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THE INTERNATIONAL RECEPTION OF *DOWNFALL* (*DER UNTERGANG*, 2004)

Mattias Frey 

Nearly twenty years after its premiere, Downfall still constitutes, among German theatrical features, the most significant media event since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The highest-profile sort of German (co-)production with a relatively big budget of approximately €14 million, well-known source material, a tie-in to sordid national history, a saturation exhibition strategy in Germany and (within five months of its September 2004 premiere) theatrical release in over 40 countries worldwide, Downfall sought – and received – wide press and public attention like almost no other German film before it. This article uses discourse analysis to survey and anatomise the international journalistic reception of Downfall, focusing on four of the five major territories for international film (USA, UK, Germany, France). Although there are some national peculiarities to the reception, in general the article argues that the critical reception can be distilled into three main, and overlapping, themes/debates: the perceived (in)authenticity of the representation of history; the aesthetic and moral implications of representing Adolf Hitler, in particular questions of sympathy; and the reception as a subject in itself, often coupled with perceptions of novelty vis-à-vis German film history. Even if the variety of topics and diversity of opinions regarding the film remain modest, Downfall's international reception supplies powerful and peculiar reminders about how commercially aspirational films representing contentious or sensitive historical events were received in the early twenty-first century. In particular, and first of all, press reactions to Downfall reveal how lived experience and identity – whether a status as a professional filmmaker, specialist historian, established critic or simply a member of a certain generation or national community – became proxies for taste and cultural authority in the early twenty-first century.

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Focused upon a dozen days in one main location whilst testing feature-length limits; a novelty item and yet familiar retro-vision; a German blockbuster and Euro-pudding co-production: *Downfall* has any number of valid entry points as an aesthetic object or film historical curiosity. Yet however one rates the film's artistic merits or entertainment potential, one aspect of *Downfall* is beyond debate: among German theatrical features, it provided for the most significant media event since the fall of the Berlin wall. The generous reportage, stimulated by a marketing and promotional campaign befitting the project's ambitious commercial aspirations, began well before the premiere. It ranged from cover stories and dossiers in *Der Spiegel*, *Der Stern* and *Die Zeit* to Reinhold Beckmann chat show appearances, not to mention hundreds of notices worldwide. *Die Welt* would file no fewer than 22 items on the film, *Die Zeit* 8, and *Der Tagesspiegel* 19.¹ The highest-profile sort of German (co-)production with a relatively big budget of approximately €14 million, well-known source material, a tie-in to sordid national history, a saturation exhibition strategy in Germany and (within five months of its September 2004 premiere) theatrical release in over 40 countries worldwide, *Downfall* sought – and received – wide press and public attention like almost no other German film before it.

This article seeks to understand the terms and forms of this attention, using discourse analysis to survey and anatomise the international journalistic reception. The article touches upon responses in Australia, Austria, Canada, Israel, Italy, Japan, Poland, Sweden, and Switzerland. Nevertheless, the examples focus on Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom and France. Not only do these countries represent four of the five largest film markets for most of cinema history; they were also – in this order – those with the most voluminous responses to *Downfall*.

For reasons of space this article limits its scope to what in 2004-2005 remained key gatekeepers and tastemakers: print and online broadsheets, tabloids, general-interest weeklies and dailies as well as specialist film magazines. Accordingly, I will not be commenting on the television and radio reportage, nor can I include lay audiences' responses or survey opinions in internet forums.² Furthermore, this article largely brackets the by-now voluminous scholarly secondary literature, a body of work that has a distinct purpose, audience and institutional structure.

Almost every academic reckoning with *Downfall* provides some overview of its reception, but these assessments nearly always satisfy themselves with scholarly analyses and a gloss over a few select German popular periodicals. David Bathrick delivered the hitherto deepest analysis of the journalistic *Downfall* reception. His article, 'Whose Hi/story Is It? The U.S. Reception of *Downfall*' focuses specifically on the United States quality press, which he variously calls the 'elite press' or the 'culture press'; he defines his sample as the following organs: the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Village Voice*, *New Republic*, *New York Review of Books*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New Yorker*, *Chicago Sun-Times* and *Boston Globe*.³ Bathrick maintains that the topics raised by critics in the United States were largely the same as those anticipated in Germany: 'Should the Germans be allowed to make Hitler films at all? Is it acceptable to portray Hitler as a "normal" human being? Should Hitler be

portrayed realistically? Is it permissible to portray the German people and the Nazis as victims rather than perpetrators? These were the most frequently asked questions in both countries, although the American press was, on the whole, more willing to concede the project's legitimacy' (2). Bathrick furthermore posits the question of historical 'ownership', a kind of cultural appropriation, as relevant to the reception: 'Whose *story* is this? By this I mean, Who is the main object of the narrative in *Downfall*? Whose history or histories form the main plot or provide the focal point? Related questions might be: Who is telling or writing this hi/story? What or whose perspective predominates in the film? And is the narrative perspective a unified one?' (4).

Although framed as an investigation of the US reception, Bathrick's article uses American reviews less as a primary source for a systematic reception study and much more as a springboard for his own critique of the film, in particular as secondary support (or critical dialogue) to broach issues of characterisation, casting, performance and music. 'My task now', Bathrick writes, 'is to confront this attitude' of an ahistorical, putatively objective historicism, 'by showing to what extent the filmmakers' allegedly neutral representations do implicitly contain a moral perspective – and a very old one, at that' (10). Bathrick eventually concludes, following Wim Wenders' view, that the film maintains no perspective at all (12).

Nearly twenty years after the theatrical release – with the benefit of historical distance and a less pressing need to take a side in a politically charged current media debate – it is imperative to return to the historical *Downfall* reception with an expansive and systematic study rooted more in the best-practice tenets of critical discourse analysis and film reception study than in the heuristics of interpretation.⁴ As Janet Staiger reminds, 'reception studies is not a hermeneutics or truth-finding of the meaning of the text. The enterprise it engages is historical and theoretical. It asks, *How* does a text mean? For whom? In what circumstances? ... Reception studies does not presume a meaning as an essence to be extracted by an insightful critic'.⁵

Departing from earlier reckonings with the *Downfall* reception I seek here to break out of comfortable cubbyholes and broaden the national scope. Seeking, furthermore, to eschew middle-class filter bubbles and incorporate a more diverse sample of primary sources, the present investigation includes all accessible international reviews from the aforementioned sample markets. That is to say that I include newspapers and magazines up and down the scale of taste and cultural legitimation – even while acknowledging, as I do in the conclusion, that outside of the German-speaking territories *Downfall* figured as a middlebrow product addressed to middle-class audiences.

Downfall's international reception is remarkable – indeed for a recent German film it is unprecedented – for its sheer volume. Although some national peculiarities exist, in general the critical reception can be productively distilled into three main, albeit often overlapping, themes, which will be analysed in turn: the perceived (in)authenticity of the representation of history; the aesthetic and moral implications of representing Adolf Hitler, in particular questions of sympathy; the reception as a subject in itself, often coupled with perceptions of novelty vis-à-vis

German film history. Even if the variety of topics and diversity of opinions regarding the film remain modest, *Downfall*'s international reception supplies powerful and peculiar reminders about how commercially aspirational films representing contentious or sensitive historical events were received in the early twenty-first century. In particular, and first of all, press reactions to *Downfall* reveal how lived experience and identity – whether a status as a professional filmmaker, specialist historian, established critic or simply a member of a certain generation or national community – became proxies for taste, cultural authority and the establishment of what Germans call *Deutungshoheit*. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, the article demonstrates how the detectable trends between and among national contexts and transnational institutional taste cultures followed particularly predictable patterns, ways of seeing and speaking previewed and cued in *Downfall*'s marketing strategies and agenda-setting intentions, intensifying in critical echo chambers.

Authenticity, realism, and historians' interventions

More or less every review dwelled on *Downfall*'s attention to period detail: its 'authenticity', 'historical accuracy', fidelity to written historical sources such as Joachim Fest's eponymous book and Traudl Junge's memoirs, or its 'realism' as an aesthetic strategy and style. *Variety* reported that the film seemed 'impeccably researched'.⁶ For Kenneth Turan, writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, *Downfall* 'painstakingly details that period'; there is 'great effort expended on physical verisimilitude', including set design and costume. In France, *Paris Match* declared that *La Chute* (as the film was called there) 'achieves an almost documentary dimension'.⁷ 'As a historical recreation', declared the *Washington Post*'s Stephen Hunter, 'it's meticulous. Only seven other viewers besides me will note the presence of the proper late-war-issue assault rifle, called an StG-44, in the hands of the German troops'. According to Hunter, this carefully researched prop (which the film, via shot scale, shows off) 'bespeaks an attention to detail on the part of the filmmakers that's almost pedantic, but also reassuring ... which is one reason why from the very first seconds a viewer believes totally in *Downfall*'.⁸ Indeed, the *Guardian*'s Peter Bradshaw opined, both the historical detail and cinematography lend the film an impressive realism: 'You can almost smell the bunker's sweat and fear'. *Timeout* even thought that *Downfall* 'can be recommended as a masterclass in reconstructive cinema'; the film provides an 'eerie 'you were there' immediacy'.⁹ For the *Independent*'s Jonathan Romney, the film represents 'history in all its squalid, drab, murderous detail'.¹⁰

One could easily fill an entire article with critics' discussions of *Downfall*'s attention to historical authenticity; nearly every review in every institutional and national context at least mentioned – and many discussed at great length – this issue. For reasons of space, however, I must forgo such a listing and instead probe the ramifications of these discussions. First, the attention to authenticity or accuracy, although clearly a key topic in the *Downfall* reception, should not be seen as *sui generis*: authenticity is a major – yes, the primary – reading protocol for historical films, whether received by lay audiences, film critics or historians.¹¹ Second, in this context it is crucial to emphasise the degree to which the makers of

historical films anticipate such readings, for instance, with tales of labour, advertising catch phrases, prominent source materials or blessings by historian-consultants. In the case of *Downfall*, this was particularly true: the film's sophisticated publicity campaign clearly intended to cue discussion around historical accuracy and authenticity. In press materials, advertisements, Q&A sessions at public screenings and interviews, Hirschbiegel and especially Eichinger went on the offensive, pre-empting and then reacting to critique about historical revisionism by continually stressing the film's meticulously researched and authentic *reproduction* of history, rather than, as they distinguished, to 'interpret' it. 'We keep strictly to the documents', Eichinger emphasised time and again: 'Things that aren't historically proven do not appear'.¹² The filmmakers wanted to tell a story, but not comment on it; the film's 'value', according to Eichinger, was that it refused to make any 'value judgments'.¹³

These efforts to guide the reception bore fruit. The stated intentions inevitably infiltrated the reportage and reviews in the form of quotations – often used to justify positive claims made about the film's historiography – and agenda-setting (in other words: the very topics on which the writers chose to focus).¹⁴ Eichinger, 'who has been researching the Nazi past for over twenty years', is one typical incorporation of the publicity into a review (from the *Rheinische Post*).¹⁵ The oft-parroted line that Ganz researched historical accounts of Hitler for 'three months straight' is another. Commentators such as Sue Summers uncritically recycled the authenticity efforts as incontrovertible 'proof' that, despite critics' protests, *Downfall* in fact represented history faithfully and properly: 'The scenes in *Downfall* that have caused the most outrage – those which show Hitler being nice to his secretaries or complimenting the cook on a plate of vegetarian ravioli – are all straight from the historical record'.¹⁶

This brings me to my third point about the *Downfall* reception's authenticity topic. Many reviewers – for instance, Hunter's enthusiastic recognition of gun models and Bradshaw's hallucinations of bunker odours – more or less reproduced the filmmakers' self-promotion, presenting the supposed great efforts at historical accuracy as a neutral background to prepare the reader for the experience of the film or as measures of the film's success (in other words: plausible recreation of historical events, characters, locations). More thorough or critical commentators, however, went on to contemplate the ends and effects of these efforts.

For a group of French reviewers, the film's attempts at realism were 'its strength, its limit too, for its concern for historical veracity impedes it undoubtedly' (Jacques Morice, *Télérama*). According to *Le Nouvel Observateur*, the authenticity succeeded as a tactic, but did not form part of any larger strategy: 'Oliver Hirschbiegel's film is undoubtedly honest, but it is never more than an illustration, and above all it carefully avoids illuminating that which hurts, that which frightens'. In *Cahiers du Cinéma* editor-in-chief Jean-Michel Frodon's devastating assessment, the slavish attention to detail and source material attempted to mask an artistic vacuum. For him, *Downfall* was nothing more than an automatised 'illustration of the inevitable facets of the end of the Third Reich, which could have been scripted by a computer and filmed by a robot programmed with scenes from third-rate American war films'.¹⁷

The perhaps most commonly voiced criticism linked *Downfall*'s pursuit of authenticity – including the filmmakers' statements that they wished to 'tell' rather 'comment on' or 'interpret' history – to nineteenth-century, Ranke-esque historicism. In the opinions of these (mostly German, but also higher-brow international) commentators, the film's authenticity project was, at best, naïve and, at worst, perniciously deceptive. For Alain Masson, writing in the venerable left-wing cinephile magazine *Positif*, the filmmakers 'have defended themselves that they have no historical or political design; they wanted to simply show the event'. And yet, they 'hardly show anything: their reality does not go beyond the consistency of a TV movie. And in that case does it show any meaning?' Furthermore, David Denby wondered in the *New Yorker* whether 'observation' as a ('naïve') historiographical and formal method is a 'sufficient response to what Hitler actually did?'¹⁸

Indeed, for Tobias Kniebe (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*), the film's attempts at authenticity were both a strategic shield and smokescreen: 'The research can hardly be attacked, the historical references, from Joachim Fest to Hitler's secretary Traudl Junge, are robust. Even the idea of decisively discarding taboos and *Bilderverbote* has something going for it. Nevertheless, it just doesn't work'. Typically, and more reflexively than most other critics, Kniebe minimises Hirschbiegel's role in the production and puts forward Eichinger as the film's Rankean visionary. Perhaps, Kniebe concludes, 'Eichinger is the most naïve person in German cinema ... The downfall of the "Third Reich" is a great story, no question about it. And Eichinger probably thought: We'll show it exactly like really it was. But every camera angle, every time you combine two shots, every close-up is also a judgment ... it transports a concrete ideology: namely, that there is a fate that must be fulfilled, regardless of the historical agent'.¹⁹

In perhaps the most incendiary attack in this vein, symptomatic-critic stalwart Georg Seeblen's *epd Film* review asked: 'What contribution does *Downfall*, a film that advertises itself as an "authentic," historically approved look at the last days of the Nazi regime, actually make?' His inevitable answer is: very little. For Seeblen, the film's 'lightly stylised form of psychological realism', its manipulative suggestion to viewers that they are 'really there' in the bunker, its many appropriations of authenticity including the 'innocent' eyewitness testimony of Junge plus Fest's authority as a historian, combine to form a deviously ideological, yet surprisingly lightweight undertaking. 'With this doubled "authenticity" *Downfall* behaves more like a docu-soap opera than a historical-moral experiment. Everything is 'frighteningly real', a deceptively 'perspective-less open "reality."' In the end, according to Seeblen, the Rankean strategy to 'show' as it really was, enacted through fly-on-the-wall stylistic tactics, 'delivers a Hitler-image for the post-post-modern', one which simply 'demands to be there, without any distance. Hitler for the children of CNN, Big Brother and political correctness'. The sum of the 'small truths' of historical fidelity to costume, set design and physical verisimilitude yields a 'big lie'.²⁰

Seeblen's and especially Kniebe's contributions point to a larger truth about the role of the authenticity discourse in the reception of historical films. In general, the cultural status of the represented history will codetermine expectations of

reverence to the accepted historical record. Specifically, at least three factors incentivise attention to authenticity in production, marketing and reception. The production is based on familiar historical incidents, featuring well-known historical agents or events memorialised in documentary films, photographs and other media. Viewers can compare the recreation with their memory of previous media representations, an aesthetic and commercial risk (but, because of viewers' overall acquaintance with the intellectual property, also a potential benefit). The film is conceived and promoted as an *historical* film, rather than a period piece or another sort of media object that happens to be set in the past.²¹ And the status of the represented history and attitude of the film is especially sensitive or contentious.²² These principles anticipate the heightened attention to authenticity in the *Downfall* reception. Even if Hitler's death does not have the same status as the assassination of JFK, the moon landing, or a plane crashing into the World Trade Center (that is to say: immortalised as a media memory with the perpetual availability of the Zapruder film and other widely circulating images), in general the film fulfils all of these conditions. Indeed, the *Downfall* *modus operandi* is precisely to visualise one of the most hotly contested moments in the history of Germany and biography of Hitler. For the same reasons that *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) elicited no outcry for being inaccurate or inauthentic, the makers of *Downfall* conversely took great pains to stress the film's authenticity in publicity – efforts and claims that were in turn thoroughly parsed in critics' assessments.

By way of conclusion to this section, as a means to complicate the itinerary of its argument about how 'authenticity' provided one of three major topics in the international reception, I would like to introduce an institutional question: *whom* did media outlets choose to write about this film? Newspapers often forswear routine personnel for other types of experts when reviewing certain films. The music editor, rather than a film critic, will often cover a musician biopic; a political documentary receives plaudits or opprobrium from a news editor or political columnist. In the case of *Downfall*, foreign correspondents living (or who had lived) in Germany (for example, Roger Boyd of *The Times*), and, above all, historians stood in for periodicals' usual film pundits. (To paraphrase one critic, a mini-*Historikerstreit* played out on world arts pages.) The role of professional historians (or even Britons who formerly worked in Germany) provides a significant example of how 'lived experience' was mobilised in the *Downfall* reception in order to justify interpretation and taste. The 'authenticity' efforts in the production and publicity were reflected and matched in the choice of writers, whose career backgrounds asserted an entitlement to pass judgment on the rectitude of the film's historical details and interpretation.

Noted British historian Ian Kershaw was a prime mover in this regard. His intervention is remarkable not only for the heft of his reputation in academia and popular culture as a Hitler biographer and Nazi historian. Eichinger personally invited Kershaw to an advance press screening in the hopes that the boffin would bless the film's recreation of the past as truthful and accurate. 'The Human Hitler', published simultaneously in the *Guardian* and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, was picked up by later commentators as a gushing Eichinger-hagiography, with certain quotations taken out of context (for example, 'as a production the

film is a triumph' – a phrase Kershaw makes to distinguish the film as entertainment from the film as a historiographical intervention). In fact, Kershaw dwells on historical accuracy (Ganz's vocal performance, he says, is 'chillingly authentic') and praises the 'outstanding cast'. Above all, the piece carefully prides apart cinema's great 'emotive power' in bringing history alive, vis-à-vis its 'explanatory power', which in his estimation remains 'much weaker'. Finding it 'hard to imagine that anyone (other than the usual neo-Nazi fringe) could possibly find Hitler a sympathetic figure' in the film, Kershaw anticipated the sympathy debates (to be discussed in depth in the next section) and concluded that only those with low confidence in liberal democracy could entertain such fears. Although doubting that *Downfall* added any new insight to Hitler as a person or historical phenomenon, Kershaw deemed the 'eerie atmosphere' and emotional representation to be 'absolutely legitimate' and 'part of a continuing, gradual, but inexorable process of seeing the Hitler era as history – even more important, feeling it as history'.²³

For a historian, Kershaw's approach was modern and enlightened. To some extent it followed colleague Robert Rosenstone's scholarly calls to see film as a worthy historiographical object poorly served by professional historians' instincts to scrutinise minute aspects of props and costumes.²⁴ David Cesarani and Peter Longerich, history professors at Royal Holloway, University of London, take such a traditional fidelity-above-all-approach in their *Guardian* jeremiad, 'The Massaging of History'. Despite the filmmakers' claims of authenticity, 'in fact they have reworked the evidence and omitted crucial information', such as the political leanings of Traudl Junge's father and husband.²⁵

To be sure, most historians evaluated the film much more harshly than Kershaw, not just for the occasional goof, but for the implications of those inventions. German historian Klaus Neumann's intervention in the Australian online cinephile journal *Rouge* or Peter Reichel's squib are exemplary for their emotional, sarcastic tone.²⁶ Separating film from history – rather than, as historians and film specialists often do, separating 'period films' from 'historical films', Michael Wildt sees *Downfall* as a 'historians' trap'. Through its style and marketing it 'invites, with nearly open arms, to assess its historicity, and yet has more or less as much to do with history as *Mutiny on the Bounty*'.²⁷ Agreeing that the film's authenticity is meant to deceive because it does not acknowledge the 'naturalism' as constructed, Wildt sees (à la Kniebe) the authenticity strategy (including publicity slogans) as an intentional distraction: 'He who promises such 'authenticity' does not express historical events, but rather, in the opposite way, designs the past in present scenery... the film stages itself as source'. Via conscious characterisation choices based on a selective or idiosyncratic use of sources, 'the filmmakers' assertion that *Downfall* strictly adheres to the historical record can no longer be called naïve – it is a conscious deception'.²⁸

Beyond inviting historians to review the film, several media outlets interviewed historians or otherwise reported on their opinions of the film.²⁹ In a thorough protocol picked up in other news outlets and reviews, for example, *Die Welt* reported on the Kiel conference of German historians who convened to dissect *Downfall* shortly after the film's premiere. Most of the quotations concentrated on the authenticity of the film's historical representations (soldier's uniforms, the

production design of the bunker) and how these were able to provide ‘insight into the workings of the regime’.³⁰

The ‘human’ Hitler: performance, characterisation, sympathy

Critics’ discussions of authenticity and realism encompassed a series of individual concerns, from uniforms and other costumes, to locations and sets, dialogue, historical actions and their chronological sequence. It contemplated – or at least glossed – the use of sources, from the Fest book and the Junge and Speer memoirs to Hugh Trevor-Roper’s post-war report on the subject. One of the most frequently treated subtopics revolved around actors’ physical verisimilitude to historical agents in their appearance, gesture, speech and demeanour. This concern overlaps with what I propose to be the second of the three main topic clusters in the reception: characterisation, performance and how the film activates structures of sympathy towards various characters, especially Hitler.

As was the case with ‘authenticity’, the initial pre-release publicity campaign and rounds of interviews cued concerns around this topic cluster. The publicity and initial interviews with Ganz highlighted the labour behind, and novelty of, his performance. Ganz pitched his task as a challenge to norms and conventions surrounding Hitler in German cinema: to overcome ‘not only a kind of *Bilderverbot*, but a kind of *Darstellungsverbot*’. Much discussion surrounded Ganz’s lengthy preparations for the role, the oft-quoted ‘three months’ of reading he did to master the material, his mimicry of a ‘rare’ audio recording of Hitler conversing casually over dinner and, in general, his desire and capacity to provide an ‘authentic’ portrayal of the dictator. Regarding the key question of empathy, Ganz repeatedly emphasised in interviews – quotations that circulated in various permutations throughout the reviews worldwide – that although he tried to distance himself from identifying with Hitler, he was ‘not ashamed’ to say that there were ‘fractions of seconds’ when, as an actor seeking to understand and thus portray a human being, ‘a certain sympathy developed’.³¹

Indeed, when the film was released even less generous reviews tended to laud the cast and above all Ganz, if only for his studied *imitatio*. Invectives, like the one delivered by Gérard Lefort in *Libération* – ‘What ferocious boredom, what mediocre actors (especially Bruno Ganz who plays ‘to Hitler’ with as much conviction as a toilet brush)’ – were entirely exceptional. Much more typical were comments like those in *Paris Match* (‘thanks to the extraordinary performance of Bruno Ganz ... this film continues to haunt the spectator’) or in Austria’s mass-market tabloid *Kronen Zeitung*, which, praising the all-star acting roster and ‘compact drama based on historical facts’, concluded that ‘Ganz plays Hitler alarmingly well’. (The last adverbial phrase became a formula – to the point that Georg Seeblen would parody it in his aforementioned review.) Indeed, the *Rheinische Post*, again referencing the ‘all-star cast’, found Bruno Ganz to look ‘frighteningly similar to the Nazi-Führer’ and stressed the amount of research and method-acting principles used: ‘In order to not identify with the Hitler character too much during the shooting, he spent the previous three months intensely studying the literature on the subject’. For Kim Newman, writing in Britain’s mass-market cinema monthly, *Empire*, at

‘the centre of it all is Bruno Ganz, easily one of the screen’s great Hitlers. He performs in German with an exact recreation of that rasping accent’. Even more hyperbolic was the *New Republic*’s Stanley Kauffmann, for whom the case was clear: the ‘cast is—the only word—perfect’. In particular, ‘Ganz brings off an extraordinary technical achievement’. All ‘the other actors are authentic, creating men and women, not dummy historical figures’.³²

A subset of reviews, however, whilst acknowledging Ganz and the cast, pondered the ends to these performances. For David Denby, the Swiss thespian achieved a ‘staggering revelation of craft ... as a piece of acting, Ganz’s work is not just astounding, it’s actually rather moving. But I have doubts about the way his virtuosity has been put to use. By emphasizing the painfulness of Hitler’s defeat Ganz has ... made the dictator into a plausible human being’ and thereby ‘insist[s] that the monster was not invariably monstrous’. Probing this idea in greater depth, Jens Jenssen (*Die Zeit*) opined that Ganz’s efforts serve no larger purpose; despite the ‘media’s hysterical reportage before the premiere’, the film does not risk a new, let alone ground-breaking, view of Hitler. To be sure, ‘Ganz speaks like the Hitler that we know from records, he looks like the Hitler in the historical photos, he moves like Hitler in the films’. Nevertheless, Jenssen wonders, ‘does one get to know Hitler because of this? One does not get to know him in the sense that he becomes plausible as a social or psychological type’. Indeed, ‘Hitler remains an incomprehensible monster, whose authority and power to attract are not unlocked through retrospective sympathy... . this film breaks a taboo, but with what purpose?’³³

Jenssen’s commentary points to what would become the most contentious questions of debate in the reception: Does the film encourage viewers to sympathise with Hitler and other war criminals? Are the film’s structures of sympathy ethical, moral and/or politically acceptable? The responses were divided. A small, but hardly insignificant minority maintained that Hitler appeared in a rosy light and, akin to the ‘media harm’-paradigm, contended that some viewers might develop sympathies for the real Hitler and his aims. *Bild-Zeitung* headlines screamed about whether Hitler may be portrayed as a human being; *Der Stern* and *Die Zeit* cited surveys that German *Gymnasiasten* were more likely to rationalise Hitler’s motives positively after watching the film.³⁴ Foreign correspondents – from Britain, the United States, Canada, Italy and elsewhere – were especially bound to reproduce this line, often replete with factual errors and exaggerations (for example, ‘Adolf Hitler appears for the first time in a central role, not as a ranting demagogue but as a soft-spoken dreamer’).³⁵

In *Die Zeit*, Wim Wenders delivered one of the most widely cited (and translated, for instance, in the *Libération*) *Downfall* commentaries, a rejoinder that self-consciously echoed his evisceration of Joachim Fest’s documentary *Hitler, A Career* (*Hitler, eine Karriere*, 1977) in the same newspaper a quarter century earlier.³⁶ Similar to the historian-reviewers like Kershaw, here too we encounter an example of lived experience (of professional background, generation and no doubt celebrity) being used by the publication and the writer himself to advance an interpretation. Wenders, assuming the authority of a prize-winning filmmaker (much in the way that historians had made their pronouncements with the weight of their doctoral

degrees and university professorships), attacked *Downfall* with a moral-symptomatic critique of its narrative trajectory and structures of sympathy. Juxtaposing the film with the success of the far-right NPD in local elections, Wenders deems *Downfall* to have 'no conviction', no moral position on its narrative, no opinion about Hitler or fascism: ultimately, it remains a trivialising portrait oddly reverential towards Nazi leaders (for example, for showing most deaths besides Hitler's and Goebbels' in gory detail). According to Wenders, 'if one wants to tell a story, it is insufficient to know that which one wants to tell, for one must also be true to how and from which perspective one tells it. The last two questions were – in a devastating fashion – not asked while making this film, or, even worse, one even consciously attempted to avoid them'.

A majority of international critics, however, took a more nuanced view: yes, some scenes showed Hitler as a 'human', but that hardly constituted a glorification of, or apology for, Hitler or Hitlerism. These sorts of positions, a frequent feature of the US and UK reviews, sometimes rated sympathising with Hitler as morally and politically positive. Responding – as almost all of these foreign reviews did – to sceptical German reviews (such as Wenders'), Kenneth Turan (*Los Angeles Times*) opined that, in fact, the 'acknowledgement of its protagonist's charisma points to *Downfall's* sane approach to Hitler's personality. Showing the German leader's more human aspects alongside his murderous ranting doesn't whitewash Hitler or rehabilitate him, it merely points out, whether we feel comfortable recognizing it, that ultimate evil inevitably shows up in human form'. Failing to recognise this fact, according to Turan, makes nations vulnerable to totalitarian strongmen; for this political lesson alone a viewing is worthwhile. Similarly, Peter Bradshaw (*The Guardian*) takes up the humanisation critique by turning this perceived liability into an asset. 'It does precisely this – and makes him seem, in consequence, far more grotesque and sulphurous than any of the dozens of picturesque newsreel documentaries on TV. It restores him to evil's banality ... its silliness and cheapness'. Hitler, according to Bradshaw, 'has never looked more noisome, a tatty charlatan. If anything, it is the SS on whom the film goes easy, although they never appear anything other than chillingly pompous'.³⁷

Following from Bradshaw's final comment, a substantial group of critics found Hitler as unlikeable as ever, but bemoaned the characterisation techniques that allowed Hitler's government, army and entourage to appear in a sympathetic light.³⁸ A number of commentators disapproved of the uncritical engagement with Junge, and, even worse, Albert Speer, Günther Schenck and SS officers. Delivering one of the most widely cited reviews, A. O. Scott (*New York Times*) espouses this line. The project's objective, which Scott deems ultimately unmet, 'is to make Hitler a plausible character without quite humanizing him'. Nevertheless, the real problem is the attention to Hitler's hangers-on. Diehard Nazi Schenck seems to have 'an uneasy conscience and a good heart'; Junge reminds Scott of 'a Hollywood career girl in a 1940s melodrama'. Thus, the 'most disturbing aspect of *Downfall* ... is how it allows the audience's sympathy to gravitate toward some of these characters. Next to the Goebbelses, and to Hitler, many of the others don't look too bad'. *Downfall* sends 'the soothing message that ordinary Germans were above all the victims of Nazism'.

This view was echoed in a number of the – relatively few, but culturally important – critical US newspaper reviews. J. Hoberman (*Village Voice*) found that, ‘Ganz’s antics notwithstanding, *Downfall*’s real subject is the suffering of the German people – as embodied mainly by a bewildered child soldier, a beleaguered if sanitized SS doctor, and an honest old general’. Ignoring the film’s international ambitions, the *New Yorker*’s David Denby similarly saw the production as a ‘film made by Germans for Germans’, that is, ‘the latest instalment in the project of ‘coming to terms with the past’ which has been unrolling in Germany for half a century ... working for the home audience, Eichinger and Hirschbiegel offer not insight but scraps of noble behavior’ by ‘the good S.S. doctor’ and German foot soldiers. Although Hitler was not likeable enough to ‘spark a recruitment drive’ for neo-Nazis, the film’s pathos comes ‘close to nostalgia’.

Finally, a (decidedly minority) opinion regarding characterisation and sympathy adopted the contrarian view that none of the characters is likeable. Such comments usually provided the steppingstone for an outright dismissal of the film. ‘Among the characters in the Führer-bunker’, Kniebe writes – listing the ‘secretary with the guileless eyes’, the tank-busting Hitler Youth and the seemingly moral-plagued Speer and General Weidling – ‘the spectator brain searches eagerly for those it might wish survival’. In the British Film Institute prestige organ *Sight and Sound*, Richard Falcon articulated a similar, if more acrid, denunciation. Bemoaning the naïve ‘trainspotter’s notion of historical comprehensiveness’, Falcon sees the ‘shuffling, ingratiating Führer’ as ‘the only element with a resonance beyond limp historical reconstruction’ and an escape from an obsessive authenticity. ‘Lacking any emotional access points beyond morbid curiosity or the desire for an illustrated history lesson, *Downfall* is ultimately of interest for Ganz’s brave, slightly mad performance and its implicit contention ... that German commercial film can now treat Hitler like any other historical dictator’. For Falcon, ‘the non-financial purposes of the film remain vague’.

In *Der Spiegel*, Andreas Borcholte was even more direct. Although the Swiss actor’s appropriation of Hitler’s gestures and vocal tics was no mere masquerade, he remained the only possible point of identification; all other characters were simply not ‘three-dimensional’, remaining ‘empty templates without clear motivations’. Ultimately, Eichinger and company ‘created a frosty film that fails to tell a moving story, indeed cannot tell a moving story: it revolves around criminals at the end of the bunker game only the fascination with the accurate depiction of Hitler remains’. Behind the production Borcholte found little more than a ‘calculated breaking of taboo’ that failed to mention the Holocaust; the lack of ‘warmth’ and any ‘interpretation’ made *Downfall* a ‘superfluous film’, as ‘harmless and flat as a two-part TV miniseries’.³⁹

Meta-reception: controversy, novelty, film history and national difference

The third main feature of the *Downfall* reception is the media’s attention to the reception itself. This meta-reception included, on the one hand, ‘news’ pieces (rather than arts-page write-ups, which served primarily evaluative purposes) that

sought to document and communicate information about *Downfall* as a cultural event. For example: 'A film depicting Adolf Hitler's human side is attracting crowds and stirring debate in Germany' (*Montreal Gazette*, 26 November 2004), or 'Controversial Hitler Film Opens Across Germany' (*Deutsche Welle*).

On the other hand, film reviews themselves almost always dwelled on the reception. This was true even in the earliest notices, which often reported extensively on Q&As with the filmmakers and pre-premiere press screening reactions, speculating about audience and international responses.⁴⁰ For some commentators, disingenuous filmmakers were the root cause of the meta-reception. *Der Spiegel* remained unsurprised that breaking a long-held convention by depicting Hitler praising his chef for well-cooked pasta would produce a media controversy:

May one do that? Of course one may. One may even do much more in the fictional space of film art. One may interpret, caricature, simplify and of course provoke ... Yet if a filmmaker cloaks himself in the disguise of pseudo-authenticity and designs his Hitler film as great drama, recruits the entire who's who of German screen thespians as his acting squad – in that case he can be assured of a lively, renewed discussion of the 'may-one-do-that' question'.⁴¹

In the course of the coverage, critics self-reflexively noted the reception and took positions on the hot takes by prominent interlocutors: above all Wenders (for example, *Sight and Sound*, *Daily Telegraph*), A. O. Scott and Kershaw, but also Schirmacher's declaration that the film was a 'masterpiece' (the latter two were usually invoked critically or, occasionally, as straw men). Details of the spats between Wenders, Fest, Kershaw, Eichinger, Hirschbiegel, Hans-Jürgen Syberberg and so on were another subplot of some interest.⁴²

There remains no space here to detail every meta-invocation of the reception, but three major subtopics should be at least telegraphed. They included, first, the *novelty* (or continuity vis-à-vis German film history) of *Downfall's* depictions of Hitler, Nazism and the Second World War. Some commentators simply aped publicity lines that such representations were unprecedented. Others pushed back on this characterisation by enumerating precursors such as G. W. Pabst's *The Last Ten Days* (*Der letzte Akt*, 1955), Syberberg's *Hitler: A Film From Germany* (*Hitler, ein Film aus Deutschland*, 1977), Jörg Buttgeriet's short *Blutige Exzesse im Führerbunker*, (1984), Christoph Schlingensiefel's *100 Jahre Adolf Hitler – Die letzte Stunde im Führerbunker* (1989) or any number of productions from further afield, such as *Hitler – The Last Days* (1973), *Moloch* (1999) or *Max* (2002), which have depicted the dictator in one form or another.⁴³

Second, and following from this, the notion of a 'change of generation' and the theme of cultural appropriation as the motivations for this supposedly new or revisionist Hitler constituted another subtopic. For commentators like Sue Summers, *Downfall* was just the 'latest from a generation of German film-makers determined to face up to their country's legacy of shame', the expression of a 'new generation' more relaxed about the Second World War than self-tortured 68er like Wenders or Syberberg. (Such pronouncements always conveniently

neglected the fact that Eichinger was a contemporary of those filmmakers, even while asserting the producer – rather than Hirschbiegel, born in 1957 – as the visionary behind the project.) Other reviewers (for instance, Seeßlen, Rebhandl, Scott, Denby) saw this ‘generation change’ as being of a piece with the contemporaneous fixation on German victimhood.⁴⁴ In contrast, Eckhard Fuhr submitted that ‘Eichinger’s obsession’ and the ‘enormous media resonance’ were ‘a sign of a successful emancipation’ from Hitler’s demonic spell over Germany. He concludes that a fundamental generational shift has taken place: ‘Germans need no longer fear an encounter with Adolf Hitler Today Germans still have their history, but they no longer have it around their necks. That also allows them to look Hitler in the eyes’.⁴⁵

Such sentiments generally echoed filmmakers’ statements about their desire (and their belief in Germans’ need) to take charge of their ‘own’ history. Shades of cultural appropriation and national pride always undergirded Eichinger’s promotional statements such as:

We resolved to shoot this film in the German language, with German actors and a German director. Why? If one shines a spotlight on the most enormous physical and psychological collapse of a whole civilisation, namely our German nation, then it must also be possible for us to tell this story ourselves. In other words: Many other projects on Hitler have been made by the Americans, English and so on I think it is high time that we tell our own story with the means that we have ourselves, and have the courage to finally put the main protagonists up on the screen.⁴⁶

A third subtopic of the meta-reception was a preoccupation with ‘foreign’ reactions to the film; I will treat this final subtopic in more depth than the previous two as a way to broach the overall subject of national difference in the reception and move towards some general conclusions. To be sure, the media’s self-reflection was not completely unprecedented for a recent German film – the responses to the historical films *Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003) and *The Miracle of Bern* (*Das Wunder von Bern*, 2003) in many ways anticipated the media outpourings over *Downfall*.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the Eichinger production inspired an exponentially greater resonance abroad; the prominent, international media discourse in turn precipitated an *intensification* of topics. That is, the media resonance – perhaps best conceptualised as a media *echo* – found critics responding primarily to questions put forth by prior commentators (and, importantly, the filmmakers’ own publicity and agenda-setting). This helps explain how a relatively small number of topics came to dominate, if not overwhelm, the discussion.

Indeed, topic intensification particularly characterised what might one call the transnational reception. Specifically, there was firstly, in the non-German press, almost always at least a mention of the ‘controversy’ that the film inspired in Germany, often including citations and quotations of Wenders, Schirrmacher, *Bild* and *Der Spiegel*.⁴⁸ Secondly, in the German (and Austrian) press, there was a particularly strong interest in ‘foreign’ reactions. The *Wiener Zeitung*, for example, devoted an article to how Poles had ‘rejected’ the ‘Hitler film’; *Downfall* was ‘slaughtered by criticism’, whether the *Gazeta Wyborcza* dismissal as ‘100% banal’

or the *Tygodnik Powszechny* charge of ‘unallowable emotionalisation’.⁴⁹ *Deutsche Welle* devoted a notice to the reactions in Israel, where trepidation among exhibitors and some mixed reactions among critics gave way to an overwhelmingly positive popular reception.⁵⁰ The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Jordan Mejias) reported on the international premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival under the rubric ‘*Downfall* Abroad’ and speculated that the ‘debate about the film, if all initial signs are not false, will proceed on the American continent quite differently than in Germany’, supporting this claim with a gushing *Hollywood Reporter* review and the softball questions that Hirschbiegel and the other filmmakers fielded from the foreign press. Finally, *Der Standard* devoted an entire notice to describing how Scott’s *New York Times* review ‘criticised director Oliver Hirschbiegel’s work in explicit terms’, while the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Stern* and *Die Welt* devoted round-ups to the reactions in France and England.⁵¹ (There is not adequate space to fully elaborate on the reasons for the German media’s preoccupation with the foreign regard of the film, but they include the German press’s traditional reliance on foreign tastemakers – especially those from New York, London and Paris/Cannes – to evaluate and adjudicate on matters of German cinema, culture and history.)⁵²

Conclusions

Despite the heavy focus on national reception in meta-reception discussions, country-by-country differences were limited. Although, as I shall detail, there are some nuances and observable trends among the national receptions, this should not obscure the general rule that *Downfall*’s international reception revolved around the circumscribed set of topics I have outlined in this article. National essentialism is not the guiding organisational principle of the *Downfall* reception.

By and large there were more, longer, more considered and more negative reviews in Germany. Critics attended more often to the role of culture, historiography, and film historical precedents, above all to come to different conclusions than the foreign press, which (with some exceptions, like in Poland or the upmarket Scott and Hoberman reviews) seemed aware but less encumbered by precedents and taboos. For instance, Denby declared that ‘German liberals need not fear: this human Hitler is just as disgusting as the iconic one’. Kershaw’s tone pervaded many Anglophone reviews: ‘The only brief reports’ about *Downfall* in England ‘commented on the breaking of a taboo in Germany by having Hitler played on the screen for the first time ... It seemed like a typical case of German angst’.

In the United States, *Downfall* received a 91% rating on the Rotten Tomatoes ‘Tomatometer’: 124 positive critics’ reviews versus 12 negative reviews. Metacritic, which uses a different algorithm (assigning a weighted numerical score to each review, rather than simply aggregating positive vs. negative), yielded a quotient of 82 from 35 professional reviews, meaning ‘universal acclaim’ among its almost exclusively North American critics. Beyond France, the United Kingdom, Poland and Israel, most other countries registered the film and the foreign controversy as a curiosity to be noted without expending much emotional

labour. The error-rife *La Repubblica* notice is exemplary in this sense: it ultimately concludes that the bitter debate in Germany is *sui generis* and, as such, from an 'objective' foreign perspective, largely much ado about nothing.⁵³ Occasionally, one national reception or another had some idiosyncratic design, for example, the Swiss enthusiastic fixation on homegrown star Bruno Ganz; titles like 'A Swiss is Adolf Hitler' abounded.⁵⁴

In sum, there were some small, yet detectable national differences in the journalistic *Downfall* reception. Non-German critics tended to pick up on the controversies surrounding the film in a circumscribed, distanced way – usually in a report on the German reception, partaking of a discourse of 'novelty' and broaching the idea of a 'humanised', potentially sympathetic Hitler only to ultimately dismiss it. In contrast, German critics, whose reviews were substantially less favourable, often contemplated *Downfall* in much more personal terms, using emotive language to advance their evaluations or justifying their regard of the film by identifying themselves as part of one generation or another. The (enthusiastic) Schirmmacher review and (scathing) Wenders piece are – if not necessarily exemplary – particularly revealing. Both seek to persuade readers by asserting in their respective introductions an initial predisposition to the opposing viewpoint. Schirmmacher entertains his initial scepticism: 'Eichinger was ... above all that which I had read about him in *People* magazine, a West German Johnny-come-lately with ambiguous morals, inhabitant of a superficial celebrity world ... No one could have entered a screening room as unmercifully or as confidently: It would have to be a miracle before a feature film about Hitler could impress us postwar Germans'. Wenders, for his part, signalled his original good will: '*Downfall*, I thought, will be the great German film about the end of National Socialism ... Precisely the right thing at the right time' delivered by Eichinger, 'whom I admire' and whose 'success makes me happy'. There are a number of ways to begin to explain these differences, which might begin by gesturing to Germans' obvious proximity to German history (and the norms surrounding its representation) through the prism of pedagogical institutions, the national media and familial oral history vernaculars.

As easy as it would be to finish on this observation, in fact the trend is more complicated than mere national specificity. For while it would not be incorrect to state that the German press's reception of *Downfall* was less positive than the US, French or Italian *in general*, this tidy sum masks clear differences in taste cultures that transcend the national. Internationally, cinephile organs, quality broadsheets and higher-brow general-interest weeklies and monthlies tended to conform to evaluative protocols that closely resembled the German reviews. So, for example, the US reception was almost uniformly positive; the few outliers, however, were the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker* and the *Village Voice*; in Canada, Toronto's *Globe and Mail*; in Sweden, for that matter, *Svenska Dagbladet* (the media-political equivalent of the *FAZ* or *The Times* of London). In the United Kingdom, the story was similar: broad support (four out of five stars was the average), with Falcon's dismissive review in upmarket *Sight and Sound* the clear outlier.⁵⁵ The French reception was not quite as generous as in the Anglophone world, but *Downfall* nonetheless received largely positive notices, from *Paris Match* and *Le Figaro* to *La*

Humanité and *Rolling Stone*; the most negative appeared in demographic-specific magazines like *Elle*, leftist weeklies such as *Le Nouvel Observateur*, but above all in the venerable cinephile specialists *Positif* and *Cahiers du Cinéma*. In the *Downfall* reception, in other words, institutional status largely trumped national origin as a predictive indicator of taste.

In the context of these international taste cultures, it is striking to note the extent to which German cinema in the early twenty-first century functioned internationally as a curiosity located outside the main distribution and exhibition channels. Although *Downfall* bears very few, if any, of the accepted aesthetic hallmarks of art cinema (for example, ambiguous narrative resolutions or psychologically opaque characters), and despite the fact that it was screened in multiplex chains and other mainstream programmes in its German release, abroad it was a niche product on largely arthouse release. In almost every country where subtitling, rather than dubbing, is the norm, the Eichinger production remained a distantly observed art object, perhaps a surprise to critics and scholars working in an exclusively aesthetic vein. (In Japan, the long-running cinephile bible *Kinema Junpou* was one of few publications to devote any coverage at all; the film was largely a novelty item in Italy, despite the 60 prints in release, not insubstantial for a European film more serious than the likes of *L'Auberge Espagnole* [2002]-style Euro-pudding.)⁵⁶ For this reason and out of habit, *Downfall* sometimes figured as a failed art film in international evaluations.

Finally, let us return to the reception's decidedly circumscribed set of topics and the marketing campaign's contributions to agenda-setting and thematic intensification. On the one hand, convergence of discussion and opinion among critics has been a perennial phenomenon. Empirical research has demonstrated that film reviewers tend to deliver similar evaluations; indeed, one study found that there is 'good or acceptable' agreement among critics 93.7% of the time.⁵⁷ This has no doubt to do with the status of film criticism as a written response to a unique, externally produced and distributed cultural object. Clearly, it also pertains to a sociology of taste, common educational and social backgrounds among most professional critics and the institutional pitfalls of being an outlier among colleagues, including fears of damaging relationships with readers or the industry. But much of this convergence can be explained by the rapid pace of journalistic publication and in the ubiquity of press kits, which tend to dictate reviews' concerns. Here, a larger point emerges about how difficult, even artificial, it can be to divorce the 'journalistic reception' (or for that matter the 'scholarly reception' or the 'popular reception') from the publicity campaign and larger marketing strategy, especially when the latter are sophisticated and well executed. Whether the meticulous historical reconstruction, the sympathy question or discourses of novelty: all were initially broached in the publicity and press kits only to re-emerge regurgitated, recycled, repurposed, or indeed rejected in critics' reviews. *Downfall*'s marketing strategy successfully intensified and exacerbated the consolidation of these topics. It courted controversy, set the agenda and led the debate. Ultimately, even bad attention was good – for the boxoffice.

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Notes

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47. See, for example, Mattias Frey, *Postwall German Cinema: History, Film History, and Cinephilia* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2013).
48. See, among many examples, Johnston, 'The Dangers of Portraying Hitler.' In Japan, where the film opened relatively late (July 2005), round-ups gave close attention to the German and international receptions, including and especially Britain and Israel. See Risa Tamura, 'Doitsujin ga Hitora no eiga o toru to iu koto', *Kinema Junpou*, no. 1433 (July 2005), 78.
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53. Celi, 'La caduta, il ritratto di Hitler che ha diviso la Germania.'
54. Andreas Keiser, 'Ein Schweizer ist Adolf Hitler', *SWI*, 17 September 2004, <http://www.swissinfo.ch/ger/ein-schweizer-ist-adolf-hitler/4099776>.
55. See, for instance, the reviews of Newman and Bradshaw.

56. See the five-page dossier in *Kinema Junpou*, no. 1433 (July 2005), 74–9 and the three- and four-star capsule reviews by four staff critics in *Kinema Junpou*, no. 1434 (August 2005), 104.
57. Myron Buor, 'Reliability of Ratings of Movies by Professional Movie Critics', *Psychological Reports* 67 (1990): 243–57.

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