

(Dissertation Abstract)

The Depiction of Hitler: Forming Collective Memory on Hitler in German and American historical fictional Films between 1945-2009

Even though there is a large number of films in which Hitler as a figure is depicted, his image contribute little towards an analysis of the portrayal of the NS-past. Instead, as a result of a detachment in the historical drama between the figure of Hitler and the depiction of the Holocaust, which I claim led to an unconscious split-up in forming the memory on Hitler and the Holocaust, these movies contribute solely to what is called, the “normalization,” of the Nazi-past. While neglecting to deconstruct the meanings in and of his depiction, critics focus mostly on the authenticity or the ridicule of Hitler, as each new film is just another shot for the reconstruction of the past.

My dissertation focuses on the depiction of Hitler in movies from three countries between 1945 and 2009. The three countries include the United States, where since 1941 movies have produced a plethora of Hitler images, The Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic, where movies were produced in which Hitler was largely absent from the scenic recreation of Nazism.

Through a systematical deconstruction of images it will be demonstrated how different cultural perceptions created specific images of Hitler, which in turn shaped our thoughts, feelings and knowledge about this person. Within this deconstruction of the Hitler images, it will become obvious to what extent the image of Hitler as cultural-historical “product” transmits social views, values, and myths and represents at the same time a mirroring of the society.

My dissertation is based upon case studies, which establish the starting point for the comparison of the different depictions. Through the comparison in the last chapter of the work, I am able to highlight the peculiarities in the depiction of Hitler in movies from these three countries.

The analysis focuses on the form, the content and the context of the production of these movies, through which the collective memory of Hitler is shaped since the end of WW2 until the present.

Four elements are constructing the empirical basis for my study:

1. The transcription of each film – enables the reading of the narrative and supports the deconstruction of the content.
2. Based upon significant points of social and cinematographic transitions, my study is divided into three distinct time periods: the first period extended from 1945 to 1961; the second period from 1961 to 1989 and the third time period from 1989 to 2009.
3. Interviews with experts, such as Gertrud Koch and Martin Wiebel, shed a light on the exclusion of Hitler's image from the German film between 1955 and 1999, and explain the social-political motivation of the unique way to depict Hitler in Germany after 1945.
4. Analysis factors – each film is analyzed through twelve analysis factors. They examine the form (lighting, Camera-angles, music), the content (narration, conflicts, relationship between the figures, the character of Hitler, the subject of victimization), the technical details of the films (black-white filming, co-production, ect.), Newspaper film critics (New York Times, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung) and the biography of the director and the actor who plays Hitler.

Apart from obvious distinctions in the portrayals' different countries, as for example the language and its role for the authenticity of the depictions, one of the main differences between the German (west and east) and the American depiction appears in the affiliation of Germany to Hitler; the German movie portrays Hitler as an inseparable part of Germany. Germany vow not to the leader of the Reich, but to Hitler. His centrality in the NS-structure is detected less through the content as through the anonymity of the other characters collaborating with Hitler. The American depiction is built on contrasts: Hitler is always represented as an anti-thesis to the hero of the story, such as in the case of the figure of

Rommel and Stauffenberg; while they embodying Germany, Hitler is a foreign enemy to Germany, therefore serving Germany means not obeying Hitler.

As a means to constitute a new basis for a collective awareness and identification, in the first period (1945-1961) films have a tendency to deconstruct the Hitler myth as it was manifested in the 1930's and 1940's. Films address and discuss the myth of Hitler as a seductive power, as a "Godsend," and through dialogues, mise-en-scene, and selected actors try to destroy it. With the deconstruction of the myth, the idea of national-socialism appears faked as well. Therefore national-socialism couldn't be realized without Hitler and couldn't exist after him.

In the second period (1961-1989), and particularly during the so called "Hitler-Wave," as biographies and documentaries focused on the person Hitler, his habits, his relationships, etc., the American depiction strives to build an adequate reconstruction of Hitler through film-technique (for example, black-white filming) and the aesthetic reconstruction of his figure. On the contrary, the young German filmmakers, who sought to deal with the society and the structure of the NS-regime, excluded the depiction of Hitler as a figure. However, portraying Hitler indirectly, through light-motives, or through flags, marching soldiers and Wagner - depictions which are a pars-pro-Toto of Hitler - reinforced his myth in the formation of the memory. They depicted Hitler not as a figure, but as an idea, as an abstract entity, subjected to our imagination.

The narratives in the third period (1989-2009) distinguish themselves primarily through the reorientation in the reconstruction of Hitler and his myth; they engage the myth through technique and content as an inherent part of the understanding of national-socialism. Furthermore, the authenticity of the story is enhanced less by the facts, as by emotional aspects, which support and explain the attachment of the German to Hitler.

The conclusion offers a survey of the developments in the representation of Hitler in movies from 1945 until 2009 across the three countries.