



## Waves of Memory: Cinema, Trauerarbeit and the Third Reich

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**Abstract.** Working through the shameful period of the national past and coping with the heritage of the Third Reich was a struggle dominating all levels of post-war German intellectual and cultural life including New German Cinema. In my presentation I theorize how filmmakers associated with the movement hoped to map up the various factors which not only gave birth to Fascism but kept it alive in the social unconscious even after its downfall. Using the insights of Theodor W. Adorno and Pierre Nora, I overview the birth of a cinematic memory-tradition in the 1970s which turned to both narrative and documentary (nonfiction) filmmaking not in order to escape (or urge people to escape) remorse once and for all through a kind of final solution to memory, but with the aim to develop an alertness to both the objective socio-cultural conditions and the unconscious recesses of the German identity that helped Fascism to power. The symbolic destruction of the Berlin Wall Germany may have lead to the geographical unification of Germany, but the reconstruction of national unity and identity required the extension of self-reflection and mass analysis through memory to every German. Cinema and especially the authors who once initiated the 70s movement again played a key role in this second wave of working through the Nazi past. Although these works come out of the hands of much-experienced filmmakers, I argue that they do not deepen previously established methods of memory-work, only make them more accessible for the global spectator.

*“What is conscious could never prove so fateful as what remains unconscious, half-conscious or preconscious.”*

*(Theodor Adorno, The Meaning of Working Through the Past)*

*“The Federal Republic did not succumb to melancholia; instead, as a group, those who lost their ‘ideal leader,’ the representative of a commonly shared ego-ideal managed to avoid self-devaluation by breaking all effective bridges to the immediate past.”*

*(Alexander and Margarethe Mitscherlich, The Inability to Mourn)*

## I.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, mainly due to cinema, the horrors of the Third Reich still seem to haunt us, serving as a source of both disgust and fascination. The moving image forms a memory a past, serves as a bridge to an era which itself was fascinated by images, and wanted to immortalize itself –amongst others – through images. The distance cinema bridges today is a historical one: it is a constructed remoteness arching between the distinctiveness of the now and the then. The average spectator watching the average WWII historical film of today (that is the viewer favouring empathic, but never narcissistic identifications and the narrative in the likes of classic Hollywood storytelling devices) is constantly made aware of this temporal distance. In a sense today's audiences are subjected to the mode of address characteristic of English–American productions during and after the war which articulated, with uttermost clarity, both geographical distinctions (here-there) and cultural dissimilarities (us-them), making identification a limited and conscious process. Actually it is the controlled marriage of fiction and reality that results in film epics, depictions of larger-than-life heroism and action-packed drama dressed up to appeal audiences looking for high production values. This cinema turns history into spectacle, just like the cinema of Nazi Germany which turns spectacle into history. This distinction may be developed into a way of differentiating between history conceived by Hollywood as staged history and Nazi cinema as a stage and embodiment of history – however my task in this essay lies elsewhere. Whereas the epic memory of the past dignifies and celebrates, there was nothing glorious in the war from the German point of view. An alternative to (and in a certain sense opposite of) epic depictions of the past is the elegiac one, in which mourning takes the role of creating distance between one and one's ideal self, of self-reflection allowing for the mental processing of past events and coming into terms with the effects of loss. In the pages to follow I give an overview of theoretical issues surrounding elegiac cinema in Germany with special attention to three representative examples: *Germany in Autumn*, *The Patriot* and *Our Hitler: A Film from Germany*.

As the above mottoes suggest, mourning is integral to the formation of a healthy identity, yet it is something that post-war German society was incapable of. Adorno and the Mitscherlichs both identify mourning as a way of working through the past, the *Trauerarbeit* without which daily existence, and, as Eric L. Santner suggests, the cinematic memory of the Third Reich will be shadowed by denial, ruinous repression and self-betrayal.

The insistence of the people and 1950s German cinema to avoid confrontation with former idols was more alarming than anything else. Adorno makes it unmistakably clear that the significance of *Trauerarbeit* was never simply to salvage the community from the shame it might have felt over the horrors committed under the Third Reich, but rather to offer support in its daily confrontation with the heritage of Nazism. The Mitscherlichs, relying on Freud, insist that what blocks the main obstacle in the path of communal healing in Germany is the result of a crushed ego-ideal, or as Santner puts it, the shattered “mirror of one’s own sense of self and power” (1990, 2). Narcissism, overidentification with idealized objects, and the ensuing fantasy of omnipotence all lie at the heart of the heritage of Nazism and so does a corrupted historical consciousness that makes *Trauerarbeit* – the separation of one from ego-ideals and the creation of distinctive self boundaries – into an almost superhuman effort. What I have in mind is that the marriage between self and ego ideal, *Volk* and *Führer*, was sealed by history, in other words, history itself functioned as the bounding material in this ego-construct, disallowing for the fragmentation of narcissistic selfhood. The Third Reich defined its emergence as a historical necessity and sought legitimacy for its existence in the historical mission it undertook. Identifying itself as a product of history was self-grounding, yet also self-debasing, since at the conclusion of the war this product was devalued in terms of its ideological, political and social zeal: in short declared a historical *cul-de-sac*. Does it not seem thus “natural” that people rejected and turned their backs on history, or in the words of the Mitscherlichs broke “all effective bridges<sup>1</sup> to the immediate past”? After all history made discontinuous not only itself in Germany, but the long line of tradition it believed to embody, consequently corrupting the reliance of people on this historically formed tradition. It made German culture into a scapegoat<sup>2</sup>, furthermore it abandoned German identity at the exact moment it found itself in the state that R.D. Laing describes as ‘ontological insecurity.’ What could have been a psychologically more shattering scenario, than seeing

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<sup>1</sup> It is of certain significance that the Mitscherlichs use the words “effective bridges,” since Germans did not altogether deny the past. As Caryl Flinn has argued: “The national psyche was unwilling to confront the realities of its complicity with National Socialism, and produced in its stead an enormous battery of symptoms that, in one extreme permutation, had Germans assuming the position of victim, rather than that of the aggressor’s associate” (2004, 9-10). The self-proclaimed victim position is an ineffective way of relating to the past exactly because it weakens the role of responsibility and strengthens that of deference in the formation of self-awareness, furthermore it expresses – in the words of Santner – the lack of the “capacity to experience empathy for the other *as other*” (Flinn 2004, 7).

<sup>2</sup> During and after the war certain English-speaking historians argued that the rise of Fascism is rooted in the aggressiveness of German culture. Representative examples are M. P. Nicolai’s *From Nietzsche Down to Hitler* (London, 1938) and William Montgomery McGovern’s *From Luther to Hitler: The History of Nazi-Fascist Philosophy* (London, 1941).

one's historical mission annulled, yet being expected to rebuild a ruined country? With this in mind, it seems all too rational to argue that Germans saw two waves of war: one fought in the name of the Party and the Reich and another for that which the Party and Reich corrupted. The reason why *Trauerarbeit* is so difficult to adopt is because it asks people to remember at a time when they fully embrace the desire to be forgotten as historical beings for good. And yet – as Adorno consistently argues – a group identified as historical waste can only hope to be reintegrated into history if it remembers what made it such, if it repossesses its past as history.<sup>3</sup> This involves coming out of the spell of ahistorical myths Germans have woven around themselves during the Nazi-era. After all it is these myths – having become a constitutive element of everyday identity – which are to be shattered through mourning.

What empowers memory are neither the criminal cases against neo-Nazis, nor the anti-Fascist demonstrations or the ever growing number and size of monuments and memorials, but the alertness towards the conditions and tendencies that once harboured National Socialism and what Adorno studies as the “superior strength of unconscious processes” (2003, 7). To counter the immense power of unconscious identifications and collective narcissism, he calls for self-reflection, subjective enlightenment and mass analysis, in short a kind of self-imposed denazification. The late work of Fassbinder, especially *Veronika Voss* (1982) portrays the almost superhuman strengths of a past unprocessed. What his characters – no matter whether protégés or the victims of the Nazi regime – call “indefinable pain” is the experience of a consciousness alienated from oneself, at war with oneself, becoming fully consumed by the reality of both physical and psychological bondage. Few films have made it so unmistakably clear that unless the psychic scars are addressed through mourning, memory-work and self-reflection, total destruction follows.

Adorno's exquisite comparative study of the socio-psychology or rather group psychopathology of the Third Reich and the Germany of the post-war economic miracle lays claim both for a memory that is not commemorative and an alertness towards the secret survival of what he calls Fascism “concealed behind the smooth façade of everyday life” (2003, 14). Let me refer to Fassbinder once again, this time to *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1979) which tells how the psychic scars of the past eat their way through the façade of physical prosperity. In this film everybody seems to progress towards a fuller life but the closer they come to

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<sup>3</sup> Hungarian historian György Majtényi – in his essay on post-war tendencies of German historiography – raises the same question when he writes: “How can the past become history in Germany?” (Majtényi 2003, 142. Translation mine, Gy. Zs.).

sharing it with others, the less they have to share, and the more evident their emotional emptiness becomes. They appear to be pregnant with the already mentioned narcissistic fantasy of omnipotence which, despite their exquisite talents of manipulation and corrupting power, crushes down on them, blasting the vague hopes of the heroine for a lasting unification with his husband in the final scene just as the photo of Hitler is blasted into pieces by an Allied bomb at the beginning of the film.

The legacy of Adorno and the Mitscherlichs is embraced not only by Fassbinder, but the German phrase *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* which refers to the struggle of coming to terms with the past.<sup>4</sup> This struggle received expression on different fronts and by very different means. It took shape in some genuine literary masterpieces, exemplified by Günter Grass' *Danzig Trilogy*, Heinrich Böll's *Billiards at Half-past Nine* and Siegfried Lenz's *The German Lesson* but also in terrorism peaking in the violent activities of the Red Army Faction. Clearly on opposing ends of the spectrum, yet both artistic production and extremist action expressed its struggle with the past in terms of a generational conflict.

German cinema, which in the 1960s just saw the emergence of a new generation of filmmakers, did not remain blind to the struggle with the past. As Flinn notes "the release of *The Inability to Mourn* coincided with the movement's first big international successes ... showing the interconnected nature of intellectual, aesthetic, and political endeavors of the time" (2004, 10). Santner describes this complex endeavour as a concerted homeopathic recovery, comparing it to a form of healing in which trauma victims are subjected to small doses of displeasing experiences in order to develop mechanisms to master them. There is hardly any representative of the so-called New German Cinema who would turn a back on homeopathic healing, the troublesome business of working through a malign past, that involved reflecting upon the often concealed roots and/or heritage of Fascism. Part of the therapeutic process was to make the critical reinvestigation of recent German history a legitimate topic for cinema. As Nora M. Alter writes "New German Cinema addressed the past with an aggressive platform that called for radically different films about a new version of history" (2002, 5–6), and involved turning away from both the cinema of the older generation of filmmakers (the *Papaskino*) and the styles and standards of Hollywood cinema. As Young German Cinema soon came to be recognized – mainly due to the success it enjoyed among international

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<sup>4</sup> Besides this layer of meaning, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* also refers to the official national policy in post-war Germany making itself articulate in various cultural practices, the media, public debates and the school curriculum. Intended as a semi-propagandistic program, working through the past was a state induced framework of memory that – amongst others – filmmakers of the New German Cinema would shape to their own temperaments and artistic principles.

cinophile audiences – as the New German Cinema, its directors soon became key figures of the national cultural elite, and with it, dominant voices of national consciousness. Coming to terms with the past in front of their audience's very eyes, in other words, as responsible artists expected to offer therapeutic visions, must have meant extreme psychological pressure. This messianistic/healer role attributed to the artist fits well into the image Thomas Elsaesser draws of New German Cinema and its heavy reliance on romanticism, sensibillism, its cult of subjectivism and apolitical autonomy but also its irrationalism (embracing both fantasy and the power of the unconscious processes). Yet many filmmakers objected against being identified on such terms as messianistic, visionary artists, since it was exactly this voluntary subjugation of the masses under an authoritative position (as a constitutive element to Fascism) they were fighting against. Alexander Kluge has been one of the most eager critiques of the filmmaker as prophet and mythic transcendence, whose supposedly superior visions evade the social sphere as didactic models to follow. Kluge's criticism of democratic values being imposed on people and memory-work forced on them from above took shape in his understanding of artistic creativity as "social productivity" (Elsaesser 2004, 126): a construction of memory and political commitment as arising from the lower levels of social contacts. In similar terms, Santner's theory of the mourning work – as understood by Flinn – is a self-therapy, a self-imposed denazification "on which a wider social and historical psyche could elaborate or perform the homeopathic process of coming to grips with an extraordinarily poisonous past" (Flinn 2004, 11).

## II.

To repossess the past is not to relive it, to mourn is not to psychically prolong a physical non-presence. Repossession and mourning furthermore require a form of memory, which is discontinuous and allows for detachment, distance and difference. French historian Pierre Nora (1989) argues that history became this form of memory<sup>5</sup> in what he calls "hopelessly forgetful modern societies" (1989, 8). According to Nora real memory is "unself-conscious, commanding, all-powerful, spontaneously actualizing" (1989, 8) and is anchored in the "undifferentiated time of heroes, origins and myth" (1989, 8). As opposed to this magical and affective experience of timelessness, modern memory is "an intellectual and secular production" (1989, 9) anchored in traces, identifying itself as organization through

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<sup>5</sup> Nora's relevant argument declares that, whereas in the past moments of history used to be inseparable from the movement of history (cf. 1989, 12), with modern memory the past and the future are no longer extensions of the present, but become fractured and discontinued.

mediation. Whereas real memory is expressed in ritual repetition, modern memory substituted to historical consciousness reconstructs “what is no longer” in *lieux de mémoire*.<sup>6</sup> The paradigmatic shift uncovered here, in short, could be grasped as the act of taking memory into one’s hand and control, even at the price of losing a link with the past inscribed “in the body’s inherent self-knowledge” (1989, 13).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was the totalitarian regimes that took memory into their own hands in the most spectacular ways and turned all aspects of life into *lieux de mémoire*: realms seized by history. Nazi Germany was especially eminent in historicizing memory: birthday celebrations, memorial services, national commemorations, etc. were all made into *lieux*, realms where not only the past but history itself was turned into a controlled substance. Relying on the assumptions of Nora – according to which the intellectualization and the psychologization of memory go hand in hand – it is easy to see that, what characterises modern societies (and more so totalitarian ones) is not simply a desire to comprehend the past more objectively, but a lust to control and manipulate the formation and transformation of identity (either individual or collective). Historical memory benefits those who want to take the future into their hands<sup>7</sup>, take control over the active shaping of those cognitive structures and frameworks of public discourse which determine the consensual sphere of everyday values, conducts and morals. It is these institutionalized spheres of identity-formation that the Nazi regime corrupted, making it into the realm of narcissistic identification, using history to capture the national irrational and myth.

If history lay at the foundation of this realm (which in a sense became the grave of German identity), history itself had to be revisited, and the past once again taken into one’s hand. Revisiting is not rewinding, history will be redeemed the least by plunging into the past through something of a duty-memory: it has to be recaptured and turned into a realm of self-reflexive memory, *lieux de mémoire* of mass analysis, mourning and healing.

Within the body of work identified as New German Cinema, *Germany in Autumn* (1978) is probably the most complex and combatant *lieu*. Being a film of multiple authorship,<sup>8</sup> it is a remarkable example of collective *Trauerarbeit*, but

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<sup>6</sup> In Nora’s understanding anything may become a *lieu de mémoire* which is formed while the spontaneous experience of the past, of tradition is articulated indirectly, that is, named, shown, and archived (Nora 1989, 8).

<sup>7</sup> This is what George Orwell’s famous lines – *He who controls the past controls the future. He who controls the present controls the past* – express with such clarity.

<sup>8</sup> The directors included Alexander Kluge, Volker Schlöndorff, Alf Brustellin, Bernhard Sinkel, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Katja Rupé, Hans Peter Cloos, Edgar Reitz, Maximiliane Mainka, Peter Schubert, Hans Peter Kloos, while Heinrich Böll and Peter F. Steinbach appear among the writers.

also an exquisite social document of the heritage of Fascism. It is a *lieu* of multiple non-hierarchical voices recapturing history as a site of open and symbolic dialogue. As Elsaesser notes, this is a dialogue of “the political father and the revolting children” (2004, 302), mother and son literally evoked in a heated argument between Fassbinder and Lilo Pempeit, but even more so in the violent exchange of opinion between the older generation for whom the execution of Hans Martin Schleyer transgresses a taboo and the younger generation who employ shock-tactics to wake their elders from the amnesia they entered during the Nazi regime and like Pempeit await “a kind of authoritarian ruler, who is quiet good and quite kind and orderly” to solve the political crises at hand. The filmmakers take sides with neither group, in fact they reveal, on the one hand, that contrary to its self-image, the Baader-Meinhof group is not a popular antifascist movement, but a fanatic terrorist cell, but also expose, on the other hand, that the parents, in their failure to begin the internal process of denazification, build up provocative taboos. The address of each sequence is both demythologizing, critical and analytical, it furthermore turns the official/non-official hierarchies upside down. The official is embodied by the government ceremonies at St. Eberhard Kirche in Stuttgart and the well-publicized commemoration of the memory of Schleyer held at the pride of German industry: the Mercedes factory. These organized forms of mourning are empty ceremonies, institutionalized formalities that address democratic principles only superficially. In contrast the non-official and peripheral voices, like the short lecture of Horst Mahler (the master-mind of the Baader-Meinhof group) about post-war social crises and generational conflict of Germany, is therapeutic even if it points out the shortcomings of democracy as practiced. Although interviewed in prison, Mahler seems to be the most authentic person in the film, a mourner in the likes of Adorno and the Mitscherlichs.

*Germany in Autumn* does not arrive to a satisfying conclusion in the numerous issues it raises; instead of reconciling the historically embedded generational conflict, it dramatizes it in long sequences portraying basically two West-Germans mourning beside one another: unified after all, but in pain and melancholia and not in principle and mourning. And yet, melancholy – as Saltner argues “is the rehearsal of the shattering or fragmentation of one’s primitive narcissism, an event that predates any real mourning for a lost object.” (1990, 3.) Such example of *Trauerarbeit* as homeopathic healing is the case of Manfred Rommel (the mayor of Stuttgart) who resists the public pressure to decline last honours from the Ensslin family and consequently embraces that which the Nazi Party and Reich first and foremost corrupted and rejected: empathy.



If *Germany in Autumn* urged for an all-pervasive melancholia to be transformed into a mourning that reconciles generations, Alexander Kluge's *The Patriot* (1979) meditates about the possibilities of a patriotic German history, the catalyst for a positive self-image. The heroine of the film is history teacher Gabi Teichert, who in a quest for "better material" to be used in her history classes, comes to acquire odd research techniques, making use of a shovel, binoculars and alchemist's tools. Gabi may be the main character of Kluge's complex collage of images, music and text but the dominant perspective belongs to a frozen knee. As Flinn observes "[c]ompared to fellow historian Gabi Teichert, who is a mere assembler and instructor of historical material, the knee is that as well as a *participant* in history. At once raw material and historian, wound and witness, the knee proves to be the central character of *The Patriot* and its most significant historian" (2004, 125). With the appearance of the knee, the connotations of patriotism transform: it will no longer refer to the positivist undertaking of producing a study material for institutionalized education. A new question arises: can the imagined voice of a frozen German soldier's knee under Stalingrad (the only thing left of him), and with it the traumas, the fractured bodies, numbed energies and ruins be taken as a form of homeopathic healing? Flinn thinks so: "old fragments [can be] put into new contexts and presented to listeners for them to make meaningful, personal connections to history" (2004, 132).<sup>9</sup> The difference between the knee and Gabi is that of the materialist historian and the material of history. Gabi exhaustively works her way through the past and the present, she undertakes a study of historical debris – such as fairy tales, the lines of Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*, the procedures of dismantling unexploded bombs, diary entries, children's poems, gestures at a school meeting and at a party convention, etc – to extract from them the very material history is made of: a molecular history. And yet hers is the cerebral, principled study of German history, something 'the closer one looks at, the further it recedes from light.'<sup>10</sup> Being a materialist, her intellectual desire for enlightenment comes from above, from the head. The bodily, lively history she is in search for can only come from the limbs, the material and participant of history itself. In my understanding, the traumatic (thus self-alienating) perspective of the knee may well be a minor or microscopic one, yet it expresses a universal ahistorical desire: the desire to survive and live. There is no patriotic rendering of German history until memory can only comprehend the patriotic sacrifices and

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<sup>9</sup> Representatives of the German leftist circle of historians conducting research in *Alltagsgeschichte* (microhistory) would fully agree with this assumption.

<sup>10</sup> Kluge himself uses this quote from Karl Krause and after it disappears he adds the word "Germany."

not the unpatriotic desire to survive of those sacrificed. For me Kluge's film identifies the enforced sacrifice as the "natural" order of history, as if the "above" was structurally programmed to deprive the "below" from its most primal desires, leaving no place for escape. It is at this point where the "below" gradually becomes the perspective of any victim<sup>11</sup> subjected to any principle administered from above.<sup>12</sup> *The Patriot* thus warns against idealizing history and suggests that mourning should take the shape of a counter-memory, one that hopes to commemorate "the knees," "the others" in history. In this respect, taking the past in one's hands and the formation of *lieux de mémoire* needs not only self-consciousness, but likewise self-criticism.

*Our Hitler: A Film from Germany*, Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's (1977) own *Trauerarbeit*,<sup>13</sup> is a grandiose, yet ironic *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a marriage of total artistic synthesis in the likes of the theories of Wagner and Brechtian effects of distancing and alienation. Syberberg's aesthetic laboratory confronts the viewer with an anti-realist, highly stylized spectacle (cardboard figures, dummies, projected still and moving images) and a chaotic aural environment (monologues, musical excerpts, original recordings of speeches, marches, radio broadcasts) resulting in a surrealist-symbolic atmosphere as one would feel in a puppet theatre, or rather, as Fredric Jameson suggests: "the playroom, or the toybox" (1981, 102) filled – we might add – with "stranded objects of cultural inheritance fragmented and poisoned" (Santner 1990, xiii). For Syberberg this is the adequate stage of the Nazi-era history of Germany, reduced to the level of kitsch, perverse spectacle of overpowering intensity and grandiose dramaturgy that makes it very hard not to embrace the power of the irrational and the mythic. As Gilles Deleuze argues, Syberberg's Hitler is not a psychological individual but the embodiment of a "complex, heterogeneous, anarchic space where the trivial and the cultural, the public and the private, the historic and the anecdotal, the imaginary and the real are brought close together ... all of equal importance and forming a network, in kinds of relationship which are never those of *causality*." (Deleuze 1989, emphasis added, 268–9) Hitler the person is like anyone else who dwells in the world of causality: a harmless clown, a frustrated actor. "Syberberg takes the image of Hitler

<sup>11</sup> As this line of argumentation openly declares that the perspective of the knee receives a universal character Flinn would clearly object. He writes: "Why didn't Kluge use the knee of a Pole killed during Germany's invasion? Or the knee of a camp prisoner whose leg had been amputated without anaesthesia? it is difficult to reconcile the film's conspicuous omission of the Shoah and of non-German histories in Germany" (2004, 133-4).

<sup>12</sup> It is also at this point that the influence of Adorno's idea of the "negative dialectics" on Kluge becomes apparent.

<sup>13</sup> Syberberg himself declared in a text title at the end of the film.

as enemy” writes Deleuze (1989, 269), the Hitler, which is evidently ours, because it is instances of non-causal but ecstatic thinking, the vitality of dreams, the unconscious fantasies of omnipotence, the irrational identifications that produce him: Hitler comes into being within the network of irrational, non-causal linkages in the collective unconscious. Cinema and projection is given such central importance in *Our Hitler* exactly for this reason. What makes Hitler the image is always already there in commercial cinema, in the legends, myths, fictions, mass produced unconscious identifications, kitsch and cultural debris pouring out from Hollywood. To overcome the image, and thus Hitler, is to go through all layers of the unconscious, to locate and receive all its interferences. Based on Deleuze (and also Jameson), this might take place as a kind of ventriloquism, where one lends not only his/her voice, but unconscious to the puppet, this way, spelling out all that which is otherwise inexpressible. With reference to Syberberg’s other works we can see, how his chief aim is to make German history and culture expressible by mapping up and making visible the stratification and interference of the multiple voices populating it, be that artistic, cultural, political, ideological, melodramatic, authoritarian, popular or confrontational. In line with Jameson I also assign a certain therapeutic function to Syberberg’s cartography of the past as an interference of unconscious energies and cultural debris. Just as one becomes more alert and immune to manipulation if s/he possesses a basic understanding of the constructedness of the cinematic image, an awareness for the Hitler living in our belly – as any psychoanalyst would agree – gives a certain degree of control over him. In sum, Syberberg’s attempt to come into terms with the past is highly personal, it would be a mistake to consider it a universal model of *Trauerarbeit*, least a final solution to mourning, yet in its persistent commitment to the labour of remembering, it becomes a key text of national elegiac cinema.

### III.

Although certain segments of memory-art prospered in the 1980s,<sup>14</sup> cinema seemed to have lost its resolve. With the making of American mini-series entitled *The Holocaust* (1978) – as an answer to which Edgar Reitz made *Heimat* (1979-1984) – the elegiac mode of address was overcome by a sensationalist one. As Flinn notes, *The Holocaust* was “once too banal and too excessive ... exploiting the affective excesses associated with the [melodramatic] genre ... its purported

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<sup>14</sup> Most notably combatant memorial art exemplified in the self-reflexive, deconstructive counter-memorials of Horst Hoheisel, Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz, Christian Boltanski, Micha Ullman, Renata Stih, and Frieder Schnock.

demurrals from political and economic problems, and its polarization of good and evil, creating a diegetic world inhabited largely by historically vacant figures.” (2004, 30.) Keeping in mind the alarming likeness of Hitler and Hollywood, Syberberg points out, such a heroicizing point-of-view of the Holocaust more likely conserves than eliminates the Nazi mindset.

The symbolic destruction of the Berlin Wall has led to the unification of Germany, ended the country’s political quarantine and strengthened democratic values and institutes. The country was “officially” reintegrated into both the international community and likewise into history: this time finding itself on the side of the victors. Little surprise that critical voices of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* caught on, especially after the public lecture of Martin Walser in 1998. Walser challenged *Trauerarbeit* both as externalized duty authoritatively enforced on people – a kind of ‘policing’ instead of a policy – and as “the exploitation of our shame for current goals.” Unfortunately cinema also offered such cases of exploitation. Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993) not only followed in the tradition of *The Holocaust* as a sensationalist cinema intended for the global spectator but marks a key moment in the commoditization of the Holocaust. Or shall we say that Spielberg understood the pressure of times changing and adapted to the new challenges of memory? Either way, the nature of commemorative healing in German cinema was significantly affected. The Shoah and the Nazi-era was no longer an internal, national affair, it became a point of interest for international audiences of little historical knowledge of the period and little interest in the delicate nature of raising certain issues in Germany. Instead of dense texts laden with introspection they were looking out for impressive historical depictions. With the fall of a bipolar world-order, the weakening distinction between left-wing and right-wing political attitudes and the uniformization of global consumption models, traditional self-inquisitive filmmaking – serving as the backbone of basically all European new waves – lost its resolve. In regard to the German context and the *Trauerfilm* this meant that the past became more than ever a legitimate topic of the historical film.

This shift occurred in close connection with the aging of the war- and post-war generations. The new generation of young Germans had no direct experience and little interest in the matters of the Third Reich: for them the past was less traumatic and involved little self-analysis and reflection. They encountered challenges of a different kind, such as the sociopolitical impact of large-scale immigration and the current debates of whether to tolerate or limit ethnic and cultural diversity in the formulation of a German nationhood. Their sense of

identity, memory and mourning is of a different composition and only history will tell how persistent they are in resisting the Hitler that interpenetrates and animates everything we do not control, but which controls us.

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