

Der Untergang (Downfall)

OLIVER HIRSCHBIEGEL (DIRECTOR)

with Bruno Ganz as Hitler

A Bernd Eichinger production for Constantin Film, Germany 2004

Dictator docudramas are not my genre of choice. I prefer romantic comedies. Recently I was munching popcorn at Greenwich Village's Film Forum, happily anticipating Preston Sturges' frothy 1935 romp, *The Good Fairy*. Behind me sat two middle-aged men who, I gathered from their expansive banter, were Jewish, gay, and in love. *Downfall* was mentioned. My ears pricked up. I turned around.

'Hi,' I ventured. 'As you know *Downfall* is very controversial...' I cut to the chase. 'Did it make you want to become a Nazi?'

'Hell, yes!' the man boomed.

I collapsed into laughter. He wasn't done yet, though. After an appropriate dramatic pause, he added, with brio, '*All over again!*'

Downfall isn't just innocent of the charges against it – that by 'humanizing' Hitler it makes Nazism newly attractive – it is a great movie. It's in the same class with *Intolerance*, *Gone with the Wind*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, and *Saving Private Ryan*. As in those films, dialogue or mere gestures exchanged by fully inhabited characters dramatize achingly tender moments of genuine intimacy—the kind of intimacy that you and I experience in our day-to-day lives—as well as Atlas shrugging, the tectonic plates of history shifting, armies taking up or laying down arms, and the power millions obey, fear or thank changing for the next dispensation.

That *Downfall* is such a great epic film is remarkable given its self-discipline. There are no 'must see' sunsets in *Downfall*, no new takes on how water, lightening or wind appear on camera, or symbolize change; there are no self-conscious *Citizen Kane*, or, indeed, *Triumph of the Will* camera angles.

There are few moments when director Oliver Hirschbiegel stages a bit of 'look-ma-I've-got-a-camera' sensation. The opening scene depicts action that occurred three years before, and is incidental to, the main narrative, that of Hitler's final days. Though there is no narrative reason for this scene to do so, it meshes stylistically with the remainder of the film. The shots are claustrophobic and dark. Five beautiful German girls are marched, single file, through full night; armed soldiers monitor, and smirk at, their every move. They have come to apply for the job of Hitler's secretary. They are seated in a row in a harshly lit anteroom. The door opens, and the girls, as one, lean forward, curiosity piquing their features. They want to know, 'Who is this Hitler? What will he be like?' We do, too.

Perhaps the single most frequently commented on scene in *Downfall*, both in professional reviews and internet posts, is the one in which Magda Goebbels (Corinna Harfouch) murders her own six children. Goebbels first administered a sedative. Then, after the tots had fallen asleep, she enters the room where they sleep in bunk-beds. Methodically, she proceeds from child to child, placing a cyanide capsule on the child's front teeth, forcing the child's jaw closed, waiting for the child to exhibit a gasp and then stiffness, and then pulling the child's blanket over its head. The viewer cannot help but reflect—this is so horrible exactly because it is executed by an elegant blond in sophisticated attire; this is so horrible exactly because it is so passionless. And the viewer

will then reflect, 'Ah, yes, the Holocaust: the coolness, the efficiency, the apparent superior culture of the murderers.' Once the camera has offered enough time for that to sink in, the camera moves outside the bedroom, where Joseph Goebbels (Ulrich Matthes) is standing. Behind him, written on the wall, is the incomplete word 'Gass-;' which is close enough to 'gas' to convey the connection. During no other scene in the film is that sign visible.

Hirschbiegel admirably resists the urge to offer wink-wink-nudge-nudge hindsight, except in one scene, where secretary Traudl Junge (Alexandra Maria Lara) confesses, 'I make so many mistakes,' and Hitler (Bruno Ganz) replies, 'You'll never make as many as I do.'

Other than that, there aren't a lot of director's-bag-of-tricks moments in *Downfall*. In this, *Downfall* is the stylistic opposite of 'Triumph of the Will,' an undeniably beautiful film in which Leni Reifenstahl uses everything short of a trip to heaven—her opening shots of sky, clouds, and Nuremberg from the air—to convey her subject matter's assumed portent.

And yet, the viewer is riveted. Like those innocent young secretaries in the opening shot, the viewer struggles desperately to figure out, 'Who is this man and what is going on here?'

The film answers that question word by quotidian word, rather than gesture by grandiloquent gesture. You know that Hitler ate ravioli as one of his last meals; you don't hear any coherent, even if twisted, philosophy. You know that Eva Braun (Juliane Köhler) giddily and girlishly invited Traudl Junge to smoke one more cigarette with her as one of her last acts, over which she confesses to secretly kicking Blondi, Hitler's Alsatian, but she never offers, 'This is what it was like to share a bed with a genocidal murderer.' Even bombed out Berlin is shot street by street, rather than in any sweeping overview. Falling bombs are frightening and damaging, not the billowing smoke and orgiastic showers of sparks of other war—or even just Bruce Willis—movies.

After taking his final leave from Hitler, architect Albert Speer, (Heino Firsch), in his sleek black leather trench coat, poses between bruised marble columns, viewing unseen fires. Hirschbiegel could have exploited the flames for their voluptuousness, their evocation of *Gotterdammerung*. That certainly would have met the demands, and the traditions, of epic cinema. But all we see of the flames are their reflection on the marble columns, Speer's remarkable coat, and his apparently grief-stricken, but ultimately unreadable, face. This is epic history as performed in human lives.

Without drawing attention to this feature, *Downfall* serves up mint fresh detail of 1945 Berlin. When *Jurassic Park* first came out, a paleontologist confessed that he wanted the camera to linger on one particular herd of dinosaurs so he could 'observe their feeding behavior.' Later, of course, he smacked himself for confusing computer-generated graphics with real dinosaurs. There is a large subculture out there, mostly male, and, weirdly, on every side of every divide of WW II, devoted to reliving it through books, films, and all-night discussions. As internet posts show, men like that are eating this movie up; it is intoxicating them. Even one very brief scene featuring Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler (Ulrich Noethen) in an underground parking garage (again; given that this scene takes place outside the bunker, there is no need for it to be shot underground, but it is) is so real in every detail—the cars, the insignia, Himmler's prissy manufactured masculinity—that I felt my distance from the action melt.

Much of the early drama, and the audience's involvement, centers on the question: how could apparently rational, normal people—people like you and me—give their lives to Hitler and Nazism? Bruno Ganz's Hitler is unfailingly courtly and avuncular with Traudl Junge, his eyes sparkle; his cheeks dimple. This Hitler is evidenced in archival film footage; not just Hirschbiegel's Hitler cries; Leni Reifenstahl's teared up, as well. With others, though, including Eva Braun, Hitler is a pig. Other characters, no matter how monstrous they may have been in life—Goebbels and Himmler, for example—a re never shown losing their composure. Speer is a dapper, suave gentleman. Traudl Junge is a sweet, beautiful girl. Watching these normal characters in Hitler's orbit, the viewer asks, or wants to scream, 'Why don't you resist him? Challenge him? Shoot him? Exit?'

The film makes only a couple of attempts to offer rational answers to that question. In two scenes, generals refer to November, 1918; that reference to the Allies humiliating and fleecing Germany at the end of WW I is one of the most rational things said in the movie. Junge admits that she is herself confused about what the heck she's doing. Soldiers refer to oaths and vows to serve Hitler unto death. Magda Goebbels says she doesn't want herself or her children to live in a world without National Socialism.

Even so, as Hitler rants about fantasy armies, the audience desperately wants to see someone break ranks in a significant way. These characters are so articulate, so well dressed, so adult-looking; why don't they *do* something? In this, *Downfall* is reminiscent of Albert Camus' 1944 play *Caligula*. *Caligula*, of course, depicts the hold a sadistic Roman emperor has on his subjects. *Downfall* also reminded me of the new A& E reality television show, 'Intervention,' which has featured modern Americans trying to coerce their family members into going cold turkey off crystal meth. If Betty Jo and Bobby Sue can grab Uncle Bubba by the lapels and tell him some cold, hard truths, why can't Speer or Junge do the same? Needless to say, they never do. Even as Hitler and Braun's bodies burn, their followers, rather than cutting and running, keep ranks and offer a final *sieg heil*. In a parallel scene, Eva Braun's brother-in-law, SS-Gruppenführer Hermann Fegelein (Thomas Kretschmann), is dragged naked and drugged from an orgy he had gone to to await the end. Before being shot to death for leaving Hitler's bunker, he manages to button one button of his uniform jacket and offer his final 'Heil Hitler.'

The desire to see an intervention is almost unbearable in the scenes between Hitler and Speer. Hitler brags about 'cleansing lands of Jewish poison;' Speer listens with the kind of polite restraint one might show an elderly relative misremembering a family event. Speer places his fisted hand to his lips and gives a little cough. How much death behind that little cough.

Downfall is not unrelievedly grim. As with all art that meticulously captures human behavior, there are several moments of unintended humor. Himmler muses, 'When I meet Eisenhower, shall I give him the Nazi salute, or shake his hand?' Before a bureaucrat marries Hitler and Braun, he is forced, by Nazi law, to ask, 'Are you of pure Aryan descent?' and 'May I see your identification?' When the six, cutely Teutonic, Goebbels children arrive, they are garbed, posed, and perform as a sort of Satanic Trapp Family Singers.

Strangely enough, the controversies surrounding *Downfall* echo controversies surrounding another film exactly one year before. In protesting *The Passion*, Boston University religion professor Paula Frederickson promised that 'When violence breaks

out, Mel Gibson will have a much higher authority than professors and bishops to answer to.' *The Passion* has come and gone and violence has not broken out.

Will *Downfall*, by 'humanizing' Hitler—tell me, how does one 'humanize' a human being?—recruit new Nazis? Increase antisemitism? I doubt it, but, who knows? Artists' intentions and the actual impact of actual works are often quite different. In the early 1900's, Upton Sinclair, a socialist, investigated the mistreatment of Eastern European immigrant workers in the Chicago stockyards. He wrote a novel, *The Jungle*, that wrenchingly detailed the mistreatment of those immigrant workers. *The Jungle* became a hugely popular and powerful book—but not for the reasons Sinclair had hoped. Americans, outraged at the filthy conditions under which their meat was produced, agitated, successfully, for improvements in the cleanliness of meat-packing. Nothing improved for the Eastern European immigrant workers; in fact, America continued to hate and revile them, and laws were passed to prevent their entry into the US. As Sinclair said, 'I aimed at the public's heart and by accident hit its stomach.'

I grew up among Baby Boomer American teens who sometimes doodled swastikas in the margins of their high school notebooks. American popular culture had sold us, ignorant of the war, a Nazism sanitized not by its humanity, but by its inhumanity. Our pop culture Nazis, unlike Hirschbiegel's, or Riefenstahl's, skipped the messy, confusing business of being human. They were stylish, antiseptic, embodiments of pure power. Kids were attracted to them for the same reasons that they were attracted to the emotion-free space alien Mr. Spock on *Star Trek*. Nazis never had to bend to maternal pressure to make their beds. They never cried because they couldn't find a date for the prom. When they walked into the room, everyone shook.

Hirschbiegel denies those lost teenagers their Hitler. When Speer, with apparent pity, tells Hitler that he, Speer, has been systematically disobeying Hitler's orders, tears run down a slumped and defeated Führer's face. With visible Parkinson's disease, before public appearances, Hitler tries, unsuccessfully, to control the flailing of his afflicted hand. He betrays his own value of race loyalty, denouncing the Germans the film depicts as courageously fighting for him as 'scum, cowards, traitors without honor' who deserve to 'drown in their own blood.' This Hitler won't disarm any hard core antisemites, but it won't attract the kinds of teens I spoke of above.

On the other hand, Hirschbiegel's 'ordinary Germans' are depicted in a friendly way I could not swallow. Outside the bunker, action follows Prof. Dr. Ernst-Günter Schenck (Christian Berkel) and Peter, a boy (Donevan Gunia). In a primal scene, Schenck and a comrade sit around a campfire in a ruined courtyard. They are surrounded by complete darkness, literal and metaphorical. Such settings are meant to communicate that characters confront their basic natures, without the shaping that civilization provides. 'We need to go,' he tells his companion, 'to where we are needed.' He spends the rest of the movie doing just that.

Epic films often feature key scenes where sympathetic characters first become aware of the dire nature of a given moment; through identification with them, the audience is to be profoundly moved. Think of the famous crane shot in *Gone with the Wind* where Scarlett O'Hara steps gingerly through the bodies of dead and dying soldiers. The camera pulls back, and back; more bodies are shown, acres of bodies; then, a tattered Confederate flag, while poignant music plays. The audience learns, along with Scarlett, that the Civil War is lost—and the audience is moved with her.

Prof. Dr. Ernst-Günter Schenck is given just such a scene in *Downfall*. He visits an air raid shelter; he sees operations performed without anesthesia. He is shocked, shocked. He witnesses all with eyes ancient with sorrow and compassion. He demands, 'Who's going to feed the civilians and the soldiers?' Christian Berkel is as good as Gary Cooper in *High Noon* at performing quiet, outraged integrity and heroism. In both *Gone with the Wind* and *Downfall*, cinematic technique hijacks the viewer's reaction, and no matter how the viewer feels about the slave-owning South, or the Third Reich, the viewer is positioned to feel some sorrow at the moment of their demise.

Narrative requirements insist that Hirschbiegel would have had to invent a character like the Schenck he has here. Drama demands conflict. Even a depiction of a world gone mad requires one set of sane eyes to highlight the insanity. This viewer had one small problem with Hirschbiegel's chosen mouthpiece here—the SS insignia on the Professor Doctor's shirt collar.

One British historian has claimed that the historical Schenck was involved in performing medical experiments on concentration camp internees. Hirschbiegel, sounding like a gangland attorney, responded that the allegation 'was never proven.' I loved Berkel's performance. I just wish it had been as a different character, in a different movie. *Downfall*, as much as I admired it, did not bring me anywhere close to believing that the SS produced such a man.

In a similar vein, various generals, notably Wilhelm Mohnke (André Hennicke), are depicted as heroic. Their heroism is the heroism celebrated in Nazism or ancient Sparta: it is impervious to pain or danger, and blindly devoted to duty. One general reports when summoned by a frothing Hitler, announcing, with all the panache of a Sabatini hero, 'I'm here to be shot.' The viewer feels puny confronting such heroism.

In his own defense, Hirschbiegel has said to Britain's *Guardian* newspaper, 'There is no way the Germans can underplay the worst crime that ever happened in mankind...but there was a certain aspect of heroism derived from the fighters...There is some nobility in it, even' (5 April 2005).

Peter, the other character outside the bunker, is a remarkably beautiful and heroic blond lad, straight off a propaganda poster. At first he is proud to fight for Hitler. In his scenes, Peter's father (Karl Kranzkowski), like Schenck, plays the one sane 'voice crying in the wilderness.' Peter's father is missing an arm; his incidental comments indicate that he lost it in World War I. At first Peter resists reason, and his father. With courage and focus, Peter fights on even as his commander is shot in the head. Hitler bestows the Iron Cross. Eventually, though, Peter sees enough dead bodies to finally run away; he returns home and enjoys a reunion embrace with his father.

Ordinary Germans' suffering is depicted in a very effective scene in which ragged Berliners in a bombed-out cityscape gather at a tap for water. A bomb falls; smoke clears; slowly, survivors regroup around the water tap, calling out names. One by one, they find the bodies of their loved ones, fall to the ground, and sob.

Ordinary Germans auto-atrocities are *also* depicted. In particularly nightmarish scenes, the *Volksturm*, thick ropes for lynching draped over shoulders, beat old men who refuse to fight. That they commit these acts in a post-apocalyptic Berlin with the Red Army mere blocks away is especially disturbing. One such gang lynches Peter's father, an unambiguously heroic character. Weirdly, the man implicated in Peter's father's death

is so stereotypically German in his appearance he could be an ethnic doll. He is rotund, florid, and wears a Tyrolean hat. He is the only German so garbed in the movie.

That ordinary Germans chose their own miserable fate when they chose Hitler—which tends to be my own uncharitable view—is voiced by a profoundly unsympathetic character, Joseph Goebbels. ‘Your *Volksturm* are being mowed down!’ Mohnke tells him. Goebbels replies, ‘I have no sympathy. They gave us the mandate; now their little throats are being cut. They chose their fate.’ Putting these words in Goebbels’ mouth provides a clever defense against charges that the movie is excessively compassionate toward German suffering.

After Saddam Hussein was captured, film footage was shown to Iraqi reporters. Some jumped from their chairs and began screaming at the screen. At the time, I thought, how quaint. I never thought I’d be so primitive as to react that way to an image on a screen.

Like most people interested in history, I’ve seen archival film footage of Hitler’s speeches. That film footage did not prepare me for *Downfall*. There they are: Himmler, Goebbels, Speer, and Hitler himself, chatting, eating, planning, going about their day-to-day activities.

I have never been so unable to control my physical response to a movie. My legs bounced up and down. My fingers balled into fists. My head shook. If I had been alone in the theatre, I would have screamed. I wanted to kill the characters on the screen, not just for their evil, but for their sheer stupidity, which violated my sense of human dignity. That was new for me.

During, and certainly after, the movie my mind raced. Without being at all preachy, this movie invites the viewer to autopsy the hero worship that surrounded Hitler. Why did a nation drop to its knees for this lunatic? Why, during Berlin’s final hours, didn’t more people read the writing on the wall? By extension, the film invites critique of any national psychosis and hero worship. Is there any comparison between the events on the screen and contemporary life? In a brief coda, the real Traudl Junge, Hitler’s secretary, attempts to acquit herself by saying, paraphrase, ‘Gosh, I was a young, pretty girl, what did I know or care about politics?’ But then she interrogates that stance. ‘I could have informed myself. I could have learned something. Being young is no excuse.’ I left the theater thinking not just about fifty years ago, but about today.

Now *that’s* a good movie.

DANUSHA GOSKA
New Jersey