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DECONSTRUCTING THE ENDURING APPEAL OF THE THIRD REICH

Abstract

One of the interesting aspects of contemporary culture has been the continuing appeal of the Third Reich (1933-1945) in the modern imagination and this essay examines reasons for this continuing appeal. It is suggested that the reasons for this continuing appeal are complex, although possibly include: 1) the aesthetic and audio-visual nature of the regime, 2) the general appeal of a militaristic society, 3) technological achievements during the regime, 4) the historical idiosyncrasy of the regime, and 5) the discourse of tragedy which can be applied to the regime. The essay concludes with an attempt to examine the implications of the appeal of the Third Reich for the task of education for peace.

The Continuing Fascination with the Third Reich

Much has been written about the appeal of the Third Reich for the people of that era and how the Nazis were able to command such allegiance. Much less, however, has been written as to why this regime continues to hold such fascination today. Ernst Nolte has well described the history of the Third Reich as “the past that will not go away” (1987) and Eric Rentschler refers to the “problematic postmodern relationship” we have to the images and imaginary products of the period (1996:23,24). This enduring appeal evidences itself in a range of forms, including the publishing industry, the popularity of university courses dealing with fascism and the Third Reich, documentary film-making, the proliferation of Internet sites and the collection of memorabilia. It is difficult not to publish a book on this subject without it being a commercial success. Similarly the demand for documentary films and feature films on the Nazi regime continues. If we take discourse to denote a way of communicating about something, then there must be something about the contemporary discourse on the Third Reich which makes this subject continue to have such popular appeal. In this essay I attempt to look at why the discourse about the Third Reich continues to have such wide appeal.

Before exploring some possible reasons for this appeal, it is appropriate to look at one obvious suggestion, and this is that the interest in the Third Reich represents an interest in the macabre. The Third Reich, after all, represents a modern and civilized society which seemingly surrendered itself to the worship of a psychopath and engaged in genocide. It can be suggested that the examination of the Third Reich gives us an opportunity to examine our own dark side, from the safety of the armchair. This does not, however, quite explain the appeal of this phenomenon. Rudolf Rummell has compared the murderousness of totalitarian societies this century (1994, 1995, 1997a, 1997b). The Third Reich was certainly horrific, yet the degree of mass murder by the Nazis, at least by Rummell’s data, is much lower than by other

totalitarian regimes, especially as is the case with Stalinist Soviet Union and Maoist China. Despite this, there is nowhere near the popular interest in either of the above regimes as exists for the Third Reich. There must therefore be some special factors in the popular appeal of the Third Reich.

Some writers have hinted at possible reasons. In a famous essay, Susan Sontag wrote of “fascinating fascism” (1982), and suggested that although fascism is generally associated with brutishness and terror, fascism also stands for ideals “that are persistent today under other banners”, such as the “cult of beauty” and the “fetishism of courage”, ideals which are still “vivid and moving to many people” (1982:319,320). Significantly, Sontag also referred to fascism as “the exotic” and “the unknown” (1982:323). Carl Tighe, writing about the pre-occupation with the Third Reich in popular literature, hints that the Third Reich uncomfortably reminds us of ourselves, referring to the “lurking complex where Nazi thought and ambition shade into contemporary science, received opinion, current political practice ...” (2000:299). Paul Betts is more ambitious when lists possible reasons for the renewed interest in fascism: a desire to understand the re-emergence of ultra-nationalism in Europe; an interest in the origins of media cultures and the political manipulation of the media; and a desire to “recall the last days of European hegemony and a European-centred world” (2002:542).

There is some truth within each of the above comments, and within each of the above there are indications of why the Third Reich might continue to exert such an appeal. Within the following paragraphs I attempt to develop these ideas in a more systematic way, with the positing of five specific reasons why the Third Reich still commands such interest in the popular imagination.

Aesthetic Appeal of Nazism

The first possible reason for the enduring contemporary appeal of the Third Reich centres upon the cultivated aesthetic appeal of the Nazi regime. Writing in 1936, Walter Benjamin famously described fascism as the aestheticization of the politics, culminating inevitably in war (1974:506-508). The discourse of the Nazis was highly engineered and audio-visual, even telegenic, and the presentation of the regime reflects all of the modern aspects of successful corporate advertising. The swastika represented a simple yet effective logo, especially when printed in black against a white and red background. The mass rally, the street march, the torch-light procession and the strong orator were all powerful visual elements in the visual discourse of the Third Reich. The message of the Nazis, of redressing past wrongs and defining a place in the world, was beguilingly simple. All this was re-enforced through an astute use of music and radio broadcasts, co-opting accepted aspects of culture such as the music of Richard Wagner. The propaganda surrounding the military was also highly visual, emphasizing the technical objects of war, such as aircraft, U-boats and tanks. Even the distinctive German helmet (*Stahlhelm*), although introduced in 1916, became an object of visual propaganda for the Third Reich.

One of the ways that the Nazi Regime presented an aesthetic view of itself was through the use of film. Much has been written of the Nazi usage of film as propaganda, not merely in feature films, but in regular documentaries. The discourse of the warrior, the ideal human form, and the nation/people was promulgated relentlessly through film and documentaries. Undoubtedly the most famous/infamous of these were Leni Riefenstahl’s documentary films *Olympia* and *Triumph der Will*.

In postwar years, Riefenstahl protested the suggestion that her films were Nazi propaganda. It may be that she did was not in direct response to Nazi dictates. There themes, nevertheless, within the films are still underlying themes of the discourse of the Third Reich. Moreover, what makes these films and documentaries relevant for understanding the current fascination with the Third Reich is that this is still highly accessible for us. The propaganda continues to impact, long after the regime itself has been defeated.

The Emotional Appeal of Militarism

A second level of the enduring appeal for the Third Reich is through the appeal of a militaristic society, especially for cultures where the military does not play a central social role and where there is no everyday experience of war. The visual discourse of the Third Reich, moreover, assists the distanced observer of the present to participate, vicariously, in the excitement and challenge of a militaristic society, in the excitement and challenge of conquest, without really confronting the physical danger that this involved. The idealization of specific generals and leaders has transcended the world war, with military leaders such as Heinz Guderian, Erwin Rommel and Adolf Galland regarded with high honour. The philosopher Jürgen Habermas has been highly critical of such an honouring of the German military, as involving a failure to delineate culprits and victims, and involving ultimately a refusal to take responsibility (1987). This may well be so. Yet at a popular level and at distance of six decades, it is difficult not to acknowledge the courage of those involved in fighting for the Third Reich, especially against quite overwhelming odds.

The problem is that militarism, and indeed the Third Reich, can be held to represent noble and yet debased values. This is poignantly illustrated in the Christmas reflection *Nach Zehn Jahren* (After Ten Years), written by the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1942 and subsequently smuggled out of prison (DBW8:19-38). Within this document, Bonhoeffer carefully lists the values which have been so important for the German people. What is telling, however, is that these values have been co-opted by the Nazi regime, especially the value of self-sacrifice (DBW8:23,24). There is an overwhelming sense of despair in this account by Bonhoeffer, and understandably so, given the failure of organized resistance against the Nazi regime. Yet within the Reflection one can see indications of exactly why the Third Reich held and still holds such an alluring appeal. The Nazi regime was a homicidal one, whose aim was murder and destruction. Yet this is rarely prominent in Nazi discourse. What is prominent, however, are the ideals of service to nation and self-sacrifice. These ideals, although displaced when applied to the Nazi regime, continue to hold an appeal, especially in post-industrial and depersonalized societies.

Obsession with Technological Achievement

A third level of the enduring appeal of the Third Reich centres upon the technological achievements during the regime. Within the short history of the regime, engineers pioneered an impressive list of innovations: a modern popular motor vehicle, freeways, operational helicopters, turbo-jet aircraft, operational rocket and turbo-jet fighter aircraft, turbo-jet bomber aircraft, heavy-lift transport aircraft, flying wing aircraft, surface-to-air missiles and air-to-air missiles, long-range submarines, and cruise and ballistic missiles. Indeed many of the technical advances in the world since 1945 were made on the basis of Nazi technology. Former German scientists were enlisted by both the global superpowers after 1945, perhaps the most noted being

Werner von Braun. Von Braun was an enthusiastic Nazi who worked on the Nazi missile programme and subsequently worked for NASA, developing the Saturn V rockets, which were instrumental in the Apollo moon-landing programme, and subsequently developing the concepts of the space shuttle and the space station, upon which current NASA operations centre.

At a superficial level, there may be much to admire in the technological advances made within the Third Reich, especially for a technologically oriented culture such as our own. Technological admiration, however, tends to obscure the purposes of the technological advances and the way these advances were achieved. The technological innovations were for the purposes of supporting a genocidal regime and these innovations were most often developed through the use of slave labour. The mind-set wherein one regards technology as being autonomous from moral considerations has been well articulated by Jaques Ellul, who specifically uses the example of Nazi technology (1954). The technological advances of the Third Reich continue to hold a fascination for twenty-first century societies, perhaps precisely because we too hold technology as autonomous from morality. In this way, we tend to operate within the same discourse as the Nazi regime.

The Historical Idiosyncrasy of the Third Reich

A fourth level of interest in the Third Reich for contemporary society may lie in the historical idiosyncrasy of the regime. By this I mean the fact that the regime came to a specific and climatic end in 1945 and is thus radically other than the present. The allure of otherly or otherworldly societies can be seen in the popularity of fantasy novels and films, focussing on societies or kingdoms which are completely different from the world of the present. What accentuates the other or otherworldly nature of the Third Reich is that Nazi ideology tended to portray the regime using Nordic mythology, as the reincarnation of a mystical kingdom. By way of contrast, the totalitarian and genocidal regime of the Soviet Union continued well after 1945, with the eventual disintegration taking place only many decades later. The Soviet regime has never fascinated the way the Third Reich did, as for so long the Soviet Union was part of our everyday mediated experience, through the Cold War and through regular news reports, up until the recent past. The Soviet Union does not enjoy the historical status of being temporally other, which the Third Reich does.

There is an American analogy to the popular interest in the Third Reich as a regime which abruptly ceased to exist: the American fascination with the American Civil War and with the short-lived Confederate State of America (CSA). There is now a thriving industry dealing with documentaries, publication and memorabilia from this era, much of this centring upon what from a twenty-first century perspective seems to be the historical oddity of the Confederacy. We may conjecture, counterfactually, that if the Confederacy had gained independence, this would have been short-lived, as economic factors would have prompted a re-affiliation with the United States. However if not, the Confederacy would not be the subject of curiosity that it is today, as it would merely be another nation-state which had evolved out of historical conflict. Similarly, even if the Third Reich had been victorious in the war, it is difficult to see that it would have continued for long, as it would have gradually disintegrated under its own contradictions and internal tensions. War and enemies was what held the Third Reich together. Yet the fact that it did cease to exist so abruptly and dramatically is what makes it such an oddity. The past may well be a foreign

country, as David Lowe suggests (1985), but having a country only exist briefly in the near past makes that country itself even more curious.

The Discourse of Tragedy

The final level of discourse through which we may locate the appeal of the Third Reich is through the discourse of tragedy and the related discourse of catastrophe. Both forms of discourse are common in describing the Third Reich, commencing with Friedrich Meinecke's 1946 interpretative history. One needs to be cautious with such discourse - the discourse of tragedy and catastrophe can serve as a mechanism for avoiding responsibility, in that it implies an inevitability to events. There is, nevertheless, a sense in which the Aristotelian notion of tragedy can be applicable to the events surrounding the history of the Third Reich. In chapter six of his *Poetics*, Aristotle famously suggested that tragedy involved the downfall of a major character, and that the downfall is related to a particular hamartia or tragic moral flaw within the major character. Most often that tragic moral flaw is hubris, or overweening arrogance of an individual or individuals, although there can be other moral flaws. The viewing of the tragedy produces an experience of catharsis or purgation, through vicarious experience of the downfall. My thesis is that we can experience a catharsis through revisiting the history of the Third Reich.

The moral flaw upon which tragedy of the Third Reich hinges may be seen as corporate or personal. There were many individuals of good conscience who supported the Nazi Regime out of misplaced patriotism and duty. The tragic flaw in this instance was an unquestioning obedience to authority and an unquestioning acceptance of duty. There is also a moral flaw of the lack of civil courage, such as would have prevented the consolidation of power by the Nazis. On a corporate level, we can identify the hubris of attempting to establish the greater German empire, by way of domination and war. From a European perspective, we can see a narrative of tragedy, in that it was a vengeful Versailles Treaty which eventually propelled the Nazis into power. There is also an element of tragic justice to the manner of the defeat suffered by armies of the Reich. After 1941, Adolf Hitler made numerous strategic errors which in effect lost the war for his Regime. Yet there was an element of tragic justice to this, in that this happened precisely because the Germans had entrusted their fate to a person who turned out to be an unstable psychopath. The result was immense human suffering, and the destruction of cities and millions of lives throughout Europe.

Conclusions

What conclusions may we then draw about the contemporary appeal of the history of the Third Reich? The issue is a complex one. One of the implications, however, may be that we should not ignore the atavistic power of violence. Even such a dedicated peace apologist as Desiderius Erasmus well recognized this. In his *Dulce bellum inexpertis*, Erasmus acknowledged the appeal of violence, although he suggests that violence is generally appealing to those who have not experienced it. Similarly we might suggest that the romantic appeal of the Third Reich works especially for those who have not experienced the realities of such totalitarian and murderous regimes. The task therefore is not so much to deny the contemporary appeal of the Third Reich to the modern imagination, but rather to deconstruct this, showing what was behind the rhetoric and propaganda that surrounded Nazism, and to point out that the regime functioned through immense cruelty and suffering. Similarly, with the culture of violence which is so pervasive within popular culture, it may be that the task is not to

deny such a culture, but rather to deconstruct this. If analysis of the discourse of the Third Reich can do no more than assist in the deconstruction of the wider culture of violence, then such analysis may serve as a useful starting point for the important and ongoing task of education for peace.

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