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The Reich of Power and Performance: A Fascist Aesthetisation of Politics

within the 1934 Nuremberg Rally

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Abstract

This undergraduate honours thesis is a study of performance as propaganda within the 1934 Nuremberg Rally. This work will make use of a visual rhetorical analysis in examining the methods in which the National Socialists indoctrinated the masses, through aesthetic expression. Walter Benjamin’s (1969) essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, will offer a theoretical foundation for the current work, employing Benjamin’s “aesthetisation of politics” as a lens to deconstruct the performances within the 1934 Nuremberg Rally. This analysis will use Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935) as medium to analyse the performative instances within Nuremberg, as the film continues to serve as the best possible documentation of the rally. This work will aim to answer the following research question: how did performance operate as propaganda within the 1934 Nuremberg Rally? To the reader, this research will reveal the visual (and aural) aspects of National Socialist performance, which contributed to an expression of ideological messages for its audience. Through an examination of official National Socialist propaganda, we are permitted a view in which we can understand how objects, people, and space contributed to the presentation of Hitler’s worldview.

Keywords: National Socialism; 1934 Nuremberg Rally; aesthetisation of politics; performance; propaganda; visual rhetoric
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Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... ii
Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................... iii
Table of Figures .................................................................................................................... v
Chapter One: Introduction ................................................................................................. 1

Chapter Two: Literature Review ....................................................................................... 3
  Studies on National Socialist Propaganda ................................................................. 4
  Studies on Fascist Aesthetics and Performance ....................................................... 7
  Studies on the 1934 Nuremberg Rally ..................................................................... 11
  Studies on *Triumph of the Will* (1935) ................................................................. 15
  Conclusion ...................................................................................................................... 18

Chapter Three: Methodology and Theory ..................................................................... 20
  Sample ............................................................................................................................. 19
  Methodology: Delivery and Style as Visual Rhetoric .............................................. 21
  Theory: Benjamin’s “Aesthetisation of Politics” ..................................................... 24
  Model: Visual Performance as Propaganda .............................................................. 25
  Conclusion ...................................................................................................................... 29

Chapter Four: Analysis ................................................................................................. 30
  The Reichsarbeitsdienst (RAD) Rally ..................................................................... 31
  The Sturmabteilung (SA) and Schutzstaffel (SS) Review ...................................... 42
  The Closing Congress ................................................................................................. 61
  Conclusion ...................................................................................................................... 76

Chapter Five: Conclusion ............................................................................................ 77

References ......................................................................................................................... 79
List of Figures

Figure 1: Hitler about to address members of the RAD ..........................................................33
Figure 2: Variants of the RAD uniform, illustrated by Pierre Turner .......................................34
Figure 3: RAD men, fashioning spades as rifles ........................................................................36
Figure 4: RAD trumpeters added a dramatic aura to the oath ....................................................38
Figure 5: Members of the RAD, participating in the roll call ....................................................39
Figure 6: High command, performing the Roman salute, in honour of the fallen .......................40
Figure 7: Partly flags on the ground, in reverence to party members’ sacrifice ..........................40
Figure 8: Party flags were raised, quickly, as drumroll encapsulated the arena .......................41
Figure 9: Hitler, Himmler, and Lutze march towards the memorial .........................................44
Figure 10: Thousands of SA men parted to the sides .................................................................45
Figure 11: Hitler, Himmler, and Lutze saluting before the memorial .........................................45
Figure 12: The scenery at the memorial, facing Hitler’s podium ...............................................46
Figure 13: Flaming stone plinths adorning the memorial on both sides .....................................47
Figure 14: Party Schellenbaum ..................................................................................................48
Figure 15: Party standards “bowing” during the memorial rites ..................................................49
Figure 16: Party standards marched for display .........................................................................50
Figure 17: Albert Speer’s “Sea of Flags” .....................................................................................50
Figure 18: Hitler’s podium, in comparison to Himmler’s ............................................................51
Figure 19: Audience members positioned behind the podium ...................................................51
Figure 20: SS officials with the band behind them .....................................................................52
Figure 21: Ranks of SS men occupying the centre stone pathway .............................................53
Figure 22: Variants of the SS uniform, illustrated by Pierre Turner ..........................................53
Figure 23: SS men performing the goose-step ............................................................................55
Figure 24: Hitler “consecrating” party standards with the Blutfahne .......................................60
Figure 25: The Blutfahne carried by Jakob Grimmer, present during the 1923 Munich Putsch 61
Figure 26: Wreath-adorned swastika overlooking the congress hall .......................................62
Figure 27: Columns embedded with the Reichsadler, as the spot-lit stage centred attention ....63
Figure 28: Hitler and high command’s entrance .......................................................................64
Figure 29: Jakob Grimmer carrying the Blutfahne, flanked by two SS sentries ............................66
Figure 30: Procession of party standards, lit by spotlights .........................................................66
Figure 31: 1923 Putsch commemoration, illustrated by an unknown artist ................................67
Figure 32: Roman vexillarius carrying a vexillium, illustrated by an unknown artist ................67
Figure 33: Hitler calmly waited as the mass cheered ..................................................................69
Figure 34: Hitler became more animated as he spoke of the party’s roots .................................69
Figure 35: Hitler, referring to past national division, gestures from right to left ........................71
Figure 36: Hitler as he waited for mass commotion to subside ..................................................72
Figure 37: Hitler looks up, as if staring deeply into the skies ......................................................73
Figure 38: Hitler’s emotional expression as he spoke of the Reich’s future .................................74
Figure 39: “Long live the National Socialist Movement! Long live Germany!”
Chapter One: Introduction

Hitler and the National Socialists orchestrated opportunities for the German people to experience the Nazis’ worldview. One of the instances is the 1934 Nuremberg Rally. The rally was a spectacle: disciplined and uniformed men marching, thousands of party banners flying across the city, music, and parades – all these contributed to an aesthetic that for the National Socialists was a worldview, or in better terms, propaganda.

This thesis proposes a study of the 1934 Nuremberg rally from the lens of Walter Benjamin’s (1969) theory of aesthetisation, as introduced in The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. Benjamin’s theory of aesthetisation focuses on the magnification of power. Known as the “aesthetisation of politics”, Benjamin’s theory applies most significantly to what he refers to as the Führer cult. The 1934 Nuremberg Rally, which glorified Hitler and his regime, distinctly features Benjamin’s Führer cult. It is the goal of this work to study how a fascist aesthetisation of power operated as a rhetorical tool within the events of the 1934 Nuremberg Rally. Through an analysis of scenes within Leni Riefenstahl’s Triumph of the Will (1935), this thesis will study the National Socialists’ use of performance as propaganda. To this end, this work will use a visual rhetorical approach to analyse the 1934 Nuremberg Rally, and will focus on two canons: delivery and style. Delivery is the study of the actual performance of the rhetor, while style offers a means to study Aristotle’s idea of metaphoric language within a rhetorical performance. Within this study, style (in-action) will refer to the audio-visual artefacts featured within the 1934 Nuremberg Rally, such as Hitler’s speeches, and some symbolic practices that took place in Nuremberg, such as the consecration of flags. Metaphors indirectly relay a message to an audience, and it is a goal of this work to see which rhetorical devices used metaphoric language in order to express ideology.
This work aims to answer the following research question: how did performance operate as propaganda in the context of the 1934 Nuremberg Rally? The rationale behind this research question stems from the researcher’s interest in ritualistic performance, which contributes to the formation of ideology. This thesis will argue, then, that the 1934 Nuremberg Rally was a spectacle that performed the National Socialist aspiration for Germany: a nation built upon a homogenous race, economically strong and powerful. The innovation of the 1934 Nuremberg Rally was to persuade through a systematic aesthetisation of power, whose strategies included Benjamin’s (1969) *Führer* cult, mass parades, and the mass as a protagonist.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

The events within the Third Reich have allowed scholars to explore how and why the regime succeeded in promoting a world and life view. This chapter will focus on scholarship that informed my view of ritualistic performance as means of propaganda. My search took off with a review of symbol and ritual within the Third Reich: traditions that encouraged the participation of the masses. These traditions, as outlined by Taylor (1981) were events “borrowed” from the Catholic tradition, “…emptied of their original content, and transformed into public expressions of the new National Socialist Weltanschauung” (p. 506). Taylor’s quote was most captivating for me, as it introduced a device of propaganda that was unique, one that did not take the form of static posters or art, such as sculpture or painting. Ritual is performative, thus encapsulating a mixture of symbols in action: SS men marching in goose-step to the Badenweiler Marsch, the Blutfahne (or “Blood Flag”, the party flag which contains the swastika, first carried in the 1923 Munich Putsch) used in consecrating party standards, and the masses formed as pseudo-religious followers.

For Taylor (1981), rituals were a “Holy-History” (p. 514) that revealed National Socialist mirroring of Christian eschatology. The relevance of Taylor’s account supports my use of Benjamin’s (1969) aesthetisation of politics as theoretical foundation, where aesthetisation “…culminate[s] in one thing: war” (p. 19). To outline the relationship between Taylor and Benjamin, I suggest that aesthetisation is a form of ritual. Like Christianity’s apocalyptic narrative with Christ at its core, so too did the National Socialists structure itself in that image, making use of Hitler as its messiah. Taylor (1981) suggests that the analogy between Christian and National Socialist ritual both perform an apocalyptic end (p. 514). Within Christianity, this is the battle between good and evil, featured in the Book of Revelation. For Benjamin (1969), this
was war, represented by mass submission to a single man (p. 19). The National Socialists used spectacle as means of performing power, subjugating the people to their worldview. Benjamin (1969) proposes that “the violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its Führer cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values” (p. 19). The theoretical component of this analysis will be explored in the next chapter; however, it is important to note that Benjamin’s link between the Führer cult and its ritualistic value served to launch this study as an analysis of performance as propaganda.

This chapter is divided into four sections:

1. Studies on National Socialist Propaganda
2. Studies on Fascist Aesthetics and Performance
3. Studies on the 1934 Nuremberg Rally
4. Studies on Triumph of the Will (1935)

Studies on National Socialist Propaganda

The ways in which National Socialism influenced the masses grew beyond the purely visual aspect of propaganda, such as posters and art (sculptures and paintings). Performance was a tool to indoctrinate. O’Shaughnessy (2016) notes that “the [National Socialists] recognised the essentially emotive nature of successful mass communication. Their appeal exploited a distinct group of emotions – pride, fear, loathing – and they invested in the symbols designed to trigger them” (pp. 215-216). For O’Shaughnessy, symbolism serves to augment the emotive experience of the masses. He further adds that “to speak of a propaganda devoid of symbolism is really to speak of some other phenomenon, because propaganda bereft of symbol-structures would be
intelligible as propaganda” (O’Shaughnessy, 2016, p. 216). The value of symbolism is highlighted by O’Shaughnessy’s statement, framing it as an indelible component of indoctrination. “… Symbols [were] a way of aestheticising the [National Socialist] regime … [they] were signs of the new, more mobile and ultimately more exciting way of life” (O’Shaughnessy, 2016, p. 216). For the National Socialists, propaganda was a means of “selling” a way of life, one that was captivating for the masses through symbolic means. Symbolism, as a tool of National Socialist propaganda, “… requested blind faith, not rational analysis” (O’Shaughnessy, 2016, p. 216). Propaganda within Nazi Germany, as O’Shaughnessy frames it, requested for surrender, or in his words, “faith”.

O’Shaughnessy adds to Taylor’s sourcing of National Socialist tradition: aside from Christianity, O’Shaughnessy (2016) cities classical sources as intrinsic to the regime’s symbols (pp. 226-227). “In private, Hitler claimed that ‘the fascist movement is a spontaneous return to the traditions of ancient Rome’ … pastiche reminiscence abounded – the Roman idiom-flaming plinths at Nuremberg, the Roman salute” (pp. 226-227). The value of citing traditions in which the National Socialists modelled their symbols from will lend to their aesthetic meaning, allowing the reader to see how symbols operated to represent ideology. For O’Shaughnessy, symbols did not stand on their own, they operated through performative means. “Nazi Germany was self-articulated through symbols. But it spoke and elucidated its key meanings through a public theatre …” (O’Shaughnessy, 2016, p. 229). O’Shaughnessy highlights the nature of National Socialist propaganda as performative, a dynamic experience shaped by the use of symbols. This dynamic experience emphasizes on symbols, evoking emotion from the masses.

Bytwerk (1998) supports O’Shaughnessy’s framing of propaganda as an experience, arguing that “[National Socialist] propaganda followed Hitler’s policy, aiming more at the
emotions than the mind” (p. 162). For Bytwerk, persuasion roots in emotion, amplified and exacerbated. Bytwerk (1998) is exerting that propaganda relies not on the response of the masses, but on the auteur’s skill; “… (Hitler) expected the force of a speech to depend ultimately on the personal abilities, the genius, of the speaker” (p. 162). The 1934 Nuremberg Rally incorporated Hitler’s speeches, among other performances; and Bytwerk values the mastery of performance as means of controlling an audience. For Bytwerk, propaganda in the performative sense was to capture the masses through mastery.

Like Taylor and O’Shaughnessy, Bytwerk alludes to the religious influence that the National Socialists infused within their propaganda. The power of a pseudo-religious approach was evident within the regime’s rhetoric. “… The [National Socialists] explicitly compared themselves to a religious movement and used religious language” (Bytwerk, 1998, p. 164). Josef Goebbels’ 1928 speech (cited in Bytwerk, 1998) stated, “You will never find millions of people willing to die for an economic program. Millions will die for a gospel, and our movement is becoming more and more of a gospel. All that we have individually experienced is joining to form a powerful faith …” (pp. 164-165). A mirroring of religious traditions allowed the regime to assign the role of “follower” to the masses. “The [National Socialists] used the language of Christianity …” (Bytwerk, 1998, p. 165), of religious rhetoric as means of propaganda, framing the masses as pseudo-religious followers. Bytwerk (1998) adds that “Kenneth Burke was correct when he saw Nazism as a perversion of fundamentally religious patterns of thought [referencing Burke’s (1957) *The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘battle’"] (p. 165). Thus far, Taylor, O’Shaughnessy, and Bytwerk all argue for National Socialist propaganda as strongly influenced by Christian tradition. This, however, does not mean that the National Socialists made use of Christian doctrine as part of their propaganda, but mimicked their ritual and language as rhetorical tools. In
other words, they saw the value of a pseudo-religious approach, one that framed Hitler as messianic, and the regime as salvation for the German people.

The National Socialists made use of traditions other than German traditions, and understanding these references will allow us to situate the image they wanted to project; in turn, this will allow the reader to grasp the type of power being performed. In conclusion, the authors within this section have outlined ritual as performative, one that is dynamic and seeks to indoctrinate through a pseudo-religious experience. A limitation to these texts, however, is their inability to capture the masses’ response. The authors were interested in the agenda of the National Socialist regime, as opposed to audience interpretation (which would inevitably vary).

**Studies on Fascist Aesthetics and Performance**

Building up on performance as propaganda, aesthetics is part of indoctrination; it seeks to capture the masses through emotion. “Aesthetics” etymologically derived itself from the Greek word, *aisthisis*; where its core was not art, but reality (Buck-Morss, 1992, p. 6). This interpretation of aesthetics focused on the “real”, that for Buck-Morss (1992) is a “[sensorial] experience … corporeal, material [in] nature” (p. 6). Buck-Morss’ discussion of fascist aesthetics is grounded on the same theoretical foundation of my study: Benjamin’s (1969) aesthetisation of politics. She argues that “in fascism (and this is key to fascist aesthetics) … perception is surmounted by a phantasmagoria of the individual as part of a crowd that itself forms an integral whole – a ‘mass ornament’ … a deindividualized, formal, and regular pattern” (Buck-Morss, 1992, p. 35). Benjamin (1969), in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (originally published in 1935), does not clearly define fascist aesthetics, but simply links it to war. Marinetti’s 1909 manifesto (cited in Benjamin, 1969) states that “war is beautiful
because it establishes man’s dominion over the subjugated machinery by means of gas masks, terrifying megaphones, flame throwers, and small tanks. War is beautiful because it initiates the dreamt-of metallisation of the human body” (p. 19). Benjamin (1969), drawing on Marinetti’s accounts, is arguing that “[humanity] has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order” (p. 20). For Benjamin (and Buck-Morss, who draws on him), aesthetics lies in humanity’s own work; that is, the production of objects that will lead to war. From megaphones to tanks, Benjamin outlines the mechanisation of modern life. Benjamin’s essay has led me to another source on fascist aesthetics, and like Marinetti’s manifesto, is not exclusive to the National Socialist regime. I find significance in sources outside Nazism, as it will allow the reader to assess if other perspectives could be applied within the Third Reich.

Foster’s (1991) discussion of fascist aesthetics derive from Ernst’s representations of machines and Bellmer’s sadomasochistic scenes, “… ambiguous explorations of the (proto)fascist obsession with the body as armour, and to see this armour as a prosthesis to shore up a disrupted body image or to support a ruined ego construction” (pp.67-68). He speaks of this type of aesthetic as a shroud, one that hides reality. In relation to Benjamin’s aesthetisation through objects of war, Foster (1991) adds: “Indeed, Jünger (1989) urged that technology be ‘intertwined with our nerves’, and that the ‘pain’ of military-industrial experience be transformed into a ‘second, colder consciousness’” (p. 85). For Benjamin and Foster, the industrialisation of war – that is, the production of its armaments – contribute to a fascist aesthetic. For Foster, this contributes to an “armour”. Drawing from Hert (1984), Foster argues of “… technology (,) aestheticised as ‘the embodiment of will and beauty’” (p. 86). The subjectivity of terms such as “will” and “beauty” root from Ernst and Bellmer’s works, that of machinery and the sadism of a
deconstructed body. For Bellmer, whose works were a direct response to Nazism (Foster, 1991, p. 87), the deconstructed body could only be hidden by an armour. Adorno and Horkheimer (1944; cited in Foster, 1991) argue that “[the National Socialists] see the body as a moving mechanism, with joints as its components and flesh to cushion the skeleton” (p. 91). The relationship between fascism and aesthetics revolve around the machination of man. For Foster, this was the armouring of a fascist regime through technological products of war. To add another layer to fascism’s armouring, drawing on Theweleit, “… armouring is developed against the other of the fascist subject … [the] weak, anarchic exterior (Jews, Communists, homosexuals, proletarian women, ‘the masses’)” (Foster, 1991, p. 95). Marinetti’s “metallisation of the human body” (cited in Benjamin, 1969, p. 19), in connection to Foster, suggests fascist aesthetics’ role as a protection from the “other”; for the National Socialists, this was anyone whom they saw as irrelevant and inferior to their worldview, such as the Jews.

Drawing on Benjamin once again, and on the value of ritual form, Mourenza argues of a fascist aesthetic, one specific to German fascism: “National Socialism exploited auratic features in the service of ritual. Through mass rallies and parades, the National Socialists created auratic effects on a grand scale in order to develop a corrupted cult of the masses” (Mourenza, 2020, p. 128). A German fascist aesthetic, according to Mourenza, develops the masses as a pseudo-religious follower, cultic in nature. This is to no surprise as Benjamin (1969) identifies fascism’s “… Führer cult … [as a] violation of [the masses] which is pressed into the production of ritual values” (p. 19). The deification of Hitler as Führer is central to a fascist aesthetic, considering the accounts of Benjamin, as explicated by Mourenza. He adds another interesting factor within a German fascist aesthetic: “Benjamin recognizes that the aesthetisation of politics undertaken by fascism was facilitated by the eye of the camera” (Mourenza, 2020, p. 129). Mourenza is
offering mediation by the camera; more specifically, film. Noting of Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935), Mourenza (2020) argues that “[Benjamin’s (1969) *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*] offers invaluable tools with which to criticize and counteract the use of film technology mobilized by fascist aesthetics” (p. 137). For Mourenza, fascist aesthetics not only relies on its ritual aspect in performing ideology, but also makes use of film to mediate this performance.

My initial research, which began with an exploration of the National Socialist ritual form, began with Taylor (1981). Mourenza (2020) also makes use of his scholarship: “Simon Taylor has argued that the … ideological system and presentation of National Socialism sought expression in the mysteries of myth and symbol. In this way, the National Socialist regime emulated the mysticism of Christian imagery and ritual consecrations in their own political celebrations” (p. 141). Again, we see the link to Christianity’s traditions, where Mourenza is framing National Socialism’s fascist aesthetic as valuing them. Citing events from *Triumph of the Will* (1935), Mourenza (2020) adds that “there is a creation of a vision of National Socialism as a total work of art, based on ritual” (p. 141). At this point, we can see the centrality of ritual as part of propaganda; with fascist aesthetics performing ideology.

Sontag provides a definition of fascist aesthetics, one that captures its totalitarian nature. “Fascist aesthetics include ... a preoccupation with situations of control, submissive behaviour, and extravagant effort; they exalt two seemingly opposite states, egomania and servitude” (Sontag, 1981, p. 91). The oppressive nature in which Sontag frames fascist aesthetics links us back to Benjamin’s *Führer* cult – the centrality of Hitler as supreme leader, Germany’s dictator. Sontag (1981) furthers the conversation on ritual by referring to the social dynamics in which they operate; she adds that “the relations of domination and enslavement take the form of a
characteristic pageantry: the massing of groups of people … and the grouping of people/things around an all-powerful, hypnotic leader-figure or force” (p. 91). Again, the pseudo-religious nature of fascist aesthetics emerges from Sontag’s discussion, much like Taylor’s and others identified in this chapter. “The rendering of movement in grandiose and rigid patterns … rehearses the very unity of the polity. The masses are made to take form, be design” (Sontag, 1981, p. 92). Buck-Morss (1992) defines fascist aesthetics as a “mass-ornament” (p. 35), and Sontag agrees by situating the masses as part of design, itself. Together, Buck-Morss and Sontag offer the submissive mass as part of fascist aesthetics, an element of design that centres itself in serving the *Führer* and his empire. In conclusion, the authors in this section have identified fascist aesthetics as a collective performance, one that showcased the submissive masses under a totalitarian regime. Fascist aesthetics constituted a metaphysical armour, one that represented modern technology’s might and its capacity to inflict war.

**Studies on the 1934 Nuremberg Rally**

Aesthetic performance, as we’ve seen in the previous section, outlined the importance of theatre in representing the National Socialist worldview. This section will tackle scholarship regarding this thesis’ object of study: the 1934 Nuremberg Rally (September 4-10), an event where aesthetic performances took place. Burden’s (1967) accounts of the rally will serve as key template, allowing the reader to know the rally’s events, its characters, and the details of each. “The National Socialists gave two titles to the party congress of 1934: The Party Day of Unity and The Party Day of Power. The period between September 1933 and September 1934 had seen Hitler’s concentration of power and the attempt to mediate between conflicting forces in the party” (Burden, 1967, p. 76). The 1934 Nuremberg Rally was the first rally after the Röhm Purge
– the assassination of Ernst Röhm and his followers in an attempt to have full control of the SA (Sturmabteilung). The rally itself was significant, as it marked Hitler’s total control over the National Socialists’ paramilitary forces, the SA, and the SS (Schutzstaffel) (Burden, 1967, pp. 76-91). Burden highlights the importance of the 1934 Nuremberg Rally as a marker of unity between the regime’s forces, with Hitler having power over them, without competing leadership. This was also the first party rally with Hitler as Führer, consolidating the offices of president and chancellor after the death of Paul von Hindenburg on August 7, 1934 (Burden, 1967, p. 77). As Burden outlines, the 1934 Nuremberg Rally was not just another rally between 1923-1939, but was significant as it marked two occasions: (1) Hitler achieving uncontested power as leader of the armed forces, the SA, and the SS with the Röhm Purge, and (2) Hitler’s accession to the position of Führer. It was Hitler’s first rally as supreme leader of Germany. “The Nuremberg rallies reached their final form with the party congress of 1934. All the basic ingredients had been added; now, the party hoped, they would harden into a tradition” (Burden, 1967, p. 91).

Burden suggests that the National Socialists aimed to create their own tradition, that when referenced back to scholarship regarding fascist aesthetics and performance, were traditions borrowed from other cultures, Roman and Christian sources in particular. Burden (1967) adds that “the irrational adulation and deification of Hitler … increased [his] megalomania; he could now whip the German masses into a frenzy, that they would carry out any order he might give them” (p. 91). Burden’s allusion to mass submission links us back to scholarship regarding fascist aesthetics and performance, in agreement with authors such as Buck-Morss (1992) and Sontag (1981). The significance of this connection serves to prove the 1934 Nuremberg Rally as representative of fascist aesthetics, one that seeks the subjugation of the masses.
Hagen & Ostergren (2006) offer a discussion of the city of Nuremberg as projecting a National Socialist vision. Johnson (2003; cited in Hagen & Ostergren, 2006) argues that “[the] notion of landscape as theatre could be further extended, not solely as the backdrop in which the action takes place, but as actively constituting the action. The stage acts more than as a context for the performance; it is the performance itself” (p. 158). For Johnson, the place in which performance occurs moves beyond propriety, and acts out a performative function. Nuremberg was not only the rally’s venue, but served a symbolic function. This links us back to performance in the previous section; though Johnson does not link space with aesthetics, physical space performs through symbolic representation. Hagen & Ostergren (2006) support this by arguing of Nuremberg as “… [containing] many historic features of architectural and cultural importance … a national symbol” (p. 158). For Hagen & Ostergren, the decision to make the city of Nuremberg the rallies’ site was a deliberate one, for the rallies represented Germanic culture. With this in mind, we can make sense of the 1934 Nuremberg Rally beyond a presentation of military unity, as Burden suggests, and begin to see it as a phenomenon of cultural importance for Hitler’s Germany, as Hagen & Ostergren contend.

Besides Roman and Christian traditions that O’Shaughnessy (2016) and Taylor (1981) outlined, respectively, in the beginning of this chapter, Hagen & Ostergren (2006) argue that the “[National Socialists] drew heavily on a tradition of national festivities and public celebrations in Germany dating back to the mid-nineteenth century …” (p. 162). They do not explicitly identify these festivities; however, drawing from Hoffman (1996; as cited in Hagen & Ostergren, 2006), these festivities “[resulted] … as a Gesamtkunstwerk or ‘total work of art’” (pp. 162-163). The rallies were a site of spectacle, encompassing “… martial music, trumpeted fanfares and thundering drums … the visually exhilarating effects of massed blocks of uniformed men and
women … [and] ecstatic effects of bombastic oratory and mass proclamations of undying loyalty” (Hagen & Ostergren, 2006, p. 163). Though Hagen and Ostergren (2006) do not mention any specific German tradition, within *Triumph of the Will* (1935), Hitler is seen, multiple times, being greeted by the masses in traditional attire. Costume contributed towards the theatrics of the Nuremberg Rallies: as highly Germanic in nature. Hagen & Ostergren (2006) close by arguing that “[the] calculated utilisation of architecture, spectacle, and place helped … to project and legitimise a National Socialist version of past, present, and future” (p. 178).

Nuremberg, as venue for the rallies, not only hosted the regime’s performances, but situated them within a historic setting, heightening the value of Germanic culture. Taylor (1981) argues of Burden’s (1967) accounts of the Nuremberg Rallies as “… the most substantive work available in English on the general theme of Nazism’s political celebrations” (p. 504). This further validates Burden’s work as substantial to this analysis. Taylor also draws on him in explaining symbol and ritual under National Socialism, arguing that ritual moves beyond the deification of Hitler and into the realm of the National Socialist *Weltanschauung* (Taylor, 1981, p. 505). Taylor is providing another layer to the Nuremberg Rallies: on top of Hitler as central to these practices, he suggests a link between the National Socialist worldview and political celebration. Taylor (1981) concludes that “[The Nuremberg Rallies] performed … a vital role in providing a carefully planned framework within which the feeling of ‘community’ could be created, and hence the mechanisms of mass suggestion could operate” (p. 512). In conclusion, the authors in this section have outlined the rallies as a vehicle of creating mass solidarity and strengthening the military and paramilitary forces under Hitler’s command. The discussions of public theatre explored in this section link symbol and ritual as part of its mise-en-scène,
performing an image of the Third Reich as a union between the Führer, his people, and Nazism’s Germanic roots.

**Studies on Triumph of the Will (1935)**

The previous section explored the 1934 Nuremberg Rally, this thesis’ object of study. This section will focus on the best available documentation of that rally, serving to amplify its performance through technological mediation. “Triumph of the Will (1935) … made Riefenstahl’s career. It has been frequently been recognised as one of the greatest films of all time, and … constituted an archetype for both documentaries and propaganda” (Petropoulos, 2014, p. 242). Petropoulos is offering a distinct recognition of Triumph of the Will (1935) as taking the form of documentary and propaganda. Considering Petropoulos’ claims, Triumph of the Will (1935) is a record of truths (as a documentary) and persuasion (as propaganda) allowing its audiences to understand the belief systems of those it represents.

O’Shaughnessy (2014) argues that “[Leni Riefenstahl] was a gifted filmmaker who produced propaganda for Hitler and the [National Socialist] regime” (p. 234). This strengthens the claim of Triumph of the Will (1935) as propaganda, thus a vehicle of the National Socialist worldview. Mourenza (2020), drawing from Benjamin’s (1969) Führer cult, argues that “the cultic element of [Triumph of the Will (1935)] is not only in the reproduction of symbols used by Nazism … but in the presentation of an image without fissures of National Socialism as the rebirth of a people” (p. 141). A very interesting concept is brought up by Mourenza: rebirth. I intend to explore more of what this means in my analysis. For now, Mourenza is offering National Socialist symbols as related to rebirth, and Triumph of the Will (1935) is a visual expression of this concept. He further adds that “German fascism … used film technology… to
provide a simulacrum in which the masses could see themselves reflected. In the cult of Hitler, the masses could imagine themselves as bearers of an armoured ego and a stable identity” (Mourenza, 2020, p. 148). A significant part of Mourenza’s text is its allusion to an armoured ego. Mourenza does not refer to Foster (1991), who argues of fascist aesthetics as a metaphysical armouring, yet makes use of the idea as a result of Triumph of the Will’s (1935) representation of the masses. Triumph of the Will (1935) represents a secure mass through a replication of their own image in film. Mourenza agrees with Taylor’s (1981) expression of an apocalyptic narrative embedded within National Socialist rituals. Drawing from Kracauer (1947), Mourenza (2020) argues that “in finding pleasure in the reification of human beings, fascism—through technology and film—reveals ‘the triumph of a nihilistic will’” (p. 148). Mourenza concludes with Benjamin’s (1969) argument where aesthetisation “… culminate[s] in one thing: war” (p. 19). There is emphasis on fascism as a means to a destructive end, as Benjamin, Mourenza, and Taylor represent. “The Nuremberg party rally of September 4-10, 1934, of which Triumph of the Will (1935) is the official document, occurred at a momentous time in the history of the [National Socialist] movement” (Hinton, 1978, p. 48). Two important things are laid out by Hinton’s statement: (1) Triumph of the Will (1935) is the rally’s official document, and (2) Triumph of the Will (1935) is a significant instance of National Socialist history. The value of stating Triumph of the Will (1935) as official documentation serves as a rationale for the film’s use, as this study is interested in propaganda by National Socialist authors. Hinton’s second point, which outlines Triumph of the Will (1935) as an important aspect of National Socialist history, refers to Burden’s (1967) argument: that the 1934 Nuremberg Rally was a marker of total military and paramilitary control under Hitler (pp. 76-91), where the film immortalises this
instance. This highlights the film as propaganda, strategically embedding a specific event in history, for the masses to consume.

“Triumph of the Will can be broken down into thirteen sequences … [the film] is not ‘in the most literal documentary narrative tradition’ and in fact, almost totally disregards chronological order in its structure” (Hinton, 1978, p. 52). Drawing on an interview of Riefenstahl, Hinton (1978) adds that “the chronological study shows that the actual order of events was of little relevance to [her] … the film both begins and ends with peaks, sequences of pronounced emotional excitement; ‘highlights and retreats’ could be observed throughout the film. (p. 56). Hinton describes Riefenstahl’s deliberate editing as producing a series of emotional highs and lows. Petropoulos (2014) adds that Riefenstahl herself helped design the National Socialist rally of 1934. She worked closely with Albert Speer … and they conceived both a rally and a film at the same time” (p. 242). I include this excerpt from Petropoulos in an attempt to highlight the conception of the rally and film as symbiotic. Identifying this symbiotic relationship will allow the reader to understand that the rally was made for the film, and that the film was made for the rally; both produced for the purpose of public consumption. “Sontag argued that Riefenstahl’s career was devoted to fascist aesthetics, identifying three distinct phases – the mountain films, those of the Third Reich, and the Africa projects – that ‘form a triptych of fascist visuals’” (Petropoulos, 2014, p. 243). Petropoulos is making use of Sontag’s (1981) description of fascist aesthetics as “… [preoccupied] with situations of control [and] submissive behaviour …” (p. 91). Fascist aesthetics is represented beyond live performance and is also expressed through film. In conclusion, Triumph of the Will (1935) serves as a documentary film and tool of National Socialist propaganda. The authors in this section have highlighted the concepts of rebirth and simulacrum through filmic representation of the 1934
Nuremberg Rally. These texts will help identify *Triumph of the Will* (1935) not only as a document of the event, but as amplifying and adding to the fascist aesthetic already evident within the rally.

**Conclusion**

The scholarship identified in this chapter have presented a good foundation for this analysis, covering the areas of National Socialist propaganda, fascist aesthetics, performance, the 1934 Nuremberg Rally, and *Triumph of the Will* (1935). They all point towards the use of symbol and ritual as aspects of performance. There is unity between the authors and their examination of the rally’s roots, allowing the reader to trace the values mapped into National Socialist traditions. Fascist aesthetics, as we have seen, not only relied on the live performances that the National Socialists staged, but was amplified (and took the form) of film; *Triumph of the Will* (1935) became a propagandistic device. For these scholars, performance and film were devices of propaganda, all promoting the National Socialist worldview. The process in which this was expressed will be explored in my analysis. There are, however, gaps within the current literature. With the exception of the outlined texts, there has been a limited amount of scholarship devoted to the study of performance as propaganda within the Third Reich. This thesis, a study of the 1934 Nuremberg Rally, as captured by Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935), will not only contribute to our knowledge of National Socialist propaganda, but proposes an approach focused on the performance of propaganda.
Chapter Three: Methodology and Theory

This study is a visual rhetorical analysis of performance as propaganda, focusing on the 1934 Nuremberg rally, which will make use of Voelz’ (2020) *Toward an Aesthetic of Populism Part I: The Populist Space of Appearance* as its model, whilst employing Benjamin’s (1969) theory of aesthetisation through an analysis of the Führer cult, derived from his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. This study’s boundary is limited to an analysis of official National Socialist propaganda, and is not an analysis of audience interpretation.

For the purposes of the current work, the definition of performance is based on Alexander’s (2011) *Performance and Power*: “Cultural performance is the social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their current situation … it is the meaning that they, as social actors, consciously or unconsciously wish to have others believe” (Alexander, 2011, p. 28). The 1934 Nuremberg Rally contained performances in the literal sense of parades and visual presentations for the mass to consume; however, Alexander’s description provides reason to performance. For Alexander, performance is a presentation of a certain reality, meant for others to perceive.

The definition of propaganda I will use in my analysis is based on Walter Lippmann’s (1921) discussion in *Public Opinion*: “[propaganda]… is the effort to alter the picture to which men respond, to substitute one social pattern for another …” (n.p.). For Lippman, propaganda operates to hide truth, in order for a manufactured “reality” to take its place. Making use of Alexander’s definition of performance, as well as Lippman’s view of propaganda, will serve to frame the 1934 Nuremberg Rally as a means of manufacturing a certain reality, for both the German people and the world to see. This manufactured reality produces power. Benjamin’s theory of aesthetisation will aid this analysis by defining the term Führer cult, as a concept that
creates a submissive mass. “The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its *Führer* cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values” (Benjamin, 1969, p. 19). Benjamin does not clearly define the *Führer* cult, nor what ritual values refer to. My analysis, however, will provide an interpretation of these terms, and an explanation of what the *Führer* cult entails, as well its application within performance as propaganda.

**Sample**

The 1934 Nuremberg Rally is this thesis’ object of study. As this work is a study of National Socialist propaganda, it is interested in how the regime indoctrinated the mass through a specific medium: performance. Propaganda within the National Socialist regime took various forms, such as posters, art (such as sculptures), music, and even speeches which were delivered live or broadcasted through radio (O’Shaughnessy, 2016). Performance, aside from Alexander’s definition, will also refer to the events of the rally which were exercised in the presence of others, or in other words, events which were “meant to be seen”. It is also the researcher’s perspective that there is a paucity of research that explores Benjamin’s (1969) aesthetisation of politics. Benjamin’s notion looks at mass indoctrination through ritualistic behaviour. For Benjamin (1969), fascist ritual values depend on the “violation of the masses” (p. 19). This study looks at indoctrination, which for Benjamin is an aestheticised display of power reliant on the presentation of a dominated people.

Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935) is a documentary film on the 1934 Nuremberg Rally. It is its best documentation as (1) it is the only official moving evidence of the rally and (2) it was produced for the purposes of expanding the rally’s reach, exhibited to the public as well as an international audience (Müller, 1993). As this study is focused on
performance, a moving image is required in order to fully grasp its content. *Triumph of the Will* (1935), as its official documentation, only adds to this importance: the rally was captured in a way that was suitable for its purpose, which the researcher defines as indoctrination. While the National Socialists’ vision of the rally (to indoctrinate) and its documentation are inseparable, the focus of this work will not be on the mediation of the film. The film, as mediation, will be considered “transparent” for the purposes of this study. The fact that *Triumph of the Will* (1935) was intended to reach the German masses, as well as an international audience, further underlines the film as the best medium to study the rally; not only does it offer a moving image, but also serves as an existing document meant to be viewed and re-viewed.

**Methodology: Delivery and Style as Visual Rhetoric**

As a methodology, visual rhetoric is mainly preoccupied with an examination of visual text that has persuasive intent. Gries (2020) argues that “visual rhetorical analysis … is best understood as a mode of inquiry for studying how visual artifacts and phenomena impact collective life through a rhetorical perspective” (p. 381). Aristotelian rhetoric refers to the means of public persuasion, presented before a live audience. There are five canons within Aristotle’s treatise, titled *Rhetoric*: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. This analysis will focus on delivery and style as these two canons focus on the performance itself, as opposed to invention and arrangement, which focus on how the rhetorical performance was formulated, and memory, which mostly refers to the memorisation of speech, as well as its structure – these are canons that have the potential to be explored, but are beyond this work’s scope. Griffin et al. (2019) argue that style is the “… selection of language [and delivery refers] to technique of presentation” (p. 262). Aristotelian rhetoric cored itself on speech rhetoric. As this study is an
analysis of visual performance, which goes beyond oral persuasion, style and delivery’s definitions will be slightly altered to best fit the rhetorical practices within the 1934 Nuremberg Rally.

Delivery encompasses the live rhetorical performance and its execution. The 1934 Nuremberg Rally was a dynamic performance, one that made use of moving elements, both human and material. This thesis will touch on delivery, as it best fits the nature of the rally in Nuremberg – as a performance, it demanded an audience; the National Socialist regime staged a choreographed rally that captured the masses. The choice of delivery will lend to an analysis which identifies how ideology was performed through visual means. Delivery, in the traditional sense, was a lesser canon, as it involved non-verbal cues, as opposed to verbal ones – after all, rhetoric was a verbal act. Porter (2009) argues that:

In classical rhetoric and through most of the history of rhetoric, delivery referred to the oral/aural and bodily aspects of an oral speech or performance—i.e., to the speaker’s voice (intonation, volume, rhythm) and to bodily movements and gestures. Because delivery came to be associated almost exclusively with speech situations and with functions of the speaker’s body (voice, gestures), it seemed less relevant, if not irrelevant, to written composition than the other canons (particularly dispositio and elocutio). (p. 207)

Aristotelian rhetoric was a live performance, where the rhetor was an orator. The rhetorical act relied mostly on verbal speech, hence Porter arguing that delivery (which constituted non-verbal acts such as bodily gestures), in the Aristotelian sense, was unimportant. Historically, delivery was a minor canon, one that did not deserve as much attention or served a major function. Porter
(2009) further notes that “Aristotle did not show much respect for delivery in Rhetoric, treating it only briefly (Rhetoric 3.1–3.7). He saw delivery functioning ‘in the same way as acting. . . a matter of natural talent and largely not reducible to artistic rule,’ except insofar as it relates to ‘how things are said [lexis]’ (Aristotle, 1991, 3.1.7, p. 219) . . . delivery does not require ‘artistic labours’ — ergo, it is not that important” (p. 209). It is interesting to see how delivery was not as significant as it is today. Within the modern setting, Porter (2009) argues that delivery enables us to represent who we are through nonverbal cues, such as the way we physically present ourselves to the public (p. 213). Considering delivery within the 1934 Nuremberg Rally, which were the stylized parades and rituals of the National Socialists, there is significance in communicating ideology through visual means. This thesis is interested in finding out how messages were communicated through acts of dynamic performance.

“Aristotle’s treatment of style in the Rhetoric focuses on metaphor . . . metaphors help an audience visualise – a ‘bringing-before-the-eyes’ process that energises listeners and moves them to action” (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 283). I find that this definition of rhetoric is most applicable within the 1934 Nuremberg Rally. The National Socialists did not openly declare their agendas within the events at Nuremberg; they did, however, present their agendas through imagery that were representative of Hitler’s Germany. Within the 1934 Nuremberg Rally, there were instances were speech rhetoric was performed, such as Hitler’s speech in the closing congress. There were also instances where style was appropriate, outside of verbal persuasion. The visual performances within the rally, such as men marching in unison and the spades used in place of rifles, were metaphor of bigger ideas – they were symbolic of something beyond simple aesthetics, and will be scrutinised within this study’s analysis section. It is a goal of this current work to see how style “in-action” operated within the 1934 Nuremberg Rally.
Theory: Benjamin’s “Aesthetisation of Politics”

This thesis will rely on Benjamin’s (1969) theory of aesthetics. The current study will make use of Benjamin’s theory in analysing how the rally took the form of a fascist aesthetic, and how its performance operated as propaganda. Benjamin’s (1969) essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, is scholarship regarding art, its forms, and how it has transformed over time, as well as how we perceive it. In the author’s epilogue, however, is a section referring to a fascist aesthetisation of power. Throughout the essay, nothing about fascism or its implications on visual art are mentioned, which is perhaps why fascist aesthetics has been minimally covered in scholarship. For this reason, the current work seeks to shed more light on Benjamin’s theory, making use of the 1934 Nuremberg Rally in exemplifying how a fascist representation of power is exhibited through visual means.

Benjamin (1969) argues that “the logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its *Führer* cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values” (p. 19). Considering key elements in the author’s essay, Benjamin notes of important concepts such as “masses” (and their “violation”), “*Führer* cult”, and “ritual”. These terms will be crucial in this analysis, particularly in conjunction with visual rhetoric. These terms from Benjamin’s text will allow readers to understand the relationship between performance and persuasion. For example, which elements within the scenes of the 1934 Nuremberg Rally show dynamics of dominance and submission? Which characters are imbued with power? How are the masses portrayed? These questions, among others, will signal the direction of this analysis: making use of visual details of the rally, as captured by *Triumph of the Will* (1935), in order to decode ideological messages. Benjamin (1969) further states that “all
efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war. War and war only can set a goal for mass movements on the largest scale while respecting the traditional property system” (p. 19). As history has proven, the Third Reich concluded its reign with the Second World War. It is also an aim of this analysis to look at fascist aesthetics and how, as Benjamin frames it, lead to war and destruction. Which visual clues within the 1934 Nuremberg Rally point towards the inevitability of war, and why? Why does Benjamin heavily note of the masses as integral to fascist aesthetics, having mentioned it multiple times? How were they instrumental in conveying ideology? Did the masses only receive the message of propaganda, or were they part of fascism’s aesthetic representation? These are a few questions that this thesis aims to answer.

**Model: Visual Performance as Propaganda**

Voelz’ (2020) *Toward an Aesthetic of Populism Part I: The Populist Space of Appearance* was a rhetorical analysis of Trump’s political rallies, focusing on audio-visual practices which Voelz identified as persuasive. This analysis will make use of Voelz’ work as a model, as it provides a foundation for studying political rhetorical performances, employing objects, interactions between orator and audience, and verbal text as persuasive devices. Though Voelz does not state any rhetorical canon used in his analysis, style and delivery will be the focal canons for the current study as these two relate closely to the actual performative instances, as opposed to the formulation of the rhetorical devices.

Voelz’ analysis focuses on audio-visual performance, drawing from George Wallace’s campaigns between 1964 – 1972. In an attempt to conduct a rhetorical analysis, however, Voelz uses Donald Trump’s campaigns between 2015-2018 in order to illustrate the persuasive appeal of visual and aural devices. Voelz makes use of Trump’s recorded rallies, purposively selecting
scenes that contributed to the rhetorical effect of Trump’s political campaign rallies. It is to note that a second part of Voelz’ work exists, though it is mostly a comparison between Wallace’s and Trump’s rallies, and will not serve the current work as apt as the first part, whereas the first part deconstructs Trump’s rallies extensively, and focuses on its performative nature.

Voelz (2020) argues that rally performances are crucial, operating as part of political tradition (particularly populist tradition) (p. 203). The 1934 Nuremberg Rally was first, and foremost, a political rally; it founded itself as a campaign rally when it began in 1923. Making use of Voelz’ model will allow an analysis which considers the persuasive impact of audio-visual devices used within political rallies. “In the course of such assembly, the performance must produce an appearance in which something becomes manifest that can be identified with the populist claim to unity … to use the words of Hannah Arendt, a ‘space of appearance’ (Voelz, 2020, p. 204). Arendt’s concept of space of appearance, as used by Voelz, fashions the physical and literal space that an orator is in, in order to deliver a message through the interactions between the orator, his audience, as well as the environment in which the rhetorical act is performed. These are valuable aspects in my analysis as the current study is one of visual rhetoric. As an example, Voelz analyses Trump’s rallies by examining three things: (1) the rally space (and objects within), (2) the orator, and (3) the audience. The same will be done in this analysis, looking at the physical spaces used within the 1934 Nuremberg Rally, such as the Zeppelinweise and congress hall, the orator, audience, and their actions, such as Hitler and his interactions with party members. Voelz’ model uses these three factors in studying how a persuasive message was delivered, and this analysis will make use of the same method in studying the rhetorical devices used within the 1934 Nuremberg Rally, as means of propaganda.
Voelz makes use of concepts such as “representative” and “represented”. Voelz simply identifies the orator as representative and the audience as represented (p. 204). These representations are also visible within the 1934 Nuremberg Rally, and this analysis seeks to find if these representations are defined in the same way Voelz defines them, or if they are subverted. The value of applying this with the current study relies on the goal of representation within the 1934 Nuremberg Rally: were the people represented, were there connections made between orator and audience, and which messages were conveyed through performances within the 1934 Nuremberg Rally. Within visual rhetoric, this will allow the reader to see how audio-visual means operated as propaganda. Though this study cores itself on visual rhetoric, including audio as part of this analysis will only allow more context in successfully studying the 1934 Nuremberg Rally.

Considering the representative’s performative role, Voelz (2020) argues that “… the assumption that in celebrity politics, the source of political appeal, and thus of power, resides in the media-charisma of a candidate rather in the substance of particular political positions” (p. 205). Voelz speaks of the orator’s ability to persuade as superior over that of ideological sentiments exhibited by a rhetorical act, drawing from the nature of celebrity. To a certain extent, this will be explored within the 1934 Nuremberg Rally, not by examining Hitler or the regime’s nature as celebrities of the nation – which can be explored in a different sociological analysis – but by examining the regime’s use of aesthetics as propaganda. Aesthetics as propaganda within the 1934 Nuremberg Rally made use of spectacle in order to indoctrinate, and this study will explore how aesthetic appeal served the purpose of the rally. In Voelz’ analysis, Trump’s jet was symbolic of industrial power, and was a deliberate exposition of Trump’s own personal wealth.
This analysis will make use of imagery in a similar way; through understanding how certain symbols operated to communicate meaning to the German people.

As this analysis is concerned with Benjamin’s *Führer* cult, where the idea of a deindividuated mass is central, Voelz’ (2020) argument of a mass following will allow further contextualisation of political rallies as cultic in nature:

As they cheer on the representative, they seem to merge into an undifferentiated mass. Not only do they seem to give up any capacity for judging the representative claim; they seem to cease to exist as independent subjects, altogether. (p. 207-208)

Voelz, in relation to Benjamin’s theory of aesthetisation connects the idea of political rallies as a space to manipulate the masses, focusing on unity; whatever unity this may be, this analysis will seek to answer, regarding the 1934 Nuremberg Rally. It is also interesting to note that within Voelz’ study, National Socialist rallies were referenced, focusing on the concepts of performance and experience. Thamer (1996) argues:

The principal objective behind these massive spectacles was to offer visual evidence of the German community united behind its leader. The ritualized rally of all National Socialist organizations was carefully stage-managed to present an impressive image of mass support for the new regime. The rally site formed the stage for the production of a *Führer*-cult. Hitler was not only leading actor and point of reference for both the architecture and the processions; he was also director and high-priest of the event, symbolically bringing the people together in an emotionally elating, communal experience. (cited in Voelz, 2020, p. 210).

The importance of this quote that by Thamer, which Voelz uses, highlights the importance of a community which is bound by experience within a specific point in time: the confines of the
rally. This will lend to the current study’s thesis, where the performative instances within the 1934 Nuremberg Rally contributed to the spirit of unity between the German people. Voelz’ work, as a model for this study, will help readers understand the concept of how a carefully choreographed performance allowed for ideological messages to be communicated through aesthetics, as means of propaganda.

Conclusion

As this analysis is a study of visual rhetoric within the 1934 Nuremberg Rally, delivery and style as focal canons will allow the reader to understand how ideology was performed. Delivery will lend to the act itself, while style in-action, will consider the metaphoric language that the National Socialists used in order to indoctrinate. Benjamin’s (1969) theory of aesthetisation will allow the study a lens in which to analyse the 1934 Nuremberg Rally. Studying the events at Nuremberg could take different paths. This work, however, will focus on an aesthetisation of power, as defined through Benjamin’s Führer cult. Lastly, Voelz’ (2020) work will serve as this study’s model as it will provide a structure to study a political rally. Voelz focuses on visual rhetoric, and so will this analysis. Making use of Voelz’ approach on rallies, as part of political tradition, will aid in seeing how performance operated to persuade.
Chapter Four: Analysis

This chapter is dedicated to the analysis of the 1934 Nuremberg Rally, as propaganda. The methodology of this study is visual rhetoric, particularly Voelz’ (2020) rhetorical model, which focuses on the aesthetisation of politics within political rallies. Benjamin’s (1969) aesthetisation of politics will be the main theory used to operationalise the notion of aesthetisation.

“The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its Führer cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values” (Benjamin, 1969, p. 19). Walter Benjamin’s (1969) The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, originally written in 1936, is a rigorous examination of art and how it is experienced. The essay focuses on how the modern world has transformed art, especially our way of experiencing it. It is only in his epilogue section, however, that Benjamin associates aesthetics with politics, and deconstructs, albeit briefly, the fascist aesthetisation of power. Without directly identifying Adolf Hitler or the National Socialists, he refers to fascist aesthetisation as a Führer cult. One cannot miss the obvious link to the Third Reich. Hitler and his regime devised propaganda in order to legitimise political power, more specifically domination, in the years between 1933 and 1945 (O’Shaughnessy, 2016). A specific instance, however, stands out: the 1934 Nuremberg Rally, also known as The Party Day of Unity and Power (Burden, 1967, p. 76).

The 1934 rally was first, and foremost, a performance; it was an aesthetic demonstration of military power and racial unity. Voelz’ (2020) model studies aesthetics as articulated through a presentation of control by the “representative”, over the “represented” (p. 204). A presentation of control over the German masses will be highlighted in this study. “… I contend that the rally
encapsulates a politico-aesthetic order in which attendees … participate, but in which there is no
room for the articulation of dissenting positions, nor for any form of compromise” (Voelz, 2020,
p. 262). In short, aesthetics within rallies (Voelz’ focus is on populist rallies) is used to display
totalitarian control. The masses are without agency, in submission to their leader. The current
examination of the 1934 rally will make use of Voelz’ (2020) model to explain the relationship
between aesthetics and power. The 1934 rally spanned the days of September 4-10, and
comprised military and political presentations. The events in Nuremberg relied on visual
performance to trigger the audience’s strong emotional response. I argue that the 1934 rally was
part of the National Socialist propaganda machine, one that imposed its ideologies through
aesthetic representation.

For the purposes of this analysis, I will focus on a select sequence of events, as opposed
to all the events within the 1934 rally: (1) the Reichsarbeitsdienst (RAD) rally, (2) the
Sturmabteilung (SA) and Schutzstaffel (SS) review, (2) and the closing congress. It is my
argument that these instances are particularly revealing of the National Socialists’ aesthetisation
of politics through the visual performance of the Führer cult. These three events, as opposed to
the other ten, presented a richer set of artefacts, such as people, objects, and space, in articulating
an aesthetic performance.

The Reichsarbeitsdienst or (RAD) Rally

The first performative instance in this analysis will be the sequence of events within the
RAD rally. Chronologically, this event happened in the morning of September 6th, 1934 (Hinton,
1975). The RAD rally was a unique occurrence within the rally programme – it militarised an
often-civilian role: that of the labourer. The German men who built farms, roadways, and worked
in mines had now been transformed into a uniformed unit within the Third Reich. The RAD rally was a performance focused on the masses – the working class. Hitler and National Socialist officials took the podium, watching over the 52,000 men presented before them. As high command peered into the rally, members of the corps had their own, choreographed, role: the delivery of what I interpret as their oath of allegiance to Hitler and the National Socialist regime. This is the first instance in which members of the RAD were presented in a party congress, just after the RAD’s formation, a year prior (Burden, 1967, p. 83). The RAD rally within Nuremberg’s Zeppelinweise (Hinton, 1975) allowed for a mass congregation which provided enough space for thousands of men, pledging allegiance, followed by a march-past. The RAD’s performance was meant to illustrate: (1) their allegiance to Hitler, (2) the militarisation of the workforce, and (3) a reverence towards the National Socialists’ claim to modernity.

For Benjamin, fascist aesthetics focuses on the Führer cult (Benjamin, 1969). This is noticeable within the RAD rally. Hitler takes his place in the podium of the Zeppelinweise as the mass hails; there is commotion in the background. A welcoming fanfare moves into the field as spectators cheer Hitler. Hitler’s welcome, framed as a triumphant one, highlights his nature as central to the regime’s public presentations: a deified figure. Hitler’s roll-call begins, and the Führer exclaims: “Heil, workmen!” The uniformed members of the RAD reply: “Heil, Hitler!”. As simple as this exchange seems, it certainly is not. Thamer (1996) argues that “Hitler was … director and high-priest of the event, symbolically bringing the people together in an emotionally elating, communal experience” (cited in Voelz, 2020, p. 210). Voelz’ (2020) model of populist aesthetics proposes a temporary union between the “representative” and the “represented” (p. 204). The interplay with “representative” and “represented” rely on the former’s ability to stand
in as a figure that cares for the needs and interests of the represented. Within the 1934 rally, Hitler is the “representative” and the German people is “represented”.

The RAD rally is meant to perform the unity between the RAD and Hitler. Hitler calls onto the RAD by exclaiming: “Heil, workmen!”. This call to order not only signals a response from the crowd, but establishes his authority. It also symbolises that these young men will answer their Führer’s call. Within this performance, the masses cry: “Heil, Hitler!”. Thamer (1996) argues that “the rally site formed the stage for the production of a Führer-cult. Hitler was … high-priest of the event …” (cited in Voelz, 2020, p. 210). Though Thamer does not mention Benjamin in any capacity, one can deduct the inspiration drawn from the Frankfurt scholar. If, for Thamer, a Führer cult demanded Hitler to be a “high priest”, then fascist aesthetics require the masses as followers (See Figure 1). The exchange between Hitler and the RAD is symbolic of this and is ever-present in the 1934 rally. The submission of the masses through symbolic gestures points towards the undisputed power of Hitler.

Figure 1: Hitler, about to address the congregated members of the RAD
Shifting our focus on the young men of the RAD, we note their uniforms, their physical movements, and oath of allegiance. As I have mentioned in the beginning of this section, the militarisation of the workforce is a crucial point within the RAD rally. The RAD is the regime’s labour force and was responsible for mitigating unemployment, promoting a German workforce. One of RAD’s most significant projects was the Autobahn. In addition, the fact the RAD wore a distinctive uniform confirms their highly militarised identity within the regime. Their collared shirts, standardised ties, jodhpurs, and jack boots mimic the SS uniform, simply differing in colour. I argue of a composition that visually presented them as an organised and efficient unit (See Figure 2).

Figure 2: Variants of the RAD uniform, illustrated by Pierre Turner

Craik (2003) argues that “the emphasis on disciplined dress codes produced an aesthetic as well as disciplinary and regimes of spectacle—as evidenced by drill and school parades—that
informed a specific sense of aesthetics in which looking, being looked at, and performativity were united” (p. 138). “Nazi Germany was self-articulated through symbols. But it spoke and elucidated its key meanings through a public theatre …” (O’Shaughnessy, 2016, p. 229). The uniform is symbolic of a disciplined regime, as Craik contends. O'Shaughnessy furthers this argument by identifying symbol-use as “public theatre” for Nazi Germany. The RAD rally was a mass demonstration, with “52,000 representatives … selected to attend the rally” (Burden, 1967, p. 83). This massive gathering allowed attendees to – in Craik’s terms – “look at” the uniformed young men of the RAD, standing erect before their Führer, in faithful service to the National Socialist regime. Burden (1967) argues that “Hitler stated that the most important function of the Labour Service was to help create a genuine community of all Germans … [Hitler] hoped to awaken in them a sense of solidarity” (p. 83). This statement by Hitler assumes that Germany was divided. If Hitler hoped to “awaken in them a sense of solidarity”, within the German people, then the term Volksgemeinschaft is most appropriate. Volksgemeinschaft refers to a “national” or “people’s community” (Welch, 2004, pp. 213-214). The RAD rally, as part of the larger public theatre within Nuremberg, is representative of German unification. Welch (2004) further adds that “propaganda presented an image of society that had successfully manufactured ‘national community’ by transcending social and class divisiveness through a new ethnic unity based on ‘true’ German values” (p. 213). Rhetorically, this unification is most evident through the visual presentation of uniformed young men, working towards the goal of eliminating unemployment and creating a stronger German workforce.

The militarisation of the RAD did not end with the use of uniforms, but was highlighted through their carrying of spades, in place of rifles, and fashioned them as if they were, indeed,
rifles. I argue that this visual element denotes the regime’s attempt at modernisation (See Figure 3) as the spades represented the work that had to be done in Germany.

Figure 3: RAD men, fashioning spades as rifles

The RAD operated to move Germany forward, post-Treaty of Versailles. “Hitler … [brought together] young people from all classes, backgrounds, and provinces to work side by side on national projects” (Burden, 1967, p. 83). The spades, carried into the Zeppelinweise, were representative of a workforce that was responsible of propelling Germany forward. For the National Socialists, this progress was defined by a national unity achieved through employment. The aesthetic impact of spades as rifles underline the regimented nature of the RAD. “The New York Times’ correspondent wrote that [the RAD rally] was by far the most striking exhibition … the men looked tanned and physically fit from their outdoor labour, and because of their youth and discipline[,] they were even more impressive than the Storm Troopers” (Burden, 1967, p.
Even American sources outside of the National Socialist regime highlighted the aesthetic impact of the *RAD* rally. In fact, the *RAD*’s mere presentation was a boastful attempt to showcase Germanic masculine strength. This instance of masculine prowess, as we shall see repeatedly, contributed to an aestheticised Nazi Germany.

While uniforms provided a strong visual statement within the *RAD* rally, the *RAD*’s oath of allegiance points us towards a cultic performance, or in Benjamin’s words, a *Führer* cult. The oath was a deliberate show of submission to Hitler and the Third Reich. As a dramatic drum roll ensued, the young men of the *RAD* chanted: “We are ready to carry Germany into a new era”. Monotonous as it seemed, it heralded something more important in the oath. With a pitch higher and lounder, the *RAD* exclaimed: “One people! One *Führer*! One Reich! One Germany!”. The repetition produced an ominous aura. Mourenza (2020) argues that “National Socialism exploited auratic features in the service of ritual. Through mass rallies and parades, [the National Socialists] created auratic effects on a grand scale in order to develop a corrupted cult of the masses” (p. 128). This was, indeed, a gathering of the masses. To those who chanted, and those who observed, the drama of the *RAD*’s oath meant submission. They cried: “One *Führer*!”.

Benjamin’s *Führer* cult certainly referred to one man: Hitler. In closing the *RAD*’s oath, the young men stated: “Land and bread for Germany!”. I argue that a message was delivered to those watching: it was valuable for Nazi Germany to achieve their *Lebensraum* (“living space”), as well as to provide for their families. To conclude the oath, decorated trumpeters began playing fanfare (See Figure 4).
After a rattling, chanted, oath were musical marches, played as Hitler and high command watched. The RAD’s roll call continued, but this time Hitler was not part of the exchange. Their next lines further the argument of the RAD as a militarised unit: “We never fought in the trenches, nor did we hear the explosion of grenades; but nonetheless, we are soldiers … with our hammers”. This continued with a list of labourer’s tools, highlighting their role as “building Germany”. A select few of the young men shouted were they had come from: “We are the Reich’s young men, and we stand united” (here, one man after another called out where they were from) “at Langemark, Tannenberg, …” and so on (See Figure 5).
Interestingly enough, a memorial was also held for Germans who had fallen. As the regime’s standards were lowered, solemn music played, and the Roman salute took place (See Figure 6 and 7). This contributed to the aesthetic militarisation of the RAD. As the solemn music slowly subsided, a male voice emerged: “Comrades who have died in the battlefield …”. He paused, then his voice erupted, as thunderous drumrolls ensued: “You are not dead! You are alive! You are Germany!”.

The party standards that were touching the ground were raised into the skies, rapidly and without haste (See Figure 8). The dramaturgy involved made this performance a unique one. Not only did it showcase young men, uniformed and astute, through their stoic posture and look, but I argue that it introduced something mystical within the events at Nuremberg: the martyrisation of the fallen.
Figure 6: High command, performing the Roman salute, in honour of the fallen

Figure 7: Party flags on the ground, in reverence to party members’ sacrifice
Taylor (1981) explains this “martyrisation” as originating from the sixteen “Martyrs of the Movement” who died in the 1923 Putsch, and were symbolic to the National Socialist Weltanschauung (world-view) (p. 514). They were symbolic as they represented an honourable group of party members who sacrificed their lives for the National Socialist Party. For the National Socialists, it was as if the fallen had never died, but remained part of the Germany that continued to exist. The memorialisation of their comrades, as we will see, was a performance that naturally occupied the rituals of the National Socialist regime.

Ending the RAD rally were Hitler’s remarks: “You represent a great ideal … work will no longer be a dividing concept”. This perfectly sums up the RAD as representing economic progress for Nazi Germany, among other themes. The RAD and Hitler served as unifying representatives of the future success of the German nation through work. As Voelz (2020)
argues, the “representative” acts to portray those “represented” (p. 204). In this example, Hitler primarily represented the masses. An interesting transformation occurred, however, where the 

RAD (the mass in this rally) became the representative of the people, symbolic of the economic progress that the National Socialists envisioned. This proves that Voelz’ notion of “representative” and “represented” can be subverted, yet continue to operate as symbols within the rally.

The aesthetic components of the RAD rally, which encompassed visual and aural means, pointed towards the narrative of a modern Germany, under Hitler and his empire. The RAD was part of this grand scheme, and were instrumental in showcasing progress for Germany. Themes of discipline, unwavering allegiance, and memorialisation were core to this performance, illustrating a united people through work.

**The Sturmabteilung (SA) and Schutzstaffel (SS) Review**

The second performative instance in this analysis will be the sequence of events within the Sturmabteilung (SA) and Schutzstaffel (SS) review. Chronologically, this event happened in the morning of September 9th, 1934 (Hinton, 1975), within the Luitpold arena. The importance of the SA and SS review illustrated two ideas: (1) paramilitary unity, and (2) a ritualisation of the Reich. On June 30th, 1934, a few months before the Nuremberg rally, the Röhm Purge took place. It was an event that divided the SA’s allegiance. “Röhm and his top followers were assassinated in a wave of executions and arrests across [Germany], and a previously unknown figure, Victor Lutze, was named to replace Röhm” (Hinton, 1975, p. 49). Hitler had leaders of the SA and other officials killed in an attempt to secure unchallenged power over his paramilitary units. This purge was in accordance with a deal made with the Wehrmacht, since Röhm intended
his SA to overthrow them as the principal military power (Hinton, 1975, p. 49). By doing so, Hitler gained the trust of the Wehrmacht, and the SA and SS review of 1934 clarified unity within the regime’s forces through performance. Shirer (1942) argues:

Hitler faced his stormtroopers … for the first time since the bloody purge. In a harangue to 50,000 of them, he absolved them from the [Röhm] revolt. There was considerable tension in the stadium[,] and I noticed Hitler’s own SS bodyguards were drawn up in force in front of him, separating him from the mass of brownshirts [SA]. We wondered if just one of those 50,000 brownshirts would not pull a revolver, but not one did. (cited in Burden, 1967, p. 88)

Shirer’s (1942) excerpt from the Berlin Diaries is a first-hand account of the events at Nuremberg. He felt that Hitler wanted to convey a message of solidarity within the SA, yet the distinct nature of the SS as Hitler’s elite was surely identified. Much like the RAD rally, the SA and SS review was an aesthetic presentation that expressed Hitler’s relationship with the Third Reich’s forces. The value of Shirer’s accounts strengthens this work’s argument of attempted presentations of unity within the 1934 Nuremberg Rally; though the SA and SS were distinct units within the regime, their ceremonial review was an effort to pave over the cracks that the Röhm revolt has caused.

“The first part of the ceremony was dedicated to laying the wreath in honour of the heroes of World War I and those who had lost their lives in the [National Socialists’] struggle for power” (Burden, 1967, p. 88). Though excluded from the footage of Triumph of the Will (1935), “… the party’s skilful use of pomp and ceremony was shown, as to the roll of muffled drums[,] the standards were paraded down the middle aisle to the War Memorial” (Burden, 1967, p. 99). A pathway for Hitler, Himmler, and Lutze was separated by thousands of SA men, columned and
standing in attention. (See figures 9 and 10) Metres wide, the pathway was visually indicative of the power the three held within the regime. It was as if they were untouchable by everyone else. They walked calmly towards the memorial, where a large wreath laid to commemorate the fallen, as solemn music played (See Figure 11).

Figure 9: Hitler, Himmler, and Lutze march towards the memorial
Figure 10: Thousands of SA men parted to the sides

Figure 11: Hitler, Himmler, and Lutze saluting before the memorial
The scenery was dramatic: flaming stone plinths, members of the SS flanking the site, whilst pensive music paid homage to the loss of German lives (See Figures 12 and 13). O’Shaughnessy (2016) argues that “in private, Hitler claimed that ‘the fascist movement is a spontaneous return to the traditions of ancient Rome’ … pastiche reminiscence abounded – the Roman idiom-flaming plinths at Nuremberg, the Roman salute” (pp. 226-227). These visual devices, I argue, sought to frame Hitler’s Germany in the same strong and conquering image of the Roman Empire. The rally, as propaganda, portrayed a powerful regime through material means, such as the stone plinths at the memorial.

Figure 12: The scenery at the memorial, facing Hitler’s podium
The SS Musikkorps carried a Schellenbaum, or a musical instrument that also served as a party standard. Atop it was the Reichsadler or Imperial Eagle, with its pole adorned with bells and two horsehair tail plumes (See Figure 14). To have such an aesthetic device furthers speaks of Nazi Germany’s value of ornamentation. Evident within the SA and SS review was the use of symbols such as party standards and music. And as we shall see later on, I will discuss how physical movements contribute to a modern fascist aesthetic. From the goose-step to the arrangement of bodies, an illustration of uniformisation was presented by the regime. “… Symbols [were] a way of aestheticising the regime … [they] were signs of the new, more mobile and ultimately more exciting way of life” (O’Shaughnessy, 2016, p. 216). Drawing on O’Shaughnessy, I argue that symbol-use within Nazi Germany operated alongside human senses
in order to indoctrinate. From bands playing marches to grand visuals of banners and thousands of stormtroopers, those who were present were exposed to an overwhelming sensorial experience.

Figure 14: Party Schellenbaum
As Hitler, Himmler, and Lutze began to walk back from the memorial to the stone podium, the party standards were still at half-mast (See Figure 15). Upon reaching the end of the pathway, the solemn music subsided. As fanfare took its place, the stormtroopers turned 180 degrees to face Hitler and high command. *Triumph of the Will* (1935) captured the event from a bird’s-eye point of view. All one could see were the thousands of party standards marching towards Hitler’s podium, as they split in the middle, then occupying the sides of the Luitpold Arena. This sea of flags dominated one’s line of sight, enveloping the arena with bright red party banners; the swastika was the centre of attention (See Figures 16-17). Hitler stood at the highest level of the stone podium, but he was also apart from Himmler and Lutze’s positions (See Figure 18). The latter had theirs a few feet lower than Hitler’s. Behind the three were select members of National Socialist high command, as well as audience members dressed in civilian clothing, and invited journalists (See Figure 19).

![Figure 15: Party standards “bowing” during the memorial rites](image-url)
Figure 16: Party standards marched for display

Figure 17: Albert Speer’s “Sea of Flags”
Figure 18: Hitler’s podium, in comparison to Himmler’s

Figure 19: Audience members positioned behind the podium
The main group presented before the Führer was the SA. As their parade finished, and the SA were reviewed by Hitler, the middle pathway was occupied by the SS, with the SA taking place in the arena’s sides (See Figures 20 and 21). Though fewer in number, the SS had a more visually striking appearance. Referring to the review, occurring just months after the Röhm purge, O’Shaughnessy (2016) argues that the event “… [was] the reimagining of the new order[,] and the storehouse of [National Socialist] imagery for evermore. The storm troopers, cleansed and sanitised, were presented and resurrected before the German people[,] alongside their nemesis, the SS” (p. 46). Clad in black, with tailored tunics and jodhpurs, they were distinct from the SA by their very look. They were striking. German fashion designer Hugo Boss had been in charge of the design. On their peaked caps was the Totenkopf or the “Death’s Head”, just below the Reichsadler. Underneath the tunic was a white (or tan, in some versions), crisp, collared shirt, adorned with a simple black tie. Their tunics were cut fit, with a belt and crossbelt, emphasizing the torsos (See Figure 22). Their presence certainly demanded attention, particularly as Hitler’s elite.

Figure 20: SS officials with the band behind them
Figure 21: Ranks of SS men occupying the centre stone pathway

Figure 22: Variants of the SS uniform, illustrated by Pierre Turner
As both the SA and SS have taken their positions in the arena, and before Hitler, Lutze shouts words of allegiance to his leader: “My Führer, just as we served dutifully in former times, we only await your orders in the future”. Lutze exclaims these words as he remains in-salute, addressing Hitler, and facing him. After this, he faces his SA, and shouts: “And we, comrades, know nothing else, but to carry out our Führer’s orders … and to prove that we are the loyal ones”. He stops, then exhales: “Sieg!” His SA responds with one breath: “Heil!”.

Neither scholars nor *Triumph of the Will* (1935) document any exchange between Himmler and the SS, but only of Lutze and his SA. This is unsurprising, considering that the Röhm purge primarily involved the SA’s leadership, and the National Socialists saw in the rally a chance to rebuild the image of the SA, which was in a fragile state. In concluding this exchange, Hitler spoke: “A dark shadow fell across the movement” (referring to the purge), and highlights that “no party institution was at fault”. As I noted earlier in this section, a great deal went into the performance of unity for the SA and the SS. Exchanges such as this, as we have also seen in the RAD rally, were exhibitions of loyalty to Germany’s leader. Recalling Lutze’s words: “And we, comrades, know nothing else, but to carry out our Führer’s orders” is a good example of the cultic nature of National Socialist ritual. I define this as ritual because the oaths of loyalty are repetitive and entirely performative throughout the 1934 Nuremberg Rally. Benjamin’s (1969) “Führer’s cult” is also evident, as he claims of it as a “violation of the masses” (p. 19). The performance becomes such a violation because of how the masses are stripped off of their individuality, in subordination to their Führer’s demands, and his demands alone. Lutze’s words confirm this, as the SA’s pledge of allegiance to Hitler is total, stating that they know of nothing else other than to serve him.
In the 1934 Nuremberg Rally, the National Socialists performed an armoured regime, one that made use of visuality in order to create an illusion of a strong and stable empire. Benjamin (1969) argues that “all efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war” (p. 19). He supports this by quoting Marinetti’s 1909 manifesto: “War is beautiful because it establishes man’s dominion over the subjugated machinery by means of gas masks, terrifying megaphones, flame throwers, and small tanks. War is beautiful because it initiates the dream-of metallization of the human body” (cited in Benjamin, 1969, p. 19). Aside from the literal metallisation through tanks, guns and cannons, Marinetti mentions the human body as a metallised element. I argue that, within the 1934 rally, in the SA and SS review and other instances, the body is portrayed as mechanised and uniform. Mechanisation is also achieved through machinated movement, which highlights the synchronicity of the body. An example of this would be marching (See Figure 23).

Figure 23: SS men performing the goose-step
During marching, leg and arm movements go in the same direction; this mirroring from body to body denote of a mechanical operation – one that works in precise movement. On a mass scale, these bodies, marching side-by-side, create a spectacle of movement. Marching connotes conformity and discipline. The same can be said with the Roman salute. Arms raised in unison with one another creates an image of unity. This salute was shared by both political and military members of the National Socialist Party, including civilian citizens. Again, much like marching which features synchronicity, the Roman salute operates to present a mechanised mass – a cultivated response to various practices within the regime. This mechanisation becomes more important when mass gestures are done in service to a fascist leader. Benjamin’s Führer cult is evident in these instances as movements such as the salute were done in reverence to Hitler.

Buck-Morss (1992), drawing from Benjamin (1969), defines fascist aesthetics as an “anaesthetic”; a means of numbing the masses to totalitarian control. Within the SA and SS review, this was evident in the exchange between Hitler and his paramilitary forces. Lutze, representing his SA men, exclaimed: “My Führer … we only await your orders in the future … and we, comrades, know nothing else … to prove that we are the loyal ones”. How Hitler was positioned before his forces commanded a power which was total, and the words exchanged in Nuremberg were markers of this submission to the Führer. Acts of loyalty through audio-visual means portrayed a Germany that was submissive to Hitler. These performances, which were acted out by both Hitler and his men, exemplifies Buck-Morss’ anaesthetics as numbing: a sensorial experience that creates a manufactured reality. “Sensory addiction to a compensatory reality becomes a means of social control” (Buck-Morss, 1992, p. 23). Within the 1934 rally, sensory experiences abounded; audiences had a variety of exposure to this: loud musical marches, overwhelming visuals of uniformed men, swastikas everywhere, and red banners atop
every house and structure in Nuremberg. Even for civilians watching, the feeling of brushing off each other, in attempts to get the best view of the parades, to the exhilaration in anticipation of the rally, produced a sensorial experience. The 1934 Nuremberg Rally was an event that relied on sensory functions in order to indoctrinate.

The metallisation of the human body moves beyond Benjamin, and is also explored by Foster (1991), arguing that fascist aesthetics are “… ambiguous explorations of the (proto)fascist obsession with the body as armour, and to see this armour as a prosthesis to shore up a disrupted body image or to support a ruined ego construction” (pp.67-68). The National Socialists’ rise to power was prefaced by the Treaty of Versailles, which left Germany in acute despair, especially economically. I argue that a part of the aesthetic performances within the 1934 Nuremberg Rally operated to “hide” the situation Germany was in. Hence, the use of propaganda to frame the regime in a certain light. The SA and SS review worked as a means to present the two organisations as working towards a secure Germany, under Hitler and his regime. It is important to note that these two organisations were not part of the German Armed Forces, but were units formed even before the National Socialist Party came to power. The SA and SS performance was a show of strength, in allegiance to Hitler’s undisputed command. This paramilitary review, in turn, hid the economic weaknesses of Germany through a manicured presentation of young men in fine uniforms, particularly the SS, and a massive production of flags, and costs of preparation for the Nuremberg rally. The 1934 rally was a week-long celebration, and I argue that its production employed many in order to make the event a success. This was a good tool in boasting of Germany’s capacity to financially support yearly rallies. The SA and SS members present in the review were all men, and of Aryan descent. I argue that Marinetti’s manifesto, which spoke of metallisation, in connection with Foster’s fascist aesthetics as armour, speak of
the regime’s protection of their own Germanic culture from the “other”, “non-Aryans” and women, who they found inferior.

At the end of the SA and SS review, there was the consecration of flags, which involved the Blutfahne, or “Blood Flag”. O'Shaughnessy (2016) argues:

The rituals of the Blood Flag were the grandest and most elemental rituals of Nazi Germany and the sacrament of the Nuremberg rally. The myriad banners of the SA divisions were presented by their bearers and touched by the Blood Flag, held by the Führer himself. This was repeated every year. The magic was not only delivered on one single epic occasion, but had to be renewed annually to continue to have meaning. (p. 247, emphases added)

As cannons fired and Horst-Wessel-Lied, the National Socialist anthem, played in the background, thousands of banners around the Luitpold Arena were raised from the ground. Hitler touched the Blutfahne onto the new party standards, as he was accompanied by his officers (Figures 24 and 25). The Führer did so whilst cannon fire continued, and the party’s anthem was played. The Blutfahne was significant because it had been carried in the failed 1923 Munich Putsch, where sixteen members of the early National Socialist Party perished. “… The Blood Flag (Blutfahne) [was] carried by the original conspirators, and was ‘stained with the blood of the sixteen martyrs’” (Taylor, 1981, p. 506). The same flag, which was carried at one of the first engagements of the National Socialist Party, continued to emerge as an important symbol during the Nuremberg rallies. I argue that the Blutfahne had a mystical significance to Hitler and his regime – it was symbolic of the Third Reich’s roots, and was treated as a relic. The Blutfahne, touched onto the new party standards, contained a power that demanded a yearly ritual, embedded within the SA and SS review. Taylor (1981) argues that “The Blood Flag is a
transparent allegory to the Christian cross, especially in its representation of the process of historical salvation for a nation or people through the blood-sacrifice of another” (p. 509). Taylor assigns a Christian meaning to the Blutfahne through the use of Christian language. I concur, and argue that the National Socialists found value in the meaning that Christian symbols conveyed, thus making use of their own symbols and rituals in order to extend the same message of salvation. Such as the consecration of flags, the National Socialists saw the value of ritualistic practice in order to indoctrinate. Instead of Christ, Hitler became the messianic figure, and the Reich as the Führer’s faithful following. Again, this is an instance in which we see Benjamin’s Führer cult come into play, where a singular figure becomes central to an entire people’s life. The Blutfahne’s details are outlined by Taylor (1981), who argues that “the swastika or sun-wheel promoted the quality of sun and light; the red backcloth[:] the association of blood and fire” (p. 510). The visual clues that the National Socialists embedded onto their national emblems are relevant because they allow us to see the messages conveyed through non-verbal sequences, particularly in repeated rituals within the Nuremberg rallies. Taylor (1981) argues that “The Pledge”, a poem by Eberhard Wolfgang Möller, was part of the consecration of flags (p. 510). Möller’s creation, however, was not featured in Triumph of the Will (1935):

We are sworn to our flag, for ever.

Whoever dishonours the flag will be cursed.

The flag is our creed, of God and Volk and land.

Whoever wants to steal it, must first take our life and strength. (cited in Taylor, 1981, p. 510)

The consecration of flags, as an annual practice, speaks of the ritualistic nature of the National Socialist Party; they infused upon the rituals a liturgy that was meant to be followed. Hitler,
holding onto the *Blutfahne*, as he consecrated the flags of the party is reminiscent of Christian relics: as if a believer would be healed if he touched a saint’s clothing. The 1934 Nuremberg Rally illustrated a ritual where the *Blutfahne* had a power that was transferrable to the regime’s standards, and by Hitler’s touch, the act was completed. An analysis of the National Socialist mythos should be considered in a different study; however, the consecration of flags in the 1934 Nuremberg Rally indicates the mystical framing of the regime. For the National Socialists, it was a practice that displayed power, which for Hitler, was not fully comprehensible for his audience, yet was a practise which instilled awe to those present.

The SA and SS review heavily exposed audiences to the theme of unity and a ritualisation of the Reich. Both contributed to a forming of the National Socialist *Weltanschauung*. The review’s ritualistic performances allowed the masses to consider themselves under a singular leader, devoted to the progress of the whole, where individualism was removed from the narrative.

![Figure 24: Hitler “consecrating” party standards with the Blutfahne](image-url)
The Closing Congress

The third, and last, performative instance in this analysis will be the sequence of events within the closing congress. Chronologically, this event happened on September 10th, 1934 – the exact time of the rally is unknown (Hinton, 1975). The closing congress encapsulated the aesthetic agenda of the rally, centring itself on Benjamin’s *Fürher* cult, with Hitler as orator. It defined, in Hitler’s words, the nature of the National Socialist Party – fashioned like a religious entity – thus giving meaning to the ritualistic nature of the Nuremberg rallies. The importance of the closing congress illustrated two ideas: (1) Hitler as foundation of Nazi Germany, and (2) the National Socialist Party as an all-powerful empire. Kracauer (1947) argued that “the convention itself had also been staged to produce *Triumph of the Will* [1935], for the purpose of resurrecting the ecstasy of the people through it” (p. 301). For Kracauer, the 1934 Nuremberg Rally was a performative device meant to be viewed (and re-viewed) by the people. As propaganda, I argue
that the rally sought to manufacture power. Lippman (1921) notes that propaganda “… is the effort to alter the picture to which men respond, to substitute one social pattern for another …” (n.p.). He regards it as a means to solicit a response from the people. Considering the closing congress in this light, Hitler was the image in which the National Socialists were united. And the events of the rally itself, as propaganda, sought a response of submission from the masses. This submission was visually expressed through repetitive movement and responses from the German people. Mass hails were frequent during Hitler’s speech in the closing congress. The commotion of the people amplified Hitler’s speech, as it was a response which signified agreement with Hitler, however extreme the content of his speech may have been. Hitler’s delivery of the speech, from his body movements to the intonation of his voice, was only magnified by the surrounding architecture. The hall was designed to overwhelm attendees: the grand swastika occupied the wall which the masses faced; party standards served as the stage’s background; columns had the *Reichsadler*, as spotlights added drama to the auratic effects of the closing congress (See Figures 26 and 27).

*Figure 26: Wreath-adorned swastika overlooking the congress hall*
The congress began with Hitler, alongside members of high command, entering through the centre aisle, as the *Badenweiler Marsch* played (See Figure 28). Unorganised, and walking as a big group, Hitler and his men were saluted by the masses. Many attendees were wearing the red armband – a cloth ornament, which was worn on the left bicep, depicting the swastika. The masses were separated in the auditorium, with military, political, and church leaders seated on the stage with Hitler, with people in civilian clothing, wearing the armband, seated before the *Führer*. 
Figure 28: Hitler and high command’s entrance

Hitler was the “main attraction” of this event. His oratory skills were put on display. His performance, at the very least, was captivating. His facial expressions demanded a change of attitude and emotion to every word he spoke, and his body movements (not just his upper body, but his whole body) moved to the rhythm of this narrative. He told a story of tragedy, uprising, and victory; all of which were themes that his party members responded to quite positively, with cheers and thunderous applause. Burden (1967) argues:

The effects of this grandiose party congress were to be devastating. The irrational adulation and deification of Hitler demonstrated during this hysterical week increased Hitler’s megalomania; he felt he could now whip the German masses into any frenzy, that they would carry out any order he might give them. (p. 91)
Burden discusses the future implications of Hitler’s deification, or in Benjamin’s words, a *Führer* cult. The Second World War, which happened only a few years after this rally, confirmed Burden’s claim: Hitler as foundation to Nazi Germany was dangerous. From mass genocide to the invasion of Europe, Hitler’s power became total. Germany was under his full command. The presentations in Nuremberg portrayed a powerful Hitler.

The *Führer’s* speech, which was central to the closing congress, was preceded by the entrance of the party’s standards. Carried by Jakob Grimmer, and flanked by two SS sentries, the *Blutfahne* was brought into the hall (See Figure 29). A series of party standards followed. It was an all-encompassing performance: musical marches played, as the spotlights redirected people’s gaze towards the procession of standards (See Figure 30). The standards had a unique plaque on them, each having the name of a German state, city, or town. These represented the political reach of the party. On each of the standards were the words *Deutschland Erwache*, or in English, “Germany, awaken” (See Figure 31). This is to no surprise, as Hitler, deified, can be seen as the messianic figure which enlightened Germany through cultural and racial cleansing. The standards are similar to the design of Roman pennants, which were carried as military standards (See Figure 32). The connection between the Roman era and Nazi Germany is highlighted by O’Shaughnessy (2016). The association of the National Socialists with Rome was performed through visual devices within the regime, such as the influence of Roman standards: An aesthetic mirroring was present between Nazism and the Roman Empire, where symbols operated to portray a structured regime.
Figure 29: Jakob Grimmer carrying the Blutfahne, flanked by two SS sentries

Figure 30: Procession of party standards, lit by spotlights
Figure 31: 1923 Putsch commemoration, illustrated by an unknown artist

Figure 32: Roman vexillarius carrying a vexillum, illustrated by an unknown artist
Attendees of the congress, including Hitler and high command, saluted as the procession of standards took place – a repetitive and conditioned response within the rally, whenever the party’s banners or standards were brought in.

As the procession concluded, Rudolph Hess, deputy *Führer* took the podium, heralding Hitler: “The *Führer* speaks!” Mass cheering commenced, and took place for quite some time, as Hitler replaced Hess at the helm of the stage. The *Führer* rose to the podium with his head down, sombre, and fixed his crossbelt as he awaited the mass to pause their commotion. Without changing his stern expression, he took a deep breath, and prepared to speak. He stood, waiting for his cue (See Figure 33). Calmly, he said: “Millions of Germans outside our ranks may only see this as an impressive display of political power. It was more than that for the hundreds of thousands of fighters … this has been a great spiritual meeting of old fighters and comrades in arms”. Hitler, still calm, reminisced of his party’s struggle before their rise to power. Quickly, however, he raised his tone, which was welcomed by the audience. Hitler emphasized more on the party’s early state as outcast, and became more animated: he moved his hands over his head, while raised himself by tiptoeing. With an angry facial expression, he pointed his fingers up, and shook his fists (See Figure 34). His voice started to growl, as he continued to speak of the early National Socialist Party. He said, in a loud voice: “First, it wanted to be a party with a worldview. And second, it wanted sole power in Germany, without compromise”. Hitler’s body tightened and raised his right arm, as his tone continued to escalate. He paused, as he waited for mass cheers and hails to subside. He attempted to halt them by raising his right hand. The crowd began to calm down.
Figure 33: Hitler calmly waited as the mass cheered

Figure 34: Hitler became more animated as he spoke of the party’s roots
Hitler continued: “As a party, we had to remain in the minority in order to mobilise those with a fighting spirit and a sense of sacrifice”. He crossed his arms, and continued in a loud voice, as he tiptoed, once again. For half a second, he smiled, then fixed his crossbelt. Hitler’s oratory gestures were both practical and aesthetically appropriate. First, from a practical perspective, an animated Hitler allowed his audiences to see him, even those in the very back of the hall. Their attention was centred at him, and all eyes remained on him, because he did not stand idly as he spoke. Second, as an aesthetic device, Hitler’s body movements kept the masses entertained. And as he would gesture during specific moments, a raised fist or tiptoe, this would signal an emotional response from the crowd. I argue that Hitler’s performance as an orator was a way of telling the masses how to feel regarding specific instances within National Socialist history. For example, when Hitler tightened up his body or raised his fists when speaking of how the party was marginalised, this would signal to the audience that anger and disdain were the right response, thus, uniting the people through emotional solidarity. Unity, the central theme within the 1934 Nuremberg Rally, was also present in Hitler’s closing speech. Hitler, waving his hands from right to left (See Figure 35), stated: “The German people are happy in the knowledge that the divisions of the past have been replaced … by a high standard leading the nation”. Hitler tiptoed once again, as he gestured his fist down. After this statement, the mass rose to their feet, some saluting him, as hails filled the hall. Hitler did not mention any specific division of the past, yet one can assume that his statement referred to a multitude of events, such as the Röhm purge which led to the reform of National Socialist leadership. The mass made noise and cheered for a while, and Hitler gestured for them to stop.
Hitler’s next words are important to note: “We carry the best blood, and we know this”. He waved his hand, swiftly, across his chest. And he did so as if whisking away those who were not part of this bloodline. He referred to the bloodline by stating that German leadership had acquired it, and to “never give it up!”. He said this as he stiffened up his right arm, and created a slashing motion, opposite his left shoulder. He continued with his speech, noting that re-arming the people was an important step. Hitler shouted that it was not enough for the people to say: “I believe”, but should say: “I will fight!”. In a proud and astute posture caused by his faith in his words, the Führer crossed his arms, with his chin poised high, waiting for the mass to calm down (See Figure 36). With Hitler’s facial expression, as well as his body’s positioning, suggest that the German leader was proud of what he just stated. The fact that Hitler did not state what kind of fight was necessary or how fighting would happen encourages the mass to assign meaning to his vague words. This allowed for the mass to think that Hitler represented their desires, and was achieved when the audience “fills-in-the-blanks”, assuming that Hitler had the same agenda. “In
order to conduct a propaganda[,] there must be some barrier between the public and the event. Access to the real environment must be limited, before anyone can create a pseudo-environment that he thinks wise or desirable” (Lippman, 1921, n.p.). By allowing the mass to project upon Hitler’s speech their own desires, a connection was established between orator and audience. 

![Figure 36: Hitler as he waited for mass commotion to subside](image)

Expressing the National Socialist claim, Hitler cried: “The party will always be the political leadership of the people! *It will remain unchangeable in its doctrine* … In its entirety, however, *it will be like a religious order*. In Hitler’s words, the National Socialist party contained in itself a doctrine, or a belief, comparing it to a religious order. As Hitler said these words, he stretched out his arms and looked above, as if staring into the skies (See Figure 37). Interestingly, the only thing above Hitler was the massive swastika adorning the venue. I argue that the large ornate swastika shared the audience’s attention towards Hitler; it was
representative of the two powers in Germany: Hitler and the National Socialists. With Hitler’s climactic words, the events in Nuremberg became more than just parades and gallantry, but were performative of the National Socialist worldview. This worldview exhibited a powerful Germany, economically progressive and militaristically strong; all these under the supreme command of the Führer. The importance of highlighting Hitler’s words, comparing the party to a religious order, underlines the ritualistic nature of the annual Nuremberg rallies – that through repetition, a sense of solidarity is formed among Germans, and a constant presentation of power is embedded within the National Socialist narrative. Indoctrination occurred through constant exposition to audio-visual performances which forced the mass to see Germany as Hitler intended it to be: a strong and conquering people, united by their blood. Hitler’s speech, up to this point, had been a narrative of struggle for the National Socialists, and the 1934 rally was a means that demonstrated the party’s triumphant claim to political victory.

Figure 37: Hitler looks up, as if staring deeply into the skies
Hitler continued: “Now, we must inspect ourselves, and reject that which is bad and therefore does not belong to us!”. The mass erupted in cheers, and shouted: “Sieg, Heil!” as they saluted. However, Hitler, did not explicitly identify who the people should reject, yet the masses seemed to be in agreement with the Führer. This could have referred to any group that the party was against, such as the Jews, communists, homosexuals, and those outside of Aryan descent.

Hitler’s speech began with excerpts from the National Socialist’s roots, and towards the end, focused on the future of the German nation under National Socialist leadership. Hitler shouted: “It is our wish and will that this state and this Reich should remain in existence in the coming millennia … this future will belong to us totally!”  Hitler stretched his arms and clasped them together, onto his chest, as if welcoming the people into his care and overwatch (See Figure 38). Hitler presented an image of enthusiasm for the future of Nazi Germany.

Figure 38: Hitler’s emotional expression as he spoke of the Reich’s future
Hitler concluded: “Others will be preparing for the next roll call … they will be gripped, cheered, and inspired anew, because the idea and the movement are the expressions of our people, and a symbol of the eternal. Long live the National Socialist movement! Long live Germany!” He tiptoed and saluted (See Figure 39), then exited the podium. The mass was in a frenzy. Hess retook the podium, yet was unable to speak as the audience continued to applaud and cheer Hitler. When he could, he exclaimed: “The party is Hitler! But Hitler is Germany, as Germany is Hitler! Sieg, Heil!” The stage continued to be lit by the spotlights, as the Horst-Wessel-Lied played, and all rose to salute and sing the National Socialist anthem.

![Figure 39: “Long live the National Socialist Movement! Long live Germany!”](image)

Hitler spoke of the rally and the party as a symbol of eternity, leaving those who witnessed the rally inspired by ideals that would propel the National Socialist movement into the new millennia.

While exciting and dramatic, Hitler’s speech lacked detail. The closing congress was a means of uniting the people, and instilling upon them an image of an eternal Reich. To conclude, above the hall’s entrance, in German script, were the monumental words “All for Germany”.

75
Certainly, these very words captured the events at Nuremberg. The performances within the 1934 rally heralded a Germany which submitted itself to Hitler and his “empire.” “The party is Hitler! But Hitler is Germany, as Germany is Hitler!” In Hess’ words, Hitler was the very foundation in which the National Socialist regime grew and claimed power. The closing congress illustrated Benjamin’s Führer cult in a complex web of audio-visual performances by both audience and orator, all paying homage to Adolf Hitler.

Conclusion

The 1934 Nuremberg rally was a propagandistic performance which manufactured power through aesthetic representation. The RAD rally, the SA and SS review, and the closing congress were expressive instances that showed and performed unity among the German people, illustrating a community, best represented by the term Volksgemeinschaft. The mass adulation towards Hitler and his regime constituted a choreographed performance of ritual, where repetition became a strategy of indoctrination. The mystical symbols Hitler embedded upon the Reich seemed otherworldly. From the consecration of flags to his framing of party as religious-like, Nuremberg became the grounds of an epic tale that narrated the National Socialist world and life view or Weltanschauung. This consisted of a structured mass, all in service to the Führer, in return of a prosperous society which would uplift the German people. This analysis has given Benjamin’s Führer cult a concrete application through the examination of the 1934 rally, which manufactured a powerful regime, and a deified Führer. The performative instances within this analysis prove that an aesthetisation of power was an elaborate device of propaganda, allowing the mass to submit themselves to a single man and his empire through aural and visual means.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

Through Benjamin’s (1969) aesthetisation of power, the 1934 Nuremberg Rally operated to indoctrinate the masses through experience; this experience was mainly propelled by performance. Benjamin’s (1969) *Führer* cult was a salient strategy of aesthetisation in the three performative instances analysed. If compared to an orchestra, Hitler was the conductor of the symphonic performances within the 1934 Nuremberg Rally. Ultimately, I refer to the 1934 Nuremberg Rally’s performances as symphonic, not only because they were carefully choreographed, but they acted out ideological messages through aesthetic presentation. Much like Richard Wagner, whose works were often referred to as a “total work of art” or a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the 1934 Nuremberg Rally exhibited much of the exhilarating and all-encompassing nature of an orchestral performance. As a rhetorical strategy, the overwhelming nature of the 1934 Nuremberg Rally’s aesthetics, from the bands playing to the banners all around Nuremberg, mirrored the totalitarian nature of the regime – a city, surrounded by symbols of Hitler’s Germany. The performances within the 1934 Nuremberg Rally certainly operated to express racial homogeneity, economic stability, and power through aesthetic devices. The performance gave a message of Hitler’s power by presenting Hitler as a cultic leader, commanding over an apparent strong Germany. The National Socialist aesthetic was an aesthetic which led to war because it expressed the concept of totalitarian control over the masses, enforced by a highly militarised regime, and commanded by a megalomaniac – the inevitability of war was highlighted by mass submission towards the *Führer*; his extreme ambitions would cost Germany lives, and an end to Hitler’s empire in the Second World War.

A limitation of this analysis, however, is its inability to critically analyse *Triumph of the Will* (1935). Due to the narrow constraints of this honours thesis, the researcher has limited this
work’s scope to the performances within the 1934 Nuremberg Rally. *Triumph of the Will* (1935) only serves as a transparent mediation of the rally, and this analysis is affected by the way in which the film captured the rally’s events.

Certainly, a fascist aesthetisation of power was present within the 1934 Nuremberg Rally. Not only was this aesthetisation amplified by how it was captured within *Triumph of the Will* (1935), but through the intricacies of the rituals and symbols embedded within it did the National Socialists fully express their world and life view. Through an almost spiritual and other-worldly aura, the events at Nuremberg offered the masses an experience which caused an indoctrinating effect – shrouding the horrors of the National Socialist agenda through fanfare, costume, mass entertainment, and a spectacular experience under the swastika.
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