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Hitler: The Rise of Evil

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13-16 minutes

Hitler

Distributor: Koch / Momentum
Cast: Robert Carlyle, Stockard Channing, Jena Malone, Juliana Margulies, Live Schreiber and Peter O'Toole
Network: CBS
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US Release Date: 2007-10-09
Amazon

Arguably, the biggest challenge of any biographical effort about Adolf Hitler (1889-1945) is the negotiation of the huge cultural and ideological baggage associated with the infamous German leader. Indeed, no other historical figure is surrounded by such an aura of pure evilness, that it truly reaches mythical proportions.

In addition, to question such an extreme moral posture is often considered taboo by society at large, and as a consequence, Hitler is rarely presented in popular media as a regular human being. That is, even though most historians and academics would agree that Nazism was the clear product of powerful and ancestral social and cultural forces, the image of Hitler as evil incarnated is immovable. Thus, it should not be surprising that *Hitler: The Rise of Evil* is a lavish TV mini series that relies on historical inaccuracies to further demonize Hitler.

Thesis

Hitler and history

Since the end of War World II, a variety of biographies on Hitler have appeared in the scholastic and popular literature. From all these, the one published in 1973 by the erudite German scholar Joachim Fest is perhaps the most important and influential. Not only was Fest's book the first major biographical work of Hitler since Alan Bullock's *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (1952), but it also exposed the difficult problem of positioning Hitler within an objective

historical context.

Indeed, according to Fest, "No one evoked so much rejoicing, hysteria, and expectation of salvation as he; no one so much hate". Following this line of thought, Fest opens his book by questioning the "historical greatness" of Hitler. On one side, Hitler efficiently brought Germany out of a terrible economic depression, completely got rid of unemployment across the nation, made local industry grow, created exceptional social benefits for the working class, and returned to his country the national pride that had been lost after its defeat in World War I. On the other hand, Hitler was a terrifying, intolerant, and vindictive megalomaniac.

As claimed by Fest, had Hitler died in 1939, most probably his name would have passed to the history books as one of the greatest leaders to ever walk this Earth. However, Hitler had a different appointment with fate: he was responsible for WWII, the largest and deadliest conflict in history, a war that claimed over 60 million lives across the world.

Quite amazingly if you think about it, it took an alliance of the world powers to vanquish Hitlerism in Europe. As such, it is undeniable that Hitler is perhaps the most influential historical figure of the 20th century. Arguably, the way Hitler shaped modern history and culture is without comparison.

In addition, because of the horrors that emerged during WWII and the holocaust, Hitler may forever be considered by the world at large as synonymous with evil. No other historical character embodies malevolence, evilness, hate, cruelty, viciousness, brutality, immorality, and intolerance as Hitler does. And even certified butchers of the caliber of Attila the Hun, Genghis Kahn, Joseph Stalin, Pol Pot, and Francois 'Papa Doc' Duvalier disappear into oblivion when compared to Hitler. In the popular mind, Hitler is seen closer to a fierce demon from hell, than to a human being.

Films cause more controversy than books

However, it is important to note that, by wrongly reducing history to an issue of moral duality between good and evil, all the social, cultural, and ideological complexities that led to the rise of Nazism in Germany are completely ignored in favor of the persona of Hitler. And still, even though scholastic history books are allowed to do so, any attempt by the popular media to reevaluate the historical position of Hitler, avoiding the moral demonization of his character, is likely to find controversy and a strong opposition.

Films and History

Thus, it should not be surprising that nearly all TV and film portrayals of Hitler tend to avoid these highly volatile issues, and contribute to the rewriting of history by means of stereotypes. To date, there have been slightly over 100 films that feature Hitler as a major role, and most of them conform to the idea of Hitler as an embodiment of evil. Some extreme examples include, of course, *They Saved Hitler's Brain* (David Bradley, 1968), where the decapitated head of Hitler continues to spread malevolence, and *Highway to Hell* (Ate de Jong, 1990), that finds an obnoxious Hitler befriending Attila the Hun and Cleopatra in the afterworld.

In this regard, *Hitler: The Rise of Evil* suggests such a moral agenda from its very title. This miniseries originally aired on public TV back on 2003, and it has recently been released in the US on a nice-looking DVD presentation courtesy of Koch Vision. In a nutshell, *Hitler: The Rise of Evil* dramatizes the life of Hitler, from his upbringing as a troubled kid in a small Austrian town and his failed dreams of becoming an artist in Vienna, to his rise as a popular and tyrannical political leader of Germany. This chronicle culminates on 2 August 1934, when the death of President Paul von Hindenburg consolidates Hitler's undisputed power over the entire country.

Undoubtedly, any aesthetical evaluation of *Hitler: The Rise of Evil* has to rank very highly. The technical and artistic merits of this miniseries are top-notch, presenting one of the most convincing reconstructions of the Germany of those years. Just consider, *Hitler: The Rise of Evil* won the award for the most outstanding achievement in cinematography granted by both the American and the Canadian Societies of Cinematography. And during the Emmys, besides being nominated for its accomplishments in musical scoring and wardrobe design, it also received an award for Art Direction and another for Sound Editing.

In addition, Robert Carlyle delivers a powerful and compelling portrayal of Hitler, even when compared to previous incarnations performed by actors of the caliber of Sir Alec Guiness and Anthony Hopkins (in *Hitler: The Last Ten Days* [Ennio De Concini, 1973] and *The Bunker* [George Schaefer, 1981] respectively).

Historical accuracy

Nevertheless, in spite of its many artistic achievements, it is nearly impossible to ignore the many historical errors presented in *Hitler: The Rise of Evil*. As the story goes, eminent Hitler biographer Ian Kershaw had originally agreed to be a consultant for the production

of the miniseries. However, when the writers and producers decided to sacrifice historical truth for the sake of dramatic effect, Kershaw smartly decided to disassociate his name.

Thus, it is perhaps ironic that *Hitler: A Career*, the exceptional documentary found as a bonus feature on the DVD of *Hitler: The Rise of Evil*, puts in evidence the many errors, inaccuracies, and fallacies seen in the miniseries. Written and directed by Fest himself, *Hitler: A Career* offers a detailed and insightful analysis of Hitler's rise to power. Avoiding the typical moral discourse, Fest discusses instead how Hitler was a product of the unfathomable social and economic turmoil that haunted Germany during the post-WWI years.

Hitler is evil

Bias

In contrast, from the very beginning, *Hitler: The Rise of Evil* alters history in order to accommodate its moral ideology. Right after Hitler's father, Alois (Ian Hogg), punishes his son for bad behavior, he discovers that all his farm animals have been slaughtered. Alois confronts the young Hitler (Thomas Sangster) when he suspects that his son had a hand in such an inhumane act of barbarism. As soon as Hitler looks at him with silent, deep hatred, his father inexplicably collapses and dies.

At this point it is worth recalling that, in real life, Hitler's father died at a local bar after drinking a glass of wine. And also, there is no evidence that indicates that Hitler ever delved into animal cruelty.

Quite the contrary, Hitler was well known for his devotion to his dogs. However, these opening scenes are shot in such a way that they present the young Hitler as an evil entity of uncanny nature, who appears to use some kind of supernatural powers to kill his own father. For a moment here, one is no longer sure if *Hitler: The Rise of Evil* is a biographical flick, or merely another entry in *The Omen* franchise.

supernatural film

Factors that contributed to Hitler rise to power

Similarly, *Hitler: The Rise of Evil* offers a misleading political discourse by suggesting that Hitler became popular solely because of his anti-Semitic rhetoric. Quite frequently the miniseries implies that the Germans liked Hitler merely because they were fascinated and captivated by his ideology of intolerance. Clearly, the series exploit the viewer's familiarity with the fact that, once in power, Hitler systematized the eradication of Jews.

Hitler offered hate in order to gain support

Thus, *Hitler: The Rise of Evil* puts forward the idea that Hitler was only able to offer hate, and that his evilness was like a disease that

infected the rest of the community. Once again we can check the history books to find out that, in strong contradiction with *Hitler: The Rise of Evil*, Hitler's oratory during his early years tended to gravitate towards more imperative issues, such as the severe economic distress and profound political discontent found throughout Germany.

Factors that contributed to Hitler rise to power

Indeed, *Hitler: The Rise of Evil* fails to detail the deep humiliation felt by most Germans following the Treaty of Versailles, which established excessive reparation payments due to France and Britain. Trying to justify claims of payment difficulties to the rest of the world, the German treasury engineered a currency crisis that sank the country in a terrible economic depression. The resulting inflation destroyed the purchase power of the mark, which went from four marks to the dollar in 1914, to 130,000 million by the end of 1923. In those days, people literally had to carry a truckload of money to buy a single loaf of bread.

Because of such a generalized economic agony, most of Hitler's hate in those days was directed at the politicians that had offered the capitulation of Germany during WWI and went on to sign the Treaty of Versailles (referred to, by Hitler, as the "Traitors of 1918"). According to Hitler and many other Germans, the Army had not been beaten in the battlefield, but had been back-stabbed by the country's political leaders. As a consequence, in his rhetoric, Hitler constantly promised to reject the Treaty of Versailles, to punish the Traitors of 1918, to restore German prosperity, and to transform the defeated Army into a renewed symbol of national pride.

By addressing vital concerns that affected most Germans, Hitler quickly became an admired orator and leader of his National Socialist German Worker's political party. As revealed in *Hitler: A Career*, Hitler was an undisputed genius in the use of rhetoric to influence people and an expert in the inner workings of the human psyche.

Hitler understood perfectly well what Germans needed to hear, and addressed their concerns with profound emotiveness. Through intensive planning, experimentation, and rehearsal, Hitler knew how to tune the content, rhythm, emphasis, and body language of his speeches in order to manipulate the response of his audience.

Hitler is portrayed as crazy Bias and Stereotype

However, in a brief scene where Hitler is preparing for a speech, *Hitler: The Rise of Evil* presents him as a lunatic, apparently addressing an invisible audience.

Historical accuracy

Further inaccuracies and oversights found in *Hitler: The Rise of Evil* include: the absolute avoidance of the issue that extreme anti-Semitism was a trait that had haunted Europe for hundreds of years before Hitler's regime; the total omission of Alfred Rosenberg, the Nazi Party's philosopher and chief racial theorist, who provided Hitler with an ideological and political justification for anti-Semitism and other forms of racial intolerance; and the trivialization of Hitler's Iron Cross, one of the most important decorations granted by the German military for bravery in battle, which he rightfully deserved for his courage and heroism during WWI.

Bias

Therefore, the list of deliberate historical blunders that *Hitler: The Rise of Evil* shamelessly uses to enhance its moralistic agenda is unacceptably large for a production that claims to be a biographical epic. Even though the production values and technical craftsmanship of this miniseries are truly outstanding, it is difficult to ignore such a critical weakness. Furthermore, the presentation of *Hitler: The Rise of Evil* is sandwiched by the Edmund Burke quote: "The only thing necessary for evil to flourish is for good men to do nothing".

But then again, perhaps a more telling finale is the phrase expressed by Fest at the end of *Hitler: A Career*: "Hitler and his career would not have been possible without the support of the German people and the gullibility and lack of concern of the world's most powerful statesmen". Indeed, it is only with the proper understanding of the social and cultural roots of Hitlerism that we can avoid history repeating itself.