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A CONTAMINATED LANDSCAPE: ANDREAS PROCHASKA'S *THE DARK VALLEY* AS A NESTBESCHMUTZER WESTERN

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When interviewed by *filmmovement.com* about his then-latest project, *The Dark Valley*, Austrian director Andreas Prochaska confessed to always having wanted to make a Western, while also admitting his film was mainly concerned with Austria's troubled past. "Every country has its own sinister story and in our small country, where people like to block out uneasy issues, you don't have to dig deep to find really sinister abysses," said Prochaska, advertising the final product as "a Western with added value" nurtured by "beautiful landscapes that make every tourist's heart leap for joy" (Trifone 5). *The Dark Valley* is an adaptation of a bestselling novel by German author Thomas Willmann, himself inspired by Sergio Leone and Ludwig Ganghofer, and as such it arrives at the junction of Spaghetti Westerns and *Heimatfilme*. Although neither Willmann's book nor Prochaska's picture aspires to be more than genre works, I propose to read *The Dark Valley* in the dual light of the Euro-Western and Austrian *Nestbeschmutzer* literature. Given the numerous latent interconnections between these two traditions, admittedly far removed from each other at first glance, I analyze *The Dark Valley* through the lens of thematic references to Sergio Corbucci and Sergio Leone, on the one hand, and the symbolism evocative of the work of Thomas Bernhard and Martin Pollack, on the other. In doing so, I hope to display that, although a representative of a genre commonly considered "not just hackneyed but dangerously retrograde" (Nelson xii), *The Dark Valley* is a glocal picture which skillfully (and, to an extent, creatively) utilizes generic universals to construct a revisionist narrative.

When thinking of German-speaking Westerns, the immediate association is with the once-legendary West-German *Winnetou* franchise. Based on Karl May's late-nineteenth-century adventure novels, the cycle of adaptations initiated by Harald Reinl's 1962 *The Treasure of Silver Lake* quickly gained cult following and elevated French actor Pierre Brice to fame, rekindling the phenomenon of Indian Hobbyism on both sides of the Iron Curtain. More importantly for the international history of the genre, most critics agree in seeing these films as an important stepping stone for the development of the Euro-Western and its solidification in the form of the Spaghetti variation. Howard Hughes notices how the success of the *Winnetou* cycle spurred Italian producers, by then searching for a profitable replacement of the waning sword-and-sandal movies, to "imitate the *Winnetou* films" (xviii) in the hope of reinvigorating the struggling local film industry. Hughes points out the ways in which proto-Spaghetti Westerns mimicked the German production strategies, listing make-believe desert locations in Yugoslavia and the Spanish province of Almeria, the casting of American actors, and factual inaccuracies as some of the parallels between the two subgenres (xi–xx). According to Matthias Stork, the *Winnetou* cycle played an important ideological role in postwar West Germany as a vessel of collective wish fulfillment, presenting Karl May's Wild West fantasy as a "world free from the demands of urbanization, industrialization, and cultural modernization that confronted the majority of Germans" (68). To H. Glenn Perry, the cycle also added to postwar Germany's efforts of reinventing itself as a pacifist community (epitomized by the peace-loving Old Shatterhand played by American actor Lex Barker) in a vision that utilized the figure of the noble savage as a symbol of political resistance, from the student protests of the late 1960s through the anti-nuclear demonstrations of the 70s and the esoteric environmentalism of the 80s (qtd in Galchen). Across the border, with Karl May's works officially put out of print due to its "capitalist" and post-Christian implications, the East-German Western similarly instrumentalized America's westward expansion as a metaphor of the ideological struggles of the Cold War period. Informed by historical materialism, and painstakingly precise in terms of historical and ethnographic details, the so-called *Indianerfilme* released by the Deutsche Film Aktiengesellschaft (DEFA) effectively contributed an idiosyncratic, "socialist" variation of the German Western, with Native Americans as stand-ins for the working class defiantly opposing the scourge of "imperialist" settlers (Birgel 42–45).¹

While subscribing to the criticism of America's imperialist history and its global expansion in the wake of World War II, in appealing to the pressing need to reconstruct the country's vastly discredited sense of identity the German Western failed to critically embrace its own, more immediate Nazi past. One may be tempted to attrib-

¹ For a more extensive discussion of the links between the film adaptations of Karl May's novels and the beginnings of the Spaghetti Western, see Christopher Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006).

ute this tendency to what W.G. Sebald famously referred to as a nationwide affliction of “the now legendary and in some respects genuinely admirable reconstruction of the country after the devastation wrought by Germany’s wartime enemies, a reconstruction tantamount to a second liquidation in successive phases of the nation’s own past history, [which] prohibited any look backward” (*On the Natural History of Destruction* 9). It is far more likely, though, that those German directors who dealt with the stigma of the Third Reich simply turned to other, less obscure genres such as the thriller (Wolfgang Staudte’s *The Murderers Are Among Us*), the war film (Bernhard Wicki’s *The Bridge*) or the historical epic (Werner Herzog’s *The Wrath of God*). Having reached its peak at the turn of the 1970s, the Western on both sides of the Inner Border gradually subsided and became virtually extinct by the time the two countries reunified in 1989.

In the meantime, the German-inspired Spaghetti Western rose to prominence, developing from what many considered an inferior imitation of its American counterpart into a full-fledged counter-genre pervaded by a characteristic meta-code of exaggeration (Fridlund 1–3), before dwindling by the mid-1970s. A vehicle for refreshingly critical discussions of current political issues cloaked as seriocomical genre tales, the Spaghetti Western found its two foremost representatives in Leone and Corbucci. Inferring from Prochaska’s openly admitted love of the genre (Trifone 4), it is easy to trace *The Dark Valley* to the Italian masters, in particular Corbucci’s *The Great Silence* and *Django*: the former for its visuals, the latter for its discussion of Italy’s fascist past.² In keeping with *The Great Silence*, Prochaska’s film concludes with “a ballet of violence in a beautiful landscape” (Hughes 204), which resolves what may be construed as a belated, *Django*-ish reckoning with Austria’s Nazi involvement.

A rare representative of the genre, *The Dark Valley* is not the first German-speaking Western produced since the fall of the German Democratic Republic. Similarly to its American forefather, the genre has obstinately defied its own demise — in fact, one could make a case for its (sluggish) revival in the past few years. Following Ralf Huettner and Helge Schneider’s lone satirical effort of the 1990s (*Texas — Doc Snyder hält die Welt in Atem* [Texas — Doc Snyder Has the World on Tenterhooks]), the first decade of the twenty-first century brought a box office hit in Michael Herbig’s spoof of the Winnetou franchise (*Manitou’s Shoe*).³ Although its commercial success failed to revive a nationwide interest in Karl May’s legacy, Herbig’s comedy

² Expounding on his cinematic influences in an interview with Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Tarantino contends, “what [Corbucci] truly was dealing with was Fascism — which makes sense, as Italy was getting out from under Mussolini’s boot heel not so long ago — just gussied up with cowboy-Mexican iconography. When his outlaws would take over a town, it had the feeling of a Nazi occupation, and with Holocaust-like suffering to the victims” (Gates 193).

³ See Matthias Stork, “(Dis)respecting Winnetou: Comedy Aesthetics and the De-Re-Construction of the German Western’s Cultural Memory.” *International Westerns: Re-Locating the Frontier*. Ed. Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper. 63–82.

seems to have resuscitated the genre in the German-speaking world, as manifested by several subsequent experiments, from the French-German-Spanish *Lucky Luke and the Daltons* (2004) through Uwe Boll's adaptation of the PC-game *Bloodrayne* (2006), Killian Manning's postapocalyptic *Snowblind* (2010), and Thomas Arslan's naturalistic *Gold* (2013). While all of these pictures fit in the mold of global attempts to redefine the genre, *The Dark Valley* presents itself as likely the least derivative and most intriguing in its snowy poetics in which — to paraphrase Sebald — the ever-returning dead resurface at the edge of the moraine more than seven decades later, as if to recapitulate Austria's long-standing struggle to cope with its dark past (*Emigrants* 23).

As a film genre, the original function of the Western was to buttress the sanctioned interpretation of America's colonial past and the ideological contingencies of the present. In doing so, classical Westerns on the one hand applied, and on the other solidified the myth of the white male liminal hero mediating between the wilderness and the civilization, rationalizing the conflicts of colonial conquest, and naturalizing (in Barthesian sense) any historical inconveniences. In Germany, a similar role was reserved for the so-called *Bergfilme* — throughout the interwar period — and their postwar successors, the *Heimatfilme*, which analogically mythicized the figure of the male mountain climbers and tight-knit communities within narratives set in picturesque Alpine valleys, with an implied dichotomy of pristine highlands juxtaposed with “demoralized” lowlands — a dichotomy which played into the hands of Nazi ideologues (Sontag 82–87).⁴ On the contrary, anti-Westerns — in this particular case *Django* and *The Great Silence* as anti-variations *par excellence* — put the foundation myth in question using highly uncompromising, inverted narratives. Known for their combinational settings, Corbucci's “mud-Western” and “snow-Western” present the audience with “unscrupulous, amoral villains, who kill [or die at the hands of] the martyred hero in the nihilistic finale” (Hughes 194). *The Dark Valley* similarly discredits the violently imposed hegemonic ideology, delivering a story in which a deprived hero fights to vindicate an anti-narrative to what Heike Endter refers to as the “foundational tales of German national mythology” (330). Naturally, argues Bert Fridlund, “mythic deduction moves in spirals, and not in circles, so we never return exactly to the starting point” (260) — thus, while noticeably inspired by its Euro-Western predecessors and inherently linked to the landmark themes of the *Nestbeschmutzer* tradition, Prochaska's Western differs in

⁴ In her article on Luis Trenkner's and Fritz Lang's Westerns, Heike Endter provides a detailed explication of the significance of Alpine landscapes in the German mountains movies, which functioned as more than “a setting, but also a metaphor for the national character that Germany imprinted on her people... Mountains thus served not only as a touchstone for German national identity but as a space in which that identity was established and confirmed — where the heroic would test their strength and adaptability against the extreme conditions of the landscape” (334).

many aspects from both of its influences, arriving at a more polished and abated (and yet still excessively violent) text.

In the light of the above delineation, I propose to read *The Dark Valley* two-fold, as a work which honors and (to an extent) develops the revisionist idiom of the Corbucci Westerns to tackle endemic issues as specified in the works of *Nestbeschmutzer* authors (due to the brevity of this text, my focus will rest with two representatives of the group, i.e. Thomas Bernhard's *Extinction* — likely the most canonical example of the tendency — and Martin Pollack's *Contaminated Landscapes*, a more contemporary study of landscapes contaminated by collective memory/forgetting). My functional understanding of the term will be modeled on Karol Franczak's extensive analysis of the impact of *Nestbeschmutzer* texts on the Austrian public discourse. Franczak traces the roots of the term back to the Third Reich and the vilification of "disloyal" citizens who criticized the intensifying nazification of the country, and notices the ambivalence of the label, pejorative when pinned by detractors, and affirmative when used by writers to define themselves (with the latter understanding used for the purposes of this text) (10–11). Significant to the context of Corbucci's Spaghetti Westerns (and Prochaska's Western), Franczak defines a *Nestbeschmutzer* as a liminal figure, a mediator artist who imparts unwanted and repressed knowledge about Austria's Nazi involvement and self-victimization (102), providing commentary on the working-through of the country's history, denouncing its ostensible and ceremonial character (15), and nullifying the clear-cut social categories (perhaps most visibly doing away with Raul Hilberg's seminal perpetrator-victim-witness typology). Importantly, Franczak points out that the process of reckoning (i.e. a critical self-inspection of oneself and one's ancestors with reference to the Shoah) tends to be delayed when compared to legal retribution (22) (as has been the case in the majority of Eastern-European countries in which communist regimes erased and appropriated any traces of that knowledge for several generations).⁵ Drawing from the work of sociologist Alfred Schutz, Franczak further describes *Nestbeschmutzer* authors as authors who reject dominant narratives, evoke the overlooked, reinterpret history, brood over the shameful deeds of their community, reject tribal bonds, exclude themselves from the communal experience, renounce proximity in favor of distance, and devise new, alternative dictionaries that inscribe the familiar with alternative, alienating significance (209).

The premises at the foundation of *Nestbeschmutzer* writing to a large extent overlap with the principles underlying the work of the most prominent Spaghetti Westerns. Iconoclastic and flying in the face of historical amnesia (and its institu-

⁵ According to Matthias Konzett, in Austria the initial postwar attempts to critically reckon with the Nazi past quickly gave way to the inter-party, political consensus which reinstated "a climate of silence and conformity" through a chain of sweeping reforms. This "coercive climate of consensus" eventually gave rise to the wave of hyperbolic counter-narratives aligning themselves with the now-marginalized victims of the Third Reich, as best epitomized by the writing of Thomas Bernhard (9).

tionalized twin, amnesty, extended time and again first by the Allied authorities, and then the Austrian judiciary), *Nestbeschmutzer* literature defies what Paul Ricoeur poetically referred to as an “abuse of forgetting” that, although efficient in quashing political upheavals, further conceals the deep-seated past (452–453). Much like Corbucci’s Spaghetti Westerns, *Nestbeschmutzer* writing abounds in counter-narratives that reveal dysfunctional state institutions, social corruption and exclusivist practices, filtering them through “the modes of the ironic and the pathetic” within a common “metacode of excess” (Fridlund 1). This is where the first and most important touching point between the Spaghetti Western and *Nestbeschmutzer* literature can be established, in particular when it comes to the work of Thomas Bernhard. A master exaggerator, Bernhard’s narratives are overtly excessive, perhaps most patently so in *Extinction*. In an interview with Krista Fleischmann, the Austrian writer objected to the stereotypical, distanced treatment of history, opting in favor of excessive agitation as a propeller of his books (105). Correspondingly, the code of excess is recurrently eulogized by Franz Josef Murau, the monologist narrator of *Extinction*. “Without the art of exaggeration,” exclaims Murau, “we’d be condemned to an awfully tedious life, a life not worth living. And I’ve developed this art to an incredible pitch” (Bernhard 65).⁶

Innate in this metacode of excess is a degree of generalization which both sensitizes external audiences to, and limits the specificity of, such authorial projects. Matthias Konzett contends that while greatly facilitating his successors’ freedom of expression, Bernhard’s output is historically restricted to voicing Austria’s postwar dissent and a sense of dissatisfaction with the country’s normalization. Still, Konzett sees Bernhard’s oeuvre as “a unique critical mirror to a culture of resentment that made possible enormous acts of administrative violence through a conspiracy of silence” (18), which the work of the Austrian master brings to the surface. In overturning the collective memory of the past, Bernhard operates with crystallized symbolical figures. He diverges from factual details, event-based narratives and linearity, opting for metaphorical space and utilizing popular myths against themselves.⁷ In Ricoeurian terms, *Extinction*’s Franz Josef Murau can be seen as a representative of an alternative collective memory (acting on behalf of those excluded from the nation-based historiography) and adds an unwelcome piece to the holistic picture of overlapping narratives, arguing poignantly for its inclusion and prominent exposure. The narrator in *Extinction* vehemently opposes what Ricoeur dubs a “devious form of forgetting” born at the junction of authorized history and social complicity manifested through passive avoidance and active

⁶ Towards the end of the novel, Murau sums up his intermittent rumination on the aesthetics of excess, stating, “the writer who doesn’t exaggerate is a poor writer, I said.... Exaggeration is the secret of great art, I said, and of great philosophy. The art of exaggeration is in fact the secret of all mental endeavor” (Bernhard 307–308).

⁷ See Saryusz-Wolska, especially 7–38.

“wanting-not-to-know.”⁸ Like *Django*'s, *Extinction*'s path “leads in the opposite direction” (Corbucci), imbricate in terms of their excessive aesthetics and historical revisionism, and covertly conflating in *The Dark Valley*. In this regard, these two remote vantage points crisscross expediently to form an anti-myth, and enable a curious recapitulation of *Nestbeschmutzer* efforts within a text which reinterprets vital nationalist symbols and offers a counter-narrative on the past, embedded in a genre movie formula. To this end, *The Dark Valley* may be read allegorically, in the broad understanding of the term developed by Janina Abramowska who, inspired by Dorothy Sayers and Michael Bloomfield, approaches allegory as an extended metaphor. To Abramowska, the modern, “rehabilitated” allegory exceeds its traditional, strictly religious/moralistic implications and contributes a useful hermeneutic tool, provided that one treats it principally as a metasemantic principle and extends its application onto a variety of multilayered narratives. Thus, although it is primarily a craftily executed Euro-Western, one may also decipher *The Dark Valley* as another critical retelling of Austria's disavowed history disguised as a metaphorical exposition of themes central to *Nestbeschmutzer* literature, such as characters obsessed with excavating the murky secrets of their communities (and criticizing their deeply-ingrained pathologies), through the inclusion of marginal narratives, the role of landscape as a repository of history.

The Dark Valley opens with its anti-hero, Greider (Sam Riley), riding into an Alpine valley in what seems to be the late-nineteenth-century Austro-Hungarian Empire, much in the manner of Clint Eastwood's *Pale Rider*.⁹ Greider is a dandy. Sporting a fitted overcoat, a “townie” suit and a silver pocket watch, his looks quickly brings to mind Lee van Cleef's Mortimer in Leone's *For a Few Dollars More*. With the coming of winter, Greider slips into a more practical fur coat, his head shrouded in a scarf as if in homage to Jean-Louis Trintignant's Silence in Corbucci's *The Great Silence*. It is possible to brush these fashion intricacies aside, and yet, when combined with the reticent precision of Greider's subsequent actions, his meticulousness suggests a character driven by inner obsessions. The viewer soon learns

⁸ Ricoeur refers to this strategy of avoidance in an ethically-charged manner which may remind one of Murau's ruminations on Austria's postwar self-victimization. “It is an ambiguous form of forgetting, active as much as passive. As active, this forgetting entails the same sort of responsibility as that imputed to acts of negligence, omission, imprudence, lack of foresight, in all of the situations of inaction, in which it appears after-the-fact to an enlightened and honest consciousness that one should have and could have known, or at least have tried to know, that one should have and could have intervened. In this way, as social agents remaster their capacity to give an account, one encounters once again along this path all of the obstacles related to the collapse of the forms of assistance that the memory of each person can find in the memory of others as they are capable of authorizing, of helping to give, an account in the most intelligible, acceptable, and responsible manner. But the responsibility of blindness falls on each one. Here the motto of the Enlightenment: *sapere aude!* move out of the state of tutelage! can be rewritten: dare to give an account yourself!” (449).

⁹ Interviewed by Lisa Trifone, Riley recollected that while shooting the film, he went by the nickname “Pale Greider,” partly as a joke and partly as a tribute to Eastwood's 1985 classic (8).

that Greider is a person driven by vengeance, his mother a survivor from the valley's autarkic rule, his would-be father killed by his actual begetter. Within the vengeance variation selected by Prochaska, and against Greider's best intentions, the character's identity remains bound to the valley. This duality connotes Franz Josef Murau of Bernhard's *Extinction*: haunted by his Austrian identity,¹⁰ which he tries to shed by living abroad, Greider struggles with a "catastrophic burden" (Konzett 55). In a daily cleansing ritual, he wakes up to break through the sheet of ice which has gathered overnight on the bowl of water in his room, staring into his own reflection the same way he inspects the pocket watch with a picture of his mother pasted on the inside of the lid, before rinsing his face with cold water (paraphrasing Konzett, one may say Greider's strength lies precisely in his ability to reflect upon his own sociopathy; Konzett 2). As in the case of Franz Josef Murau, the art of self-reflection proves an uphill climb for Greider, albeit for different reasons. Patterned after Corbucci's *Silence*, Greider is a clam, his silence forced on the audience by the mechanics of the plot, as Greider is an Austrian-American coming back from America to the German-speaking valley to settle an old score. Speaking with a heavy accent, Greider toils away at speaking his mind when interacting with the natives. Similarly, although seemingly a linguistic virtuoso, Murau's tortuous monologues amount to an ever-gemming struggle with "the intolerable weight of the language which suppresses any thought before it can find expression" (Konzett 4). In Prochaska's *Western*, Murau's verbose contemplations are dispensed with in favor of visual means, and his performative acts (such as the cession of the Wolfsegg estate to the Jewish Commune of Vienna) — substituted by gunplay retribution, in harmony with the generic canon.

As befits a *Nestbeschmutzer* (and an undercover gunslinger), Greider is an astute observer,¹¹ carefully planning his actions under the guise of a photographer, dragging the heavy camera case around in a fashion evocative of Django hauling his coffin. Wandering around the valley, he takes pictures of its landscape and inhabitants, as if in a dual quest to commemorate the site of past crimes and their perpetrators (and bystanders).¹² Prochaska beautifully recreates the process in the course

¹⁰ Murau hails from Upper Austria ("Hitler's" part of Austria, and a quintessence of all things evil in Bernhard's novel), Greider was conceived in a valley in Tyrol, whose Nazi sympathies have been painstakingly documented by Martin Pollack in *Anklage Vatermord — der Fall Philipp Halsmann* (Patricide: The Case of Philipp Halsmann). Coincidentally, in Pollack's book the Zillertal valley functions metaphorically, too: on the literal plane, it provides a majestic backdrop for the eponymous, alleged patricide; on the symbolic level, it becomes a focusing lens for the region's interwar anti-Semitism, whose analysis is the focal point of Pollack's narrative.

¹¹ For an in-depth discussion of the importance of observation to the development of Thomas Bernhard's characters see Agata Wittchen-Barełkowska, *Kategoria teatralności w dziele Thomasa Bernharda*, in particular chapter 1 (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Nauka i Innowacje, 2014).

¹² Greider's hostess in the village calls his camera "ein Spiegel mit Gedeachtniss" (a mirror with memory), hinting to its ethically-charged capacity.

of which Greider's antagonists (and the villagers whom they intimidate) become metaphorically embalmed in death, as famously dubbed by Barthes (14). Paradoxically, Greider is not the kind of contortionist whom Barthes teases for trying to produce "lifelike" effects — he is calm and thorough, and his aseptic portraits invoke the work of a death mask artist. After all, writes Barthes, "photography cannot signify... except by assuming a mask... The mask is the meaning, insofar as it is absolutely pure. This is why great portrait photographers are great mythologists" (34). Greider's pictures are counter-myths. They dissect traditional photographic themes (the huntsman, the happy couple, the idyllic landscape).¹³ His photographs attest to the crimes of the past and the repudiated collective memory, amounting to what Pollack termed as the "topography of violence" and "a map of contaminated landscapes" (100–101). Projected throughout the end credits, Greider's pictures seem intended to "leave [viewers] with questions they may find themselves mulling over the following day," in the words of the director himself (Schiefer).

A conflicted personality, Prochaska's anti-hero is a bundle of anger, revulsion and compulsive habits which all drive him to return to his homeland and face his legacy, against the better judgment of the valley's intimidated inhabitants, such as Luzi (Paula Beer), who advises Greider, "das ist kein Ort fuer dich. Noch kannst du weg" (This is not a place for you. You can still leave). As a dissident heir, alienated from his family and at odds with the Austrian province, he follows in the footsteps of Bernhard's Murau who, despite his own assurances, finds himself returning to the Wolfsegg estate much sooner than expected. The valley is his obsession, one which he scrupulously records through his camera (and his guns), at the same time erasing it (in a Bernhardian sense) through a series of killings and preserving it through in a series of "mirrors with memory."

Greider's resolve brings to mind Murau's manic resolution to reckon with Wolfsegg. "One day, I said, I'll set about recording all the things about Wolfsegg that obsess me and give me no peace. For decades Wolfsegg has given me no peace. It haunts me day and night, and since my family have neither the will nor the ability to describe Wolfsegg as it is and always has been, it's clearly incumbent on me to do so" (Bernhard 98). Murau sets on a quest to erase a history of which he is unwittingly a part — to an extent, the eponymous "extinction" is tantamount to self-destruction, since his new identity is a negative one, with Murau continually defining himself in opposition to Austria and his family. In a striking parallel to Murau, when in the valley, Greider "can't and won't make friends with these people" and "can't go back to

¹³ While Murau detests the art of photography to its very core, he shares a similarly utilitarian approach to pictures. Stashed in the desk of his Rome apartment, the images of his kin incite Murau to ever more vitriolic tirades against the hypocrisy of his family and compatriots ("What they demand of the photograph is an ideal image of themselves, and they will agree to anything that produces this ideal image, even the most dreadful distortion... they ought to be appalled. But because they don't think, they are shielded from the awful knowledge that they are unhappy, ugly, and false"; Bernhard 64).

them and their like” (Bernhard 194). “Some [hold] out their hands,” but he refuses to shake them, having “deliberately imposed this self embarrassment on [himself]” (Bernhard 324).¹⁴ His work is the work of counter-memory, unyielding to officially sanctioned myths and bent on exposing them. Franczak refers to this strategy as a “narrative subversion” (122), where the author extracts the excluded from silence, lending his voice to those whom the public discourse deliberately marginalizes as it fails to acknowledge its own injustice towards them (122).¹⁵ In *Extinction*, the symbolic representative of this community of the excluded is Schermaier, a miner from Kropfing, a village below Wolfsegg, denounced to the Nazis for listening to the Swiss radio. Murau takes it upon himself to commemorate Schermaier and his wife “as representatives of so many others who never speak about what they suffered during the Nazi period and permit themselves only to weep now and then” (Bernhard 230), given Austria’s incapacity to grieve (“What kind of a state is it that allows the mass murderer to live in luxury and has forgotten about Schermaier?,” he asks rhetorically; 225).¹⁶ In *The Dark Valley*, the instrumental victim is Greider’s own mother and, by extension, Luzi, both subject to a twisted common law, pursuant to which the feudal master of the valley beds each bride on her wedding night. Old Brenner’s (Hans-Michael Rehberg) indulgence in the *prima noctis* ritual turns the valley into a community of inbreds, binding it from within through silent consensus. To this extent, concluding in an excessive shootout, and interjected with brutal killings of perpetrators and their accomplices, Greider’s return to the valley seems compatible with the recent work of Quentin Tarantino (*Inglourious Basterds*). The introduction to *The Dark Valley* brings to mind the opening scene in Tarantino’s film, with the newly-wed couple crouching underneath the floorboards of a mountain hut in a vain attempt to hide from Brenner’s posse. The scene is punctuated by Luzi’s voiceover, in which the audience learns of the “Sachen über die darf man nicht reden. Sachen, die früher passiert sind. Vor langer Zeit” (things you can’t talk about. Things that happened in the past. A long time ago). While they seem a B-class movie platitude, Luzi’s words acquire a deeper meaning in a revisionist reading of Prochaska’s film. Following the introduction is a wish fulfillment revenge scenario, with Greider’s arrival at the valley reminiscent of Aldo Rein’s Jewish-American squad which ventures to “inflict pain where our European aunts and uncles had to endure it” (Gross 166). Greider’s figure is more ambivalent, though. He is both an avenger and (by

¹⁴ In a one-scene tribute to George Stevens’s *Shane*, we see Greider enter the local bar, where he quietly confronts Brenner’s sons, has a glass of schnapps poured onto his face, and is badly beaten for refusing to drink with the local folk.

¹⁵ In a similar vein, Agata Wittchen-Barełkowska interprets Franz Josef Murau’s memory as a construct set in stark opposition to Austria’s (and his family’s) past, and an act of defiance against their long-standing myths (177).

¹⁶ See Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich. *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern. Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens* (Munich: R. Piper & Co., 1967).

birthmark) an insider or, in this context, a *Nestbeschmutzer*, his resurfacing in the Austrian countryside less than desired by his kin.

The Dark Valley was shot in the sublime Val Senales in the Italian region of Trentino-Adige, not too far from Cortina d'Ampezzo, where Corbucci made his *The Great Silence*. While inspired by the Italian director, Prochaska chose to use landscape without disguising it as an American locale. While most Spaghetti Westerns shrewdly turned European locations into North American look-alikes, *The Dark Valley* unabashedly highlights the material culture, the intrinsic dialect, and idiosyncratic architecture of its Italo-Austrian setting, even if its muddy (and progressively snowier) aura recalls *Django* and *The Great Silence*. Greider enacts his revenge amidst the characteristic dwellings with richly ornamented gables, with an Italian Romanesque church overseeing the village. The foggy settlement no doubt connotes the shady symbolism of the valley as a contaminated landscape in *Nestbeschmutzer* literature (e.g. Pollack's *Anklage Vaternord — der Fall Philipp Halsmann* [Patriicide: The Case of Philipp Halsmann], *The Dead Man in the Bunker: Discovering My Father*, *Contaminated Landscapes*; Bernhard's *Extinction, Yes, Breath: A Decision*). Although Bernhard provocatively admitted he had never been interested in describing landscapes (Fleischmann 12), he also cited landscape as an influence on his writing, stressing the importance of switching between Mediterranean and Austrian surroundings (Fleischmann 9), and consistently setting many of his novels in the mountainous regions of Austria. In *The Dark Valley*, landscape is not merely a stylistic device but an important vehicle of remembrance (those who oppose Brenner's bloody rule end up murdered like Greider's would-be father), much like in Martin Pollack's autobiographical prose, where the memories of idyllic childhood overlap with the belatedly acquired knowledge of Nazi history.

Prochaska's winter is excessive (like Corbucci's), with the characters bundled up in pelts and face shrouds (in one sequence, we see Brenner's son, Hans (Tobias Moretti) roam the village wrapped in warm clothes, his gargoyle face stunningly remindful of Klaus Kinski's Loco in *The Great Silence*). So is the toponymy of the film, with the chief antagonist, who reveals himself as Greider's father, named after a mountain pass which symbolically delineates the border between the "Germanic" North and the "Romanesque" South. Importantly to a reading of *The Dark Valley* as an allegorical text, one is reminded that Brenner Pass also served as one of the main gateways to Italy for the former SS men fleeing to South America and the Middle East after the war (as we are reminded by Pollack's account of his own father's death on the escape trail when crossing Brenner Pass, which the writer details in *The Dead Man in the Bunker: Discovering My Father*). A Waldheimesque figure, Brenner is the father figure who governs the community in spite of being discredited by his misdeeds, of which the villagers are aware yet fail to protest, both for fear of punishment and out of political opportunism. He has the final say in all civic matters and turns the community into silent accomplices, both physically and metaphor-

ically “leaving his semen in each family.” Presenting Old Brenner as a haunting apparition, both physically (gazing at the pocket watch in the recognition scene, Brenner evokes an aged yet still fiery Indio from *For a Few Dollars More*) and mentally (sitting on a wooden deathbed engraved with rune-like symbols, he seems resigned but remorseless), Prochaska distills Austria’s unsettled past to a powerful symbol. Brenner’s hut emanates a similar ambience to that of the Children’s Villa in the Wolfsegg garden, with former Nazi Gauleiters spending their “best years” in hiding, living unmolested in the lap of luxury.

Correspondingly, the indifference of the valley’s community resembles that of the Murau family, who focus on the present and conveniently repudiate their status as accomplices, sitting “stiffly and rigidly on their estate, their life’s mission being to ensure that this immense mass of inherited wealth progressively solidified and under no circumstances dissolved” (Bernhard 18). To them, Franz Josef (and his spiritual guide, uncle Georg) are two rotten eggs, self-expelled from Wolfsegg as the odd individuals “interested in our family connections, though not the way they were, not just in its hundred and thousands of glorious pages but in the whole of it” (28). Greider likewise refocuses the official narrative towards a rigid critique, in which the country, its society and individuals can no longer shield themselves with the nationalist myths disseminated for decades by the state. Modeling the valley as a settler community within a Western formula, Prochaska allegorizes its inhabitants as active entities in the process of conquest. If Corbucci’s pictures indeed offered a critique of Mussolini’s Italy and the country’s infatuation with fascism, *The Dark Valley* concludes the work of the *Nestbeschmutzer* writers in debunking the myth of Hitler’s first victim, one which guided Austria’s mythology the way the tale of the Manifest Destiny informed the rhetorical vision of America’s colonial past. The film also sensitizes the viewer to the taciturn collusion between the state and the church in governing a hermetic community, as Old Brenner’s rule is authorized by the local parish priest who weds Luzi and her boyfriend, instructing him to obey Brenner in the spirit of Virgin Mary and St. Joseph. In a wedding sermon delivered shortly before being shot by Greider, the priest compares the bride and the groom to the vessels of divine will, advising them to uphold the enforced order by abiding by petit-bourgeois appearances. The priest is also revealed as an accomplice in the murder of Greider’s would-be father, overseeing his crucifixion by Brenner and his sons, and thus stripping the attributes of the Passion of Christ of their redemptive qualities and resignifying them as tools of torture. The priests’ actions thus mirror the bishops attending the funeral of Franz Josef Murau’s parents and brother hand in hand with the former Third Reich officials, who “took turns visiting Wolfsegg on weekends, ceding the door handle to one another, as it were” (Bernhard 98).

In the final scene of the film, Greider leaves the valley, having disposed of the Brenner clan but unable to bring himself to stay among their silent accomplices. On the one hand, Greider’s departure offers a sense of closure denied by most *Nest-*

beschmutzer texts, as we learn that, upon her liberation from Brenner, Luzi and her husband are about to become parents, giving birth to an unprecedented first-born not conceived by Brenner. Parallel to Colonel Mortimer, Greider has avenged the woman he loved and killed his own Indio, providing the plot with a sense of reconciliation more concomitant with Leone's positivism than Corbucci's nihilism in *The Great Silence*. Still, though seemingly more positive and definitive as a recapitulation of *Nestbeschmutzer* renunciation of the Nazi legacy, Greider leaving the village possibly mirrors the country's ongoing reluctance to fully account for its dark history, as if in a vivid reminder that when faced with harsh dissent, more moderate and somewhat reactionary narratives prove more convincing (Lorenz 45).

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A CONTAMINATED LANDSCAPE: ANDREAS PROCHASKA’S THE DARK VALLEY AS A NESTBESCHMUTZER WESTERN

Summary

Associated by audiences worldwide with the 1960s Winnetou westerns featuring Pierre Brice as the heroic Apache chief originally introduced by Karl May’s adventure novels, the Western in the German-speaking countries has showed renewed signs of life early into the twenty first century. Several productions have been released, including Uwe Boll’s computer game-based *Bloodrayne* (2006), Kilian Manning’s post-apocalyptic *Snowblind* (2010) and Thomas Arslan’s naturalistic *Gold* (2013). While these films constitute notable examples of the global trend to redefine the Western as a transnational genre, they tend to be largely derivative, amounting to inter-generic pulp infused with references to the classics. One intriguing exception to this tendency can be found in Andreas Prochaska’s *The*

Dark Valley (2015). Set in late nineteenth-century Tyrol, the film follows in the footsteps of Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon* and Stefan Rusowitzky's *The Counterfeiters* as another Austrian Academy Award candidate tackling the country's Nazi past. The paper offers an interpretation of Prochaska's picture as a revisionist allegory of Austrian collective memory, and an exemplar of the transnational Western today: a global genre whose universally recognizable formula enables directors to comment on locally specific issues. The author examines *The Dark Valley* in the context of the Austrian *Nestbeschmutzer* literature (in particular Thomas Bernhard's *Extinction* and Martin Pollack's non-fiction books), on the one hand, and as an inventive combination of the *Heimatfilm* with the dark vein of the spaghetti Western (represented by Sergio Corbucci), on the other.

SKAŻONY KRAJOBRAZ — MROCZNA DOLINA ANDREASA PROCHASKI JAKO NESTBESCHMUTZER WESTERN

Streszczenie

Kojarzony przez światową publiczność z westernami o Winnetou z lat 60. z Pierre'em Brice'em w roli głównej jako bohaterskim wodzem Apaczów, pierwotnie wprowadzonym w powieściach przygodowych Karola Maya, western ten w krajach niemieckojęzycznych dał nowe oznaki życia na początku XXI wieku. Ukazało się do tej pory kilka produkcji, m.in. oparty na grze komputerowej *Bloodrayne* Uwe Bolla (2006), postapokaliptyczny *Snowblind* (2010) Kiliana Manninga oraz naturalistyczny *Gold* (2013) Thomasa Arslana. Choć filmy te są istotnymi przykładami światowego trendu nadającego westernowi nowy ponadnarodowy wymiar, przejawiają tendencję głównie derywacyjną, równając się z międzygatunkową pulpą, aromatyzowaną nawiązaniem do gatunkowej klasyki. Jeden intrygujący wyjątek od tej tendencji można odnaleźć w filmie *Mroczna dolina* (2014) Andreasa Prochaski. Osadzony w dziewiętnastowiecznym Tyrolu, film ten naśladuje *Białą wstążkę* Michaela Hanekego oraz *Falszerzy* Stefana Rusowitzkiego jako kolejny kandydat do nagrody Austriackiej Akademii dotyczący kwestii nazistowskiej przeszłości kraju. Artykuł prezentuje interpretację obrazu Prochaski jako rewizjonistycznej alegorii zbiorowej pamięci Austriaków oraz jako wzorcowego współczesnego ponadnarodowego westernu — globalnego gatunku, którego powszechnie rozpoznawalna formuła umożliwia reżyserom komentowanie typowo lokalnych problemów. Z jednej strony autor analizuje *Mroczną dolinę* w kontekście austriackiej literatury *Nestbeschmutzer* (w szczególności książki *Wymazywanie. Rozpad* Thomasa Bernharda oraz książek literatury faktu Martina Pollacka), z drugiej zaś strony ujmuje ją jako pomyslową kombinację *Heimatfilmu* z ciemną nutą spaghetti westernu (reprezentowanego przez Sergia Corbucciego).

Przel. Kordian Bobowski