A Threat to Decency: “Degenerate Art” in Nazi Germany

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At the end of the 19th century, as industrialization became widespread and the new science was making discoveries in genetics, evolution, and psychology, what we now know as modern art was beginning to emerge. The various modern art movements not only challenged the prevailing artistic styles of the times, they also began to question the meaning and purpose of art itself. From impressionism to surrealism to the Ready-Made movement, modern art challenged artists and observers alike to expand and redefine their notions of art. Germany in the early 20th century had a large share of artists participating in the various modern art movements, particularly expressionism. In addition, German museums were very much interested in obtaining modern pieces for their collections. However, Adolf Hitler’s acquisition of power in Germany in 1933 led not only to the persecution of particular groups of people, but also to what amounted to an all out war on culture, specifically targeting the “modern”. Most people are familiar with the book burnings of the 1930’s, but a lesser known event, the Degenerate Art exhibition, demonstrates the extent to which Hitler opposed what he saw as the infiltration of “foreign” and “elitist” ideas in German art and culture. This exhibition aimed not only at creating a new image of the Reich and legitimizing its power; it sought to restore the complacency necessary for the rise of a totalitarian state.

As Europeans colonized the rest of the world between the 15th and 19th centuries, they encountered cultures and civilizations distinctly different from their own. These cultures were usually seen as “primitive,” “barbaric,” or “savage.” They tended to be either romanticized or demonized by the Europeans, but regardless of how these foreign cultures were portrayed, there was an unquestionable fascination with them. Many people boarded ships and traveled to the dark places of the world, either out of curiosity or as a matter of employment and wrote about what they saw and experienced, Mark Twain and Joseph Conrad being two prime examples. For those who were unable or disinclined to travel, anthropological and cultural museums opened, displaying the works of African, Oceanic, and American natives and exposing the general population to these novel societies. In addition to cultural artifacts, humans, too, were brought to be displayed in “human zoos,” a phenomenon that became quite popular between 1870 and WWII. The World’s Fair of 1889 in Paris had as its main exhibit a “Negro Village,” populated by 400 indigenous people.  

Over time, with the development of theories about genetics, evolution, psychology, and the rise of modern science in general, the members of these non-European cultures acquired the labels of “animals,” “degenerates,” and “sub-humans,” among others. In 1866, Gregor Mendel published his work on genetic experiments with pea plants\(^2\); in 1871, Charles Darwin published his *The Origin of the Species*; and in 1899, Sigmund Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in which he discussed the unconscious and how to access it through dreams. As a result of these works and those of many others, our understanding of humanity was not only forever changed, but imperialism, colonization, slavery, and discrimination were provided with a scientific basis. Rich, white Europeans were now not only socially and culturally superior; they were also genetically and psychologically superior— their superiority and repression of others was scientifically justified. As a result, the early 20\(^{th}\) century saw the rise of Social Darwinism and the eugenics movement, an orchestrated effort to rid the world of the “unfit,” first in the United States and then, more famously, in Nazi Germany. It was on these ideas of genetically and psychologically superior and inferior races that the Nazis based their political program, and which they used to justify the displacement and murder of millions of people. The modern era was forever transformed by 19\(^{th}\) and early 20\(^{th}\) century scientific discovery, although those discoveries were in many ways mistaken or misunderstood. However, these discoveries also had an enormous influence on the rise of modern art.

Rather than subhuman savages that needed to be tamed or civilized, many artists saw in these “primitive” peoples something quite different: a return to nature, an escape from the madness of modernization, or a pure, untainted, innocent existence free of the constraints of society. It is not surprising that many of them turned to these “savages” for inspiration. One way, of course, is the taking up of “primitive” subject matter in art— Gauguin, Van Gogh, Picasso, and others were highly influenced by non-European cultures, and we can see the results of this in much of their work. Gauguin abandoned his job and family in France to live among the natives of Tahiti, while Picasso and others used the images of African art and masks in many of their works. Other artists, such as the Expressionists, took up “the primitive” in quite a different way. They saw their work as an opportunity to express their innermost thoughts, emotions, and instincts, all of the things that we tend to cover over with the veneer of civilization. Art was a vehicle for getting back in touch with the parts of the self that were repressed for the sake of propriety, and this was often done through utilizing “savage” or “primitive” imagery. To many, this type of art was dangerous and threatening.

Hitler and the artists of the Third Reich also looked to the past for inspiration. While the Expressionists and other modern artists took the ancient, primitive, foreign, and inexplicable as their models— images of the noble savages of the Americas and Africa who were not yet inhibited by the bonds

of society, man in a more “natural” or “primitive” state—the Nazis looked back to the reason, order, and civility of the Greeks.

The National Socialist standards for art were based upon the idealized figures and sentimental landscapes that had informed nineteenth-century popular taste and upon the neoclassical themes that were Adolf Hitler’s favorites. National Socialism annexed neoromantic and neoclassical art, defining it as racially pure, an art that could easily be understood and whose depictions of men and women exemplified the Germanic race.³

Although this turn to the Classical past was partially because of Hitler’s racial theories and his belief that the Aryan race descended from them, there is another, very powerful, reason for turning to Classical principles: it provided stability and order. The early 20th century is known as the “Age of Anxiety”—life for everyone was changing quickly and drastically as a result of industrialization, colonization, two world wars, the Russian Revolution, the Depression, and major advances in science, to name but a few factors. More and more was becoming possible, but at the same people were forced to completely restructure not only their everyday lives, but also their political, religious, moral, social, and cultural outlooks. As a result, many felt that the world was barely holding together, that life threatened to spin out of control with this modern technology, and that the solid, accepted moral and social standards were being not merely chipped away, but totally annihilated. This was arguably most deeply felt in Germany, where, between the two World Wars, inflation reached ridiculous heights (one dollar equaled 4.2 billion Marks) and unemployment hit around 43%. In order to counter this threat of social and political disintegration, Adolf Hitler sought to restore “respectability” to German culture—“Respectability ensured security, order, and the maintenance of values, taming the chaos that seemed always to threaten society; it reflected people’s attitudes toward themselves and toward all that was ‘different.’”⁴ It was believed that it was the foreign element that was bringing Germany to its knees, that had caused it to lose WWI, that had caused the depression and unemployment and shortages, and it was the foreign element, the exotic and the strange, that needed to be eradicated in order for Germany to regain her honor and health. Modern art was exactly this.

The Nazis fed off of this insecurity and fear of the post-WWI Weimar period in order to further their political aims; this seemed to be the primary target of their propaganda. Not only did they attack the perceived causes of the German depression, but they also provided a new, easily comprehended focus to which the people of Germany might turn. They did all of this to a large extent through the use of art and culture. While the use of cultural products to promote political ideology is not new (think ancient Egypt,

⁴ Ibid., p. 25.
Greece, Rome, the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation, Absolutism, and practically every other place, time, and movement), few others have controlled, utilized, and destroyed them to the same extent as the National Socialists. The book burnings began in 1933, immediately after Hitler came to power, as did the architectural plans for the 
_Haus Der Deutschen Kunst_ ("House of German Art"), the confiscation of modernist pieces from German museums, and the dismissal of museum directors who collected such pieces. In addition, the 
_Reichskulturkammern_ (the German Cultural Cabinet) was formed in September, 1933 and headed up by Joseph Goebbels. This Cabinet was divided into sections, each one responsible for the various aspects of a particular art—film, radio, journalism, painting and sculpture, music, literature, and theatre. As Stephanie Barron says, “What became apparent is the microscopic attention the Nazi hierarchy accorded the observation and regulation of all aspects of cultural life in the Reich.”5 The Nazis, by creating such a cabinet, revealed the extent to which cultural life was important to the political ideology and aims of the Third Reich.

It was in 1937, however, that the battle for the visual arts culminated in two competing exhibitions: on July 18, 1937, the 
_Grosse Deutsche Kunstaustellung_ (Great German Art Exhibition) opened in Munich for the first time in the 
_Haus der Deutschen Kunst_ (House of German Art), displaying the “Nazi-approved” art, and on July 19, 1937, literally across the street, the 
_Entartete Kunst_ (Degenerate Art) exhibition opened, bringing modern art in front of the public so that they might judge it with their own eyes. It is not mere coincidence that these two exhibitions opened within a day of each other, and in such close physical proximity: “By planning the opening of the Great German Art Exhibition of 1937 in Munich to coincide with a show of Degenerate Art, the National Socialists meant to underscore the triumph of ‘art in the Third Reich’ over ‘degenerate’ modernism.”6 These two exhibitions were meant to make explicit to the public the difference between “art” and “non-art,” and, perhaps more importantly, to show the public that the National Socialist regime represented order, stability, and a tie to a more moral and comprehensible past standing up to protect the people from the overwhelming chaos of the modern world. It had come in order to replace the failed Weimar Republic with a new, strong, and proud Germany. This is clearly exhibited not only by the contents of each show, but also through the way in which each show was presented.

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The *Grosse Deutsche Kunstaustellung* consisted of approximately 600 works which, although initially judged in an open competition by artists Adolf Ziegler, Arno Breker, and Karl Albiker, were to a large extent chosen by Hitler himself.\(^7\) Köln critic Dr. Wilhelm Späl describes the exhibition as follows:

A walk through the exhibition proved that the principles of clarity, truth, and professionalism determined the selection..... The heroic element stands out. The worker, the farmer, the soldier are the themes..... Heroic subjects dominate over sentimental ones..... The experiences of the Great War, the German landscape, the German man at work, peasant life..... The life of the State with its personalities and developments. These are the new subjects, they demand new expressions and styles..... In accordance with the subject, the style of most of the works is clear, strong, and full of character..... there is a whiff of greatness everywhere. Healthy, fresh, and optimistic artists are showing their work with manifold individuality. A new era of art has begun.\(^8\)

The pieces were chosen for their realistic style and their representation of the Nazi ideals of hard work, the virtues of peasant life and family life, the superiority of the Aryan race, and the honor of war. They were straightforward and easily comprehended; the message of each was clear. These works, when viewed, clearly represented something- both an object and an ideal- thus providing the public with opportunity for “…contemplation, empathy, and spiritual edification”\(^9\) rather than “an active participation from the observer.”\(^10\) They were not confusing or alienating but orderly and respectable. Even the arrangement of the exhibition promoted these ideas: the building itself was monumental in size and heavily Classical in style; the exhibition halls wide and spacious; the pieces carefully hung or displayed in order that they might be individually contemplated and appreciated. These were things that were familiar to the masses, images and ideas and experiences that they could understand and that provided a point of stability to which they could cling—and this was exactly what Hitler intended. While the stated purpose of the exhibition was to show the people what true art was, the underlying purpose was one of political manipulation-

…the ‘conflict’ [between art of the Third Reich and “degenerate” art] had been consciously planned and instigated as a technical measure toward consolidating power. The negation of modern art was intended as a means of defaming the Weimar Republic associated with it. At the same time, the image of the Third Reich was built up as a positive contrast. The regime

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\(^8\) Dr. Wilhelm Späl, *Grosse Deutsche Kunstaustellung 1937*, *Kölnerische Volkszeitung*, July 22nd, 1937.


had been able to capitalize on the fact that modern art was by no means integrated into the total society.\textsuperscript{11}

The Great German Art Exhibition provided a means of furthering Nazi ideology and solidifying its power base through giving the people what they desperately craved—a scapegoat and a new vision that was actually based on old, familiar ideas. However, a truer picture of Hitler’s intentions is drawn through a consideration of the Degenerate Art exhibition in contrast to the Great German Art Exhibition.

The Degenerate Art exhibition opened on July 19, 1937, one day after and directly across the street from the Great German Art Exhibition. Modern art had been given the label of “degenerate” in contrast to the respectable and civilized art presented at the Great German Art Exhibition—modern art was the product of insane minds and a manifestation of mental illness. It pointed not just to regression, immaturity, or unbridled instinct as seen in its references to the “primitive,” but to actual illness. The term “degenerate” had begun to be applied not just to plants and animals, as Darwin had used it, but to humans and their products as well—

*Degeneration* was, in its modern sense, a medical term used during the second half of the nineteenth century to identify the condition of those who had departed from the ‘normal’ because of shattered nerves, inherited abnormalities, or behavioral or sexual excess….The physician Max Nordau\textsuperscript{12} [my footnote] in his book *Entartung* (Degeneration) of 1892 did much to popularize the term in its application to modern literature and art: modern artists, whether Impressionists or Expressionists, were incapable of reproducing nature because they had lost the faculty of accurate observation and painted instead distorted and irregular forms mirroring their own nervous deformities and stunted growth.\textsuperscript{13}

This is exactly how the National Socialists sought to portray modern art: as diseased and dangerous. It threatened not only the purity of German culture, but also its very stability and existence. The exhibition was meant to be the death of modern art: “The National Socialists sought to re-write art history, to omit what we know as the avant-garde from the history of modern art.”\textsuperscript{14}

The Degenerate Art exhibition featured 650 works confiscated from thirty-two German museums\textsuperscript{15}, the works representing the major artists and styles prevalent in modern art since the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century. As was previously stated, Germany had been an avid collector of modern art in the early

\textsuperscript{12}It is perhaps somewhat ironic to note that Max Nordau was Jewish, as the term was ultimately applied to Jews.
twentieth century, so these 650 pieces were chosen from thousands that had been confiscated from German museums. Others that did not make it into the exhibition were often destroyed or sold. The Degenerate Art Exhibition, in contrast to the Great German Art Exhibition, displayed its works in a wild and haphazard manner. Paintings were crowded onto walls in small, poorly lit rooms and surrounded with graffiti. The pieces often hung crooked, and some of the abstract paintings were even hung upside down. This was pure genius on the part of the Nazis. Instead of labeling modern art as degenerate, dangerous non-art and then removing it from public sight, they placed it on display for everyone to see for themselves, and used the method of display and the statements and photographs in the program guide to influence public opinion such that the public would agree with their verdict. Then, the Nazis offered an alternative with which they knew the population would identify and which they would understand—art displaying realistically depicted hard-working, heroic types. We have only to remember the 2 Live Crew affair to realize what happens when controversial materials are made inaccessible and even illegal— they become even more sought after. Although curiosity was piqued by the exhibition (it toured for four years, and over 3 million people viewed it), the materials featured were rendered “safe” due to the fact that the audience to the exhibition was clearly directed in what its reaction towards it ought to be. It was non-art that did not deserve the respect and dignity given to true art- that displayed across the street.

What made it “non-art”? How were the artists and pieces, labeled “Jewish,” “Bolshevist,” “insane,” and “degenerate,” connected? August Macke, Ernst Ludwig-Kirchner, Wassily Kandinsky, Franz Marc, Oskar Kokoschka, Otto Dix, Marc Chagall, Max Beckmann; all of these artists and many others were included and condemned. Not all of these artists were Bolshevists or political opponents of the Nazi regime; not all of these artists were Jewish (in fact, only six out of the 120 artists in the exhibition were actually Jewish); one artist, Emil Nolde, was in fact a long-standing and committed member of the Nazi party (and, ironically, also had the greatest number of pieces in the show) and others explicitly rooted their style and ideology in the German artistic past (groups such as Die Brücke, who turned to the art of the German Middle Ages and Romanticism). Yet, Adolf Hitler saw such art as “foreign” and “elitist,” as most people found it confusing and incomprehensible—“Movements such as Expressionism, Cubism, and Dada were often viewed as intellectual, elitist, and foreign by the demoralized nation and linked to the economic collapse, which was blamed on a supposed international conspiracy of Communists and Jews.”

Berthold Hinz, in his *Art in the Third Reich*, states, “The constantly recurring labels of ‘degenerate,’ ‘Jewish,’ and ‘culturally Bolshevist’ do not identify qualities that are evident in the paintings or that can be read into them. They denote nothing more than a political...

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position.”

So what tied these artists and their works together, if not political affiliation, religious or racial categories, nationality, or artistic movement? Nothing, other than their categorization as “modern.” None of the artists in the Degenerate Art exhibition portrayed their subject matter as they “truly” appeared, but rather sought to bring personal perception and individual experience to bear in their portrayals. Distorted figures, bright bold colors, inconsistent perspective, grotesque facial expressions; these were in direct contrast to the calm stoicism of the Nazi-approved art being shown across the street and were a direct threat to Germany’s well-being. Just as the Great German Art Exhibition had a dual purpose--to show the people what true art looked like and to further the political ideology of the National Socialists--the Degenerate Art exhibition also had a dual purpose—to expose the masses to “non-art,” but also to provide legitimacy to the Nazi regime.

How could art, and the annihilation of a particular type of it, provide political legitimacy? In one sense, modern art and its prevalence in German museums was represented as a physical manifestation of the moral decline of German society, which in turn was blamed on the Weimar Republic (which itself, of course, was said to have been run by Jews and Bolshevists). Getting rid of this type of art was one way of erasing that political past. As Hinz states, “If everyone was to see and be convinced that the National Socialist assumption of power had put an end to the defects of the Weimar State once and for all, then modern art had to disappear from the scene for good, as did Jews, gypsies, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and homosexuals as well as the political opposition…”

This was even made explicit in the program for the Degenerate Art Exhibition. One of the listed purposes of the exhibition reads as follows: “It means to give, at the outset of a new age for the German people, a firsthand survey of the gruesome last chapter of those decades of cultural decadence that preceded the great change.”

It is much easier to exorcise the past through the elimination of a physical reminder of that past.

However, in another sense, modern art, the avant-garde, wasn’t just a mere manifestation and symbol of the decadent past; it in itself was dangerous. This becomes evident when one examines the content and purposes of both the Nazi-approved and the “degenerate” art. Both Hitler and the avant-garde sought to depict reality- Hitler wanted art to match external reality, to present its subject matter in a realistic way such that its identity was clearly known and understood. The art of classical Greece was innovative in the sense that for the first time, figures are depicted realistically and naturally- one can look at Myron’s Discobulos or Polykleitos’ Spearbearer and say, “yes, that is what a man really looks like.”

The proportion of the body, the curvature of joints and muscles, the carefully and naturally posed stances;

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19 ibid., p. 62
these are not characteristic of earlier Greek works or the works of other cultures of the time. These are works that look like the things themselves, that are easily comprehended, and that promote a “healthy type.” In building up the image of his Reich, Hitler sought exactly this type of image. But these works also lie— they are highly idealized and do not show the blemishes and failings that are part of being human. Hitler also fails to acknowledge the homosexuality prevalent in ancient Greek culture, probably one of the main reasons why the male body was depicted and revered as it was by the Greeks, yet a practice publicly condemned and punished by the Nazis. “The National Socialists wanted an art that did not reveal alienation but disguised it.”

The avant-gardists, though, sought to depict inner reality— those things that lie under the surface and are covered over in order to maintain the illusion of civilized society. Peter Selz states,

Twentieth century art and esthetics are characterized by a growing disbelief in an objective reality. Emphasis has shifted from the outer world of empirical experience to the inner world that a man can test only against himself. As the subjective personality of the artist has assumed control, it has demanded, in place of the old passive contemplation, an active participation from the observer. This is perhaps the most important single factor in the development of the expressionist movement.

Selz specifically mentions the Expressionists here, but this statement can apply to most of modern art. The Impressionists were still concerned with the appearance of things in the sense that their work traced the changing effects of light on various scenes and objects. But as the Fauves with their bright, bold colors, and Van Gogh with his aggressive, highly textured brush strokes (and many others) began to break onto the art scene, we see another shift begin to occur. These artists began to manifest their inner states and individual perceptions on the canvas. “…The true and the ‘real’ must be found within ourselves, and must not submit to repression or distortion by they conditioning of institutions, social convention, tradition, education, and other sources of fallacious stereotypes.”

The observer can see, in the grotesque facial expressions, twisted limbs, and heavy black lines characteristic of his drawings, Otto Dix’s horrifying experience of World War I, while the bright colors and sensuous lines of Henri Matisse’s cutouts exhibit the tenacious drive to life and creative production still present even when he was too old and sick to paint any longer. Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque sought, in their cubistic style, to show objects in the world from multiple points of view all at once, while Marcel Duchamp’s Nude Descending a Staircase perfectly captures the graceful movement of a figure through time. In modernism, “the concept of reality thus becomes separated from that of appearance, and the resemblance of essential form

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23 *Gardner’s Art Through the Ages.* P. 1022.
to ordinary vision is no longer important. The assumption, beginning in the Renaissance, that what we see in nature should find correspondence in the forms that the artist paints, is given up, and the epic that began with Giotto and Masaccio comes to an end in the twentieth century.”

The artists of the modern period challenged our notions of objective reality by manipulating that reality in order to reveal inner emotional states and highly individualized experience, and through the removal of any recognizable object whatsoever as in the abstract works of Wassily Kandinsky (Slide 34). No longer is the purpose of art to accurately represent the objective reality that we see in nature, but rather to represent that inner, individual reality of the artist. Franz Marc sums this idea up nicely:

Art is metaphysical…it will free itself from man’s purposes and desires. We will no longer paint the forest or the horse as they please us or appear to us, but as they really are, as the forest or the horse feel themselves—their absolute being—which lives behind the appearance which we see. We will be successful in so far as we can succeed in overcoming the traditional “logic” of millennia with artistic creativity. There are art forms which are abstract, which can never be proven by human knowledge. These forms have always existed, but were always obscured by human knowledge and desire. The faith in art itself was lacking, but we shall build it: it lives on the “other side.”

Modern artists sought to represent emotion, the changing nature of reality, and what lay behind appearances; Hitler sought art and artists who would show the permanent, balanced, and orderly nature of the world, and who would provide idealized images of people, society, nature, and war. Where expressionism and cubism and the other forms of modern art were alienating and incomprehensible, the art of the Third Reich was clear and straightforward- Dr. Hans Kiener wrote in 1937, “The Leader wants the German artist to leave his solitude and to speak to the Folk. This must start with the choice of the subject. It has to be popular and comprehensible. It has to be heroic in line with the ideals of National Socialism. It has to declare its faith in the ideal of beauty of the Nordic and racially pure human being”. Where the modern artists showed human nature as emotional, ugly, sensual, sexual, animalistic, ever-changing, and forever dancing on the edge of insanity, Hitler’s artists depicted humans as noble, beautiful, chaste. Hitler drew on the fear that permeated German society (and many other societies as well) as the world changed into an increasingly unrecognizable place and provided the people with a tie to a stable (and moral) past. He provided a lifeline to millions of people drowning in modern culture. “What was at issue was art as the expression of supposedly unchanging values in a society in search of such values.

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24 Gardner’s Art Through the Ages. P. 1047.
26 Dr. Hans Kiener, Die Kunst im Dritten Reich, July/August, 1937, page 19
The modern age seemed to threaten the coherence of life itself.”

It is more than just the fear and discomfort created by the avant-garde that was threatening and dangerous, though. It goes back to Selz’s statement above, that, “As the subjective personality of the artist has assumed control, it has demanded, in place of the old passive contemplation, an active participation from the observer.” The observer is required to think. Looking at a piece that does not depict things as they really are causes the observer to ask questions, to begin to look at familiar objects and situations from new perspectives, and ultimately, to understand that “reality” is not always as it appears. This possibility was recognized by the Nazis, as is made evident by the “Decree Concerning Art Criticism,” issued November 11, 1936- “This decree forbade art as a means of public discussion and communication; art was made instead into an aid to contemplation, empathy, and spiritual edification.”

Art was no longer to provoke thought and discussion, but to provide an example and an object of moral contemplation. So in order to undermine and ultimately to exterminate such “dangerous” art and replace it with one that was more “respectable,” the Nazis staged the “Degenerate Art” exhibition.

The events and discoveries of the late 19th and early 20th centuries had vast ramifications, and it was nearly impossible for most people to integrate these so quickly into their lives and values without significant anxiety. The rise of modern art was both a cause and a product of this anxiety. As a result, people sought the familiar, the comfortable, those things that they could understand, and Hitler preyed upon this impulse in order to prevent the other possible product of so much anxiety: the rise of a new individuality. Challenge moves people either back into the familiar past, or forward into an uncertain future; which of these is the more useful option for a totalitarian leader? The Degenerate Art exhibition was specifically designed to push the public back into the welcoming arms of a more orderly past, one in which they didn’t have to think and worry, and one in which they would not be forced to face uncomfortable truths. While a new image of the Reich and the legitimation of power were two main goals of the Nazi war on modern art, another was simply that of closing people’s minds to anything that might cause them discontent.

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