



HITLER

AND THE POWER OF

AESTHETICS

FREDERIC SPOTTS

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Preface

There he sits, deep in thought, studying a grand model of his home town of Linz. The model shows the city as it will look after being transformed into the culture centre of Europe. It had been delivered the day before and lighting arrangements were installed to enable him to envisage how the buildings would appear at various times of the day as well as by moonlight. The date is 13 February 1945. The place is the bunker under the Reich chancellery in Berlin. The Russians are at the Oder, a hundred miles away; the British and Americans are near the Rhine some 300 miles to the west. Yet Hitler spends hours absorbed in his model. He worries that the bell tower in the centre of town may be too tall; it must not eclipse the spire of the cathedral at Ulm further up the Danube since that would hurt the pride of the people living there. But it must be high enough to catch the first beams of the sun in the morning and the last in the evening. 'In the tower I want a carillon to play – not every day but on special days – a theme from Bruckner's Fourth, the Romantic Symphony,' he tells his architect. During the weeks and months to follow, the model will continue to offer him solace, even as his Reich – and it was his Reich – collapses around him.

This book is about the life of Adolf Hitler as epitomized in that scene – his aesthetic nature, his conviction that the ultimate objective of political effort should be artistic achievement and his dream of creating the greatest culture state since ancient times, or perhaps of all time. 'I became a politician against my will,' he said over and over. 'If someone else had been found, I would never have gone into politics; I would have become an artist or philosopher.' After being appointed chancellor in 1933 the first building he had erected was not a monument to his own triumph – comparable to Mussolini's Forum Mussolini or Franco's Valle de los Caidos – but a massive art gallery. Having failed to induce Churchill to drop out of the war in 1940, he complained to his field commanders, 'It is a pity that I have to wage war on account of that drunk instead of serving the works of peace.' A little later he commented, 'Military

battles are eventually forgotten. Our buildings, however, will stand.' And, speaking of the cultural marvels he intended to create after his final victory, he assured his staff, 'The funds which I shall devote to these will vastly exceed the expenditures which we found necessary for the conduct of this war.'

Did he mean what he said? Are his words credible in light of the indescribable death and destruction he caused? Shortly after he launched his war in 1939, Albert Speer's secretary overheard him say, 'We must end this war quickly. We don't want war; we want to build.' Years later she asked herself, 'Are we to think that that was a lie too?' It was not a lie, as the following pages show, but it was a half-truth. He wanted both war *and* art. Once he had won his war and established an Aryan state that was a dominant world power, he intended to devote himself to the creation of cultural monuments that would change the face of Germany and immortalize himself. Destruction was to be the way to construction.

The Hitler of this book is someone for whom culture was not only the end to which power should aspire but also a means of achieving and keeping it. In *The Story of Art*, E. H. Gombrich observed that Expressionism sprang from the fear of 'that utter loneliness that would reign if art were to fail and each man remained immured in himself'. This fear was deeply felt by Hitler personally, even though he considered Expressionism the disease it sought to cure. Perceiving the anomie of twentieth-century life may have been his most precocious intuition. To replace the German feeling of defeat and isolation with self-confidence and pride was the aim he set for himself and a critical element in his political appeal. Culture, which historically defined German identity in the face of disunity and ambiguous borders, played a vital role.

It was Hitler's aesthetic talents that also help to explain his mysterious grip on the German people. What Stalin accomplished through terror, Hitler achieved through seduction. Using a new style of politics, mediated through symbols, myths, rites, spectacles and personal dramatics, he reached the masses as did no other leader of his time. Though he took away democratic government, he gave Germans what they clearly found a more meaningful sense of political participation, transforming them from spectators into participants in National Socialist theatre.

Yet for over fifty years books written about Hitler have ignored the centrality of the arts in his life and career. And for over fifty years studies of one or another aspect of cultural life in the Third Reich have left him out of the picture. Why? With a few notable exceptions in recent years, most art historians do not know or want to know about this embarrassing connection.

Among biographers a strong preference for 'drum and trumpet history' is a large part of the explanation. History written during the last hundred years, as Fernand Braudel observed, is almost invariably *l'histoire événementielle*, political history focusing on the drama of 'great events' – in this case, what-Hitler-did-next. 'We failed to see,' George Mosse said on behalf of the liberal left, 'that the fascist aesthetic itself reflected the needs and hopes of contemporary society, that what we brushed aside as the so-called superstructure was in reality the means through which most people grasped the fascist message, transforming politics into a civic religion.' Only in the memoirs of Albert Speer is to be found some appreciation of the way Hitler applied his aesthetic talents to public life and only in the biography of Hitler by Speer's editor, Joachim Fest, is this trait touched on.

But even Fest and more recently Ian Kershaw have viewed Hitler as basically an 'unperson'. In comparison with Napoleon, Bismarck, Churchill and Kennedy, who were 'figures of substance outside their public lives', according to Kershaw, 'outside politics Hitler's life was largely a void'. This is as misleading about Napoleon, Bismarck, Churchill and especially Kennedy as it is about Hitler. Hitler's interest in the arts was as intense as his racism; to disregard the one is as profound a distortion as to pass over the other. But how is this side of Hitler to be reconciled with the all-too-familiar one? Carl J. Burckhardt, League of Nations Commissioner in Danzig, who met the dictator twice on the eve of the war in 1939, gave the only answer. The man had a dual personality, he concluded, 'the first being that of the rather gentle artist and the second that of the homicidal maniac'. For the last half-century and for obvious reasons writers have written about Hitler the homicidal maniac. Without in any way ignoring that Hitler, this book examines the other one.

Being neither biography nor a history of the arts in the Third Reich, the book treats biographical material and cultural developments only insofar as they are directly pertinent to an understanding of Hitler's aesthetic bent of mind and how that worked its way out in his personal and political life. Although Hitler enjoyed looking at movies, he had no interest in the film as an art form and left it to Joseph Goebbels to exploit cinema for propaganda purposes. Relatively fond of the theatre though he was, he paid little attention to it after becoming chancellor. Although in his youth he loved adventure stories – not just Karl May's Wild West fantasies, as is often thought, but also such works as *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and especially *Don Quixote* – serious literature held no interest for him. Therefore it has been possible to pass over these topics.