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Why America Fought: Post-Postmodernism in Amazon's *The Man in the High Castle*

Abstract: The article proposes a twofold reading of Amazon's hit series *The Man in the High Castle*. Thus the series can be understood satirically in that its depiction of an America under Nazi rule functions as a foil through which dominant media representations of 1960s America are potentially demystified as being utopian. This first perspective is related to Fredric Jameson's notion of postmodernism that criticizes the nostalgic dimension inherent to such media representations. The other reading links the series to the September 11 terror attacks; through what the article calls the post-postmodern perspective, Amazon's *The Man in the High Castle* can be viewed as advocating a forceful U.S. government which is willing to take control over America's trajectory in the course of history.

Thankfully, the world never witnessed what it would have looked like if the Nazis had realized their collective fantasy of a *Großdeutsches Reich* ("Greater German Empire"). What is left from this era is predominantly propaganda and war imagery, including film and photos captured by the Allies during their liberation campaign.¹ In fact, Hitler's dream was shattered by reality in 1945: National Socialist ideology did not itself survive its implementation phase, ethnic cleansing would never reach the scale the Nazi leadership envisioned, Germany lay in ruins, and The Führer killed himself in an act of delusion and desperation.

Not so in the TV series *The Man in the High Castle*. Produced by Amazon Studios, and distributed through Amazon's digital video streaming service, Amazon Video, *The Man in the High Castle* is based on Philip K. Dick's 1963 alternate history novel of the same title. The series attracted notable attention, not only because it was one of Amazon's first original series but also because of its provocatively dystopian subject: what if the Allies had lost the Second World War to the Axis powers?

A horrifying scenario, to be sure. And yet the TV series, coproduced by former *X-Files* writer Frank Spotnitz and veteran director Ridley Scott, seems to have its finger on the pulse of the present zeitgeist; *High Castle's*

Dies ist eine veröffentlichte Manuskriptfassung des Titels "Why America Fought: Post-Postmodernism in Amazon's *The Man in the High Castle*" von Moritz Fink veröffentlicht in der Zeitschrift *SPIEL: Eine Zeitschrift zur Medienkultur / Journal of Media Culture*, Neue Folge, Jg. 2 H. 2 (2016), S. 127–146.

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¹ In addition to amateur film material giving insights into everyday life in Nazi Germany, a remarkable exception are the visual recordings by the American documentary filmmaker Julien Bryan, who was officially traveling through Nazi Germany in 1937, documenting daily life and the impact of National Socialism before the war started in what was released as *March of Time: Inside Nazi Germany* in 1938.

first season became Amazon's most streamed original series of 2015 (Jarvey 2015), a second season was released in 2016, a third season is currently in production.²

One explanation for this success might be the strange yet not uncommon fascination with representations of historical Nazis as narrative elements signifying evilness and horror – a perspective informed by the safe assurance that such representations refer to a distant past. Furthermore, this perspective uses irony as part of a larger, “postmodern” sensibility according to which we take pleasure in fictional representations of Nazis as we see them in *High Castle*, because we understand them as “historical parody” rather than “real” history (Hutcheon 1988, 4). What we may call the postmodern perspective, then, recalls Fredric Jameson’s criticism of postmodern aesthetics and their superficial use of parody – or, as Jameson prefers to call it, “pastiche” – for “approach[ing] the ‘past’ through stylistic connotation” (1984, 67).

In touching on Jameson’s notion of postmodernism, I will arrive at what I regard as another, perhaps even more thought-provoking, aspect of *High Castle*’s popular success. Aside from the fact that the series is a well-produced melodrama, which falls into the line of today’s highly acclaimed complex television series as discussed by Jason Mittell (2015), this essay argues that *High Castle* is topical not so much because of its postmodern sensibility but rather because the series complicates an ironic distance vis-à-vis history, thus answering to a condition that we have begun to refer to as post-postmodernism. This other perspective views *High Castle* in the context of a new cultural uncertainty – a sentiment that doesn’t stem from the fictional element inherent to our (re)construction of historical reality, but from the potential “realness” inherent to what we used to write off as mere fiction.

The Man in the High Castle: From Book to Television

As in Dick’s novel, the series’ setting is early 1960s America. Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan have won the war, and the world finds itself parted among the two superpowers. As a result, the former United States is divided into an eastern “Nazi America” under German influence and Japan’s province on the west coast. The two spheres are separated by the Rocky Mountain area which functions as a neutral, demilitarized buffer zone.

In the series’ first season, we encounter Juliana Crain (Alexa Davalos), a young woman who shares a basement apartment in San Francisco with her half-Jewish boyfriend, Frank Frink (Rupert Evans). Juliana appears to be quite adapted to the culture of the rulers – she practices aikido and knows

2 Amazon does neither reveal the number of its subscribers nor the number of subscribers who streamed a certain series.

Japanese. Then we see her witnessing soldiers and members of the ruling Kempeitai party kill her half-sister, Trudy, right after Trudy has given Juliana a box with film reel. Juliana learns that Trudy worked for an underground network called the Resistance and planned to smuggle the film reel, containing an illegal picture entitled *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*, to Canon City in the neutral zone. Juliana decides to substitute for Trudy and goes to Canon City where she meets John Blake, a handsome man in his mid-twenties, who is also in search of the *Grasshopper* film in his function as a double agent. In fact, Blake has infiltrated the Resistance while working for the Nazis, reporting to SS-Obergruppenführer John Smith (Rufus Sewell).

For our purpose it is not very helpful to dwell on the plot too much, or to exhaustively list all the differences between Dick’s original story and Amazon’s screen adaptation. Instead, I wish to point out two striking differences that I consider relevant with regard to our subject. First, unlike the book, where the impact of Nazism on America is demonstrated almost *en passant* and in a highly subtle fashion (for instance, by including German words and names, or brands like I.G. Farben), the television version of *High Castle* gives a much fuller picture of the “Nazi part” of America (in addition to the appropriate name, the “Greater Nazi Reich in America”). As close readings of scenes from Obergruppenführer Smith’s family celebrating a national holiday will illustrate, regarding its representation of civil life in Nazi America, *High Castle* mostly draws on representational clichés as we know it from traditional media depictions of postwar America, which correspond to what Jameson calls postmodern “nostalgia mode.” I argue that *High Castle* works more as satire rather than a dystopia in this regard, with American culture being supplemented rather than replaced by National Socialist elements (not to mention that the latter would have probably been unacceptable for an American mainstream audience).

The second difference concerns the story’s very object of desire, *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*. While Dick’s novel describes *The Grasshopper* as a piece of writing, thereby providing “a *what if* scenario with a twist” in presenting a book about an alternative world within a book about an alternative world (Brown 2001, xi), this device has been effectively reinterpreted in Amazon’s screen adaptation; meeting the audiovisual form, it has been transferred to the film medium. In addition to this formal choice, I will read the content of the *Grasshopper* films (indeed, there exist multiple versions of *The Grasshopper* in the *High Castle* series) in relation to a post-postmodern account of history: even if we know that a particular scene showing the Nazis’ atomic bombing of San Francisco belongs to the world of fiction (in *High Castle*’s fictional universe as well as in humanity’s “real” history), we are familiar with such images of nuclear destruction-scenes that undoubtedly did take place and have affected mankind’s future existence in terms of what is now our historical

heritage. As I will argue, this sentiment, which I shall call post-postmodern, is related to the terror attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, 2001, as well as to a new form of approaching history which goes along with this sentiment. History, in this view, isn't understood ironically in a postmodern fashion, but as a matter of evidence that a forceful American government has been essential in order to keep fiction bound to its prescribed realm of fantasy.

History as Narrative: Reading *The Man in the High Castle* as Postmodernism

One of the most irritating characteristics about *High Castle* is that it depicts what we may have seen many times before – and not yet: a representation of the “Golden Times” of 1960s America with all its optimism, prosperity, and modern design, all of which is juxtaposed with Nazi imagery and rhetoric. Already the opening of the series’ first season, in the pilot episode titled “The New World” (released on January 15, 2015), demonstrates this principle. Here we see one of *High Castle*’s male lead characters, Joe Blake, watching newsreel film in a movie theater. Effectively establishing the theme of the series, the film clip promotes the state of the Greater Nazi Reich. If it wasn’t for the deep hypnotic voice using “code words” we immediately associate with totalitarian propaganda rhetoric (“our brave leaders,” “our proud land”), this would perfectly echo the standard postcard picture of 1960s America.

We recognize a bourgeois family in front of their brand-new car and house – American suburbia as the ultimate stereotype representing this era of economic prosperity and the rise of consumerism (Figure 1). “Everyone has a job,” says the narrator’s voice, as we see auto workers fixing cars on an assembly line (that the cars aren’t Chevrolets but VW Beatles, however, should already raise suspicion). At the end of the newsreel clip, an American flag is shown – yet it bears a swastika instead of the fifty white stars, as well as an eagle on top of the flag pole. This shot is arresting not only because of the powerful “logo-like” image of the swastika. In a striking fashion, the composition demonstrates *High Castle*’s general mode of imaging Nazi America through what is a disturbing amalgamation of the Nazis’ and the United States’ political symbolisms, a stark contrast that is strengthened by revealing the repurposing of the Roman eagle symbol in both political iconographies – with the Nazis, of course, even aping the Romans’ usage of the eagle symbol in the *aquila* battle standard (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Still from the theater scene in High Castle’s pilot episode, “The New World,” advertising 1960s American suburbia (01:33).



Figure 2: A stark contrast: the last scene of the newsreel advertising the Greater Nazi Reich of America (02:10).



As Joe leaves the theater and enters the nightly streets of New York City, we get an even better sense of the “new world” that *High Castle* is about. We recognize car models characteristic of the sixties, as well as New York’s iconic yellow cabs, as Joe passes a billboard that shows uniformed people standing erect above the caption “strong bodies, strong nation” (Figure 3). Then a wide-angle shot offers an impression of how Times Square might have looked

like had it been branded by the Nazi Party, not Corporate America. We see a large-scale swastika flag on the front of the Times Tower, including the slogan “work will set you free” (the English translation of the cynical *Arbeit-macht-frei* slogan that actually hung over some entrances of concentration camps), and various other spotlighted political billboards promoting the “Reich” (Figure 4). The sound of a helicopter fades in as we recognize the aircraft’s searchlights in the sky, all of which adds to the Brave New World portrayed in *High Castle*. Helicopters, jet planes, space rockets, or a monorail in New York City do not come across as science fiction; they are the very markers of the postwar technological boom, which make us shudder when they do not appear in contradiction to the Nazi world. This is also true for the impact of advertisements and corporate culture that we associate with this period.

At the same time, the horrors of an America under the swastika are cinematographically reinforced. Our first impressions of the Reich consist of a sinister New York by night; techniques like low-key lightening govern a scene in the pilot episode in which SS units are torturing a member of the Resistance; and the juxtapositioning of low-/high-angle shots and close-up/long shots characterize a memorable moment from season one’s ninth episode, “Kindness,” when Obergruppenführer Smith pushes an SS official who works for an oppositional fraction from the SS headquarter building in New York. These are conventional filmic means to connote both the diabolic character and powerful agency of the Nazi empire (represented by the Obergruppenführer and the swastika symbols) within *High Castle*’s image of America (represented by the skyline of New York City).

Figure 3: Joe Blake rushing through the streets of High Castle’s New York City (02:47).



Figure 4: High Castle’s depiction of Times Square with a large-scale representation of the Nazi Party’s swastika flag on the Times Tower (03:00).



Beneath the overall dystopian setting, and the powerful element of Nazi aesthetics as a narrative device connoting “the bad guys,” however, Amazon’s *High Castle* corresponds to what Jameson calls the “nostalgia mode” of films like *American Graffiti* (directed by George Lucas, 1973). In this mode, according to Jameson, the post-WWII era works as the simulacrum of a “privileged lost object of desire,” conveying “‘pastness’ by the glossy qualities of the image, and [...] ‘1950s-ness’ by the attributes of fashion” (1984, 67). That is, these films revel in a nostalgic past, creating “pastness” rather than representing “real” history (it is another question if films like *American Graffiti* have aspired to provide “authentic” historical documents in some form). From this perspective, the Nazi component in *High Castle* functions more as an auxiliary feature of the series’ mise-en-scène rather than an aspect that fundamentally challenges our shared “filmic” idea of postwar America. What obscures this viewpoint is *High Castle*’s cliché-ridden depiction of Nazis – almost all of them wear SS-uniforms, sometimes including the infamous black leather coat; we see soldiers wearing the typical German WWII-steel helmet; the streets are controlled by “brownshirts” and German shepherds. Within what is a largely conventional approach to representing the postwar era, then, the Nazi element constitutes the series’ very source of incongruity, inhibiting the audience to understand *High Castle* in a purely nostalgic sense.

America über Alles: Nostalgia as Satire

The degree to which the Nazi element is merely a prop within the postmodern dimension of *High Castle* becomes demonstrated best in the first season's sixth episode, "Three Monkeys" (released on November 20, 2015). Admittedly, "Three Monkeys" stands out from the rest of the series in that a significant part of this particular episode departs from *High Castle*'s "pulp melodrama," as Noah Berlatsky (2015) appropriately puts it, but rather suggests how everyday family life might look like in the Greater Nazi Reich of America.³ While Dick's original story does not indicate the neo-Nazisploitation spectacle of Amazon's *High Castle* – Dick's novel features neither Nazi villains nor descriptions of Nazi America – it is through the representation of mundane life in Nazi America in "Three Monkeys" that the television show follows the book's subtle portray of a dystopian world. As Berlatsky observes, it is this Dickean way of portraying a dystopia that "doesn't feel dystopian," because the horrifying things – genocide, ethnic cleansing, slavery – are merely incidental remarks, and "most of the characters go about their daily lives just as most of us do now."

The episode "Three Monkeys" opens with Joe Blake visiting the family of Obergruppenführer Smith for the so-called VA Day, the day the Axis powers celebrate their victory over the Allies in *High Castle*'s universe. The festivity takes place in an idyllic suburban family setting. On the whole, the mise-en-scène reflects the way national holidays like the Fourth of July have actually been celebrated in the United States. We see the Smiths' neighbor and his daughter decorating their house with banners in the colors of the American flag—red, white, and blue—including tiny blue swastika symbols, as the neighbor and John Smith greet each other with a casual "Sieg heil!" (Figure 5). Everybody is dressed appropriately, including the Obergruppenführer who doesn't sport his SS uniform but a private outfit, which gives emphasis to what is shared by many authorities serving totalitarian regimes – a second identity as loving husbands and fathers (Figure 6). It is a nice summer day, and so Joe is playing catch with the Obergruppenführer's son, Thomas. The son's appearance is interesting in its own regard: he is wearing a baseball glove and, instead of a boy-scout getup which would seem much more common in the American context, a Hitler Youth uniform, complete with the characteristic brow shirt, swastika armband, and sheath knife. After the Smiths and their guests had turkey and apple pie (this quintessential American celebratory meal seems to indicate that VA Day has substituted not only Independence Day but Thanksgiving as well), they watch The Führer's address on TV together.

³ This everyday life atmosphere is echoed in the second season, especially in the opening of the first episode, "The Tiger's Cave" (released on December 16, 2016), in a scene in high school where Thomas performs what is a perverted version of the Pledge of Allegiance.

Also the music introducing the episode right after the opening credits, one of the few examples of background music in *High Castle*, sets the tone of the episode. When we hear the tunes of "Mack the Knife" in a big band version, this compares to the soundtrack-function of music in the intro sequence of *American Graffiti*, which opens with Bill Haley's "Rock Around the Clock." While the usage of "Mack the Knife," a song originally written by socialists Kurt Weill and Bertold Brecht, seems quite ironic in the context of Nazi America, it evokes a feeling of American postwar bourgeois easygoingness. This atmosphere contributes to destabilize what we assume to be definite boundaries between a "real" historical image of 1960s America and its fictive, counterhistorical Nazi doppelgänger in *High Castle*.

In fact, were it not for the Nazi emblems (an *aquila* on top of the TV set, the swastikas on the flags and banners), the setting would not be that different from conventional media images representing that historical period. One may be reminded of the patriarchal culture of smoking, whiskey-drinking white man in suits as depicted in *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007–2015), or even of the sugar-coated sitcom images of the traditional white/patriarchal suburban family world originally promoted in the late 1950s and the early 1960s in shows like *Leave It to Beaver* (CBS, 1957–1958; ABC, 1958–1963).⁴ As James Poniewozik (2015) puts it in a review of *High Castle* for the *New York Times*:

The series' most terrifying invention is to depict Nazi America not as Germanized but as representing a kind of perverted hyper-American, a *Leave It to Beaver* nightmare in which homogeneous suburban neighbors greet one another with a hearty "Sieg heil!"

Perhaps nowhere in *High Castle*'s first season becomes this "*Leave it to Beaver* nightmare" more overt than in the *Three Monkeys* episode. We see the 1960s' model family: an all-white ensemble consisting of mom and dad, three kids, and a dog (Figure 7); the patriarch, suitably named John Smith, exemplifies the all-American from-rags-to riches myth, for his parents have lost their wealth during the stock market crash of 1929, and John lived the (perverted) American Dream when he moved up the ladder by entering the Nazis' military apparatus. Embodying 1960s television togetherness, the Smiths and their guests are sitting in front of the television set, the quintessential postwar broadcast medium that seems to have superseded the function of the *Volksempfänger* (state-issued "people's radios") in the Nazis' propaganda machinery.

We are invited to indirectly watch with the Smith family and their guests. And what we see does not seem 1960s America at all. We are watching propa-

⁴ It speaks for itself that *High Castle*'s female lead character, Juliana, comes from the Japanese-ruled west coast – that is, from a cultural background where women have been associated with a much more active role than in the dominant hegemonic-male narrative of the West. For a critique of *Mad Men*'s gender politics, see Mittell (2010).

ganda as we know it from audiovisual artifacts of the Third Reich – albeit in color and in a 1960s American living room ambiance, mediated through the technological achievement of that time, the “boob tube,” furnished with the political symbol of the *aquila*. Emphasized by means of a close-up, we recognize Adolf Hitler holding his VA address (Figure 8), before the camera cuts back to the homey family setting – represented by John Smith sitting cozily with his wife, Helen, on the sofa (Figure 9).

Figure 5: Neighborly salute: the Smiths' neighbors greeting John with a casual “Sieg heil!” (01:53).



Figure 6: The all-American suburban idyll: John Smith carving a turkey for his family and guests (19:55).



Figure 7: Family togetherness in front of the TV set: at the Smiths' with guests Joe Blake and Rudolph Wegener (25:41).



Figure 8: Close-up of the family's TV set: the content doesn't fit what we associate with 1960s American television diet (28:08).



Figure 9: Countershoot of John Smith and his wife watching *The Führer's speech* (28:09).



Whenever the episode cuts to the ceremony at the Smiths, mise-en-scène and cinematography act jointly to create an atmosphere of “1950s-ness” or “1960s-ness” in Jameson’s sense. In contrast to the series’ overall sinister tone, the high-key lightening of the sequences at the Smiths illustrates what Jameson observes to be a “glossy quality of images” in films like *American Graffiti*. In general, *High Castle*’s aesthetics correspond to Jeremy Butler’s (2013, 45) observations regarding *Mad Men*, where cinematography serves “to build mood and add characterization rather than to mimic the visual style of the multicamera [mode of production]” that originally shaped the television image in the 1960s. Instead, *High Castle* follows a single-camera mode associated with the sophisticated visuals of contemporary boutique television series and theatrical films.

This amalgamation invites reading the sequences at the Smiths’ house as deconstructing the utopian character of dominant media representations of 1960s America. Significantly though, this deconstruction is built less on an ironic gesture than on a satirical subtext challenging the taken-for-grantedness of Western liberalism, and provocatively asking if there had been a fertile ground for fascist ideology in American society as there had been in the Weimar Republic. Nazi symbolism notwithstanding, *High Castle*’s *Leave It to Beaver* America presents “a different culture,” as Poniewozik puts it, which might be “subjugated, racially cleansed, but also disturbingly familiar.” Here *Gleichschaltung* (bringing social and institutional elements into line with Nazi ideology and its aesthetics) seems to have worked perfectly. Hence, “one of the biggest questions about the alternative history in *High Castle* is: did the

Axis impose fascism on America, or did they find its seeds already here?” (Poniewozik 2015)

For decades, historians and ordinary folks have debated about how Nazi Germany, and the Holocaust, had been possible. *High Castle* seems to push this crucial question to the next level by asking, at least potentially, if a country like America would have been immune to Nazi ideology. As Berlatsky (2015) notes,

It makes sense that a world in which the Axis won the war would be, in just about every way, more racist. But the uncomfortable question is, just how much more racist is it? Again, the Nazis seem to have created a protectorate of sorts in the southern U.S., the implication being that whites who supported Jim Crow there would find the Nazi racial doctrines quite congenial.

The Quest for History: *High Castle*’s Post-Postmodernism

All these *woulds* and *what ifs* are of course hypothetical; they are part of *High Castle*’s narrative as a form of allohistory. It is here that *High Castle* perfectly captures the postmodern spirit associated with Jean-François Lyotard (1984) according to which all (historical) knowledge derives from multiple, competing narratives. As Richard Evans (2013, 29) observes in his book *Altered Pasts: Counterfactuals in History*, the emergence of postmodernism, “with its skepticism about the possibility of real historical knowledge, its blurring of the boundaries between past and present, fact and fiction, and its questioning of linear concepts of time,” has been crucial for the rise of counterfactual history in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century – a field of historical research and writing which has its origins in fantasy and science-fiction tales like *High Castle*. Indeed, as Karen Hellekson notes, *High Castle*’s alternate history gives emphasis to the notion that “the world is simply a reflection of the mind,” that history “relies not on events but on the individual construction of reality” (2001, 10, 62). Hellekson points to the aspect of historicity inherent to *High Castle*, the Dickean premise to “link the present and the past in that something is made in the present [such as fake artifacts] in order to evoke the past,” and “history is not implicitly present in the object but constructed by the beholder” (68).

This relativism inherent to any notion of “reality” is reflected through the alternate history within the alternate history that is *High Castle* – the *Grasshopper* book within Dick’s original novel and the *Grasshopper* films within Amazon’s television adaptation, respectively. In the novel, *The Grasshopper* is a single piece of writing that portrays a (fictional) world where the Allies have won against the Axis powers; its plot is based on the (fictional) author’s usage of the ancient Chinese book, the *I Ching*. In Amazon’s series, however, the *Grasshopper* newsreel films open up multiple simultaneous courses of history. Thus,

in the series' pilot, we witness Juliana secretly watching what is on the film she is supposed to smuggle to Canon City. It shows apparently original newsreel of World War II ending with – as we know it from our history books – a victory for the Allies over the Axis powers. With tears in her eyes, Juliana sees images we recognize as iconic and historically authentic: the 1943 Tehran Conference (Figure 10), the Japanese delegations' surrender on the USS *Missouri* in 1945 (Figure 11), and U.S. Marines flying the American flag on Iwo Jima (Figure 12).

Figure 10: Juliana watches a Grasshopper film showing Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill at the 1943 Theran Conference (20:54).



Figure 11: A scene showing Japan's surrender in 1945 (21:13).



Figure 12: The raising of the American flag on Iwo Jima (21:38).



As Juliana talks with Frank about the newsreel, he tells her that it must have been made by someone called "the man in the high castle" who is said to produce the clips Frank refers to as "antifascist movies." "Makes them?" Juliana queries. "G.I.s in Times Square?" "No, I know they look real," Frank answers. "Yeah," Juliana responds. "They look real 'cause they are real." "But," Frank insists, "they can't be, can they?"

Apart from the leitmotif of *High Castle* – that is, who is in power to define the course of history? – these references to what we accept as being a legitimate version of historical truth depart significantly from Dick's book in which the eponymous man in the high castle has conceived the *Grasshopper*'s plot by means of asking "the oracle," *I Ching*. Furthermore, the book's *Grasshopper* appears to be less dramatic than that in the TV series, with the latter going so far as to imagine a nuclear air strike towards the end of season one. In the ninth episode, "Kindness" (released on November 20, 2015), Juliana and Frank watch a second film that appears to have been taken after the Nazis had dropped an atom bomb on San Francisco (Figure 13). In another segment, Frank recognizes himself as he is lined up with several other civilians (probably Jews) and executed by being shot in the head – a disturbing scene that not only alludes to but also reimagines incidents of ethnic cleansing and the horrors of the Holocaust (Figure 14).

Figure 13: Juliana and Frank watching how San Francisco had been hit by a nuclear strike (45:18).



Figure 14: Frank follows his own execution on the screen (46:18).



The depiction of the nuclear strike is particularly remarkable as it mirrors the TV series' initial moment, where Nazi Germany has dropped an atom bomb on Washington, D.C., to win the Second World War, thus changing the causality of history – what Hellekson (2001, 5) calls “the break.” That *High Castle* addresses a nuclear scenario seems to be meaning-laden and a deliberate choice of departing from Dick's original story, in which the Germans

have invaded the east coast by means of ground troops. Not only does the series' variation maintain the dictum that the United States has never had to defend itself against ground troops on its own terrain. Furthermore, pictures of atomic clouds and devastated cities have etched themselves in the collective consciousness; they inevitably remind us of the United States' nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. To some degree, then, the choice made by *High Castle*'s producers to show the Nazis' nuclear strike seems to suggest a historical subtext, namely to reinforce the argument that it was necessary to drop atom bombs on Japan because, as *High Castle* suggests, all the dread and wrongdoing that happened in World War II notwithstanding, it could have ended much, much worse.

This leads to the conclusion of this essay. As with other WWII imagery, we know that the atomic bombings on Japan happened. They are no simulacra, no events obscured by directed media coverage, as Jean Baudrillard (1995) notoriously argued – they really took place, as aftereffects such as cancers and birth defects have testified. If postmodern thinkers like Baudrillard or Jameson have criticized that our notions of reality and history are corrupted by delusive fictions, we can say that *High Castle*'s representation of a nuclear strike on San Francisco challenges the postmodernist posture. The series does so by showing a fictive scenario that conjures up the iconic character of images of the nuclear bombings of Japan, functioning as the corresponding underside to the famous cheerful scenes of the Allies' victory in *High Castle*'s pilot episode. A similar thing can be said of the scene depicting Frank's execution. While we see Nazis, or rather, American soldiers serving the Greater Nazi Reich, shooting civilians who are most likely American Jews, we have to take into account that pictures of American soldiers committing atrocities are not exclusive to *High Castle*'s fictional world. The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the My Lai massacre during the Vietnam War or, more recently, the torture scenes from Abu Ghraib have inscribed themselves in contemporary visual culture, as have the horrible images of the atrocities and mass murders committed by Hitler's SS and the German Wehrmacht.

In evoking these links, the television series makes a statement the original book, where randomness determines what happens in the *Grasshopper* book, misses. I would like to argue that this has to do with the historical contexts in which the respective *High Castles* were produced. Dick wrote his book at a time where the Cold War was getting increasingly intense and unpredictable – hence the mentioning of a growing Cold War in *High Castle*'s universe and a hot war in the story's alternate history. Dick has thus addressed a “new uncertainty” that came “[i]n place of the optimism of the sixties generation” (Evans 2013, 29).

It might be surprising, at first, that this “new uncertainty” comes to life again in Amazon's *High Castle* series just at the begin of the twenty-first

century – with World War II and the Cold War being long over. However, we have to consider that the TV series is an American production created after the 2001 terror attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11. As Wheeler Winston Dixon notes in the collection *Film and Television after 9/11*, “[w]ith the events of 9/11, America truly entered the twenty-first century, an era marked by uncertainty and danger, in which wars are conducted not by nations but by terrorist cells” (2004, 3–4). America has proved vulnerable, and this matter of fact goes along with a demystification of the postmodernist notion of hyperreality. As Slavoj Žižek observed of the 9/11 events, it was as if reality superseded fiction – the incident revealed that it cannot be reduced to “just another media spectacle” (2002, 17). Likewise, Dixon notes that “many peoples have said that watching the World Trade Center collapse was like watching a movie, simply because they had no other referent to fall back on” (2004, 9).

The events on 9/11, indeed, rendered “postmodern passions” obsolete; instead of reminding us that “we should not mistake fiction for reality,” 9/11 makes us aware that we “should not mistake reality for fiction” (Žižek 2002, 19). It is this sentiment that *High Castle* seems to tap into. When Frank, regarding the Allies’ victory scenes in the first *Grasshopper* film, notes that these images can’t be real, we take comfort from the knowledge that Frank is wrong, that we do live in the world we live in, which undoubtedly is a better one than that depicted in the series. In this sense, *High Castle* seems to answer the desire, as Dixon puts it apropos American post-9/11 mainstream cinema, “to replicate the idea of the ‘just war,’ in which military reprisals, and the concomitant escalation of warfare, seem simultaneously inevitable” (2004, 1).

In the early 1940s, the U.S. government commissioned a series of propaganda films, mostly directed by Frank Capra, entitled *Why We Fight*. These were meant to justify involvement in what would soon become World War II. The *Why We Fight* films made excessive use of film footage from various contexts (including Hollywood-made reenactments) and re-edited it, so the assemblage promoted the argument of a necessary war to be fought. Albeit within the framework of a fictional TV series, the *Grasshopper* films in *High Castle* do something similar. Not only do they conflate fictional and original material, they also make the cautionary statement that what is shown mustn’t be written off as fiction. Indeed, the *Grasshopper* films ask us to revisit the situation before and during World War II, arguing that it was essential for the United States to fight (and win) the war. Admittedly, some viewers of *High Castle* might be on the fence about whether a certain scene is historically authentic or not. And yet the series succeeds in evoking the aspiration that its plot is going to turn into a course that we commonly hold to be our historical past.

High Castle’s basic premise is that our historical past doesn’t allow for any relativism. History might be obscured by fiction, but the Holocaust did

happen; it has been documented with all its horrible details by the survivors’ narrations, the Allies’ reports, and the Nazis themselves. And the signing of Japan’s surrender on the USS *Missouri* did happen, too, as did Hiroshima and Nagasaki – otherwise the world would look different today. *High Castle* suggests what one such alternative course of history could have looked like if the United States and the Allies hadn’t effectively intervened.

Asked about the reasons for *High Castle*’s popular success, executive producer Spotnitz (2015) remarked:

I think one guess is that we still live in age of fear right now. I think we’re all still living a post-9/11 world. To see how people deal with nightmare situations and survive feels really relevant. [...] Before 9/11 I was doing *X-Files*, which was about distrust of the government and paranoia. But weirdly I think 9/11 is at least partially responsible for the end of the *The X-Files*. We wanted to like the government. We wanted to feel safe.

Of course, as Spotnitz further notes, *High Castle* “is also about paranoia and more than distrust of the government – fear of the government in this case.” But this fear is kept in check by the (safe) reasoning that *High Castle* presents an alternative course of history that we know to be fictional. Thus, in a post-postmodernist (and quite patriotic) sense, the series makes the argument that fiction might become reality were it not for a strong American government that is willing to adopt an active role in the course of history – with all the misconduct this might entail.

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