Cathedral of Light: The Nuremberg Party Rallies, Wagner, and The Theatricality of Hitler and the Nazi Party

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The National Socialist, or Nazi, Party was keenly aware of the power of the arts, the elements of the theatre, and the power of spectacle on the minds and attitudes of the German people. This was especially true of music, and they found fertile ground in the minds of the people through the imagination of Richard Wagner and his great, nationalistic Operas. The Nazi Party engaged with the political philosophy of the composer and elevated the enjoyment of his art to a key ritual of the cult of Nazism. The music and philosophy of Wagner had a great impact on Adolf Hitler's ideology. Hitler was obsessed with the composer, and saw in his works the embodiment of Germany's struggle. He utilized many of the aspects of Opera, which had so enraptured him, in his Party's propaganda and events, namely through the highly theatrical productions of the Nuremberg Rallies. The Nuremberg Party Rallies were the culmination of Wagner's influence on Hitler, and were a vibrant display of the use of music, spectacle, and theatricality by the Nazi Party leaders in their indoctrination and unification of the German people under the banner of the Third Reich.

Hitler was first introduced to Wagner's works at a very young age. He was only twelve when, in 1901, he first attended a performance of Lohengrin in Linz.\(^1\) Captivated, he proceeded to attend the Linz opera house night after night.\(^2\) Only a few years later, in 1906, he attended a performance of Rienzi, which moved him powerfully.\(^3\) Afterward, he regaled the friend who had accompanied him with his plans for leading the German people forward to a great future—just as the hero of Rienzi had saved medieval Rome from aristocratic tyranny.\(^4\) In 1933, Hitler commented to Albert Speer that it was Rienzi, which had inspired him, and made him believe that he could achieve his goals of uniting Germany and making it great.\(^5\) The Rienzi overture was played at the beginning of every Nuremberg Party Rally, which suggests that Hitler wanted to establish and maintain a connection between the Opera, its hero (who, upon saving his beloved country, nobly declined the crown and settled for being the tribune for the people) and Hitler's ambitions for himself and Germany.\(^6\)

While there has been some debate about how much Hitler's philosophy directed the Nazi Party versus how much it was simply a foil for their policies, it seems impossible to completely sever the links between Hitler's reverence for and obsession with Wagner and the use of his imagery and music by the Nazi Party.\(^7\) Hitler was obsessed with Wagnerian operas. It was the only type of music he listened to with any enthusiasm, and he could be heard whistling it perfectly.\(^8\) He was witnessed to be visibly calmed by the music of Wagner when agitated. According to Goebbels, Hitler had a “strong inner need for art,” and was known to, in the middle of important political negotiations or tactical battles to go by himself or with a few comrades, to sit in a theater and listen to “the heroically elevated measures of a Wagnerian music drama in artistic unison with his political being.”\(^9\) This was a tendency that began long before his appointment as Chancellor. Already a passionate follower of Wagner's works, Hitler was further directed on his path towards Führer when, upon meeting Wagner's son-in-law at his Villa Wahnfried in Bayreuth in September, 1923, the master of the house told him that he saw in Hitler, Germany's savior.\(^10\) Hitler would go on to make Wagner a central part of his Nazi Mythos, incorporating his works into almost every aspect of his propaganda schemes.

As the nineteenth century came to an end, a virulent, racial form of anti-semitism came onto the German political scene, propagated largely by the literary circle of which Richard Wagner was at the head.\(^11\) Wagner had written diatribes against the Jewish and the French, and in 1869 had written an anti-Semitic essay, which described Jews as demonic, parasitic and uncreative.\(^12\) The nibelungs in his Ring Cycle were greedy creatures laden with gold and silver, and were, as contemporary illustrations present, small with beards and large noses, stereotypically anti-Semitic, in keeping with the attitudes of the time. Illustrator Arthur Rackham produced his illustrations less than a decade after the premier of the Ring Cycle, and his drawings were praised and admired as reflecting the essence of Wagner's work.\(^13\) Wagner's writings against Jews in the 1850s accused the Jews of being, by their very existence, obstacles to revolution and human redemption.\(^14\) Wagner preached a cessation of the eating of meat. He saw it as a dirty practice of sacrifice endorsed by the Jewish god, and believed that all Germans should stop their consumption of meat. This leads to the question of whether or not it was a result of reading Wagner's writings that Hitler chose to transition to vegetarianism.\(^15\) Wagner also declared that it was the Jewish blood, which never fades through commixture, which was a permanent obstacle to progress.\(^16\) Paul Laurence Rose, author of Revolutionary Antisemitism in Germany from Kant to Wagner believes that Wagner must have known that physical action was eventually going to have to be taken, if it was the Jews very blood, which was hindering German progress.\(^17\) The anti-Semitic attitude was already in place by 1910, and the movement later found a home in the hearts and minds of many of the members of the National Socialist Party.

The association of Wagner's works with National Socialism is sometimes seen as exploitation and
falsification of his work, rather than as consistent with his social and political thought. Wagner's apologists took that view, and it was the most prominent perspective in post-Holocaust studies of his work until the trend in scholarship broadened again. Wagner himself was not a Nazi. For one, the Party did not exist in his lifetime. The Nazis did find within his works and writings fertile ground for their own anti-Semitic attitudes. Still, the use the Nazi Party made of Wagner's operas as a part of their fascist propaganda was in distinct contrast to Wagner's own imagined utopia of art. Some historians would paint Wagner as a prophet and Hitler as his willing (or mindless) disciple. Some imagine Wagner's music maligned and misused by the evil Nazi regime, or appropriated as some sort of twisted therapy for Hitler. John Deathridge, author of Post-Mortem on Isolde, is of the opinion that Hitler's empathy with Wagner's music was more connected with “Wagner's almost scientific interest in the psychological and technical control of audience response” than any sentimental considerations. It is important to remember that while the ideas that so impacted Hitler and the Nazi Party were present in Wagner's writing and works, it was the combination of social, economic and political factors, with the fertile soil of Wagner's grand myths, that shaped the character of the Nazi Party.

One of the elements of Wagner's legacy appropriated by the Nazis was the Bayreuth Festival; created by Wagner as an annual showcasing of his operas in 1876. It ran every year, with a break for WWI, until 1944 when it was canceled. It has since resumed, in 1951. The Bayreuth Festival became something of a Nazi shrine in the early 1920s. Hitler made a pilgrimage to the festival every year, to honor his favorite composer; whose works he had elevated to the status of hymn in his cult. In 1924, the festival organizers posted the slogan Hier gilt’s der Kunst, which means, “Our Aim is Art.” This was posted as a reminder to the Nazi Party members who had begun to congregate there that the festival was not intended to be a political space, but a celebration of art. This was symptomatic of a tendency of the Germans to shroud the political in the artistic; “It was not accidental, but symptomatic, that at Bayreuth one spoke about art when one meant politics.” Hitler would further cement the connection between Wagner, his festival, and the political, as by 1933, despite the intention of the organizers in 1924, Bayreuth became something of a “court theater” for Hitler, receiving public funds and support. Bayreuth transcended its original place as an art festival, and instead became a shrine in the cult, which strove to renew the entire social and political structure of the nation.

Winifred Wagner, director of the festival upon her husband's sudden death in 1930, did nothing to stop that transformation, as she was a personal friend of the Führer.

There exists an interesting parallel between the continuance and atmosphere of the Bayreuth Festival, and that of the Nuremberg Rallies. The Bayreuth Festival is an annual celebration of Wagner and his Operas. The Nuremberg Rallies were an annual celebration of the greatness of the National Socialist Party and the German people. Citizens would come to Bayreuth from across Germany to witness a great spectacle of artistry. Performance and glittering costumes, transcendent music, and majestic voices relaying the epic stories all comprised the Wagnerian mythos. People were brought to Nuremberg from all over Germany to witness the spectacle of military and social power and greatness: grand speeches, columns of tanks and soldiers in their best uniforms, music and practiced recitation—all saturated in the myth of Germany's superiority and greatness. The Bayreuth Festival provided a quasi-religious event for the Nazis, as they went on a pilgrimage to experience the overwhelming emotion of Wagner's work, in addition to hearing it as part of their great festivals and celebrations. According to Nora Alter, author of Sound Matters: Essays on the Acoustics of Modern German Culture, it was simply in the nature of Germans of the era to see music as inherently political. Music articulated a way of seeing and being in the present, as well as defining the affiliations of the listener. Music could enforce and order, or be used to attack a political opinion. Even today music is often a tool of political groups; in the 1960s and 70s rock and roll declared generational and political differences, and today's hip-hop is a voice for minorities. Thomas Mann, author of Doctor Faustus, considered “musicality of the soul” to be “part of the German predicament.” The Nazi Party saw music as an extremely useful form of propaganda, as it was seen to be able to illicit a response “almost on cue.”

The Nazis learned that a good tune, arranged in a pleasing manner and with an appropriate political text, placed the public in the proper frame of mind for indoctrination.

A love of music also helped to mitigate differences between the Nazi Party and the “German intelligentsia,” which were hostile towards, and distrustful of the government. Music is considered by Frank Trommler, author of “Conducting Music, Conducting War,” to have been the most pervasively used form of German propaganda, even beyond the efforts in the visual sphere.

Music was present in many aspects of life; singing in the Hitler Youth, participation in parades, music education in school, use at Nazi conventions and rallies, and most of all, through the new technology of the radio. Jews were quickly banned from most sections of German society and culture, including the theatre. Contemporary music was banned along with Jazz and other offensive modern music. The classical music of Wagner, and occasionally Beethoven, was part of countless political events, where it stirred heroic emotion, and assisted in the stylization of Hitler as the leader of the Germans, who were carrying out a historic
mission. As an example of the supremacy of music in the Nazi Party’s propagandizing mission, the 1940 celebration of Hitler’s birthday included 23 program events, of which 17 were musical, including the chorus of Wagner’s *Meistersinger*.

Goebbels called *Die Meistersinger* “the most German” of all of Wagner’s music dramas an incarnation of national identity—as part of his speech, which declared it to be the official opera of the Nazi Party at the 1933 Bayreuth Festival. Leni Riefenstahl also appropriated Wagner’s *Die Meistersinger* as part of the soundtrack for *Triumph of the Will*, which documented the 1934 Nuremberg Party Rally. It would, in 1935, become officially part of the annual Nuremberg Rallies.

Fredrick Neitzsche, an author famous for his writings on politics and manipulation, once accused Wagner of exploiting the ability of music to “inveigle [us] into thinking that our interests are other than what they really are” in the creation of his religion of redemption. Recent psychological studies have proven that what we watch on television affects how we think and behave, and the values we are exposed to are the ones we tend to hold as our own. While these studies are recent, the effects are not. The opera, theatre, movies, and great events organized by the Nazi Party could be considered to be the equivalent of television in the early half of the 20th century. Of all the aspects of Nazi Party propaganda and spectacle that fall into the realm of the theatrical, none were so visible, nor are so prominent in the public imagination even today, as the great Party Rallies in Nuremberg.

Theater is one of the oldest and most evocative methods of human communication, communion, persuasion, and teaching. It is no wonder that Hitler and the Nazi party organizers utilized many aspects of theatrical performance in the programs through which they strove to control and influence the German population. It is a fallacy and a misconception that theatre must take place within the physical confines of a theater. Theatre is as much the lone actor soliloquizing on a street corner to a passerby, as it is the cast of a hundred painted fools overshadowed by 100 foot operatic backdrops and performing for royalty. Theatre is a means for describing the human condition, for teaching lessons, and for conveying ideas. It has, with the advancement of technology, evolved to include movies and television as mediums for the transmission of ideas and we will, for our purposes here, include aspects of theater like music and choreography in our definition of the theatrical. A theater is a building in which performances are held. The latter needs the former, but the former does not need the latter. Nowhere in the Nazi regime was this demonstrated more profoundly than through the medium of the Nuremberg Party Rallies.

Although the atrocity of the actions of the Third Reich is indisputable, the Party was incredibly successful in many of its endeavors. Looking beyond their military, technological and organizational feats, one of their most impressive accomplishments was in persuading the German people to go along with their ideals. Part of this was due to the powerful use of aesthetics and imagery. There are images of the Nazis still seared into the public consciousness, and many of them were deliberate constructs of party organizers; Hitler, up on a stage, passionately expounding to an enraptured audience, the swastika stark against a bloody red flag, or lines of tanks and soldiers in uniforms marching past. To most today, these are images of past horror, of the danger of fascism, dictators, and war. They evoke sentiments like “never again.” They were intended at the time to be rallying points—images of pride and strength that a downtrodden population could look to for hope, pride, encouragement and direction. Hitler and the Nazi Party took aspects of one of the most powerful communication tools on the planet to introduce their ideals, to sate the yearning of a struggling people looking for something to believe in. Historian William Carr declared Hitler to be “manifestly a man of theatre.” This was supported, he said, in large part by his organization of the Nuremberg Rallies, where “light, sound, and color were blended together to make the maximum impact on the eye and ear of the beholder.”

Hitler had no desire to be a theater producer, although he was acutely sensitive to the capacity of spectacle to build and bolster public support for his policies. He was also keenly aware of the power of the mentality of the “community of the mass rally” to influence his people, and seduce them further into the ideals of the Nazi Party. The Rallies helped to put faces on the political leaders for the sake of the public, and instilled a sense of unity across the country. Truly awe-inspiring feats of organization and a triad of military showcasing, civilian morale boosting and jaw-dropping theatrics, the Nuremberg Rallies were the brainchild of Albert Speer; architect of the Rally grounds and designer of the Rallies’ events and effects from 1934. Speer’s influence and direction created the Lichtdom, or Cathedral of Light, one of the most striking of all the theatrical elements used at the Party Rallies.

So powerful were the effects of the aesthetic and psychological aspects of the rallies that they swept people up into a fervor of passion and support, just as Hitler predicted they would. One young Jewish historian, who was understandably wary of Hitler, accompanied a friend to the 1933 Nuremberg Rally. She watched the procession of group after group parade by; youths full of idealism; uniformed soldiers; swooning, worshipful women, and loyal elderly. All were brilliantly costumed, and meticulously rehearsed and choreographed. As the anticipation of Hitler’s arrival grew, she found herself caught up in the sweeping momentum of the event, tugged along to the first crescendo as Hitler descended from the heavens to land on the Rally grounds in a small plane. She found herself saluting and adding her voice to the cry of “Heil Hitler” with the rest of the cheering,
Hitler’s entrance to the Rally ground in such a fashion outlines a connection with the traditional staging of operas. *Desus ex machina* is an operatic device by which a character, usually a god, descends from heaven to resolve the problem of the plot, or rescue the hero. This was originally from the Greek theatrical tradition in which the ‘god’ was literally lowered into the stage by a crane. The concept has expanded to include other methods, but the origin remains true. What else could be inferred by Hitler’s descending from the sky at the climax of the events, at the great theatrical stage of the Nuremberg Rally Grounds? He was the ‘god’ descending from heaven to save the heroic, loyal Germans from the threats facing them from all sides of depression, Bolshevism, and those nasty, scheming Jews. Even when he did not appear at the rallies from above in a literal sense, he embodied the more modern use of the term as a force—a god, a flood, or powerful entity—that appeared just as the situation became hopeless in order to resolve the problem.

Throughout his speeches, Hitler continued to captivate his audience with a dramatic flare that spoke to a keen understanding of the psychology of public speaking. He began speeches calmly, his body still and his manner almost conversational. He quickly built energy, gestures growing wilder as his face contorted in rage—this was the image so often seen in documentaries of his wild harangues. As quickly as it began, it is abruptly over. He is still, calm and steady again, leaving his audience to its histrionics in the abrupt, contrasting silence. It seems impossible for a man truly enraged, aroused by the passion of his words like his audience was, to fall so abruptly still and calm. His contrast in energy levels reveals the performance as just that; a masterfully delivered, excruciatingly rehearsed performance. Exhaustive rehearsals, choreography, and precision are evident in all aspects of the demonstrations of the Nuremberg Rallies.

As important as what happened within the Rallies were the grounds upon which they happened. Originally, the Rallies were one-day affairs in a couple simple arenas. The First Party Congress was in Munich in 1923, and was attended by no more than 20,000 people. The next year, it was a two-day event held in Nuremberg, the Zeppelinfield, constructed by the 1937 Rally, could hold almost a quarter of a million people, and was flanked by the huge architectural framework, which directed all attention towards the Führer. The audience themselves became part of the structure as, arranged on the grounds in columns and detachments; they echoed the aesthetics of their surroundings. The desired result of the Rallies’ theatrical effects was the merging of audience and participant, until the lines blurred and all became one: united in the Nazi Party, dedicated to the cause.

One of the most successful effects used to unite the audience was the visually striking lighting effect called *The Cathedral of Light* by its creator, Albert Speer. British Ambassador Henderson, who described it as “sacred and beautiful at the same time,” called it a “cathedral of ice.” The French ambassador Francois-Poncet described the illusory cathedral as “Mystical ecstasy, a sort of holy illusion,” which gripped the audience. This pseudo-religious experience echoed the architecture of the grounds, as well as those of the great Catholic Cathedrals. The effect was accomplished by the use of one hundred and thirty anti-aircraft searchlights to encircle the Rally grounds. When Speer first made his request, Goering wanted to deny it, as that was the larger portion of their strategic reserve of searchlights. Hitler overruled him on the premise that the use of the lights for a non-tactical purpose would give the impression that they had more than they could ever use. It also serves as evidence of the importance Hitler placed on the image and success of the Rallies, to reallocate important resources to its production. The result was striking beyond Speer’s best expectations; the sharply defined beams soared to twenty five thousand feet, where they then merged into a general glow. The light seemed to form the great pillars and ceiling of a vast room, enclosing the audience within a luminescent architectural marvel together, in the church of Nazism.

As spectacular as the lighting effects were, the elements of sound were also incorporated into the Rallies. Every Rally opened with the overture from Wagner’s *Rienzi*, with the sounds of the heroic opera ringing across the grounds. During the rally, the audience was treated to the use of the voices of the performers as instruments in the chorus of a great opera of Germanic achievement, singing and glorifying the greatness of the Nazi Party and their deeds and ideas. In more prosaic retrospect, the novel *The Karnau Tapes* by the German author Marcel Beyer follows the life of a technical savant and sound technician of the Nazi Party, whose job it was to ensure the intelligibility of the speeches even on the huge rally grounds. It gives a certain amount of insight into not only the technical capabilities needed to achieve the desired impact of the rallies, but also the amount of manpower involved in the events, both on, and off-stage. On Rally days, one could hear a thousand voices echoing in declaratory rapture: “The Führer is Germany and Germany is the Führer” with Hitler himself answering, “I am never without you, and you are never without me.”

Despite the astonishing scope of the spectacle of the Nuremberg Rallies, and the hundreds of thousands shipped in for the occasions, there were many across Germany who could not attend the festival in person. For them, and those across the world, German reporters and foreign journalists wrote about the Rallies, and were featured on front pages around the world. Newsreels and the documentary “Triumph of the Will” ensured that audiences near and far had a front row seat in
The documentary is exceedingly theatrical in its own right, with careful attention played to the composition of scenes and the order of events portrayed. It also served to draw even those far removed from the actual event into the excitement, and introduce them to the main actors in the drama that was the rise of the National Socialist Party and the Third Reich. The added benefit to modern scholars is the accessibility of the visceral imagery and sound, which cannot truly be relayed to us through the paper and ink that we must otherwise rely on. Even though we must still use our imaginations in regard to colors, the documentary allows us to hear the roar of the crowd and see for ourselves the passion evoked by Hitler's speeches, which enraptured a country and the imagination of scholars for generations.78

The Nuremberg Rallies were important festivals and great examples of the aesthetics, organization, and ritual of the Nazi Party. It is important to remember that the Nuremberg Rallies were part of a larger fabric of the Nazi rituals. They stand alone, as an example of the powerful influence of theatre on Hitler and the Nazi Party, but they are best viewed with the knowledge of their context.79 Similarly, it is a vast oversimplification to say that Hitler inherited his ideas about aesthetics, theatricality, and their place in persuasion and conferment of ideas from Wagner. There were a myriad of factors that influenced Hitler, and his party organizers, towards their beliefs and their chosen forms of expression. It would be just as easy to say that Hitler sought out Wagner's influence because of already internalized, deep-seated beliefs in the importance of aesthetics which Wagnerian operas sated, or a belief in the message that Wagner relayed. It is nearly impossible in this case to differentiate cause and effect, but cause does not preclude influence. Wagner's influence is easily seen in the many theatrical aspects of the Nuremberg Party Rallies; not the least of which is the use of his music and the aggrandizement of his operas into a cult movement. Wagner's Bayreuth Festival, the Nuremberg Rallies and countless other events and festivals were all part of the efforts of the Nazi Party to exploit powerfully evocative theatrical methods in their efforts to indoctrinate the German people, and show the world the might of the Third Reich.

Notes
3Carr, Hitler: A Study in Personality and Politics, 139.
4Ibid.
5Joachim Kohler, Wagner's Hitler: The Prophet and his Disciple (MA, Blackwell Publishing), 3) The book Hitler: A Study in Personality and Politics states that the person he relayed this story to was not Albert Speer, but rather Robert Ley, head of the German Labor Front.
6Carr, Hitler: A Study in Personality and Politics, 139.
7Ibid, 140.
9Deathridge, “Post-Mortem on Isolde,” 121.
10Ibid.
12Ibid, 119.
16Rose, Revolutionary Antisemitism in Germany, 374.
17Ibid, 373-374.
18Ibid, 374.
19Weiner, Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination, 16.
20Ibid.
21Ibid.
23Deathridge, “Post-Mortem on Isolde,” 121.
Carr, Hitler: A Study in Personality and Politics, 139.

Moller, “Music in Germany during the Third Reich,” 41.


Large, “Art, Ideology, and Politics at Bayreuth, 1876-1976,” 149.

Ibid.

Carr, Hitler: A Study in Personality and Politics, 139.

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Ibid.


Alter, Sound Matters, 10-11.

Alter, Sound Matters, 67.

Moller, “Music in Germany during the Third Reich,” 40.

Ibid, 44.

Ibid, 42.

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Ibid, 73.

Applegate, Music and German National Identity, 95.

Ibid, 94.


Carr, Hitler: A Study in Personality and Politics, 140.

Ibid.


Rawson, Showcasing the Third Reich, 6.

Etlin, Art, Culture, and Media, 194-195.

Ibid, 195.


Davis “Hitler's Movement Signature,” 152.

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Ibid.

Davis “Hitler's Movement Signature,” 152.

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Rawson, Showcasing the Third Reich, 9.

Taylor, “Symbol and Ritual under National Socialism,” 512; Rawson, Showcasing the Third Reich, 16.


Etlin, Art, Culture, and Media, p. 194.


Ibid.


Speer, Inside the Third Reich, 69.

Ibid.

Alter, Sound Matters, 69-70.

Ibid.


Etlin, Art, Culture, and Media, 194.
The analysis of the documentary, its effects, and historical value are a paper of their own, but some information can be found in the article “Triumph of the Will: Document or Artifice?” by David B. Hinton.

Taylor, “Symbol and Ritual under National Socialism,” 505; Triumph of the Will, Netflix, directed by Leni Riefenstahl (1934, Universum Film AG).

Bibliography


