

Bunkered down

By [John Petrakis](#) in the [April 19, 2005](#) issue

Guilt and remorse over Nazi atrocities and the horrors of World War II have consumed Germany for decades, influencing politics, culture and the arts, including cinema. The rise of the German New Wave of filmmakers in the 1970s (led by Werner Herzog, Wim Wenders and Rainer Fassbinder) was fueled in part by a desire to exorcise Germany's dark past. Therefore it speaks volumes about the state of discussion in Germany that the country has produced a film that is not only explicitly about Hitler but one that the makers wanted to submit for an Academy Award.

Directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel, scripted by Bernd Eichinger and adapted from two books of history (including one by celebrated German scholar Joachim Fest), *Downfall* looks at the fall of Berlin in April 1945 from the viewpoint of those occupying the massive bunker deep underneath the German chancellory. The lead figure is Hitler himself, who spends much of the two-and-a-half-hour film shifting between fury and resignation as the guns from the advancing Russian army boom outside.

There has been much discussion about Swiss actor Bruno Ganz's performance as Hitler. Ganz makes Hitler too human, some complain, and not demented enough. The fear (especially in Germany) is that any portrayal of Hitler that doesn't showcase him as a psychotic or a demon invites sympathy for the devil. (It was the same logic that required that Hitler be labeled a housepainter for many years after his death, as if no man with even a shred of artistic talent could be such a butcher.)

This argument is flawed. Evil is most terrifying when administered by a human being who knows what he is doing, and why. Ganz is hugely impressive as Hitler, giving a performance that keeps swinging from subtle to demonic.

What separates *Downfall* from other "bunker" movies over the years (including G. W. Pabst's 1955 *The Last Ten Days*) is the way it scrutinizes the big picture surrounding the final curtain call. The film is peppered with subplots involving key Nazi figures—Heinrich Himmler, Albert Speer, Joseph Goebbels—along with Eva Braun and Hitler's secretary, Traudl Junge (the subject of the recent documentary

Blind Spot). Hitler is not even a part of the film's most chilling scene, which shows Magda Goebbels deciding to kill her six children, since she is unable to bear the thought of them living in a world without National Socialism.

Events swirl around Hitler as he eats his cheese ravioli (he's a vegetarian), gazes at a painting of a former German kaiser and takes time to feed his dog. The streets of Berlin are controlled by blond-haired boys of the Hitler Youth. Civilians who talk of surrender are shot on the spot or hung from lampposts as a warning to others. A father tries to convince his son that there is nothing left worth fighting for. In the bunker the generals drunkenly debate whether to tell Hitler the truth about the hopeless situation and whether he could comprehend the truth.

There are individual set pieces that stand out, including the superb final scene between the crushed Hitler and the stoic Speer, who calmly asks Hitler to spare Berlin and its citizens. The Führer, in turn, accuses the German people of cowardice and declares that they all deserve to die.

Most remarkable is how *Downfall* manages to make the final days of the Third Reich seem like the end of an ordinary dictatorship. It isn't until the film's quiet coda that the viewers are reminded that this seductive leader and persuasive orator was directly responsible for the death of millions. But this approach makes *Downfall* all the more chilling.