‘Freedom’ versus Autonomy

‘The [French] Revolution wrote, as it were, the word freedom on its banner but, in truth, it equated freedom with the arbitrary will and licentiousness of the individual... This idol of 1789, which [in fact] was the enemy of freedom and individuality, has been destroyed by us and replaced by a monument to true freedom... [The German Revolution] has effected a complete change from the concept of “I” to the concept of “we”, from the individual to the whole.’ (Otto Dietrich, 1935.)

‘In October 1917 we overthrew the Tsar, the landlords and capitalists, and the Great Proletarian Revolution has since developed in our country. The great Lenin, our father and educator, proclaimed that from that time forward we would no longer have either rulers or ruled, and that the people would be equal and free. In this way he buried the old bourgeois politics of the Tsarist era and proclaimed the new politics of Bolshevism, the politics of friendship, the politics of the brotherhood of the peoples of our country.’ (Joseph Stalin, 1935.)

‘To truly understand Fascism, one must first understand this truth: that it is not a reactionary tyrannical movement nor a blind ferocious hatred of change. On the contrary, it is and intends always to grow into an even more democratic aristocracy, governed not by the people but for the people and for their interests, ruled by a hierarchy which is always open, in which all can join, and into which the interests of all have penetrated.’ (Margherita Sarfatti, 1934.)

Unconvincing as it may be to hear the representatives of National Socialism, Communism or Fascism speaking about ‘freedom’, they all, in their different ways, believed that their collective, corporate states had created new forms of living which, because they were ostensibly for the benefit of all their citizens, were implicitly more ‘free’ than previous, more limited structures which had benefited only despots or bourgeois democrats.

In his speech to the party faithful, Otto Dietrich, Joseph Goebbels’s Chief of Propaganda, unwittingly touched on one of the central paradoxes of modern history when he noted that the third annual celebration organized for the Day of Art in the great ‘City of Art’ of Munich had coincided with the 150th anniversary of the French Revolution. Here, within the intellectual ferment of the European Enlightenment, he identifies the germ of the series of conflicts in which the meaning of “modernity” may be understood.

Logically, the free expression of the rights of the individual would, by definition, become less free if they were collectivized – a point which had been articulated with extreme passion by the Marquis de Sade. Individual freedoms soon agglomerated into new forms of nationhood, in which the people were governed not by despots but by their own collective will. Only in such states as these, Dietrich argued, could ‘true freedom’ be found. Yet, when it was analysed, the power of collective will was as confining, as confused and as mystical an entity as the divine right of kings had ever been.

The dictators of the 1930s were the apotheosis of modernity. By looking simultaneously at both the past and the future, they were able to sustain the fantasy of being able to stand outside their own time. They were prepared to draw a line through the past but would then have no compunction in remaking and remodelling its culture to suit their own ends. Aggressively modernizing, they were modern but hate Modernism. Their impulse to repudiate both modern art and modern culture, however, has to do with the semantic confusion between the ‘modern’ and the ‘Modernist.’

The aesthetic foundation upon which all modern ‘art’ has been built – the notion that an artist’s individual conscience or sensibility can lead to personal or universal redemption – is in direct opposition to this corporate view of culture, and was violently repudiated both by Stalin and by Hitler. There were similarly repressive tendencies within the Italian Fascist party, though Mussolini long refused to give them a free hand.

The idea of the autonomy of artistic expression was crystallized towards the end of the eighteenth century in the Critique of Immanuel Kant. These set out the notion of a subjective but altruistic form of aesthetics which expressed, symbolically and intuitively, what Kant described as the Absolute – a universal moral consciousness. Art was purely an end in itself; and, if it happened to illustrate other forms of reality, this was coincidental to the act of transcendent ecstatic
whereby art became a paradigm of individual and social freedoms.

Kant's ideas had been influenced by the ferment of opinion about the nature of law, morality and society which had consumed Europe during the previous century. In 1750 Jean-Jacques Rousseau had pointed out in a seminal essay, *Discours sur les Sciences et les Arts*, that science, art and literature – far from representing a universal ideal – had for many years been the agents of servility and corruption:

'Princes always view with pleasure the spread among their subjects of the taste for the arts ... besides fostering that spiritual pettiness so appropriate to slavery, they know well that the needs that people create for themselves are like chains binding them ... The sciences, letters and arts ... wind garlands of flowers around the iron chains that bind [the people] and stifle in them the feeling of that original liberty for which they seemed to have been born, makes them love their slavery and turn them into what are called civilized people.'

And from this point onwards, the idea of a specialized, fragmented and modern world became a pervasive double to that of the romantic, unitary being of the alienated but 'noble savage' – the human being who had not been corrupted by the decadence and idleness of despotism. Rousseau summarized the cause of this corruption as simply 'inequality ... Wherever men are equal, there will be neither rich nor poor. Wealth inevitably leads to luxury and idleness; luxury permits a cultivation of the arts, and idleness that of the sciences'.

Under despotism, art had reflected and reinforced the immoral power of the state. As an antidote, Rousseau maintained that the search for freedom and equality demanded that a moral sense should pervade all aspects of the new culture. By the end of the eighteenth century, Kant had provided an idealistic framework for such convictions, in which autonomy in the arts represented a field of non-specific, secular, symbolic and intransigent morality.

Kant's mapping out of the field of the aesthetic, as full of potential conflict as it may be, remained important because it constituted a symbolic space through which artists could move and work and in which they represented, as much as depicted, alternative forms of reality. In modern societies, 'Bohemia' and the avant-garde have fulfilled symbolic functions as counter-cultures in which aesthetics was established as an ethical field.

The concept of the avant-garde developed in parallel with that of modern art. The term originally been taken from military usage Saint-Simon in the 1820s to denote those revolutionaries and artists who could sensibly by the beginning of the twentieth century meaning had moved away from what was positivist model of progress to evolve a di- Kantian lines, creating a 'politics' and an were entirely specific to art.

Inevitably, at times, this discourse became conflated and confused with political ideas when faced by the naked reality of power autonomy soon crumbled. In the brave new world the dictators, the idea of an avant-garde either like an unwelcome reminder of the rallying point for counter-revolution. It w accordingly, one of the first manifestation order which had to be obliterated.

As the heirs of the French Revolution believed that they had at last fulfilled Robespierre's demand: men were now 'equal', and therefore longer rich nor poor. But the price the people pay for this was high: in an inversion of French original model, the chains which bound them were fashioned not by despotism but by the 'noble savage' had lost his autonomy as an integrity; the modern, ignoble barbarian control.

Art as a Weapon

'A new epoch is moulded not by literary warriors.' (Adolf Hitler, 1937)

'In our hands we hold a sure weapon, which we can overcome all the difficulties path. This weapon is the great and invincible of Marx-Engels-Lenin-Stalin, a doctrine put into practice by our Party and our Comrade Zhdanov, 1934.)

'A group of soldiers who at three o'clock in the afternoon have to get into a line of fire at four, or go up in an aerocities or counter-attack enemy flights, we vain the perfect preparation for these in the kiss of a mother, of a wife, of children or passionate letters ... Instead these fights around a table, where they are served a raw fish or a roll of fish and some "Raw M Trumpet Blasts".' (Filippo Tommaso Maroni, from "Art as a weapon")
In the words of Hitler, a failed painter, more successful politician and would-be architect of the Thousand Year Reich; of Zhdanov, a party hack, Stalin's mouthpiece and Soviet cultural supremo; and of Marinetti, a bellicose Futurist, anarchist and strong supporter of Fascist ideals, the rhetoric of war and struggle echoed across the 1930s like a trumpet blast. In Germany, the USSR and Italy, increasingly intense battles for the control of art and culture were an integral part of the establishment of power and prefigured the real war which started in Spain and then spread throughout Europe. These battles for art—or cultural revolutions—were part of the process of purging or cleansing through which each 'threatened' nation could be healed and made whole. Its enemies could be found everywhere; but first they had to be eliminated at home—where they seemed to threaten its very existence. Art was a weapon that could be used for this end. Only when a firm hand had taken control could attention be directed further afield, to those unknown enemies who lurked beyond the frontiers.

Both Hitler and Stalin had departed from Marx in that they believed that the control of culture was as important as that of the economy; both agreed with Lenin that, in a revolutionary society, culture had to be engaged with the party. But party culture did not already exist: it had to be created, and during the 1930s, both in Germany and in Russia, cultural revolutions took place during which all autonomous Modernism was eliminated, to be replaced with a compliant officialdom.

For Stalin and Hitler, cultural purity had to be imposed. Both, in differing degrees, paid homage to the Greek and Roman heritage; but Mussolini had a less defensive attitude. For him, this was already part of a living history; it was firmly rooted in the soil of the first Roman Empire which he saw sought to emulate.

These new states, which had all been created out of the chaos of the First World War, were essentially hermetic, self-referential bodies which set out consciously to establish new world orders. They were driven by utopian ideals and shared a common lineage in the traditions of messianic Socialism to which idiosyncratic admixtures of Nietzsche, Nordau and Marx had been added. And all, to a greater or lesser extent, believed in the eugenic theory of the creation of a higher race. The achievement of their programmes was schematized in a process of bureaucratic categorization and pseudo-rational centralized planning, regimented by weighty ministries and fuelled by an obligatory sense of solidarity and enthusiasm. In the religion of dictatorship, facts became fables; unpalatable realities, which denied the onward march of progress, were ignored or obliterated.

In spite of these obvious similarities, however, the ideologies of the dictatorships were distinct. Hitler's book Mein Kampf (My Struggle, 1926), the wellspring of the Nazi political programme, advocated the necessity of racial purity as a precondition for the future development of the German peoples according to the destiny which had been ordained for them. Written long before Hitler became a serious political force, it clearly set out the tenets of a totalitarian, racist, military state. The Aryan, Teutonic and Nordic fantasies of the Nazis were based on the desire to establish a Kultur which was worthy of a chosen people. This inversion of the Jews' belief in themselves as chosen marked the beginning of the racial policy that culminated in the Holocaust. The Jews were labelled as 'impure': the opposite of all the 'positive' values embedded in the Aryan race.

The ideology of Stalinism was formulated some time after Stalin had assumed control, as part of the general rewriting of history which resulted from the Central Committee decree of May 1934 On the Teaching of Civil History in the Schools of the USSR. This dealt with the issue of Stalin's political legitimacy as the natural and chosen heir of Lenin; the converse was the obliteration and demonization of such enemies as Trotsky and Bukharin. From this Stalin derived his mandate to forge ahead with the construction of heavy industry and the collectivization of agriculture in the Five Year Plans. The Short Course in the History of the All-Union Communist Party (of Bolsheviks) finally appeared in 1938 after the Great Purge and provided the correct party line on historical development to date. It was a justification of the increasingly florid Stalin cult, as well as mandatory reading for all painters of historical subjects. Such a version of events was grossly mendacious, but it provided a seamless narrative to support the image of Stalin which had been regularly appearing in propaganda and art since the beginning of the decade. Gustave Klucis's Five Year Plan poster, Under the Banner of Lenin for Socialist Construction (1930; p. 221) shows the face of Lenin as a mask, with that of Stalin emerging behind him; it was one of the first and most telling manifestations of this lie.

The ideology of Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism which supported the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was non-racial, although racial discrimination undoubtedly existed. As a result, its ethos was imperial rather than national and incorporated many races under a single leader (see p. 234:Should A Leader Typical Friend? A Much
stress was laid on the fact that the land area of the USSR covered one-sixth of the earth, from the Pacific Ocean to the White Sea. The history of antisemitism in Russia dates from long before the Revolution, but since Karl Marx, and some active party functionaries, such as Lazar Kaganovich, were Jewish — it did not become enmeshed in party policy until the Cold War, by which time Stalin's power in the party was unchallenged, and ‘cosmopolitanism’ rather than ‘formalism’ became the main enemy of the state.21

Italian Fascism, like Nazism, was a nationalist ideology which attracted for a time a much broader range of adherents. A streetwise amalgamation of nationalism and Socialism, forged in the social ferment which followed the First World War, it established its credibility in the image of the fascists — the insignia of the popularly elected lawmakers of ancient Rome. An axe head, projecting from a bundle of elm or birch rods tied together by a red strap, became a symbol not only of strength in unity but also of the penal power of the state — both physical and capital. Fascist gangs of Blackshirts helped Mussolini to suppress opposition, but beyond a state-sponsored syndicalism there was little coherent ideology to the movement which incorporated many different and conflicting viewpoints which Mussolini manipulated. Thus, during the 1920s he was critical of Nazi racism,22 but a significant wing of his party did not share this view; it was eventually adopted as party policy in 1938 when, under German influence, the anti-semitic Laws were enacted.

No formal summary of Fascism appeared until 1932, when Mussolini published the ‘Doctrina del Fascismo’ (Doctrine of Fascism) in the Enciclopedia Italiana. Typically, this built an ideology out of pragmatism: ‘Our programme is simple, We wish to govern Italy. They ask us for programmes, but there are already too many. It is not programmes that are wanting for the salvation of Italy but men and willpower.’

Equally telling was the showpiece Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista (Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution), which opened in Rome in the same year, to mark the tenth anniversary of the party's advent to power. The most modern and striking display techniques were employed, and architects of all tendencies were invited to participate in the design (pp. 39, 140-41).

Victims and Losers

'The triumph was short-lived, of course: always short-lived and, as it is written, 'tends in spite.' (Primo Levi, 1982).’

Rome’s and Berlin’s vainglorious dreams of domination were soon to crumble to dust. The old forgotten enemies. By May 1944 drawing to a close, Hitler and Mussolini’s German troops had swept across Europe. In the end it was not yet won. Under the dicta party artists and writers, along with war crimes were punished, forceful exile or had tracks at home.23 And the new Europe was characterized by a terrible vacuum when people, language and art.

Energy and power had begun to slip Atlantic, with those many artists who had escaped to New York, where a new generation of Americans was about to change the ambition of modern painting. In Europe, revived, but haltingly. The Cold War, social and political horizons, and their influence, either thorough or submissive. In Italy, a double political realism, between realist, Communist-inspired Pietro Gavant and abstract artists such as Fontana (who, during the 1930s, had been supporter of the Fascists). But it was a superpower, in which America was no more than an occasional moveable world stage. It rooted within the American camp, as of the Federal Republic.

Nationalism of the old kind was an empires of either East or West, and new international culture had to be put in its place. Socialist realism became the lingua franca in Eastern Europe. In the West, Modernism aspired to be a universal and international art but increasingly — in economic and pol in cultural terms — it was America that dominated the world stage. It rooted within the American camp, as of the Federal Republic.

Germany was split between the US West, and started to construct two separate and histories with which to justify its positions. In the Federal Republic there was a debate about the relative merits of socialist realism, which had political parallels in conflict between the rival doctrines of ‘freedom’ and collective ‘democracy’. I Democratic Republic there was a communist party line, but the country had a more

18 The first part of 13th
Kermep was written in 1921 in Hamburg, where it was first printed, and was published in Munich in 1926. A second part of the book was written between 1927 and 1928, and was published in Munich in 1928. The book was translated into English in 1937 as 'The History of the German Working Class'.

19 Lenin had prepared the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Provisional Government of the Russian Republic for the publication of the document during the power struggle with Trotsky and Bukharin, which ensued after Lenin’s death in 1924. For the story of Lenin’s letter, see Michael Holm and Yekaterini M. Mironova, ‘Lenin in Exile: The Uprising of the Soviet Union from 1872 to 1917’, in his


22 See note 15.


24 Of the suite shown in the exhibition, the U.S.S.R. were divided: Vova Seremianka, thuis, for example. The group of Nazi officers who murdered and tortured Jews in the U.S.S.R. were divided: Max Beckmann, Walter Gropius, Max Klahn and Max Klahn’s wife, Rosa, were interred in a mass grave, and Ernst Graul and Felix Naumann were buried in a mass grave near the train station. The group of Nazi officers who murdered and tortured Jews in the U.S.S.R. were divided: Max Beckmann, Walter Gropius, Max Klahn and Max Klahn’s wife, Rosa, were interred in a mass grave, and Ernst Graul and Felix Naumann were buried in a mass grave near the train station.
generation of East German artists began to invent a revised form of realism which tried to accommodate leftist traditions within both the history of German art and European Modernism.5

In the Darmstadt Dialogues of July 1950, Willi Baumeister passionately and effectively defended abstract art from attack by the realist painter Carl Hofer and right-wing critics such as Hans Sedlmayr who blamed modern art for the ‘loss of centre’ in our culture. Modernism – but only of an international kind – won the day in the West and received official patronage. And it was not until the 1960s that the generation of painters which included Georg Baselitz, Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, Jörg Immendorff, Anselm Kiefer and Markus Lüpertz was able, authentically and unapologetically, to re-integrate a concern with German cultural history and sensibility in their work.

One dictator – Stalin – had survived, and the purges continued in the USSR as Zhdanov, and latterly Georgi Malenkov, imposed an increasingly constricted concept of art. Opposition was impossible, but after Stalin’s death an independent, autonomous art again slowly began to take root within an unpromising, sterile seedbed.2 Within the system itself, however, deprived of its supreme leader and no longer fuelled by terror, entropy took its toll. Mikhail Gorbachev’s perestroika and the collapse of the Berlin Wall dealt the coup de grâce. Although it had enlisted some talented artists, the dogma of Socialist Realism could now be perceived as a nightmare rather than as a creative method or a style; it is one from which Russia has only recently, haltingly and painfully, begun to awake.

This battle for art has now come to an end, but it has been replaced by other no less vital contests. One paradox is clear: the point at which art becomes a weapon is the very moment when it loses its power. But the converse is also true: when power tries to enlist art for its own purposes, it runs the risk of curtailing other basic freedoms. In this battle there can be no winners, only losers and victims; and being a loser is probably the more convivial fate.

Like all ideals, complete artistic autonomy is impossible, but it is a symbol which should be cherished. For a free society, art is both a reflection of its complexity and an intimation of its capacity for change. As a result, modern art – almost by definition – often has an incompatible or critical relationship with the culture in which it is made. In a politics of totalitarianism (or even of consensus), where democracy is elevated at the expense of freedom, it is easy to overlook its value. But, like a canary down a coalmine, its state, no longer allied to power but dependent on it, may be an indicator of potential disaster.

In the world of metaphor which art resolutely occupies, the health of the canary is of the greatest importance; the essence (and paradox) of the autonomy of modern art is that it should be valued not only for itself but also as a sign and guarantor of other freedoms – particularly when it turns to peek the hand that solicitously tries to feed it.