

## Workshop 4: Perpetrators in Movies and the Role of Film Education

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„Depictions of Perpetrators, Confrontation with History and Media-Based Education“

Can one understand evil? If the answer to that question is yes - then should one? These questions come up again and again in the debate about National Socialism and the murders of millions of innocent people in the concentration and death camps. How can one envisage evil? And does its description as "evil" not already distort our view of the past?

The National Socialists and their supporters were born and raised in the middle of Europe. They enjoyed an education and an upbringing. Despite social and economic crises, they had chances and options. Millions of respected men and women chose a path that made them into murderers, fellow-travellers and spectators. Not only did they succeed in planning, carrying out, condoning or supporting these acts; they were also capable of integrating these crimes into their value systems and thus legitimising them for themselves.

### Judging and Envisaging

When we speak here of *understanding* the perpetrators and their actions, what is meant is by no means *understanding* in the sense of sympathy. On the contrary, understanding or comprehension is aimed at allowing us to confront and judge the perpetrators and their actions. Any such judgement in turn implies self-questioning, and should lead to self-knowledge.

While observing the former SS *Obersturmbahnführer*, Adolf Eichmann, during his trial in Jerusalem, Hannah Arendt's attention was drawn to a fact that influenced her subsequent philosophical work. She noticed in Eichmann a conspicuous "inability to express himself", which she concluded came from a much more fundamental "inability to *think*". This inability to think shocked Arendt, because it reflected an inability "to envisage something from the point of view of another person" -- an absolute "lack of ability to envisage". (Arendt 1998a, 126). Yet this ability to envisage is a fundamental precondition for being able to judge; to judge in the sense of distancing oneself from one's own biographical position, a position guided by certain interests, the ability to observe one's own self from outside and thus to reflect upon oneself and to scrutinise one's own actions.

At another point, Hannah Arendt made a connection between this position of the person doing the judging with that of a spectator. She made it clear that "only the spectator occupies a position that enables him to see the whole: the actor, because he is part of the play, must enact his part – he is partial by definition. The spectator is impartial by definition – no part is

assigned to him. Hence, withdrawal from direct involvement to a standpoint outside the game is a condition *sine qua non* of all judgment." (Arendt 1998b, 75)<sup>1</sup>

It is interesting that in this context, Arendt draws the comparison with a play. This image, and that of the spectator, automatically leads us to the audio-visual media, especially to film. This is because in a certain way, films function like the ability to envisage. They can make something absent present, and thus deliver to the audience a portrayal that makes a judgement possible. On the other hand, films can capture what has happened in the past in concrete pictures, and convert this past into fixed narrative images. With regard to the use of film in history education, two important factors can be noted:

- Films enable something absent to be envisioned, they can *represent* past events and thus make them concrete.
- They tend towards concrete and fixed definitions, which is why one should enquire about the possibilities of developing the spectators' own envisaged images, i.e. about open structures, breaks and ambivalence.

### Media and Historical Consciousness

If one follows current studies on the development of historical consciousness, it becomes clear that envisagements of the past and, in particular, affective and emotional attribution of the past, are less influenced by cognitive knowledge of history than by narrated history as it is experienced in family circles -- not least through film and television (see Welzer et al 2002,15). There is a fundamental difference between knowledge of history on the one hand, and emotional envisagements of the past on the other hand, which also affects the development of historical consciousness (ibid.: 9). These can come into conflict if emotion-laden images of history contradict cognitively-imparted knowledge. At the same time, historical knowledge is influenced and changed by the re-living of history in personal narratives or through the reception of films.

This makes necessary a reflective use of the media in historical education. On the one hand, new ways of accessing the past can be determined with the aid of audio-visual media. However, this includes critical reflection of cinematic forms of representation and the imparting of media-analytical skills. In this way, a consciousness of how images of history are produced in the media can be created.

The use of media and media-based education work are to be seen in the context of social forms of memory, especially a constantly growing media-related memory. This is subordinate to processes of conversion, of re-interpretation, of forgetting, of suppression or of chronological change, which are shaped by the respective present as a mode of reception. At

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<sup>1</sup> "Only the spectator occupies a position that enables him to see the whole: the actor, because he is part of the play, must enact his part – he is partial by definition. The spectator is impartial by definition – no part is assigned to him. Hence, withdrawal from direct involvement to a standpoint outside the game is a condition *sine qua non* of all judgment." (Arendt 1982, 55)

the same time, the mass media are acquiring their own "interpretive authority" with regard to history (Voit 2004, 19). Furthermore, media representations of history are becoming interpretive frameworks for what people experience themselves (see Ebbrecht 2008, p. 90).

With regard to media-based history education, we can therefore note that audio-visual media:

- allow an alternative access to the past,
- that their mode of portrayal is shaped by a retrospective view from the present, and hence their depictions of the past represent not so much historical events, rather visualise contemporary interpretations of history,
- the images of history passed on in the media are subordinate to processes of change, structures of repetition, and consolidation (stereotyping), of which people can be made aware using film-analytical methods.

In the style of methods used in history science, media-didactic forms of analysis can be developed in response to these structures of media influence and effect. These forms include, in particular, media-analytically founded criticism of sources. By comparing different representations of the same events, people can be made aware of the structure of historical images.<sup>2</sup>

### Images of Perpetrators

The way in which National Socialism is dealt with in the media is influenced additionally by a generational paradigm. Large parts of German society still have a familial relationship with the National Socialist era, and are confronted with personal memories and experiences. Especially in terms of the crimes and the portrayal of perpetrators, a confrontational constellation emerges from this.<sup>3</sup>

This suggests a focus on the portrayal of characters for media-based education work regarding National Socialist perpetrators. A character usually represents a multiplicity of similar histories and destinies and thus acquires the characteristics of a character-stereotype. The heterogeneous structure of history is smoothed out for ease of narration. The prototypical film *Der Untergang (Downfall)* challenged the viewer to reflect in particular on the portrayal of Hitler (see Rother/Herbst-Meßlinger 2008). In order to decipher the effects of the film, the

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<sup>2</sup> In terms of cinematic portrayals of perpetrators, *Downfall* (2004), for example, uses a range of sources and blueprints, which it does not expose in a self-reflective manner, but which it re-enacts. This is already clear in the opening sequence, which shows the first encounter of a subsequent contemporary witness, Hitler's secretary Traudl Junge, with Hitler. In the feature film's version of events, Hitler appears as a lenient, older man and boss, when the nervous secretary makes a typing error during a test dictation. However, if one compares the scene with Traudl Junge's account in the documentary film *Im toten Winkel (Blind Spot: Hitler's Secretary)* (2002), a fundamental difference manifests itself. While, in *Downfall*, Hitler amicably encourages the young woman to repeat the erroneous dictation, in Junge's own memory, she rewrote the sentences while Hitler was distracted by a telephone call. *Downfall* makes Junge's memories tangible, alters them, adapts them to the dominant historical image in the film and turns them into established historical images. This especially affects perceptions of the characters, which are portrayed as historical interpretations.

<sup>3</sup> The possible involvement of a family member is usually denied by transforming their experiences into experiences of victimhood or resistance. At the same time, "the Nazis" are separated from the respective family's own history.

representation and, especially, the conversion of perpetrators to victims, and thus to analyse how it is shaped by the present, it is necessary to view Hitler in the context of a broader constellation of characters. Thus, minor characters, such as the historical protagonists Traudel Junge and the SS doctor Schenck provide stronger opportunities for identification than the character of Hitler (see Ebbrecht 2007, 148f.).<sup>4</sup>

This makes a more precise analysis of the characters necessary, an analysis which must include the different forms of portrayal just as much as it must film-analytical and history didactic methods. Media-based education related to examining National Socialism should also include confrontational elements, especially because of the lasting, strong emotional ties to history (through family or film). This means that any examination of perpetrators must overcome historical distance and bring about an examination of actions and motives. On the other hand, students should be put in a position in which they can adopt their own behaviour and stance towards these confrontations. The films can therefore be used as triggers of activation and positioning processes, which are based on the capacities for critical thought and judgement outlined above.

For example, this can take place through a comparative analysis of the portrayal of a perpetrator. Due to the reshaping of the Hitler figure by the media, it makes sense to examine other leading protagonists of National Socialism.<sup>5</sup> The actor playing Heinrich Himmler in *Der Untergang*, Ulrich Noethen, had for example prepared himself for the role with the aid of the film *Das Himmler Projekt (The Himmler Project)* (2000). In the film, a neutrally-dressed actor delivers Himmler's speech to SS Generals in October 1943 in Poznan in a neutral tone of voice and in full length. The two portrayals provide different forms of access to the historical figure. While the former concentrates Himmler's characteristics and integrates the dominant historical image from the film, the latter allows an examination of his thought structures. At the same time, it undermines the expectations, formed by the media, of how the historical figure should be portrayed. Other media representations of Himmler such as the one in the US series *Holocaust* (1978) or the film *Aus einem deutschen Leben (Death is my Trade)* (1977) can thus be contrasted. They should also lead to a critical study of the historical sources, such as the transcription and the audio-recording of the "Poznan speech", as well as including scientifically-informed portrayals such as Peter Longerich's recent biography of Himmler (Longerich 2008) or Katrin Himmler's examination of her family history (Himmler 2005).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The character Schenck is a good illustration of the transformation from perpetrators to victims. By omitting the person's historical background, his/her participation in human experiments in concentration camps, *Downfall* can make the character resemble the stereotype of the "good German".

<sup>5</sup> In this regard, characters such as Heinrich Himmler, Adolf Eichmann or Albert Speer provide good opportunities because of their diverse portrayals and extensive source material.

<sup>6</sup> A wide range of internet sources is available for this purpose. The full text of the transcribed "Poznan speech" is available under: <http://www.nationalsozialismus.de/dokumente/textdokumente/heinrich-himmler-posener-rede-vom-04101943-volltext> (last download: 10 January 2009). This source also provides an excerpt from the audio recording of the speech, in which Himmler discusses the murders of the European Jews: <http://www.nationalsozialismus.de/dokumente/tondokumente/heinrich-himmler-posener-rede-vom-04101943-auszug-5-min-mp3> (last download: 10 January 2009). An English-language translation of the speech and short film with audio clips is to be found under: <http://www.holocaust-history.org/himmler-poznan/> (last download: 10

## Family Histories

The latter book refers to the possibility of making the intergenerational passing on and examination of the past and its after-effects a subject matter in itself. Although many of the more recent German films about National Socialism are implicitly shaped by this family narrative, this is seldom visualised in a reflective manner. This dialogically-framed generational structure is however to be found in numerous recent documentary films, for example, the film *Zwei oder drei Dinge, die ich von ihm weiß* (*Two or Three Things I Know About Him*) (2005). However, while this film is based on the autobiographical involvement of the film-maker in his family history, the documentary film *Was bleibt* (*What Remains*) (2008) confronts a "perpetrator family" with a "victim family" and allows their experiences to enter into an exclusively cinematic dialogue; i.e. one created purely through the montage sequence. The fundamental difference between the experiences communicated is thus preserved. At the same time, relationships are created between the viewpoint of the perpetrators and/or their children and their treatment of the past and that of the victims and their families. This kind of film can be used on a number of levels for media-based history education: it can be used for the reconstruction of historical events, especially of daily life in the Ravensbrück concentration camp, as it can for an examination of the after-effects of the past. It offers starting points for discussion of the motives and psychology of the perpetrators as well as the effects on the later life of the victims. At the same time, through its multi-layered treatment of identity, growing up in different eras, and in the context of different polarities, it creates links to the contemporary present of young audiences. In this sense, a film such as *What Remains* can act as a trigger for processes of reflection, of comprehension and especially of a student's own responsibility in a constellation of the past which continues to reach into our present to this day.

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