

Propaganda & uglification



by Theodore Dalrymple

Sometimes I think (or is it feel?) that we are living in a propaganda state, not like that of North Korea, of course, in which the source of a univocal doctrine is clear and unmistakable, but one in which we are constantly under bombardment by an opinion-forming class that wants to make us believe, or be enthusiastic about, something to which we were previously indifferent or even hostile. There is no identifiable single source of the propaganda, and yet there seems also to be coordination: for how else to explain its sudden ubiquity? It is more Kafka than Orwell.

For example, quite recently there has been a concerted attempt to persuade the European public that women's football (soccer) is interesting and exciting. The newspapers and online publications suddenly carry stories about it, with pictures, reports, profiles, and the like, whereas, shortly before, most

people were only vaguely aware that women even played football.

No one can object to their doing so, of course, but the fact remains that they are not very good at it, at least not by comparison with men. They may be good—but with for women always appended. It is not the fault of women that they are not very good at football, any more than it is the fault of fish that they are illiterate, but the fact that everyone pretends not to notice it and dares not say it, at least in public, is surely a little sinister. A man of seventy may still play a good game of tennis, but it is always for his age: one wouldn't expect him to win Wimbledon, nor would one expect excited, breathless reports on an over-seventies' tennis tournament. The sudden interest in women's football thus has a bogus feel about it, like the simulated enthusiasm of a crowd for the dictator in a communist state.

Many examples of the phenomenon could be given. Ever since I first noticed the ascent of tattooing up the social scale, now a quarter century ago, I have collected books about it in desultory fashion, all of them laudatory of so-called body art. Over the years, as an ever-higher percentage of the population mutilates itself in this way, I have had to change my interpretation of the phenomenon. At first, I thought it was a typical example of intellectual and moral preening, as well as of condescension towards the insulted and injured—the torn jeans of the skin, as it were. Not so very long ago, it was predominantly the marginalized—prisoners and the like—who were tattooed. Therefore, those who were not themselves marginalized sought to identify themselves with those who were, imitation supposedly being the highest form of empathy, while hypocritically enjoying the advantages of non-marginalization.

Now that a third of adults in America are tattooed, this can no longer be the explanation, if it ever was. The desire for individuation and self-expression is the commonly accepted

explanation, even by those who see tattooing as a triumphant advance in human freedom. At last, people are free to express themselves! At last, they can display to the world their innermost thoughts! At last, they can actually be themselves! All this is frequently, and indeed repeatedly, intoned by the intellectual fellow travelers of the fashion for tattoos, very rarely it being noted that such individuation and self-expression—if that is what it is—is indicative of tragedy, not liberation. The almost universal intellectual laudation of the phenomenon demonstrates (to my mind) the sheeplike nature of modern intellectual life, intellectuals being followers rather than the leaders they suppose themselves to be. A hundred million Americans can't be wrong, or at any rate it would not be prudent to say so; praise be, then, to tattoos!

That professional tattooists have undoubtedly become highly skilled is everywhere taken as proof that they are artists, though skill is not the same as art; indeed, skill exercised for a worthless end is morally worse than incompetence. If I were a theist, which I am not, I would even say that skill exercised in this way is an insult to God's freely given gift. As it is, it simply appalls me.

At any rate, there seems to have been a concerted attempt to persuade us that what not long ago would have been considered degradation is actually human advance. And, incidentally, what goes for tattooing also goes for the graffiti that so disfigure urban spaces. (The two aesthetic sensibilities, those of tattooing and of modern urban graffiti, seem to me to have at least a family resemblance.) The many books about the phenomenon of tagging also consider it a liberation and a form of art, as if everywhere had suddenly become Renaissance Florence. Again, one detects a certain cowardice, or at least insincerity, in this.

But one attempt to persuade us of the great value of the hideous, the dysfunctional, and the bad that has particularly exercised me of late is a seemingly concerted effort by

architects and architectural critics to persuade the public that the architectural style known as brutalism has merit and is not what it appears to most people to have been: a self-evidently destructive, ugly, inhuman aberration in the history of architecture.

As many know, brutalism derives its name from *béton brut*, the French name for raw concrete, and not from brutality, though it is difficult to think of any architectural style more brutal than the brutalism. If you asked people to design deliberately brutal architecture, brutalism is what you would get.

I have a small library of picture books on the subject, all of them laudatory, though to most people the photographs in them would be sufficient evidence of the aesthetic catastrophe that brutalism inflicted on cities and their inhabitants everywhere it was tried. One is inclined to say, on looking at the photographs, *res ipsa loquitur*, but evidently this is not so. There is nothing so obvious that it cannot be denied.

My attitude to brutalism is like my attitude to snakes: I am horrified but fascinated. In the case of brutalism, the questions that run through my mind like a refrain are: How was this ever possible? Who allowed it and why? What cultural, social, educational, and psychological pathology accounts for it? When people claim to approve of it, even to love it, what is going through their minds? Do they see with their eyes, or through the lens of some bizarre and gimcrack abstractions?

Recently, like a masochist, I bought two picture books, *Brutalist Paris* and *Brutalist Italy*, by Nigel Green and Robin Wilson, and Roberto Conte and Stefano Parego, respectively, in part because I could scarcely believe my eyes.¹ The former had a text of some length, the latter only three pages, but, as one has come to expect from the writing of architects or architectural critics (Wilson is an architectural historian at a British school of architecture),

length does not equate to greater enlightenment. The words are like a shifting fog through which meaning may occasionally be glimpsed, only to disappear again soon after.

What is particularly painful about these books, but also exceptionally instructive, is that both Paris and Italy are heirs to what may be the greatest architectural heritage in the world. The contrast, then—the complete absence of taste and judgment—that these books illustrate beyond all possible refutation, when just around the corner, so to speak, there is a treasury of architectural genius, is all the more stark and terrible. One feels that this is not just architectural, but civilizational, collapse.

Yet the books are designed to impress and convert, or to appeal to “a new appetite for architectural form and photographic imagery,” as well as “for urban adventure.” What kind of urban adventure is suggested by Wilson’s account of his return to a housing project two years after he had first visited it:

I discovered Cité Rateau transformed by an obtrusive regime of gated access, which almost totally prevents the porosity of circulation from the street previously enjoyed. Moreover, some of the most complex sections of the inner parts of the undercroft are now entirely concealed by new, featureless, double-height walls.

One can almost smell emanating from the photographs the urine that must impregnate many of the ground-floor concrete walls, a kind of urological commentary on the efforts of the brutalist architects, who as often as not considered themselves as much constructors of a new world order as of mere buildings.

One could perhaps excuse the first architects who used raw concrete as an external material for buildings because the way in which it would deteriorate might not have been appreciated

in advance of experience. But the deterioration was very rapid and indeed often set in before the building was finished. Experience made no difference to their practice, however: it is difficult not to conclude that the sheer inhuman ugliness of what resulted was not to be eschewed but embraced. It should have soon been obvious that trying to make a beautiful building from concrete was like trying to concoct a delicious dish from feces.



But beauty could not possibly have been one of the architects' desiderata. The photograph of the building that graces (if that is quite the word) the cover of Brutalist Italy, the Casa del Portuale in Naples, is almost comically dreadful: it would be funny, if only it did not actually exist. Naturally, its concrete is stained in the characteristic way of that material, as if sewage were seeping through it, but the jagged and inharmonious overall design—with unnecessary angles, curves, and juxtapositions—is redolent of psychosis. The whole acts upon the retina like a visual scouring pad. It is the

worst among equals; it could, however, serve as a model for architects in training if they were given the task to design something yet worse, something uglier: that would take real imagination. Indeed, I rather doubt that it could be done.

Yet I repeat: these books do not set out to appall but to attract. I think part of the attraction (for those attracted) is the obvious connection of this architecture to totalitarianism, which many intellectuals long for, whether they admit it openly or not. In one of his lucid passages, Wilson tells us of brutalism:

Another vital part of the equation that contributed to the level of endeavour, innovation, and critique within the architecture of the period was the involvement of a potent, leftist politics in the urbanism of the 1960s and '70s, and, indeed, the monetary power of the French Communist Party. Most importantly, this translated into local governance in the form of communist-led departments and municipalities of outer Paris . . . which reached a peak of communist control in the mid 1970s. . . . Many of the architects employed were themselves communist party members.

Wilson also mentions, without apparent discomfort or embarrassment, that some of the French architects were impressed and influenced by the Atlantic Wall, concrete blockhouses and bunkers constructed by the Nazis to keep the Allies out.

Si monumentum requiris, circumspice—as you take the drive from Charles de Gaulle Airport into the City of Light. There may be uglier townscapes in the world, but not many.

Wilson's commentary mentions aesthetics but never beauty. Of course, we get the usual praise of the material and the style as "honest"—in contradistinction to the mendacity of the Sainte-Chapelle, I suppose. We also get stuff like the following:

Within a purely architectural pursuit of the “as-found,” the apprehension and expression of the conditions of the building site, the moment of assembly is paramount: that is, the creation of a material expression at the intersection of labour and the medium of construction.

Verbiage is designed to disguise the most patent truth, namely that the only way to improve these buildings is by demolition:

It would seem that, in this post-war era, achieving the effect of a clear separation from the ground is no longer symbolically viable, but that now a new symbolic activation of the ground plane takes hold. In contrast to the cellular accommodation block above, the irregular vessel of communal space is a searching exploratory form, as if uncertain of its own limits.

The utter indifference, even outright hostility, to beauty is endemic in modern architectural criticism. Here is Oliver Wainwright, The Guardian’s influential architecture and design critic, on the late Sir Roger Scruton’s campaign to restore beauty as an important quality of architecture:

the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission . . . headed up by the late aesthetic philosopher Roger Scruton . . . focuses on the outward appearance of buildings at the expense of much more crucial issues. Our mental and physical health depends less on being titillated by the design of a façade than by being able to live and work in adequately sized spaces with decent ceiling heights, ample daylight, good ventilation and thermal insulation.

Here technocracy finds its purest voice: it knows what is good for us, and if we don’t get what we like, we must learn to like what we get. Such is the function of architectural criticism, and of the propaganda state in which we now live.

¹ *Brutalist Paris: Post-War Brutalist Architecture in Paris and*

Environs, by Nigel Greene and Robin Wilson; Blue Crow Media, 192 pages, \$30. *Brutalist Italy: Concrete Architecture from the Alps to the Mediterranean*, by Roberto Conte and Stefano Parego; fuel Publishing, 199 pages, \$34.95.

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