ADOLPH HITLER, CHARISMA AND TOTALITARIAN ARCHITECTURE

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To my knowledge, no English-language studies of Nazi architecture in the 1930s examine the relations between Adolph Hitler's charismatic leadership and his building projects. In both the fascist and totalitarian phases of Hitler's Germany, architectural projects embodied the features that Max Weber ascribed to the charismatic leader: His visionary sense of mission, his legitimation not through any public office but by extraordinary acts in crisis and war, and his rejection of constitutional process, rational economic conduct, and bureaucratic control.

Thomas Mann's 1933 essay, "The Sufferings and Greatness of Richard Wagner," analyzes how Wagner typified major tendencies in nineteenth-century European Romanticism. Without direct or indirect references to Adolph Hitler himself, the essay's core ideas nevertheless illuminate just how strongly rooted Hitler was in the same tendencies. As such, I propose that Mann's essay provides a framework for understanding Hitler's political charisma and his attempts to make architecture serve and amplify it.

One qualification. I think that the film and book versions of *Schindler's List*, and the increasingly detailed documentation of Nazi horrors and German collaboration in recent scholarship and in the archives of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC have not only failed to remove Hitler from the historically incomprehensible world of the monster but, ironically, have actually lodged him more securely within it. Perhaps a mature study of the subject I propose — developed well beyond the framework I present here — might by one small increment help ground this mythically evil figure a little more firmly in German and European cultural history. I emphasize that this paper can only outline a framework or part of a framework, since full treatment of the subject requires a much lengthier analysis than a brief presentation allows, and much more labor than I, who am at this point no more than a dilettante-scholar on the subject, have yet given it. Two other caveats: First, in linking Hitler's charisma to 19th century Romanticism, I have no intention of making Richard Wagner's artistic achievements into a proto-Nazi manifesto; second, the paper assumes that the audience is familiar with the more spectacular parts of Hitler's building programs and Leni Riefenstahl's films.

The starting point in Mann's essay is how Richard Wagner's operas embodied the 19th century taste "for the monumental and the standard, the copious and [the] grandiose." These tendencies in Wagner's work reflected many social, political and artistic transformations of literally epic scope, such as the industrial revolution, the development of nation-states, the modern novel's comprehensive views of human nature and human history — particularly those in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and Balzac's voluminous *Human Comedy* — and the romantic phase of opera itself, which in last century often focused on the mythic origins of the community or the nation-state, the subject for which Wagner's works were in Mann's view the century's supreme elaboration. In this regard the novelist cites composer's techniques of "deliberate and splendid longwindedness," his highly orotund musical structures, and his insistence "on saying a thing until in desperation one believes it." These rhetorical tendencies were an integral part of the century's various Romantic genres, as works by such writers as John Ruskin and William Morris attest, to cite only English prose examples.

The reconstruction of a nation-state crippled by World War I was, of course, the task Hitler assigned himself. Less obviously, the rhetorical Germany he constructed in speeches, actions and programs was literally epic in scope and depended for its appeal on feelings of an intensity aroused in the arts only by opera. This is the art form which most fully exalts the power of the elemental emotions: love, hate, terror and ecstasy in all their mythical amplitude. It was the license that fascist oratory gave to the expression of these emotions, all of which lie outside the realm of polite or circumspect political discourse, that provided the orator with that full range of feeling which alone releases the incantatory power of the charismatic voice.

Mann also emphasized Wagnerian opera's integration of mythic amplitude and psychological acuity. Often considered in the 20th century to be incompatible with one another, these qualities regularly appeared in the work of such representative 19th-century cultural figures as Friederich Neitzche, Hendrik Ibsen, Soren Kirgegaard and Walt Whitman. Hitler's own capacity to connect these two opposed states was evident from the twenties through the mid-thirties in his successful multiplication of the number of groups who supported him. With increasing skill Hitler systematically exploited the grievances and injuries, real or imagined, of masses of

Germans: The country's thousands of unemployed veterans, its farmers made poor by steep declines in crop prices during the twenties, its industrialists wary of any political program that would inhibit market conditions favorable to them, and the multitudes humiliated or angered by the Versailles reparations, pained by the two million soldiers who died in World War I, and fearful of the social disorder associated with democratic modernization, socialist revolution, and the modernist art and architecture directly related to these developments.

That is, much of what gave Hitler's speech its charismatic force depended on its oscillation between the two oratorical poles where Wagner's operas displayed so much facility, poles that Hitler made central to the political rhetoric of modern fascism. Psychologically, Hitler was among the first modern practitioners of that politics of mass resentments which both Neitzche and Kirkegaard, before the turn of the century and independently of one another, had predicted would characterize modern political life. Mythically, Hitler sought to unify a nation by creating purified images of German's past and future, images often based on certain kinds of architecture and summed up oratorically by a tribal nationalism in which visionary leadership would redeem a nation from the discontents of contemporary life. In effect, Hitler brutalized the subtleties and greatly overextended several of the themes Mann placed at the center of Wagnerian opera, with its emphasis on heroic leadership, on communal redemption, and on what Mann phrases as "the glorification of the slain and [the] martyrized and [the] fallen."

How did Hitler do this? And what did his techniques have to do with his charismatic appeal and his building programs? The answers to these questions bear on opera's inherent constitution as a total work of art, on how Hitler exploited in particularly modern ways both an historicist architectural ideology and the traditional idea of the total work of art. Mann thought that the sequence of Wagner's operas culminating in *Parsifal* dramatized "the secret longing and ultimate ambition of all theater — to return to the bosom of the ritual out of which it sprang in both the pagan and the Christian world. The art of the theatre is already baroque, it is [metaphorical] Catholicism, it is the church ..." Mann did not say so, but the more elaborate the ritual, the more it requires a physical environment defined by the total work of art, for nothing less than it seems appropriate to ritual's timeless, totalizing and mythic dimensions, in which everything as-it-always-was merges with everything as-it-always-will-be, in which people seek redemption by stopping the flow of history itself.

That is, Hitler undertook a task that Walter Benjamin actually understated when he referred to fascism's "aestheticization of politics." At the annual Nuremburg party rallies, in Leni Reifenstahl's films on the 1934 party congress and the 1936 Olympiad, in widely distributed newsreels and radio broadcasts, in magazine and newspaper photography and reportage, and in the regime's extensive plans for new building projects, Hitler hybridized features common to religious ritual, the total work of art and opera. These features include: the orchestration of multitudes for the ritual processions at the annual rallies; ritual gestures of solidarity and martial discipline like the goosestep, the straight-arm salute, and throngs of civilians waving arms; the ritual regalia and the operatic spectacle of flags, banners, batons and scepters, of hierarchically coded uniforms and vestments in various styles and colors for the different military and civilian groups building the new state; ritual consecration and rededication through the operatic din of streetside and stadium cheering, through the recitative interludes of anonymous soldiers, through the choral apostrophes of party leaders articulating a ruthless doxology of the state, through the charismatic arias of a self-anointed, Luciferian pseudo-prophet founding and leading an unholy order; and, finally, an architecture demanded by the ritual programs, building projects that quickly resulted in the operatic super-grandiloquence of colossal stadia, assembly halls, ministerial palaces, urban axes, parade grounds, and the exalted folk vernacular of the medieval German city and "timeless" agrarian culture. In Hitler's rhetorical seizure of absolute political power he displaced ritual affirmation into quasi-operatic exaltations.

And he did so by constructing a fiction of the state as a total work of art. The movement and color of urban pageantry, the size and extraordinary nature of the built and unbuilt projects, the aural plenitude of music and speech and cheering crowds, and the massed participation of thousands constituted more than the traditional demonstration of extraordinary leadership by the charismatic individual. Hitler gave to this demonstration a uniquely modern rhetorical power through the first fully systematic political use of the modern mass media, new machines which were collectively available for the first time only in the postwar period. Hence, the aural immediacy of radio's magnification of the voice inside the listener's brain, the triumphant camera angles in the newsreel, the pseudo-documentary film and the photographic essay in magazines and newspapers; the automobile and motorcycle in motorcades of unprecedented mobility. The coordinated use of these novel machines gave Hitler an omnipresence that immeasurably reinforced the omniscient aura in which he sought to envelop his regime.

It is striking that in his major propaganda campaigns Hitler rarely failed to couple modern mass media to architecture's traditional rhetorical power. Even the blind medium of radio often depended on the architectural enhancement of the leader's speech and the cheering crowds as their voices rang out against the steep buildings and echoing streets, or the stone steps of the centuries-old building type of the imperial reviewing stand. Although subsequent experience with modern media revealed a rhetorical potency so formidable that it substantially diminished the communicative power of architecture itself, the thirties were a transitional period in which these media and the traditional medium of architecture mutually reinforced their distinct powers of persuasion, with the result that together they heightened Hitler's charismatic appeal to a degree that either of them alone could not.

In these ways, Hitler conscripted for demagogic politics the core idea of both ritual and opera, the total work of art not simply as the fulfillment of all artistic

desire but of all human yearning that finally matters. Using modern media to multiply the number and impact of his public appearances through their repeated replay at the different locations in a comprehensive distribution system, Hitler transferred into the reality of political time and space the shifts in physical and temporal locales formerly available only within the omniscient points of view adopted by opera composers and creators of other types of fiction.

Pulling out all stops in both modern and traditional means of communication, and projecting buildings that would outdo in size, magnificence and longevity Roman imperial and Napoleonic architectural achievements, Hitler sought to achieve an exponential amplification of what Mann identified as Wagnerian opera's "density of mythological atmosphere," and its "immediate, complete communication to the senses of everything that was to be said." Programmatically, Hitler's communal pageantry exploited operatic sublimity by emphasizing pure national origins, the redemptive power of violence, the cult of the supreme leader, the arrival of the new fascist man, the promulgation of a 1000-year Reich signified most dramatically by the unbuilt Nuremburg and Berlin projects, and Albert Speer's theory of ruin value, intended to prolong memory of the Reich into the millennia beyond its first thousand years.

Mann maintained that each of the component parts of Wagner's operas — the words considered as free-standing poetry, the libretti as song unaccompanied by the orchestra, the instrumental music heard by itself — "breathe[s] something rank and lawless that disappears only when [it] blend[s] into the noble whole." The operas, Mann continued, have "something majestically and sovereignly inept, side by side with such passages of absolute genius, power, compression, primeval beauty, as disarm all doubt."

As architecture, of course, the Berlin and Nuremburg projects never achieved the power of great architecture, which, as in the Roman Pantheon and the Hagia Sophia, profoundly impress upon believers and unbelievers alike a higher order of existence to which even the most powerful representatives of the cultures that produced these buildings willingly subordinated themselves. Even when densely peopled for civilian or religious ceremonies these buildings did not recede into the background; rather, the building enveloped its ceremonial population in a physical subordination to a metaphysical reality, the people acting out the beliefs embodied even more vividly in the architecture itself.

In contrast, the Chancellory balcony, the Nuremburg reviewing stand and parade ground, the searchlight "Cathedral of Ice," and the Nuremburg's bannered medieval buildings were scenographic excess imported from the opera stage, inflated from two to three dimensions, and greatly jumped up in scale to intensify one thing-only, the leader's charismatic presence, the model for which is perhaps that of a pagan god. Beyond a certain cold rigidity, these designs communicated little or nothing when empty. Once in use, however, they, unlike the all-enveloping Pantheon or Hagia Sophia, ceased to be in the foreground or at the center of attention, becoming instead visually powerful backgrounds that functioned as the indispensable frames for the animated middle ground of military and civilian multitudes, who in turn served as the backdrop to the Fuhrer's movements across these interlocked stages.

Where architecture at its most profound aspires to unify people and space in a transcendent whole that is communicated even when such buildings are empty, the power of scenography lies solely in background conditions, which become meaningful or galvanic or spectacular only when the sets are in use. In the work of Hitler and Speer, and in the various media through which they recycled their designs to multiply Hitler's movements and appearances, we have the entirely choreographic, scenographic and pagan equivalent of the total work of art. Where each of the component parts of Wagner's opera communicated something rank and lawless that finally disappeared when blended into the noble whole, both the component parts and the complete ensemble in Hitler's totalizing scenography communicated an expanding lawlessness, in which the architectural disregard of classical proportions and a mounting obsession with greater than colossal scale corresponded with unusual precision to the leader's ongoing arrogation to himself of the power and authority normally conferred only through constitutionally sanctioned offices.

In the figure of Kundry in *Parsifal*, Mann recognized the dramatic power in Wagner's creation of the "world-demonic female," the "Rose of Hell" who as the instrument of evil contends with the opera's major and lesser agents of salvation. She exhibits the Romantic fascination with infernal soul-states, morbid psychology, and extravagant appeals to the primitive parts of brain. The several such antagonists in Wagnerian opera — females whose "lofty hysteria" is expressed in somnambulistic, mesmeric, and ecstatic states — exhibit what Mann characterizes as "an odd, uncanny modernity in their heroics." Hitler is their perverse cultural descendent, the world-demonic male who usurps and distorts into a malevolent charisma the role of the morally unassailable Wagnerian hero typified by Parsifal, whom Mann described as "[the] free man, [the] breaker of tablets and [the] renovator of broken society."

From 1934 onward Hitler built a totalitarian state. In Hannah Arendt's analysis in her *Origins of Totalitarianism,* front organizations, the party itself, and elite military units constructed a fictional state whose logic, consistency, and organizational efficacy competed with and redeemed the confusions, inconsistencies and humiliations of everyday life. Uniformly dismissed by architectural historians as banal or megalomaniacal, the distortions in classical scale, form, proportion and detail in later Nazi building programs expressed exactly this imperative to establish a totalitarian counter-reality. Thus, the fanatical precision, martial repetition and classical stasis in Hitler's unbuilt Berlin and Nuremburg projects not only appealed to the industrial elite and others necessary to support the Nazi war machine; the projects were also intended to sustain the loyalty of the front organizations, the party membership, the elite military units, and the general populace, to extend Hitler's charismatic reach.

Most important, these projects were physically

represented what Hitler in *Mein Kampf* called the "living organization" of a movement, in contrast with the "dead mechanism" of a bureaucratic party. They embodied the trajectory of Hitler's own career, in which an ordinary human being transformed himself in a series of economic, political and personal crises and was now using architecture among other tools to help precipitate a commensurate transformation in followers, to create a new communal identity out of the ashes of a damaged state. Just as Wagner, in Mann's view, was continuously "screwing up his language to the highest pitch and then unconsciously seeking ever stronger and more intense situations to go with them," Hitler and Speer's most hyper-grandiose designs approached a politically apt Burkean sublime that mixed awe with fear or even terror. Reaching for a charismatic power specific to totalitarian control, the impossible scale of these projects — as Speer belatedly discovered some years later in Spandau Prison — would have reduced Hitler, even in his most impressive oratorical performance, to a charismatic or visual nullity.