



DER UNTERGANG

(English title: Downfall)

Dolby Digital, German, 150 min

Drama/war, 2004 by Oliver Hirschbiegel

With Bruno Ganz, Alexandra Maria, Corinna Harfouch

Warner Brothers Entertainment

FILM ESSAY BY GORANA OGNJENOVIC

Going to the cinema to see this film was an exciting time, expectations were running high. Finally we would see a more realistic vision of what had happened. More or less all of us were aware of the fact that the only films accessible to us on this theme were made by some or other American film company as war and post-war propaganda. 50 years after the fact Germany is showing their vision of it, a fresh contribution after 50 years of clichés on the theme. When marking the 50 years since events took place, we thought that things had changed, we were hoping to hear and see something more, something different from what we were force fed with until now.

We were disappointed more or less immediately as the first images were revealed to us on the big screen. None of this would ever even try to say how Germany was under dictatorship of the national socialists. The reading was all too simple, as if all Germans were national socialists and all national socialists were Germans, and no matter from which side of this equation you start, it makes no difference to how ridiculous it sounds. On the other hand one might say that there was a slight difference to this German version. This version made a serious effort to create an image of Hitler as 'caring employer', it tried to envision Goebbels as a humane killer of his own children, and it even tried to blame the actions of Hitler's secretary on her blissfully ignorance. Sadly enough it made absolutely no effort to show how a humane nation has been taken over and driven by an inhumane regime. Still, 50 years on, even in the German version, the White Rose never made it onto the big screen.

Zygmunt Bauman argued some time ago how it all was the point of evolution where Germany found itself at the time made the execution of the Holocaust possible. That was hard to see in this particular version. The hierarchy of the Third Reich was in this version presented like any other top of the power scale. Kings



chambers were full of individuals that usually surround man of power. There was king's full (Himmler as megalomaniac and antique dealer), there were the insane scientists (Goebbels who not only performed experiments on prisoners but also on himself), there were blind followers (military personnel), there were conspirators (the group of military personnel who made few attempts to assassinate the Fuehrer), there were the careerists (Speer), and there were the loyal servants (SS). Some things just never change.

At the same time it was very striking how the last days of the Third Reich have been described as the end of a nation that had done wrong. Some of us expected actually to see something more than the last signs of life on a boat that is slowly sinking, after all the rats had left. What we got was a description of a panic that ruled amongst the soldiers that suddenly appear as defenders of the German nation instead of being army forces representing the dictatorship by which German nation was actually terrorised. The film even gives a vague idea of dilemma, some sort of bizarre question of loyalty divided in two, loyalty to one's nation and loyalty towards the Fuehrer as if they themselves were never a part of the dictatorship that had been terrorising the nation the entire time. Diverse description was obviously not the goal of this film expedition.

And then eventually the film was over. At last but not the least the narrative stops at a very specific point in time. There was no mention of the bombing of Dresden as the Allied revenge. There was no mention of the rape of 50 000 German women 'on command' by Russian soldiers, on the night that Berlin had 'fallen'. The fact that there were so many other European 'entrepreneurs' that eagerly contributed to the execution of the 'final solution' who will never be punished for their acts, of course was never mentioned. As if none of this ever happened.

We came out of the cinema thinking that this was one of the biggest disappointments so far exactly because this experience, the German version of what was happening those days, never amounted to anything more but another product of Hollywood post war propaganda industry. Some things never change, after fifty years that passed by, the wrap paper might appear fancier, but the content remains the same.

The question of why is it still important to give people such one-sided, deceptive versions of history remains hanging in the air.