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Aestheticizing Politics and Politicising Aesthetics: Principles of Aesthetics in the Context of Totalitarianism

Abstract: This article examines the complex interplay between art, society, and power, focusing on the aesthetic strategies employed by totalitarian regimes, particularly Hitler's Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union. Both regimes harnessed aesthetics to propagate their ideologies and suppress dissent. While Nazi Germany aestheticized politics to promote their ideology of racial purity, the Soviet Union politicised aesthetics to glorify the proletariat and the Soviet state through Socialist Realism. The regimes' manipulation of aesthetics reveals how art can become instrumental in enforcing authoritarian control and shaping public perception through manipulating emotions. The paper further examines common aesthetic principles utilised by totalitarian regimes, aiming to raise awareness about practices of aestheticizing politics and politicising aesthetics, which makes the topic relevant in contemporary turbulent times. The article thus underscores the contemporary relevance of these strategies in the digital age, where art continues to influence political discourse and public behaviour. It calls for a critical engagement with the ethical dimensions of art in politics and advocates for supporting artistic freedom to ensure that art serves as a tool for empowerment of the silenced, resistance against totalitarianism, and positive social change. Through historical and contemporary lenses, this study highlights the dual potential of art to both oppress and liberate, emphasising the need for vigilance in maintaining its ethical use in society.
Keywords: Aesthetics, Art, Politics, Totalitarianism, Power.

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Estetiği Politikleştirmek ve Politikayı Estetize Etmek: Totalitarizm Bağlamında Estetik İlkeleri

Öz: Bu makale, sanat, toplum ve güç arasındaki karmaşık etkileşimi, özellikle Hitler'in Nazi Almanya'sı ve Stalin'in Sovyetler Birliği gibi totaliter rejimlerin kullandığı estetik stratejilere odaklanarak inceliyor. Her iki rejim de ideolojilerini yaymak ve muhalefeti bastırmak için estetikten yararlandı. Nazi Almanya'sı, politikayı ırksal saflık ideolojilerini teşvik etmek amacıyla estetize ederken, Sovyetler Birliği estetiği politize ederek Sosyalist Realizm aracılığıyla proletaryayı ve Sovyet devletini yüceltti. Rejimlerin estetiği manipüle etmesi, sanatın otoriter kontrolü dayatmada ve halkın duyguları manipüle ederek kamu algısını şekillendirmede nasıl araçsal hale gelebileceğini ortaya koyuyor. Makale, totaliter rejimler tarafından kullanılan ortak estetik ilkeleri daha ayrıntılı olarak inceleyerek, politikayı estetize etme ve estetiği politize etme uygulamaları hakkında farkındalık yaratmayı ve konuyu günümüzün çalkantılı dönemlerinde de geçerli kılmayı amaçlıyor. Makale, sanatın siyasi söylem ve kamu davranışlarını etkilemeye devam ettiği dijital çağda bu stratejilerin çağdaş önemine dikkat çekiyor. Sanatın politikadaki etik boyutlarıyla eleştirel bir şekilde ilgilenmeye çağıran ve sanatsal özgürlüğü destekleyerek sanatın sessizlerin güçlendirilmesi, totalitarizme karşı direnç ve olumlu sosyal değişim için bir araç olarak hizmet etmesini savunan makale, tarihsel ve çağdaş perspektifler aracılığıyla sanatın hem baskıcı hem de özgürleştirici çift potansiyelini vurguluyor ve toplumda etik kullanımını sürdürme ihtiyacının altını çiziyor.
Anahtar Kelimeler: Estetik, Sanat, Politika, Totalitarizm, Güç.

Introduction

Scholarly inquiry and public debate have long focused on the relationship between art and power. Throughout history, artistic expression has served both as a mirror of ideologies and as a tool for enforcing them. Defined by their pursuit of power, control, and ideological conformity, totalitarian regimes such as Adolf Hitler's and Joseph Stalin's left an indelible mark on the course of the twentieth century. Nowhere is the connection between art and power more apparent than in the aesthetics of totalitarian regimes where art functions as a potent instrument of control and as propaganda of ideologies. At the heart of these regimes, although distinct in their ideological foundations and modes of government, lay a complex interplay between aesthetics and politics. Aesthetics, broadly understood as the philosophy of beauty and artistic expression, became a potent instrument wielded by totalitarian leaders to shape public perception, enforce ideological conformity, and cultivate a cult of personality.

Before delving into the intricacies of this relationship, it is important to clarify definitions. Within the present context of totalitarian systems, aesthetics

encompasses not only visual arts but also literature, music, architecture, and other forms of cultural expression that were subjected to state manipulation and control. Politics refers to governance by the exercise of power where ideology serves as a guiding principle, confronting dissent with severe repression. Finally, totalitarianism, characterised by its centralised control, suppression of opposition, and emphasis on ideological conformity serves as the overarching framework within which the paper analyses the role of aesthetics. Hence, briefly pointing out some of the key differences between the concepts of dictatorship, despotism, authoritarianism, and totalitarianism might be useful for the purpose of pinning down the notion of totalitarianism in order to understand why many prominent scholars in the field include not only Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany but also Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union as notable examples of totalitarian regimes. However, although these forms of governance may vary in their methods, ideologies, and impact on society, they often overlap, sharing certain similarities in terms of centralised power and limited political freedom.

A dictatorial regime is a political system characterised by the absolute authority of a single person or a small group without effective constitutional limitations. Dictators often come to power through non-democratic means (coups or inheritance) and maintain control through military force and political coercion, suppressing political opposition and limiting political freedoms (Brooker 2000; Gandhi 2008). Political scientists have identified key features defining the power structure of dictatorship such as single rulers (personalist dictatorship and absolute monarch) or a small group of leaders (one-party dictatorship), which may vary in their institutional forms (military or civilian) and is characterised by limited political pluralism and mobilisation, and by the exercise of power with few limitations (Linz 2000). The term despotism, on the other hand, is often used interchangeably with tyranny and autocracy, referring to a form of government where a single entity wields absolute power, often arbitrarily and oppressively. The personal interests of the despot or tyrant typically take precedence over the

state's interests, leading to governance based on the ruler's arbitrary decisions and personal whims rather than laws or regulations (Arendt 1962; Wintrobe 1998). In *The Political Economy of Dictatorship*, Ronald Wintrobe highlights that a despotic ruler often pursues policies contrary to the interest of their subjects and makes use of violence to maintain power. He also defines timocracy as a system governed by a benevolent despot, and differentiates despotism from totalitarianism as the former characterised by high repression and low loyalty whereas the latter as high in both repression and loyalty (1998). Authoritarianism is a political system also characterised by strong central power and limited political freedom. Unlike totalitarianism, it allows some social and economic institutions to operate independently of the state. Authoritarian regimes concentrate power in a leader or small elite not constitutionally responsible to the public. Juan Linz defines authoritarian regimes as political systems "in which a leader or a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones" (2000: 15). They maintain limited political pluralism, suppress political opposition, and emphasise the status quo rather than pursuing an ideological goal (Arendt 1962; Linz 2000; Svolik 2012). In *Political Order in Changing Societies*, Samuel Huntington defines authoritarian regimes as characterised by a single leader or group of leaders with no party or a weak party, limited mass mobilisation and political pluralism (1968). Totalitarianism, on the other hand, represents an extreme form of authoritarianism, where the state seeks to control nearly every aspect of public and private life. It is marked by absolute power held by a single party or leader, an all-encompassing ideology aiming to transform society, and an extensive use of propaganda, surveillance, and state-controlled media (Arendt 1962; Friedrich and Brzezinski 1965; Gleason 1995; Wintrobe 1998). Hannah Arendt's work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) became foundational in the field, calling it a new form of dictatorship and highlighting the role of ideology aimed to transform human nature. Huntington emphasises that totalitarian regimes rule by a single party led by an individual with powerful secret police

(1968). Totalitarian regimes employ fear and repression to suppress opposition and centralise control over the economy, education, and social institutions. As Natasha Ezrow and Erica Frantz note in *Dictators and Dictatorship: Understanding Authoritarian Regimes and Their Leaders*, totalitarian regimes are also characterised by "total control of mass communications and social and economic organisations" by which they "aim to create an ideal society through the use of governmental propaganda" (2011: 3). In *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, Carl Frederich and Zbigniew Brzezinski note six features of totalitarianism: a single political party, an implementation of official ideology, total control over mass communication and military, establishing a secret police, and centralising economy (1965). In his other work, Brzezinski highlights the aim of totalitarian governments to bring about a social revolution and a total unity of society by politicising the populace through political organisations via propaganda and fear. Brzezinski also notes that in totalitarian regimes, the leader has greater power than the party or security apparatus and generally appeals to the public as a charismatic leader (1962).

The key differences between authoritarian and totalitarian regimes could be roughly pointed as following: Totalitarian regimes seek to control every aspect of life whereas authoritarian regimes may allow some individual freedoms and non-political social institutions to operate independently. Unlike authoritarian regimes, focused more on maintaining control and stability, totalitarian regimes are driven by a specific ideology aimed at transforming society. Authoritarian regimes might permit some degree of limited political pluralism whereas totalitarian regimes do not tolerate any political opposition or diversity. While all these systems use coercion and repression, totalitarian regimes rely heavily on surveillance, state terror, and the use of propaganda aimed to control the population's thoughts and beliefs whereas authoritarian and dictatorial regimes might rely more on military power and political repression. With these definitions in mind, the present article aims to explore the intricate dynamics of the aesthetics

of totalitarianism, with a primary focus on the regimes of Hitler's Third Reich and Stalin's Soviet Union. Through an examination of historical sources, academic perspectives, and cultural artefacts the study seeks to elucidate how aesthetics served as both a reflection and reinforcement of totalitarian power.

Central to present argument is the assertion that aesthetics played a main role in legitimising and perpetuating totalitarian rule; from the imposition of state-approved artistic styles to the glorification of political leaders, serving as a means of propaganda, social control, and ideological indoctrination. By examining the methods by which Hitler and Stalin utilised art and aesthetics to shape public perception, promote ideologies, and suppress dissent, the present study aims to offer insight into broader implications of the relationship between art and power in totalitarian systems within the frame of issues related to artistic agency, social control, and the enduring legacy of aesthetic authoritarianism. In the subsequent sections, the study first explores why many view not only Hitler's but also Stalin's government as a quintessential example of totalitarianism, then it examines some of the key themes and manifestations of the aesthetics of totalitarianism, including the imposition of state-sanctioned artistic styles, the glorification of political leaders and ideologies through propaganda, and the ethical implications of aesthetic manipulation in politics. Through this exploration, the paper aims to elicit reflections on the enduring legacy of aesthetic authoritarianism and its implications for contemporary discourse on art and politics and encourage critical reflection on the role of art in shaping political discourse and social dynamics in the past and present. With the spread of social media use, the contemporary fascination with aesthetics might shift into a dangerous flirtation with values that are authoritarian as the allure of aesthetics can desensitise people to underlying ideologies they represent. The paper thus calls for a critical awareness of how aesthetic appreciation can obscure and even perpetuate ideologies.

1. The Stalin Era: Totalitarianism vs. Dictatorship of the Proletariat

The debate over whether the Stalin era should be classified as totalitarianism or as *the dictatorship of the proletariat* underscores discussions that involve weighing ideological intentions against practical implementations and outcomes. The concept of *the dictatorship of the proletariat* originates from Marxist theory, where it signifies a state in which the working class holds political power. This transitional state is meant to pave the way from a capitalist society to a classless, communist society. According to Marxist ideology, *the dictatorship of the proletariat* is necessary to dismantle the existing bourgeois structures and prevent the re-emergence of capitalist exploitation. This view would posit that the Soviet Union, despite its repressive practices, was an attempt to implement a Marxist state.

Proponents would argue that the harsh measures and centralisation of power were necessary responses to internal and external threats, including the threat of counter-revolution and the need to rapidly industrialise and collectivise agriculture. However, critics claim that during Stalin's rule from the mid-1920s until his death in 1953, the Soviet Union undoubtedly fits the model of a totalitarian state due to Stalin's comprehensive control over society, economy, and political life. Stalin's state also engaged in widespread surveillance of its citizens to monitor and suppress dissent and to control every aspect of daily life. Ronald Wintrobe's *The Political Economy of Dictatorship* (1998), exploring the interrelationships between the economy, policy, and society within non-democratic societies and dividing dictatorship into four categories (totalitarian, tinpot, tyrannical, and timocracy), defines both Hitler's and Stalin's rules as totalitarian regimes. In *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917-1991* (1994), Martin Malia also defines Stalin's Soviet Union as a quintessential totalitarian regime, marked by Stalin's absolute control over all aspects of life. Arendt's and Brzezinski and Friedrich' work became foundational, analysing and

defining the Soviet Union under Stalin as a notably totalitarian regime. While Marxist theory calls for the necessity of the *dictatorship of the proletariat* as a transitional phase, the actual implementation under Stalin manifested significant deviation from Marxist principles, with the centralisation of power in a single leader rather than the working class. Stalin held absolute authority, with decision-making concentrated in his hands and those of his close associates. Critics therefore highlight that the bureaucratic elite under Stalin had more in common with a totalitarian ruling class than a state representing a working-class rule. Arendt's exploration of totalitarian regimes undoubtedly includes Stalin's Soviet Union within the category of totalitarianism, emphasising the centralisation of power in Stalin's hands and Stalin's use of terror and propaganda to maintain this power (1962). Hence, Stalin's state might have promoted Marxism-Leninism as the guiding ideology, however, with Stalin's own interpretation that became the official doctrine. Friedrich and Brzezinski likewise provide a detailed analysis of totalitarian regimes, specifically categorising Stalin's Soviet Union as such due to Stalin's personalised ideological control, the use of terror, and his centralised authority (1965). Thus, despite the original ideological intentions of creating a classless society, critics argue that the outcomes align Stalin's regime with totalitarianism. The Soviet state, especially under Stalin, was characterised not only by extensive repression, lack of political freedoms, and the suppression of dissent but also by purges, forced labour camps (Gulags), and the Great Terror, imposing a regime of fear and control over the working class. The forced collectivisation of agriculture led to severe hardship for millions of peasants and agricultural workers, and resulted in widespread famine, most notably the *Holodomor* in Ukraine in 1932 and 1933, estimating the death toll range from 3 to 7 million people. Stalin's regime employed extensive propaganda to maintain its narrative and control public perception, and his use of state terror, exemplified by the Great Purge, saw millions of people imprisoned, exiled, or executed to eliminate perceived threats to his power. Robert Conquest's work, particularly *The*

Great Terror: Stalin's Purge of the Thirties (1968), underscores the totalitarian aspects of Stalin's rule in this sense, highlighting Stalin's systematic use of violence and repression to maintain in control.

Through their extensive research and analysis of the regime's political, social, and ideological dimensions, these and many other scholars contribute to the view of Stalin's Soviet Union as a totalitarian state. Stalin's rule aligns more with what characterises totalitarian regimes, defined by the absolute control of the state over nearly every aspect of public and private life, seeking to control the economy, education, culture, and even the personal beliefs and behaviours of citizens, marked by an overarching ideology, centralised authority, suppression of political pluralism, state-controlled media, propaganda, and the use of terror to suppress dissent. Nevertheless, the debate over whether the Stalin era should be perceived as *the dictatorship of the proletariat* or as exemplifying a totalitarian regime requires an examination of historical realities that involve weighing ideological intentions against practical implementations and outcomes. In this sense, perhaps a closer look at the aesthetic strategies employed by Stalin's governance might also contribute to this debate.

2. The Relationship between Totalitarianism and Aesthetics

Each era is defined by distinct expressions that profoundly shaped subsequent developments with the twentieth century prominently emerging as the era of totalitarian regimes. Despite varying contemporary views, totalitarian regimes are commonly characterised by the monopolisation of political and social control by a single party, bolstered by a charismatic leader who asserts authority over both the military and the masses. Arendt emphasises the alienating effects of totalitarianism, highlighting how mass mobilisation is achieved through the isolation and alienation of individuals by seemingly apolitical practices. Paradoxically, although totalitarian regimes utilise practices that seem to unify

masses, the initial step in totalitarian regimes is a process of alienating individuals, rendering them devoid of social ties:

> Compared with all other parties and movements, their most conspicuous external characteristic is their demand for total, unrestricted, unconditional, and unalterable loyalty of the individual members....Such loyalty can be expected only from the completely isolated human being who, without any other social ties to family, friends, comrades, or even mere acquaintances, derives his sense of having a place in the world only from his belonging to a movement, his membership in the party. (1962: 323-4)

While the aim of totalitarian regimes is a complete subordination of individuals to the state, they also strive for legitimacy, even if only in appearance. In their quest for societal control, penetrating all areas of social life to dominate it, totalitarian regimes extend their reach beyond politics into non-political domains such as culture, art, and economy. Paradoxically, totalitarianism relies on public cooperation for its legitimacy, necessitating ideological indoctrination, whether enforced coercively or through what Louis Althusser terms as Ideological State Apparatus. This dependence underscores the significance of captivating the masses, thereby intertwining totalitarianism with aesthetics and various aesthetic practices, instrumental in creation, reproduction, and projection of ideologies.

The interplay between aesthetics and politics traces back to the earliest forms of human organisations. Artistic representation, including songs praising national heroes, anthems, festivals, parades, and sculptural and architectural designs, have historically served as tools for governance, aimed at unifying masses and eliciting reverence. While aesthetic expressions previously retained some degree of autonomy from politics, the advent of the industrial revolution and the proliferation of mass media precipitated fundamental changes, culminating in a paradigm shift in political systems. Walter Benjamin elucidates these transformations, attributing them to broader social changes that influenced art and the perception of it. Benjamin's exploration of the ritualistic function of art before the Renaissance introduces the concept of the *aura*, signifying the unique presence of an artwork linked to time and space, and steeped in tradition ('The Work of Art

in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', 1936). In other words, *aura* refers to the authenticity of the artwork, understood as the essence and testimony to the history. However, the advent of technological modes of aesthetic production heralded the decay of the *aura* as mass reproduction divorced artworks from their traditional contexts, in Benjamin's words: "the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition [and] by making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence" (215). Herbert Marcuse further elucidates the concept of authenticity in art, positing that authentic art is self-reliant and independent of external representations ('Philosophy and Critical Theory', 1989: 61). Marcuse claims that since artistic reproduction owes its existence to the original, it ceases to be authentic. Thus, the rise of mass reproduction not only undermines the authenticity and authority of artworks but also paves the way for their politicisation. Benjamin also reflects on the concept of authenticity of art, claiming that not only does a reproduction lack authenticity but authenticity itself is not reproducible. Therefore, practices of mass reproduction not only destroy the *aura* and the authenticity of art but also shatter traditional value, jeopardise the authority of the object, detach the reproduced object from tradition, and above all, "emancipate the work of art" that "begins to be based on another practice—politics" (Benjamin 218). In *Walter Benjamin,* Graeme Gilloch summarises Benjamin's view on technological innovations in production of art, especially Benjamin's focus on film and photography, as a shift from traditional art and aesthetics to a revolutionary reconfiguration of arts within political practice (2002: 174). Benjamin's insights underscore the symbiotic relationship between modern aesthetics and politics, particularly in totalitarian regimes' manipulation of arts and aesthetics for political ends. While fascism sought to legitimise violence by aestheticizing politics, "introducing aesthetics into political life", communism politicised aesthetics, blurring the lines between art and ideology (Benjamin 234). Notably, both regimes exhibited features of the other to varying

degrees, highlighting the nuanced interplay between adverse practices of arts and aesthetics within totalitarian contexts.

3. Aestheticizing Politics and Politicising Aesthetics

In the context of totalitarian regimes, where leaders utilise art and aesthetics to influence and manipulate public perception through emotions to consolidate power, the fusion of politics and aesthetics warrants deeper examination. The term *aestheticize*, as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, encapsulates this notion, referring to the representation of elements and aspects of ideologies as beautiful and pleasing, precisely, as perceived in a pleasurable manner by feelings (2012). In *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Terry Eagleton highlights the emotional aspect of aesthetics, defining the term as that which is "born as a discourse of the body" (1991: 13). The notion of *aestheticizing politics* refers to the purposeful use of artistic elements and aspects that address emotions to the propagation of political messages or ideologies. This process involves presenting political ideologies in an aesthetically pleasing or emotionally compelling manner, often employing symbolism, imagery, and theatricality to captivate masses while masking underlying violence and oppression. Within this framework, political leaders leverage artistic mediums such as propaganda posters, grandiose public displays and ceremonies, monumental architecture, and choreographed public events to cultivate a sense of unity, reverence, and loyalty among masses. On the other hand, the concept of *politicising aesthetics* involves the appropriation of artistic forms and expressions for explicitly political ends. The embedding of political messages within art and cultural expression entails aligning artistic movements with specific political agendas or imbuing artworks with ideological content. In totalitarian regimes, the state exerts control over cultural production, dictating the themes, styles, and messages that artists are allowed to portray. The artistic expression becomes instrumental, serving as a tool for indoctrination, propaganda, and social engineering. Dissenting voices are

supressed, and those who deviate from state-approved aesthetics are subject to censorship and punishment. Thus, the manipulation of sensory experiences through the strategic use of art and aesthetics for political purposes, either by aestheticizing politics or politicising aesthetics, was instrumental in both unifying and controlling the masses, revealing the profound impact of aesthetics on political life.

To provide a more nuanced understanding of these concepts, it is helpful to draw upon scholarly interpretations and historical examples. Susan Buck-Morss and Enzo Traverso explore the role of aesthetics in totalitarianism, shedding light on how the culture of visualised fascism shaped collective consciousness and political discourse. Buck-Morss's essay 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered' (1992) delves into the symbolic language of fascist iconography and explores the deep interconnections between aesthetics, politics, and sensory perception, revealing how visualised fascism was consciously aimed to rally support for the regime by addressing the emotions of the masses. Buck-Morss argues that totalitarian regimes create a sensory environment—through propaganda, mass media, and public spectacles—that manipulates, overwhelms, and often numbs the public, making them more susceptible to control. This sensory overload and subsequent numbing effect align with the fascist strategy of aestheticizing politics to maintain control and suppress dissent. Furthermore, Buck-Morss illustrates how Hitler utilised aesthetic strategies, including fashioning his body language and facial expressions to evoke emotional responses, and by the use of imagery and public performances, the aestheticized politics aimed to create a sense of unity and strength among people. These orchestrated spectacles transformed political life into an on-going theatrical performance, blurring the lines between reality and illusion. Traverso's *The New Faces of Fascism: Populism and the Far Right* (2019) explores the contemporary resurgence of fascist-like movements, arguing that today's far-right movements, shaped by globalisation and the crises of neoliberalism, differ from the classical

fascism of the early twentieth century. Traverso delves into how these movements capitalise on populist rhetoric, media manipulation, and xenophobic sentiments to gain power, highlighting the aesthetic strategies employed to captivate and mobilise supporters. Traverso's study offers a discussion on the use of aesthetics in politics by modern technology and social media to spread propaganda, creating an omnipresent spectacle that likewise blurs the lines between the reality of politics and the aesthetics of fiction. This manipulation of visual culture serves to legitimise authoritarian ideologies and foster a collective identity, centred on exclusionary and nationalistic ideals. In this context, Traverso's analysis aligns with the concept of politicising aesthetics, and his insights into modern practices of politicising social media by contemporary far-right movements reinforce the argument that totalitarian regimes, both past and present, leverage visual and symbolic language to consolidate power and manipulate public perception. Traverso's contemporary perspective on politicising aesthetics complements the earlier arguments of Buck-Morss on aestheticizing politics, both providing a view on the interplay between aesthetics and politics in different historical periods.

Case studies from history offer specific examples of aestheticized politics and politicised aesthetics in action. The grandiose architectural projects serving as a physical embodiment of Nazi ideology such as the imposing structures of the Nuremberg Rally Grounds that covers about 11square kilometres, including The Congress Hall, inspired by the Colosseum in Rome, are examples of aestheticizing politics in Nazi Germany. Published as a memoir in 1970, the book *Inside the Third Reich* by Albert Speer, who served as Hitler's chief architect, sheds light on the use of architecture and aesthetics in Nazi propaganda, illuminating the ways architecture was utilised to embody and project Nazi ideology. Speer details his architectural projects, including the redesign of Berlin and other monumental buildings, revealing the ways of aestheticizing politics as integral to Hitler's vision to convey the grandeur of Nazi ideology. Similarly, the politicisation of aesthetics is demonstrated by the Socialist Realism art movement in Stalinist Russia, where

artists were forced to create works that glorified the Soviet government and its leadership while opposing voices were silenced. In *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (1992) by Boris Groys, the author investigates how Stalinist culture appropriated aesthetics to produce a totalising vision of reality, effectively employing art and aesthetics as a tool for ideological dissemination and political control. Groys discusses how Soviet art was turned into a weapon of state propaganda, aimed at moulding public consciousness and spreading the ideals of the Communist Party. Groys' work offers a detailed analysis of how artistic expression was subordinated to political ends in the Soviet Union, providing examples of how various art forms and genres were used to further state objectives. Edited by Hans Günther, the collection of essays titled *The Culture of the Stalin Period* (1990) deals with numerous aspects of Stalinist culture such as art, literature, architecture, film, and popular culture, providing insights into how Stalinist policies directed the cultural and artistic production of the time, thereby by politicising aesthetics, aimed to reinforce the power and ideology of the regime. Various scholars analyse the mechanisms through which the Soviet state controlled and utilised arts and aesthetics to promote its political agenda, and discuss the role of Socialist Realism in reflecting the ideal Soviet life. Edited by Dawn Ades and others, *Art and Power: Europe under the Dictators 1930-45* (1995) offers in-depth studies of the relationship between art and power. The book covers regimes under Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia, and Mussolini's Italy, and offers over 450 illustrations, ranging from architecture to sculpture and painting, from literature to cinema and photography, providing examples and analysis of politicised instrumental aesthetics. These sources collectively underscore how regimes aestheticized politics and politicised aesthetics by transforming art into a vehicle for ideological indoctrination and state propaganda, revealing the complex relationship between politics and artistic expression within a totalitarian context. Artists in the Third Reich and Soviet Russia faced severe restrictions and were required to demonstrate political reliability. This resulted in a significant loss of

creative freedom and expression, as discussed by Philip Rieff in 'Aesthetic Function in Modern Politics' (1953). The uniformity imposed on cultural institutions ensured that art served the state's ideological goals, effectively turning the regime itself into an artwork that signified totalitarian ideals.

This blending of an artistic allure with politics was epitomised by Mussolini, who infamously proclaimed his intention to treat his people as "raw materials" with the dual approach of a "gentle hand of an artist and the iron fist of a soldier" (Günther 2006: 107). Hitler likewise portrayed himself as Germany's artistic visionary, leveraging aesthetics as a tool for political indoctrination. Similarly, Stalin's regime transformed the entire Soviet state into a theatrical production, blurring the lines between political reality and artistic spectacle. Their vision of creating a new world order might seem unrealistic nowadays but it is precisely for this reason that these regimes put a great effort into creating illusions by harnessing aesthetic practices such as symbolic representations, theatrical public staging and public speeches, parades, ceremonies, and marches that grandiosely displayed power; all designed to address the emotions of the masses. Illusions merged with reality, and the boundary between theatrical and political dissolved. Benjamin's insights reveal how the *aura* of art served fascism, captivating the emotions of the audiences and legitimising aestheticized violence through mythical narratives (mythos) that obstructed rational thought (logos) (1936).

The advent of mass media further amplified these efforts, enabling the seamless dissemination of aestheticized propaganda and politicised art to a wide audience. Siegfried Kracauer's concept of the *mass ornament* underscores how society became engulfed in a spectacle of political aesthetics, further blurring the boundaries between art and life (*The Mass Ornament*, 2005). Thus, in both totalitarian regimes, aesthetics became a tool that fostered the society's gradual integration into politics. Mass reproduction of aestheticized politics and politicised aesthetics not only allowed the spreading of ideologies but also made random

modifications possible; for example, adding texts to these images, boosting their ability to attract and convey ideological massages. Moreover, underpinning this aesthetic manipulation was the regime's absolute control over artistic expression, deciding on valid forms of arts and suppressing dissent, thus monopolising cultural production. Artistic forms were set and coerced into serving the regime's political agenda, legitimising its authority and perpetuating its historical narrative. To illustrate the pervasive impact of aesthetic manipulation, numerous dissenting artists who dared to challenge the regime's narrative or did not align with the domineering ideology were censored, imprisoned, or put to death. During Hitler's Germany, the prominent painter, Otto Dix, whose work, depicting the horrors of war and the Weimar Republic, was labelled as *degenerate* by Nazis. Dix was dismissed from his teaching position and his paintings were confiscated and destroyed (Gutbrod 2010). Likewise, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's paintings were deemed *un-German* and *degenerate*; his art was removed from museums, the artist was expelled from the Berlin Academy of Arts, and facing persecution, he committed suicide in 1938 (Henze, et al. 2019). Numerous other artists such as painters Max Beckmann, Emil Nolde, and Paul Klee, the caricaturist George Grosz, and the sculptor Kathe Kollwitz were fired from their positions, their work censored, removed from public collections, and suffering constant harassed, they eventually fled Germany to escape Nazi persecution. The experiences of these artists reflect the extent to which the Nazi regime sought to control and suppress artistic expression that did not conform to its ideological standards. Under Stalin's Soviet Union, artists likewise faced censorship and persecution for their artistic dissent. For instance, for his satire denouncing Stalin, or as his wife Nadezhda Mandelstam puts it, a sixteen-line death sentence, the poet Osip Mandelstam was arrested and exiled to Stalin's labour camp where he died in 1939 (Mandelstam 1999). The poems of Anna Akhmatova were likewise banned and her son imprisoned as a way to exert control over the artist (Feinstein 2005). The master of the *genre of silence*, as the well-known writer Isaac Babel called himself, was

likewise persecuted, arrested during the Great Purge in 1939, and eventually executed in 1940. According to his translator Peter Constantine, from the day of his arrest, Babel "became a nonperson in the Soviet Union. His name blotted out, removed from literary dictionaries and encyclopaedias, and taken off school and university syllabi" (*The Complete Works of Isaac Babel*, 2001: 4). Likewise the work of Mikhail Bulgakov was heavily censored, and the author lived under constant surveillance. His famous novel, *The Master and Margarita,* was not published during his lifetime (Milne 1990). Dmitri Shostakovich also faced significant censorship and denunciation, and the composer lived his entire life under constant threat of arrest (Wilson 1994). Vsevolod Meyerhold, a theatre director, was arrested in 1939, tortured, and a year later, executed for his avant-garde theatrical productions that refused to conform to Socialist Realism (Braun 1979). These examples are only a fracture of the events that took place but the live stories of these artists demonstrate the severe repression of artistic freedom in Soviet Russia where deviation from the approved Socialist Realist style or any perceived criticism of the regime resulted in censorship, imprisonment, or execution. Indeed, one might argue that totalitarian regimes are defined precisely by their power to turn arts into a vehicle for political control. Aestheticizing politics and politicising aesthetics have thus been central tenets of totalitarian rule, shaping public consciousness and perpetuating authoritarianism.

4. Aestheticizing Politics: The Aesthetics of Hitler's Third Reich

Although the totalitarian regimes of Hitler and Stalin shared commonalities, their approaches to aesthetics diverged. While Stalin's Soviet Union used art primarily as a tool of state propaganda to promote Socialist Realism, the Third Reich under Hitler adopted a more nuanced strategy aestheticizing politics. This approach involved imbuing political life with aesthetic principles. This section explores how Hitler's regime utilised aesthetics to forge a powerful connection

between art and politics, thereby manipulating public perception and consolidating power.

The act of aestheticizing politics in Hitler's Third Reich was a strategic mechanism grounded in the concept of aestheticizing the representation of fascism to manipulate public perception, foster national unity, and consolidate totalitarian power by representing political ideology via modes of artistic expression. The Third Reich's aesthetic strategy also took a step further by imposing racial and national ideals rooted in aesthetics, which became a governing principle for national unity aiming to create a homogeneous cultural identity that resonated with the German populace under a singular vision of cultural purity. This aesthetic approach aimed to not only shape artistic practices but also merge them with the audience's sense of cultural heritage and tradition, fostering identification with the leader and the Nazi ideology.

A clear example of this strategy is seen in how Hitler, despite being twice rejected by the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, channelled his artistic ambitions into politics. He transformed aesthetics into a vehicle for his governance, making his regime a reflection of his artistic vision. Steven Heller, in *Iron Fists: Branding the 20th-Century Totalitarian State*, highlights how Hitler intricately woven politics with aesthetics, turning Germany into a "grand opera" where every aspect of life was infused with his artistic vision; with aesthetics playing a central role in reinforcing his ideology (2008: 14). Under Hitler's leadership, the Nazi regime became a cohesive masterpiece, with aesthetics as an effective driving force behind the Third Reich's propaganda and control mechanisms. The Nazi regime institutionalised aesthetics, integrating art forms such as literature, music, theatre, print, radio, and film into the political machinery. These mediums became a vehicle for disseminating Nazi ideology, contributing to the creation of a cohesive, totalitarian state that reflected Hitler's vision. As Paul Johnson observes in *A History of the Modern World*, Hitler's ability to unify the public through

aestheticized spectacles, parades, speeches, and rituals was remarkable and unique (1983).

One of the most prominent ways Nazis used aesthetics to control the masses was through grandiose spectacles such as public speeches, parades, rallies, ritualised gestures, and ceremonies. These were meticulously designed and choreographed to evoke emotional responses and foster a sense of unity among the populace. For instance, the annual Nuremberg Rallies, as documented in Leni Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will* (1935), showcased the power of coordinated visual and auditory elements to create an overwhelming sense of order, strength, and inevitability of Nazi rule. These rallies were meticulously choreographed to evoke a sense of awe and unity among participants and spectators alike. Each rally was carefully designed to be a visual representation of Nazi ideals, with elaborate light displays, aesthetically synchronised marching, and the dramatic use of music to evoke emotional response. The use of flags, banners, and uniforms in these parades created a visually cohesive and emotionally charged atmosphere, and the grand scale of these events along with their repetitive, ritualistic nature served to instil a sense of belonging and loyalty to the regime, blurring the line between reality and theatrical performance, creating an immersive environment where politics and aesthetics became indistinguishable. Albert Speer's architectural designs, such as the Zeppelinfeld stadium, served as monumental backdrops for these occasions, further blending art with political messaging. The use of architecture was not just functional but also symbolic, creating a tangible representation of Nazi power and ideology. The imposing structures and the vast open spaces filled with participants in uniform were designed to aesthetically convey the might and unity of the Nazi state.

Symbols and iconography also played a crucial role in Nazi aesthetics. The most notorious of these symbols, the swastika, was ubiquitous, appearing on flags, uniforms, armbands, and public buildings. This emblem was chosen for its visual

impact and its historical connotation of purity and strength. The widespread use of the swastika contributed to the visual homogeneity that reinforced the regime's ideals of racial and national unity. Another prominent Nazi symbol was the eagle, which was frequently depicted clutching a swastika in its talons to symbolise the might and domination of the Aryan race. These omnipresent visual symbols and emblems were designed to be instantly recognisable, to convey ideological messages at a glance, and instil a sense of fear, power, and belonging. These symbols were not merely decorative; they were integral to the Nazi's aestheticizing of politics. By saturating the public realm with these symbols, the Nazi government ensured that their ideology was embedded into the very fabric of daily life—constantly reinforced in the minds of the German people.

Scholars like Susan Sontag and Claudia Koonz have explored how Nazi aesthetics were used to glorify the regime and demonise its enemies. Sontag's essay 'Fascinating Fascism' (1974) defines fascist aesthetics as glorifying strength, power, submission, and the heroic ideal that romanticise violence and celebrate domination through recurring motifs such as the idealisation of the human body, the collective mass, and the spectacle of power. The essay discusses how the act of aestheticizing politics under fascism involved eroticising and fetishizing power, with a focus on idealised bodies and disciplined forms, serving to make the power and authority of fascism appealing and seductive. As Sontag highlights, these practices that eroticise and fetishize ideology blur the boundaries between politics and sexuality, and here I would add, they also address the audience on emotional level not only by means of aesthetic pleasure but also by that which Freud calls as the primitive instinctual aspect governed by sexual drives. Worth noting is that Sontag's essay also explores how fascist aesthetics have permeated modern culture, demonstrating how elements of fascist style appear in modern art, fashion, and advertising, and suggesting that the act of aestheticizing politics seen during fascism has found its novel modes in various forms of cultural production where style and form often overshadow substance and moral considerations. By

dissecting the seductive power of fascist imagery and its implications, prompt to captivate modern audiences through a fetishizing imagery and ideals, Sontag's study warns of the potential for history to repeat itself if these aesthetics are not critically viewed and contextualised within their political origins. Likewise, Koonz's *The Nazi Conscience* (2003) examines the ideological foundation and moral justifications of the Nazi regime, emphasising how propagation of Nazi racial hierarchy through various forms of media, particularly propaganda films and posters, meticulously crafted and cultivated a collective consciousness aligned with Nazi racial ideologies. Koonz details how Nazi propaganda, utilising the principle of aesthetics, portrayed the Aryan ideal as the epitome of human perfection, characterised by attributes such as physical strength, beauty, and purity, which were depicted in a glorified manner in films and posters. The study highlights the extensive use of visual propaganda, using posters, films, and other media to create powerful and persuasive aesthetic images that communicated Nazi ideology to the masses and were designed to foster a sense of pride, belonging, and unity among Germans. By embedding racist ideas within appealing and culturally resonant aesthetics, the regime aimed to normalise and legitimise their brutal, discriminatory policies. Crafting aesthetically appealing representations that helped shape public opinion and foster a collective identity based on national pride, Koonz argues that the Nazi regime's use of aesthetics was a crucial strategy that sought to normalise policies by embedding them within appealing and culturally resonant aesthetics. Akin to Sontag's, Koonz's work also manifests as a stark reminder of the importance of critically examining the ways in which visual culture can be used and abused to influence and control societies.

The Third Reich's use of aesthetics as a tool for political control offers a warning of the dangers inherent in aestheticizing politics. The historical examples reveal how aesthetics can be weaponised to manipulate public perception and consolidate authoritarian power, and become a powerful instrument of propaganda, oppression, and violence. Understanding the practices of

aestheticizing politics in Nazi Germany reveals the potentials of visual culture in shaping political discourse and collective consciousness. These historical examples underscore the dangers of intertwining aesthetics with authoritarian ideology that may lead to legitimisation of violence. In contemporary contexts, the legacy of Nazi aesthetics should serve as a reminder of the potential consequences of aestheticizing politics, and underscore the importance of critically examining the ways in which visual culture and political messaging intersect, recognising how art and media influence and reflect political power dynamics, and ensure that the lessons of the past inform our vigilance against similar manipulative tactics today.

5. Politicising Aesthetics: The Aesthetics of Stalin's Soviet Union

Despite differences, both regimes relied on aesthetics to bolster their authority. Like Hitler, Stalin created a cult of personality to solidify and expand his power. The totalitarianism of Stalinism was marked by its pervasive terror and as with Hitler's Germany, the Soviet regime focused on crafting a new kind of citizen, completely loyal to socialist ideals and fully submitted to the order. In its use of aesthetics to reinforce totalitarian power, Stalin's regime mirrored Hitler's; nonetheless, it employed a distinct strategy that centred on Socialist Realism. This artistic doctrine mandated that all works of art should serve the ideological objectives of the state by depicting the Soviet reality in an idealised form that promoted socialist principles and values. Unlike the Nazis' focus on classical beauty and Aryan ideals, Soviet aesthetics emphasised the glorification of the proletariat and the heroism of everyday labour. The following section explores how Stalin's Soviet Union politicised aesthetics to enforce ideological conformity and consolidate totalitarian control. By examining the integration of artistic production with state propaganda and the impact on cultural life, the discussion reveals the mechanisms through which Stalinism sought to reshape society through art.

Stalin's approach to art and culture was influenced by Marxist aesthetics but significantly diverged to serve his totalitarian goals. Although Marx did not extensively develop a theory of art, his ideas were later expanded by intellectuals such as Mikhail Lifshitz and György Lukács. They stressed that the socioeconomic circumstances can be understood and should be reflected in and critiqued by art. Marx considered art and art institutions to be a part of the superstructure that adapted to the materialist base. Drawing on dialectical and historical materialism, Marxist aesthetics proposes that art reflects the economic base of society (Lang 1998: 186). However, under Stalin, Marxist aesthetic ideals were distorted. Art was transformed into a tool for promoting the Soviet state and glorifying its leader. The principles of Marxist aesthetics were replaced with a rigid doctrine of Socialist Realism, which obliged all art to be realistic in form and socialist in content, serving the goals of the regime rather than providing genuine social critique. Stalin's use of aesthetics is evident in the monumental public works and widespread propaganda that defined his reign. Art was not merely a reflection of the economic base, as Marxist theory suggested, but served as a tool to shape public consciousness and foster a cohesive socialist identity. This politicisation of aesthetics meant that artistic production was closely monitored and regulated by the state, with severe consequences for those who deviated from the prescribed norms.

The establishment of Socialist Realism as the official art form in 1934 marked a significant moment in Soviet cultural history. By establishing the official cultural policy, Stalin's Cultural Revolution signified as a means to combat bourgeois influence by promoting folk culture as the foundation of socialist art. The reorganization of the arts and their institutions to align with state directives was a key aspect of this policy. On April 23, 1932, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union's Central Committee issued a decree titled 'The Reconstruction of the Literary and Art Organizations' that mandated the dissolution of all existing artistic associations. This directive consolidated all artists and cultural workers into a

unified union of Soviet artists, ensuring that their efforts were directed towards supporting the government's platform and contributing to Socialist construction. During the first congress of Soviet writers in 1934, the regime formally adopted Socialist Realism as the principal style of artistic expression. This doctrine, heavily influenced by Maxim Gorky's novella *Mother* (1906), was reportedly coined by Stalin, who viewed writers as "engineers of human souls" (Harkins 1998: 204). To comply with the tenets of Socialist Realism, art had to be both realistic in form and socialist in content, serving the dual purpose of aesthetic representation and ideological reinforcement. Socialist Realism became a powerful instrument in shaping both art and society in the Soviet Union, demanding that all artistic and cultural production adhere to the prescribed norms that glorified the socialist state and its leaders. This approach ensured that art was used as a tool of political propaganda, reinforcing the regime's control over public consciousness and fostering a unified, state-sanctioned cultural identity. Stalin's regime exerted absolute control over artistic production, with artists being required to join state-sponsored unions and adhere to strict ideological guidelines. Through these measures, Stalin's regime effectively wielded aesthetics as a means of consolidating power, promoting its ideological agenda.

Scholars like David Hoffmann and Steven Heller have examined the intricate relationship between Stalinist aesthetics and political control. *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917-1941* (2003) by Hoffmann explores the cultural and social values promoted by Stalin's regime. The author examines how the Soviet authorities sought to shape its citizens into ideal socialist individuals through various campaigns and policies. In an effort to transform human nature to conform to socialist ideals, these initiatives promoted reading, sobriety, personal hygiene, and cultured speech. Hoffmann contends that the Stalinist regime did not simply betray the socialist revolutionary principles or revert to traditional Russian mores. Instead, it sought to manufacture a modern socialist order by mobilising and cataloguing its citizens. This included significant state intervention in people's

private lives and efforts to engineer social behaviour that aligned with state objectives. The book describes in details how these cultural campaigns coexisted with Stalinist practices, such as purges and forced labour camps. It also discusses the 1930s' efforts to boost reproduction rates, which occasionally clashed with earlier campaigns for sexual abstinence aimed at preserving energy for socially productive work. Hoffmann also notes that despite Stalin's collectivisation of agriculture, which destroyed the traditional groups of independent peasants, Soviet art often paradoxically celebrated traditional peasant life and imperial heroes despite the regime's official stance against bourgeois and pre-revolutionary elements. As Stalin's Cultural Revolution aimed to fight bourgeois influence, it purposefully utilised folk culture as socialist art. By highlighting these facets of Stalinist cultural policy, Hoffmann's work offers insights into the complex relationship between ideology, daily life, and aesthetics in Stalin's Soviet Union. In *Iron Fists: Branding the 20th-Century Totalitarian State* (2008), Heller outlines how Lenin's initial guidelines on art were codified into rigid regulations under Stalin. Art had to align with party ideology, connect with folk traditions to unite masses, and employ a materialistic interpretation of mimesis, emphasising the reflection theory in arts. These principles and guidelines ensured that art served as a vehicle for socialist education and propaganda. By exerting total control over Soviet art and cultural production, Stalin was enabled to impose his political ideology. He was hailed for his contributions to Soviet art, which he used to elevate himself above ordinary people. For instance, his supporters emphasised the leader's "brilliant contributions to the Soviet art as an art of Socialist Realism", which supposedly represented "the peak of all progressive efforts in terms of aesthetic thinking of humanity" (Heller 164). As Stalin's new world order required aesthetic representation, he positioned himself as the supreme artistic leader, exerting absolute control over the ideological content and form of Soviet art. By transforming art into a national responsibility, Stalin used artistic and cultural production to reinforce his authority and the socialist state's ideals.

Artists were obliged to produce work that was realistic, optimistic, and supportive of state policies, celebrating the labour movement and the envisioned utopia of the socialist state. As a result, prominent Soviet artists were forced to adapt or face censorship and persecution for their nonconformity. Artists like Kazimir Malevich and Alexander Rodchenko were initially praised in the Soviet Union for their ground-breaking avant-garde contributions, which aligned with the revolutionary spirit of the early post-revolutionary era. However, as Stalin's administration solidified power and shifted towards Socialist Realism in the 1930s, these artists encountered increasing repression. For example, the work of Malevich, credited with founding Suprematism—an abstract art movement that emphasises simple geometric forms and a limited colour scheme—was radical, boldly departing from traditional forms; and therefore, it was deemed inappropriate and subversive as Socialist Realism became the state-mandated style, emphasising realistic and optimistic depictions of socialist life and glorifying the state's achievements. By the mid-1930s, Malevich's career in the Soviet Union was effectively stifled; he was forbidden from exhibiting his work and lost his teaching position, living his final years in relative obscurity and poverty. Rodchenko, whose artistic endeavours included painting, graphic design, photography, and architecture, was likewise an innovative artist—a pioneer of Constructivism. His avant-garde creations, which placed a strong emphasis on industrial materials and utility, were initially seen as a perfect match for the revolutionary ethos. However, with the imposition of Socialist Realism, Rodchenko's experimental abstract approach fell out of favour. The regime's demand for art that was accessible to the masses, portraying unambiguous themes and conveying didactic messages left little room for Rodchenko's avant-garde techniques. Consequently, he was forced to adapt his style and largely withdrew from fine art, shifting his focus on photojournalism and design projects that aligned with state regulations. The marginalisation of avant-garde artists like Malevich and the suppression of divergent styles like Rodchenko's are a reflection

of the larger repression of avant-garde art during Stalin's rule. By enforcing Socialist Realism, the Soviet government sought to eradicate creative innovations and artistic experimentation, imposing a uniform style that could be used as a tool for ideological indoctrination. This period of artistic and cultural repression in Soviet Union left a lasting impact on the development of Soviet art, stifling creativity and driving many artists into obscurity or exile.

The totalitarian regime of Stalin's Soviet Union starkly demonstrates the dangers of politicising aesthetics. By co-opting art to serve ideological purposes, Stalin not only suppressed creative expression but also manipulated and controlled cultural production to uphold his totalitarian reign. This historical instance underscores the critical need to remain vigilant against politicising artistic expression. In contemporary contexts, understanding Stalin's use of aesthetics may inform our awareness of how visual culture can be exploited to spread ideologies and control societies.

6. The Common Aesthetic Principles for Both Totalitarian Regimes

Although Hitler's Third Reich was marked by aestheticizing politics and Stalin's Soviet Union by politicising aesthetics, both regimes shared significant similarities in their approach to arts, arts policy, and the types of art they promoted. These shared aesthetic principles highlight the congruence between these two forms of government in context of totalitarianism. They both adhered to certain aesthetic principles which became instrumental in shaping their unique forms of totalitarianism. Through these principles, art became an instrument that totalitarianism required to legitimise and perpetuate its existence.

6.1. Realism as Artistic Expression

The first aesthetic principle common for both regimes is Realism. By promoting Realism as the true and pure form of art, these regimes fostered their own values and ideology, showing a utopian vision of life under its rule. Realism, especially socialist realism, is a style that can be easily controlled and directed by

the state, requiring artists to depict reality in a way that aligns with the ideology and propaganda of the regime, often highlighting the virtues of the state and its leaders. As an art form, Realism is straightforward and easily understood by the masses. Totalitarian regimes often seek to communicate their messages and ideals to the widest possible audience, and art forms, such as abstract or avant-garde art, which can be open to multiple interpretations, are less useful for propaganda purposes. Realism, on the other hand, can be easily utilised as a powerful tool for propaganda, capable of mobilising the population toward the regime's goals. By depicting heroic figures, national achievements, and everyday life in a positive and inspirational light, Realism under Hitler's and Stalin's rules served to motivate and unify the populace around the regime's objectives. By embracing realism, totalitarian regimes can also position themselves as the inheritors of a long artistic tradition, which can provide a sense of continuity and legitimacy since realism has roots in various historical and cultural contexts, making it a familiar and acceptable form of expression. Overall, Realism as an aesthetic movement was favoured by totalitarian regimes because it could be easily controlled and directed, was accessible to the masses, idealised the state and its citizens, provided cultural legitimacy, rejected critical modernist trends, and served as an effective tool for propaganda and mobilisation. Hence, both regimes embraced Realism, not merely as an artistic style but as a tool to shape and control the perception of reality. In art theory, realism typically refers to the representation of real-life events, characters, or historical realities. However, under totalitarian regimes, this realism was not about depicting objective reality but creating an idealised version that served the regimes' propaganda needs. Descriptive realism or naturalism was not suitable for the aims of totalitarian regimes; thus, it was replaced by a sort of ideal type of Realism, concerned with creating aesthetics of politics as reality (Günther 2006). The aim of totalitarian Realism was to depict the reality under the regimes, which was indeed more fictional than realistic. In this kind of Realism, reality indeed

became fiction, accepted as fact. In service of totalitarian regimes and their ideology, art became realistic propaganda.

6.2. Incorporation of Folk Culture and Kitsch

Both regimes shared another common aesthetic principle, which was the incorporation of elements of folk culture and kitsch, aimed to unify and galvanise the populace. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term, *folk,* refers to "the common people of a society or region considered as the representatives of a traditional way of life and especially as the originators or carriers of the customs, beliefs, and arts that make up a distinctive culture" (2012). The term thus signifies common people and their cultural expressions. In 'The Totalitarian State as an Artistic Synthesis' (2006), Hans Günther elaborates on the ways the term gained new connotations over time, demonstrating how the incorporation of folk elements helped shape the arts and culture under these regimes. In both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, folk culture was co-opted to foster a sense of national unity and cultural purity. In Nazi Germany, the concepts of *Volk* and *volkisch* were tied to nationalism and racial identity while in the Soviet Union, despite the term expressing Slavophilism and nationalism, it related to class as ethnic identity. Nevertheless, it is evident that the Soviet national ideology was a reflection of the German one as both regimes used folk culture to unite their subjects against the outside world. The utilisation of folk culture and the incorporation of folk elements created an illusion of timelessness and continuity with a glorified past in both regimes. It aimed to unite people in an organic unit that stood against the mechanical outside world. As Günther further notes, the concept of folk culture served to distinguish the nation as united and differentiated from external influences (2006). Moreover, both Hitler's and Stalin's regimes emphasised the importance of clarity and intelligibility in artistic representation, particularly with the purpose of art to reproduce ideology. As a result, kitsch, often

used pejoratively to describe art that is overly sentimental or gaudy, was employed effectively to simplify messages for ideological purposes and engage audiences.

6.3. Rejection and Suppression of Avant-Garde Art

Both regimes suppressed avant-garde art, viewed as incompatible with their ideologies. Characterised by its constant innovation and rejection of traditional forms, avant-garde was inherently at odds with the totalitarian ideal of uniformity and control. While both regimes initially tolerated or even encouraged avant-garde movements, they eventually suppressed them in favour of art that conformed to their ideological needs. In Nazi Germany, this culminated in exhibitions like *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art), condemning and mocking modernist works whereas in the Soviet Union, the avant-garde was replaced by Socialist Realism, glorifying the regime's achievements and the ideal Soviet citizen. To elaborate, in Nazi Germany, there was a significant curtailment of artistic freedom, resulting in the prohibition of individual art criticism, which was replaced by centrally controlled *news about art*, aiming at promoting and disseminating National Socialist ideas. The peak of transformation in German culture and arts occurred during two exhibitions held in 1937. The first one, launched on July 19, 1937 at the Archaeological Institute in Munich, was called *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art). It displayed 650 avant-garde works by 112 artists under adverse conditions, with poor lighting and vituperative descriptions, intended to degrade modern art in the eyes of the German public who had previously appreciated modern art (Spotts 2004). Simultaneously, Hitler launched another exhibition at the House of German Art in Munich, the centre of official German art, which emphasised the purity of German art as a National Socialist ideal. A total of 900 works, selected by Hitler himself, were showcased to represent a realistic view of the Aryan ideal of beauty (Shirer 1990). These exhibitions were planned to present complementary examples of racial and political themes in art, and marked a significant turning point in the manipulation of art for political

purposes, contrasting so-called degenerate art with the propagandist realism that the regime sought to promote. Likewise, Stalin's regime suppressed the Soviet avant-garde. After the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia had established the foundations of Socialist Realism, the focus in art shifted into depicting the lives of the Red Army, workers and peasants, revolutionaries, and the heroes of the regime. In other words, the aim was to represent the new Soviet man in a style of heroic realism (Heller 2008). This purification of Soviet art meant the removal of the avant-garde in favour of Socialist Realism, which became the obligatory form for all Soviet artists.

6.4. Monumentality

Monumental architecture and sculpture were crucial in both regimes for symbolising their power and ideals. Monuments served to immortalise significant events or figures, provide a constant reference to strength, and promote the regimes' ideologies. Monuments also served as a form of teaching younger generations about the actions of their predecessors. By signifying through glorification, they expressed values and timelessness (Sturken, in Kelly, *Encyclopaedia of Aesthetics*, 1998: 272). The rise of monumentality in the twentieth century was thus precisely due to totalitarian regimes. Monumentality became a defining characteristic of the art, particularly in architecture. Totalitarian regimes sought a synthesis of all sectors of society, including arts, and architecture proved to be an effective aesthetic form to achieve this. As an art form, architecture is linked to practical functions, making it an ideal medium for synthesising different aspects of society. Both Hitler and Stalin recognised the importance of architecture and often took on the role of planners and builders of their new worlds. Stalin, for example, planned to build the Palace of Soviets. The Red Square in Moscow was planned to be purified of the cathedral and in its place, the Palace of Soviets was supposed to be built as the most important monument of the Soviet Union. This project was, however, never realised but it served as a model for the architecture

in the Stalinist era (Groys 2008). Similarly, in Nazi Germany, there were numerous monumental projects, one of which as a direct parallel to the Palace of Soviets, was Albert Speer's plan to build a central landmark of Berlin in the form of a monumental pavilion (Günther 2006). The goal of both regimes was to rebuild the cities, but with the failure of these regimes, these plans were not realised. Moreover, both regimes built monumental sculptures to reinforce the regimes' narrative and ideology. Official Soviet artists were commissioned to create thousands of statues. In both regimes, the dominant motif of monumental sculpture was a representation of the leader but also an image of an ideal worker. Monumental sculptures of the National-Socialist worker symbolised the Aryan race whereas a labourer in the Soviet Union was represented as a hero of the proletariat (Young, in Kelly, *Encyclopaedia of Aesthetics*, 1998: 277). The Nazi monumental sculpture emphasised classical forms, removing excessive decorative motifs, and instead manifested excessiveness of size. This desire for size implied an everlasting legacy for the next generations (Sturken 1998: 275). Similarly, classicism with the elements of national tradition in both regimes was a dominant form of architecture, merging past traditions with totalitarian promises of harmonious future.

6.5. Myth Creation

Myth-making was also a remarkable strategy in both regimes for creating and sustaining their ideological narratives. Myths, vital in the formation of cultures as a medium for conveying and maintaining values, norms, and traditions, played an important role in legitimising the regimes' authority. Additionally, myths provided a sense of social cohesion and solidarity. In general, myths are fundamental devises of indoctrination of "value systems and conventions of behavior" (Bonnell 1997: 2). In *Mythologies* (1972), Roland Barthes emphasises the influential role of myths during historical shifts. Barthes notes the resurgence of ancient mythology in the European tradition and the significance of myths in the

eighteenth century, which was a reaction to the rationalism of the Enlightenment. In Nazi Germany, myths about the Aryan race and the glorious German past were central to Hitler's propaganda. The revival of Nordic mythology served as a landmark for Hitler's ideology to justify racial policies. In the Soviet Union, myths centred on the proletariat and the creation of a classless society under socialism. In addition, myths are linked with the emergence of mass media and the creation of a nation. As a result, political myths also played a significant role in both regimes. These myths were administered and promoted to subdue the masses and create strong supporters who viewed them as facts (Orlow 1967: 906). These myths were propagated through various forms of art and media, reinforcing the regimes' visions and values. After all, both regimes aimed at mass support and thus, constructed their larger-than-life heroes utilising myth-making practices. Dietrich Orlow notes that after the First World War, the German society became fragmented and convulsed by economic problems. They turned towards popular myths that idealised the pre-war life that had fallen apart not because of the defeat in the war but due to a "political financial Jewish conspiracy" (1967: 906-7). Hitler's regime fabricated these myths to serve the national-socialist movement. Another myth was *the myth of the empire.* According to this myth, a Holy German Empire, independent of the pope, emerged as a projection of the mystical notion of *the Germanic-Christian marriage*. Nazi mythology further developed this idea and adapted it to their government. Thus, the Third Reich was built on the myth of the ideal of the Nordic race that originated in the representation of the antique ideals and the concept of an ideal nation. In Stalinist myths, the ideology that supposedly granted power to the working class was based on attributing global historical significance to the proletariat. Therefore, public discourse was necessary to promote the heroic role of workers and create a system of collective ownership that would eliminate class inequalities (Bonnell 1999: 2). Stalin, however, abandoned the vision of global communism and instead, he emphasised the nationalist characteristics of the Soviet nation, drawing on the traditions of the

czarist era. His goal became the fabrication of the myth of a class-free society under socialism, and soon, a new myth of a prosperous and content Soviet Union emerged.

6.6. The Heroisation of the Leader

Both totalitarian movements required a creation of heroic ideals that facilitated mass support. They utilised heroic realism to achieve this goal, making heroism a key component of their representation. This allowed them to express activism and gain support. The hero was often depicted as emerging from the masses, playing the role of a builder of the new world, leading people, overcoming obstacles, and defeating enemies (Günther 2006). However, there was one particular hero that surpassed all others. This hero was guiding the regime and his existence was bound up with it—the leader hero. In the Soviet Union, he was known as *Vozhd* and in the Third Reich as *Führer*. The leader hero played a vital role in connecting the masses and the party, and represented not only the official ideology but also served as the projection of the masses' fears, desires, and hopes (Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 1949). Thus, the ways Stalin and Hitler were presented were far from realistic depictions. Instead, the personas of these leaders were sophisticatedly fabricated to represent archetypes. Ian Kershaw analyses "the Hitler myth", concluding that the success of this project was evident in Goebbels' declaration in 1941 where he acknowledged it as his greatest propaganda success, a perfect work of art (*The Hitler Myth: Image and Reality in the Third Reich,* 2001: 9). Stalin likewise started building his personal myth right after he took power in 1924. Although his initial focus was on building the myth of Lenin, in 1929, Stalin began building his own myth by creating a link between Lenin and his life, which resulted in the myth of both Lenin and Stalin being infallible leaders (Rosenthal 2002). Eventually, the myth of Lenin was replaced by the myth of Stalin, with Stalin portrayed as a scientist, a scholar, and the educator of the Soviet nation, dedicating himself to the good of his people, with

no private life, no family, or hobbies, always working hard for the betterment of his nation. The myth successfully portrayed Stalin as the Father protecting his Soviet children.

6.7. Theatricality

Both regimes extensively used theatricality to evoke emotional responses and create a sense of unity and support among masses. The main objective was to replace constitutional forms of integration with emotional unity (O'Sullivan 1984). The theatricality took many forms in the totalitarian regimes and daily events in both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union were infused with exhibiting elements of theatricality. It was mostly performed during public events such as demonstrations, ceremonies, and parades, designed and staged with meticulous attention to symbolism, costumes, rhetoric, and visual and auditory effects. The public space, which was used to demonstrate the power of the regime, was turned into a theatrical stage where various elements of aesthetics were combined to evoke emotions. This use of theatricality aimed to replace rational political discourse with emotional identification with the regime and its leaders. Hitler and Stalin were presented as larger-than-life figures, embodying the regimes' ideals and commanding personal loyalty from the populace. The theatrical staging highly resembled religious ceremonies signifying the almost-divine power of politics. Both totalitarian systems thus also adopted elements from religious practices as a means of legitimising power. The leaders held the roles of prophets; Hitler was referred to as *the preacher of Providence* and Stalin was compared to Jesus, likewise often personified as having divine powers (Brooks 2000). Loyalty to these leaders was expressed through organised events that utilised religious ritualistic practices and theatrical performances. These ceremonies were the most common expressions of theatricality and were used as an aesthetic weapon to turn the masses into ornaments. Through theatricality, totalitarian regimes shifted politics into aesthetics, and likewise transformed the deeds of the leaders into an aesthetic

function, casting them into the roles of tragic heroes. This strategy also allowed shifting attention from their brutal actions. The utilisation of a tragic hero convention was not accidental and its relevance to theatrical performance was first explained by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. The use of a tragic hero in tragedy intensifies the emotional effect and engenders cathartic responses within the audience. For totalitarian leaders, a tragic hero convention was an ideal strategy that fostered audiences' identification with the experiences and ideas of the leaders. Comedy, on the other hand, characterised by several characters, could not evoke the same emotional intensity. Also, these *totalitarian fictions* required an antagonist, akin to the convention of tragedy. Hitler's antagonist was the Jew whereas Stalin's, the capitalist. As Frederic Spotts argues in *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics,* totalitarian regimes intentionally used Aristotle's aesthetic principles and power of the convention of the tragedy to evoke emotions and obscure the true nature of their rule (2004). Political ceremonies in totalitarian regimes also often relied on costumes and extras to create the illusion of unity and identification with the masses. For instance, the costumes of Hitler and Stalin were notably indistinguishable from the uniforms of the masses—a tactic that aimed to foster people's identification with the leaders. By strategically placing extras among the audience to unify the diverse crowd, these regimes aimed to manipulate the perceptions and emotions of the masses. These powerful propaganda techniques and tactics manifest practices that merge practices of aestheticizing politics with those of politicising aesthetics.

In conclusion, the shared aesthetic principles of Realism, incorporation of folk culture and kitsch, suppression of avant-garde art, monumentality, myth-making practices and the heroisation of leaders, and last but not least, theatricality underscore the similarities between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union despite their ideological differences. These principles were instrumental in transforming art into a powerful tool for totalitarian control, shaping the cultural and ideological landscape of both regimes.

Conclusion

The relationship between art, society and power is multifaceted and complex. As this article argues, art and aesthetics have been used as tools to enforce authority. The use of aesthetics by totalitarian regimes has revealed a complicated relationship between politics and aesthetics. These regimes have manifested practices of both aestheticizing politics and politicising aesthetics; practices that are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Hitler utilised aesthetics as propaganda to promote Nazi ideology but also imposed its ideology on artistic expression. Similarly, Stalin's regime fully controlled artistic production but also used art to glorify the Soviet state, suppressing dissent. Understanding the role of art in politics and society is crucial as it can be used as a tool of empowerment and control. However, the relationship between aesthetics and ideology is not always necessarily negative. Art can be a powerful tool for social change, capable of challenging dominant narratives, provoking thought, and inspiring social movements.

In today's world, the threat of aesthetics being abused is even greater. While the historical significance of the relationship between aesthetics and politics is evident, it is important to address its contemporary relevance. In the age of digital technology and social media, aesthetic manipulation continues to shape modern political discourse. Contemporary political campaigns, social movements, and even state propaganda leverage digital art to influence public perception and manipulate behaviour. This underscores the on-going challenges posed by the intersection of politics and aesthetics. The ethical implications of using aesthetics as a tool of political control necessitate further examination. Cultural institutions, artists and intellectuals, and society are required to navigate issues of censorship, cultural appropriation, and the representation of silenced voices. It is essential to safeguard artistic freedom and promote ethical practices in arts. Raising awareness and fostering a critical perspective at these dimensions might ensure that art remains a force for good rather than a tool for oppression.

Art also holds great potential for resistance and subversion. Throughout history, often at great personal risk, artists have challenged oppressive regimes through their work, underscoring the transformative potential of art in challenging authoritarianism and promoting social justice. Art that defies propaganda can inspire and mobilise towards positive change. In conclusion, it is vital to critically engage with the complex relationship between aesthetics, society, and politics. Supporting cultural organisations and artists that promote diversity and inclusion and uphold ethical standards in arts is essential. By doing so, we can help ensure that art continues to serve as a powerful tool for empowerment of the silenced, resistance against authoritarian systems, and foster positive changes. Understanding the complex relationship between arts and ideology, and acting on these insights can promote a more vibrant and just cultural landscape, ensuring that history does not repeat.

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