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A troubling look into Hitler's head

'The Empty Mirror' presents a portrait of the monster as an artist and a man of our time.

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By HENRY SHEEHAN

A fascinating oddity, visually ingenious, chock full of ideas (some more persuasive than others) and featuring a tour de force performance by the Royal Shakespeare Company's Norman Rodway, "The Empty Mirror" is a guided tour through the mind of Adolf Hitler. The feature debut of Barry Hershey, the movie could easily have been lost in the ongoing flood of attempts to understand one of history's great monsters. But it gets our attention thanks to the original way it focuses our attention and, perhaps more disturbingly, in how it presents Hitler as very much a man of our time and, at least partially, our sensibility. The movie is set in a strange sort of bunker, which looks like a large cave outfitted with classical columns, where we find Hitler (Rodway) apparently dictating some sort of memoir to a typist (Doug McKeon) in a Nazi uniform. The exact time is unstated, but from the tone Hitler adopts, it's clear that we are late in his career, perhaps even in some sort of anteroom to the afterlife. As the dictator goes on with his memoir, he's joined by various figures, including henchmen Joseph Goebbels (Joel Grey) and Hermann Goering (Glenn Shadix), lover Eva Braun (Camilla Soeberg) and, perhaps not so surprisingly, Sigmund Freud (Peter Michael Goetz).

More provocatively, the background is occupied by a movie screen constantly filled with images. Frequently, and especially early on, it's snippets from Leni Riefenstahl's propaganda film "Triumph of the Will," a record of a large Nazi rally. Other archival footage, including Hitler's home movies and Allied shots of recently liberated concentration camps, also appears, either supporting or contradicting whatever remarks Hitler is making.

Both these techniques keep the movie, essentially a series of monologues by the superb Rodway, from settling into either visual or aural monotony. Hershey and his co-writer, R. Buckingham, display too lively an intelligence to ever be merely dull. Partly, this comes from the way they illuminate a character and subtly further a point at the same time, a moment exemplified when a toadying Goebbels gushes to Hitler, "Next to you, Wagner was a minimalist."

This reference to Hitler's favorite composer is particularly apt because one of "The Empty Mirror's" larger points is that Hitler was, in his peculiar but easily comprehended way, an artist. The movie makes constant reference not just to film, but to music, art, costume, spectacle and architecture. At one point, Hitler disdains his brother tyrant, Stalin, by saying

the Russian ruled by terror, but Hitler ruled by ecstasy. The movie agrees with him, showing how he led the German people by constructing a worldwide stage for an epochal performance and then leading them to take their parts in it.

Other arguments might be less susceptible to illustration, but just as intellectually daring and plausible. The movie suggests, for example, that Hitler's notions of racial purity were linked with those of innocence and, as the Freud character interpolates, back to some personal shame.

As the movie goes on, a natural progression emerges, with Hitler's memories of his rise to power giving way to World War II and finally to his downfall. As this happens, other changes occur in the setting and his demeanor. A man wearing a non-Nazi uniform and swinging a truncheon first appears fleetingly at the bunker's periphery, then slowly appears more often and, to Hitler, more threateningly. And as time passes, the dictator physically ages and mentally descends ever more into madness.

There are times in "The Empty Mirror" when we are left, despite Rodway's efforts, with little more than ravings. And, in the end, we're still left without a total explanation for the phenomenon of either Hitler or Hitlerism. Still, "The Empty Mirror" is a bold and frequently revealing attempt to answer questions that we would all prefer had never come up.

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