

REVIEW ARTICLE

NATIONAL SOCIALISM, ART AND
POWER IN THE 1930s*

For good or for ill, the art and architecture produced in Nazi Germany — not to mention the films, the uniforms, and the other visual paraphernalia — continue to fascinate many members of the general public, as well as the scholarly community. Over the past decade, a number of books (academic and otherwise), television ‘documentaries’, and exhibitions have attempted to analyse Nazi art and architecture in terms of the Third Reich’s ideology, its social and political aspirations. One venturesome exhibition, which opened at the Hayward Gallery, sought to compare the condition of the arts in Hitler’s Germany with that in other nations of the time. Another exhibition, which originated at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, even dared to broach analogies with the present. In terms of conclusions, no clear consensus seems to be emerging. Instead, we are witnessing a profusion of ever more critical questions and increasingly differentiated answers concerning the relationship of art and power.

Peter Adam’s *The Art of the Third Reich* was conceived as a spin-off to the documentary that he produced for the BBC in 1988. The book is profusely illustrated, and, for his text, he has drawn upon many relevant secondary works as well as a number of Nazi magazines and journals. At its best, it is a good (though often very brief) summary of developments in painting, sculpture and architecture. Full of short, declarative sentences, it assumes a tone of factuality and authority. But the reader should be wary,

* Peter Adam, *The Art of the Third Reich* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 332 pp.; Dawn Ades, Tim Benton, David Elliott and Iain Boyd Whyte (eds.), *Art and Power: Europe under the Dictators, 1930–1945* (London: Thames and Hudson in association with the Hayward Gallery, London, 1995), 360 pp.; Stephanie Barron (ed.), *‘Degenerate Art’: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1991), 423 pp.; Josip Plečnik — *Architect of Prague Castle* (Prague: Prague Castle Administration, 1997), 664 pp.; Jonathan Petropoulos, *Art as Politics in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 439 pp.; Alan Steinweis, *Art, Ideology, and Economics in Nazi Germany: The Reich Chambers of Music, Theater, and the Visual Arts* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 233 pp.

since the sweeping generalizations, offered in abundance, are often excessive. For example, to say that 'Nude bathing became one of the favorite pastimes'¹ of Germans during the 1920s is a rather fanciful overstatement, but not crucial to the argument. More serious is the author's persistent contention that the politicization of the arts in the Nazi era 'brainwashed' the German populace as a whole. Adam postulates 'the people's total submission to a state aesthetic'; 'it brainwashed almost the whole nation', as citizens 'wallowed in the artistic window dressing'.² But Adam presents no evidence to support this contention. In fact, anyone who deals seriously and critically with cultural history knows the difficulty of determining how a population at large responds to performances and works of art. Even when we can ascertain how many people saw a play or a film, or attended an exhibition, we still do not know their thoughts and reactions. Studies of the political attitudes of Germans in the Third Reich, such as the model works of Ian Kershaw,³ are rare enough; for cultural beliefs and artistic preferences, they are practically non-existent.

Adam is not alone in assuming an overwhelming power of images in the Third Reich; it is a trap into which a number of scholars have fallen. The Nazis generated a very distinctive and widespread visual imagery. When it is assembled in a single volume (or exhibition, or film), it (re-)creates a swastika-saturated environment of such overwhelming consistency and homogeneity that we cannot help but ask: how could anyone resist the visual barrage? A richly illustrated tome such as that of Adam presents, as it were, a pure culture of Nazi visual culture; but the historical reality was more diluted than the distillate. More importantly, the contention that a visual culture could 'brainwash' a population not only attributes excessive power to the aesthetic sphere, but also exculpates the citizenry from responsibility for accepting Nazi values. It throws us back to the old arguments, so popular in Konrad Adenauer's Germany, that Hitler had 'mesmerized' the Germans. It is a thesis that refuses to die, precisely because it is neat, convenient, simple and (for post-war Germans) self-exculpating. Joachim Fest employed it

¹ Adam, *Art of the Third Reich*, 38.

² *Ibid.*, 10, 21.

³ Ian Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich: Bavaria, 1933-1945* (Oxford, 1983); also his *The 'Hitler Myth': Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford, 1987).

in his film *Hitler: Eine Karriere* (1977). Having viewed hours of Nazi film clips showing masses of Germans adulating a rhetorically powerful and seductively demagogic Hitler, Fest argued that Hitler's rhetoric and demagogy overpowered and seduced the masses. But since that was what the Nazi films were intended to illustrate to begin with, the argument becomes circular and self-fulfilling. Adam too seems to have been ensnared by his sources: since Nazi imagery portrays a *Volk* united in spirit, he concludes that the whole nation was 'brainwashed' into mental homogeneity.

Part of the problem with Adam's book is that it does not deal explicitly with its profusion of illustrations; there is a general correspondence (usually thematic) between images and text in any given chapter, but the visual material is never examined in detail. The same hesitation applies to Adam's analysis. Having read extensively on Nazi art, he knows that there are important issues of interpretation, but he does not elaborate them; nor does he sense that, if taken seriously, they would undermine a number of his blanket generalizations. Some of the most interesting problems concern issues of continuity: the degree to which Nazi culture was similar to that of other eras, including our own. What are we to make of Adam's assertion that much Nazi painting 'was no better and no worse than that exhibited in the so-called academy exhibitions of the pre-National Socialist era'? Or: 'Neo-classicism has long been the language of political power'? Or even, most provocatively: 'The designs of the Bauhaus with their simple lines suited the volkish message'?⁴ These statements hide complex issues, but to understand them, we must put down Adam's book and turn to more analytic works.

A far cry from Adam's tome, Alan Steinweis's *Art, Ideology, and Economics in Nazi Germany: The Reich Chambers of Music, Theater, and the Visual Arts* has few photographs, but is rich in analysis and archival research. Rather than argue that Germans were conned into supporting Hitler, he contends that the Nazis appealed to the conscious self-interest of various groups. In the process, the Nazis satisfied many adherents, but they were not able to deliver upon all of their promises: hence they failed to achieve the degree of legitimacy that they craved. Steinweis focuses on the Reich Culture Chamber (*Reichskulturkammer*), the umbrella organization for professionals in the arts that Joseph

⁴ Adam, *Art of the Third Reich*, 104, 225, 76.

Goebbels created in the autumn of 1933. Of the several sub-groups, Steinweis concentrates on music, theatre and the visual arts. Anyone who wanted to be employed in those areas was required to be a member, and membership was denied to Jews as well as to political opponents of the regime. Obviously, the institution was founded to gain control over cultural production. But Steinweis says that we should not place 'too much emphasis on the regime's reliance on coercion'.⁵ For those who were racially and politically acceptable to the regime — the vast majority — the system offered positive material incentives.

Steinweis contends that the Reich Culture Chamber represented a type of neo-corporatism that had been gaining numerous adherents even before 1933. Many artists, musicians and theatre professionals had been flustered by the workings of the free market, which did not provide their 'idealistic' endeavours with sufficient monetary rewards; they began to demand the creation of monopolistic, self-regulating corporations or 'estates' for the artistic professions. Needless to say, their financial plight reached crisis proportions during the Depression. The Reich Culture Chamber, which appeared, on the surface, to be subdivided according to professional 'estates', claimed to come to the rescue by offering various employment programmes, some social insurance, and limitations on the free market (such as restricting performances by amateurs); it also took over the functions of the previously independent professional organizations of artists. All of these policies were successful to a certain degree, since 'by the end of the 1930s thousands of German artists had come to enjoy unprecedented prosperity', but, at the same time, 'a great many artists' were still 'disappointed, frustrated, even impoverished'.⁶ This was partially due to limited resources, but it also was caused by denial of autonomy to arts professionals: an autonomy that traditionally had been part of the pre-Nazi neo-corporatist ideal.

In the end, despite Steinweis's caveat about over-emphasizing coercion, it plays a large role in his analysis. By 1935 Goebbels had become increasingly irritated by what he perceived to be ingratitude on the part of 'acceptable' (non-Jewish, non-leftist) artists and performers. He progressively shut down avenues of expressing discontent: in November 1936 he ordered that the traditional newspaper columns devoted to art, theatre, music and

⁵ Steinweis, *Art, Ideology, and Economics in Nazi Germany*, 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

film criticism be replaced by 'art reporting', a simple listing of who did what, where and when; and in December 1937 he banned references to any political issues (whether positive or negative) in theatres, variety shows and cabarets. Whereas at first the Nazi state did not have a unified system of preliminary censorship, increasingly large areas of cultural endeavour were placed under the tutelage of Goebbels's office; for example, by 1935 theatre repertoires and film production schedules required advance approval from the Reich Culture Chamber. Finally, even Steinweis has to admit — despite his initial focus on material incentives — that the main system of control was the creation of 'an environment of anxiety in which self-censorship by artists became the norm. Knowledge that the regime was prepared to use its coercive power deterred most artists from giving it the opportunity to do so'.⁷

Whereas Adam sees Nazi Germany in terms of a generalized system of brainwashing, Steinweis perceives a differentiated system of incentives and intimidation that evolved over time. These two differing accounts, taken together, still provide only a partial and even contradictory story. From Adam's perspective, we have to assume that there were thousands of enthusiastic Nazi ideologues churning out masses of propaganda to overwhelm the senses and blot the minds of their fellow citizens. According to Steinweis, there were thousands of arts professionals who were happy to accept material benefits from the Nazi regime, but found the calls for ideological conformity at the very least annoying. Another level at which the two books speak past each other concerns actual artefacts. Whereas Adam provides a profusion of images (though he fails to analyse them), Steinweis deals more with general 'structures' than with individual artists or works of art. At the outset he tells the reader that his book will not provide 'an exercise in cultural history in the traditional sense. Its emphasis is less on the substance of artistic and cultural life in the Nazi years than on the political, professional and economic environment in which German artists were compelled to function'.⁸ Though he excels at mapping the system of incentives and control, Steinweis does not provide detailed discussions of well-known painters, composers, musicians, playwrights, actors or directors, let alone their works. How to mediate between

⁷ *Ibid.*, 132–3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

the 'environment' and the resulting artefacts is a fundamental question that future research should address.

With his emphasis on structural conditions of production, Steinweis also refrains from fleshing out the Nazi bosses who were in charge of the cultural machinery. Although Goebbels and his cronies, such as Hans Hinkel, play important roles in Steinweis's account, they too act more like ciphers than individuals. For a more personalized sense of the Nazi élite as shapers of culture, we must turn to *Art as Politics in the Third Reich* by Jonathan Petropoulos. The picture he paints is not a pretty one. Focusing on a dozen people who belonged to the 'narrow circle of leaders', Petropoulos adopts and elaborates that body of scholarship which portrays the Third Reich as a 'polycratic' system of competing (and increasingly radicalized) individuals, over whom Hitler stood as ultimate arbiter.⁹ He maps the conflicts among various leaders — the shifts in their alliances, their increasing or decreasing influence — as they were played out on the cultural terrain. According to Petropoulos, all of the Nazi leaders were involved in a struggle to dominate culture and acquire works of art. In the realm of arts administration, Goebbels won out over competitors like Alfred Rosenberg, largely due to his ability to adapt himself doggedly to the Führer's taste, even if it meant sacrificing his own aesthetic preferences. But Goebbels was not quite as successful as his competitors in what seems to have become a veritable mania among the Nazi leadership, namely the 'acquisition', through purchase or plunder, of art.

Initially, according to Petropoulos, the opportunities for outright theft were relatively limited, but, after 1938, the radicalization of anti-Semitic policies and the expansion of the Reich provided golden opportunities for *de facto* robbery. Those Viennese Jews who had assembled fine collections of Old Master paintings and graphics were the first victims. Having tasted the prestige as well as the financial rewards that acquisition of such works could bring, the Nazi leadership indulged in a feeding frenzy. Rosenberg, who headed 'the most effective art plundering agency the world has ever witnessed', was particularly successful at decimating the collections of French Jews. In the East, Heinrich

⁹ Petropoulos, *Art as Politics in the Third Reich*, 6. Petropoulos takes the notion that the Third Reich was a 'polycracy' competing for Hitler's favour from Martin Broszat, *The Hitler State: The Foundation and Development of the Internal Structure of the Third Reich* (London, 1981, trans. of 1969 edn).

Himmler proved himself to be 'the most capable plunderer'. Of course, the Nazi potentates rarely dirtied their own hands; rather, they employed underlings who consisted of 'respected professionals — above all, academics and museum directors'.¹⁰ Needless to say, Hitler always had the first pick and accumulated the most spoils, supposedly for his planned mega-museum in Linz. Hermann Göring, the second most powerful man in the Third Reich, also had the second largest collection. Calling himself a *Renaissancetyp*, he intended to act like a *condottiere*, as he stated in 1942: 'It seemed to me to be a relatively simple matter in former days. It used to be called plundering. It was up to the party in question to carry off what had been conquered. But today things have become more humane. In spite of that, I intend to plunder and to do it thoroughly'.¹¹ He certainly kept his promise.

Occasionally, Petropoulos is so carried away by his argument that he overstates the importance of cultural considerations in Nazi policies, as in the following passage: 'So intense was their desire to propagate Germanic art across the continent and to control Europe's artistic legacy that these considerations, along with the biologically centered drive for *Lebensraum* (living space), the political mission to eradicate Communism, and the *Realpolitik* notion of military superiority, powered the expansionist machine'.¹² Concern for the arts probably was not quite that significant a cause for Nazi aggression. Nevertheless, Petropoulos has assembled a bounty of evidence which demonstrates that the Nazi leadership was much more obsessed with art than we have imagined, not out of aesthetic appreciation, but hunger for prestige and material greed.

At the same time that the Nazi leaders were amassing personal stockpiles of art, they were defaming and destroying what did not suit their taste. The obloquy of cultural modernism in the Third Reich is a story that has been told many times, never more fully and forcefully than at the exhibition '*Degenerate Art*': *The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*. Originally intended only for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), where it was curated by Stephanie Barron, and the Art Institute of Chicago, its reputation was so great that it travelled to Berlin

¹⁰ Petropoulos, *Art as Politics in the Third Reich*, 126, 120, 105.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 194–5.

¹² *Ibid.*, 261.

as well. The exhibition and the accompanying catalogue focused on the events in Munich during the summer of 1937. On the one hand, the Haus der deutschen Kunst, designed by Hitler's favourite architect, Paul Ludwig Troost, was ceremoniously opened by the Führer; the occasion was the first of what were to be annual displays of the 'best' new paintings, graphics and sculptures produced in the Third Reich. On the other hand, several rooms nearby housed a show that attracted many more viewers: Degenerate Art (*Entartete Kunst*). Public collections had been ransacked at short notice and works by modernist artists — mostly expressionists and followers of the New Objectivity (*Neue Sachlichkeit*) — were put on display in cramped rooms. In both the 'degenerate' show and the exhibition guide that was sold at the time, the art was accused of a variety of sins, such as blasphemy, pornography, Communism and racial impurity (in particular, Jewish and 'Negro' influence).¹³ On top of that, it was branded as simply incompetent — a perception underscored by juxtaposing modernist works with pictures drawn by inmates of mental asylums. For added effect, captions noted the names of the museum directors who had purchased the works (often Social Democrats, or appointees of Social Democratic municipal and state governments), as well as the prices paid: all to show that in the Weimar era corrupt, leftist officials had wasted the money of the hard-working taxpayer.

The 1937 show was not an anomaly in the Third Reich; exhibitions of shame (*Schandausstellungen*) of modern art had been organized 'spontaneously' in various parts of Germany since the spring of 1933. At the outset of Hitler's rule, such exhibitions had a clear function: to intimidate modernist artists. Indeed, by 1937, the goal of eliminating modernist painting, graphics and sculpture from public view had been achieved. What, then, was the purpose of flogging a dead horse? One possible answer is that the Nazis learned that they could not generate as much 'positive' support as they had hoped with their own works of art: that is, the visual 'brainwashing', as Adam would say, had limited success. Even Nazi leaders, including Hitler, privately admitted their disappointment at the annual exhibitions at the Haus der deutschen Kunst. On other fronts as well, the brakes were pulled on overt propaganda. Already by 1934 Goebbels was steering the

¹³ The brief exhibition guide of 1937 is reproduced and translated in the LACMA catalogue: Barron (ed.), *'Degenerate Art'*, 357–90.

film industry away from ostentatiously pro-Nazi themes and toward products that were, at least on the surface, pure entertainment.¹⁴ The Thingspiel movement, a laughable attempt to create a Nazi cultic theatre, ended in 1937. But if the Nazis could not always convince people what should be liked, they were very adept at stimulating public outrage. By all accounts, the Germans who flocked to the 'degenerate' show in 1937 did so in the spirit intended, as they joined in the shock and the mockery. What the Nazi state gained in return was backhanded legitimacy for its dictatorial policies: it had saved the *Volk* from the outrageous art that had flourished under the Weimar Republic's democratic regime.

The LACMA exhibition had a sorry tale to tell about Nazi Germany, but it did not let contemporary Americans off the hook. Indeed, its resonance was due in part to the fact that it explicitly drew parallels between Nazi tactics and certain ploys used by American politicians at the time of its 1991 showing. The analogies were precise but not heavy-handed: the LACMA curators by no means wanted to imply that there were general similarities between the United States and the Third Reich, nor did they want to emulate those simplistic artists and intellectuals who, when faced with censorship, immediately cry 'fascism!'. Rather, the LACMA exhibition was mounted at a time when the National Endowment for the Arts — the (by European standards) pitifully small federal funding agency for the arts — was being subjected to vicious public attacks by America's home-grown, right-wing ideologues, such as Jesse Helms and Patrick Buchanan. In particular, they hammered away at the fact that the money of hard-working taxpayers had been spent on 'blasphemous' and 'pornographic' works by artists like Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe. To be sure, Helms, Buchanan and their allies did not, like the Nazis, attack blacks or Jews in this context (although Helms is known for his implicitly anti-black political campaigns, and Buchanan for his veiled anti-Semitism). Instead, it was homosexuals (via the Mapplethorpe photographs) who bore the brunt of their vituperation. But aside from that, the tactics were similar. So were the intentions: paradoxically, in both cases, the goal was

¹⁴ Recent works that analyse the hidden ideological agendas in the 'entertainment' films of the Third Reich are Eric Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Feature Films and their Afterlife* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996); Linda Schulte-Sasse, *Entertaining the Third Reich: Illusions of Wholeness in Nazi Cinema* (Durham, NC, 1996).

not to hurt the artists in question — in Nazi Germany, they already had been silenced or goaded into exile by 1937; in the United States, under diametrically opposite conditions, they were protected by laws guaranteeing freedom of expression. Rather, in both cases, the purpose was to foster indignation in the population at large, with the aim of solidifying support for a more general right-wing agenda. That meant, ironically, that the very art that was vilified was of great use to its detractors: the denounced works were not suppressed, but rather highlighted. After all, the modernist works displayed in 1937 had to be dredged out of museum storage rooms, where they had been banished in 1933; and relatively few people had heard of Serrano or Mapplethorpe before the public attacks on them. In each case, the existence of putatively offensive art actively benefited its opponents, as it allowed them to mobilize their supporters through a campaign of invective.

These parallels were not drawn so explicitly in the exhibition, but they did appear in numerous reviews and reports which took their cues from the show's catalogue. Stephanie Barron alluded to the attack on the National Endowment for the Arts in the concluding paragraph of her opening essay.¹⁵ George Mosse's entry argued that the Nazis' defence of 'decency' against 'degeneracy' is a perennial issue: 'That *Entartete Kunst* exists in a continuum is demonstrated by the controversy in 1989 over Robert Mapplethorpe's homoerotic photographs, which were thought to offend against public decency . . . [The 1937 exhibition] was like the tip of an iceberg, and that iceberg has not yet melted'. Mosse contended: 'we must never forget that for most people respectability was and is much more than merely a form of behavior or an ideal of beauty; for many, perhaps even for the vast majority, it offers cogent proof of the cohesiveness of society, a cohesiveness necessary for all systems of government, not just for National Socialism'.¹⁶ The gist of Mosse's cautionary essay is that the Nazis, at least in the 'degenerate art' show, did not appeal to unusual feelings, but rather to conventional emotions when they vilified the 'pornography' and 'blasphemy' of the

¹⁵ Stephanie Barron, '1937: Modern Art and Politics in Prewar Germany', in Barron (ed.), *Degenerate Art*, 22.

¹⁶ George Mosse, 'Beauty without Sensuality: The Exhibition *Entartete Kunst*', *ibid.*, 25, 31.

modernists. The appeal to 'normality' was effective for the Nazis, and it remains a potent political weapon to this day.

If the LACMA exhibition chipped away at some of the perceived boundaries between the Third Reich and our own times, it maintained another distinction: that between modernism on the one hand, and reactionary art and politics on the other. In recent years some scholars have questioned that division. It always has been known that two prominent expressionists, the painter Emil Nolde and the poet Gottfried Benn, were enthusiastic supporters of National Socialism in its early years. The fact that other expressionists, as well as members of the Bauhaus, were not so averse to the Nazis has, however, been kept under wraps until recently.¹⁷ That was one of the unpleasant realities that was addressed in the rather uneven, but very thought-provoking exhibition, *Art and Power: Europe under the Dictators, 1930–1945*. Shown at London's Hayward Gallery in 1995, then in Barcelona and Berlin the following year, it compared the art of the Third Reich, the USSR and Italy, and Spain during the Civil War. In his catalogue essays on the Third Reich, Iain Boyd Whyte notes that a number of expressionist artists and Bauhaus architects offered their services to the Nazi regime. Expressionist painters Ernst Barlach and Erich Heckel, along with modernist architects Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Emil Fahrenkamp, signed a pro-Nazi manifesto that appeared in the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the Party's flagship newspaper, in August 1934. A month later Hitler slammed shut the door on expressionist painting, but there still was room for modernist architecture. In 1934, Walter Gropius and Wassili Luckhardt submitted building proposals for the German Workers' Front (DAF), the Nazi organization that had supplanted the banned trade unions.¹⁸ That same year Gropius and Hans Poelzig designed entries to the Reichsbank competition, which was won by Mies van der Rohe; Hitler himself had to overturn the outcome. Fahrenkamp, as well as Herbert Bayer, worked on the propaganda exhibition that accompanied the Olympic Games in 1936 and 'Bayer remained very influential in the design of National Socialist propaganda exhibitions until

¹⁷ See Elaine Hochman, *Architects of Fortune: Mies van der Rohe and the Third Reich* (New York, 1989); Winfried Nerdinger (ed.), *Bauhaus-Moderne im Nationalsozialismus: Zwischen Anbiederung und Verfolgung* (Munich, 1993).

¹⁸ Iain Boyd Whyte, 'Berlin, 1 May 1936', in Ades et al. (eds.), *Art and Power*, 47.

1937'.¹⁹ To be sure, by that year Gropius, Mies van der Rohe and Bayer had left Germany; for Bayer, the 'degenerate art' exhibition had been the last straw. But many students of the Bauhaus masters continued to design buildings in the Third Reich, particularly in the realm of industry.

Having made these points, however, Iain Boyd Whyte is careful to re-establish the boundaries between Bauhaus modernism and its (mis)use in Nazi Germany. Functional considerations often gave way to propagandistic purposes. The north-south axis planned for Berlin, which would have cut a horrible gash through the city, was intended more for spectacle and parade than vehicular flow. Even a massive project like the autobahn system was essentially propagandistic: the small volume of automotive traffic hardly justified its construction and, contrary to received opinion, it was of limited strategic use, since tanks and heavy armoured vehicles would have cracked the concrete slabs. Instead, what the autobahn construction provided was an image of national unity: pictures of thousands of Germans working together to connect all corners of the Reich.²⁰ Yet the reality was otherwise, since labour conditions were harsh and often punitive for the many ex-socialist and Communist workers who were compelled by law to stay on the job after 1938. Other parts of the Nazi construction programme were directly dependent upon 'slave labour'²¹ from concentration camps, such as at the stone quarries at Flossenbürg and the brick and tile works at Sachsenhausen.

Whereas Iain Boyd Whyte maintains fundamental distinctions between the Bauhaus project and its selective misappropriation by the Nazis, Winfried Nerdinger cautions against an all-too-facile amalgamation of Nazi representational architecture into the broader sweep of neoclassicism. In recent years some historians of architecture have tried to rehabilitate the works of Troost and Albert Speer by arguing that their projects were not essentially different from those of other, politically more respectable neoclassical architects. Nerdinger has nothing but contempt for such attempts to 'naturalize' the buildings of the Third Reich, as he analyses how the works of Troost, Speer and the other 'third-rate architects [who] occupied the leading positions in Nazi public architecture' showed massive degrees of 'incompetence' and

¹⁹ Iain Boyd Whyte, 'National Socialism and Modernism: Architecture', *ibid.*, 266.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 268–9.

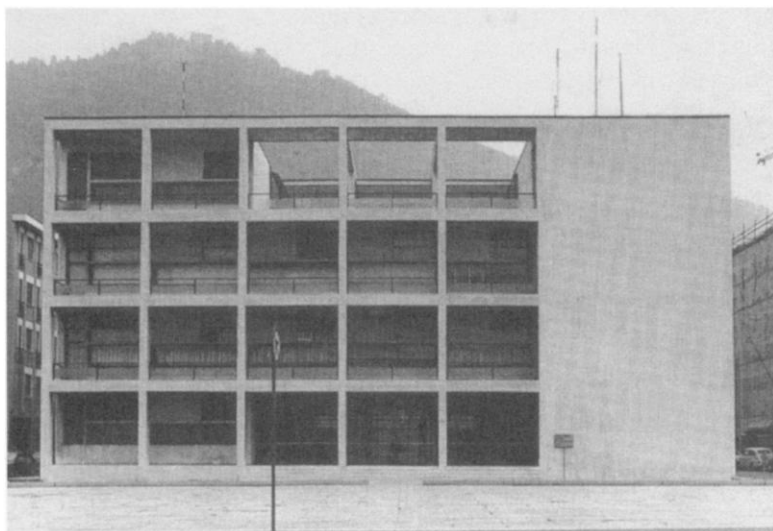
²¹ *Ibid.*, 264.

'ineptitude'.²² Glib symmetry, lack of proportion and simply bad design (even with respect to the 'function' of grandiose representation) are some of the faults that Nerdinger attributes to the 'best' structures of the Third Reich: faults that exclude them from the sophisticated neoclassical tradition that was still alive in Washington, London, Paris and elsewhere in the 1930s.

Art and Power cautiously opened up, but then contained, the question of relationships between Nazi architecture and modernism, as well as neoclassicism. It also broached the question of parallels between Nazi visual culture and that of two other dictatorships in the 1930s, Italy and the USSR, without, however, engaging in explicit comparisons. The three dictatorships obviously shared a desire to address the 'masses', a fact that led all of them to turn to spectacular media and cultural forms: architecture, sculpture, film, radio, rallies, parades. But they differed in terms of style and content. Italy was much more open to modernism, as many futurists sided with Mussolini, and the international style was adopted for a number of public buildings. To be sure, the pristine linearity and flatness of Giuseppe Terragni's Casa del Fascio in Como (Plate 1) was controversial among Italian architects, but it would have been totally unthinkable for a representational public building in the Third Reich. So why was fascist Italy more receptive to modernism than Nazi Germany? That question is generally left unanalysed. The answer might be as simple as the fact that Hitler could not abide the style and personally squelched it. The fierce debate of 1933–4 between Goebbels, who defended certain forms of modernism, and Alfred Rosenberg, who advocated a prehistoric 'Teutonic' aesthetic, was ended by the Führer himself in September 1934 at the Nazi Party congress in Nuremberg. Hitler ridiculed both standpoints and made it clear that nineteenth-century academic painting and neoclassical architecture would be the norms for public art and design in the Third Reich.²³ There were benefits to be gained both from supporting and from quashing modernism; Mussolini and Hitler

²² Winfried Nerdinger, 'A Hierarchy of Styles: National Socialist Architecture between Neoclassicism and Regionalism', *ibid.*, 324. Nerdinger was curator of the landmark exhibition that surveyed the wide variety of construction projects in Bavaria during the Third Reich: see Winfried Nerdinger (ed.), *Bauen im Nationalsozialismus: Bayern, 1933–1945* (Munich, 1993).

²³ See Hildegard Brenner, 'Art in the Political Power Struggle of 1933 and 1934', in Hajo Holborn (ed.), *Republic to Reich: The Making of the Nazi Revolution* (New York, 1973).



1. Giuseppe Terragni, 'Casa del Fascio', Como, 1934–6; reproduced in Dawn Ades, Tim Benton, David Elliott and Iain Boyd Whyte (eds.), *Art and Power: Europe under the Dictators, 1930–1945* (London: Thames and Hudson in association with the Hayward Gallery, London, 1995), 40.

(Courtesy of Tim Benton)

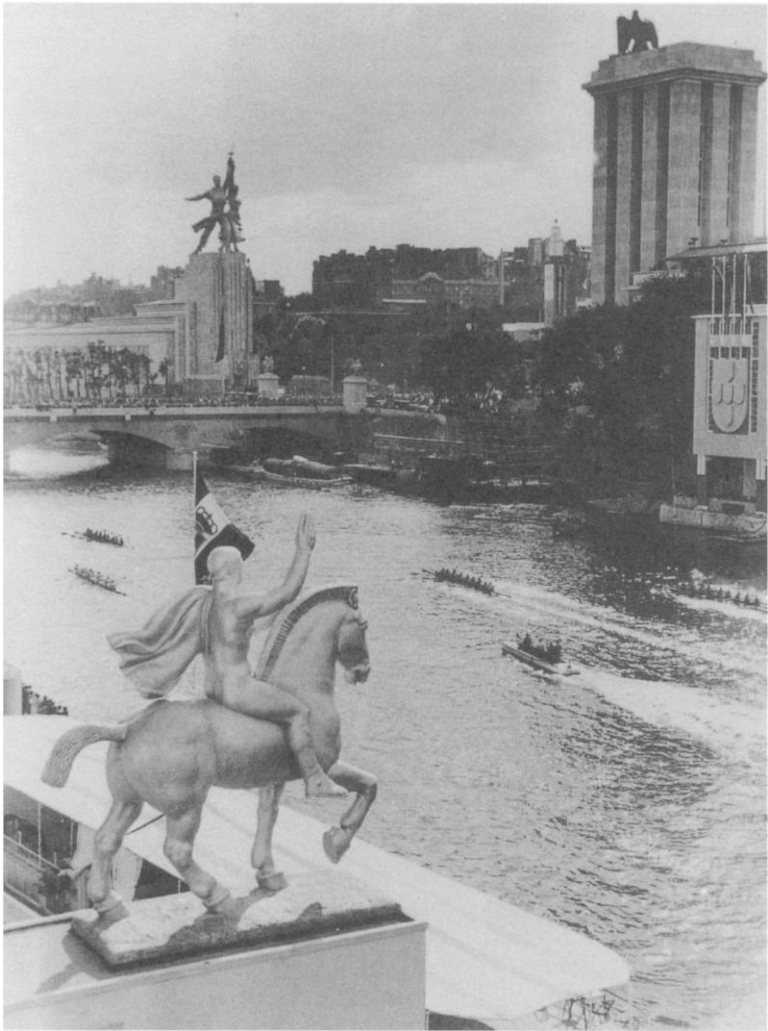
called the shots differently. Goebbels would have opted for the Italian policy because he realized that the flight of Germany's best-known artists and architects in 1933 was a public relations disaster; he also believed that the Nazi state could benefit from drawing upon the services of the expressionists, with their idealism and enthusiasm, and the architectural modernists, with their faith in technology. But Hitler was convinced that his own aesthetic preferences, mired as they were in the nineteenth century, were infallible. He also knew that the *Volk*, as well as thousands of conventional artists and architects, shared his taste. As the 'degenerate art' show indicated, vituperation against modernism was an effective means of building consensus.

Art and Power was even more wary of comparing the USSR with the fascist states. Construction projects were similarly grandiose and Stalin's regime was as effective as Hitler's at suppressing modernist art, even without resorting to populist demagoguery like the 'degenerate art' exhibition (though the 'show trials' might have had a similar function in the sphere of popular political

attitudes). But even a superficial walk through the exhibition indicated real differences in imagery. The art of the USSR had none of the Third Reich's nostalgia for a bucolic, rural past; Stalin was not big on Heimat. Instead, the Soviet visual vocabulary was unabashedly pro-industrial. It also lacked the coarse sexism of Nazi art: the latter's portrayal of women as either fecund mothers or salacious nudes had no counterpart in the Soviet Union, where women — even when mothering²⁴ — were clearly part of the working and professional classes. But what were the implications of such differences? That question, too, was not addressed directly. In the end, *Art and Power* refrained from undertaking a truly extended, systematic comparison of the 'art of the dictatorships'; it opted instead for juxtaposition. The major icon of the show, a photograph of the visual stand-off between the facing German and Soviet pavilions at the Paris International Exhibition of 1937 (Plate 2), is emblematic of an analytic gulf that has yet to be bridged.

Art and Power also raised, obliquely, the issue of how the art of dictatorships relates to the art of democracies. The topic surfaced because, in retrospect, by far the most interesting pavilion at the 1937 exhibition was that of republican Spain. The building by Josep Lluís Sert and Luis Lacasa was a model of modernist design (Plate 3). A raised two-storey glass and steel structure, supported by thin columns, it showcased artistic works by Joan Miró and Pablo Picasso — above all, *Guernica*. It also used the most advanced photomontage techniques to highlight progressive social and political platforms. Yet it would be hard to argue that the Spanish pavilion was 'representative' of the style of 'democracy'; rather, it was the art of a democracy fighting for its life against fascism. The visual culture of Franco's forces also was presented in *Art and Power*. One of the most chilling works was the mural painted by Sert's great-uncle, José María Sert, entitled *St Teresa, Ambadress of Divine Love to Spain, Offers to Our Lord the Spanish Martyrs of 1936* (Plate 4). It had been displayed at the Vatican pavilion in 1937 as a pro-Franco response to the republican message. It depicts a crucified Christ hovering overhead: with one hand, which he has freed from the cross, he clasps the upraised arm of an earthbound St Teresa, who in turn

²⁴ See T. G. Gaponenko's painting, *To Mother for the Next Feed* (1935), where women take a break from harvesting to nurse their infants; reproduced in Ades *et al.* (eds.), *Art and Power*, 234.



2. 'International Exhibition, Paris 1937. Regatta in progress on 13 June, with Italian Pavilion in foreground, German Pavilion at right, and Soviet Pavilion in the background'; reproduced in *Art and Power*, 2 (frontispiece).
(*Courtesy of Associated Press, London*)



3. Josep Lluís Sert and Luis Lacasa, 'Model of the Spanish Pavilion at the 1937 Paris Exhibition'; reproduced in *Art and Power*, 71.
 (Courtesy of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid)

embraces with her other arm a Spanish bishop, the first in a long line of 'martyrs' that snakes to a burning cathedral in the background of the painting. The fact that, as Marko Daniel writes, 'Christ appears to be flying his Cross like a precision bomber'²⁵ adds an eerie note to the work. After all, the republican Spanish pavilion was concurrently showing *Guernica* and numerous other paintings and posters that expressed horror and outrage at the bombing of civilians by Franco's forces and their Nazi allies.²⁶

Where, then, are we to turn for the 'art of democracy'? As Eric Hobsbawm reminds us in his foreword to *Art and Power*, 'By the middle of the Second World War no more than twelve out of the sixty-five sovereign states of the interwar period had anything like constitutional elected governments'.²⁷ Czechoslovakia had numbered among them until its dismemberment by the Nazis. In the summer of 1996, Prague Castle harked back to the political optimism of the young Czechoslovak republic by mounting a

²⁵ Marko Daniel, 'Spain: Culture at War', *ibid.*, 64.

²⁶ See the illustrations *ibid.*, 77, 84, 85, 96.

²⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, 'Foreword', *ibid.*, 11.



4. José Maria Sert, *St Teresa, Ambassadors of Divine Love to Spain, Offers to Our Lord the Spanish Martyrs of 1936* (1937); reproduced in *Art and Power*, 101.

(Courtesy of the Museo Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona)

fascinating exhibition entitled *Josip Plečnik: Architecture for the New Democracy*. It showcased *in situ* the work of the brilliant Slovenian architect who, at the invitation of President Tomáš Masaryk, redesigned the castle in the 1920s and 1930s. Masaryk wrote, 'it is necessary to reconstruct Prague Castle, a purely monarchical structure, as a democratic building',²⁸ and he believed that Plečnik was the man for the job. The choice was curious; indeed, Marco Pozzetto might be correct in saying that Plečnik himself did not see a link between his idiosyncratic style and democratic government.²⁹ His works were highly eclectic, an expression of his equally eccentric world-view, which combined a profound spirituality with nationalist beliefs that were odd even by Slavic standards (for example, he contended that the Slovenians were descended from the Etruscans). The capital of Slovenia was the main beneficiary of his talent: many striking public buildings, churches, gardens and promenades in Ljubljana testify to the uniqueness of his vision. Whatever Plečnik's own political ideas, Masaryk and his daughter, Alice, were convinced that the Slovenian's style would be most appropriate for the democratization of Prague Castle; together, they supported Plečnik's efforts and sustained him against his own self-doubts.

What Plečnik had to offer was nothing less than the *Ur-Form* of postmodernism — at least according to today's architects and designers, who retroactively claim him as a precursor. That is hardly anachronistic, since much of what is called 'postmodernist' actually developed concurrently with, or even preceded, what is usually dubbed 'modernist', as François Lyotard and others have noted.³⁰ At a time when other architects were either adopting international style or developing variants of beaux-arts neoclassicism, Plečnik was creating a unique vocabulary based upon an eclectic mixture of classical and pre-classical elements. What separated his work from the historicist and neoclassical traditions was not only the radical juxtaposition of disparate design elements, but also the avoidance of excessive symmetry (Plate 5). Rostislav Švácha notes that the irregular placing of stone vases,

²⁸ Masaryk cited in Damjan Prelovšek, 'Ideological Substratum in Plečnik's Work', in *Josip Plečnik*, 89. That volume had been intended to serve as the exhibition's catalogue, but unfortunately it appeared only after the show had ended.

²⁹ Marco Pozzetto, 'Plečnik and Prague Castle', *ibid.*, 52.

³⁰ François Lyotard, 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?', in his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, 1984).



5. 'Bull Staircase, View to the South Gardens of Prague Castle, 1929–1931', in *Josip Plečnik – Architect of Prague Castle* (Prague: Prague Castle Administration, 1997), 361.

(Courtesy of Pavel Štecha, Černošice, Czech Republic)

pyramids, bowls, columns and obelisks throughout the castle grounds and the gardens was intended to give the impression of *ad hoc* growth, like that of a Greek *agora*, rather than the imperial planning suggested by a Roman forum.³¹ The lack of repetition and the sense of improvisation was an attempt to loosen up the neoclassicism of Prague Castle, whose imposing stylistic unity had been the result of renovations undertaken at the time of Maria Theresa; it was, after all, one of the prototypes of Franz Kafka's *Castle*, written just before Plečnik started on his additions. According to Tomáš Vlček, by creating a 'discourse' of stylistically contradictory elements, 'Plečnik disrupted the monolithic impenetrability of the Castle'. The syncretism of styles, the asymmetry of placement, and the general openness of the designs established a 'dialogue' among the various elements, thus providing a visual counterpart to Masaryk's dictum that 'democracy is discussion'.³²

Whether Plečnik's contributions to Prague Castle really did make democracy visible is open to debate. But the exhibition began to ask serious questions about 'art and power' in a realm where 'power' was not simply non-dictatorial, but self-consciously anti-dictatorial. What would be the style most adequate for representing democracy? Traditionally, republican and democratic regimes, harking back to the Athenian *polis* and the Roman Republic, have adopted conventional forms of classical architecture; but that prevents them from distinguishing themselves visually from imperial and dictatorial regimes, which can claim classical precedents with even greater justification. The redesign of Prague Castle suggested that a much looser and eclectic appropriation of classical, pre-classical and wholly novel elements could best represent the diversity of modern democracy. And that, in turn, indicates that what we now call 'postmodernism' harbours undeveloped possibilities. It need not — indeed, it should not — be a warmed-over version of imperious neoclassicism, as is so often the case when it adopts a monumental, repetitive guise. Nor does it have to represent our disorientation in a corporately dominated global economy, as Fredric Jameson would have us believe, when it cloaks itself in aleatory and

³¹ Rostislav Švácha, 'Czech Architecture in Plečnik's Time', in *Josip Plečnik*, 33.

³² Tomáš Vlček, 'Modernism as a Means to Achieve Democracy', *ibid.*, 45, 47.

fragmentary forms.³³ Rather, it could be a visual guidebook to democratic pluralism. It could be, in the hands of a Plečnik, everything that the Nazi aesthetic was not.

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³³ See the title essay of Fredric Jameson (ed.), *Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC, 1991).