

The background is a dark, monochromatic line drawing of a cityscape. In the foreground, a large, stylized figure of a man in a military-style uniform stands on a rooftop or ledge, looking towards the left. The city below is filled with various buildings, including a prominent tower with a dome on the left and a large, rounded structure in the center. The overall style is reminiscent of a woodcut or a detailed line drawing. The text is overlaid on this background in a white, outlined, cursive font.

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# A Flashmob of Hitlers



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**Abstract.** If Hitler is one of the most infamous and important political characters of the modern Western World, how are alternate history works reflecting his legacy and personality? In this short paper I try to reflect on some of the most emblematic literary and ludic works created around his life and personality.

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Yes, Hitler. I knew him well. Not on first terms, of course, but as a recurring ghost that appears almost every day of my life. Either on TV, or on books, or games, or the internet, Hitler is always around the next page or the next image or the next meme to tell us something about himself, but mostly about us.

One cannot really describe Hitler as a father-figure, but one can say that Hitler is largely one of the most important parents of the modern world. Until the 1940s, the world was made of certainties, of science, of axioms about what was true or false, acceptable or unacceptable.

Hitler changed all that by becoming so uni-dimensional, so cartoonish in his principles and endeavors, of taking reason, technology, culture and civilization to its mechanical madness, that almost everything he promoted and defended became tainted by association. Even vegetarianism is sometimes attacked due Hitler himself being a vegetarian. And by making everything so black and white, Hitler made it legitimate to make everything blurred, because everything could be compared to Hitler and look acceptable.

It is therefore easy to recognize why Hitler is one of the most recurrent figures of alternate history, thinking how much the world would be different if he had not ruled or if he had prevailed against USA and USSR. In fact, his defeat cast his victors, USSR and USA, previous allies, against each other in a long and secret war call the Cold War, that probably lasts until today.

The most famous example of a possibility of alternate history based on the triumph of Hitler is “Fatherland”, the 1992 alternate history novel by Robert Harris, where Nazi Germany won the Second World War and Europe is dominated by the Nazi party [1]. We are presented with a boring, almost normal society, where Hitler represents the role of a benign father overseeing a carefully curated government, which hides carefully the extermination of the Jews. It is only the work of a SS

detective, Xavier March, that uncovers this secret, which is quickly covered again by the government forces, and only a female American journalist is able to escape with the story, hopefully to share it with the world. By presenting a nazi society as something normal, Harris may seem to be normalizing nazi ideas, rendering therefore necessary to make clear that this normality is just a *façade of evil*. Yet, by this interplay between normal society and terrifying government secrets, the novel’s reader can’t help wondering if our own boring society isn’t hiding equally dark secrets.

More famous, and perhaps influential, is “The Man in the High Castle”, the 1962 novel by Philip K. Dick, where the American author also imagines a world dominated by the Axis Forces [2]. Not only Europe, but America itself became partitioned between Japan and Germany, with a buffer nation in the middle. As typical of this author, Dick is more interested in the nature of reality than in the political implications of authoritarian power. The focus of the novel is the search of the author of a fictional book, “The Grasshopper lies heavy”, Hawthorne Abendsen, who is the supposed “man in the high castle”. It seems Hitler is just a tertiary character in the novel, incapacitated by syphilis, powerlessly watching his followers fight for power, but the book not only includes explicit references to Reinhard Heydrich, the German architect of the Final Solution, but the name “high castle” seems to be a literal translation of the German “hochburg”, which commonly means “fortress, stronghold”, the place where Hawthorne Abendsen lives, the elusive character whose initials are the same as Adolf Hitler, but inverted.

Abendsen, however, writes a book where he imagines an alternate history where the Allies won the war, supposedly a happier world, but not really, as the world it depicts isn’t really our own, but a stranger version of it. And the title of the book, taken from a verse from the Bible,

Ecclesiastes 12:5, is a reference to a time of sadness, anguish and despair [3].

Which of these worlds fictional worlds that co-exist in Dick's novel would be better? We tend to think that the alternate world created by Abendsen would be better, as it is closer to our world, and more distant from the world Hitler fought to bring on. But I am not sure if that would be the intention of Philip K. Dick. He assumedly wrote his novel through the use of "I Ching", the Chinese book of permutations (another way of describing alternate realities), to create his always shifting realities, that seem more the result of utter randomness than of human agency and struggle [4]. In fact, the novel is quite open in its ending, probably a result of the notorious incapacity of the author to build consistent plots, but in the context of the novel, also suggesting a sort of open-ended world, where nothing really settles, and nothing is really true.

Strangely, this uncertainty evokes the same atmosphere as Secret Hitler, the social deduction game, where players are divided between fighting a fascist coup and trying to promote it [5]. And one of the players even gets to play Hitler. The game is based on uncertainty, suspicion and a continuous sense of dread and fear that the people next to you can backstab you. In a way, evoking the political conditions of the Nazi world described by Philip K. Dick, but also bringing to life that what I would call the Hitler effect: that far from bringing about a fake, but stable society, a triumph of Hitler would never create a stable society, but a society of fear, dread, suspicion, of uncertainty in what is real or not. This would be typical of authoritarian states, as described by the sociologist Max Weber, who noted that they do not rely on true power, but on violence and propaganda to gain a simulacrum of legitimacy [6]. That is, an alternate history where Hitler won wouldn't be the quiet and boring Europe of Fatherland, but a world of fake news, fake facts, information overflow to erase memory,

sensationalism, violence, backstabbing, populism, performative emotions to manipulate minds.

And that is what makes Hitler scarier, the fact that we know that he was defeated, but that we cannot be certain that his world was defeated and so his ghost lingers own, looking for new ways to haunt us.

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