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The Political Psychology of Air Shows: Strata of Mass Rally, Pageantry, and Spectacle

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Abstract. This article describes the psychology of air shows' attractiveness and suggests the congruence of this psychology with the attractiveness of mass political rally, pageantry, and spectacle.

Why do people flock to air shows? Attendees often profess to enjoy viewing and learning about the capabilities of aircraft and the skills of pilots. Is that all? One doesn't have to be a proselytizer of sublimation as source for the politics of ideas to posit that there may be more.

Some air show attendees seem to identify with aircraft capability and pilot skill. That is, disbelief can be temporarily suspended as for some fleeting interlude attendees become more than they otherwise are--as if capability and skill become them, even if these same attendees can't pull off the look.

Some attendees may profess a hope for disaster. This hope may reside in more than those who profess it, but for some, this hope is out of awareness. For some attendees, this hope may stem from a seemingly intrinsic or deep-seated need to experience--if not effect--the death, destruction, or injury of others. For others, this hope may stem from a need to repeatedly simulate or re-experience the overcoming and surviving of tragedy to the self--a repetition compulsion. Both sources of hope for disaster may not be especially appealing aspects of humanity but true to it.

Almost all attendees in some way may be linked by deep motives represented in myths such as that of Icarus. Freeing oneself from the constraints of the ground, to soar, to dare the seemingly impossible--all this mirrors the quest for great achievement, of towering ambition, of the greatest success or failure depending on how high one goes. Through identification, those soaring above us are us.

Many attendees may be linked through psychological phenomena first experienced in early youth. Fantasies of flying a la Peter Pan frequently characterize the young--even as fear of flying a la Erica Jong may characterize the so-called young at heart who have confused animal instinct for love. Ascribing animate characteristics to inanimate objects mirror common developmental sequences of perception that may never be totally outgrown. Even earlier, all of us may possess so-called body memories of flying that may result from being playfully tossed by caregivers or from some Jungian or evolutionary phenomenon of ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny.

The experience--conscious and unconscious-- of much of the above may be potentiated by the collective context of air shows. Being in a sea of humanity may foster empirically validated aspects of deindividuation--even if temporary--resulting in a more primitive mentality of each individual and dynamics of the collective. The experience may be especially potentiated at a military airshow by the wearing of special apparel, e.g. uniforms, the use of standardized and specialized language, e.g., acronyms, and the viewing of symbols, e.g., larger than life paraphernalia evocative of some poorly understood but shared past.

A rhetorical question: are the psychological phenomena experienced at an air show any different from the essence of political rally, pageantry, and spectacle? These phenomena--perhaps best alluded to in

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modern times by Wilhelm Reich's *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*--not only can increase the entertainment value of political engagement but the kinetic and potential energies of political violence. (See Allett, J. (1996). *Crowd psychology and the theory of democratic elitism: The contribution of William McDougall*. *Political Psychology*, 17, 213-227; Reich, W. (1980). *The mass psychology of fascism* 3rd ed. Noontday. (Original work published 1945.); Reicher, S. "The Crowd" century: Reconciling practical success with theoretical failure. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 35, 535-553; Russell, G.W. (1995). *Personalities in the crowd: Those who would escalate a sports riot*. *Aggressive Behavior*, 21, 91-100; Russell, G.W., & Mustonen, A. (1998). *Peacemakers: Those who would intervene to quell a sports riot*. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 335-339; Tarnow, E. (1996). *Like water and vapor: Conformity and independence in the large group*. *Behavioral Science*, 41, 136-150.)(Keywords: Air Show, Crowd, Mass Psychology.)