

# KINO LORBER

*Presents*

## HITLER'S HOLLYWOOD

**German Cinema in the Age of Propaganda – 1933 - 1945**

A Film by Rüdiger Suchsland

Germany | 2017 | 100 minutes | Documentary | In German with English subtitles

KinoLorber.com | Twitter: @Kinolorber

**Press Contact:**

Rodrigo Brandao  
Kino Lorber inc.  
212-629-6880  
Rodrigo@kinolorber.com

# KINO LORBER

## WHAT WAS HITLER'S HOLLYWOOD?

*"These films left the viewers with a feeling of clenched longing, longing which the Third Reich then promised to fulfill."* – Alexander Kluge

About 1000 feature films were made in Germany in the years between 1933-45. Only a few were overtly Nazi propaganda films. But by the same token, even fewer of them can be considered harmless entertainment. What does cinema know that we don't know?

In his world-renowned and groundbreaking documentary, *From Caligari to Hitler*, film historian and critic, Siegfried Kracauer, developed the idea of cinema as seismograph of its context and origin – a bellwether for the cultural unconscious of its period – with fascinating results. *Hitler's Hollywood* asks what the Nazi cinema of the Third Reich reveals about its period and its people. How did the open lies and hidden truths in these films affect the future of German cinema? And what consequences can we, the generation of grandchildren, draw from these findings?

Cinema under the Nazis was a state-controlled industry, subject to rigid political and cultural censorship. At the same time it aspired to be great cinema, viewing itself as an ideological and aesthetic alternative to Hollywood. This state-funded studio-based cinema followed familiar industrial modes of production. It established its own celebrity star system and marketed itself with the latest promotional techniques. The aim was to beat US cinema with its own tools. Even abroad, amongst the "enemy" democracies, German cinema was to have an ideological impact and commercial success. German cinema thus produced the Nazi blockbuster "Münchhausen", as well as National Socialist *films d'auteur* such as "Opfergang" (*The Great Sacrifice*).

Nazi cinema thought big. Technically, it was executed to perfection. The films were of great sentimentality; they awakened longings and desires, gave free range to dreams, offered refuge. Cinema was meant to educate and entertain according to the requirements of the elites in power. It was industrially pre-fabricated in order to manipulate the people, co-opt the masses, and stir up sentiments of hatred and consent, self-sacrifice and moral cowardice. Perhaps, the emotions evoked by these films were feelings of self-delusion. But still, they were feelings.

# KINO LORBER

It is only in this vein that the impact of Nazi cinema can be understood. It was popular, satisfying the desires of large sections of society. In its day, millions of people flocked to the cinemas. The National Socialist cinema was not petty-minded. It respected its audience. Broad ranges of people responded and still respond to the films made in the

Nazi period. This consideration raises a two-fold question: How did these films achieve such a popular response, and what does it tell us about the audience?

HITLER'S HOLLYWOOD presents these films and the people behind them. It explains how propaganda works: how stereotypes of the "enemy" and values of love and hate managed to be planted into viewers' heads through the screens.

## ABOUT RÜDIGER SUCHSLAND

*Director, Writer*

Rüdiger Suchsland lives in Berlin. He studied history, philosophy and political science and presently works as a journalist, writer and cultural activist. Primarily a regular contributor and critic for print, radio and internet, he is also a speaker, instructor and author on subjects of film, theory, East Asia, zeitgeist and popular culture. He is part of the curatorial team for film festivals in Mannheim-Heidelberg and Ludwigshafen. Together with Josef Schnelle, he co-authored the book "Zeichen und Wunder: Das Kino von Zhang Yimou und Wong Kar-Wai"\* (2008). His documentary debut was *From Caligari to Hitler. Hitler's Hollywood* is his third film.

\* Character and Wonder: The Cinema of Zhang Yimou and Wont Kar-Wai

# KINO LORBER

## INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR, RÜDIGER SUCHSLAND

*How did you first come up with the idea of Hitler's Hollywood?*

When I was a child in the 1970s and early 1980s, I often visited my grandmother during school holidays. She didn't want anything to do with the Nazis, was anti-fascist, and in the late-1930s had pursued an almost illegal relationship with a Jewish man.

At the same time, my grandmother was a great fan of old cinema classics and together, we watched all sorts of films. At the time, German TV was very high quality and they showed old films like *Casablanca* - which I saw for the first time when it premiered on German TV in its uncensored version with Nazi characters. I think it was about 1976, at a time when I still didn't fully understand these things. But emotionally, I understood it, and the excitement of my grandmother somehow made me aware that this was something special.

It was similar with old German films, which I got to know by watching TV. In the 1970s, they were rerun on West German TV. Even local networks showed films such as *The Man Who Was Sherlock Holmes*. Heinz Rühmann, Hans Albers, Ilse Werner, Grete Weiser, Hans Moser, and Theo Lingen – I got to know them all through television and through my grandmother's stories. In the breaks, Marika Röck would advertise 'Hormocenta' skin cream with her Hungarian accent – another thing I will never forget.

It wasn't until much later that I realized that most of these films were made during the Nazi era and, in one form or another - sometimes aggressively, sometimes subtly - were conveying the Nazi ideology. I think the memory of these afternoons spent with my grandmother watching TV set the initial spark. How was it possible that one could love these films and loathe the political ideas they stood for? My grandmother would probably have said that these films were apolitical. This is wrong, of course, and it's exactly this prejudice that makes them so interesting politically.

# KINO LORBER

Later, my studies in history, philosophy and politics also played a role: I have always been fascinated by the relationship between aesthetics and politics. I wanted to know how these supposedly pure, propaganda-free, mainstream films, managed to convey a political message. But we should never forget that the Nazi ideology, National Socialism, was communicated to the German people primarily through film. From my point of view, this relationship has not been sufficiently explored. We have engaged with National Socialism on a moral and political level and formed clear judgements, but have we ignored the aesthetic dimension? We tend to blend out the aesthetic aspects of Nazism, the seduction that contributed to turning a blind eye to fascist ideology, or at

the very least to minimize its effect, because it is a narcissistic injury and offends our sense of taste. Perhaps it is because it remains the medium through which fascism is still most effective.

I am also convinced - something I owe to Siegfried Kracauer\*\* - that films contain the collective unconscious of the period in which they were created, and thus reveal much about the Nazi era. And it really seems true: the way these people moved, the way they talked, the feelings they depicted, and the relationship between 'Kitsch and Death,' as Saul Friedländer called it.

\*\* author of "From Caligari to Hitler from which Suchsland adapted his first film

Lastly, one aspect that has only been explored by historians recently: The final nine months of the Third Reich saw a wave of suicides amongst the German population. Not only at the Eastern front, out of a propaganda-fueled fear of the Russians, and not only amongst perpetrators and fanatic Regime-followers. Entire village communities went into the forests and the fathers first shot the children, then the women, then themselves. Inconceivable, unfathomable, without precedent. It haunts me. I believe we have to seek an explanation for these suicides. My hypothesis is: People were looking at the Third Reich like one big spectacular film, a great production, a political fantasy, a wish-fulfillment machine. When it suddenly became clear that the film would end and that there would be no happy ending, many people simply did not want to leave the cinema.

After the success of my cinematic debut 'From Caligari to Hitler,' which premiered at the Venice Film Festival, the question of a sequel came up: What happened to German cinema after 1933? Others were asking me and I felt this was a subject I had to explore.

# KINO LORBER

*What questions did you ask yourself when you were approaching the subject?*

After a longer research period three questions crystallized:

- On the one hand, what does propaganda actually mean? When and how does mainstream cinema become propaganda? And how do we approach these films on an aesthetic and critical level when we know that we are dealing with fascistic films as in the case of Leni Riefenstahl and Veit Harlan?
- Secondly, how diverse was Nazi cinema? What pockets of freedom and what niches existed for filmmakers? How should we regard filmmakers who were working within the system without problems over a period of years, like for instance Douglas Sirk and Helmut Käutner?
- Thirdly: How do these films reflect the Nazi era? How do they communicate with the world that surrounds them and in which they occur?

An additional question emerged from this, an afterthought to the film: What does German cinema tell us about the German Soul? Because this is something that cinema can and does do: How does it live on in our memory, in our unconscious and tangibly in contemporary cinema today? Because it does live on and is something that develops an incredible infectious power in the present. And like everything that is suppressed – it regularly returns in new, pernicious ways that we don't expect.

*How did you prepare for it?*

To be honest, I didn't know much about it beforehand. The history of Nazi cinema has been, up to a certain point, repressed into a shameful corner of our historical memory. I viewed a lot of films and tried not to be restricted by predetermined questions and presumptions. Then I followed my personal instinct: What interests me? What appeals to me? What do I abhor? Where do I get that feeling that there is something more to it, something unspoken, diffuse? The latter encounters were, of course, the most interesting.

Additionally, I reviewed the essential literature on the history of film and propaganda. Besides the great books by historian Peter Reichel, the most important publications actually came from French and English-speaking countries. Ever since the outstanding work of the sadly deceased Karsten Witte

# KINO LORBER

and Wolf Donner, German studies of its film history has had nothing relevant to contribute on Nazi cinema. In every aspect, it lags 20 to 30 years behind.

I have always been irritated by the judgement of some friends and colleagues, who argue that these films, for instance the ones directed by Leni Riefenstahl, were “simply bad films.” I don’t think this is true. They’re politically abject, but artistically, they are good, and in some ways very good – and this is the problem. If they were all bad, we would not have to deal with them any more. Conversely, there is no reason to establish a counter-myth that all these films were masterpieces. This was clear to everyone, not least to Goebbels himself. He was one of the sharpest critics of the quality of National Socialist cinema.

*You used a lot of archive footage so you must have viewed a large number of films. How did the decision-making process work? How did you select the films and scenes? And how did you gain access to the films?*

The Murnau-Institute, which holds and administers most of the Nazi-era film rights, granted us access. We worked very well and very closely with them. German film archives are presently facing financially tense times and precarious arts and culture public policy. Compared to many other countries, it lacks the necessary support and funding. Yet despite this, the Murnau-Institute was very generous and was keen to help.

There is only one film, we did not get access to: Riefenstahl’s *Olympia*, simply because the government under [Gerhard] Schroeder sold the rights to the International Olympic Committee, years ago, and their licensing fees are obscenely high.

I would also have liked to show one excerpt of *Die Feuerzangenbowle* (*The Punch Bowl*) as it is an infamous film that hides behind the pretense of harmlessness. But the rights belong to the Alternative Party for Germany Chairman in Münster and we simply didn’t want to even start negotiations with far-right radicals.

The selection of particular films and segments was initially based on personal taste and instinct. It was clear from the beginning that some films could not be omitted: without Riefenstahl’s work, without Harlan’s *Jud Süß* or *Kolberg*, without Zarah Leander, we would have painted a distorted picture.

Nevertheless, I tried to keep the obligatory acts to a minimum: Our aim was to

# KINO LORBER

produce an essay film, i.e. not make a canonical piece of work, but to offer an openly subjective and personal view of the subject. Examples for this approach of filmmaking, that we obviously could not hope to match, are the essay films of Godard and Marker, or Dominik Graf in Germany.

*Your last documentary film From Caligari to Hitler explored the cinema of the Weimar Republic from 1918 to 1933. Hitler's Hollywood addresses German cinema in the era of propaganda, 1933 to 1945. What fascinates you about the cinema of this time?*

Fundamentally, the same goes for both periods: It is our film history, in both good and bad times. I wanted to get to know it better. And working on a film like this is a way to approach the subject and to communicate with the public about it.

I have the feeling that our understanding and knowledge of our own film history remains largely underdeveloped. This is silly, considering everyone outside of Germany knows it is one of the birthplaces of cinema. Only we forget, or choose to repress it. There still seems to be a major difficulty in recognizing cinema as an equal and modern part of our national culture. Unfortunately, this is also one of the late consequences of the National

Socialist period. If I can help challenge people's perceptions about cinema then it will be worth it.

I am also convinced that these films live on in our collective unconscious. They mark our conception of contemporary cinema in a concrete way, both in our expectations of what great cinema is and also by our rejection of it. I think we can clearly see today what the work of Fassbinder, of Herzog, of Schlöndorff and Wenders has taken from pre-1945 cinema and also what it owes to Goebbels' cinema. In 20 years' time, I am convinced that we will be able to recognize the same in today's *film d'auteur*.

What particularly fascinates me in National Socialist cinema? The iridescence, the ambivalence of most Nazi films. But I would rather call it interest in my case and less an unbroken, innocent fascination. It's also interesting how much of the spirit of the time is transported by this cinema, and how open and shameless it was in moral and political terms. Many of these films seduce their public into immorality or at least into holding double standards. It was a cinema that was openly insincere, and which integrated lies and imposture.

Of course a follow up question would be how and where does our contemporary



# KINO LORBER

cinema become propagandistic. Without wanting to conflate the two periods, it would also be naive to say today that propaganda doesn't exist. This has contemporary relevance – in terms of the history of contemporary German cinema and in Hollywood, in terms of the representation of politics within cinema, but also in news, advertisements and electoral campaigning, which I hope to share with the viewer.

*What did you want to focus on in HITLER'S HOLLYWOOD?*

As peculiar as it sounds: On the present. Because as interesting as history may be, our engagement with it only makes sense if these experiences of the past can be of use to our own lives, and to our present and future. I hope that the viewer, when leaving the cinema, will reflect on how propaganda works today, where it can be found and what traces of Nazi cinema remain in contemporary films today. As far as the historical material goes, as I said before, I focused on mainstream cinema and on what I considered to be a neglected area of research: the aesthetic experience of National Socialism, and its seduction and enchantment mechanisms.

*Are there any films possibly coming up?*

There is certain material and questions that I'm interested in, yes. On the one hand I always planned to make a trilogy on the history of German cinema. There is already a clear treatment in place and I have had interest from channels and potential investors.

An amazing retrospective on the cinema of the Adenauer period was shown at the Locarno Film Festival in 2016 and has made it clear how interesting and underestimated post-war cinema was for 15 years after 1945. There was no *Zero Hour!* for German cinema, the Nazis were still around, people who had migrated were coming back, and Germany was part of both political blocs. The ensuing *films d'auteur* then vilified it across-the-board and repressed it. So there is a lot to discover there.

It would also be interesting, of course, to dig deeper into the subject of

# KINO LORBER

propaganda, go further or choose a different approach. That being said, it would also be great to make a well budgeted and long form documentary film about [Gustaf] Gründgens\* or Fritz Lang, for instance. But as it stands this is very unlikely.

I have of course some other ideas that are completely independent of these sequel projects, but let's leave that discussion for another time.

[\* Star of Lang's M and Peter Gorski's Faust (1960)]

*Did you have any new revelations during the development and production of this film?*

I was surprised by the diversity and range of the films. The archive didn't contain all of them, but the ones we came across were diverse. And it was actually fascinating to discover documentary traces of an everyday aesthetic that was unknown to me; somehow at the edges. Whether it was views of old, destroyed cities, or advertisement billboards peeking up at the edge of the frame, or of a swastika flag on a beach chair... There are hundreds of such details that allow us to glimpse everyday life. The use of films in this way, as a primary historical source, is very rare in Germany.

*Is there a female or male icon of the era that you find particularly interesting?*

There are a lot of actors I find very interesting, including the more unknown people, like Irene von Meyenburg, Anneliese Uhlig, or those that are forgotten today, such as O. E.

Hasse and Carl Raddatz. But Ilse Werner stands out, of course, because she was very atypical for the time, and even more so for the Germany of the time; in her looks, but also in her performances. Helmut Käutner recognized it and brought it out of her. In a different country, in a different era, she could have become a world star.

Besides Werner, I also find Gustaf Gründgens sensational: his charisma remains unbroken, even today. He is vain, his performances are one-man shows, but they are always captivating. And absolutely modern! He is without a doubt the most enigmatic figure, opalescent, hard to grasp. There are very few people whose biographies convey such a strong sense of what life was like during the Nazi

# KINO LORBER

period with its ambivalence, precipices and temptations. Heinz Rühmann or Heinrich George are lousy actors by comparison, very one dimensional and completely outdated.

*In your opinion, which film featured in HITLER'S HOLLYWOOD was the most fascinating or dangerous, and why?*

That's a very difficult question – after all, I love them all! No, joking aside, it is difficult to decide. This is partly due to the fact that there are very few films in Nazi cinema that are very good, without reservations. This may be exactly the point. The conditions in which they were produced did not allow it; they involved too many small compromises and adjustments. Rather, there are many great scenes and performances within weaker films.

In terms of technique, *Wunschkonzert* by Eduard von Borsody, is very interesting because he is openly, almost shamelessly, propagandistic, but he still wants to be nice and cute and tries to cozy up to the viewer in a populist way.

There are many dangerous films, but I think the most dangerous ones are the ones that are precisely not openly propagandistic. Veit Harlan's *Opfergang* is more dangerous than *Kolberg*, I think, because its message is imbued into the viewer's consciousness through soft, almost-imperceptible, small doses. I have argued with friends and even highly respected colleagues about whether one can call *Opfergang* fascist or not. I would - just because I believe that the bourgeois decadence, this field of sickness, tiredness, death and premonition is a more fascist and dangerous version of the fascist ideology than the pathetic self-sacrifice aria of *Kolberg*.

*Verwehte Spuren* by Veit Harlan, for instance, makes a brilliant plea for denunciation and treason. It was shown on German TV station RTL 2 as early as the 1990s and is far more dangerous than most suspense films. As much quality as Veit Harlan's films demonstrated, I believe that Helmut Käutner was the better filmmaker. He was just

less-openly manipulative. And that's why all his films, *Große Freiheit Nr 7*, above all, objectively belong in the best category. In terms of performance, most films with Hans Albers and Gustav Gründgens are excellent.

Personally, I am also fascinated by *Der verzauberte Tag*, by Peter Pewas, but this film was banned, so doesn't count here. The most fascinating film of all though for me is – perhaps also because it is one of the most dangerous ones -

# KINO LORBER

is *Großstadtmelodie* by Wolfgang Liebeneiner. A *Vexierfilm*, it can be seen as dark propaganda, but it also highlighted uncomfortable truths about the era, which were usually whitewashed. And it depicted characters and values, which seemed rather anti-Nazi for the time. This shimmering ambivalence is the most fascinating aspect of many of these films.

*Propaganda films of these times were spreading a way of thinking that influenced people consciously and subconsciously. Is propaganda still relevant today?*

Of course! The whole debate about the influence of politics, about the manipulation of public opinion – the latest catchwords of the “lying media” and about a “post-truth” world show how current the subject of propaganda is.

Propaganda occurs when others want to invoke our fantasies, our desires and fears, and use them to manipulate us. Let's not forget that the term propaganda comes from advertising, and never really got over its origin. Today, propaganda operates above all through the economic system; certain products, lifestyles and looks are advertised as being desirable. Within democracies, propaganda takes the shape of conformism, restriction on free thought, and taboos.

Violence is taboo; any form of supposed extremism and excess is taboo. Everyone tends towards the center of the political sphere and some things cannot be said in public. Because this impression exists at least in people's minds, extremist factions like the far right can earn points with their dangerous and stupid slogans; including among the educated middle classes. The root cause of this is the lack of debate about culture in our society.

A lead article published in the 'FAZ' (Frankfurter General Newspaper), 30 years ago stated that there was an “incapacity to argue” the “end of utopias” claimed by the right, and about the “end of ideology.” These are in themselves ideological propaganda slogans.

The ideology of the 'Post-ideology' movement does not allow for any irreconcilable differences of opinion anymore. There are no debates anymore; just discussions and talk

shows that abhor dissent and feature only diffused opinions and reactions to what has been said. Authenticity and principles are seen as arrogant or ideological, and are scorned. Nothing is allowed to be irreconcilable; we are not allowed to have enemies, or even opponents. Instead, there is the collective 'we.' Subconscious propaganda also

# KINO LORBER

happens when films reproduce the self-evident nature of a society and its consensus and thus reinforce it. Today, we see this everywhere, in every TV series; in every advertising spot. To interiorize this collective 'we' and not question anything, is the final aim of propaganda - the opposite of enlightenment. In a pluralistic society enlightenment exists, and an essential part of it is usually an irritation with blind consensus.

*Do you think films are influencing us today?*

Of course. The machinery of illusion works as well as ever. And I would be lying if I didn't admit it. I like cinema as a machinery of illusion. Cinema can and should irritate, enlighten, and teach us something. But it can also lie to us and seduce us. And anyway, it is not easy to separate the two; they bleed into each other and intermix. This is precisely the machinery of illusion. Life and art, which includes cinema, do not disintegrate into two distinct parts, but mutually influence each other. Cinema is a dream factory. And enlightenment is also – to a certain degree – a beautiful dream, that cannot be divorced from the realm of fantasies.

*What role does music play in the films?*

They always play music in these films. People always sing, someone always yodels something or other. The Third Reich damaged the culture of singing. Sometimes with very expressive lyrics: 'A night in May / So much can happen / You can lose your heart / And this goes one, two, three / One night in May/ What's there to it anyway?' which today seems cynical, considering that Marika Röck sings against a backdrop of images of the invasion of France of May 1940. Or when Zara Leander sings: "It's not the end of the world" as troops are seen leading a war of extermination against Russia. Men are also seen singing. The main thing is that no one remains quiet. That's also something I wanted to show in the film. At times everyone sings loudly and pungently! On the other hand, the film ends with "If I could wish for something," by Friedrich Holländer; the only song by an expelled Jewish composer and a conscious counterpoint to all the droning, marching music and trilling Nazi pop songs. It is also sung by Charlotte Rampling in the film "The Night Porter," also a very conscious decision. Liliana Cavani's masterpiece is a prime example of how the Italians approached their fascist past completely differently. In the films of Lina Wertmüller, Luchino Visconti and Pier Paolo Pasolini, they all understood that fascism was also an aesthetic phenomenon.

# KINO LORBER

*At the end of the film, you state that: "Perhaps we would understand more about the Third Reich if we could view it as one long film." What do you mean by this?*

I say at the beginning: National Socialism communicated with the population through film. In a very blunt and perhaps overstated way, this means that National Socialism can be seen as one single film with Goebbels as the director. The Nazis made promises to the German population and these were fulfilled in the cinema. There was always a happy ending. Riefenstahl's early party day films and the weekly newsreels, Goebbels' first speech as minister and his diaries, even more so, make it unmistakably clear: National Socialism as a whole was dramatized from beginning to end. It was all spectacle and performance, aligned towards the "Beautiful glow of the Third Reich" (Peter Reichel). This aspect of seduction is, in my opinion, one of the most modern aspects of German fascism. I want to focus on that and place it at the heart and center of the thoughts that the audience will take home with them at the end of the film.

*What can the audience expect?*

A rollercoaster ride of emotions, of taste and a journey into the unknown. I think this trip should be surprising but also fun for the audience. There are no prerequisites, not even to a particular openness. The film takes care of that.

# KINO LORBER

## CREDITS

**Written and directed by**  
Rüdiger Suchsland

**Produced by**  
Martina Haubrich

**Edited by**  
Ursula Pürrer

**Director of Photography**  
Anne Bürger

**Music**  
Lorenz Dangel  
Michael Hartmann

**Executive Producer**  
Martina Haubrich  
Gunnar Dedio

**Sound**  
Jens Pfuhler

**Color Correction**  
Sergej Jurisdizkij

**Graphic Artist**  
Oliver Regahl

**Online Editor**  
Jérémie Pujau

**Voice Over**  
Rüdiger Suchsland  
Hans-Henrik Wöhler  
Rike Schmidt

**Voice-Over Direction**  
Karin Meissner

**Sound Mixer**  
Linus Nickl  
Tobias Fritzsch

# KINO LORBER

## **Creative Producer**

Sarah Schmidt

## **Film Laboratories**

Screenshot

### **Berlin**

Omnimago GmbH

Ingelheim Postproduction

## **Mind & Image Manipulation Coop.**

Sergej Jurisdizkij

## **Looks**

Markus Thüne

Volker Schulze

## **Line Producer**

Alexander Säidow

## **Head of Production**

Jan Müller

## **Editorial Department**

Martin Pieper

Nina Goslar

## **Archive**

Friedrich-Wilhelm-Murnau Stiftung

## **Wiesbaden**

Bundesarchiv Filmarchiv

## **Berlin**

Transit Films

## **München**

SZ Photo

## **München**

Chronos Media

## **Potsdam**

Agentur Karl Höffkes



# KINO LORBER

**Gescher**

MovieMax  
Walter Potganski  
Deutsches Literaturarchiv

**Marbach**

National Archives, Washington, DC  
Fred Stein Archive, USA  
Lee Miller Archive, UK

HITLER'S HOLLYWOOD is a co-production of Looks Filmproduktionen GmbH and Arte/ZDF, supported by Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg, Deutschen Filmförderfonds, DFFF and Hessischen Filmförderung.