Accompanying the political transformations of 1989/90, Germany’s official stance on antisemitism¹ and the Shoah has changed as well. Its commemoration has become, instead of a matter of national disgrace, a featured mark of international distinction. However, this development implies significant shifts concerning hegemonic images of victims and perpetrators as well as historically specific constructions of the respective ‘Other.’ Since 2001, there has been a remarkable surge in German films depicting narratives set during the period of National Socialism. This paper investigates which characters to identify with are currently made available by these films, and how features presented as ‘Jewish’ are used to position these characters as part of collective in- or outgroups. Examples such as the ostensibly innocuous alpinist melodrama Nordwand (Philipp Stölzl, D/A/CH 2008), and the three-part miniseries Krupp – eine deutsche Familie/Krupp – a German family (Carlo Rola, D 2009), demonstrate that in terms of their status as victims of National Socialism, Jewish victims are replaced by non-Jewish Germans in contemporary German discourse. Concurrently, this essay analyzes the ways in which this development is connected to the resurfacing of antisemitic stereotypes when it comes to explicitly Jewish characters, and how images of ‘other Others’ serve to reinstate positive images of the German national Self.

Introduction: Discursive Shifts since 1989

Regarding minority politics in Germany, the Shoah represents the negative reference point when it comes to its Jewish population. In what Dan Diner once called a “negative symbiosis,” collective identities of both (non-Jewish) Germans and Jews in one way or the other refer to this ultimate crime against humanity that has established precedence for developments in global human rights ever since.²

1 The common spelling “anti-Semitism” suggests that there could possibly be something called “Semitism” or, even more problematic, a “Semitic race.” To avoid such essentializing notions and to stress the constructed character of both, in this paper I have chosen the spelling ‘antisemitism’ for the phenomenon in question.

2 Wenzel, Mirjam, Gericht und Gedächtnis. Der deutschsprachige Holocaust-Diskurs der...
Following the so-called “reunion” of the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany in 1990,³ Germany’s political culture changed dramatically. A new, ‘normalized’ nationalism has been evolving over the last two decades⁴ that has influenced the politics of memory and, accordingly, the discourse on Jewish-Gentile relationships as well. Speaking in terms of discourse theory, this shift can be conceived as a conflict of two mnemonic discourses, one Jewish, one non-Jewish German. Gilad Margalit describes them as characterized by “the motif of guilt, whose most widespread manifestation in the West German political culture was the Jewish Holocaust narrative, and the motif of suffering expressed by the reconciliation narrative.”⁵ The discursive competition of these two tends to be neutralized in the relatively young, but in the meantime having become hegemonic discourse that accepts responsibility for the Shoah and even includes it in a new German national identity: The “unified”⁶ Germany has integrated its past into national narratives of identity. It has turned the Holocaust into a distinguishing mark in the politics of history,⁷ and thus, in contemporary politics as well.⁸

In this paper, I want to argue that one of the consequences of these changes – and the motor that drove them – has been an adjustment of those available images to make them more congruent with these structural changes and the related new narratives, the latter of which can be described as Germany’s growing assertiveness in international relations, beginning with its participation in military actions abroad.⁹ With a cultural lag of approximately ten years, these shifts

---

³ Since the two nation-states in question had never existed previously as one ‘unified’ state, the political transformation in question was per definitionem an annexation. Usage of the term ‘reunion’ is in itself an ideological effect of the structural changes. Strictly speaking, it implies an affirmation of the era in which the regions in question had been under a single governance – the most recent of which would be the regime of National Socialism.


⁵ Margalit, Gilad, Guilt, Suffering, and Memory. Germany Remembers Its Dead of World War II, Bloomington/IN 2010, 291.

⁶ The term ‘unified’ represents an ideological part of that discourse itself insofar that it camouflages the fact that the Federal Republic of Germany of 1990 never existed before within those borders.


⁸ Regarding these changes and their effects on visual culture, see also Ebbrecht, Tobias, Geschichtsbilder, l.f., 32ff.

⁹ This nexus of present policy and the politics of memory is probably best illustrated by the
have begun to be reflected in popular German film. Since 2001, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of films with narratives set during the reign of National Socialism and that feature stories of German victimization as well as of the common image of the ‘good soldier.’¹⁰ The flip side of this development is the state of the true victims in this discourse. Margalit concludes his study about German remembrance of World War II with the disturbing proposition that the amplification of the discourse of German suffering is concomitant with a neglect of the (true) victims of Naziism. Moreover, he assumes that this amplification is probably also linked to a resurgence of antisemitism, racism, and anti-Americanism in Germany.¹¹ Margalit’s findings in his transdisciplinary study parallel and confirm the tendencies represented by the bulk of German films on the topic of National Socialism from the last two decades.

Current representations of this historical period are highly relevant for images of the past, and for identity politics of the present. Furthermore, due to the specific qualities of film as a medium – such as the potential to generate emotional identification – filmic representations have a particular influence on conceptions of the world.¹² This paper will therefore conceptually investigate discursive ten-

---

¹⁰ This paper draws on research of approximately forty films. The corpus being investigated consists of films that have been commercially released since 2000 and were German produced, that is, completely funded or co-funded, and that in some way refer to the topic of either National Socialism or Israel. In addition to this thematic limitation, the ongoing project only investigates fictional films, produced either for television or for the cinema.

¹¹ Margalit, Gilad, Guilt, 292ff.

¹² Remarkable evidence of this influence is represented by the findings of Welzer et al. about the integration of media images in family narratives about the war. Welzer et al., “Opa war kein Nazi”, l.f.,105ff. I have given a detailed account of the possibilities and the limits of filmic representations of National Socialism in my essay „Idolatrische Mimesis oder Wölfe im Schafspelz. Möglichkeiten und Grenzen des Spielfilms für Repräsentationen des Nationalsozialismus.“ In: Steinberg, Swen, Meißner, Stefan, Trepsdorf, Daniel (Eds.), Vergessenes erinnern. Medien von Erinnerungskultur und kollektivem Gedächtnis, Berlin 2009, 83-103.
dencies with regard to relationships between ‘Jews’¹³ and ‘Gentiles’,¹⁴ specifically their images in contemporary German films about National Socialism. The productions on which I will draw, particularly the film *Nordwand* (Philipp Stölzl, D/A/CH 2008) and the three-part television miniseries *Krupp – eine deutsche Familie* (Carlo Rola, D 2009), are exemplars of the tendencies I want to discuss insofar as their *sujet* is not explicitly focused on National Socialism; in each case the story is set in this period almost incidentally. *Nordwand* tells the tragic story of a young woman and her two alpinist friends, who try to climb the Eiger North face in 1936. *Krupp – eine deutsche Familie*, a family epic about the German industrialist dynasty of the same name, spans a whole century, which includes the two World Wars and National Socialism.

I have chosen these two films because they contain most of the elements typical of the discourse in question: an ongoing victimization of ordinary Germans on the one hand, accompanied by an externalization of Nazism as ‘absolute evil’ and a reinstatement of the supposedly good, ‘ordinary soldier’ on the other hand. Concurrently, images of Jewish Holocaust victims are appropriated for the depiction of non-Jewish German victims, a strategy I have called Idolatric Mimesis.¹⁵ Since my findings and arguments rely on particular theoretical and methodological premises, I will first give a brief outline of the approach taken with these images. Second, in order to put my arguments in perspective, I will sketch the developments referred to above with regard to filmic discourse. And, since antisemitic *topoi* resurface simultaneously on several different levels in the same films, I will elaborate on this aspect in the third section of this paper. Furthermore, a remarkable new development has been emerging lately upon which I want to dwell on in particular in the following, namely, a tendency to show non-Jewish Germans as being drawn to characters that represent Otherness in terms of the dichotomies of hegemonic Western culture, most notably, of German *völkisch*

---

13 It is important to stress that the category of ‘being Jewish’ underlies the same problematic limitations as any other socially constructed collectivizing category, which is why these terms are only used in a distancing way here. For a thorough examination of ‘Jewishness’ as an analytical term, see Silverman, Lisa, Reconsidering the Margins. Jewishness as an Analytical Framework. In: *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* Vol 8, No. 1 March 2009, 103–120. Silverman suggests using ‘Jewishness’ as a relational term, similar to the category of ‘gender’. I am grateful to my colleague Dekel Peretz for indicating this article to me.

14 When using these categories not in an essentializing, but in a differential way, the term ‘Gentile’ in the context of this article means not only ‘not Jewish’. Rather, since the reality these films refer to is Nazi Germany, it at the same time refers to being ‘German’ as opposed to ‘Jewish’. As imagined and constructed as this dichotomy has always been, it was nevertheless put into murderous practice.

values. To wit, the protagonists of these films are not only depicted as themselves being the ‘Other’ of their time but they also embrace the ‘Other’ of our time, as I will argue in the fourth section. The fifth section will explore the implications of these representations in terms of contemporary visual politics, while the corollaries of these tendencies will be discussed in the sixth and concluding section.¹⁶

The Dialectics of Representation

When analyzing images with regard to ‘Jewishness’ and antisemitism in Germany today, a gap between private and public opinion has to be taken into account methodologically¹⁷ since open antisemitism in its traditional forms is usually considered as illegitimate in public discourse, rendering it difficult to detect in any new or latent strains. This is where the special qualities of film as a mass medium communicating “daydreams of society,” as Siegfried Kracauer has put it, come in. The fundamental analytical move I want to adopt for my analysis is enclosed in his following statement: “Stupid and unreal film fantasies are the daydreams of society, in which its actual reality comes to the fore and its otherwise repressed wishes take on form.”¹⁸ Kracauer further bolsters his argument by showing how historical films realize such wishes by setting them in the past, just as the current films on National Socialism do. He writes: “The courage of these films declines in direct proportion to their proximity to the present. The most popular scenes from World War I are not a flight to the far reaches of history but the immediate expression of society’s will.”¹⁹

¹⁶ In this paper, I am trying to conceptualize findings of my ongoing research on antisemitism in contemporary film, so what follows should be considered as preliminary results and work in progress.
¹⁹ Ibid., 293, italics added.
According to Kracauer, that which is shown in a film represents a daydream, a wish, a desire. This approach towards filmic representation offers a strong potential for its analysis because it treats images not as theses, as mere depictions of society, but as its antitheses. This dialectical perspective becomes applicable when we turn the point of departure of analysis upside down. Staying inside the psychoanalytical terminology, this means to read the dreamer from its images: Which kind of society, which discourse constellation, which particular socio-political situation has created this desire, these images of Self and Other?

Kracauer thereby provides means to examine ideological contents of media texts that at the same time preclude arbitrary readings. In contrary, the possible “dreamer’s positions” are very few in number, as I am going to show in the next section. Consequently, to ask “which constellation has produced this desire? Which specific absence, which deficit generates this particular presence?” not only restores the category of desire for analyses of media images but offers a way to overcome positivist approaches by applying a dialectical perspective. Kracauer himself puts it like this:

In order to investigate today’s society, one must listen to the confessions of the products of its film industries. They are all blabbing a rude secret, without really wanting to. In the endless sequence of films, a limited number of typical themes recur again and again; they reveal how society wants to see itself. (The quintessence of these film themes is at the same time the sum of the society’s ideologies, whose spell is broken by means of the interpretation of the themes).²⁰

Apart from a remarkable proximity of Kracauer’s perspective to present discourse theory – “the sum of the society’s ideologies” can be read as a description of a ‘hegemonic discourse’ that accounts for the “limited number of typical themes” –, this paragraph also sums up why his approach enables the detection of latencies, namely, because these themes “reveal how society wants to see itself”. The dialectical approach Kracauer sketches here thus becomes very helpful when it comes to investigating ideologies such as antisemitism, its aftermath and its present forms, as well as other forms of Othering.

---
²⁰ Ibid., 293, italics added.
Appropriating the Other I: Victimization of Non-Jewish Germans

To begin with, ‘traditional’ German antisemitism constructed ‘the Jew’ as the negative counterpart of the image of ‘the Aryan.’²¹ The characteristics of this figure are well known, not least because antisemitic stereotypes live on and resurface with disturbing timeliness in current forms of global antisemitism.²² The consolidation of the “Holocaust discourse” since the 1980s has been accompanied by a growing public interest in Jewish topics and Jewish life that has always borne signs of philo-Semitism – the other side of the coin regarding constructions of the Other in antisemitic discourse.²³ This development in Jewish-Gentile relations, from total neglect of the Holocaust at first, followed by the percolation of Jewish narratives of the Shoah into public discourse²⁴ and educational curricula, until it became raison d’etat after 1990,²⁵ has received an additional spin lately with the appropriation of Holocaust iconography for non-Jewish narratives.

This tendency was first described as Wechselrahmung (changing frames) by Harald Welzer, Sabine Möller, and Karoline Tschuggnall in their social psychology study Opa war kein Nazi (Grandpa was no Nazi) in 2005. In their investigation of the position of the Holocaust in German family narratives, they found that stories about German victimhood were illustrated using images from Holocaust iconography. Such images had initially become part of cultural memory through their publication as documentary photographs or inclusion in films made after WW II, and later on by fictional narratives such as the television miniseries Holocaust (Marvin J. Chomsky, USA 1978) and the movie Schindler’s List (Steven Spielberg, USA 1993). These images from cultural memory were then transferred into non-Jewish German family narratives,²⁶ and therefore into communicative memory.²⁷

²² Rabinovici, Doron et al. (Eds.), Neuer Antisemitismus?, Frankfurt, 2004.
²³ For notions of philo-Semitism as reversed antisemitism, see Diekmann, Irene (Ed.), Geliebter Feind – Gehasster Freund. Antisemitismus und Philosemitismus in Geschichte und Gegenwart, Berlin 2009.
²⁴ Margalit, Guilt, l.c., 289ff.
²⁵ Ebbrecht, Geschichtsbilder, l.f.
²⁷ For a brief outline of Maurice Halbwachs’s notion of ‘collective memory’ and its further elaboration by Jan Assmann into ‘cultural’ and ‘communicative memory,’ see Welzer et al., l.f., 12ff.
Yet the victimization of non-Jewish Germans takes on a new quality regarding its hegemonic force by the phenomenon to which I referred earlier, that of ‘Idolatric Mimesis’,²⁸ meaning a double transfer of iconography that originates in the Shoah and its aftermath. Then it was transferred from media artifacts of cultural memory into transgenerational communicative memory – the above cited Wechselrahmung – and, at present, it is being transported back into cultural memory. This means that not only images in the stories told to each other in German families, but moreover, mass media images of non-Jewish Germans are nowadays constructed by use of images that have been globally circulated via pictures of Jewish suffering during the Shoah. This process can be called idolatric because of the adaptation to an image: the image of the victim, the Holocaust victim that is mimed thereby.²⁹ In a second shift, these images of victimhood are now being transferred back into cultural memory by fictional narratives such as the films I investigate here. In his analysis of Holocaust films, Tobias Ebbrecht calls this process a “migration of historical images.”³⁰ Thus, Idolatric Mimesis involves a double shift of collective pictorial or visual memory – Holocaust imagery – that updates traditional stereotypes to the extent that non-Jewish characters are depicted as analogous to Jewish Holocaust victims.

For example, at the end of the two-part made-for-television film Dresden (Roland Suso Richter, D 2006), about the bombing of that city in 1945, the protagonist Anna, a German nurse, wanders through the gray debris of the city in a red dress – a scene invoking the little girl in the red dress walking through the Warshaw ghetto in the otherwise black-and-white film Schindler’s List. Likewise, in another two-part television film produced for German public television, Die Gustloff (Joseph Vilsmaier, D 2008), German refugees trying to board a ship of the same name are filmed using shots that alternate between long shots from a bird’s eye perspective and close-ups. They are carrying suitcases, are being watched over by mean-looking guards and surveilled from watchtowers, are confined by barbed wire fences, and they enter through gates that make them appear like detainees of a concentration camp.³¹ I will come back to the corollaries of such

²⁸ For a detailed derivation of this notion, see Schmid, Antonia, Idolatrische Mimesis, l.f.
²⁹ A precondition for and paralleling this kind of adaptation has been the universalization of the Holocaust as a master narrative of suffering in global Western culture, as Tobias Ebbrecht emphasizes. Ebbrecht, Geschichtsbilder, l.f., 33. The emergence of this universal model has been described by Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, Erinnerung im globalen Zeitalter: Der Holocaust, Frankfurt am Main 2007 [2001].
³⁰ Ebbrecht, Geschichtsfiktionen, l.f., 314.
³¹ I have given a more detailed description of this scene, including screenshots, in my essay Idolatrische Mimesis oder Wölfe im Schafspelz. Möglichkeiten und Grenzen des Spielfilms für Repräsentationen des Nationalsozialismus, In: Steinberg, Swen / Meißen, Stefan /
‘image takeovers’ below. At this point, it is important to stress that this discursive strategy, the victimization of ordinary Germans by use of images of ‘Jewishness’ in the context of National Socialism, is concurrently accompanied by two accordant phenomena regarding Jewish-Gentile relations. To wit, the first involves an externalization of Nazism as ‘absolute evil’ on one hand and a reinstatement of the ‘good German.’ and, moreover, the supposedly good, ‘ordinary soldier’ on the other hand. But, as Tobias Ebbrecht has indicated, this figure of the ‘good German’ as a historical exception, actually points to the standard of real behavior during that time.³²

The historically distorting externalization of National Socialism mainly consists of depictions of unambiguously evil characters, such as the sadistic physical education teacher Josef Peiner in Napola – Elite für den Führer (Dennis Gansel, D 2004), the equally repellent Lt. Commander Petri in Die Gustloff (Joseph Vilsmaier, D 2008), and the Gauleiter Mutschmann in Dresden (Roland Suso Richter, D 2006). All these characters share distinct, unappealing characteristics while at the same time they are explicitly shown as staunch Nazis. They are often portrayed negatively, to such an extent that they almost seem mere caricatures of Nazis: they yell, they torture innocent (non-Jewish German) people, and they are ideologically so misguided that it would be easy to believe that nobody could ever have wanted to participate in carrying out their agenda. Referring to Krakauer’s notion of society’s daydreams, these characters represent the wish for exculpation of the majority of the German population, carried on to and by the now third generation. This strategy also makes use of all dimensions of filmic representation – visually by showing the mimic of the villains, their grimaces, on the level of sound e.g. by the yelling, and on the level of the plot unfolding, for example, by their diegetical “punishment”, meaning that most of these villains die throughout the films. The strategy of externalization works in the same direction as Idolatric Mimesis in depicting non-Jewish Germans as very different from ‘the Nazis’ and as their victims – just as, or even more than, the Jewish victims since the latter are seldom to never shown visually. This strong effect of how the presence of the visual dominates representation and can make absent any cognitive knowledge about the historical context – the Shoah – is very important yet can only be touched on here.

To summarize, this first aspect of appropriating images of the ‘Other’ or images of those formerly marked as Other – ‘the Jew’ – is for the purpose of pro-

³² Unfortunately, due to the limited scope of this paper, I can only touch on this matter very briefly here. For an account of the recent tendencies, see Ebbrecht, Geschichtsbilder, l.f., 276ff.
viding constructions of the present national Self, while images of the historical national Self – the perpetrators, National Socialism, its followers, and ordinary Germans who supported the regime – are today split off and marked as ‘other.’ In this kind of representation of National Socialism, the ubiquitous antisemitism of that time seems to have been a product of a few mad minds, and the ‘good German’ becomes the hegemonic image of non-Jewish Germanness. At the same time, antisemitism continues to be prevalent in the same films that supposedly disapprove of it by projecting it onto the ultimate ‘bad guys,’ the Nazis. Since National Socialism and open forms of antisemitism are externalized onto characters marked unequivocally as ‘evil,’ these existent inherently antisemitic stereotypes become all the more covert, which I am going to turn to in the following.

**Skeletons in the Closet? Persisting Antisemitism in Contemporary Film**

Regarding Jewish characters as alleged ‘perpetrators’ in antisemitic discourse before 1945, several topoi can be found in contemporary film that function as an update of “traditional” antisemitic stereotypes. For example, the topos of the ‘vengeful Jew’ is reproduced (*Dresden*, Roland Suso Richter, D 2006) as well as the topos of the ‘treacherous Jew’ (*Die Gustloff/Ship of no Return*, 2008), and the well-known medieval accusation that Jews poisoned wells, as depicted in *Paradise Now* (Hany Abu Assad, D/ F/ NL 2005). There is also a certain dehumanizing way of depicting Jewish Holocaust victims, portraying them as animal-like in *Krupp – eine deutsche Familie* (Carlo Rola, D 2009) which, on a pictorial level, repeats the dehumanization implemented historically. The generally pejorative depictions of Jewish characters, drawing on pre-Holocaust stereotypes, exemplified by the overweight, fun-spoiling stock trader in the alpinist drama *Nordwand* (Philipp Stölzl, D/ A/ CH 2008), continue to operate as well.

However, maybe even more noteworthy in this context is the recurrence of a coded or latent antisemitism regarding the ensemble of characters in a film that draws on long established codes, thereby reproducing basal structures of antisemitic discourse.

This phenomenon concerns the occurrence of patterns that reproduce dualisms that are integral to antisemitic discourse without openly referring to Jews, structural homologies to antisemitism that use common dichotomies without explicitly naming Jews. This a kind of latent antisemitism that constructs the

---

same patterns as the customary forms but leaves out the last step of assigning the descriptor “evil” to the Jews. Such antisemitic statements do not work overtly; they are camouflaged, e.g., as in the chiffre or phrase, very common in current German media, “the ‘American East Coast’ rules the global economy,” meaning “the Jews rule the global economy.”³⁴ Employing Lisa Silverman’s use of the category of ‘Jewishness’, I suggest perceiving this form of antisemitism as “within the framework of ‘Jewishness’ – despite the absence of an actual Jewish victim”,³⁵ or, it should be added in this case, an actual Jewish perpetrator. Using the category of antisemitism as a differential one that takes into account the relations between its parameters allows for a detection of otherwise overlooked, yet important forms of discursive arrangements.

With regard to film, this implies the depiction of characters alongside antisemitically coded binary oppositions, such as in Die Gustloff/Ship of No Return, 2008. The reason for the sinking of the Kraft durch Freude-turned-refugee-ship has never been cleared up historically, yet the film introduces a fictitious character – Hagen Koch – who betrays the ship’s position to the Russians, who then torpedo it shortly thereafter.³⁶ Koch’s virtuous counterparts, the hero/heroine-couple of civilian captain Hellmuth Kehding, another fictitious character, and his girlfriend, the naval assistant Erika Galetschky, are only interested in saving as many civilians as they can. Posed in opposition, the evil Nazi characters, whose sole purpose is either to carry on an already lost war or, later, to save themselves during the sinking of the ship. Moreover, Erika is depicted by several motifs using Idolatric Mimesis, e.g., she deserts her unit in order to escape on the ship together with Hellmuth. This inner structure of the ensemble reproduces the well-known antisemitic pattern of the in- and the out-group: treacherous villains endanger the Volksgemeinschaft, the community, heroes and heroines save it. Characterizations are constituted parallel to antisemitically coded binary oppositions (‘innocent victims’ versus. ‘evil perpetrators’) and the plot lacks (overtly) Jewish characters. Combinations of antisemitic elements are used to construct pejorative characterizations of the Other. Today, interestingly, these depictions of Others nowadays include portrayals of Nazis (!) as selfish cowards who destroy the community, which I have referred to as externalization above.

³⁵ Silverman, Lisa, Jewishness, 114.
³⁶ The paralleling of German/ic and Jewish narrative topoi— that make up the practice of Idolatric Mimesis as explained below— is further complicated since in Richard Wagner’s Nibelungen Ring, Hagen is also the name of the traitorous character. Due to space limitations, I can only touch on this similarity here.
Another ‘merely’ structural update of antisemitic discourse concerns antisemitic fantasies regarding the rape of ‘the Aryan woman,’ who represents the nation, except that in Anonyma – Eine Frau in Berlin/ Anonyma – A Woman in Berlin (Max Färberbröck, D 2008), a recounting of the raping of German women by Russian soldiers, the figure of the lecherous Jew is replaced by ‘the Bolshevik.’ Since antisemitic ascriptions traditionally include holding Jews responsible not only for liberalism, but at the same time for Bolshevism, the replacement is not far-fetched, judged by the twisted inner ‘logic’ of antisemitic discourse. This is a textbook example for coded updating of antisemitic discourse in contemporary Germany – covert enough not to cause reproaches while still drawing on well-known topoi that have been passed on through generations.

Recapitulating these findings with regard to present Jewish-Gentile relations and the correspondingly different narratives of memory, this implies that images of Jewishness have become the model for the construction of the national Self, while the Jewish narrative has become more and more neglected, to the point where antisemitic representations recur in the same films that seem to be part of a German coping process. Gilad Margalit describes it as follows: “the new preoccupation with German victims has come, explicitly, at the expense of the Nazi’s victims.”³⁷ Regarding contemporary constructions of Otherness, this development also facilitates a resurgence of antisemitic stereotypes of ‘the Jew’ that work covertly but draw on the same patterns as “traditional” antisemitism insofar as Otherness implies exclusion from the in-group, the national collective of victims, or, beyond that, these Others being characterized as a menace to the community. Hence, while the image of the Other has been appropriated for images of the Self, ‘the Jew’ in its anti-Semitic composition becomes again the Other of contemporary identity constructions – skeletons in the closet of a seemingly German method of coping with its Nazi past.³⁸ The focal point of the following section is that the accordant discourse has been consolidated to a point where films dealing with this past now concentrate, on the one hand, on other, ‘ordinary’ aspects of this historical period, and, on the other hand, thereby succeed in fulfilling further ideological functions of current representations of Otherness.

³⁷ Margalit, l.f., 292.
³⁸ This might be considered an example of a form of antisemitism that is a specifically German reaction to the Shoah, namely, so-called secondary antisemitism. See Rensmann, Lars, Kritische Theorie über den Antisemitismus. Studien zu Struktur, Erklärungspotential und Aktualität. Berlin, Hamburg, 1998, 231ff.
Appropriating the Other II: New Others, Alterophilia, and Antisemitism

Having outlined the larger background of constructions of Otherness with regard to images of ‘the Jew’ in current German film, I am going to turn to some rather new developments in this discourse. A remarkable trend concerning recent productions set in the era of National Socialism is that first, they actually are no longer centered around the topic of National Socialism but treat this period en passant, that is, almost casually.³⁹ Related to this process of normalization⁴⁰ of Germany’s Nazi past in contemporary visual culture are two developments that are also relevant in terms of images of Jewishness and their function in present discourse, namely, the appearance of images of ‘other Others’ and the compromised status of Jewish characters, a growing invisibility of Jewish victims, and an increase in pejorative images of ‘the Jew.’

The two examples that I have chosen represent this constellation quite well. In the alpinist drama Nordwand (Philipp Stölzl, D/A/CH 2008) set in 1936, female protagonist Luise, a newbie photographer for a Berlin-based newspaper, is assigned the task of reporting on her two friends’ attempt to climb the north wall of Eiger mountain. Both Andi and Toni die tragically, and in the aftermath, Luise becomes a fierce opponent of her country’s nationalistic exploitation of what was supposedly a private challenge. The two mountaineering friends are depicted as likeable “guys-next-door” who failed to fulfill the militaristic requirements of their regiment since they didn’t take their tasks as Gebirgsjäger (German mountain troopers), seriously enough. The dichotomy of decadent urban culture versus a positively connoted countryside, a traditional matrix of antisemitic imagery, is an important frame in this setting: Luise returns to the countryside from the big city and discovers her true values, while at the same time, warding off her colleague Arau’s advances. After the tragic death of her friends she refuses to return to Berlin because “there are too many of your kind,” as she tells Arau. The film ends showing Luise in her New York studio, taking pictures of a black saxophone player. This final image, of Luise embracing a black musician, is an iconic aggregation of the topos with which I want to conclude: the turning of non-Jewish German protagonists, themselves portrayed as victims of the Nazi regime, into characters who represent the Other of hegemonic Western discourse.

³⁹ Another example of the tendency to focus on ordinary people and their lives during National Socialism is Die Entdeckung der Currywurst/ The Invention of the Curried Sausage (Ulla Wagner, D 2008).
⁴⁰ Hawel, Die normalisierte Nation, l.f.
The second example for this new topos is the character of Arndt von Bohlen, the last heir to the Krupp German steel empire, who heroically abdicates his legacy so that the company can be turned into a foundation, and thus live on. The miniseries *Krupp – eine deutsche Familie* (Carlo Rola, D 2009), produced for the public broadcasting channel ZDF, spans more than a century, and Arndt represents the ‘new’ Germany: he is openly gay and exhibits queer behavior, such as dressing in a burlesque, dramatic way. In the last scene of the film, his face is shown in close-ups, wearing make-up, crying, and wiping off his tears with a feminine gesture before putting on his sunglasses and driving away in his convertible into the Moroccan desert. A reverse image is that of his father, the well-disciplined Alfried, who throughout the film is depicted as having suffered from having to subject himself to patriarchal German culture. Von Bohlen pater sets von Bohlen filius free from the traditions that demand being a tough paternalistic entrepreneur who must sacrifice his whole life to the company’s interests. While the father, victim of the constraints of his gender, class, and national identity, dies at the end of the film, Arndt will continue to live well off of his inheritance and lead a very liberal, hedonistic, or even decadent life.

The character of Arndt represents the topos of ‘embracing the Other’ as opposed to ‘becoming the Other,’ a move similar to Luise’s affinity for liberal, multiethnic American culture. Just like the nameless black saxophone player in *Nordwand*, Arndt is not the main protagonist but represents an image of contemporary, postwar, postreconciliation Germany that can be seen as the telos of the now supposedly overcome German society. Alfried, who had to serve time as a convicted and then refined war criminal, and Luise, are representatives and victims of that “old” Germany that has now been retroactively overcome. The ‘other Others’ are not figures with whom to identify, but they represent images upon which the audience’s fantasies can be projected. For the non-Jewish (as Jewish) German audience, Luise and Alfried, as representations of German victimhood, stand for the true victims of National Socialism.⁴¹

This turn toward images that once represented the Other in colonial discourse cannot be conceptualized in the usual terms of theories about antisemitism. With regard to the recent developments in the visual politics of memory, however, I

---

⁴¹ In the case of *Nordwand*, it is first and foremost the alpinists Toni, Luise’s beloved, and Andi who become victims of the Nazi regime since they actually die. Toni’s agonizing and slow death is shown in particularly devastating detail. In spite of their deaths, however, they accomplished the feat of finding a navigable route through the North face. In the film’s closing credits, this achievement is framed as having been abused by the Nazi regime. After this catharsis, Luise takes an explicit stance against that regime, representing the nation as a whole. For further discussion of matters of representation, see below.
do believe that this phenomenon is also relevant for the status of ‘the Jew’ in German political culture. Therefore, to investigate the relationship between this seeming embrace of the Other and anti- or philo-Semitism, I want to introduce the notion of ‘heterophobia,’ as coined by sociologist Albert Memmi. Memmi conceptualizes racism as an ideological legitimization of actually existing differences. However, since this kind of rationalization of what are, in fact, unjust practices is applied with regard to other differences as well – differences of class, sexual orientation, gender, and so on – he attempts to find a term that encompasses all of these ideologies that legitimize discrimination. Accordingly, his notion of heterophobia is meant to signify all those phobic and aggressive constellations that are directed toward others and legitimized by several psychological, cultural, social, and metaphysical ‘arguments.’ Based on this broader approach to processes of Othering, I want to suggest calling the respective phenomena of ‘positive’ constructions of Others, as described above, alterophilia. Analogous to philo-Semitism as a positively turned version of antisemitism, it will signify the construction of images of Others that are connoted positively. The implications of such representations will be discussed in the following section.

**Tracing the Absent of Alterophiliac Representations**

As I have already indicated, the turn toward positively connoted representations of ‘other Others’ signifies a qualitative change with regard to representations of Self and Other, a change that can best be described as a consolidation of the discourse of reconciliation. Gilad Margalit suggests a similar change in German political culture, cf. Margalit, *Guilt*, l.f., 293ff.
second function that these films fulfill in the present. Concerning a dialectical approach to these images that attempts to explain their appearance at this specific historical point, instead of only describing them, it is important to go back to Kracauer’s notion of films as “daydreams of society.” If these images represent contemporary society’s wishes or dreams, if they are viewed as a desire, what can they tell us about the present? What contradictions of present German reality are synthesized by these images?⁴⁷

In view of the images in question, their emergence at this time and their positioning in relation to the victimized protagonists hints at specific contradictions that these images neutralize. The features of these particular Others can be characterized as that side of Western culture that has traditionally been devalued: femininity, being colored, being queer. Seeing how these features are embraced in Nordwand and Krupp – eine deutsche Familie, it seems as if colonial history has finally been overcome. Yet if these images are not seen as mere depictions of reality but as representations of certain desires and, at the same time, as representing particular interests that do not necessarily conform to these desires, then they point to a different constellation. To wit, in present-day Germany, a conflict persists between societal norms, such as human rights discourse, on the one hand, and factual national politics on the other hand. While antidiscrimination laws are passed and Germany engages in a worldwide human rights discourse that has essentially been shaped by Holocaust discourse,⁴⁸ at the same time it has implemented policies that fundamentally contradict these values.

Without being able to lay out a thorough analysis of postcolonial world politics here, these practices should at least be summed up briefly: while, on an international level, national wealth and political power are constituted along the North-South axis of former colonial powers and former colonies, on a national level, migration policy has become extremely repressive. In 1993, Germany abolished the basic right to political asylum by introducing the Third Country Regulation. Refugees are excluded from most parts of public life, for example, the so-called residency obligation forbids them from leaving the country and then being able to return. To sum this up: of course, racism, as well as antisemitism in its old and new forms, also persists in Germany today, as does inequality regarding gender, sexual orientation, and a lack of protection from hate crimes.


⁴⁸ Wenzel, Gericht und Gedächtnis, l.f., 365ff.
The point I want to make is that the images represented in contemporary German films about National Socialism make use of the Nazi past, not only suggesting that ordinary Germans were mainly victims, and that today’s Germany has overcome its heterophobic politics and culture. Above all, the images in these films suggest a continuity of a liberal political culture that distorts history. The negative images represented serve as a counterpart against which the positive characters can unfold, representing not contemporary Germany but how it wants to be seen, or rather how it needs to be seen regarding its positioning in international relations and its internal policies.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the presence of these seemingly positive images of the Self produces particular absences. It makes invisible daily racism as well as common antisemitism and the concrete politics of exclusion. The absence created by current representations thus consists of the factual Othering contemporary society carries out every day. In the case of Krupp – eine deutsche Familie, the company that is shown to outlive its old, now allegedly eclipsed patriarchal traits represents the nation in a nutshell, while persisting conflicts of interests and conflicting narratives of memory are neglected by this synthesis. In Nordwand, the presence of the victimized protagonist, Luise, who is drawn to a racialized Other, makes invisible the factual treatment of those who were marked as Other by the Nazi regime, whose politics of annihilation were actually carried out.

**Conclusion: The Impact of Visual Politics**

The latest developments regarding images of the Self and images of the Other in the context of Jewish-Gentile relations in Germany suggest that the discourse of suffering and victimization of non-Jewish Germans has reached a point of consolidation. Moreover, the films I have discussed above cannot simply be viewed as products of individuals. Rather, they are products of a culture industry, and as such are part of a hegemonic discourse. Financed mainly through public funds, their production is part of a political action that can be called visual politics. As an instrument of these politics, they mirror present German society, and they do so in a far broader sense than just by depicting reality. As I have tried to show, they represent “the daydreams of society” (Kracauer), and the images they offer

⁴⁹ Without being able to expatiate upon this matter further, it should be noted that any nationalism works in favor of neutralizing existing internal differences by homogenizing the majority of the population against an outside. Hobsbawm, Eric, Nationen und Nationalismus. Mythos und Realität, Frankfurt am Main 2004 [1990], 40ff.
serve as fantasies that point to persisting contradictions that this society produces – and, of course, they provide models for conceptions of reality.

To conclude, in contrast to “classic“ antisemitism, the counterimage of the German nation today, its Other, is not ‘the Jew’ anymore but Nazism as the allegedly defeated regime of Others who are constructed as fundamentally different from ordinary Germans. At the same time, in current films about National Socialism, these ordinary Germans are represented as the primary victims of the Shoah, often by adaptation of the image of Jewish victims through the process of Idolatric Mimesis. While the victimized protagonists thus represent a non-Jewish audience by appropriating images of the former Others, the first and foremost victims of the Nazis become more and more absent. Regarding the visual strategy of Idolatric Mimesis, this takeover of Holocaust iconography is blatant, if not to say outrageous, since it blurs existential differences between those who were annihilated and thus excluded from the human family, and those who, after all, remained part of the *Volksgemeinschaft* and were therefore considered worthy of rescue. Being a victim of war and being a victim of the politics of extermination is a distinction that these images fail to make. In the now hegemonic universalist view that everyone, Jewish or Gentile, was a victim of National Socialism, particularities that once determined whether one lived or was murdered, are overwritten.

Concomitantly, antisemitic stereotypes are reproduced in the same films, often in coded or camouflaged forms. Thus, the ideologically constituted Other to antiliberal, nationalist communitarianism persists concerning the structuring of character ensembles and the dichotomies of Self and Other of the national collective: those who pose a threat to the image of the national Self – the true victims of National Socialism – become invisible, or they are reinstated as a menace to the collective by use of antisemitic imagery.

In addition, the new phenomenon of *alterophilia* as embracing the ‘other Other’ can be disclosed as a reaction to a normative pressure to incorporate present images of a ‘good’ national Self into images of national history, not the other way around. Hence, the ostensible anti-antisemitism these films feature, the discourse of reconciliation they represent, distorts images of history to a point where existential differences become invisible and the former Others undergo a secondary process of Othering in which they are excluded from hegemonic narratives of memory. Considering the ‘other Others.’ the exploitation of their images is not less problematic since it disguises existing racialized and gendered politics in a postcolonial world.

Moreover, projection of the present values of political culture into the past creates the illusion of a democratic continuity that renders invisible the fact that the process of democratization of German society was initially forced top-down onto the German population by the Allies, and that it took decades to percolate
through all levels of German postwar society. Furthermore, in spite of having inte-

grated itself into the democratic West by now, a democratic culture is a process 

that needs to constantly be sustained and reinforced. Especially with regard to 

its living Jews, persisting antisemitism in new but often not yet acknowledged 

forms, such as antizionism and Germany’s role in international politics, the films 

discussed here and their strategies of Othering do not contribute to a raising of 

consciousness in this context. Instead, they work in the opposite direction: they 

make invisible continuing practices of domination by suggesting that the Self has 

not become but always has been the Other.

Works cited

Bergem, Wolfgang, Politische Kultur und Geschichte, in: S. Salzborn (Ed.), Politische Kultur-


Decker, Oliver et al., Vom Rand zur Mitte. Rechtsextreme Einstellungen und ihre Einflussfaktoren 

in Deutschland, Berlin 2006.

Diekmann, Irene (Ed.), Geliebter Feind – Gehasster Freund. Antisemitismus und Philose-

mitismus in Geschichte und Gegenwart, Berlin 2009.

Ebbrecht, Tobias, Geschichtsbilder im medialen Gedächtnis. Filmische Narrationen des 

Holocaust, Bielefeld 2011.

Hawel, Marcus, Die normalisierte Nation. Vergangenheitsbewältigung und Außenpolitik in 

Deutschland, Hannover, 2007.


Hobsbawm, Eric, Nationen und Nationalismus. Mythos und Realität, Frankfurt am Main 2004 

[1990].


Varianten eines alten Deutungsmusters, Münster 2005.

Kracauer, Siegfried, “The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies.” In: Id., The Mass Ornament. 


Levy, Daniel/ Sznaider, Natan, Erinnerung im globalen Zeitalter: Der Holocaust, Frankfurt am 

Main 2007 [2001].

Margalit, Gilad, Guilt, Suffering and Memory. Germany Remembers Its Dead of World War II, 

Bloomington/IN 2010.

Memmi, Albert, Rassismus, Frankfurt am Main 1987 [1972].


Rensmann, Lars, Kritische Theorie über den Antisemitismus. Studien zu Struktur, Erklärungspo-


Schmid, Antonia, Bridging the Gap: Image, Discourse, and Beyond – Towards a Critical Theory 


50 Margalit, Guilt, l.f., 289.


