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Terror and Aesthetics: Nazi Strategies for Mass Organization

* Introduction

Political power invariably requires orders of visibility for its production, sustenance and legitimation. From democratic to despotic regimes, the leader must make himself visible in deliberate ways by the people for their recognition of his authority and of themselves as subjects in both senses of the word outlined by Althusser: as subjected to and as subjectifying the leader's power.¹ Foucault repeatedly emphasized that power is not a substance that can be accumulated and owned by the State or by a leader, nor a purely repressive device, but a continuous productive process, tightly connected to subjectivity throughout the whole social body.²

¹ Louis Althusser, *Ideología y Aparatos Ideológicos del Estado* (Bogotá, 1978).

² See Michel Foucault, *Vigilar y castigar*, translated by Aurelio Garzón del Camino (Mexico D.F., 1976); *Historia de la sexualidad*, translated by Ulises Guinazú, 3 vols. (Mexico D.F., 1978), I, 112-17, *Microfísica del poder*, translated by Julia Varela and

Oppressive systems in particular—in which the destitute and pauperized majorities at the service of privileged minorities can overturn the system by their sheer numbers—enforce visibility strategies for preserving the system's stability despite notorious social unbalance. Among power-engendering procedures are the regulatory and disciplinary technologies extensively analyzed by Foucault, but the most effective and imposing strategy of visibility (not fully examined by this author) is the aesthetic, as it opens its way through the subject's emotional self, and consequently, to his or her decisional self (the one that votes, praises, consents, resists or obeys).³

The political sphere does not stand on pure rational argumentation or *logos* alone, nor on the sole authority or *ethos* of its leader. It requires the weight of *pathos* to produce hegemony among the population and consensus among the governing classes. Rhetoric, as the typical political weapon in all regimes, particularly democratic societies, is altogether intertwined with the aesthetic by the use of formal resources such as rhythm, repetition, figures or tropes.⁴ It also deploys the weight of *pathos* by addressing highly emotional

Fernando Alvarez-Uría (Madrid, 1979), 163-89 and *Genealogía del racismo*, translated by Alfredo Tzveibely (Madrid 1992). In his analysis of the *Panopticon*, Foucault deals with the passive 'made visible' applied to penitentiary prisoners, applied also to other disciplinary institutions such as the medical. Its corresponding side, the active strategy of 'making oneself visible' is the one focused upon here. For further elaboration on this distinction, see Katya Mandoki, *Estética y Poder* (Ph.D. dissertation) (México D.F., 1991), 98-105.

³On the direct connection between both the emotional and the decisional self, see Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (New York, 1995).

⁴Rhetoric operates not only through these verbal and acoustic registers but includes the kinesic or body language and the iconic or spatial and visual to produce and display its power of persuasion. For a more detailed analysis of the these registers' display and

topics for the public and emphasizing their significance through pitch, volume, pauses and intonation.⁵ Thus the aesthetization of politics and its use of the *pathos* dimension is a necessary process in every society, no matter how sharp or mild its social stratification may be. This link between power and aesthetics has been so close and pervasive that numerous material traces inherited from stratified societies since the antiquity are of an aesthetic nature, ranging from pyramids, temples, palaces, murals, mausoleums and cathedrals to contemporary stadiums, banks, deluxe hotels, museums and skyscrapers.

Fascism is no exception. We can, however, make no generalization about fascist aesthetics except what it has in common with all autocratic, highly centralized regimes: monumentality. Yet its pattern, style and social import vary significantly according to each specific historical and cultural background as well as to the idiosyncrasy of its people and leaders. We will focus on one particular form of fascism, that of the NSDAP (*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*)⁶ as it controlled the State, and examine how the aesthetic became both an implement for and a victim of mass organization during the Third Reich. What characterizes NSDAP aesthetics is exactly what distinguishes it from other types of fascism and protofascism. NS was unique in its systematic process of substitutions which were deployed through: 1) the substitution of religion by the instrumentalization of art, 2) the substitution of art by propaganda, 3) the substitution of propaganda by indoctrination, 4) the substitution of culture by monumentalism, 5) the substitution of politics by aesthetics and 6) the substitution of the aesthetic by terror. No

aesthetic strategies see Katya Mandoki, *Prosaica: introducción a la estética de lo cotidiano* (México D.F., 1994).

⁵*Pathos* and the aesthetic are not synonymous; on their distinction see Katya Mandoki, 'Aesthetics and Pragmatics: Conversion, constitution and the dimensions of illocutionary acts', *Pragmatics & Cognition* 7 (1999) 313-337.

⁶National Socialist German Workers Party.

other dictatorial, totalitarian or fascist regime achieved this particular constellation of aesthetic strategies.

* The 'temple of art': The substitution of religion with the instrumentalization of art
In October 15, 1933, Hitler laid the cornerstone of the House of German Art designed by Paul Ludwig Troost to replace the burned down (1931) glass and steel Munich Glass Palace (1854) which used to be a symbol of modernity, technology and functionality. The new museum was a heavy monumental, neoclassicist building made of huge cut stones on the exterior and marble on the interior. It expressed the anti-industrial and anti-economic spirit hypocritically maintained all along by the NSDAP, as industrial technology and the rapacious use of the human body and labor for warfare were the iron fist hidden within the velvet glove of Nazism's neoclassicist façade. During the ceremony, Hitler declared his pride at being able 'to lay the foundations for this new temple in honor of the goddess of art'. This was, remarkably, the first major architectural project dedicated to the Third Reich, though it would not be inaugurated until 1937.

German fascism would have been an artists' paradise thanks to the immense financial resources invested in the aesthetic, despite the precarious economic conditions of the nation at the time. Creative freedom, of course, was lacking. It is true that no artists are completely free in any society, as all art production has always required patronage, was commissioned to do specific works and treat particular topics (as contemporary art depends on the market's demand and the artworld's criteria). Patronage of German fascist art, however, came not from social groups traditionally immersed in cultural production, such as classical Greek and Roman elites, medieval clergy, renaissance patrons or bourgeois art

collectors, but from sectors of the population such as the NS party's inner cliques whose artistic expectations were not precisely refined.⁷

From ancient times to the present, religion has been used to legitimate political regimes. Spanish fascism, particularly the National-Catholicism movement, is a case in point. Most architectural projects of Spanish fascism that were not strictly governmental were related to religion. *El Valle de los Caídos*⁸ designed by Francisco Franco himself (which included a school, a monastery and a sanctuary with its 300 m. high Cross, same height as the Eiffel Tower), the Basilica de Nuestra Señora de la Merced and the Templo de Nuestra Sra. del Pilar in Barcelona are other examples of this military and religious alliance.⁹

There is an immense difference, however, between Spanish and German fascism's use of religion. While National Catholicism used religion as its content and the State as its form, the NSDAP used religion as a format, depleted its content and substituted it with art as object of worship. This maneuver is clearly expressed in the above phrase referring to

⁷ The most reliable authority to judge the aesthetic taste of his NSDAP partners was Albert Speer who describes Hitler's taste as 'gaudy' and Goering's as pompous. He states that there was hardly any interest in literature in that circle, which mainly enjoyed operettas and Wagner's operas. Speer quotes Hitler criticizing Hess's crude taste. 'Even the few representatives of the intelligentsia in Hitler's leadership, such as Goebbels, did not bother with such functions as the regular concerts of the Berlin Philharmonic under Furtwängler...' For Speer, the Nazi elite would rather attend beer halls than cultural events. The majority of the Reichsleiters and Gauleiters 'had never gone beyond secondary school,' and 'almost all displayed astonishing intellectual dullness' See Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, translated by Richard and Clara Winston, (New York and Toronto, 1970), 60, 121, 137.

⁸The Valley of the Fallen.

⁹ Alexandre Cirici, *La estética del franquismo* (Barcelona, 1977), 138.

the 'temple in honor of the goddess of art' which appears metaphorical but couldn't have been more literal. This substitution of religion with art was fabricated by a shallow version of Greco-Roman and 'Nietzschean' paganism (after Nietzsche's sister Elizabeth mutilated his writings) and justified by the idealist and romanticist trends prevalent in philosophical aesthetics inherited from Schiller, Hegel and Schelling, (as Gentile for Mussolini) and their abstract, mystified but at the same time instrumental notion of art as a didactic and moral tool.

Hitler's tenacious instrumentalization of art cannot be explained solely by his professional frustration as an artist or his laughable claim that if it were not for World War I, he would have become a Michelangelo. Such implementation was perhaps one of the few pragmatic measures taken by the NSDAP, as it required an already established, highly reputed institution with a rich aesthetic reserve to bolster and consolidate an image of the movement. Religious institutions owned these assets but implicated political and social commitments wholly undesirable for the NSDAP such as: a) significant communal ties that required to be dissolved to mobilize the masses, b) firmly established religious authorities harder to manipulate, and c) basic ethical values that could jeopardize plans for mass extermination. On the other hand, religion had an unequivocal, repeatedly tested and verified force of attraction and an aesthetic wealth to allure the masses. The solution was keeping a quasi-religious format and utilizing its appeal while substituting its content with artistic rather than religious ideas, since artists were too individualistic, detached, exiled or sent to concentration camps and consequently easier to manipulate and control by the NSDAP than religious and ecclesiastic authorities.

The House of German Art at Munich became the Mecca of this new pseudo-religion which had the Führer as its pope, the Aryan race as its chosen people, the military officials as its clergy and the SA (*Sturmabteilung*), and later the SS (*Schutzstaffel*) and Gestapo (*Geheime Staatspolizei*) officers as its bishops, cardinals and archbishops. This 'temple' exhibited artworks that utilized formats and motifs of traditional religious paintings such as

Madonnas and Pietas (as Berann's *To Those Who Died for the Austrian National Socialist Party in 1934*) except that instead of Jesus, they were holding future or elapsed soldiers. Triptychs associated with salvation and redemption were used to represent the trinity of soldier, farmer and worker as saints.¹⁰ The solemn title *In the Beginning Was the Word* for Hoyer's banal painting represents Hitler speaking at a Munich beer hall.¹¹

As in the substitution of Christian for nationalist topics or the reduction of universal humanism to racism, fascist aesthetics operated equally with religious ritualization. It substituted religious ceremonies such as morning prayers by 'Celebration of the Morning' in Hitler's Youth camps, traditional celebration of solstices became 'Germanic' holidays, Jewish Passover and Christian Easter became 'Festival of Life', Christmas and Chanukah festival of lights mutated into the Nazi 'Festival of the Rising Light' plus other ideologically serviceable celebrations.¹²

Keeping religious topics while emptying them of their content by substitution with racist and military themes was only one of the many substitution strategies implemented by the NS regime. The Nazis became experts at substitutions.

*The substitution of art by propaganda: a grim augury:

This pseudo religious institutionalization and dogmatization of art naturally implied its heretic counterpart in what was decreed 'degenerate art'. A plebiscite was organized against

¹⁰ Or that of the army, navy and air force, each related to primal elements of earth, water and air. See Berthold Hinz, *Art in the Third Reich* translated from *Die Malerei im Deutschen Faschismus*. (New York, 1979), 116.

¹¹ Hinz, 83.

¹²Rainer Stollmann, 'Fascist Politics as a Total Work of Art', *New German Critique* 14 (1978), 43.

modern art to prove its rejection by the masses and provide Hitler with the certainty that he counted with the (obviously foreseen) support of the majorities against modern artists. The masses' disapproval of modern art came to be very useful in several ways: a) socially, as a unifying element since it is always easier to find adherents among the masses *contra* rather than *pro*, 13 b) psychologically, by sanctioning the masses' hostility against everything they cannot understand and thus blaming it on the artists, c) 'judicially', if one may use this term, by providing an additional pretext to persecute talented artists since they were, after all, not sympathizers with the NS party anyway (except for Emil Nolde), and d) economically, by looting and confiscating artworks, many owned by Jewish collectors, that could be sold at very high prices in the international market and add cash to the party's funds and to the officers' personal purse, particularly Goering's.¹⁴

In July 1937, parallel to the premiere of the Great German Art Exhibition at the 'temple of art' in Munich, an exhibit of the 'degenerate' modernist artists was simultaneously inaugurated. The fate of this so-called 'degenerate art' very mildly foreshadowed what would later occur on a vast scale, not to artworks but to human beings. The term 'degenerate', often used as a synonym for Jewish or Marxist, uncannily prefigures later eugenic and sterilization measures taken by the SS. Hinz quotes Hitler's condemnation of modern artists' expressive and eloquent use of color, blaming it on 'visual ailments' due to 'mechanical failings' or 'congenital disorders'. He even speaks of 'preventive measures that would spare later generations from inheriting such dreadful visual defects'. He adds

13 As an eloquent illustration of this *contra* attitude, 2,009,899 people attended the 'Degenerate art' exhibition, more than three times the visitors attending the official German exhibition. See Hinz, 1.

14 Speer 178. According to Hinz during a single year 1933-34, the total number of confiscated works is estimated at 15, 997 from museums, although no records are kept from plundering, extortion and theft of private collections. Hinz, 39.

that if such chromatic distortion was intentional, these artists should be prosecuted by criminal law because of their lack of belief in the reality they depict.¹⁵

While the art of the Third Reich attempted to create the impression that the regime provided fertile ground for the growth and development of art, creativity and genius, Berthold Hinz decidedly holds that it mainly exhumed from indifference a group of technically skilled but antiquated, opportunist and mediocre artists. Despite the title of his book *Art in the Third Reich*, Hinz goes as far as to argue that there was, in fact, no such thing as an art of the Third Reich.¹⁶ What was produced during that period for Hinz was anachronic art, which acquired salience merely because it filled the vacuum left by the eradication of modern art. Albert Speer also declares that '... no such thing as a style of the Third Reich developed, but buildings took a definite cast, marked by certain eclectic elements.'¹⁷

Nazi art may have been artistically mediocre, but it certainly was propagandistically effective. Paraphrasing Hitler's remark 'my talent for painting seemed to be excelled by my talent for drawing'¹⁸ to justify (?) why he was rejected from the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, it is more fair to say that his 'talent' for art seemed to be monumentally excelled by his talent for propaganda. Emerging from the mobs, Hitler truly knew how to move their hearts by injecting the right formula and dosage of *pathos*. *Mein Kampf's* recipe for simple, uncomplicated and repeated oratory was efficiently implanted on art for its mutation into propaganda. Art unfit for propaganda had to be eliminated. While art attests to the stream of perception of life and to subjective and unique views of reality, NSDAP art was decreed

¹⁵Hinz, 42.

¹⁶Hinz ,15, 18.

¹⁷Speer, 142.

¹⁸Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* translated by Ralph Manheim, eleventh printing (Boston, 1943), 19.

to univocally represent as 'eternal truths' the Third Reich's coagulated ideals of race superiority, military sacrifice, secret police officials' omnipotence and Hitler's idolization.

In the 'degenerate art' exhibition, artworks were crowded together from floor to ceiling in claustrophobic badly lit rooms, a mild augury of the crowding of human beings in cattle-wagons to concentration camps. In March 20, 1939 at the courtyard of the Berlin Central Fire Department, a 'final solution' was imposed to what was left of modern art in Germany. According to Hinz, 1004 oil paintings and sculptures as well as 3825 watercolors, drawings and prints were burned to ashes. Again, and as in the elimination of art unfit for propaganda, this was a feeble anticipation of what would be later decreed upon human beings.¹⁹

This same strategy of converting fear of difference into rabid hatred was used not only against artistic styles but against all racial, political, cultural, medical, religious and sexual minorities. The resentment of mediocrity against talent must have relished the emigration of Bertolt Brecht, Paul Klee, Käthe Kollwitz, Kurt Weill, Wassily Kandinsky, Josef Albers, Oskar Kokoschka, Max Beckmann, Thomas and Heinrich Mann, George Grosz, Walter Gropius and so many others. Max Ernst was sent to a concentration camp, Otto Dix was arrested, Oskar Schlemmer was artistically silenced until his death in 1943, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1938) and Ernst Toller (1939) committed suicide away from Germany but related to the war (as Walter Benjamin in 1940 fearing the Gestapo). The 'artistic' Führer provoked the most radical talent depletion ever seen in any country (an unequivocal substitution of talent by mediocrity). In this sense, modern art acquired a symbolic role as resistance against German fascism simply by expressing all values

¹⁹Hinz, 43, 57.

opposed to the NSDAP's agenda.²⁰ It represented everything Nazism most feared and disdained: plurality, respect for difference, the vitality of *homo ludens*, singularity, joy of life, social criticism, creativity, humor, autonomy, sensuality, freedom and lively imagination.

*The substitution of propaganda with indoctrination

The organization of the masses deployed by Joseph Goebbels, *Reichminister für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda*,²¹ completely controlled theater, literature, press, radio, film and art to induce ideological propagation by aesthetic appeal. These propagandistic strategies exhibited military, folklore and work theatricalizations to create for the masses what Canetti calls 'a domesticated experience of themselves'.²² All these events were not, as I will later argue, an 'aesthetization of politics',²³ as there could be no politics under the 'Führer-principle', but the construction and exhibition of an order of visibility thick enough to hide reality.

These exhibition aesthetics implemented the allure of myths like *Nibelungenlied* and Wagner's music, of light and sound effects, of marches and gymnastics, of the 'ebullience of fraternity' in multitudes orderly gathered, of Hitler's fervid rhetoric and icons such as the inversion of the Gnostic swastika to a mechanic clockwise mandala on gigantic

²⁰ This contrasts to Italian fascism, where modern art, particularly Marinetti's futurism, was accepted. Spanish fascism also was hoping Picasso would return to Franco's Spain as a repentant, prodigal son.

²¹ Minister of popular enlightenment and propaganda.

²² Elias Canetti, *Masa y poder* translated by Horst Vogel (Madrid. 1983), 15. All quotations from Canetti are translated from Spanish by myself.

²³ Which is Stollmann's claim.

red 'Roman style' banners. The most glaring of these was Speer's design at the Zeppelin field party rally when he used 130 aircraft searchlights for sharply defined beams at intervals of 40 ft. visible to a height of 20,000-25,000 ft.²⁴

Propaganda, however, did not suffice for organizing the inner circles of the NSDAP. Hitler knew that propaganda 'must be addressed always and exclusively to the masses.'²⁵ He contrasted propaganda to organization: '*The function of propaganda is to attract supporters, the function of organization to win members.*'²⁶ Goebbels was in charge of the former while Heinrich Himmler and Rudolf Hess of the latter. Although both propaganda and indoctrination coexisted during the Third Reich, a shift of emphasis or a substitution of the former by the latter took place because as soon as the war began, the Germans did not cheer their Führer as they had since 1932. Hitler no longer appeared on his specially designed balcony to the acclaiming crowds, and his departure to conquered Poland remained totally unnoticed by the masses. Berlin was as empty then as Paris during Hitler's 3-hour visit to his envied city.²⁷ Goebbels simply did not organize the theatricalization of German occupation as a Nazi victory.

In his well known essay *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility*, Walter Benjamin establishes a distinction between two polar aesthetic values: exhibition and cultic values.²⁸ In applying these concepts, it becomes evident that propaganda utilized the former to expand its radius of influence as extensively as possible, aimed at the masses,

²⁴Speer called it 'a cathedral of light', another illustration of this depletion of religious content while employing its format, even in this metaphorical sense. See Speer 58-9.

²⁵Hitler, 179.

²⁶ Italics in original text. Hitler, 581.

²⁷Speer, 158, 167.

²⁸Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' in *Illumination* (New York, 1968), 224-26.

whereas for its elite members' indoctrination, mainly ceremonial and secret, cultic value was used not for expansion, but for coagulation.

Cultic value was used to create what Canetti calls 'mass crystals ' which he defines as 'small and rigid groups of men, fixedly limited and of great constancy, that serve to unchain the masses.'²⁹ For Canetti, their unity is more important than their size, and they must by all means be kept identical and manifest as an indestructible totality. Mass crystals are the compacted human version of monumental architecture symbolizing the illusory solidity, permanence and consistency of the movement. It was not fortuitous that every official building had a consecration hall as a laboratory for crystallogenesis.

Cultic aesthetics used by Himmler and Hess implemented esoteric hodgepodes, astrology and occultist symbolism, like the runes, for indoctrination rituals among SA, Gestapo, and SS members. They appropriated the Habsburgs' legendary treasures and searched for St. Maurice's Lance and Wilhelm I's bones as cultic symbols of power.³⁰ In contrast to signs and signals which work mainly by denotation, these occult symbols work by emotional connotation and become aesthetic by the fascination they exert over their fans through their intricate design, narrative fantasy and ritualistic theatricality.³¹

A significant constituent of cultic value was the purity of race by which Himmler recruited the crystal masses. He demanded a height over 5 feet 8 inches tall and proofs of Aryan ancestry back to 1750, which operated as a blood requisite for initiation. SS members believed that they were chosen not by Himmler alone but by The Fatherland Himself, thus producing a sense of necessity and infallibility to their selection. In addition

²⁹Canetti, 69-70.

³⁰ On this subject see Ken Anderson, *Hitler and the Occult* (New York 1995), and Dusty Sklar, *The Nazis and the Occult*, (New York: 1989).

³¹ On the aesthetics of occultism, see Mandoki, *Prosaica*, 217-22.

to their abominable acts, their mere homogeneity, height, body language and heavy dark uniforms produced very intimidating effects.³²

What the two, indoctrination and propaganda, have in common is that both are arranged by aesthetic patterns. They differ, however, in their contrasting dynamics. While the mass tends outwards for expansion through propaganda exhibition, the elite tends inwards for coagulation and ossification through the secrecy of cultic value. The masses, like an amorphous organism, have a tendency to expand and augment in size, whereas the elite compresses into harder crystal masses from within. These dynamics are exemplified by the process through which the NSDAP generated inwards the crystal of the SA (*Sturmabteilung*) under Ernst Roehm in 1921-22, which later generated inwardly the SS (*Schutzstaffel*) under Himmler's command as an elite of the SA, followed by the Shock Troops and the Death Head units merged into the Waffen-SS, after which came the Office for Questions of Race and Resettlement.³³ This peculiar, deadly organism that breeds itself inwards expresses how compact centripetality kept the NSDAP from disintegration through an ever denser black hole of power.

*The substitution of culture with monumentalism

Culture grows naturally from every communal environment and engenders the necessary stability by signifying a place and a collective identity to the people who share it. Culture is, by its very nature, a collective enterprise. Monumentalism, on the other hand, although it requires an enormous amount of collective labor, is basically a personal project. A community may, nonetheless, take pride in its monumental achievements, such as pyramids

³² This is one of many cases that exemplify what Foucault calls 'biopower'. See Foucault *Genealogía del racismo*, 247-273.

³³ Arendt, 368.

and cathedrals, and consider them part of their culture. Culture grows from the bottom up, whereas monumentalism is set from the top down.

There are cases when rather than coalesce, culture and monumentalism confront one another. The utterly disproportionate Berlin project assigned to Speer made infeasible by its very scale any possibility of spontaneous social confluence and cultural vivacity within its limits and required demolition of a significant part of the existing urban constructions. Speer was aware of its being 'the very expression of tyranny'³⁴ and compared it to a Cecil B. De Mille set (except that Speer's was of incomparably expensive heavy granite and marble).³⁵ The problem for Speer was how to inject some 'urban life into the new huge avenue' as it looked completely 'lifeless and regimented'.³⁶ As Speer noted, Hitler was totally uninterested in the social dimension of the Berlin project, since cultural and social life were of no avail to him: what counted was monumentalism alone.

As Speer writes '...I found Hitler's excitement rising whenever I could show him that at least in size we had "beaten" the other great buildings of history'.³⁷ The plan for the capital of the Reich included a parade ground of 3,400 by 2,300 ft. (more than double in size that of Kings Darius I and Xerxes at Persepolis which measured only 1,500 by 900 ft.); a sculpture of a woman, bigger than Nero's 119-ft.-high colossal figure at the Capitol and the 151-ft.-high Statue of Liberty (Speer's was 46 ft. higher than the latter), a Great Stadium to hold 400,000 spectators, (more than twice the Circus Maximus in Rome which held 150,000 to 200,000 spectators). The Berlin arch of triumph was three times bigger than

³⁴Surprisingly, and contrary to Speer, Krier does not believe that what he calls Classical Architecture was designed for intimidation. See Leon Krier (ed.); *Albert Speer: Architecture, 1932-1942* (Bruxelles, 1985).

³⁵Speer, 159.

³⁶ Speer, 134.

³⁷Speer, 69.

Napoleon's in Paris. St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome would fit several times in Berlin's dome hall and its main avenue would surpass the Champs Elysées in width by seventy-odd feet. The Nuremberg Stadium could have enclosed three times the pyramid of Cheops.³⁸

Nazism's disdain for culture extended much deeper and farther than this greed for scale. Despite its rhetoric on the *Volk* and its slogans on 'blood and soil', cultural stability was inevitably deemed as a threat to the NSDAP due to its aim at furious mobility. Nazism focused on direction in its appetite for expansion, so the ruler 'must establish the fictitious world of the movement as a tangible working reality of everyday life, and he must, on the other hand, prevent this new world from developing a new stability; for a stabilization of its laws and institutions would surely liquidate the movement itself and with it, the hope for eventual world conquest.'³⁹

Canetti holds that this desire for expansion is the first and supreme quality of the masses.⁴⁰ Only augmentation, not culture (which is necessarily limited and defined by borders) can defend the fragility of mass movements from disintegration since, as the author observes, the mass disintegrates with the same speed with which it was constituted. This sense of the masses' own imminent disintegration is thus pathologically projected towards the 'others'. The masses are inculcated to perceive the outside world as that which is dying and has to be fled by adhering to the movement. While culture is closed and does not aim at expansion but at reproduction, mass movements are open and aim at propagation. Equally, any concrete experience of place and of identity that results from culture was undesirable for the Nazi movement in its requirement of selfless sacrifice from its adherents and the utility it found in their very rootlessness.

³⁸Speer, 76.

³⁹Arendt, 391.

⁴⁰Canetti, 11.

Sensus communis, which for Kant was 'the idea of a public sense', or 'the collective reason of mankind', was among the first victims of Nazism. Common sense, ingrained in culture, had to be eradicated to create the masses' illusion of world conquest and their belief in the Thousand Years Reich. As Arendt writes, the masses' 'general contempt for even the most obvious rules of common sense'⁴¹ was a result of their losing all roots to a community. The masses 'lost the whole sector of communal relationships in whose framework common sense makes sense'.⁴² They willingly cashed in common sense for what Arendt defines as 'logicality', as it was only through it that these 'consistency hungry masses' found security, independently of how deranged and detached from concrete reality that logicality may have been. Such consistency is of course not logical but an effect of sheer repetition.

The success of the movement towards the 'Thousand Year Reich' did not have any concrete meaning for the masses, since concreteness itself lost its meaning when the capacity for experience provided by culture vanished and was replaced by the façade of monumentality. Lacking practical or utilitarian gains for the individual, Nazism became dangerously unpredictable, like today's suicidal religious sects. This abstractness to conceal the masses' instability (comparable to contemporary sect adherents' mental instability) was buttressed by and hidden under the monumentality and martial severity of NSDAP architecture and ceremonies. ⁴³

As opposed to culture and *sensus communis*, the NSDAP depended upon instability to trigger immediate obedience and operated irrationally through sudden strategical

⁴¹Arendt, 316.

⁴²Arendt, 352.

⁴³In painting and sculpture an equal monumentality effect was achieved by representing massive animal and human figures as seen from below, reinforcing the same intimidating message to the spectator. See Hinz, 113-14.

shifting, in addition to the often vague and conflicting nature of orders given. 'The members of the ruling clique themselves could never be absolutely sure of their own position in the secret power hierarchy'.⁴⁴ The aesthetic was here to provide the service of hiding the party's inherent instability and irrationality under the façade of order and solidity upheld by the Reich's 'chief decorator' as Speer calls himself.⁴⁵ He effectively represented the movement according to its basic values: homogeneity, massive aggregation, facelessness, overwhelming scale and centripetality of the Führer. As exhibition value shifted towards cultic value and propaganda to indoctrination, monumental construction—which had replaced culture—was to be itself substituted by monumental destruction when Speer, the *Generalbauinspektor* (Inspector General of Buildings), was substituted in 1942 for Speer, the Minister of Armaments and Munitions. This deadly mechanism of substitutions took even Hitler as its prey, since he was ready to swap his megalomaniac fantasies of massive construction with war destruction, itself substituted soon after with mass extermination.⁴⁶

*The substitution of the political by the aesthetic

Following Benjamin's ideas that 'all efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war'⁴⁷ Rainer Stollmann attempts 'to comprehend fascism as a political movement and as a system of control... from the standpoint of aesthetics, the theory of perceptible beauty, of "beautiful illusion" in the broadest sense'.⁴⁸ He declares that 'the greatest

⁴⁴Arendt, 400. Speer confirms this situation repeatedly in his diary.

⁴⁵Speer, 59.

⁴⁶This was proved by the financial resources diverted from really urgent national priorities during wartime toward mass extermination.

⁴⁷Benjamin, 241.

⁴⁸Stollmann, 42.

aesthetic accomplishments of German fascism were the stagings of the Party conventions' which he defines by the ambitious term of 'total work of art' or *Gesamtkunstwerk*. 49

Implying the comparison to bourgeois art, which would be only 'partial', Stollmann does not explore its implications, beginning with what exactly does he mean by a 'total work of art'. The reader is left on his own to infer that what is referred to by *Gesamtkunstwerk* is the monumental massivity, aesthetic effectism, theatricalization and strict geometrical arrangement of the party's meetings and military parades. Simulation of battles with tanks, dropping bombs, lighted torches and war games were all part of these aesthetics, as well as party rallies, newsreels, Riefenstahl's films, youth celebrations, the 'Heil Hitler' arm/hand signal, radio 'cultural' speeches by the Führer, pageants with costumed participants and trained animals such as dogs, horses and falcons, gymnastics, dances and the typical Nazi goose step.

The first question that forces itself upon Stollmann's categorization is whether we are really dealing here with an artwork in the strict sense or whether his use of the term is loosely metaphorical rather than analytical. Artworks are always related to particular cultural traditions and make sense in relation to their artworld's codes and conventions. The context or institution from which the activities considered by Stollmann as artworks emerged, however, is not the artworld, since the cultural dimension was banished, but a paradigmatic projection of martial and pseudo-religious ceremonies into the cultural void intentionally fabricated. The only art in the strict sense produced by German fascism was the kitsch neoclassicist paintings, sculptures and architecture favored by the NSDAP.

Contrary to Stollmann's claims, I contend that German fascism did not aestheticize the political because after Hitler's control of the State, and specifically after the fire at the *Reichstag*, there was no political life left in Germany to be aestheticized. Political life was simply abolished as cultural life was annihilated by the SA, the SS and the Gestapo by

49Stollmann, 44.

prohibiting art criticism, modern art and photographic reportage, banning every kind of discussion and interaction, not only political but cultural, and finally, by sending the opposition to concentration camps. What the NSDAP aestheticized were not politics but a contrived image of the movement to recruit the elite and maintain the popularity it enjoyed among wide sectors of the German population. It was the abstract ideal of the Nazi movement, not politics, what was aestheticized by representing it as heroic and inescapable.

Although Stollmann ambiguously speaks of the substitution of 'a beautiful illusion' in place of politics and at the same time of the aesthetization of politics, it must be stressed that what has been substituted can no longer be aestheticized. Aesthetization does not cancel the political but is part of it, complementary to debate and reason by enhancing argumentation through the appeal to emotion. Whether to exhibit or to hide political significance, the aesthetization of politics substitutes reason, not politics, by seducing instead of thinking.

A category mistake in Stollmann's thesis—which is partly to blame for the ambiguity of his text—is the conflation between the aesthetic and the artistic. What Stollmann views as a 'total work of art' is in fact not art but an extensive aesthetization of military and party organization by the effectist use of illumination, props, staging and rigidly ordered, uniformed multitudes. This extensive aesthetization is not new, since all rituals, as opposed to mere habits, are basically aesthetic. From Pharaonic, Roman and Aztec ceremonies for the sun-god to present religious ceremonies, the combined and simultaneous use of architecture, painting, sculpture, music, literature and poetry, dramatization, dance and special illumination (eclipses, torches or colored light passing through stained glass windows) generate a holistic aesthetic that favors religious or societal experience. Moreover, these ceremonies were integrative, not substitutive. What was definitely new in the NSDAP's aesthetic deployment was its exclusively military character and its colossal scale which, in contrast to the low quality of Nazi art, best embodied what was most

precious for the German, and particularly Prussian, collective identity: its army.⁵⁰ In short, the so called *Gesamtkunstwerk* was in fact not new, not an artwork and not an aesthetization of politics but grandiose military aesthetics as a substitutive for everything else: the religious, the cultural, the artistic, the intellectual and particularly the political domain.

*Entropy and implosion: the substitution of the aesthetic by terror:

Aesthetics' chief function was to frame the shapelessness of the masses and fabricate their fictitious image as an ordered, steady and invulnerable organization. The Third Reich's planned monumental architecture—with its strict symmetry, martial severity, apparent permanence and compactness—was, however, the exact opposite of Nazism's real character, closer to an organic swarm or plague devouring everything in its way than to a geometric, rational structure. '[O]nly a building can have a structure, but a movement... can have only direction.'⁵¹ Loyalty is devoted to direction rather than structure, as in SS slogan *Meine Ehre heisst Treue*.⁵² Executing the Führer's will was following The Direction, whoever the Führer happened to be and wherever the direction happened to aim.⁵³

Members of the movement were required to move by the same pull, separated but without distance, as in the army's marches where distance is shortest but physical contact forbidden. This 'heterogeneous uniformity' of the masses is for Arendt one of the primary

⁵⁰This was part of Germany's revenge against the Treaty of Versailles.

⁵¹Arendt, 398.

⁵²'My honor means loyalty' more elegant or aesthetic than the factual *Meine Pflicht heisst Gehorsamkeit* 'My duty means obedience'.

⁵³ In Arendt's view, even the Führer was needed 'not as a person, but as a function, and as such he is indispensable to the movement.' Arendt, 387.

conditions for totalitarianism.⁵⁴ It is, in our terms, equivalent to social entropy in that it maintains uniformity at a macroscopic perspective (a colossal mass of people with a single direction) but keeps total heterogeneity and disorder when seen at a closer range (since there are no cultural, professional, class or individual bonds nor identities within such total segregation).⁵⁵ Entropic disorder guarantees a general uniformity that the socially displaced masses find as their last refuge.

German fascism, as a conglomeration of homogenous masses, began by leaving no space between one person and another that would enable any political or cultural relation. 'By pressing men against each other, total terror destroys the space between them' writes Arendt.⁵⁶ As this space is essential to their encounter face to face, by erasing space, terror also erases the face, and with it, any sense of responsibility. Emmanuel Levinas' ethics towards the face of the other and the basic responsibility each one has for his or her own acts are arrested when space implodes. Eichmann's 'excuse' that he was 'merely following orders' illustrates this total facelessness. General irresponsibility geared towards total obedience was machinated through a simulacrum of responsibility monopolized by and attributed to the Führer, whose face was on permanent and ubiquitous display.⁵⁷ His image

⁵⁴Arendt, 322.

⁵⁵ I am not using the terms 'homogeneity' and 'heterogeneity' in Bataille's strict sense related to fascism, but in the usual sense. See Georges Bataille, 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism' *New German Critique* 16 (1979), 64-88.

⁵⁶Arendt, 466.

⁵⁷It was a simulacrum because Hitler always blamed others for his failures: his teachers were guilty for not recognizing his talents, the Jews were responsible for the war and for Germany's defeat, and the Germans' weakness was to blame for downfall of the Third Reich.

was as immanent to the whole organization as his reasons were transcendent even to the highest SS officials.

On a general level, people that constitute the masses all seem alike and merge into a single organism, but are kept segregated by the arbitrariness of terror and the totalitarian device of 'guilt by association' implemented by purges and concentration camps. Terror's sharp edge penetrated even the aesthetic unifying façade, since the demand for unconditional obedience required the entropic abolition of every horizontal bond of comradeship, work or family ties which could compete with a direct relation to the Führer. These dual opposing forces, the centripetal of aesthetics for conglomeration through both propaganda and indoctrination, and the centrifugal of terror for atomization, were astutely manipulated by Nazism until the latter totally eroded and substituted the former.

Aesthetics, which rendered such useful services to the Nazi movement, turned out to be as expendable as the lives of the German soldiers sent to freeze and die at the Russian front. When the capacity for experience—which is aesthetics' condition of possibility—became itself an obstacle to the movement and to expeditious mass extermination (as previously religion, culture and politics), the aesthetic was no longer necessary and had to be discarded. 'Identification with the movement and total conformism seem to have destroyed the very capacity for experience, even if it be as extreme as torture or the fear of death'.⁵⁸ This loss of experiential capacity is notoriously manifest by classical music indifferently played at the gates of the gas chambers. When human sensibility ceases to exist, the aesthetic implodes and everything else becomes incomprehensible and meaningless.

Terror and sensibility both act from the innermost core of subjectivity, but while sensibility requires distance, terror compresses it. Contrary to horror, which is an aesthetic category and can be contemplated from the outside, terror snatches from within and leaves

⁵⁸Arendt, 308.

no space between one person and another, between one and the world. Monumentalism intimidates, but can still be kept at a distance. When psychological and perceptive distance are abolished and men pushed against each other, sensibility is drained out and terror creeps in, installing itself in that void. This was the last, deadliest substitution implemented by Nazism.

In terms of scale, NSDAP megalomaniac architectural monumentality ended completely miniaturized by the magnitude of genocide. The true 'masterpiece', the aesthetic totality accomplished by Nazism was not total works of art or *Gesamtkunstwerke* but total atrocity with total indifference. The most accurate image of Nazi 'aesthetics' is congealed in the train to Auschwitz: uniform direction to the systematic mass production of corpses.

* Conclusion

What was most salient about NSDAP strategies for mass organization was its methodical process of substitutions. We saw how Nazism substituted religion with art, art with propaganda, propaganda with indoctrination, culture with monumentalism, politics with aesthetics and aesthetics with terror. The magical device, the key that enabled the implementation of these substitutions was the aesthetic. From this pivot, additional substitutions, all related to the aesthetic, branched off. The first victim was rational argumentation, substituted with aestheticized ideology, or what Arendt sharply defines as 'the tyranny of logicity'.⁵⁹ Art followed, substituted with propaganda, when talented artists and intellectuals forced to escape or sent to concentration camps were substituted with kitsch and pamphletarian artists. Traditional pagan and country celebrations were substituted with obligatory official ritualizations. Mass *pathos* substituted individual and

⁵⁹It began long before the NSDAP took power, with the massive publication financed by Henry Ford of the forged *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, *Mein Kampf* and Rosenberg's texts.

collective *ethos*. Hypnotic fixation upon graphic symbols substituted *logos* and the analysis of ideas; indoctrination substituted understanding. Secret Police's deadly arbitrariness substituted customs for civic coexistence. Religious and communal values were substituted with racism; cultural stability and identity were substituted with the masses' instability and anonymity. Selfhood was substituted with selfless uprootedness, common sense with blind fanaticism. Concern with concrete individual and collective well-being were substituted with the party's imposition of abstract chimeras and demand of self-sacrifice. We may add to this list the Nazi fantasy, taken from the fraudulent *Protocols*, of substituting Jews in their supposed 'control of the world'. Not even aesthetics—whose useful services to the party had been indispensable in assisting a quasi-suicidal sect to achieve a massive scale—were spared. Sensibility was substituted with terror. The aims of technology and design, devised since the origins of the *homo faber* for the improvement of human life, were substituted with their implementation for the systematic mass production of anonymous death.

Contemporary reality has alarming conditions in common with the rise of Nazism, such as escalating unemployment, a growing unqualified labor force, extensive migration from rural to urban megacenters, propagation of deranged indoctrinating sects, communal rootlessness, proliferation of triviality, violence and kitsch in mass culture, a prevailing sense of human expendability, an obsession with success for its own sake and epidemic social resentment by incessant display of unattainable goods to the majority of the world's population. Legions of illegal refugees and economic exiles are flooding the world's industrial and financial metropolises stirring hostile, often racist reactions from residents.

Globalization, with its implicit prospect of an extended planetary responsibility for the welfare of all human beings, also entails the threat of global totalitarianism.

Vattimo's⁶⁰ insistence on the present explosion of the aesthetic beyond its traditional institutional confines may be symptomatic. Contemporary hyper-aesthetization is again used as a legitimation and substitution device for a new order of visibility where the economic, rather than the political, plays the upper hand: what it legitimates is a model of exclusion and what it substitutes is kantian *sensus communis*, 'the idea of a public sense'..⁶¹

To Foucault's claim that '[u]nder the affirmation of the masses' desire for fascism lies a hidden historical problem whose solution has not been attempted'⁶² one could reply that it is not only historical but psychological and aesthetic as well. The former was lucidly pursued by Arendt and attempted by Bataille among others.⁶³ This text may hopefully count as a contribution to the latter, since aesthetics continues to be not only a substitutive instrument but a highly sensitive warning device for social danger, if adequately attuned and heeded.

⁶⁰Gianni Vattimo, *El fin de la modernidad*, translated by Alberto L. Bixio (Barcelona:1986), 49-59.

⁶¹Of course, this would be a subject for another paper.

⁶²Foucault, *Microfísica del poder*, 168.

⁶³Bataille, 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism'