Retreat into Myth: Joseph Goebbels, Kolberg, and the Ideal in Nazi Cinema

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Rentschler, “so-called ‘unpolitical’ features constituted 86% of the epoch’s films” (Illusion 37). Citing film sociologist Gerd Albrecht’s Nationalsozialistische Politik, Rentschler writes that “propaganda” or entertainment productions constituted 941 of the 1,094 feature films made under Nazi control, including 295 melodramas and biopics, 123 detective and adventure films, and 525 comedies and musicals (Rentschler Afterlife 7). This was a cinema dominated by “formula fare and escapist diversion replete with well-known stars, upbeat scores and alluring production values” (Rentschler Afterlife 9). In other words, it was no two-minute hate, and this inclination to entertain was reflected in many of Nazi Germany’s larger social policies. National Socialism was “a political order that openly proffered tourism, consumerism and recreation as dialectical complements to law, order and restriction” (Rentschler Afterlife xi). To those people not alienated, despised and deported by the fascist ideologies of the party, Nazi Germany aimed to please (albeit with candy-bar concessions and pleasures as mundane as anything else). A government repute for its public rallies and splendiferous parades, “show business and National Socialism were of a piece” (Rentschler Illusion 35). Nazi Germany’s adversary’s most infamous cult of personality, and Hitler is the dictator star-supreme, but if any one person were assigned the role of “propaganda,” due partially to the definitive difficulties and the term itself presents. In his book Film Propaganda: Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany, Richard Taylor makes an admirable attempt to sort through the various historical coming to a succinct conclusion: “Propaganda is the attempt to influence the public opinions of an audience through the transmission of ideas and values” (15). For the purposes of this essay, this definition will suffice. The other variable that grays the propaganda label attached to the Nazi cinema is that many of the films produced under the regime were consciously created as entertainment, rather than instructional or intimidation pieces. What one might conceive as a period brimming with Orwellian brainwashing upon even a cursory examination reveals an industry output primarily composed of slick entertainment fare on par with what is normally associated with Hollywood. According to author Eric

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Articulate 2000

"All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war." - Walter Benjamin

"Even entertainment is nowadays politically important, if not decisive for the outcome of the war." - Joseph Goebbels

"Cinema is a ribbon of dreams." - Orson Welles

Nazi cinema enjoys a dual position in the history of German film. It stands as the dark hallmark of an abhorrent and reprehensible regime while at the same time representing a time of great success and productivity for the nation’s industry, spawning films that still fascinate and engage cineastes today, both for their inherent quality and craft as well as their role as propaganda pieces designed to further indoctrinate their audiences with National Socialist ideology. Both Adolf Hitler and Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels were avid film enthusiasts prior to and throughout their ascension to power; they were also great opportunists, and in assuming control over the German film industry, they took the reins of what was arguably the most productive and influential in Europe.

In many ways, the Nazi leadership and the German cinema made for an easy courtship. The German national cinema, ironically enough, grew out of an overtly nationalist thrust—an urgent desire to see German habits, culture and values "inevitable." As with Fritz Lang's Metropolis, Hitler and Goebbels recognized, more perhaps than anyone else in history did, the power of the cinema as a formative political tool, and they set it into action right away.

Debate persists among scholarly studies of Nazi cinema regarding how many of the films produced during the period of Nazi rule (1933-1945) actually constitute "propaganda," due partially to the definitional difficulties and the term itself presents. In his book Film Propaganda: Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany, Richard Taylor makes an admirable attempt to sort through the various historical coming to a succinct conclusion: "Propaganda is the attempt to influence the public opinions of an audience through the transmission of ideas and values" (15). For the purposes of this essay, this definition will suffice. The other variable that grays the propaganda label attached to the Nazi cinema is that many of the films produced under the regime were consciously created as entertainment, rather than instructional or intimidation pieces. What one might conceive as a period brimming with Orwellian brainwashing upon even a cursory examination reveals an industry output primarily composed of slick entertainment fare on par with what is normally associated with Hollywood. According to author Eric
In this, he disagreed with Hitler on two fundamental points regarding propaganda. First, Hitler felt that art and politics should be kept distinct and separate. In his book Mein Kampf, he writes, “where the destiny and existence of a people are at stake, all obligation toward beauty ceases” (19). In conversation, he remarked:

Certainly, on the one hand I want to use the film fully and completely as a medium of propaganda, but in such a way that every viewer knows that today he’s going to a political film... It makes me sick when people make politics under the guise of art. Either art or politics... You can’t have both.

Second, Hitler felt that the importance of strong propaganda is inversely proportional to party membership. It is crucial only insofar as it is necessary to draw allegiance. Once allegiance is solidified, Hitler felt that the significance of propaganda decreased. Goebbels, however, felt that propaganda efforts should be continued even after power has been consolidated (Taylor 143). Additionally, aesthetics were absolutely a concern and, above all, Goebbels never wanted an audience member to “know that today he’s going to a political film.” Disallowing that realization was to Goebbels the key to effective propaganda and the primary impetus behind his emphasis on entertainment. He feared that overtly political propaganda, where the hand of the government was clearly visible, risked alienating the audience. An audience aware that it is the target of didacticism will naturally be skeptical, and Goebbels hoped to avoid such a dynamic. As Goebbels stated in a letter to Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, presumably in an attempt to solicit his participation: “I do not require a film to begin and end with a National Socialist procession. Leave these to us—we know how to do them better than you do” (qtd. in Taylor 211). Goebbels relegated more overt forms of propaganda to the newsreels that predicated and the bottomline. In 1937, when American imports were out-finessing domestic German productions, he kept his ear to the ground; audiences made it clear they desired their Steamboat Willie before their Battleship Potemkin. His features were seen as apolitical and innocent recreations (Rentschler Afterlife 16). Images of boot-stomping and sieg-heils were also threatening to international audiences, for Goebbels the key to effective propaganda was to avoid the antiseptic facade of the “true” Aryan existence as fabricated by the Nazi party, an existence that could only really subsist on screen—in the realm of the ideal and the fanciful.

If Nazi film production kept a steady pace prior to 1940, the onset of war kicked it into high gear. The industry itself was never more successful—escapist fare made film houses a welcome respite from the trials of wartime living. It was not until 1942, when the Sixth army of the German forces lost over three-quarters of its numbers to death or capture at the battle of Stalingrad, did a discernable shift in Goebbels’ approach to conceiving the propaganda feature take place. With the production of Munchhausen (1943) Goebbels made a direct attempt to prompt a psychological and spiritual rebound on the part of the German populace in response to a specific political/military setback (Rentschler Afterlife 193). His strategy was characteristically diverting, and the product more fantastical than ever. Stalingrad and Munchhausen concurrently mark “the watershed in delineating Goebbels’ shift from a combination of factual-mythical propaganda—which characterized his approach during the early years of the war—to an increasing dependence on irrational themes” (Baird 40). So would begin Goebbels’ “total war of illusion meant to distract Germans from painful and traumatic realities, from the presentiment of a national catastrophe and the shame of mass murder” (Rentschler Afterlife 212). Days after a massive Allied bombing, Munchhausen premiered in Berlin as part of Ufa’s 25th anniversary celebration (Rentschler Afterlife 194). Conceived as the “ultimate entertainment,” the film is a ribald pop fantasy based on a popular piece of European folklore. The eponymous hero is a grand liar whose on-screen antics bear an interesting parallel to the Minister of Propaganda himself: “the type of character whofabricates tales, and, mimicking the powers of cinema, incarnates a medium that traffics in illusions” (Rentschler Afterlife 198).

No expense was spared in the creation of Articulate’s 2000 Afterlife. The film is a grandstanding piece of propaganda that would demonstrate the dominance of the German cinema’s ability to entertain. The film’s high-concept production “put German technical talent in the forefront, and what was hoped to be reassuring-triumph of special effects” (Rentschler Afterlife 196). The film would also serve to amnesthe the German populace to a stinging defeat on the battlefield and the ominous specter of a war that was now raining down over their heads, providing the ultimate vehicle of escape in the character of the Baron, whose magical powers allow him to travel through space and time and escape tradiplon with ease. According to Rentschler, Munchhausen represents the era’s “ultimate exercise in wishful thinking” (Afterlife 202). That is, until Kolberg.

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Goebbels to green-lighting its town against Napoleon's forces, though the film involved for the military. Most of the town leadership, who intend to surrender to the citizenry of Kolberg for retaliation. Meanwhile, Napoleon's forces proceed toward Kolberg. As Loncadou, Kolberg's misled military commander, debates with Nettlebeck over the necessity of fighting, French troops occupy the farmhouse of Maria's family, just outside of Kolberg. Maria's brother Klaus, portrayed as an emmanciated milquetoast, toasts Napoleon with the French soldiers, disgracing his father. Nettlebeck is imprisoned for his insolence. He sends Maria on a mission to Konigsberg to demand of the King that a citizenry of Kolberg. At the behest of the citizenry, Nettlebeck is freed, and the new commander arrives; it is Gneisenau, now participating in his own narrative and again providing voice to Goebbels' dictums. Gneisenau scolds Nettlebeck for his questioning of orders. "You want to lead but can't obey?" he asks. Here we see the fascist ideology begin to emerge; in times of great distress and turmoil, concern for one's homeland is pivotal, but never at the expense of hierarchy and order. Otherwise, the commander states "we'd be on the road to anarchy." In the following scene, with a speech supposedly scripted by Goebbels himself, Gneisenau addresses the people of Kolberg directly (Marvell and Fraenkel 83). He begins, with "Citizens of Kolberg, Prussians, Germans!" effectively drawing the intended metaphoric line of the film. He states:

No love is more sacred than love for one's fatherland. No joy is sweeter than the joy of freedom... Citizens and soldiers, from farm labourer to citizen general, you want to be as good as your fathers were. Dare to live up to them; you have their example, so set an example. The best way to defend a fortress is to attack (qtd. in Taylor 204).

As Taylor points out, "once more we have a call in the film that could just as well be addressed to the Berliners of 1945 as to the Kolbergers of 1807" (Taylor 204). The battle ensues, and the Kolberg uprising proves to be a resilient one. The people make continual sacrifices of person and property, but ultimately prevail. They succeed in keeping the French forces from breaching their gates. The story then returns to 1813 in Breslau. Gneisenau has completed his story, and his King is swayed. As he sits down to sign the proclamation, Gneisenau moves to the window looking out over the Prussian people. Inspired by the memories of Kolberg, he begins to pontificate, and his words summarize the ultimate desires of Goebbels. Speaking almost directly into the screen. They walk arm-in-arm, singing in unison. Inside his chambers, the King of Prussia, Frederick William II, is braced by comments of the film a new piece of Nazi cinema. As the camera focuses on this, the sounds of music and applause are heard. The film is dubbed a 'pragmatist' of the Enlightenment, and a miracle in its own right. It is a film that could just as well be relevant to the Berliners of 1945 as to the Kolbergers of 1807..." (Taylor 207). The film is completed, and the King is swayed. As he sits down to sign the proclamation, he looks out over the Prussian people and declares:

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camera at Goebbels' Berliner audience, Gneisenau says:

The people are filled with a mysterious strength. The example the citizens of Kolberg once gave them, they want to follow and finally shake off their chains. The people are rising for coming battle. The information comes...from the ashes and rubble, like a phoenix, a new people will rise. A new nation. The message is clear: Kolberg is an example. Emulate it and find the honor they found.

Kolberg was a deliberate attempt at political self-preservation via aesthetic means. As a propaganda piece, it is a virtual catalogue of prototypical Nazi/Aryan qualities. Several other characteristics of the National Socialist ideal are evinced in addition to the chest-thumping nationalism embodied by Nettlebeck and Gneisenau. Not entirely relevant to the central lesson of the narrative, they often serve to reinforce the ideal via counterexample. For example, Maria's brother Klaus, whose behavior confirms the Nazi distaste toward internationalism. Klaus announces early in the film that he has "become a citizen of the world" while abroad at music school. Nettlebeck, the protector of the homeland, regrets his decision to send him there. Fey and Childish, Klaus is shown to contribute noth-


