

Götterdämmerung in a hole in the ground

A great deal of controversy attended the release of Oliver Hirschbiegel and Bernd Eichinger's film *The Downfall* (*Der Untergang*) last year, in France as well as in Germany: Claude Lanzmann, the historian and director of the monumental 9 hour long documentary film *Shoah* (1982), felt that the crimes committed by Adolf Hitler overwhelmed any reason that could be given for making a film about him. Other people took the view that the film 'humanised' Hitler, as if it were scandalous that he should be represented as a man rather than an alien, or even that it made him seem 'affable', as if the almost unctuous Viennese courtesy towards his secretarial staff and his maudlin dog-love were traits somehow not in keeping with the man who sent millions of people to their deaths. Kitsch and cruelty get along famously, as WH Auden knew when he wrote his poem *Epitaph on a Tyrant*: 'And when he cried the little children died in the street.'

The Downfall, in fact, is a masterly study in claustrophobia, a Götterdämmerung in a hole in the ground. It relies heavily on the eyewitness account of the last 12 days of Hitler's life in the Führerbunker written in 1947, and published just before her death in 2002, by Hitler's Bavarian secretary, Traudl Junge, whom we see being recruited at the beginning of the film, and Joachim Fest's solid scholarly work *Inside Hitler's Bunker*, which was published last year in English translation. Hitler is played by the Swiss actor, Bruno Ganz, best known for his role as chief angel in Wim Wender's film *Wings of Desire* (1987). Both demented and ordinary, his is the only convincing impersonation of Hitler (other than Charlie Chaplin's, but that was a rather different kind of film). All the bigwigs who attended Hitler in the prison of his own myth are there: Albert Speer, who drops in from organising the new Europe, Josef Goebbels and Martin Bormann. Many of them have one eye on the loudly ticking clock, and the other on how to save their own skin. Battle-weary generals come in to announce the bad news to Hitler, recoil before a verbal tirade and

then emerge, half-convinced even in that late hour, by the Führer's victory rhetoric. It all has to be heard, of course, in the original German. The only figure conspicuous by his absence is Hitler's Leibarzt or personal physician, Dr Theodor Morell, a quack who was at least partly responsible, thanks to his benzedrine and morphine cocktails, cocaine eyedrops and barbiturate sleepers, for the lamentable physical state of his patient. (Hitler was probably also taking low-dose strychnine to ease flatulence.) Hitler celebrated his 56th birthday in the bunker 8 days before his suicide, but it is a far older-looking and undisguisedly ill man who walks out into the chancellery gardens, left hand flapping behind his back, to decorate the boys who were defending Berlin. That was to be his last public appearance. The Russians were less than 20 miles away.

The women around Hitler are exceptionally well played, especially Magda Goebbels (Corinna Harfouch), who veers from idolatrous Führer-worship to cold detestation of her husband: after Hitler's suicide on 29 April, she alone undertakes the terrible task of killing her six blond children, the parade family of Nazi eugenics, which she did by drugging them and then crushing phials of prussic acid between their teeth. Theirs had been the only innocent life in the bunker, playing games and singing in its concrete corridors. Amidst the coming and going of generals and adjutants, and the pounding of heavy shelling, Eva Braun introduces a flippant touch: her role in Hitler's life is still, to put it mildly, enigmatic. She was what PG Wodehouse would have called a 'flibbertigibbet'. Her presence in the bunker adds a touch of absurdity to a situation already teetering on the ridiculous. A registrar is summoned to marry her and Hitler a few days before their joint suicide. 'Are you Aryan?' he nervously asks the Führer, like a good servant of the state. The Führer's brief hesitation defuses the tension of the film for a moment, although it hardly offers comic relief. As the diarist EM Cioran wrote, if Hitler had

replied 'No' to that question, 'it would have been the most extraordinary reply in History.'

What is shocking about the film, in fact, is not Hitler's supposed 'humane qualities' but his inhumanity. The one danger in the film lies perhaps in the astonishing veracity of Ganz's depiction: Ganz's portrayal is so convincing that next to Hitler the other Nazis seem almost level-headed. Hitler's every move was the dogmatic response of a man who believed himself to be, supremely, 'the man of Will': reality counted for nothing. The front soldier who had 'miraculously' survived the trenches of the First World War was never interested in consolidating the territorial conquests chalked up in record time by his armies. The immaculate preparations for his death and disposal of his post-mortem remains suggest that, at least in part, he knew the truth about himself: universal destruction was at the empty core of his vision. By 1945, it hardly mattered to him if those being annihilated were Germans, Russians or Jews. Throughout his career Hitler never changed: he had announced his rationale, and programme, way back in *Mein Kampf*, in 1925. It sold millions but nobody, it seems, ever read it.

IAIN BAMFORTH

Downfall Der Untergang
Directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel, Germany, 2004,
155 mins (15).