New German Cinema: Economics without Miracle,” Kraft Wetzel writes: “Since the films made in the Federal Republic of Germany usually don’t even gross enough to cover distribution costs—not to mention production expenditures—there is no possibility of establishing a fund for financing other films. Therefore, West German filmmakers can only produce as many films as the government can afford to subsidize. Consequently, the history of West German film is the history of a struggle to convince the government to create subsidies, to gain access to these funds, and then to persuade the State to increase the amount of money available.”

In 1981 the German states and the federal government spent a total of 80 million marks on its patronage of film production. Although the government subsidies for opera, concerts, and theater are significantly higher, a sum of this magnitude carries obligations. The state-subsidized German film has, more than in any other country, accepted a secret cultural mission: for twenty-five years the “artistically ambitious” New German Cinema has represented the Federal Republic with astonishing success at foreign film festivals. Goethe Institutes all over the world show films of the New German Cinema in retrospectives or in theme-oriented series; teachers at foreign schools and universities can borrow films of the New German Cinema for a nominal fee from the embassies and consulates of the Federal Republic. Thus the New German Cinema plays an important part in the promotion of West German culture abroad. Considering how little known and appreciated some of the films of the New German
Cinema are inside West Germany—foreigners are always amazed to learn this—one is tempted to conclude that the publicly subsidized film functions mainly as an export article for distribution abroad.

The Federal Republic presents itself to the rest of the world in the mirror of these films. It is not surprising, therefore, that films dealing with the recent German past arouse particular attention. Occasionally the federal government launches a protest against the often self-critical image of Germany that these films display, fearing damage to the reputation of the Federal Republic. Nonetheless, particularly in the last ten years, an astoundingly large proportion of government-sponsored films have dealt with the period 1933 to 1945, possibly as sort of a compensatory mechanism that leaves the painful task of coming to terms with the past to the simulated reality of the media. Between 1975 and 1985 alone, more than fifty new feature films dealing with National Socialism were made in West Germany, nearly as many as in all the thirty years before. The numbers are impressive, but from an aesthetic point of view most of these films mean very little: they recycle images of images.

Starting in the 1970s, an iconography of the Nazi era has evolved that is now routinely reproduced over and over in these films. The great international art films of the early 1970s—Luchino Visconti’s *The Damned*, Louis Malle’s *Lacombe, Lucien*, François Truffaut’s *The Last Metro*, and Liliana Cavani’s *The Night Porter*—presented the fascist past through imagery so powerful that most subsequent films about the Third Reich were invariably influenced by these films. Their visual style became a convention for historical films dealing with Nazism. The Third Reich itself was often reduced in these representations to a semiotic phenomenon: SS uniforms, swastikas, shaved napes, black leather belts and boots, intimidating corridors and marble stairs have become mere signs unmistakably signaling “fascism”; they serve as a suggestive backdrop that lends the private events in the foreground historical weight and consequence. Already in 1977, Karsten Witte attacked the clichéd use of fascist images:

Haven’t we speculated enough on the past under the pretext of coming to terms with it? Haven’t we been exposed to the Nazi past enough under the pretext of “immunization”? What is left for the visual analysis of fascism to discover except the tautological reproduction of the material with which we started? This supply of images is exhausted. We have already seen them all, but seldom from a new perspective. Public opinion should protect itself from the blight of these fascist products that are nonchalantly televised on holidays, and force speculators who exploit collective fascinations in the name of enlightenment to publicly admit their true intentions.

Many of these films and television productions figured in the so-called “Hitler wave” of the 1970s. We do not know whether any of these representations caused Germans to begin remembering. Their straightforward, realistic narrative form made it easy to take them as entertainment—gripping but harmless. Television, ever hungry for stories, swallowed the historical films about the Nazi era without difficulty. These were films in the past tense, narratively closed to the viewer’s present. Their “authentic” reconstructions showed the past as finished and done with; no one needed to be affected by it.

**The Return of the Repressed**

The dead, too, write on the paper of the future, with flames already threatening to destroy it.  

HEINER MÜLLER

On September 5, 1977, Hanns Martin Schleyer, chairman of the Daimler-Benz company and one of the most prominent West German industrialists, was kidnapped by members of the Red Army Faction (RAF). Four of his companions were shot to death. On October 13, a Lufthansa airliner carrying eighty-six passengers was hijacked and compelled to land in Mogadischu, Somalia, to force the release of captured RAF members. On October 18, an antiterrorist team of the West German border police liberated the hostages. On the same day, in the maximum-security prison of Stammheim, Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin, and Jan-Carl Raspe, members of the Baader-Meinhof group of terrorists, were found dead, apparent suicide victims in circumstances so mysterious that an international commission convened to investigate the matter. On October 19, Schleyer’s corpse was found in an abandoned car in Mulhouse, Alsace. These were the events of the autumn of 1977, the “German Autumn,” as it was later called. In April of the same year members of the RAF had murdered the attorney general, Siegfried Buback, and in June the banker Jürgen
Ponto. In a climate of suspicion, anxiety, and hysteria, the government countered not only with intensified security measures but also with an active and undifferentiated persecution of anyone suspected of sympathy with the RAF terrorists, including all those who, like Heinrich Böll, had dared to criticize the government policy of repression. It became dangerous to express one's opinions; a general fear of surveillance and censure lay heavy over the country. The senseless accumulation of terrorist crimes exposed an underlying political madness that had, if not method, at least a history. Norbert Elias, then eighty years old, referred to this in his comments about the Autumn of 1977: “The violent acts of small, hermetic groups of terrorists in the Federal Republic and the reaction of declaring open season on sympathizers have only the function of a trigger: they suddenly brought to light the latent fissures that exist in West German society and made them visible to the whole world. The reasons for these fissures go further back.”

The postwar generation in Germany, from which most of the terrorists came—in the mid-1960s they were about twenty years old, on their way to the university—had broken more radically than elsewhere with the political values and attitudes of their parents' generation. Margarethe von Trotta's fiction film Die bleierne Zeit (Marianne and Juliane, 1981) explores the only thinly disguised life history of one such terrorist, Gudrun Ensslin. In von Trotta's view, Ensslin, a minister's daughter, was radicalized by her awareness of the monstrous guilt passed on to her by her parents. The filmmaker shows the Ensslin character as a child watching documentary footage of the concentration camps in Alain Resnais's Night and Fog; she is so shaken by the images of horror that she vomits. For those born at the end of the war, the atrocities of the Nazi regime were an ineradicable mark of Cain, a stigma that did not allow them to identify with a country capable of such barbarity. Since members of this generation saw the Federal Republic as the successor of the old fascist state, they violently opposed it—almost as if they wanted to show their parents how they should have battled the fascist state thirty years earlier. Thus they offered belatedly the resistance that their parents had failed to offer. In their futile struggle against the alleged contemporary “fascist system” of West Germany, they symbolically wrestled with the demons of their own past.

According to Norbert Elias, German crimes under Hitler were distinguished from the crimes of other nations by their disregard of the reality principle and by their excessive senselessness. These features, he says, also characterize the terrorist acts of Autumn 1977. They ultimately stem from the collective trauma of learning the truth about the horrifying German past, usually not from one's parents but from books or in school. It was only a matter of time before this repressed trauma would coalesce with the frustration about the “petrified conditions” in the Federal Republic. The memory of the Nazi reign of terror had been excluded from public discussion during the entire reconstruction phase of German postwar history; Germans had thus been denied the chance to work through the past and come to terms with it. This omission now seemed to be taking its revenge in the terrorism of the younger generation. The title of the English book Hitler's Children mistakes the true motive of the terrorists, who had “Antifascism” inscribed on their red flags. Nevertheless, in the memory of older Germans, terrorism, restricted freedom of expression, and the Hitler regime were all too closely related. Writing about the German Autumn, Alexander Kluge stated: “The fatal catastrophe succeeded in cutting through the amnesia of many. The events did not have much to do with war directly, but ‘1945’ and ‘war’ were associated with them. It is no coincidence that we have an emotional movement that is posing questions about Germany and about the history that takes the form it has. The repressed shock breaks out in terrorism, a point that is actually not suited to genuinely coming to terms with the previously repressed material; it may even produce new distortions.”

In October of 1977, nine directors of the New German Cinema decided to produce a collective film about Germany in 1977 that would be both a chronicle and a commentary. The suggestion came from the Filmverlag der Autoren, a distribution organization founded in 1971 by a group of filmmakers and, from February 1977, partly owned by the magazine Der Spiegel. The film, entitled Deutschland im Herbst (Germany in Autumn, 1978), was intended to document the immediate reactions to the events of fall 1977 and also to reflect the anxieties of that time in short fictional scenes. The communal project was also meant to be a means of countering the government's news blackout and an attempt to answer the “official” version of events with an unofficial one. Like the 1967 French film Loin du Vietnam (Far from Vietnam) by Alain Resnais, Chris Marker, Jean-
Luc Godard, and others, *Germany in Autumn* is a collective production. The 15- to 30-minute contributions by the nine filmmakers are not individually identified. Nonetheless, the film unmistakably shows Alexander Kluge’s overall guidance, since he and his editor, Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus, were in charge of cutting the two-hour film (from nine hours of material). On the surface the film imitates the structure of a television program, with its mixture of documentary shots, interviews, and fictional scenes. But it presents images, tells stories, and offers perspectives not to be found on German television.

The film is framed by two public ceremonies of mourning: the state funeral of Hanns Martin Schleyer and the burial of the dead terrorists, with the police out in force. In between there are funerals and images of violence in German history: documentary shots of Rosa Luxemburg before she was murdered and old footage of the state funeral of Field Marshall Erwin Rommel, who was forced by Hitler to commit suicide in 1944. The nexus of the present and the past is strikingly evident when we see (in an interview) Manfred Rommel, son of the war hero and mayor of Stuttgart, personally demanding a burial with dignity for the terrorists.

The contribution of Heinrich Böll and Volker Schlöndorff centers around the (fictional) cancellation of a television broadcast of Sophocles’ *Antigone*. Denied burial, rebellion, and suicide: these themes, seen from the perspective of myth in the play, are associatively related to the efforts of Gudrun Ensslin’s sister to care for the common grave of the three RAF members who died in Stammheim. The bitter satire makes clear that a television broadcast of *Antigone* would be too inflammatory in the political situation of Autumn 1977; a classical play about the themes of violence and resistance has become unpresentable.

The mix of forms in *Germany in Autumn* corresponds to the ambiguity of its political agendas. In discussing the goals of their undertaking, the filmmakers emphasized that they had not tried to present a theory to explain terrorism because that would be a “film without images”:

As if nothing had happened. In this traveling express train of history we are pulling the emergency brake. For two hours of film we are trying to hold onto memory in the form of a subjective momentary impression. As best we can. No one can do more than he can. In this regard our film is a document—this too is another weakness that we do not want to hide.

... Autumn 1977 is the history of confusion. Exactly this must be held onto. Whoever knows the truth lies. Whoever does not know it seeks. This is our own bias, even if we have different political views.48

At a press conference held to publicize *Germany in Autumn*, the first film of the New German Cinema made without public assistance and without the support of governmental committees or commissions, and, above all, the first cooperative work, the nine filmmakers stated their future program as succinctly as possible: “We want to concern ourselves with the images of our country.”49

It is no accident that *Germany in Autumn* inspired several projects concerned with “the images of our country.” Alexander Kluge continued his short episode showing Gabi Teichert, the Hessian history teacher who digs with her spade for the roots of German history, in his film *Die Patriotin* (*The Patriot*, 1979). Fassbinder’s contribution included a staged conversation with his mother about the formation of political opinion and about public behavior today under National Socialism. He used this revealing conversation as an impetus to reflect on the beginnings of the Federal Republic in his “FRG Trilogy,” consisting of *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (*The Marriage of Maria Braun*, 1979), *Lola* (1981), and *Die Sehnsucht der Veronika Voss* (*Veronika Voss*, 1982). Edgar Reitz, in his segment of *Germany in Autumn*, had shown a border guard speaking in dialect, dreaming of becoming an aviator. He took those dreams up again in his filmic chronicle *Heimat*, begun in 1979. Volker Schlöndorff made a film based on Günter Grass’s novel *Die Blechtrommel* (*The Tin Drum*) in 1979, intrigued by the unruly “terrorist” dwarf Oskar who refuses to grow up in the Nazi period. Bernhard Sinkel, another director involved in *Germany in Autumn*, also tried to work through a chapter of recent German history—the unholy alliance of the German chemical industry and National Socialism—in his eight-hour family epic, *Väter und Söhne* (*Sons of the Fathers*), begun in 1979 and shown in four parts on West German television in 1986.

*Germany in Autumn* consciously sought to counter the collective amnesia by relating images from the present to the past. It could
have served as a model of how filmic “images of our country” could be exhibited in a critical and detached manner. But the public resonance of *Germany in Autumn* was limited because its thematic interest in questions of memory and mourning as well as its experimental montage form contradicted most viewers’ expectations for a feature film. There were no characters to identify with, no elaborate historical sets, and no engrossing story to follow. Only a year after *Germany in Autumn*, these expectations found fulfillment in the American television series *Holocaust*.

*Holocaust* was the first major commercial film to deal with the persecution and systematic slaughter of millions of European Jews in a fictional form. As such, it was destined to evoke an especially strong response in the Federal Republic. The German discussion began already in mid-April 1978, when NBC broadcast the four-part, eight-hour-long television series to an audience of approximately 120 million viewers. Initial reports from America castigated the commercial motives of the film, its consistently kitschy style, and the tasteless blend of concentration camp scenes and commercials. When the series began on April 16, 1978, Elie Wiesel, himself a survivor of Auschwitz, described his revulsion at the series in a *New York Times* article called “Trivializing the Holocaust: Semi-Fact and Semi-Fiction.” To most German critics, his objections served as a substitute for an argument of their own:

Untrue, offensive, cheap: as a TV production, the film is an insult to those who perished and to those who survived. In spite of its name, this “docudrama” is not about what some of us remember as the Holocaust.

Am I too harsh? Too sensitive, perhaps. But then, the film is not sensitive enough. It tries to show what cannot even be imagined. It transforms an ontological event into soap-opera. Whatever the intentions, the result is shocking. Contrived situations, sentimental episodes, implausible coincidences: If they make you cry, you will cry for the wrong reasons . . .

*Holocaust*, a TV drama. *Holocaust*, a work of semi-fact and semi-fiction. Isn’t this what so many morally deranged “scholars” have been claiming recently all over the world? That the Holocaust was nothing else but an “invention”? . . . The Holocaust must be remembered. But not as a show.

Following the classical narrative pattern of historical fiction, *Holocaust* tells the story of a fictive family to reflect a larger general history. The scripted lives of fictional characters are woven into the historical “text” of verifiable data and occurrences; private events intersect with political and public ones. The series uses a doctor’s family to show the stages of the systematic persecution and annihilation of German Jews in the Third Reich between 1933 and 1945. The viewer learns about the Nuremberg Laws, the “Kristallnacht,” the euthanasia program, and about the concentration camps of Warsaw, Buchenwald, Theresienstadt, Babi-Yar, Sobibor, and Auschwitz, through the personal lives of these imaginary characters. In terms of dramatic structure, the Weiss family is paired against the family of the unemployed Eric Dorf, who hopes that joining the Nazi Party will enable him to find work. Pushed by his ambitious wife, he makes a career as an assistant to SS leaders Heydrich and Kaltenbrunner. After the collapse of the Third Reich, Dorf commits suicide. The characters and their love stories, their coincidental meetings and forced partings, are obvious fictions, staged and artificial, but the history that intervenes in their lives is real.

This conflation of historical events with invented characters, of political *Geschichte* (history) with private *Geschichten* (stories), characterizes the genre of the classical historical novel in the tradition of Walter Scott. Televised history tends to follow this formula, but, as a result of television’s habitual claim to authenticity, the distinctions between imagined and factual history, between fictional and real spaces, are blurred even further. Presented as a television mini-series, the historical Holocaust shares in this medium-specific dilemma of ambiguous factuality. “Is fact watched as fiction? And fiction fact?” This question, posed by Gerald Green, author of the *Holocaust* screenplay, remains unanswered.

In the case of *Holocaust*, an answer is not necessary, since it exploits this very indeterminacy. The realistic style, the carefully reconstructed historical mise-en-scène, and the occasional intercutting of documentary photographs and authentic film footage from the concentration camps, always motivated by the dramatic action, impart to the film a strong “reality effect.” This effect gains intensity in its appeal to the visual memory of the spectator. The pictures of concentration camps are well-known ones; no one would fail to recognize them. Seeing these images again as part of a television series produces a déjà-vu effect that implicitly validates the historical “correctness” of the film.

*Holocaust* is a *mixtum compositum* in view of its narrative struc-
ture and visual style, offering something for everyone, much like a consumer commodity. The series includes domestic happiness and its dissolution, love, war, humiliation, incarceration, survival, rebellion, and ultimate liberation—all universally valid dramatic set pieces whose combination guarantees the broadest possible public appeal. Not surprisingly, in the year of its first broadcast Holocaust was sold to fifty countries—including the Federal Republic of Germany, where it played on four evenings in the last week of January 1979.

After its popular success in the United States, the broadcast of this series in the “land of the guilty” promised to draw strong reactions, yet the extent of the collective preoccupation with this film exceeded all predictions. Holocaust—the word became a German neologism in 1979—encountered a sensitive political situation. It coincided with the ongoing Majdanek trial, which lasted from 1975 to 1981, the most extensive trial for concentration camp crimes in the history of the Federal Republic. It also coincided with the Filbinger affair, in which the governing president of Baden-Württemberg was accused of having sentenced a deserter to death in the last days of the war. And it coincided with heated debates in Parliament about extending the statute of limitations for Nazi crimes. Even so, the statistics are startling: over 20 million West Germans—which means every other adult—watched Holocaust.

The television station WDR, responsible for the broadcast, received more than 30,000 telephone calls and thousands of letters. Radio stations, newspapers, and magazines addressed the issue of German war crimes in the wake of Holocaust. The publishers of the two largest weekly magazines in the Federal Republic, Spiegel and Stern, wrote editorials confessing that they too had taken part in discriminating against German Jews because they had looked the other way. During each of the four episodes telephone numbers were superimposed over the film, inviting viewers who wanted to share their experiences to call in and talk—before the whole nation—with experts from the press and academia. These open-ended discussions followed each segment of Holocaust and ran for hours. Heinz Höhne, writing for Spiegel, described the public climate of opinion:

An American television series, made in a trivial style, produced more for commercial than for moral reasons, more for entertainment than for enlightenment, accomplished what hundreds of books, plays, films, and television programs, thousands of documents, and all the concentration camp trials have failed to do in the more than three decades since the end of the war: to inform Germans about crimes against Jews committed in their name so that millions were emotionally touched and moved. Only since, and thanks to, Holocaust does a large majority of the nation know what was hidden behind the seemingly innocuous bureaucratic phrase, “the final solution.” They know it because U.S. filmmakers had the courage to free themselves from the crippling precept that it is impossible to portray mass murder.

Günter Rohrbach, director of the entertainment division of the television station WDR, stated: “Holocaust not only changed our consciousness of history, it also taught us what mass communication can be. After Holocaust television can no longer be what it was before.” The American series provided a marked break with previous attempts to address the past on German television, which had never attracted a large audience. “A society of educated citizens communicates with each other,” Rohrbach said, “in hopes that the news will someday, somehow, filter down.” This “arrogance of the educational elite” could not develop in the United States, he continued, where “lines of communication run from below to above.” This populist view of American television does not mention that unlike West German television, which is largely state-controlled with a strong educational mandate, American television is part and parcel of the advertising industry and very much dependent on mass audiences and high ratings.

The intellectual elite in particular was disturbed by the runaway success of the American television series. The conventional German distinction between “high culture” and the “soulless” products of commercial American “mass culture”—a distinction that goes back to debates in the Weimar Republic—seemed suddenly rather questionable. The long-cherished German dream of cultural superiority over the “shallow entertainment culture” of America found a rude awakening. German pride in high culture—an essential part of its national identity since the eighteenth century—had to face the question of its actual effect and social function. Those who felt responsible for the state of German culture chastised themselves publicly. Even someone as enmeshed in tradition as the literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki asked testily why the Germans had not managed to produce
a work like *Holocaust*. And Marion von Dönhoff, publisher of the influential weekly *Die Zeit*, questioned her own aesthetic objections: “The league of film critics, led last year by the *New York Times*, raised many critical objections in this country as well: it is a melodramatic tear-jerker, a trivial entertainment cliché, an impermissible mixture of love story and horror story—as if these aesthetic categories had even the slightest significance in the face of the moral dimension and the message of this series. Some critics overvalue the aesthetic at the expense of the moral in a truly horrifying way.” She went on to say that placing value on the purely aesthetic was a typical feature of fascism. “Even during the Hitler business the aesthetic perfection of the flag parades or the grandiose choreography of the Nuremberg Party Congresses infected many and made them ‘fellow travelers.’” The rigid, undialectical opposition between aesthetics and morality, between quality and mass effect, as well as the demonization of the aesthetic as tainted by fascism, demonstrate the journalistic excesses that the media event *Holocaust* called forth in Germany.

The shifts in the press's response before and after the showing of *Holocaust* are especially telling. Sabina Lietzmann, journalist for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, wrote one of the first articles about the American mini-series on April 20, 1978, using the pejorative headline, “The Annihilation of the Jews as Soap Opera.” She described her discomfort with the trivialization of suffering and the watering down of history as story. She revised her opinion on September 28, 1978, several months before the German showing, convinced now that the theme was so central to national self-awareness that it “promotes constant thought, which sometimes, as in this case, can lead to a total rethinking”:

Why? The response of the American public to *Holocaust*, many of them delayed reactions, taught us that intellectual and critical reaction is one thing, whereas the spontaneous effect on the naive emotions is something altogether different. For millions of viewers throughout the country, *Holocaust* was the first and only access to that otherwise unimaginable phenomenon of the destruction of the Jews. We still consider a good, objective documentary to be a superior instrument of information, but we know that “in terms of people,” the television series compelled the mass audience to watch and to empathize. This is a power that no documentary has, however well made. If we are faced with the choice whether to allow no information to be presented or to permit information tailored for easy access as a “story” and produced for people who want entertainment, today, resigning ourselves to the realities, we choose the story. In this sense *Holocaust* has a function, however much our taste and our critical purism rebel against it.

When the series was finally broadcast on West German television in January 1979, it seemed as if for the first time an entire nation dared to remember and to look at its own past. Collective mourning in the Federal Republic itself became a public spectacle, played out, consciously or unconsciously, before the eyes of the world. The Germans knew the rest of the world would be waiting with bated breath for their reception of this film. The influential American columnist Mary McGrory, for instance, intimated this in her commentary on *Holocaust*: “What would be most encouraging, perhaps, to those who are drained from watching this harrowing and often inept recreation of recent history would be the news that Germany had ordered a print of the film.” And Günter Rohrbach, the person mainly responsible for showing the film in Germany, wrote in the same vein: “It would be remarkable if the Germans, whose protagonists proceeded so purposefully in the annihilation of the Jews, were to raise special objections to the treatment of this theme by others.” Similarly, Heinz Werner Hübner, the television director of WDR, admitted candidly: “The film is a political event, and if it is shown in the land of those who were affected by the Holocaust, in Israel, then we should expect the people in Germany who participated in those events and their successors to view it as well.” Günther Rühle described the international horizon of expectations even more explicitly before the series was shown in Germany:

During the past thirty years the rest of the world has constantly reminded us of what happened in Germany between 1933 and 1945. The four-part television series *Holocaust* ... comes to us as a new reminder ... It is a film that has provoked the most contradictory reactions in America, in England, in Israel. But people in these very countries have also been asking how Germany will deal with the presentation of those events in which almost six of the eleven million European Jews were annihilated in a campaign that included virtually the whole of Europe.

From this perspective, the *Holocaust* series seemed to be a challenge to the Germans to recognize themselves in the mirror held up by Hollywood. One advantage of the “right” reaction would be the
chance to show the rest of the world that the Germans had learned from history, that they had changed. It is not surprising that this confrontation with a long-repressed history met with resistance and criticism. Peter Schulz-Rohr, director of the station SWR, spoke about the “almost exhibitionistic German inclination to engage in self-abnegation,” which “combines in a fatal way with the performance of public acts of atonement and exemplifies the kind of moral gesture made to impress others that, for anyone with a sensitive conscience, calls into question the very morality it is meant to demonstrate.” For Edgar Reitz, even worse than the dreaded spectacle of guilt and atonement was the fact that the “commercial aesthetic of America” had taken charge of German history, had even “ripped” German history “out of the hands” of the Germans. This insistence on retaining one’s own history, even in its most inhuman form, introduces a new, highly ambivalent note in the chronicle of Germany’s coming to terms with its own past—a note that became unmistakable a few years later, during Reagan’s controversial visit to the military cemetery at Bitburg in May 1985 and in the so-called “historians’ debate” in 1986. Both events highlight the new revisionist struggle over German history, memory, and national identity.

Even with several empirical studies at our disposal, it is still difficult to assess the actual effect of the Holocaust series on the German public. Its aesthetic structure, deliberately organized to meet a large variety of expectations (and thus to be commercially successful), allows, not surprisingly, a large variety of reactions. Letters from German viewers ranged from aggressive rejection to demonstrative, self-chastising confessions of guilt. Whatever the individual strategies of dealing with Holocaust, however short-lived the tears it provoked, one thing is certain: the film ignited a new, broad-based interest in the images and stories of the German past. The Holocaust series also inspired renewed vigorous discussion about the various ways in which history should be presented on film. The innovations in narrative technique and film aesthetics that characterize several of the films in the wake of Holocaust can be seen as indirect reactions to the aesthetic and dramatic structure of the American television series. The German Autumn of 1977 had evoked an “excess motivation” (Klage) among intellectuals and filmmakers to deal with German history, but only the broad reception of Holocaust allowed the numerous films about the recent German past to find an audience. Germany in Autumn presented impressions of a country on which the past weighs heavily; the German reaction to Holocaust showed how much still had to be done to master that past. It seemed in 1979 as though the Germans had finally become able to look their history in the eye. Holocaust allowed the Germans to work through their most recent past, this time from the perspective of the victims, by proxy, in the innocuous form of a television show that viewers could switch off at any time. Because the collective catharsis felt by many viewers came about through a film (that is, through a fiction, a simulation), one might well suspect that the catharsis, if there indeed was one, rested on a self-deception. Still, no matter how skeptical one may be about the long-term effect of a media event like Holocaust, it cannot be denied that in its wake a new historical consciousness emerged in the Federal Republic. The past suddenly seemed very present. German filmmakers felt challenged to come to terms with German history and its images.
Reden über das eigene Land: Deutschland, vols. 1 ff. Munich: Bertelsmann, 1983–.


### NOTES

1. Images of History

1. For a description of the production history and the political background of Kolberg, see Veit Harlan’s autobiography, Im Schatten meiner Filme (Gütersloh: Sigbert Mohr Verlag, 1966), pp. 180ff. According to his account, the film was eight times more expensive than the average film of the time, costing eight and a half million marks. “Goebbels wanted to see huge battles,” Harlan wrote. “He wanted to make ‘the biggest film of all time,’ one that would overshadow the cast-of-thousands films of the Americans” (p. 184). On Kolberg, see also Hermann Hinkel, Zur Funktion des Bildes im deutschen Faschismus (Steinbach/Giesen: Anabas, 1975), pp. 114–117. On Harlan, see Siegfried Zielinski, Veit Harlan: Analysen und Materialien zur Auseinandersetzung mit einem Filmregisseur des deutschen Faschismus (Frankfurt am Main: R. G. Fischer, 1981).


All translations of quotations are mine unless a published English source is given.


4. Leiser, Nazi Cinema, p. 124. Goebbels also said, in a speech given on February 27, 1942, “Optimism is simply part of waging a war. You do not win battles by hanging your head or discussing philosophical theories. For that reason it is necessary to keep our people in a good mood and to strengthen the power of moral resistance in the broad masses.” Quoted in Gerd Albrecht, Nationalsozialistische Filmpolitik (Stuttgart: Enke, 1969), p. 58.


8. Hitler: A Career had its premiere at the Berlin Film Festival in February 1977. It ran with great success in movie theaters across West Germany and was rated “besonders wertvoll” (especially valuable). On January 4, 1987, the film was shown on prime-time television with the following disclaimer, meant to preempt criticism: “When this film ran in 1977, it provoked much controversy. It does not try to portray the history of the Third Reich. Instead, it deals with the relationship of Adolf Hitler to the German people: the circumstances that shaped him and made possible his rise to power, and the following he had until the catastrophic end. The terrible crimes of the regime have caused a whole generation to disclaim this experience: No one rejoiced, no one knew, no one participated. But how did Hitler find the resolve to commit unprecedented crimes if not from the feeling of accord with his people? Who is served by denying that the majority of Germany agreed with him? Recognized itself in him? Was happy with him for a long time? This film will show by what means and to what purpose this fatal happiness was produced. How much delusion it contained. The price it exacted is well known.”


12. The visual documentary material is also selected and arranged largely from Hitler’s perspective. For instance, when anti-Semitism is being discussed, we see close-ups of long-bearded Hassidic Jews from Vienna of 1900, followed by a sketch of a revenging angel drawn by the young Hitler, who aspired to become an artist. On the criticism of Fest’s film on Hitler, see Jörg Berlin et al., Was verschweigt Fest? Analysen und Dokumente zum Hitler-Film (Cologne: Palli...

21. From today’s perspective it is striking how strongly the film emphasizes male heroes. Women seem to have no history of their own; they are only projections of male fantasies. Not until the late 1970s was the female perspective of history addressed. See Helma Sanders-Brahms’s representation of women in her 1980 film Deutschland, bleiche Mutter (Germany, Pale Mother).


28. Hans Deppe (1897–1969) made about half of his approximately seventy films between 1934 and 1945. There were many who, along with Deppe, stood behind the camera again soon after the denazification and continued the traditional UFA style, purged of obvious Nazism and anti-Semitism. Goebbels’s UFA had been dissolved as a company, but its staff, its style, and its spirit lived on through the entire 1950s.

29. On the critical Heimatfilm, see Eric Rentschler, “Calamity Prevails over the Country: Young German Filmmakers Revisit the Homeland,” in Rentschler, West German Film, pp. 103–128.

30. See in this context the discussion about Das Boot in Die Zeit, 8, 15, and 29 March 1985. The articles deal with the six-hour, three-part television broadcast of 1985, not with the shorter film version of 1981. This film about the submarine war of 1944 was Germany’s most expensive film up to that date (1982), and especially in the United States it is probably the most commercially successful German film ever made, repeatedly shown on cable television and readily available in video rental outlets. The West German television broadcast, which reached a record 60 percent of all households (that is, 24 million viewers), engendered a short but intense controversy. The film, as is often the case with historical subjects, provided the impetus for debates about larger issues. See the titling of the published reviews, “Are Soldiers Criminals?” and “Culprits Are Also Victims.”


34. The most important of these are Wolfgang Staudte’s social-critical films Rosen für den Staatsanwalt (Roses for the Prosecutor, 1959) and Kirmes (Fairground, 1960), Herbert Vesely’s experimental films nicht mehr fliehen (Stop Running, 1955) and Das Brot der frühen Jahre (The Bread of the Early Years, 1962), Ottomar Domnick’s debut feature film, the neo-expressionist Jonas (1957) with texts by Hans Magnus Enzensberger, and Kurt Hoffmann’s satire on the continuities between the Third Reich and the Adenauer era, Wir Wunderkinder (Aren’t We Wonderful, 1958).

35. The West German film industry also had no Günter Grass, no Wolfgang Koeppen, no Siegfried Lenze. On the thematization of the “unmastered past” in German literature, see Hamida Bosmajian, Metaphors of Evil: Contemporary German Literature and the Shadow of Nazism (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1979); Felicia Letsch, Auseinandersetzung mit der Vergangenheit als Moment der Gegenwartskritik (Cologne: Pahl-Rugener, 1982); Judith Ryan, The Uncompleted Past: Postwar German Novels and the Third Reich (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983); Donna Reed, The Novel and the Nazi Past (New York: Peter Lang, 1985).


41. In 1974 these films, representing "la mode rétro," provoked an intensive discussion in the *Cahiers du Cinéma* about film, popular memory, and the rewriting of history. The discussion also emphasized the inherent conservatism of historical films that show fascism as a fate that both fascinates and paralyzes. See the interview with Michel Foucault in "Film and Popular Memory—Cahiers du Cinéma/Extraits," *Edinburgh Magazine* 2 (1977): 20–25, originally published in *Cahiers du Cinéma* 251 (1974), in which he argues that a battle for collective memory, the "memento populaire," has begun. Foucault believes that whoever controls the memory of people controls their experience and knowledge of the past as well. He claims that there are no more films about the resistance because someone wants the resistance to be forgotten. The defeatist films about fascism which aim to prove that no one was immune to fascism (implying that nothing can be done about fascism) unwittingly play, according to Foucault, into the hands of the dominant powers. See also the contributions by Colin MacCabe, Stephen Heath, Jacques Rancière, and Jean Narboni in the issue of *Edinburgh Magazine* 2 (1977) which is entitled "History/Production/Memory."  


43. See Karl Heinz Bohrer, "Hitler, der Held der siebziger Jahre?" *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 29 June 1977; Marion Gräfin Dönhoff, "Was bedeutet die Hitlerwelle?" *Die Zeit*, 26 September 1977. At the same time, surveys showed that young students knew grotesquely little about Hitler. See Dieter Bossman, *Was ich über Adolf Hitler gehört habe* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1977). Some students thought, for instance, that Hitler was an Italian or that he belonged to the Christian Democratic Union.


45. Ibid., p. 744f.


47. Alexander Kluge, *Die Patriotin* (Frankfurt am Main: Zweisprachieder, 1979), p. 28 (emphasis mine).

48. Alexander Kluge et al., "Germany in Autumn: What Is the Film's Bias?" in *West German Filmmakers on Film*, pp. 132–133.

49. Ibid., p. 132. On Germany in Autumn, see Miriam Hansen, "Cooperative Auteur Cinema and Oppositional Public Sphere: Alexander Kluge's Contribution
to ‘Germany in Autumn,’ “New German Critique” 24/25 (1981–82): 36–56. In 1969 a plan was proposed to deal with the German present and past in about 100 documentary films under the overall title “On Germany”; the project never materialized. See Fischer and Hembus, Der Neue Deutsche Film, p. 277. Germany in Autumn was followed by two additional cooperative films: Der Kandidat (The Candidate, 1980) and Krieg und Frieden (War and Peace, 1982–83).


53. Quoted in Cecil Smith, “Dokudrama: Fact or Forum,” Los Angeles Times, 17 April 1978. Although he is aware of the “inherent dangers” of the “dokudrama,” Gerald Green here legitimates the process of mixing fact and fiction: “The technique, of course, is old as literature itself. Tolstoy created all those Rostovs and Volkonskys and others — they didn’t exist in history. Then he placed them among the Napoleons, the actual generals and the real events of War and Peace … I think what’s important is that even though in a dramatic structure you can’t get every nuance 100% historically correct, you can get the thrust and the essence of history, probably more effectively than any other way. I think there’s more truthful, documented history in Holocaust than in anything I have ever seen about the Nazi destruction of the Jews.”


55. Sabina Lietzmann, in her Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung article of 20 April 1978, explains it as follows: “‘Holocaust’ is the burnt sacrifice of ancient Israel, where not only animals but also human beings were offered. God had demanded a burnt offering of Abraham, who was ready to slaughter his son Isaac. In America, ‘Holocaust’ has come to mean the mass slaughter of the Jews in the Third Reich. And ‘Holocaust’ is the title of a television series that’s running every evening this week on American television sets.” The word “Holocaust” was elected “Word of the Year” by the Bibliographic Institute in 1979.


59. Ibid.


61. Marion Gräfin Dönhoff, “Eine deutsche Geschichtsstunde: Holocaust-Erschrecken nach dreissig Jahren,” Die Zeit, 2 February 1979. See also Wolfram Schlütt’s apt critique of Dönhoff’s rigid dichotomy between morality and aesthetics, “Wie einige Intellektuelle den Kopf verlieren und den anderer fordern: Holocaust und erste Folgen einer ‘Revision unseres Kulturbegriffes,’” Frankfurter Rundschau, 5 February 1979: “That questions of aesthetics are also (or even necessarily) questions of morality as well; and that the critics of Holocaust expressed their aesthetic reservations for moral reasons; further, that an aesthetic process can or even must also be one of reflection and of learning: — the possibility of such considerations and of such a self-critical treatment of reality
and of its aesthetic appropriation, shaping, and reproduction is no longer permitted by the existential dismay that Holocaust caused, and not only in Mr. Dönhoff. Such a differentiated attitude was dismissed with scorn as elitist intellectual arrogance in an article by Günter Rohrbach in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, as he pointed triumphantly to audience figures, market shares, and the degree of public arousal ... Under the pretense of populism: the newest form of iconoclasm and contempt for art?"


69. On Sunday, May 5, 1985, President Reagan and Chancellor Kohl visited the military cemetery at Birkenau—a highly symbolic act that sparked a long and bitter controversy because the cemetery also included the graves of SS soldiers. "Birkenau" was seen, especially in the United States, as a bold attempt to blur the lines between perpetrators and victims in the name of reconciliation. All the major American newspapers and periodicals dealt in detail with the far-reaching moral and political questions posed by Reagan’s Birkenau visit. See the anthology of critical essays, Birkenau in Moral and Political Perspective, ed. Geoffrey Harman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) and the exhaustive documentation Birkenau and Beyond: Encounters in American, German and Jewish History, ed. Ilya Levkov (New York: Shapolsky Publishers, 1987). See also Eric Rentschler, “The Use and Abuse of Memory: New German Film and the Discourse of Birkenau,” New German Critique 36 (Fall 1985): 67–90. And see "Reagan at Birkenau: Spectacle and Memory" (with statements from Hans Jürgen Syberberg and Jean-Marie Straub, among others) in On Film 14 (1985): 36–40; also Die Unfähigkeit zu feiern: Der 8. Mai, ed. Norbert Seitz (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Neue Kritik, 1985).


71. Apart from that: “You see, it is thoroughly impractical if the emotional shock of German families, which would have meant something important for the victims of Auschwitz in 1942, is made up for in 1979; for today it is an essentially useless, that is, timeless form of shock.” The words are Alexander Kluge’s in his essay, “The Political as Intensity of Everyday Feelings,” Cultural Critique 4 (Fall 1986): 126. The article, Kluge’s acceptance speech on the occasion of the award of the Fontane Prize for literature, first appeared in 1979.

2. Germany as Myth

1. The page numbers in parentheses refer to the film script, Hans Jürgen Syberberg, Hitler, a Film from Germany, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982). This is a translation from the German