Commentary

Selling Hitler: propaganda and the Nazi brand

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- In this article we argue that Nazism functioned as a brand, and that this is key to our understanding of the extraordinary success of the Hitler regime in galvanising German public opinion. Nazis understood and manipulated the power of the brand, creating what amounts to a parallel universe of imagery and symbolism. The integuments of this brand strategy were the idea of Hitler himself and his projection, the stress on solidarity, the proclamation of a modernist Utopia with ancient accents, and the construction of an existential threat to the German way of life. But underpinning these were the deployment of what have become classic marketing concepts, such as targeting and segmentation, and a perceptive comprehension of the idea of packaging. Beyond this the regime was anchored in a kind of banality of ordinariness, it looked, at many levels, like a normal Western society and this element was made more credible by the promotion of a vigorous consumer culture. In many ways the Nazis were ahead of their time, masters of such political marketing arts as spin and rapid rebuttal. The fact that all this was done in the service of the most monstrous empire that was ever created, whose lasting legacy to the human race was its unique pictography of genocide, must alert us to the more sinister ends to which political marketing can be perverted.

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Introduction

What differentiates this argument is the contention that propaganda is the prism through which to view the Third Reich. Our distinctive advocacy is that Hitler was the universal auteur of the regime he founded and anchored in imagery: propaganda was the governing philosophy, not merely a means to an end but an end in itself. Everything, from machinery to documentaries to books to buildings, to art itself, was interrogated with a single question: what is its persuasion value? But it is the breadth of the Nazi understanding of the concept of propaganda that astonishes. The Nazi idea of propaganda covered everything, was in fact the foundation of the regime,
a composite of ideology and methodology. Military strategy for example was itself an exercise in propaganda, as with the battle of Stalingrad and the decision to hold it to the last because of its symbolic resonances: the propaganda dictated the political and military strategy rather than the other way round. The propaganda was not simply an instrument.

We accord the idea of propaganda the same breadth and flexibility of treatment that the Nazis themselves gave it. For example the long and vivid drama of Hitler’s foreign policy bluffs and triumphs, shameless, ruthless, which increasingly horrified the world but stunned and delighted its German audience, was bounded by a propaganda framework and epitomised propaganda values. The propaganda nexus embraced everything from uniforms to technology, the costuming of policemen and soldiers, the folk festivals and folk dress. It reached saturation levels. There were even groups for spreading graffiti, groups for spreading rumours; the dominance of the idea in Nazi Germany simply knew no bounds. For example, the scream of a Stuka dive bomber had no military value whatsoever: they were simply there to terrify the enemy. They demonstrate the extent to which the regime internalized a propaganda perspective. What was created was in the end a parallel universe of imagery and symbolism. Education for example with its classes on race theory was a branch of propaganda that was instrumental in the drive to an all-embracing militarism; mathematics classes could be made vivid by such devices as calculating the angle of attack of a dive bomber. The German campus was thoroughly de-intellectualized.

This reliance on propaganda was more than a mere article of faith, it was a voracious addiction. Even propaganda against the enemy: ‘My Last Appeal to Reason by Adolf Hitler’, dropped over England in 1940, may seem to us as quixotic as it did to the English then, but the regime behaved thus because it believed in that method; one can for example take the illustration of Signal (1976), a colour magazine printed in 20 languages (the articles are not without interest, a partisan coverage of for example Mexican gangs in Los Angeles, the English class system, the American capitalism). Yet the regime on some occasions dropped these by Heinkel-launched V1 flying bombs.

**The product: the idea of Adolf Hitler**

**Hitler as auteur**

Nazi propaganda had a supreme director, Dr. Goebbels, and a supreme star, Hitler himself. Yet the relation between the two of them was often that of propaganda conceptualizer and propaganda subcontractor. Hitler also reviewed and critiqued films and speeches and cuts were made at his suggestion: he was not merely a theorist on propaganda, but a practitioner also.

Goebbels was the manager, the chief operating officer. He was a missionary, the zealot for communicating the idea of communicating, a practitioner and evangelist for the idea of impression management. His battles were with the armed services – his frustrations with the military often overwhelm his diaries with their failure to understand the significance of the propaganda angle. The Propaganda Companies were very much his brainchild. His fights were also of course with the Party, getting it to have a more subtle appreciation of how to be more sensitive propagandists – for example, his complaints about funeral orations performed by party officials failing to find the right emotional resonances. And then his other fight was a personal one with the British media. He observes what they are saying, and launches ripostes against their attacks in a curious farrago of charge and counter charge. In this duel, this privatized fight, his anger is astonishing. And his observations on the British press are detailed, to the extent of example of reading articles by George Bernard Shaw to an amused Hitler (Goebbels, 1982). As the war continued, Goebbels became himself not merely the propaganda director but in fact the propaganda star, being seen everywhere among the bomb victims, making his Total War speech and continuously exhorting the people to further
heights of sacrifice. He was not above taking on party rivals in this propaganda struggle, even to the extent of closing down Goering’s favourite restaurant (one of the more amusing fights among the paladins of the Third Reich).

Hitler had the unique distinction of being a shrewd theorist of propaganda, as well as its ultimate practitioner, the famous chapters in Mein Kampf a quite extraordinary discourse on the ideas he then implemented, specifically on the centrality of emotion and unreason and the power of repetition. These theories were the distilled essence of what Hitler thought he had learned from the British in the First World War, and they arose ultimately from his supreme hubris about the omnipotence of Prussian militarism. He simply did not believe that the British could have won the First World War by military means; there was surely a trick, and the name of that trick was Propaganda.

While the suggestion of his distinguished biographer, Joachim Fest (2002), that Hitler might have been, inter alia, an advertizing copywriter and designer in pre-First World War Vienna (producing amongst other things a soap powder advertisement) may be a fiction, it is nevertheless a credible fiction. Hitler, according to Fest, was particularly impressed in those years by a woman who advertised hair tonic which promised to restore the tonsure of balding men. If they believed that, they would believe anything.

It remains an extraordinary truth that the essentials of the Nazi symbol system, as well as the idea of locating the regime within an ideology of propaganda, were defined by Hitler himself – his researches among archives to determine the particular style of the swastika for example, and other corporate logos of the party, or the sketches for the People’s Car (Spotls, 2004), which accurately anticipate its final design under which tutelage of Ferdinand Porsche. Little did the hippies of the 1960s, for whom this car was a favoured symbol, recognize the identity of its authorship.

A key aim of Nazi propaganda was, of course, the projection of Hitler himself as the central integument of Nazi propaganda. As he himself once said ‘I am the greatest actor in Germany’, and he was. But the propaganda projected numerous different roles for Hitler, there is ‘ascetic’ Adolf, the austere bachelor with Germany as his bride. But there were multiple other roles, People’s Kaiser, mystical diviner of public will, priest-king (a function long studied in anthropology), heir to Bismarck and Frederick the Great, Marshal and soldier – all implied in the concept of the Fuhrer. But if he is the Fuhrer, you will by definition be follower. There was ingenuity in separating out this image, and related imagery, from that of the party, its hacks, cronies and parish demagogues.

One intent of the propagandists was that the image of Hitler should be ubiquitous in Nazi Germany, in poster, magazine, newsreel, and, via the use of historical surrogates like Bismarck or Schiller, an eminent presence in entertainment as well. Thus a key part of the projection of Hitler was to use film surrogates. Another aspect of this was the cultivation of the photo opportunity, something made possible by the sheer number of popular news illustrated magazines in Germany as well as newspapers, and the photograph books prepared by Hitler’s photographer (Heinrich Hoffman). The photo opportunity was something the Nazis cultivated to perfection long before it had become established in other parts of the Western world: Hitler with small children, Hitler’s role as father of the nation supplanting Hindenburg the grandfather, Hitler as first soldier and brooding philosopher-king. Hitler was created as a free-floating symbol of national greatness, the central consciousness, one actually detached from the daily realities of the regime. A part of this was a resurrection of the ancient idea that ‘the king can do no wrong’, only the evil advisers. The advantage of this image is that its essence was flexibility and it could be changed or at least nuanced as circumstances dictated: as Kershaw (1987) explains, it was only the after Stalingrad that its magnetic powers began to fail. The propaganda projection of Hitler’s role was that of a self-cast diviner of the popular will. Nor was this the fantasy: in many ways it represented a proximate truth.
Projecting Hitler

But the essence of the propaganda projection of Hitler lay in his rhetoric, this word being defined by both the script and performance, or dramatic expression. At the core of Hitler’s rhetoric lay the idea of the manufacture of grievance and his story is an essay – relevant to our own times – in how grievance can be surfaced, packaged and politicized. This should not obscure the fact that many such grievances were indeed genuine, such as the loss of territory post-Versailles (but that is also equally true for example of Germany today, which is bereft of Pomerania, Silesia and East Prussia). Part of the contemporary relevance of the phenomenon of the Selling of Hitler is that it reminds us how dexterously grievance, legitimate and illegitimate, can be turned into a sense of tribal or national oppression so powerful that it bursts out into a rage of nihilistic aggression against the claimed perpetrators of the injustice. This has usefulness, for example to the study even of terrorism today. The point is that a sense of injustice can be talked into people thereby leading to the rhetorical creation of conviction: we offer a vision of rebirth, an enemy to hate, the righting of historical wrongs, a job, a home, bread on the table and cash in the bank.

The essence of Hitler’s rhetorical style follows the precept of Le Bon, who described ‘the abusive use of violent affirmation’. We argue that central to the construction of Nazi propaganda was the serial creation of enemies – reds, Poles, Jews, Old Reaction: it was a world-view teeming with internal and external enemies that had to be slain. Critical to this fabrication of enmity was the concept of an existential threat, that is to say, what is at stake is the future of the tribal community, and it is redefined and refreshed through the threat of extinction. There is no question that Hitler believed that the Jews really were an existential threat, and that there was little time left to save the ‘volk’. This gives an apocalyptic sense to Hitler’s ravings, and an urgency to the regime, because they defend a race and folk culture that will soon be time-expired. And the biggest threat to their future is a hyphernated entity, that is the Jew–Bolshevik, an amalgam of the race and political credo that represents the obverse of all Nazis believe in.

The product: core ideas

Idea of leader

The Third Reich was founded on the leader principle. But there was a more general interest in leadership as such that thrived in such a society: the leadership principle was something that had to be replicated at every level and was a constant theme of the
propaganda; and our study explores how this was done. Many films for example function as training manuals in how to be a leader: books, pamphlets and magazines are all replete with heroic homilies. Just as today the airport departure lounge school of management guru literature tells us how to lead, so then did the popular cultural product of the Nazis. Films are training manuals in dominance and initiative – for example, Gneisenau in the film Kolberg, but also Moltke during the Battle of Sedan in the film ‘Bismarck’: explicitly, a fussy and risk averse, older military style is contrasted with the thrusting technocentricity of the new. These men are prototype officers. They are focused, scientific, brave, commandeering: but they are not in fact cruel, since cruelty was not the regime’s publicly articulated self-concept. This fascination with leadership style, with the idea and ideal of the leader, functioned at all levels of the Third Reich. The Leader could emerge in anything from a pack of Hitler youth to a detachment of German Labour Front road diggers. Mixed in with this was the all-important concept of the hero, as embodied in the heroic narrative. Military leadership could not be detached from ideas of supreme bravery, and popular narratives constantly celebrate this, such as the pilot who guides his plane back and saves his comrades even though he is in fact dying. There is therefore a serial creation of idealized role models throughout Nazi media, and Nazi Germany is, in fact, one gigantic military training manual.

Solidarity

We suggest that if there is one central idea that dominates Nazi propaganda culture, a constant ideological obsession, it is the idea of solidarity. In this notion of solidarity lay all the other ideas of Nazism: the focus was, overwhelmingly, on the cohesion of the group. To be cohesive, a group has to have an identity of purpose and a perceived commonality of origin – at least to gain the extreme cohesion that the Nazis cultivated. Their creation of a climate of surveillance and subservience was mitigated by the stress on warm linkages of social community. The individual was no longer alone in the world, but a member of tribe to which he was united by ties of blood, of inherited folk wisdom, culture and history, and passionate antagonism to all that threatened these bonds. For to gain total solidarity a menacing enemy, who threatens the group with extinction, is truly needed. And if it does not exist that enemy can be fabricated, as indeed it was. The creation therefore of the pseudo-folk culture, the idea of the community, even things like the focus on the overseas Germans and the unity of all Germans, were all aspects of this enterprise. Nazism offered the modernist man, rootless in an amorphous and fluid urban environment, regression to the warm, febrile bonds of the tribal family. Integral to this was the idea of care: the national family would look after him and prize his life far above those of the alien and the outgroup. In film after film, documentary after documentary, book after book, the interdependency of individuals is constantly stressed, their reliance on their friends, fellow soldiers and neighbours, and how this help is always unstintingly given. It is not our dependence, but interdependence, which Nazi propaganda most stresses.

Today, our era of multiculturalism, diversity, inclusion and ethnicity connect us also with the world of the Nazis by showing us their opposite image. Nazis are the historical causation that made us liberal. In essence, Nazism represents all that goes wrong when the bonds of solidarity are over-stressed in a regression to tribalism. Today however the perceived absence of cohesion or community leads pundit and politician to a search for common bonds and the thread of community; we have, they claim, forgotten social cohesion in the pursuit of self-affirmation and the rights of subculturalities.

Utopia

The aspiration underlying Nazi propaganda is essentially one of utopia, the creation of a paradisal state on earth. Its integuments are a condition of solidarity and social community,
the regression to some kind of native authenticity and above all the salvation of the race from racial pollution: in this paradise, the man or woman is cared for and valued as long as they conform; that is crucial. In such a nirvana all individualism is bleached out, a race of ‘sunny’ (a favourite word), standardized people is produced. Much Nazi propaganda is thus about the enactment of a utopia. Their hatred of others is a necessary stage in this progression towards a perfect world, or at least a perfect world for Germans: behind the rantings, the visceral loathings, the neo-pornographic depictions of assorted enemies, lies, in fact, the longing for paradise. Notions of perfection and perfectibility underpinned Nazi rhetoric: their obsession with hygiene, their constant use of metaphors of health and disease, is very clearly a part of this. Ideas of pollution, of invasive illness, of bacilli (frequently associated with the Jews), teemed in Nazi texts and particularly the speeches of Hitler. Pamphlets with titles like ‘Keep your blood pure’ abounded, threats to their purity being in particular from the (forcibly immigrant) foreign workers as well as the Jews. The illicit connection between personal health and the health of the ‘folk’ is a much exhausted analogy. Parallel to this is an extraordinary interest in personal hygiene; creams and cosmetics are a constant refrain of the advertizing: thus, jackbooted and Nivea-creamed, the Reich marched towards mid-century. This notion of hygiene was thus translated wholesale to society.

Modernism

The Nazis, whatever else they were, were a self-consciously modernist movement, who claimed that their idiom was the idea of the future, of the coming man. As such, they used technology in every conceivable way as both an object and a medium of propaganda. The aim was to create sensations of the cutting edge, of technical ingenuity mobilized for the purposes of the state, and beyond that of Germany as the crucible of the modern, that is to say modern as in the best and most powerful technology available. And not surprisingly therefore, the first jetplane flight (in 1939 under the auspices of Von Olin) was under the Third Reich. The imagery of the technology was mixed in with mediaeval accents and ancestral voices: autobahns and ruins, thatched huts and rockets, the Cyclotron, images of knights in armour, Flying Wings, four engined jet bombers and superfast submarines, stocky peasants in costume. The ‘Bachem Natter’ for example was a manned rocket; the cockpit would then separate and descend by parachute: an extraordinary technology for the 1940s and one which was about to be launched in squadron formation strength when the airfield was overrun by the Americans. A Technopolis then, but with ancient voices: everything from the big railway gun tormenting Sevastopol and manned by a crew of 250 to the ability to fly jet spy planes so high up that there was no need for them to carry any weaponry. Nothing could reach them.

And eventually, much of the Nazi propaganda programme centred on the idea of miracle weapons, the super technology which would retrieve victory from the claws of the allies and return the status quo to Germany. Miracle weapons were going to be the answer: they would spread terror among the allies and vengeance for all that Allied bombing had done to Germany. They were the last propaganda hurrah of the Third Reich. And yet, militarily the miracle weapons were useless. The V1 and V2 could only be targeted imprecisely at large areas, the housing estates of civilians etc: an exploded V2 could indeed destroy 150 homes, but of what military value was that terror, even, to a population habituated to the war. But what mattered to Nazis was the visceral imagery and emotive power. It is not surprising that there is a kind of science fiction aspect to Nazism, or that representation of the Nazis has been a recurrent theme in the science fiction media of the past 60 years. This is not an accident: as cyborgs with ancient accents, as a default programme of the modern consciousness – however we conceptualize the Nazis, they saw themselves as not mere modernists, but
futurists. They were enacting and celebrating a future kind of society, which rested in every conceivable sense on science and technology, from the machines used to propel its military aggression to the foundation doctrine of race theory, arising out of the social darwinism of Herbert Spencer, which would promulgate an efficient and scientific base for civil society and its future reproduction. The comics were onto something.

Then there was the technology of communication, in itself an act of propaganda and self-conscious affirmation of the modern. There was colour, Agfa colour films like Kolberg or Munchhausen; but especially Signal, an astonishing achievement, colour imagery seeping out of every issue, images ostensibly appropriated from ‘Saving Private Ryan’. But they are not. They are real. The effect is to package the war as colour epic. And then there was television, decreed by Goebbels as a medium for the public space; at the 1936 Olympics 150,000 Germans saw the games on TV and more technical support was afforded the TV crews than to Reistenfahh herself. But television, shot directly, unedited, shows the Nazis as they really were (Spiegel TV, 1999). This imagery is striking, with none of the hard polish of the documentaries; Reich television’s Nazis are overwrought, even disorganized.

Ordinary

What is often forgotten in remembering the Third Reich is the illusion of the normal, of normalcy, which the dictatorship was able to create. It looked and felt, despite all the uniforms, like the modern world: the world of movie posters, magazines groaning at newsstands, foreign movies, international magazines and newspapers, foreign radio broadcasts. All this changed with the war, but before then it is important for example to remember that 20% of the movies shown in the Third Reich were Hollywood, and that they had a marked impact, even to the extent of audiences groaning when the Teutonic product appeared on the screen. The era of the Third Reich was not like the hermit kingdom, North Korea, a sealed information system. Fashions, styles, attitudes from outside Nazi Germany were buzzing around, even to the extent of the Nazi cultural system itself seeking to imitate them, as with the re-make of the film It Happened One Night (with Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert), re-imagined, re-made, as the Nazi film ‘Lucky Kids’ (Rentschler, 1996). The aura, this look and feel of an ordinary society, was sustained in every way possible. It was perpetuated for example by the social character of Nazi journalism with its light touch, easy-going, gossipy, mildly inquisitive and even comedic ethos. Normality: such as for example a photo journalistic essay of life in occupied Paris depicting chic women, pipesmoking professors on funny bikes, etc., or images of life in Vichy, or a day in the life of the Propaganda Ministry with its official cars, international communications, the office of Goebbels (Signal, 1976), etc. The idea was that you had been invited in, the idea of openness. There was a cult of the light, the trivial and the everyday, the idle chatter of the ordinary, of an innocent parish. This was further refined by very powerful appeals to altruism, selflessness and the civic sense: and how could a regime which had stressed the love of others be murdering people? Thus masses of propaganda attached to Winter Relief, to helping the indigent among the Folk, to the famous Pot Sundays where the family ate a simple meal and gave the excess profit to Winter Relief. You were exhorted to help your neighbours, an ethos which the war itself drove to new heights of appeal and endeavour. In the continuity of consumer culture, and in colour movies, action films, foreign tourists and an ostensible openness of the world, the regime sought to mask itself and its true drivers towards authoritarian control and the abolition of the individual critical mind.

The Nazis were creating a narrative, an explanation as to why we are where we are, where we are going, and how we will get there. The Nazi worldview was self-explanatory and obvious, everything connecting and all the elements united in a universal
explanatory framework. As a result no great intellectual effort or tax was needed to understand the meaning of the regime. It offered something for everybody, including simplicity for the simpleminded.

**Consumerism**

An important part of Nazi propaganda was consumerism, and in this it is distinct from communism with its stress on collective ownership. Under Nazism the individual could aspire to the ownership of property and the blessings of consumer goods. This consumerism is absolutely critical to the appeal of Nazism, and a part of its modernist idiom. A cornucopia of consumer products, Mercedes cars, watches, cruises, champagne, fashion, soap, hygiene products were integral to Nazis success. There was the promise of material plenty and access for the masses to the perquisites of a social elite: the People's Car, later the Volkswagen Beetle, or cruises to the Azores on Nazi liners such as the Wilhelm Gustav were all part of this idea of entitlement, of packaging luxury to the masses. The Nazis were of course acutely aware of American-style consumerism, and indeed attack it, as with an article in the magazine Signal criticising American advertising or what it called the ‘kitschified mass soul’; but while abusing it, they also replicated it. Indeed, the Nazis made the fateful decision of continuing with an essentially consumer economy to the middle years of World War II, until in fact, Goebbels' Total War speech of 1943. Much of course of this material world was a chimera: very few workers for example ever enjoyed one of the Strength Through Joy cars (and many of the funds they had paid into the account were expropriated by Dr. Robert Ley). But the key point is that the Nazis recognized the power of consumerism and saw in it the way of making their regime more palatable. It also fortifies the impression we have of Nazis as an essentially Modernist movement, one which had a good understanding of the emerging dynamics of a mid 20th century world and of how it could harness those dynamics for its own self-perpetuation. Social aspiration, the quest for status, the longing for identity bearing, identity defining goods, these things were intuitively understood by the Nazi party and its ideologues.

Construction of the propaganda under the Third Reich embraced the confetti, the tat of the regime. Kitsch, such as Hitler youth dolls, postcards of heroes, postcards of party events, talks, booklets, gilded volumes, stamps, photojournalism books, collectibles, busts, insignia, even to this day fester and multiply at antique fairs and auctions. The Nazis were of course themselves very worried about the superfluity of popular kitsch surrounding the regime and very well aware of it. They took steps to try and control it, reminding manufacturers and the public of the essential dignity of the regime, which had to be properly protected. Nevertheless, the tat of the regime was an important part of its popularity. When you buy an object, you make a commitment, however trivial, it is part of the process of value exchange. The pins, badges, daggers, reproduced portraits and so forth are constant reminders of the power and glory of the regime. Insignia such as the hero mother medal for matrons of large families were an important way of connecting people to the Reich, while there was a uniform for every conceivable function. And where you wear the uniform, you adopt the values. All of these were public identity definers and ways of creating an adhesive, binding rulers and ruled. Their propaganda value cannot be underestimated. The vulgarity, bright colours and brassy surfaces constituted a magnetic presence, an urge to collect, which brought in its wake an identification however unconscious.

**The political marketing of the Third Reich: targets and techniques**

**Targets: segmentation**

It is of course often conveniently forgotten that Hitler fought a long sequence of democratic elections, before finally becoming German.
Chancellor. The political marketing of Adolf Hitler, therefore, the free election propaganda, is useful to look at because it uses and anticipates modern marketing techniques; for example he was not a German citizen until 1932, so posters stressed his patriotic credentials very much in the way modern American campaign advertising would preempt negative attack (they showed images of him wounded with the Iron Cross, images of the front line combat soldier, etc.). This is not to suggest that the Nazis were proto-management scientists, merely that they had an intuitive understanding of the process of persuasion in all its aspects. For example, they used public opinion research: the SD reported back to Goebbels and sought out the temperature of public opinion. These methods may have been crude, and restricted by the overall intimidation of the population, but the important point is that some kind of primitive feedback loop existed. Moreover, the Nazis understood the technique of market segmentation, that no market, including a political market, is an amorphous mass accessible via an undifferentiated appeal, but rather a fragmentation of subgroups, each of which has to be addressed in terms of its own interests and through the medium of its own emotional language. One example is of course of Albert Speer’s first listening to Hitler addressing a university audience: he arrives expecting to be hostile, and is astonished by the moderation and rationality of Hitler’s tone. Apparently everyone appeared to be taken in.

And so the Nazis were excellent at crafting different messages to different groups. The posters aimed at women, which they recognized by the beginning of the 1930s as an important potential constituency, are entirely different in tone from the posters aimed at, say, farmers or unemployed working-class males. They emphasize nurture, and there is no militaristic or violent imagery. Moreover, the Nazis had a real understanding of the idea of brand building; whether they acknowledged it or not, Nazism was a brand with its own brand logo system. They had a great grasp of this. Their swastika functioned as a brand, and their propaganda functioned in the classic sense of advertising as ‘pouring meaning into the brand’. The swastika itself was condensed meaning: an example of this brand power is cited by the historian Alistair Horne in his book on the Algerian war, A Savage War of Peace. The independence fighters, the FLN, purchased swastika-branded Luger pistols from Czechoslovakia, even though these pistols were made post-war and by a (communist) society which had been the victim of the Nazis. Such was the authority of the swastika in its role as a highly marketable military brand.

**Targets: anti-semit**

Anti-Semitism in much of the mainstream media of the Third Reich is less visible than we might imagine, and this is one aspect of Nazi media culture which creates real surprise. The Berliner Illustrierte for example, or films like Kolberg, are bereft of sinister Jewish characters or indeed any reference to the Jews at all. In fact, what the Nazis were really doing was the very modern consumer access method of market segmentation. The anti-semites were a distinct target market and accessed through particular media, particularly the paper Der Sturmer of Julius Streicher. Thus anti-Semitism was appropriated by particular media and particular media vehicles. The ‘Toadstool’ series of cartoons, for example, issued by the Sturmer, showed images of grotesque Jews and their wickedness, such as the story of how ‘Little Hans’ refuses a sweet from a fat (pederastic?) Jew (Calvin Archive, 2008). Such images were disgusting to many Germans; it is questionable how far they saw them or actively chose to watch films such as Jew Suss or the Eternal Jew or the Rothschilds’ Shares in Waterloo. These media texts were labelled anti-Semitic and the audience knew what it would get. But it was not necessarily a national audience. It was an audience which constituted a particular market, namely those citizens of the Third Reich who had a particular appetite for incendiary anti-Semitic imagery.
Techniques: management

The subject of Nazi propaganda cannot be successfully addressed without reference to the management of the process, for it was at the managerial aspects of persuasion - coordination, consistency, on the ground organization, etc. that the Nazis excelled, and yet this less than glamorous field of study is most easily overlooked. Control was tight, and it was only with this degree of managerial oversight that the special effects could in fact be achieved, the orchestration, smoothness, replication of imagery, the tone of command and control, the geometric patterns, and everything else: a laissez faire attitude in the view of the Nazi party would have been an affront to the dignity of the regime. The Nazi propaganda process was a rule-bound process, rules, for example, on precisely what the decoration should be at speaker meetings, where they should be placed, how extensive should they be, as with for example the flower arrangements. Implementation was the key to the effects produced. There were of course journals such as ‘Will and Way’ to support this, or the journal SS Black Corps, where tips and management notes could be promulgated, advice about how to be more effective as propagandists, and the distillation of mature experience or what we would described today as best practice. Thus the focus was managerial, the operations perspective on how to make propaganda work through manuals, feedback loops, and even market reward systems (speakers were paid according to how many they could gather in their audience). But there was also much good sound pragmatic advice, for example on how to look after and reward visiting speakers, or how to maintain the party’s dignity. Beyond this, there was the micromanagement by Goebbels himself: the daily instructions to the press setting out the party line. Consistency and coherence were created throughout the realm, impressing foreign observers with an ostensible unity and identity of national purpose; such was Goebbels’ control that (according to Signal, 1976) he could interrupt any radio programme via a switch in his office.

The emphasis on management cannot be overstressed: without it the effects would have been random, impulsive and lacking in the core symmetry of design so memorable in Nazi imagery. But by doing this also they created a kind of brand insistence: the Nazi public product had universally the same (or similar) look and feel, the same packaging, triggering repeated exposure effects. Moreover it created an illicit inference of efficiency; if the packaging was so good, so impressive, so therefore was the regime: an intuitive connection, though not a logical one.

Techniques: creativity

Klemperer recorded in his diary his belief – and he was a victim – that the Nazis were the best advertizers the world had ever seen. But Nazi propaganda faced a problem of creativity. In the first place, the attempt to place a society under a constant velocity of stimulus does of itself raise this issue of creative exhaustion. How can the stimulus be sustained, what strategies and tactics need to be introduced to fire this level of intensity? Can we risk periods of lower intensity, that is a turning down of the propaganda volume, when there might be independent political consequences in so doing? More generally, it is obvious that all totalitarian systems face problems of creativity, since there is an inherent contradiction in the idea of creativity within an oppressive state. The conditions that are needed for creativity are absent: the freedom to think new ideas, the freedom to be irreverent and so forth. Yet Goebbels was obsessed with what he saw as the mediocrity of so much Nazi propaganda. He constantly sought ways of raising the imaginative quality of the propaganda product, and his diaries report agonies of frustration at being confronted with the nonentity products of terrified minds. And yet, when he did encourage editors to become more irreverent, one journalist took him at his word and ended up in prison. And this was the core of the problem. More generally, any creative system, even in a liberal democracy, whether the advertizing industry or Hollywood, is for the
most part quotidiern and workaday in its
products. True creativity is by definition rare
and not easily replicated, truly creative indi-
viduals are only creative for part of their time.
Thus the great crisis in Nazi propaganda, this
internal contradiction, was never fully nego-
tiated. There was much mediocre Nazi propa-
ganda, we have to admit: sometimes it is the
sheer quantity, rather than the quality, which
truly impresses.

The political marketing of the
Third Reich: deceit

Manipulation

The Nazis were great manipulators: their
propaganda was not inflexible, but could
find a U-turn, a new argument, a different
image. It could escape its stylistic rut. For
example, radio programming was changed
from the pompous, the politicized, the rhaps-
dody of martial music, to essentially light
programming and entertainment, very early
on in the history of the regime. Again, they
could vary the tone and content of the movies
radically, moving as the war continued
towards films retailing light relief and pure
escapism for war weary publics, in such
vehicles as the Adventures of Baron Munch-
ausen; as Paxman (2005) argues in ‘The
Anatomy of Fascism’, the ideology was inher-
ently flexible, unlike Marxism, and you could
invent it as you go along. For example there
was no initial euthanasia programme, the idea
was originally inspired by a request from the
father of a severely disabled son. The basic,
non-negotiable demand was total loyalty to
Hitler himself: everything else, providing he
did not object, was made up. But all imagery
was edited, whether studio-made or shot for
the newsreels: there was never any attempt to
provide a kind of gritty reality. Thus the Nazi
text was a produced text: for example the
newsreels virtually never ever showed
the bodies of the German dead. Always, they
were a clarion call to heroism, but heroism of a
peculiarly 19th-century kind with all the
carnage of modern war bleached out.

And the media image, the propaganda, was
flexible enough to accommodate events as
they arose and providing a plausible rationale
which the public could accept. The serious
test of this was the so-called Night of the Long
Knives, in effect, a mass murder of elite
individuals such as Major Ernst Rohm and
General Kurt Von Schleichers carried out by the
regime of itself with no recourse to judicial
decision, something astonishing among such a
process minded, bureaucratic and legally
obsessed people. The Nazis achieved this by
talking up the threat to the state itself, which
had to be immediately extinguished, by playing
on popular fears of the massive, anarchic
‘brown army’, and, especially, by raising the
bogeyman of homosexuality. A homosexual
plot against the heart of the nation-state. Again,
further creativity was used in the reaction to
the defeat of Stalingrad. The Nazi media did not
in fact deal directly with the event; they played
funeral music over the radio for several days.
Thus was the announcement of the death of
the Sixth Army at Stalingrad made indirectly
and with dignity.

What intrigues is the extraordinary and often
subtle levels of manipulation revealed. For
example the SS magazine Black Corps (Calvin
Archive, 2008) had a discussion of what to do if
German troops overwhelm American positions
and German soldiers discovered jazz records.
The conclusion – let them, ‘because they need
a holiday from us’: an extraordinary sentiment
to come from the mouth of the SS. Other Party
instructions in the run-up to the seizure of
power included for example the suggestion
not to show the swastika very much in middle-
class areas, a quite extraordinary piece of
advice given the organization that was offering
it. The Nazis in other words did not simply
proceed with a propaganda steamroller,
though that was part of the show, they were
able to achieve with deftess, nuance: a balletic per-
formance in the manipulation of human psychology
(There is even a colour photograph of SS
Reichfuhrer Heinrich Himmler picking flow-
ers). Indeed, the SS actually published an attack
on Superman (Superman was of course Jewish:
the critique was a response to an episode
where Superman attacks the West Wall and pulls German bombers from the sky). And they were capable also of ‘spinning’ events to an extent breathtaking even to jaded modern sensibilities, as with Goebbels re-branding World War Two midway - and this is no exaggeration – from a German national quest for ‘lebensraum’, etc. into a pan-European anti-bolshevist crusade that all Europeans should enlist in!

During the Battle of France for example, Goebbels afforded journalists every facility, and bribed them with luxury hotels and full access to the front, interviews with soldiers, etc. In contrast the British and French were bureaucratic and unresponsive and fearful of the press, keeping journalists well away from the front line. This exposes the radical difference in philosophy, between a regime whose entire being rested on the idea of communication as the wellspring of power, and whose democratic opponents for whom information was not a tool to be used but a private asset to be restricted. During the war itself, the Propaganda Companies (PK) of the German army provided actuality footage of the reality of war and transmitted the exhilaration of combat to everybody: they were an extraordinary achievement, and the American army’s Combat Camera today is only a vague echo of what they did then: they produced the best footage of the Second World War.

And even the Holocaust itself was, ultimately, marketed. Concentration camps were a frequent subject of press attention, far from being hidden in remote forests. They were sold to the German people as reformatory establishments, in the view of one writer (Gellately, 2001), rather like penitentiaries for offending adolescents in 1950s America, where the public were told fresh air, exercise and skills training were on offer to discipline social deviants who could then be returned to the society. There was of course the ‘model’ concentration camp, Sachsenhausen; an image almost of hi-di-di 1950s Butlins; the role of propaganda in fomenting the holocaust is considerable - propaganda as the preface to genocide. Press attention was not merely invited, it was delighted in. Again, the police were also vigorously marketed with police shows, police events and the much publicized National Day of the Police. The organs of the Nazi state were set forth as something you could admire, and even regard with affection: they were the public musculature of your tribe.

We also explain how, unobtrusively, a new language began to take hold of people’s minds, a new culture sprang forth in print which was unquestioned, a cultural given which was therefore accepted, not as perverse or subversive, but as an everyday part of life. The Nazis had a gift for banality, for making workaday and acceptable what was in effect profoundly radical and a portal to monstrosities of the most unimaginably evil kind. The new values were accepted and uninterrogated because they appeared with such ubiquity and powerful assertion, or because they were disguised in new rhetorical formulae or language, or in media products which while ostensibly entertainment made the perverse possible. A good example is the film. ‘I Accuse’, a response to the campaign by the Catholic Church against the euthanasia programme and specifically Cardinal Galen’s pulpit denunciation. This pseudo-intellectual film was cast as a courtroom drama; the jury seeking to pronounce on the fate of a man who had killed his wife crippled by multiple sclerosis, when the doctor had refused to do so. And it was a plausible film, with ostensibly balanced debate among the jury member, but also involving subtly subversive moments (such as when the elderly hunter on the jury discusses his love of his dogs but how it is necessary to kill them when they are old, and in great pain). Packaged thus, and appearing in this innocuous disguise, perverted ideas could be localized and blended with every day values and attitudes.

**The packaging of the Reich**

**Popular culture**

The film was an essential part of the Nazi enterprise, its colonization of the entertainment
medium. It was here that Goebbels himself held most sway. But this was a disguised media: the Nazis had a greater appreciation of the apoliticality of most people, and after the box office failures of 1933 - the three party films Hans Westmar, Hitler Youth Quex and SA Man Brand (when German audiences much preferred the Hollywood product. 'I'd Was a Fugitive From a Chain Gang'), Goebbels recognized that the propaganda message must be clothed in the pageantry of costume drama and romance and action epic. Nazi films were a way of talking about the Reich itself, and films like Bismarck or Frederick Schiller involved Hitler surrogates, and, especially, the contrast of a new style of leadership with a discredited older style. They articulated a Nazi ethos, as with the Bismarck’s brusqueness with craven partisan politicians. Costume drama abounded, but it was all about the present, these costume dramas represented a transposition of message onto history. The use of entertainment to persuade was not of course invented by the Nazis. But they took it to new levels, the political message nestling amongst folds of character acting and melodrama.

Yet the message is uncompromising: there is never any subtle aspersion or nuance, no interrogation or introspection. One might for example contrast this with a contemporary Hollywood epic, ‘Dawn Patrol’ with Errol Flynn and David Niven: though a classic action movie set in the First World War among aviators, it has to pay homage to the pacifist ethos of its era, and the appalling consequences of the gross losses on the Western front. It is impossible to imagine a product of the Nazi media machine being similarly ambivalent. Some of these films were undoubtedly crude: in the Rothschilds Shares in Waterloo, the Star of David is imposed on a map of England: while in ‘Soldiers of Tomorrow’, the English elite are degenerate and implicitly homosexual. Even in the better films, there can be an ideologically laboured element, as with the speech of Gneisenau in the town square of Kolberg, where he harangues and hectors the assembled masses not only in the tone, but with the very language of Goebbels himself. The message/manner of this film demonstrates how the propaganda was adjusted to suit changing contexts, for this is a film about courage when surrounded, the encircled Kolberg of the Napoleonic Wars. It is packed with imagery of obliteration and violence, of blasted homes and brutally destroyed buildings, a level of destruction in fact that would have been unknown in the Napoleonic Wars. It is, actually, the costume drama face of Germany at the end of World War II (all those stories about 100 000 soldiers being used to make it are wide of the mark, but the employment of a more moderate number of 25 000 still represents a massive deployment of manpower at the end of the war [Hoffman, 1996]). The film and its making illustrates the value Nazis continued attached to propaganda, and how far they placed reliance on the medium to hold the home front together.

Sometimes the ideological touches are discreet – for example in both Kolberg (with the French), and in The Rothschilds (with the English), the black footmen are in attendance wearing turbans. The black footman is a signifier of the metropolitan decadence of Germany’s enemies, and the fact that they attach no importance to the concept of racial purity.

Again, in the film Jew Suss the clever idea is not to show imagery of allegedly contemporary Jews (as was done in the box office failure, ‘The Eternal Jew’), but rather costume the Jewish enemy in the garb of the 18th century. This time the Goebbels media apparatus presented the Jew as sophisticated. But it was a similar story: the Jews can change shape. The insidious message is that the real danger lay not with obviously Jewish figures but with the well mannered ‘Court Jew’, who insinuates himself into polite society. By proceeding thus, the Nazis attacked an audience when its cognitive defences were down, because the entertainment package does not come with the label ‘Political Rant’ attached, or seem like a lecture from a Nazi party official. But, audience research showed that viewers got the message.
A much more successful idea was the film Request Concert (Herzstein, 1978), which was a perfect ideological vehicle for the Nazi government since it cleverly conveyed a core message the regime wanted to communicate, that is the unity between front and homeland. Based on a real radio programme, where civilians could request tunes and songs for family and lovers in the military, it is the story of an airman and his girlfriend who lose touch after he goes to fight in the Spanish Civil War in the Condor Legion. They are reunited when she requests a tune on this programme, and he is there to hear it. The film finishes with him going off to fight again, this time at the beginning of World War II. A vehicle like this is carefully constructed, because the ideology is so well integrated into the fabric of the narrative. It creeps unobserved into the mind of the viewer. The message is absorbed without conscious intent, the pleasures of narrative leading unobtrusively to renewed political consciousness.

Art

The point about art of the Nazis is that it was another conduit or means of propaganda, therefore, its essence was all about being public, and being utterly clear about the ideology imparted. Massive sculptures, architecture, paintings were critical to the projection of the regime. Oils and watercolours were not intended merely for the galleries or private consumption, but to be endlessly reproduced as posters, cards, or images in magazines. The aesthetic of the Nazis looked to early models such as Durer or Breughel, and rather more generally the aesthetic was petrified in a kind of mid-19th-century moribund agrarian romanticism. All abstraction was banned as degenerate art, and artists were even prevented from painting for their own private satisfaction in their own studio. Bizarrely, the posters in contrast often affect a modernist aesthetic which was exorcised from the formal arts. There are useful comparisons between the Nazi aesthetic and the decrees of the Soviet Zhadanov in 1932. This was simply another branch of propaganda, nothing more, nothing less: thick-set villagers, ideal families, horses, and folk festivals. And of course, virile combat soldiers, especially after the war had begun. The Roman idiom was a constant theme, from the Roman salute of the parade ground to the style of the buildings and gimcrack revelries of the sculptors such as Arno Brecker: massive, scowling male nudes with tiny penises, mighty, muscular, their bodies an act of violence. Emphases in music were of a similar martial dimension. And architecture had coherence with the rest of this palimpsest. The aim was the classic idea, celebrated not only in the scale of the stupendous neoclassic structures but in such details as the quality of the stone and granite selected. This public propaganda of architecture was ongoing, as manifest in for example the plans for ‘Germany’ or the continuous construction of the Nuremberg stadium (which is now signposted after demands from visiting British football fans).

Public imagery

The production values of Nazism were substantial. War and Peace were spectacle, the ultimate show coming to a theatre near you – the Third Reich. Nazism was visual, and physical theatre, everything from the massive wooden eagle at Nuremberg, the gleaming limestone and the polished surfaces, to the rock star features of its great Charismatic, and the pageantry and cathedrals of light. The 1936 Olympics were fully in this tradition, a great Nazis set piece arising out of the gullibility of the International Olympic Committee. The broader system of public rituals took many forms. In general there is what we might call in gimcrack prussianism, elements of the Prussian military culture which were exaggerated, dignified, distorted and embedded in the texture of everyday life. And then there were the seasonal festivals, and a vast calendar to rival that of the Christian churches, the highest being the commemoration in Munich of the
‘victims’ of the putch, but these symbolic events lasted through the year and marked out on alternative Nazi calendar. There were the grandest rituals, the Nuremberg rituals, and much else in addition. One role of ritual in the Third Reich was to internalize the idea of the regime via memorial enactments: the Reich, it has been said, was never more alive than when celebrating death, and the associated rituals – flaming torches, funereal marches, orations, solemn pounding music – lent dignity to the deaths and murders of the early days of the movement, deaths which so readily occurred in squalid backstreets and sordid yards.

Then there was poster power. A poster, especially a Nazi poster, is a trespass on the consciousness with its supercharged imagery. No one could ignore them. And there were the magazines, the illustrated papers with their stress on narrative, their myriad photographic essays in how exactly for example a wounded soldier is saved from the harsh desert and returned to the comforts of a Berlin hospital.

**Rallies**

The rally was another, and live, medium and a centrepoint of Nazi propaganda, a theatre of mass affirmation wherein those attending could internalize Nazi values. The function of the big parade, the big rally, was a collective recognition of solidarity. And there were many of them. Parades were a form of street theatre, where the regime strengthened the allegiance of its core supporters and impressed the less committed with its organization and pageantry. The role of orchestrated human beings in geometric formation symbolising a kind of mortal perfection seems strange to modern eyes: but the rigid geometry, the patterns of the marching feet, were a balletic enactment of the values of the regime, insistent, organized, hard. Then there was the role of declamatory public rhetoric. Speakers were paid via the size of the crowd they could attract; a limited number of the best were accorded the honour of being Reich Speaker. Nazis organized such meetings with a fine degree of precision and attention to detail. Such an occasion stressed the role of the ecstatic crowd as a way of creating loyalty among crowd members and spreading that sensation to their friends. The creation of a perpetual sense of euphoria was forced of course, not real.

**The branding of the Reich:**

**rhetoric, symbolism, myth**

**Brand rhetoric**

The Third Reich was about the uses and abuses of language as much as anything else, a point which struck Victor Klemperer to the point of obsession and was dissected in his book The Language of the Third Reich. The colonization of language was one of their greatest achievements and a pre-requisite of everything else they did. Slogans occupied for example centre stage in Nazi evangelism – there was the slogan of the week, and the slogan of the day. Slogans encapsulate perspective, they telegraph the key meanings that the party wants you to absorb. More generally, as Klemperer outlined, the Nazis were preoccupied with language, with giving new meanings to old terms or creating entirely new meanings. ‘Heimat’ for example was always an important idea for Germans and does not translate well into its English equivalent, ‘homeland’. But the Nazis elevated it into a neo-mystical concept. Alternatively, there was also a distinct list of boo/hurrah words, through which Nazi concepts and ideology were channelled. Keywords for example were the words ‘heroic’, or ‘sunny’. They were particularly fond of dynamic words, of power and motivation, or words with violent resonances. Many verbal formulae came from the worlds of machinery and engineering and were applied to human motivations. Words which previously had no especially good connotations now became virtue terms, such as the word ‘fanatic’, the highest term of approval in the Third Reich.

There were of course specific Nazi concepts, the integuments of the ideology; words like volksgemeinshaft, volkish, untermenschen,
weltenschaung, lebensraum; these were the rhetorical structure of a total (another favourite term) worldview. Beyond this, the regime was more than a brand; it was a serial branding exercise with especially resonant names chosen for military contexts and events – ‘Barbarossa’, ‘Sea-Lion’, ‘Night and Fog’, Wolf’s Lair, Eagle’s Nest, Wehrmacht, etc. And there were the well-known slogans, shopworn verbal mantras which at one time must have seemed refreshing – ‘Children, Church, Kitchen’, ‘Ein Reich, Ein Volk, Ein Fuhrer’; such words come trippingly off the tongue, yet these are not mere slogans but an integral part of the Nazi brand in the same way that a corporate logo often encapsulates the slogan or strapline as part of its total perceptual construct, for example ‘never knowingly undersold’. More broadly speaking, the use of phrases has to be seen as part of the creation of an alternative truth, one entirely fabricated and with only the most shallow anchors in current realities.

But the Nazis understood the value of language, the importance of controlling it and how necessary it was to their rise and survival. The language encapsulates a way of seeing that excludes other perspectives, other ways of seeing. The rhetoric functions via a kind of internal determinism, presenting something as the natural order of things, the situational given which cannot be negotiated. Thus the phrase ‘living space’ when repeated with sufficient force, seems in the end to be a predeterminate destiny, something which is natural and right. More generally, words have propaganda value because the selection of the right word or phrase has an adhesive quality, it sticks in our minds and the dim-lit recesses of consciousness; multiplies and festers and so that in the end we begin to see the world as they want us to see it. Nor of course were contradictions ever a problem: Goebbels could describe Allied air raids as ‘terror raids’ with a straight face in spite of what the Nazis did to elicit this response, the destructions of the Rotterdam, of Warsaw, the infernos of London or Manchester and the devastation of Coventry (to give just a few examples).

Brand imagery: symbolism

The imagery and propaganda of the Third Reich depend for much of their persuasive power on the idea of coherence: there is for example a remarkable degree of integration within the symbol system. Overall, the eagles, the flashes of lightning or the SS runes, the crosses and swastika banners are the interlocked and interlocking parts that collectively create a unitary imagistic vehicle whose impact is related to the elements of superordinate design. The visualities presented therefore offer a totality of imagistic system: everything from buildings to banners and statues. Design saturates everything in the Third Reich: for example, the smart cut of uniforms is a very important in fostering a collective identity. British battledress, by contrast, a kind of ugly green boiler suit, flatters the vanity of the wearer far less (compare the picture at Dunkirk of Erwin Rommel next to the newly captured Major-General Fortune). Visual coherence was underpinned by ideological coherence, and the visual expression was the overlay of an idea. And both bore clear testament to design, and therefore clarity.

In Germany, symbolism took centre stage. Much of the regime’s propaganda resided in its serial production of symbolism and its frequent resort to symbolic strategies. This was a symbolic society, with symbols decoded and absorbed every moment of the day. This existed at every level, from the colouring of the swastika flag itself – the lavish dashes of red contrasted with the white and black, to the use of symbolism to avoid making any kind of more direct commitment. Thus we have the Reich’s symbolic socialism, the addressing of societal issues at the purely symbolic level, as with the state funeral Hitler ordered for workers killed building the Berlin subway. Then there was symbolic democracy as well. The multiple referenda – there were five of them – were helpful in creating a pseudo-legitimacy to Hitler’s regime, and the shadow of the ghost of an idea of democracy. His projected self-concept was as diviner, articulator and
implementer of some mystical public will. The inference was that people preferred this to a real democracy: the symbolism of the referenda however created the image of a government responsive to citizens without actually being so. But what really mattered was the symbol, and the regime understood only too well that people are often satisfied by symbolism alone, and not something more tangible.

Much ingenuity went into the creation of Nazi symbols. Klemperer gives the example of the SS lighting rune, and in an essay worthy of Barthes analyses the symbol systems it represents, including that of an electricity substation, and also of lightening, and how these meanings are multiple yet condensed into one symbol, which also of course hearkens back to old Teutonic runic script. Meaning has been packed into the symbol. There is for example Himmler’s BMW numberplate, SS1. Much of this might be summarized under the notion of the ‘packaging of the Reich’, that is to say the number of slogans, images, symbols and rituals with which the Reich presented itself to its multiple publics at home, and indeed abroad.

A critical part of this symbol system was ritual. The Nazis understood this very well. The power of ritual is something which all societies throughout history have used to communicate and reinforce their core meanings and norms. And the Reich was bursting with ritual, rituals at every corner, rituals for all of the day. Most notably of course, there was the Roman salute, an easy way of identifying opponents by their failure to perform it, but also a way of cementing loyalty to the regime by coercive social pressure; this included public enactment on all possible occasions, including of course when people simply met each other. The point about a ritual is that it is repeated, and through repetition learning and reinforcement take place.

Brand narrative: myth

The Nazi propaganda system was also a system of myth production. Goebbels in particular understood the value of the mythology and the entire Nazi narrative was saturated with myths; the November criminals, the stab in the back, the snatched victory, international plutocracy and the Jewish conspiracy, the Jewish Bolshevik, Old Reaction: these were the ideological myths, but they were made material and visible when embodied in a human personality. Thus the idea of the Era of Struggle was embodied in the persona of Horst Wessel (Baird, 1992), a Goebbels mass media operation which elevated an obscure young storm trooper, murdered in a dispute over his ex-prostitute girlfriend, into a hero and idolized in the film Hans Westmark, his story transferred to the silver screen.

There were many others such as Hitler Youth Quex (Rentschler, 1996), a working class boy who is enchanted by the Hitler youth, their love of the outdoors and patriotism and the purity of their way of life contrasted with the brutish, unkempt Communists. This boy is eventually murdered by Communists while delivering Nazi literature, a true event in fact, but turned through the alchemy of film into the pitilessly cruel murder of a patriotic boy. The Nazis specialized in the creation of ideal martyr types, one of whom, Schlagater, was actually critical of the Nazis, and was executed by the French long before the Nazi ascent to power: the Nazis though retrieved his memory from recent history and placed it on a plinth.

Most dear to the Nazi myth makers was the concept of the heroic, and a distinct propaganda industry was devoted to the manufacture of fearless, square jawed warriors, eyes alight with fanaticism. The course of the war itself provided many such candidates, although not all of them fitted the textbook case. For example the smiling, boyish face of Hauptman Marseille is frequently to be seen in the Nazi illustrated magazines; yet he was fond of nightclubs and jazz music, an individualistic rebel whose self-centred hubris would be equally at home in our world today (on one occasion he landed his plane on a motorway, got out and urinated: farmers rushed to his assistance thinking he was in trouble, and he took off, blowing them in the air stream; yet he...
downed about 140 Allied aircraft, mainly over the desert, the highest score of any ace in any war ever). The qualities most valued by the Nazis are the object of their myth-making and rhetorical focus – radicalism, energy, dynamism and unreflective loyalty. The most prized quality was obedience, the most despised was self-reflection. The anti-intellectualism is frequently on display in Nazi propaganda products. For example in Kolberg the pacifistic, violin playing musician shrinks from military action and is of course drowned pathetically. The violin is signifier of defeatist, pacifistic culture and is the one item the family does not seek to save from its flooded farm.

Myths are not unique to the Nazis: the nation itself is a myth system of sorts, and myths and mythologies are critical to social cohesion. Those that seek to undermine myths in the interests of the unflinching light of truth may be doing a service to honesty, but at the same time they are destroying a critical mechanism by which nations sustain and renew themselves. Myths have a key social function. The recognition of this by the Nazis was of course part of their general understanding of manipulation and persuasion: but the fact that they did it so consciously, in such an organized way and to such effect, must be regarded as an important part of their propaganda operation. The myth is in the end a narrative, the story a nation tells to itself about itself and a way of bequeathing its values to the cadet generations. But no nation has ever in history formalized the production of myths as vigorously as the Nazis.

Illusions, delusions and dreams: psychology and the Nazi brand

The appeal of Nazi propaganda and the ideology it articulated was that it simplified life in a tortuously confusing world. The assumption that people are happy with fluidity and complexity was and perhaps is, misconceived: the party and its answers saved you the pain of thinking, and the return on an unqualified loyalty was a life secure and simple. And it understood the power of the emotional appeal, a theory of propaganda that stressed especially the anti-intellectual approach. If there is one idea in psychology, however, which Nazis made their own, it is that of the ‘repeated exposure effect’. Nazi propaganda theory believed implicitly in the power of repetition. Internal mental resistance was stunned and demoralized by saturation levels of propaganda: it represented an internal colonization of the mind. Yet Nazism occurs in a modernist context, a world of increasingly homogenized tastes, manufactured lifestyles and international media; the popular consciousness could apparently compartmentalize these things – Klemperer for example describes watching a young stormtrooper and his girlfriend at the movies who both swing to the jazz tunes and then respond to the Nazi histrionics.

Fear

Nazis did not, contrary to general belief, work primarily through fear, though fear was integral to their activities and a necessary condition for their success. They placed great faith in notions of mass suggestion which they had borrowed from vogue psychologists. Thus ideas were often implied rather than expressed concretely: the viewer or reader could draw their own inevitable conclusions, as with the film Jew Suss, where anti-Semitism is transposed to 18th century Wurtemberg. This indirect approach was deliberate. Goebbels and the Nazis recognized the apoliticality of most people, and that a raw propaganda would never succeed; a sweetened medicine was needed. People are cognitive misers: they necessarily exclude much of the stimuli with which they are daily bombarded in order to maintain some kind of independent character. Therefore propaganda had to penetrate their indifference and pre-occupation, and did so primarily through the entertainment.

Co-production

The theory of the Nazi propagandists derived extensively from the work of the 19th century
French theorist of the crowd, Gustave Le Bon, who was pre-occupied with what he called the feminine nature of crowds, their vulnerability to the declamatory and assertive, the simple-minded and crude. They were susceptible to a ‘masculine’ force in other words, an idea which much appealed to Hitler. To work, however, propaganda has to resonate, in other words to surface some ideas and feelings which are already latent in the minds of the target group. This ‘Resonance Theory’, which Tony Schwartz applied to American politics, remains just as relevant to the study of Nazism: Schwartz argues that the successful political manipulator uses the viewer as workforce, surfacing feelings and notions that are already latent within their consciousness. In other words, propaganda is a co-production, and this is pre-eminently true of the rhetoric of Nazism which drew forth elements already extant in traditional German culture, feelings and ideas which lay half buried in the tenebrous recesses of the teutonic consciousness, structured and packaged them, and sold them back to their initiators and authors, the German people.

Repetition

Another useful idea is the concept of low involvement learning, one that was initiated by Herbert Klugman of General Electric, which he applied to the advertising industry, but again has relevance to any analysis of the propaganda of the Third Reich. Low involvement learning is a set of recognitions and understandings which take place below the surface level of analytic consciousness; things like nonsense syllables or nursery rhymes and advertising jingles can still be influential even though at the rational cognitive level we discard and reject them. Similarly with Nazi propaganda. We are confronted, on the surface, with propositions and rituals too absurd to be taken entirely seriously. And yet repeated many times, and embodied in many different forms, they seep into the consciousness and gradually begin to take it over. Low involvement learning is a very good description of what the impact of Nazi propaganda really was. People might appear indifferent to it, and intellectually reject it, or to agree with it in part, but over time they were all evangelized: not via a Damascene moment, but through the slow and torpid pressure of low involvement learning, meandering but inevitable.

The psychology worked. Hitler told Sefton Delmar that propaganda is an assault man’s inner ‘schweinhund’, and this was a perceptive comment. This harshness marks out the Nazi propaganda product. The way to sell a more disciplined, intrusive and ruthless society is by stressing vengeance, the righting of wrongs, social inequality and status fears, and these are all key themes of Nazi propaganda. This was a regime that bombarded the individual consciousness into inertia and apathy. For example there was repetition of the corporate insignia at every turn of the head, many times a day: the interior of the People’s Radio even contained five images of swastikas plastered among the internal electronics. This quality of brand insistence creates a colonization of conscious thought. Out of this rose a climate of fanatical insistence, which long transcended the point of self-parody. Klemperer, for example a cat lover, describes cat magazines pontificating about ‘the German cat’, so insistent was the social climate created by propagandists, and Klemperer even gives examples of Jews who thoroughly believed in Hitler, apparently. One consequence of course, was that Germany and Germans fought on to the bitter end, a tribute to the enduring power of propaganda: the struggle was ferocious and unremitting in the long decline after Stalingrad.

Another important reason for the success of Nazi evangelism was the stress on participative activities. Everyone was enlisted within some politically related group or other, even university professors. There was uniform for every function, and a ritual for every uniform. This represented a transmission of identification and affirmation: to repeat a ritual many times, or to wear an organization’s uniform, or to join others in a process leading to group solidarity, all these are ways of creating bonds to the governing ideology. Even if of course the ranks
of participants contain many timeservers and hypocrites, participation is nevertheless an extremely powerful way of creating allegiance.

**Illusion**

It is of course very difficult to understand why people were so beguiled by the illusions and exaggerations of Nazi propaganda, as well as by the lies. How could trained minds ever respond positively to these phantasmagoria: how could even the ignorant be really persuaded by distortions so gross? The answer is probably that they were not that naïve. Something more interesting is going on, and in my book Politics and Propaganda Weapons of Mass Seduction, I expound a theory of propaganda as containing, at its core, an invitation to share a fantasy, a mutual hallucination of enmity and exaggerated threats and so forth; images and assertions too ridiculous to be taken seriously. If we recognize this as a truth about propaganda, that it is an invitation to share a distortion which the target consciously accepts, then much in Nazi polemic becomes intelligible. The anti-Semitism of Der Sturmer and so forth is too absurd, which is why it worked. The Jew in Nazi propaganda for example is unlike any human, a comical caricature and quintessence of repulsiveness. No such people ever existed. But the propaganda does not make the mistake of asking for belief, rather it creeps under cognitive defences with ideas so extreme as to be repelled at the intellectual level. The explanatory power of this idea, of this invitation to join essentially a charade, co-produced, is demonstrated clearly for example in the fabrications which justified the invasion of Poland. Nazi newsreels showed burning German farms, corpses were gathered from concentration camps and put in German uniform to illustrate the consequences for the German army of Polish aggression. The Polish attack had, therefore, been entirely contrived. Ostensibly Germans believed this, and that the war was a justified war of self-defence. In practice, it is difficult to accept that they really did; we see therefore a wilful self-delusion and not, emphatically, the chicanery and imagistic blandishments of a manipulative regime persuading its gullible population. Rather, the population is a people empowered, who willingly join in, and consciously deny their own rational critical faculty.

**Chapter 9: the Reich as power brand**

**Impact**

Nazi propaganda was effective in preparing people for the sacrifice of German life in the cause of European domination. Notions of immortality pervade the Nazi media text: the souls of the fallen in the cause are seen to sanctify the living and march at their side; this is the ‘immortality’ of the pagan, the soul of a fallen warrior watching over his living comrades. There is a need to psychologically reconcile people to massive private as well as material loss and the Nazis thought they knew how to do this. Another aim of the propaganda is that of intimidation – to intimidate enemies, potential enemies and conquered people. The vistas of menacing aggression evident in documentaries such as Triumph of the Will or newsreels were a form of speech to the international community, to arouse fear and respect by the presentation of a regime on steroids. But what is often neglected in the analysis of Nazi propaganda is the attractiveness of menace: some people want to be part of something frightening, they identify with the power. This cannot be overstated: the imagery of latent violence and depravity in uniform, which so repels most people today (as indeed it repelled many then), was also a critically important recruiting device to the party, the SS, and the SA, and a means of pulling in recruits eventually from all of Europe.

And in the end, they believe their own propaganda, they were making propaganda only for themselves, for the Nazi elite. The regime sought its own immortality in celluloid, and in the film Kolberg (Hoffman, 1996) this trend reached its apogee. Few ever saw
Kolberg then, or have seen it now, since its premiere was on January 30th 1939 (a copy was also dropped onto the besieged garrison at La Rochelle). Audiences in the few cinemas that remained intact were nervous and beyond persuasion. Kolberg is a rhapsody to the ideology of the regime, in costume drama: the idea of the folk community, the unity of all Germans, heroic death and ultimate sacrifice, the unflinching confrontation of impossible odds, this is truly the last testament of the regime and services the psychological needs of its leadership in its doomed and final years.

The impact of the propaganda was such that there was in Germany no collapse of the home front in 1945, as they had been in 1918. Street by street, the Reich was defended: partly it is true, because of the savage cruelty of SS reprisals on wavering, but also because the population had been saturated by industrial quantities of propaganda. Even after towns and cities had fallen, menacing Nazi graffiti began to appear and the terrors of a ‘werewolf’ campaign were promised. Here are also the examples of the convinced, the converted and the fanatical given by Victor Klemperer. He portrays the aristocratic woman secretary: noticing her in the crowded bank when a radio fanfare booms forth, then Hitler’s voice: she is frozen in ecstasy, hand raised in salute. Or Klemperer’s description of the former professional who he finds labouring after the war is over: why? he enquires. But the man replies that he cannot denounce the former regime: you see, he says, ‘I still believe in him’.

Brand heritage

The impact of Nazi propaganda did not lie completely buried in the rubble of the Berlin: it has an ongoing life today, the posters, wall clocks, daggers, even dolls of Hitler, Himmler and Heydrich are all available, and much else besides. There is thus an industry recreating the imagery of the Third Reich for a large global consumer market and retailing it through the Internet. Most collectors simply have a fascination with the imagery and symbolism. But surely today such imageries signify, also, the lime pits, concentration camps, gas chambers and burning villages? Yet collecting does not (usually) translate into an ideological identification with the regime; rather it is a tribute to the insistence of the imagery, that it has such a power of replication through time. Its design, its aesthetic, the totality of its symbol system have a power to insinuate itself into the male consciousness, its existence a synonym for extreme discipline and warrior fanaticism.

It is a testament to the effectiveness of Nazi propaganda that its impact today is powerful and if anything growing. The Nazis have bequeathed to us their image as they would want history to see it, the dull footage edited out. It is perhaps little understood how successful they have been in retailing their image to later generations. And this is a triumph they would have valued. We see them as they wanted to see themselves: they have manipulated their image to history, just as they did to their contemporaries. To echo Walter Lipmann, they recognized that what matters is not the event, but the received public image of the event. Today, therefore, Nazi Germany is part of the popular cultural industry: indeed, popular mass media really have succeeded in communicating core insights about that regime in symbolic ways, from Raiders of the Lost Ark to Darth Vader to James Bond; the representation of Nazism in science fiction gets closer to some of its truths than more cerebral studies. At the same time, the science fiction representation of Nazis makes them no longer real, but part of a twilight fantasy world. They stand alongside Romans and space cadets as something which exists vividly in the imagination but only has a tenuous connection to any reality. Yet the measure of their public impact may be gauged from the photographic book created by Peter Uklanski (1999), which consists exclusively of cinema images of famous actors playing Nazis: there are 200 of them.

Conclusions

The relationship of Nazism to the world we live in today and its issues and fears must from time
to time occupy us. The Nazis of course represented the express rejection of a democratic state, namely, the Weimar Republic. And one that was a radical world, experimental, and in many areas such as film and art in fact a world beater, with films like Murnau’s Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, or Metropolis, the radical art of Otto Dix, Paul Klee, etc. All this was exploded by the Reich, all were to literally knuckle under in a state of the uniform, and uniformed, man. Nazism destroyed a permissive, liberal, hedonistic democracy. One where arts flourished, authority was challenged, a world of artistic and sexual experiment. In fact a society such as our own. Berlin, with its nightclubs and cocaine dealers and gay bars, that were exorcising the memories of the Great War in a tide of bohemian licence and promiscuous excess, provides in fact an approximation to our own day. It has lessons for ourselves in our era of the ‘engineering of consent’. The experiment, and the experimental nature, the sophistication, of all the arts in this regime is inexplicably mixed in with this public licence to indulge, the one that is unthinkable without the other. Yet what was destroyed was a vast, a distinguished society, not merely a habit of public indulgence; it is in fact a roll call of much that was most cherished in 20th century European culture.

References