

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Der Untergang

Credits:

Director: Oliver Hirschbiegel

Script: Bernd Eichinger
(based on Joachim Fest's *Der Untergang* and Traudl Junge's *Bis zur letzten Stunde*)

Producer: Bernd Eichinger

Cinematography: Rainer Klausmann

Editing: Hans Funck

Music: Stephan Zacharias

Special Effects: Die Nefzers

Cast: Bruno Ganz (Adolf Hitler); Alexandra Maria Lara (Traudl Junge); Corinna Harfouch (Magda Goebbels); Ulrich Matthes (Joseph Goebbels); Juliane Köhler (Eva Braun); Heino Ferch (Albert Speer); Christian Berkel (Dr. Schenk) Thomas Kretschmann (Hermann Fegelein); Andre Hennicke (General Mohnke); Alexander Held (Walter Hewel); Ulrich Noethen (Heinrich Himmler)

Screening Hitler – Allen Krumm

"Wir sind mit Hitler noch lange nicht fertig." It is difficult to argue with this assessment. Why? Perhaps because, as Joachim Fest notes, "History records no phenomenon like him." In the introduction of his biography, Fest continues:

"...No one evoked so much rejoicing, hysteria and expectation of salvation as he; no one so much hate. No one else produced, in a solitary course lasting only a few years, such incredible accelerations in the pace of history. No one else so changed the state of the world and left behind such a wake of ruins as he did."

Jacob Burckhardt said that to be a good historian "...one has to be able to read." For the present generation his aphorism might be amended to "one has to be able to watch." People get much of their history from the movies and a prodigious sub-genre of that cinematic history comprises films about Hitler. Notwithstanding his negatives, der Führer disposes of more than a little box office magic, rivaling sex, car crashes and special effects as an audience aphrodisiac and as an enduring source of fascination. Perhaps there is a belief, ala Putzi Hanfstaengel, that if enough is written and filmed about him, and enough people read the books and see the films, future generations will be inoculated; they will be done with him, and a recurrence of such a time will be rendered impossible.

An enthusiastic kinophile, Hitler would be pleased by the number and range of productions inspired by his *Lebenslauf*. Actors ranging from Albin Skota (*Der Letzte Akt*) and Alec Guinness (*Hitler: The Last Ten Days*) to Derek Jacobi (*Inside The Third Reich*) and Anthony Hopkins (*The Bunker*) have given serious portrayals of him. Hitler has been savagely spoofed by the likes of Charlie Chaplain (*The Great Dictator*), Moe Howard (*I'll Never Heil Again*) and Jack Benny (*To Be Or Not To Be*). He has even inspired such fictional flights of horror as *The Boys From Brazil* and alternative histories such as *The Fatherland*.

A director, like every artist must make interpretive and artistic choices. Is the goal to achieve understanding or to achieve accuracy? Or is it perhaps simply to send a message? When these choices impinge on Hitler, they are fraught with perils. How do you tell a story about Hitler and the Third Reich from the inside out without incurring the accusation of presenting an apologia. Can a director be guilty of humanizing Hitler? What about those surrounding him – were they pawns, or accomplices or something in between? Whatever choices are made, and whatever the rationale for those choices, the director will never please everyone, neither artistically nor historically, and is more likely to incur the wrath of critics for promulgating what they deem as either bad art or false history.

It has been essentially de rigueur to either demonize Hitler as a virtually inhuman supernatural phenomenon, or to portray him as a complete lunatic. Another school of thought would counter that he was rather a very rational, very brutal warlord whose *Treibstoff* was pure extract of hate. Opting for either of the former two views, contends the third view, precludes any possibility of understanding why he was able to influence so many others and dominate his own revolution from the day he took power until the day he died.

So, perhaps to break a small lance for this third view, Oliver Hirschbiegel heads once more into the breach. The film scholar William Rothman titled his major work of criticism *The "I" Of The Camera* and it seems that with every film there is a synergy, for better or worse, between the technical Eye of the camera and the interpretive I of the camera. The visual narrative presented to us is the product of this synergy. It remains for us to digest the story.

In *Der Untergang* Hirschbiegel employs his own unique version of this methodological hypostasis to attempt yet another navigation through the hermeneutical minefields of history and the aesthetic shoals of art. His narrative proceeds principally via the I of Traudl Junge's memory. She was a young woman who was one of Hitler's private secretaries. But first we briefly meet the

contemporary Traudl, in old age pondering and regretting that fate ever made it possible for her to have such memories.

The setting is Berlin from April 20th until May 2nd, the same period as G.W Pabst focused on in his 1955 version of this story. Hirschbiegel ensconces us immediately within the inner sanctum of the dying Third Reich and his sequencing of scenes in the bunker viscerally conveys the radically conflicting dynamics of that shrinking kingdom: fanatical faith cohabits with crass cynicism; unbreakable discipline synergizes with rampant dissolution; unflinching realism dialogues with unbridled delusions.

To the degree that Hirschbiegel's *Eye* succeeds in capturing *wie es eigentlich war*, it is perhaps because he tends to avoid pandering to audience expectations or relying on conformist, orthodox iconography. There are few intrusive interpretive devices, and no special effort is made to either involve or distance the viewer. The reconstruction of the war ravaged capital (mostly shot in St. Petersburg because that city has so much German architecture) is rendered in realistic detail and immediacy. The banal, random horror of war is vividly captured without making the war beautiful.

There are many exceptional performances in *Der Untergang*, but two stand out. Bruno Ganz yields up a riveting evocation of Hitler's dark persona: the faustian magnetism, the undeniable courage at once polluted with the maniacal hatred, the utter contempt for humanity, and not least, the Führer's most frightful quality, the ability to stoke the fanaticism and hate of others. Corinna Harfouch's chilling portrayal of Frau Goebbels is arguably the best performance in the film. She embodies the ice cold quality which Hitler so much admired and the fanaticism that made her willing to remove her children from a world where there was no Führer.

We can admire or critique or analyze whatever we wish about this story, but ineluctably the center of gravity of the film is the image of Hitler which is presented to us. If history is the memory of things said and done, can we say

that this character memorialized for us by the narrative I of Traudl Junge, the technical Eye of Hirschbiegel, the literary Eyes of Eichinger and Fest and the *schauspielerish* I of Bruno Ganz is the real Hitler of history, unfiltered and unmediated. Or is it an illusion to believe one can ever achieve unfiltered, unmediated historical knowledge?

Do the proponents of the Hitler as demon theory have it right, or the advocates of the lunatic interpretation, or the adherents of the hate filled warlord thesis? Along with the makers of the movie, each of these groups has their own set of Eyes/I's, and each will certainly be confident that the movie shows what their Eyes see and what their I's know. So the conclusion is inescapable: the Eyes/I's have it. This is very comforting, but any viewer as yet undecided might do well to heed Burkhardt so they can see with their own Eyes/I's.

Does ***Der Untergang*** bring us any closer to being done with Hitler? Possibly not. But the film does give us a very clear glimpse of the hatred (epitomized by but not exclusive to Hitler) which catalyzed a war that left more than 50 million people dead. One philosopher has said we study history not to learn what happened, but rather to learn about ourselves. In that sense, as Fest has noted, Hitler taught us some things we will never forget.

The real Traudl Junge appears to have finally learned something about herself, when in a brief postscript she compares her actions and reactions during that time to the example of Sophie Scholl, who was executed for resisting the Nazis. Traudl Junge walked into the *Wolfslair* one winter night when it still seemed possible the Führer might win his war. She walked out of the bunker three springs later amidst unbelievable devastation. In the final scene, she peddles a bike out of the vortex of the collapsing Third Reich into the void of the wasteland that was post war Germany, a wasteland spawned by the hatred Hitler preached, a wasteland pervaded by the "infamous sorrow" which was Hitler's ultimate legacy to Germany.

Selected Filmography of Oliver Hirschbiegel

Kinderspiel (for television) 1992
Todfeinde (for television) 1998
Das Experiment 2000
Mein letzter Film 2002
Der Untergang 2004

Bibliography and suggested reading

Der Untergang - Das FilmBuch. Rowohlt Verlag, Hamburg 2004.

Joachim Fest (Der Untergang: Eine Historische Skizze);
Bernd Eichinger (Der Untergang: Ein Film).

Bis zur letzten Stunde. Traudl Junge. 2002

The Hitler Filmography. Charles Mitchell. McFarland & Company - 2002

The Dark Mirror: German Cinema Between Hitler and Hollywood.

Lutz Koepnick – Univ. of Calif. Press: Berkley 2002

Hitler. Joachim Fest. Verlag Ulstein – 1973

The Hitler of History. John Lukacs. New York: Alfred Knopf 1997

Adolf Hitler: Eine politische Biographie Rainer Zitelmann -
Gottingen: 1989

Hitler und seine Deutschen. Christian Von Krockow - Munich:
2001