Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the Film Director as Critical Thinker
Essays and Interviews
R. J. Cardullo (Ed.)

Hans-Jürgen Syberberg is an original, the most controversial of all the New German directors and a figure who has long been at the vanguard of the resurgence of experimental filmmaking in his homeland. Syberberg’s most characteristic films examine recent German history: a documentary, for example, about Richard Wagner’s daughter-in-law, who was a close friend of Hitler (The Confessions of Winifred Wagner [1975]). But especially “historical” is his trilogy covering one hundred years of Germany’s past, including, most famously, Hitler—A Film from Germany, also known as Our Hitler (1977). In this film and other works, Syberberg unites fictional narrative and documentary footage in a style that is at once cinematic and theatrical, mystical and magical.

Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the Film Director as Critical Thinker: Essays and Interviews is the first edited book in English devoted to this director’s work, and includes his most important English-language interviews as well as some of the best English-language essays on his work. In sum, this book is a significant contribution not only to the study of Syberberg’s oeuvre, but also to the study of German history and politics in the second half of the twentieth century.
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*Essays and Interviews*

Edited by

R. J. Cardullo
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FOREWORD

Over the course his career, Hans-Jürgen Syberberg was consistently one of the most prolific and persuasive thinkers about modern German identity. In addition to his many films, the most important of which concern the problem of German identity and aesthetics reflected in characters ranging from Karl May and the mad king Ludwig II of Bavaria to Adolf Hitler, Syberberg produced a series of books that also address these themes. Syberberg’s most acclaimed films, *Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland* (*Hitler: A Film from Germany*, 1977) and *Parsifal* (1982), each treat irrationalism, music, and Romanticism as the core of German identity and intellect. One of the most remarkable aspects of Syberberg’s talent is his ability to synthesize major and sometimes complex and contradictory strands of thought about modern German culture into a consistent and relatively coherent whole. This is true both for his magnum opus, the Hitler film, which crystallized thinking about German identity in the late 1970s, and for his 1990 book *Vom Unglück und Glück der Kunst in Deutschland nach dem letzten Kriege* (*On the Misfortune and Fortune of Art in Germany after the Last War*), which did the same for the time of the collapse of the German Democratic Republic and German reunification.

While Syberberg’s output remained relatively consistent over the decades, it served quite different functions in the different social and political contexts in which it appeared. Not surprisingly, these and other works consistently met with more praise outside Germany than at home, in part because Syberberg deals with uncomfortable aspects of the German past more readily accepted abroad. In many ways the most classically German of the previous generation of German filmmakers, Syberberg nonetheless frequently refused contact with the German public and was in turn blasted by German critics and directors alike. One West German writer labeled him “a manic egocentric beset with a persecution complex, sniffing out conspiracies all over the place” (*Der Spiegel*, Oct. 30, 1978: 266), while his more sympathetic colleague Rainer Werner Fassbinder described him as a “merchant in plagiarism” who simply imitated Werner Schroeter’s techniques and “competently marketed what he took from Schroeter” (*Frankfurter Rundschau*, Feb. 24, 1979: 21).

Syberberg’s rapport with the American film industry was no less ambivalent. He regularly denounced Hollywood as “the great whore of show business,” derided other German filmmakers (like Wim Wenders) for their successful manipulation of Hollywood formulas (*Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland* [Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1978], 47), and consistently made films antithetical in every sense to the traditional cinematic models. Yet, despite these belligerent stances, Syberberg’s *Hitler* was received by American audiences with an enthusiasm rarely equaled by other contemporary German films, an enthusiasm concretized and encouraged by
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Susan Sontag’s glowing essay on the film. The message is clear: whether expressly or unintentionally, Syberberg’s films have become demiurgic projections whose radical difference has generated much of their spectatorial fascination and whose extreme nationalism has been their most effective commercial ploy on the international market.

Thus it is no accident that the first critical collection about Syberberg should be published in English in the United States—and should include the aforementioned, justly celebrated piece by Sontag. *Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the Filmmaker as Critical Thinker: Essays and Interviews* contains eight of Syberberg’s most provocative interviews as well as eight seminal essays on, or reviews of, his work. Also included in this excellent book are a helpful introduction and a reflective postscript, together with complete film credits, a comprehensive bibliography, and a number of well-chosen film stills. As meticulously edited by the highly experienced, widely published R. J. Cardullo, *Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the Filmmaker as Critical Thinker* is a significant contribution not only to the study of this important film director’s œuvre, but also to the study of German history and politics in the second half of the twentieth century.

Timothy Corrigan
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Figures 1–2. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg in the 1970s
The films of Hans-Jürgen Syberberg (born 1935) are at times annoying, confusing, and overlong, but they are also ambitious and compelling. In no way is he ever conventional or commercial: critics and audiences have alternately labeled his work brilliant and boring, absorbing and pretentious, and his films today are still rarely screened. Stylistically, it is difficult to link Syberberg with any other filmmaker or cinematic tradition. In this regard he is an original, the most controversial of all the New German directors, and a figure who has long been at the vanguard of the resurgence of experimental filmmaking in his homeland.

Not unlike his (late) contemporary Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Syberberg’s most characteristic films examine recent German history: a documentary, for example, about Richard Wagner’s daughter-in-law, who was a close friend of Hitler (Winifred Wagner und die Geschichte des Hauses Wahnfried von 1914–1975 [The Confessions of Winifred Wagner, 1975]). But especially ‘historical’ is his trilogy covering one hundred years of Germany’s past, including Ludwig: Requiem für einen jungfräulichen König (Ludwig: Requiem for a Virgin King, 1972), which portrays the mad king of Bavaria who was the patron of Wagner and a builder of fairy-tale castles; Karl May—Auf der Suche nach dem verlorenen Paradies (Karl May: In Search of Paradise Lost, 1974), which deals with the life of the famous author of Westerns who himself had never seen the American West; and, most famously, Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland (Hitler, A Film from Germany, a.k.a. Our Hitler, 1977).

Seven hours and nine minutes long, in four parts and twenty-two chapters, Our Hitler effects a synthesis of Brecht and Wagner, of epic defamiliarization and operatic pathos. Brecht’s influence began relatively early in Syberberg’s artistic life: the latter’s 8mm sound film of the Berliner Ensemble at work in the 1950s—a film blown up to 35mm and released in 1970 as Nach meinem letzten Umzug (My Last Move)—is the only record of that group during the Brecht period.) Syberberg’s Hitler is painted as both a fascist dictator who could have risen to power at any point in time in any number of political climates, and a monstrous movie mogul (called ‘the greatest filmmaker in the world’) whose version of D. W. Griffith’s Intolerance (1916) would be The Holocaust, with himself in the leading role.

Syberberg unites fictional narrative and documentary footage in a style that is at once cinematic and theatrical, mystical and magical. His films might easily be performed live (Our Hitler is set on a stage, and Die Nacht [The Night, 1985] was in fact performed live), but the material is so varied that the presence of the camera is necessary to translate the action thoroughly. Additionally, this director is perceptibly aware of how the events that make up history are ultimately comprehended by the public through the manner in which they are presented in the media. History is thus
understood more by catchwords and generalities than by facts; as a result, in this age of mass media real events can easily become distorted and trivialized. Syberberg demonstrates this in *Our Hitler* by presenting the Führer in so many (dis)guises that the viewer is often desensitized to the reality that was this mass murderer.

*Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the Filmmaker as Critical Thinker: Essays and Interviews* is the first edited book in English devoted to *Our Hitler* along with the rest of Syberberg’s films, and includes all of his English-language interviews (together with one translated from the German) as well as some of the best English-language essays on his work, written by such noted critics as Susan Sontag, Fredric Jameson, Ian Buruma, and Stanley Kauffmann. This book also contains a complete filmography, with credits, and a comprehensive bibliography of English-language criticism devoted to Syberberg, as well as of Syberberg’s own writings that have been published in English translation. *Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the Filmmaker as Critical Thinker* is thus a significant contribution not only to the study of Syberberg’s cinematic oeuvre, but also to the study of German history and politics in the second half of the twentieth century.

* R. J. Cardullo
My deep gratitude goes out to all the contributors for their writings in this volume, and to their original publishers or editors for permission to reprint those writings. I am also grateful to my family—my wife, Kirsi, and my children, Kia and Emil—for listening to (or, better, putting up with) my long-running commentary on the cinema of Hans-Jürgen Syberberg.

Thanks, above all, to Syberberg himself for his cooperation on this project—and for his revisioning of contemporary cinema, as well as his contribution to our understanding of modern Germany.
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Hans-Jürgen Syberberg: Of Fantastic and Magical Worlds; A Career Review

1. INTRODUCTION

Hans-Jürgen Syberberg was born on December 8, 1935, in Nossendorf, Pomerania, a region he would later characterize as the homeland of both the Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich and the iron chancellor of German unification, Otto von Bismarck. This vision of a historically rich landscape in which cultural tradition converges with the politics of German identity provides an important key to an understanding of Syberberg’s cinematic oeuvre.

Having spent his boyhood in a classically conservative atmosphere and his adolescence in the East Germany of the Stalinist era, Syberberg missed the flood of postwar American influence after 1945 and therefore grew up, in his words, “without chewing gum and pinball machines.” Instead he was introduced to the established canon of great artistic works and to the ideology of the war victors from the Eastern sector:

My first impressions were really Faust and Brecht, unforgettable, while others [in West Germany] proceeded along very different paths…. While many [in the West] listed to their political ministers playing jazz, we heard Beethoven and Bach, Carmen too, and read “Diamat,” dialectical-historical materialism … Thus an art education of high cultural heritage … until 1953 with the … socialist realism of Soviet origin.²

This background undoubtedly explains many of the features that distinguish Syberberg from other New German filmmakers: the constant references to a rich cultural tradition, particularly of the nineteenth century; his “whole German” (gesamtdeutsch) perspective not fixated on specifically West German issues; and finally his immunity from, or, better, antagonism toward Hollywood and the filmic tradition that has proved so attractive to several of his directorial contemporaries.

Syberberg spent his early years in the countryside, but in 1947 his family moved to Rostock, where his new urban surroundings offered opportunities for regular contact with theater, music, and film (largely Soviet works). During this period he began his own filmmaking, including 8mm versions of Chekhov stories as well as documentaries on public demonstrations and sporting events. In Rostock Syberberg also met Benno Besson of the Berliner Ensemble, and this led to an invitation from Bertolt Brecht to come to Berlin. There, in 1953, Syberberg was permitted to film
Brecht’s rehearsals for the Ensemble of *Mother Courage* (1941), *The Mother* (1932), *Herr Puntila* (1940), and Goethe’s *Urfaust* (1775), footage from which was worked into his 1970 documentary *Nach meinem letzten Umzug* (*My Last Move*).

![Figure 3. Nach meinem letzten Umzug (My Last Move, a.k.a. The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht), dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1970](image)

While Brechtian aesthetics profoundly influenced Syberberg during this period, he was equally fascinated by the French films he could see now, for the first time, in West Berlin, such as Jean Cocteau’s *Orphée* (*Orpheus*, 1950) and *La Belle et la Bête* (*Beauty and the Beast*, 1946) and Marcel Carné’s *Les enfants du paradis* (*Children of Paradise*, 1945). In 1953 Syberberg left East Germany for good, and, after completing school in Minden, traveled to France, England, Austria, and Italy; finally he settled in Munich in 1956, where he entered the university to study literature and art. Syberberg describes this environment as a “hell of artistic inactivity,” and when he completed his studies in 1962 with a thesis on elements of the Theater of the Absurd in the plays of the Swiss dramatist Friedrich Dürrenmatt, he took work in Bavarian television, since no jobs were then available in the German film industry itself.

During the following three years, Syberberg turned out cultural reports on the Munich scene, topical films for various holiday seasons, and movies of regional
interest. The 185 films of this period varied in length from three to thirty minutes. These were years of apprenticeship for Syberberg, and he recalls making every effort to maintain control of all aspects of production—the shooting, the cutting, and the sound. Here one may discern the roots of his mature oeuvre: the technical mastery of the medium, the interest in cultural documentation, and, above all, the familiarity with the established culture industry that would later become the target of his bitterly radical criticism.

In 1965, still working for Bavarian television, Syberberg undertook his first major project, the documentary *Fünfter Akt, siebte Szene: Fritz Kortner probt Kabale und Liebe* (*Fritz Kortner Rehearses Schiller’s Love and Intrigue*), dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1965. As in the case of the Brecht film, Syberberg directed his attention to a grand old man of the theater—this time at work on a realization of the climactic death scene, between Ferdinand and Luise, from a German classical drama. No outside financing was available, and the crew was therefore reduced to a bare minimum. Its task consisted of following Kortner onstage continuously in order to capture the development of the scene in the course of rehearsals. Even in this early film, the unique character of Syberberg’s documentary work is apparent. For, unlike normal German television documentaries with their voice-over narrations and emphasis on behind-the-scene sensations, the Kortner film rigorously observes the artist at work without extraneous commentary or tendentious montage.

A short sequel to the Kortner film, *Kortner spricht Monologe für eine Schallplatte* (*Kortner Delivers Monologues for a Record*, 1966), depicts the actor in some of his most impressive roles, including Richard III and Shylock. Meanwhile, Syberberg was also working on a documentary on the actress Romy Schneider that had been
commissioned for German television. Although he initially intended to show her at a critical stage in her career, wavering between Germany and France, he was hindered by the demands of Schneider’s manager, who was anxious to present a wholly German—and purely wholesome—image to the German public. Legal suits followed, and Syberberg withdrew his name from the finished film: *Romy—Portrait*
INTRODUCTION

eines Gesichts (*Romy—Anatomy of a Face*; made in 1965, released in 1967). This conflict represents one step in a series of confrontations with a culture industry motivated, according to Syberberg, only by profits and hostile to any aesthetic sensitivity in its products.

Syberberg continued his documentaries of cultural figures in 1967 with *Die Grafen Pocci* (*The Counts Pocci*). The Pocci family joined the Bavarian court in the late eighteenth century, and its most renowned member, Franz Pocci (1807–1876), a master of ceremonies and court jester for Ludwig I, created the famous figure of Kasperl for the Munich puppet stage. Syberberg’s film traces the history of the Pocci family and its traditions by exploring the family estate, Castle Ammerland, while profiling the sixty-three-year-old Count Konrad. The thematic complexity, the division into a series of chapters, and the use of montage-cum-collage here anticipate formal features of Syberberg’s later work. Similarly, the fundamental motif of *Die Grafen Pocci*—the wealth of a heritage in danger of extinction—would soon find an echo in Syberberg’s major projects.

*Figure 6. Scarabea—Wieviel Erde braucht der Mensch? (Scarabea—How Much Land Does a Man Need?), dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg. 1968*
In the final sequence, Konrad Pocci, seated at a hunting post in the forest, insists that he would never sell his land, since money could never replace the happiness provided by the nature he so deeply loves. Such Romantic anti-capitalism, a central theme in Syberberg’s works, is coupled in this film with a search for the multi-dimensionality of a mystical vision.

These sentences by Pocci, taken seriously, would mean a revolution. A revolution in our activity, our thinking and spirit: no longer buying and selling everything … no longer modernizing as far as possible, cutting down trees, widening streets, covering kilometers with asphalt … for once tolerating secrets and riddles in pictures and sound … with respect for ancient myths, wisdom, and warnings.⁴

Syberberg’s notion of an alternative to the world of banal modernization—the beach beneath the concrete of the metropolis, as it were—was nourished by the countercultural currents that would soon overflow in the European political uprisings of 1968.

Reminiscent of the closing ideas to be found in Die Grafen Pocci, Syberberg’s first fiction feature, titled Scarabea—Wieviel Erde braucht der Mensch? (Scarabea—How Much Land Does a Man Need?, 1968), is based on a story by Tolstoy in which the devil tempts a poor peasant to seek ever greater land holdings. In the story, the peasant enters into an agreement with nomads from the Asian steppes: for a set sum, he may have all the land he can stake out on foot before sunset. Greedy as he is, the peasant overexerts himself, and, although he returns to the starting point just before dusk, he dies of exhaustion; a simple grave, six feet deep, is all the earth he then needs. Syberberg sets his film in Sardinia, replacing the Russian nomads with highlands bandits and the land-hungry peasant with a German tourist eager to gain possession of some promising coastal property. In the course of the day, however, the tourist’s value system, based on investment and profit, gives way to a yearning for peace and a new life in the sensual constancy of the primitive South.

Syberberg has thus synthesized Tolstoy’s fable with a traditional motif in German literature (the parallels to Thomas Mann’s Death in Venice [1912] are obvious), while updating the source material in order to criticize contemporary European culture. Less attention is paid to a coherent plot here than to a series of images with mythic associations: the noonday sun glistening on the water, mysterious caves, a festival replete with folk dancing and bloodletting. On a formal level, this de-emphasizing of a suspense-filled plot represents a rejection of the Hollywood cinema still predominant at the time in Germany. In fact, a parody of the prototypical Hollywood genre—the western—is inserted into Scarabea, such that the film itself becomes the battlefield for the opposing forces of civilization and myth.

Syberberg treats cinema, then, with all the seriousness of an aesthetic revolutionary, viewing it as the art form of the modern age, the new Gesamtkunstwerk (total work of art)—in his words, “the continuation of life by other means.” Film has the potential to provide the images of dreams and utopias otherwise banished from a by-now thoroughly rationalized everyday life. Yet, he argues, this cinematic potential has
rarely been realized because market pressures and profit motives, which operate throughout Western society, corrupt all the activities of the movie industry.

Art then becomes replaced by financially lucrative endeavors such as pornography, a problem that Syberberg investigated in his 1969 documentary *Sex-Business—Made in Pasing*. As in his earlier films, he records here the process of cultural production by following one figure at work, but Brecht and Kortner are now replaced by Alois Brummer, a director of Bavarian pornography films, as “the symbol of the inhumanly mercenary cinema.” Syberberg is interested, not in the sensationalism of the topic (Brummer himself makes a rather commonplace impression), but in its significance as a major component of the German film market. Consequently, he punctuates the picture with interpolated comments and statistics regarding the current state of the pornography industry.

Figure 7. *Sex-Business—Made in Pasing: ein Beitrag zur Filmsoziologie in Deutschland* (A Contribution to the Sociology of Film in Germany), *dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg*, 1969

Syberberg’s increasingly profound criticism of commercial cinema (together with the financial losses incurred by *Scarabea*) led him to join other young German directors in an effort to avoid the established channels of distribution by establishing direct contacts with theaters. This strategy was intended to foster an autonomous film culture outside of, and hostile to, the predominant world of porno and kitsch, and Syberberg’s first contribution to this organizational initiative on the part of the New German Cinema, *San Domingo* (1970), reflects the movement’s sociopolitical agenda. Based on a novella by Heinrich von Kleist in which a mulatto woman feigns love for a white officer in order to detain him long enough for black rebels to arrive, the film was originally to be set in the former German colonies in Africa. However, because of financial difficulties and a desire to attract a larger German audience, Syberberg transposed the story to Munich. There, a naïve and idealistic middle-
class youth, anxious to run off to Africa, hesitates because of his attraction to the abandoned daughter of a black American G.I. Meanwhile, this young woman’s accomplices, a gang of toughs, attempt to extort money from the boy’s parents.

The choice of an unexotic setting parallels other neorealist aspects of *San Domingo*: all the characters, except the central youth, are played by non-professional actors, and they speak in a heavy Bavarian dialect. In general, the film emphasizes the overwhelming influence of milieu by focusing on drug parties, motorcycle forays, and the connection between juvenile delinquency and radical politics. Syberberg himself considers *San Domingo* an early warning against terrorism, and it ends, in fact, with a dramatic quotation from Eldridge Cleaver on the danger of ignoring the alienation of contemporary young people.

With *San Domingo*, the initial phase of Syberberg’s career drew to a close. Since the Kortner films he had developed a unique documentary style, a set of central thematic concerns, and, most importantly, an increasingly elaborate critical analysis of postwar German cultural life. In 1972 he commenced a series of five films tracing the roots of contemporary cultural life back to the politics, art, and myth of the past century. The three major works are built around key figures in modern German consciousness: King Ludwig II of Bavaria, the popular author Karl May, and Adolf Hitler. While these major films are often regarded as a closed trilogy, their production alternated with two other pictures: the first was devoted to Theodor Hierneis, a cook at Ludwig’s court, and the second to Winifred Wagner, Richard Wagner’s daughter-in-law. Important in themselves, these two works, as monologues of a kind, provide contrast with the sovereign epic sweep through a philosophical landscape that characterizes the three central films in this group of five.

Throughout the whole series, Syberberg’s examination of taboo issues regularly provoked an often acrimonious public debate; that said, his investigative reporting
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is directed here, not at sensational political transgressions, but at the unsuspected conspiracy of ideas. This is a decidedly intellectual cinema whose rich imagery never overpowers language, and where illusion remains subordinate to enlightenment. “If film is to live,” writes Syberberg, “and not merely as entertainment for a few pleasant hours, then we must work in that open space where politics and the search for truth border on each other.”

The title of the first film in the series of five, Ludwig: Requiem für einen jungfräulichen König (Ludwig: Requiem for a Virgin King, 1972), is intended to suggest less an atmosphere of mourning than the rigor and complexity of musical form. Syberberg’s animosity toward the simplistic narrative films of the culture industry explains the formal structure of Ludwig: a series of nearly thirty Brechtian episodes tied to one another by content but not linked together within a sequential plot. Each episode is introduced by a title, often with an ironic undertone. The actors are placed within stylized tableaux whose backgrounds often consist of rear-projections of scenes from Ludwig’s castles. Narrative continuity is further

Figure 9. Ludwig: Requiem für einen jungfräulichen König
(Ludwig: Requiem for a Virgin King), dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1972
interrupted by the casting of the same actor in several roles. This technique both prohibits any facile identification with the characters—another aspect of Syberberg’s Brechtian legacy—and establishes connections by means of visual quotation: when Peter Kern appears as Ludwig’s hairdresser, Hoppe, for example, and later as the SA leader Ernst Röhm, Syberberg’s thesis of a continuity between Ludwig’s vision and aspects of the National Socialist ideology is underscored.

Quotation is essential to Syberberg’s overall use of montage, or the careful juxtaposition of heterogeneous elements on the levels of spoken text, image (including the rich sociopolitical iconography of each shot), and sound. Ludwig’s complex historical relationship to Wagner, for instance, is echoed on the soundtrack: the film begins with the opening of Das Rheingold (The Rhinegold, 1869) and closes with Götterdämmerung (Twilight of the Gods, 1876); the frame of Ludwig is thus marked by the beginning and end of Wagner’s Der Ring des Nibelungen (The Ring of the Nibelungs, 1876). Music and idea correspond similarly when Elisabeth of Austria’s warning to Ludwig is accompanied by the music of Brangäne’s warnings to Isolde from Tristan und Isolde (Tristan and Isolde, 1865). As a result, Ludwig’s attraction to the mythmaker Wagner takes on an ominous coloration in which erotic overtones cannot disguise the shadows of impending doom. Thus music functions here as a component in a highly structured associative montage, where it is as important as other compositional elements such as props, settings, gesture, and text.

Ludwig describes a series of incidents associated with the Bavarian king in order to suggest that the problems Ludwig perceived—the evils of industrialism, the ambivalence of the German people to unification under Prussian domination, the

Figure 10. Theodor Hierneis oder: Wie man ehemaliger Hofkoch wird (Theodor Hierneis, or How One Becomes a Former Royal Cook, a.k.a. Ludwig’s Cook), dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1972
erosion of myth in the modern age and its rebirth in frightening forms—were central to a cultural malaise that would eventually engender fascism. Yet Syberberg argues neither that Hitler fulfilled Ludwig’s legacy nor that Ludwig somehow foresaw and rejected the Hitlerian possibility. Rather, Ludwig appears in this film as a helpless visionary, unable to prevent the rapid industrialization of Germany despite his awareness of the cultural crisis it would precipitate. A Romantic anti-capitalist, he searches desperately for the security of myth—finding his affinity in Wagner—but ultimately allows the forces of modernization to gain the upper hand. Eventually, of course, myth and modernization combine, in the case of Hitler, in a paradoxical catastrophe that releases the worst of both as the culmination of Ludwig’s brightest hopes and darkest fears.

Theodor Hierneis oder: Wie man ehemaliger Hofkoch wird (Ludwig’s Cook, 1972), the second picture in the series, is based on the memoirs of Theodor Hierneis, who began his culinary career as a cook’s helper at Ludwig’s court. This film is a long monologue in which the actor Walter Sedlmayr, as Hierneis, recalls his past and his views of Ludwig as seen from the kitchen. Hierneis appears here as the subject of a (fictional) documentary, but certain methods of distancing have been employed to prevent any placid identification with such a pedestrian hero. For example, while the bulk of his speech occurs in the first person, it begins and ends in the third person. Furthermore, the castle rooms described are often not shown, and the viewer, required to imagine them, is therefore forced to be both Hierneis’s intimate interlocutor and his distanced observer.

The English title of this film, Ludwig’s Cook, suggests the comic element inherent in the servant’s view of the master, or the fantasy of Ludwig’s Romanticism next to the down-to-earth experience of his cook. Thus Hierneis recounts how his sleeping quarters were located underneath one of the castle’s artificial lakes, a bothersome leak from which forced him to take an umbrella to bed. The film’s German title, however, captures another aspect, as revealed by its literal English translation: Theodor Hierneis, or How One Becomes a Former Royal Cook. After leaving Bavaria, Hierneis became a successful restaurateur who capitalized on his illustrious past. Tenaciously loyal to his former servitude, he thoroughly internalized the authoritarian mechanism of his own society. As a study in subjugation, the film thus captures both the cook’s fascination with power and his reproduction of hierarchical attitudes as a restaurateur. Ludwig’s Cook, which Syberberg describes as “chamber music,” is certainly not as complex as the requiem Ludwig, but the central interests of both films converge in the examination of dominance and subservience, or subjugation, in mass society.

Like Ludwig, Syberberg’s Karl May stands at the threshold of the twentieth century. Nostalgic about the vanishing world of Romanticism—hence the title of this, the third film in the series of five, Karl May—Auf der Suche nach dem verlorenen Paradies (Karl May: In Search of Paradise Lost, 1974)—he is also apprehensive about the age in the process of being born. For in this modern, rational world that has relentlessly eradicated myth, an attraction to the irrational unexpectedly recurs. And
the central figure here is well aware that the attraction to an irrational alternative to
the modern order can easily lead to catastrophe. “Woe, if the wrong man comes,”
May warns toward the end of the film, and indeed, invited to speak in Vienna, he
attracts the attention of the young Hitler. While Syberberg does not equate the two
figures ideologically, he does suggest a proximity, within “the spiritual panorama
of European people at the onset of the proletarian mass age,” between aesthetic
compensation and the aestheticization of politics, or between utopia and its perverter.

May is presented in the film, then, as “the last great German mystic in the age
of dying legends,” whose immensely popular novels provided utopian images set
against the exotic colonial background of 1900. This particular novelist anticipates
the development of film, which is for Syberberg the specifically modern form of
fantasy production. The thematic relationship between such a popular author and the
popular art of cinema explains the film’s brief homage to the early French director
Georges Méliès, whose magical works are still considered to be the epitome of
cinematic imagination.

**Figure 11.** Karl May—Auf der Suche nach dem verlorenen Paradies (Karl May:
In Search of Paradise Lost), *dir.* Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1974

Similar considerations of cinematic history motivated Syberberg to select a cast
for *Karl May* composed of German stars of the 1930s: Helmut Käutner, Lil Dagover,
Kristina Söderbaum, Mady Rahl, and others. The choice of these actors had nothing
to do with the Nazi nostalgia of the 1970s; instead, their presence constituted a
visual quotation implying a hidden affinity between May’s imaginative fantasies and the aura of movie stars. For Syberberg, the erosion of traditional society initiated a “search for paradise lost” that ranges from May’s popular literary visions to the images visible on a movie screen. Appropriately enough, passages from Gustav Mahler’s *Resurrection* symphony (1895) dominate the soundtrack of *Karl May*.

In *Winifred Wagner und die Geschichte des Hauses Wahnfried von 1914–1975* (*The Confessions of Winifred Wagner*, 1975), the fourth in Syberberg’s series of five films, this *auteur* continues his investigation of the interdependence of the Wagnerian tradition and the growth of National Socialism by returning to the documentary form of his earlier pictures. In 1915, Winifred Williams married Richard Wagner’s son, Siegfried, and, when the latter died in 1930, she gained control of the Bayreuth Festival, over which she retained power throughout the Nazi period. Her friendship with Hitler began in 1923 before the Munich *putsch* and lasted until 1945; Winifred’s continued unrepentant loyalty to the Führer, as recorded by Syberberg, resulted in heated public controversy as well as her family’s repudiation of the film. The English title’s connotation—a confession of guilt—is therefore inappropriate. The absence of any self-criticism or willingness to examine the past characterizes Winifred’s account, the superficial objectivity of which is captured in the dry but precise original German title, the literal translation of which is *Winifred Wagner and the History of the House of Wahnfried, 1914–1975*.

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The film is fundamentally a study of Winifred Wagner as she recounts her past, particularly her relationship to Hitler. In the West German context, her expression of unshaken loyalty to Hitler is a rare exception; however, her unwillingness to examine closely what she euphemistically calls his “dark” side is paradigmatic. This inability to reconsider Hitler’s role or her own betrays a rigidity that is hostile to change and intolerant of contradictions. “Basically, I’m an insanely loyal person,” Winifred remarks. “Once I develop admiration for a person, it remains through thick and thin. Well, I mean, then I simply stand by him [Hitler], but I don’t stand up for his errors; as I have said, they just don’t affect my relationship to him. I separate the two completely.” Were Hitler to appear today, she adds, she would greet him as warmly as ever. Winifred’s repeated assertions of this separation of personal and political dimensions and of her own fully unpolitical character rapidly become grotesque. When Syberberg asks about her reaction, for example, to the attacks on Jewish artists and the banning of certain works, such as the music of Gustav Mahler, she merely replies that she never liked Mahler’s music anyway, and therefore the matter did not bother her at all.

The motifs of loyalty, stability, and steadfastness, which Winifred Wagner consciously invokes in the film, are part of the Wagnerian ideological heritage in which the wholesome, the homogeneous, and the pure (including the racially pure) constitute the opposite of the mixed, the differentiated, and the changing. Winifred represents opposition to any change on principle, and Syberberg’s film examines the relationship between such a frozen vision of the past and the morbid stability of the present. By uncovering the connection, he attempts to initiate a “work of mourning,” or the confrontation with the past necessary if one is to achieve a liberated life in the present. Syberberg describes The Confessions of Winifred Wagner as “a matter of breaking a spell with cinematic means.” It is a biopsy of a conservative society that still looks askance at former opponents of Hitler, and in which Winifred is certainly not alone in her view that Willy Brandt’s enlisting in the Norwegian army in order to oppose Nazi aggression was an unforgivable act of treason.

At the Wagner family’s request, Syberberg agreed to an epilogue to the film in which Winifred could allow for errors of memory—but not for any critical distancing from the substance of her presentation. Syberberg wrote this epilogic disclaimer, which she reads in voice-over narration to a series of still shots. At the end, Winifred Wagner rhetorically explains why after thirty years she broke her public silence: “Why not?” Syberberg reports that she was amused by this ultimate gesture on his part—the agreeing to an epilogue—and described it as a “Jewish ending,” by which she means that its openness and levity directly contrast with the inscrutable, remorseless loyalty that she herself upholds.

By means of Winifred Wagner’s monologue throughout the film, which contains both fascinating and trivial information, Syberberg underscores Hannah Arendt’s thesis concerning the “banality of evil” (propounded in her 1963 book Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil), even using it as one of the quotations that divide The Confessions of Winifred Wagner into chapter-like sections. Otherwise
his film consists only of close-ups and medium shots of Winifred speaking, spurred on occasionally by the director’s very broad questions. The slow rhythm of the camera follows the rhythm of her discourse, betraying in the process a non-polemical tenderness toward its subject. Syberberg has attempted to let Winifred Wagner speak without imposing a tendentious perspective on her words via the usual documentary methods: there is no voice-over narrator who explains Winifred’s errors, for example, nor has the director introduced any extraneous material—footage of Nazi rallies or of concentration camps—as montage to contradict the spoken text.

Only in the final sequence has Syberberg included extraneous images, in particular shots of the early years of the National Socialist movement and of the Wagner family itself in 1923. Thus *The Confessions of Winifred Wagner* is no heavy-handed exposé, but rather a profound analysis that is radical because of its very sensitivity. The extraordinary length of the original version—five hours—indicates the director’s unwillingness to muffle his subject’s words. And ultimately, despite Winifred’s efforts to de-politicize Hitler’s attraction to Bayreuth, this garrulous woman confirms Syberberg’s thesis that “the Hitler we hate and the Wagner whom we love are linked inextricably to each other, from the beginning and without end.”

After *Ludwig* and *Karl May*, Syberberg’s examination of modern German culture and its relationship to its own politico-artistic legacy culminated in the 1977 magnum opus *Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland* (*Hitler, A Film from Germany*, a.k.a. *Our Hitler*), the fifth and final film in the series begun in 1972. Syberberg again makes no attempt here to provide a conventional documentary of historical events with the help of authentic footage and the instructional commentary of a narrator. The film is not concerned with the actual Hitler—the private person, the politician, and the dictator—but with Hitler as a figure of popular fantasy. Hence the emphasis in *Our Hitler* on the mass support behind the Führer’s legal—and, as Syberberg underscores, democratic—accession to power.

Yet even more important to this film is Hitler as a fascinating figure outside Germany and after 1945: Chaplin’s Hitler, Hollywood’s Hitler, Hitler as the incarnation of evil in the popular mind. Such an emphasis on Hitler-as-image, implicit in the title of the work, evokes Syberberg’s second theme in *Our Hitler*: film itself. The many motifs associated specifically with Hitler and National Socialism are intertwined here with references to the history of cinema, including Méliès, Thomas Edison, Sergei Eisenstein, Erich von Stroheim, the Expressionists, Leni Riefenstahl, and the Hays Office (responsible for enforcing the Hollywood Production Code).

These two thematic levels even converge in the monologues of Fritz Ellerkamp, Hitler’s personal projectionist, who describes the Führer’s addiction to movies. But the proximity between the two levels is less a matter of Hitler the film buff than a consequence of key elements in Syberberg’s own thought. As he suggested in *Karl May*, the rationalized world of modernity suffers from a dearth of myth; and the fantastic images of cinema might offer a substitute, just as the utopian promises of an unscrupulous politician might mobilize the masses. Aesthetics or politics, film or
Hitler—Syberberg regards them as twin elements within the single historical context of the modern industrialized world.

Because of its highly political and emotionally charged subject, Our Hitler has met, over the years, with a good deal of opposition from critics who would have preferred a more traditional discussion of the specific background of National Socialism. Instead of describing Hitler as a lackey of heavy industry or a necessary result of German backwardness, the film treats him as a typically modern phenomenon, not unrelated to contemporaneous developments in Stalin’s Soviet Union or in Hollywood’s America. (In this regard, Syberberg is surely indebted to the critical theory of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno.)

Despite the provocative nature of Our Hitler’s arguments, one suspects that the fervor of Syberberg’s critics stems largely from a hostility to the film’s formal features. Constructed on a scale that dwarfs Riefenstahl and rivals Wagner, Our Hitler, more than seven hours long, is divided into four distinctly titled parts. These parts themselves are in turn divided into a total of twenty-two sequences similar to the chapter units in Ludwig; here, however, the chapters are not introduced by titles designed to orient viewers in their response to the rich and highly complex material. More importantly, Syberberg’s tendency to downplay narrative continuity reaches a climax in Our Hitler. The biographical framework inherent in Ludwig and Karl May has been diminished in this instance; historical chronology gives way to the primacy of an intellectual argument that is carried out in the various layers of cinematic material. The very breadth of that argument, which concerns the relationship of Hitler to “the age of the masses,” necessitated the development of a form less constraining than a simple storyline and closer perhaps to that of the modern novel. Thus, despite some humorous as well as profoundly moving passages, Our Hitler is a difficult film, not immediately accessible, that demands repeated viewing and reflection.

Figure 13. Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland (Hitler, A Film from Germany, a.k.a. Our Hitler), dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1977
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Syberberg continues in this film to work with the tableau as collage of heterogeneous materials suggesting incongruous affinities or Brechtian contradictions. Each shot contains five formal elements: the projected background; the foreground (which can contain diverse elements); the music; noise on the soundtrack; and the spoken text (generally monologues, in keeping with the anti-realist nature of Our Hitler as a whole). For example, at one point an actor portraying the young Goebbels appears in a room full of mannequins, dressed and arranged in order to suggest an elite social gathering of 1923. In the background, we see a slide of the Venus grotto from Wagner’s Tannhäuser (a.k.a. Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg; Tannhäuser and the Singers’ Contest at Wartburg Castle, 1845); Syberberg intends thereby to refer both to the subject of this opera—erotic entrapment in an otherworldly utopia—and to his own Ludwig film, where the very same slide is used during the nightmare sequence. The soundtrack includes street sounds, machine-gun fire, political songs, a Hitler speech, contemporary popular music, and the spoken text itself, in which the actor portraying Goebbels recounts the excitement of his initial meeting with Hitler. Syberberg’s point here is not that the fundamentally uninteresting private person Hitler was irresistibly convincing as the public Führer, but that within a specific cultural context the search for leaders who appear charismatic—and who can be misperceived as messianic—eclipses traditional political values.

As a corollary to this collage structure, Syberberg has relied on a complex system of quotation ranging from the aural montage of authentic recordings of Nazi speeches or Allied war broadcasts to cinematic parody—as, for instance, when Peter Kern in an SA uniform speaks the final monologue from Fritz Lang’s M (1931). Similarly, the visual images are often quotations of important paintings, especially those of the German Romantics, and one of the key props is a large black stone modeled after an image in Albrecht Dürer’s Melancholia (1514). Furthermore, the musical soundtrack in Our Hitler is itself composed of quotations from both popular and serious compositions.

The development of the soundtrack, then, is fundamental to the structure of the film. On one level, the montage of radio broadcasts generally proceeds chronologically, from the recordings of the early Nazi movement in the first part of Our Hitler to the Allied announcements of military victory at the end. This provides a weak but consistent timeline—heterologous to the biographical approach found in Syberberg’s earlier films—around which the central themes of the film can be organized. More significantly, Syberberg uses excerpts from Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Wagner, and Mahler in a complicated fashion: not as background mood music but as precise citations within the associative complex of each tableau.

A brief description of this musical system can illustrate the key developmental lines of Our Hitler. Here, as in Ludwig, Syberberg has consciously employed a musical model by creating four semi-independent symphonic movements, each centered on a different problem or thematic question. The first part, with its emphasis on the rise of National Socialism, returns repeatedly to excerpts from Rienzi (1842), Wagner’s opera about the populist Roman revolutionary. Syberberg underscores his point by
juxtaposing *Rienzi* with “The Horst Wessel Song” (the anthem of the Nazi Party from 1930 to 1945) and, later, with radio broadcasts of the book burnings in Berlin. The second part turns to the problem of utopian elements in the National Socialist vision; the key musical citations here include Wagner’s *Parsifal* (1882) and, above all, the resurrection passage of Mahler’s Second Symphony, which suggests associations familiar from *Karl May*.

As the radio reports shift to the military developments of 1944–1945, Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung* is quoted in the third part of *Our Hitler*. Finally, in the initial passages of the film’s fourth section, only brief references to *Rienzi* and Haydn’s “Kaiserquartett” (“Emperor Quartet,” 1799), with its nationalist connotation, are heard; otherwise, the realm of high culture seems to disappear from the soundtrack in this section, because, as Syberberg complains, business has replaced art in the modern world. Only at the very end does the promise of the resurrection of authentic art resound: through Mahler’s resurrection passage, *Parsifal*, Tristan’s plea for salvation—“O sink hernieder, Nacht der Liebe” (Descend upon us, night of passion)—from *Tristan and Isolde*, and the chorus from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony (1824).

This musical system demonstrates that the thematic centers of *Our Hitler* include resurrection, revolt, and defeat. Syberberg presents a theology of the modern world in which the gods have disappeared but not the yearning for paradise. Banished from the heavens, Lucifer, as in Dürer’s engraving, may brood and plot, but he is nonetheless condemned to stare off in the wrong direction—toward hell. Syberberg’s Hitler similarly takes on the guise of the devil, who is desirous of divine status and promises utopia while in reality fanning the fires of hell. In the context of this basic parable, many of the elements of the film thus take on particular significance: the brief, almost parenthetical reference to Thomas Mann’s 1947 novel *Doctor Faustus* (from which Syberberg has otherwise borrowed a good deal); the Weberian call for charismatic leadership in the second section of *Our Hitler*; and the Biblical allusion to faith’s moving of mountains in a 1943 Goebbels speech heard at the beginning of each of the last three parts of the film.

Finally, the interplay between musical system and spoken text in the film suggests the ultimate failure of Hitler’s heaven-storming dreams. The cosmic motifs (reminiscent of Stanley Kubrick’s 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*) that open *Our Hitler* and reappear at the end of each of the main sections are regularly accompanied by excerpts from Mozart’s Piano Concerto in D minor (1785), but, within the coded system set up by the film, Mozart takes on a particular significance. In one of the most memorable sequences, Hitler, clad in a Roman toga, rises from the grave of Richard Wagner and reports from the afterlife that Mozart was the one spirit who refused to respect him. Thus Mozart, whose music fills the divine spheres, is set in contrast Hitler, the fallen angel, who may promise utopia to the godless masses of modernity but for whom paradise remains forever unattainable.
As controversial as the film’s examination of Hitler’s popularity is its theme of the legacy of National Socialism. One is reminded here of the proposition in Jorge Luis Borges’ short story “Deutsches Requiem” (1946) that the defeat of Germany constituted, paradoxically enough, a necessary condition for the further spread of National Socialist ideology. Thus, in the important “dialogue that is really a monologue” between Harry Baer and the puppet of Hitler, we hear the latter laud the postwar world: “Praise from Adolf Hitler to the world after me. What is the short span of my human life compared with the eternity of my subsequent victory? Can I not be satisfied with immortality?” He then proceeds to recount those developments of which he approves: the thoroughly changed map of Europe under American hegemony, Stalinist terror and the persecution of dissidents in the East, the anti-Zionist resolution of the United Nations and the success of Idi Amin, torture in South America, the Berlin Wall, and West German terrorists. All this pleases Hitler and compensates for his posthumous unpopularity. If the list seems cantankerously eccentric, Syberberg has provided in an earlier section two visions of the “Hell around us” in which the cultural life of each of the two German states is attacked, in highly specific terms, as a perpetuation of the fascist catastrophe.

In general, Syberberg’s understanding of Hitler’s legacy focuses on the fundamental discrediting of idealism. By placing his mark on utopia, Hitler rendered it forever unpalatable. As André Heller (the Austrian author and singer-songwriter) complains in one of the final sequences of Our Hitler: “You have taken away the sunsets, the sunsets of Caspar David Friedrich. You are guilty that we can no longer see wheat fields without thinking of you. You have trivialized Old Germany with your simplistic pictures of workers and peasants.” Hitler, then, has destroyed the legitimacy of any dignified human life and left only the pursuit of money as a possibility. Here, as elsewhere, Syberberg denounces the postwar world as the locus of unfettered capitalism: Hitler’s most devastating bequest. Interestingly, this interpretation of postwar Germany is not extraneous to the West German Left’s thesis concerning the continuity of class-driven society. However, whereas the left emphasizes problems such as ownership of capital, Syberberg suggests a broader notion of capitalist society that emphasizes its hostility toward authentic culture.

A high point of Our Hitler occurs in the fourth part when the mayor of Berchtesgaden and its director of tourism gleefully calculate the potential success of a German Disneyland at the site of Hitler’s alpine home, replete with personal memorabilia, sensational facsimiles, and even stuffed models of Hitler’s dogs. With the energy of vaudeville performers and a mercenary spirit worthy of figures from the plays of Henrik Ibsen, the two put forth their plan: “Business is the freedom of the democrat. And democracy is only possible with economic growth. Hitler is clearly the international top product, with real cash possibilities…. Nothing esoteric. Culture is extinguished. We want real popular taste.” Despite complaints that the film lacks a critical perspective, in this scene Syberberg has masterfully described an affinity between capitalism and fascism with a keen, satirical hand: commercial
culture is construed, namely, as the legacy of Hitler and perhaps the very condition of his rebirth.

Syberberg’s linking of the venal materialism of modern culture to Hitler’s unbroken influence echoes an important dissident note in postwar West German culture—for example, Günter Grass’s complaints that his compatriots had abandoned their ideals in exchange for the consumerist pleasures of the *Wirtschaftswunder*, or “economic miracle” of the 1950s and 1960s. The real source of this critique, however, was the controversial 1967 book by Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn*, which argued that postwar German consumerism represented a sublimation of the collective trauma of 1945; frenetic economic activity thus allegedly provided an alternative to a therapeutic confrontation with the Nazi past. The Mitscherlichs, key figures in the establishment of West German psychoanalysis, used the term “mourning” in its full Freudian significance as the productive process of overcoming emotional loss. Freud labeled its alternative “melancholy,” implying a pathological fixation on the loss and an inability to come to terms with reality.

The “work of mourning,” which Syberberg invoked at the close of *The Confessions of Winifred Wagner*, clearly still inspires *Our Hitler*, in which the emblems of melancholia represent precise symptoms of the postwar German ailment. Through cinema Syberberg hopes to heal—hence his antipathy toward an entertainment industry that destroys film’s curative powers. Film, he insists, must be serious art in the grand tradition, and it is obligated to examine those traditions—political, social,

*Figure 14. Parsifal, dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1982*
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and cultural—that have led to national catastrophe. At its best, the cinema can unveil utopian forms in an otherwise melancholy world, where dreams have given way to pedestrian routine: in this way, film can help in the reappropriation of eroded ideals and become a projection, however tentative, of paradise regained.

None of Syberberg’s later work has earned him the visibility, let alone the acclaim, of Our Hitler and other earlier films of his. After Parsifal (1982), his version of the Wagnerian opera that was his most widely seen work, he collaborated with one of that film’s stars, Edith Clever. Their artistic ventures included a number of theatrical monologues, a few of which were videotaped or filmed. The series commenced with Die Nacht (The Night, 1985), a six-hour long examination of how an individual may act or what an individual may ponder deep into the night—the literal night as well as the figurative one that resulted from (among other events in the history of the West) the holocaust of the Second World War. As part of his series with Clever, Syberberg directed the following five films after Die Nacht: Edith Clever liest Joyce (Edith Clever Reads James Joyce, a.k.a. Molly Bloom—Monologue; 1985); Fräulein Else (Miss Else, 1986); Penthesilea (1987); and Die Marquise von O. “vom Süden in den Norden verlegt” (The Marquise of O., 1989); and Ein Traum, was sonst? (A Dream, What Else?, 1994).

Figure 15. Ein Traum, was sonst? (A Dream, What Else?),

dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1994

Syberberg’s last full-length work, a video installation titled Höhle der Erinnerung (Cave of Memory, 1997), itself continues to pursue his major filmic theme—Germany’s
collective remembrance, or repression, of things past—in addition to exploring the following important subjects that recur in his oeuvre: the relations between theater and film, and by extension among film, video, and computer-enabled digital technology; the relationship of the Gesamtkunstwerk to the particular arts of closet drama, literary fiction, and lyric poetry; and the juxtaposition of artistic “shadow worlds,” in Plato’s cave as in Syberberg’s own films, with the material world of transitory reality, on the one hand, and the ideal realm of immutable eternity, on the other.

NOTES

2 Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, Syberbergs Filmbuch (München: Nymphenburger Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1976), 307. Berman’s translation, as are all other translations from the German in this introduction.
3 Syberbergs Filmbuch, 111.
4 Syberbergs Filmbuch, 310.
5 Syberbergs Filmbuch, 79.
6 Syberbergs Filmbuch, 109.
7 Syberbergs Filmbuch, 46.
8 Syberbergs Filmbuch, 39.
10 Syberbergs Filmbuch, 293.
11 Syberbergs Filmbuch, 285.
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12 Syberbergs Filmbuch, 263.