Photography in the Third Reich
Art, Physiognomy and Propaganda

Edited by Christopher Webster

This lucid and comprehensive collection of essays by an international group of scholars constitutes a photo-historical survey of select photographers who embraced National Socialism during the Third Reich. These photographers developed and implemented physiognomic and ethnographic photography, and, through a Selbstgleichschaltung (a self-coordination with the regime), continued to practice as photographers throughout the twelve years of the Third Reich. The volume explores, through photographic reproductions and accompanying analysis, diverse aspects of photography during the Third Reich, ranging from the influence of Modernism, the qualitative effect of propaganda photography, and the utilization of technology such as colour film, to the photograph as ideological metaphor. With an emphasis on the idealised representation of the German body and the role of physiognomy within this representation, the book examines how select photographers created and developed a visual myth of the 'master race' and its antitheses under the auspices of the National Socialist state.

Photography in the Third Reich approaches its historical source photographs as material culture, examining their production, construction and proliferation. This detailed and informative text will be a valuable resource not only to historians studying the Third Reich, but to scholars and students of film, history of art, politics, media studies, cultural studies and holocaust studies. As with all Open Book publications, this entire book is available to read for free on the publisher's website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary digital material, can also be found at www.openbookpublishers.com.
Most scholars will recall Walter Benjamin’s observation that fascism is defined by the ‘aestheticization of politics’. What fewer remember is that Benjamin first floated this argument in a Weimar-era book review. The review dealt with a collection of essays titled War and Warrior, which were edited by the well-known nationalist writer, Ernst Jünger. ‘The inner connection which lies at the basis of the essays collected in this volume’, Jünger explained, ‘is that of German nationalism’, a nationalism ‘that has lost its connection to both the idealism of our grandfathers and the rationalism of our fathers’ and sought ‘that substance, that layer of an absolute reality of which ideas as well as rational deductions are mere expressions’. ‘This stance is thus also a symbolic one’, Jünger continued, ‘insofar as it comprehends every act, every thought and every feeling as the symbol of a unified and unchangeable being which cannot escape its own inherent laws’. No wonder that Benjamin titled his review of Jünger’s collection, ‘Theories of German Fascism’.¹ For Jünger had articulated well, already three years before Hitler’s rise to power, the relationship between art, myth, and politics in radical nationalist thinking. It was a relationship that sought to escape the realm of empiricism by symbolically uniting the racial and the metaphysical in order to reveal that ‘layer of absolute reality’ that ‘rational deductions’ could never suffice to express.

The essays in this volume work to uncover this ‘layer of absolute reality’ in the realm of National Socialist photography, namely ‘the stylised representation of the body as constituent parts of the

Volksgemeinschaft’. More specifically, these essays trace the Third Reich’s creation of a ‘visual myth of the “master race”’ through the use of physiognomy — the science of judging character through facial features and other ‘racial’ characteristics. Although its theoretical premises were not explicitly supernatural, physiognomy belongs epistemologically to other ‘border’ or ‘fringe’ sciences (Grenzwissenschaften) popular in interwar Germany and Austria. These faith-based, supernaturally-inspired sciences included astrology, radiesthesia (‘pendulum dowsing’), characterology, graphology, cosmobiology, and biodynamic agriculture — together constituting an important element of what I call the ‘Nazi supernatural imaginary’.

Combined with racialist (völkisch) esotericism, neo-paganism, and Germanic folklore, the border sciences helped the Third Reich square the circle between claims that National Socialism was a scientifically sound doctrine based on ‘applied biology’, in the words of Hitler’s Deputy Rudolf Hess, and the blood-and-soil mysticism that undergirded National Socialist perceptions of race and space, culture and aesthetics. National Socialist attitudes toward photography, informed as they were by so-called pseudo-scientific doctrines such as physiognomy, might therefore be placed in the context of a broader supernatural imaginary that informed many aspects of German culture in the interwar period.

The authors in this volume recognize that the National Socialist preoccupation with a faith-based, quasi-religious conception of blood and soil was not the only element determining the aesthetic character and cultural trajectory of photography in the Third Reich. As Alan Steinweis, Michael Kater, Pamela Potter, and others have shown in respect to music, theatre, and the visual arts, one cannot ignore the continuities between Weimar and National Socialist-era aesthetic traditions. Most of the contributors to this volume recognize such continuities in the realm of photography as well — between the ostensibly völkisch, romantic, racially organicist photography of the Third Reich and the highly modern, experimental culture of the Weimar Republic.

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At the same time, one must acknowledge the mystical and irrational trends in Weimar culture itself before 1933. ‘Occult beliefs and practices permeated the aesthetic culture of modernism,’ writes Corinna Treitel, one of the foremost experts on German esotericism. Numerous Weimar artists and intellectuals, Treitel reminds us, ‘drew on occult ideas and experiences to fuel their creative processes.’ Among these Weimar-era artists there was a shared expectation that the ‘new art speak to the soul’ by drawing ‘heavily on fin-de-siècle German Theosophy and its deeply psychological understanding of a spiritual reality that lay beyond the reach of the five senses’.4

While such aesthetic trends were not inherently fascist, they nonetheless influenced and encouraged modes of artistic experimentation that had little to do with Weimar-era progressivism, what the film historian Lotte Eisner referred to as the ‘Mysticism and magic, the dark forces to which Germans have always been more than willing to commit themselves’, culminating ‘in the apocalyptic doctrine of Expressionism [...] a weird pleasure [...] in evoking horror [...] a predilection for the imagery of darkness’.5 Similarly, the Weimar social theorist Siegfried Kracauer has cited Fritz Lang’s expressionist masterpiece, The Cabinet of Dr Caligari, as well as his later films featuring the criminal mastermind Dr Mabuse, as representative of Germany’s ‘collective soul’ wavering between ‘tyranny and chaos’.6 In his Theses Against Occultism, Kracauer’s Frankfurt School colleague, Theodor Adorno, insisted that the interwar renaissance in occultism — which he dismissively regarded as ‘the metaphysics of dunces’ — contributed to the rise of National Socialism through its ‘irrational rationalization of what advanced industrial society cannot itself rationalize’ and ‘the ideological mystification of actual social conditions’.7

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6 Thomas Koebner, ‘Murnau — On Film History as Intellectual History,’ in Dietrich Scheunemann, ed., Expressionist Film: New Perspectives (Rochester: Camden House, 2003), pp. 111–23. There are those who see the völkisch, supernatural, and irrational elements intrinsic to Weimar film as less all-encompassing. See, for example, Ofer Ashkenazi, A Walk into the Night: Reason and Subjectivity in the Films of the Weimar Republic (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2010); Ofer Ashkenazi, Weimar Film and Modern Jewish Identity (New York and London: Palgrave, 2012).
7 See Siegfried Kracauer, From Caligari to Hitler a Psychological History of the German Film (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); Cary J. Nederman and James
If esotericism might have abetted some of the more anti-democratic tendencies within Weimar culture, however, we should be careful about equating fascist aesthetics with traditionalism or anti-modernism. National Socialist ideology and the fascist aesthetic that developed alongside it, was a dynamic and contradictory amalgam of high modernism and neo-classicism, of industrial rationality and agrarian romanticism, biological materialism, and racial mysticism. To be sure, Goebbels and his acolytes were always willing to make concessions to the market and the needs of propaganda. If the reality of National Socialist artistic policy was complex and contentious, the attempt to create a new fascist aesthetic was nonetheless authentic. As Wolfram Pyta argues in a recent book, Hitler. The Artist as Politician and Military Commander, the National Socialist Führer viewed himself as an artist staging an elaborate Wagnerian drama in which he and other party leaders were Norse heroes fighting a (meta)physical battle against the Jewish-Bolshevik Nibelungen. In this political and cultural struggle, the aesthetics of race and the body, as exemplified by physiognomy, was an essential element.8

Such aesthetic norms went well beyond preoccupations with representing socioeconomic reality, as articulated in the Weimar-era photography of Helmar Lerski or August Sander. Already before 1933 völkisch-oriented photographers such as Erna Lendvai-Dircksen and Erich Retzlaff favoured a more romantic idealism, anticipating the Third Reich by producing images that reified physiognomic characteristics and highlighted the putative racial superiority of heroic peasants vis-à-vis the subhuman other.9 Though still reflecting the aesthetic sophistication of Weimar modernity and the pragmatism of the ‘New Objectivity’ (Neue Sachlichkeit), these photographers were, like their colleagues in the

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9 See, for example, Claudia Gabriel Philipp, Deutsche Volkstrachten, Kunst und Kulturgeschichte: der Fotograf Hans Retzlaff (Marburg: Jonas Verlag, 1987); Thomas Friedrich and Falk Blask, eds, Menschenbild und Volksgesicht: Positionen zur Porträt fotografie im Nationalsozialismus (Münster: LIT, 2006).
fields of characterology or graphology, mimicking and in some respects employing highly modern techniques. Far from rendering the world ‘wie es eigentlich war’ ‘(what it was actually like)’, they were in fact working to create a new (faith-based) reality through photography, drawing on the supernatural imaginary wherever possible. Thus, while Third-Reich-era photography appropriated elements of high modernism and scientific progress in technical terms, racial physiognomy reinforced a vision of racial utopia, a völkisch ideal disconnected from any real-world understanding of science or society.

The perennial debate regarding the visual arts in the Third Reich, after all, is twofold. The first question has to do with the accuracy of Benjamin’s assessment above: were the National Socialists successful in aestheticizing politics in service of their racial and spatial goals; or did they resign themselves to eliminating only the most prominent examples of avant-garde (‘degenerate’) art, allowing, sometimes even exploiting, modern art — not to mention apolitical entertainment — in order to maintain popularity? The second and related question has to do with artistic coercion versus consent. To what degree did the regime manage culture through top-down repression? Or was culture determined by bottom-up efforts of artists and writers to ‘work toward the Führer’, in the words of Ian Kershaw, voluntarily producing art that appeared to satisfy the National Socialist-era market, Hitler, or both?

Early ‘intentionalist’ accounts of National Socialist culture tended to focus on Hitler and Goebbels’ preoccupation with coordinating and politicizing art (aestheticizing politics) from the top down. Many of the same scholars suggested that the National Socialists were cultural philistines, traditionalists who couldn’t recognize quality art or understand modernist aesthetics.10 Beginning in the 1980s and 90s, more ‘functionalist’ accounts have emphasized the porous nature and artistic eclecticism that defined National Socialist cultural policy, characterized by competing agendas and often producing improvised

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and inconsistent outcomes. Instead of a National Socialist ideological consensus imposed from above, we see a remarkable willingness on the part of leading artists and intellectuals to ‘coordinate’ themselves, whether for economic or ideological reasons, in order to remain viable.\(^\text{11}\)

The essays in this volume provide a newer perspective that moves beyond both of these schools.\(^\text{12}\) First and foremost, this collection indicates that the National Socialists were anything but cultural hacks. They could appreciate modernist aesthetics, and innovative artists could appreciate National Socialism as well. In this sense, the National Socialists were open to new, even avant-garde ideas — provided they served the purposes of the regime (or pleased its leaders). Indeed, in looking at the role of the state, individual party leaders, and National Socialist propaganda before and after the outbreak of the Second World War; in surveying photographic representations of peasants and workers; and in analyzing aesthetic norms such as Heimat and beauty, the essays in this volume uncover a greater ideological coherence and cultural symbiosis between the regime and the arts than one is accustomed to finding in classic functionalist accounts. Yet this ideological consensus is both more voluntarist and diverse than most traditional (‘intentionalist’) interpretations of National Socialist culture would allow. Whether due to market forces or ideology, many photographers were eager to work towards the Führer in order to remain financially and culturally viable in the Third Reich.

The National Socialists, in turn, embraced many photographers’ experiments in modern technology and communication. This modernity in technique appeared, in particular, in the pages of the era’s popular photographic periodicals, such as the Deutsche Illustrierte and Volk und Rasse, which ranged in content from beautiful ‘Nordic’ women on skis to physiognomic profiles of putatively ‘degenerate’ Dachau inmates.\(^\text{13}\) Hitler’s personal photographer, Heinrich Hoffmann, and the above-mentioned Erich Retzlaff produced parallel images of the National

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\(^{11}\) See again Steinweis, Art (1996); Kater, Culture in Nazi Germany (2019); Potter, Art of Suppression (2016); Spotts, Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics (2004). For an earlier example anticipating this argument, see Hildegarde Brenner, Die Kunstpolitik des Nationalsozialismus (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1963).

\(^{12}\) For a useful synthesis of this newer approach, see Kater, Culture in Nazi Germany (2019).

Socialist elite, promoting an ideal of physiognomic ‘nobility’. Similar attempts were made by Retzlaff and others to portray the German peasant as an ideal of Aryan physiognomy, the archetypal representative of blood-and-soil ideology. National-Socialist-era photographers also glorified labour, though in ways that emphasized technology as well as race, creating images not dissimilar from those idealizing industrialization in America or the Soviet Union. Photos of the German Heimat were, in contrast, especially romanticized and racialized, drawing on the mythical imagination of Germany’s past and future. Nowhere were the aesthetics of physiognomy more clearly on display — or more explicitly politicized — than in Leni Riefenstahl’s Olympia, which played on racist tropes as consciously and as successfully as any contemporary work of National Socialist propaganda.

What held all this together — the regime’s intentions and the artists’ aspirations — was the ‘Nazi supernatural imaginary’, infused by völkisch imagery and the aesthetics of physiognomy. This pseudo-scientific thinking allowed faith-based, blood-and-soil mysticism and ‘applied biology’ to co-exist, bringing the Third Reich’s racial and spatial fantasies into more concrete reality. Though technically sophisticated and modernist in aesthetic sensibility, National-Socialist-era photography consequently drew on the ‘parascience’ of physiognomy to facilitate a project of racial resettlement and even mass murder. At least in the realm of photography, as the essays in this volume suggest, Benjamin’s pronouncement still rings true.