Soundtracks of the Holocaust in East and West German cinema: *Jakob der Lügner* (1974) and *Hitler, ein Film aus Deutschland* (1977)

Matt Lawson

Issues surrounding the reaction to, and reception of, the Holocaust in post-war Germany are complex, owing to the differing politics in East and West Germany, and more recently, the reunified Federal Republic of Germany. The ideological differences between the East and the West far outweighed their geographical proximity and provided two contrasting outlooks on the Holocaust. During the initial post-war decades, the Holocaust was not the focus of much scholarly inquiry worldwide, suggesting that there was not an immediate engagement with the past.[1] Later, debates emerged about how best to engage with the Holocaust in the Germanies, and more broadly in terms of the Germans' coming to terms with their past, or *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. This culminated in West Germany in the late 1980s with the *Historikerstreit*: a major public debate between left- and right-wing intellectuals, resulting from years of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* discourse.

This chapter examines the music used in a filmic response to the Holocaust from East and West Germany. The significantly differing musical scores from the two case studies, *Jakob der Lügner* (Jacob the Liar, East Germany, 1974) and *Hitler, ein Film aus Deutschland* (Hitler, a Film from Germany, West Germany/France/UK, 1977), are analysed and examined in relation to their political and filmic contexts and confines. The two case studies are not intended to be

[1] Peter Fritzsche, "What Exactly is *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*? Narrative and Its Insufficiency in Postwar Germany," in *German Memory Contests: The Quest for Identity in Literature, Film, and Discourse since 1990*, ed. Anne Fuchs, Mary Cosgrove, and Georg Grote (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2006), 33.

representative of the two countries and their film studios, but have been selected for the unique way they each use music to represent their shared National Socialist history.

East Germany

The history of East German cinema has been described as convoluted, contradictory, paradoxical, and complicated: both fascinating and sobering.[2] Films were oftentimes confined by the doctrines of socialism, and at other times enjoyed periods of thaw, whereby the artistic license and creativity of filmmakers were relaxed slightly. East Germany's engagement with the National Socialist past on screen resulted in some memorable films. Largely responsible for this success was DEFA (*Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft*), the state-owned East German film company that produced over 750 films during four and half decades of operation.[3]

There was some post-war cinematic engagement with the Holocaust, with films such as *Ehe im Schatten* (Marriage in The Shadows, 1947: dir. Kurt Maetzig) and *Sterne* (Stars, 1959: dir. Konrad Wolf) touching on the subject, but never explicitly or politically. From the 1970s onwards, anti-Semitic persecution on film was more confidently approached, and the Holocaust began to be present in the cultural discourse of East Germany.[4] It was a renewed interest in the Third Reich that prompted this rise in a number of anti-fascist films, and the films of the 1970s and 1980s began to explore anti-Semitism, resulting in a "fundamental reassessment of the categories of class, race, ethnicity and nation" in cinema.[5] *Jakob der Lügner* falls into this

---

[2] Sebastian Heiduschke, *East German Cinema: DEFA and Film History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 9.
[3] Seán Allan, "DEFA: An Historical Overview," in *DEFA: East German Cinema 1946-1992*, ed. Seán Allan and John Sandford (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 1.
[4] Anka Pinkert, "Tender males: Jewish figures as affective archive in East German DEFA film," *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 3, no. 2 (2012): 203.
[5] Sabine Hake, *German National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2002), 146.

category, with notions of anti-Semitism linked with older DEFA anti-fascist tropes such as hope and resistance. Despite this apparent rise in Holocaust engagement in cinema in East Germany, it is still comparatively marginalized in academic enquiry, and often significantly outnumbered by its West German counterparts.[6]

Jakob der Lügner (1974)

Jakob der Lügner is DEFA's most prominent film based on the Holocaust, and the first to "link the representation of the Jews with the theme of resistance," as well as one of the first to utilize comedy in order to deal with the challenging Holocaust narrative.[7] Directed by Frank Beyer, with music by renowned East German composer Joachim Werzlau, it was based upon the novel of the same title by Jurek Becker. Beyer was a director who worked within the popular DEFA remit of anti-fascist cinema, with the conventions of narrative cinema, and who "pushed the limits of verisimilitude to create new filmic realities."[8] This was Beyer's first film since losing his job and being exiled from Berlin, following severe artistic censorship arising from the Eleventh Plenum of the Central Committee of the SED in 1965.[9] The music in the film favoured function over emotive expression, in accordance with the doctrine of socialist realism.[10]

---

[6] Elizabeth Ward, "Contesting the Memory of Frank Beyer's *Jacob the Liar* (1974)," in *The Holocaust in the Twenty-First Century: Contesting/Contested Memories,* ed. D.M. Seymour and Mercedes Camino (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2016), 165.
[7] Daniela Berghahn, "Resistance of the Heart: Female Suffering and Victimhood in DEFA's Antifascist Films," in *Screening War: Perspectives on German Suffering*, ed. Paul Cook and Mark Silberman (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2010), 176.
[8] Hake, *German National Cinema,* 134.
[9] Daniela Berghahn, "The forbidden films: film censorship in the wake of the Eleventh Plenum," in *100 Years of European Cinema: Entertainment or Ideology?*, ed. Diana Holmes and Alison Smith (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 43.
[10] Larson Powell, "History and Subjectivity: The Evolution of DEFA Film Music," in *Re-Imagining DEFA: East German Cinema in its National and Transnational Contexts,* ed. Seán Allan and Sebastian Heiduschke (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016), 41.

The narrative centres on the title character, Jakob, and his life in the Litzmannstadt ghetto in Łódź, in occupied Poland. After entering a German military building to report why he was out after curfew, Jakob hears news of the Soviet advance on a radio, and reports this to other inhabitants of the ghetto. However, they refuse to believe that he had been close enough to a German radio to hear the story. Therefore, to ensure he is believed, Jakob lies to them, telling them he owns the radio. Jakob is then pressured into offering further updates by his fellow Jews, which results in him keeping up the falsehood, and manufacturing news stories of the Soviet advance in order to instil hope in others. Eventually, he concedes to a close friend that only the initial report was true, and that he does not own a radio. His friend is sympathetic, thanking Jakob for giving them a will to survive. The film ends with the deportation of Jakob and the other Jews in the ghetto, to, presumably, an extermination camp, which is alluded to but not seen.

Werzlau used music sparingly, mainly utilizing a sad and sensitive solo violin playing variations on a folk-like melody. Music is present mainly during flashbacks, and only occasionally during the scenes set in the mid-1940s ghetto. Werzlau's score to *Jakob der Lügner* was in keeping with his compositional mantra outlined in his autobiography, where he claimed that unambiguity, clarity, and richness of expression were ingrained in him.[11] The violin was such an integral and primary aspect of the score, that the opening credits acknowledged both Werzlau as composer and Siegfried Krause as solo violinist. The score was also in keeping with musical developments in East German film music of that time, namely to produce more economical scores, which saw maximum effect with minimum extraneous effort.[12]

---

[11] Joachim Werzlau, *Contra Lamento: Reminiszenzen eines Musikers* (Berlin: Verlag Neue Musik, 1988), 8.

[12] Wolfgang Thiel, *Filmmusik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Berlin: Henschverlag Kunst und

The film opens with a simple *pizzicato* solo violin accompanying the open credits. The music is tonally unstable, mirroring the film's narrative, where the uncertainty regarding the fate of the inhabitants is reflected in the music. There is no permanent settlement in the musical tonality, just as the ghetto is no permanent settlement for the Jews who find themselves temporarily living there. For a motif to modulate three (or possibly four) times when it stretches to just twenty-one bars, and contains only fifty-one notes, shows an instability in the music. Despite the modulations being of a musically routine nature, namely tonic to relative major and back, the tonal centre is never truly established for a substantial amount of time before the listener is guided towards its relative major/minor.

The opening theme hints at a Jewish element to the narrative even before the film's action has commenced. As Andrew Killick suggests, "[m]elodically, the most obvious musical marker of Jewishness is the minor mode."[13] The Jewish influence or implications drawn from the music are further reinforced by Howard Taubman who proposes that "the lush violin obbligato is a musical sign of Jewishness."[14] The uniformity of note values, instrumentation of solo violin, and short phrasing, all signify Jewish music.[15] The violin introduction to the film, tenderly played in *pizzicato*, offers little in anticipatory mood. The screen is split unevenly, with the black background and credits taking up most of the visible area, and inconsequential shots of the ghetto occupying the remainder. The tonally ambiguous music juxtaposes with the equally ambiguous

---

Gesellschaft, 1981), 225–26.

[13] Andrew Killick, "Music as Ethnic Marker in Film: The 'Jewish' Case," in *Soundtrack Available: Essays on Film and Popular Music,* ed. Pamela Robinson, Arthur Knight, and Robertson Wocjcik (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2001), 190.

[14] Killick, "Music as Ethnic Marker in Film," 193.

[15] Killick, "Music as Ethnic Marker in Film," 193.

visuals, to offer little by way of introductory narrative, and it is only when the next musical theme is introduced, along with Jakob, that the film progresses.

As we see Jakob walking through the streets of the ghetto, we hear a more jovial musical theme when the Jewish-sounding first half of the theme accompanies Jakob on his walk. However, the moment the tempo halves, the melody becomes *legato* and expressive in style, changes to a major key, and the visual cuts to Jakob's past and a close-up shot of food. It is a clear associative process that links minor "Jewish-sounding" music to Jakob's current situation, but also links the "happy" major melody, lush with expression, to his previous life—but more importantly the simple commodity of food. This signifies that being Jewish in Jakob's current scenario is the predominant issue in his life, whereas in the brief glimpse into his past, religion was just a minor part of his existence. This is reflected by the music's sudden divergence away from Jewish signification to a quasi-romanticized juxtaposition of visual and music in the form of a flashback. As Jakob walks through the ghetto, we see a flashback of him and his lover Josefa at a railway station and outside their apartment. As they smile at each other, the third musical theme is heard. The solo violin assists the viewer in deciphering the flashback not as one of delighted nostalgia, but one of sadness and mourning for a loss in his life. Compared to the themes preceding it, this is more conventionally romantic in nature, and can be considered as a chromatic, bittersweet love theme. Interestingly, the musical theme for Josefa is less romanticized than the theme representing food, and hints that the relationship was not one of complete happiness.

The faster first segment of the theme returns later in the film, but this time diegetically, as Jakob himself is heard whistling the first few bars.[16] This is noteworthy for two reasons. Firstly,

[16] In film, the diegesis is the story "space" or world. Therefore, diegetic sound or music is that

it crosses the boundary into the diegesis from the non-diegetic side. Jakob is whistling a melody, which therefore reinforces and all but confirms his Jewish background. It is almost a breaking of the fourth wall, in so much as the character in the diegesis performs part of the original non-diegetic film score. This would assist the audience in empathizing with the character through his musical identification.

The next theme appears in a moment of slapstick comedy in the film. In the narrative, Jakob decides to visit the Aryan-only toilet in the ghetto to try and locate some real news. By so doing, he can continue his lie and deception regarding his "ownership" of a radio. As he is scrambling around for old newspapers on the floor of the dark wooden cubicle, he espies a Nazi guard heading towards him. In a light-hearted moment, he sits down and pretends to be reading the newspaper while concealing his face, leaving the guard to turn around embarrassed, having disturbed his apparent ablutions by casting open the door. The music here takes on a *scherzando* feel, with a rapid tempo and dotted rhythm, combined with jovial *appoggiatura* and energetic shifts in tonality. However, this is an uneasy comedic moment, as the consequences of Jakob being caught would be fatal. Therefore, there is an underlying darkness to this scene, despite the comedic music offering alternative perceptions. The music, consequently, becomes simultaneously congruent with the overriding light-heartedness of the scene, but also incongruent due to the constant menacing undertones suggesting the danger of being caught by the guards. This coming together of two contrasting moods, moreover one tangible and one potential, is often used as a tension-builder in film. The audience cannot fully appreciate or enjoy the light-hearted moment, because one judgement of error can completely alter the outcome of the scene.

---

which is found within the narrative "space" or world and can be heard by the characters therein. Conversely, non-diegetic sound or music exists outside of the narrative "space" or world and can be heard only by the audience.

The only on-screen diegetic music in the film is found towards the end. Jakob, through a request from the young girl Lina with whom he has forged a bond, begins to hum a waltz while tapping the beat on a jug. This jug was used earlier in the film to mimic a radio in a role-play for Lina and is the very epitome of the objectified lie upon which the film is based. The waltz Jakob begins to hum is *Valurile Dunării*, more commonly known by its German title, *Donauwellen Walzer* (Waves of the Danube Waltz), by Romanian composer and conductor Iosif Ivanovici (1845–1902). The diegesis of the ghetto, with Jakob's humming, is soon replaced via a hard cut to an analepsis of a dance hall before the war. Here, Jakob dances with Josefa as a band (the new diegetic source of music) continue to perform *Donauwellen*. This scene is the sole moment in the film where music is foregrounded, as all other sounds are absent. There is no dialogue or ambient sound, and the music takes full control of the scene, becoming the key narrative device. The score is also the primary focus of the audience who can enjoy the respite from the miserable reality of the ghetto. The present day and the past cut to and from one another, presenting point-of-view shots of Jakob and Josefa in the analepsis, but also of Lina in the "present" of 1944 smiling on as Jakob waltzes with the jug and sings along. This is a transcendental moment of catharsis for both the characters and the audience, and the music is so foregrounded as to give the impression of a musical interlude in the dark narrative. The two women in Jakob's life, Josefa and Lina, are foregrounded visually along with the music to create a moment of escapism for Jakob and the audience, and a rare moment of peaceful, reminiscent content.

The music is a relatively standard waltz in a fast tempo, written for string quartet. The melodic line in the passage used in *Jakob der Lügner* is taken by the first violin, maintaining a consistency with the rest of the score by Werzlau. Rather than use a jovial waltz, such as many of those written by Johann Strauss II (1825–99), the film score implements a waltz grounded in a

minor key. Thus, a juxtaposition is formed between the amorous and contented facial expressions and a rather gloomy waltz in the analepsis. The fact that we see Jakob begin to hum the waltz before the sound morphs into the analepsis diegesis, grounds the audience and the music in the "present" of the ghetto. Consequently, though we see and hear Jakob and Josefa in the carefree past, one component of the audio-visual construct remains firmly in the persecuted present.

The ending is abrupt, highlighting the dancers applauding the orchestra, but barely a second later the audience is transformed, once again via hard cut, back into the non-musical diegesis of the ghetto. The moment of blissful yet tormented reminiscence is quickly over, and the fade-in and subsequent abrupt ending of the musical passage contributes significantly to this. This notion of the quick passing of the analepsis is developed by Maureen Turim, who states that the "flashback is a privileged moment in unfolding that juxtaposes different moments of temporal reference," and continues by claiming that a "juncture is wrought between present and past and two concepts are implied in this juncture: memory and history."[17] Turim is emphasizing the two concepts of memory: a personal concept based on identity and biased recollection, and history that is more authentic and accurate. These two explicitly bittersweet concepts are present in *Jakob der Lügner*. The assumption with memory and history is that they both eventually fade, and the cut-back to the ghetto is as unwelcomed by the audience as by Jakob himself.

The use of pre-existing music in *Jakob der Lügner* offers a sense of musical familiarity, both in the characters who recognise the waltz and also in the audience. *Donauwellen* is a well-known piece of classical music, and therefore a proportion of the viewers would be familiar with it. It has a humanizing effect in the face of the dehumanization of the ghetto and lack of basic

[17] Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 1.

rights, such as owning a radio. By singing—and, in the analepsis, dancing—to this piece of music, we are offered a brief glimpse of the poignant effect with which music can add a humanizing element to the narrative. This use of classical music as juxtaposition with the visual has since been deployed in more prominent Holocaust films, most notably *Schindler's List*, as well as lesser known productions. The use of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* to underscore a gassing sequence in the Polish film *Kornblumenblau* (Cornflower Blue, 1987: dir. Leszek Wosiewicz) is a noteworthy example. In this film, a crude performance by camp prisoners is interspersed with harsh cuts to other prisoners being herded into gas chambers. While this is happening, Russian aircraft fly overhead, signalling the impending liberation of the camp. There is a powerful juxtaposition of the camp prisoners performing a faux-triumphant version of Beethoven and an explicit gassing sequence, alongside a third element of imminent freedom. Classical, pre-existing music as an affective device is highly effective in any film, especially when the piece of music is recognizable to a large audience. Preconceptions of the music are brought to the viewing of the film, and additional meaning drawn from it, as well as the sole audio-visual experience the audience is presently witnessing. Whether this is irony, nostalgia, comedy, or a darker effect, classical music always complements the film and film music with a third element: music in its original context.

West Germany

February 28, 1962 was the most significant date in West German cinematic history. The building of the Berlin Wall in August 1961 formalized the division between East and West, but the Oberhausen Manifesto, which arose from the meeting of several young filmmakers at the Oberhausen Short Film Festival, "announced a radical break with the cinema of the post-war

period."[18] Filmmakers such as Edgar Reitz and Alexander Kluge announced: "The old film is dead. We believe in the new," and with this, a total of twenty-six filmmakers used the Oberhausen Manifesto to propose three aims: "to formulate a critique of conventional genre cinema, to introduce a new kind of filmmaking, and to present a list of demands for the government."[19] The intention of the manifesto was to call for public policies that would acknowledge film as a comparable art form to art, music, literature, and so forth, and it prioritized institutional concerns over aesthetics.[20] In 1979, the West German engagement with the Holocaust changed dramatically with the introduction to Germany of the American TV miniseries *Holocaust*. The series "had such a dramatic impact when broadcast to Germans in January 1979" because "[w]hat had always existed as an off-screen threat was finally shown in greater detail."[21] The series was the catalyst for the production of the influential German series *Heimat* (1984: dir. Edgar Reitz) and its sequels, which held the Holocaust and the key events of National Socialism on the periphery, in favour of a more self-conscious depiction of rural life and of everyday German life under the Nazis. It defended and promoted regional interests against national, rural against urban, and tradition against modern society.[22]

1979 was a threshold year regarding films with a Jewish or Holocaust-based narrative. Jewish characters were practically absent in New German Cinema of the 1960s and early 1970s, reflecting the lack of prominent public Jewish figures in West Germany at the time.[23]

---

[18] Hake, *German National Cinema*, 153.
[19] Hake, *German National Cinema*, 153.
[20] Hake, *German National Cinema*, 153.
[21] Mark Wolfgram, "West German and Unified German Cinema's Difficult Encounter with the Holocaust," *Film and History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies* 32, no. 2 (2002): 30.
[22] Hake, *German National Cinema,* 171.
[23] Wolfgram, "West German and Unified German Cinema's Difficult Encounter with the Holocaust," 24; Thomas Elsaesser, "Absence as Presence, Presence as Parapraxis: On Some

Representations of Jewishness in West German cinema in the mid-1970s rose significantly in number, and there was a "doubling of films with Jewish themes between 1970–74 and 1975–79."[24] Suddenly, Jews were depicted on screen as victims, and "stories about Nazi genocide became an ever-increasing feature of German television."[25]

A further issue was the representation of perpetrators, which until this point had generally been "ruthless, ideologically motivated, but otherwise strangely undefined Nazi thugs and bureaucrats."[26] The notion that the audience could be encouraged into a collective guilt was not yet evident, as the audiences were not provoked about their problematic and uncomfortable pasts. The Holocaust was represented on West German television as "a crime without perpetrators and bystanders."[27] It had "never sought to identify the people who committed the crimes or watched the catastrophe unfold and remained passive."[28] Furthermore, where perpetrators *were* identified, the programmes were few in number and aired at unsociable times such as the middle of the night.[29] The 1980s saw the engagement with the Third Reich increase in cinema, and this was intrinsically linked to the *Historikerstreit,* with films of this period on the theme of National Socialism tending to either study historical figures or events, or investigate fascism in everyday life.[30]

Problems of Representing 'Jews' in the New German Cinema," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema & Media* 49, no. 1 (2008): 108.

[24] Wolfgram, "West German and Unified German Cinema's Difficult Encounter with the Holocaust," 24.

[25] Wulf Kansteiner, "Entertaining Catastrophe: The Reinvention of the Holocaust in the Television of the Federal Republic of Germany," *New German Critique* 90 (2003): 144.

[26] Kansteiner, "Entertaining Catastrophe," 157.

[27] Kansteiner, "Entertaining Catastrophe," 153.

[28] Kansteiner, "Entertaining Catastrophe," 153.

[29] Kansteiner, "Entertaining Catastrophe," 155.

[30] Hake, *German National Cinema,* 180.

Hitler, ein Film aus Deutschland (1977)

Hans-Jürgen Syberberg (b. 1935) is a German director who divides opinion in his homeland Germany and abroad, and has produced films which are "extensions of cinéma verité, straight documentaries, or monologues" and incorporate "artificial props, puppets, objects and replicated objects, dummies, and dolls.".[31] *Hitler, ein Film aus Deutschland,* a joint German, British, and French production, conforms to these design aesthetics and principles.[32] In *Hitler,* Syberberg relies on visual, literary, musical, and philosophical sources in his cinema, and has created a cinematic *Gesamtkunstwerk* by working through the legacies of German romanticism and the trauma of the National Socialist past.[33] A *Gesamtkunstwerk,* or "total art work," is a form usually associated with Richard Wagner, the composer on which the film's case study is focussed. Leon Wieseltier, in a review for *The New Republican,* declared that "Syberberg had set out to save the German intellectual tradition from Hitler, creating 'the greatest Wagnerian spectacle since Wagner,'" which, given the Wagnerian underscore, is rather appropriate.[34] The unusual length and style of the film have been well-documented elsewhere, and only a short section of the film is examined in this analysis.[35]

Richard Wagner's political views and legacy are discussed on a similar scale to his music, with his notorious anti-Semitic essay *Das Judenthum in der Musik* (Judaism in Music, 1850) and alleged anti-Semitic portrayals of Jewish characters in his works contributing to his tarnished posthumous reception. The name of Wagner is often raised when examining music of

---

[31] David Schwarz, *Listening Awry: Music and Alterity in German Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 151.
[32] The film's title will usually be shortened to *Hitler* from here on in.
[33] Hake, *German National Cinema,* 170.
[34] Stephen Brockmann "Syberberg's Germany," *The German Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (1996): 49.
[35] For more detailed analyses of *Hitler, ein Film aus Deutschland,* see Santner (1990), Koepnick (2002), and Berghahn and Hermand (2005) as prominent examples.

the Third Reich, with Hitler's "legendary adulation" of the composer being one topic of discussion, and the "presumed prominence" of Wagner's music being another.[36] The anti-Semitism of the composer combines with these two concepts to form an explicit link between Wagner and National Socialism. However, this connection is largely fabricated by national socialists and post-war commentators.

The choice of Wagner as the dominant composer in the third part of the film evoked controversy, and encourages either staunch defence or criticism when linked with the Nazi period.[37] Wagner is by no means the only composer to be used by Syberberg in his epic Hitler film: other well-known figures include Ludwig van Beethoven and Gustav Mahler. Only one of the Oberhausen signatories, Alexander Kluge, used classical German composers in his films as prominently as Syberberg, although some 1970s and 1980s German cinema utilized the "Deutschlandlied" or Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* in their scores.[38] Classical music was beginning to emerge from the cultural compromise under which it found itself during the National Socialist era and appeared more frequently in 1970s West German cinema. Directors such as Werner Herzog tended to avoid Richard Wagner's music in their films due to his posthumous National Socialist associations, despite these directors frequently incorporating other Romantic concepts such as nationalism, adoration of landscapes, and fantastical aesthetic in their films.[39]

---

[36] Pamela M. Potter, "Wagner and the Third Reich: Myths and Realities," in *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, ed. Thomas S. Grey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 235.
[37] The film is split into four parts, the third of which—*Das Ende eines Wintermärchens und der Endsieg des Fortschritts* (The End of a Winter's Tale and the Final Victory of Progress)—tells the story of the Holocaust from the perspective of Heinrich Himmler.
[38] Roger Hillman, *Unsettling Scores: German Film, Music, and Ideology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 36.
[39] Hillman, *Unsettling Scores*, 36, 74.

The length and complexity of Syberberg's works are consciously Wagnerian, suggesting an almost paradoxical relationship to this composer. In *Hitler*, Syberberg created his own filmic version of Wagner's "Gesamtkunstwerk," incorporating elements of cinema, theatre, and music. Syberberg avoids the prevailing, clichéd Hollywood Wagner of "The Ride of the Valkyries" or the *Lohengrin* Wedding March, reflecting the complicated narrative of *Hitler* compared with the films containing popular cues from Wagner.[40] Rather than presenting a simple juxtaposition of Romanticism with neo-Romantic film aesthetics, or another coupling of Wagner and Hitler, Syberberg's adoption of Wagnerian music challenges negative connotations.

Despite Wagner's music accompanying several significant shots of Hitler in the earlier segments of the lengthy film, Hitler himself only appears for short sections in Part Three of the film. Rather, it is Heinrich Himmler, *Reichsführer* of the SS, who plays the key on-screen role. As the camera zooms in on Himmler's back while he is being tenderly massaged, an extract from Himmler's Posen (Poznań) speech of October 4, 1943 dominates the soundscape. Aspects of this speech focused on the extermination of the Jewish people, in a rare example of public acknowledgement that the Holocaust took place. His speech of October 6 follows on immediately, in which Himmler discusses the killing of women and children as a necessary evil. This is heard in perfect synchronicity with Siegfried's funeral march from Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* (Twilight of the Gods), the fourth and final part of his epic *Der Ring des Nibelungen.*

It is equally symbolic and problematic to hear Himmler's advocating of the mass murder of women and children accompanied by some of Wagner's finest and most emotive music. While the funeral march has a degree of literal relevance (the focus on death), it is also

[40] Hillman, *Unsettling Scores*, 74.

reinforcing existing connotations by having Wagner in direct correlation with discussions of murdering women and children. The fascist and anti-Semitic elements of the composer's character are being foregrounded over the beauty of his music at this point. The composer's music and personality are in constant battle with one another to assume the dominant force in the scene. On the surface we have a filmic engagement with the Holocaust accompanied by some of Wagner's most emotionally affective music, but Wagner's connotative indirect link to Nazism is hard to ignore. The music has two functions at this moment in the film. Firstly, the use of Siegfried's funeral march here could signify Himmler casting himself as a tragic hero; his extermination of the Jews seen as a thankless task, with the music aligning Siegfried with Himmler as a hero doomed to die for his acts. Alternatively, the funeral march is mourning the culture that produced National Socialism and the Holocaust. These interpretations are equally feasible, but the latter is more compelling. The funeral march resonates with tragedy and loss, and its use to accompany Himmler's detached discussion of the extermination of Jews suggests that Syberberg is commenting on the tragic circumstances that led to the Holocaust in the first place.

As the scene continues, the *Wälsung* theme from Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* is heard as it appears in Siegfried's funeral march. The use of the *Wälsung* theme in *Hitler* is a prominent example of a cross-contextual application of music. Hillman highlightins that "[a]n excerpt from pre-existing music[…]forms an arc which at the dramatic level relates to two different hermeneutics circles—the original musical work and the new film score."[41] It is noteworthy here that Himmler's speech discusses the "subhuman." The Wälsungen were a race or tribe of people who were wiped out following Siegfried's death, thus pointing to a prudent

[41] Hillman, *Unsettling Scores,* 9.

choice of music on Syberberg's part, and an allegorical link between the Wälsungen and Jews. Pre-existing music is always subject to a change of context when applied as film underscore. Hillman states that when "art music is employed in film, it is not only [the] earlier narrative role that is carried across to the new context". [42] Therefore, the classical music ceases to be classical music in its own right, and becoming classical music as film musicThe original context (Wagner), applied context (film music) but also combined contexts (Wagner's music used as film music) all play a significant role in how the music is perceived as film music.

Syberberg was using Wagner's anti-Semitic views and subsequent appropriation by the Nazis as the key reasoning behind underscoring parts of the film with his music. Wagner's music is reinforcing the Nazi appropriation and acting as a ridiculing parody or perversion, being both self-referential to the Romantic period of the nineteenth century, but also negatively or ironically commenting on the pomposity of the neo-Romantic nationalism of National Socialism. The case can be made for Syberberg engaging with his own *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* through his film by asserting that Germany had to accept the Nazis' use of Romanticism, but also that the film is self-referential in asserting that Wagner might have been an effective filmmaker if he had lived a little later.[44] Syberberg and Hitler are even suggested to be "the composer's filmic heirs," although this link is considered tenuous.[45] Regardless, in order for Syberberg to engage fully with the Nazis' use of certain elements of Romanticism, Wagner is one of the most comprehensible choices of composer to appropriate. Wagner's proto-cinematic aesthetic found in the larger music dramas known as *Gesamtkunstwerke* was referenced by Syberberg, and so the

[42] Hillman, *Unsettling Scores*, 5.
[44] Patrick Carnegy, *Richard Wagner and the Art of Theatre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 380.
[45] Carnegy, *Richard Wagner and the Art of Theatre*, 380.

film became a kind of grotesque, post-war *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In other words, Syberberg created a Wagnerian piece of art.

As the funeral march continues in the film, and Himmler continues to be massaged, the narration turns to a passage from the SS propaganda pamphlet "Der Untermensch" (The Subhuman, 1942). In Wagner's *Ring* cycle, the sword Nothung is represented by its own motif. The sword represents power, but also destruction, and these terms resonates strongly with the Nazis and the Holocaust. The juxtaposition and connection are strong between the 'wandering Jew' in the narration, and Wotan the Wanderer's staff being broken in the musical cue used to underscore it. The use of a C major arpeggio in direct conjunction with the words "half shadows" in the narration might also suggest irony, with the film suggesting that it was German culture itself that had been dragged into the shadows, including Wagner's music. The musical synchronicity here is remarkable. In addition to the appearance of the Wälsung leitmotif representing the audial discussion of the extermination of Jews, two other Wagnerian leitmotifs found in the *Ring* cycle and funeral march are also heard underneath the excerpt from "Der Untermensch." Without missing a literal and metaphorical beat, the funeral march continues unabated from the aforementioned Wälsung motif onto a variation on the love motif. What is especially noteworthy is that the love motif underscores the non-diegetic narration concerned specifically with the emergence of human society and families, showing a false glimpse of humanity reflected fleetingly in the musical accompaniment. As the love motif concludes, the musical texture in the Siegfried funeral march builds up through crescendo to a triumphant rendition of the sword motif from the *Ring* cycle. This also shows a great degree of synchronicity with the topic of the narration, with the aggressive yet exultant major chord brass motif accompanying the first mentions of the "beast" that is the 'wandering Jew.'

Syberberg's personal intention was to confront the legacy of the National Socialist era and develop a "new interpretative strategy" for dealing with history.[46] This new strategy was not new in terms of the Wagner-Holocaust relationship, as Syberberg's film did not encourage any form of catharsis or redemption for the composer's troubled musical links to the period. Syberberg takes on Wagner as a metonym for the abuse of cultural traditions by the National Socialists, and the composer is the director's prominent object of focus as he mourns the destruction of German art in the National Socialist period.[47] Syberberg is using Wagner to comment on, and mourn, the Nazis' use of Wagner, with the composer used posthumously against himself to express the grief associated with the misuse and partial loss of German culture during National Socialism. The real focus of mourning is that Wagner's reputation as one of the finest and most revolutionary German composers of the late Romantic period has been reduced to "tawdry attributes of Nazism," [48] and his contributions to the world of music and theatre permanently tarnished by National Socialist associations. Syberberg is recasting the historical appropriation of Wagner's music to underscore National Socialism. Suggesting that Syberberg is confronting the Wagner-Hitler-Holocaust debate head-on is an exaggeration, as he did not attempt to cleanse Wagner's reputation through a filmic catharsis or redemption. Instead, he used Wagner's music to form a politically ambiguous underscore to scenes involving the party by and with whom his reputation was tarnished.

Wagner's music underscoring the scenes in *Hitler* explicitly discussing the Holocaust creates a solid link between Wagner and the genocide, through Syberberg's stated intention of coming up with a new interpretative strategy. It is difficult to suggest a more appropriate

---

[46] Carnegy, *Richard Wagner and the Art of Theatre*, 376.
[47] Hillman, *Unsettling Scores,* 68.
[48] Hillman, *Unsettling Scores*, 68.

composer to underscore such scenes and although it would be insensitive, it would offer interesting analysis, if Jewish composers such as Mendelssohn were used to accompany scenes discussing the Holocaust. Instead, Syberberg's use of Wagner's music simply repeats the same clichéd views of the composer and contributes to his complicated standing in the musical world. Alternatively, the film can be viewed as an aesthetic operatic experience without the political undertones attached to the composer, if the audience recognizes the music at all, by likening the hidden pit orchestra of Bayreuth to the non-diegetic film music in Syberberg's film.[50]

Syberberg expressed sadness about the German anxiety to perform or discuss Wagner. The director lamented that the Germans were afraid to sing their grandfathers' songs, or to appreciate Wagner.[51] Syberberg was confronting "the baleful link between Hitler and the historical reception of the music of Wagner," and it remains an enduring debate.[52] However, films such as Syberberg's *Hitler* certainly contribute to—rather than absolving—Wagner's music and persona.

Wagner's political views are inextricably linked with his appropriation by the Nazis. To conclude the discussion of Syberberg's film on an anecdotal but rather revealing note, it helps to turn to Jeremy Tambling: "The original title was *Hitler in Us,* to which an indignant critic had reacted 'Not in me!' Syberberg in turn pointed out that 'if I had said 'the Wagner in him' he might have accepted it.'"[53] Tellingly, this comment suggests that Wagner can be separated from the political and anti-Semitic connotations with which he is associated, and that the man and his music can be taken at face value in spite of fierce posthumous complexities.

---

[50] Hillman, *Unsettling Scores,* 68.
[51] Hillman, *Unsettling Scores,* 68.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Jeremy Tambling, *A Night in at the Opera: Media Representations of Opera* (London: J. Libbey, 1994), 122.

Conclusion

It is clear from the two textual analyses that there is no status quo when it comes to the musical representation or accompaniment of the Third Reich and Holocaust in German cinema. Acknowledging the bias that the two case studies were chosen for their intriguing musical scores, thus being atypical in some regard of the predominant style of both nations, the gulf in how music is utilized in the two films highlights the diverse approaches that directors and composers can adopt when scoring challenging narratives.

Despite this, there were instances where the two scores aligned with the political doctrines of both nations. The use of sparse film scoring matches conventions of East German cinema and social realism, where a fuller, emotional score could be perceived as an admission of responsibility and guilt. The representative and realistic everydayness of art in the socialist realist style expected of composers would have rendered a musically and emotionally intense score incongruous. The prevailing anti-fascist film style of the time was to be restrained and realist in style, and the music reflected this. DEFA film scores followed a similar pattern to those in the West, with a move away from grandiose symphonic scores in favour of jazz, popular, modernist, or sparse musical interjections.[54] In *Jakob der Lügner*, the use of analepses and jovial scoring provides moments of light-heartedness in a darker narrative. Moments such as the change to a major key when a flashback to Jakob's former lifestyle was shown provided the audience with a respite from the ever-darkening situation in the ghetto. The two main components of the film score: folk-like violin melodies and richly orchestrated waltzes, are not unique in Holocaust

[54] Powell, "History and Subjectivity: The Evolution of DEFA Film Music," 43.

films from the socialist region of Europe. The earlier Czech film *Obchod na korze* (The Shop on Main Street*,* 1965: dir. Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos) uses the same musical features.[55]

In *Hitler,* the recapitulation of the Wagner-Hitler-Holocaust trichotomy manifested itself in Syberberg's use of the composer to underscore dramatized Holocaust narrative. The crux of the analysis highlighted the changing contexts of pre-existing music used as film music, particularly when the composer has preconceived negative connotations. It is these preconceptions in cinema audiences that render such a musical analysis challenging, as the reception of Wagner's music differs significantly when based on prior knowledge not only of the composer's music, but of the anti-Semitic criticisms and National Socialist appropriations. Without this knowledge, the use of a funeral march in a classical music style elicits the notion of a functional, straightforward use of film music, spared of the extramusical, extra-cinematic difficulties that an informed audience member would otherwise engage with.

In both films, music functions as an audial emotional barrier against the horrors of the narrative, whether visual or implied, affecting the atmosphere and mood of the *mise-en-scène*. These emotional barriers discourage the audience from feeling negative emotions, by means of a technique similar to Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt,* while simultaneously promoting positive emotions like the joviality in *Jakob der Lügner*. When music is juxtaposed against the inhumanity of genocide, an uncomfortable yet intriguing audio-visual experience is constructed. There may be certain confusion in the audience, as they are potentially placed in a position to consider which of the visual or audio elements is the dominant force. They may choose to watch the visual of the Holocaust and be horrified, or consciously acknowledge the music, acting as the

[55] Larson Powell, "Wind from the East: DEFA and Eastern European Cinema," in *DEFA at the Crossroads of East German and International Film Culture: A Companion,* ed. Silberman, Marc, and Henning Wrage (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2014), 230.

aforementioned emotional barrier, which may numb the horrors of the visual somewhat. The sparse musical score, as seen in *Jakob,* also restricts emotional involvement from the audience. It offers an uncomfortable, neutral approach to the audio-visual experience, and does not purport to draw in the audience emotionally. To a modern-day audience accustomed to Hollywood 'blockbusters,' this might seem unusual and even uncomfortable, but to East and West German audiences dealing with the Holocaust on screen, the lack of commitment from an oversentimental musical score may have mirrored their respective countries' initially hesitant engagement with the Holocaust.

Political, social, and cultural contexts have significant impact on the type of music used in films. This chapter reinforces the point that one cannot easily label Holocaust film music as a tangible style of underscoring. Similarly, there is no East or West German composition style when dealing with films based on the Holocaust or Third Reich. The individual nuances are too varied to attempt such a generalization due to the broad eclecticism in approaches to underscoring Holocaust films.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781787445956.008

Bibliography

Allan, Seán. “DEFA: An Historical Overview.” *DEFA: East German Cinema 1946-1992*, edited by Seán Allan and John Sandford, 1–41. New York: Berghahn Books, 2010.

Berghahn, Daniela. “Resistance of the Heart: Female Suffering and Victimhood in DEFA’s Antifascist Films.” *Screening War: Perspectives on German Suffering,* edited by Paul Cook and Mark Silberman, 165–186. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2010.

Berghahn, Daniela. “The forbidden films: film censorship in the wake of the Eleventh Plenum.” *100 Years of European Cinema: Entertainment or Ideology?*, edited by Diana Holmes and Alison Smith. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000: 40–50.

Bier, Jean-Paul, and Michael Alliner. “The Holocaust and West Germany: Strategies of Oblivion 1947-1949.” *New German Critique* 19, no. 1 (1980): 9–29.

Bjonderberg, Ib. “Coming to Terms with the Past: Post-1989 Strategies in German Film Culture.” *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 1, no. 1 (2010): 29–42.

Brockmann, Stephen. “Syberberg’s Germany.” *The German Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (1996), 48–62.

Carnegy, Patrick. *Richard Wagner and the Art of Theatre.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.

Di Napoli, Thomas. “Reception of the Holocaust in the German Democratic Republic: A Philatelic Commentary.” *Jewish Social Studies* 44, no. 3/4 (1982): 255–70.

Elsaesser, Thomas. “Absence as Presence, Presence as Parapraxis: On Some Problems of Representing ‘Jews’ in the New German Cinema.” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema & Media* 49, no. 1 (2008), 106–20.

Fox, Thomas C. *Stated Memory: East Germany and the Holocaust*. Rochester: Camden House, 1999.

Fritzsche, Peter. “What Exactly is *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*? Narrative and Its Insufficiency in Postwar Germany.” *German Memory Contests: The Quest for Identity in Literature, Film, and Discourse since 1990*, edited by Anne Fuchs, Mary Cosgrove, and Georg Grote, 25–41. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2006.

Hake, Sabine. *German National Cinema*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Heiduschke, Sebastian. *East German Cinema: DEFA and Film History*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Hillman, Roger. *Unsettling Scores: German Film, Music, and Ideology.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005.

Kansteiner, Wulf. “Entertaining Catastrophe: The Reinvention of the Holocaust in the Television of the Federal Republic of Germany.” *New German Critique* 90 (2003), 135–62.

Killick, Andrew. “Music as Ethnic Marker in Film: The ‘Jewish’ Case.” *Soundtrack Available: Essays on Film and Popular Music,* edited by Robertson Wocjcik, Pamela Robinson, and Arthur Knight, 108–201. Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2001.

Pinkert, Anka. “Tender males: Jewish figures as affective archive in East German DEFA film.” *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 3, no. 2 (2012): 193–210.

Potter, Pamela M. “Wagner and the Third Reich: Myths and Realities.” *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner,* edited by Thomas S. Grey. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008: 235–245.

Powell, Larson. “History and Subjectivity: The Evolution of DEFA Film Music.” *Re-Imagining DEFA: East German Cinema in its National and Transnational Contexts,* edited by Seán Allan, Séan Sebastian Heiduschke. New York: Berghahn Books, 2016: 41–60.

Powell, Larson. “Wind from the East: DEFA and Eastern European Cinema.” *DEFA at the Crossroads of East German and International Film Culture: A Companion,* edited by Marc Silberman and Henning Wrage. Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2014: 223–242.

Schwarz, David. *Listening Awry: Music and Alterity in German Culture,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

Tambling, Jeremy. *A Night in at the Opera: Media Representations of Opera.* London: J. Libbey, 1994.

Thiel, Wolfgang. *Filmmusik in Geschichte und Gegenwart.* Berlin: Henschverlag Kunst und Gesellschaft, 1981.

Turim, Maureen. *Flashbacks in Film.* New York: Routledge, 1989.

Ward, Elizabeth. “Contesting the Memory of Frank Beyer’s *Jacob the Liar* (1974).” *The Holocaust in the Twenty-First Century: Contesting/Contested Memories,* edited by D. M. Seymour and Mercedes Camino. Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2016: 163-181.

Werzlau, Joachim. *Contra Lamento: Reminiszenzen eines Musikers.* Berlin: Verlag Neue Musik, 1988.

Wolfgram, Mark. “West German and Unified German Cinema’s Difficult Encounter with the Holocaust.” *Film and History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies* 32, no. 2 (2002): 24–37.

Wolfgram, Mark. “The Holocaust through the Prism of East German Television: Collective Memory and Audience Perceptions.” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 57–79.