

War and the results of war

Films look inside Hitler's bunker and at shattered Vienna

By David Sterritt, Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor | MAY 7, 1999

NEW YORK — World War II returned to movie screens with a vengeance in "Saving Private Ryan" and "The Thin Red Line" last year. While it's too early to say whether this trend will grow in the near future, two new releases take us back to the 1940s for sidelong explorations of the conflict and its aftermath. "The Empty Mirror" pays an impressionistic visit to Adolf Hitler skulking around his bunker as the Third Reich topples, while a 50th-anniversary reissue of "The Third Man" travels to postwar Vienna for a dramatic look at a shattered society.

The Empty Mirror is set in the quarters where Hitler spent the last days before his apparent suicide. This single-setting format gives it a claustrophobic undertone that's darkly appropriate to Hitler's maniacal ideas.

The movie is never monotonous, though, weaving a complex web of sounds and images around the riveting portrayal of Hitler by Norman Rodway, a British stage actor. Alternately ranting, brooding, haranguing, and whining, his stream-of-consciousness monologue provides the film with its transfixing core. Rodway also resembles comedian John Cleese just enough to evoke the tragic absurdity at the heart of Hitler's grotesque enterprise.

Equally important is the visual fabric that surrounds Hitler, as he passes time watching Nazis newsreels, Holocaust atrocity films, and movies of his private moments and demagogic speeches. These images come and go with dreamlike unpredictability throughout the movie, punctuating its spoken material: the dictator's mental dialogues with his associates - his mistress, his propagandist, his military mastermind -

and an imagined conversation with Sigmund Freud, whose psychological insights are closer to the mark than he can tolerate.

At times "The Empty Mirror" threatens to become pretentious, but its emotional strength and visual ingenuity help it past such moments. At its best, it conjures up a postmodern version of what composer Richard Wagner called a *gesamtkunstwerk*, or "total art work," integrating an eclectic blend of sights and sounds into a seamless whole.

The Third Man has been a recognized classic ever since its premiere in 1949, and it's as powerful as ever in its "director's cut" version, 11 minutes longer than the former edition. Based on Graham Greene's novel, it's about an American author who arrives in Vienna shortly after the war, only to discover that the friend who invited him is a black-marketer. Now the villain has turned up dead, or is he simply in hiding?

Credit for the movie's excellence goes to several contributors, starting with director Carol Reed, whose brilliantly baroque filmmaking was clearly inspired by Orson Welles's earlier innovations in "Citizen Kane." This may not have been a coincidence, given Welles's presence in the cast of "The Third Man," where he gives one of his most popular performances. Joseph Cotton is superb as the novelist, and it's impossible to overpraise Robert Krasker's expressive camera work.

And then there's the music by Anton Karas, played entirely on the zither, a nearly forgotten instrument. One of the greatest movie scores of all time, it will keep you humming long after the picture has faded from the screen.

*Neither movie is rated; both deal tactfully with mature material. ■