Analyzing Portrayals of Hitler and Neo-Nazis in Two Contemporary Films:

Er ist wieder da and *Imperium*

Analyse der Darstellungen von Hitler und Neonazis in zwei zeitgenössischen Filmen:

Er ist wieder da und *Imperium*

by

Nicole Orminski

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

World War II occurred three quarters of a century ago, but Nazis continue to be a popular choice of antagonist in contemporary film. These characters include not only those set in 1940s Germany, but also portrayals of Hitler as well as neo-Nazis in the modern day. Two films that contain such characters are *Er ist wieder da* (David Wnendt, 2015) and *Imperium* (Daniel Ragussis, 2016): *Er ist wieder da* portrays a revived Hitler in 2014 Berlin, and *Imperium* tells the story of an FBI undercover agent infiltrating a group of neo-Nazis around Washington, D.C. This thesis analyzes characters in the films to explore the portrayal of neo-Nazism in the present day. The analysis is carried out in three parts: by placing these portrayals into a larger film history; by using Jens Eder's heuristic model "die Uhr der Figur" to investigate the characters; and by reviewing events in both the United States and Germany which define the cultural moments at the time of the films' premieres.

Film history contextualizes the ways in which Hitler and neo-Nazis have been portrayed over time. Portrayals of Hitler range from comedic reductions of the character to sympathetic humanizations, while depictions of neo-Nazis are shown as either reformed or non-reformed (usually undergoing reformation over the course of the film). Eder's model, as described in *Die Figur im Film: Grundlagen der Figurenanalyse* (2008) and "Understanding Characters" (2010), provides a comprehensive, foundational understanding of the construction of these depictions by taking into account both the way in which the characters are constructed by filmmakers and the way in which they are received by audiences. An examination of the two countries' cultural moments provides insight to the films' resonance at the time of their production.

The portrayal of characters in both films is indicative of the development of national discourses on neo-Nazism in the United States and Germany, as what qualifies as a socially

acceptable portrayal of Hitler and neo-Nazis has changed over time. Hitler in *Er ist wieder da* toes the line of humanization, but more importantly, he embodies the ever-present susceptibility of a people to their prejudices. Similarly, the leading neo-Nazi in *Imperium* is not a caricature, but rather a calm and seemingly rational bigot who is dangerous because he fits in so seamlessly with mainstream society. These portrayals critique the underestimation of the influence of neo-Nazism in their respective societies, as well as the fortification of this influence by the misuse of media.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Despite the number of decades that have passed since the fall of the Third Reich,

Germans and Americans alike still show a great interest in the topic of Nazism. Filmmakers from

both countries often weave fascist ideologies into the beliefs of their villainous characters.

Sometimes Nazis, and sometimes neo-Nazis, represent the ideology as it still exists in both

countries today. *Er ist wieder da* (David Wnendt, 2015, based on the 2012 novel by Timur

Vermes) and *Imperium* (David Ragussis, 2016, based on the 2007 book *Thinking Like a*

Terrorist: Insights of a Former FBI Undercover Agent by Michael German) are examples of the

latter. While *Er ist wieder da* is satirical and often comedic, *Imperium* is a thriller; both films,

however, have characters who provide insight into the perception of the persistence of neo-

Nazism in their respective countries of origin. These two films were chosen as they both reflect

perspectives on neo-Nazism in a time of related, intense sociopolitical unrest in both countries.

Even though Hitler is not a neo-Nazi by any common application of the term, his function of

spreading and supporting neo-Nazism in the mid-2010s make his portrayal in *Er ist wieder da*

and Gerry Conway's in *Imperium* comparable.

These films contribute to ongoing national discourses about neo-Nazism which are fueled

by inflammatory current events. The European "refugee crisis" (written in quotation marks to

note the problematic nature of the term) has brought neo-Nazis out of the woodwork in

Germany, and the campaign and election of Donald Trump has similarly stoked xenophobic

attitudes in the United States (Große; BBC News; Bradner; Imbert; Mascaro; Schreckinger;

Walker). *Er ist wieder da* and *Imperium* are contemporary films whose premiers coincided with

these events. Their reception is thus influenced by the current cultural moment in each country,

and the films' portrayals of neo-Nazi characters can be viewed through this lens. The term "cultural moment" refers to a particular period of time during which a specific social or political phenomenon is prevalent. Although simplistic, this term is a useful shorthand for the purposes of this thesis. Character portrayals are an especially useful filmic element to analyze for the purposes of this thesis, as the evolution of such depictions over the course of the last several decades can provide insight as to how neo-Nazis are and have been viewed in the United States and Germany. The portrayals of Hitler and neo-Nazis in *Er ist wieder da* and *Imperium* will be compared with those of Nazi characters in other films that have been created since the end of the Cold War. *Er ist wieder da* and *Imperium* will thus be positioned in their cultural moments through analysis of concurrent and temporally adjacent events as well as a look at the body of film work which surrounds them. In this way, their contributions to the national discourse about neo-Nazism in both countries will be examined.

In this thesis, the term neo-Nazism will most often be used to describe the ideology which our characters of interest support (alternatively labeled simply as their ideology), which strives to sustain the continued existence of Nazism in a post-WWII world. Other terms will be used intermittently: Nazism will be used on occasion to refer to the ideology as it existed during WWII, as an instrument of Hitler and other Nazis of that time period. White supremacy and white nationalism will be noted as expressions of racism and xenophobia, respectively (though often not mutually exclusive), and which are adjacent to neo-Nazism. Skinheads are mentioned at times solely due to their usage as stereotypical neo-Nazis in film and other entertainment media, recognizable through their shaved heads and tattoos of Nazi iconography.

Although the term neo-Nazism will be used to describe the ideology in both the United States and Germany, it should be recognized that its context differs between the two countries. In

the United States, there exists institutional racism which is rooted in the enslavement of Africans and African Americans over the course of hundreds of years of the country's history. This history paved the way for persistent white supremacism in the country, as well as other avenues for racism such as white supremacism's close cousin, neo-Nazism. However, in Germany, neo-Nazism is more clearly an attempt to actively keep Nazism alive as it existed when it rose to the political forefront in the 1930s. It is more clearly laden with a long history of anti-Semitism. Despite these differences, neo-Nazism in both countries is built on a foundation of racism and racial exclusion.

In the film *Er ist wieder da*, a down-on-his-luck freelance videographer named Fabian Sawatzki stumbles across someone who he believes to be a rather talented Hitler impersonator in Berlin. Unbeknownst to him, this person actually *is* Adolf Hitler, who through some anomaly of time and space has been transported into the present-day. After some adjustments to the new time period—which are shown through humorous vignettes such as his being introduced to modern technology as well as ironic scenes such as his being beaten by neo-Nazis—Hitler decides that he must continue his political work and finish what he started many decades prior. The vast majority of characters surrounding him (with only one or two outstanding exceptions) are unaware of his intentions, and think of him only as an actor specializing in parody. By the time Sawatzki realizes that he has aided Hitler in his return to an influential position, it is too late. Hitler has already had a meteoric rise in popularity through his appearances on TV broadcasts, and these culminate in him being portrayed in a film (*Er ist wieder da*—in this case, a film within the film). Although many characters in the film unintentionally assist Hitler with his goals, almost no one but Sawatzki ultimately recognizes him as a threat, and only Sawatzki attempts to take action against him. A couple of passersby here and there express unease at

Hitler's "act," as well as Oma Krömeier and MyTV's producer, Rico Mancello (though he only spoke out once he was drunk)—the lion's share seem to accept his presence.

Unlike *Imperium*, no main character in *Er ist wieder da* is a neo-Nazi. There are, however, quite a few scenes in which Hitler interacts with disturbingly supportive strangers as he travels around Germany. Although some are staged (for example, the scene showing Hitler at the NPD headquarters), some of these scenes are real, and involve non-actors interacting candidly with Hitler actor Oliver Masucci (Albers Ben Chamo). These candid scenes expose the support for Hitler's beliefs that still exists in the present day. Rather than just providing commentary through Vermes' story and their own interpretations of that story, the filmmakers cut out the middleman by including these real scenes: they do not have to convince us of the lingering racism and xenophobia in the country through fiction, they can show audiences directly through the words of the real-life interviewees.

Due to the lack of a single significant neo-Nazi character in the film, the character of Hitler will be analyzed instead, along with some limited examination of the behaviors of his "fans," including those who may not be self-proclaimed neo-Nazis, but nonetheless align themselves with Hitler's views. This film is based on the 2012 Timur Vermes best-selling novel of the same name, and the unsettling premise of both—as well as the candid scenes in the film— left a strong impression in Germany (Chase; "'He's Back': Hitler Movie Hits Nerve in Germany"). The candid scenes themselves were especially risky, as a film on this topic which mixes these elements of fiction and a real, modern-day Germany has not otherwise been made. The film also premiered in a time in which the question still remains as to what is socially acceptable when creating a portrayal of Hitler. The question posited by Andreas Borcholte resonates throughout this thesis: when it comes to pushing the limits with portrayals of Hitler,

"darf man das?" What are "appropriate" portrayals of this character and why? What does creating innovative portrayals contribute to the national discourse on the persistence of fascist ideologies in our societies? And to the process of coming to terms with the past, Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung (a term preferable to the popularized "Vergangenheitsbewältigung" as it emphasizes the ongoing nature of this process)?

Ragussis' film strikes a very different tone, creating a thrilling and often disturbing story concerning an FBI investigation into white supremacist activity. In *Imperium*, an FBI Agent named Nate Foster must infiltrate several neo-Nazis groups in and around Washington, D.C. in an attempt to uncover a rumored, forthcoming terrorist attack. While ingratiating himself into these groups, Foster encounters various archetypal neo-Nazi characters, including militaristic neo-Nazis preparing for a race war and tattooed skinheads who create public disturbances. However, the most dangerous antagonist is Gerry Conway. Although seemingly non-violent, especially in comparison to his neo-Nazi counterparts, it is revealed near the end of the film that he was the one orchestrating the attack. Because his character is generally more complex than most other neo-Nazis portrayed (with the exception of Johnny and Dallas Wolf, a disillusioned young man and a radio show host looking to increase profits, respectively), and due to his involvement in the terrorist plot, he will be the main antagonist analyzed from this film.

Thinking Like a Terrorist: Insights of a Former FBI Undercover Agent is a memoir by a retired FBI agent which was more concerned with examining methods for handling the threat of terrorism than studying neo-Nazis and their motivations. *Imperium*, its film adaptation, references the former topic to a minor extent: there are several scenes in which Toni Collette's character, Angela Zamparo (Foster's case officer) coaches the agent on the intricacies of building trust with their suspects by attempting to understand and relate to them. The focus of the film is

on Nate's interactions with the many different neo-Nazi characters who are suspects, and who range from stereotypical reckless lawbreakers to a talk-show host who pretends to be passionate about the ideology. *Imperium* is a unique film due to its diversity of neo-Nazi personas and their reasons for becoming ensnared by the ideology. The film emphasizes that neo-Nazism can proliferate in a society in unexpected places, and is not just associated with stereotypical skinheads. This range of character types makes character analysis especially suitable for an examination of this film.

The second chapter of this thesis will examine portrayals of neo-Nazism in film characters since the end of the Cold War, a significant cultural turning point for Germany. However, distinctions will not be made between events related to neo-Nazism or films created in East versus West Germany. Neo-Nazism can have regional bases, but it is by no means confined in any one place. Examining these portrayals will serve to place *Imperium* and *Er ist wieder da* into a larger film history, allowing for an observation of the many ways in which Hitler and neo-Nazis have been portrayed as well as the resonance of these character portrayals—from comedic reductions to sympathetic humanizations of Hitler as well as reformed and non-reformed neo-Nazis. The popular and academic reception to the films in each country will also be observed via sources such as press reviews and scholarly articles. These analyses will assist in gauging the significance or unique characteristics of the films as noted by viewers both in the film's country of origin and beyond, and thus lead to an understanding of the films' contributions to the national discourses about neo-Nazism in both countries. The portrayals in *Er ist wieder da* and *Imperium* will be compared with the portrayals in these past films in order to understand what our two films of interest contribute to this growing film history.

When it comes to portrayals of Hitler, the character is depicted on a scale ranging from comedic reduction to sympathetic humanization. The former refers to those comedies which make the character appear foolish, weak, or incompetent (such as *Mein Führer* from 2007), and the latter refers to those dramatic films which display Hitler's character as having realistic flaws and behaviors which are not immediately made fun of, but rather are included to portray him as one might any other film character (such as *Der Untergang* from 2004). Of course, many portrayals of the character fall somewhere in between. Debate is ongoing as to what is a socially acceptable way in which to portray Hitler, as audiences and filmmakers alike express discomfort in relating to the dictator. However, they simultaneously do not want to make light of the crimes committed by believers of the Nazi ideology both in the past and present. The tension between these two concerns will be addressed throughout this thesis.

Neo-Nazis in contemporary film are also split into two categories: reformed and non-reformed. Although seemingly self-explanatory, these two categories are important because many films featuring a neo-Nazi as a main character show the reformation of the neo-Nazi, creating a redemption plot for that character and possibly winning sympathy from the audience for the character's attempts to change over the course of the film. Though the spectrum of reformation is not universal, it is an observable pattern in films portraying these character types. Such reformations rarely occur without a price: a loved one will often become the "sacrificial lamb" who must die in order for the character's reformation to be complete. This is one occurrence which can win the reformed or reforming neo-Nazi sympathy from the audience. However, just as concerns arise about the ways in which Hitler is portrayed, reviewers may also wonder about the morality of showing a neo-Nazi and their journey in a sympathetic light. With this type of storyline, it is possible for the harm that the neo-Nazi has caused to remain

unaddressed, eliminating the voice of the neo-Nazi's victims from the narrative. One might then wonder if stories about neo-Nazis experiencing reformation are a healthy contribution to a national understanding about neo-Nazism: on one hand, the story suggests, optimistically, that a person can be saved from the ideology and can improve themselves—a positive outlook on society. On the other, the story runs the risk of not recognizing the pain caused by the neo-Nazi while they were a member of the ideology, focusing instead on their character development. Thus the binary nature of portrayals of neo-Nazi characters in contemporary film mirrors the nature of depictions made of Hitler.

Depictions of Hitler especially have undergone an evolution over the course of previous decades, from being scarcely shown in German film to being utilized semi-regularly in satirical media. This evolution in the presentation of Hitler as a film character is an important part of the analysis of his character: the history of such portrayals contributes to the shaping of what may be deemed socially acceptable in film today. This is not only an integral part of the themes of the second chapter, but also presents implications for the current cultural moment through citizens' reception of such portrayals at the time.

The academic reception of both films will also be observed to paint a more comprehensive picture of the cultural moment in which these films premiered. This reception examines how the films measure up to other works with similar themes and provides insight into the societal reaction to the films. For example, Paul Rich's 2018 study "Hollywood and Cinematic Representations of Far-Right Domestic Terrorism in the U.S." critiques many films' lack of characterization of its Nazi figures beyond the two-dimensional, arguing that it "leads to an impoverished understanding of why particular individuals become attracted to far-right terrorist movements in the first place" (19). Rich suggests that *Imperium* was unremarkable aside

from the casting of Danielle Radcliffe as the lead, arguing that this focus on the star rather than the neo-Nazism depicted in the films demonstrates that "[…] Hollywood remains nervous about delving too deeply into the far right at a time of rising populism" (17). Even just recently, in 2019, Fox Searchlight Pictures expressed concerns about Hitler's appearance in *Jojo Rabbit* (Taika Waititi, 2019) (Galuppo). Although portrayals of Hitler have evolved, debate as to what qualifies as a socially acceptable portrayal of the character continues—and depictions of neo-Nazis face similar scrutiny.

The third chapter of the thesis will involve character analysis of the aforementioned character types in the films *Er ist wieder da* and *Imperium*. Analysis will be made based on Jens Eder's model "die Uhr der Figur" (as described in his book *Die Figur im Film* and his article "Understanding Characters"). This model provides a step-by-step means of character analysis which first studies the cinematographic choices of the filmmakers (the character's mode of representation) and progresses to the higher-level meanings which the audiences will perceive as being associated with the character (the mode of reception). Following this model, cinematographic elements utilized in the portrayals of our characters of interest will first be closely examined. In *Imperium*, camera angles, lighting (natural lighting versus darkness or hard lighting), and sound (both diegetic and non-diegetic) will be used to analyze the character of Gerry Conway, the seemingly non-violent father of two who is ultimately unmasked as the primary antagonist of the film. In *Er ist wieder da*, the camera work (such as the evolution from a shaky camera into steadiness, as well as first-person shots) and non-diegetic narration by the main antagonist (a revived Adolf Hitler) will be examined in this first step of analysis.

Especially important in this analysis is that features may humanize or dehumanize the characters at hand: more specifically, the camera work in *Imperium* often dissects the neo-Nazi

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characters (only showing parts of their bodies, not showing their faces while in conversation with Foster, etc.) while still fully presenting the expressions of Radcliffe's character, the hero of the story. In *Er ist wieder da*, Wnendt ensures that the viewer relates to Hitler's initial confused plight in the present day by creating shots that appear to be through Hitler's eyes and perspective, while also shooting the scenes with a shaky camera, emphasizing his emotional instability and uncertainty in this new situation. Humanizing non-fictional, fascist characters such as Hitler has proven to be a large point of contention and controversy: while some argue that it allows for the showcasing of the character's flaws, thus preventing him from being put on a pedestal by contemporary supporters, others are concerned that it will garner the character undeserved sympathy. The latter point brings to bear the concept of alignment—what Murray Smith defines as one of three integral parts of building sympathy for a character. He explains it as "[…] the process by which spectators are placed in relation to characters in terms of access to their actions, and to what they know and feel" (83). The important aspect here is "access," as the camera work in the first half of *Er ist wieder da* especially gives the viewer a first-person look from Hitler's perspective. The concern over how portrayals of Hitler should be handled is the basis for much discussion of the character as he is reduced in some films and humanized in others.

Assuming that film characters, like all other aspects of film production, are the result of deliberate artistic choices on the part of the filmmaker, every cinematographic element that contributes to the construction of the character can be analyzed in order to understand the character more deeply. Jens Eder points out the need for a comprehensive and coherent model for character examinations so that analysis may be completed objectively and methodically. This is why the usage of the clock of character begins at the character as an "artifact," an on-screen

object which is defined by the cinematographic choices from which it is composed—the model is built on the foundation of the character traits which are observable on screen. His model provides four aspects of character (artifact, fictional being, symbol, and symptom) which can be utilized for analysis, and emphasizes that the reception of film characters must occur in a multifaceted way. The "symbol" aspect describes all higher-level meanings of a character, while the "symptom" aspect refers to the intentions of the filmmaker and the responses of the audience to the character. These two aspects compose the mode of reception and allow for the subjectivity that accompanies character reception to be methodically observed. The traits of Conway and Hitler as artifacts and as fictional beings will be observed individually on the basis of details taken from scenes of each film, however, the last two aspects—characters as symbols and as symptoms—shall be combined for the purposes of this thesis. The higher-level messages presented by the filmmakers through their characters provide commentary on sociocultural issues, namely on the xenophobia and racism that still exist in both societies. This commentary is indicative of the filmmakers' intentions and will influence the ways in which audience members respond to the characters and to the films as a whole. The two aspects of symbol and symptom, which are both influenced by sociocultural context, are therefore inseparable in this particular investigation.

Eder's model provides a suitable methodology for this thesis due to his attention to the perception of characters in a given society—how a viewer's and filmmaker's own experiences (and thus cultural perspectives) affect their interpretation of the character (their "mental models" of the characters–Eder, "Understanding Characters" 19). He expands his examinations beyond textual analysis and attempts to encompass in his model a number of additional character-defining factors in order to create a foundation by which to understand these figures. He thus

combines a systematic methodology with recognition of subjective viewer insight. The breadth of his investigative focus provides a wide lens with which to analyze the films, which assists in carefully placing *Er ist wieder da* and *Imperium* into their niche in film history as well as their cultural moment in their respective countries of origin. He also remarks upon the "general artifact properties" of filmic characters, which note their abstract traits (such as aspects that would be impossible in the real world). This is useful for a side-by-side look at Conway and Hitler, because while Conway's portrayal is bound by realism, Hitler's is defined by a supernatural element by which he is a man out of his own time.

The usage of Eder's "Uhr der Figur" for analysis of these films' characters brings us to the conclusion that the filmmakers sought to exemplify the common underestimation of the threat of neo-Nazism in American and German society. Both Conway and Hitler appear, at the beginning of the films, to be relatively benign presences: Conway seems to be a suburban family-man, who (despite his terrible prejudices) would not want to disturb the peace, and Hitler seems far too out of his depth in modern-day Germany to make any sort of impact on its society or culture. Outside of violent flare-ups, neo-Nazism is often viewed as a "sleeping" or underground threat; it is viewed as deplorable and toxic, but policial or governmental responses to its presence has been, at times, disturbingly minimal. The films demonstrate that this is a flawed way to view and handle the threat of neo-Nazism—that even when it seems that members of the ideology may not actively cause harm, such ideologies invariably will drive its members to do as such, and they will continue to indoctrinate their children into the hateful belief system unless the cycle is interrupted.

The fourth chapter will revolve around the cultural moment of these films, discussing relevant current events in both America and Germany in some detail. The main issues which will

be examined—and which have coincided with neo-Nazi activity—include the "refugee crisis" in Europe as well as the campaign and eventual presidency of Donald Trump (which was, in part, fueled by fear of illegal immigration). These issues shed light on the problem of right-wing extremism (Rechtsextremismus) in both America and Germany. Particular events which can contribute to an understanding of this cultural moment include the Charlottesville rally of August 2017 and the year-long "Freital Group" trial in Dresden which began in June 2017 (Al Jazeera; "Lange Haftstrafen im Prozess gegen Gruppe Freital"). *Imperium* and *Er ist wieder da* resonate differently in an era when neo-Nazism appears to be thriving, as their antagonists are likely to be viewed with increased scrutiny, and the audience members may more seriously reflect on the contents of the film. These films serve as a medium through which the filmmakers can comment on neo-Nazism in their countries, and also become a lens through which viewers can reflect on their own perceptions of related issues.

Both films also comment on the role that entertainment media plays in the discourse on and perception of neo-Nazism in the present day. In *Er ist wieder da*, the station MyTV provides Hitler with influence and allows him to reach a massive audience nationwide, despite his racist ideology. The station does this to increase viewership and profits. Similarly, in *Imperium*, Dallas Wolf promotes a race war on his radio show, and participates in neo-Nazi events, just for increased revenue and fame. Neither MyTV nor Wolf prioritizes "ethical usage" on their platforms. Therefore, both *Er ist wieder da* and *Imperium* warn media creators to carefully consider the impacts of their content.

This thesis discusses multiple questions inspired by the two films of interest: How do these two films portray neo-Nazism, and how do they portray progress in the national discourses on the persistence of neo-Nazism? How do such portrayals resonate in the cultural moment of

the films' release and beyond? Do the creators and consumers of media hold responsibility for the impacts of that media on their societies? And if so, to what extent is that responsibility shouldered? The combined filmic analysis and examination of current events will provide a foundation on which answers to these questions may be formulated.

Clear in the character portrayals of Nazis and neo-Nazis in American film is the fear of a masked threat: that a harmful ideology or impetus for terroristic actions will pervade the lives of the innocent through agents whose intentions are concealed. In *Er ist wieder da*, the implications provided by the portrayal of Hitler are a bit different. The undying nature of Hitler (through his resurrection in the present day and through his immortality in the film within the film) presents the fear that racist ideologies are here to stay. Rather than a masked threat, as in the American films, the German portrayals of neo-Nazism are up-front; there is no way to even momentarily forget their alignment. When the threat of neo-Nazism is recognized, it is recognized differently in the United States than it is in Germany, partially due to their differing histories with this ideology. However, both films also show that the underestimation of neo-Nazism in the present day only allows it to grow and intensify its capacity for harm. The films push their audiences to reflect on the continued presence of such ideologies in their societies. How both countries deal with the past or the persistence of neo-Nazism into the present (both through Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung) is a complicated issue which relates to their history with the ideology as well as their current cultural moments. This thesis will contribute some clarity on these topics.

Chapter 2

Portrayals of Hitler and neo-Nazism in film and other media since the end of the Cold War

Nearly every genre of film has examples of stereotypical villains. A common trope is that of the Nazi villain. Even in contemporary film, portrayals of Nazis, including Hitler, are prevalent, alongside the more topical neo-Nazi antagonists. Part of the reasoning for the continued presence of these villains may be tradition: for example, portrayals of Hitler were created as propaganda during WWII (such as in *The Great Dictator* (Charlie Chaplin, 1940)) and set a historic precedent for satiric depictions of his character. Another reason for the continued use of Nazi characters may be the ongoing political and sociocultural climates of the countries involved in these depictions—both America and Germany, for example, still struggle with the terrorizing presence of neo-Nazi groups (for example, Der Dritte Weg in Germany and Aryan Nations in the United States). This could account for the presence of portrayals of neo-Nazis in contemporary thrillers such as *Green Room* (Jeremy Saulnier, 2015), as well as dramas such as the more recent *Aus dem Nichts* (Fatih Akin, 2017).

This chapter explores the history of portrayals of Hitler and neo-Nazi characters in contemporary film, to assist in positioning *Er ist wieder da* and *Imperium* into this larger film history prior to analyzing their characters in Chapter 3. Similar films created since the end of the Cold War will be examined to understand this film history. This starting point was chosen due to German reunification and the fall of the Berlin Wall being a significant turning point in German history, a cultural marker that signals a new period in the country's history. This chapter will also examine different styles of depicting these characters, including comedic reductions and sympathetic humanizations of Hitler as well as non-reformed and reformed neo-Nazis. The

nature of these characters, namely their threat level and an underestimation thereof by the audience or by other characters, provides commentary on the cultural moments in America and Germany around the time of each film's creation and release.

Although there is a wide range of films that concern themselves with Nazis and the Third Reich—made in countries around the globe—it should be noted that many will not be mentioned here. This thesis is focused particularly on portrayals of Hitler and neo-Nazis, rather than on all portrayals of Nazi characters. This is because our two films of interest (*Er ist wieder da* and *Imperium*) utilize, respectively, a portrayal of Hitler superimposed into the modern era and an array of differing neo-Nazi characters to critique and provide commentary on their societies. One aim of this thesis is to unpack the construction and portrayals of these characters in order to fully understand the commentary on contemporary society made by each film.

2.1 Portrayals of Hitler

Parodies about Hitler have been around since Hitler himself, but these humorous depictions persist and continue into the present. More recently, attempts have been made to humanize Hitler rather than just make him laughable:

> Prior to the turn of the millennium, most films about the Führer portrayed him from a strongly moralistic perspective. Whether depicting his meteoric rise or catastrophic fall, they tended to demonize him as the epitome of evil. Recent films, by contrast, have adopted a less judgmental stance and depicted Hitler as a human being who can be understood in conventional historical terms. In the process, these motion pictures have both reflected and contributed to the increasing normalization of the Nazi past. (Rosenfeld 234-35)

This humanization has been a contentious issue for film critics and audiences alike, due to concerns about the sociocultural impact of these films: the potential of normalizing the ideology through the audience's exposure to the character raises the question of whether it is immoral to create such representations. Additionally, such portrayals may draw attention away from the suffering caused by Hitler and other Nazis. The depictions of Hitler, including those which humanize him, nonetheless attract audiences: Nazism and neo-Nazism are sometimes used as a "backdrop" for a film's story "without any political significance or link to reality" (Lee 224) due to the dramatic context which such characters bring to the silver screen. This inclusion of an evil ideology can make for a more compelling story, even if no thoughtful commentary is provided regarding its presence.

In Germany, there is a much different historical context to stories about Hitler and neo-Nazism than in other countries; it is thus natural to recognize that those stories told in German films are represented in a manner distinct to depictions originating in America or elsewhere around the world. The impact of WWII is still felt in German culture today, and as pointed out by Henryk Broder, "as soon as you mention Hitler, the entire subject of German history comes up again." It is impossible to breach the topic of neo-Nazism without the sociocultural context of past wartime events—of the harm caused by the ideology and of concerns that such events could transpire in the country again.

General audiences are drawn to the personal details of Hitler's life and relationships: "It satisfies salacious curiosity and a prurient imagination, but it also testifies to a desire to domesticate the dictator, to diminish him to the merely monstrously human. […] One couldn't possibly find genocide funny, but one can laugh at common and recognisable domestic bickering" (Rau 174). Although there are critics of the budding tendency to make comedies out

of Hitler's character, others (such as Rau) argue that humanization allows the dictator to be knocked down a peg and lowered from a status of nearly mythical figure to a flawed one. This debate as to how one may "best" depict Hitler highlights the continued weight which portrayals of the historical figure carry, even in the present day.

A recent film which mocks Hitler in part through the selection of the actor who portrays him is *Jojo Rabbit* (Taika Waititi, 2019), a film loosely based on the book *Caging Skies* (Christine Leunens, 2004). Waititi himself plays the role of Hitler, who appears as the imaginary friend of the young protagonist Jojo. The director tweeted "[…] what better way to insult Hitler than having him portrayed by a Polynesian Jew?" Fox Searchlight Pictures, the distributor of the film, stated that they would be involved in the project under the condition that Waititi play the role of Hitler. There was concern that the nuances of the role would be lost without his direct interpretation (Galuppo). Waititi also admitted that his version of Hitler had as little to do with Hitler as possible, for several reasons: he wanted to present the character from the perspective of a 10-year-old, preserve his own level of comfort (as he expressed discomfort in portraying Hitler), and prevent the alienation of the film's audience via a depiction which came across as too authentic (Burack).

The films' creators assumed that a depiction too close to Hitler himself would prevent the audience from viewing and enjoying *Jojo Rabbit* as a comedy (though one with several dark moments) in which the purpose of the interpretation is clearly to mock the dictator and cut him down to size. This film therefore supports the notion that a film degrading Hitler can undermine admiration for his character and the ideology which he spread, that laughing at him takes away his character's power. When compared to *Er ist wieder da*, another film with a portrayal of Hitler, there is a clear difference in tone. Although generally labeled as a comedy, *Er ist wieder*

da offers a gloomy and often foreboding illustration of the presence of neo-Nazism in Germany due to most interviewees' acceptance of Hitler. The comedic aspects of the film dwindle as the plot progresses, from Masucci's Hitler bumbling about Berlin to him swiftly regaining influence. It projects seriousness through its authentic presentation of Hitler—not only through his appearance, but also through his domineering personality. In contrast, Waititi's interpretation of the character is more similar to the real Hitler visually than he is in terms of persona, and the film is told through the perspective of a child. In this way, the portrayals of Hitler in these two films differ considerably but deliver the same message: a non-threatening Hitler can entertain audiences and be laughed at, a true-to-life Hitler will diminish accessibility to audiences, but can provide solemn commentary in a way that an excessively satirized version cannot.

A common concern regarding more lighthearted Hitler-based comedies is whether or not this focus on Hitler himself diminishes the attention that should be given to the crimes which he committed. Moers points out the need to recognize Hitler's humanity, although it makes for a more complex character (leading to the possibility of some form of sympathy from the audience), because realism can simultaneously push back against those who still support his ideology:

> Adolf Hitler war nur mal ein Mensch. Er ging aufs Klo und wahrscheinlich auch manchmal in die Badewanne. Ich weiß, dass die Menschheit es mit ihm vielleicht einfacher hätte, wenn er [Hitler] der Teufel oder ein Außerirdischer gewesen wäre. Aber er gehört zur Familie, so unangenehm das auch sein mag. Gefährlich ist die Dämonisierung, die ihn zur Kultfigur für Neonazis werden ließ. Hätte man Hitler schon zu Lebzeiten mal nackt gesehen, wäre alles vielleicht nicht so weit gekommen.

Like Rau, Moers believes that the focus on very human flaws can take the wind out of a supporter's sails. Some films take this idea of seeing Hitler naked literally in addition to figuratively. Take, for example, the bathtub scene in *Mein Führer – Die wirklich wahrste Wahrheit über Adolf Hitler* (Dani Levy, 2007). This film serves as an important cultural precursor to *Er ist wieder da*: those aspects of the film which some argued would have made it formidable (such as being unapologetic in its content) were also seen as not being socially acceptable at the time of its premiere. At the time, Mark Landler noted that "Hitler remain[ed] an enduringly uncomfortable topic" in Germany. He also pointed out ways in which the film was tweaked from the get-go, removing pieces of its construction which sound eerily similar to Wnendt's film, which would follow in less than a decade:

> Yet even Mr. Levy had to accommodate the sensitivities of a German audience. "Mein Führer" was originally told from the point of view of Hitler, who had survived the war and was plotting his return to power. That version deeply unsettled viewers at a test screening last summer.

Only eight years separate the premieres of *Mein Führer* and the film version of *Er ist wieder da*. Could this indicate that the cultural perspective on such films may not have had time to change significantly? Perhaps Wnendt's source material was willing to take more risks in terms of showing Hitler's viewpoint first-hand—or maybe the filmmakers felt that even if the subject matter disturbed the audience, it would become an important film for that cultural moment in Germany by casting a light on the disturbing presence of neo-Nazism in the country. Wnendt succeeded in creating a film which began with a non-threatening version of Hitler who existed awkwardly out of his own time, but then dove into the frightening implications that would realistically accompany the presence of someone with his character.

The topic of Hitler's fantastical survival into the present day as well as his humanization are prevalent in the film *Er ist wieder da*. *Er ist wieder da* succeeded in humanizing Hitler via cinematographic methods which made him seem vulnerable in the present day (as will be discussed in Chapter 3). The alteration in critical response between *Mein Führer* and *Er ist wieder da*, though in part inevitably due to the different filmmaking styles of their creators, may also indicate a changing landscape in the public acceptance of Hitler-related fictions. Although still disturbing, a more in-depth study of the character of Hitler was perhaps felt to be necessary: the waxing of neo-Nazism in a time of tumultuous political circumstances (such as the influx of asylum-seekers in the mid-2010s, see Chapter 4) creates a demand for an improved understanding of how xenophobia and racism function in modern German society. An examination of Hitler and how he would interact with the German population in the present day is one way in which these issues can be more closely observed and their origins better understood.

In the initial reception of *Mein Führer*, there is a noticeable rejection of Hitler's humanization. For example, one critic stated that "most of the jokes are flat, harmless or stale, and what's particularly offensive is that Adolf Hitler, of all people, is given quite sympathetic character traits" (Peters). At the same time, and quite in contradiction, other reviews called for filmmakers to go all out if they were to at all breach taboo topics (such as comedic representations of Hitler): " 'Go for Zucker!', Dani Levy's last film, was so effective as a comedy because there Levy didn't have the handbrake on, even if he ran the risk of being misunderstood" (Broder). This torn reaction to *Mein Führer* shows that at the time of its release, the comedic treatment of Hitler's character as well as his humanization (for example, by him confiding in Grünbaum about the abuse he received from his father) was possibly more

contentious than at the time of the release of *Er ist wieder da*, as reviews of the latter tend towards a greater focus on the real-life reactions of Germans to Hitler which were included in the film (see, for example, Taylor's article). Attention thus shifted away from the portrayal of Hitler as a main character in a comedy, and towards the troubling themes of xenophobia and racism which were shown in the film's interview segments.

The 1996 film *Gespräch mit dem Biest* (Armin Mueller-Stahl) was also a precursor to *Er ist wieder da*. In each film, one unsuspecting protagonist (Sawatzki in *Er ist wieder da* and Webster in *Gespräch mit dem Biest*) recognizes that another main character is truly who he claims to be: Hitler. After getting to know him, the protagonist eventually attempts to dispose of Hitler. *Gespräch mit dem Biest*, however, defies simple categorization into a single genre:

Was ist das für ein Film: „Gespräch mit dem Biest"? Eine intime Annäherung an den Teufel, möglicherweise? Ein absurdes Spiel von der Unsterblichkeit des Bösen? Ein Psychothriller mit wahnwitzigem Mut zu schwarzem Humor? Ein Lehrstück über Schauspieler, Rollen, Identitäten? Manche Kritiker, fürchte ich, werden schon daran verzweifeln, „Gespräch mit dem Biest" in irgendeiner vernünftigen Kategorie unterzubringen. (Blumenberg)

The ambiguity of this film's genre allows it to walk the line between humanization and reduction of the character, resisting tropes and offering up a new historical context through which Hitler could have survived. Unlike Hitler's successful attempt to regain power in *Er ist wieder da*, he is unable to do so in *Gespräch mit dem Biest*. The combination of these elements may lead the viewer to uncertainty about how they should feel concerning Hitler's character in *Gespräch mit dem Biest*: disgust and anger at realizing the character is the genuine article, or some form of twisted, begrudging pity at an elderly man whose life has lost its purpose (despite

knowing what this purpose is). This is where films often become controversial, as filmmakers do not want to be seen as encouraging sympathy for "the beast." In *Er ist wieder da*, Hitler at first seems helpless, but quickly rises above his vulnerabilities and uncertainties and utilizes his reception as a comic to his advantage, taking to the national stage and regaining influence. His swift departure from vulnerability is a reminder to audiences of how powerful and threatening his character can be. The underestimation of his character gave him and his ideology the opportunity to flourish in the present day.

A film that was contentious (for some, to the point of infamy) for its humanization of Hitler was *Der Untergang* (Oliver Hirschbiegel, 2004). This style of portrayal was in part due to the film being a historical drama and not a comedy. This difference in genre forced audiences to take the depiction of Hitler more seriously than they may have if they were watching a comedy: rather than laughing off some of his comments, they see him in a context which emulates realism and suggests authenticity. Unlike *Er ist wieder da*, in which Hitler fantastically appears without explanation in modern-day Berlin, *Der Untergang* is set during the fall of the Third Reich, the time in which Hitler historically belongs. Much like *Moloch* (Alexander Sokurov, 1999), the film exposes the vulnerable side of Hitler's character, such as his weakened mental state as well as his behavior in a romantic relationship with Eva Braun. It allows contemporary viewers to see how his followers perceived him, as much of the film is shown through the perspective of his secretary, Traudl Junge. Borcholte points out the key question surrounding portrayals of Hitler, especially within a context which indicates seriousness: "Darf man das?" When it comes to Hitler, what filmmakers are perceived as being socially "allowed" to do has evolved even in the past decade and a half—as can be seen in the aforementioned difference in reception between *Mein Führer* and *Er ist wieder da*. On the topic of such controversial humanization, Hobbeling

notes the groundbreaking nature of *Der Untergang*: "*Der Untergang* wird als erster Film betrachtet, der Hitler auf eine neue Weise wiedergibt: nicht nur als Mensch, sondern auch ‚normaler' als zuvor." (6) This humanization is also taken up in both Vermes' novel and Wnendt's film, continuing the legacy of this type of portrayal.

Despite its serious tone, a number of YouTube memes stemmed from *Der Untergang*, mostly from one scene in particular where Hitler has a breakdown due to the hopeless military predicament. This scene is used in memes to show Hitler complaining about a vast array of topics, with increasing absurdity: "By 2009, the 2004 film *Downfall*, referred to in *Look Who's Back*, had entered into the top twenty-five of films most parodied on YouTube. These parodies included Hitler ranting because a pizza was late, because Oasis had split up, and due to a parking problem in Tel Aviv" (Lee 234). These memes contributed to the popularization of contemporary comedic representations of Hitler, and the transformation of dramatic interpretations of his character to satiric ones.

While some films humanize Hitler so as to examine his character in a serious or dramatic manner (referred to here as sympathetic humanization), others reduce him to the punchline of a joke—and some films fall somewhere on the spectrum in between, managing to do both, shifting from one treatment to the other. To say that he is reduced is to suggest that his character is made to appear less threatening or, at the very least, less competent to the audience. One example of this is Hitler's need to lean on one of his would-be victims in *Mein Führer* in order to pull himself out of a depression and motivate himself to give a rousing New Year's speech. He is at times laughable, but also experiences failures in his everyday life with which the audience may empathize.

In the interest of reducing the threat of Hitler's character, there are filmmakers who utilize comedy and satire to set audiences at ease—however, concern arises that the audience's perception of the threat of Nazism is reduced concurrently. One example of a "reduced" Hitler is his portrayal in *Inglourious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, 2009). Hitler is barely shown in this film, and for the brief time that he is, he comes across as a foolish caricature who is no match for the Basterds. The film in this case provides a narrow character constellation and limited background in terms of the Nazi characters shown. Bösch argues that this shrunken view of the characters' social network allows for viewers to focus moreso on the moral choices of the characters and also more easily apply moral relativism, as the audience only has a couple of other characters to directly compare. For instance, after seeing the exaggerated evil of Hans Landa (who receives significantly more screen time), Hitler's character in *Inglourious Basterds* does not come across as threatening. On the topic of Hitler's inflated ego and actual threat level in *Inglourious Basterds*, Rau states:

> Banging on the table in front of him, gesticulating wildly and screaming 'Nein! Nein! Nein!' at two generals seated before a gigantic, swastika-riddled map of Europe, Tarantino's Hitler (Martin Wuttke) is immediately recognisable as the ranting megalomaniac dictator Charlie Chaplin satirised in 1940. A mere former corporal rather than a general; an Anstreicher ('house painter'), in Brecht's words, rather than an accomplished artist; a dyspeptic ranter rather than a rhetorician, Hitler is never a threat in any of the scenes in which he appears. Most importantly, perhaps, the size of the room, the painting and the map on the wall characterise the ambitions of the man who is dwarfed by them. (Rau 162)

The two-dimensional nature of his persona only serves to increase the intellectual distance between his character and that of the others. The enormity of the other characters'

stories, from Shoshanna's revenge to Lieutenant Raine's vendetta, overwhelm the presence of Hitler in the film. He becomes a footnote, as the struggle in the story is formed between Nazism and its victims rather than the latter and Hitler—he presents, in this film, as only a figurehead. Landa, a fictional character, is viewed as the main threat to the characters of the film, while Hitler, based on real life, is overlooked. Although a Nazi character is granted competency, it is one who never existed, which allows the audience to rest more easily as they are entertained. They thus have a form of escape from an evil character, Hitler: had he been given authenticity, it would have forced the audience to consider more seriously the crimes of the past, rather than be whisked along in the action-packed alternate reality of Tarantino's own making.

Tarantino's use of wartime Germany as a setting for his film could be viewed as disrespectful to the victims of the time period, "but is irreverence the same as indifference?" (Walters 21). Critics have written many an article on this film, some scathing and others full of praise—but the film does serve as an outstanding example of the differences between American and German-made portrayals of Hitler and of WWII, as Tarantino alters history in ways that may not be acceptable in Germany. This alternation between cultures provides a space for audiences to enjoy the story in *Inglourious Basterds*, without feeling the need for deep historical reverence, as Tarantino's story treads into fantastical territory bent on emotional catharsis, rather than focusing on reality.

Satiric portrayals of Hitler are of course not limited to film. The *Obersalzberg* skits on *Switch Reloaded* (2007-2012) are one example of irreverence towards Hitler shown on contemporary German television. This reoccurring parody satirizes the series *Stromberg* by placing Hitler in an office setting as an awkward and bumbling boss. As such parodies are

accessible through mainstream media, some cite concern about their influence on viewers, especially younger audiences. On this topic, Hobbeling comments:

> Trotzdem sollte man keine Angst haben, dass die jüngeren Generationen nicht kritisch mit dem Thema umgehen: Es gibt nämlich nicht nur Hitlerparodien, Persiflagen und Karikaturen. Noch immer gibt es Dokumentationen im Fernsehen und Kinder lernen in der Schule über Hitler und den Zweiten Weltkrieg. (9-10)

The argument made here suggests that the guaranteed presence of a serious framework (in school) for reflection on the past and on the Third Reich allows for flexibility in comedic portrayals, because the younger generations will understand from their history lessons that this ideology is not just a topic for jokes. In this way, it could be proposed that with the extensive knowledge and awareness of the Third Reich that is a part of German culture (as shown by the cultural movement of Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung) there is artistic space for new interpretations concerning the portrayals of Nazi characters.

Portrayals of Hitler in recent years have become a mixed bag in terms of placement on the spectrum from comedic reduction to sympathetic humanization. *Er ist wieder da* (the novel, 2012; the film, 2015), although it makes jokes at Hitler's expense due to his ignorance of modern-day life in Germany, also allows the audience to see from his point of view via narration and scenes shown in first-person. Therefore, despite his being laughed at by the film's audience for his befuddlement as he stumbles into the path of a group of Segways, the audience is still forced to walk a mile in his shoes—an uncomfortable experience for most viewers, as they know that the evil of his character is not a work of fiction, but rather written in history. Outside of its ground-breaking treatment of Hitler's character, *Er ist wieder da* also pays homage to past German films portraying Hitler, such as its own parody scene of *Der Untergang*, and utilizing

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actress Katja Riemann as Eva Braun—or an Eva Braun-adjacent figure—as was done in *Mein Führer*.

2.2 Portrayals of neo-Nazism

There is also a growing number of films portraying neo-Nazism, not just in America and Germany, but around the world. These films provide an opportunity to reflect on the sociocultural context of the real-world presence of neo-Nazism; for example, some films examine factors which may draw individuals into this ideology. Similar to the paradigm of sympathetic humanization or comedic reduction which is expressed in contemporary portrayals of Hitler, neo-Nazi characters are shown as reformed or non-reformed—an optimistic look at those in the grasp of the ideology, as it proposes the possibility of rehabilitation. Reformed neo-Nazi characters are commonly found in dramas like *American History X* (Tony Kaye, 1998) or *Familie Braun* (Maurice Hübner, 2016), in which they must cope with the fallout of their previous lifestyles. On the other hand, non-reformed neo-Nazis are often the protagonists of violent thrillers. It is relatively common for neo-Nazi protagonists to cross over during the progression of the film, generally drifting from a non-reformed to a reformed position, so as to exhibit character development and to gain some amount of sympathy from the audience. Both types of neo-Nazis are represented in the films discussed below.

Kombat Sechzehn (Mirko Borscht, 2005) is one film which includes a number of neo-Nazi characters. It utilizes the architecture of its setting in the city of Frankfurt (Oder) to represent the internal struggle of the main character: "The camera selects buildings to follow Georg's change in psychological state, from idyllic panorama shots of the cityscape to the concrete maze of slab buildings imitating fascist iconography" (Heiduschke 68). The film is a

presentation of eastern Germany in a post-unification era, and explores how the need for social validation and acceptance of a disheartened youth can become a slippery slope into choosing the path of neo-Nazism (Heiduschke, Hodgin). This desire for a social network is one common reason for a character's transition into neo-Nazism—it occurs in the subplot concerning Johnny in the film *Imperium* as well. *Kombat Sechzehn* represents its young protagonist Georg sympathetically, as the film demonstrates his feeling lost in a new city without the means to continue on with his passion for martial arts. The film affords him a beginning and an end to his story in which he is free of the ideology. This suggests that those involved in neo-Nazism may run the gauntlet of behaviors and attitudes, from holding long-term racial prejudices (and acting out violently on the basis of these prejudices) to naively joining such a group solely out of the need to find a social niche for themselves—a situation which they shortly find themselves desperately wishing to exit.

Non-fiction films are also made on this topic to satisfy viewers' interest in neo-Nazism and to increase awareness of the persistence of neo-Nazism in modern-day societies. *No Exit* (Franziska Tenner, 2004) is a documentary which followed the members of the Freie Kameradschaft Frankfurt (Oder). Documentaries, though not creating their protagonists from scratch, do curate their footage to shape the portrayal of their persons of interest and provide their own form of commentary. They help the public understand the current cultural moment in Germany in terms of the continued presence and impact of neo-Nazis in the country.

Similar to portrayals of Hitler in film, portrayals of neo-Nazis are not always made to be multifaceted. Some films contain depictions of neo-Nazis which only seem to exist as a context for violence, such as *Romper Stomper* (Geoffrey Wright, 1992) and *Green Room* (Jeremy Saulnier, 2015). Although *Romper Stomper* showed the hesitation of several skinheads (namely

Davey) to continue life as members of a white supremacist group, there was widespread concern in the reception of the film that its racial violence dwarfed all else, including any messages about potential reform: "While enticing you to hate the gang and take delight in everything bad that happens to its members, the film also gives you the vicarious thrill of being one of the gang" (Holden). Placing the audience members in the shoes of a neo-Nazi and proceeding to show excessive violence from the neo-Nazi's perspective (with no reflection on the ideology or the harm done to its victims) can understandably be seen as problematic.

Green Room is an example of a film which uses neo-Nazism as a backdrop for its plot rather than delving into the sociocultural significance of the group's presence. In the film, a band is held hostage inside the green room of their venue, a club frequented by neo-Nazis. The antagonists of the film are unflinchingly violent, as they kill one by one the band members who had witnessed their crime (the murder of a neo-Nazi who was attempting to leave the group). Beyond the mention of the murder victim's intentions to leave the ideology, further aspects of neo-Nazism, its source or its impacts are not deeply explored, and the film ends anticlimactically. The film does not contribute much to thoughtful discourse on the continued presence of neo-Nazism, but it does exemplify the body of films which use neo-Nazis only as a context for violence.

Other films portray neo-Nazis with more nuance. For example, *The Infiltrator* (John Mackenzie, 1995) is based on the book *In Hitler's Shadow* (Yaron Svoray & Nick Taylor, 1994). The film is much like *Imperium*, with the exception that the main character is a journalist attempting to investigate a story, rather than an FBI agent trying to prevent a crime. There is a character (Gunther) who exhibits an attitude similar to that of Gerry Conway in *Imperium*: he believes wholeheartedly in the neo-Nazi ideology, but behaves more civilly than his

counterparts, and is thus (to a minor extent) befriended by the protagonist while he is undercover. Gerry Conway's character will be analyzed further in Chapter 3, including his civility and near friendship with Nate Foster which may lead to an underestimation of his threatening nature as a neo-Nazi. *Imperium* expands on the idea of undercover intrusion into neo-Nazi groups, yet emphasizes the importance of understanding the neo-Nazis' motivations in order to confront or change their behavior (for example, the change of heart of the young neo-Nazi, Johnny).

Some films show the difficulty of resistance to neo-Nazism (in part due to violent consequences): a much more serious tone than the multiple comedic portrayals of Hitler mentioned above, these films are based on the struggle of their characters to escape the hate-filled lives which they previously led. *Kriegerin* (2011), also created by Wnendt, has a rare focus on a female protagonist in a film about neo-Nazis. Like *American History X* (1998), its drama stems from the main protagonist's (Marisa's) attempts to defy her former neo-Nazi group and leave the lifestyle behind. Much like the extremely violent neo-Nazi Hando from *Romper Stomper*, Marisa is ultimately killed on a beach. In these films, the protagonists' attempts to escape the ideology unscathed fail.

Some films and television series allow a more positive and hopeful outlook for their neo-Nazi protagonists—or at least, the ones who try to change themselves for the better. However, the good fortune of the reformed neo-Nazis may not extend to their companions. The series *Familie Braun* (Maurice Hübner, 2016) and the film *Heart of a Lion* (Dome Karukoski, 2013) both feature a neo-Nazi who has a change of heart after making a connection with a person of color. In *Familie Braun*, this is Thomas' daughter, Lara, who is dropped off to live with him and his roommate Kai, who is a fellow neo-Nazi. In *Heart of a Lion*, the protagonist Teppo meets the

biracial son of the woman he loves, and is able to build a relationship with him. Despite relatively uplifting endings, however, both Thomas and Teppo suffer and experience loss in order to escape the ideology: Thomas loses his best friend (though he does not die), and Teppo loses his brother. The death of a loved one is common retribution to those neo-Nazis attempting to reform. In *American History X*, Derek (our reformed neo-Nazi) has to cope with the death of his younger brother, who would not have died had he been free of the ideology's influence. These loved ones become "sacrificial lambs," killed in exchange for the neo-Nazi's newfound freedom. In this way, the films seem to hold the neo-Nazis accountable for the pain which they have caused: not exhibiting the suffering of the victims, but forcing the reformed protagonist to suffer instead. The absence of the victims' stories in these films is notable.

These films embody the concept of the reformed Nazi: clearly struggling, both internally against themselves and externally against their former allegiances, these protagonists earn our sympathy if not our respect for their attempts to change. The focus on the character shifts from their immoral and often criminal acts during their association with various neo-Nazi groups to their hopes for the future. While these reformed neo-Nazis may reach a somewhat happy ending for themselves, the other neo-Nazis they know are not so fortunate, whether through the sad nature of their continued myopic existence (as with Kai in *Familie Braun*) or an untimely death (as with Teppo's brother, Harri).

The Believer (Henry Bean, 2001) stands almost completely alone in its innovative content: it shows the plight of one young Jewish man who hides his heritage as he strives to become a neo-Nazi. The film is one of the first to present this type of neo-Nazi character, emphasizing the crisis of identity which the protagonist is experiencing. The book *The Nazi and the Barber* (Edgar Hilsenrath, 1971) also breaches this relatively unexplored territory of warring

identities by telling the story of a Nazi who goes into hiding after the war by posing as a Jew. Here Rau discusses the novel *The Nazi and the Barber*, but her words apply just as well to *The Believer*:

> Hilsenrath's grotesque satire intervened in the Holocaust discourse not only by radically unsettling the categories of perpetrator and victim, 'German' and 'Jew' (as if these were mutually exclusive), but also by suggesting that the increasingly sanctified conception of the Holocaust arrested the discourse rather than sustained it. (Rau 14)

Both of these stories encourage reflection on these identities by their respective audiences. *The Believer* challenges stereotypes of neo-Nazi criminals and of their victims. It is based on the story of Dan Burros who experienced this very struggle and ultimately committed suicide when he was publicly revealed to be Jewish (Bean). Like *Kombat Sechzehn*, it portrays a young man who is seduced by neo-Nazism, but with the caveat of his Jewishness, it builds new inquiries into the discourse of the pull to the ideology in the modern day. Rau's comment on the sanctity of the topic of the Holocaust also applies to the restrictions felt by filmmakers: although innovative content and new interpretations may contribute to a growing discourse on neo-Nazism, the possibility of perceived irreverence towards past (and current) suffering remains a concern.

The topic of neo-Nazis in film has persisted over the past several decades, but has also evolved: *Aus dem Nichts* is a film that depicts a woman's desire for justice and vengeance after her family was killed by a neo-Nazi terrorist attack. It is different than the other films mentioned here due to its protagonist not having any affiliation with a neo-Nazi group: it rather demonstrates the fear of neo-Nazi terrorism from an outside perspective, creating her character as an (initially) uncorrupted victim. This shift away from both direct involvement in such an

organization and the group-driven violence which occupies many neo-Nazi thrillers leads to a new category of film—the protagonist must grieve the completely unexpected, and ultimately decides to take matters into her own hands. Although this carries the connotations of a simple revenge plot, the disconnect between her and the neo-Nazis of the film as well as her coping period may indicate a growing societal concern about the threat of the ideology. The film begs the questions, "what if this were to happen to you and your family despite your lack of affiliation with the ideology? What if the impacts of the ideology bleed into your communities?"

2.3 Conclusion

Portrayals of Hitler and neo-Nazis continue to be prevalent in contemporary film and other media. The pervasiveness of such depictions is telling of both America and Germany's current cultural moments. The films *Er ist wieder da* and *Imperium* in particular delve into thoughtfully created representations of these characters, building on a legacy of similar films which came before them. Hitler is presented on a spectrum from laughingstock to a subject of relatable misfortunes, which may garner his character momentary sympathy from the audience. Neo-Nazis are commonly given the chance to reform themselves, transforming their characters over the course of the film and offering up a quiet optimism in the cultures from which they originate. The way in which these antagonistic characters are depicted is enlightening—not only of each country's ability to cope with the past (as in the theme of Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung in Germany) but also of their perspectives on dealing with ongoing neo-Nazism in the present day.

These two films contribute invaluably to a continued discourse on neo-Nazism in contemporary culture worldwide via their commentary on the underestimation of its threat. It is debatable whether humanization and/or reduction of characters such as Hitler is healthy for a

society which still struggles to quell racist movements, especially considering the concern of undermining the ongoing suffering caused by the ideology. This issue can be similarly applied to the reformed versus non-reformed dynamic of neo-Nazis in film: does a straightforward absolution of a neo-Nazi character undercut and oversimplify the damage done by violent extremists in the real world? Or does the chance of redemption possibly assist in crafting an optimistic societal outlook that individuals can be educated to reject xenophobia and racism? One issue of these films still persists: the victims of neo-Nazism are usually absent from the narratives. The silence of the victims may be a flaw in these films' designs: it may be easier to underestimate the impacts of the ideology and its members when the suffering of those affected is unseen.

Films containing content pertaining to neo-Nazism may still make their audiences feel uncomfortable. Filmmakers must ask themselves what makes for a socially acceptable depiction ("Darf man das?"). Such reflection is critical to understand the ongoing development of these film genres, as well as their relevance to the current sociocultural situations of the countries from which they originate. Filmmakers and audiences alike now face a challenge: although there is an implicit moral imperative when it comes to ethically representing these characters and issues, it is important to preserve artistic freedom. The ongoing discussion on the continued prevalence of neo-Nazism in our societies, as well as how this issue is represented in film, may assist artists and audiences alike in reflecting on the development of this corner of filmic history.

Er ist wieder da and *Imperium*, like the films discussed in this chapter, have depicted Hitler and neo-Nazis in a variety of ways. Contextualizing these portrayals within a larger film history is the first step in understanding how they have evolved and developed over time. We can now turn our attention to a step-by-step analysis of the characters' portrayals in each film: how

they are portrayed through cinematographic choices as well as the film's plot, as well as the elements which contribute to the characters' reception. This analysis will be carried out via a utilization of Jens Eder's heuristic model, "die Uhr der Figur."

Chapter 3

Utilizing Eder's "Uhr der Figur" to analyze character portrayals in *Er ist wieder da* and *Imperium*

Films can and should be analyzed through a variety of their parts, rather than just the whole of their messages—for example, through their creators' artistic decisions in terms of mise-en-scène or editing. Jens Eder has created a heuristic model of character analysis which serves as a springboard for studying film. His book *Die Figur im Film* (2008) and his article "Understanding Characters" (2010) detail a suitable methodology for the analysis of *Er ist wieder da* and *Imperium* in this thesis. His attention to the perception of characters in a given society—how a filmmaker's or viewer's own experiences (and thus cultural perspectives) affect their interpretation of the character, their "mental models" (Eder, "Understanding Characters" 19)—provide a foundation for Chapter 4, in which we will turn our attention to the cultural moments in both America and Germany at the times of these films' releases.

One of Eder's main goals is to present a method for analysis that allows for a systematic look at a film's character, firstly through the small technical details of the character's portrayals, and eventually building into the impressions the character makes on the audience. He named this model "die Uhr der Figur" ("the clock of character", Figure 1). The model serves as a starting point or basis for further and more specified character analysis, and its use is flexible for this very purpose: in this way, researchers can begin with the clock regardless of the ultimate goal of their analysis of a film's characters.
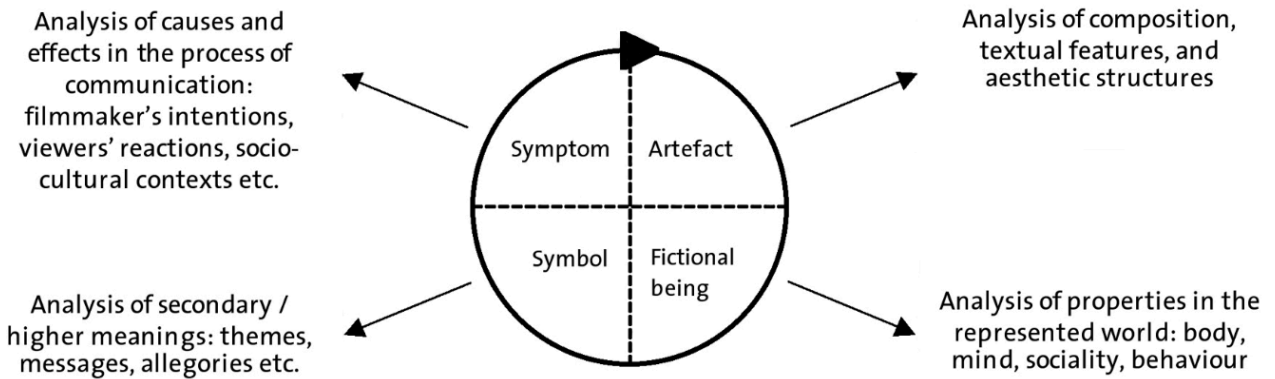
Figure 1. The "clock of character" diagram as presented in Eder's "Understanding Characters" (2010).

Eder claims that earlier methodologies of character analysis were often too strongly based on the intuition and instinct of the viewer alone, and that these purely subjective responses could not suffice to provide evidence-based explorations or support claims about a film's characters. Such methodologies only examined characters based on their motives, rather than observing the multiple layers of a character's makeup, from filmmaker intention and creative strategies to audience reception. These older strategies generated studies of film character which could not create a reproducible procedure for analysis:

> Aber auch unsere subjektiven, flüchtigen, veränderlichen Figurenvorstellungen sind
> nicht die objektiven, gleichbleibenden Figuren selbst. Verschiedene Zuschauer erfassen
> und erleben Figuren auf unterschiedliche Weise. (*Die Figur im Film*, 132)

The variability which can accompany character analysis could lead to any number of conclusions being drawn about a character, and consequently about the film as well. In the interest of cutting through such complications—namely viewer subjectivity—analysis of significant characters through a stepwise methodology allows for a direct and achievable route

towards understanding a film. Its effectiveness is especially evident when compared with results gleaned through an analysis of film reception:

> Figurenanalyse ist im Grunde nichts anderes als eine systematische Rekonstruktion und Elaboration verschiedener Rezeptionsformen auf der Basis möglichst genauer Daten und Beobachtungen. Dabei spricht man aber häufig nicht (direkt) von der Rezeption, sondern von Figuren, weil dies eine erhebliche Vereinfachung bedeutet. (*Die Figur im Film*, 133)

Studying a film's reception involves utilizing a variety of sources from critical and academic reviews to those written by the casual viewer (which may be difficult to reconcile with one another). Eder's model of character analysis succeeds in simplifying the process of analysis by beginning with the technical details of the source material (usually a film) and branching out, eventually touching upon specific aspects of audience reception—but only once a foundation via the film's construction has been laid out. Furthermore, the concentration on characters and how other aspects of the film funnel into their creation allows for a focused approach by which meaning can be gleaned from the film in a straightforward manner, as the vast majority of film plots are driven by their characters. This means that there is almost always a character on screen, speaking and gesticulating—presenting exactly as was intended by the filmmakers. This makes analysis based on film characters easily accessible to casual viewers and critics alike.

Eder's clock of character shows four aspects of character which can be examined. According to the clock of character, analysis begins with characters as artifacts, and then subsequently as fictional beings, symbols, and symptoms. Although Eder states that the model does not need to be read or utilized in this order, as he intended it to be a "flexible heuristic" (*Die Figur im Film*, 143), the order indicated in Figure 1 is the default configuration, and will be

followed in this chapter. This order conveys a clear division between the artist-driven aspects and reception-driven aspects of the clock, or (as labelled by Eder) the mode of representation versus the mode of reception. Emphasis may be placed on any of the four listed aspects, and a character may not embody all aspects (especially as one reaches the symbol and symptom portions of the clock) so addressing all quadrants in an analysis of a film's character may be unnecessary. For example, the viewer may not feel compelled to reflect on the presence or meaning of a character with a small amount of screen time or one who does not contribute to the progression of the film's plot. Four different frames of reference allow for a comprehensive analysis taking into account multiple artistic choices which may culminate in an impact on the viewer's perception of a character. In this way, and with the inclusion of the "mode of reception," Eder channels the instinctual responses to film characters into an objective system of analysis.

Eder also makes mention of various types of character reception: "empirische", "intendierte", and "ideale" (*Die Figur im Film*, 133). These reflect, respectively, the ways in which characters are perceived by the audience in reality, the way in which the filmmaker meant for them to be perceived, and how the characters would be perceived under optimal conditions (when the perspective of the viewer and the intentions of the filmmaker align). The consideration of these forms of character reception is especially important while analyzing films concerned with topical themes—such as neo-Nazism in the United States and Germany—because the "optimal conditions" in which filmmakers and viewers can understand one another are made more attainable by a shared recognition of cultural events. Well-known current events which overlap thematically with film content lead to both the viewer's and the filmmaker's focus gravitating towards the same sociopolitical issues while considering the film. As the last three of

Eder's four aspects of character are (at least in part) reception-driven, these varying types of circumstances are important to understand when considering his model.

Eder utilizes the portrayal of Rick Blaine in *Casablanca* as a case study for each part of the clock of character. These examples will be briefly noted in this chapter in order to introduce each section of the clock. To begin with, "audiovisuelle Darstellungen" and "basale Wahrnehmung" (*Die Figur im Film*, 142) determine the character as an artifact. The lighting, camera angles, sound editing, and other building blocks of the film which were included by the filmmaker's choice contribute to this aspect. Therefore, technical details utilized in the portrayal of a character are the starting point for character analysis. Their presence is objective, and do not rely on the viewer's reception (aside from the need for them to notice or at least unconsciously absorb such details). In terms of *Casablanca*, Eder references the way in which other characters' dialogues about Rick in his absence as well as a close-up of his writing begin to shape the audience's perception of him. Notable here is the fact that Rick does not have to be visible on-screen for the viewer to begin to perceive him. These audiovisual details still create the audience's very first impression of Rick's character.

This first impression of Rick is then built on piece by piece through the creation of "mentale Modelle der Figur" and "Vorstellungen über eine Gestalt" (*Die Figur im Film*, 142). There are several ways to define this second aspect of "the clock of character," as it is sometimes described as the character's presence as a social or fictional being, or as the portrait of the character which the audience has painted in their minds. The sum of these descriptions creates this section of the clock. In Eder's case study, it denotes a budding perception of Rick which draws from the traits of the character as an artifact, but also from the viewer's prior, personal experiences with similar character models both in film and in real life. In this way, the second

aspect bridges the gap between the mode of representation shown by the clock of character (such as the character as an artifact) and the mode of reception (the character as a symbol or symptom). Although Eder presents this second aspect as part of the mode of representation, I posit that the character as a fictional being—or the "mental model" of the character—could conceivably be considered a part of either mode. Not only the audiovisual cues provided to the audience, but also the audience's preconceived notions of character archetypes and associations with these traits contribute to their mental model of the character.

Mental models are not only applied in film studies, but also to a myriad of other fields for the purpose of understanding perceptions which exist in a given social system. For example, Jones et al. (2011) defines mental models as "personal, internal representations of external reality that people use to interact with the world around them." The authors discuss the application of mental models in decision making practices in natural resource management. Mental models provide a view of reception which emphasizes interpretation, thereby taking into account both external circumstances and internal preconceptions. This range of potential uses further illustrates why the second aspect of the clock of character could occupy a role in the mode of representation and the mode of reception.

The mental model of a character may be continuously evolving throughout the film, and could even be further revised with reflection after the film. It is also related to situational models and images we have of ourselves—simply put, a viewer's understanding of a character is based on both what they see in the film and the preconceptions about social behavior which they bring with them into the theater. Therefore, it may be realistic to presume that the cultural moment in which the viewer finds themselves also has an impact on their mental models.

Eder considers the above two aspects of character (artifact and fictional being) as contributing to a "system of anthropological categories" that can aid in character analysis. These involve the corporeality, mind, and sociality of characters. The element of sociality can be addressed with reference to the characters of interest through the social networks portrayed in the film.

Just as the analysis of a character as an artifact contributes to the understanding of that character as a fictional being, so does the latter inform the analysis of the character's "higher meanings", which constructs the next section of the "clock of character":

Haben die Zuschauer Eigenschaften des fiktiven Wesens erfasst, können sie es als Zeichen begreifen, das über die fiktive Welt hinausweist und zur Vermittlung indirekter Bedeutungen, übergeordneter Themen und allgemeiner Aussagen beiträgt. (*Die Figur im Film*, 142)

These higher-level meanings denote the aspects of character as a symbol (and then lead to our understanding of the character as a symptom). Eder uses the term "symbol" here to refer to all "higher level" or indirect meanings (such as themes) that might be interpreted from a character and which may apply not only to that particular character, but may also tie in to greater themes of the film as a whole. A character could in theory symbolize something in the oft-recognized manner of representation or exemplification (Eder explains that Rick may be seen as a symbol for America during WWII) but this category of analysis not only indicates characters that (in the simplest sense) stand for another entity. Its broadness allows for all manner of theories about the character, which are most often not explicitly shown.

Analyzing a character as a symptom involves a broader view: it includes a look at the intentions during the creation of the film and the reactions of the audience members to its contents. More succinctly, it indicates the "socio-cultural causes in [the characters'] production and to effects in their reception" (Eder, "Understanding Characters" 19). When analyzing Rick from *Casablanca* as a symptom, his being a role model for many viewers of the film is among the more salient features of his reception: his stoic charm and the selflessness he portrays in the final scenes of *Casablanca* (giving up Ilsa, and putting himself in harm's way so that she and Victor can leave) turned him into an icon who represented heroism to the viewer. The ultimate effect of his character on the audience is a positive one, and viewers leave the theater admiring him and desiring to be more like him. In this way, the aspect of symbol is indicative of a certain interpretation of a character, whereas the aspect of symptom denotes the effect on the viewer of that interpretation: the emotional impacts or reflections which the viewer may experience throughout the film and after its conclusion.

In these ways, the aspects of symbol and symptom are concerned with the potential reception of a character more than the way in which that character is represented (they have a reception-driven nature). I contend that, especially for this thesis, keeping these two parts of the clock separate from one another only serves to weaken the analysis of the films. The interpreted "higher level meanings" associated with a character as a symbol will be drawn by the viewer in part from the context (social, political, historical, etc.) prior to and at the time of the film's premiere, especially if the film deals with topical themes. In the cases of *Er ist wieder da* and *Imperium*, sociopolitical strife is a key element in the makeup of the films, and so the interpretations of the films' themes and messages as well as their intentions and impacts will be inextricably linked.

For example, Eder's analysis of Rick as a symptom entailed a consideration of the "aesthetic and political intentions the film team associated with Rick or how he affected the audiences of his time" ("Understanding Characters," 21). This relates to Eder's idea of an "intended reception"—filmmakers utilize their characters to carry higher meaning (symbol aspect) relating to their time period. In the case of *Er ist wieder da* and *Imperium*, the timing and sociopolitical context of the films' releases would make a division of the symptom and symbol categories unwise: the audience's interpretations of the film and its characters' meanings will naturally reflect the cultural era during which they live, and so the thematic elements of the films which are associated with insidious neo-Nazism in modern society are intrinsically linked with the real cultural moment in which the viewers find themselves—and thus their processing and reflection on the films' contents beyond their viewing. The symbol and symptom (and sometimes even the fictional being/mental model) sections of the "clock of character" succeed in relaying the character's "mode of reception."

3.1 Analyzing Er ist wieder da

In the film *Er ist wieder da*, our character of interest is Oliver Masucci's Adolf Hitler. The first-person perspective used in the beginning of the film as well as the non-diegetic narration by Hitler defines his character as an artifact. The camera work (namely the evolution from a shaky camera to a steady camera over the course of the film) facilitates the first-person perspective by replicating Hitler's transition from vulnerable to confident in modern-day Germany. Even before Hitler makes his first visible appearance, his voice is heard as the audience's view roves over various regions of Germany. The bird's eye view of the Reichstag (Figure 2) is the final image shown in this sequence. The camera pans over each location, and

settles finally directly over the Reichstag—this focus illustrating immediately the ultimate goal of the journey on which Hitler will embark when he reappears in Germany. A match cut then occurs: Hitler's eye pops open as he awakens in modern-day Berlin, replacing the circular dome of the Reichstag. This cut once again reiterates his yearning for political power, but also symbolizes his view of himself as the true authority in Germany (the audience's prior knowledge of Hitler and the historical context of his character assist in informing these readings of the scene). This visual equivalency reminds the audience of Hitler's inflated ego and forceful ambitions as they see him rise up from the ground.
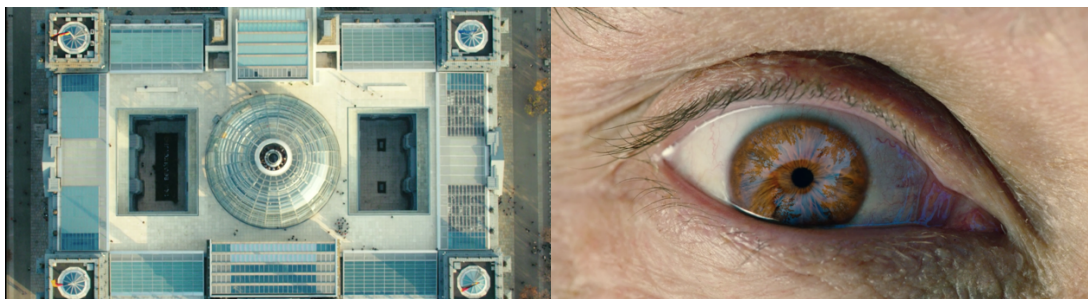

Figure 2. A bird's-eye view of the Reichstag and an extreme close-up of Oliver Masucci's eye which are shown sequentially in Er ist wieder da.

The next three images (Figures 3-5) show Hitler's perspective as he awakens in Berlin in 2014. Not only do these shots often include at least one of his hands extending in front of the camera to enforce his point of view, but they also show him looking down at his uniform. The audience is immediately shown that they occupy his viewpoint. The occupation of not only his body but also the Nazi uniform is especially jarring for the audience. The last two images exhibit Hitler's anxiety and vulnerability in his new setting—meaning that not only are the viewers forced to witness a coincidence of their and Hitler's identities, but that the audience should feel pity (though only a fleeting modicum thereof) for him due to his evident distress in the modern

day. Here the viewer would not feel sympathy for Hitler as he is historically known, but for a

person in whose shoes they have been forced to walk a mile, and who is dazed and confused in a

foreign setting.

Figure 3. As Hitler awakens in modern-day Berlin, this point-of-view shot places the viewer in his uniform.

Figure 4. Hitler recoils as he is bombarded with a new environment. His hand obscures the audience's view as he protects his face. This defensive behavior suggests that the audience should feel some modicum of pity for his vulnerable state.

Figure 5. Dazed and confused, and having been maced by a startled mother, Hitler wanders about in a red-toned, hazy blur.

The point-of-view shots are important in relation to another take on character analysis: Murray Smith's concept of alignment. This theory is compatible with Eder's discussion of a mental model of the self. Smith describes alignment as one of three integral parts of building sympathy for a character. He defines it as "[…] the process by which spectators are placed in relation to characters in terms of access to their actions, and to what they know and feel" (83). The important term here is "access." The camera work in the first 15 minutes of *Er ist wieder da* gives the viewer complete and unfettered access to Hitler's perspective. In this way, the viewpoint allows the audience a brief glimpse into his mind.

While the montage of views of Germany from above cross the screen, Hitler's voice can be heard as the overture of *La Gazza Ladra* plays. He passionately expresses his surprise at the tenacity of the German people:

Das Volk hat mich voll am meisten überrascht. Nun habe ich ja wirklich das Menschenmögliche getan, um auf diesem vom Feinde entweihten Boden die Grundlagen für eine Fortexistenz zu zerstören. Von daher hätte es dieses Volk doch eigentlich gar nicht mehr geben dürfen. Es ist aber, wie ich jetzt feststelle, immer noch da! Das ist mir

einigermaßen unbegreiflich. Andererseits… ich bin ja auch da. Und das verstehe ich genauso wenig.

As with Eder's example of Rick Blaine as an artifact, Hitler's voiceover enables the audience to perceive Hitler before he appears on-screen. In the instance of this commentary, the viewer also perceives an ominousness—that if the audience follows the narrator's logic, then not only are the German people persistent, but so is Hitler—and by extension and implication, the ideology which he peddled. The intense delivery of this speech also foreshadows his ability to influence and manipulate those around him. This contributes to the audience's understanding of Hitler's character as a social or fictional being—both the construction of Hitler as an artifact and the audience's prior knowledge of his influence over others and the power of his speeches make the audience see that his persona has not been altered since the existence of the Third Reich.

In *Er ist wieder da*, Hitler continuously expands his social web; the audience is shocked and disturbed by his insidiousness but may be simultaneously impressed by his rapid ascent to popularity in the modern day. His social adeptness is an example of what Eder considers to be a "social feature" of his character, and it has a strong impact on the audience's mental model of Masucci's Hitler—it contributes to his position in the film's overall character constellation. Not only his ambition (which was immediately exhibited) but also his complete lack of self-doubt in social scenarios allow him to hold a room in thrall. In this way, he connects with Katja Bellini, the chairperson of a television station (MyTV) who presents to the viewer as a modern-day Eva Braun (a blonde woman who catches Hitler's eye and who ultimately departs with him in his car at the end of the film). He is able to talk himself into a role on her channel during their first meeting. His willfulness additionally allows him to plow over less confident people, including the sheepish Sawatzki and the underhanded Sensenbrink. The film's character constellation

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enables the proximity of Hitler to these other characters—especially Sawatzki for a large portion of the film—which serves to further emphasize Hitler's overpowering personality.

Hitler's quick ascent to an influential position in the film shows his character's higher level meaning: it communicates the German public's fear of another fascist's rise to power in the present day, as well as how quickly neo-Nazis could be mobilized by a charismatic leader. Parsing apart the symbol and symptom sections of Eder's clock is not advisable for this film, largely due to the utilization in the film of non-actors reacting to Hitler. In this way, the "audience reaction" has been included within the film itself: those who are shown to support Hitler and his ideology throughout the film are not all fictional. This usage of clips of real German citizens reacting positively to Masucci's Hitler (such as in their interviews with him) creates an unnerving backdrop for the rise of Hitler's star in television and intertwines real world concerns with the film's and character's thematic messages.

Hitler reappears in Germany with no warning, and the entertainment industry rejoices— German citizens feel emboldened to voice controversial and often offensive opinions, such as those regarding immigration issues. The emphasis placed by the film on his acceptance in modern German society reminds the audience of the sociocultural state of Germany, such as the presence of neo-Nazis in the country and the fears accompanying the European "refugee crisis." His character is therefore symptomatic of German citizens' political concerns as well as the intentions of both the filmmakers and the story's original author (Timur Vermes) to comment on the issues of the day. Hitler's rapid ascension and transition from vulnerability to grossly influential, as well as his social capabilities, point to the concern in German society of this ideology that could be lurking just below the surface—waiting for a leader to latch onto.

3.2 Analyzing Imperium

The "clock of character" can just as well be applied to *Imperium*. In this film, the lighting and camera angles used for the encounters with the film's variety of neo-Nazi characters set Gerry Conway apart and define him as an artifact. As can be seen in images from the film, a scene's lighting changes as the undercover FBI agent Foster meets each neo-Nazi character in turn. Unlike his meeting with a group in a darkened diner earlier in the film (Figure 6), his first meeting with Conway at a barbeque is bathed in natural light (Figure 7). The former meeting was filled with tension; Foster was nervous about being found out, and the group's members were visibly aggressive. Unlike Conway, the other neo-Nazis often attempt to intimidate Foster by behaving unpredictably, invading his personal space, and physically threatening him. At the barbeque, however, Foster is able to engage in a conversation with Conway and another neo-Nazi (and even the latter behaves in a jovial and friendly manner in this situation).
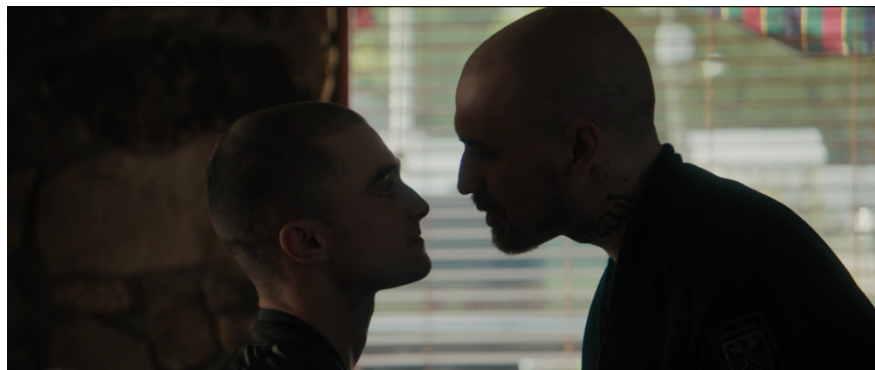

Figure 6. Foster is stared down and interrogated as he has his first interaction with neo-Nazis while undercover.

In this way, the first group that Foster meets fits in with a standard neo-Nazi archetype. These characters shave their heads and sport tattoos complete with Nazi iconography. They cause scenes in public and destroy property. As the film progresses, others that were categorized with these standard neo-Nazis earlier in the film are seen to be more than what first meets the

eye. For example, the extreme right-wing radio host, Dallas Wolf, is revealed to not care at all for the ideology, acting as a neo-Nazi (or at least as a sympathizer) simply to gain listeners and earn revenue from them.

Wolf, although not truly embracing the neo-Nazi belief system, is still grouped together in the minds of audience members with the other neo-Nazis, thanks to his widely publicized affiliation with them as well as his residence, which is shown to be in a darkened basement. In this way, the lighting around each neo-Nazi character at the time of their first meeting with Foster is reflective of the impression which he has of them. While darkened rooms reflect Foster's fear of being found out and attacked by the more volatile neo-Nazis, or indicate his suspicion of their involvement in the terrorist plot, the sunny day during which Foster meets Conway would suggest that Foster felt at least physically secure (if still somewhat mentally and emotionally disturbed) in Conway's presence. Conway later states that he "avoids the political stuff," referring to the ill-fated rally from which Foster escaped, giving Foster a reason to believe that with Conway, he is free from the threat of harm which hangs over him in the presence of the other neo-Nazis.

Figure 7. Foster meets Conway for the first time at the barbeque.

Late in the film, however, the lighting around Conway changes. Just before he reveals his plans to Foster, they sit together in a darkened room (Figure 8). This foreshadows the approaching development of the audience's mental model of his character—although the audience undoubtedly sides with Foster and rejects Conway's belief system, Conway initially comes across as a relatively benign presence in the film. The character constellation of the film which includes an array of more volatile neo-Nazis whose behavior stands in stark contrast to Conway's ensures this impression. The most disturbing aspects of his character are his association with neo-Nazis and the echoes of his beliefs in the words of his children—these are powerful details, though he still appears in these scenes to be a non-violent member of the ideology. When Conway takes Foster outside to tell him about the terrorist plot, the sunlight from earlier in the film is gone, and Conway's "halo" is thus missing—now grouping him with the other neo-Nazis Foster has encountered (Figure 9).

Figure 8. Conway sympathizes with Foster pre-confession.

Figure 9. Conway reveals his plans.

The other neo-Nazis aren't just set apart from Conway via each scene's lighting, but also by the usage of distinct camera angles. Shots of Foster with these other characters often portray more of his body while dividing theirs into parts. For example, as seen in Figure 10, Foster is shown speaking with a young neo-Nazi named Johnny. Foster is clearly disturbed by Johnny's involvement in the group due to his youth and what Foster perceives to be a potential for change in the young man (Johnny does ultimately leave the neo-Nazi milieu). This scene alternates with a close-up shot of the two characters talking, but repeatedly cuts away to show a low-angle shot of Foster standing next to Johnny. In these shots, Johnny's body floats slightly off-center in the frame, with only the middle of his torso showing. His head and legs are out of frame, and this succeeds in dehumanizing him as he transforms from another character who is equal to Foster to a vehicle for Foster's discomfort and disappointment at the young man's slurs. Unlike Johnny, Conway is always shown front and center in the same way as Foster (see Figures 8 and 9), and this betrays his higher function in the film as Foster's main adversary.

Figure 10. Foster listens in consternation to Johnny's story.

These differences in lighting and angles impact the audience's perception of the film's character constellation. The initial warmth of Foster's interactions with Conway stand in stark contrast to his meetings with other neo-Nazis in the film. Conway's house becomes a sanctuary for him, and Foster confides in him about his struggles (as much as he can without blowing his cover). The relationship built between the two becomes the impetus for Conway's later exposure.

Sound is additionally important in the construction of Conway's character. Most of the confrontations between Foster and the other neo-Nazis in the film are accompanied by tense, non-diegetic music. When he is with Conway, however, Foster is comforted by the diegetic classical music (namely scores by Johannes Brahms) coming from Conway's stereo, despite his being simultaneously surrounded by a collection of historical Nazi paraphernalia. Foster continues to hear Brahms at every visit to Conway's house: Symphony No. 4, Quintet in B minor for Clarinet, Two Violins, Viola, and Cello, Op. 115, Symphony No.1 in C Minor, Op. 68, and Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 77. In this way, song after song, Foster forms a bond with Conway as they discuss their respective musical tastes and other artistic interests.

While analyzing film characters as fictional beings, Eder notes the "general artifact properties" of filmic characters such as "realism or multi-dimensionality" (Eder, "Understanding Characters," 21). This concept is similar to the first character aspect mentioned

earlier (character as an artifact) but encompasses the more abstract traits of a character. General artifact properties are useful for a side-by-side examination of Conway in *Imperium* and Hitler in *Er ist wieder da*. While Conway's portrayal is bound by realism, Hitler's is defined by a supernatural element; he is a man out of his own time, but through a process unknown to the viewer, he is able to come back from the dead. Conway is ultimately defeated and another neo-Nazi (Johnny) is able to remove himself from the group and its ideology. Therefore, the conclusion of *Imperium* discloses a hopefulness that neo-Nazism can be successfully opposed. In *Er ist wieder da*, though, our "hero" Sawatzki ends up locked away in a padded room, while Hitler continues to develop his career with Bellini at his side.

This difference between these two antagonists' general artifact properties is key: whereas Hitler's return is shown to be a fantastical occurrence, as he is not only reincarnated but also transported through time, Conway is represented as a realistic being bound by laws and mortality. The undying nature of Hitler's ideology in *Er ist wieder da* is suggestive of a concern in the country about neo-Nazis gaining power and influence. This is especially relevant to the sociocultural issues in Europe over the last decade (the "refugee crisis" in particular) as there has been a spotlight on actions of the far-right. On the other hand, Conway's hidden terrorism demonstrates a lack of trust in American society—whether that be a lack of trust between citizens or in those in political power. The latter can be connected with the presidential campaign and election of Donald Trump: distrust in government was embodied in one of Trump's unofficial campaign slogans, "drain the swamp." In addition, Foster's work to relate to and ingratiate himself within neo-Nazi groups did not just yield a solution to the case he was working—he was also able to encourage one young neo-Nazi to reform himself. This addresses a common social issue in a time of political division: though an echo chamber and avoidance of

conflict is more comfortable, Foster's exchanges with the film's neo-Nazis suggests that it is interaction and discourse which will free those trapped in an ideology driven by ignorance. These symptomatic issues raised by the two films will be further discussed in Chapter 4.

Conway makes his mark on the audience as the only immediately friendly neo-Nazi that Foster has met—every other encounter ranges from uncomfortable to dangerous. Conway is a veiled threat: he could be your neighbor, and seems at first charismatic and harmless. He is, however, the most threatening of the neo-Nazis with whom Foster comes into contact. His presence acts as a symbol for the ever-present conflict in the fabric of the United States that stems from racism and fear, and communicates a theme of mistrust which winds its way through the film. In this way, he may also be read as a symptom: a cause for the creation of the film and for his character's persona stems from a desire by the filmmakers to address the insidiousness of neo-Nazism in America. Additionally, American viewers see his behavior and pretense of normalcy (namely that which is depicted during the barbeque scene) and connect the image of him standing at the grill and teasing his children to the mental models which they have of their own acquaintances—again raising questions and concerns about the proximity of this hateful ideology to one's own home.

3.3 Conclusion

Eder's "clock of character" allows for a systematic approach to character analysis, and assists in placing these films in their cultural moment through both the "symbol" and "symptom" aspects as a mode of reception which relies on the perspective of the viewer. One weakness of Eder's model, at least in the context of the films analyzed in this thesis, is the separation of the symbol and symptom aspects. The concept of character as a symbol is best utilized as a subset of

the symptom aspect, especially in the case of films with themes which are currently of cultural significance. Identifying the four aspects' natures as artist- or reception-driven as an alternative to the categories "mode of representation" and "mode of reception" can provide further clarity to the source of each aspect. In this regard, acknowledgement should also be given to the dual nature of the second aspect (fictional being) as it can be categorized as a part of the character's mode of representation or mode or reception.

Eder's model is suitable for an acknowledgement of the cultural influences on character creation by filmmakers and on a character's reception by viewer. It places subjectivity into the latter two aspects of the clock of character where it can be more carefully observed (via the mode of reception). The "clock of character" considers characters first as artifacts, then as fictional beings, symbols, and symptoms, expanding outwards to include more complex and evolving factors. Each aspect builds into the next as the level of complexity increases—allowing for a stepwise analysis of our characters of interest, as well as a measured comparison of the two to one another.

In the films *Imperium* and *Er ist wieder da*, the characters of Conway and Hitler are respectively humanized from the very first aspect applied to the films (characters as artifacts). In *Er ist wieder da*, Hitler is humanized via narration and first-person shots at the beginning of the film—the audience is forced to walk a mile in his shoes after his awakening in Berlin, and is made to chuckle at his foolishness and apparent harmlessness as he initially bumbles about, while simultaneously developing a sense of pity for his plight. The dissection of characters in *Imperium* via lighting and camera work (only showing parts of their bodies, not showing their faces while in conversation with Foster, etc.) while still fully presenting Foster's expressions works to dehumanize most neo-Nazis aside from Conway. However, both Hitler and Conway are

eventually revealed to have a greater capacity for harm than what their debuts in the films would have suggested. This creeping and swelling sense of danger perceived from the characters leaves the viewer contemplating the state of neo-Nazism in their societies in the present day. More specifically, the filmmakers of both films succeed in making a statement which critiques the underestimation of neo-Nazism in their respective societies.

Both Hitler in *Er ist wieder da* and Dallas Wolf in *Imperium* misuse popular media to espouse Nazi ideology. Their utilization of a television show and a radio show, respectively, allow both characters to expand their social circles and gain power and influence. By displaying the negative societal impacts of this misuse, mainly via the enablement of a harmful ideology and its members, the filmmakers of both films communicate the importance of "ethical" media production and consumption.

Breaking down Hitler and Conway with the guidance of the "clock of character" allows not only for a comprehensive analysis of the way in which both the filmmakers and audience members engage with the characters, but also what these characters' presence in each of our films of interest mean for the conveyed commentary on present-day society. In order to further understand the messages communicated by the films, an observation of the cultural moment during which they were created and premiered is critical. Chapter 4 will chronicle events which occurred in the mid-2010s and which are related to the threat of neo-Nazism in both the United States and Germany. This examination will serve to further clarify the commentary provided by Conway's and Hitler's portrayals in *Imperium* and *Er ist wieder da*.

Chapter 4

How the sociopolitical themes of *Imperium* and *Er ist wieder da* critique the current cultural moments of the United States and Germany

The presence of Nazi ideology in present day Germany and the United States raises the question of how this belief system has been allowed to persevere in modern civilized society. Terrorist threats are monitored and quelled by governmental force, and racist beliefs are by and large condemned in our society. The survival of these racist beliefs and the continued occurrences of neo-Nazi rallies and attacks are therefore not due to a lack of acknowledgement of their presence, but instead due to an underestimation of the impact of neo-Nazis on our societies as a whole. Privilege allows a large portion of the population to live without thinking about the threat on a day-to-day basis, although those targeted by neo-Nazis have no choice but to recognize the danger. In addition, this ideology often operates underground, on the edges of our cultures and lurking in online forums and chatrooms, making it difficult at times even to label this collective as a "movement." A seeming lack of power or ability to organize within neo-Nazi groups leads to the perception that they are only a blight on society, and not as threatening as other terrorist factions—that is, until periods of flare-ups driven by current events causes reflection on the presence of these groups in our societies. This underestimation of the threat of neo-Nazism in both America and Germany contributes to the ideology's continued presence in these nations.

Both *Imperium* and *Er ist wieder da* succeed in depicting this underestimation. Each film contains themes and messages that reflect the current cultural moments of the real world, and recognize the xenophobia and racism in both countries. Although both films portray their neo-

Nazi characters as partially incompetent, they also acknowledge that these characters' seemingly

haphazard efforts to promote their ideology will ultimately have harmful consequences (ranging

from the normalization of racism to physical assaults and terrorism). In *Imperium*, this is

demonstrated by nearly every group of neo-Nazis Nate comes across, and in *Er ist wieder da*,

through the scenes depicting the headquarters of the NPD (Nationaldemokratische Partei

Deutschlands), the newsreel images of neo-Nazis that are spliced throughout the film, and the

skinheads' beating of Hitler (the originator of many aspects of their ideology), as well as Hitler's

initial bumbling behavior. The films also criticize the usage of news and entertainment media for

profit, especially when the user does not contemplate associated long-term societal impacts. Two

examples of this are the MyTV station's broadcasting of Hitler (in *Er ist wieder da*) and Dallas

Wolf's comments on an impending race war (in *Imperium*).

4.1 Imperium *and mid-2010s America*

The issues of racism and xenophobia are front and center in *Imperium*. These subjects are

presented as problematic and harmful, especially when paired with the rampant conspiracies

which the neo-Nazi characters in the film support and perpetuate. While the film does

acknowledge the destructiveness of these issues, it is also quick to show its neo-Nazi characters

as incompetent, thereby reducing their threatening nature in the eyes of those around them.

An example of this projection of incompetence is the neo-Nazis' propensity for petty

violence amongst themselves (e.g. Johnny and Roy's arguing, or complaints about a lack of

alcohol at Conway's barbeque gathering). Another is their tendency to oppose each other on the

basis of minor differences, rather than acting as a group, such as Andrew Blackwell and Vince's

tense disagreements about religion, or Vince's criticism of the KKK for being "tired old guys

waiting for some catastrophe to start a race war." Their lack of unity makes it appear as though they would be unable to successfully perpetrate a planned and large-scale terroristic act. Their need for Nate to guide them in terms of weapons maintenance and hazardous chemical management also shows their ineptitude. Ineffectual one-liners such as Vince Sargent's "we can't control the ketchup, but we can control the streets" (in regard to the kosher certification service of the Orthodox Union) does not help their image. The film therefore manages to show the dangerous nature of neo-Nazism while also displaying the incompetence that can occur on an individual level, thus exposing one reason why neo-Nazis may be underestimated—they may not appear threatening on a personal basis.

However, their prejudices can become ingrained in a society and passed along to others, especially those susceptible due to their youth (for example, they were passed on to Conway's children and to Johnny). In this way, they can persist over long periods of time. Although they may not always result in violence (as opposed to the confrontation between the neo-Nazis and the Antifascist League protestors at the rally or the terrorist plot planned by Conway and his co-conspirators), they still have detrimental societal impacts. This presence of widespread bigotry in day-to-day life, however, does not often foster the same immediate call to action against neo-Nazism as a violent event may inspire. Indoctrinated hate, if not physically acted on, may go unacknowledged or unaltered and may continue to prosper through the ignorance of its hosts.

This form of indoctrinated hate is addressed through Johnny's redemption subplot and the racist remarks made by Conway's children. These aspects of the film reflect the indoctrination of youth into neo-Nazism, as well as how hate can stem from ostracism and a sense of victimhood. Johnny's involvement with neo-Nazism began when he witnessed a friend being beaten by a group of black students (or so he initially told Nate). At the end of the film, however, he notes

that it was his sense of "victimhood" which drove him to the ideology: "I blamed black kids and I blamed the school, I blamed… the cops, I blamed everybody. I was going to hurt everyone else the way they hurt me." Joining the neo-Nazis not only gave Johnny a social network of sorts, but it also made him feel powerful—even though it is evident by his negative interactions with Roy that these so-called friendships are toxic.

Johnny's vulnerability to the ideology is echoed in some ways by the plight of Gerry Conway's children. When they first meet Nate, Madeline and Timmy show him a tree house which Gerry had built for them. They tell Nate that it will "protect [them] from the mud people." They then repeat slogans which they have learned from their parents: "Always be ready. Always be watchful, and stick together." Like Johnny, their youth and naiveté made them vulnerable to this exposure to the ideology. Unlike Johnny, however, Conway's children were raised on the ideology as though it was their religion. They were taught from the very start of their lives that these perspectives regarding others were the norm, and their misguided enthusiasm in emulating their father is as disturbing to the audience as it is to Nate. Conway's character in *Imperium* reflects the fear that neo-Nazism could be thriving in one's immediate vicinity (one's own neighborhood, for example) as well as how that presence can have a detrimental impact on impressionable young minds.

It's no secret that Conway is a neo-Nazi—he holds a barbeque for the other neo-Nazis in his yard for all of the world to see, and teaches his children to repeat neo-Nazi slogans. And yet he is still the character who we perceive as less dangerous than the others—here it is important to keep in mind the character constellation which the audience has for reference and comparison in this film. There is an entire collection of neo-Nazis on-screen, and in comparison to Blackwell, who is building a militaristic camp for the Aryan Alliance, or Wolf, who is raving about a race

war on air, Conway is not suspected to be building a bomb or plotting a terrorist attack. He is leading a peaceful suburban life, with the only exception being his neo-Nazi ideology. When talking to Nate about his children and their treehouse, he says, "You know how you spell love, Nate? T-I-M-E." This line only serves to further cement his role as a man who seemingly prioritizes his quiet and contented family life over his intolerant ideology, and therefore appears unlikely to act out violently—since acting on his ideology would undoubtedly endanger the status quo of his home life.

In contrast, the other neo-Nazi characters live recklessly and dangerously. For example, they accost an interracial couple on the street or acquire plans for the city's water system. Nate feels a certain level of comfort with Conway as opposed to the other neo-Nazis, feeling relaxed enough to tell him about issues which concern him (or at least, as much as he can without revealing his true identity). In turn, the audience also feels at ease, watching Nate recline on Conway's couch and listen to classical music. However, as Nate's handler Agent Zamparo stated: "Just because you're not looking at something, doesn't mean it's not there." Conway's desire to start a race war and destabilize the country was always a part of his character, even if only offered up to the audience implicitly, and perhaps it is Nate's wishful thinking as well as the viewer's which lead to an overlooking of him as a suspect.

Topical issues of racism and xenophobia dominate the film. For example, nearly every neo-Nazi with whom Nate speaks harbors conspiracy theories about the government or various industries being run or manipulated by Jewish people (for example, the mention of a "Zionist Occupation Government" or "ZOG" conspiracy). Racial slurs are also often used by the neo-Nazi characters throughout the film. They speak about the preservation of the "Aryan" or "European" race, and feel threatened by those different than them. Dallas Wolf, the talk show

host who capitalizes on the neo-Nazi ideology, mentions to Nate that he would like to expand his talk show into Florida. He says that this is because Florida is "ripe" due to all of the "immigration stuff." He is aware that there will be a larger audience for his show due to the political divisiveness as well as xenophobia associated with the immigration issue.

These topics echo the present cultural moment in the United States. Consider the rhetoric used by Donald Trump, who has made a large number of contentious and offensive remarks concerning immigrants entering the United States. For example, when he announced his candidacy for president, he stated that "tremendous infectious disease is pouring across the border" and that the U.S. is a "dumping ground for Mexico […] and many other parts of the world" (Walker). His ire is directed at Mexican immigrants in particular: "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. […] They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people" (Imbert). As president, Trump created an executive order banning entry of those from seven Muslim-majority countries (United States, Executive Office of the President [Donald Trump]). It was officially named "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States." This was widely criticized: some leaders and human rights groups disparaged the ban itself (Sadiq Khan, the mayor of London, called it "shameful and cruel," and Amnesty International called it an "appalling move with potentially catastrophic consequences"). America's next-door-neighbor presented a more hospitable front in response, with Justin Trudeau tweeting: "To those fleeing persecution, terror and war, Canadians will welcome you, regardless of your faith" (BBC News).

Nate initially believes that Dallas Wolf is involved in the planning of the impending terrorist attack due to his fervent claims on his show. However, we later learn that Wolf is an

imposter. He acts as though he is passionate about neo-Nazi ideology: he tells Nate that he would "give his life for the cause." He shows up at a conference for white supremacists, and promotes his book and his brand. But when he is interrogated by Zamparo, it is revealed that Wolf was not actually passionate about the ideology: he states that he spoke about violent acts only as "public entertainment" and was only concerned with getting funding for expanding his show. He says, "it is not illegal to advocate violence," as well as "I tell these jackasses what they want to hear… and they worship me for it." Wolf has no concern for the consequences of his advocacy of violence. Even the white supremacist conference and march which he puts together are collectively named the "Dallas Wolf Unity Rally" (putting the focus first and foremost on his own name and persona). The rhetoric which he uses in his show is just a means to an end.

Trump is similar to Wolf in that he may not fully believe in his rhetoric on the topic of immigration—however, his words get a reaction and accumulate listeners and attention. His tendency to make inflammatory remarks affords him much attention and screen time on the news as many react with outrage and many with enthusiasm. It is not important for the purposes of this thesis whether or not Trump believes what he says about immigration or violence, but it is important that a great number of people in the United States believe in his words and support him because of what he says. A message of nationalism and xenophobia resonates with a group of people within the country—and they are threatening once mobilized, as evidenced by the Charlottesville Rally and other real-world events discussed below. Trump does not feel the need to discourage such behaviors, and even amplifies them with his violent discourse. The intensification of concerns over racism and xenophobia in the United States has led to a deepening of political divisions.

Trump's discourse has had a measurable impact on far-right groups' activities and attitudes across the country. Don Black, the founder of Stormfront (a neo-Nazi internet forum), stated that "demoralization has been the biggest enemy and Trump is changing all that. He's certainly creating a movement that will continue independently of him even if he does fold at some point" (Schreckinger). When asked about Trump's success in the race so far in 2016, white supremacist David Duke said, "I love it. The fact that Donald Trump's doing so well, it proves that I'm winning. I am winning." Richard Spencer, president of the National Policy Institute (a white nationalist think-tank), said "before Trump, our identity ideas, national ideas, they had no place to go" (Mascaro).

The Anti-Defamation League and the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) have stated that Trump's order to prevent the entrance of Muslims into the U.S. increased the amount of online chatter by white supremacists and could incite violence against Muslims. Mark Potok of the SPLC said: "When well-known public figures make these kinds of statements in the public square, they are taken as a permission-giving by criminal elements who go out and act on their words. Is it energizing the groups? Yeah. They're thrilled" (Schreckinger). Not only has Trump repeatedly made such contentious remarks, he has also been seemingly unaffected by any public outcry about his words. This lack of consequences has likely increased a sense of validation and immunity among those who echo Trump's rhetoric.

Although white supremacists supported Trump in the mid-2010s, Trump has a mixed history with such groups. He disavowed David Duke after his 2000 bid for president, saying that he would not want to keep company with a Klansman (claiming this as one reason for his departure from the Reform Party). In 2016, however, when asked about the KKK supporting him, he said he didn't know anything about "David Duke or white supremacists." When pressed,

he said that he would have to "look at the group" to determine if they should be disavowed, and claimed that he didn't know David Duke and that he had never met him before (Bradner). This suggests either confusion or forgetfulness on Trump's part, or an active attempt to dodge the social pressure pushing for a disavowal. Even if he did not know David Duke personally, his response dodges the main issue at hand: the reasonable public pressure for the president to speak out against a racist ideology. His avoidance of the topic (on this and on other occasions) indicates that he is aware that a disavowal may disappoint some of his supporters.

The political divides which have become only more entrenched with the entrance of Trump into the Oval Office have led to violent encounters between white supremacists and protestors. Such an event is reflected in *Imperium*, when Nate is marching alongside Dallas Wolf, Andrew Blackwell, and a number of other neo-Nazis. A group of Antifa protestors breaks through a barrier and begins fighting with the neo-Nazis. This altercation leads to Nate fleeing the scene after rescuing Blackwell. Although not explored in great depth, this violent clash demonstrates the deep political divide currently in the United States. Though the Antifa characters were not presented as complex characters (partially through the coverage of all of their faces with masks during their brief amount of screen-time), the outbreak of fighting between the two groups shows the precariousness of today's political landscape. The scene seems to have predicted the United States' current political climate: 2020 has been filled with protests relating to racial discrimination and police violence, with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement leading the way.

Trump often encourages and instills an Us vs. Them mentality in his followers. He has encouraged violence against those protesting his rallies: "So if you see somebody getting ready to throw a tomato, knock the crap out of 'em, would you? I promise you, I will pay for the legal

fees. I promise. I promise" (Nguyen). He has even encouraged security to take protesters' coats away while kicking them out: "Take him out. Get him out of here. Don't give him his coat! Don't give him his coat! Keep his coat. Confiscate his coat. You know it's about 10 degrees below zero outside … Keep his coat. Tell him we'll send it to him in a couple weeks" (Campbell). These actions only inflame the political divides already present in the country, especially as it is the president, an important source of leadership, who is encouraging further conflict.

A real-life event closer to the time of the film's premiere, and which echoed the conflict shown in *Imperium*, was the Charlottesville "Unite the Right" rally of August 2017. Violence broke out between white supremacists and their opponents over the presence of a Confederate statue (Katz). A vehicle was driven into a crowd of counter-protestors by one white nationalist, James Alex Fields Jr., resulting in the death of a counter-protester and injuries for more than 30 others (Yan). Trump responded to the rally and incident as follows: "We are closely following the terrible events unfolding in Charlottesville, Virginia. We condemn in the strongest possible terms this egregious display of hatred, bigotry and violence on many sides, on many sides" (Hanna et al.). Trump did not initially fault the white nationalists for the incident, instead casting blame on everyone present (Al Jazeera), even though the white nationalists present were responsible for the aforementioned bigotry as well as the second degree murder of a counter-protester (Wilson).

The tendency of Trump to ignore (and even, at times, encourage) bigotry and xenophobia in conjunction with the unwavering backing of his supporters illustrates the prevalence of these issues in contemporary American society—as well as why they persist. Trump's rhetoric incited a surge in white supremacist activity before (and during) his presidency, and the responsiveness

of members of this ideology to a figure in power who agreed with them shows their willingness to act when their beliefs are validated. Outside of such surges in activity, many underestimate neo-Nazis' ongoing impacts on society. As the ideology has reached a higher profile in the United States during the mid-2010s, there is hope that future administrations will act decisively to combat such harmful beliefs and behaviors.

4.2 Er ist wieder da *and mid-2010s Germany*

Recognition but underestimation of neo-Nazism and a lack of ethics in entertainment media is also present in *Er ist wieder da*. The former feeds into the latter: the idea that neo-Nazism poses a low-level threat, with concern arising only with visible flare-ups when events such as the "refugee crisis" occur, may lead to a greater acceptance of Hitler-related jokes and entertainment. Mainstream entertainment media may have an "open season" on taboo topics once a certain amount of time has passed to allow those jokes to be socially acceptable—but due to the magnitude of harm done by Nazism in the 20th century, as well as the ongoing impacts of the ideology via neo-Nazism into the present day, there is still disagreement over whether such material is acceptable in a comedic context. Both *Imperium* and *Er ist wieder da* suggest a need for filmmakers to consider and reflect on the effects that their portrayals of Hitler or neo-Nazi characters will have on the audience and on their societies.

In *Er ist wieder da*, many of the scenes which showed Hitler and civilians together were candid, capturing the real, live reactions of Germans to Masucci's Hitler. These include Masucci's interactions with tourists at the Brandenburg gate, posing with soccer fans at the World Cup, making conversation in restaurants, and painting portraits of passersby in small Bavarian towns. *Er ist wieder da* premiered on October 8th, 2015, but was set in 2014, and this

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setting is evident in some of the scenes (such as those with World Cup fans). Not all of the scenes were candid, however: one example of a scene staged to appear unscripted is Hitler's interactions with NPD members at their party headquarters in Berlin (Albers Ben Chamo). However, the film succeeds in smoothly transitioning between candid and staged scenes in such a way that it is at times difficult to tell what is real and what is not. The staged scenes are realistic and believable, and blend in with the candid ones, proving that the exhibited xenophobia seen by audiences is not at all outside of the realm of possibility.

Er ist wieder da shows that Rechtsextremismus is still present in Germany, but expresses the desire of various groups of neo-Nazis across the country for a political leader to latch onto who can legitimize the ideology in the eyes of the public. For example, the members shown in the sequence at the NPD party headquarters did not suggest a driven, self-sustainable movement, but rather a small group of untidy men puttering about an old building. This apparent lack of leadership makes it easier to underestimate the threat that accompanies these neo-Nazis' ideology. With regards to this need for leadership, Masucci's Hitler states: "[…] wenn Sie viele kleine Menschen—kleine Männer und kleine Frauen—zusammen tun und einen starken Großen wählen, dann könnte man natürlich etwas verändern." The person he was interviewing promptly agreed. A small group of men sitting in the basement of an old building seems far less threatening than a committed movement. And even though this scene was staged, its plausibility exposes popular opinion on the (in this case, seemingly limited) capabilities of neo-Nazis.

Discontent about the continued reception of refugees was prevalent in Germany in the mid-2010s, and this attitude was displayed by some interviewees in *Er ist wieder da*. In several of the unscripted interactions between Masucci's Hitler and the Germans he meets, the latter often expressed racist or xenophobic views towards not only newly-arrived immigrants, but

sometimes even towards other German citizens. These candid interactions commonly bring up the topic of immigration, and generalized themes of xenophobia and racism also arise. The first person to be interviewed by Hitler and Sawatzki—a restaurant worker named Annett—says that she could not complain about the immigrant children in the neighborhood because she would be called "ausländerfeindlich" and that she was afraid that their parents would stab her. Another mentions that "die Bartleute, die verdächtig sind" were a problem in Germany (in reference to Muslims; this interviewee names Salafists in particular), and that they should be kicked out of the country, regardless of where they were born: "die sind ja teilweise von hier, aber trotzdem sollen sie weg." A dog trainer complains of the continued influx of immigrants, and agrees with the film version of Hitler's comments on mixing races (which he makes as an analogy to mixing dog breeds). The belief in conspiracies is also an issue amongst the interviewees as it had been in some of the characters in *Imperium*; for example, Annett says that she did not vote in the elections as she believes them to be rigged.

There was a visible rejection of neo-Nazis in *Imperium*: by the FBI, the Antifa protestors, and Nate's friend Tim, who sees him at the march. Yet when someone sees Hitler during his cross-country trip in *Er ist wieder da*, he is more often than not accepted or at least laughed at. There are very few instances of rejection of his character in the movie: the man who speaks up during the painting scene; the MyTV producer Rico Mancello, who criticizes Bellini at the office while drunk; Franziska's grandmother, who recognizes Hitler; and ultimately Sawatzki when he realizes that Hitler is exactly who he claims to be. However, it takes Sawatzki most of the movie to recognize that Hitler is truly a threat—and this is only when he realizes that the Hitler with whom he has been touring Germany is the genuine article. He was not concerned with Hitler as an actor who passionately and committedly portrayed Hitler, despite witnessing the beliefs which

he saw Hitler encourage in his fellow Germans. It is possible that the image of Hitler himself has become satirical and lost its meaning in popular culture: seen as a street entertainer when near the Brandenburg Gate and as a comedian when painting behind an easel, Masucci's Hitler is by and large not taken seriously. There is a fixation on the imagery of Hitler as a symbol for the ideology, and it is nearly as recognizable in its connection to Nazism as is a swastika. However, over the course of time and a large number of Hitler parodies in popular visual media, this image has become less threatening. In addition, it may even distract from the changing face of modern-day neo-Nazism.

In this way, *Er ist wieder da* provides a critique of contemporary Germany: although the real Hitler can't appear in the present—and so the sight of him (or a lookalike) walking around may be less troubling than the sight of a neo-Nazi—concerns still arise when people take Hitler and neo-Nazism lightly. Whether he is an actor or not is irrelevant: the film is filled with scenes that show that the presence of Masucci's Hitler and his discourse encourages those around him to reveal their racist or xenophobic thoughts, much like a satirical Sacha Baron Cohen skit would. *Er ist wieder da* is a satire of Hitler films as they are commonly known—it ridicules the making of Hitler solely into a joke or a comedy. Hitler causes a lot of harm in the film, suggesting that Germany is not ready for this sort of comedy, and perhaps never will be, thus providing its own answer to the question posed concerning comedic portrayals of Hitler: "Darf man das?"

Interestingly, providing this answer may not have been the intention of the filmmakers. David Wnendt said that he wanted Germans to be able to laugh at Hitler, but that "[…] it should be the type of laugh that catches in your throat and you're almost ashamed when you realise what you're doing" (Connolly). Therefore, the original message of the film may have been shaped and changed by the candid responses of the non-acting interviewees, and while the film is

a comedy, the filmmakers do not want the audience to forget the larger context of Rechtsextremismus in modern-day Germany.

Far right ideologues have always been present in Germany (as in the United States), but the anti-immigration stance of some Germans (and its intensification in the mid-2010s) led to an increase in violence from nationalist and neo-Nazi groups. The European "refugee crisis" (as described in more detail below) defined 2015 for multiple countries, including Germany. Citizens responded to the "crisis" in a number of ways, from expressing pragmatic logistical concerns to exhibiting xenophobic behaviors (such as attacks on migrants and those helping them). The success of the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) during and following this greater influx of migrants (often refugees escaping dangerous situations in their home countries) shows the strong support that exists for the party's far-right ideas. 2015 ended with attacks on around 80 women in Cologne (and more in other cities, adding up to 1,200 criminal charges) on New Year's Eve (McGuinness, "Report: Cologne New Year's Eve Attacks 'Could Have Been Prevented'"). After the attacks, there was uncertainty as to the nationality of the offenders, sparking intensified discourse regarding the ongoing "refugee crisis" ("Report: Cologne New Year's Eve Attacks 'Could Have Been Prevented'"). This event contributed to ongoing debates as to the ability of the country to successfully and peacefully integrate the many people that were entering Germany.

When Hitler in *Er ist wieder da* states that he is a part of every German, he is referring to the xenophobia and racism which Germany seems unable to escape. His immortality is what most citizens of Germany fear—that despite the memorializing of the past and the victims of Nazism and neo-Nazism through the process of Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung, there will still be a number of Germans susceptible to racism and to fear of those who are unlike themselves. The

premiere of *Er ist wieder da* (2015) occurred three years after the publication of the novel by Timur Vermes. This indicates that the themes of the novel and the film were topical and resonated with readers, even before the most recent immigration "crisis." This support for far-right extremism is anything but new.

One issue that has evoked political tension in Germany is the aforementioned "refugee crisis" in Europe. Although refugees have been coming to Europe for decades, a surge in the mid-2010s sparked violence against refugees from far-right extremist groups such as the "Gruppe Freital," the "Identitäre Bewegung Deutschland," and the "Freien Kameradschaft Dresden" (Siewert), and the far-right political party AfD also saw an increase in support following the influx of refugees in 2015. Tens of thousands of migrants arrived in Upper Bavaria during the fall of 2015, largely a result of Hungary's actions in September of that year. The influx of people into cities such as Munich necessitated a great amount of assistance to process their arrivals. In response to the large crowds arriving, Christoph Hillenbrand (district president) said, "Wir sind hier sehr am Anschlag" ("Oberbayern rechnet mit bis zu 10.000 weiteren Flüchtlingen"). Angela Merkel was very vocal about the importance of accepting refugees into Germany. Initial estimates of expected refugees were only about half of the number that did arrive: 800,000 refugees (Große). But these large numbers nevertheless caught the country completely off guard and unprepared. The number of asylum-seekers rose from 202,000 in 2014 to approximately 475,000 in 2015 and 745,000 in 2016, a quantity of people for which Germany was unprepared (Landeszentrale für politische Bildung). More than 1.3 million asylum-seekers arrived in Germany between July 2015 and the end of July 2018, with the majority arriving between July 2015 and March of 2016 (Bielicki).

When more refugees were accepted into Germany in 2015, Horst Seehofer, at the time the leader of the Christlich-Soziale Union (CSU), the CDU's coalition partner, called this decision a mistake. The issue of asylum and how many refugees should be accepted into the country has remained a point of contention between the CDU and the CSU since (Große). Violence against refugees rose following these influxes: "Im Jahr 2015 werden laut Bundeskriminalamt mehr als 1000 Angriffe auf Asylunterkünfte gezählt, darunter mehr als 90 Brandstiftungen—sechsmal mehr als im Vorjahr" (Große).

The "refugee crisis" led to the strengthening of the AfD, who were voted into three state parliaments in the spring of 2016 and became the third-largest party in the federal parliament after the 2017 national elections. The party's opposition to migration has been criticized as racist and xenophobic. One such instance involved one of its members, Björn Höcke, who in 2018 published a book entitled *Nie zweimal in denselben Fluß*. Höcke's musings about his life and opinions on Germany are presented in an interview format, and could not be differentiated from quotes from *Mein Kampf* by his fellow party members ("AfD-Abgeordnete können Höcke nicht von Hitler unterscheiden").

Violence during this time period was not only directed against to those who had recently arrived in the country: volunteers and organizations aiming to support refugees (such as "Moabit Hilft" in Berlin) were threatened and attacked by far-right extremists (Fuchs). Other groups, such as the "Identitäre Bewegung Deutschland" (IBD) showed an increased radicalization in response to the "crisis" ("Verfassungsschutz beobachtet 'Identitäre Bewegung'"). Members of the "Freien Kameradschaft Dresden," formed in June 2015, were arrested under suspicion of arson, property damage, and assault ("Razzia gegen Neonazi-Gruppe in Dresden").

The year-long "Freital Group" trial in Dresden began in June 2017. This far-right

extremist group stemmed from a group named "Bürgerwehr FTL/360." The latter was formed in

April 2015 after an alleged attack by two Moroccans against students on a bus route between

Altenberg and Dippoldiswalde. The group was created for its members to patrol bus line 360,

especially at night. They claimed to be there to maintain order, but paid special attention to any

migrants on the buses. A post from the group's Facebook page in May of 2015 said, "Alles

verlief Ruhig. Außer die letzte Runde. Da waren 20 Asylbewerber vom Heim drin und hörten

Laut Musik." Another stated that the police should be called if the members „sehen das

Asylbewerber euch anmachen oder jemand anders" (Schawe).

The "Freital Group" grew out of "Bürgerwehr FTL/360" group and was especially active

in the fall of 2015, starting with bombings of properties of left-wing city council members and

continuing on to attack the residences of refugees with rocks, acid, and explosives. Some arrests

happened days after the last attack in October, while other arrests occurred months later

(Maxwill). The "Freital group"—smaller than "Bürgerwehr FTL/360" and actively violent—was

likely formed by July, 2015, with the intention to threaten and harm refugees in the city. Timo

Schulz, one of the leaders, had been active as a neo-Nazi in northern Germany before coming to

Dresden. Patrick Festing was the other ringleader, and is known to have experimented with

explosive materials. The local police originally labeled these crimes as ordinary before the case

was taken by the federal prosecutor's office. The criminals were then pursued as terrorists

(Steffen). The "Freital group" members were found guilty of five explosive attacks in Dresden

and Freital. The members received sentences of 4-10 years in prison, with the leaders Schulz and

Festing receiving the longest sentences. The members had described themselves as "terrorists"

on their coded online chats. However, the police did not originally want to recognize the

criminals as a terrorist group ("Lange Haftstrafen im Prozess gegen Gruppe Freital")—whatever their reasoning for this hesitation, it underestimated the threat of these criminals. Had the police viewed the group as a serious threat, then definitive action would likely have been taken at an earlier date.

This lack of recognition by the police of the terrorist nature of the "Freital group" is reflective of one of *Er ist wieder da*'s critiques of contemporary German society. A lack of police action based on an underestimation of the threat of the neo-Nazi group fits with the theme of Germans not finding harm in agreeing with Hitler's talking points, since an actor playing Hitler in modern-day Germany seemed harmless enough. Hitler seemed incompetent at the beginning of the film: bumbling about helplessly, pepper-sprayed by a busy mother, and unable to thrive in a new environment. As was shown in *Imperium*, this perceived incompetence on a personal level may translate to a mitigated evaluation of threat level by observers—leaving greater opportunity for the subject of evaluation (whether a neo-Nazi or Hitler) to do harm.

4.3 Conclusion

In Germany, there is still a fear of repeating the past. This is where the topic of Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung arises: German citizens want to avoid the mistakes and crimes of the past, and one way to ensure this is to memorialize past victims in order to come to terms with what had occurred. Germany memorializes the victims of the Third Reich, not just to honor those who were murdered and tortured, but to also remind those alive today of the consequences of racist ideologies. In the United States, there are efforts to memorialize those same victims, but the country has a different history with Nazis—and so the methods of Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung of each nation (in terms of the events of WWII and the Third Reich)

are distinctive, and less pronounced in the United States. The perspective on how threatening neo-Nazis are is thus also different. While *Imperium* and *Er ist wieder da* both show the incompetence of neo-Nazi characters, *Imperium* utilizes a character one would least expect to be physically threatening and makes him the film's villain. *Er ist wieder da* suggests that the groups of neo-Nazis and those with far-right ideologies become threatening once they're mobilized by a leader (in this case, it was once again Hitler). These two films reflect, respectively, the fear of a hidden but possibly growing threat and the fear of a threat which has never truly vanished. These different approaches by the two films reflect the nuances of the perceptions of neo-Nazism in both the U.S. and Germany, as well as how members of each society envision the perceived threat level of such groups rising.

Both Dallas Wolf in *Imperium* and MyTV in *Er ist wieder da* choose sensationalism over acting as "honest brokers" of information; by promoting a race war (Wolf) and giving Hitler a platform to share his ideas (MyTV), both are more concerned with the publicity and revenue which they would receive for their broadcasts than the societal impact that sharing such material would have. The prioritization of profit gave both Wolf in *Imperium* and Hitler in *Er ist wieder da* access to the means to potentially reach millions of audience members and spread their ideology.

So can Hitler's character truly be utilized in a cathartic comedy, or is doing so indicative of harmful thoughtlessness? The topic is addressed by some of the YouTube clips shown in *Er ist wieder da* after Hitler makes his TV debut: the various Youtubers question "Soll man das ernst nehmen oder drüber lachen?" and "Die große Frage ist nur: Ist Deutschland überhaupt schon bereit für diese Art Humor?" Is the use of Hitler's character for comedic relief useful for processing the past (for leaving it behind)? Or does his presence in a comedy undermine the

suffering that he and other Nazis have caused? The continued reliance on Hitler's image as the symbol of Rechtsextremismus might draw attention due to its recognizability, but it is possible that this fixation prevents the full consideration of the harm that neo-Nazis can cause, as the face of neo-Nazism has changed over the course of decades. Recognition of this ideology as it exists in modern society is an integral part of properly identifying, evaluating, and diminishing its threat.

In addition, as *Er ist wieder da* posited through Hitler's interactions with a wide variety of German citizens, is the presence of his xenophobic rhetoric harmful even when he is only seen as an actor, and not as a politician? More specifically, is his racism and xenophobia "permission-giving" (as described by Potok in Schreckinger's article) to those who would otherwise resist expressing such attitudes for fear of some form of social consequence? The support of a political leader may serve to legitimize the ideology in the eyes of members of the public. These questions have implications for ongoing Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung in Germany as well as the continued presence of neo-Nazis in the country, and deserve ongoing examination in future research. *Er ist wieder da* suggests that continued representations of Hitler (even as a satirical character) can be harmful for German society.

Both *Imperium* and *Er ist wieder da* succeed in telling stories which involve not only the insidiousness of neo-Nazism, but also how citizens could come to underestimate it—whether through the display of the small group haunting the NPD party headquarters in *Er ist wieder da*, or through the thuggish neo-Nazis in *Imperium* who do not seem capable of organized crime. This underestimation of the threat of neo-Nazism leads to opportunities for its growth and proliferation; not just through indoctrination of hate and xenophobia—sometimes passed down to younger generations—but also through the abuse of broadcasting capabilities. While there are

those who suffer greatly at the hands of neo-Nazism, there are also those who would choose to

capitalize on its rhetoric. Both films encourage the audiences to think critically about the impacts

of neo-Nazism on their respective societies.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Several years after *Er ist wieder da* and *Imperium* premiered, films and television shows with Nazi or neo-Nazi characters continue to be prevalent. Our films of interest have been (and will continue to be) followed by further filmic portrayals of neo-Nazism and its adherents. However, *Er ist wieder da* and *Imperium* stand out from other films by demonstrating our societies' need to understand the perseverance of neo-Nazism into the modern day and the impacts associated with the ideology's presence. *Er ist wieder da* does so by showing the contemporary openness to Hitler's ideals, while *Imperium* shows that neo-Nazism can exist insidiously in a society and not only be the province of stereotypical skinheads. Both films create narratives concerning this ideology that the viewers in their countries of origin can understand on the basis of each country's distinct history.

Er ist wieder da made a splash in Germany by not only portraying Hitler in a manner one might call authentic (as opposed to warping or altering his persona for the sake of comedy), but also by holding up a mirror to German society through interviews with its citizens. Both were risky decisions on the part of the filmmakers, especially as audiences are historically uncomfortable with accurate portrayals of Hitler (as was demonstrated in the reviews of *Mein Führer*). Viewers (as well as the filmmakers) were dismayed to observe how Masucci's Hitler was accepted and endorsed in these candid interviews. Even those scripted scenes which were made to look like candid interactions (such as Hitler's visit to the NPD headquarters) are practically indistinguishable from real interviews.

The inclusion of candid interactions sets *Er ist wieder da* apart from other portrayals of Hitler in contemporary film. Other films with portrayals of Hitler may include lines which shock

the audiences or make them laugh (or both), or force the viewer to consider the humanity of the historical figure. But it is rare that a film can accomplish all of these simultaneously. Although the film version of *Er ist wieder da* is based on the book by Timur Vermes, the decision to use a style of cinematography which utilizes candid interactions propelled the film to a higher level of commentary than would have been achieved had all scenes been scripted with actors. *Er ist wieder da* is also one of the few films showing Hitler as a main character which straddles multiple genres, joining ranks with *Gespräch mit dem Biest*. The range of Hitler's character in the film—his development from a helpless man stuck in the wrong time period to an "actor" widely accepted as a staple of popular media—indicates that portrayals of Hitler have evolved and may continue to advance the discourse on what neo-Nazism and its symbols mean to Germany in the present. His swift development also exposes the flawed foundation on which an underestimation of the ideology is built.

While *Er ist wieder da* contributed to the discourse surrounding the portrayal of Hitler, *Imperium* explored the types of people involved in neo-Nazism and the diverse reasons for that involvement. While some neo-Nazis portrayed in *Imperium* did fit the trope of skinheads who disturb the peace (though their compulsion to act violently or support conspiracy theories is not deeply explored), less stereotypical neo-Nazi characters had varied reasons for their participation in the ideology. For example, Conway's children were being indoctrinated into the ideology as they grew up, Johnny yearned for some form of social acceptance as well as a way to regain a feeling of agency over his life, and Wolf wanted to increase the profitability of his radio show by appealing to white supremacists. This assortment of motives for involvement with neo-Nazi groups, as well as the integration of the belief system into the Conway family's otherwise apparently normal suburban life, provides the audience with a more complex look at the nature

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of neo-Nazism in the present day. These sorts of character examinations as well as the suggestion of an optimistic ending (in which a character distances himself from the ideology) are productive in creating a more positive societal outlook in terms of ending neo-Nazism.

However, *Imperium*, much like its predecessors, does not show the plight of the neo-Nazis' victims. This vacuum in film history (only recently occupied by Fatih Akin's film, *Aus dem Nichts*) indicates a glaring flaw in the portrayals of neo-Nazism in our societies: the focus in these films is almost invariably on the neo-Nazis themselves, rather than those who their bigotry impacts. The review of film history in Chapter 2 shows that the creation of films about neo-Nazis should continue to be monitored over time, with special attention given to the character types presented (Hitler, neo-Nazis, or their victims) as well as the popular reception of these portrayals. There has been a visible shift in the reception of portrayals of Hitler, even in just the last two decades—how might films focused on a different side to these stories be viewed by audiences and critics? How might this reception change over time?

Jens Eder's character-based methodology was employed in the analysis of these two films and two of their main characters, Hitler in *Er ist wieder da* and Gerry Conway in *Imperium*. What Eder's "clock of character" allowed us to discern were the ways in which Conway and Hitler were humanized and what an audience's underestimation of their capacity for harm tells us about the ability for neo-Nazism to survive in our societies. The ability of these two characters to either fly under the radar or get away with their racist rhetoric shows how neo-Nazism is often not taken seriously, or perhaps not seen as immediately harmful in comparison to other threats. This is naturally flawed thinking, as neo-Nazis constantly pose a threat to the lives and well-being of people of color. The ability for the neo-Nazi characters to carry on with

their behavior with limited outcry from other characters in the films indicates one reason why the ideology still thrives.

Er ist wieder da and *Imperium* emphasize the importance of novel and updated perspectives on the ongoing issue of neo-Nazism in both the United States and Germany. Although both films deal with topics that have historically been viewed as taboo in popular media (such as the systemic racism that still exists in our societies), and *Er ist wieder da* largely does so in a comedic way, the films do not sugarcoat the issue. They confront the ways in which neo-Nazism proliferates and causes harm, and how the citizenry of each country may underestimate the threat that accompanies the ideology. These bracing reflections of neo-Nazism in the present day are necessary for a productive and relevant societal discourse on how to combat such harmful beliefs: *Er ist wieder da* condemns popular media's flippant and thoughtless use of xenophobic material, while *Imperium* emphasizes the need for our societies to recognize that these beliefs can go unnoticed, and how youth must be educated to recognize and resist neo-Nazism.

It is notable that awareness of racism and xenophobia, as well as a push for solutions to these problems, appear to have increased recently. This is especially apparent in the 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and accompanying protests in the United States and elsewhere, including Germany, as tensions related to discriminatory police action and violence reached a breaking point. Watching films and television series is one way in which people inform themselves of these and related issues, of historical context, and of the perspectives of disenfranchised groups throughout the country (in this case, those represented by the acronym BIPOC—Black, Indigenous, and People of Color). This enhanced focus on issues of racism in

American culture could advance the national discussion surrounding the presence of neo-Nazism, as the latter thrives off of the prejudices that the BLM movement is confronting.

Imperium and *Er ist wieder da* suggest that at a time when neo-Nazism still prospers (often unchecked), it is the responsibility of filmmakers who want to utilize portrayals of these characters for their narratives to contribute to a discourse on the ideology with their work. As was mentioned in Chapter 2, Nazi and neo-Nazi characters are sometimes used as a "default" villain to provide a more dramatic or frightful backdrop for their film. This often comes across—at best—as lazy or thoughtless, and—at worst—exploitative. In this case "ethical usage" would likely necessitate a social cost versus benefit analysis on the part of the filmmakers: is the potentially harmful appearance of such characters outweighed by the film's messages about the ideology? Audiences may be shocked or uncomfortable by such characters' portrayals, but that is a risk that filmmakers must recognize if they are to make a film which addresses neo-Nazism in a way that can contribute to societal understanding and reflection on the issue.

To be more specific, filmmakers would need to recognize the impacts of the character portrayals they send out into the world. Comedic, reductionist portrayals of Hitler can potentially help to reduce the mythology which some of his supporters attribute to his character. However, making light of Hitler may lead to making light of the crimes he committed and the suffering he and other Nazis caused. Creating narratives in which neo-Nazis are given the opportunity to reform themselves and move on with their lives provides hope that those currently involved in the ideology can improve themselves—but do these storylines recognize the pain that has been caused by the character's involvement in the group, or portray a realistic or believable transformation of the character? Filmmakers would take into account the cultural moment into which they are sending their films, and ask themselves whether these films carry messages which

are helpful to their societies. In terms of some topics seeming to be "sanctified" (as suggested by Rau) or taboo, filmmakers would feel empowered to make films which provide commentary on these issues. They would recognize that these films contribute to ongoing national and international discourses and reflection on the continued presence of neo-Nazism in modern-day society. Filmmakers would be deliberate in their handling of these characters, and not simply use them as tropes.

The onus would then not only be on filmmakers to create "ethical" media, of course. Audience members would be conscientious consumers of popular media. Although it can be comforting to watch a formulaic film which features good versus evil, it is important to be culturally and socially aware of the issues surrounding the nature of certain characters. The difference between watching for entertainment and watching for commentary may feel like the difference between consuming junk food and consuming a cauliflower salad—although it can be pleasing to do the former, the latter is healthier. This isn't to say that media consumption for entertainment would be avoided, rather that there could be enormous societal payoff when a citizenry pays mind to important sociocultural issues and their use in film or television.

Despite these positive impacts that theoretically accompany "ethical" production and consumption of such media, artistic license and freedom cannot be disregarded. Although our films of interest suggest a moral imperative for the careful reflection on the impacts of portrayals of Hitler and neo-Nazis in both American and German society, there is no clear path towards deliberately balancing this imperative with artistic freedom. We can only hope that as awareness of this harmful ideology in our societies grows, as well as the body of filmic works which address the persistence of the ideology, portrayals of Hitler and neo-Nazis will continue to evolve and be a source of reflection for viewers.

Two questions still remain and should continue to be considered in future research: is it truly the responsibility of filmmakers to provide commentary, even in comedies? And can filmmakers trust their audience to view their films with a critical eye? This "meeting in the middle" of both parties through critical creation and response allows for the ideal character reception which Eder discussed in his book, and which leads to successful commentary on an issue.

It is also important to continue tracking the creation of films which contain neo-Nazi characters or portrayals of Hitler. As the United States and Germany continue to wrestle with the issues of immigration and cultural integration, a need to understand the presence of racism and xenophobia in these countries will persist. Films portraying neo-Nazi characters can help audience members reflect on this presence in their own communities, and become more aware of the harm which neo-Nazism and other problematic ideologies cause. Researchers should also continue to study the ways in which character portrayals of contentious figures convey commentary on the cultural moments during which they were conceived and created. An understanding of what has been socially accepted or rejected in terms of portrayals of Hitler over the years speaks volumes to the state of Germany's Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung.

Time should also be taken to consider how Eder's "clock of character" may be made more effective or streamlined for popular usage—my interpretation of the clock assisted in an analysis of *Er ist wieder da* and *Imperium* (such as the combination of the symbol and symptom categories), but a different division of and emphasis on each of the four sections of the clock would encourage other analyses and interpretations.

One reason for the continued prevalence of neo-Nazi and Nazi characters in modern day media are the sociopolitical climates in both the United States and Germany, in which neo-Nazi

groups and xenophobic attitudes still exist. Filmmakers want to explore the nature of neo-Nazism's presence in their countries, and sometimes create a hopeful tone in their works through the reformation of neo-Nazi characters. Additionally, the willingness to turn something with negative connotations into an outlet for humor (such as the memes made of Hitler yelling in *Der Untergang*) should be investigated in future research. Such a study would answer the question of what genres of films are most appropriate or effective for the communication of commentary about these characters and issues. As German and American society develop new ways of reflecting on ideological crimes of the past and present, film portrayals of neo-Nazi characters should evolve concurrently, providing a creative outlet for the communication of societal concerns and hopes for the future.

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