

Reviews and Discussion

Berthold Hinz. *Art in the Third Reich.* New York: Pantheon Books, 1979. 268 pp., 8 leaves. \$15.95 (cloth), \$7.95 (paper).

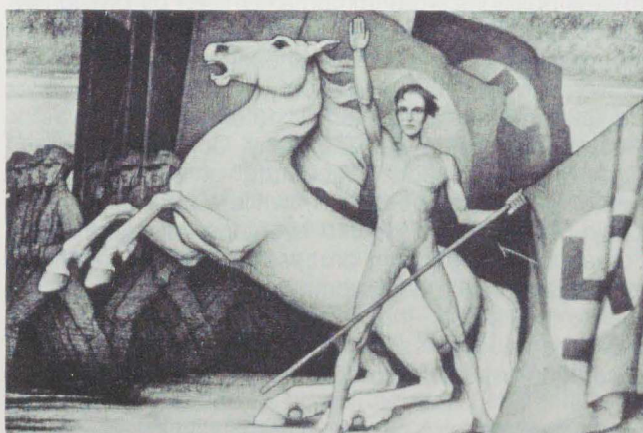
Review Essay by Amos Vogel
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Whether the value systems of a given society are inscribed in its art should be a fatuous question; Egyptian friezes clearly respond to different realities than do Elizabethan drama, and high tech art could not have originated in Bulgaria. In our time, it is useful to refer to such "controlled experiments" in precisely this question as Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia, in which art was both fully controlled and forcefully directed toward particular styles and narrative structures, while others were explicitly forbidden. In such situations, art is nakedly revealed as the ideological handmaiden of a power structure, destined to assuage tensions, create the appropriate myths, and harness our sensuous need for aesthetic release to its own purposes. The Nazi experience is a perfect laboratory model in directed art, and it is the particular merit of Berthold Hinz's *Art in the Third Reich* to have placed this crucial issue at the center of his carefully researched inquiry.

My personal encounter with German fascism—an experience that traumatized my entire life—convinces me that it is impossible for those not having lived through such an event to believe it, just as we cannot truly "believe" what was done in our name in Vietnam, Dresden, or Hiroshima. If someone told us today that the works of Rauschenberg, Mailer, Warhol, Bateson, Welles, Meyer Schapiro, Goffman, and Woody Allen had been forbidden and burned, their authors forced into emigration, suicide, concentration camps, or ovens, it would be but a small sample of what occurred in German art and culture during the Nazi period. It must be remembered that the Weimar Republic had been one of the most vital centers of the modernist movement in the arts, its very social lability contributing to the spectacular flowering of the most progressive experimentation and stylistic advances in the plastic arts, literature, theater, dance, and film. In a move unprecedented in modern history, the Nazis quite simply eradicated the entire movement and an entire generation of outstanding artists and intellectuals, with results so incalculable that Germany (the world, in fact) has not recovered from this wholesale bloodletting.



Ferdinand Staeger. "We Are the Work Soldiers" (title supplied by the painter in 1974: Work Corps). (From Hinz.)



Walter Hoeck. "Young Germany" (railroad station waiting room, Braunschweig). (From Hinz.)

Hinz properly concentrates on 1937 as the spectacular culmination of this drive. It was then that the Nazi government organized, simultaneously and tentatively, the Great German Art and the Degenerate Art Exhibitions in Munich.

"Degenerate art" was the official title given by German fascism to "Jew" art, "culturally Bolshevik" art, i.e., modern art: in painting, the over 16,000 works in Germany by Beckmann, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Grosz, Kandinsky, Matisse, Klee, Kokoschka, Mondrian, Leger, Marc, Picasso, Rouault, Munch, De Chirico, Braque, *et al.* From 1933 on, their works had been confiscated from museums and private collections, their names eradicated from the history books, their intellectual supporters—critics, journalists, teachers, curators—driven from their posts. The entire faculty and administration of Germany's legendary Bauhaus had been eliminated; surrealism, expressionism, cubism, abstract art, were *verboten*.

In an impressive demonstration of totalitarian social engineering, new bureaucratic and administrative control structures had been created by Reich Minister for Popular Education and Propaganda, Goebbels, now the president of the newly formed Reich Chamber of Culture. This was the prototype of class-collaborationist Fascist "corporate" structures, in which management and labor were forced into the same organization, with membership (Aryans only) obligatory, leadership appointed from above, collective bargaining and strikes outlawed. The thousands of new positions were immediately filled by previously spurned outsiders, failures, and new opportunists, all clamoring to settle scores and exercise absolute power. It was this organization which, by admission or denial of membership, literally determined who was or was not an artist in Nazi Germany. Contractual freedoms were annulled ("degenerate" art being confiscated without compensation), while a para-military chain of command involved everyone engaged in the "creation, reproduction, processing, dissemination, preservation, sale and promotion of cultural products" (unlike the liberals, the Nazis knew that "art" involves more than aesthetics). Goebbels's famed 1936 decree even established new criteria for art criticism:

I am herewith forbidding, from this day on, the conduct of art criticism as it has been practiced to date during the period of the Jewish domination of art. From today on, the art report will replace art criticism. . . . it will be less an evaluation than a description and appreciation. . . . art editors must have undefiled hearts and national-socialist convictions.

The public culmination of this counter-revolution in the arts was the 1937 Degenerate Art Exhibition. Kafka and the surrealists would have appreciated the irony of two million people (three times the number of those at the concurrent Nazi art show) attending what was the largest modern art exhibition ever held anywhere. One-hundred and twelve of the most famous artists of our time were displayed helter-skelter, floor-to-ceiling, each work accompanied by inflammatory, often obscene captions. The catalog stated that this was "a general survey of barbarous methods of representation . . . Jewish trash . . . Marxist propaganda . . . total madness . . . the progressive destruction of sensibility for form and color . . . with the Negro and South Sea Islanders representing the racial ideal of modern art . . . either a hoax or suffering from dreadful visual disorders." Following the exhibition, the most important works were sold abroad (the profits accruing to the state). The rest—five thousand masterpieces of the modern period—were burned March 20, 1939, in Berlin.

The new art to take the place of these "symbols of a doomed world" was simultaneously displayed in Munich's Great German Art Exhibition, and from then on annually until the end of the war, amidst spectacular ceremonies and pageantry. It was to be genuine German art, explicitly designed to last at least as long as the Thousand Year Reich. In the event, it lasted seven; the 1955 Dokumenta Exhibition in Kassel signaled, with a vengeance, the renewed triumph of modern art in Germany.

What was the nature of this "Germanic" art? Instead of the "rootless cosmopolitanism" of modern art (significantly attacked in identical terms by Stalin at the same time), the "new" art, ironically, heralded an attempt to fuse long-exhausted stylistic and thematic preoccupations with the ideology of German fascism.

Hinz's outstanding work is based on over 700 Nazi art works (many later destroyed in air raids, the rest now locked away in Munich and forbidden to Germans). It discusses, on sixteen color and forty-five black-and-white pages, a wide variety of works thematically and stylistically organized into an analysis of Nazi art as a whole.

This study gives the lie to the claim that the regime was able to create a "new art." Instead, it continued ancient trends, reactivating artists who had been left behind, and drawing on hidebound regionalists, provincial artists, and even semi-amateurs of pre-Nazi times for its artistic and administrative personnel. The characteristics of this art include an artificial return to the pre-modernist concentration on simple content (modern art involving a shift from narrative to exploration of form): a return, therefore, to traditional landscape painting, still lifes, portraits, nudes, and allegories—discredited subcategories of the plastic

arts—and a renewal of “genre painting”—a style of conventional painting using traditional techniques that simply portrays “what exists” and remains almost entirely contemplative and descriptive. Originating in seventeenth-century Dutch-Flemish art, this style had been progressive until the nineteenth century, when it conquered the West in opposition to the conservatism of its then dominant art. By 1900, however, “everything” had already been painted—there were “animal paintings, sport paintings, views of villages, of houses, of doors. Buildings had been depicted from within and without. Artists had followed tourists to tops of mountains, workers into their factories, hunters to the fields, children to school, travellers to the Orient . . .” (Arnold Gehlen, *Zeitbilder*, Frankfurt, 1960). Resuscitated by the Nazis, it therefore became a stillborn attempt at reviving a corpse. The more detailed it became, the less did it reflect the world’s totality. Such mystification represented the precise intent of Nazi art.

The subjects of this art, therefore, were “German” figures, particularly the more primitive professions closer to the “native soil,” the simple artisan, the hunter, the farmer sowing by hand; and the Mother (as guardian of life), the family circle, the nude (a predominant, curiously lascivious theme), the soldiers and marching columns. These subjects were portrayed in a timeless, static state, thus robbing them of human specificity while raising them to “epic” stature. The subject could no longer be itself, but had to signify some larger, “substantial” truth. This substantialization remained largely empty; a perfectly obvious landscape could be made allegorical only by means of a fraudulent title (“Cloud of Doom,” “Liberated Land”). The attribute “German” was arbitrarily affixed to all conceivable natural phenomena, the earth, oak trees, summer days. The German soil was always fertile. The individual pain of a soldier was always lifted into inhuman, timeless realms. Nudes were trumped up into primal images of “Woman,” invoking her cosmic powers and the cycle of life. Such portrayals were hence always profoundly traditional: “The raising of a family,” Hitler had already said in 1932, “will always be the central goal of woman’s organic and logical development”; she existed to serve the sexual needs of the male who dominated her. Her intellectual inferiority had already been carefully spelled out in *Mein Kampf*, an unsung classic of unbridled sexism.

This “substantialization” inevitably leads to allegory in which actual subject matter is almost obliterated by what it must signify. The stress is on the grandiose, the primal, on essential substance, on themes of war and conquest, national glory and battles, all designed to prepare viewers ideologically for the necessity of sacrifice and death.

Separate chapters on photography and architecture unfortunately remain too sketchy; Nazi architecture, in particular, demands an in-depth treatment that is lacking here.

Photography, due to its inevitably more rigorous adherence to the notion that reality reflects truth, was not recognized by the Nazis as art, but only as a means of information and propaganda. Only to the extent that it approached the painterly did it come closer to art; hence, there was an emphasis on posed, artificial compositions, based on traditional visual conventions. Film and painting thus merge (cf. Riefenstahl’s 1936 *Olympia* films, in which classical sculptures merge with naked bodies, and her postwar picture books of African natives, which perpetuate the fascist aesthetic of idealized nature).

Nazi architecture remains crucial testimony to the ideology and megalomaniac fantasies of the fascist state. Massive, sepulchral, ominous, overwhelming in size, it was designed to inspire religious awe and human impotence in the face of limitless power physically displayed (the Nuremberg Stadium seats 400,000; the Berlin Arch of Triumph was to have had a 260-foot-high opening). Employed for government buildings, shrines and monuments, this architecture addressed “eternity” (hence the use of massive stone, granite, marble, instead of steel and concrete). Hitler and Speer, deeply aware of the permanence of Roman ruins and ancient cathedrals, consciously attempted to emulate them: “Our buildings,” said Hitler in 1937 in Nuremberg, “will tower over the millenia of the future like the cathedrals of the past.” Architecture represents perhaps the clearest indication of how consciously the Nazis understood form to express content.

Hinz’s work—a demystificatory study of a manipulative aesthetic—is a splendid contribution to the growing literature regarding the semiotic and ideological significance of art and offers closely researched insights into the philosophical underpinnings of Nazism. The approach is resolutely grounded in Marxist aesthetics and sociology, at times ideologically overassertive without sufficient data. The weak representation of the other arts is due to the original German edition’s having been limited only to paintings; the scope has been widened for the American edition. Beautifully produced on coated stock, the reproductions are voluminous and first-rate; a comprehensive bibliography of over 400 sources adds to the work’s scholarly value. Unfortunately, Hinz repeatedly analyzes paintings without indicating whether or where they are reproduced in the book; one must constantly consult the index for this. Nor are their actual size or production year provided.

Hinz's work is intellectually so stimulating that it forces the attentive reader into uncomfortable questions. Does art express a society's ideological value systems only in totalitarian societies, or must it inevitably do so also in the present-day nominally democratic societies of the West? Do not the art market and the mass media in these societies also act as constraints, if not censors, legitimizing certain artists and deligitimizing others? What does post-modernist, conceptual, or minimal art have to say about the nature of contemporary society? Has not the New Right shown preference for certain art, and how different is it in style and content from the invocation of family, clean thinking, and national glory espoused by the Nazis? Are there not increasing references to decadent art, to the role played by "secular humanists," unAmerican forces, Jews, and "Communists"? Have we not recently suffered from books being banned or burned and art works being removed? It is to Hinz's credit that he succeeds in making us feel uneasy. We begin to sense that the moldy terror faintly emanating from these art works of defeated megalomaniacs in "someone else's" past may just possibly be portents of our own future.



Ernst Pfannschmidt, *Honoring the Memory of Dead Heros.*

William A. Frassanito. *Antietam: The Photographic Legacy of America's Bloodiest Day.* New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978. 304 pp., ill. \$15.95.

Reviewed by James Borchert
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Let him who wishes to know what war is, look at this series of illustrations. . . . The sight of these pictures is a commentary on civilization such as the savage might well triumph to show its missionaries.

—Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. (1863)

Only slightly more than 20 years after the "discovery" of photography in 1839, photographers set out to record visually what was to become the bloodiest war in the history of the United States. They did so with a strong interest in the financial "possibilities" as well as a concern for posterity. While their efforts seldom realized the profits they imagined, these pioneering photographers did provide Americans and the rest of the world with the first photographs of the human carnage that results from war. Although these were not the first visual representations of war (drawings had long depicted the glories of the battlefield and some military scenes had been photographed in the European and Asian wars immediately preceding), the photographs of the U.S. Civil War were the first of these views to be widely available.

Before Civil War scenes could be a commercial possibility, however, several preconditions had to be met. The introduction of an inexpensive (though cumbersome) negative and multiple print process (collodion wet plate) reduced the technological constraints on such a venture, while the number of photograph studios and supply companies developed the necessary distribution systems. Finally, on the eve of the great war, the introduction and immediate popularity of the *cartes de visite* and stereographs created a market for inexpensive photographs. Thus, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., a frequent writer on photography for the *Atlantic Monthly*, could prophesy in 1859 that "the next European war will send us stereographs of battles" (Holmes 1859:748).

While photographers were active throughout the war on both sides, often in the employ of a major studio like that of Mathew Brady, virtually all the views recorded posed troop scenes, gun emplacements, and occasional shell-torn buildings.¹ Technology did not permit photographing actual battle scenes; long exposures (10–30 seconds), large cumbersome cameras, and a portable darkroom to prepare and imme-