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Nazi Aesthetics in Historical Context

Something in the study of Hitler repels us. Whether it is our own traditional reflex to blot out the memory of our enemies (or to remember them as blotted out, as we do Haman and Amalek), or just the queasy sense that too much time spent in his company cannot be a good thing, I'm not sure. Or maybe we fear that by understanding Hitler and his Nazi cohort too well, explaining them, we come perilously close to justifying and rationalizing their evil deeds--akin to asking "why" of the Nazis and receiving their own, self-aggrandizing, exculpatory explanations in turn. Or maybe it's always easier and much safer to identify with the victims of history, to empathize with them, and try to understand their own responses to extreme events.

In this vein, it's always been much easier, certainly more fashionable, to study the

aesthetic responses of victims to their suffering than to explore the aesthetic preoccupations of the killers or, G-d forbid, the aesthetic principles on which the killers based their policies of war and mass murder. It is almost as if our own romantic notions of art and its transcendent link to beauty have led us to protect both art and beauty from the barbaric claims made on them by the Nazis, from the evil acts committed in their name. A “Nazi-aesthetic,” in this view, seems to be a veritable contradiction in terms. If “beauty is truth, and truth beauty,” as Keats would have it, then Nazis and art are mutually exclusive categories. But in fact, as historians like George Mosse, Peter Viereck, and Saul Friedlander among others have long known, the Nazis not only possessed a highly refined aesthetic but unlike most, practiced their aesthetic at every level of politics and policy. Moreover, they not only believed themselves artists, but were regarded by others at the time as artists, whose very ideology was founded in an essentially aesthetic logic. “Like it or not,” Thomas Mann wrote in his 1938 essay, “Brother Hitler,” “how can we fail to recognize in this phenomenon [of Hitler and his spell over the Germans] a sign of artistry?” (Spotts, 3) As Frederic Spotts has pointed out in his forthcoming study of Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics, quoting Peter Vierick’s Metapolitics (Knopf, 1941), “the artistic ambitions of Hitler, Goebbels, Rosenberg, von Schirach, Funk and and Streicher were originally far deeper than their political ambitions and were integral parts of their personalities.” Spotts also notes that the late George Mosse lamented how belatedly he and other liberals came to understand that not only

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were these artistic ambitions part of their personalities, they were also part and parcel of Nazi ideology. “We failed to see that the fascist aesthetic itself reflected the needs and hopes of contemporary society, that what we brushed aside as the so-called superstructure was in reality the means through which most people grasped the fascist message, transforming politics into a civic religion.” And as such, this fascist aesthetic had earth-shattering consequences, which we dismiss at the peril of our historical understanding.

What, then, is this Nazi aesthetic, what kind of “art” came of it, and why do we concern ourselves with it now? As made abundantly clear in the fascinating exhibition here at the Williams College Museum of Art, “Prelude to a Nightmare,” and as suggested in Frederic Spotts’s riveting new book, not only did the Nazi aesthetic have several interpenetrating parts, including idealizations of purity, violence, and the human form. But in fact, the resulting “art” encompassed much more than the kitsch statuary and paintings so easy to dismiss now: it also included Nazi pageantry and regalia, films and political choreography, architecture and, without too much of a stretch, even the so-called theatres of war and mass murder, as well. What this exhibition does so well, along with the new work by Spotts and foundational books in these areas by Jonathan Petropoulos (Art as Politics in the Third Reich, 1996) and Brigitte Hamann (Hitler’s Vienna: A Dictator’s Apprenticeship, 1998) is to restore to the historical record the role aesthetics actually played in the Nazi Reich and its policies, the ways a Nazi aesthetic was part and parcel of Nazi ideology, and not just an ornamental by-product of it.

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In my discussion today, I'd like to look more closely at several parts of this Nazi aesthetic--specifically the thematic preoccupation with redemption, the veneration of ruins, and embrace of spectacle and its architectural twin, monumentality--in order to show just how fundamental they were to Nazi ideology and practice. For here I find that the Nazis' relentless concern with exhibition and choreography were not just means by which to deliver the Nazi message but very much part of the message itself, even fundamental pillars of their rule and power. From the actual, incredible buildings and rallies to the cinematic records they commissioned of these rallies and buildings, every production was amazingly well-composed and, I believe, embodied a very carefully orchestrated aesthetic impulse, which in the end served as both a source and a reflection of Nazi power at its height.

One of the most brilliant "documentary films" ever made, of course, was no mere documentary, but perhaps this last century's benchmark for cinematic propaganda. In the opening moments of "Triumph of the Will," Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi-commissioned record of the 1934 Nuremberg rallies, we find an object lesson in the "aesthetics of redemption." A plane is carrying the Fuhrer and his entourage over the picturesque landscape of hills, valleys and churches on their way to Nuremberg. A strident voice-over narrative introduces the scene: "After the disastrous defeat of the World War, with Germany in ruins, a leader has emerged from the ashes to lead Germany to greatness." The plane suddenly appears from the clouds and glides over the countryside, its shadow

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in the form of a cross, as the narrator intones, “From the ashes of defeat, a Fuhrer has arisen who will save and redeem Germany.” As Hitler did so brilliantly in his speeches’ transvaluation of religious terms, when he invoked the Christian language of Gnade (grace), Glaube (belief), and Unterblichkeit (immortality) toward expressly political ends, Riefenstahl now just as brilliantly framed Hitler’s arrival in the explicit iconography of Christian redemption and messianic deliverance. The rest of the film both captured and created the immense sense of Nazi pageantry and monumentality, both cornerstones of the Nazi aesthetic, for reasons I will explore further here.

Of course, to this day, the 100-year-old film-maker Riefenstahl insists that her film was pure documentary, a lens objectif through which Hitler’s ascension was merely recorded, not glorified. But this denial of human agency, of the individual’s hand in shaping such idealized images, as if such idealizations were in themselves eternal and historically transcendent, was also part of her Nazi aesthetic. The notion that her film-making merely captured the genius of Hitler for all to see, that this film somehow made itself and did not depict Hitler as the messianic figure so apparent in the film, was in keeping with the Nazis’ powerful self-portrayal as an invincible force of nature. To this day, the film-maker denies a role in both shaping and reflecting the Nazi aesthetic, being anything more than a documentarian: but Leni Riefenstahl was no more a mere documentarian than Hitler was a mere politician. And both of their creations—from the Nazi Reich to its filmic representation—issued from a strict aesthetic logic. One of the

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reasons both Hitler and Riefenstahl could exploit the language and imagery of messianic redemption so adroitly, it turns out, is that both regarded the logic of redemption as a universal tenet, and in fact it was one they shared not only with each other but with the rest of Germany and with much of the western world, as well.

For Hitler, redemption was not only the compensation of some earlier loss, the necessary destruction of the old Germany in order to make way for the new Germany he envisioned, but also part of what he regarded as a sacrificial offering. “If at the start of the World War [I],” Hitler wrote in Mein Kampf, “we had held under poison gas some 12 to 15 thousand of these Hebrew subverters of our people, then the sacrifice of millions of German soldiers on the front would not have been in vain.” That is, the deaths of millions of Germans could be redeemed or compensated by the deaths of Jews killed in Germany’s name.

In fact, the historian Saul Friedlander has argued compellingly that the very notion of redemption actually played a central role in the Nazis’ particular brand of anti-Semitism, what Friedlander has termed “redemptive anti-Semitism”: “born from the fear of racial degeneration and the religious belief in redemption.” Friedlander elaborates here: “The main cause of degeneration was the penetration of the Jews into the German body politic, into German society, and into the German bloodstream. Germanhood and the Aryan world were on the path to perdition if the struggle against the Jews was not joined; this was to be a struggle to the death. Redemption would come as liberation from

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the Jews—as their expulsion, possibly their annihilation.” (Friedlander, p. 87) Just as Germany’s disastrous defeat in World War I was to be “redeemed” by the messianic advent of the Fuhrer, in Riefenstahl’s version, so would the war effort here, no matter how terrible the costs, be redeemed by Germany’s “liberation” from the Jews. In Friedlander’s words, “It was this redemptive dimension, this synthesis of a murderous rage and an ‘idealistic’ goal, shared by the Nazi leader and the hard core of the party, that led to Hitler’s ultimate decision to exterminate the Jews.” (Friedlander, p. 3)

And as Frederic Spotts shows so well, the principle of redemptory “sacrifice” also played a primary role in the memorial landscape Hitler introduced into the Nazi topography. From the “Eternal Guard” at the Temples of Honor in Munich, which held the sarcophagi of eight “Martyrs of the Movement” killed in the 1923 putsch attempt (115-116) to the Totenburgen—or Citadels of the Dead—to be built as mass burial grounds for thousands of prospective fallen German soldiers, Hitler made redemptory sacrifice one of the aesthetic architectural pillars of his Reich. And as Spotts points out, even the Nazis’ elaborately choreographed party rallies, during which Hitler would salute a “blood flag” included scenes of “almost pagan ritual, [in which] animal sacrifice has been replaced by the prospective human sacrifice of wars to come” (70).

Of course, this is also why a new generation of artists in Germany is loath to find any redeeming aspects of any sort in national memory of Hitler’s mass murder of Europe’s Jews. To their minds, making an art out of this catastrophe, finding consoling

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meaning in this catastrophe, compensating this catastrophe with beauty of any sort, would not just be a betrayal of the Jews' experiences during the war, but an extension of the crime itself, of the redemptive cast-of-mind that led to mass murder. It was in service to such idealizations—of the German nation, of the Jews (each now defined in contrast to the other), of the human form, of art and architecture—that led to a diminishing of human life in the Nazi aesthetic, which for practical reasons almost rendered actual human beings irrelevant to the higher cause.

Indeed, here we are reminded of Hitler's own absolute indifference to individual human lives, especially as they paled in significance to the larger cause and idealizations of race and nation, and the way this diminution of the individual underpinned his aesthetic embrace of the monumental. After citing Hitler's chilling meditation on the value of individual human life, "which should not be given such a high value," in Hitler's words. "A fly lays a million eggs; they all die. But the flies survive," Frederic Spotts suggests that Hitler's "lack of feeling for humans, even for fanatical party members, was already evident at the Nuremberg rallies and other spectacles when his 'architecturalizing' of the participants and his deployment of them in geometrical patterns reduced them to noctambulant creatures" (119). At first, I doubted such a simple conclusion, this reduction of individuals to mere props in one of his apocalyptic stage sets. But as I looked further into Hitler's aesthetic embrace of monumentality, I had to agree that it was tied to his fundamental conviction that the private or individual consciousness must

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always be made subservient to larger idealized aims of the nation-state.

Thus the particular kind of monumentality Hitler embraced in his aesthetic also included a side of it he abhorred: “How truly deplorable the relation between state buildings and private building has become today,” he wrote in *Mein Kampf* (265). “The sum of money spent on state buildings is usually laughable and inadequate,” which was to say, that too much of the era’s most prominent architecture was being built for private clients, monuments to individual as opposed to communities and ideas. “If the fate of Rome should strike Berlin,” Hitler continued, “future generations would some day admire the department stores of a few Jews as the mightiest works of our era and the hotels of a few corporations as the characteristic expression of the culture of our times” (256).

For Hitler, the problem was that

Our big cities of today possess no monuments dominating the city picture, which might somehow be regarded as symbols of the whole epoch. This was true in the cities of antiquity, since nearly every one possessed a special monument in which it took pride. The characteristic aspect of the ancient city did not lie in private buildings, but in the community monuments which seemed made, not for the moment, but for eternity, because they were intended to reflect, not the wealth of an individual owner, but the greatness and wealth of the community. Thus arose monuments which were very well suited to unite the individual inhabitant with his

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city . . . For what the ancient had before his eyes was less the humble houses of private owners than the magnificent edifices of the whole community. Compared to them the dwelling house sank to the level of an insignificant object of secondary importance. (264)

That is, individuals come and go, as well as their humanly-scaled dwelling places, their sites of life. What gets left behind is not the uniqueness of individual human experience, or the messy heterogeneity of life itself, but a monolithic form that imposes singular meaning on disparate deeds, experiences, and lives.

It is a monumentality that denies the multiplicity of experience and forces all to adopt one vision of the world as their own. This is, of course, precisely the monumental aesthetic that is so completely rejected by a post-war generation of German artists in particular, who remain deeply suspicious of a monumentality still redolent of fascist tenets: the didactic logic of monuments that turns people into passive spectators, their demagogical rigidity and certainty of history that imposes singular meaning on complex times and events, that would dwarf and subjugate a population now made to feel insignificant by an entire nation's reason for being. The multiple, competing stories are lost to such monumentality, of course, all supposedly for the unity and well-being of a polity. But such an aesthetics presumes not only the unity of being that can only be imposed from on high, but the complete disregard for noisy, democratic dissent, and debate.

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The monumental in Hitler's eyes was not only an end result, however, but also a means by which he could reduce the individual to insignificance, thereby making all appear as one. Specifically, he did this in his elaborately choreographed spectacles and pageants, against which the individual seemed helpless to act. Witness his dozens of gargantuan productions: the Nuremberg rallies, the colossal stadiums and political arenas designed to hold 500,000 people, or even the North-South Axis he and his architect Albert Speer designed for Berlin, an impassable 50 meters wide. On a commemorative "Day of the Political Leaders," in 1936, over 110,000 men marched onto the review field, while another 100,000 spectators watched from the stands. "Once darkness fell," in Spotts's words, "the space was suddenly encircled by a ring of light, with 30,000 flags and standards glistening in the illumination. Spotlights would focus on the main gate, as distant cheers announced the Fuehrer's approach. At the instant he entered, 150 powerful searchlights would shoot into the sky to produce a gigantic, shimmering 'cathedral of light,' as it was called. More vividly, the British ambassador famously described it as 'solemn and beautiful . . . like being inside a cathedral of ice.' In either case, 'cathedral' was the apt term since the essence of the ceremony was one of sacramental dedication to Fuehrer and party" (66). Or as Albert Speer wrote in his memoirs, "I had long thought that all these formations, processions, dedications were part of a clever propagandistic revue. Now I finally understood that for Hitler they were almost like rites of the founding of a church" (as cited by Spotts, p. 68).

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Such an aesthetic vision, of course, also relieves individuals of human agency and responsibility. All are acting in the name of a force much larger than themselves, all merely ciphers through which transhistorical events play themselves out. Hence, Leni Riefenstahl's claim to this day that she was somehow passively documenting these Nazi rallies, was somehow even a victim of them, and not actively choreographing them. The result is an art and architecture without human beings to animate it. It is a strange concept, perhaps, but it is also at the heart of a Nazi-aesthetics, which emphasized the idealized human forms of Arno Breker over the actual forms as found in life; which emphasized the spectacular, singular voice of the masses over the smaller, dissenting voices of individuals. Spectacular rallies that reduced people to spectators of something much larger than themselves, over which they had no control; art that represented life not as it was but as it should be according to Nazi precepts.

In Peter Cohen's "The Architecture of Doom," there is a fascinating filmed sequence of Hitler's visits to the great architectural wonders of Paris. On this, his first visit to Paris, Hitler arrives before dawn and then proceeds at breakneck speed through the empty streets of Paris, stopping for studied walks through the Opera, national library, the museums and the Eiffel Tower. All of this is pre-dawn, deliberately planned so that Paris is for the purposes of this visit, essentially a life-sized architectural model of itself, a place empty of life and people, as formal and inanimate as the architectural blueprints he had studied so assiduously before his trip that he was able to lead his entourage

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through the Opera and point out a missing ante-chamber. Part of his fascination with ruins, one feels, is that they resemble more closely the plans and the models than they do the lived in buildings themselves.

Indeed, our preoccupation with what we glibly call “the future of the past” finds a disturbing parallel in the Nazis’ own aesthetic preoccupation with the future of their past. Recall Hitler’s words again, “If the fate of Rome should strike Berlin . . .”, and then picture Albert Speer passing by the rusting iron and rebar protruding from the wrecked and reinforced concrete construction of the Nuremberg conference grounds as they were being redeveloped into a Zeppelin field worthy of the “Thousand-Year Reich.” He writes that here he is shuddered at the thought that the building he had designed for the new Reich would at some point also find themselves in such wretched demise. Here Speer concocted his theory of “ruin-value,” whereby he would build into his architecture a calculation of what would be left behind after a thousand years. “The employment of particular materials as well as attention to particular structural considerations,” Speer wrote, “was meant to make buildings possible, which in a state of decay, after hundreds or (so we calculated) thousands of years would resemble the Roman models” (Speer 1969, p. 69). To illustrate what has been called this “anticipated retrospection,” Speer sketched a romantic drawing, which according to the Nazi architect, showed “what the grandstand of the Zeppelin field would look like after generations of neglect, covered with ivy, with collapsed pillars, the walls here and there fallen down, but in broad outline

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still clearly recognizable. Among Hitler's entourage this drawing was regarded as 'blasphemy.' The mere idea that I had calculated a period of decline for the freshly-established thousand year Reich seemed unheard of to many. But the idea struck Hitler as sensible and logical." (Speer 1969, 69). This is to view events constantly not as they are on the ground but always through a future-perfect prism. From a past-perfect mode of thought—"it has happened"—to a future perfect mode of thought, in which "it will have happened," a mode that, as Harald Welzer says, "already looks back on that which is imagined as having already come to pass."

Of course, such an aesthetic can also lead to the deluded inability to distinguish that which has happened from that which one imagines (or hopes) will have happened. Hence, Hitler's preoccupation in his last months with his plans for Linz and the 1950 victory parades that would never actually take place outside of his imagination. These and other thoughts occupied Speer in his days in the Spandau prison, of course, where he was able retrospectively to grasp just the deludedness of this particular aesthetic of "anticipated retrospection." When one of his fellow prisoners was for health reasons given a chair that Speer had designed for the now-destroyed Reichs Chancellery, Speer came face to face with the reality of what was left of all his works. "The chancellery has already been demolished," he wrote morosely from his Spandau cell, "the Nuremberg parade ground is to be blown up, nothing else remains any more of all the grandiose plans which were to transform the architectural face of Germany. How often had Hitler said to

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me, that the greatness of our buildings would still bear witness to the greatness of our age after thousands of years—and now this chair.” (1975, p. 339) And now this chair. That only this single chair would remain of all his great design works, and that it would now serve a completely humane function in the end, must have thrown into especially sharp relief the absolutely inhuman scale at the heart of the rest of his works, the ways in which individual lives were absolutely expendable in the pursuit of an idealized world.

Toward the end of his very appreciative review of “Prelude to a Nightmare,” *New Yorker* art critic Peter Schjeldahl finds that this show “rebutts the comfortable sentiment that Hitler was a ‘failed artist.’” For as Schjeldahl notes, “Once he found his metier, in Munich after the First World War, he was masterly, first as an orator and then as an all-around impresario of political theatre” (Schjeldahl, p. 171). That is, Hitler was both a product of his time’s aesthetic temper (even if his tastes were somewhat retrograde) and ultimately the greatest producer of political design and choreography who ever lived. The point is that we cannot separate Hitler’s deeds, his policies, his Nazi ideology, from his aesthetic temper. Our reflex may be to protect the aesthetic realm from the ugliness and barbarism often committed in its name. But without examining the potential for evil in aesthetics, as well as the potential for good, we dismiss aesthetics altogether as a historical irrelevancy, as something disconnected from life as we actually live and experience it.

Here I would like to correct Schjeldahl’s concluding impression. He quotes the

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show's curator, Deborah Rothschild, from one of her wall-texts: "The union of malevolence and beauty can occur; we must remain vigilant against its seductive power," and then Schjeldahl adds, "I disagree. We must remain vigilant against malevolence, and we should regard beauty as the fundamentally amoral phenomenon that it is." Here I think he has simply misread the wall-text: it is not beauty's seductive power against which we must remain vigilant, but its union with malevolence that we must guard against. For by itself, beauty may indeed exist outside morality. But when is beauty ever "by itself?" It is always a quality of something, part of something other than itself. Once yoked to a malevolent force, beauty is no longer amoral or benign but now, as this exhibition makes so disturbingly clear, also part of that malevolent force's logic. Beauty and terror, aesthetics and power, are not only to be twinned after the historical fact—but must now be regarded also as historical forces that drove events as they actually unfolded at the time.

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