Visualizing Fascism

In Don DeLillo’s 1985 novel, *White Noise*, the protagonist, Jack Gladney, a professor in the rural Midwest at the fictitious institution The-Coll-ege-on-the-Hill, is a specialist in “Hitler studies,” a field Gladney is known for pioneering. In tune with the discourse of postmodernism of the time, DeLillo uses this invented academic specialism to convene the novel’s interlinked themes, including the addictive properties of mass consumption; the impact of media-driven popular culture on family relations, childhood, and general psychic well-being; the character of contemporary academia and its pretensions; the prevalence of political conspiracy theories; the regenerative potential of violence; and (as a metacommentary informing them all) the relationship between representation and the real. Running through the whole is DeLillo’s interest in the Debordian idea of spectacle, itself a primary fascination of the then emergent cross-disciplinary field of cultural studies. The novel strongly suggests, with varying directness across its respective themes, that fascism’s emotional power and popular appeal rested in harnessing new technological means and society’s ritual and symbolic resources for purposes of cleverly choreographed mass mobilization. The manipulative apotheosis was the Nazi spectacle, which DeLillo encapsulates in the following descrip-
tion early in the book, as Gladney rhapsodizes about his subject: “Close-up jostled shots of thousands of people outside a stadium after a Goebbels speech, people surging, massing, bursting through traffic. Halls hung with swastika banners, with mortuary wreaths and deaths-head insignia. Ranks of thousands of flagbearers arrayed before columns of frozen light, a hundred and thirty aircraft searchlights aimed straight up—a scene that resembled a geometric longing, the formal notation of some powerful mass desire.”

DeLillo’s description vividly conjures one of our most enduringly familiar images of the Third Reich as it wanted to be seen. By simply googling “NSDAP Nuremberg Rallies,” for example, we instantly receive an endlessly cascading array of the kind, showing vast numbers of uniformed, symmetrically ordered, immaculately disciplined, usually male Nazi supporters in anonymously massed ranks, marching or standing, sometimes with arms raised in salute—an embodied perfection of homogeneous collective simultaneity. In the guiding conception behind such massed displays, this perfectly drilled uniformity was intended to symbolize the ideal unity of the nation in a manner that celebrated both the leader’s plebiscitary endorsement and his resulting authority. For illustrating the distinctiveness of Nazism’s popular appeal, or indeed the self-projection of fascist movements more generally, these are probably the most commonly reached-for visual markers. Yet, when designing posters or choosing illustrations for flyers and magazines, Nazi propagandists themselves were as likely to choose individuated versions of the same messages—the idealized worker, soldier, farmer, mother, family, student, shining young boy or girl—or else an image of violent action, a fist crashing into an opponent’s face, for example. A further stock repertoire used caricatures of the Jewish, Bolshevik, Social Democratic, liberal-bourgeois, or other enemy (figure 3.1). In other words, the Nuremberg Rally and its equivalents were only one element of the purposeful machinery of Nazi visuality. The Third Reich’s visual landscape had far more to it than the relatively small number of spectacular massed events per se, however essential these became to the state’s ritual calendar. That greater multiplicity of images circulating inside Nazism’s visual economy had an impact far beyond what the elaborately stage-managed official spectacle might accomplish. For such rallies, however gigantic, were confined physically in time and space. Their full popular reception presumed varieties of amplification, most obviously via radio, but also via satellite events, print media (newspapers, flyers, posters, pamphlets), photography, and perhaps especially film. Our lasting perception of a Nuremberg Rally has, after
all, been indelibly shaped by Leni Riefenstahl’s artfully contrived documentary of the 1934 rally in *Triumph of the Will* (*Triumph des Willens*, 1935). The event’s mobilizing effects, in terms of political excitement, spontaneous identification, and affective solidarity, could be transferred immeasurably more widely than the immediate venue and physical surroundings of the rally itself. Within the overall fields of ideological influence and action managed from Joseph Goebbels’s Reich Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda, the mounting of these massed spectacles was held mainly distinct, whereas the larger task of producing active popular compliance, in Goebbels’s remarkably catholic estimation, knew no boundaries. Schooling, policies for youth, recreation and sports, social work, everything associated with the workplace, family values and domesticity, the behavior of the professions—all were arenas requiring attention, where the Nazi state sought to shape social practices and expectations. The written and spoken word, print and visual media, and cultural policies and the arts were all deployed, consciously...
and systematically (if not always with the desired consistency), to massage and coerce into existence the active conformity the Nazis wanted.

Here the jump from “movement” to “regime”—a long-standing focus in fascism historiography—had decisive effects. The Nazis had been impressively active in the aforementioned ways before 1933, even without the resources of a state. They were not the first party to perceive the importance of the mass form, whether in stylistics and display or by converting politics into spectacle—even learning some of this from the Left—but they did so on a strikingly new scale by boldly occupying public space. During the electioneering of 1930–32, they blanketed print media and streets with flags, flyers, posters, and badges in a gaudy red-and-black, swastika-adorned visibility; they conveyed youthful energy through every possible type of agitation (marches, parades, rallies, picketing, leafleting), further sensationalized by the SA’s (Sturmabteilung’s) street-fighting violence; they held 34,000 meetings in the last month of the 1930 election alone. By 1932 such action had already been elaborately choreographed. The April 1932 presidential election saw another bold innovation: Hitler’s first publicity-grabbing “Germany Flight” (Deutschlandflug), an airborne campaign with no German precedent, used a chartered plane emblazoned with “The Führer over Germany” that crisscrossed the country for twenty major rallies in less than a week, with aggregate audiences a million strong. Hitler repeated this for the various state elections immediately afterward, addressing twenty-five major rallies during April 16–24, ranging from 120,000 in big-city Hamburg to several thousand in small-scale Miesbach in rural Upper Bavaria, where the audience “waited for hours in pouring rain” to hear him speak. For the July national campaign his third “Germany Flight” covered a staggering fifty-three venues. This time the party also used film while distributing fifty thousand gramophone records of Hitler’s “Appeal to the Nation.”

*After* power was seized, the technicians of the spectacle worked this into a highly ramified system. With resources of state, the possibilities became incomparably greater: Goebbels acquired a subordinate press, national film studios, and a national broadcasting system; buildings, public arenas, and parade grounds could be commissioned; cities and the entire built environment could be redesigned, technologies harnessed, and centralized budgets deployed. At hand was an elaborate, organized machinery of mobilization, not just for setting people into motion, but for bringing them into deliberately managed public visibility, by materializing them as a mass. By these means, the nation and its histories and futures could be reimagined. Citizenship and
national belonging could be re-presented through the language of *Volksge-
meinschaft*, the community of the people-race-nation. “Germany” itself could be revisualized.

Aesthetics and Politics

In much recent discussion, whether of the Third Reich, Mussolini’s Italy, or fascism more generally, this process is conceptualized as the “aestheticization of political life.” Most such usage refers to the *Inszenierung* (stage-managing) of political action enabled by the pushing of *Gleichschaltung* (complete coordination and standardization of organized social and political life) into the sphere of cultural expression. Thus, in a drive toward “dedifferentiation and false reconciliation,” often mistakenly characterized as “anti-modern,” Nazism “infused aesthetics into the political sphere in order to turn life into a unified work of art.” The result was a deliberately engineered political stylistics, epitomized not just by the Nuremberg Rallies but still more by the elaborate secondary staging of the surrounding representational excess. Mobilizing the latest technologies of radio, cinematography, light, and sound; organizing masses of people into regimented and ritualized displays of disciplined uniformity; drawing upon rich iconographies, powerfully resonant mythologies, and easily recognizable symbolics, whether well-tried or freshly invented: these were key for the fascist spectacle, all concentrated in the glorified charismatic leader. Politics became subsumed into “a highly ritualized and operatic public sphere” wherein the acclamatory performance of mass political submission followed upon the destruction of the pluralism and procedural negotiations associated with the practice of democracy. The mounting of the fascist spectacle and its intended visual power specifically replaced the exchange of views and deliberative civility of the democratic public sphere: “It recast the political as a realm of the beautiful so as to compensate for the costs of modern disenchantment and to suture disenfranchised individuals into an all-encompassing spectacle of homogenization, an aesthetic simulation of community.”

The cue has been Walter Benjamin’s oft-quoted assertion that “the logical result of fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life.” An industry of exegesis has gathered around Benjamin’s elliptical and aphoristic remarks on this subject, to be found in his brief “Epilogue” to the 1935 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility.” Thus for Benjamin fascism was a brutally coercive response to the crisis of capital-
ism and its associated social and political contentiousness, a violent rejoinder to the rise of the masses and the organized challenge of the urban working class, whose impact through the 1918 German Revolution first instigated the Weimar Republic’s democratic constitution and then supplied its main defense. Politically, fascism sought to replace the fragmented, mobile, and conflict-ridden openness of society under Weimar with a diametrically contrasting authoritarian frame—one that was centered, rigid, and closed—in a relationship to history conceived as organically finished and whole. In the face of the Left’s political challenge, under the late-Weimar political crisis, fascism wanted to immunize the given property relations against reform or attack.9

Benjamin’s thinking rested on a contrast between “auratic” and “postauratic” art, or the qualities of authenticity and uniqueness of traditional artwork against the commodified circulation of images enabled by the new industrial technologies of photography and cinema and their applications. As a consequence of the latter, the artwork’s presumed and reverential authority was lost. “For the first time ever,” John Berger argued in one of the earliest commentaries on Benjamin’s insight, “images of art have become ephemeral, ubiquitous, insubstantial, available, valueless, free.”10 Against those democratizing effects, Benjamin warned, fascism wanted a restoration. It sought to return the new perceptual openness to the coercively imposed rigidities of order, in an apotheosis of “l’art pour l’art.” This was in turn linked to an argument about urban modernity (Paris, New York, Berlin) and its transformative consequences for sense perception.11 Here Benjamin voiced the often seemingly ubiquitous efforts of German intellectuals to capture both the specific qualities of metropolitan life after 1918 and their consequences for how people could live, in their social habits, their psychic composure, and their negotiable forms of everydayness. How, given the challenges of this new environment, should one learn to live in the modern world? Severed from the familiar securities of smaller-scale and readily knowable community living, or “experience” as a lived relationship to dependably known continuities of cultural understanding, people were exposed instead to the constant commotion of city streets: “According to Benjamin, in the age of crowds and automats, bombarded by images and noises, overwhelmed with chance encounters and glances, we need to put up a ‘protective shield’ against the excesses of daily shocks hitting us. In this process, our system of perception ends up repressing our senses, deadening them in an ‘anaesthetic’ procedure, and we lose the capacity for shared meaning.” The “alienation of the senses” associ-
ated with this condition of modernity opened a new and distinctive space for politics, one that fascists proved adept at using (figure 3.2).\footnote{12}

Parsing this argument requires returning to those pioneering attempts of the 1980s, associated with writers such as Marshall Berman and Stephen Kern, to reopen a discussion of “the modern” and modernity by rehistoricizing their emergence and currency to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.\footnote{13} Among German historians, the relevant impact came from the oeuvre of Detlev Peukert.\footnote{14} Here the Third Reich’s advent and the specificities of Nazi rule were traced back to the unmanageably hypertrophied contradictions of modernity under the Weimar Republic, with its “charged atmosphere of social and cultural innovation,” its “dreams of reason,” and all the resulting conflicts and insoluble contestation.\footnote{15} During the 1920s, Peukert argued, the urgencies of crisis pervaded one sphere after another, including “economics, politics, high culture and mass consumption, science and technology, architecture and city planning, the family and gender relations.” Beneath
the Republic’s protections, he continued, both the cultural experiments of the avant-garde and the progressivist projects of social reform collided with yearnings for a simpler, less hectic, and more reliable way of life, so that under pressures of economic collapse, political polarization, and social disorder, a reach for dictatorship started to become thinkable.16

On the one hand, the project-driven imagining of a realizable modernity among the new cohorts of managers and planners, architects and designers, social engineers and social policy experts encouraged an unbounded belief that society could be entirely remade, in effect a utopian wish that social and economic needs would be addressed to a degree that could never actually be satisfied, least of all under the straitened circumstances of fiscal retreatment after 1929. The Machbarkeitswahn (“delirium of makeability”) of the heyday of the Republic passed during the freneticism of the succeeding economic and political collapse into anxieties of disorientation. Yet, modernity’s inescapable “irritations” hardly ceased to engender the fantasy of wholeness, whose appeal became even radicalized under the societal crisis and its polarizing disorders. Once the Nazis achieved their startling electoral breakthrough in September 1930 and reached a crescendo of success by the summer of 1932, before being hoisted into power in January 1933, that appeal to wholeness acquired material political form, whether by reclaiming “traditions” or through “a ‘clean,’ frictionless modernity to be achieved by dictatorial political means.”17

This was what Benjamin meant by “fascist aesthetics as a monolithic space of false reconciliation, as a postauratic renewal of aura.”18 “By demystifying the world,” David Crew argues by means of Peukert, “modernity produces a desire for a revitalization of everyday life by a charismatic leader and by irrational appeals to ‘new religions’—such as ‘race.’”19 The most successful efforts at concretizing Benjamin’s claims—at grounding them in a convincing account of Nazism and its dynamics of organized appeal—have reformulated their conception of modernity in this way, as an argument about Weimar’s historical particularities. The Republic emerges as a regime space of social, cultural, and political experiment whose radicalisms provoked an increasingly violent right-wing response. That backlash had many triggers and targets, from the New Woman, the trashiness of popular culture, the flaunting of permissive sexuality, and the visibility of the avant-garde to the political culture of liberal constitutionalism, the legal entrenchment of trade unions, and the militancy of Social Democrats and Communists. The new freedoms simultaneously enabled their opposite: “Modernity constructs new social and
cultural forms (i.e. a mass consumerist public) that are politically ambiguous and can be appropriated for dictatorial as well as for ‘progressive’ political purposes (i.e. the Nazi Inszenierung der Massen).”

This is really an argument about the predisposing-cum-generative relation of a certain sociocultural condition of modernity—as modes of intelligibility, as default regimes of perception, as psychic predication, as sensorium, as both unsettlement and excitation, as both warning and incitement—to the enabling of a certain kind of politics. If we render this more cautiously, then Peukert’s approach (and Benjamin’s) asks us to consider how the definite political outcome of the 1930s, along with the distinctively fascist publicness of the Third Reich, might be read for their relationship to that cultural condition of modernity. But what, concretely, did the “bringing of aesthetics into politics” mean? My opening gloss on DeLillo’s rendering of this into fiction, along with Lutz Koepnick’s further explication, seems the most convincing and helpful way of beginning to answer that question. In what follows I point to some of the complications.

Mosse, Gentile, and Political Religion

Here certain affinities exist with arguments about the “sacralization” of politics and “political religion,” associated with Emilio Gentile and George Mosse. Invoking the “cult-like” or “quasi-religious” features of the Third Reich’s public ceremonial and commemorative calendar, plus some homologies between Nazism’s public symbolics, ritual practices, and formal beliefs and those of German Protestantism, this approach reads Nazism’s mass appeal for its displaced religiosity, attributing its purchase to a combination of political inventiveness and popular susceptibility during the extremes of the crises of Weimar. Beyond functional and imitative similarities, the most fruitful analyses suggest Nazism’s deeper indebtedness to the apocalyptic and salvationist thinking generated by a crisis of German Protestantism in the early twentieth century, which grew ever more radicalized by the traumas of war, military collapse, and revolutionary upheaval. Amid wild talk of spiritual endangerment, darkness, and catastrophe, Nazism offered a redemptive vision of political deliverance based on the leader’s charismatic authority, the primacy of the Volksgemeinschaft, and a Manichean drive against the enemies of the race. By addressing the religious disorientation, it sought to capture for itself the primary faculty of faith in the divine—namely, the promise of transcendence—to raise the movement rhetorically above politics and sublimate worldly fears.
in the supreme postulate of the racial struggle for existence and its rewards. This illumines the internal structure of the outlook of ideologues such as Joseph Goebbels, Dietrich Eckert, and Alfred Rosenberg, as well as leading Nazis’ salvationist language and the messianic aura imputed to Hitler himself. It makes intelligible the extremes of emotional investment orchestrated around the Nuremberg Rallies and other elements of the Nazi liturgical calendar.\textsuperscript{23}

By its excessive formalism and functionalism, however, the sacralization thesis sacrifices historical specificity to an overarching interpretation of the political forms called functionally into life by the conflictual dynamics of modernization as a diffuse macro-historical process. Mosse’s version, with its deep cultural indebtedness to his so-called anthropological approach, rests heavily on an argument about the larger political forces of nationalism and mass-political forms seeded by the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{24} Mosse ascribed both the popular breadth of fascism’s appeal and the ritualized forms of its plebiscitary orchestration to this ability to draw “for its own purposes” on “the fragments of our Western cultural and ideological past.” Fascism succeeded “because it annexed and focused those hopes and longings that informed diverse political and intellectual movements of the previous century.”\textsuperscript{25}

While originally engaging “the aesthetics of politics” by pioneering the historical treatment of masculinity and sexuality and calling attention to “the myths and symbols that comprised a national liturgy appropriate for national self-representation,” Mosse always recurred in this way to a longer-range metatheory of European history, reflecting his own default understanding of Enlightenment-initiated cultural change. Cultural rootedness and “the dialectics of irrationalism” were primary to Mosse’s concern.\textsuperscript{26} His particular idea of political religion involved essentializing claims about the “hunger for totality” produced by the worries of Europeans in “confronting modernity.”\textsuperscript{27} But here modernity becomes a far more diffusely transhistorical category than Peukert’s (and Benjamin’s) more grounded argument about metropolitan life in the 1920s. The particular audacity of the movements of Hitler and Mussolini dissolves into the deeper mists of European time:

In analyzing a political style which was eventually used for such ugly ends, it may seem odd to begin with a discussion of beauty. But the “aesthetics of politics” was the force which linked myths, symbols, and the feeling of the masses; it was a sense of beauty and form that determined the nature of the new political style. The ugly ends to which this style was eventually used were masked by the appeal of the new politics for a large section of
the population, by its usefulness in capturing their longings and dreams. A concept of beauty objectified the dream world of happiness and order while it enabled men to contact those supposedly immutable forces which stand outside the flow of daily life.\textsuperscript{28}

Mosse \textit{does} extend Benjamin in emphasizing the kinds of equivalence that linked Nazism to the mass forms cultural socialism had invented earlier. One unhelpful version of that argument was the conflationist approach of totalitarianism theory, in which Stalinism and fascism are rendered simply the same. Likewise, it is easy enough to invoke the authoritarian dourness of official culture in the post-1945 state-socialist world, with its collectivist uniformities, standardization, limiting morality, and repressive disciplinary power, epitomized in the paramilitary conformities and Boy Scout ethos of the Young Pioneers and other official youth cultures. We might also cite the regimentation of the official Soviet-style sports apparatus, the hostility against sexual dissidence, and the highly gendered languages of Stalinist collectivism. But however uniformly rigidified these state-institutionalized forms were during the 1930s and after, whether in Stalinist, fascist, or wider collectivist versions, the new genres of mass-political action originally had more contingent and dynamically variable meanings in the popular political cultures of the early twentieth century. They came, above all, from the unprecedented post-1918 wave of European democratization and its global anti-colonial equivalents. Rather than the novelties attending the “nationalization of the masses” deeper into the nineteenth century (Mosse’s view), they came far more specifically from the popular politics accompanying the revolutionary turbulence of 1917–23. Fascists in Italy, Germany, and more widely certainly invented their own forms of direct-action militancy, collective display, and public intervention based around the heedless paramilitary recourse to physical violence. But they also consciously appropriated the mass forms developed earlier in the socialist tradition (before 1914), while responding with alacrity to the Left’s innovations after 1917.

By the 1920s in Germany, in other words, Social Democrats, Communists, and Nazis were all drawing on a rapidly developing common repertoire of organized display and collective mobilization: huge rallies and festivals; public shows of massed discipline and strength; the well-choreographed mass march; the mass gymnastic displays and mass choirs; the development of new rituals; and the orchestration of a distinctive political symbolic. Further, the massed \textit{visual} power defining that repertoire increasingly obscured
individual political subjectivities. Sublimating personal desires, effacing individuality, frowning on dissident sexualities, closing down diversity and the latitude for cultural experimentation—all might be found on the Left no less than on the Right. Specifying Left/Right differences is difficult within this emergent arena of spectacular politics. Thus, in Red Vienna, surrounding the opening of the socialist-built Vienna Stadium in July 1931, aggregate crowds of 240,000 watched a mass pageant of the Austrian Socialist Party’s history performed by thousands from the movement’s cultural organizations, which climaxed with worker-actors toppling “a huge gilt idol-head representing capital from its scaffolding.”

Visuality, Monumentalism, and the Faces in the Crowd

Thus, much received wisdom notwithstanding, Nazis did not exactly invent the mass spectacles associated with the Nuremberg Rallies, the 1936 Olympiad, and other efforts at staging the disciplined formations of popular homage and nationalist unanimity. Rather, they drew upon rich antecedents from the 1920s, which the Social Democratic and Communist Parties inventively pioneered. As Nadine Rossol remarks, “in contrast to the common modern perception, the Nazi Party Rallies did not create aesthetically original features. Instead, they combined and expanded, often on an unprecedented scale, well-known elements characteristic of political assemblies.” Thus a mode of massed political choreography was already at hand, through which republican loyalists had sought to invent “highly disciplined rituals that situated bodies in space—the style of walking, the clothing of the demonstrators, the route of the parade, the sounds of their steps and slogans—to symbolize the unity and strength of the national community.” Yet, as the Nazis then showed, these potentials could enhance the public arsenal and performative repertoire of the Republic’s enemies too. The mass form in that sense became a site of contestation. As Rossol concludes, “rather than inventing mass spectacles, the Nazi movement brought them under the state’s control and eventually abandoned them.” Ironically, “the National Socialists showed that the inclusive, spectacular, and representative forms tried out as part of visualizing the republic could be easily extended and reinterpreted to reflect the structure of their own political system.”

Fascist monumentalism becomes similarly ambiguous. The Nazi architectural vision seemed distinctive enough in its colossal scale alone. As imagined, this extended from the Nuremberg Party Rally grounds, the Olympic
stadium, and the new Reich Chancellery, through a variety of showcase projects across the emblematic cities of the Reich, to the plans for a new Berlin, envisaged to reemerge by 1950 as the new world capital of “Germania.” Hamburg was planned to receive the world’s tallest skyscraper as the new party regional headquarters, along with the world’s largest suspension bridge across the Elbe; Munich’s new central rail station would be the world’s largest steel-frame structure. One such project actually built was the reconstructed Tempelhof Airport in Berlin, designed by Ernst Sagebiel in the mid-1930s and at the time the largest in the world. Nazi planners happily deployed the modernist techniques and materials of the New Architecture (Neues Bauen), if not its aesthetic vision and ethicopolitical esprit. Other new technologies were enlisted too. Beginning in August-September 1933, Albert Speer designed a so-called Cathedral of Light to enframe the annual Nuremberg Rally by positioning antiaircraft searchlights at twelve-meter intervals around the Zeppelin Field parade ground and pointing them directly into the night sky. To achieve that effect, he requisitioned the Luftwaffe’s entire inventory of 152 powerful searchlights (figure 3.3).

A complex of grand-scale halls, arenas, and assembly grounds covering a site of 4.2 square miles, the Party Rally Grounds in Nuremberg, whose construction was never quite completed, supplied the single clearest example of Nazi monumentalism at work. When filled each year with the regimented ranks of fascist collectivism in motion, the Rally Grounds glorified power as such; they conveyed a morally coercive pedagogy of the state’s authority, and they staged the latter as a public drama carefully conceived to overwhelm visual sensibilities. As an organized megaspectacle, the annual Reich Harvest Festival, held on the Bückeberg Hill during 1933–37, was even larger still: likewise overseen by Speer, its initial attendance was half a million, increasing to 1.2 million by 1937. Experientially, these events were certainly multifaceted. But the physical monumentalism of Nazi official architecture—ministries, ceremonial buildings, cultural institutions—was deliberately imposing: the purpose was to intimidate, belittle, overawe. The epitome was the Reich Chancellery, conceived in 1934–35 and built 1938–39, again by Speer: after negotiating a series of entrance rooms (725 feet long) through double doors nearly 17 feet high, visitors approached Hitler’s study via the 450-feet-long Gallery of Mirrors, twice as long as its model in the palace at Versailles; the study itself was 4,305 square feet in size (88 feet long, 47.5 feet wide, 40 feet high), intensely laden with promiscuous symbolism (busts, artworks, tapestries, swastikas, eagles, laurel wreaths) and culminating in Hit-
ler’s enormous desk (11.5 by 4.6 feet). When aged Czech President Emil Hácha arrived there at 1 a.m. on March 14, 1939, to sign off on the dissolution of his country, “his face red from nervousness and anxiety,” he first had to trudge the full length of this building before presenting himself.37

Spatially and visually, this was an architecture of belittlement and intimidation, conceding nothing to ambivalence or talking back.38 But the massed spectacles were more complicated. The photographic record surrounding Nazi celebrations, such as the popular adulation accompanying Hitler’s fortieth birthday on April 20, 1937, was only deceptively transparent. Did the cheering crowd giving the Hitler salute signify genuine joy, or were the pictures carefully selected and staged? How far was adoration of Hitler’s person endorsement for the policies of the regime? Which policies were supported and which not? Who was absent from the crowd and why? These same questions also apply to the organizing ideal of the Volksgemeinschaft, in whose name Nazi spectacles were staged. In the heyday of social history, German historians gave a confident answer: the “people’s community” was a
mere trick and a “fictitious concept,” a projection of bogus unity by the now-
triumphal Nazis who declared the divisiveness of Weimar democracy healed. The spectacle was “an aesthetic simulation of community” and a “false reconciliation,” in Benjamin’s sense.\textsuperscript{19} The Volksgemeinschaft may have been “a potent mobilizing agent.” But “between the exaggerated pseudo-egalitarian propaganda that claimed to have transcended class, denominational, and political division and the essential continuities in the class structure of Nazi Germany,” a huge gap still existed.\textsuperscript{40} “What are the reasons,” asked Heinrich August Winkler rhetorically, “why we should actually take the Nazi slogans for anything real?”\textsuperscript{41}

The big events of the Nazi ritual calendar can be seen too straightforwardly as the vehicles for successful Nazi indoctrination. Readings that rely mainly on the photographic record too trustingly take the visual bombast of Nazi self-representations at face value, accepting that Nazi culture should be identified primarily with “the deindividuating, conformist, and unifying spectacles of Leni Riefenstahl’s films and Albert Speer’s monumental architecture.”\textsuperscript{42} In contrast, we need to probe more searchingly into how the impact of the mass spectacle worked its way into the minds and habits of individual Germans, whether they joined in the event directly or partook vicariously from various kinds of distance. For “ideology” existed not only in the explicitly programmatic and dramatically staged doctrinal content of the Nuremberg Rally. It also lurked in the social relations and material practices by which Germans found themselves having to live in an unfamiliar social world after 1933. It was found in the ideas, beliefs, values, prejudices, and assumptions through which people tried to bring meaning and order into their material everyday lives.

The massified character of the spectacle necessarily presumed the multitudinous participation of socially diverse populations, whose personal experience involved complicated mixtures of emotions. Propagation of the Volksgemeinschaft after 1933 was systematic, unceasing, and morally coercive. But joining its appeal could also be emotionally satisfying and socially enjoyable. Ordinary Germans might well embrace “Nazi ideology” as such. But they could also accept Nazi values on a variety of other grounds, including already formed if diffuse patriotic loyalties and anti-Bolshevik fears of disorder, as well as self-interested careerism and material advantage, including the desire for a quiet life and simply to be left alone. Joining the regimented multitude of a Nuremberg Rally or other massed events entailed a very convoluted set
of motivations, some consciously chosen, but others externally anticipated or imposed. Joining a rally might well concentrate a person’s subjectivity, but only provisionally and doubtless only in part. Being a face in the crowd simultaneously implied a practical self-erasure and a conscious individuality, disappearing into the disciplined and uniform anonymity, on the one hand, yet seeking a satisfying self-validation on the other. What people really did at those official events, and what they took away, would vary immensely, even as their experience undoubtedly converged around certain common ideas and values. Likewise, the event carried very different meanings for the direct participants as against the various categories of immediate spectators, the wider audience listening to the radio, or the broader publics at still further remove, not to speak of the many categories of service laborers who enabled the event even to be staged. Once again, the precise efficacies of the Nazis’ intended message will come better into view only if we pursue its effects into the mundane and localized settings of daily life, away from the alarums and excitement of the performance of the spectacle per se.

Here, the evidence of film may help. The earliest historiography of Nazi cinema typically used a dichotomous model of propaganda and society, in which the vast top-down machinery of Goebbels’s Ministry acted concertedly on German society to manipulate the masses into the desired conformity. In its treatment of filmic content such work was also reductionist, simplifying complex fields of meaning into a straightforward story of indoctrination, even while conceding the entertaining qualities of the vast bulk of the films actually produced after 1933. Thus if the approach presumed one binary opposition between ideology and social context ("propaganda" and "society"), it also added a second between ideological indoctrination and escapist diversion, which obscured much of what films actually produced in meanings for the people who saw them. Yet precisely as entertainment, films not only filled people’s everyday lives by distracting them. They also offered images to frame a private realm of wants—a dreamworld of a better life—in ways that stitched these into the racialized vision of the Volksgemeinschaft. Popular and official culture could thereby be made to work together. Far more than just the regime’s propaganda operations, Nazism developed a complex aesthetic program that matched the mass spectacle to the appeals of consumer pleasure and visual enjoyment. In the “seemingly unpolitical spaces of private commodity consumption” and “American-style consumerism,” Nazi cinema projected a promise of private satisfactions, “even as it coopted these ‘to ar-
rest and rechannel’ them.” It was in the cinema’s space of enjoyment, no less than in the audience for the Nuremberg Rally, that Germans were invited to become good Nazi subjects.

Under its ruthlessly authoritarian and violently coercive terms of rule, the Third Reich’s visual environment was both multifaceted and systemically clear. But nor was it lacking in positive appeal. The Nazi Volksgemeinschaft was not just an elaborately constructed propaganda screen or a “beautiful illusion” based on deception and sloganeering that simply disguised repression and preserved social inequalities as before. Workers’ rights and collective bargaining may have gone, but the “Beauty of Labor” (Schönheit der Arbeit) program of Strength through Joy (Kraft durch Freude [KdF]), created under the aegis of the German Labor Front in September 1933, brought real practical benefits into the workplace, from better washrooms and changing facilities, brighter lighting, and more generous space to improved health and safety, longer breaks, and expanded holidays, which increased under the Nazis from an average of only three days to one or two weeks. Even as older forms of collective solidarity and the dignity of labor were being traduced, in other words, new slogans such as “Honor of Labor” (Ehre der Arbeit) and “Excellence of German Work” (Deutsche Qualitätsarbeit) brought very tangible meanings. KdF also operated sports and fitness facilities; broadened access to previously exclusive pastimes such as sailing, horseback riding, and tennis; discounted tickets for concerts, theaters, and museums; subsidized cinemas and theaters; supported hobbies and adult education; and maximized workers’ access to holidays and recreation. As a travel bureau it had some 140,000 employees and by 1939 was running twelve cruise ships, including the custom-built Wilhelm Gustloff and Robert Ley. By 1938, an aggregated 54 million Germans had passed through its hands; in 1937, inland vacations peaked at 1.4 million tourists, and weekend excursions at 6.8 million; by 1939, 140,000 were taking cruises of the Baltic, North, and Mediterranean Seas.

The balance sheet of popular acceptance of what the Nazis tried to offer was very mixed. In common with other recovering economies in the 1930s, Germany saw certain consumer industries able to flourish: radios, cinema, furniture, and telephones, for example. But the Nazis’ grander promise of accessible “people’s products” (Volksprodukte) never came to much. Although 340,000 orders were placed for the “people’s car” (Volkswagen), which was announced to great fanfare in 1937, not a single unit ever rolled out of the giant purpose-built plant, which was converted for military production in
September 1939, along with its model city (KdF-City) and planned family housing and amenities. Prora, the intended KdF showcase megaresort, a twenty-thousand-bed vacation complex begun in May 1936 on the Baltic island of Rügen, was likewise never completed but refitted for military use. Yet the potency was in the promise of improvement, which was seemingly guaranteed in the Prora resort’s imposing comprehensiveness, which combined the collectivist sameness of Germans being together with the personal pleasures of relaxation. This vision of the future, of a purified Germany beyond the former class divisiveness, in which the body of the nation (Volkskörper), healthful and united, purged of its weaknesses and foreign elements, could be strengthened and renewed in the pursuit of wholesome enjoyments was continuously reaffirmed, not just in the visual barrage of the KdF’s happy propaganda but in the tangible actualities of the goods it delivered: “Strength through Joy catered to consumer expectations as economic recovery ended unemployment and raised family incomes, recognizing that individual pleasure and autonomy mattered as much as the collective experience of cultural uplift and national renewal. While KdF directed its low-cost, non-commercial consumption toward collective ends, it simultaneously embedded visions of future prosperity in the dream worlds of the present, advertising material ‘luxuries’ to appeal to its audience.”

Any appraisal of Nazi Germany’s visual record must take all of these aspects into account. My purpose is not to dispute the attractions of the Volksgemeinschaft or the efficacy of the Third Reich’s propaganda, but rather to complicate how their impacts each occurred. Moreover, once we grasp the more insidiously unspoken means by which ideology does its work—in everyday processes, in unexpected places, in personal lives, and in the many semiconscious and unconscious ways through which subjectivities are made—we are unlikely to underplay fascism’s popular appeal. Surely the large-scale, extravagant, and systemic propaganda offensives needed to depend on a substrate of ordinary perceptions and quotidian practices. Certainly, through their gargantuan and monolithic scale, Speer’s major building projects sought to architecturally stage the fascist will to power. To those already mentioned we may add his design of the German Pavilion for the 1937 World Exposition in Paris. The massed spectacles, no less than this monumental built environment, were meant to dwarf the individual subject while investing the Führer with grandiosity.
Conclusion

These thoughts on Nazi visuality might be taken in various further directions. The “aesthetics of production” and the “beautification of labor,” mentioned briefly above, would certainly be one.\textsuperscript{50} Representations of Heimat (literally, “home”) could be another, involving the complex reciprocities joining local and regional rootedness to national identifications in a time of aggressively pursued foreign expansionism. Nazi imperialism—the ideology of Lebensraum (living space), the projection of a racialized European “New Order,” and the spatial imaginary of the “East”—would be a closely allied third. Yet a fourth could be a visualization of the Jewish enemy, along with the many other categories that the Volksgemeinschaft ruthlessly debarred. Along with the spectacle of the stage-managed massed event, my discussion has focused mainly on the classically modern visual media of film and photography, plus architecture and a redesign of the built environment. But Nazism’s visual repertoire also included painting, drama, heroic poetry and myth, dance, monuments, commemorations, museums, exhibitions, and everything involved in memorialization and memory work.

Finally, my discussion deliberately stops short of World War II because with the outbreak of the latter in September 1939, the stakes so markedly changed. The visual landscape was now one of troop movements, weaponry, motorization, and aerial warfare, leading initially to victorious occupation, then apocalyptic retreat, in “the iconography of metalized bodies” joined to “images of death and transfixation.”\textsuperscript{51} The spectacle moved indoors; after November 1938, no more massed events occurred in the open air. All the war’s major speeches, whether by Hitler himself or by Goebbels, including the infamous “ ‘Total War’ address of February 18, 1943, were interior affairs, delivered invariably in the Berlin Sportpalast before audiences of around fourteen thousand. The spectacle was literally unseen, sent by radio over the airwaves (figure 3.4).

But Nazism was nothing if not an imperialism. Only “imperial warfare” could “fulfill the palingenetic promise of national rebirth and racial purification,” Koepnick argues, in a politics implacably opposed to Weimar’s “political modernity” of conflict, civility, and difference. In 1933, that politics brutally severed the preceding democracy of popular representation while siphoning individual and collective hopes into a new arena of ritualized charismatic redemption. When we describe the fascist spectacle as an effort to
“recast the political as a realm of the beautiful,” Koepnick reminds us, we can easily efface these other scenes of mass action, which took brutality, physical violence, destructiveness, and killing as their script: from the repression of 1933–34 through the desecrations and humiliations of Reichskristallnacht in 1938 to the mass murdering in the killing fields of the east. These were versions of the spectacle that were not publicly emblazoned across the visual landscape of the official nation, as was the artfully constructed showcase of the Volksgemeinschaft. Nonetheless, they incited and produced records of visualization, circulating privately and furtively in the countless snapshots of ordinary soldiers from the Eastern Front, colonizing the everydayness of intimate life more insidiously, but no less potently, than had the images of Nuremberg. In other words, we should not forget “the distinctive implication of fascist aesthetics in a project of imperial warfare, national purification, and genocide.”

3.4 Goebbels’s speech at the Sportpalast in Berlin, February 18, 1943.
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Notes


12 Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini’s Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 12. In Benjamin’s terminology, this is the contrast between two distinct meanings of the English “experience”: *Erlebnis* (encountering the random shocks of life) and *Erfahrung* (being able to know life as continuity).

13 Marshal Berman, *All That Is Sold Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*


Griffin, “Withstanding the Rush of Time.”


Mosse, Nationalization of the Masses, 127; “The Aesthetics of Politics” is chapter 2 of the latter (21–46); Gentile uses “hunger for totality” and “confronting modernity” in characterizing Mosse’s oeuvre; see Emilio Gentile, “A Professional Dwelling: The Origin and Development of the Concept of Fascism in Mosse’s Historiography,” in Payne, Sorkin, and Tortorice, What History Tells, 56, 58.

Mosse, Nationalization of the Masses, 20.


Rossol, “Performing the Nation,” 631.


Rossol, “Performing the Nation,” 638.


35 Kitchen, Speer, 35.


37 During the audience with Hitler, Hácha was assaulted by a verbal tirade so ferocious that he eventually fainted. See Ian Kershaw, Hitler 1936–1945: Nemesis (New York: Norton, 2000), 170–71.

38 The style of building per se could be quite eclectic. Sagebiel’s Air Ministry (1935–36) might well be assimilated into what became the international style, from Albert Kahn’s General Motors Building in Detroit (1919) to Hans Poelzig’s IG-Farben-Haus in Frankfurt (1931). That style traveled transnationally across Josef Stalin’s Soviet Union, Benito Mussolini’s Rome, and Stanley Baldwin’s London. As Speer later claimed, there was nothing specifically national socialist about much of the architecture of the 1930s: “Ideology was apparent in the definition of the commission, but not in the style of its execution.” See Albert Speer, Spandauer Tagebücher (Berlin, 1975), 202, quoted in Kitchen, Speer, 32. For longer-term legacies, see Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, Munich and Memory: Architecture, Monuments, and the Legacy of the Third Reich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Karen E. Till, The New Berlin: Memory, Politics, Place (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

39 Koepnick, Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Power, 1, 190.


44 See Peter Reichel, Der schöne Schein des Dritten Reiches: Faszination und Gewalt des Faschismus (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1992).


46 The “people’s radio” (Volksempfänger) was an exception: by 1941 almost 75 percent of households had radio sets, up from only 25 percent in 1933. But this was not exceptional to Nazi Germany. Radio was still more extensive in Denmark and Sweden, whereas Norway and France had faster growth from lower starting points.


48 Baranowski, Strength through Joy, 6.

49 “It was dominated by a massive pseudo-Classical tower of ten fluted piers joined by a cornice at the top, towering over all the nearby structures, including the Soviet pavilion, and outdone only by the Eiffel Tower, which stood at the end of the avenue on which the structures were located. Red swastikas glowed at night from the spaces between the piers. Next to the tower, the long, rectangular, windowless main hall projected a monolithic sense of unity to the outside world.” See Richard J. Evans, The Third Reich in Power 1933–1939 (New York: Penguin, 2005), 185.


52 Koepnick, Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Power.