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The Haunted Screen (Again): The Historical Unconscious of Contemporary German Thrillers

I

In an essay in *Die Zeit*, the German filmmaker Wim Wenders reflected critically on Oliver Hirschbiegel's 2004 film *Der Untergang*. Wenders compared the film unfavorably to the popular, mass-marketed film *Resident Evil: Apocalypse*, the sequel to the first *Resident Evil* film.¹ Although one deals with a “downfall” and the other with an “apocalypse,” the link between the two films is not only nominal; they are also linked through the involvement of their German producer, Bernd Eichinger, who was both the executive producer of the *Resident Evil* films and the author and producer of *Der Untergang*. Eichinger also produced Wenders's own 1975 film, *Falsche Bewegung*. Wenders indicates that as someone who has worked with Eichinger, he generally takes pleasure in his fellow countryman's success; but Eichinger's involvement with *Der Untergang* came as a disappointment to him. When comparing *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* to *Downfall*, Wenders finds the *Resident Evil* sequel superior. As he sees it, this zombie film based on a video game—referred to in one review as “survival horror”²—conveys both a greater truth about fascism than Hirschbiegel's critically acclaimed Hitler film and a sterner warning.

Wenders's criticism concerns how Germany as a “perpetrator nation” can make films that deal with or engage effectively with the legacy of what it means to have been historical malfeasants. Reaching back to Karl Jaspers's 1946 reflection on the question of German guilt, Germans have long been engaged in a project of coming to terms with a past of perpetration, with varying degrees of success. Hirschbiegel's cinematic drama

1 Although Wenders speaks only of *Resident Evil*, he is certainly writing about *Resident Evil: Apocalypse*, the sequel to the first *Resident Evil* film, which was in theaters at the same time *Der Untergang* was having its release in Germany.

2 This description appeared among the many user reviews of the *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* DVD on the commercial German website <www.amazon.de>.

about Hitler's last days in the *Führerbunker* is one among many recent efforts on the part of post-perpetrator generations to come to terms with their legacy, a project with which some critics, especially Martin Walser, have grown weary. With an eye to reflecting on perpetrator guilt and motivation, the word "resident" in the title of *Resident Evil* catches Wenders's attention. He asks whether *Der Untergang* forces a consideration of the "resident evil" that may still lurk in German culture, or implicitly, how such a film would meet with Adorno's demand to remind us that fascism is always present and could return at any time.³

Wenders once similarly disputed with the historian Joachim Fest—the author of one of the two key texts that served as sources for *Der Untergang*—over Fest's film *Hitler: Eine Karriere*.⁴ Almost thirty years earlier Wenders argued that Fest's reproduction of images of Hitler in his 1977 film was not enough to create a critical consciousness about those dangerous images. According to Wenders, both then and more recently with *Der Untergang*, Fest was complicit in reproducing a problematic fascination with the person of Hitler, especially on film, a medium that the Nazis had used so effectively. Wenders credits the Nazis' total control of the production of cinematic images with enabling Hitler's "career." Thanks to Hitler, he writes, "there was a hole in the film culture of this country which lasted for thirty or forty years." Wenders adds that Fest and those involved with *Hitler: Eine Karriere* reopen the wounds that the Nazi era inflicted on German cinema, and that they are "proud of their gruesome discoveries" ("Entertainment" 128). Wenders labels Fest's film a failure because it avoids commenting on the flood of images it unleashes. He explains: "[Fest's] film is so fascinated by its object, by its importance [. . .] that th[e] object again and again takes control of the film, becoming its secret narrator" ("Entertainment" 130). As he sees it, the fascination with historical images becomes an obstacle to critical reflection on the present. Wenders appears to charge German film with the task of finding a way to represent history other than "as it actually was."

In the following essay, I argue that contemporary genre films, especially popular "thrillers" including Robert Schwentke's *Tattoo*, Stefan Ruzowitzky's *Anatomie*, and Oliver Hirschbiegel's own *Das Experiment*, represent an alternative to recent trends in historical filmmaking. They

3 See Adorno, who concludes his essay "What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?" with the comment, "We will not have come to terms with the past until the causes of what happened then are no longer active. Only because these causes live on does the spell of the past remain, to this very day, unbroken" (129).

4 The two texts that serve as sources for the film *Der Untergang* are *Der Untergang: Hitler und das Ende des Dritten Reiches* by Joachim C. Fest and *Bis zur letzten Stunde: Hitlers Sekretärin erzählt ihr Leben* by Gertraud Junge, as detailed in the list of works cited.

open a new path to working through a past of perpetration, a task all the more necessary in Germany as Germany continues to struggle to find new ways of speaking about its history. Distinct from the spate of recent historical films, which have generally been well received in both intellectual circles and internationally, thrillers and horror films offer Germany a worthwhile opportunity to approach this same struggle with a certain candor. Historical films, which focus frequently on presenting the past in apparently realistic detail, often steer away from presenting a genuine confrontation with atrocities. As a consequence of their efforts to stay within the bounds of good taste, they tend to avoid being atrocious, and can therefore make little claim to have addressed brutal truths. Contemporary thrillers, by contrast, have the advantage of being less constrained.

To think along the lines of Wenders's assessment, survival-horror films such as *Resident Evil* have a number of advantages over "tasteful" historical filmmaking.⁵ Wenders notes that *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* deals with a world-dominating empire, biological weapons, and genetic engineering.⁶ According to his account, the film thinks varied modes of violence generally associated with fascism through to their science-fiction conclusions. As survival-horror films (to apply again this genre-defining term), such works are less bound by the strictures of serious or historical filmmaking than dramas such as *Der Untergang*, or any of the recent group of what Lutz Koepnick has described as "heritage films," including *The Harmonists*, *Aimée und Jaguar*, *Gloomy Sunday—Ein Lied von Liebe und Tod*, and *Nirgendwo in Afrika*.⁷ Additionally, Wenders points out that *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* has yet another advantage over *Der Untergang*: It proposes that the threat of fascism continues even after the film's conclusion. Not only does the film's fictional Umbrella Corporation cover up their responsibility for the horrors we see depicted, but *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* also, at its end, returns the protagonist to us as a dangerous, reconstructed corporate agent. Wenders explains that the film reminds us wherever possible that the "residing evil" of the title is an omnipresent, ever-growing threat.

5 I do not mean to suggest that the *Resident Evil* films are specifically German thrillers. Although Bernd Eichinger, Alexander Witt, Thomas Kretschmann, and Bjorn Schroeder were all involved, these were very international productions. Because of Wenders's comments, I am merely using these films as a convenient example of the sort of work thrillers are capable of doing.

6 The corporation depicted in the film is the fictional Umbrella Corporation. In a special documentary feature on the *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* DVD entitled *Corporate Malfeasance*, it is explained that the Umbrella Corporation is meant to represent something of a synthesis between Microsoft and the U.S. Military.

7 See Koepnick's article about German "heritage films," esp. 49-50. Koepnick studies in particular the large number of these films that appeared in the late 1990s, although this tendency has obviously continued. In some sense, *Der Untergang* may be considered an outgrowth or extension of this overall trend.

Seen in this light, *Der Untergang*, by contrast, has rendered fascism innocuous.

Still another of *Der Untergang*'s shortcomings is that Hirschbiegel's film chooses not to represent Hitler's suicide. This historical event takes place off screen. Wenders strongly criticizes *Der Untergang*'s reluctance to depict this as a gruesome horror. This is not to say that *Der Untergang* is tasteful at every turn—indeed, many would argue that the whole concept guiding the film's production was tasteless—but it is to suggest that the film takes pains to avoid confronting its audience with certain horrors. It may be groundbreaking insofar as it is a German film that depicts Hitler, but as an historical drama, seen as an outgrowth of other recent "heritage films," it is less so. The film has boundary lines it elects not to cross, ones with which genre films would never be concerned. To use a metaphor borrowed from Wenders's earlier essay, one could argue that Hirschbiegel's historically "accurate" film takes too much care to dam the violent images that might otherwise come gushing out of the screens of midnight movie houses. As an historical drama, *Der Untergang* is unwilling to present the wounds of German history by way of literal bodily wounds, as such films often fail to do in their search for wider audiences. Wenders also argues that the film re-auraticizes or re-sacrilizes Hitler's and Goebbels's deaths by refusing to represent the horror of their bodily destruction. He would prefer that we have the opportunity to see these auratic leaders eaten by zombies, as was the fate of *Resident Evil*'s own corporate fascist, a role played, incidentally, with a heavy German accent by the actor Thomas Kretschmann.⁸

It is along these very lines that thrillers can make a special claim: They have a more candid relationship with sex and violence because of their explicit, and expected, connection to the demands of the libido. Although generic films, and their cult siblings in the "trash cinema," may seem unlikely candidates to carry political or historical weight, it is often the case that thrillers associated with explosive action or grotesque horror—or, in the case of the *Resident Evil* films, hybrids that conform exactly to the norms of no particular genre—have a closer relationship to the truth of historical atrocities than films that would seek to render history digestible or tasteful. Genre films of the midnight cinema are harder to swallow because of their direct tie not to history as such, but to the libido, the death drive, and to a dark social-psychological underbelly, a characteristic distinction long self-evident to scholars who specialize in science fiction

⁸ Kretschmann has the distinction of having been in both films under discussion, having also starred as *SS-Gruppenführer* Hermann Fegelein in *Der Untergang*.

and horror.⁹ By definition, generic films create expectations that can be toyed with, and as in dreams, where the id plays an active role, such films offer manifest content beneath which lurk latent truths. This should, of course, not be taken to imply that genre films never directly tackle historical problems such as perpetrator guilt. Films such as *Ilsa, She-wolf of the SS* or the Italian film *L'Ultima Orgia del III. Reich* certainly appear to be staring German violence in the face. My point, however, is that such films need not approach fascism or other historical atrocities head-on in order to address them; indeed, works such as *Tattoo* and *Das Experiment* speak more suggestively about the sex and aggression that are part of the historical document of barbarism when they take the liberty of doing so from behind the acceptable veil of generic expectation.

The so-called “trash” cinema of Jörg Buttgereit, the director of films such as *Der Todesking* as well as the infamous *Nekromantik* films, exemplifies German films in which sex and horror are unconventionally foregrounded. Linnie Blake writes that Buttgereit’s works (in which, among other things, protagonists have sex with exhumed corpses) “dwell on the existential isolation of the desiring German subject and the libidinally ambiguous re-animation of the deeply repressed historical past.” She concludes: “Through his unruly and repulsive imagery we are offered *Die Unbewältigte Vergangenheit*—the past that has not been adequately dealt with” (192). That genre films may be more adept at dealing with these issues than highbrow or art house cinema is not a new assertion. Lotte Eisner’s psychologically oriented assessments about horror in *The Haunted Screen* could easily be understood as the first stab, so to speak, at putting forward this thesis. Even after German Expressionism faded, the undead reappeared on German screens, subsequent to a hiatus under the Third Reich. In an essay about the 1952 film *Rosen blühen auf dem Heidegrab*, Johannes Von Moltke points out that the film, about a farm girl who is being bullied into a marriage with a local man rather than with her childhood sweetheart, is actually a partly horrific confrontation with the specters of the war and with the U.S. occupation. Focusing in particular on a scene in which one of the film’s characters rises from the dead, Von Moltke argues for what can be viewed as the film’s indirect engagement with the unmastered past, an engagement in which the trappings of generic expectations serve as a screen behind which historical issues can be said to operate. In his reading as well as in Eisner’s work, horror films can be understood as having a particular claim on psychological

9 There are numerous examples of such work. Recent research that approaches the question from a specifically German perspective includes Hantke’s *Horror Film: Creating and Marketing Fear* as well as Randall Halle’s essay on Jörg Buttgereit’s *Nekromantik* films in *Light Motives*.

complexity because the ghosts and the skeletons in their closets always indicate the return of something that has been repressed, and even more so because they allow themselves to inquire into the consequences of allowing the libido to run rampant, inquiries that Freud was willing to make with respect to the overall causes of violence and war.¹⁰ Arguably it was for this reason that the Nazis rejected horror as a genre. Where there is horror there is an evocation of the social-psychological. It is no wonder that the frankness of such films concerned them.

Stefan Ruzowitzky's film *Anatomie* is one recent example of a generic thriller's indirect engagement with Germany's past of perpetration. *Anatomie* is a horror film in which history functions more as subtext than as text, yet it forces a confrontation with the question of German atrocities and their legacy. The film depicts a young student, Paula, who moves to Heidelberg for medical school and discovers that a number of her fellow students as well as her teachers are members of a secret society, the anti-Hippocratics, which is dedicated to engaging in grotesque experiments on live subjects. Paula realizes that her grandfather was also part of this secret society, and that her father, though likely aware of her grandfather's hobbies, did nothing to stand in his own father's way. In a parallel with Günter Grass's recent working-out-the-past novel *Im Krebsgang*, the middle generation, the one born during or at the end of the war, is depicted as passive; the representative of this immediate postwar generation appears anxious about taking a position on the perpetrator past of his parents, preferring instead to avoid trouble. By contrast, the younger generation, born two or three decades after the end of the war, is now viewed as having an inclination to engage with the past, or to make more emphatic statements about crimes committed by their grandparents.

The film's two main characters, Paula and the psychopathic killer, Hein, are both of this same, younger generation. In one scene, Hein stabs his fellow anti-Hippocratic, Grombek, who is in the process of betraying him to Paula. This scene of violent murder is intercut with shots of Paula locating the certificate of the anti-Hippocratic society on the wall of her grandfather's study. As Paula smashes the framed document to pieces, the montage connects her with Hein—the heroine and the killer—as twin representatives of a generation with an opportunity to make a choice: either to repeat the mistakes of their grandparents, as the secret society continues to do through experiments that very obviously recall Nazi research, or to identify with the victims, in this case those on the operating table. As far as the film is concerned, Paula's choice to expose the anti-

10 I am thinking here in particular of comments made in Sections Five and Six of *Civilization and its Discontents*, as well as the discussion of the causes of war in the famous letter exchange from 1932 entitled "Why War?"

Hippocratic society is not enough; the narrative requires her to go an extra step and put herself in the place of the victims. At one point close to the film's denouement, she finds herself on the operating table, injected with the debilitating drug Promidal, a potential victim of Nazi-style experimentation.

In its willingness to be graphic, *Anatomie* is not only able to evoke the memory of Nazi atrocities, but it also, by taking place in the present rather than in the distant past, meets the important demand of calling to consciousness the continued presence of potential perpetrators. It makes this point especially clear by way of an epilogue that depicts medical students first apparently expressing regret over the scandal at their medical school, and then revealing that they have every intention of continuing to engage in such experiments once they go into private practice. Despite the fact that it is a genre-based horror film, *Anatomie* achieves the same goal with which Wenders credits *Resident Evil*. It reminds us that latent fascist tendencies persist, that its traces have not been completely extruded. It draws our attention to the problem of the legacy of German perpetration.¹¹ This genre-based film is not significant because it reaches a wider audience—it does not likely reach a wider audience than either the Oscar-nominated *Der Untergang* or the Oscar-winning *Nirgendwo in Afrika*—but because it can successfully talk about the atrocities of the past in a way that is frank with respect to violence, and one that suggests the possibility that such violence will return.

While one may hesitate to apply these conclusions uniformly to all genre films, I would argue that because of their relationship to sex and aggression, action and horror films or contemporary thrillers may more ably turn their gaze upon the war. As Lotte Eisner quite credibly notes, horror films are uniquely conjoined with psychological subtexts. German Expressionism, its stepchild, *Film Noir*, and—as I argue—contemporary thrillers, can always be viewed as part of an attempt to “draw something into the light that had been festering in the dark.”¹² Horror films are able to confront the past not only by virtue of their special relationship to the demands of the libido, but because (especially for the purposes of this inquiry), one can say that they have a willingness to depict monsters of one kind or another.

If we accept this premise—that some, though not all, popular German horror films are uniquely capable of directing our attention to the monsters of the past—we are led to a secondary question: What kind of

11 For a more extensive discussion of *Anatomie*, see Hantke's essay in *College Literature*.

12 This is a phrase used by Robert Schwentke to describe his own film *Tattoo* on an interview on the UK issued DVD of the film. Any references to interviews with Schwentke refer to this edition of the DVD, detailed in the list of works cited.

monsters do these contemporary German films construct? Historical narratives that theorize perpetrator motivation such as Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* and Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men*, are likewise monster stories. Although many have accused these tales of perpetrator motivation of being too streamlined or simplistic, or of separating the monsters of the past from the more ubiquitous ones of the present, they, like the horror films under discussion, provide answers to the question of whether the perpetrators are still among the living. It is my intention, then, in the following parts of this essay, to look respectively at how recent German thrillers—ones that do not shy away from violence—have constructed their monsters, how those monsters of the present provide an opportunity to confront audiences with the past, and for better or for worse, whether they offer a means of working it through. By way of a reading of Schwentke's *Tattoo* and Hirschbiegel's *Das Experiment*, I argue in favor of understanding apparently ordinary, popular genre films in the light of this ongoing project. *Tattoo* deals directly with the perpetration of atrocities, and how affect and identification play a part in confronting the crimes of the perpetrators. In the case of *Das Experiment*, the question that guides the film's director is the social-psychological one of how the perpetrators themselves were led to violence.

II

It is clear that Robert Schwentke's *Tattoo* means to evoke, at least in some measure, specters of the Holocaust. Of the film's most notorious set, a special room, designed by a lawyer who collaborates with the film's violent killer, in which all the furniture is upholstered in human skin, Schwentke says that German viewers immediately see the connection to the past, or that they "get it" right away. Here, the screen is once again haunted, although Lotte Eisner's chiaroscuro has now become a gray and brown palette that identifies a contemporary, alienated, hyper-industrial cityscape. At times consciously and at times unconsciously, the violence in *Tattoo* is calculated to recall Holocaust atrocities. It also provides, I suggest, instruction as to how viewers of post-perpetrator generations should orient themselves toward those atrocities. In the mode of post-memorial identification, the violence in the film opens a path by which contemporary Germans can think themselves into identifying with the traumatized victim.

In both form and content, Schwentke's film shares a close relationship to the hit U.S. thriller *Seven*. Though the films are not directly related,

they indisputably share some key plot elements. *Tattoo* was inspired by the latter's overall aesthetic sensibility. In Schwentke's film, a murderer selects victims with tattoos, removes large swaths of tattooed skin, and sells them to collectors in private internet auctions. Tough-talking, two-fisted Inspector Minks of the homicide division is assigned to the case. He especially requests that Marc Schrader, a rookie direct from the police academy, be recruited as his new partner. Minks has an ulterior motive for choosing this rookie; Schrader is immersed in Berlin nightlife and Minks hopes that he will be helpful in locating his own daughter who has run away from home following the death of her mother. Again, in ways that resonate with the plot and style of *Se7en*, the film's diabolical killer torments the police, playing cat and mouse with them, and ultimately locates and victimizes Minks's own daughter. Her murder drives Minks to suicide, leaving the rookie on his own to catch the killer. Schrader does not close the case, however, leaving open the possibility of continued violence.

The presence of tattooing is in some measure an evocation of the past, although here one must tread carefully. The tattoo itself does not always mark a victim, and it is certainly not equivalent with a reference to Jewish victims, as that theme is never mentioned directly. It is symptomatic of the form of indirect representation of which I am writing, that such meanings are not fixed or over-determined. The film's primary perpetrator of violence, Maya, is herself tattooed, and additionally, at one point the investigation leads Minks and Schrader to a tattoo parlor where a young man sits in the foreground of the frame having a neo-Nazi style tattoo etched into his arm. Schwentke is making the point that the tattoo on its own does not unambiguously signify the presence of a victim, but rather that the combination of the atrocious violence and dehumanization allows the tattooing in the film to carry this connotation.

In an essay on the historical legacy and re-employment of Holocaust-related tattoos among young people, Dora Apel has looked at how a number of artists, some of them Jews, have used tattoos to re-semanticize the history of the concentration camp. Apel cites the case of one conceptual artist, John Scott, who had himself tattooed and then had the tattooed section of skin—his thigh, inked with three small roses and a seven-digit number, resembling, but not the same as numbers of camp inmates—removed and displayed. While some viewed the exhibition as a simplistic means of showing identification with the victims, the artist himself averred that this had more to do with critiquing what he described as “a certain notion of our collective self image” (qtd. in Apel 303). The removal and display of the tattooed skin sounds much like what is transpiring in *Tattoo*, in which tattooed skin is likewise aestheticized and placed on display. The controversy and multiple readings surrounding Scott's

work points to a network of meanings one can also productively read into *Tattoo*.

Though this evocation of the Holocaust is somewhat indirect, there are ways in which the film insists that viewers make a link between tattooing, the murders, and Holocaust violence. In the film's very first sequence, a woman who is missing a patch of once tattooed skin runs, wounded and naked, out into the street. She then steps in front of a bus and is burned in the ensuing fire. The notion that she was "completely burned" ("völlig verbrannt"), as it is put in the film, redoubles the resonance of her victimization with specific characteristics of Nazi atrocity. More important, however, is the film's subsequent depiction of the skin room, as well as a later scene in which Minks learns that his daughter has been attacked by the killer. In that scene, the perpetrator sends Minks a wallet made from a fragment of his daughter's own tattooed body. The still bloody section of skin, drawn upon and transformed into an accessory, unambiguously recalls images that many Germans were compelled to confront in the period immediately following the war. Sequences in George Stevens's film *Nazi Concentration Camps* include the documentation of how skin of Jewish victims was used for similar purposes. Stevens's film was mandatory postwar viewing for many. These images were also employed as evidence in the Nuremberg trials.¹³ Samuel Fuller's film *Verboten!* includes a staging of a fictionalized representation of the effect that seeing such images was supposed to have on perpetrators, including a sequence in which a visit to the Nuremberg trials provokes at once catharsis and conversion on the part of a potential postwar Neo-Nazi. It is hard to imagine that Schwentke's image of a wallet made out of tattooed skin would not resonate for some viewers as a resurfaced collective memory.

If the film evokes memories of this sort by showing the consequences of violence, it deals with the issue of perpetration through the filter of generational conflict. In other words, it not only confronts its viewers with atrocities consonant with wartime ones, but enacts conflicted affective responses to those atrocities. As I indicated earlier with reference to the recent example of Grass's *Im Krebsgang* (although one could cite numerous others), a key question is how different generations deal with one another both with respect to revealing a secret history of perpetration as well as with respect to the degree to which one is permitted to identify with the victims in question. In ways that resonate with films such as *Das schreckliche Mädchen*, the use of this intergenerational motif suggests that something in the past had not been properly dealt with, and that the

13 For discussion of this, see Barnouw's chapter "To Make them See," esp. 7-12. On the use of the film *Nazi Concentration Camps* at Nuremberg, see Chapter One of Lawrence Douglas's *The Memory of Judgement* 11-37.

younger generation, often that of the grandchildren, has an obligation to take guilt upon themselves and confront it. This was certainly the case with the character Paula in *Anatomie*, who was compelled to look directly upon her grandfather's role as the perpetrator of awful medical experiments. In *Tattoo*, Schrader is forced to wonder about the older cop with whom he has been partnered. He appears to him as a father figure, but it also occurs to him that Minks may himself be a perpetrator of violence. He has been nicknamed "Minks the Killer" by other members of the force, and we are supposed to wonder whether or not he secretly murdered the man who recklessly killed his wife.

While this difference between the generations is consistent with the motif of uncovering concealed truth, in one sequence, as a body unrelated to the case is being exhumed (a motif that recalls films such as *Nekromantik*), the only truth that is uncovered consists of Minks revealing his feelings about his wife's death. The main thrust of this scene, therefore, is not so much in uncovering buried "facts" about Minks or about an older generation's crimes, but rather in its representation of affect. The distinction with which it plays—the generational distinction—ultimately involves the younger cop learning both to acknowledge and to act upon an apparently appropriate empathetic response when confronted with the victims of violence; it involves inquiring into what it would take for a member of this younger generation to put him or herself in the place of victims of atrocities. The film addresses, in other words, an act of post-memorial traumatic identification with the victims on the part of the grandchildren of possible perpetrators. As in *Anatomie*, the perpetrator of *Tattoo*, Maya, is of the same generation as the protagonist. She collaborates with a white-haired lawyer who enjoys his skin-upholstered furniture and comes across (stylistically if not otherwise) as an unreformed Nazi. Like the character Hein in *Anatomie*, Maya passes for an ordinary young person. Schrader, by contrast, describes himself only half-jokingly as being part of a new, reform-oriented generation of police. Once again, the film is about a choice offered to this younger generation, either to repeat the mistakes of their grandparents, or to identify with the victims of atrocious violence.

The transformation in the character Schrader is marked by the way he is depicted at the film's onset. He likes to dance alone and take recreational drugs in a way that, the film suggests, puts him out of touch with his feelings. By the end of the film, however, not only has Schrader learned to be a better detective insofar as he now takes crime personally, but, as is revealed to us during the course of the film's closing credits, he has himself tattooed, taking on a mark that indicates his fascination and identification with the victims. Much as Paula had ended up on the table

in *Anatomie*, Schrader is willing to become a potential victim in order to get at the truth.

Though all of this may seem somewhat removed from *Tattoo*'s manifest content, Schwentke himself has averred that he meant, at least in part, to screen the Nazi past. In an interview about *Tattoo*, he reflected on his own experience growing up in Germany, asking a question often asked by members of his generation: "Am I guilty because I'm German?"¹⁴ In the same way, Jörg Buttgerreit has also wondered about having grown up under the shadow of taboos, and about the impulse to find new ways of dealing with a legacy of violence. Buttgerreit explains the motivation on the part of filmmakers of his generation to play with, work through, and re-deploy images of the past. He recalls hearing about historical atrocities as a child at school, and later feeling a sense of "artificially implanted guilt" because he had not himself been the perpetrator of violence. Decontextualizing and recontextualizing the images and icons from the past came to him as a liberating opportunity. He adds, "when I saw Sid Vicious running around with a swastika T-shirt it was a relief. [. . .] When I first saw *Isa, She Wolf of the SS*, I was totally amazed by the possibilities of doing such an unthinkable thing" (Perks 207). In some respects, the unthinkable things that occur in *Tattoo*—or in *Der Todesking* or in *Anatomie*—become a productive means of bringing past atrocities into the psychic space of the present.

III

Oliver Hirschbiegel's film *Das Experiment* is not a horror film in the conventional sense, although it does deal with medical experiments and does not shy away from depicting graphic violence. The film is more a thriller than a horror film, and is explicitly concerned with violence insofar as it asks what conclusions can be drawn by social psychology regarding perpetrator motivation. *Das Experiment* centers on a journalist, Tarek Fahd, who, at the onset, is working as a cab driver (for reasons that are left somewhat vague). Tarek hopes to return to journalism through writing an investigative story about a psychological experiment in which twenty male participants are placed in a simulated prison, eight of whom are to play the role of guards and twelve of whom are to play the role of prisoners. Tarek applies and is included in the experiment. The guards are tasked with

14 This comment is made in the interview with the director on the UK edition of the DVD. See the list of films cited.

enforcing the regulations regarding meal times and bed times. Tarek, playing the part of a prisoner, rejects the rules of the game, owing to his anti-authoritarian personality, his desire to generate an interesting story, or both, and things quickly spiral out of control. He threatens the guards' sense of dominance and masculinity, and brings about a violent response. Despite the film's disclaimer, it quite evidently draws its inspiration from the well-known Stanford Prison Experiment, a 1971 study of the psychology of prison life conducted by Philip Zimbardo. The original study was meant to last two weeks, but it had to be ended prematurely after only six days because of the damaging and frightening consequences for the participants. In a much shorter time than anticipated, the guards became sadistic and the prisoners became clinically depressed.¹⁵ The film, *Das Experiment*, goes farther than Zimbardo's study: Where the Stanford Prison experiment was aborted, Hirschbiegel's film takes the extra step of envisioning a violent denouement.

Das Experiment never refers directly to Nazi violence, and for the purposes of this essay, it should be noted that Nazism is barely even mentioned in the film. As with *Tattoo*, the connection is indirect; it is one of resonance and implication. The entirety of the psychological experiment, and the bulk of the film, takes place in a space that is meant to be outside of or removed from the German cultural life-world. The "black box" in which the experiment is conducted is not only the title of Mario Giordano's novel on which the film is based, but it is also one of the film's key metaphors; it is the basement laboratory in which all its events transpire, and it is meant to suggest a blacking out of the issues of ideology, history, and generational conflict.

One may then ask whether references to Nazism and German history are deliberately avoided. There are points during the course of the film when it would otherwise seem likely that German history would make an appearance. For example, during a "reference test" meant to gauge Tarek's psychological response to a series of strong images, none of the violent pictures are of Holocaust atrocities. It seems as if this scene, one that recalls similar sequences in *A Clockwork Orange* or in *The Parallax View*, would be the appropriate place for those historical images, yet they are left out. The series of images in this test are totally deracinated and make no reference to the subject's German identity. At another point in the film, Schütte, one of the prisoners, refers to Berrus, the guard most given to violence, as a Nazi, along with other epithets. This is the only time the word is used in the film. Because Schütte mentions it, Berrus

15 A detailed description of the experiment appears on the official website of the Stanford Prison Experiment.

immediately hits him over the head, a blow that is ultimately fatal. The drama of Berrus's over-reaction may reveal the fact that Hirschbiegel, who was later to direct *Der Untergang*, is aware of the weight of this label, given the implications of his overall project.

To focus for a moment on the experiment itself, it is worth asking what conclusions the experimenters hoped to draw from the original study. The Zimbardo experiment is often linked to other behavioral experiments, such as those performed by the social psychologist Stanley Milgram, experiments to which Christopher Browning refers in *Ordinary Men*, his study of perpetrator motivation.¹⁶ The question Milgram meant to research was one of what people will do in the name of obedience, or how his test's subjects were willing to overlook their consciences in the interest of complying with authority. Milgram drew connections between his work and violence under the Third Reich, connections that *Das Experiment* never explicitly draws. This type of social-psychological inquiry has a particular resonance with the theorization of the psychology of Nazi perpetrators. Browning, who had investigated the police battalions who committed mass murder against Jewish communities in Poland under the Nazis, studied how one unit made up not of Nazi ideologues, but of relatively "ordinary" German men, became killers. According to the historian Omer Bartov:

Browning's explanation of this phenomenon is that these "ordinary men" became acclimatized to mass killing during the first few murder operations and ended up (with few exceptions) viewing them as part of a job, distasteful as it might have been to some of them, which they had to carry out. In Browning's account, it was not beliefs but circumstances which made ordinary men into killers. (129-30)¹⁷

The main thrust of Browning's thesis, and its relevance for *Das Experiment*, is that the killers in question were not "special" Germans. Drawn at random from a cross-section of German society, these men did not kill because they were compelled to or because they were threatened with dire punishment, they killed because, according to Browning, most ordinary men put in similar circumstances would have responded to orders in the same way. His study claims not to be about Germans, but about "ordinary men." As he puts it in his own concluding remarks:

The fundamental problem is not to explain why ordinary Germans, as members of a people utterly different from us and shaped by a culture that permitted them

16 For an account of the experiment, see Milgram's own *Obedience to Authority*. For his comments relating his own work to crimes committed during the Nazi era, see esp. 175-78. Browning also refers directly to Milgram in *Ordinary Men*, esp. 171-76.

17 For much more on this, as well as a critical perspective on the applicability of Milgram's study, see Chapter Six, "Germans as Nazis."

to think and act in no other way than to want to be genocidal executioners, eagerly killed Jews when the opportunity offered. The fundamental problem is to explain why ordinary men—shaped by a culture that had its own particularities but was nonetheless within the mainstream of western, Christian, and Enlightenment traditions—under specific circumstances willingly carried out the most extreme genocide in human history.” (222)

Browning’s work, and in some measure this film, manages to exonerate the Germans as Germans. The idea of “ordinariness” stands in for universality; it brackets out the possibility that the proclivity to violence is culturally specific.

In its effort to understand the psychology of the perpetrators, peer-pressure plays a key role, one that is significant in both Browning’s story and in Hirschbiegel’s film. Group dynamics, including peer-pressure centered around generally accepted concepts of masculinity, guide the formation of perpetrators. From the onset, the phallic apparatus of penal accoutrements fascinates the guards-to-be. One of them, who turns out to have a rapist buried not very deeply beneath his surface is an Elvis impersonator, and it could be argued that his proclivity toward violence was already prefigured by the way he enthusiastically wears his role. At one point the Elvis impersonator (who is also the one who sneaks a gun into the experiment) reacts defensively when the other guards ask him if he is a family man like them. The moment when he would otherwise have to reveal that he does not have a wife and kids is the very moment that he, in order to prove his masculinity, engages in one of the precipitating acts of aggression against the prisoners.

Browning’s emphasis on the truths of social science is underscored by what is depicted in *Das Experiment*, which intends not to implicate German culture in the crimes of Germany’s past. On the one hand, this argument that perpetrators were ordinary, that they were no different from us, can be a distressing thought. As Tim Cole has explained:

There is a sense in which we feel that such an outrageous notion as the systematic murder of people because of their Jewishness must have been the product of crazy minds. What is disturbing is when we come to the dawning realization that such a degenerate scheme was thought up and carried out by men and women who were ‘normal’ (people like Eichmann). [. . .] There is something terrifyingly nihilistic about the idea of banal murder and banal murderers. (71)

In some ways, therefore, *Das Experiment* is more frightening because of its decontextualization of German violence, or the suggestion that perpetrators might not be dissimilar to us. On the other hand, such a narrative of perpetrator motivation can also be reassuring for Germans. It may provide an alibi or an excuse not to understand perpetration as part of a cultural legacy. It is convenient to imagine that the perpetration of atrocities is a uniform, transcultural possibility.

Hirschbiegel's film, however, chooses a third way. It is not about German men or ordinary men, it is about men with authoritarian personalities, and as such it deals with the past without pointing an accusatory finger at its audience. Presumably, no audience member would imagine that they themselves would have been given to violence. In *Ordinary Men*, Browning makes a distinction between "eager killers" and "non-shooters." A similar distinction is put forward in Hirschbiegel's film. Not everyone is a potential killer; one must be predisposed. Berrus, the most violent perpetrator, is an eager killer, while another guard, Bosch, comes across as something like a non-shooter. The latter, it seems, was ill-suited among the guards as he gets no pleasure from his duties. At one turning point in the film, Bosch speaks directly to a surveillance camera in order to plead with the researcher in charge of the experiment, Dr. Thon, for guidance. Berrus, by contrast, during that same crisis, advises his fellow guards that they will likely regain control over the prisoners through humiliating them. Berrus here reveals himself as the film's monster, as an extreme authoritarian personality, as the leader among the guards. It is clear that the doctors also feel as though their experiment would not be the same without him, which casts doubt on the idea that almost anyone would react to the experiment's conditions in the same way.

The researchers realize that their experiment requires not only Berrus, but that it needs Tarek as well. In the context of the experiment, Tarek sometimes plays the part of an anarchist, appearing to reject the rules simply because they are rules, and sometimes he plays the part of a collective organizer, such as when he gets all the prisoners to do push-ups in defense of the prisoner Schütte, who is lactose-intolerant, but who has been forced to drink milk. The only insight we get into Tarek's background is that his Oedipal conflicts—his relationships to authority—were such that if his father told him not to do something, he did it.¹⁸ In his Oedipal relation to figures of authority, Tarek is the opposite of Berrus. As ground personnel for an airline, Berrus is at home in a uniform even before the experiment begins. He completely identifies with the rules, wanting to take orders only from Dr. Thon. To borrow the phrase that Raul Hilberg used in the film *Shoah* to describe perpetrators of Nazi atrocities, Berrus is the one who takes it upon himself to "become creative."

The last shot from within the world of the experiment, though not the last scene of the film, is a tracking shot that surveys the physically and psychologically wounded as if from the point of view of one who had

18 In his article in *Kinoeye*, Hantke theorizes more about Tarek's background, taking note of the very important fact that he is likely Turkish-German.

witnessed the whole event and was now assessing the damages. Unlike historical films, which, owing to their explicit temporal distance remove us from their events, this film issues us a challenge. It means to suggest that we, the viewers, regardless of backgrounds, are equally implicated in the experiment's "findings." As indicated, this can be seen problematically as an alibi for Germans, giving them the sense, as had *Ordinary Men*, that the problem of perpetration is not culturally specific. On the other hand, it conveys the unsettling truth that there are always perpetrators among us, and it illuminates the connection between authoritarian personalities and violence in the name of the State apparatus. Through the contemporary trappings of a thriller, rather than the histrionics of the heritage film, Hirschbiegel sets up a stage on which the drama of victims and perpetrators can be produced such that it again becomes present to the post-memorial generation.

IV

It should be noted that Oliver Hirschbiegel directed both *Das Experiment* and *Der Untergang*. The two films have in common that they both take place beneath the surface. The basement in *Der Untergang*, the *Führerbunker*, is a perverse world, similar to the uncontrollable institution depicted in Werner Herzog's *Auch Zwerge haben klein angefangen*. This space, however, the "black box" in which *Der Untergang* takes place, is entirely disjoined from the present. How are we to watch the film while bearing in mind Adorno's claim that the past that we so much wish to evade is still intensely alive? In his essay, "What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?" Adorno reminds us: "National Socialism lives on, and to this day we don't know whether it is only the ghost of what was so monstrous that it didn't even die off with its own death, or whether it never died in the first place—whether the readiness for unspeakable actions survives in people, as in the social conditions that hem them in" (115).

While they are not perfect means of coming to terms with that past, films like *Anatomie*, *Tattoo*, or *Das Experiment* can be more effective in the process than historical dramas like *Der Untergang*. These contemporary genre films, unlike historical dramas, are not afraid to shock or transgress against what is generally understood to be tasteful. Such transgression is the very hallmark of generic cinema. As Lotte Eisner's work shows us, blood spattered across the screen can serve as a signpost, meant to indicate that something that has been repressed is returning, or that a dam of sorts has been torn open. Confronting the wounds of history by way of

literal bodily wounds is one means of opening a path to working through the past of perpetration. Yesterday's atrocities can be thrust into today's psychic space. In this way, contemporary thrillers have an unparalleled ability to speak about violence and the uncontrolled id, as well as to challenge us by haunting today's screens with the monstrous ghosts of the past.

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