

Panel 4: Interdisciplinary Approaches: the Social Sciences - Philosophy - Representation

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"Visual *Wunderjahre*: German Television and the Disappearance of the Nazi Perpetrators"

For many decades, the historical culture of the Federal Republic failed to represent Nazi perpetrators in any meaningful, let alone self-critical fashion. The failure of dealing with Nazi perpetrators was first and foremost a failure of West Germany's visual culture. While a minority of public prosecutors, judges, and historians tried to deal with the perpetrators with various degrees of success, television, the new *Leitmedium* of the Federal Republic, systematically avoided any in-depth analyses of the people who planned and ran the camps, the Holocaust, and the war of destruction. The failure is so complete that one immediately starts to wonder – a la Lübke – if it is not an integral part of the (West) German success story of collective memory management.

We will first document this failure especially with regard to ZDF for which the best data exist. The documentation also addresses the question of how perpetrators generally appear on TV in productions which focus on other aspects of Nazi history, for instance resistance, warfare, political persecution, and especially survival. In a second step, I will highlight the few exceptional programs that directly look at the perpetrators – they were mostly produced in the 1980s – and then briefly deal with the deluge of perpetrator representations which Guido Knopp launched in the mid 1990s in an effort to close a stunning gap in Germany's historical culture.

One might assume that a post-fascist country run by a democratic, anti-totalitarian elite would jump on the opportunity to depict Hitler as the source of all historical evil but that most certainly did not happen – at least not on TV which became the most important platform of collective self-definition in divided Germany in the 1960s. Up until the 1990s Hitler was everywhere and nowhere. His face briefly popped up in hundreds of features and documentaries about NS history but not a single ZDF program exists which focused on Hitler the war criminal – until 1995. In fact, it is quite amusing to recall which aspects of Hitler's life were deemed worthy of ZDF attention. In the 1970s, ZDF journalist dabbled in psychohistory and dared to take a closer look at Hitler's youth and his start in politics.¹ In addition, in a fleeting moment of political courage, they exposed their post-primetime audience to 75 minutes of Helmut Qualtinger reading excerpts from *Mein Kampf* and, many years before *Der Untergang*, restaged the last two

¹ *Der Hitler-Ludendorff-Prozess: Szenen aus einem Hochverratsprozess in einer Republik ohne Republikaner*, 11/5/1971; *Wie er es wurde: Ein junger Man aus dem Innviertel – Adolf Hitler*, 11/30/1973. ZDF broadcast similar psycho-historical inquiries into the minds of Heydrich and Himmler in 1977 and 1985 respectively, *Reinhard Heydrich: Manager des Terrors*, 7/22/1977; and *Der Vater eines Mörders*, 10/20/1985.

months of Hitler's life for the benefit of the German prime time audience.² Apparently, nothing noteworthy happened in Hitler's life between 1925 and 1945 that might have warranted the use of the valuable ZDF broadcasting time.

The situation did not improve in the 1980s. While television, including ZDF, helped craft and popularize the Holocaust paradigm in a string of programs about the victims and survivors of the "Final Solution," the journalists in Mainz developed a peculiar curiosity about Hitler's aesthetic predilections.³ They launched inquiries into the relations between Hitler and the arts and Hitler and Wagner and tried to answer the daunting question if Hitler loved swing.⁴ The visual disengagement with Hitler left the door wide open for Guido Knopp who returned the Führer once more to center stage in Germany's visual culture albeit at the price of rendering Nazism both evil and desirable.

The lack of curiosity about Hitler's specific responsibility for the unfolding of the "Final Solution" and other crimes reflected a similar disinterest in the motives and fate of many less prominent German perpetrators. In fact, the two gaps are probably closed linked since an analysis of Hitler's involvement would have quickly revealed that he was not running the camps single-handedly. Any TV play or documentary about Hitler and Auschwitz would have brought a whole slew of other names and faces onto the TV screens. Thus, the first decades of ZDF history television are particularly noteworthy for the elegant ways in which program providers and audiences avoided any face-to-face encounter with German perpetrators.

First, the ZDF staff developed a sustained interest in the war crimes of other European nations and their postwar efforts to come to terms with ethnic cleansing and collaboration. The station acquired Hungarian, Italian, French, and Danish productions which revealed in compelling fashion that many Europeans failed to master the moral challenges of Nazi occupation and/or had pursued their own genocidal campaigns under the cover of World War II.⁵ Any German viewer who relied exclusively on ZDF for his historical education could have easily come to the conclusion that the German crimes were neither unprecedented nor extraordinary. On the ZDF screen, World War II already became an era of international human right abuses long before such themes were adopted as the official memory of the European Union in the 1990s.

Second, ZDF might not have paid much attention to Hitler and his ordinary henchmen but they did develop a sustained interest in Hitler's media czar Goebbels. Obviously, ZDF directors and scriptwriters were not paying tribute to a

² Helmut Qualtinger liest: *Adolf Hitler 'Mein Kampf'*, 8/27/1974; *Der Führerbunker*, 11/8/1981.

³ For the Holocaust coverage of ZDF see Kansteiner, *In Pursuit of German Memory*, 109-130.

⁴ *Liebte Hitler Swingmusik*, 5/27/1983; *Hitler und die Kunst*, 8/7/1983; *Wagner und Hitler*, 10/2/1983. See also *Der grösste Kunstraub aller Zeiten: Hitler 'Sonderauftrag Linz'*, 12/13/1987; and *Wo Hitler and Goethe tafelten...: zu Gast im Hotel Elephant in Weimar*, 11/18/1991.

⁵ *Flucht nach Frankreich*, 7/15/1963; *Der Mann*, 4/2/1969; *Kalte Tage*, 4/14/1969; *Ein Tag mehr oder weniger*, 4/5/1974; *Der Opportunist oder vom Umgang mit den Besatzern*, 9/17/1976; *Der Duce hat immer recht*, 1/30/1977; *Das Hospital der Verklärung*, 9/23/1980; *Der andere Führer*, 7/29/1983; and *Ich und der Duce*, 4/17&18/1988. The ZDF coverage of the Barbie trial achieved a similar effect by focusing on the divisive discussion about collaboration in France, *Der Fall Barbie: Spuren eines Kriegsverbrechers*, 5/11/1987; and *Hotel Terminus: Leben und Zeit des Klaus Barbie*, 3/26&28/1990.

kindred spirit who had helped bring television to Germany. Rather, their efforts to enlighten viewers about the devilish machinations in the propaganda ministry, on one occasion revealingly entitled *Total Seduction: Propaganda and Reality in the Third Reich*, reminded the audience of how effectively they had been brainwashed before 1945 – to the point of being completely incapable of telling right from wrong.⁶

ZDF also found time to object to Nazis killing each other, calling the Röhm-Putsch “the first obvious breach of law in Nazi Germany,” and to delve at length into the life of Arthur Nebe whose criminal record as the head of *Einsatzgruppe* was weighed against his belated and half-hearted contacts to the resisters of July 20 (which lead to his execution in January 1945).⁷ Both broadcasts would have been perfectly acceptable if they had followed in the wake of a series of programs about the crimes and motives of SS, Wehrmacht, and affiliated perpetrators.

ZDF engagement with the history of Nazi perpetration is altogether disappointing at least during the first decade of the station’s existence when generations whose members were adults during the Third Reich were still running the show and representing a large share of the audience (including, invariably, the people in control of the dial). But the record is more mixed on the memory front. When ZDF journalist and directors reported on contemporary attempts to come to terms with the Nazi past, they spent more time on legal history and individual attempts at *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* than on the crimes themselves. Nevertheless, a few select broadcasts in the category memory provided more information on the perpetrators and their crimes than the vast majority of strictly historical programs.

In 1967 and 1970 respectively, ZDF broadcast two primetime TV plays that demonstrated vividly that West German society had never come to terms with the many Nazi perpetrators in its midst. *Death of a Fellow Citizen* by Jürgen Gütt dealt with the panicky reactions of friends, relatives, and political allies of an industrial tycoon who reveals in his will that he is a wanted war criminal and insists on being buried under his real name.⁸ *Confession* by Oliver Storz focuses on a priest who is deeply troubled by the confidential, anonymous confession of a former member of an *Einsatzgruppe* who refuses to give himself up.⁹ Both plays ran head to head against very popular programs on ARD and therefore received poor ratings although *Confession* was at least a critical success.¹⁰ More important, however, both TV plays, while dedicated to the cause of historical education, never visualized the “war crimes” nor, for that matter, the criminals themselves. Thus the well-intended interventions supported the problematic

⁶ *Die totale Verführung: Propaganda und Wirklichkeit im Dritten Reich*, 3 parts, 9/16, 9/17, 9/18/1970, followed by a TV discussion entitled *Hitler und die Deutschen* on 9/19/1970. See also *Brückenallee* Nr. 3, 10/27/1967; *Propaganda I: Die Psycho-Maschine des Dr. Goebbels*, 4/5/1983; and *Der Verführer: Anmerkungen zu Goebbels*, 11/29/1987.

⁷ *Der Fall Nebe*, 11/18&19/1964; *Der Röhm-Putsch*, 6/30/1967.

⁸ *Der Tod eines Mitbürgers*, 3/8/1967.

⁹ *Die Beichte*, 11/11/1970. See also *Der Fussgänger*, 8/7/1988.

¹⁰ Both TV plays were watched by 16% of TV households, for a representative review of *Die Beichte* see Ulrike Piper, “Die Beichte,” *Vorwärts*, 11/19/1970.

assumption that West German society had no choice in the matter and needed to wait for the invisible Nazi ghosts to come out of the woodwork on their own volition.

The repeated ZDF attempts at explaining the importance of the Nuremberg trials have even more serious flaws. The documentaries quickly adopt a metahistorical, transnational point of view by lecturing on the evolution of international criminal law after 1946 and raising the critical question if the victors of World War II stand above the legal framework of Nuremberg. Shouldn't the lessons of Nuremberg be applied to deal with the legacy of Algeria, Vietnam and other crime scenes of the Cold War?¹¹ On a few occasions, the reports even seem to convey a perverse sense of pride about Germany's lasting contribution to the cause of global justice.

Yet the coverage of the attempts to punish Nazi perpetrators, especially the reports on the efforts of the West German courts, also includes a number of exceptionally compelling representations of Nazi criminals. It needs to be emphasized, however, that all programs in question were marginal television events. In the end, we are left with a handful of documentaries which attained average ratings of merely 10% of television households, are less than 50 minutes long each, and, with two exceptions, were broadcast during off-primetime hours. 217 minutes in 28 years! The first noteworthy production entitled *The Last Stop* aired in 1964 at the occasion of the Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt.¹² Director Thomas Gnielka summarized the events in Auschwitz relying on photographs and excerpts from a Polish documentary by Maria Kwiatkowska. In addition, Gnielka offered a short synopsis of the lives of six of the defendants telling viewers about their behavior in Auschwitz and their unremarkable postwar careers.

After 12 years of silence, ZDF broadcast another truly remarkable perpetrator documentary entitled *Dr. W.: An SS physician in Auschwitz*.¹³ The Dutch director Rolf Orthel assembled a complex picture of Eduard Wirth on the basis of extensive interviews with friends and relatives. Wirth had served in Auschwitz for several years, participated regularly in selections, but also occasionally helped prisoners and committed suicide in 1945. *Dr. W.* was part of a modest increase of Holocaust coverage that was produced by ZDF and ARD a few years before news about the NBC mini-series *Holocaust* crossed the Atlantic. This coverage laid the foundation for the remarkable reception of *Holocaust* and later turned into a wave of TV stories about the victims and survivors of "Final Solution."

The invention of the Holocaust paradigm remains a remarkable turning point in the historical culture of the West, among other reasons, because survivors finally received the public recognition they deserved. In Germany, however, the special attention paid to the survivors of the "Final Solution" quickly

¹¹ *Das Weltgericht von Nürnberg Ein Prozess und kein Ende*, 10/1/1970; and *Spuren der Gerechtigkeit Nürnberg und die Folgen*, 11/7/1976. See also *Nürnberg: 20 Jahre danach*, 9/29/1966; *Das Urteil von Nürnberg*, 3/16/1970; and *Das Urteil von Nürnberg*, 9/28/1986.

¹² *Die letzte Station: Eine Dokumentation zum Auschwitz-Prozess*, 1/11/1964.

¹³ *Dr. W.: Ein SS-Arzt in Auschwitz*, 9/12/1976.

turned into yet another factor that deflected attention from the perpetrators. On several occasions, survivors participated in this pact of silence. Some were simply not able to talk about their tormentors. Others were appreciative of the educational efforts of their mostly younger German interviewers and conscious of the political difficulties which they might face at home. Consequently, with polite reserve, they refrained from what could be perceived as inflammatory statements and failed to volunteer information about the names and specific crimes of the Germans who had caused them so much pain. Consider for example the truly exceptional and path-breaking documentary *Mendel Schainfeld's Second Trip to Germany* by Hans-Dieter Grabe which ZDF broadcast in 1972.¹⁴ Schainfeld and Grabe talk at length about Schainfeld's family background, his experiences in ghettos and camps, and his continued physical and psychological suffering. Whenever the talk turns to perpetrators they use passive voice and generic phrases for the "bad people whose names I prefer not to mention" (5:10).

Despite this important qualification the early 1980s – i.e. the period after the invention of the Holocaust paradigm and before the commercialization of German television and the onset of Knopp TV – represent the most self-reflexive and self-critical era of German history TV. A number of noteworthy perpetrator documentaries were broadcast during those years, including the subtle *My Grandfather: KZ-Guard Konrad Keller*.¹⁵ Director Paul Karalus accompanied the young journalist Kurt Kister during his attempts to research the life of his grandfather who was a guard in Dachau and also a much-loved family patriarch. As Gnielka and Orthel before them, Karalus and Kister put the perpetrator front and center, visually as well discursively, and explored the disconcerting concurrence of extreme brutality and everyday kindness that characterized the lives of so many NS perpetrators but seemed not have caused them much discomfort during or after the war.

Apparently, it takes exceptionally favorable conditions and a lot of determination to land a NS perpetrator documentary in ZDF prime time. Jürgen Meyer accomplished that feat in 1977 with his devastating report about the Majdanek trial, one the longest NS trials in West German history.¹⁶ Meyer presents a few of the defendants and calmly documents the extensive use of Neo-Nazi jargon by the defense, the terrible treatment of survivors by officers of the court, and the complete indifference of the public towards the proceedings. But only the determined philosemite Lea Rosh really broke the mold and, at the same time, managed to retain a prime time broadcasting slot. In November 1982, a week before the re-broadcast of *Holocaust* on ARD, ZDF aired the bluntly entitled feature *Holocaust: The Crime and its Perpetrators*.¹⁷ Rosh had done her homework and presented a seemingly endless sequence of West German judicial scandals. Like her few predecessors dealing with the unpopular genre of perpetrator television Rosh described the lives and crimes of a few Nazi

¹⁴ *Mendel Schainfeld zweite Reise nach Deutschland*, 3/17/1972.

¹⁵ *Mein Grossvater: KZ-Aufseher Konrad Keller*, 7/25/1982.

¹⁶ *Die Vergangenheit kehrt zurück: Nach 33 Jahren – der Majdanek-Prozess*, 11/27/1977.

¹⁷ *Holocaust – die Tat und die Täter: Die Amnestierung der NS-Gewaltverbrechen durch die deutsche Justiz und Nachkriegsgeschichte*, 11/1/1982.

thugs but added another devastating level of analysis by informing the ZDF audience about the outrageously lenient sentences that German courts meted out to the perpetrators. One could argue, as some reviewers have done, that Rosh's fury clouded her judgment and that she failed to present a balanced view of the West German judiciary.¹⁸ Also, judging by the production file, Rosh must have been difficult to work with.¹⁹ Nevertheless, *The Crime and the Perpetrators* stands out as the only prime time document that deals with perpetrator history and conveys emotions of rage and grief that, in an ideal world, would have been expressed by many more journalists, politicians, and normal citizens.

The non-existence of perpetrator history on German TV was one of the preconditions for the success of the ZDF division for contemporary history. In the 1990s, Knopp and his associates started to fill the void by pursuing concepts of Nazi history and Nazi crimes that had had a long tradition in other realms of German historical culture. These concepts had often been alluded to on TV but never been developed in detail by ARD and ZDF, especially not in prime time. However, as Knopp and Co. started to visualize conventional perceptions of Hitler and his henchmen as the primary perpetrators of war and genocide, they relied extensively on visual documents crafted by the Nazis themselves. The films and photos would be digitally remastered and integrated into slick, fast cut sequences of eyewitness testimony, animation, and restaged historical scenes. The resulting documentaries filled a long-existing gap in Germany's visual culture and gave ZDF an edge in the competition with increasingly successful commercial TV networks. But the films accomplished a lot more. By combining explicit, politically correct anti-Nazi messages with much more ambivalent visual products celebrating Nazi power, Knopp and Co. invited their viewers on an unprecedented ride. The ZDF audience was offered a chance to play Nazi while remaining (safely?) grounded in Germany's mainstream, anti-totalitarian historical culture.²⁰

Without empirical reception studies there is no way of telling if this type of historical pornography had positive or negative consequences for the development of collective memories in Germany. The illicit pleasure of temporarily reveling in Nazi power might have brought viewers into the ZDF fold who otherwise had little interest in history education. But the ZDF media revolution had some problematic consequences for the representation of ordinary perpetrators. Part of Knopp's innovation consisted of a shift in emphasis from addressing traditional historiographical problems – why did the Nazi catastrophe happen – to pursuing much more emotionally driven questions – how did it feel to experience the Nazi era, how did it feel to be a victim or a perpetrator. That shift required evocative editing techniques which, among many other consequences, put a premium on the emotional, not the historiographical content

¹⁸ "Kritisch gesehen: Holocaust: Die Tat und die Täter," *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, 11/11/1982.

¹⁹ A substantial production file documenting for instance serious budget disagreements during and after the production of *Die Tat und die Täter* is retained in the ZDF archive "Zentrale Registratur" under the production number 6471/0284.

²⁰ On the exceptionally successful Hitler-focused Knopp productions, including the series *Hitler: Eine Bilanz* (1995) and *Hitlers Helfer* (1997-98), see Kansteiner, *In Pursuit of German Memory*, 167-180.

of eyewitness testimony. One of the highlights of *Holokaust*, for instance, is the testimony of a perpetrator who starts crying in front of the camera while sharing with the viewers the nonsensical insight that the killings might have stopped if he had informed his superiors.²¹ The producers did not see any need to correct him and thus both perpetrators and survivors appear as victims of history and equally deserving of our empathy.

²¹ *Holokaust*, 10/17&24&31 and 11/7&14/2000.