

After the Truth: An attempt to tackle Germany's past

The Berlin Editorial Board
13 November 1999

Nichts als die Wahrheit (literally “Nothing but the Truth,” but given the English-language title *After the Truth*) is a new German film by director Roland Suso Richter, first shown at the 47th San Sebastian Film Festival in Spain. At the Spanish festival and then upon its release in Germany the film has unleashed a torrent of discussion and controversy.

The opinions in the Spanish press swung between “A vigorous condemnation of Nazism” (*El Mundo*) to “a trivial swindle,” which “finally ends up defending what it intended to attack” (*El Pais*). “*Nichts als die Wahrheit* is a bold film,” declared *Die Zeit* in Germany, while the *Berliner Tagesspiegel* regarded the film as “a dangerous distortion”. The newspaper of the post-Stalinist PDS *Neues Deutschland* headlined its criticism of the film with “Everything but the Truth”. The *TAZ* praised the director for his “astounding political courage” and the weekly *Focus* magazine concluded “an exciting courtroom thriller with brilliant performances and guaranteed to lead to controversial discussion”. The well-known German director Doris Dörrie claimed to recognise in the film's portrait of Mengele “the monster that lives in us all,” and some newspapers used the opportunity to reopen a discussion on the extent of anti-Semitism amongst Germans.

The story of the film takes place in the present. Peter Rohm, a young lawyer, has for years been gathering material on the Nazi war criminal, Josef Mengele. Rohm knows everything about the atrocities committed by the man who was the principal doctor at the Nazi death camp of Auschwitz. Not only was Mengele responsible for deciding which of the camp inmates were to be sent to the gas chambers, he also used his position to conduct monstrous medical experiments on his helpless victims, in particular twins. Both Mengele and Rohm were born in the same town. The latter intends to write a book about the SS doctor entitled *One of Us*. However, he is unclear about and stumbles over the question of Mengele's motives.

Under mysterious circumstances Rohm is kidnapped and taken to Argentina and, upon waking up, confronts the doctor who was thought to have died some time ago. The “Death Angel from Auschwitz,” who is fatally ill, wishes to make a public confession.

In Germany the official reaction to Mengele's arrival is less than enthusiastic. After his identity is confirmed, preparations are made for a “show trial” for the benefit of world opinion. Mengele is entitled to a defending attorney and he insists that Rohm conduct his defence. The lawyer is shocked: “Is it even possible to defend someone like Mengele?”—someone who has committed such dreadful crimes. Eventually he agrees, after all he seeks to understand Mengele's motives—what better way than as his defender?

The trial begins and Mengele's opening statement elicits surprise and anger. Contrary to the majority of Nazi war criminals who pleaded innocent to the charges brought against them in trials after the war, Mengele confesses to all of the charges against him. However he can see no wrong in what he did, his deeds were not crimes. On the contrary, he acted on “humanitarian grounds”; “Auschwitz was pure hell,” a “camp

for the destruction of masses of people” in whose construction he had played no role. As a doctor he had done the only thing humanly possible to relieve the suffering of those condemned to death. Yes, he had killed small children. “Should I have left them to agonisingly starve to death?” It was an “act of mercy”—euthanasia. “Doctors will always have to kill people,” Mengele states. “A surgeon is no butcher just because he works with a knife.” The public and state attorney are left speechless.

Rohm puts pressure on Jewish witnesses who accuse Mengele of turning them into cripples. Under questioning they are forced to concede that despite their mutilation, because of Mengele they were left alive. Rohm is also able to prove that another survivor has given inaccurate and misleading evidence. The unthinkable emerges: Mengele has a real chance of winning the trial.

Well into the trial Rohm has renewed doubts about his role as Mengele's attorney and considers dropping the case. In conversation with Rohm, however, the manipulative Mengele indicates that he has information indicating that Rohm's own mother played a minor role in collaborating with Nazi doctors in the past—as a young nurse in the thirties, she had unwittingly administered two euthanasia injections. Even today she retains the profound feelings of guilt for what she did 50 years ago.

Confronted with this new information, confirmed by his own tear-ridden mother, Rohm is once again inspired to pursue the trial. After his concluding statement in which he defends Mengele as a “victim of circumstance,” Rohm makes an astonishing turn-around and calls for the maximum penalty for his client.

In the closing scene of the film Mengele's wide eyes feature in close-up and confront the viewer as he poses the question: “Don't you see something of me in yourself?”

That the film has little to do with reality is clear from its “reincarnation” of Mengele. The real Mengele, who was never apprehended by the authorities, drowned in a swimming accident in Brazil in 1979.

The most powerful scenes in the film take place in the courtroom where Götz George, in heavy make-up, gives an eerie portrayal of Mengele pursuing his own brand of relentless logic—a characterisation which evidently draws on his previous screen portrayal of the famous mass murderer of the twenties, Fritz Haarmann (*Der Todmacher*). In these scenes Mengele is quite able to justify his actions with arguments that find a moral resonance in current social and political life, and the prosecutor has considerable difficulties taking the moral high ground against him. In this respect the film is penetrating and produces a certain shock effect.

The film's producer Werner Koenig has commented on the self-assurance and stubbornness with which Mengele defends his actions: “[I]n every system people try to do their job well.... What emerged in the course of the Third Reich were precisely those managerial qualities which are called for today: *efficient, emotionless bosses. Today Mengele would be the chairman of a Board of Directors.*”

Indeed is it not the case that the most elementary humanitarian principles, sympathy and solidarity for one's fellow man, have been

sacrificed on the altar of the free-market economy and the logic of “global competition”? Are not the victims of such a process as helpless in their arguments as Mengele's victims confronted with their tormentor?

The deliberately subjective viewpoint adopted by the film, i.e., the attempt to explore what is happening behind Mengele's piercing eyes, at a certain point invites an enquiry into the objective conditions and social background which gives rise to such a monster. Do such conditions exist today? Can it happen again? Why is it that the moral standpoint of the fictitious Mengele bears such a resemblance to much of the morality of modern society? What are the roots of this shocking continuity?

This is the point at which the film fails. It is as if the director, script-writer and main player retreat in the face of their own analysis. The issue of the continuity between fascism and aspects of present-day society is artificially and clumsily forced into the sphere of individual morality. Any genuine examination of the material connections and continuity with the heritage of Nazism on the part of sections of the rich and powerful is either set aside or posed in a thoroughly abstruse and one-sided manner.

The makers of *Nichts als die Wahrheit* concentrate on Mengele's “medical practice” in the concentration camp. In the course of courtroom cross-examination it is stated that Mengele merely carried out a form of euthanasia designed to cut short the suffering of the camp inmates. To demonstrate the thin line between medical practice and murder, the defence refers to present-day debates on the merits of euthanasia taking place against a background of spending cuts. “The last 30 days are the most expensive.” Evidence is also given of a case in 1985 where, for supposed medical research, a German doctor administered a fatal injection to a mentally ill patient. The act was treated by the court at the time as a minor offence with the responsible doctor receiving an insignificant fine.

At the same time and without beating about the bush, the film's producer Koenig concedes that there is no historical basis for raising the issue of euthanasia in connection with Auschwitz. “Naturally it is a dead-end,” he stated, “and I knew that the film would not be able find a way out. But still I wanted to keep this aspect in order to build a bridge to today.” In fact, in a recent interview, a close colleague of Mengele declared that the “Angel of Death” did not proceed merely from his own interpretation of medical ethics, but rather carried out his work as a convinced anti-Semite who advocated “the healing of the world through the elimination of the Jews”.

“Every trick for dealing with this theme is legitimate,” according to Götz George, and the actress playing Rohm's wife, Doris Schade, emphasised “that this theme has to be dealt with continually, *no matter how*”.

Despite the pretensions of a high moral tone adopted by the film (the commitment on the part of the film crew is undeniable—most of the principal players worked without pay to ensure that the film was made, and when the financing ran into problems Götz George contributed his own money), this very cavalier attitude to historical fact and a purely speculative concentration on Mengele's motives paradoxically produces a large dose of self-satisfaction and passivity.

Screenplay author Johannes W. Betz regarded his work on the script as a form of self-therapy “which enabled me to liberate myself from this so-called collective guilt.” The thesis of collective guilt basically declares that the roots of fascism and anti-Semitism are mystically rooted deep in the German soul and history.

In fact, in order to make a few (historically inaccurate) points comparing past Nazi medical practice to that of today, Betz's film evades any real examination of society and social forces then and now. Beginning with the rhetorical title of his planned book “One of Us,” to the final scene featuring Mengele's penetrating eyes and his comment “Don't you see something of me in yourself?” the film is peppered with references which reduce anti-Semitism to a spectral, psychological problem and a moral weakness above class interests. In this respect the film does not challenge

the prevalent ideological framework within which such questions are dealt.

What is left is the demand for personal purification. “It is time,” Betz writes in his introduction to the screenplay, “that we dealt with the deeds committed by our fathers and grandfathers,” and thereby, presumably, recognise and attempt to overcome the “Mengele in us all”. Bearing in mind the genuine and pressing contemporary social problems of growing poverty, neo-fascism, intensifying militarism and the threat of war such a path strikes one as severely limited.

This is the significance of the dramatically weak and least convincing scene in the film where the director allows Rohm's mother, as a sort of *deus ex machina*, to appear before the court, confess her sins and emerge as the moral counterweight to Mengele. Now, driven by his own feelings of personal guilt, a recharged Rohm continues his crusade, and as one newspaper, the *Hamburger Morgenpost*, in its review of the film rightly commented: “In this respect the film is certainly politically correct.”

It is significant that the most recent and notorious advocate of a form of *Kollektivschuld* (collective guilt)—despite his protestations to the contrary—Daniel Goldhagen, proceeds in a similar manner to Betz. In his analysis of fascism Goldhagen excludes any genuine examination of class and material interests expressed through political parties and the activities of masses of people; instead he concentrates on the motives and consciousness of those who committed atrocities as the key to understanding anti-Semitism. In this way personal motive, instead of being one important part of an overall picture, is itself rendered mysterious and remote. And then finally Goldhagen permits himself the absurd and soporific claim that the post-war settlement has established a democracy in Germany which is impervious to the re-emergence of fascism and anti-Semitism.

Any serious and honest artistic discussion of the origins of Nazism and its practices by filmmakers or other interested parties is fraught with obstacles in contemporary Germany. On the one hand, influential right-wing forces seek to revise and relativise German history to justify the emergence of new ultra-right parties. On the other, the children of the post-war generation, the radicals of '68, who declared their mission to be the clarification of the issues raised by Germany's past, have made their peace with the system. To acknowledge such difficulties by no means excludes criticism of a film which, despite its good intentions, merely adds to the confusion.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact