

THE SPATIALIZATION OF IMAGE POLITICS: THE NAZI PARTY RALLY GROUNDS IN NUREMBERG

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In our collective imagination, two categories of images carry the indelible mark of national-socialism: thousands of perfectly aligned followers with the right arm raised for the *Sieg Heil*¹ salute and emaciated bodies photographed during the liberation of concentration camps. As many historians have noted, the infinite columns of well-ordained militants and the piles of skeletal corpses dumped in mass graves show the two extreme poles, inseparable from one another, of Nazi politics.² “Fascination and violence”³: two terms of an equation that provokes a struggle to understand how the first was so powerful and the second so brutal.

The deadly attraction exerted by the National-Socialist regime remains imperfectly understood, and even less so the particular role played by images in fostering this fascination. Explored here is the interdependence between spatial politics and image politics as a function of the power of Nazi propaganda photographs. The [visibility of the crowds deployed in the congresses](#) (*Reichsparteitage*) held by the National-Socialist Party (NSDAP) in Nuremberg are compared with that of present-day crowds attending summer festivals at the same site, showing the great care with which the *Reichsparteitagsgelände*⁴ were [spatially redesigned after the war](#) to prevent both the integration of Nazi architectural ruins in parades and the making of images similar to those used by the National-Socialists in their propaganda. At least as important as the mass meetings they are taken from, the images of the congresses draw their suggestive power from the use of crowds as a rhetorical means that asserts the role of photographs as active construction sites of historical truth.

THE NATIONAL-SOCIALIST CONGRESSES IN NUREMBERG

Between 1923 and 1938, the NSDAP organised ten *Reichsparteitage*. The first four, from 1923 to 1929, took place in the context of the rise of the party to national prominence; from 1933 to 1938, the last six marked the increasing grip the regime had on Germany in peace time.⁵ A further congress was organised for 1939, but it was cancelled following the declaration of war on Poland one day before

it was intended to take place. History retains the sinister irony of its title: the “Congress of Peace” was intended to show the peaceful intentions of Hitler’s government to the world.

Their respective scale is what differentiates the rallies before and after the election of the NSDAP: from 1933 on, the party possessed the considerable means of the state to deliver its political propaganda. Although they consistently increased in size, from 470,000 participants and spectators in 1933 to 1,270,000 in 1938,⁶ the proceedings of the congresses show continuity in format from year to year. During the day, multiple speeches, party delegates’ meetings, outdoor spectacles, processions, manoeuvres, reviews, and ceremonies were held. After sunset, torchlight marches,⁷ concerts and fireworks displays would take place. Each day was dedicated to a specific body of the Nazi state such as the Hitler Youth or the army. The particularities characterising each congress are not central here; however, it should be noted that the *Reichsparteitage* were mass meetings of considerable size in which important financial, human, material, and organisational resources are deployed on a scale never before seen, and seldom after.⁸

IMAGES OF SPACE

When they are empty, the party rally grounds are nothing more than vacant lots: they are purposeless spaces without a definite nature. They are only suitable for mass meetings because their colossal scale overwhelms the individual and their location on the outskirts of the city of Nuremberg prevents them from serving as public places. It requires a mass of people to activate the space, to allow it to perform the purpose for which it was planned and built. This role is so embedded in the rally grounds that to this day they still mainly serve to accommodate mass meetings, notably summer music festivals; otherwise they are visited by occasional individuals out for a walk or World War Two history enthusiasts. Before the National-Socialists claimed the area, the *Reichsparteitagsgelände* served recreational purposes—purposes to which they now have been returned.

A crowd is only partly visible for its participants.⁹ It follows that, to observe a crowd, an individual must be abstracted from it; this requires an act of will that goes against the movement of the crowd towards inclusion. It is here that the image plays its role: the photographer, perched on scaffolding built for that purpose, is the only one who can give an encompassing image of the

crowd. None of the spectators or participants sees this view, but it is nonetheless the one that is the closest to the impression of psychological unity that they feel—much more than an image showing a partial view of the crowd from within.

During the congresses, such an external view of the crowd was not left to chance. To achieve this viewpoint from above, the photographer would have to climb an elevated structure, either temporary or architectural. In the rally grounds, different constructions served that purpose, such as short scaffolding built for the press in front of speaking tribunes, high poles supporting colossal Nazi banners erected for the congresses, or the stone war memorial commemorating the death of German soldiers in World War One. These structures were key in the staging of Nazi ceremonies and their access was restricted to holders of special authorisations; ¹⁰ the photographer's sensibility thus played a minimal role in determining the view captured of the crowd—a view over which the National-Socialist party had total and exclusive control.¹¹

Only the mediating authority of the image allowed spectators or participants access to this point of view. To get a sense of the space in its entirety, the mediation of the photograph and of its

agent, the photographer, was necessary. In viewing these images, the audience gained access to the space as it was deployed by the NSDAP; ultimately, actual experience was subordinated to the memory of the event contained in the image.

POLITICS OF SPACE, POLITICS OF IMAGES

A massive number of participants and spectators attended the rallies of the NSDAP, growing every year and surpassing one million in 1938. However, beyond the popularity and scale of these meetings, it was their sheer media outreach that established them as important events. From 1933 to 1938, only one political event of importance happened during the congresses: the promulgation of the anti-Semitic laws of Nuremberg in 1935, which considerably limited the civil rights of Jews. It was not, however, this one major political event that justified the organisation of such immense displays and made them important in the collective imagination. It was the striking still and moving images they gave rise to, such as Leni Riefenstahl's masterpiece of propaganda, *Triumph of the Will* (1935).

The Spatialization of Image Politics

Beyond what actually happened during the congresses, such as the endless assembling of troops for reviews or the miserable lodging conditions of the participants¹², it was their images' distribution that granted them their widespread consideration. The photographs, published in all major illustrated newspapers in the Reich, greatly helped to emphasize the importance of the event in the German people's imagination.¹³ This new status and significance of the media's role in events did not go unnoticed; as early as 1934, three decades before Marshall McLuhan's famous claim that "the medium is the message", the conservative writer Ernst Jünger observed that, "in many cases, the event itself is overshadowed by its 'transmission'."¹⁴ If they were not the first events of this type, the *Reichsparteitage* nevertheless pushed the logic of this genre by being essentially gigantic sets designed to allow the taking of pictures fully in accordance with the National-Socialist *Weltanschauung*.

The distribution of series of images in photo essays allowed the event to be perceived as a complete whole by relating it to the reader step by step. Participants and spectators could only have partial views and memories of the congresses; it was by reading the illustrated newspapers that they themselves could come to understand the rallies' general scope and totalizing character.

This general point of view escaped first-hand experience and therefore had to be seen in an illustrated narrative sequence to be fully understood. Without the photo essays, the congresses were incomplete events. Without the elevated views showing their extraordinary expanse, the crowds remained abstract for those who found themselves in them.

But how could one today judge the role played by images in the reconfiguration of the rally grounds? The answer lies right where the pictures were taken: the *Reichsparteitagsgelände* themselves. A comparison of the site's current and pre-war uses show that it has been redeveloped not only to prevent its direct reappropriation as parading grounds, but also, and maybe above all, to prevent the making of images similar to those taken in the Nazi era. A comparative study of historical and contemporary images will stress the great degree to which spatial politics and image politics are interdependent. The Luitpoldarena and its war memorial will be used as an example.

In 1929, the city of Nuremberg built a war memorial to commemorate its citizens' deaths from the Great War, the Ehrenhalle (Hall of Honour). The sobriety and elegance of its modernist neoclassicism pleased the national-socialists, who

immediately appropriated it as a set for their ceremonial stagings. After the taking of power by the NSDAP, a very large rectangular area surrounding the monument was cleared, a stone tribune was built in front of it and stands were erected all around to accommodate spectators.

Today, a visit to the Luitpoldarena shows a much different layout: the planting of trees has reduced the area of the esplanade facing the Ehrenhalle by three quarters and the tracing of nonlinear paths prevents visitors from mentally reconstituting the space as it was under the Nazi regime. Lines of trees now bisect the rectangular esplanade and round its angles, effectively denying the geometry it once had. A solid stone tribune facing the Ehrenhalle on the other side of the area, whose demolition was probably too expensive, was covered with earth in its centre, forming a small hill from which stands emerge on the sides. The ruins are so well camouflaged by trees and bushes that only historical information panels allow one a glimpse of the place as it was designed under the Nazi regime. It is impossible to have a central perspective on the Ehrenhalle from atop the small hill: a few judiciously planted trees prohibit such a view. It is also no longer possible to capture the cleared site in a photograph since vegetation will always occupy a portion of the image.

The fact that all central vantage points are blocked is a testament to an image-conscious redevelopment of the site. In the 1930s, photographers could take striking pictures from the top of the Ehrenhalle of the perfectly aligned crowds of national-socialist ceremonies: the view was completely unobstructed. Today, tall trees on all sides but the front surround the monument. They greatly reduce the facing angle from which it can be viewed and prevent photographers from having a general view of the esplanade. This redevelopment of the site suggests that landscaping authorities tried to prevent the appropriation of this space in the National-Socialist fashion while at the same time preserving its crowd-accommodating character. The Luitpoldarena, now irregularly shaped and dotted with scattered clumps of trees, is still used every year for a mass meeting, that of the Klassik Open Air festival. A temporary stage is built for the musicians in front of the Ehrenhalle, completely blocking its view; its erection some thirty meters in front of the monument is necessary in order to broaden the angle from which the crowd in the esplanade can see the musicians, thus proving the effectiveness of the trees' obfuscating function. The aerial pictures of the event¹⁵ show the irregular form of the site, which, though accommodating a very

large crowd, has nothing of the linearity and geometry of the national-socialist pictures. This is not due to the “intention” of the contemporary photographer to avoid resemblance with Nazi images: in their propaganda albums, the National-Socialists did not hesitate to use pictures made by foreign agencies such as Keystone or Associated Press,¹⁶ which can hardly be accused of having a secret Nazi-supporting agenda. Rather, it shows how strongly the shaping of space is related to ideology.¹⁷ It is then logical that, to destroy the legacy of National-Socialism, planning authorities destroyed the geometry of its potential images by redeveloping the area.

THE USE OF CROWDS AS RHETORICAL MEANS

Crowds were a central theme in the large corpus of photographs used by the Nazi regime to assert its propaganda. More than a simple subject, they played a leading role in the persuasion strategies implemented in images, which can be grouped into six categories: proof, narration, synecdoche, continuity, authority, and organization.

PROOF

The presence of a crowd seems to negate the possibility of an obvious lie, of a falsification or tampering with the image. As the

Reich’s Propaganda Minister Josef Goebbels said himself, masses of people cannot be invented.¹⁸ What is being shown in the image must have happened in one way or another if the participants were so numerous. The crowd constitutes proof of the event as well as of its grand scale.

NARRATION

Images of crowds fill an essential gap in the direct perception of the congresses’ events; often, they show the events from a general point of view inaccessible to any individual spectator or participant. Despite its distinction from direct experience, this position makes sense to anybody who has read a story: it is that of the narrator, who sees things from above without taking part in the events. This vantage point away from action gives the impression of an objective gaze, presenting the events in an unmediated form to a reader who may not have attended. This apparently neutral point of view precisely bears the mark of the totalizing gaze of the NSDAP.

SYNECDOCHE

The *Volksgemeinschaft*, the racial community of the German people, was a central tenet of Nazi ideology. The social contract proposed on the basis of the *Gemeinschaft* (community) instead

of *Gesellschaft* (society) was a fundamental aspect of the transformation of the world the National-Socialists wanted to achieve. If posters used visual metaphors to suggest the reality of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, such as the eagle of the nation protecting an Aryan family with its nurturing wings, photographs of crowds were its concrete manifestation. The mass meetings they show referred, by synecdoche, to the entire people united under the powerful and strict supervision of the party, thus consecrating its union in the community.

CONTINUITY

The *hors-cadre*¹⁹ is always of prime importance in Nazi propaganda photographs. The frame systematically segments the photographed subject, so as to show its extension beyond the image and metaphorically suggest the inclusion of the outside (that is, the rest of Germany) within itself. The crowds play a particularly important role in this regard. When viewers observe a photograph showing a building partly cut by the frame, they can mentally complete it, for we are used to the scale of the built environment. But a crowd escapes any organic scale related to the human body.²⁰ By cutting through the mass of the crowd, the photograph suggest its extension without

giving any reference point enabling to conceive its end; this accentuates the impression of the crowd's size.

AUTHORITY

Éric Michaud, in *Un art de l'éternité*, analyses the fundamental influence of Christianity on National-Socialism.²¹ The regime's ideology appropriated many elements of the religion, especially formal aspects of its ritual ceremonies; the regime was also influenced by the principle on which Christianity grounds legitimate authority. The *Führerprinzip* theorised by Carl Schmitt laid the legal foundations of an order of power drawing its legitimacy not from the citizens' choices, but from that of the Chief, whose decisions are said to emanate from its people.²² The image economy of Christianity, by grounding temporal power in artificial images, naturally supports this vision.²³ Images of crowds embody this relation and bear within themselves the authority conferred on the Chief by the masses, thus helping him to provide grounds for his legitimacy. If the strength of a religion, according to Elias Canetti, relies on that of its invisible legions,²⁴ the crowds of SA and SS men fixed in photographs carry within them the very real threat of their mobilisation.

ORGANIZATION

In order for crowds to be photographed, they first must assemble. Considering the number of participants and the training they had to undergo, the order and geometry of National-Socialist crowds imply considerable organisation. The regime thus insisted on its capacity to mobilise, in an orderly fashion, first crowds, and then, by synecdoche, the entire nation. The mass ornament, as theorised by Siegfried Kracauer, is the use of many coordinated bodies to aesthetic ends. It acts as evidence of power and control: “like the pattern in the stadium, the organization stands above the masses.”²⁵

The use of crowds as rhetorical means rests upon the link between the space of the image and that of the NSDAP congresses. The fragmentary character given to the photograph by its framing determines its reception. The asserted presence of something that is exterior to it grounds the image’s claim to referentiality and grants its ideological content a greater force of truth.

THE TEMPORALITY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

The redevelopment of the *Reichsparteitagsgelände* after the war offers an example of the keen awareness of the power of images

on the part of the municipal authorities of Nuremberg: each of its multiple sites has been redesigned to neutralise the resemblance of festival crowds to those assembled by the National-Socialists. But what is the nature of the power of photographs? Following a thread in the history and theory of photography starting with Siegfried Kracauer (1927) and Walter Benjamin (1929, 1936), this power can be characterized as nothing less than the capacity to transform reality.²⁶

Particularly in propagandistic pictures, “historical reality [is] staged and modelled at the same time *by* the image and *for* the image.”²⁷ Hence, what would these images bear witness to if not to this very staging? This is why photographs are never a simple, passive and inconsequential recording of their present:²⁸ they always construct the memory they present to the future.

This temporal play, shared by all images, is fundamental for persuasion purposes. To understand the part photographs assume in propaganda, it is necessary to detect the internal mechanisms that allow such a staging of history. Images testify to an acute conscience of their historicity from their patrons by

being thought of in the *present* as archives of a *past* addressed to people of the *future*.

Roland Barthes uses his famous “that-has-been”²⁹ to qualify what seems to him the essential aspect of a photograph: when it is stripped of its context, the only assurance left is that the referent was as it appears in the image, at least for the moment of the captured pose. It is of course impossible to contradict this statement; it is indeed the very nature of photography as a technology. However, in asserting in a final and absolute fashion the reality of the referent, the “that-has-been” tends to detract from the importance of staging before the taking of any picture.

This is precisely the role of propaganda photography: to control the “that-has-been” which will be remembered, setting up the picture which will become part of the archive. Images result from an interpretation of the present offered to the future, thus influencing the way in which the future will judge its past. They can never be stripped from their context of production. To insist on the very active role that is played by images in the constitution of memory, and thus ruining the beauty of the phrase, it should be extended to: “henceforth, that has been thus.” By creating what the past will be, photography sanctions

the subordination of events to their representation. Ultimately, the understanding of space depends on that of its images.

The spatial reorganization of the *Reichsparteitagsgelände* conducted after World War II by the municipal authorities of Nuremberg showed a keen awareness of the prime importance of images in the appropriation of space. By redesigning the various esplanades into welcoming parks devoid of any geometrical lines, they have allowed a renewed use of the area for mass meetings while preventing any association with the National-Socialist regime.

Notes

¹ Hail to victory.

² See notably the work of historian Peter Reichel, *La fascination du nazisme* (Paris: Odile Jacob), 1993.

³ Its German equivalent, *Faszination und Gewalt*, is the title of an exhibition held in 1986 at the Zeppelinfeld tribune in the Nazi Party Rally Grounds in Nuremberg about the visual manifestations of National-Socialist power.

⁴ Nazi party congress grounds: name given by the NSDAP to a vast area south-west of Nuremberg comprising the architectural complex where the congresses were held.

⁵ No congress was organised from 1930 to 1932, a period of intense political and electoral activity where four elections took place in less than three years, leaving the NSDAP no time to organise an event of the scale of the *Reichsparteitage*.

⁶ The numbers differ from one source to another; these figures in particular come from Siegfried Zelnhefer, the scholarly authority on the NSDAP congresses. Siegfried Zelnhefer, *Die Reichsparteitage der NSDAP in Nürnberg* (Nuremberg: Verlag Nürnberger Presse, 2002), 122-123.

⁷ Albert Speer made the party delegates parade at night to hide their portliness and their inability to march on pace.

⁸ The opening ceremonies of Olympic Games and the celebrations of the Revolution in China and North Korea offer contemporary examples of mass meetings on a grand scale.

⁹ Only the pictorial aspect of crowds is addressed here. There is an abundant literature on their psychology, of which the classical study by Elias Canetti still gives the most thorough description. Elias Canetti, *Masse et puissance* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).

¹⁰ The precise control of access characterised every congress held by the NSDAP. In order to direct such huge numbers of participants and spectators, organisers gave everybody a card explaining everything from schedules to accommodation, a card whose colour determined the level of access it granted to different areas.

¹¹ This control was developed over time by the NSDAP, as shown by photographs from a special booklet of the *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung* on the May 1st, 1933 ceremonies. Because the setting of these ceremonies was less controlled, the photographer Martin Munkácsi was able to make ironic pictures of reversed swastikas to mock the regime. Ulrich Keller, "Die umgedrehte Swastika: Propaganda und Widerspruch in Fotoreportages der Machtgreifung," *Fotogeschichte* 107 (2008): 34-50.

¹² Internal organizational memos characterize the tents the participants slept in as "pigpens" and deplore their inadequate furniture, with hay bales as beds and insufficient blankets for the the cool September nights.

¹³ The NSDAP congresses receive very limited foreign coverage before the late 1930s and are then understood as propaganda events. See, for example, Thornton Sinclair, "The Nazi Party Rally at Nuremberg," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 2, 4 (1938): 570-583.

¹⁴ "dans de nombreux cas, l'événement [politique] lui-même est éclipsé par sa 'transmission'." Ernst Jünger, "Sur la douleur," (1934), ed. Olivier Lugon, *La photographie en Allemagne: anthologie de textes (1919-1939)* (Nîmes: J. Chambon, 1997), 29.

¹⁵ The photographer Hajo Dietz has made a series of aerial views of Nuremberg, including the Klassik Open Air festival.

<http://www.nuernbergluftbild.de>

¹⁶ See NSDAP, *Nürnberg 1933. Der erste Reichstag der geeinten deutschen Nation* (Berlin, Reimar Hobbing, 1933), 112.

¹⁷ The case of the Luitpoldarena is not unique: a similar analysis could be drawn from the Zeppelinfeld and its famous tribune or any other area of the *Reichsparteitagsgelände*.

¹⁸ Josef Goebbels, "Discours d'ouverture de *Die Kamera*," (1934), ed. Olivier Lugon, *La photographie en Allemagne: anthologie de textes (1919-1939)* (Nîmes: J. Chambon, 1997), 411.

¹⁹ Literally: out-of-the-frame.

²⁰ It is impossible to judge the size of a crowd only by looking at it. One has to calculate its surface area and evaluate a concentration average. This difficulty explains the discrepancies in the evaluation of protests' size by policemen, journalists and organisers, each group calculating according to its own interests.

²¹ Éric Michaud, *Un art de l'éternité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 125-206.

²² This conception of political or intellectual legitimacy is not archaic, but modern. Read on this matter Slavoj Žižek's remarks on revealed knowledge (from Christ to Marx and Freud) as the overcoming of the older dialectical knowledge (from Socrates to Hegel). Slavoj Žižek, "Identité et autorité," in *L'introuvable: psychanalyse, politique et culture de masse* (Paris: Anthropos, 1993), 72-95.

²³ The imaginal economy in play is that of an "economic conception of the natural image grounding the artificial image followed by a conception of the artificial image grounding temporal power." Original French: "conception économique de l'image naturelle fondatrice de l'image artificielle et d'une conception de l'image artificielle qui vient à son tour fonder le pouvoir temporel." Marie Josée Mondzain, *Image, icône, économie. Les sources byzantines de l'imaginaire contemporain* (Paris: Seuil, 1996), quoted in Jean Lauzon, *La photographie malgré l'image* (Ottawa: Les presses de l'Université d'Ottawa, 2002), 199.

²⁴ Canetti, *Masse et puissance*, 41-47.

²⁵ Siegfried Kracauer, "The mass Ornament," in *The Mass Ornament: the Weimar Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 78.

²⁶ Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," *Critical Inquiry* 19, 3 (1993): 421-36; Walter Benjamin, "Petite histoire de la photographie," in *Œuvres 2* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 295-321; Walter Benjamin, *L'œuvre d'art à l'ère de sa reproductibilité technique* (Paris: Alia, 2003).

²⁷ French original: "la réalité historique [est] mise en scène et modelée tout à la fois par l'image et en vue de l'image." Michaud, "La construction de l'image comme matrice de l'histoire," 41.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁹ Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire*, Paris: Gallimard, 1980.