

TV Genre, Political Allegory, and New Distribution Platforms

“Streaming American Fascism: Amazon Studios’ *The Man in the High Castle*”

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The first scene of Amazon Studios’ *Man in the High Castle* pilot features newsreel propaganda depicting a prosperous United States. A male narrator intones: “Across our land, men and women go to work in factories and farms, providing for their families. Everyone has a job. Everyone knows the part they play. Keeping our country strong and safe.” The nationalistic language is juxtaposed with images of industry and bourgeois domesticity: women work side-by-side in an office, a man sketches a blueprint at his desk, a finely-coiffed housewife buys groceries with her husband and baby, and a young boy runs to greet his parents and a relative in front of a shiny white convertible.

Whiteness is a common theme in this film – all the people pictured are Caucasian. For this reason, as much as for its exaltation of capitalism and the nuclear, heteronormative family, the majority of the newsreel could be mistaken for an artifact that actually screened in U.S. movie theatres in the early 1960s. That footage of a soaring bald eagle accompanying the narrator’s claim that the country is “stronger and prouder, and better,” serves to further entrench the film in traditional American iconography. It is only at the end of the reel, as the narrator declares “sieg heil” and an American flag emblazoned with a swastika unfurls onscreen, that it distinguishes itself as belonging to an alternate history. The timing of this revelation underscores a theme that becomes more apparent as the series progresses: that many of the values typically associated with mainstream American culture in 1962 are fascistic in nature.

Rather than foregrounding this subversive message immediately, show creator Frank Spotnitz opts to establish what initially seems to be a morally straightforward conflict between representatives of fascist governments and agents of a resistance movement. The atrocities committed in the first two episodes by Obergruppenführer John Smith and Chief Inspector Kido, especially because they are committed in an effort to suppress a film which depicts a reality in which the Axis Powers lost World War II, make it easier for first-time American viewers to comfortably categorize the fascist society presented onscreen as a nightmarish fantasy with no relation to their own history.

However, the depiction of the Neutral Zone in these early episodes complicates this categorization. There Juliana and Nazi spy Joe Blake encounter pre-war cultural artifacts, including Billie Holliday's "Strange Fruit," that serve as reminders of America's ugly history of racial genocide preceding the Nazi occupation. The main representative of the Reich in the Zone is the Marshall. He speaks with a pronounced southern drawl, carries a shotgun which he uses to intimidate civilians, and, in a line of dialogue that recalls a lyric from "Strange Fruit," insists on leaving the corpse of a man he's executed hanging in the street "till the birds pick it clean." The character, in his striving to embody a kind of aggressive masculinity that was often celebrated in the Westerns of the 1950s and '60s, acts as a reminder of how traditionally American ideals of law and order can and have been used to justify the persecution of minorities.

Like the Marshall, Obergruppenführer Smith embodies an archetype of American masculinity, in his case the loving yet authoritative patriarch from 1950s television shows such as *Father Knows Best*. Any attempts by viewers to dismiss him as a purely villainous figure are aggravated in the sixth episode, which focuses on Smith celebrating "Victory over America Day" in idyllic suburbia, throwing a baseball around with his son and cuddling on the couch with his

homemaker wife. Like many military veterans in the wake of World War II, Smith has persevered through hardship to achieve the American Dream. What John can never forget, however, is that his success is dependent on the oppression of people who do not conform to societal norms of race, religion, and gender. The persistent similarities between John's home life and that glorified in the popular culture of the 1950s and early '60s makes it difficult for viewers to ignore how that Dream was also shaped by stringent, even fascistic, norms.

In choosing to wait until episode six to expound on this theme, Spotnitz demonstrates awareness of the viewing norms surrounding streaming shows. Offering an extended critique of American fascism in the first couple hours of the first season might have alienated some viewers. By episode six, many viewers are invested in "binging" the show and unlikely to stop watching, regardless of any discomfort they may feel. Whereas weekly breaks between episodes allows viewers to reconsider and potentially take offense at what they have seen, the streaming format discourages such reflection until after the binging process is complete. Perhaps after binging *High Castle*, some viewers may be less likely to reject the notion of American fascism as purely fantastical.