Newsday Review by Scott McLemee
http://www.mclemee.com/id62.html

Scott McLemee
Third Reich (First Volume)
Newsday, 29 February 2004


In cynical moments, it sometimes appears that the first law of commercial nonfiction book-publishing runs: “If you put Nazis in it, they will come.” After more than half a century, the Third Reich retains its extraordinary hold on the public imagination. Its only rival, at least in America, is the Civil War. (One historian I know jokes that if he could find a way to get both into one book, he might be able to retire.) But there is an important difference in the way each serves to captivate readers.

The Civil War has the quality of tragedy, in an almost classical sense: a conflict of brothers (sometimes literally so) torn apart by differing conceptions of right and duty. By contrast, the power of the German catastrophe to command our attention is much more troubling. The Confederacy dehumanized people. So did the Third Reich, except now, with the full force of technology behind it, rendering the whole process all the more depersonalized.

But what makes fascination with the Nazis especially problematic is the fact that they wanted to be fascinating. No mass movement has ever aestheticized itself so completely – so ruthlessly. The Nazi leadership contained a disproportionate number of erstwhile bohemians and artists manque. They designed their movement to create awe and to defy reason. When readers consume books on the Third Reich, it is often a
matter of yielding to precisely the dark aura that the führer sought to embody in uniforms, symbols, rituals, architecture and mythology.

The Coming of the Third Reich by Richard J. Evans, a professor of modern history at Cambridge, is only the first of what will be a three-volume history of the Nazi system. It draws on the enormous scholarly literature covering the regime, but it is not intended for specialists. It is a work of popular history – but one with a difference.

Unlike other chroniclers of the Third Reich, Evans is not awed by the Nazis themselves. He defies their efforts to defy reason. He repeatedly asks, in different ways, whether the movement’s rise to power was as irresistible as the Nazis tried to make it seem.

A tendency to regard German culture as fundamentally authority-loving and anti-democratic has long had a certain currency among non-Germans. "In a curious way," Evans writes, "this echoed the Nazis' own version of German history," in which such traits were part of a "racial instinct... alienated from them by foreign influences such as the French Revolution." What gets written out of history, then, are the liberal and democratic strains of German politics -- including "the very widespread opposition to Nazism which existed in Germany even in 1933," when Hitler came to power. Erasing anti-authoritarian traditions from the historical record, Evans writes, means that "the dramatic story of Nazism's rise to dominance ceases to be a drama at all: It becomes merely the realization of the inevitable."

And so in reconstructing the history running up to the 1920s and '30s, Evans stresses the contradictions in German society. By the turn of the century, it combined dynamic economic growth -- driven by heavy industry, high technology and incessant research--and--development -- with a political system that combined the worst features of feudal authority and modern bureaucracy. (Imagine a cross between an army and an insurance company.)

Germany came relatively late to the grand scramble for colonies. While carving out its chunk of Africa, it wasted no time in absorbing ideas about racial superiority from thinkers in more successful empires, such as France and England. But while a few political sects tried to fuse old prejudices against the Jews with newfangled ideas about social Darwinism, "the vast majority of respectable opinion in Germany, left and right, middle class and working class, remained opposed" to proto-- Nazi
ideas. In particular, the well-organized and unrelentingly optimistic labor movement condemned anti-Semitism.

The effect on German society of World War I and of the hyperinflation of the 1920s are by now familiar enough. What sets Evans' account of the period apart is his emphasis on the Weimar government's deep continuities with the political order created by Bismarck and the Kaiser. The problem was not, he contends, the lack of roots of the republic's emergent democratic institutions, as such. Rather, the instability came from the way the economic crisis fueled the rise of paramilitary organizations, left-wing and right, that made the streets into a war zone.

The Nazis were simply the most adept at deploying bully-boy tactics while also appealing to the desire for order. As early as 1923, they were explicit about their intent to herd what the party program called "security risks and useless eaters" into concentration camps. But Hitler also made clear (to the frustration of factions within his party) that he intended to take power by legal means.

For all the charisma and sinister magic of his demagogy, he also had the skills of a modern politician capable of leading people to hear what they wanted to hear. As Evans writes, "The vagueness of the Nazi programme, its symbolic mixture of old and new, its eclectic, often inconsistent character, to a large extent allowed people to read into it what they wanted to and edit out anything they might have found disturbing."

While that evasiveness helped the party move from the political fringes to a growing presence in the legislature, it also meant that even Nazi cadres sometimes worked for the movement without actually reading Mein Kampf. "Among ordinary Party activists in the 1920s and early 1930s, the most important aspect of Nazi ideology was its emphasis on social solidarity -- the concept of the organic racial community of all Germans -- followed at some distance by extreme nationalism and the cult of Hitler. Anti-Semitism, by contrast, was of significance only for a minority, and for a good proportion of these it was only incidental."

Soon enough, of course, it would be far more central than that. The first volume of Evans's trilogy closes with Hitler in power -- and the Nazis working swiftly to transform themselves from one party in German politics to The Party, period, full stop. Countless books have told the story. But Evans has distinguished himself by offering an account that avoids the merely sensational, while bringing the real horror of it into
view. How? By taking seriously a remark of Goebbels', who gloated: "It will always remain one of democracy's best jokes that it provided its deadly enemies with the means by which it was destroyed."

**Powells.com Staff Pick**


"The Coming of the Third Reich is sober reading when compared against current events; the temptation to draw parallels is great....The past can...inform the present, and Evans offers much information on how a democracy became a fascist dictatorship in less than five years. Almost excruciatingly documented — seventy-two pages of notes, and forty-nine pages of bibliography — The Coming of the Third Reich is a lucidly written addition to Third Reich scholarship." Doug Brown, Powells.com (read the entire Powells.com review)

Review–A–Day

"Evans...has published the first of a projected three volumes that when finished will long remain the definitive English-language account....An always reliable, often magisterial synthesis of a vast body of scholarship, and a frequently deft blend of narrative and interpretation, Evans's book is an impressive achievement." Benjamin Schwarz, The Atlantic Monthly (read the entire Atlantic Monthly review)

**Synopses & Reviews**

**Publisher Comments:**

From one of the world's most distinguished historians, a magisterial new reckoning with Hitler's rise to power and the collapse of civilization in Nazi Germany.

In 1900 Germany was the most progressive and dynamic nation in Europe, the only country whose rapid technological and social growth and change challenged that of the United States. Its political culture was less authoritarian than Russia's and less anti-Semitic than France's; representative institutions were thriving, and competing political parties and elections were a central part of life. How then can we explain the fact that in little more than a generation this stable modern country would be in the hands of a violent, racist, extremist political movement that would lead it and all of Europe into utter moral, physical, and cultural ruin?

There is no story in twentieth-century history more important to understand, and Richard Evans has written the definitive account for our
time. A masterful synthesis of a vast body of scholarly work integrated with important new research and interpretations, Evans's history restores drama and contingency to the rise to power of Hitler and the Nazis, even as he shows how ready Germany was by the early 1930s for such a takeover to occur. With many people angry and embittered by military defeat and economic ruin; a state undermined by a civil service, an army, and a law enforcement system deeply alienated from the democratic order introduced in 1918; beset by the growing extremism of voters prey to panic about the increasing popularity of communism; home to a tiny but quite successful Jewish community subject to widespread suspicion and resentment, Germany proved to be fertile ground in which Nazism's ideology of hatred could take root.

The first book of what will ultimately be a complete three-volume history of Nazi Germany, The Coming of the Third Reich is a masterwork of the historian's art and the book by which all others on this subject will be judged.

Review:
"Richard J. Evans's The Coming of the Third Reich...gives the clearest and most gripping account I've read of German life before and during the rise of the Nazis." A. S Byatt, Times Literary Supplement

Review:
"[H]ighly readable and comprehensive....[A] first-rate narrative history that informs and educates and may inspire readers to delve even deeper into the subject." Jay Freeman, Booklist

Review:
"A brilliant synthesis of German history....A peerless work....Of immense importance to general readers — and even some specialists — seeking to understand the origins of the Nazi regime." Kirkus Reviews

Review:
"[A]n enormous work of synthesis — knowledgeable and reliable, and playing to the author's strengths....This is a vivid although familiar account of why the Weimar Republic collapsed." Mark Mazower, The New York Times

Review:
"[A] gripping if overwhelmingly detailed study....Evans... broadens the historic perspective to demythologize how morbidly fertile the years before WWI were as an incubator for Hitler." Publishers Weekly

Synopsis:
From one of the world's most distinguished historians comes a magisterial new reckoning with Hitler's rise to power and the collapse of civilization in Nazi Germany. The first of what will ultimately be a
complete, three-volume history of Nazi Germany. 32 pages of photo inserts.

About the Author
Richard J. Evans was educated at Oxford, has taught at Columbia and the University of London, and is currently the Professor of Modern History at Cambridge. His books include Death in Hamburg (winner of the Wolfson Literary Award for History), In Hitler's Shadow, Rituals of Retribution (winner of the Fraenkel Prize in Contemporary History), In Defense of History, and Lying About Hitler.

A Review by Doug Brown
http://www.powells.com/review/2004_07_03.html
The Coming of the Third Reich
by Richard J. Evans

In recent years a number of scholarly tomes on the Third Reich have been written, from Ian Kershaw's two-volume Hitler biography to Michael Burleigh's monumental The Third Reich: A New History. Richard Evans now enters the fray with a solid first volume of what will ultimately be a three-part history of the Nazi regime. Evans, a professor of history at Cambridge, first gained attention as an expert witness in the libel case in which Holocaust denier David Irving sued Deborah Lipstadt for claiming in her book Denying the Holocaust that Irving was a poor scholar who intentionally misrepresented data. Irving lost, and Evans wrote about the experience in his book Lying about Hitler.

The Coming of the Third Reich covers events in Germany from the late 19th century through mid-1933. The Bismarckian Reich, Versailles, the Weimar Republic, and Germany's hyperinflation are all covered, along with the strand of antisemitism in European culture. The Nazis were just one of many right-wing parties that appeared in Germany after WWI. Nationalism was strong, and the fear that Bolshevism and Communism were out to undermine Germany gave strength to these parties, who often violently clashed with Communists in the streets. Through the 1920s and 1930s the Catholic Church often aligned itself with fascistic right-wing regimes because they opposed Communism, which the church saw as an atheistic force; they formed a Concordat with the Nazis in 1933.
In the early 1930s the Nazi party pushed more and more for elections, which they performed increasingly well in. They received 18% of the vote in the September 1930 Reichstag election, and by July 1932 they had doubled this. They held far more Reichstag seats than any other party, though still not enough to command an absolute majority. Even though the party had enough seats for Hitler to come to power heading a coalition government, Hitler wasn't interested in sharing power. Thus he held out while the Brownshirts carried out a campaign of violence in the streets. Finally Hitler was appointed Chancellor to bring the violence under control in January 1933.

This was not when the Nazis truly came into power, however. As chancellor, Hitler still depended on the Reichstag and the president to get things done. It took an act of terrorism for the Nazis to really take over. On February 27, 1933, an unemployed Dutch Communist named Marinus van der Lubbe broke into the Reichstag Building and set it ablaze. While subsequent conspiracy theories have tried to pin the fire on the Nazis, van der Lubbe appears to have been working on his own. But the Nazis saw their chance and took it, beginning with the Reichstag fire decree. Among its provisions, the decree "allowed the police to detain people in protective custody indefinitely and without a court order, in contrast to previous laws and decrees, which had set strict time limits before judicial intervention occurred." Hermann Göring spoke to the Reich cabinet, "claiming that van der Lubbe had been seen with leading Communists...shortly before he entered the Reichstag. The Communists, he said, were not only planning the destruction of public buildings but also the 'poisoning of public kitchens' and the kidnapping of the wives and children of government ministers. Before long, he was claiming to have detailed proof that the Communists were stockpiling explosives." Police were stationed at railway stations and bridges to support the regime's claim that such places were potential terrorist targets. Hitler took advantage of an article in the Weimar constitution which gave him the power to rule in an emergency for an interim period. However, the Nazis used it as the basis for a fictitious permanent state of emergency that lasted until the end of the war.

As a result of the suspension of due process, jails quickly filled with Communists and other suspected terrorists. The Nazis thus created a series of camps for storing the political prisoners, the first in a suburb of Munich called Dachau. These prisons were not very professionally run, and torture was common. The Bavarian state prosecutor unsuccessfully tried to investigate the torturing death of three Dachau prisoners in
1933, and the next year charges were brought against Stormtroopers and police officials running the Hohnstein camp in Saxony. In a quote straight from today's headlines, the Reich Minister of Justice stated the torture of inmates at Hohnstein "reveals a brutality and cruelty in the perpetuators which are totally alien to German sentiment and feeling."

The Coming of the Third Reich is sober reading when compared against current events; the temptation to draw parallels is great. The Nazis never quite won a popular election, and cemented their power base by restricting civil liberties and selling fear to the German people in the wake of a terrorist attack. They held political prisoners without due process and restricted access of humanitarian groups like Red Cross to these prisons. However, the old adage "history repeats itself" is untrue; patterns often reappear, but each event in time is a new occurrence with unique circumstances. The past can nonetheless inform the present, and Evans offers much information on how a democracy became a fascist dictatorship in less than five years. Almost excruciatingly documented — seventy-two pages of notes, and forty-nine pages of bibliography — The Coming of the Third Reich is a lucidly written addition to Third Reich scholarship.

The Atlantic Monthly Review by Benjamin Schwarz
Tuesday, February 10th, 2004

The Coming of the Third Reich
by Richard J. Evans

A Review by Benjamin Schwarz

Three British historians have recently written commanding and lasting chronicles of the Third Reich. In 2000 Ian Kershaw completed his two-volume Hitler — a masterpiece of academic biography, which perhaps will never be superseded — and Michael Burleigh published his one-volume narrative of Germany under the Nazis, the best scholarly general history of the subject until now. Evans, Professor of Modern History at Cambridge (he was the utterly convincing, if prickly and pedantic, scholar whose testimony thwarted the libel suit of the notorious David Irving), has published the first of a projected three volumes that when finished will long remain the definitive English-language account. Although Burleigh's history is written with more flair, it lacks the scope and depth
of Evans's, which probes far more fully into social, economic, labor, cultural, and legal matters. And whereas Burleigh took a self-conscious and distracting condemnatory approach (one would have thought a degree of moral agreement had already been reached regarding the Nazis), Evans's tone is cool, and hence far more authoritative. But his book is not without flaws. This volume ends in mid-1933, just after the Nazis crushed the opposition political parties, abolished the trade unions, cowed their conservative sometime allies, and brought the churches to heel — and Evans confirms Burleigh's emphasis on the central role played by the Nazis' skillful deployment of street violence and political terror in engendering popular compliance and in preparing the ground for the Nazification of all aspects of German life. But whereas this portion of his work is both gripping and precise, the opening sections — the book's first 150 pages — are diffuse and intellectually lazy. In these chapters, devoted to historical background, Evans catalogues such topics as the history of German anti-Semitism; the religious, regional, and class differences that divided Bismarck's Germany; the Weimar Republic's structural political weaknesses; and culture, the arts, and public morals in the 1920s. But he fails to link them with exactitude to the subject of his book — the rise of Nazism. The extent to which Hitler and the Nazis were a natural or even an inevitable outgrowth of forces embedded in German history and society is, of course, a subject of perennial debate, and Evans can't really be faulted for failing to come up with a definitive interpretation. But by letting the facts merely sit on the page, with almost no attempt to interpret, shape, and dissect them, he essentially throws up his hands; these flabby chapters mar the work as a whole, and they clash with Evans's crisp, analytical, meticulously argued history, which emerges as soon as Hitler and the Nazis enter the story. (Evans's closing chapter, in which he assesses both the extent and the limits of the Nazis' electoral success and, concomitantly, Hitler's use of both law and thuggery in establishing a one-party state, is as bracingly intelligent a historical analysis as I've read.) An always reliable, often magisterial synthesis of a vast body of scholarship, and a frequently deft blend of narrative and interpretation, Evans's book is an impressive achievement. If in his subsequent volumes he avoids the laxness that vitiates this one, his opus will be one of the major historical works of our time.

**Review by Steven Welch**

The Third Reich in Power 1933–1939
February 18, 2006

In his new book, Richard Evans stresses the coercive nature of the Nazi regime.

The Third Reich in Power: a valuable contribution to the literature on the darkest period in modern European history.

Author
Richard J. Evans

British historian Richard J. Evans is perhaps best known for his role as an expert witness in the libel case brought by notorious Holocaust "revisionist" David Irving – now languishing in a Viennese jail – in 2000 against American historian Deborah Lipstadt and her publishers. At the trial Evans thoroughly demolished Irving’s claim to be a serious scholar by relentlessly exposing a vast number of historical falsifications in Irving’s published writings and public pronouncements.

In his book Telling Lies about Hitler (2002) Evans recounted his role in the trial and laid out the evidence that demonstrated the shoddiness of Irving's work and proved that Irving did indeed deserve to be labelled a Holocaust denier. As a result of his involvement in the Irving trial, Evans came to the conclusion that there was a pressing need for a general, up-to-date history of the Third Reich aimed at non-specialist readers.

With remarkable speed and diligence Evans has himself moved to remedy this deficiency by embarking on the ambitious project of writing a three-volume history of Nazi Germany. The first volume, which appeared in 2003, told the story of how the Nazis came to power in Germany; volume two examines what they did with that power from 1933 to the outbreak of war in 1939.

In seven thematically organised chapters Evans sets out to provide a comprehensive portrait of the Third Reich during its pre-war years, examining the political, economic, social and cultural dimensions of the Hitler regime. His purpose is to "understand" and "explain" the Third Reich, rather than to pronounce moral judgements.
After a description of the central institutions and terror techniques of the Nazi police state, Evans surveys Nazi propaganda and the regime's attempts to change the spirits and minds of the German people; Nazi ideology and relations with organised religion; economic policy and the drive for military rearmament; and the attempts to refashion German society into a genuine people's community.

The final two chapters focus on Nazi racial policy, the persecution of the Jews and other minorities, and on Hitler's aggressive foreign policy, which aimed from the outset at leading Germany and the rest of Europe down the road to war.

Within each of the chapters Evans offers concise, well-crafted overviews of developments in specific areas, ranging from the law, the arts, education, and the economy to industrial relations, family policy, "racial hygiene" and military expansion. He has done general readers a great service in digesting a vast amount of the enormous scholarly research in English and German – he notes that at least 37,000 items had been published on Nazism as of 2000 – and producing cogent syntheses that accurately reflect the current state of our knowledge about the Third Reich.

In contrast to some recent studies that stress the extent of popular support among Germans for Nazism – to the point of becoming "willing executioners" of its policy of racial murder – Evans emphasises the brutal and coercive nature of the Nazi regime, which "intimidated Germans into acquiescence".

He vividly describes the main features of a "polymorphous, uncoordinated but pervasive system of control" imposed by the Nazis and insists that in the Third Reich a constant threat of violence loomed over everyone, not just over small and marginalised minorities.

A key step in establishing the Nazi police state was the destruction of traditional legal principles and norms. The notion of human rights was dismissed as nothing but sentimental claptrap, and the basic civil rights guaranteed in the Weimar constitution were suspended and ignored. With no legal checks in place to provide protection against the state, the way was open for the regime to pursue its aims with increasing radicalism.

In Evans' view, the Nazis used their unchecked power primarily in pursuit of two overarching and interrelated goals: carrying out a rather vaguely
defined cultural revolution, and preparing Germany for war. Through a cultural revolution Germans would be transformed into a unified racial community committed to a new, anti-humanitarian warrior ethic, thus laying the basis for successful wars of conquest and annihilation.

There can be no doubt about the Nazis' single-minded determination to rearm and wage war, and Evans convincingly makes the case that the drive for war overrode all other considerations, including economic rationality and the unsatisfied desires of German consumers.

By 1938 more than 20 per cent of national income was devoted to military spending and an economy overheated by relentless expenditure on rearmament was showing signs of serious crisis. Typically, Hitler paid no heed and instead called for further acceleration of the military build-up.

Evans neatly illustrates the obsession with rearmament and some of its grotesque consequences by noting that shortages in scrap metal led the government in 1938 to order that all metal garden fences throughout Germany be removed. Outlet pipes for toilets had to be made of clay rather than iron in order to help satisfy the insatiable demands of the weapons makers.

"Above all," Evans writes, "what Hitler and the Nazis wanted was a change in people's spirit, their way of thinking, and their way of behaving." But he rates their actual success in this grand endeavour of social and cultural engineering as low.

Whether it be the creation of a "new German woman" selflessly devoted to nurturing the next generation of soldiers, the cultivation of a new ruling elite through special Nazi educational institutions, or a new form of German Christianity purged of its Jewish features, the Nazis, in Evans' estimation, consistently fell short of their professed goals. The cultural revolution remained more aspiration than achievement.

Evans injects a more personalised perspective into his narrative through extensive use of contemporary sources and memoirs. Particularly interesting are the many excerpts from the unpublished diaries of Luise Solmitz, a conservative Hamburg schoolteacher, whose enthusiastic endorsement of the Hitler regime and its policies was representative of the generally positive response of the Protestant middle class as a whole.
Solmitz consistently applauded the hypernationalistic and aggressive policies of Hitler. In response to the dramatic reoccupation of the Rhineland in March 1936 she wrote: "I was completely overpowered by the events of this moment . . . delighted by our soldiers marching in, by the greatness of Hitler and the power of his language, the force of this man."

But the story has an ironic and unexpected twist. Solmitz's husband was a Jew. Although Major Friedrich Solmitz was a decorated World War I veteran and a convert to Protestantism, in the racial categorisation of the Nazi regime he remained a Jew and thus quickly became a target of discriminatory measures.

Conservative and highly patriotic, Friedrich Solmitz, like his wife, had welcomed the advent of the Third Reich. He even served as an air raid block warden in 1933 and found no difficulty dismissing Jews under his authority in accordance with the "Aryan paragraph".

In 1935, however, Solmitz was stripped of his citizenship rights as a result of the Nuremberg Laws. Despite his exclusion from the national community, during the height of the crisis over Czechoslovakia in 1938 he volunteered again for military service; his offer was rejected. In Nazi Germany racism always trumped nationalism.

Stories like that of the Solmitzes serve as a welcome balance to the analyses of impersonal structures and processes that unavoidably take up much of the space in Evans' comprehensive narrative of Nazism in power. His skill at combining careful analysis with revealing accounts of individual experience makes this volume a richly rewarding and accessible general history of Hitler's pre-war regime.

Steven Welch is senior lecturer in modern German history at the University of Melbourne and is writing on the crime of subversion in the Third Reich

The Damned: Nationalism as Regression
http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/michaelwalford/entry/the_damned_nationalism/June 09, 2007
Representing Nazism and Nationalism: Visconti’s The Damned (La Caduta degli dei) 1969
Switzerland / Italy / West Germany

(The film was shot in English at the insistence of Warner Brothers)

Introduction: Visconti, History & Nationalism

Through an analysis of The Damned (1969) with some comparative work of Visconti’s The Leopard (1962) this article argues that the work of Visconti is overdue critical revision in terms of the sophistication of his oeuvre regarding the nature of history related to two critical turning-points in modern European history namely the Risorgimento and the accession to and consolidation of power of the Nazis. These two films represent the major triumphs of nationalism of the 19th century often seen as progressive Garibaldi for example was greeted by massed crowds when he visited London hailed as being very progressive by British radicals. The closure of this era of nationalism, which by the 1930s can be seen as highly regressive in all European countries, was represented by The Damned. It represents the corrupted coming to power of the Nazis and the heinous activities they undertook to maintain and consolidate their hold on Germany. The massacre of the Night of the Long Knives is a direct echo of the off screen execution of Garibaldian radicals as the Prince of Salina returns home from the ball at the end of The Leopard.

Post First World War nationalisms had led to the establishing of several reactionary governments across central and Eastern Europe as well as in Italy and later Spain. For Visconti Nazi Germany represents the nadir of this wider reactionary nationalism. Historically Nazism was to play out the end of this nationalist urge movement in the most melodramatic of ways. The Damned functions as a film about the few critical months between February 1933 – June 1934 which saw the installation and consolidation of a regime that would bring Europe crashing to its knees and end the period of liberal nationalism the Risorgimento symbolised as it mutated into reaction. For Visconti The Damned is nothing less than a representation of an attempt to turn back the tide of history.

The argument presented here seeks to show that Visconti’s notion of anthropomorphic cinema, which combined a unique blend of Gramscian and Lukacsian Marxism, consistently and successfully uses some great European realist works of the 20th century to represent the trajectory of history through cinema in ways which have yet to be matched by any
other director. This posting draws upon recent scholarship of the Nazi period to cross-reference Visconti’s approach. As a result the article takes issue with Nowell-Smith’s (2003) suggestion that Visconti shifts his interest in history towards culture. I argue that for Visconti they are intimately intertwined. The article also takes issue with the other main critical work in English on Visconti by Bacon (1998). Bacon’s otherwise interesting and insightful work also fails to grapple fully with Visconti’s understanding of history which as a result leads him to re-inscribe Visconti as a Liberal democrat. The argument here is that a careful reading of Visconti’s work reveals a very profound and decidedly Marxian approach to history and representation.

The Damned

The Damned has often been regarded as the first of Visconti’s films described as ‘The German Trilogy’ the others being Death in Venice (1973) and Ludwig (1973). Henry Bacon (1998) specifically categorises these films together under a chapter ‘Visconti & Germany’ an approach which is perhaps in need of revision. Previously Visconti’s films had analysed Italian society during the Risorgimento and post-war periods. Bondanella has seen the ‘trilogy’ as a move to take a broader view of European politics and culture. Stylistically ‘They emphasise lavish sets and costumes, sensuous lighting, painstakingly slow camerawork, and a penchant for imagery reflecting subjective states or symbolic value’[i] comments Bondanella. He also notes that much critical discourse has confused the examination of decadence in Visconti’s later works with a recommendation for its continuation. Visconti himself has commented that he was interested ‘in the analysis of a sick society’, and there is a marked difference between the representation of rising modernity and its links with the bourgeoisie in The Leopard compared with the stasis of Europe. This stasis is examined through allegory encapsulated by a sick fin de siecle Venice and a moribund Bavarian monarchy. Both are studies of decadence which Visconti considers is an outward symbol of a society entering into its death throes. These represent issues raised by the construction of the Bismarckian strong state and aspects of the weakness of the old empire of Austro-Hungary and its former ally Bavaria.

The Damned takes as its subject matter the relationships between the heavy industrialists in the late Weimar Republic on the cusp of Nazi success. There was a clear need for the Nazi leadership to discipline, and revise its approach should it wish to reach the heights of power with the blessing of the powerful industrialists as well as win over the army. This
manufacture of consensus – albeit temporary – precisely illustrates the workings of hegemony as understood by Gramsci. This case study seeks to analyse The Damned through the lens of Visconti’s notion of ‘anthropomorphic cinema’. Nowell–Smith defines this notion as a situation where ‘the movement of social forces is reflected in the actions and passions of individuals expressed through the representation of character’ (Nowell–Smith 2003, p 151). Furthermore anthropomorphic cinema within The Damned relates the historical processes in which Visconti develops Gramsci’s notions of ‘Hegemony’ as a political process which can emerge as a regressive not just a progressive force.

Critics have commented that Visconti has been strongly influenced by William Shirer’s ‘Rise and Fall of the Third Reich’ and also by Thomas Mann’s Buddenbrooks. It is also noted that Visconti read other historical publications apart from Shirer. Shirer was an American journalist covering events in situ which he later turned into a book. It was certainly a widely influential book, however historiography of the Nazi period has moved on considerably since then [ii]. Visconti might well have been strongly influenced by Italian historiography of the time which in general has been viewed as ‘ethico–political’ by Martin Clark (1984) in a standard British text of Italian history. Clark notes that the ‘mainstream Marxist’ historians of Italy who were members of the Communist Party were strongly influenced by Gramsci. Gramscian ideas certainly helped formulate one of Visconti’s main theoretical lenses in constructing his historical films. Nevertheless it is stressed below that Visconti was not trying to construct a conventional drama–documentary of an historical event, rather, I argue, he was trying to bring to the fore the notion of underlying historical processes at a deeper and more universal level through his cinematic practice.

The search and attempts to represent universals is currently deeply out of fashion as critics, theorists and practitioners tinker with post–modern ideologies such as ‘the end of history’. Nevertheless ‘Great Art’ has usually been identified as a matter of seeking universals from specifics and the wheel of intellectual fashion may well return to this approach in due course. Artistic licence is precisely bending situations, not being concerned with representing the specific moment naturalistically but transforming it into the universal. Many consider Shakespeare’s Macbeth to have been influential upon Visconti in preparing for this film. Macbeth is a dramatic version of an historical event a real Macbeth in Scottish but worked over so that it has become a classic interpretation of power and desire leading ultimately to downfall. Shakespeare’s tragedy is modelled
upon Greek lines in that fate plays a part. Where Visconti has improved artistically upon Shakespeare is by removing fate and destiny and its role over the individual actor from the realm of individuals to a representation of historical processes by developing his concept of anthropomorphic cinema. Viscontian tragedy is thus an inversion of Greek classical tragedy through his understanding of historiography.

Visconti’s Anthropomorphic Cinema and Gramscian Hegemonic Theory

The breaking down of Visconti’s work into differing categories is a critical construction which vitiates against other interpretative structures. What is argued here is that The Damned can be seen not simply as a ‘German’ film but as a film about the role of nationalism within modern history. Thus it can be argued that by linking this film with The Leopard for the purposes of critical analysis at the level of historical theory Visconti can be seen to be using the processes at work within the Risorgimento as a representation of progressive liberal nationalism. The progressiveness is limited for as the character Tancredi famously points out, everything does change in order to re-establish stability and embed the reconstructed social elites. Often, as Clark (1984) notes, the leaders of disaffected groups are perfectly willing to become absorbed into new social formations but it is the troops who remain recalcitrant. In The Leopard the troops were the Garibaldian hard-liners who are executed off screen at the end of The Leopard. The Damned acts like a mirror of The Leopard in a misrecognition in which the recalcitrant leadership of the SA fails to become absorbed into the new consensus which Hitler needs to construct in order to develop his project.

It has been traditional to view the nationalisms of the 19th century as largely progressive whilst the 20th century nationalisms, at least within Europe, have been viewed as regressive by post Second World War historians. Both Senso and The Leopard provide a critical historical background to the process of the Risorgimento but the cinematic approach of the former is closer to that of The Damned. The Damned uses the methods of ‘anthropomorphic cinema’ to show how German nationalism was doomed to failure. Visconti is careful to choose key historical turning-points to develop his ideas of history. These are times when historical changes requires a reconfiguration of the ruling elites to contain more progressive elements and form a stable social structure capable of meeting the change as in the case of the Risorgimento films. The difficulties and price of reconfiguration amongst the elites in Nazi ruled Germany leads to disaster as in The Damned.
The compromises and self-seeking attitude of the aristocracy was examined in different ways in the two Risorgimento films. In The Damned Visconti shows the failure of liberal democracy and the industrial imperative of capitalism to forge a progressive agenda. Other major industrial countries France, Britain and the United States at the time had, through a variety of different paths, established liberal democracies albeit with problems. Germany by comparison did not: the founding moment of the Weimar Republic was a poisoned chalice which was handed over by a militaristic leadership facing defeat in 1918. These elites were trying to save themselves and regroup. Consequently the old Prussian elites were never comprehensively defeated. Throughout the time of the Weimar Republic they exerted a strong reactionary influence refusing – unlike the Prince of Salina in The Leopard – to engage constructively with the formation of a new hegemonic social formation which could provide a stable ruling elite. Bacon quotes Visconti as saying ‘...but Nazism seems to me to reveal more about a historical reversal of values.’ (Visconti cited Bacon, 1998 p 145 my emphasis) but Bacon doesn’t follow this insight up.

The inability to become involved in the construction of a new hegemonic order by the older elites in Germany is represented in a very persuasive way by Visconti. The opening scenes of the film follow Friedrich (Dirk Bogarde) being tempted by the SS into a murderous plot amongst scenes from a family celebratory gathering which ends in murder and mayhem. At the gathering, the head of the Essenbeck family and the overall controller of the steel company, Baron Joachim, clearly displays his dislike of the new order as does one of his vice chairman Herbert the husband of his niece. Joachim’s second son Konstantin has clearly decided to back Hitler through his membership of the SA.

Visconti’s The Damned is analysing Gramsci’s notions of hegemony applying them to an emerging historical conjuncture. A new elite will, if necessary, be created by force and will create a cultural and social order to match. In Italy the previous ruling elites, whether in Piedmont or in Sicily, backed the new constitutional monarchy and the liberal constitutional apparatus which was attached to this. By comparison Joachim’s failure to take a fuller political stand earlier is highlighted when Herbert notes that Joachim was only concerned about adapting the company to external circumstances not in seeking to change the circumstances themselves. Joachim went along this collaborative path by sending people – including his own son – and weapons into the front–
line. In the first instance this attitude can be compared with the Prince of Salina in The Leopard who, at the expense of his immediate family, recognises the need to play the long game thus supporting Tancredi. Short term profit ruled over long term political insight for both the elder Krupp in reality and Joachim Essenbeck in the film.

The failure of Joachim can also be discerned by comparing his attitude to the rising Bourgeoisie exemplified by Friedrich Bruckmann (Dirk Bogarde). In the opening scenes Friedrich is in a car with the SS officer Aschenbach bemoaning the impossibility of being able to marry Sophie the widow of Joachim’s elder son because of Joachim’s unenlightened attitude typical of the Prussian elites trying to freeze the processes of history. In The Leopard the Prince of Salina encourages and supports Tancredi’s marriage with the rising commercial classes. By comparison Joachim is entirely opposed to a similar possibility. That Joachim is murdered by Friedrich could be seen as the outcome of not accepting social change in an ordered way. His refusal to let change happen disillusions and disarms the new commercial classes and also makes a potential power vacuum into which other social forces such as Nazism can emerge. Thus it can be seen that anthropomorphomic cinema is working effectively through individual characters.

In Gramsci’s classic analysis of hegemony, state power is used in the last instance to maintain the state and the processes of hegemony allows for a political restructuring of the social orders in a controllable way. However, the Weimar state was disintegrating especially between 1931 and 1933. The breakdown of hegemony necessitated a new power struggle, Aschenbach and Konstantin represent the contenders in the process of re-hegemonising German society. The Joachims, Friedrichs and Sophies have no sense of historical processes in the way exemplified by the Prince of Salina.

Let us take another comparison between the role and function of the marriages in The Leopard and The Damned. In the former marriage symbolises the new vehicle in which the new Italian order will be crystallised. The fabulous ball scene at the end of The Leopard lasts approximately 40 minutes. Visconti shows us a situation in which the officers of the new army will marry into the daughters of the old order who are depicted as interbred and running about like monkeys. Less historical criticism has focused upon the surface sumptuousness of Viscontis’s set at the expense of displaying a full understanding of
Visconti’s attempt to represent as the culmination of his film the full process of re-hegemonisation.

By comparison, in The Damned, the marriage between Sophie and Friedrich has come far to late. There is no possibility of an easy re-formation of the old orders with the new. Both the older elite represented by Sophie and the rising elite, Friedrich, have in Bridge parlance been ‘endgamed’, it is the Nazis who control the play. It is an empty marriage going nowhere, and held in isolation not at the centre of society. The embittered son Martin has crossed into the camp of the emergent monster which has erupted through a rent in the thin democratic fabric of Weimar society. This was because of the failure of the old elites to combine with the rising mercantile classes. The Weimar collapsed because of the failure to form a consensus amongst the ruling elites.

This astute analysis of historical processes is a fundamental strength of Visconti’s anthropomorphic cinema. In reality the economic desires of the industrialists who have supported the Nazis are stymied by 1936 with the take over of the economy under the second four year plan headed by Goring. Their desire for the creation of a consumer based, highly profitable economy once the communists and unions are brought under control is diverted into the project of total war[i], and Germany’s ultimate damnation is its trial by fire leading to ‘Germany Year Zero’.

Historical background

I have argued that the Essenbeck family around which the film is centred acts as a synecdoche for German society as a whole. The period covered by the film starts about three weeks after Hitler’s invitation to become Chancellor by Hindenburg at the behest of von Papen at the end of January 1933. Von Papen had hubristically and wrongly ‘guaranteed’ that Hitler and the Nazis were controllable. This way of looking at the film tends to invert the emphasis that the family is torn apart by the pressures of Nazism which often how critics have seen the film. The Essenbeck quarrels represent key conflicting currents and strands amongst the Weimar German elites.

The first section of The Damned shows events leading up to, during, and after an important family dinner taking place on the night of the Reichstag fire. The fire itself was interpreted by Visconti as a pretext – twice underlined by the film’s dialogue – for the Nazis to severely repress the Communists in particular in the remaining days coming up to the last
‘free’ election of the Weimar Republic’ in March. This is probably the case although there is no discovered direct evidence linking the Nazis to the fire according to Richard Evans (2003). The subsequent implosion of the Essenbeck family parallels the collapse of institutions in Germany as the Nazis pursued their policy of ‘Gleichshaltung’ or ‘co-ordination’, which was a reasonably pleasant sounding term for the total repression of potential political opposition within Germany. It also meant the taking over of the political institutions at local and regional level once total control at the centre had been achieved.

Cinematically there is a useful comparison to be made between the way in which family dinners are handled in The Leopard and in The Damned which features two dismal dinners. In The Leopard the dinner at the Prince’s residence in Donnafugata is a vehicle in which the possibilities for the processes of hegemony can take place. Tancredi first sees an adult Angelica (Claudia Cardinale) and is smitten. Cinematically and socially the dinners in Visconti’s historical films function as a vehicle for integration and progressive change in The Leopard or disintegration and regression as in The Damned.

The Damned takes the viewer to the end of the period of Nazi ‘co-ordination’ finally finished by the 1934 Nuremberg rally. Famously this rally saw the making and release of Leni Riefenstahl’s Triumph of the Will. The rally was a follow up to the infamous ‘Night of the Long Knives’ which took place at the end of June 1934. This action was centred around the political beheading of the Sturmabteilung or SA headed by Rohm who were agitating for a ‘Second Nazi Revolution’. After the full accession to power by Hitler in March 1933 and the take-over of the constitutional institutions by a carefully contrived fait accompli the SA were in the forefront of the fight against the Communists, Social Democrats and Trade Unionists who tried in the early days to offer some resistance to Hitler. They also played an integral role in the harassment of Jews, informally before April 1st 1933, and in an increasingly organised way afterwards, starting with a boycott of Jewish businesses on this date.

The Nuremberg rally which Riefenstahl filmed was not simply a propaganda stunt, it was a public declaration in the most powerful way possible backed by cinema to fully establish in the minds of the Nazi party itself that Hitler was the ‘Fuhrer’ and that the Germany was now united along its path to an historic future. The film which features the German Army as well as the SA and other Nazi organisations is the outcome of Hitler’s ideological cull. The presence of the German Army
and its leader von Blomberg at the 1934 Nuremberg rally was symbolically immensely important for Hitler. The Nazis were reliant upon the army to achieve his long-term aims of ‘Lebensraum’ or colonial expansion mainly directed towards the east. By 1936 Hitler against the desires and advice of most capitalists and his economics minister and governor of the central bank Schacht was determined to pursue economic policies of rearmament. Overy argues that these policies were being carried out with the express intention of preparing Germany for a total war in which it could survive for up to 15 years.

It can now be seen that that Visconti has been very precise in the historical moment that he has chosen to represent. Nowell-Smith (2003) is surely right to note that the film operates on three levels of history, drama and myth. Nevertheless Nowell-Smith’s critical comments, like those of Bacon, do not exam the history closely enough. Instead they focus too closely upon the literary and the critical influences within the film at the expense of the historical process which is being represented. As a result they both tend to glide over an essential feature which Visconti certainly wished to represent. It is also important to note that the rise to power of Hitler and the Nazis was itself an operatic trajectory in real life and it was intensely melodramatic. It is worth bearing in mind that Hitler was obsessed with Wagnerian opera. After defeat at Stalingrad in 1942 Hitler then eschews Wagner. For Visconti opera in such films as Senso could be represented as progressive liberal Italian nationalism albeit undermined by the ruling elites. Wagner by comparison was infused with a regressive Germanic 19th century romantic mysticism. Wagner was also intensely anti-Semitic. The Damned is thus open to a thorough reading of Visconti’s ideas on the role of opera in culture considering Verdi as progressive and Kultur through Wagner as regressive. However discussion of this is beyond the scope of this entry.

The Reichstag Fire

Visconti correctly picks the night of the Reichstag fire as an historical turning-point marking the beginning of the final collapse of Germany into its path of damnation – the outcomes of which are well documented by Rossellini’s ‘Germany Year Zero’ (1947). The first dialogue of Aschenbach (the SS officer) and Friedrich (Dirk Bogarde) gives rise to a hint of something about to happen, in the entrance hall Aschenbach even more strongly signals that on this night in particular it will be important for Friedrich to act. It is clear that Aschenbach is in possession of some a priori knowledge. This is an invitation to murder Joachim the head of the
family and the steel company. The prizes for Bogarde are Sophie and effective control of the company. The time for personal morality is dead states Aschenbach. The question at this stage is will Bogarde accept this Faustian pact?

The Reichstag Fire is announced by Konstantin the coarse and vulgar SA member of the family who also announces that the ‘culprit’ a communist has already been captured. The culprit in reality was captured on the site of the Reichstag trying to set alight yet more curtains. Van den Lubbe was not however a communist. He was an unemployed fairly deranged anarchist with bad visual impairment who had several years ago been flung out of the Dutch communist party for promoting arson and other acts of sabotage. As yet there is no precise historical evidence to definitively link the fire to a piece of agent provocatuerism on the part of the Nazis. However, we are asked to believe that this character in his physical state was easily able to break into the Reichstag without discovery only a few days after being released from a police force which was already thoroughly infiltrated by active Nazis as well as being controlled by the Nazis at the top. In reality the Nazis immediately arrested hundreds of Communists in Berlin and this carried on in the following days and weeks leading up to the election. It effectively ensured that the Communists couldn’t make an effective election campaign. By not banning the Communists outright Hitler ensured that their votes were unlikely to go to the Social Democrats. This fire effectively sealed the fate of Germany which Visconti was clearly well aware of.

Night of the Long Knives

The melodramatic themes of the film are carefully interwoven with a clever analysis of real events. The tour de force is the representation of the infamous ‘Night of the Long Knives’, when the SS (Black-shirts) massacred the leadership of Eric Rohm’s SA (The Brownshirts). This was a crucial moment in the rise to power of the Nazis. The Brownshirts represented the mobster populist element upon which the Nazi party was based, this populist element represented the so-called ‘socialist’ element of the ‘NSDP’. It was an element that was unsympathetic towards large capitalist organisations seeing them as exploitative of the ‘little man’ and the petit-bourgeoisie. If Hitler was to take the final step to power then he was going to have to purge his party of these elements and reconfigure the basic ethos of his party. The leader of the SA Eric Rohm had a strong personal power base and had been a colleague of Hitler’s since the
beginnings of the Nazi party and had been a member of the paramilitary Freikorps before that. The ‘Night of the Long Knives’ also saw the murder of other leading figures such as von Schleicher who had been the Conservative Chancellor before Hitler was manipulated into power by von Papen. It is important to note that the German army colluded in the ‘Night of the Long Knives’. Reichenau made the agreement with Himmler to keep the army confined to barracks during the 1934 Rohm Purge. After the event Reichenau even issued a statement justifying the murder of General von Schleicher. It was effectively the last major act in the reformation of the ruling elites but a formation that was now on the road to an even worse fate than befell Germany in the First World War. That was also a war which the Prussian military elites had encouraged.

The final step to power for the Nazi party was based upon a compromise between, on one side, Hitler and his closest allies in the Nazi party underpinned by the rise of the SS as an elite corps answerable only to Hitler. This dishonourable political marriage to gain power was made with the most powerful of the German industrialists many of whom were members of, or sympathetic to, the Nationalist party, which was small but highly influential amongst the upper classes of Germany. A prominent leader of this party was Hugenberg who not only took over UFA after its near bankruptcy but also became the Minister of Finance when the Nazis first won a majority in the Reichstag. Whilst the plot of Visconti’s film initially appears complex, the family of ‘misfits, powers seekers, and perverts’ as Bondanella describes the Essenbeck family which is loosely based upon the Krupps family can be read as a trope for the confused state of Weimar Germany in the early 1930s. Bondanella would probably not subscribe to a reading of this nature for he asserts that Visconti did not intend the film to be taken as a serious sociological or psychological reading of German culture in Weimar Germany.

Bondanella’s position also runs counter to Nowell-Smith’s final comments in his reading when he argues that ‘Visconti’s focus of interest has shifted from history as such, in the sense of a given set of events of which people are the agents, to culture in the sense of the objects which people have produced in history, to represent or to form part of the world they experience.’ (Nowell-Smith 2003, p 156).

Has Visconti’s prior concern with history changed?
More on the issue of culture below, but firstly let us take the assertion that Visconti’s focus upon history as such has shifted. That the film is loosely based upon the Krupp family is important. It is well known that the head of Krupp wasn’t keen on the Nazis coming to power and it is certainly true that that the Krupp family had to make compromises to fit in with the demands of the Nazi regime. However it is important to note that the whole of the capitalist class was forced to do this as well. Visconti’s film is not a history of Nazi Germany it is a representation of the socio-political forces at work in the country in a very tight time-frame. If the Essenbecks are seen as representative not just of the Krupp family but as industrial capital within Germany in general then the perfidy, confusion betrayal and counter-betrayal makes more sense. It is important to note for example the example of Thyssen below and compare that with a brief outline of the Krupp family. In the film Martin can be seen as being close to the character of Alfred Krupp (see box below). The role of Herbert is more difficult to assess. Perhaps he should be seen as a portmanteau character who represents those in the ruling elites who recognise the fate which awaits Germany and leave. That Herbert reappears briefly because his family has been held hostage is also significant. Recent work on the Nazi Terror shows how the Gestapo went to great efforts to track down communists who left the country in the early 1930s, even those who were not especially important. These people were often used as sources of intelligence because their families were threatened with torture and the camps[i]. In reality the ruthlessness of the Nazis against former supporters is shown when the leading industrialist Thyssen and Schacht, the architect of early Nazi economic success both end up in concentration camps.

One important concern is how to represent a period in which the KPD on Stalin’s orders had declared the German Social Democrat Party (SPD) ‘Social Fascists’. As much as anything this contributed to the rise to power of the Nazis when they achieved electoral success in 1933. At the time the film was made in Italy the communist party was still strongly allied to Moscow, it was only later in the 1970s that the cracks wrought by ‘Eurocommunism’ began to show. A critique of this nature would not have served Visconti well thus the working class as a class force in a Marxist sense disappear from view. Instead this is replaced by the bitter incestuous infighting in the grab for power by the elites.
By taking this artistic route Visconti was able to focus his critique upon the false hopes of redemption promoted by populism. Populism fails structurally to be a historical force able to liberate the socially excluded. The populists in the SA, like the working class nationalists in The Leopard meet their comeuppance. In The Leopard the bourgeoisie can still be seen a social force moving society forwards – in Marxist terms achieving their historical role. By comparison, at a time when modernity has become strongly installed in Europe and when the Weimar Republic represented one of the most advanced constitutions in the world the liberal bourgeoisie are forced out by a failure to connect socially or politically with the masses. Liberalism is subject to betrayal by unenlightened members of their own class who have tied their fortunes to Nazism as a mythological force doomed to failure. It is here that Visconti’s mise-en-scene described so well by Bondanella acts to signify this historically doomed trail up a one way street. The colour red comes to symbolise a hyperbolic and horrifying vision of a family embodying a corrupt culture that wilfully pulls the world down around its Ears’. (Bondanella, 2001, p 206).

The Role of Culture

Within Visconti’s notions of anthropomorphic cinema it is useful to discuss the role of culture and to consider culture in relation to civilisation. The stock question which always seems to be asked is ‘How can such a “cultured” nation have descended to the depths of such depravity?’ It enjoyed its cultural heritage this even down to enjoying to the greatest icons of European classical music such as the romantic lieder of Schubert and Beethoven symphonies after a busy day offloading Jewish deportees in the death camps of Auschwitz and Treblinka.

Kultur for Germany has been associated with the ‘spirit of the nation’ unlike France and to some extent Italy which focused on ‘civilisation’ seen through German eyes as superficial and manneristic ‘feminised’ in the view of some. Bacon describes The Damned as a description of the ‘utter negation of German culture’. The greatest success of Aschenbach was the winning over of Gunther (the cello playing son of Konstantin) to the evil of Nazism. Gunther can be seen as a synecdoche for the institutional liberal cultural establishment within Germany which makes its accommodation to Nazism. The likes of von Karajan for example spring to mind. Richard Evans 2003 gives a useful review of the cultural turn in post-Weimar Germany discussing some of these concerns. Bacon turns to George Steiner to try and provide some insight into this seeming cultural paradox. Steiner in a footnote comes up with an explanation
which argues ‘If your brain, your nervous system, your imagination, your sensibility, your professional skills are completely and deeply invested in the great arts of the imagination and in abstract thought, speculation, instead of becoming more human, you may, unless you are terribly careful become less human...’ (Steiner cited Bacon 1998 p 240). For Steiner the paradox which arises it that there may be a desire for barbarism and also an indifference to barbarism. This, for Steiner, explains the capability of those in charge of the camps being able to play the cultural classics very, very well.

The other aspect of culture / entertainment which is represented is the cabaret. It is seen by all the observers as a culture of decadence which leads into perversion. As cabaret was strongly implicated with Jewish Bohemianism and Bohemian culture was seen in Nazi eyes as the degradation of the country associated with being non-German it was obviously rejected. The interruption of Martin’s performance and the subsequent walking out can be read as the filmic equivalent of marking the end of this culture. The grand walk out by the family could well be read as a marker of cultural pessimism of the kind espoused the likes of Spengler in his ‘Decline of the West’.

Martin is obviously incensed at this development, for it has been his rather feeble raison d’etre as someone entirely decadent. The film sees Martin changing from a lover of Bohemian decadence as a guilty cultural transgression into being able to take his place as a ‘richtige’ man. His paedophilia itself is a repressed desire for power at the start of the film, he isn’t a ‘real man’ he can only sing way about this in a self parodying way, dressed in a woman’s nightclub outfit at the start. By the end of the film he has reversed the tables over his viperous mother exercising his sexual power over her. Having driven her into a state of semi-madness he officiates over the marriage and death of Sophie and Friedrich. The bait of power left by Sophie has shifted from little girls to the capability of exercising any act without any sense of culpability whatsoever for Martin always displayed the amoralism desired by Aschenbach. Aschenbach has found his ‘willing executioner’ who can act with pleasure. This is unlike the purely selfish motives with which ‘the Macbeths’ (Sophie and Friedrich) conduct their heinous crimes. Martin will clearly revel in orchestrating millions of deaths. If Aschenbach is imagined as the ‘banality of evil’ as as Hannah Arendt has mistakenly described the organiser of the Holocaust [i] then the pure nastiness of Martin seems rather closer to that of the Nazi executioner Heydrich.
Martin had something to keep hidden but is represented at the end of the film as the face of evil.

Conclusion

Visconti has chosen to represent this important historical period in a very clever dramatised way. The film is neither a historicisation of psychology nor is it, as Micciche argues, a psychologisation of history. That Martin, for example, is an example of the worm that turns is a comment upon how Nazism learned to appeal to the weak through an ‘armoured strength’ propping up masculinity in crisis provided by the unremitting structures of Nazi power [i]. This psychoanalytical approach begins to make sense of the tendency of directors such as Rossellini to over exaggerate the evils of Nazism by de-masculinising them. Roma Citta Aperta and Germany Year Zero feature Nazis as gay, lesbian and paedophilic. These outcasts could become a part of that discourse of power safe in its solidarity. There was no morality except that of service to a greater notion of the Nazi ideal provided by the almost godlike figure of the Fuhrer. Visconti has shown how ruthless the Nazi party was in pursuing its ends. It played upon class weakness, personal weakness and manufactured situations in which it could take advantage at both these levels of weakness.

Visconti of course used technical artifice such as the use of colour and mise en scene to make the film partly a melodrama. But at its heart it never seemed to veer from the position of anthropomorphic cinema. None of the characters were exact representations of real characters of the moment, they were portmanteau characters crystallising certain currents and tendencies in a way which managed to universalise from the specific precisely because the film was removed from the constraints of being documentary realism into an operatic / melodramatic register. Thus, it is possible to agree with Bacon that by interweaving these strands the film shows that the historical forces which led to the rise of Nazism can rise again, a fact witnessed by the Cambodian Khmer Rouge, and the ‘ethnic cleansing’ in Rwanda and during the break-up of Yugoslavia.

When it comes to a question of culture this film is especially interesting for Visconti is exploring the nature of the relationship of culture to politics. High art and culture when it is taken out of its context is no guarantor of civilisation. The Gods (Hitler) are kept in the twilight but are seen as directly responsible for the downfall of society, the Wagnerian
dreams far from the trends of modernising society are trashed for they can only be regressive. Visconti doesn’t offer the viewer any pleasant futures for we already know the future of Germany. Instead the film functions as a route towards an explanation provided by history for the possibilities of a dystopian future not only for Germany.

This analysis by taking two of Visconti’s most developed historical films seeks to explore whether there is a clear structural link between Visconti’s explorations of history through culture and culture through history. I have argued that there are strong grounds for rethinking Visconti’s oeuvre as part of a more coherent framework than is currently recognised. By re-categorising his work away from the Risorgimento / German binary which has been critically established this analysis can be pursued further by revisiting his other ‘German’ films Death in Venice and Ludwig. Visconti is trying to explore through the cultural framework how European society managed to implode triggered by start of the First World War leading to a European Thirty Years war. At an international level this war functioned as the completion of a process in which empires as they were previously known largely disappeared in the following few years. They were now clearly redundant and a new dynamic force in the shape of the USA had replaced the old orders. Arguably the USA is the absent other which came to thrive out of the chaos and decadence of a Europe which had gone past its ‘sell by date’. Visconti chose to examine this process using the works of Thomas Mann and the drama of Chekhov through a Lukacsian based filter. Here, the best realist work can be seen to be representative of the processes underlying socio-economic change in society through their characterisations in ways unrecognised even by the authors. But Visconti’s theoretical concerns also lead to a blending of Gramscian Marxism with Lukasian Marxism in ways which will be fruitful to explore further for Lukacs of course made his own famous contribution to thinking about history in History and Class Consciousness however that is a task beyond the limits of this article.

Visconti’s The Leopard and The Damned are probably the two best films ever made about history from a Marxist perspective. More work remains to be done in revising the rest of his later works from this perspective. This article parts company with Nowell-Smith by reading Visconti as being thoroughly imbricated with history. The article also parts company with Bacon by insisting that rather than being a liberal democrat in his later years Visconti’s primary concern is to be exploring the processes of history at a very deep level. Visconti should be taken at face value when he argued that he was interested in analysing a sick society. That he
chose to do so using some of the great works of European fiction within a realist mode should not detract from his project. The analysis here provides evidence that Visconti was working on a great project pursued steadily through his work. This project was driven by combining Gramscian and Lukacsian insights developing his own contribution to critical analysis and artistic representation which was the concept of anthropomorphic cinema.