LIGHTS, CAMERA, CREATING HEROES IN ACTION:
CLAUS VON STAUFFENBERG AND THE JULY 20TH CONSPIRATORS IN GERMAN AND AMERICAN FILMIC REPRESENTATIONS OF THE JULY 20TH PLOT

Kenneth Rex Baker, III

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green
State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS
August 2009

Committee:
Christina Guenther, Advisor
Geoffrey Howes
ABSTRACT

Christina Guenther, Advisor

Nearly 65 years have passed since filmic representations of the July 20\textsuperscript{th} Plot began to be produced in West Germany in order to assist in the rehabilitation process of post-World War II German identity. This paper focuses on a close reading of German and American filmic representations of the July 20\textsuperscript{th} Plot since 1955, within the context of the event’s historiography, in order to present a new perspective from which to understand their different cultural Rezeptionsgeschichte. Additionally, special emphasis is placed on the figure of Colonel Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg as he is the main protagonist in each of the films analyzed: \textit{Es geschah am 20. Juli} (1955), \textit{Der 20. Juli} (1955), \textit{Stauffenberg} (2004), and \textit{Valkyrie} (2008).

The process of establishing a positive (West) German identity independent of Hitler’s Nazi legacy took place not only within the political arena, but also in popular culture productions, such as film. An integral aspect of creating this new identity lay in heroizing the July 20\textsuperscript{th} conspirators, which is the main focus of each of these films, in order to help establish an honorable tradition based on German resistance to Hitler’s rule. These films are, therefore, important documents from which to understand the construction of German identity over the last half century as relates to efforts of Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung, coming to terms with the legacy of the Nazi past. This is especially true as the films reflect the progression of historiographical trends over the last half century, during which portrayals of the July 20\textsuperscript{th} conspirators have become more critical.

Finally, this paper ends with an analysis of the 2008 American film \textit{Valkyrie}, in which the notion of German identity based on the heroization of the July 20\textsuperscript{th} conspirators as depicted by a non-German production is explored.
Jeder glückliche Augenblick ist eine Gnade und muss zum Danke stimmen.

Theodor Fontane

For my mom, Mylene, and grandparents, Wilma and Norman, who have supported me immeasurably during my academic journey.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The original idea for this paper began in February 2008 during a trip to the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site with my sister, Rebecca, when she asked, “Why didn’t the prisoners resist? There were so many of them compared to guards.” We both knew, of course, that no satisfying answer could be reached on that one trip and the thought remained in my mind for months afterward as I began formulating my thesis topic.

The next step in refining my research aim came during a meeting with Dr. Edgar Landgraf in Salzburg a couple months later. We had previously discussed my interest in films and it was he who proposed narrowing my general interest in German resistance during World War II down to one specific movement which has been represented in film. I was ecstatic at the idea of writing my master’s thesis about films and remember thinking to myself, “I didn’t know academic writing was allowed to be fun!” Additionally, we were both aware of the upcoming release of Bryan Singer’s *Valkyrie* based on the events of the July 20th Plot and I knew at the end of our meeting that I had found my topic.

It is my main thesis advisor, Dr. Christina Guenther, however, who I must credit with guiding and supporting me through the sometimes arduous writing process of this last year. Your ceaseless enthusiasm, encouragement, and assistance have been a primary source of motivation for me and for that you have my heartfelt gratitude.

I must also thank my secondary advisor, Dr. Geoffrey Howes, as his notes at the outset of this project provided my paper with greatly needed structure at the time when the thought of writing a master’s thesis was still quite daunting.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge my friends and family for their loving support as well as Toto’s “Africa” for being the anthem of the last two years of my life. This paper was only possible thanks to everyone mentioned here.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I. HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II. 1950s FILM ANALYSES</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G.W. Pabst’s <em>Es geschah am 20. Juli</em></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falk Harnack’s <em>Der 20. Juli</em></td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III. ANALYSES OF CONTEMPORARY FILMS</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jo Baier’s <em>Stauffenberg</em></td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryan Singer’s <em>Valkyrie</em></td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I. HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

Nearly 65 years have passed since July 20, 1944, when Colonel Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg, an army officer in the organizational department of the German Army High Command, initiated an ultimately unsuccessful assassination attempt against the fascist German Chancellor Adolf Hitler as the first step in a calculated coup d’état with the purpose of ending Germany’s involvement in the Second World War. Although this act of resistance against the state failed, it has inspired much scholarly analysis which has sought to clarify the events, relationships, and intentions among the key participants who shaped and effectuated the July 20th Plot. This scholarship has also attempted to understand the July 20th Plot’s changing reception in popular culture over time, both within Germany and internationally. This paper will focus specifically on a close reading of German and American filmic representations of the July 20th Plot since 1955, within the context of the event’s historiography, in order to present a new perspective from which to understand its different cultural Rezeptionsgeschichte (“history of reception”) as well as how these representations influence and continue to inform the United States’ and (West) Germany’s perception of the event.

In order to discern and trace historiographical trends during the last half century in these popular interpretations of the July 20th Plot, I will analyze four films: Es geschah am 20. Juli (1955), Der 20. Juli (1955), Stauffenberg (2004), and Valkyrie (2008). The main questions which this paper will explore and seek to answer are: To what extent do these films adhere to a historically accurate portrayal of the event? How does a film’s country of origin affect any deviation from an “accurate” portrayal of the historical event? What differences exist between the American and German filmic representations of the July 20th Plot? Why did it take over 40 years for the first American filmic representation of this event? What sorts of creative, possibly
revisionist, liberties have been taken in these interpretations? In light of any such deviations or creative liberties, how is their use influenced by the historiography of the event and its aftermath? For instance, I will explore the more recently challenged German perception of the Wehrmacht as an organization morally and, thus, diametrically opposed to the Waffen-SS, and whether the effects of the Wehrmachtsausstellung of the mid-90s are reflected in the two most contemporary films. To what extent do these films evince a heroization of the historical figure of Claus von Stauffenberg (1907-1944), and why? Lastly, do the four filmic representations of the July 20th Plot evince any observable shift in presentation over the last half century which can be contextualized within the event’s historiography? For example, the two films of the 1950s were made before any large-scale movement or discussion was underway with regard to the German issue of Vergangenheitsbewältigung. How does this affect how the movies were made or their respective reception?

In conjunction with a historiographical analysis, I will also perform a close reading of these films in order to help extract an informed analysis of key scenes and elements from each film. For example, how do the results of a technical analysis of elements such as cinematography, composition, and use of sound within each film support or seemingly contradict the historiography of the July 20th Plot? How does one reconcile any such seeming contradictions between these films and the event’s historiography?

At the outset of researching the July 20th Plot one quickly realizes that scholars have attributed numerous interpretations and meanings to the terms resistance and opposition over the last sixty years. The eminent German historian Joachim Fest, for example, in his work Plotting Hitler’s Death: The Story of the German Resistance foregoes any discussion of terminology and simply uses these terms interchangeably. The British historian Ian Kershaw, in comparison,
engages in a discussion of the development over time of these terms, as well as their varied meanings, in his work *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation*. As Kershaw states, “For more than twenty years, West German resistance historiography was largely preoccupied … with élite opposition by conservative and bourgeois groups and individuals” (190). Starting in the 1960s a major shift occurred which lent more attention to forms of defiance against the Nazi regime, such as communist and working-class groups, both of which are directly associated with the terms civil disobedience and civil courage. The pertinent terms with regard to this paper are: resistance, opposition, defiance, and civil disobedience. What has been meant by any of these terms, however, has varied greatly and, even today, depends on the interpretation of individual historians. It is for this reason, that working definitions of these four terms, to which all subsequent research in this paper will adhere, follow next.

In defining the first two terms of resistance and opposition I refer back to the ‘Bavaria Project’ of the 1970s, which was an extension of the then nascent study of *Alltagsgeschichte* (‘the history everyday life’). The meanings of these two terms evolved as research in this project which studied ‘Resistance and Persecution in Bavaria 1933-1945’ progressed, and this paper focuses on, as well as synthesizes its definitions from, the formulation of the Bavaria Project’s first director, Peter Hüttenberger, who wrote that resistance is, “every form of rebellion against at least potentially total rule within the context of asymmetrical relations to rule” (126). Taking this notion one step further, resistance must also have the aim of realigning the pre-existing power scheme. If an asymmetrical relationship of power against potentially total rule in part defines resistance, this paper defines opposition as a struggle for power between two or more political parties within a state. The balance of power between opposing parties must not be equal; however, there must be a system in place in which a legitimate struggle for power between
political opponents exists. As the July 20th Plot transpired under a dictatorship and with the explicit aim of realigning the scheme of power within the state, it should be understood and examined as resistance, not opposition.

Although Hüttenberger’s formulation of resistance is the starting point for this paper’s definitions of key terms, it must be noted that his concept is vaguely stated and as a consequence encapsulates all forms of resistance – from the defiant act of one individual to the expansive resistance movements within the Wehrmacht which reached a climax on July 20th, 1944. A subtle distinction must, however, be made at this point between resistance and defiance, such as instances of civil disobedience. Whereas the goal of realigning the pre-existing power scheme is essential to the definition of resistance, defiance should be understood as acts which, although they display contempt for the ruling party and could possibly serve to stymie its will to a certain extent, are not carried out with the intention of overthrowing the ruling party. As stated above, civil disobedience is a classic example of defiance. As Kershaw writes, examples of this are a “refusal to give the ‘Heil Hitler’ greeting; insistence on hanging out the church flag instead of the swastika banner; objections by peasants to farm legislation; public criticism of anti-church measures by Catholic priests; continued trafficking with Jewish cattle-dealers; or fraternizing with foreign workers” (193).

---

**Figure 1**

The three classifications of the defined key terms, as well as an example of each.
From this clarification of terms one can see why the July 20th Plot is classified as a form of resistance, and specifically as an act of military resistance within the *Wehrmacht*.\(^2\) I acknowledge that breaking down these terms into such absolute categories may seemingly neglect other nuanced definitions of resistance and research areas, such as resistance within the church; however, the effects on the state of other such resistance groups lie outside the scope of this paper and, therefore, are not elaborated upon here.

When researching filmic representations of the July 20th Plot one quickly understands why such a large emphasis is placed on Colonel Stauffenberg. Although assassination attempts on Hitler by members of the *Wehrmacht* had already occurred before Stauffenberg assumed a leading role among the military resistance in Berlin in September 1943, it was he, as Fest notes, who, “imbued the resistance with a vitality that had long been lacking but that now served to encourage Olbricht’s cautious deliberations and heighten Tresckow’s determination” (215). In addition to this, as Christopher McQuarrie, the screenwriter of the 2008 American film *Valkyrie*, states, “…Stauffenberg is far and away the central character of the drama on July 20th. Not only because he delivered the bomb, but because what he was responsible for doing after the delivery of the bomb. He’s a character that takes you through the entire conspiracy” (“Valkyrie: The Plot to Kill Hitler”).

Stauffenberg was indeed the central figure in the July 20th Plot in terms of planning and execution, but before this he was a dedicated officer in the German Army High Command who was in agreement with many initial aims of the war, “especially unification with Austria and hostility to the Treaty of Versailles” (Fest 216). Additionally, Stauffenberg, as a well-trained and dutiful officer of the *Wehrmacht*, initially carried out his orders on the Eastern Front while
perhaps himself harboring racist tendencies. After a successful campaign in Poland on September 1939, for example, Stauffenberg wrote home, “The inhabitants are an unbelievable rabble, very many Jews and very much mixed population. A people which surely is only comfortable under the knout. The thousands of prisoners-of-war will be good for our agriculture. In Germany they will surely be useful, industrious, willing and frugal” (Hoffmann 115). Any instances of theoretical agreement with the Nazi platform must, however, be understood as in the context of the early years of Nazi power before any genocide or mass executions of civilian populations began. For many Germans in 1933, Hitler was their leader who came to power legitimately and who sought to rectify what many of them saw as the unjust punishment forced upon them after their loss in the First World War. In this light, Stauffenberg’s years-long transition from a soldier dutiful to the state to a member of the military resistance is quite understandable. As Fest notes:

> At first his critical view of the regime was spurred by technical, military, and national concerns. Gradually, though, moral issues came more and more to the fore, and in the end all these considerations played their part in a decision best summarized by his laconic answer to a question asked of him in 1942 about how to change Hitler’s style of leadership: “Kill him.” (217)

Stauffenberg may have been in favor of a German expansionist platform and supported the war in the early years of Nazi power; however, one must recognize the very real separation between an officer of the Wehrmacht with nationalist tendencies and a devoted follower of Hitler. The need for such a distinction becomes apparent when discussion shifts to the relationship between the Wehrmacht – Germany’s national military - and the Schutzstaffel (SS) – a Nazi military force led by Nazi racial ideology.
For many years after WWII, the *Wehrmacht* was viewed by the German public as a morally and, thus, diametrically opposed force to the *SS*. In other words, it was Hitler’s savage *SS* that perpetrated the heinous acts of genocide and civilian slaughter during the war, while the *Wehrmacht* was a noble institution full of brave German soldiers who fought to protect the honor and needs of Germany. This general view was shared by most Germans starting in the mid- to late-50s and largely prevailed until the mid-1990s when the original version of the so-called *Wehrmachtsausstellung* made its provocative debut on March 5, 1995. Produced by the Hamburg Institute for Social Research and originally titled *Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944*, this exhibition challenged the prevailing myth of the blameless *Wehrmacht* through written documents and photographic evidence which showed soldiers in the *Wehrmacht* perpetrating war crimes, for example by allowing *SS Einsatzgruppen* to carry out the mass execution of Soviet Jews in areas under the command and administration of the *Wehrmacht* (Bradish 8). The exhibition undertook a 33-city tour throughout Germany and Austria which lasted 4 years (1995-1999) and attracted much media attention due to the controversy and criticism it provoked. The fulminant reaction by the German general population to the new perception of the *Wehrmacht* that the exhibition evoked is quite understandable when viewed in context, which the following, brief overview of this shift shows.

As Peter Hoffmann notes, “The German army could not simply be reconstituted as it had existed until 1945. It needed an honorable tradition. And where to find an honorable tradition? The answer was: the resistance” (“Valkyrie: The Plot to Kill Hitler”). Although Germans were reluctant to label resistance members as heroes due to the excessive glorification of heroes during the Nazi era as well as the effectiveness of Nazi propaganda in labeling the conspirators as a “ganz kleine Clique ehrgeiziger, gewissenloser und zugleich verbrecherisch dummer
Offiziere …” (qtd. in Trummer 2), they generally came to embrace them eventually in an attempt to distance themselves from the notion that all Germans were inhuman Nazis and, among other reasons, to prevent a second *Dolchstoßlegende.*³ To then be confronted with evidence from the *Wehrmachtsausstellung* nearly 40 years later which contradicted the foundation of the supposedly new, honorable and, above all, democratic Germany (as well as brought about questions regarding the involvement of family members in war crimes during WWII) was not easy for millions of Germans – especially as this occurred only 5 years after West and East Germany reunited and were still attempting to reconcile their two distinct national identities. Many Germans saw the reunification of Germany as an advantageous time to leave the blemish of Hitler in the past once and for all; however, the uproar caused by the *Wehrmachtsausstellung* was a clear sign that Hitler’s legacy to Germany could not simply be left in the past and the need for the honorable tradition of resistance members was still relevant.⁴

The adoption of resistance members as archetypes of an honorable tradition for the new (West) Germany in the 1950s in order to move away from the Nazi past and the controversy caused by the *Wehrmachtsausstellung* in the last 1990s are not separate incidences which occurred in German history. Rather, both can be placed on a continuum of historiographical development regarding the July 20th Plot, which I will demonstrate during the proceeding film analyses. Much as the German population in general focused on élite resistance members in the immediate years after the war’s end (as demonstrated by the two 1955 films *Es geschah am 20. Juli* and *Der 20. Juli*, which each heroize the members of the July 20th Plot), so too did the historiography of the time. It was not until the 1960s that a younger generation of historians, removed from more personal experiences of the war than their older counterparts, “looked more critically at the motives and aims of the resistance” (Kershaw 186). However, even if research
interests within academic settings at this time were beginning to shift to a more critical examination of resistance history, the notion of the honorable *Wehrmacht* remained prevalent among the general population and government. An excerpt from the Tradition Decree of the Federal Minister of Defense, Kai-Uwe von Hassel (CDU), on July 1, 1965, for example, highlights this prevalence: “Finally answerable only to their conscience, the soldiers of the resistance proved themselves to the final degree against the injustice and criminality of the National Socialist rule of force. Such loyalty to conscience must be preserved in the Bundeswehr” (Bradish 33).

It was also in the mid 1960s that research began focusing more on social groups of opposition, as opposed to the previously quite narrow field of élite resistance. Expanding upon this trend in the 1970s, the concept of *Alltagsgeschichte* was developed, in which further emphasis was placed on resistance within the civilian population (notably in the Bavaria Project, as I have already mentioned). This shift in research has been the cause of much of the confusion of terms when writing about resistance, defiance, opposition, and civil disobedience/courage - a further reason why I have defined these terms at the beginning of this paper.

Two fundamental developments during the 1980s regarding the historiography of German resistance were Martin Broszat’s plea for a ‘historicization’ of the Nazi past, and the so-called *Historikerstreit* which lasted from 1986-89. In 1985 Martin Broszat, who was head of the *Institut für Zeitgeschichte* (Institute for Contemporary History) in Munich from 1972 until his death in 1989, published his essay “Plädoyer für eine Historisierung des Nationalsozialismus” in which he argued that historians should study the Nazi era without moral judgments, just as they would other historical periods such as sixteenth-century France (Kershaw 225). Additionally, as Kershaw summarizes, “The underlying notion behind the whole concept of ‘historicization’ is
that below the barbarism and the horror of the regime were patterns of social ‘normality’ which were, of course, affected by Nazism in various ways but which pre-dated and survived it” (221).

In other words, Broszat believed that the atrocities of the Nazi era should not be viewed as an abnormality in German history, rather as one part of a linear progression of German history which continues today. A main critic of Broszat’s plea was the historian Saul Friedländer, who found fault with the approach as it was, among other reasons, “by no means straightforward, but might be interpreted in radically different ways – as indeed Nolte and Hillgruber demonstrated in their controversial interpretations of the Nazi era which provoked the ‘Historikerstreit’” (224).

The Historikerstreit began in 1986 when German historian and philosopher Ernst Nolte published the article ‘Die Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will’ in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ), in which he relativizes the atrocities committed by Nazi Germany to the “barbarities of other ‘totalitarian’ states, particularly those of Bolshevik Russia” (231). Nolte’s main opponent during this time was the philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas, and it is he who made the association between Nolte and the late West German historian Andreas Hillgruber, who in his 1986 essay “Der Zusammenbruch im Osten 1944/45” bases his interpretation of this time not on a critical analysis but rather on a personal identification with the Germans who suffered under the Red Army on the Eastern Front. Both Nolte and Hillgruber were criticized extensively for their alleged attempts at minimizing the blame, extensive crimes, and atrocities committed by Nazi Germany – a sign perhaps that German historians at the time were not ready to adopt Broszat’s approach of historicizing the Nazi past, and that Friedländer was quite correct in his fear that this approach was vague and open-ended and, therefore, as Kershaw states, “subject to different – some unattractive – interpretations” (231). As German historian Wolfgang Benz wrote at the time, “Detached concern with Nazism as an era of German
history among others and work on it devoted to purely scholarly interest seems then not so easily possible. The mere distance of 40 or 50 years does not make the Nazi era historical” (33). This continued inability in the 1980s to detach moral judgments from historical analyses of National Socialism 40 years after its end corresponds with Germany’s continued need to heroize resistance members within the Wehrmacht as morally opposed to the Nazi SS, a fact which would lead to the furor instigated by the Wehrmachtsausstellung the following decade.

The impassioned discussions sparked by the Wehrmachtsausstellung were not, however, the only significant development of the 1990s vis-à-vis German perception of, and attempts at coming to terms with, the Nazi era. In 1996 the American political scientist Daniel Goldhagen published his book Hitler’s Willing Executioners, in which he defends the thesis “bluntly put, […] that the Jews were murdered because the uniquely anti-semitic German people wanted them murdered” (Kershaw 253). The ensuing controversy and discussions about this book have come to be known as the ‘Goldhagen Debate,’ and although most historians have dismissed Goldhagen’s thesis and argumentation as seriously flawed and highly simplistic, its eager and widespread reception in Germany “demonstrated, yet again, how far we are from any ‘historicization’ of Nazism, from treating it dispassionately as a period of history much as any other” (261-62). Although many commemorations of the July 20th Plot in the 2000s, such as the 2004 German film Stauffenberg, which I will examine in the following film analyses, have become more critical in their depictions of the conspirators, their existence demonstrates an on-going need within Germany for heroized figures from the German resistance as the process of reconciling its Nazi past with its reunified present continues.
CHAPTER II. 1950s FILM ANALYSES

The first two films which I will examine are *Es geschah am 20. Juli* and *Der 20. Juli*, West German films which were produced and released within days of each other in 1955 at a time when the July 20th conspirators were far from the iconic status they hold today. As Douglas Peifer notes, “Nazi propaganda had effectively convinced most Germans that the coup had been the work of a small number of irresponsible military officers, an opinion that did not suddenly shift with the Third Reich’s defeat” (1036). In addition, many Germans did not want to admit “there had been a moral alternative to ‘following orders’” (1037) due to questions such a view raised concerning personal accountability during the Nazi era. Consequently:

… the process of transforming Stauffenberg, Beck, Goerdeler, and associates from traitors to heroes was gradual and contested in the West, with the majority of Germans shifting their interpretation only after a decade-long effort on the part of government speakers to rehabilitate the men and women of the Twentieth of July. (1035)

As will next be shown, the problems encountered by the productions of these films, the focus of each film, and their respective public reception all fit into the larger trend of the event’s historiography at the time.

Given that the rehabilitation of the July 20th conspirators was still on-going at the time these films were produced and released, it is not surprising that each had to endure legal battles, as well as mixed receptions. A first legal battle occurred in 1955 involving the production company of *Der 20. Juli*, CCC-Film, when the copyright lawyer Otto Joseph filed a lawsuit in which he claimed to represent the interests of the surviving family members of Stauffenberg, Hoepner, von Witzleben, Beck, Oster, von Stülpnagel, von der Schulenberg and also the widow
of General Fromm (Trummer 3). These family members were concerned that they and their loved ones who died as a result of the July 20th Plot might be portrayed negatively in a film version of the events, and as a result their goal apparently was to make all portrayals of their loved ones conditional upon their approval. In order to quell these legal troubles the film’s producer, Artur Brauner, hired as the film’s historical advisor Rudolf Christoph Freiherr von Gersdorff, the man who had previously failed to assassinate Hitler with a bomb and subsequently supplied the July 20th conspirators with their explosives. Legal problems subsided after this until just days before the film’s scheduled release date, when General Fromm’s widow, Frieda Fromm – who as it turns out had been hired as an adviser by the producer of the competing film *Es geschah am 20. Juli* – was granted an injunction to delay the film’s release by one day. As a result, *Es geschah am 20. Juli* was released on June 19, 1955, two days before Brauner’s *Der 20. Juli* (Trummer 8). Interestingly, the legal troubles instigated by these family members probably contributed greatly to the fact that they are not portrayed in each of these two films, which allowed (or perhaps even forced) the filmmakers to focus singularly on Stauffenberg’s life as it pertained to his involvement in the July 20th Plot, thereby creating the effect of a greater resoluteness to his actions which in turn emphasizes his heroic qualities even more.

The contentious process of rehabilitating the July 20th conspirators is demonstrated not only by legal battles which beset the productions but by the choice of directors as well. A crucial requirement for each production was to hire a respected director with no ties to the Nazi past in order to help to legitimize each film as well as their portrayal of the conspirators as heroes. In accordance with this, Brauner’s production company, CCC-Film, first approached the film legend Fritz Lang, who had emigrated to Hollywood in exile shortly after the Nazis came to power in the early 1930s. Due to time constraints, however, Brauner opted for Falk Harnack, a
director already employed by CCC-Film who had been an active resistance member during the
war with associations to well-known resistance groups such as the Rote Kapelle (through his
brother’s activities with the group) and die Weiße Rose. The production company of Es geschah
am 20. Juli eventually hired G.W. Pabst, an Austrian director whose previous film Der letzte Akt
portrayed Hitler’s last days (Trummer 6).

The careful selection of directors, however, was not enough for either film to ensure
success at the box office. Perhaps Germans at the time were not yet ready to confront feelings of
guilt stemming from personal experience during the Nazi past, or perhaps the much-publicized
legal entanglements and split reviews of each film account for the films’ lack of financial success
(8). A third option, however, could be something that a group of former political dissidents of the
Nazi era had recognized as a problem before the production of the films and un成功fully
attempted to resolve. This group, including then-President of the West German Bundestag Eugen
Gerstenmaier, thought it a poor idea to release two films simultaneously on the same subject yet
differently depicted. As Der Spiegel reported on April 6, 1955, “Die ehemaligen Widerständler
möchten auf jeden Fall verhindern, daß dem deutschen Kinopublikum in einer Saison
gleichzeitig zwei konkurrierende, das Thema unterschiedlich behandelnde Filme über den 20.
Juli vorgesetzt werden” (37). Not only could the release of both films within days of each other
confuse the German public, but it could also greatly reduce the impact of each film’s intended
message due to possibly contradicting portrayals of the conspirators of the July 20th Plot. Perhaps
the poor ticket sales for each film are proof that this group’s worries were justified.

Despite their lack of box office success at the time these films are valuable documents
which reflect the period in the historiography of the July 20th Plot when its members in West
Germany were undergoing the process of rehabilitation from national traitors to national heroes,
which the results of the 1956 *Deutscher Filmpreis* – the German equivalent to the Academy Awards – demonstrate. As Anne Nelson of the Columbia School of International and Public Affairs writes, “Pabst’s film was regarded as a straightforward, blow-by-blow account of Stauffenberg’s assassination attempt, perhaps more artful than Harnack’s, but less politically sophisticated”, and it was this political sophistication – not the artistic merit of the film alone – which earned *Der 20. Juli* the 2nd place award (*Deutscher Filmpreis in Silber*) that year for “Outstanding Feature Film Promoting Democratic Values.” Wolfgang Preiss also won the 2nd place award for the category “Outstanding Individual Achievement: Actor” for his portrayal of Stauffenberg. As West Germany at the time was undergoing the arduous process of defining itself by creating an identity distinct from Hitler’s Nazi Germany (a process which included the legacy of denazification and the notion of German “collective guilt”) it should not be a surprise that a film with greater political, rather than artistic, merit would win this award. Additionally, the category “Outstanding Feature Film Promoting Democratic Values” (or German: “Film, der zur Förderung des demokratischen Gedankens beiträgt”) only existed from 1953-1957, a possible further indicator of West Germany’s need at the time for national role models that supported its burgeoning, still newly democratic identity.

G.W. Pabst’s *Es geschah am 20. Juli*

G.W. Pabst’s depiction of events of the July 20th Plot in *Es geschah am 20. Juli* portrays the conspirators as an extremely small group of Germans trying to free their country from a tyrannical leader who wields overwhelming force, which the film’s cinematography, speech, composition, and genre all combine to repeatedly accentuate throughout the film.

The first shot of the film, for instance, lasts more than two minutes without change as the opening credits run and consists of a close-up on a wall with, as a casual viewer of the film may
believe, simply a few small chunks chipped out in a scattered pattern. It is not until the final shot of the film, immediately following the execution of the conspirators by firing squad in front of this wall, that the exact image of it from the beginning is repeated and the audience realizes that those seemingly innocuous marks in the wall shown at the outset of the film are bullet holes signifying the defeat of good by evil. This symmetry of the opening and closing shots is an indication to the viewer that perhaps no matter what this small yet determined group of conspirators was willing to sacrifice and to undertake in order to help their country, they were destined to fail. This film proffers no possible solutions as to why this may have been. Perhaps only posing this question was the best tactic for the film at this point in time, as Germans in 1955 were not yet actively engaged in attempts of Vergangenheitsbewältigung, in coming to grips with their Nazi past.

Cinematography, specifically the use of lighting, plays an interesting role in Es geschah am 20. Juli as it assists in establishing the events of July 20, 1944, in an oppressive setting where a small group of good citizens – represented by the film’s strategic use of light – struggles impossibly against a larger evil – represented by the film’s strategic use of darkness – and where, ultimately, light is taken over by the dark. The first scene with dialogue, for example, takes place between the main conspirators in a cramped room and opens in near darkness due to a presumed air raid. All of the characters sit silently in the dark as the raid ends and the lights are finally turned on. This serves to further underscore the tone set by the opening credits (even if the audience may not understand the significance of the bullet-ridden wall during the opening credits until they see its image repeated as the last shot of the film) that the conspirators are surrounded by a dangerous world in which any actions of theirs will be overshadowed by their enemy.
Another example of the cinematography furthering the sense of danger occurs as Colonel Stauffenberg stops at a church to pray on his way to the Wolfsschanze, Hitler’s Eastern Front military headquarters, to carry out the assassination attempt against the German despot. This shot is filmed from inside the dark, unlit church and captures Stauffenberg as he approaches the entrance from the bright light of day outside. He only enters into the immediate foyer of the church to pray, but noteworthy is that his body becomes silhouetted in darkness upon his entrance. After a brief prayer, Stauffenberg steps back into the light of day to resume his mission. Why he encounters the darkness representative of evil within a church may not be immediately clear to the viewer, but I believe it is an act of acknowledgment from Stauffenberg that he fully understands the futility of his actions, yet in spite of this he will carry on with his duty to Germany and so marches bravely back into the light toward hope. Such an assessment could be viewed as mawkishly sentimental or romantic, but within the context of the event’s historiography such a description is most likely accurate. This film was produced at the time when Stauffenberg and his fellow conspirators were being rehabilitated within Germany to represent the goodness that existed and opposed Hitler’s Nazi Germany, and scenes such as this at the church which exaggerate the protagonists’ virtues are in line with the process of heroizing the conspirators.

The film’s final illustration of this takes place during the last scene as the conspirators are marched to their execution. As they leave the building of the General Army Office, where they had attempted to carry out the coup, they are led through a lighted courtyard and disappear into darkness in front of an unlit wall where they stand to be executed – an apt metaphor for the conspirators’ fortitude throughout the film as they attempted to carry out their plan in the face of certain defeat.
The dialogue in this film is combined with other elements, such as composition, to bolster the heroization of the conspirators. For instance, the first scene with dialogue takes place during the conspirators’ final discussion regarding their forthcoming coup attempt and ends with a brief speech from General Beck. Not only what is said is important, but also how it is filmed. As the scene draws to an end, two of the conspirators voice concern over personal and political issues. It is General Beck who has the last word, however:

Es ist nicht das Entscheidende, was aus uns persönlich wird, oder was für Bedingungen wir von den Alliierten erreichen. Entscheidend ist es, dass seit Jahr und Tag im Namen des deutschen Volkes Verbrechen auf Verbrechen – Mord auf Mord – gehäuft wird. Es ist unsere Pflicht, uns mit allen Mitteln dagegen zu stellen. Und von dieser Pflicht kann uns weder Gott noch unser Gewissen befreien.

Not only does the ranking leader of the group give a brief speech which presents the planned coup as an inescapable moral responsibility to act against the atrocities of a despotic ruler, but the camera zooms in to a close-up of General Beck halfway through his speech and by the last sentence he is staring directly into the camera, as if daring the viewer to label him and his fellow conspirators as anything but heroes.

There are two more instances of note in this film when a character’s words are explicitly used to further the representation of the conspirators as heroes. The first takes place as Stauffenberg arrives back in Berlin after the assassination attempt and phones General Olbricht. After receiving confirmation from Stauffenberg that Hitler has been killed, Olbricht gives a brief speech to his fellow conspirators in which he heroically states, “Aber was die Zahlen nicht vollbringen, muss unsere Uberzeugung schaffen, für eine gute Sache zu kämpfen.” This
statement implies an inherent righteousness within the group of conspirators, which a German audience in 1955 would have had to accept at least publicly or else risk seeming to favor instead the atrocities and genocide carried out by Hitler and Nazi Germany – crimes which an audience in 1955 would have been fully aware of. Still more dramatically and heroically declared, though, is a rebuttal by an impassioned Stauffenberg after an officer accuses him of high treason: “Ist das Hochverrat, an ein besseres Deutschland zu glauben?”, as well as his final words before being executed, “Es lebe das heilige Deutschland!” As the subtleties of the other elements of the film that heroize the conspirators, such as cinematography and composition, might elude the casual viewer, their words serve as a forthright message to the audience: these men had the courage and moral certitude to sacrifice their lives for a better Germany and were by no means traitors of the state.

Monologue is also utilized in the film in order to challenge the viewer to carry on the honorable tradition begun by the conspirators, and is best exemplified by the two brief speeches given by General Beck. The first, as I have already discussed, occurs at the end of the first scene and finishes with General Beck staring directly into the camera, as if addressing the viewer personally. Not only do his words of conviction and directness portray him heroically, they also confront the viewer with a moral challenge not to abide tyrannical and oppressive rule. Beck’s second speech to this effect comprises, interestingly enough, his last words in the film before his death and lacks any ambiguity of intent toward the viewer which one may have interpreted in his first speech: “Ich denke an die Zeit, wo der Soldat nicht nur dem Befehl, sondern zuerst seinem Gewissen folgt.” These men have been built up throughout the film as dutiful and honorable German military officers, and this final statement by their ranking commander evokes an authority to be abided by.
A final role of speech in this film is to acknowledge to the viewer that, although the members of this resistance are being portrayed as resolutely carrying out their mission, it is understandable why not every German opposed to Nazi tyranny did not resist. This is exemplified by the roles of two officers who work in the communications center and are responsible for determining which orders are to be forwarded from the General Army Office to the German army at large. As the coup starts to fail and conflicting orders begin being issued by the conspirators in Berlin and Field Marshal Keitel under the command of a recovering Hitler at the *Wolfsschanze*, these communication officers must decide whose orders to follow, i.e. whether to follow good or evil. In one scene, for instance, their conversation while deciding this captures the dilemma of many Germans at the time. As he holds the opposing orders in each hand, one of the officers states, “Hier liegt Witzleben und Stauffenberg. Hier liegt Keitel. Einer von beiden kann bloß Recht haben.” The blunt reality, however, as to why many Germans did not resist against Nazi rule is stated rather succinctly by the second officer in a later scene, “Erschossen oder befördert. Das ist jetzt die Frage. Aber ich glaube Hitler schießt schneller.” The inclusion of these officers in order to acknowledge the complexity of the decision to resist or not helps balance the film’s representation of good and evil, while simultaneously preventing it from portraying a mere caricature of this struggle.

The roles of composition in this film in heroizing the conspirators and their struggle of good versus evil is used quite effectively by the director to recall the authority Hitler commanded over Nazi Germany and the popular German sentiment toward Hitler against which the conspirators had to fight. Throughout the film the members of the resistance are framed cramped together in tight spaces, which emphasizes the smallness and impotency of their group, while military forces under Nazi control are framed in expansive areas, such as training grounds or
airfields. The most noteworthy use of composition to highlight the relative power of these groups, however, comes in the form of an homage to the German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl’s work of Nazi propaganda *Triumph des Willens*, which would have been well-known by a German audience in 1955.

There are multiple instances in *Triumph des Willens* in which Nazi might is demonstrated through sequences of Nazi processions which last for many minutes at a time. The first occurs at the beginning of the film after a plane carrying Hitler lands in Nuremberg and he is driven through the city in a sequence lasting three minutes during which throngs of elated Germans line the streets and lean out windows while giving the Hitler greeting as he drives by. A second procession of Nazi might occurs nearly an hour later in the film during Hitler’s grand review of all paramilitary formations of the NSDAP and begins with a close-up of swastikas on Nazi banners which line the streets. This second procession lasts more than eighteen minutes as paramilitary forces are marched across and through the frame, as well as to the side of the camera itself. These processions of Nazi power are mirrored in *Es geschah am 20. Juli* during sequences in which military transports and tanks are shown driving for minutes at a time on their way to Berlin to carry out *Operation Walküre*. Ultimately the tanks get turned back before entering Berlin and the military transports carrying soldiers meant to provide support unknowingly for the coup become co-opted back to Hitler’s side after the coup is found out; however, these sequences are still highly effective at recalling Hitler’s popularity in Germany so that the viewer is reminded of the enormity of the challenge and strength of opposition facing the conspirators.

Lastly, genre plays an important role in furthering the aims of this film while simultaneously legitimizing its portrayal of events. *Es geschah am 20. Juli* belongs to the
subgenre of the docudrama, which “blends the heightened emotional conventions and traditional narrative structure of dramatic fiction with the convincing didactic tone of the documentary in an attempt to capture accurate portrayals of historical and social events” (AMG). The film additionally utilizes a voice-over narration, which is typically found in documentary films and whose supposed main function is to convey objective facts to the viewer. After the opening credits, the film begins with nearly two minutes of archival war footage toward the end of which the narrator first speaks and explains: “Scheinbar war es ein Tag wie jeder andere. … Aber heute soll eine befreiende Tat dem Schrecken ein Ende machen, den letzten Rest Deutschlands Ehre und Ansehen in der Welt retten.” The narrator’s address to the viewer as well as the archival war footage then come to an end, and the next scene, in which the conspirators resolve to assassinate Hitler, begins. The transition of this sequence from a Germany destroyed by war to the narrator introducing the would-be saviors of Germany’s honor and reputation in the world is quite dramatic and serves to initiate the indoctrination process of the viewer to the filmmaker’s point-of-view from the very first scene. Corresponding with this indoctrination from the beginning, the film ends on a black screen with the narrator challenging the audience to honor the conspirators: “Nun liegt es an uns, ob dieses Opfer umsonst gewesen ist.” The use of this genre and the voice-over narration were quite a smart tactic by the filmmakers as they implicitly depict the events of the film as historically accurate, thereby lending more credibility to the viewpoint and heroization process advanced by the film.

Falk Harnack’s Der 20. Juli

Although Der 20. Juli is centered around the July 20th Plot, it also portrays various other resistance groups, such as those within the church and among civilians. The inclusion of other groups of resistance was a clever strategy on the part of the screenwriters (which included Falk
Harnack, the film’s director) to demonstrate that the July 20th conspirators were not just a “ganz kleine Clique ehrgeiziger, gewissenloser und zugleich verbrecherisch dummer Offiziere …” but rather part of a much larger movement throughout Germany in which a multitude of average civilians took part. The risk of blending fact and fiction together throughout the film could be to undermine its reliability as a source for accurate information about the July 20th conspirators, in turn diminishing the credibility of the film’s message; however, the average German in 1955 probably knew very little, if anything, about the specifics of the July 20th Plot and, therefore, most historical inaccuracies within the film would have likely been overlooked by the viewer.

The film’s fictional characters are utilized in order to further the prevailing German differentiation between the supposedly morally and, thus, diametrically opposed “good” Wehrmacht and “evil” SS, a topic which Pabst’s more narrowly focused scope of events in Es geschah am 20. Juli does not address. They are also quite beneficial as they emphasize the moral motivation for the conspirators to resist, which is otherwise not depicted since the film begins with all of the historical characters having already decided to resist. Pabst’s Es geschah am 20. Juli begins in a similar fashion, yet, besides its simplistic portrayal of the July 20th Plot as a struggle between intrinsically good and evil parties, the conspirators’ motivations are left largely unexplained. The main fictional characters in Der 20. Juli, for example, Hauptmann Lindner, a captain in the Wehrmacht, and Frau Klee, a secretary in the Army High Command and secret resistance member, argue about the relationship between the Wehrmacht and the SS as a Jewish doctor is dragged off by SS officers outside of their building. Frau Klee calls the SS “Tiere” – to which Lindner responds, “Das sind Auswüchse! Aber die Front hat keinen Anteil an diesen Dingen. Die Front ist sauber!” Frau Klee then counters, “Ja, aber ihr kämpft doch dafür! Wisst ihr das nicht?” and Lindner leaves.
This marks the beginning of Lindner’s transformation in the film from an officer in the Wehrmacht loyal to the government to a member of the resistance loyal to the higher moral good. His transformation becomes complete in a later scene after he has witnessed the mass execution of “hunderttausende” Jews at the hands of – presumably – the SS and he discusses it with an officer who is already a member of the resistance, Henning von Tresckow. Speaking about the mass murder, Lindner says, “Das kann der Führer nicht gewusst haben,” to which von Tresckow responds, “Die Details vielleicht nicht. Das ist Himmlers Geschäft. Aber der Grundbefehl “Ausrotten”, der kommt von Hitler.” Lindner’s final response to this is, “Ich kann nicht mehr zu meinem Führereid stehen. Ich hasse ihn.” Lindner’s transformation serves the dual purpose of illustrating the moral motivation for resistance as well as propagating the largely unchallenged notion of the morally upright soldier in the Wehrmacht which was rather prevalent at the time this film was produced (and would remain so until the opening of the Wehrmachtausstellung forty years later).

Another instance of the Wehrmacht being portrayed as the moral opposite of the SS takes place at a meeting of civilian resistance during which a member, a former soldier, asks “Wer jagt die Nazis endlich zum Teufel?” to which the leader of the group responds, “Das kann nur die Wehrmacht.” The leader then goes on to explain that he has met with like-minded officers in the Wehrmacht about acting against Hitler very soon. The former soldier then calls these officers “… nur Handlanger vom Adolf.” The leader, however, counters this by saying, “Abwarten. Wenn die Offiziere nicht isoliert handeln, sondern mit uns allen zusammen, dann fliegt Hitler und seine Clique in die Luft.” The inclusion of this scene of civilian resistance looking toward military officers in the Wehrmacht for leadership in their resistance against Hitler’s Nazi Germany is very important as it creates a bond between the July 20th conspirators and the civilian population at
large. In addition, the leader of this pocket of civilian resistance labels Hitler and Nazis as a “Clique” just as Hitler had labeled the conspirators a “kleine Clique ehrgeiziger, gewissenloser und zugleich verbrecherisch dummer Offiziere …” in his radio address the night of July 20, 1944, after the coup failed, effectively turning the Nazi propaganda regarding the conspirators, which had largely prevailed since the failed coup attempt, on its head.

Religion seems to be emphasized in this film with regard to the resistance, which implies a Christian righteousness on the part of Stauffenberg explicitly and the other conspirators by association. The inclusion of a Christian priest who speaks against the Nazi government, a form of resistance, for example, strengthens the implication that the conspirators were carrying out a righteous – and thus morally superior – duty. Both Der 20. Juli and Es geschah am 20. Juli incorporate Stauffenberg’s faith; however, the former emphasizes it to a much greater extent. This portrayal of his faith is an important feature of Der 20. Juli, especially when combined with the film’s political sophistication, as we can infer from it that religious and political affiliation were not independent of each other with regard to a person’s esteem at the time that these films were produced. This demonstrates that part of what made a hero at this time in West Germany was a willingness to oppose political injustice coupled with a belief in a higher power – a power even higher than the Nazi government could have ever hoped to achieve and which was assumed to be intrinsically morally superior. This depiction of Stauffenberg as a man of faith who chooses to act against the injustice and immorality of a governing body casts him as a savior figure with obvious parallels to the savior within his and his fellow German countrymen’s Christian faith, Jesus Christ. This parallel is emphasized by the composition in one sequence particularly, which I will now discuss.
Stauffenberg offers to deliver the bomb to the Wolfsschanze in order to assassinate Hitler – General Beck speaks here of Stauffenberg’s “Opferbereitschaft” – and after some debate he is given permission. In the next scene Stauffenberg enters a church as organ music begins to play and he pauses for a moment at the entrance, so that his figure takes up the right half of the screen and the left half of the screen is occupied by a statue of a mortally wounded Jesus Christ. This is a blatant juxtaposition on the part of the filmmaker to emphasize a religious dimension to Stauffenberg’s heroization. In the next shot, as the organ music takes on a louder, haunting sound, he approaches the altar where a crucifix is centered in the frame with a dual shadow being cast on each side of it representing the two men crucified alongside Jesus according to the gospels. We only see a partial medium shot of Stauffenberg from behind and in the bottom right corner of the frame, leaving the savior figure and the implied connection to Stauffenberg as the viewer’s focal point. The shot then cuts to a close-up of Stauffenberg’s face for a few moments which then blurs into a nearly minute-long sequence of archival footage showing battle and death and destruction within war-torn Germany accompanied by a separate, unsettling music. This sequence then blurs back to the close-up of Stauffenberg and the haunting organ music, and the screen, in turn, fades to black. The filmmaker’s use of composition in this sequence demonstrates quite clearly the film’s intention of legitimizing Stauffenberg’s heroization through his Christian faith, which, not coincidentally, was the prevailing faith in West Germany and, therefore, would have possibly elicited the perception of Stauffenberg as a savior figure from a majority of the viewing audience.

In order for a hero to exist, however, there must be an evil against which he struggles. For Stauffenberg and the other conspirators of the July 20th Plot this evil was obviously Hitler and his fascist state, yet Hitler is never explicitly depicted in Der 20. Juli. Given that this film was
produced a mere 10 years after the end of WWII, however, this makes sense, as depicting Hitler on screen at this time would have been quite controversial. Therefore, this film instead presents the viewer with the character of the SS-Obergruppenführer (roughly translated as “Senior Group Leader”) as a stand-in of sorts for the tyrannical Nazi leader. Not only was this the third highest rank an SS member could achieve (with the highest rank being occupied by the leader of the SS, Heinrich Himmler), therefore contributing to the character’s role as a substitute for Hitler, but he is also never referred to by anything but this title, which helps deny him a personality of his own. Additionally, this substitute-Führer is the shortest yet loudest and most outspoken man in his office with a penchant for cutting off subordinates in outbursts of rage, which mirrors Hitler’s dictatorial personality. Much as composition is utilized in this film to depict Stauffenberg and his fellow conspirators heroically, it is also used to strengthen this link between the SS-Obergruppenführer and Hitler which the following scenes will demonstrate.

The first scene with the SS-Obergruppenführer occurs immediately after a Jewish man is forcibly hauled away from his Berlin home by other members of the SS, which sets an ominous tone even before we see the character. The scene opens with an establishing shot filmed in his office from a low angle in which this Führer, or leader, sits behind his desk encircled by his subordinates and with a portrait of Hitler as an armored knight immediately above his head on the wall behind him. The next shot is again from a low angle and follows the menacing leader as he stands and confronts a subordinate for answers regarding resistance groups. The use of the low angle perspective in these first two shots is quite effective in establishing the authority of this character as the viewer has no choice but to look up to him even as he is seated, which effectually relegates the viewer to a subservient role vis-à-vis this intimidating figure.
As the scene progresses, the Obergruppenführer circles his office while scolding his subordinates for their lack of vigilance with regard to gathering intelligence about resistance groups. At one point while reprimanding his inferiors the leader crosses his office and stands alone in the frame in a rather open space. The lighting of this shot is rather important in reinforcing his position of authority as it creates three separate shadows which stretch out from his body to occupy most of the open area in the frame and seem to imply an omniscient and inescapable quality on his part. These traits are furthered in the next shot as he berates one of the anonymous officers under his command for not knowing the intricate details of a specific resistance group that he himself has inexplicably attained.

Lastly, the penultimate shot of this scene is a reverse shot from behind the Obergruppenführer in which his subordinates once again encircle his desk and a sculpture of the Parteiaadler (the German eagle standing on top of a swastika inside a wreath of oak leaves and looking over its left should which represented the Nazi party) hangs above their heads on the far wall. There is hardly any space in this frame not occupied by SS officers or Nazi regalia and this use of composition suggests an overwhelming force on the part of the enemy. Not being able to see the group leader’s face in this shot is also important as it reiterates that the character’s identity is not his own, but rather he essentially functions as a surrogate Hitler for the 1955 audience who may have otherwise adversely reacted to a human portrayal of the fascist dictator, as West Germans at the time were attempting to distance themselves from the atrocities they had committed in Hitler’s name and had not yet begun the process of coming to terms with their Nazi past. Despite the necessity of substituting an actor portraying Hitler with the dictatorial persona of the SS-Obergruppenführer, the film’s use of composition effectively strengthens the link
between the two in order to present the viewer with a requisite enemy against whom the conspirators can struggle in order to legitimize their heroization throughout the film.

The next element I will focus on in this analysis is speech. As can already be inferred by its extensive use so far in this analysis, the words of the characters play a more pronounced role in *Der 20. Juli* than in *Es geschah am 20. Juli*, which one would expect from a film with a greater focus on political rather than artistic sophistication, and are integral in the heroizing process of this film. Stauffenberg’s words in particular further this aim. For instance, when the responsibility of overseeing *Operation Walküre* is turned over to him from Henning von Tresckow he states, “Sie können sich auf mich verlassen. Es gibt für mich nichts wichtiger als die Befreiungsaktion.” Later in the film as the coup begins failing, Stauffenberg rouses his fellow conspirators to continue their cause with an altruistic speech: “Solange noch ein Funken Hoffnung ist, kämpfen wir weiter. Das ist nicht unsere Sache allein; dies ist die Sache des deutschen Volkes und wir haben kein Recht, aufzugeben.” After the coup has failed and the conspirators are being rounded up in the Bendlerblock, Stauffenberg reflects on their situation and determines why they were not successful: “Woran sind wir gescheitert? An all den unglücklichen Zufällen? Nein, nicht nur. Wir wollten die Methoden unserer Gegner nicht anwenden,” which is followed immediately by a gun shot from the hallway. The implication here is that the conspirators were morally superior to the Nazi regime they resisted and, therefore, would not use violence as their main resource to quell opposition, and because of this they were perhaps doomed to failure from the outset – evidence of further altruism and sacrifice on the part of the conspirators.

General Beck advances this point further with his last words before he takes his own life. He stands face-to-face with Stauffenberg and says, “Wir sind einen Weg gegangen, den wir
Baker 30

gehören mussten,” to which Stauffenberg replies, “Ja. Und wenn wir nur bewiesen haben, dass es ein anderes Deutschland gibt.” At this point both men know they have lost their battle and the cost is their lives, yet instead of making any attempt to save themselves they still only speak of performing their duty for the higher good of Germany. Even Stauffenberg’s final words before being executed by firing squad are devoted to the ideal of a better Germany: “Es lebe unser heiliges Deutschland!” Throughout the film Stauffenberg is presented as a man devoted in deed and speech to saving Germany from the grips of a fascist dictator, and, in the end, not even imminent death is able to stop him from this final declaration of resistance. Such fortitude and valor in the face of overwhelming force demonstrate the virtue of a true hero, and this virtue is embodied never greater in this film than by its portrayal of Stauffenberg.

Although Stauffenberg’s words play a major role in the heroization process in Der 20. Juli, the final scene of this film must also be commented on with respect to speech. In this scene, Henning von Tresckow’s character is at the site of a previous battle on the front and says to a fellow officer, “Wir haben getan, was wir konnten. Und für so eine gerechte und gute Sache ist der Einsatz des Lebens der angemessene Preis.” He then walks off into the distance as a voice-over from the narrator concludes the film with a final, religious justification for the resistance: “Mit gutem Gewissen kann Tresckow jetzt vor Gottes Richterstuhl verantworten, was er getan hat. Gott richtet nicht nach dem Erfolg. Er weiß, dass euer Kampf ein Aufstand des Gewissens war. Es ging um die Zerstörung rechtloser Tyrannei und um die Ehre des deutschen Namens.”

The use of religion as a means for legitimizing the actions of the conspirators is not only evinced by the film’s speech but by its use of composition as well, and both of these elements work in unison to create a rehabilitated heroic figure out of Stauffenberg and his fellow conspirators, which West Germans could look to in establishing an honorable tradition distinct
from their Nazi past. In light of the poor box office sales of each 1955 film, however, to claim an immediate success for these attempts to portray a heroized version of the conspirators is perhaps questionable. Although, given the gradual acceptance of the July 20th conspirators within Germany, these films can be regarded as important documents which helped form the vanguard for their eventually successful rehabilitation that began in the 1950s.
CHAPTER III. ANALYSES OF CONTEMPORARY FILMS

After *Es geschah am 20. Juli* and *Der 20. Juli* premiered in 1955 there was a long period in which no narrative film portrayals of the July 20th Plot were produced. In fact, it was not until 2004, the 60th anniversary of the event, that another German narrative film was made which exclusively depicted the July 20th Plot – the made-for-television film *Stauffenberg*. Before this, the nearly 50-year interim had been filled with documentaries concerning the event as well as films regarding non-military/élite aspects of resistance during the Third Reich. This shift to films depicting non-élite forms of resistance, for example *Die Weiße Rose* (1982) and *Sophie Scholl – Die letzten Tagen* (2005), reflects the historiographical shift in focus to civil forms of resistance which gained prominence among historians beginning in the 1960s.

Another shift which occurred during the interlude between 1955 and 2004 was the transition to a more critical examination of the events and conspirators surrounding the July 20th Plot. The blatant emphasis on the heroization process of the conspirators and Stauffenberg specifically, which seemingly defined the purpose of the 1955 films, for instance, is done away with in the 2004 film *Stauffenberg*. As the film’s director Jo Baier stated regarding this change, “Ich wollte Stauffenberg vom Sockel holen und zu einem Menschen machen” (qtd. in Leszczynski). In order to achieve this goal, Baier’s Stauffenberg places a strong importance on his family. This is quite different from the 1955 films which could not portray many of the immediate family members of the deceased conspirators since, as discussed in the previous chapter, some of them engaged in legal actions to prevent themselves from being represented in a feature film about the July 20th Plot. The legal ruling which finally permitted filmic representations of persons connected to historical events – including family members of historical figures – was reached in January 1956 when it was decided with a decision to the
contrary “auch den Angehörigen und Hinterbliebenen von NS-Tätern eine Art Vetorecht gegen jegliche unliebsame Darstellung in die Hand gegeben würde” (Trummer 7), thereby creating the possibility for Baier to include immediate family members of Stauffenberg in his film nearly 50 years later. The second tactic Baier uses in his film in order to portray Stauffenberg more as a regular man than a heroic historical figure is to depict Hitler as a larger-than-life villain through the use of composition, speech, and lighting. This juxtaposition of an unstoppable Hitler to the family man in Stauffenberg further accentuates Stauffenberg’s depiction as a regular human and not as an extraordinary historical figure.

Of course, historical events leading up to Baier’s film must be acknowledged in order to provide context for his decision to represent Stauffenberg still as a hero, but also as a “regular” man. As previously discussed, the 1990s were a tumultuous time in Germany. Not only did Vergangenheitsbewältigung, or Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung as it was now referred to, become a contemporary issue once more with the reunification of East and West Germany, but it was also the time during which the Wehrmachtsausstellung made its debut. The coupling of these two events provided Germany with a unique opportunity to reexamine its past in the light of decades of research regarding German involvement in World War II and to place it under greater scrutiny. Although the Wehrmachtsausstellung was quite controversial due to its assertion that members of the Wehrmacht committed atrocities during World War II which had previously been attributed solely to Himmler’s SS, its provocation was a benefit to Germany as it provided a forum for reassessing German history. The Wehrmachtsausstellung toured until 2004, the year in which Baier’s Stauffenberg premiered, and it is in the context of Germany’s critical reexamination of its army’s involvement in World War II, which began in the 1990s, that Baier’s film should be viewed.
Even though Baier’s more critical portrayal of Stauffenberg did follow the German trend of self-evaluation which began the previous decade, it was still subject to criticism. The most notable criticism came from the distinguished German historian and biographer of Stauffenberg and his less well-known brother Berthold von Stauffenberg, Peter Hoffmann. After viewing Baier’s film, Hoffmann wrote a letter to the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ) in which he elaborates upon historical inaccuracies as well as underdeveloped plot points regarding Stauffenberg’s motivations in the film. In response to Hoffmann’s critique, Stauffenberg producer Gabriele Sperl sent a rebuttal to the FAZ in which she clarified the film’s focus as a narrative film centering on Stauffenberg’s actions rather than Stauffenberg as actor: “Stauffenberg ist der Protagonist dieser Geschichte, nicht sein Leben, sondern seine dramatische, mutige Tat, der Kulminationspunkt seines Lebens, unser Filmstoff” (Sperl). Put simply, the film may not include all of Stauffenberg’s motivations for resisting, as Hoffmann laid out in his critique, but that was never the filmmaker’s intention. For Baier, making Stauffenberg as a narrative film in which the audience can empathize with the protagonist was enough to help sufficiently communicate Stauffenberg’s motivations for resistance that the film does not explicitly address. As he stated in an interview regarding this matter:

Zum Prinzip des Spielfilms ist zu sagen, dass er die zeitliche Distanz aufhebt. Das, was ich abilde, geschieht hier und jetzt. Der Zuschauer kann sich in den Helden hineinversetzen, in seine Motivation. (…) Der Dokumentarfilm dagegen wahr eine größere Distanz zum Geschehen. Hier steht die aufklärerische Arbeit im Vordergrund. (Trummer 11)

In addition to producing Stauffenberg as a narrative film, Baier also incorporates elements of a modern thriller into the film. This may be because the film was made for
television, and Baier had to appeal to as wide an audience as possible and not just to those interested in simply viewing a historical retelling of the July 20th Plot (Berger 9). This turned out to be a shrewd decision, as Stauffenberg debuted with an overall market share of 22.9% and 17.1% for all viewers between 14 and 49 years of age (“Stauffenberg”: historischer Spielfilm mit Top-Quote). Not only did the film enjoy a successful premiere in spite of criticism leveled against it by those such as Hoffmann, it also received high recognition at the 2004 Deutsche Fernsehpreis awards – the German equivalent of the Emmys – as Stauffenberg won the category of “Best Movie Made for Television or Miniseries” and was nominated in three further categories: “Best Actor in a Movie Made for Television” for Sebastian Koch as Stauffenberg, “Best Editing”, and “Best Music”. This indicates Germany’s ongoing need into the twenty-first century for celebrating the members of the July 20th Plot, even if the trend of overly heroizing them is slowly being supplanted by more discriminating portrayals.

A final issue to be addressed when contextualizing Baier’s Stauffenberg is its medium of release, i.e. why was it produced for television as opposed to a theatrical release? The answer to this question has two parts, both of which share the root of cultural identity. Firstly, television as a medium provides the opportunity for “a sense of collective belonging” among its viewers (Hill 609). In Germany’s case, evoking this sense of collective belonging serves to perpetuate the country’s post-war anti-Nazi identity, which the heroization of Stauffenberg and his fellow conspirators helped to establish. Secondly, as Hill continues:

… an alliance between film and television has provided not only the most economically prudent form of cinema for European countries, but also the one most likely to offer a culturally distinctive alternate to Hollywood norms, by drawing on television’s public-service traditions and speaking to their own
cultures in ways that Hollywood films, aimed at global markets, cannot. (609-610)

Therefore, the release of *Stauffenberg* for television can be understood as a continuation of German television’s public-service tradition as well as a strategic financial decision since the film, with its German-centric subject matter, may not have been as profitable with a theatrical release compared to – and due to competition from – Hollywood films which are produced for worldwide audiences. The 2008 Hollywood film *Valkyrie* demonstrates this point.

*Valkyrie* is an American film by director Bryan Singer (*The Usual Suspects, X-Men, Superman Returns*) which explores essentially the same plot as Baier’s *Stauffenberg*, yet which has enjoyed much greater financial success. With Tom Cruise portraying Stauffenberg and a reported $75 million budget, Singer’s version of the July 20th Plot earned over $198 million worldwide, including $11.44 million from Germany alone (“Valkyrie”). Also, whereas Baier’s film contains aspects of a modern thriller, Singer’s film was produced and marketed specifically as a thriller, and casting Tom Cruise as the lead was a strategic method for associating the film with an exciting story and fast-paced action, especially for audiences from around the world not familiar with the July 20th Plot. The combination of an action star as the main protagonist and a director known for making suspenseful thrillers and superhero films also helped the film appeal to the largest demographic of moviegoers, 15-24 year olds (Hill 606), who otherwise might not be interested in paying money to see a slow-paced film about an obscure German historical figure.

The liberty of producing *Valkyrie* explicitly as a thriller in order to increase box office sales is something that an American studio can exercise as it has no social or cultural history to consider, unlike Germany, regarding the heroization of the July 20th Plot conspirators. As an
article for the German newspaper *Die Welt* put it: “Für Deutschland ist der 20. Juli 1944 einer der moralischen Gründungspfeiler des neuen, demokratischen Deutschland. Für den Rest der Welt läuft schlicht hier ein Thriller ab . . . . Deshalb baut Bryan Singer Thriller-Elemente ein, wo immer es sich verantworten lässt” (Rodek). The lack of an American social and cultural history regarding the heroization of the July 20th Plot, which has been mirrored in this paper by a respective absence of American films in my analyses until this chapter, is by no means a coincidence.

This near-absence of American films based explicitly on the July 20th Plot during the last half of the twentieth century reflects the historiography of the time in America better than any film could have. As I discussed previously in this paper, although recognition of military resistance within the *Wehrmacht* was prevalent in West Germany and even helped in establishing a new, honorable tradition after 1945 (which the two West German films of 1955 can be seen as attempting to bolster) the events of the July 20th Plot remained relatively unknown in the United States, as “all three Western occupation powers strove to root out Prussian militarism as well as Nazism during the period 1945-47” (Peifer 1036) and, therefore, had no interest in promoting a failed coup attempt perpetrated by German military officers, some of whom had ties to both Prussian militarism and Nazism. This began to change only with “the coming of the Cold War and the shift in American and British perceptions of Germans from enemy to ally” (1036) and helps to explain why the July 20th Plot was only represented marginally in two American films – *The Desert Fox: The Story of Rommel* (1951) and *The Night of the Generals* (1967) – before 1990, when the critically panned made-for-television movie *The Plot to Kill Hitler* premiered. I will not go into an analysis of this movie here as my focus in this chapter is the two most contemporary films based on the July 20th Plot, namely *Stauffenberg* and *Valkyrie*. I will,
however, finish my inclusion of *The Plot to Kill Hitler* in my discussion with one film critic’s astute synopsis regarding its dubious worth:

> The players are not clearly identified, and the various reasons why those within the government wanted Hitler out are not very clear, further muddled by the bullet-pointed nature of a movie that has to wrap up in 90 minutes and break at predetermined times to sell cars and beer. Melodrama rules the day here and it’s sometimes downright comical; in one scene, one of von Stauffenberg’s sons says to his mother after an evacuation of a circus, “You’re safe in here, Mama – no one will drop bombs on the clowns.” (Newton)

Given that the events of the July 20th Plot had little historical impact in the United States, American film studios have a much greater freedom in how to portray the events surrounding the conspiracy as well as the historical figures involved in it. In Germany a tradition was established in the 1950s by the films *Es geschah am 20. Juli* and *Der 20. Juli* which heroized the conspirators in an attempt to bolster a new and positive national identity. This tradition is now an integral part of contemporary German identity and for this reason has been perpetuated over the last 50 years while, although it now includes a more critical examination of the events and conspirators, as seen in Baier’s *Stauffenberg*. Bryan Singer’s decision to produce *Valkyrie* as a suspense thriller in order to “bring this movie to a wider audience” (qtd. in Douglas) can, therefore, not be viewed as summarily good or bad, but rather as a legitimate choice resulting from the United States’ unique position within the historiography of the July 20th Plot. Furthermore, this freedom of choice results in an entertaining film not only full of suspense, but which to a large extent accurately adheres to the facts of the historical event, if not at times indulging in a Hollywood machismo, which the following analyses will demonstrate.
Jo Baier’s *Stauffenberg*

The opposing roles of Stauffenberg and Hitler, as Baier presents them throughout this film, are set up during the second scene which takes place at a performance of Wagner, the composer of “Ride of the Valkyries” – the operatic namesake of the emergency military plan the conspirators would come to use to carry out their attempted coup, Operation Valkyrie. In this scene Stauffenberg is shown as a joyful man in love and about to start a family while Hitler literally presides over the performance from his balcony seat. In addition, Stauffenberg arrives late – much as he joined the resistance at a late stage after army generals had failed to act – and must watch the performance from behind a curtain so as not to disturb it, which symbolizes and foreshadows the conspiratorial role he will later assume. Stauffenberg is setup for the film in this scene as the quintessential “man behind the curtain,” so to speak, who will be orchestrating the July 20th Plot, but without exaggerating his moral character as done in *Es geschah am 20. Juli* and *Der 20 Juli*.

Removing Stauffenberg from his heroized pedestal of earlier films and portraying him as a normal man was a main goal of Baier during the production of this film and he employs multiple strategies in order to achieve this end. The first strategy he employs is to depict Stauffenberg’s family life, which already begins in the second scene when he proposes to his future wife Nina (Trummer 13). Presenting Stauffenberg as a caring father and husband provides him with a human dimension which helps to prevent the character from coming across as an automaton single-mindedly devoted to Hitler’s assassination, as is the case with the 1955 films.

Scenes which serve to remind the audience of Stauffenberg’s family are inserted in key moments of the film so that the viewer is never allowed to perceive him in an overly heroized fashion in which nothing matters except his moral obligation to Germany. The first instance of
this already occurs just after the first scene in which Stauffenberg actively participates in the
resistance. After a secret meeting with Henning von Tresckow and his secretary to write up the
Valkyrie order, Stauffenberg is shown at home wishing his children a goodnight as a goodbye
since he is scheduled to leave for Berlin later that night. After the children have been put to bed
by his wife Nina she returns and the two have an argument about his secretive and distant
behavior as well as her fear for his life. The theme of their conversation seems to depict
Stauffenberg as devoted only to his cause; however, Nina’s accusations to this effect actually
serve as a basis for Stauffenberg himself to refute the notion of him being ruled by a single
purpose. At one point she even asks him straightforwardly, “Willst du den Helden spielen?” to
which he replies, “Ich will nur, dass dieser Krieg aufhört.” At the end of the scene Stauffenberg
is visibly upset because it is apparent that they will be parting on bad terms and he asks, “Sollen
wir so Abschied nehmen?” Nina answers with a final and passive accusation, “Du willst es ja
nicht anders,” and he responds, “Ich wollte schon.” With this scene Baier advances his aim of
presenting Stauffenberg not as an exceptional historical figure, but as a normal man caught up in
exceptional circumstances.

Baier reintroduces family into the narrative in two further instances in order to prevent
his depiction of Stauffenberg from becoming one-dimensional and focused solely on his duty to
Germany. They both come after it has become obvious that the coup has failed. In the first
instance, Stauffenberg sits in his office and engages in a monologue while holding a picture of
his family. He speaks of creating life through his family over the last 11 years since Hitler had
been in power, whereas Hitler had brought death and destruction to all of Europe. In the second
instance, Stauffenberg has been shot in the arm by Hitler loyalists who are seizing the building
and he is holed up inside his office as his staff scrambles around him to destroy documents
related to the conspiracy and his wound is being bandaged. Amid all this chaos he still has the presence of mind to have his secretary attempt to call his wife so that he can say a final “goodbye.” His wife cannot be reached at this point, but this is inconsequential as simply the attempt to contact his family at this point furthers Baier’s goal of establishing Stauffenberg as a man with a moral duty he needed to see through as opposed to a glorified national hero with an obsession to serving his country.

The second tactic Baier employs to counteract the extreme heroization of Stauffenberg is dialogue. I have already demonstrated an example of this during the above-mentioned discussion regarding the exchange between Stauffenberg and his wife; however, there is a noteworthy sequence, which must be acknowledged, during which Baier allows Stauffenberg himself to twice more play down his heroism. The first instance occurs the morning of the assassination attempt as Stauffenberg and his brother Berthold prepare for the day. After their chauffeur takes leave of them to ready the car to drive to the airstrip, Berthold expresses his dissatisfaction with Stauffenberg’s carrying out the assassination since he plays such a crucial role in Berlin. Stauffenberg does not answer this with an impassioned speech about a higher moral good or his duty to Germany, as the character does in the films of 1955. Instead, Baier’s Stauffenberg gives a succinct and pragmatic answer, “Da findet sich ja sonst keiner, der die Drecksarbeit macht,” and the scene changes. Baier does not use dialogue here to reiterate Stauffenberg’s bravery to the viewer, but rather to communicate the historical truth that no one had been willing to take action up until this point.

In the following scene the brothers arrive at the airstrip where Stauffenberg will fly to the *Wolfsschanze*, but there is a delay due to fog which gives Berthold time to take him aside for what may be their final words to each other. Once in private Berthold begins to praise brother,
“Ich möchte dir sagen, dass ich großen Respekt vor dir habe, vor deinem Mut –” only to have Stauffenberg cut him off with, “Versuch nochmal Nina zu erreichen. Sag ihr … sag ihr, dass ich sie liebe. Sonst sag ihr nichts,” and the scene ends. Once again Baier’s Stauffenberg dismisses an affirmation of his heroism, and once again it is his family which is used to provide the counterpoint.

It does not take much effort to portray Stauffenberg as a hero, as his altruistic actions speak for themselves. There is one brief scene in the film, however, in which Baier does indulge in highlighting Stauffenberg’s daring and uniqueness to go against the masses of the time in order to stand up for what he believed was Germany’s best interests. After Stauffenberg departs from his family in Bamberg and arrives back in Berlin, General Fromm calls him to his office and informs Stauffenberg that he is to give a report to Hitler at the Wolfsschanze in two days’ time, on July 20th. An air raid siren then sounds, and all personnel in the building begin evacuating to the basement. As Stauffenberg reenters his office he crosses the room to a portrait of Hitler. His secretary then enters before going to hide in the basement and asks, “Herr Oberst, kommen Sie nicht mit runter?” The camera cuts back to Stauffenberg and there is now only himself and the portrait of Hitler in the frame. He responds to his secretary simply, “Nein” and the camera lingers on this shot before cutting back to the mass of people now rushing away to hide from the danger. The use of dialogue and composition to create the heroic metaphor in this scene is quite clear: There is danger all around which Stauffenberg is unwilling to hide from, and it is now between himself and Hitler as to how much longer it will last.

Although Baier does indulge in an occasional moment of heroizing Stauffenberg at this point, he does so while also incorporating the third tactic that he uses in this film in order to portray Stauffenberg more as a regular man than a heroized historical figure. He depicts Hitler as
a larger-than-life villain, which he accomplishes by, among other strategies, maintaining a
presence of Hitler in portraits and photographs throughout the film. The first time Hitler’s
presence is made known through a photograph takes place quite early in the film while
Stauffenberg is stationed in Tunisia. As he rummages through an old army transport, a young
officer comes to take command of one of his units, but within seconds there is an air attack and
the young officer dies in Stauffenberg’s arms. An enraged Stauffenberg then throws a framed
photograph of Hitler which the camera focuses on as it shatters. This initial use of symbolizing
Hitler’s presence by proxy is rather overt and sets the foundation for its subtlety of use which
continues throughout the film. Other key moments when Hitler’s menacing presence is
represented by portraits and photographs occur as: Stauffenberg lies in a hospital bed in Munich
recuperating from his wounds; he is in a meeting with Field Marshal Keitel minutes before he is
to plant the briefcase bomb; the conspirators arrest General Fromm and he tells Stauffenberg to
shoot himself; Gestapo arrive at Stauffenberg’s office to question him about the bombing; as
Nazi loyalists siege the building where the coup is underway; and finally a photograph of Hitler
hangs behind the conspirators as General Fromm carries out his impromptu court martial and
sentences them to death.

Speech is also used in the film to strengthen Hitler’s menacing persona. It is used on the
part of the conspirators, for example, as Stauffenberg and his adjutant Werner von Haeften are
flying back to Berlin after the bombing and Stauffenberg declares, “Eine solche Bombe – die
überlebt man nicht. Selbst er nicht!” Speech is used to its greatest effect in order to further this
end, in particular, by Hitler himself. In this film, an actor portrays Hitler during the attempted
bombing scene (during which his face is eerily lit from an unknown source in the otherwise
relatively dark room), but he says no more than ten words onscreen and never with the camera
directly trained on him, which contributes to his mystique. His mystique and menacing persona are also heightened by the only other two instances in which he speaks. Curiously, we never hear him speak directly to a particular counterpart; in the first instance, his voice is overheard through a phone and, in the second instance, over the radio as he addresses Germany immediately following Stauffenberg’s summary execution. Hitler seems to have the last word against the conspirators which begins as a voice-over while the camera is still fixed on the just-murdered bodies of Stauffenberg et al., and he labels them “eine ganz kleine Clique ehrgeiziger, gewissenloser und zugleich verbrecherisch dummer Offiziere…” These methods, which Baier uses to ensure that the danger posed by Hitler is never far from the minds of the viewer, also serve to create suspense during the film, which Baier would have wanted in order to attract as big an audience as possible during the film’s television premiere, as previously discussed.

Another strategy that Baier uses in order to build suspense during the film is to begin it with Stauffenberg’s execution … or is it his execution? The viewer is shown Stauffenberg as he stands before a firing squad, but as the order to fire is given we only hear the shots ring out as the screen simultaneously cuts to black. Without being shown the conclusion of the sequence, the audience is left to wonder whether the execution was successful. Perhaps Stauffenberg somehow survived the assault? The name “Stauffenberg” is then simply displayed on the title screen followed by the second scene with a two-eyed and two-handed, uninjured Stauffenberg arriving hurriedly at a performance hall. The location and date of the scene “Berlin, Sommer 1933” are displayed on screen for the first time as they will continue to be throughout the film with each new scene, thereby creating a countdown for the audience leading back to the unanswered question of Stauffenberg’s death from the opening scene (Berger 10). For nearly 90 minutes the viewer must watch as Stauffenberg takes on the role of conspirator and his plans are set in
motion only to unravel around him in the end, all the while left to wonder if he will in fact be executed. Stauffenberg’s life did indeed come to an end that night, but, even though most Germans are aware of this fact, Baier’s tactic to structure the film with this trait of a suspense thriller ensures that the audience will nonetheless stay tuned-in until the end credits roll. The use of suspense to heighten the drama of the July 20th Plot is also used in the 2008 film Valkyrie, the final subject of this analysis of filmic representations of Stauffenberg.

Bryan Singer’s Valkyrie

As Valkyrie is an American film and, therefore, exists outside of the German tradition of heroizing the conspirators of the July 20th Plot as well as the contemporary German process of Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung (which has helped trigger a more critical examination of the tradition of heroizing the July 20th conspirators), it enjoys the freedom to treat the event however the filmmakers would like, for example, deciding to produce it explicitly as a suspense thriller. This freedom is, however, limited by the conventions of big-budget Hollywood films, which filmmakers employ in order to make the most profit by appealing to the largest possible audience. A clear-cut narrative distinction between good and evil is perhaps the single most important feature of the Hollywood blockbuster. Interestingly enough, it is precisely this convention which functions in Valkyrie to support a heroized depiction of Stauffenberg.

In the opening scene, for example, the audience is first introduced to Stauffenberg as he decries Hitler in his personal journal and the devastation he has brought to the world. These writings also become the first words of the film spoken in English in the form of a voice-over belonging to Stauffenberg as he writes, “… the murder of civilians … torture, starvation of prisoners … the mass execution of Jews. My duty as an officer is no longer to save my country, but to save human lives. … Hitler is not only the arch enemy of the entire world, but the arch
enemy of Germany.” The stage has thus been set for the entire movie: Stauffenberg hero, Hitler villain. The audience may now sit back for the next two hours and root for Stauffenberg’s triumph as well as fear for him in moments of suspense, of which there is no short supply.

Overlooking the myriad suspicious glances and lingering stares which permeate the film, Singer’s skill at constructing a suspenseful scene is best exhibited when combined with other narrative devices, such as dramatic irony, which emphasize the distinction between the opposing forces of good and evil. Additionally, highlighting the conflict between good and evil in order to produce suspense consistently serves to further the heroization of Stauffenberg by emphasizing his virtue. For example, after Stauffenberg has revised the emergency plan “Operation Valkyrie” to suit the clandestine needs of the conspirators’ planned coup, he must go to Hitler’s private residence, the Berghof, in order to acquire in person Hitler’s signature for approval. As if confronting Hitler in person does not already create a looming suspense, Singer has Goebbels and Himmler – replete with cold stares – present as well. Not only does this amplify Stauffenberg’s heroism by juxtaposing him with the three most powerful and infamous Nazi leaders simultaneously, but Singer also tops off the contrast with an instance of dramatic irony as Hitler greets Stauffenberg: “May I say what an honor it is to meet an officer who has sacrificed so much for Germany. If only more of my men were like you. Let this man stand as an example to all of you – he is the ideal German officer.” In case the audience had any doubts as to Stauffenberg’s heroism until this point, they now have “the arch enemy of the entire world,” Adolf Hitler himself, affirming it.

In addition, heroizing Stauffenberg is not only achieved through contrast, it is also achieved by association. Bryan Singer’s first feature film was the widely-acclaimed 1995 suspense thriller The Usual Suspects, but since his highly successful 2000 film X-men his name
has been attached to big-budget superhero films. In fact, *Valkyrie* was Singer’s follow-up to the 2006 film *Superman Returns*, and it is perhaps not coincidental that Stauffenberg’s heroization process includes attributing to him typical superhero virtues, such as integrity, fortitude, and altruism. As producer Gilbert Adler, who made *Superman Returns* and *Valkyrie* with Singer, said:

Stauffenberg is, in a way, a real-life counterpart to what we look for in cinematic heroes: an ordinary man moved to extraordinary actions. Certainly, he was very human and flawed, but I think Bryan brings out that Stauffenberg’s remarkable strength was all grounded in very real things: his dedication to his country, to his family, and especially to what was right. ("*Valkyrie* Production Notes")

Interestingly, this American view (from the previous makers of a big-budget Hollywood superhero film) of Stauffenberg’s heroism reflects the contemporary, critical view of Stauffenberg and his fellow conspirators in Germany as reflected by Jo Baier’s made-for-television film *Stauffenberg*.

Unlike Baier, however, Singer also incorporates religious elements into the film which suggest Stauffenberg as a savior figure. For instance, Stauffenberg first agrees to participate in the coup while inside of a church. In this scene the viewer is first shown a sequence of religious imagery from throughout the church, beginning – rather significantly – with a crucified Jesus Christ, as Stauffenberg, seemingly in prayer, expresses aloud his acknowledgement that he must act against Hitler in order to serve Germany even at the risk of being labeled a traitor. It is only then revealed that he has been addressing General Olbricht, who has just approached Stauffenberg to join the resistance. By this point, though, the intended effect has been accomplished as Singer has established the connection to Stauffenberg as a savior figure.
Another, more blatant instance of heroizing Stauffenberg through religion occurs during a secret rendezvous between himself and Henning von Tresckow as the latter says, “You know, God promised Abraham he would not destroy Sodom if he could find just ten righteous men. I have a feeling that for Germany it may come down to one.” Singer demonstrates with these lines that subtlety is certainly not requisite to efficacy when furthering themes in a Hollywood film.

A final point to discuss regarding *Valkyrie* is Singer’s motivation for being involved with the film. Being Jewish, Singer has been acutely aware of Nazi atrocities since his childhood and has explored this theme in many of his feature films. His 1998 film *Apt Pupil*, for example, centers on the perverse relationship between an American high school student with a fascination for Nazi history and his neighbor who he discovers is a Nazi war criminal. Even Singer’s 2000 superhero film *X-men* explores this theme allegorically as the film’s main antagonist is a mutant Holocaust survivor who in present-day America fights for mutant superiority against non-mutant humans who, he believes, are an inferior species. In a 2003 interview with the BBC, Singer acknowledged his proclivity for exploring this personal topic in his films. When asked by the interviewer, “Does the fascination with evil that runs through all your films have its roots in the fact that you are Jewish?” Singer responded:

I think so. I was very obsessed with the Holocaust as a child and man's inhumanity to man. And, ultimately, it came from my fear of intolerance. In certain places, for whatever reason, just for being Caucasian or having blue eyes, someone might want to cut my head off. For being American, for being anything, for just being myself, someone might want to destroy me. That concept is so terrifying that it constantly bears exploration. (Applebaum)
This personal connection to Nazi atrocities through his Jewishness is important to understand when contextualizing *Valkyrie*’s significance with German filmic representations of the July 20th Plot.

Although the rehabilitation and heroization of the July 20th conspirators was a uniquely German historical development, the catalyst which necessitated that process stemmed in large part from the Holocaust, an event that affected Jewish people from around the world, including in the United States. It is interesting to note that Germany’s heroized depictions of Stauffenberg and his fellow conspirators in films over the last half century have had their roots in rehabilitating German identity within Germany as necessitated by their role as perpetrator during World War II, while the American heroization of Stauffenberg in the contemporary film *Valkyrie* – which depicts essentially the same historical figures and event as its German counterparts – is rooted in its Jewish director’s historical identity as victim to World War II Germany. Regardless of the differences concerning the motivations behind the production of the four films discussed in this paper or each film’s methods for portraying the events and people surrounding the July 20th Plot, however, *Valkyrie* effectively carries on the tradition of heroizing Stauffenberg and the July 20th conspirators that began over half a century ago in Germany, while bringing the story to a worldwide audience.
The terms “civil disobedience” and “civil courage” are closely related, yet a distinction must be made at this early point. Whereas “civil disobedience” is understood as acts of defiance against the state as defined by the perspective of the state, “civil courage” refers to the perspective of civilians within the state who bring themselves to commit acts of civil disobedience against the state. From this point on, the term “civil disobedience” will be used in the discussion of defiance, with its connection to civil courage assumed by the reader.

In fact, other forms of resistance were to be found within the Wehrmacht before the events of July 20th, 1944. The September Plot, for instance, was a poorly organized resistance attempt which due to its members’ tendency to philosophize about their situation rather than act against it, as well as unfortunately-timed political changes, never came to fruition. Two other well-known failed attempts at military resistance occurred in March 1943. On March 13 a bomb stowed away on Hitler’s plane en route to the Wolfsschanze failed to detonate, and a mere 8 days later, on March 21, a suicide bombing was aborted as Hitler hastily exited a planned exhibition in Berlin of captured weaponry (Fest 192).

Dolchstoßlegende, or stab-in-the-back legend, was the post-World War I German conspiratorial concept that subversive activities from Jews and political dissidents caused Germany to lose the war. Hitler was able to exploit this widely-held belief in order to further his nationalist and genocidal agenda. In the context of the July 20th Plot, many German politicians immediately following World War II feared this concept and its potentially dangerous effects could see a resurgence if the conspirators were not properly rehabilitated to be viewed as heroes and not traitors who sabotaged Germany’s war effort.

The first exhibition of the Wehrmachtsausstellung caused a substantial controversy in Germany as critics accused its producers of manipulating documents to further their own conclusions while distorting historical accuracy. Due to these accusations, the head of the Hamburg Institute for Social Research, Jan Philipp Reemtsma, closed the exhibit while a panel of historians verified its sources. After review, the panel concluded that “charges the authors of the exhibition had manipulated or forged material could not be upheld” (Bradish 34), but that some documentation errors needed correcting. They also suggested a general revision and redesign of the exhibition which was completed.
in 2001 before the exhibit re-opened under the less provocative title Verbrechen der Wehrmacht: Dimensionen des Vernichtungskrieg 1941 – 1944 and ran nearly four more years until March 28, 2004.

5 If this is true, an interesting question arises: How does one reconcile the atrocities of National Socialism in Germany with the heroization of resistance members after the end of National Socialism in Germany when both events are assumed to stem from a common past? An examination of this question lies outside the scope of this paper, however, as my analyses focus on post-war films.

6 “Broszat himself came to accept (‘Briefwechsel’, pp. 340, 361-2) that the ‘historicization’ concept is ‘ambiguous and misleading’” (Kershaw 231).

7 An approximately 2.5-minutes-long sequence immediately following the opening credits depicts Stauffenberg arriving in Berlin on his convalescence leave and already discussing the need for active resistance against the Nazi leadership. As if to emphasize Stauffenberg’s purpose for being stationed in Berlin to carry out this matter, a civilian who is busy clearing rubble from a bombed-out street says to him, “Mach mal bald Schluss damit, sonst hat es nicht mehr viel Zweck.”

8 It is quite unlikely that any Jewish person not in hiding, especially in Berlin (declared “judenfrei” in May 1943), had yet to be rounded up by the SS by this point in 1944. However, this historical inaccuracy should be viewed simply as a creative liberty taken by the film in order to attribute a human face for the audience to the suffering endured by millions at the hands of the Nazis, which the conspirators, among other things, fought against.

9 The first German feature film with an actor playing Hitler was actually G.W. Pabst’s film Der Letzte Akt (1955) which he directed before beginning work on Es geschah am 20. Juli, and it made its West Germany debut on April 14, 1955 – only two months before Es geschah am 20. Juli and Der 20. Juli. The portrayal of Hitler by an actor in a feature film caused quite a controversy at the time in West Germany and would not happen again until 2004 when Bruno Ganz portrayed Hitler in the German film Der Untergang, which itself provoked debate in Germany and America as to whether it is appropriate to depict Hitler as a “plausible human being” (Denby). An actor also plays Hitler in the 2004 made-for-television movie Stauffenberg, albeit very briefly and with no spoken dialogue on camera.
This end narration as well as Tresckow’s final monologue are an abridgement of Tresckow’s final words to his adjutant Fabian von Schlabrendorff on July 21, 1944, as recorded by Schlabrendorff in his post-war book *Offiziere gegen Hitler*, just prior to committing suicide on the Eastern Front in order to ensure that his knowledge of accomplices to the failed coup attempt could not be obtained by Nazi interrogators:

Works Cited


Hoffmann, Peter. “Stauffenberg: Seine historische Rolle.” FAZ.net. Frankfurter Allgemeine


Trummer, Peter. "Im Focus der Kamera: Der 20. Juli und die Brüder Stauffenberg im Spielfilm."


“Valkyrie: The Plot to Kill Hitler.” Dir. Kevin Burns. The History Channel. Bowling Green,