

**DANI LEVY'S LOST BATTLE: A COMMENTARY ON
THE RESPONSES TO THE TRAGI-COMEDY *MEIN
FÜHRER (MY FUEHRER)***

**10th Festival of German Films in London, 23-29
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By Helene Bartos

During the last week of November 2007, the Curzon cinema in Soho hosted the 10th annual festival of German films. Along with four documentaries, a jury of UK film-makers and cinema-operators picked a total of eight films, produced over the past two years, from a pool of submissions to the festival's organizer 'German Films' (the successor company to the 'Export-Union of German Cinema' (1954) which promoted the dissemination of German films internationally). Among these eight was Dani Levy's *Mein Führer. Die Wirklich Wahrste Wahrheit Über Adolf Hitler (My Fuehrer. The Truly Truest Truth About Adolf Hitler)*, which appeared in German cinemas in January 2007 and was – according to Dani Levy, speaking to the audience after the screening of his film on 25 November – billed as 'Germany's first post-war tragi-comedy on Hitler'. The film caught the attention of the jury and later of the audience (tickets for the film festival's premiere of *My Fuehrer* were sold out well in advance) for touching upon the National Socialist era by employing a means that for many years has been very familiar in the UK (Monty Python's *Hitler in England*, the sitcom *'Allo 'Allo*), but is less easily associated with German cinematic engagement with the Second World War: *black humour*. Perhaps unsurprisingly, contrary to the interest the film spurred at the festival and the positive reception Levy's film received from his British hosts, his movie provoked fierce reactions in the country in which it was produced. German film critics totally evaded engaging with the movie's important criticism of the genre and its obvious parody of Oliver Hirschbiegel's blockbuster production, *Downfall*. Instead, they unanimously discredited the comic elements of the movie in what could be summed up by a slightly altered version of Basil Fawlty's famous outcry 'Don't mention [z]e war [*at least not in a funny way*]!'. Their criticism has to be placed into the greater context of German public discourse as being shaped by the image of German suffering at the hands of the Nazis. Levy's parody of the Nazi leadership, depicting them as feeble and sickly human beings, with Hitler taking the ultimate lead in this persiflage, severely disturbed the national narrative of Germans as victims. Therefore, Levy's project was doomed to fail from the onset.

My Fuehrer tells the story of a mentally and physically wrecked Adolf Hitler (played by comedian and jazz singer Helge Schneider) at the end of the war, who, as Berlin lies in ruins, is tasked by Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels with the mission of inflaming the German masses one final time through an invigorating speech. Hitler can best be stimulated through his hatred for Jews; Goebbels, however, has deeper intentions, and calls for the Jewish actor Adolf Grünbaum (Ulrich Mühe) to be brought into the Chancellery from the Sachsenhausen concentration camp to help Hitler prepare the speech. What Grünbaum does not know is that Goebbels and Himmler are conspiring to assassinate Hitler during the speech, aiming to put the blame on Grünbaum so as to maximise the mobilising effect on the masses. Unable to kill Hitler because of his humanist conscience, Grünbaum at the end finds himself forced, with a gun in his face, to pronounce the fateful words of the speech as Hitler has lost his voice. On the podium and facing the crowd, Hitler mouths and gestures to Grünbaum's words who, talking from a little cabin underneath, sets out to fulfil his dream of Jewish empowerment and starts diverting from the text. Hitler, through the words of Grünbaum, reveals to the crowd that he is a loser and that it is his father who is to blame for his miserable existence. As the crowd, first confused, greets its leader, Armaments Minister Albert Speer, who can no longer bear to watch Hitler being ridiculed, moves to shoot Grünbaum in a tragic end to the story, while Hitler leaves the stage unharmed.

When the film was first shown in Germany, commentators, with a few notable exceptions (such as Daniel Hass and Daniel Kotherschulte), rejected Levy's film outright, focusing on aspects such as the film's 'simplistic' representation of Hitler's character and the apparent lack of a cruel enough persiflage to make this a truly 'funny' movie (see, for example, Harald Martenstein, 'Adolf auf der Couch'). More generally, it was asked whether one does not belittle Hitler by ridiculing him and whether a comedy can have Hitler as its main protagonist. German historian Hans Ulrich Wehler pronounced: 'The treatment of figures such as Lenin, Stalin and Hitler is better suited for historians than as persiflage.' Such debates, however, ignored Levy's own explanation of the movie as a critique of the 'doctrinal writing of history' in German cinema. In an interview with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, Levy conceived of his movie as a response to the conspicuous symbiosis of historians and film-makers in 'recreating history'. Critiquing *Schindler's List* in the same interview, Levy argued: 'I was annoyed by attempts at creating an image of a phenomenon [...] which cannot be replicated and may not be replicated from a moral point of view. Therefore, I thought that one

has to go about it in a more cranky, hard-headed and free-thinking manner.’

Levy conceives of these efforts as ‘subversive dialectics’, a kind of humour aimed at the ‘reversal of values and morale’. This concept pervades the film throughout, starting from the film’s title, which claims to be the ‘truly truest truth about Adolf Hitler’, a clear antipode to the monumentality imposed by Hirschbiegl’s film. Levy follows this theme through to the end when, in response to Hitler’s secretary Traudl Junge’s reflection that age is not an excuse for ignorance, attached to the ending of Hirschbiegl’s *Downfall*, Levy lets children appear who are clearly clueless about Adolf Hitler.¹ But Levy also stands in a long tradition of slapstick. Thus, when Levy’s Hitler consumes supplies from the ample medicine stash in his ‘globe’, for a second one is reminded of Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* of 1940 where Hitler’s globe became a tool of ballet-like acrobatics. Similarly, Hitler’s response ‘Ich heil mich selbst’ (‘I heal myself’) to his inferiors in Ernst Lubitsch’s *Sein Oder Nicht Sein (To Be or Not to Be)* of 1942, a funny play on words,² finds its way back to Levy. Thus, the physically and mentally exhausted Hitler pleads with Grünbaum: ‘Heilen Sie mich!’ (‘Cure me!’), to which Grünbaum responds by saluting Hitler. Levy, however, is at his best when he parodies Hirschbiegl’s claim for authenticity. Hitler’s Alsatian ‘Blondi’, whose killing takes such a prominent role in *Downfall*, in Levy’s version performs the Hitler salute. Equally bitter-sweet is Levy’s mockery of Hirschbiegl’s characterization of Hitler as a seducer. Having endured Hitler’s miserable and boring attempts at entertainment on New Year’s Eve, Eva Braun (Katja Riemann) lets Hitler know that ‘Mein Fuehrer, ich spüre Sie nicht!’ (‘My Fuehrer, I can’t feel you!’), when he is about to have sexual intercourse with her. Even his attempts to ‘make himself bigger’ remain futile. ‘Mein Fuehrer, ich spüre Sie immer noch nicht!’ (‘My Fuehrer, I still can’t feel you!’).

Even though Levy claims he received positive feedback from such acclaimed figures as the historian Götz Aly, who wrote a personal letter to him,³ he clearly remained frustrated at the fact that his criticism of the genre remained unheard. In an unusual manner, Levy directly appealed to the audience in a letter published in the newspaper *Die Welt*, expressing his disappointment over how the movie was debated in German press. In an article

‘Lachen Ist Ein Politikum’, published on the *Welt* web site on 20 January 2007, Levy writes: ‘The controversy is not conducted eye-to-eye. From above and in school masterly fashion, every effort has been made to extinguish your [the audience’s] desire to watch the movie. Have you read anywhere: “Go [and see it], discuss, argue, form your opinion?” Exactly.’

The debate on Levy’s film as conducted in the feature pages of German newspapers and magazines – specifically the lack of will to give any credit to Levy for his critique of the industry – is indicative of the discrepancy between public discourse, of which the feature writers are a part, and critical scholarly assessments of German cinema as they have emerged in recent years. In *Germans As Victims*, Bill Niven, Robert G. Moeller and Paul Cooke have carefully outlined how collective memory, including a discourse of victimisation and equalization of German and Jewish suffering, is enshrined in popular German cinematic productions such as *Downfall*. However, it is no secret that portrayals of Germans as victims of the war and the Nazis are omnipresent in German film and TV productions to the detriment of critical engagement with German atrocities during the war. Numerous such productions have been released in the last couple of years, with bombastic ratings confirming public demand – the major TV productions ‘Dresden’ (2006), ‘The Escape’ (2007), ‘Gustloff’ (2008), for instance, have attracted viewers in their millions.

There seems little place for a bit of bitter-sweet sarcasm in German public discourse. The mapping of collective memory in film – this time through Bryan Singer’s monumental Hollywood production *Valkyrie* (which is heavily subsidised by the German Federal Film Fund), based on Stauffenberg’s failed assassination attempt of Hitler – is in full swing. Ironically, while Dani Levy’s film was branded among critics as ‘lacking courage’, in November 2007, main actor Tom Cruise (ahead of *Valkyrie* coming into the cinema) received the ‘courage’ Bambi, Germany’s version of the ‘Oscar’, on account of ‘introduc[ing] a story to international audiences that has never been the topic of a major Hollywood production: the German resistance during the Third Reich.’ It is little wonder then that Levy’s movie did not fit in easily, sadly enough.

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For more information on the festival, please see <http://www.germanfilmfestival.co.uk>.

¹ For this purpose, Levy interviewed a random sample of youngsters. Only the girl’s (Levy’s daughter’s) reference to Adolf Grünbaum being her grandfather was staged as Levy informed the London audience in the Q&A session.

² The word ‘Heil’ in the Nazi salute, ‘Heil Hitler’ originates from the German verb ‘heilen’ (‘to heal/to cure’), thus creating the double meaning of saluting/curing someone.

³ Levy mentioned this in a brief conversation with the author after the Q&A.

Suggested Further Reading

- Cooke, Paul, 'The Continually Suffering Nation? Cinematic Representations of German Victimhood' in *Germans as Victims*, ed. by Bill Niven (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 76-92.
- Hass, Daniel, 'Der Gröfaztke', *Spiegel Online*, 8 January 2007, <<http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/kino/0,1518,458278,00.html>> [accessed 1 December 2007]
- Kothenschulte, Daniel, 'Lachen gegen den Wohligen Schauer', *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 9 January 2007, 15.
- Levy, Dani, 'Lachen Ist Ein Politikum', *Welt.de*, 20 January 2007, <http://www.welt.de/kultur/article710386/Lachen_ist_ein_Politikum.html> [accessed 1 December 2007]
- Martenstein, Harald, 'Adolf auf der Couch', *Zeit*, February 2007, 31.
- Moeller, Robert G., 'Victims in Uniform: West German Combat Movies from the 1950s', in *Germans as Victims*, ed. by Bill Niven (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 43-61.
- Niven, Bill, 'German Victimhood at the Turn of the Millenium' in *Germans as Victims*, ed. by Bill Niven (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 1-25.
- 'Dürfen Wir Über Hitler Lachen?', interview with Dani Levy, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, 17 December 2006, 25.
- 'Press Release: Bambi Award for Courage to Tom Cruise', <www.hubert-burda-media.com> [accessed 1 December 2007]
- 'Skandalnudel, gefährlich, Verharmlosung' [n. author], *Welt.de*, 10 January 2007, <http://www.welt.de/kultur/article707804/Skandalnudel_gefaehrlich_Verharmlosung>Weitere_Kritik_an_Mein_Fuehrer.html> [accessed 1 December 2007]