

Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the Film Director as Critical Thinker

Essays and Interviews

R. J. Cardullo (Ed.)



SensePublishers

**Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the Film Director as
Critical Thinker**

**Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the Film Director as
Critical Thinker**

Essays and Interviews

Edited by

R. J. Cardullo



SENSE PUBLISHERS
ROTTERDAM/BOSTON/TAIPEI

A C.I.P. record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: 978-94-6300-828-0 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-94-6300-829-7 (hardback)

ISBN: 978-94-6300-830-3 (e-book)

Published by: Sense Publishers,
P.O. Box 21858,
3001 AW Rotterdam,
The Netherlands
<https://www.sensepublishers.com/>

All chapters in this book have undergone peer review.

Printed on acid-free paper

All Rights Reserved © 2017 Sense Publishers

No part of this work may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, microfilming, recording or otherwise, without written permission from the Publisher, with the exception of any material supplied specifically for the purpose of being entered and executed on a computer system, for exclusive use by the purchaser of the work.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword <i>Timothy Corrigan</i>	vii
Preface	xi
Acknowledgements	xiii
List of Figures	xv
1. Introduction: Hans-Jürgen Syberberg: Of Fantastic and Magical Worlds; A Career Review <i>Russell Berman</i>	1
2. Politics, Aesthetics, and Patriarchy in <i>The Confessions of Winifred Wagner</i> <i>Marcia Landy</i>	25
3. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg: <i>Our Hitler</i> as Visual Politics <i>Beatriz Schiller</i>	41
4. Eye of the Storm: Syberberg's <i>Hitler</i> <i>Susan Sontag</i>	47
5. Interview with Hans-Jürgen Syberberg <i>Steve Wasserman</i>	63
6. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's <i>Hitler</i> : An Interview <i>Roswitha Mueller</i>	75
7. 'In the Destructive Element Immerse': Hans-Jürgen Syberberg and Cultural Revolution <i>Frederic Jameson</i>	81
8. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg: An Interview <i>Betsy Erkkila</i>	99
9. Syberberg's <i>Our Hitler</i> , Wagnerianism, and Alienation: A Re-viewing <i>Hans R. Vaegt</i>	113
10. Myths for Sale—Reviews of <i>Ludwig: Requiem for a Virgin King</i> and <i>Karl May</i> <i>Stanley Kauffmann</i>	131

TABLE OF CONTENTS

11. Sustaining Romanticism in a Postmodernist Cinema: An Interview with Hans-Jürgen Syberberg <i>Christopher Sharrett</i>	139
12. ‘They Want to Kill Me’: An Interview with the Filmmaker and Theater Director Hans-Jürgen Syberberg <i>Die Zeit (Time)</i>	147
13. There’s No Place like <i>Heimat</i> : Nazism and the Work of Film Director Hans-Jürgen Syberberg <i>Ian Buruma</i>	165
14. Germany’s Heart: The Modern Taboo; Interview with German Filmmaker Hans-Jürgen Syberberg <i>Marilyn Berlin Snell</i>	175
15. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg and the State of the Ghost <i>Robert Shandley</i>	185
16. ‘Adolphe Appia and Me’: A Discussion with Hans-Jürgen Syberberg <i>R. J. Cardullo</i>	193
17. The Theater-of-Film of Hans-Jürgen Syberberg: <i>Parsifal</i> and <i>Die Nacht</i> <i>R. J. Cardullo</i>	205
Postscript: Hans-Jürgen Syberberg: Leni Riefenstahl’s Heir? <i>Jonathan Bowden</i>	217
Filmography (with Credits for All Features, Documentaries, and Shorts)	233
Bibliography	245
Index	249

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).

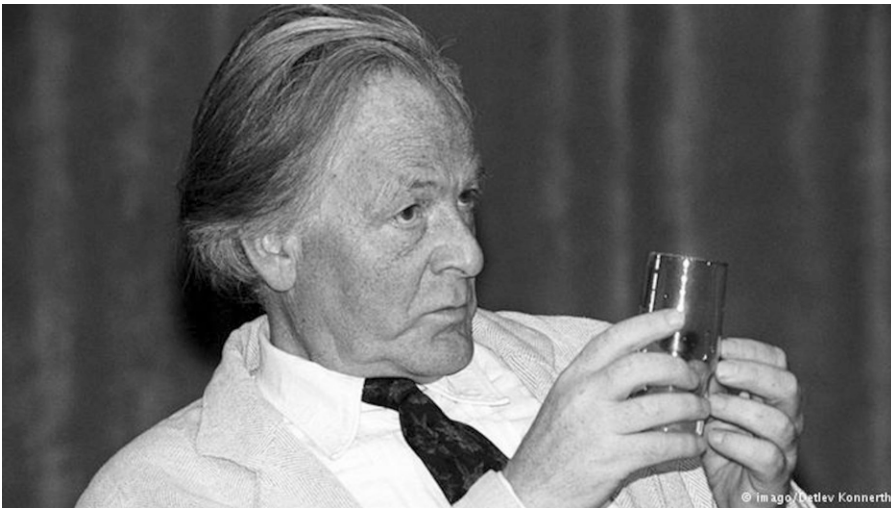
Syberberg's rapport with the American film industry was no less ambivalent. He regularly denounced Hollywood as "the great whore of show business," derided other German filmmakers (like Wim Wenders) for their successful manipulation of Hollywood formulas (*Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland* [Reinbek bei 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

FOREWORD

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 *oeuvre*, but also to the study of German history and politics in the second half of the twentieth century.

Timothy Corrigan
University of Pennsylvania



Figures 1–2. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg in the 1970s

PREFACE

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

PREFACE

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

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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.

LIST OF FIGURES

Figures 1–2.	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg in the 1970s	ix
Figure 3.	<i>Nach meinem letzten Umzug (My Last Move, a.k.a. The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1970	2
Figure 4.	<i>Fünfter Akt, siebte Szene: Fritz Kortner probt Kabale und Liebe (Fritz Kortner Rehearses Schiller’s Love and Intrigue)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1965	3
Figure 5.	<i>Die Grafen Pocci—Einige Kapitel zur Geschichte einer Familie (The Counts Pocci—Some Chapters on the History of a Family, a.k.a. The Counts Pocci)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1967	4
Figure 6.	<i>Scarabea—Wieviel Erde braucht der Mensch? (Scarabea—How Much Land Does a Man Need?)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1968	5
Figure 7.	<i>Sex-Business—Made in Pasing: ein Beitrag zur Filmsoziologie in Deutschland (A Contribution to the Sociology of Film in Germany)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1969	7
Figure 8.	<i>San Domingo</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1970	8
Figure 9.	<i>Ludwig: Requiem für einen jungfräulichen König (Ludwig: Requiem for a Virgin King)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1972	9
Figure 10.	<i>Theodor Hierneis oder: Wie man ehemaliger Hofkoch wird (Theodor Hierneis, or How One Becomes a Former Royal Cook, a.k.a. Ludwig’s Cook)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1972	10
Figure 11.	<i>Karl May—Auf der Suche nach dem verlorenen Paradies (Karl May: In Search of Paradise Lost)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1974	12
Figure 12.	<i>Winifred Wagner und die Geschichte des Hauses Wahnfried von 1914–1975 (Winifred Wagner and the History of the House of Wahnfried, 1914–1975, a.k.a. The Confessions of Winifred Wagner)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1975	13
Figure 13.	<i>Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland (Hitler, A Film from Germany, a.k.a. Our Hitler)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1977	16
Figure 14.	<i>Parsifal</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1982	20
Figure 15.	<i>Ein Traum, was sonst? (A Dream, What Else?)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1994	21
Figure 16.	<i>Höhle der Erinnerung (Cave of Memory)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1997	22

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 17.	<i>Winifred Wagner und die Geschichte des Hauses Wahnfried von 1914–1975 (Winifred Wagner and the History of the House of Wahnfried, 1914–1975, a.k.a. The Confessions of Winifred Wagner)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1975	31
Figure 18.	<i>Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland (Hitler, A Film from Germany, a.k.a. Our Hitler)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1977	45
Figure 19.	<i>Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland (Hitler, A Film from Germany, a.k.a. Our Hitler)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1977	49
Figure 20.	<i>Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland (Hitler, A Film from Germany, a.k.a. Our Hitler)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1977	65
Figure 21.	<i>Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland (Hitler, A Film from Germany, a.k.a. Our Hitler)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1977	77
Figure 22.	<i>Theodor Hierneis oder: Wie man ehemaliger Hofkoch wird (Theodor Hierneis, or How One Becomes a Former Royal Cook, a.k.a. Ludwig's Cook)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1972	83
Figure 23.	<i>Karl May—Auf der Suche nach dem verlorenen Paradies (Karl May: In Search of Paradise Lost)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1974	109
Figure 24.	<i>Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland (Hitler, A Film from Germany, a.k.a. Our Hitler)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1977	118
Figure 25.	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg at the time of the filming of <i>Our Hitler</i>	130
Figure 26.	<i>Ludwig: Requiem für einen jungfräulichen König (Ludwig: Requiem for a Virgin King)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1972	131
Figure 27.	<i>Ludwig: Requiem für einen jungfräulichen König (Ludwig: Requiem for a Virgin King)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1972	134
Figure 28.	<i>Karl May—Auf der Suche nach dem verlorenen Paradies (Karl May: In Search of Paradise Lost)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1974	136
Figure 29.	<i>Karl May—Auf der Suche nach dem verlorenen Paradies (Karl May: In Search of Paradise Lost)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1974	137
Figure 30.	<i>Die Nacht (The Night)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1985	143
Figure 31.	<i>Parsifal</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1982	145
Figure 32.	<i>Parsifal</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1982	147

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 33.	<i>Penthesilea</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1987	152
Figure 34.	<i>Die Marquise von O. "vom Süden in den Norden verlegt"</i> (<i>The Marquise of O.</i>), dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1989	156
Figure 35.	<i>Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland (Hitler, A Film from Germany, a.k.a. Our Hitler)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1977	167
Figure 36.	<i>Die Marquise von O. "vom Süden in den Norden verlegt"</i> (<i>The Marquise of O.</i>), dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1989	170
Figure 37.	<i>Parsifal</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1982	195
Figure 38.	<i>Edith Clever liest Joyce (Edith Clever Reads James Joyce, a.k.a. Molly Bloom—Monologue)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1985	197
Figure 39.	<i>Penthesilea</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1987	200
Figure 40.	<i>Parsifal</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1982	206
Figure 41.	<i>Parsifal</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1982	208
Figure 42.	<i>Parsifal</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1982	210
Figure 43.	<i>Die Nacht (The Night)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1985	214
Figure 44.	<i>Romy—Portrait eines Gesichts (Romy—Anatomy of a Face)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1967	219
Figure 45.	<i>Kortner spricht Monologe für seine Schallplatte (Kortner Delivers Monologues for a Record)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1966	220
Figure 46.	<i>Winifred Wagner und die Geschichte des Hauses Wahnfried von 1914–1975 (Winifred Wagner and the History of the House of Wahnfried, 1914–1975, a.k.a. The Confessions of Winifred Wagner)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1975	221
Figure 47.	<i>Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland (Hitler, A Film from Germany, a.k.a. Our Hitler)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1977	223
Figure 48.	<i>Wilhelm von Kobell</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1966	233
Figure 49.	<i>San Domingo</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1970	235
Figure 50.	<i>André Heller sieht sein Feuerwerk (André Heller Watches His Fireworks)</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1991	241
Figure 51.	<i>Nietzsche/Weimar</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1994	242
Figure 52.	<i>Hommage for Einar Schleaf</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 2002	243
Figure 53.	<i>Hölderlin, Mnemosyne Edith Clever</i> , dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 2009	243
Figures 54–55.	Hans-Jürgen Syberberg in the 21st century	244

RUSSELL BERMAN¹

1. INTRODUCTION

*Hans-Jürgen Syberberg: Of Fantastic and Magical Worlds;
A Career Review*

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] listened 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

R. BERMAN

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

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,"³ 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.



Figure 4. Fünfter Akt, siebte Szene: Fritz Kortner probt *Kabale und Liebe* (Fritz Kortner Rehearses Schiller's *Love and Intrigue*), dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1965

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*). 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

R. BERMAN

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*



Figure 5. Die Grafen Pocci—Einige Kapitel zur Geschichte einer Familie (The Counts Pocci—Some Chapters on the History of a Family, a.k.a. The Counts Pocci), dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1967

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 multidimensionality 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.”²⁵ 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.

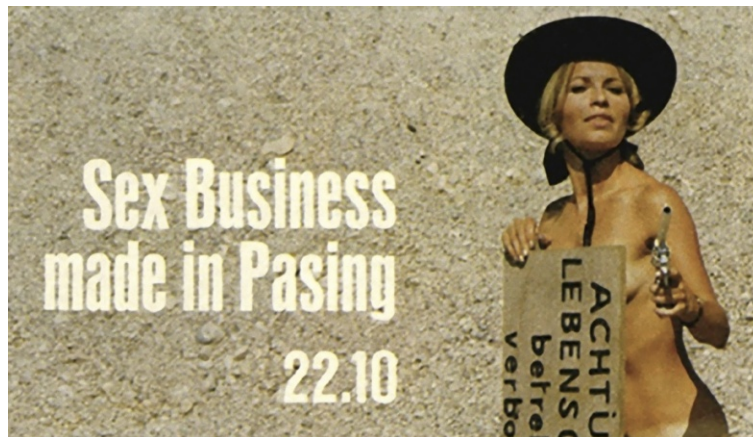


Figure 7. *Sex-Business—Made in Pasing: ein Beitrag zur Filmsoziologie in Deutschland* (A Contribution to the Sociology of Film in Germany), dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1969

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-



Figure 8. *San Domingo*, dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1970

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 neorealistic 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



Figure 9. Ludwig: Requiem für einen jungfräulichen König
(Ludwig: Requiem for a Virgin King), dir. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1972

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.”⁶

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