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Klaus L. Berghahn, Jost Hermand (Eds.): Unmasking Hitler: Cultural Representations of Hitler from the Weimar Republic to the Present

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Klaus L. Berghahn, Jost Hermand (Eds.): Unmasking Hitler: Cultural Representations of Hitler from the Weimar Republic to the Present

New York, Washington, D.C./Baltimore, Bern, Frankfurt/Main, Berlin, Brüssel, Wien, Oxford: Peter Lang 2005 (German Life and Civilization, Bd. 44), 264 S., ISBN 3-03910-553-1, € 50,40

Though dead for over six decades, Adolf Hitler still looms large in the Western cultural imagination. During his political heyday, he was omnipresent: in posters, in films, on the radio, in newspapers and books and magazines. What have Hitler's various signifiers signified? *How* has this author of unfathomable atrocities been

represented? Indeed, how *could* he be represented? With horror and indignation, certainly. But may we also at this remove attempt to peel back the layers of his carefully crafted image? May we even laugh at him? These are just a few of the important questions that the authors of the ten essays in *Unmasking Hitler: Cultural Representations of Hitler from the Weimar Republic to the Present* address. The book focuses on various constructions of Hitler, visual and textual, arranged chronologically from a variety of genres: literature, film, photography, theater, historiography, and comic books. If a couple of the essays do sit somewhat awkwardly among the collection, the editors should nevertheless be praised for the breadth of their inclusions.

After an opening essay by Claudia Schmoelders, a digest-version of her fascinating book, *Hitlers Gesicht. Eine physiognomische Biographie* (Munich 2000; available as of December 2005 in English translation as *Hitler's Face: A Physiognomic Biography*), Jost Hermand examines the Hitler photomontages of John Heartfield. Using several visual examples, the author argues that Heartfield sought not only to warn Germans of the “war-mongering ideology of the Nazis, [...] but repeatedly sought to dispel them of the notion that Hitler was a leader of the workers’ party as he sometimes presented himself” (p.71). He was instead, in the eyes and art of the communist Heartfield, a capitalist shill. Eric Ehrenreich, Matthew Lange, and Corina Petrescu analyze three of the most important Hitler biographies – British Alan Bullock’s *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (London 1952/62), German Joachim Fest’s *Hitler: Eine Biographie* (Frankfurt/Main 1973), and British Ian Kershaw’s recent two-volume *Hitler* (London 1999/2000). The authors read closely and consider the times in which the volumes were written, seeking not only what each reveals about the biography of a single man, but also how they “comment on the German nation as well” (p.104). Had the authors also included American John Toland’s two-volume *Adolf Hitler* (Garden City 1976), they could have performed a real cultural triangulation of their target. (The recently deceased author did, after all, receive a Pulitzer Prize for historical writing.) Gerhard Richter offers a weighty – at forty pages, nearly twice as long as any of the other essays – and occasionally belabored cogitation on the post-Auschwitz meaning of the proper name, “Hitler,” in Theodor Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*. Although the writings of the late Marxist sociologist almost always invite what his friend Walter Benjamin called “contemplative immersion,” writings about his writings should avoid submerging the reader in mere philosophical niceties, as, for example, when Richter argues that if non-identical thinking failed to organize itself around an openness to our inability to decide between a *Sturz* and a (*Rück*)*fall*, “then the thinking of non-identity would itself turn into a mere thinking of the identity of non-identical thinking and thus, as another form of a thinking of identity, cancel that which precisely resists identity in the non-identical” (p.143). David Bathrick presents an historically-informed reading of *Triumph des Willens* (1935) and Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (1940), while further essays investigate

Bertolt Brecht's limitations in constructing the 'Führer' with an entirely Marxist toolbox, George Tabori's difficulties in dressing him with a comic wardrobe, and Walter Moers's subtlety in inflating him like a pop-icon.

Perhaps because the essays spring from a 2002 Wisconsin Workshop (Madison), none of them deals with the recent controversial reincarnation of Hitler in Oliver Hirschbiegel's *Der Untergang* (2004), starring Bruno Ganz, one of the few German actors known widely in the United States. Nor with the recent Broadway and Hollywood (Susan Stroman, 2005) resurgence of interest in Mel Brooks's *The Producers* (1967), a comedy about two failed theater men who scheme to stage the world's worst musical, *Springtime for Hitler*. Nor do the authors even refer to the comical representation of Hitler in *Which Way to the Front?* (1970). Directed by and starring Jerry Lewis (which may explain the oversight), the film tells the story of the world's wealthiest man who, unfit for service in the US Army, assembles his own squad of hapless mercenaries to assassinate the 'Führer'. (They succeed and then head for Japan to target the Emperor.) These objections aside, *Unmasking Hitler* opens a fascinating discussion that should receive wider attention among scholars and students of German history, media, culture, and visual arts.

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