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**Constructing the Enemy: Analyzing German Myth and *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in War
Period Films in 1960s Eastern and Western German Cinema**

After the Second World War, the Allied Powers decided how to split and occupy Germany, creating four distinct military occupation zones. France took sovereign authority over the southwest territory, Great Britain the northwest, the United States the south, and the Soviet Union the east. In 1949, what was formerly occupied Germany officially split into the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG, or West Germany) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR, or East Germany). Each aligning themselves with their former occupying power after the formation of their respective countries, East and West Germany took different approaches to cope with their Nazi past and to define post-war East and West German identities within their state funded or mandated media, and most German films followed pre-established national narratives. In the 1960s, however, some films departed from these norms in order to highlight other problems of the time. West German *Nicht versöhnt, oder Es hilft nur Gewalt, wo Gewalt herrscht* (*Not Reconciled; or, 'Only Violence Helps Where Violence Rules,'* 1965) and East German *Die Abenteuer des Werner Holt* (*The Adventures of Werner Holt*, 1965) both use the idea of the “Other” to highlight major taboos, specifically the idea of complicity and subsequent lack of punishment for members of the Nazi party (*Nicht versöhnt*) and the problematic relationships with the USSR (*Werner Holt*). Understanding these films within the larger context of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or ‘coming to terms with the past,’ we can see the beginnings of a cultural conversation that continues to affect Germany in the modern era.

The 1960s, specifically in West Germany, is often credited with the onset of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, referring specifically to Germany coming to terms with its role in the Holocaust. However, this defined time period ultimately depends on how one defines dealing with the past – the ‘Central Office’ was created in 1958 in Ludwigsburg (West Germany) to investigate Nazi war crimes, but the public conversation surrounding the genocide would not begin in earnest until the 1960s (Port 637). This timeline only encompasses West Germany, as the process of denazification in the east officially ended once East Germany became its own country and *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* would not officially begin until German reunification in 1990 (Vogt 4).

Reconciling German guilt in East Germany was ostensibly much simpler than in West Germany, as the dominant ideology proposed a narrative in which the very foundation of East Germany was anti-fascist and disavowed Hitler completely (Berghahn, “Hollywood Behind the Wall” 57). Therefore, films that did deal with the events of the second world war directly were very harsh in their depictions of Nazis, as they were not the ancestors of East Germans. This distinction “legitimized their state as the ‘better Germany’ and allowed East Germans to enjoy a guilt free ‘memory’ of the Third Reich” (Berghahn, “Screen Memories” 294-295). Other scholars do point out, however, that this did not mean that East Germany did not explore their own culpability; Katrin Sieg, for example, makes connection that through making films about oppressed or liberated nations other than its own, East Germany could more easily explore its legacy of Nazism without breaching any political taboo (qtd. in Hosek 9).

In his 2006 study on German postwar mythology, Mark Wolfgram specified two postwar myths as related to Germany: the rhetorical barrier that separated Germans and Nazis into distinctly separate categories, and a Nazi terror state (20). The myth of the terror state certainly

has merit in historical fact, but Wolfgram asserts that it was the way in which this myth was perpetrated through popular culture, for example film, and how integral the separation of “Germans” and “Nazis” was to this idea that codified the terror state as postwar myth rather than a very real memory of the war. Focusing specifically on the East German portrayal of the terror state, this idea mainly served to explain the lack of German resistance against Hitler’s regime, framing Germans as the victims to a terror state beyond their control (33). While these notions have more to do with the collective memory of Germans post-World War II, media plays a central role in cultural reproduction, which partially creates collective memory (Assmann 15).

These films, though distinctly German in origin, cannot be removed from their transnational context, as one of the ways the Allied Powers’ influence remained in West and East Germany, can be seen through its film industry. When Allied forces took over the film industry in 1945, they were not particularly interested in reconstructing a “native German film industry” in West Germany; they were primarily concerned with regaining Germany as a consumer demographic of their own films in the foreign market (Kaes 10). Despite the fact that post-war Germany was preoccupied with the consequences of WWII, such as denazification and reparations, the United States flooded the screens with a backlog of Hollywood films, mainly in their specific occupied zones, in order to make up for wartime losses (Lindenberg 114). Leading up to West Germany’s *Grundgesetz* in 1949, the Western Allied Powers gave increasingly more control to West Germany until finally granting powers of self-government (with certain exceptions) on the 21st of September 1949 (Hake 67).

This same film production strategy cannot be said for East Germany, however. The film industry in East Germany actually officially began much earlier than in the West, as the Soviet Union was quick set about “re-educating” its citizens against the dangers of fascism

(Lindenberger 116). In establishing the film monopoly DEFA in 1946 (Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft), East German filmmaking was already underway by the time the GDR officially formed in 1949. While it is important to discuss the key industrial differences between DEFA and the film studios in West Germany, that is not only outside the scope of this paper, but also, as Thomas Lindenberger notes, less of a distinction than many scholars make it out to be: DEFA controlled what was made through direct, monopolistic control, West Germany's film industry itself actually almost entirely on government subsidies, so it would be inaccurate to depict it as unattached to its government's transnational ties with countries such as the United States, Great Britain, and France (Lindenberger 117). Furthermore, to stress this difference of autonomy would be a fallacy to the larger differences in what *kinds* of narratives these films were promoting.

Whereas the West German film market ostensibly joined a larger, transnational industry and demographic due to their more direct Hollywood roots, they did so by adopting a specific national demeanor within their films. More precisely, the FRG was "obliged to accept in the public realm the image of itself as the successor state of the Third Reich," and therefore not only culpable for its *Sonderweg* (separate path), but publicly repentant as well (Berghahn, "Screen Memories" 295). This resulted in what scholar Siobhan Kattago defined as the "therapeutic [mourning] model in the 1960s and 1970s" in West German films, speaking to the attempts to work through their culpability through fictional characters under the Nazi regime (qtd. in "Screen Memories" 295). These shifts, it should be noted, reflected less on what was going on in public conversation in East and West Germany, rather that these themes portrayed the myth of Germany as needed to fit into the larger historical contexts within each country's transnational narrative.

Period war films, such as *Nicht versöhnt* and *Werner Holt*, operate within a uniquely international and national space; the respective depictions are codified by national bias and history while players both within the film itself and the ideal consumer base of the film expand far beyond Germany. The war genre itself, then, specifically films depicting either of the World Wars, “open up beyond national and transnational considerations” (Halle 98). Traditionally, the historical genre within a transnational context serves a “vehicle for the imagining of the *national community*,” but as noted German film scholar Randall Halle notes, the era of European fascism, the Holocaust, and ultimately WWII does little to present a “transnational union” (90). This being said, films like *Nicht versöhnt* and *Werner Holt* still needed to fit into a larger transnational narrative discussed earlier, in order to acquiesce to international standards of their film industries. However, these films each took departures from their established structures in order to explore the growing discourse surrounding the modern implications of the events of WWII.

West Germany’s *Nicht versöhnt, oder Es hilft nur Gewalt, wo Gewalt herrscht* was based on Heinrich Böll’s 1959 novel *Billiards at Half-Past Nine*. It follows the Fähmel family through flashbacks as Robert Fähmel retells stories to a young hotel bellhop over a game of billiards in 1965. Spanning between WWI and post-WWII Germany, *Nicht versöhnt* depicts a story of an unfinished (and ultimately, unreconciled) history of Germany and the individuals left to carry the trauma and indictment of its past. Early critics of the film did not necessarily know how to place the film within German film canon; in a 1966 review of the film, Gideon Bachmann remarked that at first glance, *Nicht versöhnt* appears to have been made by someone who hates Germans, which in the larger context of the FRG’s film industry, ultimately incorrectly defines the way in which this film embodies the themes at the time. West German cinema had been dominated by other Western powers since before the Second World War, and while director Jean Marie-Straub

was French-born, he was not an outside observer of German culture; he himself had a place within German filmmaking in a transnational context. Straub based this film on both a German novel and his experiences living in Munich after the war. What seemed to be an issue with his Germanness, however, was Straub's film's damning portrayal of post-war West Germany, one supposedly still divided and influenced by its Nazi past.

In the same year *Nicht versöhnt* came out, East Germany's *Die Abenteuer des Werner Holt* directed by Joachim Kunert graced the screens. The film followed the titular Werner Holt, whose life and descent into fascism is also depicted through a series of flashbacks. Focusing on the loss of youth and innocence during the war, the film ostensibly concentrated on the Nazi regime as being the true perpetrators of violence and the Wehrmacht as those who did not know better until it was too late to get out. *Werner Holt* actually explored more controversial ideas surrounding the USSR within the pre-established forms and context of a typical DEFA anti-fascist film, which is why it can serve as the other point of comparison to *Nicht versöhnt* when analyzing *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and the myth of Nazi era Germany in both East and West Germany.

Although the films followed traditional narrative arcs of other mainstream films of the time, as they both present Nazi-era Germany within the accepted national myth of that time, they stand out in their depiction of post-war Germany. Both of these films utilize flashbacks throughout their narrative; in fact, most of the plot takes place within the flashbacks. Robert Fährmel, who is presenting the framed narrative within *Nicht versöhnt* by recounting his family's stories all during one afternoon, does not present a heroic lens of the Wehrmacht, which was typical of West German narratives leading up to this era (Wolfenden 71). Werner, on the other hand, contemplates his own actions and role he played in the rise of Hitler, which leads him to

question himself, his friendship with the fanatical Gilbert, and the necessity of war. In both films, flashbacks as a narrative device call into the question that this era of terror and fascism ever truly ended; although *Werner Holt* takes place before the end of the war, the structure of the film suggests long lasting consequences and modern implications of his actions and guilt. Robert Fährmel embodies this even more, as he carries the legacy of both his family and his country, even while playing a casual game of billiards. He carries a trauma that will never leave him.

Each film's depiction of its characters speaks to the larger context of the way in which German citizens during the war are respectively depicted narratively. Werner and Gilbert, 17-year-olds swept up in the fervor of fascism and forced to face the consequences of their own actions appear as a stark contrast to Robert Fährmel and his Jewish friend, Shrella, are the victims in the narrative, suffering abuse at the hands of their Nazi teachers and classmates. One classmate in *Nicht versöhnt*, Nettlinger, appears at the end of the film having gained rank in the post-war Federal Republic of Germany, asserting denazification's failure to provide justice to those who suffered under the Nazi regime.

Werner Holt concerns itself more with depicting the evils of fascism and its corruption, but does not dwell on the idea that those individuals affected by this ideology continue to live in East Germany. Within the context of the Eastern Bloc's rhetoric, these individuals are a concept of the past; an inevitable "logical consequence and culmination of monopoly capitalism," these societal issues were solved by creation of the German Democratic Republic (Berghahn, "Screen Memories" 294). *Nicht versöhnt*, on the other hand, even within its title considers the modern implications of Germany's Nazi past, something which even within the transnational rhetoric of West Germany being the overall guilty party during WWII was groundbreaking for its time. What does it mean that the guilty were not necessarily punished, and

continue to hold power in post-war Germany? *Nicht versöhnt* was one of the first films to explore this notion a bit more closely, even before the mainstream *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* swept the country.

Werner Holt was equally radical within its own context. This film, while depicting fascism in the accepted portrayals of East German film, depicted thematically the growing feeling of dissatisfaction with the GDR's "liberators" from fascism, that being the Soviet Union. He wonders if everything he sacrificed was for nothing, and while a dominant reading of the text could indicate a nihilist perspective in which Werner speaks only of his inability to regain his innocence, another reading of the text is that the Soviet Union did not provide the clean break from the Nazi regime which they consistently claimed in public rhetoric and in film. *Werner Holt* presents a narrative where East Germany simply moved from one dictating power to another, slowly losing their own autonomy and German identity, and subsequently their personal identity, in the process.

Both of these films, ultimately, relied on a portrayal of the "Other" as the enemy, but that other was variations of their own memory. To the West, the enemy shifted as the industry shifted: originally portrayed sympathetically in order to promote the country's remilitarization in the '50s, the 1960s sought to answer questions of Hitler's regime by exploring Germany's *Sonderweg* and what it even meant to be German after Hitler's rise to power (Berghahn, "Screen Memories" 295). To the East, however, the "Other" was presented as the German fascists that they were, relying on the idea that all of the Nazis defected to the Federal Republic of Germany (Lindenberger 115). *Nicht versöhnt* and *Werner Holt* each depict respective departures of this rhetoric within the accepted transnational portrayals of each nation's idea of victory over their own troubled pasts.

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