
Dramaturgies of the Negative. How Film Deals with Disconcerting Political History

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Political myths most often refer to caesuras, may they be turning points or beginning and end of something meaningful to a given society. They mostly deal with exemplary behaviour up to heroic deeds. If, however, the rule is based on its exceptions, the question arises as to how an ill-omened caesura of political history is dealt with. How does a society communicate about events having deeply shaken its self-image? What strategies are used when a myth can only make offers for identification with difficulty because the protagonist is morally unsuitable as role model?

These are the questions I will be exploring in the following. In order to do so, firstly, I will explain film's mythopoeic contribution to the political culture of a society; secondly, I will develop a dramaturgical typology of negative myths in film. Building on this, I will specify different dramaturgies of the negative based on selected instances of German history. In particular, I will discuss the films *Downfall* (2004. Oliver Hirschbiegel. *Der Untergang*) and *The Baader Meinhof Complex* (2008. Uli Edel. *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex*).

Beyond questions of quality, truth, cultural-historic differences or media form, narration appears as a universal communicative opportunity to communicate about the world. Societies also have narrations of their own, by means of which they negotiate conflicts, assure themselves of their identity and pass on generally relevant knowledge to future generations. If one of these collective narratives is about something exemplary and shows how certain things are or should be fundamentally constituted, it becomes a political myth.[\[1\]](#)

In terms of their narrative patterns, stereotypes and definite antagonistic constellations of conflict, political myths are similarly structured like religious myths; unlike those, however, they do not focus on transcendence but on the symbolic basis of political systems. Myths frame and arrange knowledge; they legitimise and comment or criticise social and political practices by giving meaning to events, places, persons and symbolisms.[\[2\]](#) Political myths thus draw a line between the Self and the Other - including the first, excluding the latter - so a we-identity necessary for the inner cohesion of a group can be formed. Therefore, they are often more present within public discourse in times of (crisis-like) upheaval or identity and legitimation deficiencies.

According to the philosopher Ernst Cassirer, the myth is defined less by the content of the narrative than by its form. For Cassirer, the myth, like language or science, belongs to those symbolic forms that fulfil certain social needs. While language objectifies sense perception, for Cassirer, the myth has the function of an “objectification of feelings”.^[3] So, inasmuch as myths are endowed with emotional meaning, the myth as collective narration is predestined to initiate that, which according to sociologist Max Weber is “a communal relationship”.^[4] As symbolic form, the political myth aims at an affective appropriation of the history of a political association by keeping the past present, in order to generate orientation for the future.^[5] To quote the cultural scientist Aleida Assmann, political myths “largely detach historical experience from the concrete circumstances of its coming into existence and remodel it into stories suspended in time being passed on from generation to generation”.^[6]

For the functionality of myths, their ontological status – does the story correspond with the truth? – is less important than their narrative utility value: what significance does a narrative have for a society and its self-image? The more relevant a myth is, the more intense its passing on becomes. Not surprisingly, feature films belong to the media of lore. With its strategies of personalisation, moralisation and the creation of emotion, film has proven to be especially suitable for transmitting myths, as it is capable of addressing a large audience. The historian Frank Becker pointed out that the task of political myths is to mediate between highbrow and lowbrow culture, i.e. to offer an endowment of meaning being variously compatible.^[7] Unlike other forms of knowledge transfer and meaning generation (like theoretical models, programmatic writings or chronologies of events) myths can occur in a variety of sophisticated ways. The Devil’s Pact, for example, can be told as a simple fairy tale, as a complex novel – see *Doctor Faustus* by Thomas Mann – or in a fictional film, such as István Szabó’s film adaptation of the novel by Klaus Mann, *Mephisto* (1981).

Film’s mythopoeic contribution to political culture

In general, narrations can be regarded as being constitutive for the formation of a political culture. However, especially the so-called ‘narrative cinema’ is part of a discursive construction of social and political reality. By its mimetic qualities, feature film provides information on the respective prevailing political culture(s) in aesthetic condensation. Feature films – but also series – operate as media of the political imaginary as they are able to depict those notions of what politics is or should be. Thus, films enable a reflection of reality within the fiction – in the words of Siegfried Kracauer: “Films are the mirror of the prevailing society.”^[8] Furthermore he writes: “Stupid and unreal film fantasies are

the *daydreams of society*, in which its actual reality comes to the fore and its otherwise repressed wishes take on form" (author's emphasis).[9]

On the one hand, given notions of normality, values and constructs of meaning are confirmed and stabilised by fictional and story-formed repetitions whereby popular film in particular tends towards affirmation. On the other hand, potentials for societal and political change are supported by film – may it be by critique and the sketching of alternatives, or by political instrumentalisation up to propaganda.

Political stories follow a specific narrational logic. As political structures cannot be narrated without further ado, the performance of characters is essential. In order to get the recipients emotionally engaged, the characters must have a clear moral alignment. Mostly these orientations are fed by political mythology, since these, as collective narrations, are common knowledge. Political myths can effortlessly be integrated into other narrations or media texts, as it is not compulsory to tell the respective myth in its entirety: in order to recall a myth, often it is sufficient to detach set pieces – comparable to quotations – from the original context and insert them into a feature film. Nevertheless, however, in a film, a myth is often told in total. Therefore two procedures are essentially available: either the events, on which the plot is based, are illustratively staged, or the myth is read against the grain of prevailing schemes of interpretation and subjected to reinterpretation. This opposition can also be expressed with the terms congruence and contrast. If congruent adaption serves as opportunity of legitimising claims to power in the field of interpretive culture then a contrasting myth interpretation may be observed rather in the case of symbolic devaluation and thus resulting in an interpretation of delegitimation of power. Films of contrasting myth interpretation seize the myth in order to unmask and to assign a new meaning to it. This process is not necessarily linked to a demythologisation, a shift in the interpretation of the political event brought by the myth is also conceivable. In his *BRD trilogy* Rainer Werner Fassbinder, for example, looks back on the early years of the Federal Republic of Germany: in the films *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1978. *Die Ehe der Maria Braun*), followed by *Lola* (1981) and *Veronika Voss* (1982. *Die Sehnsucht der Veronika Voss*), he interprets the West German founding myth – the so-called economic miracle (*Wirtschaftswunder*) – as a missed opportunity for a new beginning. In Fassbinder's reading, the economic miracle seems as an upswing paid for with emotional coldness, the repression mechanisms of which inevitably led to the caesura of 1968 and 1977.[10]

It can be stated that political myths always refer to a political culture in two ways. They do not only offer (political) meaning but are themselves subject of – political – disputes when it comes to questions of interpretive

sovereignty. As processes of negotiation and interpretation find their ideal medium in feature films, fictional film is essentially involved in processes the philosopher Hans Blumenberg catchily summarised as *Work on Myth*. Blumenberg's concept of the myth refers to Cassirer and can be transferred to the political myth:

Myths are stories that are distinguished by a high degree of constancy in their narrative core and by an equally pronounced capacity for marginal variation. These two characteristics make myth transmissible by tradition: Their constancy produces the attraction of recognizing them in artistic or ritual representation as well [as in recital], and their variability produces the attraction of trying out new and personal means of presenting them.[\[11\]](#)

Work is being done on the (political) myth insofar as, on the one hand, the myth exists in contours and is passed on accordingly but, on the other hand, it can be only narrated and understood from the respective present. Blumenberg sketches the myth's functionality as a reaction to the "absolutism of reality"[\[12\]](#), as a possibility for human kind to overcome its fear of the unknown and to build "trust in the world". [\[13\]](#) In another passage he speaks of the myth as a "way of processing the terrors of the unknown and of overwhelming power"[\[14\]](#). Since a myth, however, has to be told again and again, this means that, by depicting it again and again, it passes on not only the exemplary and heroic but also the antipodal terror overcome by the hero. In this sense, the myth is reproducing what it actually seeks to overcome. Pushing this further, the question arises as to how collective narratives are structured that lack the heroic, since they function not as exemplary models but as deterrent.

Negative myths in film from a dramaturgical perspective

Following Cassirer, the myth, as a symbolic form for the 'objectification of feelings', aims to link emotions and meaning in order to make events, actions and experiences comprehensible. At first, there is no evaluation connected with this, but in order to make political meaning collectively accessible via emotions, the experience of emotions has to undergo a moral coding. Social conventions and political framework conditions determine both the desirability and the appropriateness of public sentiments. Thus the value of emotions is socially reshaped, entailing the consequence that myth as form is open to both positive and negative experiences. In order to distinguish one from another, narrativisations of the political depend on moralisation. Within a culturally and historically varying system of coordinates the politically "good" and "right" is normatively distinguished from the "wrong" and "evil". The normative antagonisms and each of their evaluations become perceptible by the conflicts of the acting characters. Hubris and greed of power, for

example, have always reliably driven the plot forward. Furthermore, the – negatively coded – emotions of guilt and shame are strong motives for political narrations. Mourning and compassion for victims of violence may also become the dramaturgical motor for collective narrations.

At this point, the term dramaturgy refers to the planned construction of an interaction between the formal aesthetic composition of a cinematic narration and its audience.^[15] In feature film, dramaturgical structures can be found on three levels: firstly, they organise the course of action; secondly, they guide the audience’s attention, empathy and knowledge; and thirdly, they establish meaningfulness. As conventionalised organising principle dramaturgy manifests itself in building form. So the negative myths in question here preferably appear in the form of the tragedy, the melodrama and the farce. If one now examines the topics of negative myths as they are represented in popular film, four categories emerge – being not always quite distinct from one another.

A first type of the negative myth refers to a certain place and tells of a scenery in which people were violated and killed on a massive scale. Aleida Assmann terms these places “traumatic places”^[16]; they include Auschwitz, Verdun and also Ground Zero. Two narratives can be distinguished for the cinematic narration about these places: on the one hand, the narrative that orientates itself on events having occurred during the infliction of the trauma – so: tells the story how the place in the past has become the place in the present. On the other hand, there is a narratively mediated confrontation of the past being validated by the place with the present of diegesis. This conflict-triggering juxtaposition most often serves to negotiate questions of political or national identity, e.g. when in the feature film *And Along Came Tourists* (2007. Robert Thalheim. *Am Ende kommen Touristen*) a young German man – called Sven – is doing civilian service in Oświęcim and has to deal with the Polish everyday of a concentration camp memorial. Sven has to take care of the Shoah survivor Krzeminski. In the encounters between Germans and Poles, Sven, as a member of a post WWII generation, is challenged by issues of responsibility, guilt and taboo.

A further category of the political myth refers to a certain period of time that is considered constitutive for the respective society. By the positive exaltation of a “golden age”, an epoch is interpreted as role model for the present. In the negative case of shame, for example about the crimes committed in a phase of history, historical continuities are ignored and the period in question is regarded as singular event. Respective narrations favour working with omissions and planned concealments. Many feature films that are set in the 1950s telling of the economic miracle function accordingly. Thus Sönke Wortmann’s film *The Miracle of Bern* (2003. *Das Wunder von Bern*) parallels the victory of the German

national team at the 1954 FIFA World Cup with the reconciliation of a war returnee with his son. Questions about (individual) guilt and the overcoming of fascist ideology disappear in favour of the joy about an athletic triumph.[\[17\]](#)

Since the end of the 20th century, a more recent collective narrative theme refers to terrorism. When talking about the “myth of terrorism” it is usually not a matter of mystifying crimes. The myth here rather aims at a compensation of deficits, at events that represent or have represented a threat to society from within, and that are not overcome yet. Using the example of the left-wing terrorist Red Army Fraction (RAF) I would like to point out that the path of the RAF was accompanied from its very beginning by narratives, which, at their core, served to explain the radicalisation of a bourgeois youth. [\[18\]](#) The fictional film history of the RAF is, with a few exceptions, perpetrator-centred. This clearly distinguishes the narrativisation of left-wing terrorism in West Germany during the 1970s and 1980s from the cinematic treatment of the acts of other terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda. While films about 9/11 are most often told from the perspectives of victims or first responders, in the case of the RAF the attention usually lies on the RAF characters who appear as protagonists. A contemporary example is *Marianne and Juliane* (1981. Margarethe von Trotta. *Die bleierne Zeit*) - also called *The German Sisters* in the United Kingdom -: a fictionalisation of the lives of the two sisters Christiane and Gudrun Ensslin. *The Legend of Rita* (2000. Volker Schlöndorff *Die Stille nach dem Schuss*), a story about the life and exposure of RAF terrorists in the GDR, also focuses on former perpetrators. *If Not Us, Who?* (2011. Andres Veiel: *Wer wenn nicht wir*) presents a prehistory of the RAF on the basis of the biographies of the couple Gudrun Ensslin and Bernward Vesper.

By focussing on the perpetrator, another type of myth is brought up, which can be used to make the negative narratable: the person as myth. These narrations basically personalise history and focus on historical events as the achievements of a single man (rarely women). When a mythically elevated personality “writes history”, s/he becomes the leading figure of a society. On the other side of the scale, there are political players guilty of monstrous crimes. Myth-compatible, they are often moved into the sphere of the metaphysical and stylised into an incarnation of the evil. The personality cult around Adolf Hitler during his lifetime and after the end of his reign exemplarily shows how a leader cult is turned into its opposite: a messianic hope bearer after the lost First World War becomes the evil par excellence. In the following, dramaturgical strategies of film used to narrate perpetrator-centred myth will be examined in more detail.

Dramaturgies of the negative

The narrative necessity of a personalisation of the political in the case of a cinematic depiction of politics usually leads to clear constellations with morally unambiguous attributions. Therefore, the protagonist is most often – than vice versa – a positive hero while the antagonist accordingly takes on the role of the villain. If, however, the story is to be told in a perpetrator-centred manner – i.e. if negative protagonists are to determine the plot – it is a tried and tested dramaturgical strategy to work with frameworks. In *Downfall* this happens when Hitler's last secretary, Traudl Junge, appears as a contemporary witness. At the beginning and end of the film, excerpts of an interview are shown in which Traudl Junge – shortly before her death in 2002 – reflects on guilt and responsibility.^[19] By this framing, the story about the last days of the Nazi regime is staged in a way comparable with a flashback so that, on the one hand, contemporary witness is deployed as dramaturgical structuring and, on the other hand, as proof for the truthfulness of the narration. At the same time the audience is to identify with Traudl Junge and follow her during her learning process. In general, such framework suggests an inner necessity of the course of action and thus frees it from contingency: The acting out of conflicts finally leads the protagonist onto the right path.

Since a positive identification potential is absolutely necessary for reasons of coherence formations in political narrations, the narrative economic condensation of actual historical events offers a further approach for balancing the values: in the screenplay, characters are normatively recoded – if necessary against source materials. In other words: ambivalent personalities are reduced to their positive deeds or qualities for the sake of clarity. In films on National Socialism this is not uncommon. In *Schindler's List* (1993, Steven Spielberg) there was Oscar Schindler, an ambivalent protagonist who was recoded into a “good Nazi” and thus became an unburdening figure of identification.

Further, the dramaturgy of figures requires a corresponding supporting figure being even more evil than the protagonist him- or herself. In any case, the anticipated, normative rejection by the spectators is directed to a narratively insignificant figure by comparison. Negative protagonists are usually confronted with sanctions; most often they have to die. This also applies to satire, which offers the possibility of both presenting a negative protagonist and being able to criticise him or her at the same time. Alternatively, negative protagonists are integrated into the structure of the genre and thus, so to say, narratively re-socialised, e.g. in mafia movies or in film noir.

A final strategy to be mentioned here is the employment of established narrative patterns about the evil, be it the devil himself, the pact with the devil or the fallen angel. This dramaturgy of demonisation can be

observed, in particular, when it comes to the Hitler filmography. It is one of three dominating categories of the representation of Adolf Hitler in fictional film, which in turn generates again certain forms of narration itself. While the demonisation (Hitler as incarnation of the evil) leads to tragedy, we can find Hitler as laughing stock in the comic constellations of parody, satire, caricature or the grotesque. Last but not least, the melodrama works with a privatisation: the dictator as Everyman. What all modes of representation have in common is the notorious question of their legitimacy, since Hitler is the only person of German history whose artistic representation is frowned upon and perceived as tasteless.^[20] Nevertheless, or maybe precisely because of this, the narrative interest in his biography is of an enormous permanence.^[21] The film *Downfall* also provoked extensive debates when it first was published in 2004 about whether and if so: how human Adolf Hitler may be portrayed.

Downfall

Produced by Bernd Eichinger, who also wrote the screenplay, and directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel, *Downfall* reconstructs the last days of Adolf Hitler and his closest entourage in the *Führerbunker* in April 1945. The hermetically sealed-off world of the *Führerbunker* is contrasted to the outside world of fiercely embattled Berlin. The continuous change of narrative perspectives inside and outside the bunker as well as alternating representations of war business and the private sphere organise the dramatic arc of the film. The audience is asked to compare the different perspectives with one another and to assemble them into a complete picture of the protagonist's character. As I am going to show, a double strategy of dramaturgy is being pursued here: by emphasising "the evil", on the one hand, and by a privatisation of politics, on the other hand.

Eichinger's and Hirschbiegel's staging of Hitler's last days present a person-centred perspective on National Socialism defining politics as a series of decisions by "great men". By the cinematic juxtaposition of the *Führer* and the seduced people, however, a perspective on National Socialism is opened up which ignores the fact that the politics of the so-called Third Reich had the approval and consent of large parts of the population.

Eichinger's screenplay is based on the memories of Hitler's last secretary Traudl Junge and Joachim Fest's account of the final phase of the Second World War as he depicted it in his bestseller *Inside Hitler's Bunker: The Last Days of the Third Reich*.^[22] While Eichinger adapts Fest's descriptions for the military actions, he often literally adapts the direct speech as delivered in Junge's memoirs for those dialogues that refer to the everyday in the bunker. In other words: the female perspective

represents the private sphere while war is a male narrative. This gender-specific, personalised and ostensibly validated perspective on the events in the bunker can be termed with Aleida Assmann as “feminisation of the gaze”[\[23\]](#) which privatises the dictator Hitler.

The feminisation of the events also extends to a side storyline, which deals, having a dramatic arc of its own, with the infanticide of the six defenceless children of Joseph and Magda Goebbels. The murder of the boy and the five girls is not only the negative point of culmination of this storyline but also - in emotional terms - of the whole film. All in all, this sequence lasts six minutes and 54 seconds. It begins with the mixing of a soporific by SS doctor Dr Stumpfegger and ends with Magda Goebbels playing solitaire. In between there is the killing of the children by their mother. First the boy and the girls are sedated, then Magda Goebbels slides - each time performing the same movements - ampoules of prussic acid between the teeth of the sleeping children and presses their jaws together so the capsules break. The sixfold infanticide is shown six times, the narrative time takes two minutes and 28 seconds. The fact that the murder of the children is shown without time lapses makes it even more emotionally loaded than the act itself already is.[\[24\]](#)

There is no historical evidence, though, that Magda Goebbels killed her children herself. It is more probable that Dr Stumpfegger performed the killing at the behest of the parents or at the request of the mother. Insofar as the plot of *Downfall* defines Magda Goebbels as the performing perpetrator, the dramaturgy cites the Medea myth abundantly clearly and thus characterises the figure as undoubtedly evil. The culturally established Medea myth expresses not only the (multiple) murder of children but also the motif of revenge on the husband and unconditional devotion to an idea: Magda Goebbels embodies the ideology of National Socialism and exemplifies the longing for death as component of the *Führer* cult. As a logical consequence, Magda Goebbels is employed within the figure dramaturgy as an evil complementary figure to the “humanised” Hitler. In Magda Goebbels’ embodiment of the Medea myth Hitler’s crimes are to be mirrored synecdochally.

After the documentary prologue, see above, the plot sets in in November 1942, and Alexandra Maria Lara in the role of young Traudl Junge enters the service of the *Führer*. During the job interview Hitler is depicted as a friendly boss and dog lover. The perspective of an apolitical secretary made it possible to pick up - in historical garb - on tendencies of privatisation and personalisation of current political mediation. With the help of these strategies known to the public through journalistic mass media coverage and through a detailed re-enactment, authenticity was to be suggested but - according to the hypothesis to be substantiated - the drawing on narratively established patterns of the evil rather serves a

form of decay of a political myth.

Another side storyline uses the example of a fictitious family to tell the story of survival in the destroyed city of Berlin. The son, Peter Kranz, is introduced as a fanatical Hitler boy who experiences a transformation through the events of the street war. After his parents' death he crosses Traudl Junge's path. The plot of *Downfall* ends with the two of them setting off - on a bright summer's day they cycle into the future. This final picture - in which, by the way, the sun shines for the first time - evokes a conservative myth of West-Germany: the *Stunde Null*, at which a democratic future begins. After the catastrophe a new life begins for those who had belonged to Hitler's followers just a short while ago, but now, being purified, embark on a new path. In a second original tone, closing the political framework of remembrance, Traudl Junge mentions Sophie Scholl so the association of resistance is called upon in this incident.

While *Downfall* was generally received in such a way as to offer that a Hitler-centred perspective on National Socialism, acquitting especially bystanders of guilt, Eichinger and Hirschbiegel strongly negated that they were interested in relieving Germans of their responsibility.[\[25\]](#) However, the documentary gesture of the film is indisputable. The suggestion of a true story is reinforced by an external resemblance of the actor Bruno Ganz with the historical person Hitler when performatively embodying him. In order to prepare for the role, Bruno Ganz studied a number of texts and sources in advance: but as there are (almost) no images or sounds of the historical Hitler outside the Nazi propaganda, the acting approach can only be an approach to Hitler's media imago, i.e. the *Führer* myth of National Socialism. The Hitler figure embodied by Bruno Ganz thus proves to be a conglomerate of various narratives and media depictions; contemporary photographs and films, historical studies as well as filmmakers' imaginations add up to assertions of a *he-could-have-been-like-that*. These are presented in a masterly manner entailing, however, a special form of depoliticisation: perpetration is presented in artistic refinement at its best that can only be respected ("So great how well he can imitate him."). This critique can be applied to the entire film. To the extent that the majority of the leading actors were already involved in other cinematic re-narrations of German history, according to Sabine Hake, these acted visual sketches of National Socialism add up to a "physiognomy of the Third Reich based on stars" contributing to a normalisation and the historicising of the German past.[\[26\]](#) To be precise, the star-based physiognomy of historical epochs may be even regarded as a general feature of the historical film of recent times. Four years after *Downfall*, the Swiss Bruno Ganz appeared again in front of a camera of a further Eichinger production - *The Baader Meinhof Complex* - impersonating Horst Herold, the president of the Federal Criminal Police

Office of the 1970s and supreme opponent of the Red Army Fraction. Herold is characterised by a rational, understanding, almost paternal attitude towards the RAF. It is not absurd to discern here an illustration of the interpretation of the RAF as “Hitler’s children”. Whether this was meant ironically or not is open to question.[27]

The Baader Meinhof Complex

Being based on the same-named popular non-fiction bestseller[28] by Stefan Aust, *The Baader Meinhof Complex* belongs to the docufictional formats within the RAF’s filmography.[29] Book and film portray genesis, activity and the end of the first generation of the RAF. Founded in 1970 with the liberation of Andreas Baader from prison, the terror of the self-appointed urban guerrilla socio-politically challenged the Federal Republic of Germany for several years in many ways. The terrorists came from within, from the educated middle-class and the youth cultural milieu of the universities. If nothing else, they attacked the founding myths of West-Germany coined by economic prosperity and the narratives of a new democratic beginning at *Stunde Null*. At the end of the 1960s, parts of the New Left had become so radical in the course of the disapproval of the Vietnam war that they embarked on an “armed fight” against the “system”. [30] Resistance against the state seemed to them, the children of war, like a belated resistance against National Socialism. The protest of 1968, out of which the RAF emerged, was to draw a moral line between the generation having experienced the NS regime as adults and the one of its children. The stand taken on the question of whether the employment of violence against the Vietnam war was legitimate or not soon became the difference criterion between the *Außerparlamentarische Opposition* as such and the newly constituted revolutionary groups. Their proclamation of a “propaganda of the deed” first manifested itself in arsons of department stores, and later, after the founding of the RAF, in kidnappings, shootings and assassinations. For the purpose of logistical organisation and financing of the “war” conducted from the underground, ordinary criminal offences like car theft and robberies were also committed. Until the official dissolution of the RAF in 1998, the RAF’s acts of violence and the reactions of the challenged state to it killed 60 persons.

The film *The Baader Meinhof Complex* interweaves the biographical and ideological paths of the foundation generation – and here especially those of Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin and Ulrike Meinhof – creating a group-dynamic portrait. It was deliberately restrained from portraying one figure of identification: instead Eichinger and his director Uli Edel worked with a “drama of fragments” and confronted the audience with rapid scene changes with “puzzle pieces” the audience had to put together itself.[31] Only because the puzzle draws on a collective memory

of images offering a high potential for affection, it does not become completely confusing and superficial. The most-detailed re-enactments of known visual icons – e.g. the deaths of Benno Ohnesorg and Holger Meins – enable an engagement in the plot and create an emotional intimacy. The Christ like staged death portrait of Holger Meins in repose, after having died in prison in 1974 as a result of hunger strike, was published in the weekly magazine *stern* for the first time and became to play a great part in the public discourse. Meins became a symbolic figure; hardly any action had such a mobilising effect for supporters and sympathisers like the help of the hunger strike’s scandalised conditions of imprisonment. The film dedicates a powerful sequence to the slow starvation and funeral of Holger Meins without, however, conveying any information about how and why Meins joined the RAF.

As it already was the case with *Downfall* Eichinger – who once more appeared as scriptwriter and producer – was concerned with an aesthetics of authenticity. Featuring genre attributes of an action thriller, *The Baader Meinhof Complex* became an opulent feature film tending towards spectacle: car races, explosions and gun-fights are more likely to serve the show values of cinema than to explain left-wing terrorist practices. At the same time, the staging and self-staging of the RAF are strongly intertwined in the film – the group always worked on its own image and even more on its afterimage. As the RAF derived its identity from the concept of an *obligation to resist* (Ensslin), the self-staging strategies culminated in auratically charged figures of the rebel and the martyr. The film updates this self-mythologisation as it has already been illustrated using Holger Meins as example. The established narrative of Andreas Baader as charismatic rebel, bandit and outlaw is also upheld in the film.^[32] The interpretation of the couple Gudrun Ensslin and Andreas Baader as Bonnie and Clyde, which, by the way, already took place during their lifetimes, is also updated. The feature film *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967. Arthur Penn) not only varies the narrative scheme of lovers allying themselves against the rest of the world, but also romanticises a bank robbery as adventure, on the one hand, and as emancipatory action, on the other. By transferring the Bonnie and Clyde narrative to the RAF, an emotionalisation takes place going hand in hand with a depoliticisation in favour of a criminalisation of terror in the guise of *sex and crime*.

At the same time, however, one can also observe a narrative anchoring in bourgeois traditional narration motives that are intended to lend additional meaning and moral depth to the characters’ actions. So, for example, Ulrike Meinhof is drawn as a left-wing radical Antigone figure. Sophocles’ *Antigone* and its adaptations by, e.g., Anouilh and Brecht epitomise individual resistance against a political regime. As the incarnation of the civil obedience of an individual against society, Antigone – according to Thomas Elsaesser – has the potential of a “key

mythology of 1977".[\[33\]](#)

In summary, three narratives based on mythology can be found in *The Baader Meinhof Complex* being – above that – a typical narration about the first generation of the RAF. Firstly, a connection between eroticism and deviance is sought; secondly, a quasi-religious unconditionality of morality is exhibited; and, thirdly, by the willingness to die for one's convictions, the political is transcendently elevated. Ideological concepts, political theory and further abstract notions are reduced to the necessary catchwords. Eichinger's *The Baader Meinhof Complex* combines person myths with genre attributes of action films and thus classifies the aestheticised RAF as part of pop culture as he did before with Adolf Hitler as a depoliticised embodiment of the evil. By adaption, both films contribute to the respective 'works on myth'. In conclusion, it became clear that cinematic representations of perpetrator-centred myths draw on culturally traditional narrative patterns, uphold and update them in order to reduce complexity and interpret crime. Emotionalising, metaphysical elevation and depoliticisation – may it be by employing genre conventions, may it be by privatising political action practices – ensure that films with negatively-connoted protagonists are nevertheless consumable and commercially successful. When they were first published, Eichinger's updates on traumatising political events of German history offered a framework for interpreting the past that in both examples were subject of extremely controversial discussion. These debates, however, are stories of their own to be told at a different time and place.

Notes

[\[1\]](#) See Frank Becker: "Begriff und Bedeutung des politischen Mythos," in *Was heißt Kulturgeschichte des Politischen? Zeitschrift für historische Forschung. Beiheft 35*, ed. Barbara Rilinger-Stollberg (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot 2005), 132.

[\[2\]](#) As a research topic, myths are dealt with in different disciplines and with different approaches. Known authors are Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Mircea Eliade or Joseph Campbell. For my considerations, I refer to the myth theories of Ernst Cassirer and Hans Blumenberg, which are embedded in cultural history. The latter describes myth as literary narrative. Like me, the political scientist Herfried Münkler also refers to Blumenberg; Münkler defines myths as the "narrative basis of the symbolic order of a community" ("narrative Grundlage der symbolischen Ordnung eines Gemeinwesens"). Herfried Münkler, *Die Deutschen und ihre Mythen*, (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2009), 15.

[\[3\]](#) Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven and London: Yale

University Press, 1973), 45.

[4] According to Weber a “relationship will be called “communal“ (*Vergemeinschaftung*) if and in so far as the orientation of social action – whether in the individual case, on the average, or in the pure type – is based on a subjective feeling of the parties, whether affectual or traditional, that they belong together“ (author’s emphasis). Max Weber, *Economy and Society. An Outline of Interpretative Sociology*. Edited by Guenter Roth and Claus Wittich (University of California Press, 1978), 40.

[5] See Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (München: C.H. Beck, 2006), 40.

[6] “ (...) die historische Erfahrung von den konkreten Bedingungen ihres Entstehens weitgehend ab und formen sie zu zeitenthobenen Geschichten um, die von Generation zu Generation weitergegeben werden.“ Ibid.

[7] See Becker, “Begriff und Bedeutung des politischen Mythos,“ 136.

[8] Siegfried Kracauer, “The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies“ in idem, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*. Translated, Edited, and with an Introduction by Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1994), 291.

[9] Ibid., 292.

[10] 1977 stands as a cipher for the terror of the 1970s: in autumn 1977 Hanns Martin Schleyer was first kidnapped, then murdered; the Lufthansa plane *Landshut* was hijacked and the suicides of Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin and Jan-Carl Raspe took place in the high-security sector of Stuttgart-Stammheim prison.

[11] Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth* (translated by Robert M. Wallace, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 1985), 34.

[12] Ibid., 3.

[13] Ibid., 35.

[14] Ibid., 388.

[15] Connecting theory with practice, dramaturgy per se originates from the theatre context. In my elaborations on the dramaturgy of film, I mainly follow Jens Eder, *Dramaturgie des populären Films. Drehbuchpraxis und Filmtheorie* (Hamburg: Lit 2007). For more on

political dramaturgy see: Sandra Nuy, "Antagonismen und Affekte. Zur politischen Dramaturgie des Spielfilms", in: *Medialisierungen der Macht. Filmische Inszenierungen politischer Praxis*, ed. Irina Gradinari, Nikolas Immer, Johannes Pause (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink 2018), 33-46.

[16] "traumatische Orte", Assmann, *Schatten der Vergangenheit*, 221

[17] I would like to mention that success in football is regarded as a guarantor of German self-confidence. Especially the surprising victory at the 1954 FIFA World Cup, the so-called Miracle of Bern, is considered by many to be the actual founding act of the Federal Republic of Germany. More about the film and its political relevance see: Roland Binz, "Wenn sogar der Kanzler weint. Die Berliner Republik und ihr Wunder von Bern", in *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History*, Online-Edition, 1 (2004), H. 2, accessed May 10, 2019, <http://www.zeithistorische-forschungen.de/2-2004/id=4414>

[18] For more on RAF as a myth see: Cordia Baumann, *Mythos RAF: literarische und filmische Mythenradierung von Bölls "Katharina Blum" bis zum "Baader Meinhof Komplex"* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2012).

[19] Each is an excerpt from "Im toten Winkel - Hitlers Sekretärin", a documentary film from 2002 by André Heller and Othmar Schmiderer.

[20] See Margit Frölich, "Tot oder lebendig. Hitler als Figur im Spielfilm," in *Hitler darstellen. Zur Entwicklung und Bedeutung einer filmischen Figur*, ed. Rainer Rother, Karin Herbst-Meßlinger (München: Edition Text + Kritik 2008), 14.

[21] In the fictional field, international Hitler filmography has long exceeded the number of 100 productions. For the time until 2000 see: Charles P. Mitchell, *The Hitler Filmography: Worldwide Feature Film and Television Mini Series Portrayals. 1940 through 2000* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co Inc., 2009) .

[22] See Joachim Fest, *Inside Hitler's Bunker: The Last Days of the Third Reich* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004). In 2002 the original German version was published under the title "Der Untergang: Hitler und das Ende des Dritten Reiches. Eine historische Skizze." The film title "Der Untergang / Downfall" derives from this title. See also: Traudl Junge, *Until the Final Hour: Hitler's Last Secretary* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2004).

[23] "Feminisierung des Blicks", Aleida Assmann, "Lichtstrahlen in die Black Box. Bernd Eichingers *Der Untergang*" in, *Das Böse im Blick: Die Gegenwart des Nationalsozialismus im Film*, eds. Margit Frölich,

Christian Schneider, Karsten Visarius (München: Edition Text + Kritik, 2007), 46.

[24] The murder of the children has been connoted with the Holocaust on several occasions, especially since the letters GASS can be read on a wall of the corridor leading to the children's room in the bunker. The continuation of the word to "Gasschleuse" (gas seal) remains hidden from the viewer due to the camera perspective. Eichinger's intention, however, to remind the audience of the killing of the European Jews on an emotional level by depicting the murder of the children in detail is, at best, well-intentioned.

[25] For a summary of the producers' intentions see: John Bendix, "Facing Hitler: German Responses to Downfall", *German Politics and Society* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 70-89.

[26] Sabine Hake, "Entombing the Nazi Past: On Downfall and Historicism" in *Hitler-films from Germany. History, cinema and politics since 1945*, ed. Karolin Machtans (Basingstoke [et al]: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 118.

[27] See Bernd Zywiets, *Terrorismus im Spielfilm: Eine filmwissenschaftliche Untersuchung über Konflikte, Genres und Figuren* (Wiesbaden: Springer Verlag, 2016), 214. – The speech about the RAF as "Hitler's children" was first introduced by a publication of the same name by Jillian Becker. See: Jillian Becker, *Hitler's Children. The Story of the Baader-Meinhof Terrorist Gang* (New York: Lippincott, 1977).

[28] See Stefan Aust, *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex* (München: Wilhelm Goldmann, 2008, 3rd extended edition).

[29] The annotated filmography of the *Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung* lists 29 fictional productions on the RAF between the years 1967 and 2007; plus 49 documentary productions for cinema and TV. In the meantime, the number has even increased. See Anna Pfitzenmaier, "RAF, Linksterrorismus und 'Deutscher Herbst' im Film. Eine kommentierte Bibliographie (1967-2007)" in *Zeitgeschichte-online*, topic: Die RAF als Geschichte und Gegenwart, Jan-Holger Kirsch and Annette Vowinckel eds., 2007, accessed April 1, 2019, <http://www.zeitgeschichte-online.de/thema/einfuehrung-raf-linksterrorismus-und-deutscher-herbst-im-film>

[30] For phrasing in the jargon of the RAF see Aust, *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex*.

[31] "Fetzendramaturgie", "Puzzleteilen", Eichinger, quoted according to:

Zywietz, *Terrorismus im Spielfilm*, 215.

[32] RAF historiography agrees on the assumption that the passionate moviegoer Andreas Baader borrowed his virile and rebellious habitus from the 1960s' film and staged himself as screen gangster and moviestar.

[33] See Thomas Elsaesser, *Terror und Trauma: Zur Gewalt des Vergangenen in der BRD* (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2007), 61.

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