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RETREAT INTO MYTH: JOSEPH GOEBBELS, KOLBERG, AND THE IDEAL IN NAZI CINEMA

BY ROBERT LEVINE '00

"All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war." - Walter Benjamin

"Even entertainment is nowadays politically important, if not decisive for the outcome of the war." - Joseph Goebbels

"Cinema is a ribbon of dreams." - Orson Welles

Nazi cinema enjoys a dual position in the history of German film. It stands as the dark hallmark of an abhorrent and reprehensible regime while at the same time representing a time of great success and productivity for the nation's industry, spawning films that still fascinate and engage cineastes today, both for their inherent quality and craft as well as their role as propaganda pieces designed to further indoctrinate their audiences with National Socialist ideology. Both Adolf Hitler and Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels were avid film enthusiasts prior to and throughout their ascension to power; they were also great opportunists, and in assuming control over the German film industry, they took the reins of what was arguably the most productive and influential in Europe.

In many ways, the Nazi leadership and the German cinema made for an easy courtship. The German national cinema, ironically enough, grew out of an overtly nationalist thrust—an urgent desire to see German habits and German traditions compete with other foreign cultures for representation on screen (Taylor 126). Upon takeover, the Nazis "inherited a cinema with a strong and distinctive national tradition at a time when film was already accepted as a respectable and effective medium for the transmission of ideas" (Taylor 142). Hitler and Goebbels would shed this distinctive tradition (characterized by the stark amorality and expressionistic aesthetic of films like Fritz Lang's *M*) almost immediately upon takeover, however, opting to take the nation-

alism to a much higher level—into the realm of fantasy. Hitler's tenants of Aryan superiority, racial purity and the "inevitable" rise of the Nazi empire congealed into a grandiose false ideal, a work of megalomaniacal imagination, and the cinema would prove the ideal medium for pushing it through: "As a regime committed to an irrational ideology, the Third Reich was drawn naturally to a medium whose appeal lay in its ability to alter reality to create the proper emotional effect" (Weinberg 105). Hitler and Goebbels recognized, more perhaps than anyone else in history did, the power of the cinema as a formative political tool, and they set it into action right away.

Debate persists among scholarly studies of Nazi cinema regarding how many of the films produced during the period of Nazi rule (1933-1945) actually constitute "propaganda," due partially to the definitional difficulties the term itself presents. In his book *Film Propaganda: Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany*, Richard Taylor makes an admirable attempt to sort through the various trappings of the word, coming to a succinct conclusion: "Propaganda is the attempt to influence the public opinions of an audience through the transmission of ideas and values" (15). For the purposes of this essay, this definition will suffice. The other variable that grays the propaganda label attached to the Nazi cinema is that many of the films produced under the regime were consciously created as entertainment, rather than instructional or intimidation pieces. What one might conceive as a period brimming with sledgehammer-subtle cinematic assaults of Orwellian brainwashing upon even a cursory examination reveals an industry output primarily composed of slick entertainment fare on par with what is normally associated with Hollywood. According to author Eric

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Rentschler, "so-called 'unpolitical' features constituted 86% of the epoch's films" (Illusion 37). Citing film sociologist Gerd Albrecht's *Nationalsozialistische Politik*, Rentschler writes that "generic" or entertainment productions constituted 941 of the 1,094 feature films made under Nazi control, including 295 melodramas and biopics, 123 detective and adventure films, and 523 comedies and musicals (Rentschler *Afterlife* 7). This was a cinema dominated by "formula fare and escapist diversion replete with well-known stars, upbeat scores and alluring production values" (Rentschler *Afterlife* 9). In other words, it was no two-minute hate, and this inclination to entertain was reflected in many of Nazi Germany's larger social policies. National Socialism was "a political order that openly proffered tourism, consumerism and recreation as dialectical complements to law, order and restriction" (Rentschler *Afterlife* xi). To those people not alienated, despised and deported by the fascist ideologies of the party, Nazi Germany aimed to please (albeit with candy-bar concessions and pleasures as manufactured and orchestrated as anything else). A government repute for its public rallies and splendid parades, "show business and National Socialism were of a piece" (Rentschler *Illusion* 35).

Nazi Germany is history's most infamous cult of personality, and Hitler is the dictator star-supreme, but if any one person were assigned the role of Oz, the man behind the curtain, it would be Goebbels, Reich Minister for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda. Goebbels was appointed in March of 1933. A brilliant orator and consummate mythmaker, his role in the party to that point had been part salesman, part ringmaster. Goebbels was responsible for making his Fuhrer not simply palatable to the public, but irresistible, and he orchestrated large parades and musical reviews to that end (Baird 16). Upon his appointment to Minister, he assumed control over all the media and communications apparatuses of German society in the form of the *Reichskulturkammer*, or State Chambers of Culture, with branches for each of the main media enterprises (Art, Music, Theatre, Author-

ship, Press, Radio and Film) (Manvell and Fraenkel 69). With the film industry in particular, he pledged reform, and the provisional Reich Film Chamber [*Reichsfilmkammer*] was established by July 1933 (Manvell and Fraenkel 69). All professionals in the industry were required to join (non-Aryans being excluded, having been promptly expelled) (Taylor 145). A single official film industry trade union (*Deutsche Arbeitsfront*) was established, for which membership was also compulsory (Manvell and Fraenkel 70). The Reich Film Law of February 1934 ensured that all scripts were examined and revised prior to production (Manvell and Fraenkel 71). A rigid system of film censorship, in keeping with the party line, came into being, with Goebbels at the very top of the heap. It was designed so that his directives "could pass down the chain of command to those actually engaged in...drama and film production" (Manvell and Fraenkel 69). Citing Albrecht, Weinberg writes, "Goebbels was involved intensively in the conceptualization and production of propaganda films in general and of weekly newsreels in particular" (107). Film was undoubtedly his passion. His personal diaries are "replete with references to movie stars, appearances at premieres, and criticisms of specific films and actors" (Weinberg 107). A perusal of his wartime diaries from 1939-41 shows that he reserved time almost every evening to watch films, revise scripts, etc. He even enjoyed American pictures. Of Frank Capra's *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, he wrote: "Marvelous stuff from America, with Gary Cooper. Wonderfully made, excellent ideas, beautifully acted. I am delighted" (*Diaries* 13). Of course, with Hollywood's non-Aryan power base, his appreciation could only go so far: "In the evening, Leni Riefenstahl reports to me on her trip to America. She gives me an exhaustive description, and one that is far from encouraging. We shall get nowhere there. The Jews rule by terror and bribery" (*Diaries* 9).

From his success as a rally speaker and parade organizer, Goebbels understood the advantages of addressing a crowd, for "it is crowds rather than isolated individuals that

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may be induced to run the risk of death to secure the triumph of a creed or an idea" (Baird 17). It is no wonder he gravitated towards the cinema, for as Taylor articulates:

Cinema appeals to the individual as a member of a crowd. In this context it contains elements of theatre: the member of a cinema audience, like a spectator in a theatre, is uniquely susceptible not only to his or her own emotions, but to those of the mass around, and to the interaction between the emotions of that individual and those of the mass...he/she is like putty in the propagandist's hands (16).

Goebbels recognized the formative power of the cinema, its remarkable ability to influence and suggest. He set out to create a film industry in full service of the Reich, where every exposed frame constituted a brick in an ever-climbing ideological wall, whose purpose was to contain the German masses and the world at-large in a psychic enclosure with the Nazi/Aryan ideal, further separating all three from the polluted nature of the regime and the sinister reality it imposed.

It was Goebbels who kept Nazi cinema firmly steeped in its entertainment foundations. In this, he disagreed with Hitler on two fundamental points regarding propaganda. First, Hitler felt that art and politics should be kept distinct and separate. In his book *Mein Kampf*, he writes, "where the destiny and existence of a people are at stake, all obligation toward beauty ceases" (19). In conversation, he remarked:

Certainly, on the one hand I want to use the film fully and completely as a medium of propaganda, but in such a way that every viewer knows that today he's going to a political film...It makes me sick when people make politics under the guise of art. Either art or politics... (qtd. in Taylor 148).

Second, Hitler felt that the importance of strong propaganda is inversely proportional to party membership. It is crucial only insofar as it is necessary to draw allegiance. Once allegiance is solidified, Hitler felt that the sig-

nificance of propaganda decreased. Goebbels, however, felt that propaganda efforts should be continued even after power has been consolidated (Taylor 143). Additionally, aesthetics were absolutely a concern and, above all, Goebbels never wanted an audience member to "know that today he's going to a political film." Disallowing that realization was to Goebbels the key to effective propaganda, and the primary impetus behind his emphasis on entertainment. He feared that overtly political propaganda, where the hand of the government was clearly visible, risked alienating the audience. An audience aware that it is the target of didacticism will naturally be skeptical, and Goebbels hoped to avoid such a dynamic. As Goebbels stated in a letter to Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, presumably in an attempt to solicit his participation: "I do not require a film to begin and end with a National Socialist procession. Leave these to us - we know how to do them better than you do" (qtd. in Taylor 211). Goebbels relegated more overt forms of propaganda to the newsreels that preceded each film showing. He disdained overly intellectual or experimental projects, keeping his eye firmly fixed on the lowest common denominator and the bottomline. In 1937, when American imports were still out-financing domestic German productions, he kept his ear to the ground; audiences made it clear they desired their *Steamboat Willie* before their *Battleship Potemkin*. His features were to maintain "the appearance of escapist vehicles and innocent recreations" (Rentschler *Afterlife* 16). Images of boot-stomping and *sieg-heils* were also threatening to international audiences, for Goebbels was a shrewd businessman - he expected the German film industry to be the most successful in the world. His immediate nationalization of the film industry upon takeover in 1933 ensured that all profits from the films fed back into government hands. Rentschler encapsulates Goebbels' objectives best:

[H]e wanted films with formal assurance and popular appeal, fantasy productions that would expand German market shares and alleviate the need for foreign imports. He sought to create a

star system; he cultivated scriptwriters and directors. Like any Hollywood entrepreneur, he checked box-office returns and stressed the crucial role of advertising...Goebbels articulated a desire to create a cinema that could both satisfy the domestic market and function as a foreign emissary (*Afterlife* 19).

Goebbels became, in a way, a perverse Cecil B. DeMille: part entertainer, part businessman, all emotional engineer. Writes Manvell: "The effect of [Goebbels'] controls was to lower the temperature of German film-making until it approached zero...German films became escapist and politically harmless, or nondescript; and notable for the absence, rather than the presence, of a swastika" (Manvell and Fraenkel 72). Indeed, many of these films were designed as period pieces to assume an empty "universalism" and avoid comparison with contemporary political realities. However, Manvell's statement is slightly misleading in that it equates surface elements and content ("absence, rather than the presence, of a swastika") with an inherent political innocuousness. Posed with the aforementioned question - can these ostensibly "harmless," apolitical films be considered propaganda? - the answer lies resolutely in the affirmative. They were made with the express purpose of ushering through the antiseptic facade of the "true" Aryan existence as fabricated by the Nazi party, an existence that could only really subsist on screen - in the realm of the ideal and the fantastic.

If Nazi film production kept a steady pace prior to 1940, the onset of war kicked it into high gear. The industry itself was never more successful - escapist fare made film houses a welcome refuge from the trials of wartime living. It was not until 1942, when the Sixth army of the German forces lost over three-quarters of its numbers to death or capture at the battle of Stalingrad, did a discernable shift in Goebbels' approach to conceiving the propaganda feature take place. With the production of *Munchhausen* (1943) Goebbels made a direct attempt to prompt a psychological and spiritual rebound on the

part of the German populace in response to a specific political/military setback (Rentschler *Afterlife* 193). His strategy was characteristically diverting, and the product more fantastical than ever. Stalingrad and *Munchhausen* concurrently mark "the watershed in delineating Goebbels' shift from a combination of factual-mythical propaganda - which characterized his approach during the early years of the war - to an increasing dependence on irrational themes" (Baird 40). So would begin Goebbels' "total war of illusion meant to distract Germans from painful and traumatic realities, from the presentiment of a national catastrophe and the shame of mass murder" (Rentschler *Afterlife* 212). Days after a massive Allied bombing, *Munchhausen* premiered in Berlin as part of Ufa's 25th anniversary celebration (Rentschler *Afterlife* 194). Conceived as the "ultimate entertainment," the film is a ribald pop fantasy based on a popular piece of European folklore. The eponymous hero is a grand liar whose on-screen antics bear an interesting parallel to the Minister of Propaganda himself: "This is to be the story about a hero who fabricates tales, and, mimicking the powers of cinema, incarnates a medium that traffics in illusions" (Rentschler *Afterlife* 198). No expense was spared in the creation of *Munchhausen*; Goebbels intended to produce a grandstanding showpiece that would demonstrate the dominance of the German cinema's ability to entertain. The film's high-concept production "put German technical genius on parade and offered a compelling - and what was hoped to be reassuring - triumph of special effects" (Rentschler *Afterlife* 196). The film would also serve to anesthetize the German populace to a stinging defeat on the battlefield and the ominous threat of Allied victory that was now raining down over their heads, providing the ultimate vehicle of escape in the character of the Baron, whose magical powers allow him to travel through space and time and escape trepidation with ease. According to Rentschler, *Munchhausen* represents the era's "ultimate exercise in wishful thinking" (*Afterlife* 202). That is, until *Kolberg*.

The loss at Stalingrad also propelled

Goebbels to green-light *Kolberg*, a historical epic about a courageous civilian army defending its town against Napoleon's forces, though the film would not see release until 1945. *Kolberg*, as Taylor put it, became "the swan song of Nazi cinema" for which *Munchhausen* is an interesting antecedent (196). Both stem from the same hyper-ambitious, reactionary thrust on Goebbels' part: "With German reversal in the Russian campaign in 1942 and growing disillusionment on the homefront, the Minister of Propaganda turned his attention to what he believed would be the greatest movie ever produced" (Weinberg 113). Perhaps at the behest of an unfair precedent set by the popular success of *Munchhausen*, Goebbels spearheaded a project that would come to represent Nazi cinema's last gasp, a desperate conflagration of resources in last-ditch service of an increasingly delusional ideology.

Kolberg, like *Munchhausen*, was an enormous undertaking. Like the filmmakers behind *Munchhausen*, director Viet Harlan (*Jud Suss*) received *carte blanche* from Goebbels to complete the film according to his specifications. *Kolberg's* budget would eventually exceed that of *Munchhausen*, totaling upwards of 8.5 million Reichmarks, almost eight times the cost of an average film produced within the industry at the time (Taylor 196). Staging its elaborate parade and battle scenes would require the involvement of over 187,000 people, including several real army units (Weinberg 113). Nearly two years of shooting amassed over 90 hours of raw footage (Weinberg 113). *Kolberg* became a sinkhole of time and resources and a puzzling priority for the Minister of Propaganda. He removed more and more troops from the field to act as extras in the film. Even with a scarcity of real ammunition on the WWII battlefields, Goebbels had munitions factories work double time to produce blanks for the film (Weinberg 113). Despite the need for preservatives and food supplies all across the empire, tons of salt were shipped in to give the illusion of snow (Taylor 197). Even Harlan, the director, expressed confusion as to his Minister's intentions:

During the shooting I constantly discussed with the officers the sacrifice that the film involved for the military. Most of them were glad, and none was keen to get back to the front as soon as possible. But nobody understood why a film should be so important" (qtd. in Taylor 197).

It is ironic that a film portraying a defeatist and ineffectual military would provide refuge for real German soldiers whose will to fight was quickly waning. Harlan continues:

It was the year 1944. Stalingrad had long fallen and the danger of a war that had been completely lost moved ever more uncomfortably close to us...Hitler as well as Goebbels must have been convinced that the distribution of a film like this would be more useful than a military victory. They must have been hoping for a miracle. And what better to perform a miracle than this 'dream factory' that is the cinema (qtd. in Taylor 197).

What Goebbels hoped to achieve was a mass grassroots galvanization, an awakening of nationalist spirit in the German populace similar to the my-country-before-myself credo taken up by the *Kolberg* citizenry in the film. Again, as with *Munchhausen*, he felt a well-timed cinematic spectacle of the highest quality could prompt a psychological resuscitation in his audience, and he pursued it as a political necessity. *Kolberg* stands at the nexus of Goebbels' two primary directives: on one end, the aim to influence, dictate; on the other, the aim to entertain and enthrall. Investing as much as he did in the completion of *Kolberg*, it is difficult to tell which one of these aims he considered the priority; or, if he saw any difference between these two motives at all.

More than most Goebbels-sanctioned features, *Kolberg* wears its propagandic intent on its sleeve. It is, like many films in the Nazi oeuvre, a period piece, though clearly intended as an allegory, with themes of duty and sacrifice intended as relevant to the contemporary German dilemma. A title opens the film, reading "Breslau, 1813." Citizens of the city march en masse down its streets, filling

the screen. They walk arm-in-arm, singing in unison. Inside his chambers, the King of Prussia, Frederick William II, is braced by commander Gneisenau, Goebbels' cinematic stand-in and mouthpiece. In the background, a choir can be heard singing lines from a poem by German patriot Theodor Korner, a poem Goebbels quoted famously in his speech announcing total war in 1943 (Taylor 198). Gneisenau demands a proclamation from the king inviting the citizens to participate in the war effort. The King scoffs at first, calling Gneisenau an "impractical dreamer." "Reality is different," says the King. "I know reality," says Gneisenau, again establishing his character affinity with Goebbels, the mythmaker and the propagator of "truth." "I looked [reality] in the face many years ago" says Gneisenau, "at *Kolberg*." We then dissolve to a title reading "Vienna, 1806." This will be the film's central narrative, framed by the story of Gneisenau and the King. After hearing an announcement declaring the surrender of the various cities of the German Empire to Napoleon, we switch to *Kolberg*, where the people are celebrating in an annual festival. Nettlebeck, the brewmaster and mayor of the village, is concerned over the threat of French occupation. A paragon of nationalism and stubborn pride, Nettlebeck is set off against the other "pragmatists" of the town leadership, who intend to surrender to Napoleon should his forces reach *Kolberg*. The military presence in the town is inept and lazy; they've allowed their cannons to rust. Together with a wounded lieutenant seeking refuge from battle, Nettlebeck sets out to prepare the citizenry of *Kolberg* for retaliation. Meanwhile, the lieutenant, named Shill, strikes up a romance with a local farm girl named Maria. Nettlebeck's rebuking of a French emissary draws Napoleon's wrath. The emperor steers his armies toward *Kolberg*. As Loncadou, *Kolberg's* misled military commander, debates with Nettlebeck over the necessity of fighting, French troops occupy the farmhouse of Maria's family, just outside of *Kolberg*. Maria's brother Klaus, portrayed as an effeminate milquetoast, toasts Napoleon with the French

soldiers, disgracing his father. Nettlebeck is imprisoned for his insolence. He sends Maria on a mission to *Konigsberg* to demand of the King that a new commander be sent to *Kolberg*. At the behest of the citizenry, Nettlebeck is freed, and the new commander arrives; it is Gneisenau, now participating in his own narrative and again providing voice to Goebbels' dictums. Gneisenau scolds Nettlebeck for his questioning of orders. "You want to lead but can't obey?" he asks. Here we see the fascist ideology begin to emerge; in times of great distress and turmoil, concern for one's homeland is pivotal, but never at the expense of hierarchy and order. "Otherwise," the commander states "we'd be on the road to anarchy." In the following scene, with a speech supposedly scripted by Goebbels himself, Gneisenau addresses the people of *Kolberg* directly (Manvell and Fraenkel 85). He begins with "Citizens of *Kolberg*, Prussians, Germans!" effectively drawing the intended metaphoric line of the film. He states:

No love is more sacred than love for one's fatherland. No joy is sweeter than the joy of freedom...Citizens and soldiers, from farm labourer to citizen general, you want to be as good as your fathers were. Dare to live up to them: you have their example, so set an example. The best way to defend a fortress is to attack (qtd. in Taylor 204).

As Taylor points out, "once more we have a speech in the film that could just as well be addressed to the Berliners of 1945 as to the *Kolbergers* of 1807" (Taylor 204). The battle ensues, and the *Kolberg* uprising proves to be a resilient one. The people make continual sacrifices of person and property, but ultimately prevail. They succeed in keeping the French forces from breaching their gates. The story then returns to 1813 in *Breslau*. Gneisenau has completed his story, and his King is swayed. As he sits down to sign the proclamation, Gneisenau moves to the window looking out over the Prussian people. Inspired by the memories of *Kolberg*, he begins to pontificate, and his words summarize the ultimate desires of Goebbels. Speaking almost directly into the

camera at Goebbels' Berliner audience, Gneisenau says:

The people are filled with a mysterious strength. The example the citizens of Kolberg once gave them, they want to follow and finally shake off their chains. The people are rising for coming battle. The storm is breaking loose...from the ashes and rubble, like a phoenix, a new people will rise. A new nation.

The message is clear: *Kolberg* is an example. Emulate it and find the honor they found.

Kolberg was a deliberate attempt at political self-preservation via aesthetic means. As a propaganda piece, it is a virtual catalogue of prototypical Nazi/Aryan qualities. Several other characteristics of the National Socialist ideal are evinced in addition to the chest-thumping nationalism embodied by Nettlebeck and Gneisenau. Not entirely relevant to the central lesson of the narrative, they often serve to reinforce the ideal via counterpoint. For example, Maria's brother Klaus, whose behavior confirms the Nazi distaste toward internationalism. Klaus announces early in the film that he has "become a citizen of the world" while abroad at music school. Nettlebeck, the protector of the homeland, regrets his decision to send him there. Fey and childish, Klaus is shown to contribute nothing to the military cause. He drinks with French soldiers and cries at the sounds of cannon fire. Towards the end of the film, he foolishly tries to retrieve his violin from his flooded house and is struck down by a cannon blast. An example of how self-interest breeds weakness, Klaus also demonstrates that "being abroad in Nazi cinema means potential attraction to the foreign, distance from the homeland and all sources of well-being and stability" (Rentschler *Illusion* 35). Internationalism is a corrupting influence. Indeed, after watching his son toast Napoleon, Klaus' father states that his house is tainted. "I'll never sit at that table again. This house died when they stole my son." Later, he burns the house down and kills himself in the fire. The many undesirable attributes of the French as portrayed in the film help to buttress the effigy of

the courageous Kolberg Aryans. The "life-and-death" struggle of the Kolbergers is contrasted with the "relative coldness" of the French (Taylor 205). The French appear "distant in their manner, they sit around at tables in rather effete fashion, and they wear wigs" (Taylor 205). In another shot, two French commanders converse in the foreground while a black man is visible between them in the background, "emphasizing to German audiences that the enemy is racially inferior, and indeed racially mixed as well" (Taylor 204). The French are also used as negative examples of the authoritarian order prescribed by Gneisenau. The French commander leading the assault on Kolberg is told to order a cease-fire to accommodate peace talks in Tilsit. He rejects the edict, declaring haughtily, "That does not apply to me." Later, he is reprimanded for "costing his Emperor an army!" Again, the fascist ideal ("orders are orders") is reinforced by counterexample. Aryan gender typing is also evident in the multiple shots of women screaming frantically while their homes are bombarded, their domestic realm violated (Nettlebeck, on the other hand, watches his house burn and states simply, "Life goes on").

Kolberg ultimately proved to be too much, too late. By the time of its release, the fall of the German Empire seemed inevitable. Due to Allied infiltration, the film could not even be premiered in Berlin. Goebbels was forced to parachute the film into the Atlantic Fortress of Rochelle in occupied France (Taylor 206). The encroaching specter of defeat seriously undermined the film's propagandic message. Audience reception was lukewarm (Taylor 206). Goebbels, however, remained irrepressible. When Kolberg fell to the Russians in March of 1945, Goebbels wrote in his diary:

We have now had to evacuate Kolberg. The town, which has been defended with such extraordinary heroism, could no longer be held. I will ensure that the evacuation of Kolberg is not mentioned in the OKW report. In view of the severe psychological repercussions on the *Kolberg* film we could do without that for the moment (*Entries* 167).

This comment speaks volumes, not only raising the question of which is the means and which is the ends (the war or the film), but indicating that Goebbels had now completely severed his tenuous fidelity to reality. As Taylor articulates, propaganda "canalizes an already existing stream," but if that stream, that reality, is entirely false, the illusion breaks down (210). For this reason, *Kolberg* has come to embody "the declining fortunes of the Wehrmacht and the progressive retreat into myth which characterized Nazi propaganda during the last years of the Third Reich" (Baird 9). Goebbels seems foolish to have pursued the project at the time that he did. Based on his comments earlier, Harlan himself was aware of the futility of the project, which might explain all the multiple references, both visual and aural, to self-burial throughout *Kolberg*. Nettlebeck is heard saying, "They can burn the houses, but not the ground. If they do, we'll become moles." Later, at Gneisenau's (i.e. Goebbels') order, the villagers dig out flood canals so that they can block the enemy's advance with water. The image of the villagers digging relentlessly in unison not only suggests they're digging their own mass grave, but also evokes the mass graves used to bury the victims of the Holocaust.

Indeed, Goebbels' edicts as Minister towards the end of the war make the suggestion that his thoughts were not entirely lucid. On April 17, 1945, with Berlin about to be overrun, Goebbels called a fifty-man assembly. He mentioned *Kolberg*, then announced plans for another film, "The Twilight of the Gods of Berlin," a film that would be shown a hundred years in the future (Roper xxxi). His staff "looked at him with amazement and concluded that he had gone off his head" (Roper

xxxii).

Kolberg, despite its heritage, has all the makings of an extremely entertaining film, with endearing characters and battle sequences that are still impressive by today's standards. To a viewer raised on the films of Hollywood, *Kolberg's* pleasures are easily accessible, primarily because its conventions are recognizable as our own, from the David vs. Goliath theme to the romantic side-plot (the only thing missing is comic relief). Indeed, Goebbels often "let Hollywood be his guide" and made "films crafted along classical American lines" (Rentschler *Illusion* 41). Additionally, "the utopian energies tapped by the feature films of the Third Reich in a crucial manner resembled, indeed at times consciously emulated, American dreams" (Rentschler *Afterlife* xii). Within this affinity, there lies a disturbing realization: that our cinemas, and cultures by association, are equal part myth-machines, rival purveyors of a deceptive ideal and that we, as viewers, are equally susceptible. It is simple, with the benefit of hindsight, to point out the propagandic elements that permeate the films of the Nazi Cinema, but would we have been so capable at the time of their release? Finally, we have the figure of Joseph Goebbels, a man consumed by his own myths and "enamored of [his] own media images" (Rentschler *Afterlife* 222). He came to personify Walter Benjamin's presage that, with the advent of the cinema, "[mankind's] self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order" (Benjamin 242). With *Kolberg*, his roles as entertainer and engineer became undistinguishable, perhaps even to him.

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