

## **The Depiction of Hitler: Forming Collective Memory of Hitler in German and American Historical Film-Narratives between 1945-2009**

The presence of Hitler's figure in recent German and American films illustrates the continuing relevancy of the image of Hitler in the contemporary collective memory, as well as the society's perpetual interest in Hitler as a historical figure. Nevertheless, in the reconstruction process of the Nazi-past the historical film narrative establishes a physical detachment between the portrayals of Hitler and the depiction of the Holocaust, leading to an unconscious conceptual dichotomy of the historical images. Hence, foremost films depicting Hitler contribute little to an understanding of the NS-past and they solely prompt its "normalization." While neglecting to capture the significance in and of his unassociated role, film critics focus mostly on the authenticity or the ridicule in portrayals of Hitler, ignoring the substance of the various depictions of him.

This study centers on the reconstruction of Hitler's figure in historical film narratives between 1945 and 2009 in three countries: the United States, where since 1941 a plethora of portrayals of Hitler have been shown in movies; 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, I explore the different cultural perceptions that have created specific images of Hitler, which in turn have shaped thoughts, feelings and knowledge about this historical figure. I clarify the extent to which his image, as a cultural-historical "product," transmits social conceptions, political agendas, and cultural myths, and represents at the same time a reflection of the German and American societies.

Influential to this study are both the work of the French philosopher Étienne de La Boétie (1530-1563), *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude* and that

of Foucault, *The Subject and Power* (1982). The theories presented in these two works are relevant to the decryption and perception of the well embedded social-historical approaches behind the representation of subjects in the execution of power and power relations between subjects – between Hitler and the Nazi elite and between Hitler and Germany.

The empirical basis for the study constitutes all the historical film-narrative on Hitler produced between 1945 and 2009 in German and the United States – co-productions are included. The methodology is based on significant periods of social and cinematographic transitions, through which I illuminate the developments in his representation from the end of second world War until 2009: the post-war period from 1945 to 1961; the period between 1961 and 1989, when the Berlin Wall stood; and finally, the period from 1989 to 2009 characterized by a unified Germany and the end of the Cold War. The analysis was founded on twelve factors for conducting the deconstruction of the form, content and context of each film-production as a case study. The last chapter of the work is dedicated to a systematic comparison that highlights the peculiarities of each depiction through different time periods in Germany and the United States.

In addition, interviews conducted with experts, such as Gertrud Koch and Martin Wiebel, shed light on the exclusion of Hitler's image from German film between 1955 and 1999, and explain the social-political motivation of the unique way in which Hitler was depicted in Germany after 1945.

While striving for authenticity, historical film narratives frame the image of Hitler through differing cultural myths that reinforce competing notions of historical authenticity. In other words, the cultural interpretations of his image are subject to the formation of authenticity and the question of what would be considered an authentic representation in a

specific society. Ultimately, these aspects shape the distinct approaches to remembering Hitler.

As a means to constitute a new basis for a collective awareness and identification, in the post-war period the representation of Hitler was driven by the need or rather the expectation that Hitler's image as manifested in the 1930s and 40's should be distorted and demolished. Films have addressed and discussed the myth of Hitler as a seductive power and as a "Godsend," and, through dialogues, mis-en-scene, and selected actors, struggled to destroy this myth. With the deconstruction of the myth, the idea of national-socialism appeared eluded as well, suggesting that National-Socialism could not have been realized without Hitler.

Throughout the Berlin-Wall period and particularly during the so called "Hitler-wave," while biographies and documentaries turned their attention to Hitler's character (i.e. habits, relationships, etc.), German filmmakers excluded the depiction of Hitler as a figure from the historical narrative. However, the use of elements as an emblem or 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, subject to the imagination. In this regard, one of the main differences between the German (West and East) and the American depiction appears in the affiliation of Hitler to Germany. German film portrays Hitler as an inseparable part of Germany. In contrast, the American depiction represents Hitler as an antithesis to the hero of the story, such as in the case of the figures of Rommel and Stauffenberg: while the latter embody Germany, Hitler is a foreign enemy of Germany, an alien part in the body of the German state.

The Post-Cold-War period is distinguished primarily through the reorientation in the reconstruction of Hitler and his myth; the narratives engage the myth through technique and

content as an immanent part to the meaning of National-Socialism. Nonetheless, the authenticity of the story is determined neither by historical details nor facts, but by emotional aspects structuring and explaining the power relations between Germany and Hitler.

The last chapter serves as a detailed survey of the distinguished elements and developments in the representation of Hitler from 1945 until 2009 across the three countries.