

Question 2: As we approach the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, it seems an appropriate time to reflect upon the events of the 2nd world war. With that in mind, critically discuss and respond to the idea that evil can be explored through the practice of semiology?

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In 1933, Hitler established power; becoming the chancellor of Germany. Enacting radical policies through the Nazi Party that allowed concentration camps to be created all over Europe, he is now used as a prime example of evil. Through use of well-coordinated signs and symbols he was able to gain this leader position; influencing the population of Germany. I want to explore the power of signs and symbols, and how their influence was used to indoctrinate the German people into accepting the Nazi Party; despite the evil they spread.

Before we discuss how signs are used to represent evil, we must first discuss the definition of the word. Everyone appears to have their own definition of what they believe is evil; this makes it difficult to agree on a set of qualities or actions that make someone evil. When argued from a religious perspective, some may believe that anyone who opposes God is evil, does this make every atheist evil? Some may say that killing someone is the most evil act someone can perform, while others may argue against this, saying that it is not evil if they had a good reason. This brings up another argument, if we discuss evil, then we also should discuss the definition of good in contrast. When looking into the definition of evil it can be defined as “morally bad, cruel, or very unpleasant” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019), this suggests that someone who is evil goes against the morals that society has. This introduces the topic of morals, a set of beliefs that society generally accepts, “Morals are in all countries the result of legislation and government; they are not African or Asian or European: they are good or bad” (Diderot, 1966). This suggests that morals are universally accepted, and that most of society can tell right from wrong. In contrast to evil, the definition of good can be defined as, “morally right or based on religious principles” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019) which is effectively the opposite of evil; people who know right from wrong. With these two definitions in mind, I believe that it is evil to go against the morals that society accepts.

The usage of signs is prevalent throughout history, we see many examples of them in our everyday life, “The whole universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs” (Peirce, 1974), for example when we see a red hexagon, we know it means we should stop. Through the usage of signs and context, I will be exploring how the Nazi power influenced the people of Germany.



Figure 1

Figure 1 is a black symbol that has four arms, meeting in the centre at right angles, which all face the same direction; this is the signifier. Before the 1920s, this was a symbol of good; meaning ‘good fortune’ or ‘wellbeing’; it is commonly used in Hinduism and Buddhism. However, today in the

western world it is best known for its connotations with hate and evil; this is the signified. This symbol was taken by Hitler who appropriated it, claiming it for the Nazi Party; we now know this symbol as the swastika. This is an example of polysemy, as while it is used on temples in certain religions for good, it is also used by hate groups for evil. Now when we see this symbol, we associate it with the recent history behind it and how the Nazis used it while they were in power. The swastika was used in conjunction with other Nazi Party branding; for example, the colour red was used in conjunction with the swastika on a flag and this colour is often associated with power and strength. Perhaps a reason why this symbol is so recognisable is because of the scale it was used on, the swastika was applied to banners, uniforms and election posters all over Germany. Hitler wanted to constantly be in the minds of the German people, applying these symbols on every uniform used by the government, and every public building. By doing this he slowly indoctrinated the German population, as they became normalised to seeing the signs everywhere, which led the population to accepting and obeying the Nazi regime, as it had become normal to them.



Figure 2

Figure 2 depicts two black lightning bolts, that are drawn with harsh black lines. This is the symbol that the SS used to identify themselves with. The SS, or 'Schutzstaffel', were originally Hitler's personal bodyguards, but eventually became the guards that controlled the people within the concentration camps; where they were led by Heinrich Himmler. The design of the lightning bolts is consistent with the other Nazi Party branding, for example the swastika, as they are both formed with harsh black lines, which makes them look bold and strong. This is a symbol that represents evil, as the men who wore them were responsible for murdering and controlling the Jews in the concentration camps. However, when taken out of the context of the Nazi Party this symbol is becomes more ambiguous. For example, these two lightning bolts look remarkably similar to the ones that feature in the logo for the band 'KISS', which also features two black lightning bolts, does this make them evil for using such a similar set of symbols? In fact, the symbols are so similar that 'KISS' have had to modify their logo while performing in Germany as they got a bad reception from the population. This alone demonstrates how powerful symbols are, that even when the lightning bolts are taken out of the context of the Nazi Party, they still have some association with evil and hatred.



Figure 3 - Nuremberg Rally 1934

Figure 3 depicts an image taken of a Nuremberg Rally in 1934, Nazi Germany. From the context of the image, we can see men in military uniform, and a huge crowd of people organised efficiently into bold lines. The Nuremberg Rallies were a form of propaganda, this is an icon that shows how much power the Nazis had, and how they had complete control over everyone; you can see this by how everything is perfectly organised. The three banners in the distance showcase the swastika, these symbols are very powerful in influencing our view on the image. In 2019 this symbol is a sign of hate, used by anti-Semitic groups across the world. Everything else in the image is secondary to the swastika, this symbol is bold and powerful, and it alone is enough to make you think of the Nazi Party. Without the context of the swastika it may not be apparent that this is a Nazi rally, but with the flags in the background it solidifies this idea. The centre of the image features three men raising their arms, who are they? To give context, these men are Himmler, Hitler and Lutze, without this information you may have thought they were ordinary men obeying orders, however now knowing who they are could change your perspective and it brings a larger representation of evil into the image.



Figure 4 – Nuremburg Rally 1934 (edited)



Figure 5 – Nuremburg Rally 1934 (edited)

In figure 4 the swastika is taken away, instead replaced with what we can assume is the French flag. The swastika is the key symbol in this image, because of the convention associated with it; we know that we should respond negatively to it, as it is a sign of evil and it shows hate. However, the men performing the Nazi Salute are still present, but without the context of the swastika the action they are performing becomes more ambiguous; especially as they are quite far in the distance. While you may be able to guess that the men are performing the Nazi Salute, you may not be able to guess it is a Nazi Rally, because there are no other giveaways in the image. These men could be the only people in the image who support the Nazi Party, perhaps interrupting a French national rally to make a demonstration of hate, to shock the crowd. Is a right arm being raised 45 degrees powerful enough to indicate evil by itself? In Figure 5, the image is stripped back again, this time the men in the centre are gone. Without the context of the swastika and the Nazi Salute, the image is arbitrary and has little significance, it is the symbols that give it the meaning, “if I focus on the mythical signifier as on an inextricable whole made of meaning and form, I receive an ambiguous signification” (Barthes, 2000). The image no longer represents evil or hate, as there is no depiction of Hitler or any Nazi symbols, and the act of people standing in military uniform is not enough to symbolise evil by itself. Another perspective is that without the context of the Nazi symbols you may not be aware that this is a rally. While not knowing this, someone may not realise that the lines in the background are in fact thousands of people and instead they may see it as solid blocks of concrete; they are too far away to make out as individual people. These ideas demonstrate how important the use of symbols is in figure 3, they make the reader instantly aware that they are looking at an image of Nazi Germany; they know that it is an image that shows evil. Without these signs, the image is ambiguous, and there is no clear source of good or evil.



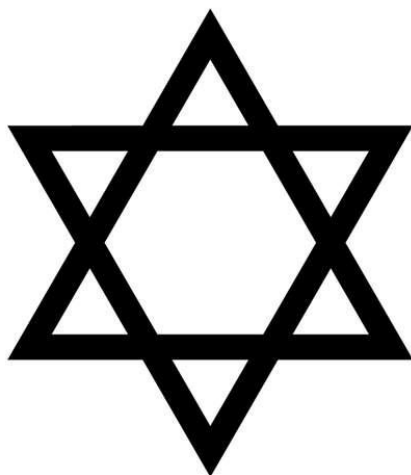
Figure 6

Figure 6 shows a young man standing with his arms folded, with what seems like a couple of people around him. Currently we don't know this man's background, or any context that goes with the image. He looks like an average citizen, he is plainly dressed, and does not seem like he would stand out from society. He has his arms crossed over his chest, which could suggest that he is feeling quite defensive and is having a negative reaction to something at that moment in time. This man is August Landmesser, and he was sentenced to three years in a concentration camp, charged for 'dishonouring the race' and 'racial infamy'.



Figure 7

In figure 7 the entire image is revealed to us; it is 1936 and Hitler is standing in front of the crowd. Here it is obvious why August stands out, he is the only man in the crowd showing defiance, by refusing to take part in the Nazi Salute. The Nazi Salute is a well-recognised gesture, and in 2019 most people associate it with evil; as we know the context of that time in history. August is not complying with the rest of the crowd as he was in love with a Jewish woman, and he doesn't believe that the way they were treated is morally right. Was he right to go against the crowd? Some may argue that all of the men in the image complying with the Nazi Party are just as evil as Hitler himself, "He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps perpetrate it" (King, 2011), suggesting that they are all a part of the reason he was in power. However, in 1926, the Nazi Salute was made compulsory as it was a sign of commitment to the Nazi Party, while also being the way that people greeted Hitler. Did these men admire Hitler and agree with his policies, or were they purely cooperating out of fear? Perhaps some of these men, like August, didn't agree with what the Nazi Party was doing at the time, but were not courageous enough to make a stand against it like he had, for fear of the consequences. Or alternatively, these men had become so used to seeing the Nazi symbols in society that they had started to accept them, as they had become indoctrinated by all of the propaganda. Does this make them evil? Your perspective may be changed again when it is revealed that August Landmesser (see figure 6) was once a part of the Nazi Party. This may alter your opinion of him slightly and bring up a series of questions. For example, if he had never met the Jewish woman he fell in love with, would he still be in the Nazi Party? If he is only standing against the Nazi Party because of his Jewish lover, perhaps he would have passively accepted the fate of all the other Jews if he had not met this Jewish woman; as he would not have been personally connected with them. Would this make him evil?



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Figure 8 – Star of David



Figure 9

Figure 8 depicts the Star of David; this sign represents Judaism; this alone is not a symbol of evil. However, in 1941 it was made compulsory for all Jews to wear this symbol on their arm in the form of a yellow badge, as a way of identification. Not only this, but the badge also featured the German word for Jew in a typeface that mocked Hebrew writing (see figure 9). The Nazis took the Star of David and used it against the Jews to humiliate them; this is an example of polysemy as the sign has multiple connotations. Figure 9 is a propaganda leaflet used by the Nazi Party in 1942, with the

words 'Whoever bears this sign is an enemy of our people'. This is an example of anchorage, as the text solidifies the idea that the leaflet is evil; without this we can see that the symbol is mocking the Jews, but it is not blatantly obvious as when we have the text to influence our opinion. We can see that this propaganda leaflet targets the German, Aryan population from the usage of 'our people'; they want the Germans to believe the view that Jews are worth less than them in society. This is part of an evil act the Nazis were playing at this time using this as well as targeting the Jews with degrading statements such as referring to them as 'subhuman'. This plan allowed the Nazis to introduce the idea that the Jews don't belong in German society, by dehumanising them and making them the enemy, "Dehumanisation is a method by which an in-group underscores the "inferiority" of an outgroup by expressing intensely derogatory statements" (Matusitz, 2015). The act of doing this would have created less resistance from the Germans when the Jews were taken away to concentration camps, as most of the German population would have been influenced by the propaganda to believe that the Jews were the enemy; so would have passively accepted it.

Signs and symbols were used heavily in Nazi Germany to influence and indoctrinate the German population; through the Nazi's application of the swastika and similar marketing throughout society. This allowed them to normalise the population into seeing their ideology every day, influencing them to accept the Nazi Party; despite their bad morals. These signs have such great importance that when an image once containing them is altered to not have them anymore, it becomes ambiguous of meaning, showing how important symbols are in influencing people.

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