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Source: *Austrian Studies*, Vol. 19, The Austrian Noughties: Texts, Films, Debates (2011), pp. 126-141

Published by: [Modern Humanities Research Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5699/austrianstudies.19.2011.0126>

Accessed: 15/01/2015 05:33

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fooling around with Film: Political Visions of Austria — Past, Present and Future

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I

Austrian cinema is experiencing a period of wide-spread acclaim after many years out of the international public's eye. The 1990s and 2000s have brought examples of prize-winning art-house films as well as more popular, box-office successes. Michael Haneke's attainments at the Cannes Film Festival have spanned the noughties decade, with *La Pianiste* (*The Piano Teacher*, 2001) and *Das weiße Band* (*The White Ribbon*, 2009) obtaining the Grand Prix and the Palme d'or respectively. Rarely were Austrian directors even nominated to the Academy Awards' category of 'Best Foreign Language Film' before Stefan Ruzowitzky became its first Austrian recipient in 2007 with *Die Fälscher* (*The Counterfeiters*). If the exponents of Austria's new wave of film-making, such as Barbara Albert, Ulrich Seidl, Michael Glawogger, Michael Haneke and others, are generally known as social realists favouring narratives or documentations of gritty, everyday issues and themes, the two lesser-known directors on whom the present article focuses, Walter Wippersberg and Peter Kern, take a more playful cinematic approach towards their subject matters. Nevertheless, both films discussed here maintain a serious, political agenda that is very much influenced by contemporary social realities.

Wippersberg's *Die Wahrheit über Österreich: oder Wie man uns belogen hat* (2001) and Kern's *1. April 2021: Haider lebt* (2002) are examples of films that use the documentary mode to satirical ends, and in so doing they provide commentary on contemporary political events as well as on Austrian political history.¹ They might be said to represent two types of 'fake' documentary or mock-documentary, with, in the first instance, a film that styles itself with all

¹ Wippersberg's film was first broadcast on 8 November 2001. The Österreichischer Rundfunk (ORF) then showed a director's cut version on 10 February 2002. See <http://members.aon.at/wippersberg/%D6sterreich.html> [accessed 28 July 2011]. Kern's *1. April 2021: Haider lebt* debuted in cinemas in 2002 and was issued as number 87 of the *Edition Der Standard* collection 'Der österreichische Film' in October 2007. Translations of Kern's film text are taken from the DVD's English subtitles. Otherwise, all translations are the author's own.

the codes and conventions of a classic information film (Wippersberg) and, in the other (Kern), a film whose near-future setting marks it as fiction but which foregrounds the investigative activities of a young German filmmaker protagonist (played by August Diehl) setting out to make a 'documentary' film about contemporary Austria and to hunt down the now vanished political leaders, Jörg Haider and Wolfgang Schüssel.

Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner define fake documentaries as 'fiction films that make use of (copy, mock, mimic, gimmick) documentary style and therefore acquire its associated content (the moral and the social) and associated feelings (belief, trust, authenticity) to create a documentary experience defined by their antithesis, self-conscious distance'.² Theorists of fake documentary often underline how its many variations serve to destabilize the very notion of the 'real', and further, to question the possibility of truthfully representing that reality. In short, fake documentaries are seen as undermining the documentary genre *per se*.³ While the two Austrian examples discussed here undoubtedly do toy with the parameters of documentary and raise some interesting questions about how the 'real' can be represented or intervened in, their significance derives from more than mere aesthetic playfulness. Their additional contribution stems from the ways in which they cut across contemporary political discourse and undermine some of the so-called 'truths' continually performed and perpetuated by populist far-right politics. The key aims of the present article, then, are twofold: firstly, to situate the work of these two Austrian directors and foster a greater critical reception of their work, and secondly, to read these examples of noughties' filmmaking for the ways in which they reflect on their contemporary sociopolitical environment, opposing and debunking some of the tenets of far-right, populist thinking.

Both *Die Wahrheit über Österreich* and *1. April 2021* might be said to draw a certain amount of impetus from a recently revived comedy of the post-war period, namely from Wolfgang Liebeneiner's state-sponsored film *1. April 2000* (1952). Liebeneiner's charming and amusing story is set in a sanitized version of its year of production, in a still occupied Austria, in an invented scenario that presents a platform for protesting Austria's national character as innocent, musical and peace-loving. In it, the fictionalized Austrian prime minister uses 'documentary' film screenings and statements by characters from within the

² Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner, 'Introduction: Phony Definitions and Troubling Taxonomies of the Fake Documentary', in *F is for Phony: Fake Documentaries and Truth's Undoing*, ed. by Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner (Minnesota, 2006), pp. 1–35 (p. 7).

³ It has long been established that the documentary form itself constructs narratives and uses codes and conventions in a similar manner to fictional modes. See Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington, 1991). On the various classifications and functions of fake documentary or mock documentary, see Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight, *Faking it: Mock-documentary and the Subversion of Factuality* (Manchester, 2001). It is not the intention of the current analysis to pursue the exact 'degree' (Roscoe and Hight) of mockumentary to which these two films adhere.

fiction to prove to the leader of the World Protection Commission (a science-fictionalized ‘United Nations’), not only that Austria’s long history is marked by acts of Christian defence (in the Crusades, for example), preference for music and culture over war-mongering (Lipizzaner horses ‘dancing’ rather than riding into battles) and monarchic reigns forged by marriage rather than military aggression (as the famed Habsburg’s policy, ‘tu felix Austria, nube’ is invoked), but that as a consequence of this demonstrable harmony, the country should be re-granted its status as a sovereign, independent state. Liebeneiner’s film, made three years before Austria signed its state treaty and saw the four allied powers withdraw from its territory, makes no mention of the period 1938–1945 and reads, as critics and reviewers have noted, more like a tourist advertisement for Austria, covering everything from music, dancing and the beautiful architecture of Vienna while mobilizing a cast of the most famous Austrian actors of the day in a plot with numerous romantic strands to delight its home audience.⁴

Where Kern’s film references Liebeneiner’s in its title, Wippersberg might be said to satirize more the actual *raison d’être* of the earlier film. Accordingly, Wippersberg’s film concludes by having its fictional, historian anchorman reassure the (Austrian) viewer-addressees — as Liebeneiner’s prime minister reassures the fictional, international court — that the proof he has just brought before them should now allow them to sleep with a good conscience. They must no longer give credence to the — falsified — histories that postwar historiography has insistently peddled. ‘Wir Österreicher sind kein politisierendes, wir sind ein musikisches Volk’ [We Austrians aren’t a political people, we’re a musical people], the presenter confirms, having unveiled to the film audience numerous examples of corrective historical ‘evidence’. Liebeneiner’s 1952 characters predominantly narrate stories of Austrian history from previous centuries and political eras, whereas the stated objective of Wippersberg’s ironic 2001 ‘documentary’ — according to its fictional historian protagonist — is to investigate Austria’s participation in twentieth-century wars and ultimately to disprove in particular the allegations of anti-semitism and of enthusiastic national-socialist sympathy.

II

Die Wahrheit über Österreich deals with the many reverberations of what is widely agreed to be one of the founding myths of postwar national identity formation: the Moscow Treaty’s absolution of Austria in 1943 as the first victim of Hitlerite aggression. Austria’s victim status and the subsequent moments when Austrians have been brought together by events that have disadvantaged

⁴ On the contemporary reception of Liebeneiner’s film, see Beate Hochholdinger-Reiterer, ‘Politik getarnt als Aprilscherz: zur Rezeption des Österreich-Films *1. April 2000*’, in *1. April 2000*, ed. by Ernst Kieninger et al. (Vienna, 2000), pp. 73–111.

them or besmirched their reputation abroad are starting-points for many other critical works of culture, satirical or otherwise. The film discussed here revisits moments of supposed victimization in international sport⁵ as well as moments of international political condemnation such as the Waldheim affair of 1986. What gives Wippersberg's film new purpose and instantly locates it as a post-2000 'Wende'⁶ protest is its allusion, at the very outset of the film, to the European Union's sanctions against Austria following the inauguration of a coalition government forged between the Austrian People's Party (Österreichische Volkspartei, ÖVP) and the Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ) in February 2000.

Following a brief, political montage of historically unrelated images, including former president Kurt Waldheim, an unknown Jewish man hiding in a wardrobe, Josef Stalin, former FPÖ leader Jörg Haider giving a thumbs up and a victory sign, and the ÖVP foreign secretary at the time of the film's making, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, smiling, a certain, fictional 'Prof. Dr. Bernhard Hopfgärtner' introduces the weighty topic that will form the basis of 'his' fifty-five-minute documentary film. Sitting in front of a fluttering Austrian flag, he alludes first to the famous description of Austria by Pope Paul VI in 1971 as an 'island of the blessed' and juxtaposes this sharply with the recent interference by the then fourteen states of the EU into Austrian affairs: 'Österreich. Eben noch als eine Insel der Seligen gepriesen, dann auf einmal ins Gerede gekommen. Und ausländische Staaten haben sogar versucht, uns vorzuschreiben, wer dieses Land regieren dürfe und wer nicht' [Austria. Recently still praised as an island of the blessed, then suddenly a talking-point. And foreign states have even tried to prescribe to us who should be allowed to govern this land and who should not]. The reference, then, is a veiled but instantly recognisable nod to the diplomatic measures taken against Austria in 2000 for including the populist right-wing FPÖ party in its coalition government. The sanctions were lifted after only seven months when the EU-commissioned report pronounced that Austria did indeed adhere to common European values (including those pertaining to the rights of minorities and immigrants) even whilst the authors of the report remained critical of certain political practices.⁷

⁵ This has been a popular theme in noughties' culture. See Allyson Fiddler, 'Sport and National Identity in the "New" Austria: Sports Plays by Jelinek, Franzobel and Streeruwitz', in *Blueprints for No-Man's Land: Connections in Contemporary Austrian Culture*, ed. by Janet Stewart, Simon Ward and Astrid Becksteiner (Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 111–30.

⁶ The term 'Wende' [political turn] is used in the Austrian context to refer to the turn in political direction signified by the election results of November 1989 and the inclusion of the FPÖ in the coalition government of February 2000. For a wide-ranging analysis of the election successes of far-right political parties, including the FPÖ, in a European comparison, see Kai Arzheimer and Elisabeth Carter, 'Political Opportunity Structures and Right-Wing Extremist Party Success', *European Journal of Political Research*, 45 (2006), 419–43.

⁷ On the sanctions see Richard Mitten, 'Austria all Black and Blue: Jörg Haider, the European Sanctions, and the Political Crisis in Austria', in *The Haider Phenomenon in*

The central ruse of *Die Wahrheit über Österreich* is to have Prof. Dr. Hopfgärtner lay claim to his research having uncovered the 'true' history of Austria and to his being able to prove the validity of this new version of events via a sequence of documents and films he has uncovered in the KGB archives following the fall of the Soviet bloc. Using the standard devices of an expositional television history programme, then, Wippersberg has his actor 'historian' show us newly found, black-and-white film footage, interview snippets with various living witnesses who have been tracked down, and academic expert testimonies from university professors of German literature and history. Wippersberg thus mobilizes the whole gamut of factual film devices in his satire. The imitation of documentary conventions becomes more and more comical, however, as the scenarios presented are coded as absurdly exaggerated, the acting is pointedly shaped for the camera to record the relevant evidence, and the aesthetic markers are ironically laden, for example by incorporating the white vertical lines suggestive of old footage to make the filmic 'evidence' look authentically 'of its time'. Thus, the Viennese are shown to have resisted Nazism and to have found ingenious places for large quantities of Jews to hide in their apartments, sheltering on average, as the 'statistics' now prove, around two Jews per head of population. A retired university professor, with the suitably suggestive military-sounding name Prof. Dr. Attila Baranovicz and dressed in his traditional, folksy Lederhosen and Lodenmantel, is about to comment that this proves to him that Austria really was 'overrun' with Jews at the time. But the television history programme that constitutes Wippersberg's satire swiftly censors Baranovicz mid word ('Ich hab ja damals schon gesagt, dass Österreich total verju...'), so that the viewers complete Baranovicz's reprehensible thoughts for themselves.

As a professor at the Viennese film academy since 1990, the director of many films and author of screenplays as well as novels, essays and plays, Wippersberg is well versed in the theory of genre itself, but his following is most decidedly not an academic but a popular one, as can be seen by the near cult status of his earlier mock ethnographic film about the people of Upper Austria, entitled *Das Fest des Huhnes* (1992).⁸ His made-for-television films can be said to question the formation and projection of knowledge and images of knowledge, but the self-reflexive element of the later example, *Die Wahrheit über Österreich*, is more complexly layered. *Das Fest des Huhnes* works hard at sending up some of the traditions and characteristics of the director's home region of Upper Austria, but it also obliges home viewers to open their eyes to the westernized assumptions of anthropologists and ethnographers as they set

Austria, ed. by Ruth Wodak and Anton Pelinka (New Brunswick, 2002), pp. 179–212. The report by Martti Ahtisaari, Jochen Frowein, and Marelino Oreja, adopted in Paris on 8 September 2000, is available at the United Nations' Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, at <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrc/docs/ngos/HOSI-1.pdf> [accessed 28 July 2011].

⁸ *Das Fest des Huhnes* was produced for television in 1992 by the ORF. The ORF released Wippersberg's film on DVD in 2003.

out to apply their supposedly sophisticated methods of analysis and inference on the African tribes they explore and explain for European audiences. Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight comment of 'mock-documentary', Wippersberg's preferred film genre, that it 'assumes a sophisticated viewer able to recognize and participate in the form's largely parodic agenda: in other words, a viewer both familiar with the codes and conventions of documentary and ready to accept their comedic treatment'.⁹ Wippersberg's conceit in *Die Wahrheit über Österreich* is to revisit Austria's victimization myth by using a mock-documentary mode to intervene in the documentary mode itself, but with the ultimate purpose of confirming (not negating) the original, i.e. the negative print of Austria's history. Thus, the director sends up those who would wish to exonerate Austria or diminish its crimes by developing an increasingly absurd set of documentary counter-narratives about how Austria's history has been mediatized and anchored in post-war memory-building. The film performs a kind of estranging double bind. It professes a new 'truth', but parodically undermines the inscription of an alternative, uncovered or unmasked, 'true' version of history and thus emphatically reconfirms the extant, accepted 'truth about Austria'. In terms of the generic codes, Wippersberg mobilizes a full range of historical documentary techniques, and his lampooning is accentuated yet further by using Joachim Höppner as the actor to play his anchorman. Höppner's voice is extremely well known both from his own television and film roles but also as the dubbed voice of many famous American film actors, too. Imitating well-known, highly respected Austrian television histories such as the ORF's *Österreich I* and *Österreich II* documentary film series,¹⁰ Wippersberg's *Wahrheit über Österreich* parodies the close, almost conspiratorial relationship between presenter and viewer, makes mock recourse to the discourses of science and objectivity but also invokes specific knowledge familiar only to Austrians or Austria-watchers.

In this vein, the film is brought up to date by asking, satirically, just how international opinion could come to view the FPÖ as an undemocratic party and to see its great leader, Jörg Haider, as arch conservative xenophobe, hater of modern, critical art and Nazi apologist. Archival footage of Haider during one of the short courses he took at Harvard University is cut together with contrived and constructed 'interviews' with Haider's supposed fellow student friend, now finance minister of Nigeria, confirming Haider's liberal views on art. His black African friend mentions an unlikely course on modern art for beginners that his friend Haider took at Harvard, and the historian presenter thereby parodically conflates both charges against Haider and seeks to exonerate him from racism as well as from his attacks on the artistic avant-garde. Another

⁹ Roscoe and Hight, *Faking it*, p. 184.

¹⁰ Produced by Hugo Portisch and Sepp Riff for the ORF between 1981 and 1995, the documentary TV series *Österreich I* and *Österreich II* refer to the first and second Austrian republics, respectively.

sequence sees a Viennese Heurigen waitress confirming that Haider and the avant-garde painter and performance artist Hermann Nitsch were in fact great friends as she shows the camera one of the pieces of art they created together (paint that has clearly been flicked at the wall of the Heurigen). The evidence becomes more and more outlandish and culminates in the presenter's assertion that there was really more than one Haider, and that it was his look-alike who voiced some of the outrageous statements, not the real Jörg Haider, who, the presenter maintains, would never have dreamed of saying some of these things. Haider's infamous, euphemistic description of concentration camps as punishment camps ('Straflager') in 1995¹¹ or his praise for the 'ordentliche Beschäftigungspolitik' [proper employment policies] of the Third Reich are proven by the fictional announcer to have been made on days when Haider was busy on other official business. Hopfgärtner rallies further to Haider's defence by pointing out that Haider could hardly allege that these remarks were made by somebody pretending to be him as the public would have thought him mad. Wippersberg even has his anchorman use some of the trademarks of Haider's own discourse, for example in his adoption of mock-conciliatory words such as 'meinetwegen' [fine by me] when making some small concession to camera.¹² The mockumentary thus comes full circle as Austria is 'proved' once more to have been the victim of the malicious intervention of other countries. This time, it is the EU that conspires to prevent Austria's natural leadership of the union and to thwart great Austrian leaders such as Haider.

Hopfgärtner's historical tour d'horizon concludes with an exposé of how Austrians could have been tricked into believing the documentary images of mass pro-Hitler hysteria and throngs of fanatical Austrian Nazis. He points out how cleverly the Nazi propagandists edited their footage, claiming that scenes were shot in Vienna when a close-up in fact shows a sign for Tempelhof airport in Berlin or when the newly found, 'real' footage of the Heldenplatz shows one or two disinterested onlookers and a whining stray dog (rather than the familiar images of massed Viennese with their arms outstretched in the Nazi salute). The footage consists of a montage of Hitler's speech and shots of the crowd gathered on the Heldenplatz for the outdoor concert of a much beloved tenor (Richard Tauber), so the announcer argues. But Hopfgärtner's own heavy editing, botched cutting and absurd scenarios underscore Wippersberg's parodic intentions. Wippersberg's film plays self-referentially with the genre of the historical documentary, but its purpose is not to negate the value of

¹¹ The Austrian Presse Agentur reports verbatim the *Profil* magazine interview with Haider of 13 February 1995 at: http://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20000512_OTSo321/profil-straflager-urteil-nicht-rechtskraeftig [accessed 28 July 2011].

¹² Hubertus Czernin's collection of Haider quotations adopts an example of his use of this word in his book title *Wofür ich mich meinerwegen entschuldige: Haider beim Wort genommen*, ed by Hubertus Czernin (Vienna, 2000). For the quotation about NS employment policies, see the extract of a speech to the Carinthian regional parliament of 13 June 1991 (p. 31).

documentary media. Instead his film acts as a further reminder of the need to keep reading Austrian history, to be wary of attempts to dupe the viewer or reader of that history and to stay alert to the attempts — by FPÖ politicians, perhaps, or by others — to trivialize the crimes of the past or indeed to perpetrate new ones. Wippersberg guards against the delusional power of political myth-making and the irrational mobilization of emotion to stir up nationalist sentiment, in this case ironically assisting his viewers finally to sleep unperturbed by the falsifications of history. *Die Wahrheit über Österreich* is a protest film, not simply against specific political events (for example the formation of the FPÖ-ÖVP coalition) but against deceptive or biased practices and nepotistic or nationalist mindsets. Ulrike Steiner's description of Wippersberg's 'Doku-Fakes' tries to pinpoint how they work:

Es geht nicht um Dämonisierung der Medien, sondern um Stärkung der Immunkräfte. Es muss schließlich eine Wirklichkeit hinter der 'medienkontaminierten' Gesellschaft geben, deren Strukturen freizulegen sind. Es geht um die Unterscheidungsfähigkeit zwischen 'richtiger' und 'verzerrter' Wiedergabe realer Sachverhalte. So gesehen, sind Walter Wippersbergs Doku-Fakes ein Impfstoff, der gegen die Auswirkungen globaler Verblendungszusammenhänge wirkt.¹³

[It's not a matter of demonizing the media but rather of strengthening the immune system. After all, there must be a reality behind our 'media-contaminated' society whose structures should be laid bare. It's a matter of being able to differentiate between a 'proper' and a 'distorted' reflection of the facts. Looked at like that, Walter Wippersberg's docu-fakes are a kind of vaccination against the effects of global mystification.]

In its overriding impetus to 'correct' memories of Austria, Wippersberg's fake documentary takes up and exaggerates a central plank of far-right, populist argumentation by playing with the idea of remembering history selectively. 'Populist movements use images of the past in order to cement the community', Patricia Chiantera-Stutte writes, and adds an important, apparent contradiction, however, that 'remembering the past is not just a corner stone of the creation of a "heartland". Populist leaders also engender a process of forgetting, as is shown by Haider's deliberate forgetting of National Socialist crimes'.¹⁴ The central paradox of Wippersberg's strategy in *Die Wahrheit über Österreich* is that in comically distorting the facts of Austrian history the director seeks rather to remedy any falsifications or revisionist narratives of Austria's past and to make sure that history is not forgotten.

¹³ Ulrike Steiner, 'Weltbilder verrücken: Die Doku-Fakes von Walter Wippersberg' in *Die Rampe: Porträt Walter Wippersberg* (2003), p. 99.

¹⁴ Patricia Chiantera-Stutte, 'Populist Use of Memory and Constitutionalism: Two Comments', *German Law Journal* 6.2 (2005), 391–97 (pp. 394–95).

III

Peter Kern's political satire, *1. April 2021: Haider lebt*, had its cinema release in the autumn of 2002 just as campaigning for the next general election was under way and the first, shortlived ÖVP-FPÖ government was nearing dissolution. Many famous actors and writers collaborated in Kern's film, reputedly for low wages or for none at all. This must be seen as a sign of the artistic intelligentsia's support for an often controversial director and actor who is well known for foregrounding political topics, including the gender-political theme of homosexuality. More importantly, the willingness of well-known Austrian actors such as Traute Hoess (Riess-Passer), Günter Tolar (Schüssel), Heinrich Herki (Haider) or Hilde Sochor (ageing social democrat) and the appearance of high-profile Austrian writers in the film, too (for example, Peter Turrini, Robert Schindel, and Marlene Streeruwitz) indicates the creative support and solidarity shown to Peter Kern in his satirical protest against the political climate of Austria in the early twenty-first century. With Martin Strutz, the then head of the Carinthian FPÖ, calling — unsuccessfully — for a ban on the film, Kern's low-budget, self-financed dystopia gained notoriety and excellent publicity even before it had been seen on the screen. The fictional Jörg Haider and Susanne Riess-Passer being gunned down by a Wolfgang Schüssel character singing the Austrian national anthem in the film's absurdist conclusion was felt to be offensive.¹⁵ Riess-Passer is ecstatic at having been reunited with her beloved 'Jörgeli', a moment described by the enthusiastic fictional film director, in the most ironic and vulgar intertextual reference, as brilliant, and as reminiscent of the ending of Veit Harlan's *Jüd Süß* (a most vicious piece of anti-Semitic, Nazi propaganda from 1940).

Kern uses the conceit of projecting his Austria forward to a date when the country has just come out of a twenty-year rule by the right-wing coalition but is now under foreign occupation and has become 'Austria-America'. Conceived of at the time of the escalating Iraq crisis, Kern's film prophetically presages the American and British invasion of Iraq and deposition of Saddam Hussein. In the film, it is rumoured that Haider is not dead but has in fact gone into hiding, as has his collaborator Wolfgang Schüssel. Fairground attractions entertain their public by telling historical narratives and using the scary ghouls of Schüssel and Haider. The 'Haider-Monster' turns out to be the real thing, and when the young German filmmaker, August Maria Kaiser from the 'Freies deutsches Fernsehen', finally catches up with him in the closing moments of the film, Riess-Passer and Haider discover that the German filmmaker is in fact their clandestine love child whom they had given up for adoption.

¹⁵ This is reported in Karin Cerny, 'Schüssel tötet', *Berliner Zeitung*, 11 November 2002, <https://www.berlinonline.de/berliner-zeitung/archiv/.bin/dump.fcgi/2002/1111/feuilleton/0057/index.html> [accessed 28 July 2011].

Haider says to Riess-Passer that sometimes, instead of spitting on him at the fairground, the people are full of hope and ask (and here he uses terminology that is redolent of National Socialism) whether this is now the 'Endsieg' [final victory]. Kern incorporates moments, too, which suggest the fictional Haider's homosexuality. Following a libel action brought by Haider's widow in 2009, German and Austrian newspapers are currently under an injunction not to describe Jörg Haider as homosexual or bisexual,¹⁶ but to the gay filmmaker Kern, the implication in his 2002 film is certainly not an insult but more a gibe at the politician's perceived need or attempts to conceal this.

When the young documentary filmmaker in *1. April 2021* discovers a CD-Rom Haider has secreted into a roadside shrine as a recorded message to his followers, Kern is able to use a montage of real-life television interview footage of Haider to parodic effect. In the first interview, Haider describes the situation on the ground after the invasion of foreign troops as a kind of civil war, and since the names of countries and forces are omitted, the viewer assumes Haider is describing Austria after the Americans' occupation and not, say, the situation in the former Yugoslavia. The second clip is after Haider's resignation as party leader in 2000 when he effectively ceded the Vice-Chancellorship of Austria and retreated to his home region of Carinthia, but remarked that like a true marathon runner, he was used to having to take a long time to get to his ultimate goal and that he would not rule out becoming Chancellor of Austria some day. The fun poked at Haider's reputation as a sporty family man and at his manner of self-styling as a kind of quasi-religious leader is evident here as it is in many other political lampoons, Elfriede Jelinek's dramolet 'Das Lebewohl' being perhaps the best known example.¹⁷ Riess-Passer refers to Haider's followers as the 'faithful' and comments to the protagonist filmmaker, Kaiser, and to the camera: 'Nun sehen Sie wie das Volk Jörgeli liebte. Im Volk lebt er ja ewig; für mich ja auch' [So now you see how the people loved Jörgeli. He lives on eternally in his people, and for me he does too]. Kaiser's increasing frustration at their wild-goose chase and his Austrian crew member's confession that he liked Haider and had heard all his speeches, results in the filmmaker-protagonist's exasperated provocation that since they could not find Haider, they would just let him die. A kind of funeral, complete with burial cross and chief mourner, Riess-Passer, is staged accordingly for the film within the film, in a move, which, as Robert von Dassanowsky points out, suggests Carol Reed's post-war

¹⁶ This is reported widely in the press. See, n. a., 'Österreich: Toter Haider gewinnt Prozess zu seinem Sex-Leben', 18 November 2009, http://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20091118_OTS0321/oesterreich-toter-haider-gewinnt-prozess-zu-seinem-sex-leben, [accessed 28 July 2011] or the report and vast number of reader comments on Elke Galvin, 'Gericht schützt posthum Haiders Privatsphäre', *Kleine Zeitung*, 19 November 2009, <http://www.kleinezeitung.at/nachrichten/politik/haider/2207536/zeitungen-angeblichen-enthuellungen-zu-haiders-privatleben-verurteilt.story> [accessed 28 July 2011].

¹⁷ Elfriede Jelinek, 'Das Lebewohl (Les Adieux)', in *Das Lebewohl: 3 kl. Dramen* (Berlin, 2000), pp. 9–35, first published in *Theater heute*, 5 (2000), 36–41.

Vienna film, *The Third Man* (1949), as its intertext, and when Haider's funeral is arranged, 'the former politician reappears to foment a disastrous ending'.¹⁸

The real Jörg Haider died on 11 October 2008 after driving at high speed and with a high level of alcohol in his blood stream on his way home from late-night socializing with his deputy Stefan Petzner, who later announced emotionally on live radio that he had had a 'special relationship' with Haider. Petzner was removed from his role as successor leader to Haider's BZÖ party, and the BZÖ vehemently refuted that Haider was gay. Although Kern's 'April Fool' pre-dates Haider's death by some six years, the implication of his following as being nothing short of cultic and worshipful was to find uncanny expression in the mass outpouring of grief, the vigils held, and the veneration directed at the deceased politician who was leader of the breakaway party, the Alliance for the Future of Austria (Bündnis Zukunft Österreichs, BZÖ), at the time of his death. His party even campaigned in the regional elections of the following spring with the highly successful slogan 'Ihm zuliebe BZÖ' [BZÖ, for his sake] and gained 45% of the vote in Carinthia.

The titular reassurance that 'Haider is alive!' means that Kern's film has if anything become more political and provocative in the post-Haider period. Asserting by analogy that right-wing extremism lives on is a strategy that Kern has employed in his 2009 film *Blutsfreundschaft* (*Initiation*), fully cognizant of the campaigning strategies of the FPÖ under the current, good-looking, male, populist leader H.C. Strache. *Blutsfreundschaft* is about a fictional, neofascist, political party called the RWT ('Partei für Recht, Würde und Tugend' [The Party for Justice, Dignity and Honour]) and a homosexual relationship between a former Nazi and a young, sixteen-year-old party member who reminds the old man of the lover he had betrayed during the war. The topic of the film is controversial, but the public scandal surrounding the film was caused more by its advertising campaign than by its content. Posters purporting to advertise the party itself were billed with a slogan satirically exaggerating FPÖ statements, for example by H.C. Strache in declining his support for gay marriage. Because the poster seemed to be about a political party (and not a film), and contained the deliberately provocative statement 'Soziale Wärme statt Woame' [a caring society not a gay one] echoing a Viennese pronunciation of the colloquial, pejorative term 'warm', meaning homosexual, the advertising company refused to display the film posters. It was not until a banner was superimposed on the poster stating that Kern's film *Blutsfreundschaft* would be in the cinemas soon, that limited advertising could proceed. Kern and others argued that it did not seem fair that their satire was being rejected while the FPÖ itself could carry on

¹⁸ The DVD cover uses a still from the funeral sequence. See http://derstandard.at/3058819/1-April-2021---Haider-lebt?_lexikaGroup=5 [accessed 28 July 2011]. Robert von Dassanowsky, 'Austria Hungry: The Return of a Film Nation', *Bright Lights Film Journal* 51 (2006), <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/51/51austria.php> [accessed 28 July 2011].

advertising with the most offensive homophobic and xenophobic slogans and were not rebuked or restrained for doing so.¹⁹

In the 2002 film we are concerned with here, the provocative and intertextually resonant title is just one part of what Claus Philipp describes as Kern's general filmic strategy of using distortions to narrate truths ('erzählen vom Wahren im Verfälschten'). This is a deliberate tactic by the filmmaker whose dictum Philipp quotes: 'Mit dem Spiel kann ich reale Verhältnisse komprimieren' [by being playful I can expose real-life circumstances].²⁰ A major plank of Kern's ludic subterfuge in *1. April 2021* is to have the viewer learn something of how things have been in Austria as a result of twenty years of ÖVP-FPÖ. Fictional Riess-Passer comments on how the German 'Chancellor' Edmund Stoiber — the hardliner also well known for his anti-immigrationist stance who in 2002 was prime minister of Bavaria — worked so well with them towards planning the eventual 'annexation of Austria' and in getting the 'Ausländerfrage' [immigration question] under control. To Kaiser's incredulous question as to whether there were in fact any foreigners in Austria during her period in office, Riess-Passer explains that they had completely solved the problem by giving over the UNO-City entirely to immigrants. The latter were allowed twelve-hour passes out of their delimited compound if they occasionally wanted to visit the shops of Vienna, and the Viennese would occasionally go there to visit restaurants and eat cous-cous.

The film's political undertones suggesting the anti-immigrationist stance of the FPÖ are anything but subtle. One admiring reviewer responds to the film equally unsubtly by attaching an alternative title, '*Haider Lives: 1. April 2021* (aka *Who the Fuck is Haider*)', dubbing the film 'an all-out agitprop assault' and 'an ultra-campy farce about a far-right Euro politico'.²¹ Kern would probably not object to the label of 'ultra-camp' and certainly does not mind his work being labelled 'trashy'. 'Darüber bin ich nicht beleidigt', he asserts, 'weil "Trash" für mich ein Qualitätsbegriff ist. Trotzdem wird man schnell abqualifiziert. Mein "Müll" ist bewusst erzählt' [I don't find it insulting because 'trash' is a marker of quality for me. People do tend to dismiss you very quickly, though. My 'rubbish' is very carefully narrated].²² The conscious crafting of *1. April 2021* does not mean that Kern employs sophisticated camera angles, lighting, or editing. Kern even pokes mild fun at cinematic codes and would seem to have

¹⁹ See Thomas Trenkler, 'Blutsfreundschaft: Mit den Waffen der Rechtspopulisten', *Der Standard*, 20 October 2009. The web edition at <http://derstandard.at/1254311841330/Blutsfreundschaft-Mit-den-Waffen-der-Rechtspopulisten> [accessed 28 July 2011] displays the film's poster advertisements. It is interesting to note that Kern has demonstrated a willingness to pursue politics through official, non-artistic channels by running as a Green Party candidate in the Viennese local elections in 2009.

²⁰ Claus Philipp, 'Retter der Erniedrigten und Beleidigten: Peter Kern', *Der Standard*, 19 April 2007.

²¹ Olaf Möller, 'Undefeated', *Film Comment* (July/August 2007), pp. 18–19 (p. 19).

²² In Philipp, 'Retter der Erniedrigten und Beleidigten: Peter Kern'.

no pretensions to emulating an art-house style, having his cipher filmmaker, Kaiser, admonish his cameraman on a number of occasions for adopting an 'arty' camera angle or for focusing on something that is not germane to the film. The rebuke comes full circle, too, when the cameraman goads his producer-director who is about to stage Haider's burial site for the camera: 'Aha, das nennt man eine Dokumentation?' [Oh, so that's how you document things?]. Kern's 'conscious crafting' [bewusst erzähl(en)] lies in the way his film works in a meta-referential fashion. Aesthetically, Kern references the making of film and the styles of filmmaking in a kind of *mise-en-abyme*. Itself a kind of resistant text, the film plays, too, with the very theme of resistance and deploys intertextual allusions to underscore this idea. Since the Americans have outlawed the use of dialect, the use of Viennese vernacular is laughingly seen as an act of resistance. A secret society even meets up to sing *Volkslieder* to keep Austrian traditions alive. The camera team are led to a secret location in the woods where, in a parodic reference to Truffaut's adaptation of Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451* starring Austrian-born actor Oskar Werner, well-known contemporary writers walk up and down reading out aloud from books and endeavouring to commit them to memory. Kern is clearly not setting up the futuristic American version of Austria to be better than the ÖVP-FPÖ-governed one. As in Bradbury's dystopian America, the viewer of *1. April 2021* infers that independent thinking furthered by reading will be every bit as frowned upon in the new, fantastical Austria, but notes that it is the continuance of *Austrian* culture — some of it read aloud in dialect — to which the Austrian writers dedicate their outlawed reading.

An early sequence in Liebeneiner's 1954 April-fool film from which Kern draws his title, serves as a less obvious intertextual allusion to the resistance theme. The legend of the provenance of the Austrian flag is recounted to the 1950s courtroom via a historical film reportedly sanctioned for use in schools: at the siege of Acre the Austrian King Leopold V removes his belt to reveal a white unbloodied band in the middle of his blood-stained tunic and is permitted by the Holy Roman Emperor to use these red-white-red bands as the banner of Austria. In what could be seen as a nod by Kern to the earlier film's 'documentation' of the burgeoning of Austrian national consciousness via the birth of its iconic flag, the Riess-Passer character performs her act of resistance, she tells us, by occasionally hanging out a bloodied towel on her balcony. Riess-Passer mutters 'rot weiß rot' [red white red] as she sees the wound on the cameraman's face. He has sustained this cut after being attacked by the zombified Austrians patronizing the former 'Café Jelinek', now known as the 'Have-a-nice-day Coffeeshop'. The kindly patriot Riess-Passer wants to tend to the cameraman's wounds, and Kern's omniscient camera now focuses on the very unrealistic dripping of red blood onto the white towel before it is hung out amidst Riess-Passer's explanation of what she sometimes does, 'damit die Leute sehen — hier ist eine, die lebt im Widerstand' [so that the people can see — there's somebody living in resistance]. The Austrians understand her ersatz flag

and show of patriotism, she implies, but the American occupiers merely think that a child must have been conceived there that night.

If Kern's film is clearly an expression of the artist's disquiet over the FPÖ's — admittedly shared — acquisition of executive power, in common with many other cultural and intellectual commentators Kern does not spare the left wing from his contempt.²³ In *1. April 2021*, the SPÖ are a spent force, and when Kaiser and his team track down Sepp Hinterhiersel, a legend of the Left's resistance, what they find is an old soak and his female companion whose current 'resistance' amounts to the smoking of cannabis and experiencing its delusional effects. 'Das ist unser Widerstand', the old lady tells Kaiser, 'Sie machen zwei Züge und die Sozis sind wieder an die Macht' [This is our resistance. Two drags on this and the Socialists are back in power]. She harks back to the 1970s and claims to hear Bruno Kreisky's voice calling from the trees. The attempt on Jörg Haider's life, for which old Sepp is famed, is fittingly unheroic, too, as the former waiter had attempted to serve Haider a glass of poisoned wine but had mixed the glasses up and given it to a different politician instead.

The 'plot' of Kern's political satire is clearly nothing short of absurd, but the hammed-up accents, dead-pan delivery, wooden acting and contrived suspense of the search for Haider and Schüssel are not merely the necessities of a low-budget film. Rather, they are deployed very deliberately by Kern to produce an ironic excess that is effective in its blunt style of questioning. In a pointed twist on the standard legal caveats that sometimes precede films, the viewer is informed at the outset that the film is only fantasy and that the real people of the same names as the film characters would never do what the film shows them doing. However, should the viewer identify similarities between any living people and fictional characters bearing the same name, then this is only because nightmares have their basis in reality, the warning continues. If the narrative is deliberately improbable, then the rough-and-ready video style of Kern's film is also a calculated tool in enabling the director to create independent art relatively quickly and to do so in a politically perceptive manner. Dietmar Schwärzler comments of *1. April 2021*: 'Dessen billige Video-Ästhetik kreiert affektive (größtenteils lustige) Momente und berührt gleichzeitig gesellschaftspolitische Wahrnehmungsmuster' [its cheap video aesthetics produce emotional (mostly humorous) aspects and at the same time touch on sociopolitical patterns of perception]. Schwärzler is right to locate in Kern's art a renewal of the political qualities promised by video film when it was first used and promised to be 'ein schnelles, politisches Medium [...], das künstlerische Unabhängigkeit gewährt' [a quick, political medium that gives artistic independence].²⁴

²³ Lonnie R. Johnson cites Robert Menasse and Armin Turnher when he asserts that 'some of the most pointed criticism of the SPÖ [Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs] comes from intellectuals who have the political label "left"'. See Johnson, 'On the Inside Looking Out: An Essay on Austria's New ÖVP-FPÖ Government, Jörg Haider, and Europe', Austrian Fulbright Commission, Vienna, Working Paper 00-1 (June 2000), n. 37 (p. 25).

²⁴ Dietmar Schwärzler, 'Zukunftsvisionen. Ein Heimatfilm: Peter Kerns *1. April 2021*:

Kern's peculiar low-budget cocktail of humorous, dystopian social criticism is punchy and raw, but *1. April 2021* makes its protest heard as acutely as many more sophisticated film projects and should not be overlooked in discussions of political filmmaking. The fake documentary mode is a convenient form for Kern's deconstruction of leading political figures, such as Riess-Passer, but most importantly, the father figure of the movement and would-be leader of the nation, Jörg Haider. In its mock quest to find the previously highly public 'Haider', the film can visit various tropes of Austrian identity (the flag, Austrians' love of song, their dialect) and use exaggerated narratives about these tropes to symbolize nationalist, 'heartland' thinking. If the nationalists feel that their core identity is constantly under threat — by those compatriots who would rather become more European or more cosmopolitan, and by 'foreign' interference in domestic affairs (after the Waldheim affair in 1986 and after the FPÖ election success of 1999), then Kern's strategy is to take this paranoia and project it fictionally in his provocatively 'unreal', parodic, documentary vision of Austria's near future.

IV

Political filmmaking comes in different guises. Recent cinema has produced examples of films in a variety of genres in which a reflection on contemporary Austrian political realities are a discernible theme or focus. Arguably, if a film is to find box-office success, then political discussions are best hidden in a genre such as the thriller and in a film for which high-profile actors have been recruited.²⁵ Swiss director Urs Egger's 1998 adaptation of Austrian writer Josef Haslinger's novel *Opernball* (1995) provides an example set in contemporary Austria. In Egger's fast-paced action film about a young neo-Nazi and the mass killing of thousands of innocent people at the state opera ball, the rise of intolerance towards foreigners in mainstream society and politics in the film's scene-setting is clearly open for viewers to interpret as an exaggerated analogy of turn-of-the-century political developments. The most obvious — and least commercial — examples of political films centring on the turn in Austrian politics in 1999/2000 are a series of short protest films gathered together under the banner 'Die Kunst der Stunde ist Widerstand' [The Art of the Day is Resistance] and ranging from demonstration footage through political satire and more avant-garde strategies of critique.²⁶

Mockumentary is the predominant guise of the two films discussed here,

Haider lebt, *Der Standard*, 3 October 2007. The text also features on the box of the DVD edition.

²⁵ Terry Christensen and Peter J. Haas report comments by Franco-Greek film director Costa-Gavras to this effect in Terry Christensen and Peter J. Haas, *Projecting Politics: Political Messages in American Films* (Armonk, NY, 2005), p. 287.

²⁶ See Allyson Fiddler, 'Lights, Camera, ... Protest! Austrian Filmmakers and the Extreme Right', *Journal of European Popular Culture*, 2.1 (2011), forthcoming.

neither of which is crafted for its potential box office. In the one instance, fake documentary is the overriding genre (*Die Wahrheit über Österreich*) and in the other it is a component within the surrounding near-future sci-fi feature film (*1. April 2021: Haider lebt*). The films show different ways of putting political filmmaking into practice rather than purporting to be the only ways of doing so. Both filmmakers reflect on the genre of documentary in their own practice and play with an unsettling approach to authenticity and filmic historiography. Whereas Wippersberg ridicules the idea of misappropriating the truths of Austria's historic past by offering a ludicrous negation of the acknowledged version of Austrian history, Kern delivers a kind of distancing or alienation effect on the present by extending an absurdist teleology of how politics might map out into the future. Both films contain moments of hilarious humour, but this does not and should not prevent us from taking these mockumentaries seriously, as accomplished examples of filmmaking and as works of political protest.