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If Nazism had prevailed: The Amazon series *The Man in the High Castle*

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21 April 2020

The year is 1962 and the United States, having lost World War II, is partitioned and occupied militarily by Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. Brutality and genocide have swept the globe, particularly in Africa and Eastern Europe. The two fascist victors eye each other warily, preparing for a global showdown. A resistance movement in the US faces harsh repression by the occupying Japanese on the West Coast and a Vichy-type regime on the East.

A storyteller provides a measure of inspiration by imagining what might have happened … if the Second World War had ended with an Allied victory.

Such is the counterfactual premise of renowned science fiction writer Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) and the television dramatization that ran for four seasons (2015-19) produced by Amazon Studios.

The web television series expanded the scope of the story and the results, at least for the initial two seasons, were interesting enough to draw a considerable audience and generally favorable reviews. The opening episode had the highest ratings for any Amazon premiere to date.

The small army of writers, particularly in the first seasons of *The Man in the High Castle*, displayed considerable creativity. They developed the show's characters in such a way as to demonstrate the terrible logic of their transformation from citizens and soldiers in the "arsenal of democracy" to henchmen (and women) of the Nazi victors (in the show, two characters in the Japanese administration are developed, but their transformations are less pronounced).

The efforts of the show's creators were enhanced by strong acting, particularly from Rufus Sewell in the role of John Smith, the eventual *Reichsmarschall* of the American portion of the Greater Nazi Reich (GNR). Cary-Hiroyuki Tagawa and Chelah Horsdal are successful in bringing to life the multifaceted roles of the Japanese Trade Minister Nobosuke Tagomi and Helen Smith, the wife of the *Reichsmarschall.* (The Smiths belong among the show's creations; they do not appear in the novel).

The story upon which the series was based provokes a decidedly mixed response.

Dick—a prolific writer who completed 44 novels and roughly 121 short stories before his untimely death from a stroke in 1982 at age 53—was imaginatively gifted in posing large questions. What would people do if the fascists had prevailed? How would society be altered by the eventual development of robots sufficiently advanced to pass as humans? (The latter being the premise of his 1968 *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* which served as the basis for the 1982 Ridley Scott film, *Bladerunner*). Other stories by Dick were adapted for the films *Minority Report* (2002) and *The Adjustment Bureau* (2011).

Interesting premises are one thing, but their convincing artistic development is another. Generally speaking, the working out of the plot's events and the various characters' development is thin. There is little in the text of *The Man in the High Castle* that even hints at the underlying social currents that fostered the Nazi rise to power (nor the turn of the Japanese regime to imperial expansion), a defect that is not surmounted in the Amazon series.

Of course, novels and television series are not mere history lessons. However, for either to succeed as convincing social drama, some indication of the driving forces behind the events is necessary, as well as elementary correspondence to historical and social realities.

In the case of the potential global victory of fascism, an indication needs to be provided of the catastrophe that would entail. And while there are a few passages in Dick's novel that refer to the Nazis' global killing fields (beyond those which unfolded in the actual Second World War), their effect is strangely muted. None of the passages are truly compelling.

The story—in both its original form as a novel and reworked in the television series—remains largely a thought experiment. This skeletal form is very thinly covered with characters and dramatic situations.

The limitations of the novel did not doom the series. Far from it. Forty hours of television allows for a far greater dramatic scope than 240 written pages. The technical capabilities of the film and television industry have developed immeasurably since the story was written. The volume of scholarly material produced on the Second World War is also far greater today than in 1962. All of which could be brought to bear.

And the series has its moments. At least one scene (in Season 2, Episode 4, "Escalation") does bear re-watching:

Juliana (Alexa Davelos), a fugitive from the Japanese Pacific States, having somewhat improbably befriended Helen Smith, wife of John Smith, the most powerful man in the puppet regime of the American portion of the GNR, is being assisted by Thomas, John and Helen's high-school-age son. To remain in the Nazi-controlled territory, Juliana will have to pass a citizenship examination. Thomas is coaching Juliana, who is studying for the section on civics.

Thomas asks, "From where does justice come?" Juliana guesses "The Reich," then (nudged on), "The Führer." "Very good," says Thomas, "Justice is a divine right, guaranteed for all and determined by the Führer, from whom all justice derives."

Having just parroted an elementary principal of dictatorship, ironically in the chipper manner of a teacher's pet, Thomas looks at his twitching hand, an indicator of a congenital illness, whose tragic implications in a society that "solves" such issues via euthanasia are

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clear enough to him already.

He pauses, then manages to proceed, "Next question is about American exterminations before the Reich." "Exterminations?" Juliana looks puzzled. "Didn't they ever teach you about the Indians?" Juliana, taken aback, is at a loss for a reply. The scene ends but its impact has been felt. The point is neither overstated nor underdone.

There are other poignant moments, particularly those involving Jews and other prisoners being sent to their deaths on both Coasts. The portrayal of J. Edgar Hoover as the most slavish servant of his new bosses is deserving and well-executed. But that which is truly haunting, terrible to behold, or chilling to contemplate is infrequent. As the story unfolds, it tends toward tried-and-true devices of the suspense genre: plot-twists, cliffhangers and the like.

In Seasons 3 and 4 the series becomes somewhat exhausted, intellectually speaking, and relies increasingly on mysticism and fantastic dramatic devices. The creators rely increasingly on the use of "alternate realities." The story about the Allies winning the war (a novel in the original, a set of films here) exists not simply as fiction. The characters themselves eventually learn to travel to this alternate reality by walking through "portals." As the series unfolds, the alternate realities hold increasing sway over Tagomi and Smith. Both characters work through family conflicts in the alternate reality and the personal elements of these dramas take on increasing centrality.

This development comes as an evasion. A drama would be rather one-sided, of course, if the characters had no personal lives or if these were entirely hidden from the viewer. To a certain degree, the telling of the life of John Smith, recounted in flashbacks as well as the unfolding of the main drama, provides certain insights and mitigates against the tendency to see him as simply a monster. To be sure, he has already become a sadist by the time we meet him in the first season. Only later does the viewer see that he has been shaped by forces well beyond his control or even his comprehension.

The problem is that the familial dramas, on the one hand, and the less-than-compelling plot twists surrounding coups and assassinations in Berlin and San Francisco, on the other, result in a drama that becomes increasingly clichéd, even banal. How is it that in confronting the most monstrous of possible "alternatives" that might have happened in the 20th century—the victory of two genocidal regimes and their "reorganizing" of the world—the series creators fall so short?

Here limitations in political insight make themselves felt. For example, Juliana suggests at one point that the significance of the films created by Abendsen (the "man in the high castle," the resistance leader, played by Stephen Root) and the reality accessible through the "portals" is that "if the Nazis can be beaten in that world, they can be beaten in this one," or, in other words, that the victory of the fascists in World War II would not have been decisive. The valiant would live to fight another day.

This differs from the fatalism in Dick's novel. There, in one scene, Frank Fink, Juliana's boyfriend, consults an oracle as he picks up his tools from the shop from which he has been dismissed. He receives a two-sided prophecy and considers its darker message. He believes it portends a new war. "Can *anyone* alter it he wondered. All of us combined ... or one great figure ... or someone strategically placed, who happens to be in the right spot. Chance. Accident. And all our lives, our world, hanging on it." (Italics and ellipses in the original). Nor is this an isolated instance. World-altering events hinge on little more than chance.

These opposed concepts have an essential superficiality as their common denominator.

The series, as a product of the past decade, obligingly pays homage to identity politics, seen perhaps most strongly in the presentation of the "Black Communist Rebellion" in the fourth season. In the Japanese Pacific States, a new resistance movement takes root among black intellectuals, expands and all but forces the withdrawal of the occupying military forces, apparently without support from broader layers of the population. The notion of a distinct working class is entirely absent in the dramatization. Given the actual roots of fascism, particularly its European varieties, in the efforts of the bourgeoisie to smash the organized workers movement, this is a very telling (if not surprising) omission. The series suggests that whites, not shown to be highly stratified in economic terms, would have been susceptible to the argument of the GNR that those living in the Pacific States should resist "being governed by Negro overlords."

As one watches *The Man in the High Castle*, other dramatizations of the terrible events of the Second World War inevitably come to mind. Films like *Schindler's List*, *Downfall*, *The Pianist*, *Conspiracy* and the *Thin Red Line* give the subject far more considered treatment. On television, even Generation War (*Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter*) shed more light and carried more dramatic force.

Limitations aside, the series found an audience, particularly in its first years. That the show was created at all and found a popular following suggests and reflects the real concerns of great numbers of people in our time that the danger of fascism is not behind us, that history presents society with alternatives, that the consequences of one course as opposed to another can be monumental. If the drama chooses not to explore key elements of the historical process—particularly that the struggle of classes lies at the root of these alternative paths and that masses of people have demonstrated time and again the ability to collectively fight for social progress—that is a definite limitation of the drama.

In the real world of 2020, this can only be surmounted by the effort to assimilate the actual history of the 20th century, a subject that cannot fail to be of interest to those drawn to the more persuasive features of this production of *The Man in the High Castle.*

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