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Review of Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics

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Review

Author: Frederic Spotts
Title: Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics
Publisher: The Overlook Press
Release date: January 2003
Number of pages: 488
Features: 100 B/W and 4 color illustrations; indexed
Format: Hard cover
Price: $37.50

Unlike biographies of Adolf Hitler which focus on the ideological and humanitarian disaster wrought by his intense anti-Semitism, Spotts’ book posits that the thirteen-year nightmare of the Third Reich was just as much a result of Hitler’s artistic nature. Though other authors have touched on certain aspects of Hitler’s artistic side—Speer (Inside the Third Reich) on Hitler’s obsession with monumental architecture, Fest (Hitler) on the relationship between the dictator’s grandiosity and his love of Wagnerian opera—only Spotts has leapt with both feet into a full exploration of Der Führer as artist.

Spotts argues that it was Hitler’s aesthetic nature that compelled him to destroy society only to re-create it according to the image in his artist’s eye. All the arts felt his deadening influence, and his influence was very, very personal indeed.

While truly seminal art always envisions something new, Hitler’s art—the art of centuries past—envisioned nothing new. Modern art repelled him. Spotts makes the point visually, with numerous photographs and drawings—many by Hitler himself. Hitler used Germany and, later, Europe as his canvas to make a picture his stunted mind could understand. Spotts, with scholarship and true artistry, has exposed this picture in a book that is accessible to the average reader, but that will be of interest to academicians as well.

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Frederic Spotts has written numerous books on European political and cultural affairs. His study of Bayreuth is regarded as the standard work on the subject. Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics was written while Spotts was a visiting scholar at the Institute for International Affairs at UC Berkeley. This is an unexpected approach to the study of Hitler and Nazism and shows itself to be sophisticated and stimulating. As Albert Speer emphasizes in his memoirs, Hitler actually saw himself as an artist and in many ways his movement was a stage-managed spectacle which of course extended to architecture and art. The book offers the first full analysis of Hitler's own work as a painter, as well as of his art collection. It also treats the entire range of his personal interests: from architecture, painting, symphony, opera, and sculpture, to the German autobahn system and the development of the Volkswagen. A riveting and highly original work, Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics provides a key to an understanding of the Third Reich which has, until now, been missing from biographies and studies of the arts in the Third Reich, as well as from political and military studies of Hitler.

Frederic Spotts. A startling reassessment of Hitler's aims and motivations, Frederic Spotts' Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics is an adroitly argued and highly original work that provides a key to fuller understanding of the Third Reich. Spotts convincingly demonstrates that contrary to the traditional view that Hitler had no life outside of politics, Hitler's interest in the arts was as intense as his racism-and that he used the arts to disguise the heinous crimes that were the means to fulfilling his ends. I highly recommend this book if you want to know more about the real Hitler, not just the crazed anti-semite and warmonger, here you find an equally crazed man, but motivated by artistic concerns as a means to truly remake society. ...more.