Nazi ideology and the visual arts, 1933-1945

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The art of the Third Reich is a difficult, controversial and complex subject. It can be dismissed as ‘non-art’, as it did not allow free expression and may even be regarded as an example of an inhumane ideology, causing psychological damage to a nation. It was politicized art, commissioned by the state, which constantly enforced the Nazi view on all aspects of society. Some art historians regard Nazi art as aesthetically poor, not worthy of attention; the official art of the regime is even seen as an embarrassment (Adam 1992, 7). However, it could be argued that to evaluate Nazi art in a political context is important, as these works present historical documents that cannot be viewed purely from an aesthetic point of view. It could also be argued that of the thousands of art works sent by artists to the official Nazi art exhibitions, at least some must have existed prior to the regime in 1933, perhaps suggesting that the concept of ‘German national identity’ already existed in the German psyche.

Artists painting in the genres favoured by the Reich would embrace National Socialism as a reaction against Expressionism and Modernism in Germany, perceived-by many as an elitist and intellectual artistic genre, far removed from the understanding of the German people. Art was considered one of the most important elements in building the new Reich; political aims and artistic expression became one and absorbed the concept of ‘volk’ (folk or nation) – the totality of German people and the German race, reinforcing cultural identity.

The task of art in the Third Reich was to impose a Nationalist Socialist philosophy of life. It had to form people’s minds and attitudes. Hitler said, ‘Art has at all times been the expression of an ideological and religious experience and at the same time the expression of political will’ (Adam 1992, 9). From the beginning of the regime his objective was a ‘thorough moral purging’ (Adam 1992, 10). The Reich would address the entire education system, the theatre, the cinema, literature, press and broadcasting; they would be used as a means to an end to promote National Socialism. Evidently, Hitler (who in his youth dreamed of becoming an artist himself, but was rejected by The Vienna Academy of Art), saw the visual arts as a means of directing and creating attitudes in the people of Germany, exemplified in the effectiveness of his social policies.

From 1933-1937 the Nazi leadership put in place a major cultural policy change towards the arts. The Reich Cultural Chamber was established with Joseph Goebbels in charge as Reich Minister for
Public Enlightenment and Propaganda. Departments were created to control production of film, music, visual arts and literature. Goebbels stated that it ‘did not mean that politics must interfere with the inner function of art ... it means only that the state regulates and orders its great beginning and total engagement’ (Adam 1992, 53). Eventually politics controlled art and every part of society was reached through a bombardment of imagery. Artists had to be racially pure and politically reliable to be a member of the Culture Chamber, and to be a member gave them rights and privileges as did membership of many institutions in Nazi Germany such as women’s, youth and military organisations. Artists now took on a new role, no longer a free individual with rights of self-expression, but a political educator with their art serving the state and ideology. They were allowed exemption from military service, also to be a recipient of social security and other benefits. Artists who did not conform faced an end to their careers. Adam argues that many artists conformed to the Reich policy, and those who did not, and subsequently left Germany, found their places filled by many artists ready to seize the opportunity to advance their own careers. As Petropoulos explains: ‘Nazi leaders elicited the cooperation of not just ideological zealots, but also many who were ostensibly apolitical’ (2000, 6); he also argues that:

one finds a situation in the art world that is analogous to the findings of Christopher Browning and Daniel Goldhagen, who have both shown that ‘ordinary’ people participated in the murder of the Jews and other victims of the Holocaust (Petropoulos 2000, 6).

In 1935 there were 100,000 members of the Reich Chamber of Culture of whom 14,300 were painters (Adam 1992, 55). It would appear that artists in Nazi Germany, who were not politically supportive of the Reich, saw the personal advantage in conforming to policy, rather than abstaining and becoming an unwanted and excluded element, persecuted or ultimately imprisoned for not towing the Party line.

The policy was that all things Modern were to be removed or destroyed from galleries and museums and Art of the Third Reich was to take its place. To this end, over 5,000 artworks were seized and these would form the basis of the 1937 ‘Degenerate Art Exhibition’ in Munich. Expressionist and Modernist artists, such as Beckmann, Klee, Dix, Baumeister and Hofer, had their work removed and were deprived of their jobs. Goebbels instigated a cleansing of the German art scene, whereby all foreign and modern influences would be removed. This Gleichschaltung (bringing into line) of the art world took place under the ideology and policies of National Socialism.
The emphasis was to bring culture again to the masses in the form of traditional Germanic belief and myth; art seen as degenerate and elitist was to be removed. Thus, the campaign was mounted against ‘degenerate’ art and artists, as new cultural policy was spread across Germany, influencing the masses in the form of art exhibitions and public displays from 1937 to 1944. Hence, in 1937, the ‘Great Exhibition of German Art’ coincided with the show of ‘Degenerate Art’, where unacceptable German, modern art was shown to the public for the last time. As Hinz points out: ‘the whole of National Socialist ideology revolved around anchoring the present in the past’ (1980, 2). National Socialists subsequently invented and exploited stereotyped concepts and art forms as a substitute for genuine artistic and personal experience (Hinz 1980, 9).

Prior to 1933 the art movement in Germany had flourished and Modernism was perceived as a search for introspection and questioning of the self, rather than that of beauty represented in Classical art of the nineteenth century. Human suffering in a dehumanised world was a major theme. New artistic movements had arisen such as Futurism, Dadaism, Cubism and Expressionism. But Hitler viewed modern art as the result of a diseased mind, and the Weimar Republic as representative of a degenerate culture. To the Nazis, Modern art meant Internationalism, Jewishness, and Marxism, which in turn would lead to large cities, industrialization and decadent living. The labels such as ‘Jewish’, or ‘Bolshevik’, which were applied to prohibited art, were not identifiable qualities in the painting, and therefore can only be viewed as denoting a political position. Hitler saw ‘true’ art as art linked with the Volks, the country, nature, tradition and the healthy perfect body. Hinz argues that the National Socialists rejected or attacked just about everything that was on the art scene before 1933, whether it was representational or abstract (Hinz 1980, 24). Walter Gropius’s Weimar Bauhaus was forced to move to Dessau and then to Berlin; once a world-leading centre of international architecture and modern design, the Bauhaus was now dominated by Germanic craft, folk-art and ornamentation. Modernist painters, such as Klee and Kandinsky, who had taught there, had their work removed from galleries in Weimar under Nazi policy. The central idea of the Bauhaus had been to achieve a total integration of art and industry, not to be replaced by a medieval craft guild, not only obsolete and archaic in concept, but the antithesis of forward thinking modern aesthetics.

The Nazi regime removed the ideology of self-expression and individuality in modern culture (as seen in the Weimar Republic) and National Socialist cultural policies were embraced by the masses, forming the basis of volkgemeinschaft (people’s community)²— the main tenet of National Socialism.
Van der Will claims that ‘National Socialism gained mass acceptance because it promised to overcome the alienations wrought on individuals by modern capitalism and instead transform society to become a large integrated community’ (Taylor & Van der Will 1990, 14). Modernism was actually blamed for the failures in Germany after the Treaty of Versailles (1919), when economic depression had seen unemployment reach six million (Adam 1992, 38). The lower middle classes felt the threat of proletarianism and the collapse of law and order. Poverty was seen in the cities, which were dirty and chaotic, and German identity was perceived as lost. Ideological disunity of the nation was felt, with its social divisions of ‘have’ and ‘have-not’, the leisured chic and the workers becoming the privileged and the underprivileged classes respectively (Taylor and Van der Will 1990, 16). Disillusionment with modern life led to a return to a belief in Germanic tradition and history, which Hitler regarded as essential to establish the Reich culture, and his distorted idea of history and art was harnessed to reach the masses.

It could be argued that the successes of National Socialism were formed on the failure of the diversity and democracy of the Weimar Republic. The German people resented cultural diversity and factionalism in an economically depressed society, and wanted to return to national solidarity exemplified in the volk mentality. Modern art was seen as elitist and inaccessible to ordinary people, as it had become not only introspective, but a philosophical and intellectual exercise, only meaningful to those who would understand the concepts in modern art. ‘Degenerate artists’ saw themselves as participants in international art movements, removed from German tradition and identity. To National Socialists modern art was the ‘spiritual sell out of national values by decadent artists’ (Adam 1992, 38). Germans, regardless of class, were happier to understand traditional art and traditional social order. Taylor comments that ‘the petty bourgeoisie began to long for authority and stability in the wake of acute ideological insecurities and the disorientating Modernism of the Weimar Republic’ (1990, 11); he also points out that:

To a nature loving – and for most of the part provincial people who longed for the good old days, modern art, modern architecture, and the by-products of decadent big-city life were disturbing. The urban bourgeoisie were considered antisocial, in love with new machines, mislead by foreign ideas. All this smacked of revolution and the destruction of the old order. Society needed to defend old values against any kind of further revolution (Taylor 1990, 30).
Modern art was seen as expensive, international, elitist, and non-German in concept. Realistic German painters, working in the nineteenth-century tradition, leapt at the chance to re-establish themselves in the art world, not realising that the conflict between representational art and abstract art was political and not aesthetic.

To reach the masses, books, pamphlets and associations promised to remove foreign influence and restore German culture, German standards and German identity based on the discipline and order seen in earlier centuries. ‘Germanic’, ‘rustic’, ‘noble’, ‘heroic’ were all qualities which Hitler perceived as truly German, to be exemplified in Nazi art and instilled in the masses as an ideology to establish the Thousand Year Reich. The impact on the art world was embraced by the German volk. It promised an illusionary future whereby traditional values would be restored and Germanic pride and national unity restored.

But, the Nazi ideal of traditional volksign unity and Germanic cultural identity was not new. Anti-urban feeling was already present in Germany, as was the popularity of nature and outdoor pursuits, embracing the open air was simply an ideology seized upon by the Nazis. German youth movements such as the Jugendbewegung were very popular, having 15,000 members in 1911 (Taylor 1990, 38). Nude bathing at the Friebader was also a popular pastime; to embrace the fresh air with a naked body was to be fit and healthy. Nudism itself was an attempt to regain, in the face and ravages of industrialisation, physical and ideological spaces for the restoration of life in harmony with nature (Taylor 1990, 21). Gymnastics were, similarly, widely encouraged. All these cultural activities were embraced by the Nazis and can be seen as an ideology represented in the visual arts, particularly in painting. The celebration of the body is seen in painting, sculpture, and visual pageants and performances throughout Germany, such as the Nuremberg Rally in 1934. Leni Riefenstahl’s film, Triumph of the Will (1935) promotes national unity and Aryan physical perfection with discipline and Germanic culture. National Socialists sought to promote Ganzeit (wholeness), Einheit (unity) and Bindung (social and ideological incorporation) (Taylor 1990, 20). All these factors, simmering under the surface in society before 1933, are indicative of future political strategies, which take place within the regime.

The concept of Aryan perfection led to the future euthanasia projects and elimination of non-Aryans from society: the removal of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, people with disabilities and the infirm. The encouragement of healthy outdoor activity is seen in the Youth Movements, such as the Hitler Youth, and in the Germanic myth of the beautiful healthy body, used in relation to girl’s
organizations for fitness, and in women’s groups to encourage them to have children, and to nurture
the next generation of Aryan perfection.

*Kinder, Kuche and Kirche* (children, kitchen and church) promoted for women a traditional gender
role of nurture and motherhood. Hitler believed that women had a biological purpose; they were to
be honoured and revered for breeding children, and were to be beautiful and pure in image and
morality. Nazis used art to define the social role of women, whereby women should surrender their
individuality in favour once again of the *volk*, to bring healthy children into the world and rear them
for the nation. Female nudes in Nazi art accounted for a tenth of all paintings exhibited in Germany
(Adam 1992, 149). Richardson argues that the ‘female nude and peasant mother are said to suggest
that an imminent natural order is being re-established and this will stabilize the present and
guarantee the future’ (Taylor 1990, 54). This could be regarded as relevant, as the failure of the
Weimar was resented throughout Germany. But, as previously stated, the female nude was also
seen as part of a nature culture, for, as Adam points out ‘the demand for naturalness, vitality, and
sensualism found its visual counterpart in the presentation of the naked body’ (1992, 149). The
imagery of women was seen over and over again relating to fertility, ripeness, purity, softness and
gentility, devotion and cooperation. She represented nature in its fertility, and also its playfulness. In
reality women had surrendered their political power in return for privileges offered by the state as
wives and mothers. They had been imbued with the Nazi ‘*weltanschauung*’ (world view). However,
the image of women presented by National Socialist indoctrination had no reality at all. It was ‘an
invitation to be an accessible ideal, the ultimate synthesis of nature and spirit. They were the
embodiment of a racial idea .’ (Adam 1992, 155).

The iconography of National Socialist art was very limited and the same themes were repeated
endlessly. The art displayed was not only an expression of Nazi political ideas, but also of the system
in all aspects. The family, homeland, natural landscapes and the simple country life, with good
honest uncomplicated peasants toiling the soil in harmony with nature were constantly displayed.
The strong loyal soldier was portrayed as making heroic sacrifice to fight and die for the nation,
represented as a glorious victor, he beckoned a nation to follow him to lead to Nazi greatness.
Imagery of military precision related to Hitler’s idealization of Roman and Grecian military history, as
demonstrated in mass propaganda rallies at Nuremberg from 1934. There was no evidence of any
reference to industrialization, poverty, physical disability or imperfection. This had been confined to
the degenerate art, and removed throughout Germany. The fine arts were an instrument of
propaganda in Nazi Germany, and this combined with national mass rallies and meetings proved effective in swaying the masses.

Nonetheless, it could be argued that Hitler did not need to indoctrinate the German people with a radical and aggressive policy in respect of fine art; from the total destruction of self-expression and individualism in Modernist and Expressionist art, it would seem that fundamental Nazi ideals were already in evidence and waiting to be drawn upon to unify a nation dispirited and fractured by war and economic depression. Art was a tool functioning in the interests of the Volksgemeinschaft. The Nazis managed to propagate future policies from seeds already in place in the German mindset and successfully exploited the visual arts to make this an effective strategy in relation to social engineering, racial and cultural prejudice, and pogroms of Jews.

Hitler’s obsession regarding the Jewish race, evident in Mein Kampf (1925-6), is an exposition of Hitler’s political ideology, in which he writes: ‘The sham culture which the Jew possesses today, is the property of other peoples’ (Hitler quoted in Adam 1992, 11). The hatred of Jews, present from the outset of National Socialism, was the opposite to the constant celebration of the volksgemeinschaft. If art were to serve the nation and the volk, Nazi anti-Semitism, a racist view mainly instilled through propaganda, seen in cartoons, posters and films, would fuel the ethnic cleansing of art and culture. Interestingly, in the fine arts, there are ‘very few-traces of anti-Semitic propaganda’ (Adam 1992 173). Even so, as Huener points out, Nazi art ‘could not tolerate the contaminating influence of Jews’, and the application of anti-Semitism to cultural policy did not take the form of a coherent state program initiated in 1933, but like the regime’s anti-Jewish policies as a whole, the discrimination against and purging of Jews from the arts evolved over time (Huener 2006, 6).

Huener also argues that ‘the measures appear to have been met with widespread approval in the art world and German society as a whole’ (2006, 7). Jews were seen as cultural parasites that contaminated the press, music, the arts, and theatre. Additionally, as Steinweis explains, it was seen as ‘an important responsibility of a Nazi government to purge Jews and their cultural production from German society’ (quoted in Huener and Nicosia 2006, 17).
Nazi hatred of Modernism in the arts was also linked to the Jews. Nazis saw modernist art as representing mentally disabled or physiologically deformed people, thereby forging a link with what they regarded as racial degeneration. It is important to state here that the majority of Jewish artists were in fact traditional artists in their aesthetic outlook, and not modernists, but Nazi ideology refused to accept this reality. No matter what aesthetics the Jews pursued, they were condemned by the Nazis in an illogical cultural strategy aimed at the eradication of any Jewish influence throughout German society as a whole.

Nazi cultural policy unfolded over time promoting authentic ‘Germanness’ in exhibitions and mass rallies, but at the same time this paralleled the removal of anything defined as ‘un-German’, ‘unhealthy’ or ‘alien’. The Reich created public support in purging Jews from German society; this was evident when the ‘Degenerate Art Exhibition’ of 1937 attracted two million viewers, far more than the ‘German Art Exhibition’ held simultaneously. The main aim of the exhibition was to link cultural degeneracy with the Jewish race. The exhibition frequently invoked the epithet of ‘Judeo-Bolshevism’ this being the notion that Jews promoted radical Marxism as a means to promote the disintegration of German society (Huener and Nicosia 2006, 26). No doubt the National Socialists intended to encourage widespread acquiescence and compliance of the German people, and this is evident with regard to the acceptance of policies towards the Jews in German society. There seems to have been widespread acceptance of Nazi policies as they gradually moved towards the Final Solution. Envy and hatred of Jews both intellectually and economically was whipped up to a frenzy by Goebbels in his propaganda campaigns, and in Hitler’s speeches, resulting in the most inhumane atrocities ever witnessed against people in the whole of mankind. Thomas Mann (1875-1955, German novelist and social critic) condemned his German compatriots for abandoning their Jewish colleagues, and their readiness to embrace Nazi cultural policies (Huener and Nicosia 2006, 27).

The purpose of Nazi art and Nazi propaganda was to create a nation which believed in ‘Ein Volk, Ein Reich, Ein Fuhrer’ – the togetherness of a nation and the leadership of one ruler. As Adam explains:

Taking art to the people and away from the elite succeeded in unifying the nation. Hitler’s notions of culture appealed to popular taste and prejudice and therefore could count on solid support (Adam 1992, 73).

The period from 1933-1945 witnessed the cultural infiltration of Nazi doctrine in every area of artistic production. Art in Nazi Germany promoted an ideology, based on a weird backward looking
philosophy, which emphasised volkgemeinschaft as a main tenet of National Socialism. Art became a successful tool that promoted the Germanic myth of tradition, and instilled in the German people a pathetic view of an Aryan ideal, which was sadly embraced by the German people to the detriment, and failure of mankind as a whole.

Examples of Nazi art can be viewed online at: http://thecensureofdemocracy.150m.com/art7.htm

Notes
1. Gleichschaltung could be described as ‘bringing into line’ or ‘coordination’. It was a Nazi expression to explain the process of the successive establishment of a totalitarian regime; it meant tight control and coordination in all aspects of society.
2. Volkgemeinschaft refers to the concept of German National identity and social solidarity. The Nazi party to promote a concept of unity; i.e. a mystical unity and a racial soul unifying all pure Germans used it. The soul was regarded as relating to blood and soil, a symbol of the unification of peasant and landowner working together for the collective need the volk- the great whole, and a cause worth dying for. Hitler exploited this concept throughout his propaganda campaigns.

References


Riefenstahl, Leni. 1935. ‘Triumph of the Will’ (Triumph des Willens) propaganda film. Available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHs2coAzLI8
