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Emotional Engineering: Hitler Youth Quex

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Emotional Engineering: Hitler Youth Quex

Eric Rentschler (bio)

Never had a song sounded like this song. Never had a path led into the distance like this one. The head knew nothing more of the

legs. There was no burden. The eye was everything. Everything was image. The march was sound, a noise, a joyous stream.

—Karl Aloys Schenzinger¹

Action does not mean “deciding in favor of” . . . for that presupposes that one knows in favor of what one is deciding; rather, action means “setting off in a direction,” “taking sides,” by virtue of a mandate of destiny, by virtue of “one’s own right.” . . . It is really secondary to decide in favor of something that I have come to know.

—Alfred Bäumler²

There in the bleak, gray twilight, yellowed, tortured eyes stare into the emptiness. His tender head has been trampled into a bloody pulp. Long, deep wounds extend down the slender body, and a deadly laceration tears through his lungs and heart. . . . Yet it is as if life stirs anew out of pale death. Look now, the slender, elegant body begins to move. Slowly, slowly he rises as if conjured up by magic, until he stands tall in all his youthful glory right before my trembling eyes. And without moving his lips, a frail child’s voice is heard as if speaking from all eternity. . . . “What is mortal in me will perish. But my spirit, which is immortal, will remain with you. And it . . . will show you the way.”

—Joseph Goebbels³

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1. Mediating the New Order

Hitlerjunge Quex (Hitler Youth Quex) is a legend for modern times, a film with a fatal attraction.⁴ It sanctifies an adolescent’s heroic deed, reshaping a young boy’s dead body into an icon. It demonstrates a cinema of clear lines and straightforward answers, a medium charged with a mission: it aims to show the way. The film illustrates a political process and intimates a master narrative wherein human subjects

become state objects and living beings give way to abstract patterns. *Hitler Youth Quex* both heralds a new order and prefigures its subsequent self-destruction.⁵

The first feature film substantially supported by the new government and produced under the protectorate of the Youth Leader of the German Reich, Baldur von Schirach, *Hitler Youth Quex* offers a stirring example of how the National Socialists employed a modern medium for state purposes, mobilizing a vast technology to craft gripping narratives and promote popular legends. Goebbels well recognized the film's potential value as a political instrument when he became minister of popular enlightenment and propaganda in March 1933.⁶ Nonetheless, a comprehensive policy did not immediately make itself evident in the first declarations of the self-avowed "passionate lover of filmic art."⁷ Being in power did not mean controlling culture; swift legislation could not ensure overnight legitimation; any campaign of coordination (*Gleichschaltung*) would demand different strategies on different fronts.

The National Socialists had become the masters of public life. Whether they would also become the masters of popular imagination remained to be seen.⁸ The Minister entered the scene with a mixture of swagger and circumspection, proclaiming a desire to combat a spiritual crisis and "reform German film from the ground up" (*von der Wurzel*) *aus* so that it might convalesce and grow into a world power.⁹ In his early programmatic declarations, Goebbels blends natural and martial metaphors, speaking of films as a body and a territorial surface, declaring himself the physician whose surgery will purge an afflicted organism of harmful alien elements. He scorns wishy-washy entertainments without national character, clear contours, and a sense of the historical moment. A new cinema for a new Germany must rediscover the innate laws of the medium and realize its mission as a mover of masses. "It takes imagination," he proclaimed, "to grant life to the innermost purpose and innermost constitution of a new world."¹⁰

Repeatedly, Goebbels stresses how film should exercise a discernible effect (*Wirkung*), how it must act on hearts and minds. Its calling should

be that of a popular art (*Volkskunst*), an art that simultaneously serves state purposes and fulfills personal needs. The...



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Emotional Engineering: Hitler Youth Quex, synecdoche, according to F.

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