

Document Citation

Title	Sanitary engineers
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Source	<i>Village Voice</i>
Date	1991 Nov 05
Type	review
Language	English English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Undergångens arkitektur (The architecture of doom), Cohen, Peter, 1989

The Architecture of Doom

A film by Peter Cohen
Released by First Run Features
At Film Forum 1
Through November 12

Hitler and the Nazis, who took over Germany even as Dutch Schultz ran the Bronx, have more than once been conceived as mobsters. Brecht wrote *The Resistable Rise of Arturo Ui* in 1941; Hollywood released *The Hitler Gang* three years later. Others have followed Walter Benjamin in finding an overweening aestheticism at the heart of the Nazi enterprise—most recently Swedish filmmaker Peter Cohen, whose compilation doc *The Architecture of Doom* opens today at Film Forum.

Although Hermann Goering is supposed to have made the bellicose assertion that the mere mention of *Kultur* made him reach for his revolver, the Nazis engaged in an unprecedented politicization of aesthetic issues. Not simply thugs armed with nationalist metaphysics and racist philosophy, their hi-

erarchy included a number of failed artists—including Goebbels, Rosenberg, and Hitler himself, whose passable postcard renderings of empty streets Cohen shows at length. This sequence is later rhymed by footage of the Führer taking a private art tour of conquered Paris, his motorcade speeding down an empty Champs Élysées, stopping so that he can contemplate this and that deserted monument. As the acme of fulfilled megalomania, the “exhibition” of Paris is complemented by Hitler’s plans to transform his provincial birthplace, Linz, into a world repository of (largely looted) art. In February 1945, the completed model was delivered to his bunker—there’s a photo of him gazing at it with avid insanity.

This round of associations is typically adroit. *Architecture of Doom* draws on all manner of archival material and, in effect, lets the images speak. (The dispassionate narration is by Bruno Ganz.) Cohen is the codirector of the 1980 *The Story of Chaim Rumkowski and the Jews of Lodz*, a compilation film that derives much of its emotional power from its scrupulous restraint. *Architecture of Doom* is less formally rigorous but has a similar lucidity. I don’t know another movie where the Nazi worldview has been evoked with such measured austerity.

Although Hitler abandoned his youthful plans to rework Wagner’s *Rienzi* (an opera in which a proto-totalitarian Roman tribune revolts against a decadent social order), his artistic ambitions were everywhere apparent in the Third

"Sanitary Engineers")
(J J Korman)

VOICE November 5, 1991

Reich. *Architecture* includes all manner of Nazi spectacles, noting the flags and regalia Hitler personally designed. Proclaiming “an end to lunacy in art,” the Führer founded a House of German Art; in 1937, he established an annual Great Exhibition of German Art to complement a massive show of “degenerate” art that, among other things, juxtaposed images of Expressionist paintings with medical photographs of physical deformities.

For the Nazis, Cohen argues, modern art was perceived as one of several related diseases threatening the German *Volk*. Some 40 per cent of all German doctors were members of the Nazi party and, along with the banning of Jews from public life, the earliest Nazi laws included the forced sterilization of the insane—both acts perceived as defending racial

purity. Cohen includes clips from a 1937 propaganda short, *Victims of the Past*, which presages the loathsome 1940 pseudodocumentary *The Eternal Jew* in announcing a deadly menace to the Aryan body politic—here, the threat is mental illness.

“I have exposed the Jews as the microbe which infects society,” Hitler would later announce. Using lurid footage shot in filthy, overcrowded Polish ghettos, *The Eternal Jew* purported to show “how Jews looked before they hid themselves behind the mask of the civilized European.” But *The Eternal Jew* did not simply compare Jews to vermin. As Cohen shows, the film adopted the visual rhetoric of an earlier documentary on pest control. (There, termites attack an artwork and are exterminated with the poison gas Zyklon B.)

In establishing the totality of Nazi notions of artistic, medical, and racial “deformity,” *Architecture of Doom*’s major omission is homosexuality. SS chief Himmler—who not only implemented the Final Solution (which he compared to the process of being de-loused) but articulated the sexual policies of the Third Reich—could have been describing Expressionists, mongoloids, or Jews when he told his officers that the ancient Teutons used to drown their homosexuals: “This was no punishment but simply the extinction of abnormal life.”

While classical sculpture satisfied the Nazi aesthetic that George L. Mosse calls “beauty without sensuality,” Cohen gives the Nazi reverence for it a further significance, suggesting that Hitler’s fixation with antiquity extended to his war aims. As the

Romans destroyed Carthage, so the Führer planned to raze Moscow and build a dam to submerge its site. Cohen calls World War II “a hypermodern war with ancient objectives”—the enslavement and annihilation of entire populations.

From the Nazi viewpoint, war was a matter of racial hygiene. The subjugation of Poland was followed by the gassing and cremation of some 70,000 German mental patients, a murder largely carried out by uniformed doctors. (Too obvious, the program was terminated once word leaked out that the government planned to also gas those soldiers who had been brain-damaged in combat.) With the invasion of Russia, SS gas vans were disguised as mobile X-ray units. The gas chambers of Auschwitz were the culmination of a campaign to “beautify” the world. ■