Film has long been a vital, if controversial means for, on the one hand, memorializing the atrocities of the Holocaust and, on the other, representing and understanding the enigmatic forces that led to the Nazis’ eliminationist policies. In the first years after the war, documentaries were prevalent among cinematic depictions. Films such as Billy Wilder’s *Die Todesmühlen* (1945) and Alan Resnais’s *Night and Fog* (1955) relied extensively on archival footage, particularly on footage taken by Allied forces shortly after the liberation of the death camps. With ignorance—or feigned ignorance—of the atrocities of the Holocaust still widespread, the primary purpose of such films was the dissemination of visual evidence of the death camps. With the assumption of access to the event that these images provided, documentary film and photography served as verification of events that seemed to exist outside of comprehensibility. Film represented a rejoinder to German denials of knowledge and attempts at rationalization. Thus, documentary films, or rather their screening, took on a pedagogical character in occupied Germany, particularly in the U.S. zone of occupation, where *Todesmühlen* was shown together with newsreels and other selected documentaries as part of an effort at «reeducating» the German civilian population.¹

While documentaries such as *Night and Fog* have continued to be screened as part of Holocaust education in Germany (a practice depicted in films such as *Die bleierne Zeit* (Margarethe von Trotta, 1981) and *Die innere Sicherheit* (Christian Petzold, 2000)) throughout the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, narrative film has emerged alongside documentary as a means for engaging in discussions about the war and the Holocaust in Germany. Certainly, from an international perspective, the feature film was introduced relatively quickly as a complement to the documentary as filmmakers sought to make use of film as a means not only to «show» the Holocaust, but also to engage viewers emotionally in a narrative about the Holocaust, utilizing the particular mechanisms of film form. While the war was not completely absent from German screens in the 1950s and early 1960s, the historical narratives told by war films were fairly well circumscribed,
focusing almost exclusively on Wehrmacht soldiers who exhibited no discernible political tendencies other than an allegiance to a sense of duty and to their fellow soldiers. It was only in the late 1960s, with the emergence of New German Cinema, that film became more directly engaged with the ideological underpinnings of the Nazi era and degrees of German complicity, both civilian and military. Although New German Cinema directors such as Rainer W. Fassbinder, Volker Schlöndorff and Helma Sanders-Brahms were clearly aware of how film as a medium could create as much ambiguity as clarity, one could argue that, like postwar documentaries, they were also produced with an urgency derived from a fear of historical forgetting as a response to the amnesia about the Holocaust and Second World War that settled over West Germany during its postwar reconstruction.

The post-Wende period, however, saw a convergence of the narrative and the documentary in German cinema. A steady stream of documentaries focusing on Nazi perpetrators, such as those produced by Guido Knopp – *Hitlers Helfer* (1996), *Hitlers Krieger* (1998), *Hitlers Kinder* (2000) – flooded television airwaves. Similarly, German narrative cinema moved towards direct portrayals of the major figures of the Third Reich in films such as *Der Untergang* (2004) and *Speer und Er* (2005). What these films share in addition to the thematic focus on perpetrators, is their effort to situate contemporary viewers along a continuum of guilt (ranging from perpetrator to bystander) by restaging the past in order to allow viewers to align themselves with a German civilian population that is either ignorant of Nazi crimes or at least powerless to stop them. It is also notable that they tend to be much more concerned with reenacting the final stages of the war rather than its beginnings; such narratives thus not only provide audiences with a cathartic and definitive ending to the Nazi era, but they allow for a forward-looking orientation, in which the past is reinterpreted through the standpoint of a contemporary subjectivity.

On the level of form, the critical engagement with cinematic representations of the Holocaust and German perpetrators has centered around two basic questions: the possibility of adequately and accurately representing what many see as an essentially unknowable event, and the role that affect plays in facilitating or hindering the transmission of meaning. Narrative films are, predictably, subject to scrutiny for how they fictionalize events and employ affect as a means to engage audiences. In both their form (i.e., through the use of hand-held cameras and the use or mimicry of archival footage) and content (by asserting the historical and even psychological accuracy of their portrayals of people and events) filmmakers such as Max Färberböck and Oliver Hirschbiegel often go to great pains to position their films as factual accounts that, despite being highly melodramatic, are grounded in historical under-
standing. Indeed both Hirschbiegel’s *Der Untergang* (2004), which draws on, among other sources, the memoirs of Hitler’s secretary Traudl Junge, Albert Speer, and Ernst-Günther Schenck, and Färberböck’s *Anonyma: Eine Frau in Berlin* (2008), which takes as its primary source text an anonymous diary written during the Soviet Occupation of Berlin, privilege first-hand accounts of the fall of Berlin, regardless of the potential for a subjective and arguably self-serving recollection of the period. Given its focus on Hitler, who had been absent from German film, though not from the German screen, Hirschbiegel’s film in particular was aggressively marketed as meticulous in its adherence to facts. Hirschbiegel insisted that «Man kann da von Interpretation nicht wirklich sprechen» (anon. *Kultura-Extra*), while producer Bernd Eichinger claimed that «Wir machen keine Soap-Opera und auch kein Dokudrama» (153). In so doing, such films sought to immunize themselves from the sorts of objections lodged against narrative historical films, namely a privileging of melodrama over reality, excessive use of affect and empathy, and a desire to provide closure in the form of a happy ending. Positioning them on the continuum of fictional and factual accounts closer to the documentary form may give such films an appearance of authenticity, but it overlooks the fact that documentaries are not immune to questions regarding the limits of filmic representability of the Holocaust and the role that audience identification and the generation of affect should play, particularly when it comes to the manipulation of historical material. The reception of Knopp’s various documentaries attests to this. Writing in *Die Zeit*, Peter Kümmel notes that Knopp approaches his documentaries with the «Behagen des Autorenfilmers» and that, while Knopp does not falsify historical dates and events, «Er zeigt die Vergangenheit als Director’s Cut. Er ist ein Historiker des Schneidetischs.» His manipulations are designed to engage the audience in an emotional investment, one that elides larger questions of guilt as they pertained to a German civilian population and that offers them closure.

Although Knopp’s documentaries stand out for their unabashed adoption of melodramatic style in order to evoke an emotional response on the part of the audience, this employment of affect is not necessarily outside the realm of the documentary. As feature films strive for a legitimacy via a notion of «authenticity,» documentary films have often followed nearly an opposite trajectory. In his seminal study of the documentary film, Bill Nichols outlines an evolution of the documentary form, delineating six different modes of engagement, beginning with what he terms an «expository» mode, which features «voice-of-God commentary» and emphasizes verbal commentary and argumentative logic (32). Other modes recognize and even valorize the filmmaker’s direct engagement in the documentary, culminating in a «per-
formative mode» in which the subjective nature of the documentarian as well as the subjective position of the audience are emphasized, and emotion and affect are afforded a central role.

While Nichols’s account of the linearity of this evolution of documentary form is problematic, as is the implication that these forms do not coexist in a single work, his categories are useful, particularly with respect to Holocaust documentaries.² *Die Todesmühlen* can certainly be understood as expository, while *Night and Fog*, whose voice-over commentary was written by Paul Celan, embodies characteristics of both the expository and the poetic modes. The most well-known example of a documentary in the interactive mode is Claude Lanzmann’s nine-and-one-half hour film *Shoah* (1985). Breaking with traditional documentaries about the Holocaust and the Nazi period, which typically feature extensive use of archival footage, Lanzmann famously omitted any material from the time of the Holocaust in favor of oral interviews and staged scenes, arguing that his film was not a documentary – indeed was not even representational – describing it instead as «a fiction of the real» (301) that was nonetheless meant to be an «incarnation of the truth» (Jeffries).

This is not to suggest that all Holocaust documentaries subsequent to Lanzmann’s *Shoah* have carried on in an entirely similar vein, although given the enormous impact of that film, it would not be entirely incorrect to suggest later films must deal with Lanzmann’s provocative statements regarding the limits of what film can, and perhaps should, represent, and its direct or indirect implications for Holocaust documentary. Two of Lanzmann’s claims in particular serve as touchstones for an analysis of tendencies among recent documentaries: Lanzmann’s assertion that the use of archival material «historicizes» the Holocaust, relegating it to the past, and his adherence to the dictum «here there is no why» (Lanzmann, «Hier ist kein warum» 279) to such an extent that he would argue that even asking the question of why is considered obscene. Both are useful points of departure for dealing with Romuald Karmakar’s *Das Himmler-Projekt* (2000) and Lutz Hachmeister and Michael Kloft’s *Das Goebbels-Experiment* (2005). By relying almost exclusively on archival materials, both films implicitly acknowledge the potential for historicization inherent in the use of such materials, but nonetheless attempt to demonstrate how such a historicization can be overcome. Hachmeister and Kloft’s film attempts to make the past present via a juxtaposition of a range of historical materials, while Karmakar’s approach takes an opposite tack, relying on a single archival source. These two are not Holocaust films in the strict sense of the word in that their focus is on the architects of the Holocaust, rather than on the events themselves, but both purport to offer viewers an unmediated glimpse into the horrors of Nazi
ideology by presenting images and texts without commentary. While *Das Goebbels-Experiment* relies exclusively on archival sources (nearly all of its visuals are drawn from German-directed feature films and newsreels from the Nazi period) and its audio track consists of passages from Goebbels’s diary (read by Udo Samel in the German release and Kenneth Branagh in the English-language one), Karmakar’s film eschews images almost entirely in that it consists of what appears to be a single camera trained on the actor Manfred Zapatka reading Himmler’s secret 1943 Posen speech on the extermination of the Jews in a dry, monotone voice. These two works use archival material as a means of re-staging the past and this re-staging engages the viewer in processes of identification, both with the perpetrator, whose words are the focus of each film, as well as with the intended audience of the perpetrator’s words. In re-staging the past, both films create a sense of temporal displacement, whereby the audience is forced to listen to or witness the events depicted in the films as if those events were taking place in the present. In this making-present of the past, the filmmakers, like Lanzmann, seek to provide an «incarnation of the truth.» They seek to provide access in an attempt to marshal an affective relationship with the material, to restage the past in such a way as to create a temporal displacement in which the perpetrator’s words are the focus of each film, and affect is mobilized in the interest of transmitting ostensible truths about the nature of Nazi ideology as reflected in the persona of a perpetrator.

First available in their fullness to historians only in 1992, Goebbels’s diaries encompass twenty-two years (and 29 volumes to date) of entries. When Hachmeister and Kloft’s documentary appeared in 2004, it was one of two to focus on the then newly published material, the other being Andrea Morgenthaler’s three-part film television documentary *Joseph Goebbels.* Like Morgenthaler’s documentary, *Das Goebbels-Experiment* uses the diaries as a means for developing a psychological rather than a political portrait of Goebbels, but while Morgenthaler adheres to a more traditional documentary form, intercutting between archival footage, excerpts from the diaries, and commentary from various eyewitnesses, Hachmeister and Kloft eschew verbal commentary entirely.

Taking Goebbels’s diaries as the source text for the film’s narration brings with it certain connotations in the minds of the audience, particularly given the key role that the diary form plays in Holocaust representation, due, as Jaimey Fisher argues, to both the invitation to a strong affective investment by the reader or viewer and its ostensibly testimonial character, which appears to provide unmediated access to an individual’s reactions to historical events as they unfold (242). Certainly, much of the reception of the most famous
«Holocaust diary,» namely *The Diary of Anne Frank*, reflects this notion of unmediated access. But this assumption of truth is, in and of itself, already problematic. Fisher, citing James E. Young, notes that despite the expectation that the diary serve as almost «sacred» testimony, it remains a form of interpretative discourse, one that should be understood as a constructed narrative (Fisher 243). In the case of Goebbels, this is doubly true. Believing his tomes to be of great historical significance, Goebbels began dictating his entries in 1941, storing them first in an underground vault in the Reichsbank in Berlin, then having them copied onto microfilm. It would thus be a mistake to treat Goebbels’s words as anything other than another form through which he fabricated a particular narrative of the Nazi era and of his own motivations.

But it is not the diary entries themselves that prove to be particularly problematic, as they at least carry with them a notion of subjectivity: they were clearly written by *someone*, someone directly identified in the film, well-known to the audience, and given substance in the form of Branagh or Samel’s voice-over narration. Rather, it is the visuals that accompany the narration of the entries that prove to be problematic. Their perceived status as an authentic account of the period is complicated because the source of these images is obscured. The film, which features clips from *Triumph des Willens* (1935), *Olympia I* and *II* (1938), *Ohm Krüger* (1941), and *Kolberg* (1945), treats newsreel and archival footage, Nazi feature films and propaganda films almost interchangeably, a tactic that would be more problematic if the archival footage could in fact be treated as non-fiction. Given the tremendous control the Nazis, and particularly Goebbels exerted over the image, over what was seen and not seen, perhaps the distinction here is moot. After all, Riefenstahl would insist that *Triumph des Willens* was a «pure historical film,» calling it «film verité,» and arguing that her film merely captured the reality that was taking place in 1934. The result is the same – a film that privileges a Nazi vision of history, a vision that remains unchallenged from start to finish.

The juxtaposition of two types of sources – the literary and the visual – has the potential for providing the audience with mutual insight into their interpretive nature, via a sort of contradictory juxtaposition. One scene in particular highlights the capacity of a film of this sort to generate an ambiguous relationship with its source material. An intertitle appears reading «Goebbels spricht,» followed by a shot of him giving a speech. Another intertitle appears, reading: «Kapitulieren? Niemals!» and the narration continues: «April 26, 1928: Gestern in Friedenau geredet. Scheissvornehmes Bürgerpublikum.» As this line is read, the image abruptly shifts from Goebbels speaking to a scene of a crowd storming what appears to be a palace gate. For several seconds, the voice-over narration drops out and the
only sound comes from this crowd footage. When Samel resumes reading from Goebbels’s diary entries, he references the film clip directly: «Ich sehe Eisensteins Film, 10 Tage, die die Welt erschütterten. Zu stark forciert und deshalb um seine besten Szenen gebracht. Einige Massenaufnahmen sehr gut. Das ist also Revolution. Man kann von den Bolschewisten vor allem in anfachen der Propaganda viel lernen. Der Film ist zu sehr Partei. Weniger wäre mehr.» The editing here opens up the film to three different readings: initially the logic of the film leads the audience to interpret the scene as a straightforward illustration of Goebbels’s words, correlating his description of an angry audience with the shots of rioting crowds. But once the source of the footage is revealed, this association becomes more ambiguous. If the crowds storming the Winter Palace in Eisenstein’s 1927 film about the October Revolution stand in for the bourgeoisie, then Goebbels becomes aligned with Alexander Kerensky, a doubling that is inaccurate both from the perspective of ideology and that of the dynamic of authority and rebellion, thus undermining Goebbels’s rhetoric of revolution. Alternately, the audience can read the angry (Bolshevik) masses as parallels to the Nazis, rising up against a decadent Weimar government. While this remains an ideologically incompatible association, it would better coincide with Goebbels’s projection of the Nazis as a mass movement poised to overthrow the status quo. But given Goebbels’s explicit reference to Eisenstein’s film, it is possible to add a third reading, one in which the audience is aligned with Goebbels, seeing the footage and interpreting it from his perspective. Doing so permits a certain amount of irony, since his sentiment expressed here is at odds with the decidedly non-subtle Nazi propaganda footage that appears elsewhere throughout the film.

The treatment of Riefenstahl’s film – and Riefenstahl herself – is an interesting one, particularly given how effectively Ray Müller’s documentary Die Macht der Bilder: Leni Riefenstahl (1993) undermines Riefenstahl’s exculpatory explanations for her films and the depth of her involvement in and awareness of Nazi war crimes, by intercutting between interviews with the filmmaker, shots from her films, and excerpts from other archival documents. To cite just one such moment: when asked what kind of relations she had with Goebbels, she responds with a laugh, «die schlechtesten, die man sich vorstellen kann!» explaining that when they first met before the war, she rebuffed Goebbels’s romantic overtures, which incensed him and led to such a breakdown in relations that she considered him «Beinah ein Feind.» The film’s narrator then reads an excerpt from Goebbels’s diary describing their close social relationship, thus contradicting Riefenstahl and sending her into a sputtering rage. A similar juxtaposition in Hackmeister and Kloft’s film
occurs, when an excerpt from Goebbels’s diary, in which he speaks contemptuously about Riefenstahl – «Fräulein Riefenstahl macht mir ihre Hysterien vor. Mit dieser Wilden Frauen ist nicht zu arbeiten. Ich bin kühl bis ans Herz hinan.» – is followed by footage of a speech in which Goebbels awards her the German film prize and praises *Olympia*. But here the contrast is between Goebbels’s contempt for Riefenstahl as expressed in his diary, and his public speech extolling her film. All this juxtaposition reveals, however, is that Goebbels’s public persona did not always reflect his personal opinions.

Moments such as these are the exception rather than the rule in the film: the juxtaposition of personal insights and archival footage is predominantly illustrative, and no attempt is made to undermine Goebbels’s descriptions of events. This is primarily due to the fact that the film effectively effaces the traces between the various types of footage used as visual material. In the shots immediately preceding Goebbels’s speech above, as the voice-over describes Goebbels’s relocation to Berlin, the film’s visuals shift from scenes excerpted from Walter Ruttman’s *Berlin Symphonie einer Grossstadt* (1927) to footage taken from a Nazi newsreel of Goebbels himself arriving at his new office. While there is a barely perceptible shift in the film’s quality in that the scenes featuring Goebbels are slightly grainier and slowed down, there is otherwise no indication that we have moved from one visual source to another. All of the film’s images, whether they are drawn from archival footage, features, or from the propaganda film *Triumph des Willens* are given equal weight as a form of visual documentation. The editing of these materials has the potential to provide a devastating and insightful commentary; instead, Hachmeister and Kloft seem to want the images to speak for themselves. But here proximity does not bring viewers any closer to an understanding of the original power of these images – it renders them hollow. As mere illustrations of a historical moment, illustrations that carry none of the emotional charge they once possessed, the images historicize the period, and themselves.8

The burden that this places on the viewer is significant. Absent a thorough understanding of the events of the Holocaust, the viewers are left simply with Goebbels’s perspective; it is the viewers’ affective relationship with him that determines their reactions to the events on screen. While Goebbels carries with him too many ideological associations for viewers to develop any real sympathy for him – indeed, viewers are more likely to see him as bombastic and slightly pitiable – the film’s uncritical use of Nazi-sourced visual material does little to undermine Goebbels’s account of the events described in the film.

Thus, while the film positions itself as offering unmediated and unprecedented access to a «truth content,» namely the innermost thoughts of one of the major
figures of the Nazi era, in seeking to delve into the psychology of Nazism, the
directors recreate the psyche of one of its architects. In doing so, they give
inordinate weight to his psychology as a means for explaining, or at least
contextualizing major events from the Nazi period, which thus remain
obscured rather than illuminated by Goebbels’s perspective. As a result,
as with narratives that seek to explain Hitler’s anti-Semitism in terms of
childhood trauma, the film reduces the Nazi ideology for which Goebbels was
responsible to the pathology of a single individual, a move that generates, if not
sympathy for Goebbels, then at least an understanding for his position and an
emotional distance from the events themselves.

One scene in which this becomes particularly clear is the sequence in the
film that references Kristallnacht. Shortly before this sequence, Goebbels
describes his depressed mental state, brought on by a dispute with his wife
Magda. An intertitle suggests the reason for this dispute, namely Goebbels’s
affair with the Czech actress Lída Baarová. Over visuals that depict a stone-
faced Magda sitting for a formal portrait, Goebbels recounts: «Ein schwerer
Tag. Am Abend noch eine lange Aussprache mit Magda, die für mich eine
einzige Demütigung ist. Ich werde dies nicht vergessen. Sie ist so hart und
grausam. Man soll auf dem Schmerz ganz aufkosten. Und sich von nichts feige
zurückziehen. Ich durchlebe augenblicklich die schwerste Zeit meines
Lebens.» As the final line of this entry is spoken, the visuals shift to footage
from the Kristallnacht riots. After a momentary pause in which the only sound
is the crackling of a fire, the narration continues: «In Kassel and Dessau große
Demonstrationen gegen die Juden. Synagogen in Brand gesteckt und Ge-
schäfte demoliert. Nachmittags wird der Tod des deutschen Diplomaten Rath
gemeldet. Nun ist es aber gut.» While the narrator reads the rest of Goebbels’s
entry for November 10, in which he speaks of Hitler’s command that the riots
be allowed to continue, the visuals are more scenes from Kristallnacht, shots of
Goebbels meeting with Hitler that night, the Oranienburger Synagogue
burning, and footage of German civilians perched on steps and window-sills
watching the events unfold. By linking these two moments – Goebbels’s
turmoil in his marriage and Kristallnacht – through Goebbels’s line, «Nun ist
es aber gut,» the film levels the difference between private crisis and a major
political event, rendering the latter comprehensible only in terms of Goebbels’s
narrow perception of it.9

Hachmeister and Kloft frame their documentary as an attempt to engage the
past with the present, by portraying Goebbels as «einen modernen News- und
Medienmanager.» But the overall construction of their film only reinforces the
historicity of its subject, both by giving it a particular and discreet historical
trajectory – defined by the first and last entries from Goebbels’s diary – and by
intersplicing into the archival footage video segments that provide a present-day view of a city or region mentioned in the diaries. These segments, the only ones not drawn from the Nazi period, are shots entirely devoid of people, however, as if their sole function is to confirm that the buildings or spaces referenced in Goebbels’s diaries existed, or continue to exist.

Unlike so many Holocaust and Nazi documentaries, the film ends, not with images of the devastation of the war or footage of the liberated death camps, but with footage showing the dead Goebbels children and the charred corpse of Goebbels and his wife. The inclusion of the children is significant here: though the deaths of Goebbels and his wife, who has poisoned the children, are not likely to evoke a sympathetic response from viewers, the deaths of their children undercut any viewer satisfaction with Goebbels’s ultimate demise. Instead of providing the sort of closure associated with the vanquishing of a film’s antagonist, the pathos of the children’s death complicates the audience response. Goebbels’s death in and of itself may not be tragic, but the consequences of his death are. These are the only victims of Nazi ideology rendered visible here – the other victims of the Nazis and Goebbels’s policies are conspicuously absent from the footage used in the film. Even in the scenes illustrating Kristallnacht described above, the film only shows images of Germans, smiling as they survey the wreckage. What is interesting about the footage included here is its provenance. Despite the careful political staging of the events of November 9, Goebbels instructed the media to refrain from taking photographs and filming events. The only existing film of that night came from amateur movies (Ebbrecht 44). Thus even the amateur quality of this footage can, in a sense, be understood as artificial: it was not that Goebbels did not want footage of burning buildings and destroyed storefronts, rather he wanted to preserve the illusion that these events unfolded spontaneously and as a result of public outrage. By forbidding official film and photography, he indirectly ensures that such footage becomes the only documentation.

Given the volume of material to be drawn upon, it might seem picky to quibble over specific entries or dates, particularly given that Goebbels’s racism (he crowed over the defeat of Joe Louis by Max Schmeling: «In der zwölften Runde schlägt Schmeling den Neger KO. Wunderbar! Ein dramatisch erregender Kampf. Der Weiße über den Schwarzen und der Weiße war ein Deutscher.») and anti-Semitism (referencing Emil Ludwig’s Mord in Davos, an account of the assassination of Wilhelm Gustloff, as «ein gemeines, echt jüdisches Machwerk. […] Diese Judenpest muss ausradiert werden. Ganz und gar. Davon darf nichts übrig bleiben.») are not entirely elided in the film. Yet there is a way in which they remain hidden, invisible – entirely circumscribed by Goebbels’s narration and the images of the perpetrators.
One could argue that this absence is a positive one, one in the spirit of Lanzmann’s unwillingness to show images of the Holocaust, but the absence is hardly noted by the writer-directors. It neither engenders a remembering in the viewer, attempts to recreate the trauma of loss, nor aids to understand an emptiness. Instead this absence, like the absence of Holocaust victims in Der Untergang, merely allows viewers to distance themselves from the consequences of Nazi ideology and position themselves as heirs to the true victims of Nazi ideology, an ideology that has run its course and should be seen as a historical aberration, one that bears no relationship to contemporary reflections on being German.

The three-and-one-half hour speech that makes up the entirety of Karmakar’s Das Himmler-Projekt was the first of two secret speeches made by Heinrich Himmler to an audience of 92 high-ranking SS officers on October 4 and October 6, 1943 in the city of Posen in Nazi-occupied Poland. The speeches are unique in that they are rare evidence of a high-ranking member of the Nazi government openly discussing elements of the Final Solution. The speeches were recorded on wax discs and then also transcribed (and edited by Himmler) to be distributed to SS generals and filed in the SS archives. It is the audio recording and not the transcript that is the basis for the film. Significant differences mark these two versions. As Margit Fröhlich notes, the care given to preserving a «secret» speech given to an exclusive audience is somewhat paradoxical, but, just as Goebbels believed his diaries to be an important historical document, Himmler believed the contents of the speech worthy of preservation (78–79). Interestingly, only around five minutes of the speech concerns the destruction of the Jews – the rest centers on the situation on the Eastern Front and in Eastern Europe more generally – but the directness with which Himmler acknowledges the extermination of the Jews, and the centrality of this task for the greater success of Germany makes this a unique and horrifying document. Moreover, it provides confirmation not only of the Final Solution, but also of the widespread knowledge of the plan to exterminate the Jews.

In many respects, Das Himmler-Projekt aspires to be the antithesis of the Holocaust documentary. It offers no voice-over or narrated commentary, no visuals, archival or otherwise, save the image of Zapatka shot against a black background and no additional sound save Zapatka’s speech. So exactly what sort of reenactment is this? On the one hand, Zapatka faithfully reproduces all of the imperfections audible in the wax recording of the speech – the mispronunciations, repetitions, and side comments, including an extended interruption during which Himmler insists that the kitchen staff be dismissed and an open doorway sealed with a mattress so that his speech cannot be heard.
by others. By relying on this recording rather than the edited transcript of the speech that was more commonly circulated, the film reclaims, as it were, the original text and the original experience of the speech, affording viewers insight into the thought process of Himmler as he delivered it. On the other hand, Zapatka makes no effort to mimic Himmler, either in voice or in appearance, and eschews any attempt at creating the illusion of authenticity. While the words of the speech are preserved, the presentation is new. Zapatka reads the speech freely in a Nachrichtensprecherstimme, but almost without emotion. He is neither enthusiastic nor monotonous. This refusal to imitate Himmler could be seen as the enforcement of a taboo of the sort that prevented the portrayal of Hitler in German cinema until recently. However, I would argue that it has two important functions. First, Zapatka’s dispassionate delivery inhibits viewers from being persuaded by the sheer force of his voice. Their reactions are determined, to the extent that this can be said, merely by their relationship to the content of the speech. As one reviewer noted, in the film’s refusal to imitate Himmler, «wird der Zuschauer mehr mit der kalten Sachlogik konfrontiert als in jedem anderen Film über den Nationalsozialismus» (Anon. die tageszeitung 15). Second, given that Himmler, like Goebbels, is well-recognized enough to evoke an immediate response, the absence of any sort of identifiable image of Himmler means, as Olaf Möller argues, that the film is free from the sort of clichéd perceptions that would inhibit an unmediated reception of the speech; instead, «gibt [es] nur Zapatka und das Textbuch» (Möller 94).
The image that fills the screen for three hours is a consistent one: after a medium shot establishes the set up of the film – Zapatka sitting at a nondescript table against a gray background – nearly all of the film is shot in close-ups of varying degrees, with an occasional shot of Zapatka in profile, his table/lectern partially visible, recalling perhaps unintentionally, the image of Eichmann sitting behind a table at his trial (Fig. 1). The effect that this image produces is unsettling. The viewer gets no respite from the image of Zapatka and the words of Himmler. There is no counter-shot, only a very rare intertitle to explain crowd reaction. Only the infrequent asides from Himmler (faithfully reproduced by Zapatka) give any indication of the contemporaneous audience’s response, if any, to the text of the speech. As a result, the ostensibly affect-less performance slowly induces in the viewer an unpleasant sensation. In contrast to Das Goebbels-Experiment which foregrounds the person of Goebbels, the historical Himmler seems to disappear as the three-hour speech unfolds; it is his words and the image of Zapatka that dominate the screen. With no visual or aural markers to remind the audience that the speaker «is» Himmler, and with very little in the way of editing, spectators remains fixed – literally – on Zapatka throughout the film, and the words he speaks seem to become his words, not Himmler’s. Ironically, it is the semi-public speech, not the ostensibly private diary entries, that affords the viewer a more unvarnished and, one could say, more truthful set of observations. The absence of commentary in both films leaves viewers with no explicit or expressed moral orientation other than the words and images of the perpetrators. Yet unlike Hachmeister’s documentary, Karmakar’s reenactment of Himmler’s speech leverages this disorientation, forcing attention back on the words themselves, stripped of context, both historical and visual.

The sort of orientation towards the unvarnished eliminationist rhetoric with which documentaries normally furnish viewers is utterly absent, leaving the audience to define its relationship to the speech on its own. The only subject position it creates, if it can be said to create one at all, is a decidedly unsettling one – that of one of the speech’s audience members. Admittedly, even if the historical setting were visually recreated in the film in any sort of meaningful way, the gulf between past and present is here too wide to truly locate the viewer in the moment of the speech. But perhaps it is not a question of transporting the audience to the past, but of bringing Himmler’s speech into the present. That is, the fact remains that the contemporary audience does become not only an audience watching a film about Himmler’s speech, but an audience to Himmler’s speech. Möller notes that Himmler had another reason for wanting to preserve and disseminate the speech, namely to make its audience culpable in the actions that would follow: «Es sollte daran erinnert
werden, dass allen die begangenen Verbrechen bewusst und bekannt waren – sodass niemand später, nach dem Krieg, wie auch immer er ausgehen sollte, sagen konnte, er habe nichts gewusst» (93). Karmakar’s audience is similarly implicated in the knowledge of the events in Himmler’s speech, a speech that they have voluntarily agreed to hear.¹⁴

Fig. 2: From Das Himmler-Projekt (2000). Directed by Romuald Karmakar.

Karmakar’s film affords its viewers just one significant break from the series of close-ups of Zapatka. Early on in the speech, Zapatka looks up as if he has heard something off-screen and then steps away from his lectern as the camera pulls back to reveal the backdrop and camera equipment that had surrounded him (Fig. 2). As Zapatka exits the stage, as it were, the film cuts away to another camera and he begins reading again. This time, however, he reads not the speech itself, but a transcript of the conversation that took place after Himmler realized that sounds from the kitchen could be heard in the hall and vice-versa. The content of this exchange is banal, yet the interruption, both aural and visual, that it provides, only heightens the uncomfortable nature of the experience of viewing the film. Rather than historicizing the speech, it draws the viewer even more into the moment of its original performance. By revealing the artifice of the film, Karmakar paradoxically creates a greater sense of intimacy, an even more unvarnished portrayal of Himmler. Karmakar here plays with audience expectations. Because the narration that the film provides during Zapatka’s retreat from his lectern and the revelation of the sound stage is also derived from the recording of the speech, Zapatka, in a
sense, does not break character, but rather performs a range of characters who are speaking not publicly; they are, in a sense, speaking privately. Thus, while this sequence remains a performance of the recording, it is one that creates the illusion of being outside of the recording. When Zapatka returns to his place behind a lectern and resumes his speech, the previous distance between audience and speaker is re-established.

The extent to which the film’s lack of critical commentary destabilizes audience orientation and the concomitant usual transmission of meaning can be seen in the film’s reception by the media establishment, and its inability to secure a theatrical release for fear that the presentation of the material without an accompanying historical framework in the form of documentary narration would become a magnet for neo-Nazi groups. When it was finally broadcast on WDR and 3sat (to record audiences), it was immediately followed by a panel discussion that condemned the speech’s rhetoric and safely historicized it (Fröhlich 81). In contrast to industry fears, critics observed that it was precisely this lack of contextualization that gave the film its power to unsettle audiences and thereby force them to come to terms with the content of the speech themselves.¹⁵

By way of a conclusion, I would like to offer two observations on how these films might contribute to a discussion of the issues raised by Lanzmann in his film. These films are not Holocaust documentaries (or, for that matter, even documentaries per se) in that they are focused so intently on the perpetrators; the victims of the Holocaust are almost entirely absent. But I would argue that the victims remain central to the reception of the films, albeit hidden from view. As such, it is worth reflecting on the two primary ways in which these films engage with the documentary practice of a film such as Shoah. The first concerns the prohibition on the use of archival footage. A critical comparison of these films shows that it is not necessarily the question of authenticity – an adherence to authentic documents or images as opposed to the re-creation or re-collection of the Nazi past – that provides the crucial distinction, but rather the difference between the visual and the aural, moving image and spoken word. By relying heavily on footage, both documentary and fictional, from the Nazi era and primarily shot by the Nazis, and, further, by allowing Goebbels’s diary entries to dictate how such images are to be interpreted, Das Goebbels-Experiment remains trapped within the perspective of the perpetrator. Karmakar’s film, by refusing to provide visual images drawn from the Nazi period, by even refusing to reproduce such images, focuses exclusively on the language used in Himmler’s speech. Like Lanzmann, Karmakar gives preference to the word over the image as a means for generating presence.¹⁶ As thorough as the Nazi corruption of the German
language was, the truth content of their words can be revealed in a way that that of their images cannot. While there is a language to be reclaimed in the Nazi rhetoric, the suppressed images of the Nazi era cannot easily be reconstructed from memory. At best, the juxtaposition of words and images in a film such as Das Goebbels-Experiment can point to the falsehood of the image, but not to a reality whose visual documentation has been obliterated. And at worst, it obscures that reality even further.

Second, Lanzmann adheres to the dictum hier ist kein warum, arguing that asking this question is pointless, even obscene, since it is not the answer to the question why, but rather only the act of transmission that can be equated with knowledge, an act that generates affect through identification with suffering. Yet what a comparison of these films shows is that there is potential for knowledge of a different sort in the generation of affect through a focus on perpetrators – and, as LaCapra notes, even Lanzmann’s dictum, uttered by an SS-guard to Primo Levi upon his arrival at Auschwitz, can be read as an adoption of the voice of a perpetrator (LaCapra 237) – as long as that identification is not limited by a historicization that allows contemporary audiences to distance themselves from the perpetrator. Both of these films take a major figure of the Nazi regime as their focus, but while Hachmeister and Kloft’s film attempts to psychologize and thereby understand Goebbels, their efforts to recreate Goebbels and recreate the Nazi era obscure the relationship between the past and present. However viewers may understand Goebbels and his motivations at the end of the film, he remains a historical figure, belonging to an era far removed from that of their own. By contrast, Karmakar’s film seeks to make Himmler the person disappear, for it is not an identification with Himmler that can provide the sort of knowledge that Lanzmann privileges, but an identification with his intended audience. In short, Das Goebbels-Experiment seeks to explain that which resists explanation – Lanzmann’s why – while Das Himmler-Projekt confronts viewers with, but does not answer, the question of how: «Wie können hundert Leute sich millionenfache Verbrechen erklären und so zurechtlegen, dass sie noch mal Jahre weitermachen?» (Worthmann n. pag.). In offering a contemporary audience no choice but to align themselves with the position of the perpetrator, Karmakar challenges them to consider the question of how they, as Germans, have been able to continue on as well.

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Weckel notes that despite the recollections of many Germans, and even Billy Wilder, these screenings were almost never mandatory. She reads this false recollection as a means to reorient the discussion away from wartime guilt and towards Allied conduct. See Weckel 326.

In his book Kerner offers a thorough overview of Holocaust documentaries grouped according to four of Nichols’s categories: expository, observational, interactive, and poetic. See Kerner 177–242.

An interesting background text here is Eyal Silvan and Rony Brauman’s 1999 film The Specialist, which provides an account of the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Israel in 1961. The film is comprised exclusively of archival footage taken from the original film of the trial, though it manipulates this footage extensively, both in terms of editing and via the addition of special effects. For a thorough analysis of the film with respect to the question of the impact of these manipulations see Buerkle.

The documentary first aired in 2005 and was broadcast on three succeeding Tuesday evenings. Each 45-minute episode of the documentary focused on a particular aspect of Goebbels’s career: «Der Scharfmacher» covered his early years, «Der Propaganda Chef» the first years of the Nazi regime, and «Der Einpeitscher» focused on his role during the latter half of the Nazi era as he foregrounded the Jewish Question and sought to rally the population.

As discussed above, feature films have similarly used the diary or memoir as prima facie evidence that their accounts are historically accurate.

Indeed, the constructed nature of the Anne Frank diary became clear when, in 1995, an unexpurgated version of her diary was published for the first time. It became clear that not only had Anne edited the diary as she wrote it, with an eye towards its future publication, but her father Otto Frank omitted certain passages, particularly those which were critical of her family or referenced her reflections on the onset of puberty and her sexual development.

Riefenstahl in an interview with Cahiers du Cinéma (1965), cited in Sontag (82). The film’s critical reception in Germany was decidedly negative. Daniel Kothenschulte likened it to «ein Reader’s Digest aus einer ebenso einzigartigen wie schwer zu nutzenden Quelle,» saying that it was a mistake to imagine that the range of archival sources from the period could simply be thrown together. The film’s approach, its «egalisierende Umgang mit dem Material, das seine Quellen nicht mehr preisgibt, macht es für den Betrachter aber weder nutzbar noch ästhetisch erfassbar» (n. pag.). Writing in die tageszeitung, Dietmar Kammerer dismisses the film as a «Nebenprodukt eines Promotionsvorhabens des Regisseurs zur Filmästhetik des Nationalsozialismus,» arguing that as a result of the film’s decidedly unexperimental style, «Die Bilder und Ansprachen, die damals fanatasierend gewirkt haben mögen, erscheinen heute nur lächerlich, die Gesten der Machhaber hohl.»

In the English-language version this connection is made even more explicit. The line here is translated as «But I am feeling better now.»

A similarly ambivalent moment occurs at the end of Der Untergang, which also depicts the murder/suicide of Goebbels, his wife, and their six children. Here, the emotional evocation of this scene is clearly intentional.

See Ebbrecht 40.
Olaf Möller notes that Himmler gave his speech not from a prepared text, but rather spoke more extemporaneously, using notes consisting only of key words (94).

Karmakar notes that threading the needle in this way poses a significant challenge: «Der Darsteller muss versuchen, Himmler wortgenau wiederzugeben, darf ihn aber nicht spielen. Gleichzeitig muss er die gesprochene Sprache so lebendig wiedergeben, dass ein Zuschauer der Rede folgen kann. Und zwischen Nicht-Spielen und Nicht-nur-Ablesen gibt es nur einen schmalen Grat. Den muss man treffen, und Manfred Zapatka konnte das.» (Worthmann, n.pag.)

Möller also notes one significant difference between the original audience of the speech and the contemporary audience for Karmakar’s film, namely that the original audience members most likely knew each other and were committed to the same ideals, while that is not likely the case today. Still, he continues, «sollte nicht die anzunehmende demokratische Grundgesinnung eines heutigen, anony men Publikums als ideal rei chen? Wieder eine Karmakar’sche Frage in Konfrontationsform» (95).

See, for example, Rother and Josef Lederle, as cited in Möller (230).

In her analysis of Das Himmler-Projekt, Alexandra Tacke points to a quote from Karmakar that encapsulates his over-aesthetic approach, namely «wie Bilder hinter den Worten entstehen können, auch ohne die entsprechenden Szenen» (127). This sentence echoes Gertrud Koch’s description of Lanzmann’s strategy in Shoah: «whenever something is narrated, an image (Vorstellung) is presented, the image of something which is absent» (21).

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