

YES DOCU AND REALWORKS PRESENT



THE UNBELIEVABLE SECOND CAREER OF THE GOOD NAZI

SPEER GOES TO HOLLYWOOD

A FILM BY VANESSA LAPA

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Israel 2020, 97 minutes, English-German OV

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A Realworks production

Producers Vanessa Lapa and Tomer Eliav
Co-Producers Björn Koll, Felix Breisach
Associate Producer Sylvain Goldberg
Executive Producers Manu & Cathy Schöngut, Stanley Cohen,
Johnny Kneller, Philippe Laub,
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With the support of yes Docu, ORF, Makor Foundation
for Israeli films, Claims Conference,
Mifal Hapais

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The unbelievable second career of Albert Speer: How did a man in charge of 12 million slaves become “the good Nazi”? A cautionary tale about his 1971 attempt to whitewash his past with a Hollywood adaptation of his memoir, “Inside the Third Reich.”

Albert Speer is an enigma. The highest-ranking Nazi in Nuremberg to be spared the death sentence, Speer was one of Hitler’s closest confidants and his chief architect, tasked with rebuilding Berlin as the capital of a global empire. As Reichsminister of Munitions, Speer was responsible for 12 million slave laborers. And yet, even now, he has the reputation of being “the good Nazi” – a myth he carefully constructed himself. “Speer Goes to Hollywood” meets its protagonist in 1971, while Speer was working on a screenplay for Paramount Pictures, based on his bestselling wartime memoir “Inside the Third Reich”. Based on months of audio cassettes, recorded by screenwriter Andrew Birkin, it features Speer’s callous attempt to whitewash his past in a feature film. The audio narrative is supplemented by rare archival footage, taken before and during World War II and later, during Speer’s retirement as a semi-reclusive country gentleman.

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Director's Note

I first encountered the story of Albert Speer and the film he wanted to make, when I met Stanley Cohen at a screening of my last film, "The Decent One". In that film, I told the story of another prominent Nazi, Heinrich Himmler. My goal in that film was to understand the inner workings of a human being whose choices made him a mass murderer by looking at his innermost thoughts, as expressed in his own words.

Stanley asked me if I had more information about the correspondence between Himmler and Speer. I did not, but about one and a half years later, Tomer Eliav, the sound designer for "The Decent One" (and producer of this film) arranged a meeting with Cohen, and learned about an unmade film based on Speer's bestselling memoir, "Inside the Third Reich." Cohen then told us about their 1971 collaboration with Paramount, his own few meetings with Speer and a young screenwriter Andrew Birkin – now a man in his seventies – spent several months with Speer in his home in Heidelberg while collaborating with him on a film adaptation of Speer's book. Stanley asked me to contact Birkin.

I went to see Birkin at his home in Wales several months later. While there, he told me that in fact he recorded his conversations with Speer. They form the basis of my new film, "Speer Goes to Hollywood".

In making this film, I wanted to take my audience on a forty-year journey through the sounds and images, thoughts and emotions that meandered through the mind of Albert Speer, a man known to history as "the good Nazi." This is his retelling of World War II and its aftermath, but is it *history* or *his story*, as he would have liked his history to be? Is it cold fact or idealized fiction, nostalgic reminiscences or the product of some conscious effort to whitewash his own reputation and walk away like a saint from Sodom? These are questions that resonate loudly in this era of fake news. Are we consumers or critics of the narratives we encounter on screens big and small? Are we more easily manipulated than we care to admit by the sounds and images meandering through our own minds?

In forty hours of audio recordings never intended for release, Speer opens up about his life to a promising 26-year-old screenwriter. He speaks freely, with no inhibitions, "correcting" the past as he talks. The aura he exudes is of an elegant man, more akin to a country squire than the mass murderer of millions. The secret, we find, lies in his soft-spoken eloquence, his sharp intellect, and his innate ability to charm and manipulate the people around him, whether they are the judges at Nuremberg, or the journalists, publishers, and filmmakers, who unwittingly helped him rewrite the past and his own part in it.

By listening closely to the recordings, we can hear Speer distort the chronological order of events, sometimes even erasing events entirely. It is all part of a calculated effort, driven by his craving for acceptance and fame despite his crimes against humanity. Albert Speer wants to be remembered, but is it really him or some fictitious Hollywood caricature that he wants to leave as his legacy?

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I came to this project thinking of Speer as an opportunist trapped by the circumstances of Germany in the early 1930s. I had yet to know him as the megalomaniacal architect, who wanted to build “buildings that would last forever”, or as the liar and relentless manipulator that I eventually found in the tapes. In some ways I suppose that when I approached this film, I was also under his sway. I did not know him as the relentless taskmaster of an army of slaves 12 million weak, one-third of whom would die to feed his ambition. I did not realize at first that he almost singlehandedly extended the war in Europe for an unnecessary two years, causing millions more to die. Or that he did this while he was fully aware that it was already a lost cause.

It was only during my four years of research that I came to “live” this other Speer. What I found was a man, who embodied evil, and for whom human life had no intrinsic value. In that sense, this film is about my personal awakening, as much as it is about Speer’s attempts to lull the world into forgetfulness.

It is the job of the documentary filmmaker to decipher and understand the people who changed the course of history by examining their words as much as their deeds. It can, at times, be a discomfoting process for the filmmakers, as much as it is for their audience. At times, old assumptions must be swept aside. But as unnerving as this process is, it is essential that the subject’s own words be brought to light and preserved for posterity. That was my first challenge in “Speer Goes to Hollywood”.

My second challenge was finding ways to match those conversations, recorded on tape almost half a century ago, with other audio sources in order to complete the story.

The third challenge was to find the appropriate visual archival materials. Mine would not be a film based on talking heads. There would be no interviews or external narration. If Speer would ever be incriminated for his attempts to distort history, he would have to incriminate himself. “The good Nazi” would have to convince his audience that he wasn’t so good after all.

After all, he convinced the judges in Nuremberg to spare him from the gallows, even though people subordinate to him found themselves at the end of a hangman’s rope. Without debating the justness of any of their sentences, it is important to realize that what really saved Speer was not his innocence, but rather his performance before his judges. Despite all the evidence, and despite their proximity to the events on trial, the judges at Nuremberg also seem to have been swayed by Speer’s unrivaled charm. If they could not see past his charade, why would anyone else? What does that tell us about justice anywhere?

For me, this film is important for correcting the false impressions and narrative that Speer tried to insert into a Hollywood feature about his life and times. Had this film been made, it would have rewritten the history of a historical injustice and transformed its villain into its unchallenged hero. To avoid this, we must reach the truth. That is something that Speer tried to deny us.

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Although she was born and raised in Belgium, Vanessa Lapa has been living and working in Israel since 1995. A talented polyglot and accomplished journalist, she produced and directed over one hundred news reports and documentaries for Israeli television. She was deeply involved on the Israeli side of content and production for “New York Times”-columnist Thomas Friedman’s riveting 52-minute documentary “Straddling the Fence” (USA, 2003), which was aired worldwide.

In 2006, Vanessa founded Realworks, Ltd., an independent production house, based in Tel Aviv, which specializes in documentary film. “Olmert: Concealed Documentary” (Israel, 2009), one of the company’s earliest projects, was hailed as a uniquely insightful achievement in cinéma vérité. The film featured behind-the-scenes revelations about the private and public life of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

At the time, Vanessa was already hard at work on “The Decent One”, an intimate look at SS Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler, the most powerful person in the Third Reich after Adolf Hitler. Having discovered that Himmler assiduously kept a diary throughout most of his life, Vanessa’s film offered an unprecedented and often surprising glimpse into the mind of this nefarious butcher. Vanessa researched, wrote, directed, and produced this remarkable document about this infamous but little-known man.

Eight years in the making, “The Decent One” had its world premiere at the Berlin Film Festival in 2014. It was an official selection for Panorama, which features the festival’s edgiest, most daring work. “The Decent One” went on to win the Best Documentary Feature award at the Jerusalem Film Festival. All in all, it was an official selection in over 100 film festivals worldwide. It had a theatrical release in 50 countries and was broadcast in 60.

Vanessa followed this film with “Speer Goes to Hollywood”, a feature documentary about another Nazi official, Reichsminister for Armaments Albert Speer, told in his own words. The film has been officially selected for the Berlinale Special, and will have its world premiere at the Berlin Film Festival in February 2020.