A comment by writer and director Andrew Birkin on Speer Goes to Hollywood

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The World Socialist Web Site *has received a letter from writer and director Andrew Birkin in response to its review, posted on March 11, of* Speer Goes to Hollywood.

Andrew Birkin was born in December 1945. In 1979 he won the Royal Television Society's award for The Lost Boys, a trilogy of films about J M Barrie and his creation, Peter Pan; he also wrote an award-winning biography, J M Barrie & the Lost Boys*, published by Yale University Press. In 1980 he won a BAFTA for* Sredni Vastar *as well as an Oscar nomination, and in 1993 won the Berlinale's Silver Bear as Best Director for his film* The Cement Garden*, for which he also wrote the screenplay. He is currently writing a book about the year he spent with Albert Speer in 1971/72, also for Yale. He lives in Wales.*

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I read Varena Nees's excellent review of Vanessa Lapa's *Speer Goes to Hollywood* with great interest, as well as her interview with Ms. Lapa, whose purpose in making the film is entirely commendable and I wholeheartedly endorse.

However, the film contains a number of historical errors in its references to our 1972 attempt to dramatise Speer's self-serving autobiography, *Inside the Third Reich.* It was never our intention to "trivialise" let alone whitewash Speer's crimes. On the contrary, my screenplay contained several damning scenes not to be found in his book, including his visit to the infamous Mauthausen concentration camp, as well as his presence at Himmler's terrifying speech to the Gauleiters on October 6, 1943, when Himmler spelled out the Final Solution to the "problem" of Europe's Jewish population: extermination. Speer, in fact, agreed to let me include this scene, even though he claimed to have no memory of being there. More on this in a moment.

Ms. Lapa's film is a dramatization based on the 44 hours I recorded with Speer back in 1971/72 when I was 24/25 years old. She has used actors to voice both Speer and myself, but has necessarily been obliged to paraphrase various topics into a few sentences that in fact lasted many minutes if not hours, with the consequence of over-simplifying complex topics. Additionally, she has imported quotes from Speer that he apparently said else-where, but not to me, and has therefore had to invent questions and responses from me that I naturally did not make. Many of these quotes don't matter, but when Speer is heard to spout anti-Semitic remarks, it reflects badly on me that I don't take him to task. Varena Nees writes in her review:

> Speer was an anti-Semite himself. He makes this absolutely clear in his response to one of Birkin's questions: he did not like Jews. According to Speer, eastern Jews in particular were *nouveau riche* money-grubbers who wanted to take advantage of Germans—a standard argument of every anti-Semite.

Speer may well have said such things elsewhere, but never to me. He was far too clever, knowing as he did that virtually everyone involved with the project was Jewish. Had he made such offensive remarks to me, I would have undoubtedly challenged him—which, in Ms Lapa's film, her *cinematically constructed* 'I' self-evidently do not.

Unfortunately, many who see *Speer Goes to Hollywood* do not understand that the "Birkin" that they hear is not actually me. It is a persona somewhat loosely constructed by Ms. Lapa to serve the film's narrative structure and plot line. Thus, the film has

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given Ms Nees (and other reviewers) the impression that I—i.e., the real Andrew Birkin—was Speer's "overly impressed" dupe. Of course, it's true that Speer did his best to ingratiate himself to me, but that does not mean that I fell for his self-whitewashing. Indeed, my screenplay proves the contrary to be true. Speer himself sent an audio-tape to one of my producers, David Puttnam, having read my second draft:

> Of course with my ego I was most curious to see what happened with the portrait of me, and I am quite satisfied with the result. I really was, as I see it now, very evasive, didn't want to see what I didn't want to realize, the responsibility and consequently the guilt lies in this failure. The audience will be dissatisfied with my always-evading responsibility, that's how it should be.

At the end of the film, Speer is heard to say to the Birkin persona: "May I tell you that I consider this script strictly confidential. It would be disastrous if somebody would see the first draft of the script and then argue about the changes made." Speer in fact never said any such thing to me, which gives the erroneous impression that he was trying to censor something in my first draft. The "script" to which Speer was referring (in the same audio-letter to David Puttnam cited above) was his draft 'Response to Erich Goldhagen' which he had sent David, and had absolutely nothing to do with my script. Besides, Speer had no script approval, which in any event would have made no sense as by then it had been read by many at Paramount and elsewhere for at least six months.

Ms. Lapa's film implies that the reason our film was never made was because Paramount saw through Speer's attempt to whitewash himself. In fact the then President of Paramount, Frank Yablans, was extremely eager to make the movie, and although some at the studio felt there should be more about the Final Solution, the studio only began to cool when Costa Gavras dropped out as the director. Incidentally, Carol Reed was never considered as director. He was my much-loved cousin and mentor, and I gave him the script for his opinion and advice.

But the real reason our script was never made is because Speer's publisher Wolf Siedler refused to renew our option unless we removed the Posen scene. Speer had spent most of 1972 trying to prove that he wasn't present at Himmler's address, and by November he had managed to obtain sworn statements from several witnesses that he had arrived at Hitler's Eastern HQ by the time Himmler made his infamous speech. Whether this is true or not has been endlessly debated; Speer himself avowed that if we wanted to keep the scene in, that was up to us, although he would naturally have to deny it if questioned as to its authenticity.

Wolf Siedler, however, was adamant: either the scene came out or he would not renew the option. Gerald Gross, the head man at Macmillans in New York and a personal friend of Speer, had equal cause to be alarmed. *Inside the Third Reich* had made them both rich men, and its sequel – the soon-to-be published *Secret Spandau Dairies* —promised further riches, but not if, in the interim, a mainstream movie were to be released depicting Speer as knowing all about the Holocaust, contrary to his earlier assertions. Who knows whether Speer himself hid behind his publishers in refusing to renew our option, but this much is certain: our attempt at telling his story warts-and-all bit the dust.

Ten years later, Speer did finally make it to Hollywood, although he himself had died some years earlier, in 1981. Starring Rutger Hauer as Speer, and with an all-star cast including Trevor Howard, Sir John Gielgud, and Sir Derek Jacobi as Hitler, ABC TV produced their two-part dramatisation of *Inside the Third Reich* with barely a mention of the Holocaust. Compared to our effort, this indeed was a whitewash of which Speer would have been unjustly proud.

Vanessa Lapa's film has much to commend it, and is driven by a heart in the right place. It's just a pity that it distorts the historical facts with respect to our attempted movie.

Andrew Birkin

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