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Propaganda Art in Nazi Germany: The Revival of Classicism

Mathilde Sauquet

From 1933 to 1945, Europe experienced what was arguably the darkest era of its history. During these years, German dictator Adolf Hitler and his powerful Nazi government cast a shadow of evil over the entire country as well as neighboring nations. This authoritative regime, known as the Third Reich, was able to hold power for over a decade, contaminate every part of society, and exert immense pressure on other great European states thanks to one very valuable tool: thoroughly well-developed propaganda. Persuaded by omnipresent propaganda messages in their everyday life, Germans became convinced of the legitimacy of Nazi ideologies, and Hitler's actions quickly benefitted from the unconditional support of his people. These messages were transmitted in a number of creative ways. Newspapers, radio shows, sporting events, songs, works of art, youth groups, parades; all became indivisible from the regime's politics. In this paper, I will show how the art movement called classicism was re-appropriated by the Nazis to become a physical, thus more comprehensible, representation of their ideologies. Before narrowing the focus of this paper to the influence of Nazism in sculpture, however, it is important to acknowledge the ideals that constituted the Nazi culture.

German Nazism rested on the belief that a so-called Aryan race stood superior to all other races, particularly the Jews. Partakers of this theory truly believed that the purity of the master German race was threatened by alien blood, supposedly found in Jews, Gypsies, Blacks, and homosexuals, to name the most targeted groups. The idea of purging the nation of 'unwanted parasites' goes back to the early 1800s, when nationalist Johan Gottlieb Fichte urged the German people to resist the occupation of Berlin by Napoleon's French troops. He awakened in them a deep sense of exceptionalism that progressively transformed into hate-filled nationalism in the mid 20th century. Stressing the importance of racial purity, respect of traditions, and the virtues of rural life, Nazism defied the rise of modern trends of the era such as materialism and industrialism. Hitler himself especially looked back to the Roman and Greek models of simplicity and traditionalism with profound admiration: "Roman history [...] remains the best mentor, not only for today, but probably for all time. The Hellenic ideal of culture should also remain preserved for us in its exemplary beauty," and in another instance, "When we are asked about our ancestors, we should always point to the Greeks" (Grosshans 83, 84). This train of thought was supported by many scholars of the 19th and 20th centuries, who argued that "reliance upon Greek and Roman models could serve as a stimulant to German national consciousness and as an antidote against materialism, utilitarian rationalism, and intellectual confusion [...] and as an inspirational expression of the racial spirit and national harmony" (Grosshans 82). Hitler longed for his name and achievements to be remembered with the same grandeur and respect as the figures of Ancient Greece and Rome, and therefore called for "the restoration of a Caesarlike heroism to German life" (Grosshans 21). Unfortunately, Nazi ideologies cannot be summed up as the pursuit of racial purity and the adoration of classical antiquity, but these are the values that will be best exemplified by the evidence presented in this essay.

The alliance between art and German nationalism was actually born years before Hitler came to power. In 1920, the German Art Society was established by Bettina Feistel-Rohmeder, a fervent member of the Nazi party who had been raised by a right-wing anti-Semitic father. Part

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of the *völkisch* movement, both racist and nationalist, the Society “combated cultural modernism and promoted the vision of a racially pure German art,” as its members “sought to legitimate traditional art on a biological basis” (Clinefelter 1). Under the leftist Weimar Germany, the group devoted itself to defeating modernist ideologies in art, promoting instead “art which faithfully represented the essence of the Germanic character” (Clinefelter 26). In the late 1920s, however, the nationalist socialist party gained ground, and the involvement of the Society in politics became more apparent. For example, it created the Executive Council of United German Art and Culture Associations, aiming to unify anti-left forces under their movement. The progressive expansion of their scope of influence on the nationalist stage was strategically planned “in the hope that the Nazi political victory would pave the way for the cultural renaissance the Society envisioned, and intended to lead” (Clinefelter 45). Feistel-Rohmeder’s initiative is the evident proof that the conservation of German nationalist values in the artistic field remained of the utmost importance to many people, even under a republican regime. During the Third Reich, the alliance between art interest groups and the party strengthened, as each recognized the opportunities that the other could offer. The party could use artworks to solidify Nazi ideals within culture, proven to be a very influential tool on people, while artists benefitted from Nazi ideologies to support their undermining of modernism.

The Nazis’ crusade against modernism was indeed unprecedented. Emerging in the 1860s, modern art rejected the traditions of the past to instead encourage fresh ideas and experimentation. By the mid-twentieth century, a number of different trends had flourished under the movement, such as cubism, surrealism, and Dadaism. The common thread in all of these was a departure from realistic representations to allow the observer to make personal interpretations. As the movement went on, artists let their creativity take over other senses and started to depict the world they lived in according to their inner perspectives, often complex and intangible, and thus artworks became more and more abstract.

Hitler certainly had his own perspective on modern art. Disgusted by “the outlandish use of color and a distorted perspective,” the Führer asserted that, under the Third Reich, “German art would be clear, without contortion, and without ambiguity” (Grosshans 74). All the major artistic figures who were taking part in the movement at the time were censured and denigrated by the authorities. In a speech, Hitler clearly exposed his profound condemnation of “Klee’s ‘foolish scribblings,’ of the ‘subhuman style’ of Kollwitz and Barlach, of that technical ‘bungler’ Nolde, of the ‘ethical nihilism’ of Dix and Grosz” (Grosshans 80). Many eventually went into exile in neighboring European countries, while the remaining few were pressured to abandon modernism for classicism. At the climax of his anti-semitism, Hitler even declared that “Modern art was an act of aesthetic violence by the Jews against the German spirit” (Grosshans 86). The alleged perversion of modernism, including its “suggestion of hidden obscenity,” simply could not be associated with the purity and dignity of the Aryan race and therefore became another victim of the Third Reich.

An artist in his early years in Austria, Hitler himself fully understood the usefulness of art in politics. In 1935, he declared that “art must be comprehensible to the people, although [...] the nation’s masses could not share in the achievements of science or philosophy” (Roh, 152). As a result, he surrounded himself with artistic and cultural advisors and tasked them with important responsibilities such as propaganda advertising, speechwriting, and education planning. Albert Speer was one of the few individuals who were part of the Führer’s closest, most entrusted entourage. A brilliant architect and event planner, Speer was the man behind the grandiose success of the infamous Nuremberg parades. The monuments, the decorations, the special

effects: nothing was neglected. Speer's attention to detail and dedication to Nazi ideology awarded him with some of Hitler's most valuable commissions, such as the construction of the Reich Chancellery in Berlin and the Party Palace in Nuremberg (Gutman 1395). The relevance of Speer in this paper, however, does not involve his achievements as an architect, but as a keen recruiter of new talents for the party's artistic division. These young prodigies were tasked to come up with works of art using strong imagery, aiming to induce the transcendence of the German people, solidifying the belief that the state came before everything else. One of these artists eventually became Hitler's favorite sculptor.

Arno Breker, born into a German family of sculptors in 1900, spent an extensive amount of time studying art at multiple universities and working as an apprentice for his father. His studies led him to live in Weimar, Paris, and Rome between 1922 and 1933. Working alongside renowned masters of modernism like Paul Klee as well as figures of classicism like Aristide Maillol, Breker for a long time remained torn between these two quite diverging art movements. The situation that Breker found himself in reflects the struggle that German artists were facing during these years: follow the worldwide trend and risk the confiscation of their art or give in to the rising nationalist pressure and sacrifice their own ideals. Mussolini's fascist Italy, however, had a long lasting impact on the sculptor, who was commissioned to restore nothing less than Michelangelo's *Rondanini Pietà*: "[It] was arguably more noteworthy because of his exposure to the monumental, "imperial style" art then in ascendancy" (Petropoulos 221). When Breker returned to Germany the next year, it was Hitler's Nazi party that was then in ascendancy. According to multiple sources close to the artists, it did not take too long before he was subjugated by Hitler's magnetism. Colleague George Kolbe confided that "a change in his artistic views became visible; the earlier one which stood close to the French sank under the strongest Nazi influence" and art expert Victor Dirksen asserted the fact "that his artistic style went through a change after 1933 is not to be disputed...He became a state sculptor" (Petropoulos 223). It was impossible for either man, or anyone else, to truly know the motives behind Breker's change of heart. The history books are presented with two options to describe the artist: a smart man who knew what he would face if he disagreed with the party or simply another gullible victim of Nazi propaganda.

Either way, it became clear that the sculptor had left behind the modernist influences encountered during his travels to focus solely on classicism. One of the beliefs driving his work after 1933 was that "massive figures built upon timeless Hellenic precedents would define the aesthetic idiom both domestically and abroad (Petropoulos 222). Yet he did not limit himself to reproducing antiquity's styles, he also added to his sculptures "frequent political allegory to suite the taste of the regime" (Petropoulos 223). The first creations of Breker for Hitler were two monumental bronze sculptures: Torch Bearer, and Sword Bearer, which pleased the Führer so much that he had them permanently moved to the front facade of the New Reich Chancellery, not without renaming the statues, respectively, The Party and Wehrmacht. Embodying the reflection of ideal German masculinity with muscular features, proud faces, exposed male attributes, and war accessories (a sword, a flame), these sculptures were the first of many to disseminate Nazi ideologies in German minds. In addition to glorifying Aryan purity as a goal to strive for, these representations were also implicit reminders that all other 'races' were incapable of these qualities and would always lay pitiful before the gigantic, strong, perfect German nation. The presence of Greek and Roman influences in these two sculptures is undeniable. A parallel can be made between the Swordbearer and Roman military figures such as Caesar who defended the honor of the empire. A similar comparison can easily be drawn between the Torchbearer and

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the Greek myth of Prometheus, the protector of mankind. This successful first impression allowed Breker into the closest circle around Hitler, who would frequently commission him with projects and invite him to tour foreign countries.

Adolf Wamper, another one of Speer's sculptor protégées, though he never was on the same level as Breker, provided the Reich with works of similar magnificence. His most notable sculpture, named *Genius of Victory*, was chosen by the party to be part of the Great German Art Exhibition of 1940. This portrayal of a strong young male wielding a sword with an imposing eagle at his feet is clearly inspired by the rising renewal of classicism. Irit Rogoff, professor of Visual Culture at the University of London, writes beautifully on Wamper's *Genius of Victory*:

The sculpture suggests an exhortation to follow, to identify and join forces with the power symbolized. Gestures, which make an appeal to the spectator, are as frequent as the corresponding titles of the work. However, since the foe is neither named nor depicted, such sculptures do hold a threat of a kind for those who are 'not behind them.' Above all, the muscular body -often colossal as here- and the one-dimensional expression of determination construct a basic image which is beyond the reach of the average spectator's physique and psyche. He is denied any feeling of elation when contemplating such a work. Only the role of a vassal, devoid of self, is left to him. (201)

It is this precise subtle intimidation that took over an entire nation. Subjugated by perfect beauty and massive strength, Germans did not take notice of their progressive mental enslavement to Nazi ideologies. Even if many worshipped the party out of fear, a large number of people grew to believe that the purification of the Aryan race held a brighter future for them personally, but also for society in general. Terribly hit by Weimar's economic downfall, Germans longed for a government that could offer them a stable, profitable life — a hope fulfilled by Hitler's extensive militarization. As exemplified by so many sculptures, war became a symbol of employment security and national cohesion. Reminiscing of the heroes and Gods of older tales such as Homer's *Iliad*, these Hellenic figures gave a romanticized justification of the legitimacy of German superiority.

Following the footsteps of Breker and Wamper, Josef Thorak was another sculptor recommended by Albert Speer. Ironically, he was not approved by the Reich at first because he was a native of Austria — much like Hitler himself. However, this attitude was rapidly reverted after the National Socialist Party publicly praised Thorak for his work. After that, he very frequently received commissions for monumental statues to adorn Nazi buildings. In addition to providing the Olympia Stadium of Berlin with beautiful, imposing nude sculptures of Greco-Roman-like athletes — asserting the superiority of Aryan blood in sports — Thorak also created perhaps the most famous representation of Germany to the eyes of the international community. His sculpture "*Comradship*" was picked by the regime to stand outside the German pavilion at the Paris World's Fair in 1937. Two muscular and enormous nude males could be seen clasping hands and posing in mutual defense. In one "picture," Thorak merged together some of the most representative values of Nazism: racial camaraderie, pursuit of perfection, superiority in strength, and appreciation for traditional art.

Along with many other tools, art became a weapon of propaganda under the German Nazi regime between 1933 and 1945. Surrounding himself with advisors and being a former

artist, Hitler recognized the potential that classicism had for the promotion of his ideologies. Because it was so distanced in history and venerated as perfection, Greek and Roman models gave the Nazi regime the ideal imagery to appeal to the people. This initiative to censor unwanted artistic trends and sponsor others shows the extent to which the Nazis aspired to control every aspect of German society. Unfortunately, the popularity Hitler acquired during these years also shows how malleable the human mind can be to expert propaganda.

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