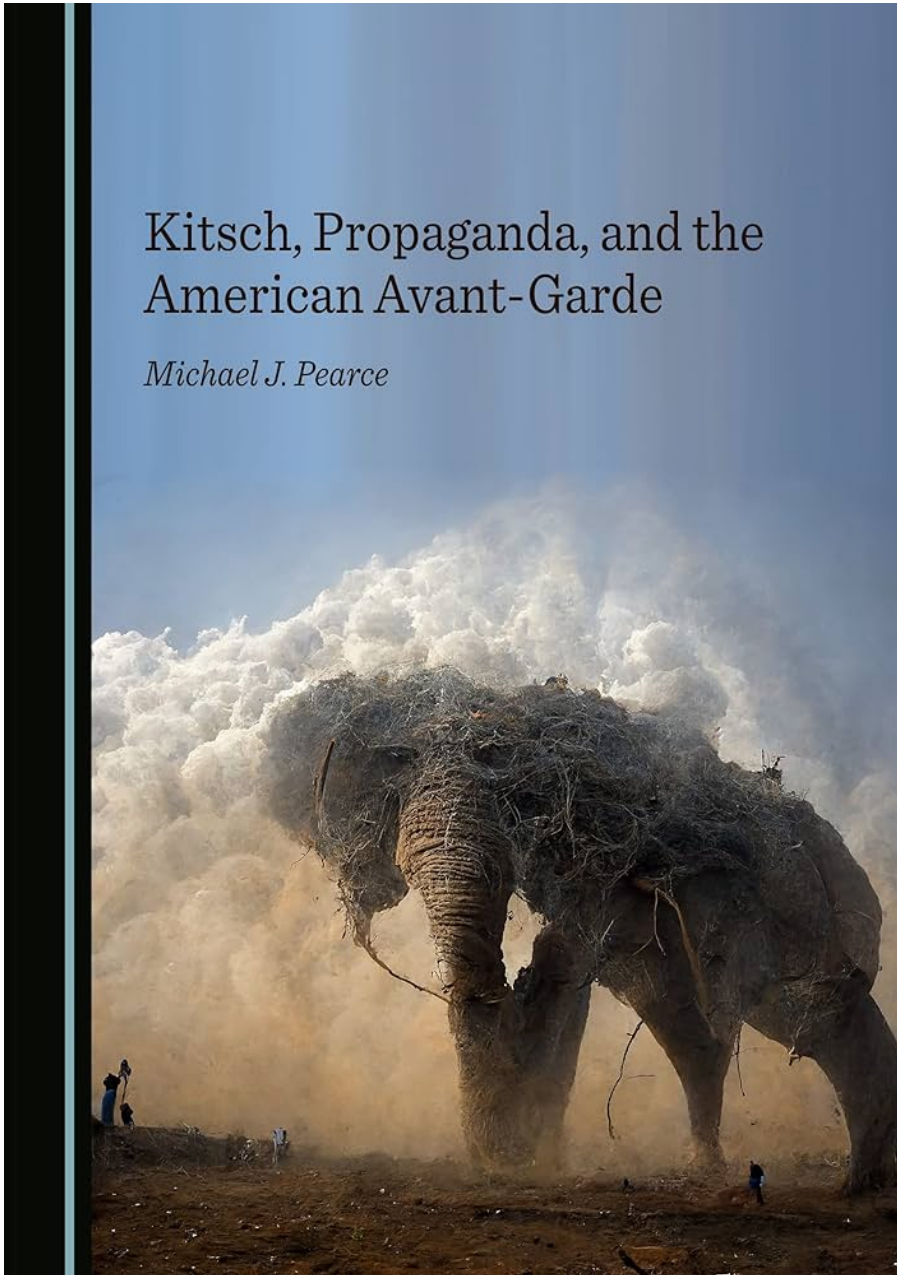


The elephant in the avant-garde

Kitsch, Propaganda, and the
American Avant-Garde

Michael J. Pearce



by James Stevens Curl

"Kitsch" means rubbishy pretentious trash – anything that is shoddy, tawdry, mawkishly sentimental and in bad taste. When applied to any of the arts, it suggests false, superficial, spurious imitation of real artistic creations. It implies that *Kitsch* art apes something without any real understanding or depth whilst at the same time trying to please, soothe and

reassurance. It has also been described as the cultural revenge of the proletariat, identified as an aspect of "camp" taste that values the outrageously hideous for its own sake. I have a certain sympathy for the latter view, which strikes me as rather more accurate.

In this important book, Michael J. Pearce, who is Professor of Art at California Lutheran University, dissects the weaponising of art as propaganda. He ranges from its extremely violent origins in revolutionary France, to the extraordinary adoption of supposedly avant-garde art by the United States of America to counter the totalitarian powers of National Socialist Germany and the Stalinist Soviet Union.

Any clear-sighted person who studies the pictorial propaganda produced under the ægis of the Nazis (posters, film, sculpture, postage-stamps, etc.) must concede that it was remarkably effective. It was drawing on traditionalist art linked to nature, the family and the homeland, but rejecting so-called "Modern Art", which the NSDAP associated with large cities, internationalism and decadence. In painting, the "new realistic tendency" rendered every detail with exactness. It celebrated ordinary people, often farming families in domestic settings: harvesting, ploughing, peasant women wearing regional costumes in church. It also featured idealised female beauty, as in the oils of the "Master of the Curly Pubic Hair", Adolf Ziegler (1892–1959). Ivo Saliger (1894–1987) was equally expert in that popular field, and there was plenty of heroic stuff idealising soldiers, sailors, airmen and, of course, Nazi Party activists, such as those uniformed members of the *Sturmabteilung*.

In 1937 two big exhibitions were held in Munich. One was concerned with "degenerate Art". It featured expressionist, abstract, cubist, surrealist, etc. work, so that the public could compare it with the finely crafted representational paintings on show at the Great German Art Exhibition in the newly erected House of German Art, designed by Paul Ludwig

Troost (1879–1934). In 1934 Professor Hans Adolf Bühler (1877–1951, no mean painter himself) criticised the “art” promoted by academies and museums, because it was above the heads of lay people, who did not understand it or like it. It was art for a select few – the art “intellectual and the art market”. To judge from the huge numbers of reproductions of Nazi-approved art purchased by the public, he had a point.

Powerful imagery was also employed in the Soviet Union to promote ideology, to celebrate the Party and Stalin, and in fact function as propaganda. Again, it was representational, often heroic, and it made an impact on ordinary people, who did not need to have obscure abstractions explained to them. What became known as “social realism” was common to both totalitarian states. In architecture, too, a stripped, elemental classicism was used to inform civic and official architecture. Meanwhile factories and other utilitarian structures were made of mass-produced components. They were to all intents and purposes “modernist”, devoid of any traditional architectural styling.

Curiously, in the democracies things were not that different. A stripped Classicism was also apparent in civic and official buildings, whilst factories, etc., were utilitarian “modernist”. What happened to turn everything on its head?

In 1939 the Nazi-Soviet Pact and the dismemberment of Poland caused more than a few flutterings in the artistic dovecotes. Up to then, officially sponsored social realist murals in American official buildings were (in terms of content and compositional-representational techniques) not all that different from similar works carried out under totalitarian régimes. Something had to give.

There were attempts to promote the idea of a true American art not indebted to Europe. Spurious links between the art of Native Americans and the crude art of untutored American primitivism were artificially manufactured. I have seen

wonderful exhibitions of Native American design in Dumbarton Oaks, and I can state categorically that any alleged connections between that and American limners entirely indebted to the Western traditions are complete fantasy. It is a fake connection for which gurus like Alfred Hamilton Barr (1902–81) and the functionaries of the Museum of Modern Art in New York can be held responsible. Unsurprisingly, Native Americans had no interest in imitating Western art. Before the invasion of the colonising and murderous Europeans, indigenous decorative arts were untouched by the traditions of Europe. The people who created them had no wish to participate in any supposed cultural narratives of the West. Attempts by Barr & Co. to co-opt Native American art in the advancement of their flimsy ideology were at worst cultural appropriation, at best self-righteous condescension.

The dismemberment of Poland led to a curious state of affairs in the USA. The American avant-garde had already levered Germans such as Walter Gropius (1883–1969) and Ludwig Miës van der Rohe (1886–1969) into positions where they could impose modernist tyranny on American architectural education (part of a process Sibyl Moholy-Nagy [1903–71] perceptively dubbed “Hitler’s Revenge”). Now it began to oppose Nazi and Soviet representational art, casting it as the *Kitsch* art of the Enemy, so “individualist” abstract modern art was set up as spuriously symbolic of Western “democratic” freedom.

In 1939 President Roosevelt publicly endorsed the Museum of Modern Art. Very soon that institution became the temple and arbiter of modernism, the new artistic religion of the USA. It held that representational art was the enemy of the new, true, democratic, honest, fresh, exciting, fashionable, really American *avant-garde*. Something similar happened with the modern movement in architecture. Nikolaus Pevsner (1902–83), in his ominously titled and pernicious 1936 book *Pioneers of the Modern Movement from William Morris to Walter Gropius*, had hailed modern architecture approvingly as “totalitarian”

because it was a “genuine style as opposed to a passing fashion”. It was now to destroy the great *Beaux-Arts* trajectory that had been the glory of American architecture. Pevsner naturally attempted to give modernism respectable antecedents by claiming that Arts-and-Crafts architects and artists were “pioneers” of the Modern Movement, just as MoMA endeavoured to invent connections with aspects of an American past. In fact Modernism both claimed and was a complete severance and brutal rupture with everything that had gone before, a ditching of millennia of development, trial and error, culture, the lot.

Roosevelt placed American culture in the hands of the Museum of Modern Art and officially endorsed Modernism, stating his intention to have it disseminated throughout the nation. He also claimed that American artists would be free, but in fact they were free only so long as they were true to the agenda of the Museum of Modern Art. *Avant-garde* had been embraced by a small coterie of the rich *élite*. Roosevelt seems to have endorsed it in public out of political expediency, but the resulting art policy made *avant-garde* a tool of the establishment, in service to the state, just as Nazi idealism served Germany, and Stalin-approved Socialist Realism served the USSR.

Aufruf der Kulturschaffenden

Berlin, 17. August.

Die unterzeichneten Persönlichkeiten richten folgenden Aufruf an die Öffentlichkeit:

Volksgenossen, Freunde!

Wir haben einen der Größten deutscher Geschichte zu Grabe geleitet. An seinem Sarge sprach der junge Führer des Reiches für uns alle, und legte Bekenntnis ab für sich und den Zukunftswillen der Nation.

Wort und Leben setzte er zum Pfand für die Wiederaufrichtung unseres Volkes, das in Einheit und Ehre leben und Bürge des Friedens sein will, der die Völker verbindet. Wir glauben an diesen Führer, der unsern heißen Wunsch nach Eintracht erfüllt hat.

Wir vertrauen seinem Werk, das Hingabe fordert jenseits aller kittelnden Vernünftelei, wir setzen unsere Hoffnung auf den Mann, der über Mensch und Dinge hinaus in Gottes Vorsehung gläubig ist.

Weil der Dichter und Künstler nur in gleicher Treue zum Volk zu schaffen vermag, und weil er von der gleichen und tiefsten Überzeugung kündigt, daß das heiligste Recht der Völker in der eigenen Schicksalsbestimmung besteht, gehören wir zu des Führers Gefolgschaft.

Wir fordern nichts anderes für uns, als was wir anderen Völkern ohne Vorbehalte zugehen, wir müssen es für dieses Volk, das deutsche Volk, fordern, weil seine Einheit, Freiheit und Ehre unser aller Not und Wille ist.

Der Führer hat uns wiederum aufgefordert, in Vertrauen und Treue zu ihm zu stehen. Niemand von uns wird fehlen, wenn es gilt, das zu bekunden.

Werner Beumelburg, Ernst Barlach, Rudolf G. Binding, Hans Friedrich Blund, Verleger Alfred Bruckmann, Richard Curinger, Professor Emil Jahrenkamp, Erich Jegerabend, Gustav

Frenssen, Wilhelm Furtwängler, Professor Dr. Eberhard Hanffstaengl, Gustav Havemann, Erich Hedel, Professor Eugen Hönig, Heinz Ihler, Hanns Johst, Georg Kolbe, Erwin Kolbenheyer, Werner Krauß, Franz Lent, Heinrich Lersch, Professor Karl Lörcher, Architekt Walter March, Agnes Miegel, Börries Freiherr von Münch-

hausen, Emil Nolde, Paul Pfund, Hans Pfitzner, Professor Dr. Wilhelm Pinder, Mies van der Rohe, Professor Dr. h. c. Paul Schulze-Naumburg, Hermann Stehr, Richard Strauß, Joseph Thoraf, Generalintendant Heinz Tietjen, Oberbürgermeister Dr. Weidemann, Arnold Weinmüller.

Call by Cultural Leaders of Germany urging everyone to vote Hitler into a position of supreme power, published in the Nazi Party newspaper, *Völkischer Beobachter* of 18 August 1934. The name of Mies van der Rohe (minus the diæresis over the e of Mies he had given himself in the 1920s to hide the unpleasant associations with what is rotten, seedy, poor, wretched, crummy and out of sorts which Mies conjures up in German, rather than the cuddly, pussy-cat, soothing sound it suggests in English) appears in lines 6 and 5 up from the bottom. On 19 August 1934 Hitler set Germany on its path to mass-murder, war, ruin, and disgrace.

Pearce has researched his sources very thoroughly, but he makes some very curious errors. He gets the successor of the Marxist Hannes Meyer (1889–1954) as Director of the Dessau *Bauhaus* wrong: Meyer was actually followed by Miës van der Rohe, who eventually moved that establishment to Berlin-Steglitz in 1932. It was he, rather than Hitler, who closed it down as part of his attempts to ingratiate himself with the new government of Germany. In 1934 Miës van der Rohe had added his signature to a proclamation by German cultural leaders urging voters to support Hitler. It was published in the Nazi newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter* on 18 August; the following day Hitler was given absolute control of the Third Reich. All that was swept under the carpet by Modernist apologists. Tradition and classicism began to be falsely associated with Naziism, whilst the totalitarianism of modernism and the Nazi affiliations of people like Miës van der Rohe were conveniently hidden. Truth was inverted, and a vast, shoddy construct of bogus “history” was created.

The index is infuriatingly inadequate, but the most problematic aspect of this book is that when discussing art and specific exemplars, there should be illustrations for purposes of information and clarity. There is not one illustration in this tome. That is a very serious omission, one that is not only puzzling, but hard to forgive.

Nevertheless, this volume contains much that is both true and disturbing. It should be read by everyone as a corrective to the downright lies that have been spread about the supposedly “democratic” nature of Modernism. As Pevsner very clearly stated, whilst approving of it, the essence of modernism was totalitarian. It still is just that.

When governments use acolytes of the self-appointed *avant-garde* as willing tools of the state, we should all be afraid – very, very afraid, too. That is the elephant in the *avant-garde* landscape, to which the author of this erudite book refers.

First published in [The Critic](#).