FROM THE IMPERFECTION AVANT-GARDE AESTHETIC TO THE "FASCINATING FASCISM"

Idea, symbol and art as mass manipulation tools in the National Socialism aesthetic

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Abstract

Nowadays, the extreme right political movements resurgence, whose success is partly consequence of some manifestations that could be considered as performative, are increasing in Europe. Employing a staging attitude to make them known, these skills are clearly used as tools into a provocative show. In this regard, these conducts could be related to The National Socialism regime manifestation of power, among other events that took place one century ago in Europe. It should be also referred the use of art as both communication and manipulation tool regarding their political discourse. It is striking to find that these situations are taking place at present in democratic countries. This paper proposes a revision on the III Reich aesthetics, referring to some cultural elements that were used to design its own appearance. In order to do this, they deconstructed and denigrated the fragmentary components from the previous avant-garde art, to construct their new totalitarian reality.

Keywords

fascism; aesthetic; avant-garde; National Socialism.

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From a phenomenological point of view, it could be said that reality – understood as the world we live in – is in fact a construct. This construct has been continually brought into being throughout history as people have interpreted the world around them from their various perspectives. With the purpose of understanding their own context, human beings have created different theories to assimilate what they cannot rationally understand. At the same time, they have tried to organise, catalogue and control their own communities by establishing divergent forms of order, so as to maintain an equilibrium. As a consequence, culture can be understood as a fragmented understanding that arises from the ruins of the past, defines the present moment and shapes the future.

Heideggerian thought proposes that we discover the truth through the layers that history and tradition have consolidated in the phenomenon of life, in order to discover its hidden origin (Heidegger, 2005: 239). In this sense, reality is comparable to a palimpsest, where it is necessary to undo the interventions made throughout history in order to embrace its original nature. In José Ortega y Gasset's philosophy, reality and knowledge are abstractions or fictions constructed from individual perspectives. Therefore, history results from the combination of the different viewpoints of the people who have interpreted it (Ortega, 1960: 16). Thus, he held that in order to adopt any historical discourse, it was necessary to maintain a series of ideas that in turn generated symbols. As these examples show, philosophy offers essential answers concerning the understanding of the world.

According to Plato, the philosopher knows truth, and those who aspire to govern must possess and share this knowledge by educating the citizens. However, this theory is very difficult to put into practice, and even Plato himself recognised that politicians tend to lack this virtue (Plato, 2005: 250). Rancière understands "politics" aesthetically, referring to the distribution of the sensible. In this way, different voices, subjects, discourses or expressions that do not have a public political presence may at last attain it. On the other hand, the "police" would be "a particular form of a more general order that arranges that tangible reality in which bodies are distributed in community" (Rancière, 1996: 43-44). When this statement is not applied properly, the political class adopts a false notion of the human rights and fundamental freedoms that must be respected, without having any idea how to ensure their fulfilment through the exercise of power (Etchegaray, 2014: 27). Western history is the result of both wise and misguided decisions. Studying the many layers of which it is composed can help us to understand the present.

Nowadays, it could be said that the European Union represents a community that contradicts its own name, since its cohesion has been brought into question now more than ever. A fragmented territory formed after World War II, where hardly a sign of its original essence remains. This disjointed union is explained by the recession that hit more than a decade ago, along with other symptoms. One of the most obvious is the resurgence of nationalism and conservative ideologies. The right or far-right leaders are gaining clout by channelling the populace's widespread discontent. This reality, which is more or less evident to society, represents an intimidation to those who remember the lessons of World War I, the Great Depression and their consequences. Some people who are afraid of repeating the past have drawn an equivalence between these historical moments and the present. At the same time, European leaders fancy that such behaviour constitutes a form of intimidation. Both freedom of thought and sense of

self are being questioned. Consequently, the main objectives to be controlled by these political personalities may be the mass media and especially the social, educational and cultural agents that defend freedom of thought.

Within any ideology, for political leaders culture represents an uncomfortable sphere that must be dominated. This is especially true for those who defend a moderate, right-wing or far-right conservative position. The push to "conserve" the established discourse (Robin, 2018: 13) leads to a negationism that rejects those sort of realities that irk conservative politics, such as the feminist movement, the existence of other sexual orientations and racial identities, climate change, etc. However, there are exceptions that are accepted by the conservative position, for example material progress. And this is precisely the fact that has brought about the present eco-social crisis.

Do not move forward, stay stuck; refrain from that constant questioning of reality that is the fundamental function of cultural agents. What spurns the latter to engage in analysis and exercise criticism towards the structures of power is their fight for a plurality of subjectivities against a unique and imposed discourse and, at the same time, the struggle for coherence in thought. These characteristics are what make them "dangerous" for the political class, who find in self-criticism the main obstacle to the achievement of their purposes. Ordine states that human beings use power to intentionally inflict harm against "libraries and works of art, against monuments and great masterpieces", and to destroy "useless and harmless things, silent and inoffensive, but perceived as a danger for the mere fact of existing" (Ordine, 2013: 19-20). Another way of destroying culture might be the appropriation of its own discourses by the powers that be, as Ionesco once said (Ordine, 2013: 120).

Along with political power, there is another form as well: economic power, represented by the capitalist system. Manipulation in capitalism goes against citizens' freedom of thought, influencing their critical capacity and perversely exploiting people for economic benefit (Ribaudo, 2017). In this sense, Foucault defined the concept of "apparatus" (*dispositif*) as the "network" (*réseau*) that tends to a "resolutely heterogeneous set", which "strategically" composes certain "discourses". It produces "a certain manipulation of force-relations, a rational and planned intervention into these force-relations, either in order to develop them into such direction, or to block them, or to stabilize them, to use them" (Foucault, 1984: 127-162). The apparatus would always be "registered in a power game", so the culture would work as one of the elements within this network when it is converted into an instrument of manipulation.

In the current post-truth era, the political class has helped create a "state of confusion". When playing different roles that hide true identity, everything is mixed into a "Dionysian ecstasy" in which art becomes a mask to complete a disguise. "Nothing is true, everything is permitted", said Nietzsche, adding, "every opinion is also a hiding place, every word is also a mask" (Nietzsche, 2004: 432). According to Baudrillard, the political sphere is quite similar to the Renaissance theatre system. Instead of being "just a game of signs, a strategy that does not deal with any truth", it is in fact closer to a "representation space" in the way it seeks to communicate with the audience (Baudrillard, 1993: 123-126). Within this metaphor, politics would be the cast, as it is in charge of delivering a great performance and vying for the audience's attention. By doing so, they are able to "enchant" the public's minds into a "spectral universe" (Salmon, 2013: 15). The spectacle can be considered "the ideology par excellence" as Guy Debord explains, because it contains " the essence of all ideological systems: the impoverishment, servitude and negation of real life" (Debord, 2008: 172). In contrast to Debord's discourse, we should also mention political aesthetics as approached in Rancière's thought, since it contains the possibility of undoing the homogeneity we find in the context of the society of spectacle. Politicians' role as "showmen" is evidenced by the fact that so many of them now come from the entertainment world, which is especially relevant in relation to the aforementioned concept of staging. Such politicians are particularly adept at appealing to the public's feelings and personal beliefs, thereby imposing their own discourse over and above the diversity of reality.

This case is not new, and is quite salient in the aforementioned interwar crisis period in Europe when art and politics became intertwined in a number of ways. Politicians in that period participated in art and artists were involved in politics, merging into movements such as Futurism or Russian Constructivism. Although not all of this feedback between arts and politics was produced in totalitarian terms, they shared the same context. Eventually, in two moments in which democracy was vulnerable, this overlap helped land both state institutions and the manipulable citizenry in the hands of the political and economical leaders (Fromm, 1981: 27). In some cases, political and social disenchantment produced artistic movements like Dadaism. In fact, for all of these movements World War I constituted a point of departure. Marinetti, founder of Futurism, regarded war as the "hygiene of the world", and so for him the Great War represented a wish fulfilled. Many artists took part in World War I, taking the concept of "avant-garde" quite literally by actually fighting on the frontlines. The ruins of Europe were certainly tied up with that old world that many new art movements wished to leave behind. However, after the war these ruins of course had to be rebuilt.

Nevertheless, the new world politics adopted a conservative approach in order to restore order. Thus, artists had to recompose reality through figurative proposals, although they never returned to traditional aesthetics. Abstraction cleared the way for Figurative Art, but this New Realism presented images that were characteristic for their strange aesthetic, which was far from the pure shape and its idealistic order. New Realism, named by Franz Roh as "Magic Realism", presented an imperfect beauty. In other words, it represented a real thing rejecting the unreal idea of perfection. Magic Realism was created in avant-garde laboratories, where members wore white lab coats and carried out their aseptic and objective operations. They analysed reality in order to deconstruct it, bringing it back to life with tools that were closer to surgical instruments than to brushes or chisels. Ortega explained the phenomenon of avant-garde art by specifying that, in spite of its inspiration in pictorial tradition, it would be difficult for human reality to acquire its own identity through "dehumanization". He also compared the work of art to a hieroglyph, as a group of signs encapsulating the author's intentions. To interpret, discover or understand these hermetic pieces represented a "delight" for the observer, who "lived in a constant task of translation" (Ortega, 1987: 64-66).

Despite its elitist appearance, avant-garde art had a critical position revealing social aspects that society tried to hide from the public. The new fragmented art presented a reality not united but broken, as a result of World War I and the economic crisis that ravaged Europe. Poverty, bad habits or wounds of war were represented in the new art images, characterised by an "ugliness" that the conservative society was not willing to tolerate. Magic Realism was questioned by dissatisfied and disillusioned citizens that lived in a ruined world. They wished to evade the world, believing in themselves in order to recover their lost identity. Politicians appeared on the stage as a messianic salvation, attacking avant-garde art as part of the problem. In its stead, they proposed a return to cultural origins and mythology. This implied not only restoring the nation's own cultural roots, but common Western ones as well: the classical order of Greco-Roman statues, whose canon of perfect bodies would also be reflected in the early 20th-century citizenry, as fascism in Italy and Germany drew heavily on this artistic canon. On the other hand, "imperfect" art was considered "degenerate", created by people that represented just the opposite of what the good citizen should be.

Kant stated in *The beautiful and the sublime* that "the different sentiments of gratification or vexation" were less related "to the constitution of the external things that arouse them" than to "the feeling, intrinsic to every person" of being touched by them with pleasure or displeasure (Kant, 1919: 7). As we have already mentioned, in Ortega's thought reality or knowledge are just constructions of fictions or abstractions, which are the only real or

existing fact (Ortega, 1960: 15). Although subjectivity is related to a relative appreciation of an aesthetic element, if we add an ideological intentionality it would be more complex and manipulative. To create an opinion, it can be turned into a discourse in order to convince the citizenry. Hitler himself declared that the will of the audience could be broken by the strength of the speaker (Fromm, 1981: 248) – in other words through dialectics, language and the construction of a discourse, even though it could be based on a fallacy.

"If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it", affirmed Goebbels in his famous decalogue. As the Reich Minister of Propaganda of Nazi Germany, Goebbels knew how to employ manipulation strategies to undermine the people's critical capacity, exhorting them to have total faith in the leader and to hate those who thought differently. The affinity that people shared with Hitler represented love of country, or even nation. Paradoxically, the enemy could be from within the country, differentiating between good and bad German citizens. In this context there was an interesting dialogue between images that, more powerful than words, directed a clear message towards the audience. One of the most significant examples came in Munich in 1937, with the two famous art exhibitions curated by the Nazis. The first one exhibited artworks whose aesthetic was in line with the regime's preferences, but, right in front of the first one, there was another exhibition touted by the Nazi curators as a "chamber of horrors", presenting artworks referred to as *Entartete Kunst* ("Degenerate Art"). At the same time, in the exhibition catalogue some avant-garde portraits were compared with actual deformed human faces, and the fragmented decomposition of these paintings was likened to real cases of disfiguration. Like Frankenstein, these artworks were created fragmentarily to represent the opposite of a harmonic and ideal order. In this sense, we should ask ourselves if the pathological visual representations related to "degenerate art" were a consequence of the previous opinion that society had on modern art. The epistemological conservation and progression that classify and separate dualistic concepts – such as the healthy and the pathological or the perfect and the degenerate– could be the reason why we are witnessing a resurgence of fascist movements today. Perhaps we ought to question the construction of definitions such as "pathological" or "degenerate". At present, these concepts are problematic due to the resurgence of the far right. In response, we find the emergence of proposals from movements for diversity like Crip Theory. These proposals work to defend against any discriminatory practices within the context of contemporary neoliberal capitalism, for instance by asserting that "disabilities" are not found within bodies but in their environment, which should be adapted to people (Moscoso & Arnau, 2016: 137-138).

National Socialism indicated what it sanctioned as "true" art and how a "good" citizen should be, marginalising avant-garde art. In any case, the "curating" of this exhibition reveals an obvious theatrical staging intended to manipulate the audience. To give an example, they exhibited avant-garde artworks not from an objective perspective, but ridiculing them (Marín, 2010: 102). This event could even be seen as paradoxical or contradictory, since most of the artworks were disorganised or deliberately displayed at crooked angles. The walls were covered in graffiti with messages criticising the artworks. The aesthetic environment created in the exhibition hall was therefore more important than the artworks themselves. The "apparatus" constructed within this exhibition was used politically to manipulate the viewer's opinion, generating a feeling of "dislike" in an unprecedented manner.

In an example of art's crucial role in the political chessboard of this period, a 1933 comic strip by O. Garvens depicts Hitler contemplating a sculpture composed of several small, quarrelling figures. The bespectacled sculptor, who has all the physical features the Nazis ascribed to the "inferior race", looks on as Hitler smashes the sculpture with his fist. Afterwards, out of the remains, reduced to a lump of clay, Hitler fashions a new sculpture representing the "ideal" man, who is colossal, athletic and free of "imperfection". Importantly, the perfect sculpture, which represents the new German citizen, is built out of the remains of the "degenerate" figures: the new product is created from the very same material, but only after violent destruction. The title of this comic, "The German sculptor", refers to Hitler's role as an artist, as "the modeller of the new Germany". In Goebbels's words, "The people don't want anything. Only to be governed decently", adding that "The people are for the leader what stone is for the sculptor" (Fromm, 1981: 249). The citizenry represented the material that should be manipulated and sculpted according to the "creator's wishes". Perhaps this narcissism of the prototypical political leader is tied up with the desire to leave one's mark on history. Beyond the intellectual capacity of a political strategist, such leaders cast themselves as "authors". Of course what we learn from history is that this characterisation of politics is found not only in fascism or totalitarian regimes, but also in other political systems like liberal democracy. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to study the artistic interests of leaders like Mussolini or Hitler. They participated in artistic proposals, for example the connection between Mussolini and Futurism and his performance as an actor in *The Eternal City* (1923). There is also Hitler and his failure to enter the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts, where he demonstrated his talent in drawing architectural spaces but, interestingly, displayed serious shortcomings when it came to the human figure.

In the Garvens comic strip Hitler is represented as a fearsome and authoritarian figure, like someone in whom people could find a "father" to obey, if we approach it in Freudian terms – someone to whom you might give your freedom, as Erich Fromm said (Fromm, 1981: 27). Someone to believe in, like a profane God. This is the way in which Hubert Lazinger represented Hitler in the artwork entitled *Der Bannerträger* (The Standard-Bearer). Like a Teutonic Knight, a Parsifal in shining armour, he sits astride a horse and carries the Nazi flag, leading Germany toward a glorious future. Nazism sought to become the religion of religions. Therefore, only some historical symbols would find a place in the regime. Heterogeneous altars were built with symbolic elements from Western culture. There were parades and sporting events full of objects transmitting an array of meanings, with the purpose of generating mass entertainment within different fields and contexts – a Wagnerian "total work of art" created to attract the masses, making them participants in the "big party celebration". A "festival of nations", as can be seen in one part of Leni Riefenstahl's documentary *Olympia*, depicting the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin. It was decided already in 1933 that Berlin would host the games, and the German authorities provided the filmmaker with all the necessary means to shoot the event. Of course cinema also had a key role in mass entertainment, specifically in terms of its characteristic ability to captivate and convince the viewer through audio-visual narrative. The aesthetic experience offered by cinematic techniques led to a new way of seeing in the observer, who entered into a political transformation well beyond the simple act of contemplation. Benjamin named this capacity the "critical dialectic", which was based on a procedure unique to the medium: the film editing technique. Cinema is characteristic in its ability to shock, generated by a new language that consisted of the assemblage of filmed fragments. Benjamin's philosophy defends the montage as artistic creation. Regarding cinematography, he remarked that montage created discourses to communicate "indoctrinating" ideas to the audience (Benjamin, 2003: 92-95).

Riefenstahl, who became a Nazi regime filmmaker, managed to have the arts play a decisive role in creating a historical discourse, as Susan Sontag demonstrates in *Fascinating Fascism*. In this essay, the author emphasises the National Socialist regime's extensive use of the cinematographic aesthetic, specifically its characteristic capacity to convince. The aim was to create a representative mask of this ideology and, at the same time, to dazzle the citizens.

Riefenstahl's most famous propaganda film, *Triumph of the Will*, documented the National Socialist Party Congress held in Nuremberg in 1934. This spectacular initiative, dominated by the masses in collective ecstasy, was designed to be filmed. Hitler's speech was one of the key

moments, being presented as "the redemptive culmination of German history". The film represents "an already achieved and radical transformation of reality" when it turns into a theatrical drama. Sontag states that the event was planned based on the film project. Therefore, this historical event serves "as the set of a film which was then to assume the character of an authentic documentary" (Sontag, 2007: 91-92). Its visual nature would not only work as a way of documenting reality, which is perhaps "one reason for which the reality has been constructed, and must eventually supersede it"[1]. At the same time, to formulate a historical discourse for the future, it looks to the culture of the past for its justification. In *Olympia*, the recreation of ancient Greece leads the viewer to one of the main references of the National Socialist proposal. This classical aesthetic was chosen as part of a heterogeneous formal appearance. In terms of Greek culture, the film focuses on the different elements of the ideal body, and also points to sport as a way of achieving such a physique. One of the most emblematic scenes in the film is related to the Discobolus of Myron, which is transformed into a real body when an actor imitates the same pose.

During this period, the German audience was awestruck by this visual display purporting to recover the lost paradise of Antiquity through culture: a tribute to the restoration of traditional principles that, upon closer inspection, are by no means positive. At present, we find this same behaviour cropping up in the campaign promises of many nationalistic politicians. As Benjamin said, the citizens abandoned the sense of nostalgia inherited from German Romanticism, reconstructing a new totalitarian reality out of the ruins of history. The dynamic thrust or feeling of permanent revolution that Fascism had to communicate to the citizenry –an impression of driving momentum– could only lead to the "final paroxysm of self-destruction" (Paxton, 2005: 175). In addition, Benjamin warns of the possible consequences of misreading these ruins of history, specifically concerning the idea of historical progress. As a metaphor for this problem, he was inspired by Paul Klee's painting entitled *Angelus Novus.* "The angel of history", which he identifies with the figure depicted in the painting, looks at the world and contemplates what is in fact a "single catastrophe, which keeps piling up wreckage upon wreckage", unable to do anything to avoid it. What prevents the angel from staying is the storm of progress that inexorably blows it into the future (Benjamin, 1971: 82). Fascism, through the cult of the leader and the "violation of the masses", led to the aestheticization of politics, the culmination of which is war. The human being was turned into a spectacle as a consequence of self-alienation, simply "experiencing its own destruction as an aesthetic enjoyment" (Benjamin, 2003: 99). Adorno, who stated that writing "a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric" (Adorno, 1962: 29), denounced the lack of critical thinking in society. In turn, this fact prevented society from confronting its

own progression. The author proposed a new type of art with the aim of remembering not to forget, avoiding the repetition of history (Gagnebin, 2005: 22).

To conclude, it is important to clarify an important issue: it would be an oversimplification of history to cast the masses as a passive agent within the processes alignment. In other words, it would mean to overlook the methods that helped build social consensus in order to win the populace's complicity –or silence– as to political decisions that resulted in tragic consequences. At present, it is our responsibility to review the historical causes behind what happened. If we are not able to engage in a culture of memory, as Adorno proposed, we will be exposed to the same repetition as Benjamin's angel.

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Notes

[1] The "theatricalization" of history is present in anecdotes from the film's shooting, for example when scenes that had already been filmed were repeated. Consequently, the public figures taking part in the film had to re-enact their performance at the rally, swearing fealty to the Führer "weeks later, without Hitler and without an audience", inside a studio set built by the architect Albert Speer (Sontag, 2007: 92).