

Verloren zonsondergangen : Hans-Jurgen Syberberg en het linkse denken over rechts in Duitsland.

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Summary

Lost Sunsets: Hans Jürgen Syberberg and Leftist Thought about the Right in Germany

This dissertation deals with the art-political theory in the work of the German filmmaker and pamphleteer Syberberg. It has the shape of an intellectual artist's biography. My main argument hooks up with the central issue in the current debate on Syberberg, the contours of which are outlined in the first, introductory chapter. This debate concerns questions like: How does Syberberg's involvement in the post-1989 Conservative Revolution in Germany relate to his earlier works, like the six-part film cycle *The Grail* (1972-82)? Has he indeed turned to the extreme right, as former admirers like Sontag, Lacoue-Labarthe, Elsaesser, and Santner believe? Or were his predominantly German critics correct after all, when they criticized the work of this filmmaker already in the late 1970s as symptomatic of a rightist ideology? The Syberberg case, I suggest, should not be considered in isolation, but in light of a much broader and older leftist controversy about the right: the debate on irrationalism.

Chapter 2 addresses Syberberg's artistic apprenticeship: the period until the late 1960s. Specifically, it focuses on his father, a gentleman farmer from Nossendorf (Vorpommern) whose farm was expropriated; his brief stint at the Brecht theater in East Berlin; the influence of Sedlmayr, his professor of art history in Munich and the key opponent of Adorno in the West-German debate on Modernism; and the making of his early films (1965-1970). An important episode in this formative period involves Syberberg's juvenile work from 1953, the film that Brecht asked him to make of his stage version of the *Urfaust*, a version that was sharply criticized by the East-German regime. This took place during the heyday of the realism/formalism controversy in East Germany, which basically was a continuation of the debate on Expressionism of the 1930s, also known as the Brecht-Lukács controversy. Lukács set up the meanwhile classic bifurcation in German cultural history: the one between 'rational' or leftist heritage and 'irrational' or rightist heritage. The 'rational' Enlightenment tradition of Lessing, Marx, Thomas Mann, and Ulbricht was counterbalanced by the 'irrational' (or: rightist, decadent, reactionary, fascistic) anti-Enlightenment tradition of Schelling, Wagner, Nietzsche, and Hitler. Lukács put the art of the avant-garde, from Naturalism to Absurdism, into the latter category as well. His critique of Germany as an 'irrational' culture provided the theoretical underpinnings for the re-education politics in the early GDR, which Brecht strongly opposed in his *Urfaust* staging. Supported by GDR dissidents Bloch and Mayer, Brecht defended the avant-garde's right to exist.

Syberberg's polemic against this 'irrationalism'-critique is a leitmotiv in his oeuvre. In all his works he is concerned with questioning the association of irrationalism with the right. Artistic and intellectual innovations result from persistently and painstakingly examining specific aspects of irrationalism – a method of scrutiny that typically results in long-winded projects. Initially Syberberg closely followed Brecht's model. He felt that cinema should be reshaped along Brechtian lines, moving from 'fun theater' to moral drama, which, both technically and intellectually, would be on a par with the avant-garde. Not surprisingly, then, Syberberg's early films basically come across as cinema translations of modern theater of the post-Brecht era: the absurdism of Dürrenmatt and Beckett. Syberberg shielded this post-Brechtian avant-garde from the irrationalism-critique in two ways. He indicated that the 'absurd conscious' corresponded well with the prevailing post-war sensibility: the early films articulate a sense of crisis that was widespread during the years of post-war reconstruction, not only in circles of cultural conservatives like Sedlmayr, but also

in those of Western neo-Marxists like Adorno and GDR dissidents like Bloch and Mayer. Second, he also showed that the theater of the absurd was a more contemporary form of moral drama in the Brechtian tradition.

In the 1970s, the period of *The Grail*, Syberberg redirected his attention from post-fascist to pre-fascist irrationalism: Wagner and late Romanticism. In Chapter 3 I explore the specific character of Syberberg's attitude toward Wagner and the role of *The Grail* in the debate on Wagner, from the Bloch-Lukács / Thomas Mann controversy to the uproar concerning the leftist 'Wagnerism' of New Bayreuth. Does Syberberg belong to the Wagner-critical tradition of the older Thomas Mann? Or are we rather dealing with someone who is akin to the (pre-war) Wagnerians of Old Bayreuth? And what are we to make of the aesthetic Wagner-Brecht formula, which the Syberberg sympathizers have frequently interpreted as an anti-Wagnerian strategy? It will be argued that Syberberg's moving from Brecht to Wagner, though, was not as large a step as is often assumed: the Brechtian didactic theater and the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* belong to the same theatrical tradition (that of moral drama). Moreover, a combined Wagnerian and Brechtian aesthetic was hardly a novelty: already in the early 1960s Wieland Wagner introduced the epic theater method in Bayreuth. It is also true that Syberberg's work contains little or no evidence of Brechtian hostility against Wagner. This suggests a major difference between Syberberg and the older Mann, whose denouncing of the 'diabolic irrationalism' of the Wagner-Nietzsche-Hugo Wolf-Hitler line in *Doktor Faustus* (1947) was correctly interpreted by Lukács as the bourgeois counterpart of his own dialectic-materialist critique of irrationalism. As Wesseltier argued, *The Grail* 'reopens a specific tradition of metaphysics and culture, which Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* was assumed to have ended'.

The main argument used by Syberberg to defend his following of Wagner is derived from Bloch, who already in the debate on Expressionism crossed swords with Lukács and Mann on this matter. The premise was that if the Nazis admired Wagner, this did not necessarily turn him into a 'spiritual predecessor' of National Socialism. The art of Romanticism gave rise to artistic traditions like Symbolism and Expressionism, and it tends to be associated with certain desires, like beauty and purity, and with particular notions (such as *Volk*, nation, homeland, *Heimat*, soil, *Führer*, the Grail, and the Third Reich) and narrative forms like fairy tale, legend, myth, saga, and fantasy. Yet if Nazism may have appropriated many of these notions, forms, and longings, this means that they are also subject to being 'expropriated' or regained. This, so Bloch argues, with Syberberg in his wake, should be the role of all genuine critical art and philosophy: developing 'strategies of reconsideration' that facilitate a de-Nazification. Bloch felt that such reconsideration should rely on a neo-Marxist perspective, but Syberberg's objective was to 'understand the German mind, as well as to honor and save it'. In so doing, and fully in line with the Old-Bayreuth Wagnerians, he defined the 'German mind' as the 'irrational', as the 'counterweight of Enlightenment thought'. Syberberg himself viewed this as a radicalizing of Bloch's dialectic. If it was useful to strive for de-Nazification of seriously perverted notions like 'soil', '*Führer*', and 'Third Reich', as Bloch argued, why, then, should 'Germany as a mental possibility' (Bohrer) be left in the hands of the Nazis?

Subsequently, Chapter 4 is entirely devoted to a discussion of a series of commentaries on the fourth part of *The Grail*: the Bayreuth documentary *The Confessions of Winifred Wagner* (1975). The commentaries discussed all situate Syberberg's work in the debate that was started by A. and M. Mitscherlich in the mid-1960s on the German 'inability to mourn'. Syberberg's position in this social-psychological debate, as well as in the art-historical debate on the aesthetic dimension of National Socialism that is closely tied to it, is further developed in Chapter 5, which also focuses on the Winifred Wagner documentary.

With the emergence of the New Left protest generation of '68, the critique of irrationalism became more prominent in the West as well. In a watered-down form its echo resounded in Habermas's defense of the 'project of modernity' and in Sontag's 1974 essay on Riefenstahl, 'Fascinating Fascism', one of the key texts in the art-historical debate. The Mitscherlichs, in their effort to elucidate the gist of their theory on mourning, explicitly relied on Lukács. They started from the assumption that after 1945 the Germans failed to deal with irrational emotions and phantasmagoria adequately, and, consequently, they repressed them: a 'radical victory' of the 'irrational' is only possible through a psychoanalytic *Trauerarbeit*. Elsaesser, Berman, Sanford, and Santner argue that Syberberg, in his *Grail* cycle, sought to initiate such 'mourning work' in the sense of the Mitscherlichs. However, as will be elaborated in detail, this interpretation is founded on a painful misunderstanding. On the issue of how the Germans should have absorbed their Nazi past, Syberberg held a radically different opinion than the Mitscherlichs and most of his admirers. He felt that the postwar re-education effort, as a critique of irrationalism, implanted a nosophobia for the irrational self in the German psyche. With his *Grail* cycle, he wanted to help Germans to overcome this nosophobia. The *Winifred Wagner* documentary was meant to confront them with a 'courageous' old lady, who, freely and candidly, positively acknowledged her own German emotional sensibility. The *Grail* cycle's fifth part, *Hitler, a Film from Germany* (1977), a *Gesamtkunstwerk* made in the Old-Bayreuth style, aimed at letting the German audience play a cathartic game with cultural signs derived from 'the long history of irrationalism'.

The latter work, in fact, is the subject of Chapters 6 and 7, which complement each other. *Hitler, a Film from Germany* is best characterized as a seven-hours-long collage of objects, texts, images, and sounds. This film provides a true sampling of nearly everything that since Lukács has been understood as a manifestation of irrationalism. Almost anything that former admirers like Elsaesser, Santner, and Lacoue-Labarthe accused Syberberg of in the 1990s can already be traced in this work from the mid-1970s: a hostile attitude versus Jews, an aggressive German nationalism, a celebration of Prussia, a flirting with the Conservative Revolution ideology (Sedlmayr, E. Jünger, Schmitt, Picard), as well as a polemic against the re-education effort in general and the way the 1968 generation came to terms with the past in particular. For the first time Syberberg openly received support from the extreme right. This said, we should not jump to conclusions, though. As the 'absurd conscious' of Syberberg's early films corresponded with the sensibility of the years of post-war reconstruction, so the German-minded anti-Enlightenment thought in the *Hitler* film appears a hyperbolic representation of the sensibility of the years following the 'German autumn' of 1977. In contrast to Habermas (1977), who claimed that the 'ideological climate' in 1970s West Germany was 'dominated by a mixture of old and new conservative movements', I argue that the 1970s was a period in which on a global basis the neo-Marxist reflection of the emigrant generation went through a renaissance. Once the emigrant discourse gained more influence, however, the old differences surfaced as well. Much of what Habermas considered as the Old or New Right, on closer inspection turns out to belong to a dissident leftist tendency, which representatives of the critique of irrationalism decried as rightist from the outset. Examples include the post-Nietzschean philosophy of the then admirers of Syberberg, including Lacoue-Labarthe, Foucault, Deleuze, and Faye, and the neo-Expressionist painting of Kiefer and Lüpertz, who in those days were always associated with Syberberg's art.

During this period Syberberg himself did not consider his work as an intervention 'coming from the right'. At that point his intellectual and artistic examples were still Brecht, Bloch, and Mayer. Only in the course of the 1980s Syberberg gradually arrived at the understanding that the intellectual roads taken by these emigrants were no longer his. The

first signs of his conservative turn become visible in *The Night*, the beginning of a four-part theater cycle about burnt-down *Pommernland*, entitled *Requiem for the End of Prussia* (1982-1991). In his striving to represent the destruction of Pommern and the suffering of those who were driven out of the *Heimat*, Syberberg was faced with the confines of a paradigm in which the horrors of 8 May 1945 were exclusively shown from the angle of the winners, the (Jewish) victims of the old Germany, and those who 'chose the socialist GDR as refuge'. Given this paradigm, the tears of the Prussian Hekabe became part of 'what is forgotten on the memorials'. In his infamous 1990 pamphlet *Vom Unglück und Glück der Kunst in Deutschland nach dem letzten Kriege* (On the Unhappiness and Happiness of Art in Germany after the Last War), Syberberg denounced German emigrant theory as 'leftist-Jewish' and committed himself to the 'native soil' and 'German-conscious' thought of the post-Nietzschean Conservative Revolution.

Finally, the concluding Chapter 8 situates Syberberg's conservative turn in the broader context of the changed mentality in post-1989 Germany in general, and the debate on 'What's right, what's left?' in particular. This debate was started in part by Botho Strauss's *Anschwellender Bocksgesang* (Louder Goat Singing, 1993), and attention is paid to some striking parallels in the artistic careers of Strauss and Syberberg. The collapse of socialist Eastern Europe caused the demise of the credibility of the emigrant generation's neo-Marxist thought, as is true of the critique of irrationalism. In the meantime, many of the taboos that Syberberg challenged already in the 1970s have become subject to debate. Yet, ironically, the disappearance of the dominance of the social-critical paradigm turned out to be disastrous for Syberberg's life as an artist. Undeniably, the filmmaker, who today openly sides with the right, has had trouble finding his way in the new Germany, both artistically and intellectually. This may be explained by the fact that over the years Syberberg's worldview and creative energy have become bound up with leftist debates to such degree that he is basically lost without them.

In an effort to understand the work of Syberberg, this dissertation explores the influential art-political debates that unfolded in Germany between the 1930s and the 1990s. Its main conclusion posits that Syberberg, who may have gone conservative, is certainly no *Alt-Konservativer*.