

Our Hitler

Barry J. Hershey's *The Empty Mirror*

By [John Patterson](#) Wednesday, May 5 1999

THE EMPTY MIRROR, BARRY J. HERSHEY'S COMPLEX, visually overwhelming portrait of Adolf Hitler, is preoccupied by, among other things, the culpability of filmed images in assisting Germany's graduated descent into depravity. In an attempt to extract Hitler from our collective demonology, and from his current, near-meaningless status as lazy shorthand for monstrous evil, Hershey locks us in a room with Hitler and invites us to assess him as a living, breathing man -- something many of us quite naturally resist -- the better to explain his multiple pathologies.

For most of the film, Hitler (British actor Norman Rodway) is seen viewing newsreels and home movies in his bunker and talking retrospectively, defensively and bombastically about his legacy from some imaginary point in time after the war has ended. During this reverie, his visitors include his chief propagandist and image-burnisher Goebbels (an eerily appropriate Joel Grey), the corpulent Göring, Eva Braun and, most memorably, the ghost of Freud, a man with his fingers on all Hitler's hottest buttons, who taunts the Führer about his "erotic affinity with Death."

Weakened by his accelerating decrepitude, Hitler is increasingly ill-equipped to resist a mental confrontation with the carnage he has wrought. But until the guilt comes, he is happy to discourse on Art, Opera and Architecture -- his grand triumvirate -- and the synthesis of them all, Cinema. Hitler, though virulently anti-Modernist when it came to aesthetics, relied heavily on the newsreel to sculpt public perception, much as he adapted Henry Ford's 20th-century assembly-line principles to the manufacture of both armaments and corpses. Hitler talks of World War II as "the mobilization of millions of extras to create the most magnificent and historic film footage," and refers to editing as "a black magic" that will aid his desire to give Germans "a sense of heroic belonging." He berates Stalin for the aesthetic deficiencies of his tyranny. "Stalin has no sense of form!" barks Hitler. "Where is the drama in slaughtering well-to-do farmers? Stalin misunderstood the principles of opera." Addressing a Hitler Youth delegation, he advises them, "Sons and daughters, take guidance from the arts." One of them remarks to Hitler, about montage, "In a way, the editing, the outtakes, the flaws . . . These were like the Jews."

Hershey is asking some of the questions posed in 1977 by Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's mammoth *Hitler -- A Film From Germany*. Given that Hitler associated himself so publicly and so often with the great figures of German culture, to what extent is their work undermined or discredited by his approval? Can any of it be redeemed? And while Hershey doesn't argue that cinema is to blame for Hitler, he does recognize the need to examine the dire ends it can serve.

Central to *The Empty Mirror* is its sophisticated visual architecture. Hitler is usually seen before a back-projected newsreel of Nazi-era footage, from the Anschluss to Treblinka, or one of Eva Braun's kitschy, *gemütlich* home movies of life at Berchtesgaden. Complementing and contradicting Hitler's demented pontifications and rationalizations, Hershey's judicious visual juxtapositions begin to portray Hitler as an emptiness, moral antimatter, covered -- almost imprisoned -- by an encrustation of propaganda images. Cinematographer Frederick Elmes, who shot *Eraserhead* and has worked with Jim Jarmusch, deserves great commendation for successfully integrating multiple layers of images; his superimpositions add an extra dimension to Hershey's already elaborate *mise en scène*.

Holding *The Empty Mirror* together is the almost kaleidoscopic performance of Rodway as Hitler. Rodway is required to range across a wild and contradictory array of emotional states, from grandiloquent denial to gibbering fear and hysteria, from petit-bourgeois burgher to would-be Caesar or Alexander. The only performance like it is Philip Baker Hall's as Nixon in Robert Altman's *Secret Honor*. Rodway needs the shoulders of Atlas to carry this heavy burden of isolation, gathering dementia and madness. Thankfully, for Hershey's mightily ambitious film, he manages it.

Hitler had star power: His intimates often spoke of the mesmerizing "Führer-kontakt," a look from Hitler that could paralyze them in adulation. A devoted demagogue is bound to be interested in the possibilities of cinema, and in his relationship with Leni Riefenstahl, Hitler found a portraitist who would never shoot him from the wrong angle. Hershey finds a rewarding and disturbing way to shoot him from nothing but the right ones.

THE EMPTY MIRROR | Directed by BARRY J. HERSHEY

Written by HERSHEY and R. BUCKINGHAM | Produced by DAVID D. JOHNSON, M. JAY ROACH and WILLIAM DANCE | Released by Lions Gate Films | At Laemmle's Music Hall