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How Aesthetics Shape Our Ethics: Exploring Nazi Germany, The Soviet Union, and Digital World

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**How Aesthetics Shape Our Ethics:
Exploring Nazi Germany, The Soviet Union, and Digital World**

**Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College**

**By
Nika Kokhodze**

**Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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Dedication

I dedicate my work to the sudden urge for creation when the purple sun breaks the dark sky,
To my loved ones,
To my true teachers,
To poets.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank my family and friends for their unconditional support and love. Without them, writing this project would be impossible; the encouragement and comfort I've felt among my friends at Bard and my family abroad meant the world to me. Thank you for bearing with me, even when I would only rant about this work.

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Introduction

As a Georgian citizen, I have experienced the effects of war on myself. I was eight. I will never forget that deathly breathless silence that followed the question I asked my mom: “Mom, whose tank is this?” This project is as informative and philosophically packed as it’s personal. Questions always bugged me, even if they weren’t met with silence, even if they sparked more questions. The response was always needed, a reaction in some form. Reading other people’s works about the same questions that have bothered me made years more bearable and comforting. As was the weight and importance of poetry in my life – it served as an enlightening response. Writing poetry became the light I always sought as I felt left alone amid the darkness of ambiguity. Was it the poetry’s ability to serve as the vessel for truth or being lost in philosophy books that helped me to overcome the crises and defeat the loneliness? I don't know. But, being a poetry writer, I felt that poetry as a process and art itself should have had immense power and impact on our lives. Carl Jung, in his work *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections*, states: “Loneliness does not come from having no people about one, but from being unable to communicate the things that seem important to oneself, or from holding certain views which others find inadmissible.” (Jung 356) At the very least, poetry defeated my loneliness by becoming the medium of communication for my troubles, discovering my self-identity, and processing darker parts of life bit by bit. I opened up to myself, everyone, and the outside world. The more I discovered my micro-world in-depth, the more the macro-world made sense. Zooming out, more immense social structures like families, communities, cities, and countries all started to make sense – only after I began to look into myself.

Growing up in Georgia, with the fear of constant Russian aggression came the daily battles with generated propaganda from Kremlin trolls. When my grandmother expressed

genuine concern about the apparent and dangerous (though non-existent) threat of Nato expansion, I knew from that moment on that she was under the influence of something she saw on the internet. She became the prey of a propaganda monster. The disinformation was flooding our identities and therefore perceived places in the world – it shattered our attempts to raise awareness about the actual political situation in our own country. Even though now more people are aware of it, Russian disinformation is still as contagious and infectious as ever. Our contemporary struggle always reminded me of the vain attempts of Georgian poets of the first Georgian republic – how they combated the new encroaching authoritarianism and censorship from the bolsheviks and the Soviet Union. They all used poetry as the vessel for truth and art to awaken morality in their readers, trying to establish the identity of the newly formed state. Years after formally becoming a philosophy student, the realization became more apparent – how inseparably aesthetics are intertwined with ethics. Doesn't Russian propaganda work these entangled lines of aesthetics and ethics? Show a distorted image of the 'west' to someone susceptible, and the work is done – the image successfully evokes moral judgment in them.

Looking at the world outside of me and within me, with and without philosophy, gained immense importance. I began to believe that exploring the mutual dependence of moral beliefs that we hold dearly and the images we stumble upon would provide a fruitful space to venture on. Making even greater use of the art we encounter and create, and even greater awareness of their impact on the moral compass we all cherish will lead us to live the examined life. Aesthetics influences every facet of our lives; if the man is believed to be a multi-faceted being, one can argue that aesthetics successfully pierce through several of these various facets. Look at recent movie versions of marvel comics, where superheroes have become alive and immensely relevant to an audience of every age. The depiction of Thor, Odin, and various other superhuman

creatures, bring the ideals to life, so much so that kids dressing up as one — regarding them as role models seems like a routine every parent goes through. Whether we like it or not, whether we allow it or not, our notions and understandings of aesthetics shape our moral perception towards specific actions. The intertwined relationship of artworks and politics, language (stories) and conceptual framework, propaganda posters, and moral perception are the branches of the relationship between Aesthetics and Ethics. The cases of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union show how the form of Aesthetics is used to advance the party's political aims further. By controlling society's moral perception and emulating the ideological belief that reflects ethical belief systems.

Aesthetics is often regarded as merely the study of what's beautiful. However, by the term aesthetics, I would never just superficially mean aesthetic appreciation of artwork. True art cannot always be about beauty and appreciating what's beautiful. Since turning the ugly into the beautiful can often mean refusing to take the horrors of the ugly—and humankind's responsibilities concerning them—into account. Art is part of the inevitable process of making sense of things that have already happened or are bound to happen—it is a means to deepen people's understanding of the world and, therefore, a contribution to the collective struggle for examined ethical life. When discussing Aesthetics or Ethics and their intertwined relationship, I didn't want to constrain myself with specific theories or schools of thought. That is why the field of Aesthetics in this project encapsulates several mediums like poems, paintings, news, stories, film, and different types of propaganda like advertisements or authoritarian regime posters. The notion of aesthetics for me has always been the employment of critical reflection on art, culture, and other manifestations of human creation.

Regarding Ethics, framing this critical approach with a specific school of ethics would only hinder my ability to get to the depths of the issue. That is why this paper's field of ethics is often covered as intentional word choices like moral perception, ethical attitude/opinion, or moral judgments. I found myself thinking about the metaphor that best encapsulated the inseparable relationship between these two fields of philosophy. I began thinking about Aesthetics as the substance that lays the foundation for our ethical (or unethical) behavior. Aesthetics is a piece of clay that, through various manipulations by ceramists, can mold into a clay pot of ethics.

The first chapter takes inspiration from my life, growing up as a Georgian poetry lover. I only discovered the incredible power of poetry myself when I started writing as a teenager. This project would only have come to life with my deep interest in aesthetics, which was kindled by my love of poetry. The chapter aims to demonstrate how reality is frequently subject to our imagination and manipulation rather than objective factual historical existence. Aesthetics is a war weapon of history, with examples from the first Georgian republic, Stalin's crackdown on artists during the Great Terror, and contemporary Russian disinformation tactics to spread lies convincingly. Each section aims to portray how various mediums shape and reshape our understanding of reality, how images evoke moral perceptions, and how stories are hardwired with the conception of our morality. With the help of historical context, the first chapter aims to plunge the reader into the world of chaos, the post-truth era, where objective truth has long been dead, and modification of reality is routine. Even though the established power of aesthetics seems liberating and positive at the beginning of the chapter, it's quickly tainted and exploited for various immoral actions by a dictator like Stalin or by the contemporary villain of the world – Vladimir Putin.

The second chapter aims to portray the debate between Aristotle and Plato. The power of aesthetics is established in both of these philosophers' thoughts; however, through understanding the concepts of imitation, depiction, and catharsis – the chapter inclines more to the Aristotelian conception of Aesthetics. The idea of mimesis is further explained, and the example of Picasso's *Guernica* with historical context puts the value of depiction at a very high level. My main aim for the second chapter was to put the philosophers and their schools of thought about Aesthetics at work, make them sit around the big roundtable, and debate each other. Furthermore, the chapter is oriented more toward conceptualizing the different notions of aesthetics and aims to attribute value to the depicter and depiction. Throughout the paper, I often mention that images work their way through the formulation of our ethical attitudes through two primary emotions: fear and pity. I would want to think that if my description of Aesthetics can be reducible to a single school of thought, I would pick Aristotle and the second chapter portrays that as well.

The third and final chapter explores different types of propaganda we encounter daily. Because we often believe that propaganda is an exclusive moral shortcoming of an authoritarian state, we tend to go about our days in blissful ignorance. However, the third chapter opens up by bringing up the issue of aesthetics forming our ethics in contemporary apolitical light. As different types of propaganda are explained, the third chapter's main aim is to cut the clear connection between the perception of an aesthetic ideal that leads to a tilt to one's moral compass. In the case of Nazi Germany, the established aesthetic ideals served as the foundation for justifying the society's moral shortcomings. The unethical treatment of Jews is perceived as expected, even if it's immoral. Alongside exposure of the unethical that built upon the notions of aesthetics – the causal link is observed through examples of language formation. How the language one uses serves as the reflection of the grip of the ideological belief.

CHAPTER 1

Reimagination of Reality

Poetry vs. History: Georgia's Thirst for Independence

Georgia became the world's first socialist democracy in 1918. However, the Soviet takeover, which occurred on February 25, 1921, put a stop to that brief period of political promise. A poem by Kolau Nadiradze, suppressed for decades, portrays the dread and treachery felt during the Soviet invasion. The poem starts eerily:

It was snowing, Tbilisi was wrapped in mourning garb
Zion Cathedral was silent, and so were the people.
Our city froze, half awake, half asleep, once more,
The anvil was forging horrors.¹

The lyrics, which describe the scene as the Red Army of Russia advanced on Tbilisi, speak of betrayal with imagery like "They've sold you, and yoked you to a cross of torments." The depiction describes forthcoming grief, perhaps a sad prophecy of what would happen. The images are a synthesis of portrayed brutality by the epithets like "transfixed chests, slashed arms." Alluding to the historical sacrifices of the nation with: "three hundred heroes' bones were shattered, Wetted by the tears of Mother Georgia." The poem's last line, "Zion Cathedral was silent, so were the people," describes the silence that would engulf the nation — especially Kolau Nadiradze — until Georgia gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. The poem evokes images from history, and words in verse portray the convergence between the deep struggle for autonomy and Georgia's historical, emotional instability to co-op with so many losses while being forced to remain silent. Every time I've encountered this poem, it has some

¹ Janney, Matt. "Our City Froze": Rereading Kolau Nadiradze's 1921 Poem on Georgia's Lost Golden Age of Independence." *The Calvert Journal*, 25 Feb. 2021, www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/12563/georgia-independence-nadiradze-poem-february-soviet-occupation

kind of effect on me. Still, I could never answer the following question: How could depicting and portraying something so distant and unfamiliar bring me to an emotional experience? It's the poetry's power and the ability of a poet to bring the scene to life – it's the aesthetic depiction of a historical event that happened a century ago that makes me realize deeply felt moral troubles that occurred in Georgia right after the Soviet invasion.

Kolau Nadiradze was a part of a prominent group, The Blue Horns, Georgian Symbolist poets and prose writers who dominated Georgian literature in the 1920s. *Tsisperqantselebi* is Georgian for "The Blue Horns." Established in 1915, a group of young, gifted writers in the city of Kutaisi and put down at the beginning 1930s during the Soviet era. The whole of Georgia engulfed its influence, ideas, and aspirations. Thanks to Tsiperkantselebi, Tbilisi developed and became a hub for avant-garde intellectuals and artists. The movement responded to Georgian literature's Realism and civic forms. It made its debut under the vogue-invoking flags of symbolism and decadence. The group immediately won praise through their effective attempts to modernize and Westernize Georgian lyrics. Even though the Blue Horns were known for their early attacks on Georgian literary classics, their poetry remained nationalist. Between 1918 and 1921, when Georgia gained its independence, poets radical experimentation flourished. Despite the leaders of the "Blue Horns" making grudging conformist gestures, the group came under intense pressure, criticism, and prey to Stalin's Great Terror – Once the bolsheviks established the Soviet influence in Georgia in 1921.

Donald Rayfield, in his work *The Literature of Georgia: A History*, brings to the reader a historical moment when during the Blue Horns' second publication, one of the prominent poets explained the meaning behind the name:

“The meaning of Blue Horns was explained by Titsian Tabidze in the second issue of 1916: ‘blue’ represented the azure sky, independent romantic dreaming, the

establishment of a powerful kingdom; ‘horns’ stood for the traditional vessel for wine and drunkenness, to stimulate fantasy and intuition and penetrate the mysteries of the universe. *Blue Horns* thus had, as well as poetic ideal, a traditional association with folklore and the lost Georgian kingdom — it combined an aesthete’s society with ethnic ideals.” (231)

The specialty of Blue Horns lay in their poetry, masterfully capturing the old ideals with the touches of modern aesthetics. During the brief independence of Georgia, poetry became a forerunner and the leading force of ideological change and the exuberant future. Historians kept taking notes while poetry kept shouting and suggesting ‘what ought to be!’.

Even though Georgia never lost touch with its ethnic identity breaking away from the tsarist regime still became a significant milestone in the nation’s life. At a certain level, the newfound regained independence for Georgia meant they had to create themselves anew, digging through history and attempting to pave the way in a blurry and chaotic future. Georgia had to think about its place in the world like a lost teenager. Three brief years for the task at hand before the soviet encroachment. As funny as it sounds, just like a teenager, Georgia turned to poetry. Poetry often becomes an excellent medium for self-expression and communication for teens who are just starting to grow into their identities and social interactions. Poetry enables us to "look" into the parts of ourselves that we don't fully comprehend and to examine any presumptions we may make about our self-identity. History changed – the Russian empire no longer exists, the superimposed authority isn’t present anymore, and the nation becomes independent again. However, the bugging question of self-identity needs to be answered: who do we want to become? Or, what are some of our deepest values and ideals? It seems that subject of history alone falls short; it lacks the poetic charm, the creators’ reflection, and aesthetic outlook. In the case of Georgia, the existential issue of self-identity becomes the job and later the curse of poets and writers.

Donald Rayfield brings the translation of Titsian Tabidze to portray the depth of the poet's own perception of poetry writing. The poem named 'Poem-Avalanche' begins with this stanza:

I don't write poems ... it's me they write,
My life and the poem unfold alike,
I call a poem torrent, a landslide,
That sweeps you off and buries you alive. (241)

The poem itself points at the transformative power of writing, the power of sublimation – energy that bursts out of the writer, sometimes appearing as if the subconscious drive is what writes him as if the expression is the other way around, as if the poem is writing him. This verse portrays the creation and the creator as having an inseparable bond. Titsian Tabidze notes the universal importance of poem writing, which isn't tied to any particular historical event. It's not simply an answer, a performative protest against an ideology, etc. The writing process *itself* is a transformation, not a mere reflection. Titsian Tabidze, much like many other poets from Tsisperkantslebi, intentionally or not, created the aesthetic forms of expression that became universal. The artists' depiction that reanimates history before our eyes and plunges our imagination into various emotional states touches on the idea of the universality of aesthetics. The most influential art speaks metaphorically to the deepest ambitions of all peoples worldwide. Artists frequently work with symbols. Aiming to depict transcendence and humanity's greatest ideals, dreams, desires, and inner worlds rather than just material demands, such art echoes with universally understood motifs. If history is concerned with, particularly, what happened on which particular date from the calendar, poetry taps into the meaning of an event by employing this universality. Aristotle best describes the difference between poetry and history when he states in *Poetics*:

The difference resides in this: the one speaks of what has happened, and the other of what might be. Accordingly, Poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history. Poetry tends to express universals and history particulars. The *universal* is the kind of speech or action which is consonant with a person of a given kind in accordance with probability or necessity; this is what poetry aims at, even though it applies individual names. (16)

Aristotle praised poets for their ability to analyze subtle facets of human character, analyze how human fortune engages and tests character, and illustrate how human flaws may be amplified in exceptional circumstances. He considered poetry more philosophical, universal, and significant than history. We don't think about a character simply for amusement. Instead, and generally, Aristotle views the purpose of tragedy in terms that might be widely characterized as intellectualist: the goal of tragedy is to teach us something about ourselves, create the gateway for contemplation and perhaps even conjure up in us the internal dilemmas of morality. Aristotle's profound look at the aesthetics' importance and role are further explainable within his terminology with the help of concepts like imitation and catharsis. The difference that Aristotle establishes between history and poetry underlines how distinctly a creator/poet views reality as it unfolds. However, the Georgian dreamy lyricism and formation of individual and national values through poetry couldn't withstand the all-consuming march of history. It is precisely valuing symbolism and an intense introspective approach to poetry writing that got Tsisperkantslebi in deep trouble by overarching notions of social realism. The battle between different schools of aesthetics quickly turned into a life-or-death war for Georgian writers and artists. The Soviet Union was about to come into existence, and on top of the system stood arguably one of the vilest humans ever. Fully understanding the power and abilities of art, once a poet himself, Ioseb Jugashvili (Stalin) aggressively and violently starts to shape the notions of aesthetics – Poet should serve the state, by action, by writing, by thoughts and dreams. Everything changes.

The Great Terror: Stalinist Notion of Aesthetics

The Great Terror, also known as the "Great Purge," was a harsh political operation launched by Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin to terrorize opposing Communist Party members, writers, and anyone he deemed a danger. Most scholars believe at least 750,000 individuals were killed during the Great Purge, which took place between 1936 and 1938. More than a million individuals were deported to Gulags or forced labor camps. This vicious and violent campaign spread panic throughout the Soviet Union and had long-term consequences.

The vocabulary that the oppressors used to classify dangerous individuals suggested and “justified” the treatment that every freedom-loving citizen couldn’t bear under the censorship of authoritarianism. During the Great Terror, Stalin used phrases like "enemy of the people" and “traitor” to characterize those who his henchman hunted out. Stalin’s cult image is always on the people’s side – it’s a solid foundation for a tyrant that if anyone who dares and challenges him will inevitably become ‘the enemy of the state and the people.’ Under the flawed ideological belief and the undeniable influence of dictator Stalin, NKVD, or the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs (Soviet Secret Police), carried out the shooting and displacing of more than a million people. During the genocide, no one was safe; even the members of the Bolshevik party, political authorities, and military personnel were among the first to be killed or imprisoned. Peasants, ethnic minorities, artists, scientists, intellectuals, authors, outsiders, and regular citizens were all targeted. In essence, no one was immune from Stalin. According to some experts, 81 of the 103 generals and admirals were killed. Stalin also approved a regulation holding families responsible for the crimes of their husbands or fathers, which meant that even 12-year-olds might be executed. Therefore, “no one” means not a single soul. Realizing how allegedly Stalin treated even the closest of his circle, it’s no wonder that creators, especially ones that championed either

individualism and national values or flat-out condemned the encroaching soviet system, met a devastating fate.

Below is a propaganda poster² from 1935 by Gustav Klutsis. The picture represents what Stalin himself and the communist party established – the ‘Bigger than life’ figure of the leader as it occupies most of the image with the soviet red flags in the background. The grandiose



immortalization of the cult is something that every authoritarian state shares in propaganda; however, what is noteworthy and remarkable in this particular image is Stalin’s seeming lover of all people image. The short description on the bottom reads: *Long live the USSR, the prototype of the brotherhood of workers of all nations of the world!* Stalin is put forth not only as the one who should be unconditionally worshipped but as someone who’s on the side of the people. By

² Klutsis, Gustav. “Long Live the USSR, Model of Brotherhood among the Workers of World Nationalities!,” www.productivearts.com, 1935, www.productivearts.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Klutsis-Poster-Collection.pdf

people, we mean the proletariat, all communities, and all nationalities. Therefore, the artist, poet, one that goes against the ideals that Stalin provides for everyone, goes against the people. They become the “enemy of the people.” Consequently, radicalization and demonization of artists lead to their inhuman treatment by the party, justifying it as positing that it’s *for* the people. Ironically enough, Stalin is portrayed like a poet; he doesn’t only represent himself and his ego but is a manifestation of the universal – people’s will. A ruthless dictator like Stalin could only use this image as a facade – with the manic attempt to establish his importance universally, Stalin became the creator of the Great Terror, an architect of genocide. The inseparable bond between Aesthetic ideals and political (moral) ideals, as we will see in the case of Nazi Germany, was also very present in the early stages of the Stalinist era. The Great Terror started hunting writers when the NKVD and Stalin realized that poetry could serve as the vessel for truth or the form of aesthetic expression that evokes in us critical moral perception. This realization leads the oppressors to execute writers outright physically. But why? What aesthetic foundations predicate this harsh, inhuman, immoral treatment? To fully grasp the Stalinist notion of Aesthetics, we might look at just how art, in general, was perceived in the early stages of the Soviet Union.

Art, even though at some extent appreciated, at some level mesmerized, it is undoubtedly this attribution of power that, in return, leads to straight out condemnation of certain forms of art or systematizing it into the shape of state propaganda. At least, that’s the case in Stalin’s empire. The politics that the ruling party successfully enforced on artists and notions of Stalinist aesthetics take their primary roots in the ideology of socialist realism. Even though art, like socialist realism, on a superficial level comes across as a mere reflection or imitation of reality, it portrays deeper meaning, especially the artists’ attitudes toward Stalin and his empire. Socialist realist mimesis makes an effort to concentrate on things’ hidden essence rather than on

appearance. More similar to something like medieval realism and the discourse it had with nationalism than it does to nineteenth-century realism. However, because realism that we know of is concentrated on things that already are, on the genuine substance of things, it does not observe any concept of party spirit. It does not make any claims to offer political guidelines. Socialist realism, on the other hand, quickly diverges from any other type of mimesis and pierces straight to an artist's heart—providing them with a set of values, ideals, and guidelines for living and artmaking. Political guidelines in the enclosed authoritarianism like Stalin's Soviet Union ultimately mean moral guidelines.

Theorists of socialist realism typically focus on the purpose of art as a way of comprehending reality, that is, on its mimetic role. This lens allows the technique to be equated with avant-garde formalism while setting their positions apart from avant-garde aesthetics. The "ideology of bourgeois objectivism," which Stalinist aesthetics associate with naturalism, and which, upon closer inspection, turns out to be what the majority of observers, including the left theorists, meant by the term "realism"—the reflection of immediately perceived reality—distances itself from naturalism no less emphatically. Mimesis, connected to the so-called Leninist theory of reflection in Stalinist aesthetics and even in later Soviet aesthetics, denotes something very distinct from a preference for traditional realistic easel paintings.

Consideration of the concept of "the typical" is a central idea in all socialist realism discourse; therefore, it's necessary to further understand the concept before beginning an investigation into the intertwined relationship of aesthetics and ethics in the Soviet Union. In his book *The Total Art of Stalinism*, Boris Groys explains and analyzes Stalinist Aesthetics and how it further distinguishes itself from any form of socialist art or avant-garde. He mentions the words of Georgy Malenkov (a prominent Soviet politician who briefly succeeded Stalin as the

Leader of the Soviet Union) from the agenda-setting Nineteenth Party Congress. It's Malenkov's formulation that precisely captures the doctrine's mature stage as he states:

As our artists, writers, and performers create their artistic images, they must constantly bear in mind that the typical is not that which is encountered the most often, but that which most persuasively expresses the essence of a given social force. From the Marxist-Leninist standpoint, the typical does not signify some sort of statistical mean. . . . The typical is the vital sphere in which is manifested the party spirit of realistic art. The question of the typical is always a political question. Thus, in the way the typical in the life of society is brought out in the artistic representation, we can see the political attitude of the artist toward reality, social life, historical events. (51)

We can note that under socialism, what is seen as dialectically evolving and developing is that which corresponds to the most recent party policies and that anything that goes opposite to these policies is becoming irrelevant and disposable. Therefore, the relationship between the typical and the notion of partymindedness is apparent: the typical is portrayed as having the ability to see still-emerging party aims, detect shifting leadership currents, and determine which way the wind blows. More specifically, it is the capacity to foresee Stalin's will, who is the true architect of reality. The way Stalin perceived "typical" was political and aesthetic, never separate and always intertwined. The notion of "typical" explains why so many authors, musicians, filmmakers, and other creatives were sometimes given access to exclusive party circles and were urged to engage in the Stalinist power structure actively. Everyone, especially young artists, should see "the norm" that their works were supposed to depict. In other words, they were given a glimpse into how the party leadership shaped reality, and since they were (had to be) a member of this leadership, they could actively participate in this process. Artists can also dream; they can depict and shape reality as influentially as the propaganda minister, but as long as it corresponds to the party's will, dreams, and notions of change. Donald Rayfield points out how the artists, like the ones part of the Blue Horns, were treated:

Writers in the USSR were no longer individuals after 1932: they were collective state property, as much as the peasant' horses and pigs. They underwent a comparable slaughter, and their fates make no sense unless seen as part of a process of prophylactic killing initiated by Stalin and, in Georgia, carried out with exceptional verve by Lavrenti Beria. (261)

The Soviet artist is more valuable as a creator of the new reality if posed as a party official, not when they are in the studio in front of an easel. Paradoxically, what is subject to artistic mimesis is not an external, visible reality but the inner reality of the artist—one who can identify with and fuse with the will of the party and Stalin. The internal fusion should generate an image, or rather a model, of the reality that the party's will is striving to shape. Therefore, the question of the typical is political since a failure to identify with the party is outwardly reflected in the inability to choose the "right" typical and can only point to a subliminal political disagreement between the party and Stalin. The artists may not even be aware of this disagreement, yet they erroneously believe they are entirely faithful. Although it would appear illogical from the perspective of another concept of Aesthetics, in this case, it makes perfect sense to physically eradicate artists due to the contrasts between their aspirations and those of Stalin. Under the grasp of false ideological belief, it becomes only natural for the oppressor to ostracize and execute the creators who aren't 'party-minded.' Absurdly enough, calling them enemies of the people and "dangers for society" at the end of the day" becomes all too logical. Being a realist in these conditions is avoiding execution for the political transgression of permitting one's dream to diverge from Stalin's. The mimesis of socialist realism is the mimesis of Stalin's will, the artist imitating Stalin and giving up their artistic egos to benefit the "people" they are working on collectively. Stalin's intention to realize his goals, a mirror of his imagination, is "the typical" socialist realism.

Looking at the case of the Stalinist notion of Aesthetics and understanding the importance of the idea of "the typical" gives us a clear conceptual framework between Aesthetics

and Ethics. Soviet Union's aim that which was identical to Stalin's will during the Great Terror, emphasizes what instituted aesthetic ideal or state-incorporated notion of aesthetics leads to when it comes to morality.

Firehouse of Falsehood: Russian Disinformation

Russian President Vladimir Putin appeared on Russian television the morning before the invasion of Ukraine, explaining his reasons for going to war. While many people were concerned about what would happen to Ukrainians and Ukraine, politicians and academics were left scratching their heads about Putin's claimed arguments. His justification included well-worn fears about NATO expansion and Western influence, Russia's need to battle far-right nationalism and neo-Nazi extremism in Ukraine, and end Ukraine's ethnic-cleansing massacre of ethnic Russians. The former is a well-known fundamental strategic concern for Russia, while the latter results from long-running Russian government disinformation and misinformation effort. It is important to state unequivocally that there is no proof of ethnic Russian genocide in Ukraine. Despite this, Putin argued:

We had to stop that atrocity, that genocide of the millions of people who live there and who pinned their hopes on Russia...the leading NATO countries are supporting the far-right nationalists and neo-Nazis in Ukraine...The purpose of this operation is to protect people who, for eight years now, have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kiev [Kyiv] regime. To this end, we will seek to demilitarise and denazify Ukraine....I would also like to address the military personnel of the Ukrainian Armed Forces...Your fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers did not fight the Nazi occupiers and did not defend our common Motherland to allow today's neo-Nazis to seize power in Ukraine...³

³ THEPRINT TEAM. "Full Text of Vladimir Putin's Speech Announcing "Special Military Operation" in Ukraine." *ThePrint*, 24 Feb. 2022, <https://theprint.in/world/full-text-of-vladimir-putins-speech-announcing-special-military-operation-in-ukraine/845714/>

Concerns of a Russian invasion grew as the globe watched Russian military exercises and buildup near the Ukrainian border. While Putin has cast the invasion as a reaction to recent events, he and other Russian officials have been sowing the seeds for years, laying the groundwork for the narrative, rhetoric, and, eventually, the justification for the invasion. Russian diplomatic declarations dating back to 2008 claimed to rise in far-right extremism and fascism in Ukraine and the need to denazify the country and address alleged human rights violations against Russian-speaking ethnic communities. 2008 was years before the Euro-Maidan events strongly allied Ukraine with the EU over Russia.

For years, Putin's justification for invading Ukraine has been boiling. As we have all witnessed, it has peaked – Russia waged a full-fledged unprovoked war against its neighbor Ukraine. Officials in Russia made similar charges and statements before and during Russia's military activities in the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. Russia accused Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili's administration of atrocity crimes at the time, claiming to be intervening to rescue lives, avert genocide, and defend the Russian people in Georgia. However, there was again no proof of genocidal behavior on the part of the Georgian leadership before Russia's invasion. Vladimir Putin employs the same language in every address, speech, and explicitly articulated political decision. Underlining that gripped by the false ideological belief (in Putin's case, to serve as the ultimate savior and liberator of Russian citizens) also expresses itself through vocabulary.

Russia's primary narrative was that "Georgians are fighting against little countries" and that the Abkhazian and Ossetian people were being "genocided" by Georgians. Following the 2003 Rose Revolution, Russia launched its first large-scale influence effort against Georgia, which culminated in the August 2008 war. The Kremlin understood that Color Revolutions,

notably Georgia's Rose Revolution, jeopardized its two primary foreign policy objectives: preventing NATO's "encroachment" in the post-Soviet region and preserving a unique position and influence in the former Soviet Republics.

The contemporary Russian propaganda we all encounter in social media and several other digital outlets alludes to well-known authoritarian states' narratives throughout history. Russia's media strategy has radically transformed since it invaded Georgia in 2008. The nation's 2014 annexation of the Crimean peninsula was a clear example of this new strategy. It is still being shown in support of the continuing wars in Ukraine and Syria, as well as to further malicious, long-term objectives against NATO allies and in Russia's "near abroad." One could find many sources about the workings of Russian propaganda; sometimes, all it takes is to travel to post-soviet countries and start scrolling the social media or surf the web and be bombarded by Kremlin's established alternate realities.

Looking at the research on the workings of contemporary disinformation mechanisms and tactics employed by the Russian Government better puts the issue of manipulated mass morality through stories and imageries more evident. One such research published in 2016 still holds crucial relevance in identifying key characteristics of contemporary Russian Propaganda. RAND corporation, by authors Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, very deservedly names it: *the firehose of falsehood*. The name is attributed due to two main reasons: a large number of channels and messages and an opportunistic propensity to spread lies or outright falsifications. Massive amounts of Russian propaganda are produced, transmitted, or otherwise delivered through various means. This propaganda encompasses text, audio, video, and still images disseminated by traditional radio and television broadcasts, social media, satellite television, and the Internet. A sizable group of hired Internet "trolls" who frequently criticize or discredit ideas

or knowledge that contradicts Russian themes are among the producers and disseminators. They do this through online chat rooms, discussion forums, and comment sections on news and other websites. Anecdotal evidence from an ex-paid Russian Internet troll claims that the trolls work 12-hour shifts around the clock and have a daily quota of 135 comments with at least 200 characters.

Fortunately, technology has also allowed many non-profit organizations and human rights advocates to effectively trace the malicious and ingenuine workings of these Russian-funded “trolls.” The sheer fact that a person has a job to undertake an effective reshaping of reality and flat-out falsifying history is depressing. In 2014, Russia realized that creating stories, coming up with false narratives, and spreading the created alternate reality through vast channels with rapid repetition worked. Well, it at least worked on its citizens’ conception of reality. However, the logical question arises: How could Russia achieve this mass hypnosis? Even though we can go into detail about the effects of the diversity of sources (that increase the perception of credibility) or the repetitiveness that dulls our rational senses over time, what matters here, as in several cases brought in this paper, is the Aesthetic substance of the content. Whether the falsified reality is received as truth for Russian citizens is in many ways predicated upon the imagery they encounter. The project StopFake very well portrayed and documented all of this in 2014. Their blog on *Russia’s top 100 lies about Ukraine*⁴ includes exactly one hundred posts and images modified by Russian trolls to affect Russia’s citizens’ moral perception of Ukraine. Looking at some of the absurd and blatantly untruthful imagery that backs up and justifies the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014, it becomes apparent that disinformation aims to reshape the ethical attitude towards Ukraine and the event of war. To look at a few examples and better bring to light

⁴ StopFake. “Russia’s Top 100 Lies about Ukraine.” *StopFake*, 12 Aug. 2014, www.stopfake.org/en/russia-s-top-100-lies-about-ukraine/

the truly darkest sides of disinformation, I will use the photos retrieved from Stopfake.org. Russian propagandists frequently utilize images of human suffering. Their true nature and intention become apparent when the created narrative capitalizes on children's suffering.

Through appealing to overwhelming emotion, images that invoke fear or pity in the viewer altogether drive the average social media user to their anti-Ukrainian agenda. Below is an image of a post⁵ from back then, a famous Kremlin troll with hundreds of followers; manipulation of the image encapsulates the inhumane and absurd extents that disinformation reaches. He posted a photo of a kid from Ukraine who had had her drawing modified from "I don't want war" to "I want war," using Photoshop.

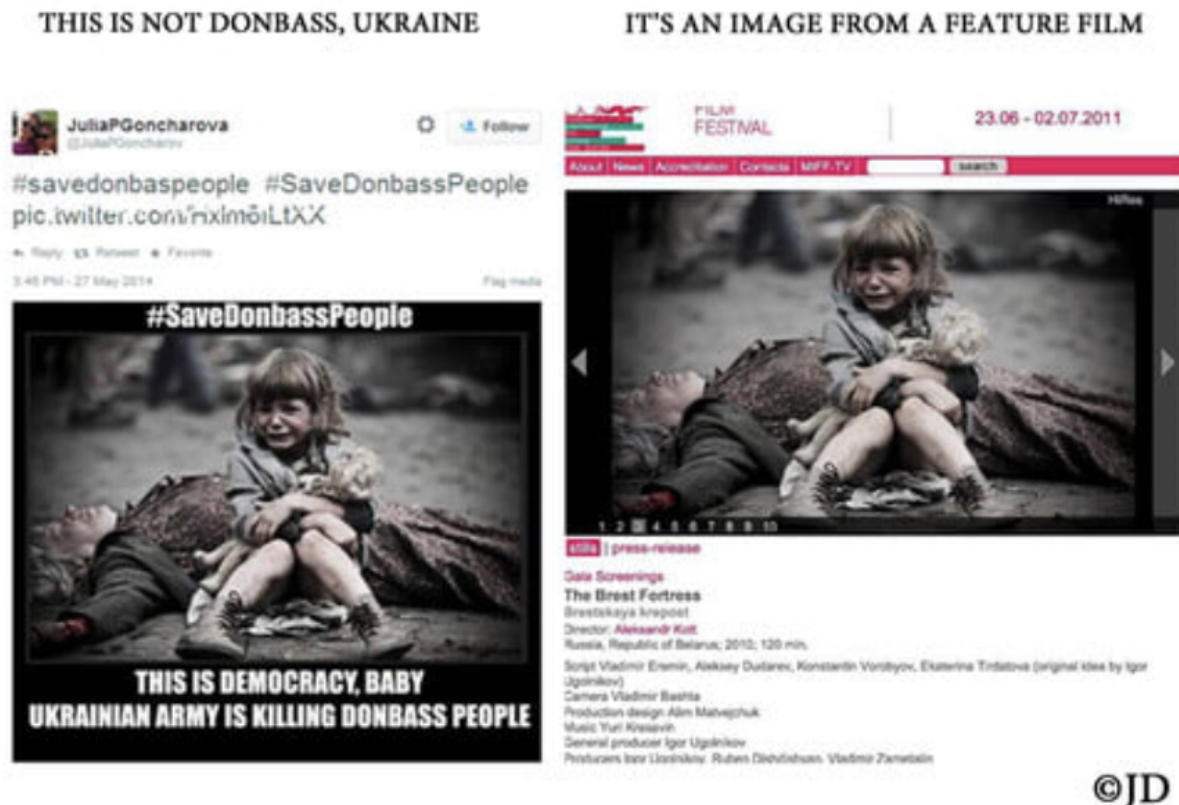


⁵ Ibid, image 81

The collection Stopfake has on the website speaks for itself; part one features various posts of Kremlin trolls containing many graphic images. It appears that very blatantly and unashamedly, trolls are taking violent, gruesome, and disturbing photos of the dead, tortured, and killed people and flat-out blame it all on Ukraine. Pictures and photographs are from all over the world, to name a few: Syria, Venezuela, South Ossetia (unashamedly), and many more. For trolls, it doesn't matter where the violence comes from, the context, or even the geographical location of the crime. What matters is the pure effect the image of human suffering has on us. It seems that as long as the image is appalling, it works for their primary job of persuasion. Kremlin trolls capitalize on the shocking effect we have when confronted by the imagery of violence and employ the effect to reshape the reality to pose Ukraine as guilty of these crimes. Thanks to trolls, the representation of the Ukrainian government and even the Ukrainian people becomes very fearful and dangerous.

The created image suggests an ethical attitude through the tools of Aesthetics (or, in this case, abhorrently unaesthetic imagery). It becomes only logical to fear the bloodthirsty barbarians near one's border, and it's logical to form a strongly negative ethical opinion about them with the help of this overwhelming "evidence." I will not go into more detail and not show the graphic imagery of many posts here. However, to get a sense of where I'm coming from here is another post that shows a similar technique, appealing heavily to emotion, mainly pity (in this case), to reach and shape the ethical assumptions of its viewers. This picture⁶ below is number 10 from Stopfake's collection. This post uses an image from a movie. The imagery was misrepresented as being of a real kid whom the Ukrainian military had abandoned in the Donbas region of Ukraine.

⁶ Ibid, image 10



Instead of looking at these mindless falsifications and forgeries, it is better to save our mental energy for what will come later in the paper. Apart from the inseparability of our moral perception and the imagery we encounter, these examples also portray the power of narrative and story. The exploration of the Aesthetics field also reflects the importance of overarching stories and narrative frameworks, following the intertwined relationship of Aesthetics and Ethics as a leitmotif. One can never overlook the significance of a story, especially when talking about the past, present, or future of a nation: In our case, either Georgia or Ukraine.

Stories are what form nations. Every day that goes by increases the number of tales that Ukrainians will share, not just in the gloomy days to come but also in the decades and generations that follow. The president insisted on remaining in the capital and informed the US that he needed ammo rather than a ride; the Snake Island troops urged a Russian warship to "go fuck yourself,"; and the bystanders who attempted to obstruct Russian tanks by blocking their

way. Stories are the substance that makes up an entire nation. These narratives have a more significant long-term impact than tanks. The stories tell the bravery displayed by the Ukrainians that inspires the whole globe, not just the Ukrainians. The governments of European countries, the US government, and even the oppressed Russian populace are inspired by them. The German government can manage to provide the Ukrainians with some anti-tank missiles, the US government can quickly shut off Russia's access to Swift, and Russian civilians can find the strength to show their opposition to this pointless conflict—if the Ukrainians have the bravery to stop a tank with their bare hands. However, looking at the impact of stories and narratives, one begins to think, why is there so much importance? And how exactly does this importance manifest in our shared reality and interconnected communication networks? To better understand the questions posed above, one might examine the distinctions between an objective, subjective and inter-subjective realms. Understanding just how the reality for humans can be shaped and reshaped throughout history one can take a look at the immensely powerful work of Yuval Noah Harari. In his book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* Harari states:

The inter-subjective is something that exists within the communication network linking the subjective consciousness of many individuals. If a single individual changes his or her beliefs, or even dies, it is of little importance. However, if most individuals in the network die or change their beliefs, the inter-subjective phenomenon will mutate or disappear. (117)

The inter-subjective realm of our consciousness is best portrayed with the existence of the internet in our lives. Therefore, it is this interconnectedness that Kremlin trolls try to exploit with disinformation. A compelling story/news doesn't only provide the context for the images; it often serves as the reflection and foundation of the moral perception it strives to instill in its viewers. Stories we invent, portray, and encounter provide narratives and are the founding myths for what the inter-subjective concept, like a nation, stands for. Whether it's poetry trying to stumble upon

the self-identity, a piece of invented news by a troll that tries to persuade its reader, or a story of bravery that boosts the fighting morale of an oppressed country like Ukraine – some form of narrative is at the background for all of them.

Providing a story, or rather an alternate history is something that Putin has personally done as well. Vladimir Putin's Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation reshapes our regular look at history. He states:

I would like to bring those who think this way back to reality, to the facts. To do so, I will recall once more Russia's most recent history. Above all, we should acknowledge that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century. As for the Russian nation, it became a genuine drama. Tens of millions of our co-citizens and compatriots found themselves outside Russian territory. Moreover, the epidemic of disintegration infected Russia itself.⁷

Knowing the history of Georgia and many other post-soviet countries, this speech's wording is deceitfully misleading and shameful. When Putin names the collapse of the Soviet Union "a major geopolitical disaster," instead of simply realizing that enslaved and oppressed countries were finally happy to regain independence, Putin puts himself in the position of a savior. The savior who will restore the Union and avert this terrible disintegration from escalating any further. Imperialist aggression put the story he told himself in effect with wars Russia waged around debatable regions and post-soviet territory right after Putin's presidential election. What freedom-loving countries near the Russian border view as Russia's imperialist thirst for Putin, as vocalized in 2005, is merely an attempt to unionize Russia again, with the addition of the territory that the Soviet Union lost.

Challenge is to be aware of our current condition in the world. Overwhelmed by the information of the digital world, the truth became infinitely harder to distinguish, whether we

⁷ Putin, Vladimir. "Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation." *President of Russia*, 25 Apr. 2005, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>

look at the contemporary disinformation politics, Georgia's lost attempts at establishing its place in the world or the notions of Stalinist socialist realism – the heart of the issue lies in the depiction of history. These cases portray that the aesthetics employed by various mediums like poetry writing, storytelling, forgery of images, and narratives serve as the foundation for our ethical opinions and attitudes. The next chapter discusses specifically the crucial concept of the power of depiction in aesthetics and how this power overflows in our conception of ethics through the lens of Aristotle's and Plato's terminology.

CHAPTER 2

Imitation, Depiction, and Mimesis

The power and influence of an art form on us, especially on our morality, is examined as far back as the existence of ancient Greece civilization. Aristotle, the prominent student of Plato, still calls tragedy a form of *mimesis* but goes much further than just 'banishing the poets.' Aristotle realizes that Aesthetics in our lives has a much more profound, authentic, and deeper presence in the form of evoking catharsis.

In Plato's world, the city's and the philosopher king's essential virtues are truth and justice. Literature depicting gods and dishonest human action is prohibited. Deception is forbidden except for the guardians, who may speak lies for the city's welfare. Socrates claims that actual knowledge necessitates comprehension of THE Form because all else is a shadowy reflection of the Forms. What's essential is the abstract, ideal, faultless, and changeless Form of Beauty. Time and change only have an impact on the physical world's beauty. However, the Form of Beauty is unchanging, flawless, and genuine in the realm of ideas. Individual examples

of beauty are weak replicas of the Form, missing the perfection of the Form; hence only the Form of Beauty is genuinely beautiful and authentic.

To conceptualize where Plato is coming from with his critique of the arts, one can look at the reasoning Socrates provides in the last book of *The Republic*: about the value of the arts. Socrates states: “Then the imitator, I said, is a long way off the truth, and can do all things because he lightly touches on a small part of them, and that part an image.” (Plato 255) He claims that art is a kind of imitation and hence has less value than the Form itself. After calling the arts a type of imitation, a more thorough critique is inevitable with the aid of his theory of the Forms. Previously, he just stated that particular works of fiction might have a detrimental educational influence on individuals; now, he criticizes poetry's intrinsic character. For Plato, if our physical reality is a copy of the world of Forms, then art is a copy of our reality. As it is two steps away from the Forms, individuals who create art move in the opposite direction of philosophy—away from the truth and toward an "image" or non-reality.

One might look at Vincent van Gogh's *Bedroom in Arles* and imagine the Platonic understanding of the painting's detail (a bed). The presence and features of all conceivable beds, for example, are included in the form of the bed, although a single instance of a bed is merely a tiny fraction of that totality. A painting of Van Gogh's bed, by extension, only shows one physical aspect and one artist's viewpoint on the bed, making it a smaller subset of the entirety possessed by the Form of the bed. As a result, Plato's philosophy provides a complete rebuke of art. The debate revolves around Socrates' definition of "imitation." He argues that whereas a form encompasses the whole universe, an imitation simply "touches on a small fraction" of that universe. Deeming an art form as a mere act of imitation (*mimesis*) and the artists as a mere “imitator,” Plato misjudges the actual values of art and neglects the arts' potential power. Mimesis

is the branch that Aristotle picks up and develops in his book of *Poetics* – still basing the arguments around the definition of the creation of art as the act of imitation but goes beyond, perhaps providing a more profound and more accurate understanding regarding the purposes of art in our lives. The Theory of Forms, according to Aristotle, is simply an affirmation of universals' supremacy over particulars. Plato claims that specific examples of beauty or justice arise solely from their participation in the universal Form of Beauty or Justice. On the other hand, Aristotle argues that universal conceptions of beauty and justice are derived from examples of beauty and justice in the real world. We only have a notion of beauty after watching specific examples, and the universal attribute of beauty does not exist outside of this conception. Aristotle emphasizes the significance of paying attention to the intricacies of this world, becoming engaged with it by saying that the particulars come first and the universals follow.

For Plato, the stories should be straightforward narratives rather than imitative theatrical works in which the poet may show evil characters, as imitating evil is to *become* evil. The dramatic style is prohibited because it places shameful words and thoughts on the lips of gods and heroes who should only speak noble and virtuous things. Because future protectors must specialize, gaining only the talents necessary for their role, literature depicting one person as several personalities or transforming would confuse them. Socrates speaks:

And we must beg Homer and the other poets not to be angry if we strike out these and similar passages, not because they are unpoetical, or unattractive to the popular ear, but because the greater the poetical charm in them, the less are they meet for the ears of boys and men who are meant to be free, and who should fear slavery more than death. (57)

This paragraph reveals Socrates' willingness to ban well-known works of art to implement his ideal city. He accomplishes the banishment in a slightly convoluted but ingenious way as he asks pardon from the (dead) poets themselves. Homer's epics were the basis and core of Greek

civilization; therefore, the allusion to him is particularly controversial. Socrates' belief that even these masterpieces must be excluded from the ideal city demonstrates how far he wanted to defy his contemporaries' perceptions. He wasn't suggesting minor tweaks to the cultural norm but rather a total overhaul of its guiding principles. How the Soviet Union cracked down, censored, and killed talented poets, writers, public figures, and artists all too well reflects how inhumanely far this reasoning can go. Perhaps, the thoughts of the NKVD officer who knocked before busting through the door of a Georgian symbolist poet were: It is all for building that ideal world. Please follow us to the nearest gulag. The thought with the same pathos as Plato's willingness to banish and censor whatever stands in the way of building the 'ideal city.'

Furthermore, the quote mentioned above shows how Socrates goes beyond merely stating that the aesthetic value of these works should not be used to justify their repression. For this reason, Socrates believes we must banish them from the ideal city: Their "poetical charm" will attract undue attention and mask the text's negative consequences. As a result, Socrates portrays the aesthetic methods that provide meaning to literary works as intrinsically harmful: They fail to fulfill the teaching function he seeks from these works and make it difficult to concentrate on the educational substance – Aristotle would reply to Socrates' superficial understanding here with the objection:

Imitation comes naturally to human beings from childhood (and in this they differ from other animals, i.e. in having a strong propensity to imitation and in learning their earliest lessons through imitation); so does the universal pleasure in imitations. What happens in practice is evidence of this: we take delight in viewing the most accurate possible images of objects which in themselves cause distress when we see them (e.g. the shapes of the lowest species of animal, and corpses). The reason for this is that understanding is extremely pleasant, not just for philosophers but for others too in the same way, despite their limited capacity for it. (6-7)

This paragraph is noteworthy because it shows that imitation, and hence poetry creation, is a natural human impulse. According to Aristotle, humans learn by imitation, beginning early in life. Humans learn to care for themselves and others by mimicking their parents or others in their environment, which supports Aristotle's theory about poetry. It is only natural for people to create poetry, as it is a type of imitation. Aristotle continues and claims that witnessing imitated creations provides natural pleasure, which supports his notion that humans have an inherent desire to produce art and poetry.

Aristotle as a philosopher, certainly enjoys learning and understanding. Still, as a side note, he attributes the ability to enjoy knowing and understanding to everyone, not exclusively philosophers. More importantly, Aristotle also argues that witnessing upsetting sights from a safe distance, such as on a stage or in the pages of a book, not only brings home his point that art and poetry are natural and hence inevitable creations but also sets the most prominent foundation of Aristotle's approach towards the power of art and creation. What differentiates Aristotle from Plato is his significant attribution to the concept of *Catharsis*. Catharsis is the process of feeling intense emotions, such as fear and pity, and therefore 'purifying' one's body from the result of it. According to Aristotle, catharsis, or "purification," is the ultimate goal of tragedy. For Aristotle, one can say that the art form (tragedy) initiates emotional experience (catharsis) closely linked to our morality. The tragedy is linked with fear and pity—the feelings that tragedy should evoke in the audience. According to Aristotle, the most efficient approach for tragic poetry to achieve catharsis is through narratives that contain reversal and recognition (Technical terms he uses to categorize further and differentiate how tragedy affects its viewer). Aristotle believed that a well-designed tragedy should include a storyline that induces catharsis at the mere mention of events, such as Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, in which Oedipus unconsciously murders his father, has

sex with his mother, and then puts out his own eyes in sorrow. Catharsis, according to Aristotle, is highest in plays like *Oedipus Rex*, when an unexpected narrative reversal causes sentiments of terror and pity. Unexpected reversals contribute to shock, which, according to Aristotle, is more intense and complete when it occurs spontaneously and for a purpose. According to Aristotle, catharsis is the unique experience of art; however, it is unclear whether he understands catharsis as the objective of art or just as a result.

The Greek term *katharsis* means "purging" or "purification," and it also refers to a doctor's inducement of vomiting to clear the body of pollutants. In a dramatic performance, Aristotle uses the phrase symbolically to allude to the discharge of pent-up feelings of pity and terror. We can let go of the tension that accumulates during a dramatic performance in such a manner that we frequently cannot let go of the tension that builds up over our lives because theatrical performances stop, whereas life carries on. If, on the other hand, the ultimate objective of art is to allow us to feel tremendous emotions and then let them go, then art becomes the equal of therapy. Therapeutic experience makes us clear our heads about the subject we are thinking about and brings clarity. Consequently, the judgment and choice-making of an individual will inevitably shift to the moral side, as the tensions of one's soul are released and will not necessarily become the object of projection anymore. Perhaps for a psychoanalyst vocabulary, it may bring the unconscious to the conscious and the dark to light, so the path forward will seem more visible. According to a more liberal reading of Aristotle, Catharsis is a means to a less readily defined end, which entails a greater capacity for emotion and compassion and more complex knowledge of what makes us human.

Imitation gives place to representation and portrayal when we engage in more complex *mimêsis*, where we need not be seen as trying to replicate anybody or anything in any specific

way. Because tragedy seeks to speak of what may be, philosophically address universal issues, and enlighten an audience by their representation instead of copying what is, as we have seen in Aristotle's distinction of tragedy (and poetry) from history. Mimesis is, thus, really just imitation. Still, as it develops to suit the purposes of tragedy, it becomes more complicated and potent, especially in the hands of poets (creators) who know how to use it effectively.

Furthermore, imitation and depiction can and have worked as tools for our reflection, transcending superficial understandings. It becomes evident just how much effect a single image has. Looking at the example of Pablo Picasso's massive mural-sized painting, *Guernica* will best portray the power of depiction – the purpose of mimesis of tragic events, especially in the hands of a master who knows how to use it effectively. *Guernica* was displayed to millions of visitors at the Paris World's Fair in 1937, expressing Picasso's disgust against war. Since then, it has emerged as the most powerful condemnation of war in the twentieth century – in two words; it has become an antiwar icon. The picture is around eleven feet tall and twenty-five feet broad, contributing much to its emotional impact. *Guernica* is not simply a work of art that one can look at; instead, it envelops the viewer and draws one into its dramatic action and larger-than-life creatures. Spanish fascist troops commanded by General Francisco Franco started a civil war in 1936 to destroy the democratic Republican government there. The events of April 27, 1937, when Hitler's overwhelming German air force devastated the town of Guernica in northern Spain—a city with little significant military value—are the inspiration for Picasso's artwork. It was the first airborne saturation bombardment of civilians in recorded history. The destruction was horrifying—fires raged for three days, and 70% of the city was utterly destroyed. 1600 inhabitants, or one-third of the population, were injured or killed. Being a supporter of the Republican administration of his native country, Picasso was shocked by the accounts of

destruction and death upon hearing the news. His artistic response to the horrific manslaughter is the painting *Guernica*. Picasso's brief interaction with the "creator" of this artwork is now known as a very popular story. As the legend goes, in the 1940s, during the German occupation of Paris, a Nazi official paid a visit to Picasso's studio. He is alleged to have asked Picasso, in front of a picture of the artwork, "Did you do that?" Picasso said, "No, you did."⁸

Guernica reminds us to take a step back, and reflect, through the pity for the unfortunate Spanish civilians and the fear of the horrors of war, have an alarming introspective pressure on the times we lived and now live in – just how much atrocity are humans capable of committing? It is challenging to interpret this artwork. There appears to be death and suffering everywhere. As our eyes become used to fast-paced motion, figures appear. A mother is shown on the far left cradling the lifeless body of her murdered kid while hunching her back and wailing in anguish and despair. This scene is one of the most horrific and memorable and undeniably affects viewers.



Picasso's *Guernica* can be viewed as just a mimetic depiction of reality, but that would leave out its very real and alarming impact. Depictor depicts reality, but the depiction is more accurate

⁸ "In Praise of ... Guernica." *The Guardian*, 26 Mar. 2009, Editorial.
www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/mar/26/pablo-picasso-guernica-spain-war.

than reality in many ways. The meaning that Picasso conveys through painting, through the use of aesthetics, is the reflection of the depth of emotion itself. The emotion that, in return, evokes in us the depicter's intended moral perception of the tragic event. The mere historical fact of the Guernica bombing doesn't resonate with us with the complexity, and moral reflection as the subject of tragedy requires. The philosophers who argue that a rational outlook on life should be of the highest value perhaps can take notes on how the emotional realm can depict reality even better and more adequately than purely rational historical fact. How could one disengage oneself from their emotional side when confronted with a painting like Guernica? Or, as Nietzsche would proclaim in *On the Genealogy of Morals*: "Without interest?! Compare this definition with this other one, made by an 'artist,' an 'observer' truly capable of aesthetic appreciation—by Stendhal, who once called the beautiful *une promesse de bonheur*." (Nietzsche 90). Nietzsche criticizes philosopher Kant's views on art. Kant believes the proper way to see art is emotionally detached "without interest." To Kant, everything in the art that is personally engaging is irrelevant. In this passage, Nietzsche claims that Stendhal's perspective on art is significantly superior.

According to Stendhal, what is truly lovely in art is that people may gaze at something they identify with and be touched by, causing them to feel joyful (*une promesse de bonheur*). Stendhal, according to Nietzsche, represents what is truly captivating about art: its ability to stir, thrill, and provoke people's emotional reactions. While Kant contends that human feelings are unimportant, Nietzsche (invoking Stendhal) contends that the value of art consists of its ability to stir people up and make them feel. Kant's belief that emotions are a diversion aligns him with 'ascetic ideals' (values that advocate maintaining emotional distance from life). On the other hand, Nietzsche believes that emotional engagement is far more vital in art and life.

After refuting Kant's assertion that humans should gaze at art with emotional detachment, Nietzsche now considers Schopenhauer's viewpoint, which he also wishes to discredit. Nietzsche states: "Schopenhauer has described one effect of the beautiful—the calming of the will—but is this effect the usual one?" (91) Schopenhauer maintains that the "will" is a universal, never-ending striving experience that underpins all reality. The will, according to Schopenhauer, is a metaphysical entity that serves as the foundation of reality and shapes the world as we know it. Schopenhauer is a pessimist because he believes that life is filled with anxiety because of this constant tugging sensation propelling people ahead that is never fulfilled. It never stops or rests, which makes life a dreadful experience. However, Schopenhauer believes there is a silver lining to this bleak existence: when people gaze at art, they may become engaged and experience a brief sensation of serenity. Engagement permits people to disconnect from the rest of the world's angst, pulling feelings, or, as Nietzsche called it, "the soothing of the will." However, Nietzsche entirely disagrees with Schopenhauer, believing that the latter misinterprets his experience as universal. Art is relaxing and peaceful to Schopenhauer, yet it is arousing and thrilling to many individuals.

Whether we employ Aristotelian notions of aesthetics or not, it's apparent that aesthetics has the immense power to engage us with ourselves and the world. Art can stir our emotions, shape and reshape our understanding of reality or evoke in us the facets of moral perception necessary for adequate comprehension of the tragic event like the bombing of Guernica. When talking about the power and influence art can have – many of us directly associate the concept of propaganda with it, and very rightly so. However, we could go as far as to argue that aesthetics and aesthetic ideals reveal themselves as the primary foundation in forming our moral compass. The immense influence of Aesthetics can be seen in the different types of propaganda

we have seen throughout history or stumbled upon when scrolling through social media or turning on the TV.

CHAPTER 3

Different Types of Propaganda and The Power of Aesthetic Ideals

Lost in the World of Advertisements

Every day, we spend an unreasonable amount of time and energy on inventions like social media. It's safe to assume that we would've already polluted the digital space and our attention in one way or another. The first chapter showed how the digital world serves as the tribune for disinformation campaigns and deceiving false narratives. However, the content I've discussed so far has been heavily politically charged and perhaps assumes that for aesthetics to enter the realm of ethics, it has to employ politically motivated narratives. Even though we all associate the word Propaganda with something deeply undemocratic – a troubling relic of authoritarian regimes, one should never overlook the fact that even at the present moment, we still are victims of propaganda, political or not. We look, hear, imagine and desire to experience what the banners, posters, movie clips, and commercials suggest. I have in mind to classify advertisements as a form of propaganda that, without any political intention, can still shape our beliefs and ethical judgments. The advertisements should remind the citizens of liberal democracies that one can still succumb to the power of propaganda without having an official minister of Propaganda in their country. To further argue this point, the definitions of propaganda need to be brought up.

The nature of propaganda for the impercipient observer might seem exclusively political; however, defining the notion of propaganda in the words that Jason Stanley uses will allow us to

capture the intricacy of the subject more acutely and inclusively. It is crucial to have a distinct definition to understand better how and when propaganda employs certain ideals, whether political or not, and how it is aimed at mobilizing viewers for the desired purpose. For our objective of becoming conscious of how the Aesthetical could affect Ethical, we can look at what Jason Stanely, In his work *How Propaganda Works*, has to say about the definition of propaganda. Stanely describes *Undermining Propaganda* as: “Contribution to public discourse that is presented as an embodiment of certain ideals, yet is of a kind that tends to erode those very ideals” (Stanley 53). Consequently, these “certain ideals” can be political, economic, or aesthetic. By definition, Undermining propaganda can be a call to action (urge one to employ moral decision) while running counter to the ideal it is explicitly represented to comprise. By this definition, it becomes apparent that certain advertisements can indeed be classified as propaganda.

Advertisements don’t have to embody a political ideal but certainly, portray an *aesthetic ideal* that calls us to employ *ethical* decisions. Therefore, propaganda doesn’t have to be political to affect us. For example, Stanely also mentions when he further elaborates on the workings of undermining propaganda: “advertisement that uses the ideal of good health in the service of selling a product that undermines health. Advertisement that uses pictures of healthy rock climbers to sell an unhealthy beverage or food item” (Stanley 56). It is depressing how every one of us has seen advertisements of this nature. Perhaps while mindlessly looking through the grocery shop’s beverage section, we consciously or unconsciously decided to buy Red Bull. Even though there’s overwhelming scientific research that can be cited here to argue just how unhealthy the drink is, it’s the “Red Bull Gives You Wings” message accompanied by uplifting

music and images of healthy risk-taker athletes in a one-minute advertisement clip⁹ that dictates our decisions – hence resulting in the economic success of Red Bull in product sale, etc. This particular instance of undermining propaganda portrays the embodiment of the ideal of good health (can easily be seen to undermine it) that uses certain aesthetic forms (images, music, aesthetic-athletic body forms) and tools to achieve the desired outcome (influence viewer and consumers' moral judgment).

Looking at the vast amount of advertisements that circle around us and in front of us, it is worth noting that even though they may not be classified as strictly undermining propaganda (Red Bull case), they can claim relevance to certain ideals while being entirely irrelevant. This type of advertisement directly shows how Aesthetics influence our everyday ethics not just by employing certain aesthetic forms in representation but now claim the causal relation to a given *aesthetic ideal*. As Jason Stanley puts it: “advertisements standardly use aesthetic ideals to promote a product, possession of which is irrelevant to the further realization of that aesthetic ideal. An advertisement that suggests that purchasing a certain kind of car will make one more attractive is an example of this.” (56). One can bring many examples here, where the advertisement of a product, a particular luxurious watch or clothes that ultimately portrays the purchaser as “beautiful,” attractive, along with the perfect-body images, etc.

*2015 Volkswagen Passat TV Commercial*¹⁰ is just specifically that advertisement that strongly associates owning a particular car model with the realization of an aesthetic ideal. The vehicle's rider in the commercial becomes attractive, meaningful, impactful, and influential just

⁹ Red Bull. “Anthony Davis: World of Red Bull Commercial 2016.” *YouTube*, 24 Oct. 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWd6VkgDrKg.

¹⁰ Volkswagen. “2015 New Volkswagen Passat TV Commercial.” *YouTube*, 18 Nov. 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YjRjUgqrTE.

because he drives the new Passat. Furthermore, the Passat commercial doesn't strictly fall into the category of undermining propaganda; it strongly necessitates the possession of a product with the realization of an aesthetic ideal. It is simply irrelevant to own a car to reach an aesthetic ideal. Still, the association will have the viewer chase the product - to attain a goal to which the product is simply irrelevant. It is hard to conceive every possible way how this created thirst for ownership of the product can manifest or how it could hinder our moral judgments, including irrational misuse of money, disassociation of priorities, investment into superficial, unnecessary values, etc. The advertisement finishes with the slogan: "*The new Passat. As advanced as you are.*" It doesn't simply portray a higher-status person associated with the car; it pierces through the viewer even further. The product becomes the essential part of our self; the product is as *we* are, as we want to be, and it includes and defines our *identity*. In short, the advertisement can represent an ideal (with or without the help of aesthetic forms) while serving to undermine it (Red Bull) or directly claim the attainment of a particular aesthetic ideal while being irrelevant (Volkswagen Passat). One can bring other examples of advertisements to portray the effective causal mechanisms of aesthetics in our decision-making. The ones brought here are intentionally and expressly non-political. As advertisements tilt our moral compass in the direction that advertisers see fit (for their various gains) gives us the awareness that aesthetic forms don't have to emulate necessarily politically charged messages to influence our ethical opinions and judgment. The main initiator and foundation of our altered moral perception could be carved out as the established aesthetic ideal that these ads portray in various ways.

One can look at what famous public figures are occupied with nowadays to conceptualize better the detrimental effects of unrealistic aesthetic ideals on us. A few years ago, Cristiano

Ronaldo, the most famous soccer player, launched an underwear line.¹¹ In his monumental book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Yuval Noah Harari eloquently touches on this fact while binding it to a relevant historical context that further portrays the psychological effects of an unrealistic aesthetic ideal. He states:

In previous eras the standard of beauty was set by the handful of people who lived next door to you. Today the media and the fashion industry expose us to a totally unrealistic standard of beauty. They search out the most gorgeous people on the planet, and then parade them constantly before our eyes. No wonder we are far less happy with the way we look. (389)

Harari's historical context gives rise to how the 21st-century teenager's self-worth has a more challenging time coming by compared to the teenager 5,000 years ago. We don't judge, evaluate and measure ourselves against our immediate environment and fellow surrounding people anymore, but against the images that pop up on our screens—comparing ourselves Against the Images of movie stars, athletes, supermodels, and other Cristiano Ronaldos. In Aristotelian terms, it's only natural to assume that we would *imitate* or try to imitate. We imitate others from a young age, first when learning a language by imitating proficient speakers and subsequently when developing character by looking up to others as role models. We imitate in both ways because an imitation is a powerful tool for learning and growth, and for humans, learning is both natural and exciting. Though unrealistic role models and unattainable aesthetic ideals are neither natural nor an ethical remedy, and the case of advertisement's effects on us portrays this.

The rise of technology meant more money to spend towards creating the perfect aesthetic ideals – the ones that presumably most humans would want to become. Harari explains the current cycle that every one of us finds ourselves in: “Even more money is transferred to the

¹¹ Sanderson, Jamie, and Metro. “Ronaldo Shows off Pants Range of Underwear.” *Metro.co.uk*, 31 Oct. 2013, <https://metro.co.uk/2013/10/31/cristiano-ronaldo-launches-pants-range-of-underwear-4168735/>

bank accounts of fashion designers, gym managers, dieticians, cosmeticians and plastic surgeons, who help us arrive at the café looking as similar as possible to the market's ideal of beauty.” (Harari 361) The ideal of beauty has a particular physical manifestation, the specific size of the cheekbone, wearing expensive clothing, having a perfect smile, and so on. The aesthetic ideal is what the market determines; it's what we want, everchanging, never fully attainable, and hence the source of our suffering. We impose moral judgments on ourselves only because we see an aesthetic ideal advertised in front of us. We are nothing like them, and perhaps we will never be – as the market and demand change rapidly, so will we and unattainable ideals. The detour to explaining advertisements as vehicles certainly brings to our attention the concept of propaganda in synthesis with technology. Whether or not the case of Cristiano Ronaldo's new underwear line falls into the category of undermining propaganda isn't as important, as it becomes apparent that advertisement in itself can manifest the qualities of a vehicle of propaganda – mainly that it manipulates and exploits its viewers for the advertisers' desired gain.

Before describing the second type of propaganda by Jason Stanley, it is worth mentioning the most obvious problematic notion of any type of propaganda. In the Kantian sense, employing the categorical imperative, propaganda, regardless of its desired outcome, is morally problematic. According to Kant, the rational will is, at the very least, one governed by rational principles and functions independently of other external causes. As propaganda deceives people by persuading them to take action while ignoring their rational will, Kant would claim their immorality. I don't want to employ an overarching Kantian categorical imperative to describe the evil nature of propaganda, as I would argue that the Aristotelian approach, even in this manner, would be more accurate. However, Kant's presupposition of rational will still help us to conceptualize the misleading and deceiving nature of the types of non-political: undermining

propaganda or advertisements that I mentioned before. Much like Platonian, Kantian would realize the innate ability of aesthetics to shape, and many ways, even trump our ability to reason; however, if an art/representation/form of aesthetic imagery lies to us or does not particularly advance our rational will, should that necessitate its consideration as immoral?

A different definition of another type of propaganda to argue otherwise will portray how propaganda itself is not mainly one-sided and evil. Stanley brings the definition of *Supporting Propaganda*: “A contribution to public discourse that is presented as an embodiment of certain ideals yet is of a kind that tends to increase the realization of those very ideals by either emotional or other nonrational means” (Stanley 53). Now that we have at least two distinct definitions of propaganda – it’s thoughtful to look at some examples of how supporting propaganda is employed in different situations. We can interpret Propaganda as something that undermines the ideal or supports it. These distinctions will help us to dissect the nature of propaganda better and better pierce through non-political and political narratives that shape our everyday attitudes towards the subject and pushes us towards action, perception, and moral judgment. Jason Stanley brings our attention to an example that could better explore the depths for our purposes; he states:

...supporting propaganda is the use of a country's flag, or the appeal to a romantic vision of the country's history, to strengthen patriotism. Delivering a very frightening public health warning to raise excessive fears about (for example) smoking, with the goal of increasing public health by the use of exaggerated fear. (58)

Cigarette packs in many countries are labeled with bold letters “**Smoking Kills**” alongside heavily disturbing imagery¹². Indeed, looking at this packaging –a reasonable citizen would still

¹² Calderon, Justin. “Cigarette Packs from Taiwan (Far Left), Malaysia (Center), and Singapore (Far Right),” *Justincalderon.com*, 25 Jan. 2012, <https://justincalderon.com/2012/01/25/graphic-cigarette-warning-labels-in-southeast-asia-and-taiwan-are-they-effective>

say that this form of propaganda isn't democratically problematic, assuming that we give a task to our health ministers to promote the ideal of health, to evoke in us the rational thought of avoiding deteriorative addiction. The images on the cigarette packs portray people in terrible health conditions directly caused by smoking, making the user/buyer aware of the likely situation they might find themselves in (if addicted to this product). It might sound alarming, and the fear exaggerated. Still, it accomplishes its goal quite successfully; the 'long-term outcome' picture seems to boost our rational thoughts and the appeal to emotion through a graphic installment of fear that pushes us to healthier ethical decisions (to take care of ourselves and others around us).

Realizing that—even countries we see as liberal democracies or rather 'free' aren't free with the instances of propaganda: employing aesthetic forms to manipulate the viewer as the enforcer sees fit—can indeed be fruitful, but one can never overlook the atrocities of totalitarian regimes when one hears the word propaganda. Exploiting one's moral compass through the help of aesthetic forms or even direct association of aesthetic ideals can most prominently be seen in political propaganda. Doesn't everyone associate propaganda with something evil? Wholly unacceptable, untrue political messaging, and something very undemocratic? Propaganda as a tool of totalitarian regimes to control and shape opinions is a well-worn subject of history. Nevertheless, it's easy to see what propaganda is in a totalitarian state; they designate the whole ministry for that. Joseph Goebbels' official title was "The Reich Ministry for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda."

When Propaganda Meets Film: The Case of Leni Riefenstahl

Leni Riefenstahl was a German film director, artist, producer, and photographer best known for her 1930s documentary films that dramatized the Nazi movement's strength and

spectacle. She began her career in motion pictures as an actor in "mountain films," a category of German movies in which the natural world, particularly the mountainous scenery, plays a significant role. Her 'prime' is during the time of Nazi Germany, in Nazi Germany. It's the time of Goebbels' rule over the art, and it's the time of the official ministry of Propaganda to tell its citizens what to think and feel. Consequently, Reifensahl's work can't be innocent; it's the art that praises the ideals that undermine morality in us. Stanley calls this form of undermining propaganda *demagoguery*. It's the most threatening form of propaganda can take. He explains the immorality of the concept and states:

Demagoguery is propaganda in the service of unworthy political ideals. What counts as demagoguery, therefore, depends on moral and political facts. Demagoguery can come in the form of strengthening unworthy political ideals. For example, Leni Riefensahl's depiction of German athletes in her film *Olympia* from 1938 is a glorification of the superiority of the Teutonic race. (68)

As Jason Stanely is more concentrated on the liberal democracies and the demagoguery that masks itself as embodying worthy political ideals, he decides not to analyze *Olympia* further. Many believe, me among them, that Leni Reifensahl should be subjected as one of the leading propagandists of the Third Reich. Her work is inseparable from political motives, and the link between Fascist aesthetics and Fascist political ideals is unbreakable. That is why it is worthy of further exploration.

Leni Riefensahl is best known for her mainly two monumental propagandist films: *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia*. Hitler viewed her as a filmmaker who could utilize aesthetics to create a picture of a powerful Germany infused with Wagnerian themes of beauty and power. He invited Riefensahl to make *Triumph des Willens* (Triumph of the Will), a film shot at the Nuremberg Rally in 1934. Hitler requested that Riefensahl produce the movie, and she eventually agreed after being given full license over the picture and limitless funding. *Triumph of*

the Will is recognized as one of the greatest propaganda movies ever made, thanks to its powerful imagery and avant-garde filmmaking techniques. Regretfully enough, It is ranked as an epic masterpiece of documentary filmmaking. Consequently, the film's theme, National Socialism, and its creator, Leni Riefenstahl, become forever linked. Susan Sontag, in her essay *Fascinating Fascism*, describes: “The Triumph of the will uses overpopulated wide shots of massed figures alternating with close-ups that isolate a single passion, a single perfect submission: in a temperate zone clean-cut people in uniforms group and regroup, as if they were seeking the perfect choreography to express their fealty.” (Sontag 87) Leni Riefenstahl’s films, primarily those mentioned here, represent the total unity of art and politics. Through different filmmaking techniques: stage design, camera movement, lighting, and color combination alongside historical script-writing and production, art doesn’t only depict the politics or moral guidelines these politics are about to superimpose; art *is* politics. The depiction that Leni Reifenstahl provides is, first and foremost suggestion of an aesthetic ideal that is about to establish and transform German society forever.

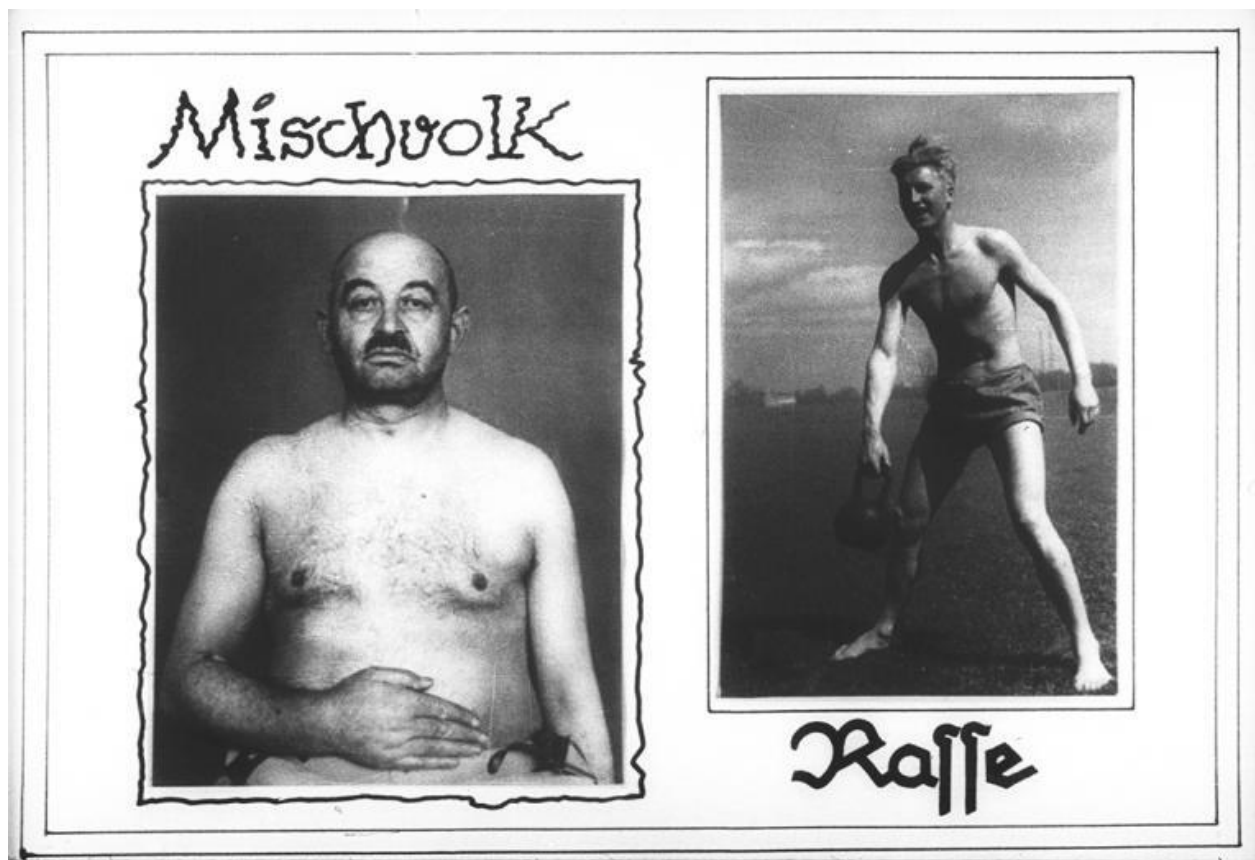
Totalitarian art’s core function is the immortalization of the leader and their doctrine, creating the cult imagery that pierces through every citizen’s thoughts and morals – with the “larger than life” imagery of the Shepard. Mass obedience, censorship, and repression are totalitarian art traits. Whether we bring examples from Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, or Mao’s China wouldn’t make much of a difference. However, what is thought-provoking specifically in National Socialism is the inseparable intertwined relationship between the aesthetics and the ethics of the state. Susan Sontag masterfully captures this synthesis: “... Relation between politics and art under National Socialism is not that art was subordinated to political needs, for this is true of dictatorships both the right and of the left, but that politics is

appropriated the rhetoric of art—art in its late romantic phase.” (Sontag 92) To further argue this point, Susan Sontag brings the words from Joseph Goebbels that portray himself (Minister of Propaganda) and other abhorrently immoral powerful Nazi politicians as the artists themselves. Goebbels names himself, “we who shape modern German policy feel ourselves to be artists... the task of art and the artists [being] to form, give shape, remove the diseased and create freedom for the healthy.” (92) Politics for Goebbels is the highest, most eloquent, most comprehensive art there is. The propaganda minister makes a clinical distinction between allegedly “healthy and diseased.” It isn’t hard to imagine how that imagery would materialize in German society under the Third Reich. If Soviet Art expounds and reinforces a utopian morality, Fascist art displays utopian aesthetics— namely, that of physical perfection. This alleged ideal of aesthetics can rapidly go downhill, and in the case of Nazi Germany, it did. Segregation, antisemitism, total antipathy, and barbarity followed and resulted in the greatest atrocity of the century – the Holocaust. As we’ve seen in many other cases of flat-out unreasonable human behavior under the grip of flawed ideological belief – whether reinforced with alleged aesthetic ideals or not, the crimes against humanity that Nazis committed are frankly immoral and atrocious.

The image¹³ below shows a Nazi propaganda poster that portrays the difference between “cross-breed” and “Racially pure Aryan.” Fascism admires the body; once the ideal of aesthetics in human form is established (Aryan race), the following conceptual step for the ministry of propaganda is to condemn every “undesirable” race as unpure, unfit, diseased, and unhealthy. These strikingly monstrous words to describe humans gained even more significance to Fascists for justifying the vile ideology of Nazi Germany. They start to despise the “cross-breeding”; the image on the left is not just unaesthetic, but it instills fear that “lower races” might pollute

¹³ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Library of Congress. *Image from a Slide Lecture Produced by “Der Reichsfuehrer SS, Der Chef Des Rasse-Und Siedlungshauptamtes” (the Leader of the SS, the Chief of the Race and Settlement Main Office).*, 1936, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1141743>.

humanity and cause degradation; therefore, for the Nazis, it sounds logical to act in the most unimaginably evil ways. Referring to Judaism as a race rather than a religion – The "Jewish race" was deemed particularly threatening by Hitler. It allegedly mistreated and polluted other races. The Nazis, therefore, referred to Jews as a "parasitic race," and they were explicitly seen as parasites killing the Aryan race. The Nazis' persecution of Jews was motivated by this discriminative and deeply derogatory assumption from which mass genocide followed. At the depths of evil, one realizes that the imagined aesthetic ideals were laid as the foundation for the justification and promotion of society's appallingly evil actions. Apart from emulating the importance of aesthetics enforcing/aiding the political aims of exploiting the morality of the masses – the connection should prompt us to think critically about our current aesthetic ideals and what kind of ethical treatment it suggests toward everyone who falls short of it.



The Dissolution of Empathy Through Language

Nazi propagandists portrayed Jews as a biological threat to Germany to make the persecution of Jews appear tolerable to the general public. Government-sponsored anti-Jewish propaganda was extensively disseminated, describing Jews as "alien," "parasitic," and responsible for Germany's "degeneration" in culture, politics, and economy. These phrases had a profound impact, encouraging persecution and retaliation. Even worse, Jews lost their human dignity in the eyes of Germans, making them less deserving of society's protection. Students burnt Jewish writers' books on pyres, destroyed Jewish and other "un-German" artists' works of art and music, and more. In other words, through language, imagery, and propaganda, the association is created, targeting a specific group of people to dissolve the central pillar of morality towards them, to demolish the feeling of empathy, and consequently perceive evil-moral. Under the grip of false ideological belief conjured up by the aesthetic ideal, the language also takes shape. Perhaps, becoming aware of the vocabulary used in public or political discourse is always a timely reminder of the words we use for descriptions (especially towards each other), as the language is the reflection and co-initiator for the expected ethical treatment. In his text, Stanley brings various examples to argue the well-established point between the derogatory representational language and the immorality of attitude/treatment of the targeted group. He states, issues some of the points from other authors, and concludes consequently:

David Livingstone Smith argues persuasively that genocide is often preceded by dehumanization expressed in linguistic and pictorial form. The deeply derogatory terms represent the targeted group as a public health threat, by linking them with animals and diseases, especially of the sort that elicits disgust, such as rats (in the case of Nazi Propaganda about Jews) and snakes (as in the Rwandan Genocide). (150)

The Rwandan genocide that Stanley mentions represents the well-established link between dehumanizing propaganda (dissolution of empathy) and genocidal actions. Hutu extremists during the Rwandan Genocide, too, used deeply derogatory terms, calling Tutsi words like “Snakes” and “Cockroaches.” Snakes are considered especially dangerous in Rwanda; killing

one (Chopping off its head and cutting it into pieces) is considered a rite of passage for boys.

The social meaning of calling someone a snake was to legitimize the act of killing, not just justifying the flawed ideological belief but altogether deeming it as a noble and righteous act, a cultural calling for rites of passage, a payback from manslaughter. Much like Putin’s speech years ago gave away clues of the specific ethical treatment he wanted to employ towards post-soviet countries, vocabulary in derogatory terms can also serve as a prediction of genocide to come. Words we speak and write are an

immediate form of aesthetic expression that



reflects the convergence of established aesthetic ideals and relevant suggested ethical treatment.

If one lesson is to be learned from all the vile depictions of particular groups of people is that: dehumanization expressed in linguistics and pictorial form ultimately has an immense influence on our moral perception and moral judgment. To tie it back to the Nazis as mentioned aesthetic ideals and horrific treatment of the Jewish community in Germany, we can look at the

children's book from 1938, which Ernst Hiemer wrote with Julius Streicher and published. *Der Giftpilz* is a work of antisemitic Nazi propaganda. The phrase "the dangerous mushroom" is the title in German. Streicher and Heimer were hanged in 1946 after being found guilty in the Nuremberg trials of aiding and abetting crimes against humanity. The pictures and depictions of Jews in German society are appallingly inhumane, and to realize that this book was issued for children to learn important lessons about life makes the fact even more atrocious. For example, one such "lesson" is titled: *Hans' and Else's Experience With a Strange Man* — it's accompanied by a picture, and the page of the book looks horrific. On the next page, there's a small written story explaining the morale of the image and encounter. The narrative is the same for every other portrayal — equally Discriminatory and antisemitic. In this story, Hans and Else both encounter what appears to be a jew child molester. Hans calls the police and informs them he is praised as a courageous citizen. The mother's answer to her children about this encounter speaks for itself. She says:

A devil walks through our land, The Jew is known to all.
 All human murderers and racial abusers A children's terror in all countries.
 He wants to corrupt our youth. He wants our people to die. Have nothing to do
 with the dirty Jew. Then you'll be fine for the rest of your life (29).

I am sure; it's unnecessary to bring more content from this truly disgusting children's book as it's packed with antisemitism and flat-out immoral vocabulary. The book reminds us to realize how much the Aesthetic realm of our lives influences our morality. The case of Nazi Germany isn't only pure hatred towards a specific group of people; it is well and strategically thought demonization of this group, so much so that society will begin to feel that they indeed deserve the treatment the oppressor befalls them. The establishment of the aesthetic ideal of the Arian race goes as far as to start teaching children morals in verse forms accompanied with pictorial

depiction of just how terrible it is to encounter the threat, a genuine danger of society, for Heimer, a Jew. This small book, as atrocious as it is, encompasses the Aesthetic ideals of Nazi Germany and the extent of their power. They used their flawed ideological beliefs to – shape language (conceptual scheme), reduce reality to intentionally distorted pictorial descriptions, and pierce through German society's inter-subjective morality (even children).

The link should worry us when a group of fellow humans is represented as unwanted creatures, insects, vermin, or derogatory adjectives. The representation carries the meaning: it's a message to legitimize the kind of treatment our society already recommends to the relevant sort of creature, animal. It's deeply troubling to realize this. Since the problem of propaganda in liberal democracy is that it goes unnoticed, we should look closely at the choice of words in the public discourse. The words represent the ideology behind the created narrative and the created truth passed onto us. Specifically, the realization that words have immense power and influence prompts Nietzsche to formulate the connection he states in *Twilight of Idols*: "Dialectics can be only a *last ditch weapon* in the hands of those who have no other weapon left." (Nietzsche 42). Looking at language as having both a descriptive and prescriptive quality, Nietzsche automatically ascribes power to the words we use. As soon as one realizes that using language as a metaphor can provide a deep understanding of the subject, then Nietzsche's use of it becomes much more apparent. His statements directly talk to a reader – a distinctive writing style in his time as a philosopher or academic. To perceive language as a metaphor for a weapon or an effective defensive or attacking tool, one should realize that even greater awareness and responsibility are required, even when just talking. Therefore, language and vocabulary itself serve as the reflection of our belief systems and conceptual schemes. The "Last ditch weapon" comparison to language is Nietzsche's metaphor that pierces through heavily. The example of

banning and censorship in the 21st century best affirms this position. In our contemporary light, we realize the power and influence, especially when we get stripped of that last-ditch weapon. Jason Stanley dedicates the whole chapter to describing the importance of language in propaganda; he brings a staggering contemporary example of the Chinese Government's censorship. He states:

On May 13, 2013, the Chinese government issued a secret document, entitled “A Report about the Current Situation of Ideology,” to university administrations. The report was leaked by Gao Yu and published in the German magazine *Der Spiegel* in August 2013. The document demands that university professors refrain from discussing seven topics. The seven topics are universal values, free press, civil society, civil rights, historical mistakes of the Chinese Communist Party, crony capitalism, and independence of the judiciary. (205)

This oppression and censorship is an apparent attempt to prevent the young generation from learning critical political concepts, especially those that would allow them to question Chinese government policies. Ensuring that they are ignorant of essential political principles is an effort to teach a false worldview to Chinese students. How would the student realize the moral shortcomings of the governing system if the state strips them away from the conceptual scheme? Stripped away from language and necessary vocabulary, the struggle for freedom naturally perishes as they become unable to articulate their own unfreedomness. Unfortunately, as it appears in this case of state-imposed censorship, the Chinese government also realized that words could be used as the immediate representation of ethical attitudes and opinions.

Conclusion

These several lines of exploration have led me to believe that aesthetics serve as the clay for the clay pot of ethics. The examples I've encountered, pondered about and brought to light mainly portray ceramists as consciously or unconsciously ill-intentioned humans. It's a negative image to envision the world where the most unethical holds all the effective tools of aesthetics. However, establishing a clear connection between Aesthetics and Ethics, arts and morality, and imagery and moral perception led me to even more questions that could perhaps tilt things to a brighter side. What is the process that undergoes when the established aesthetic ideal suggests ethical decisions in us? When one inquires into the questions that naturally spring out of this project, the link and convergence of these two fields explored in this paper can serve as a strong foundation for further elaboration of the intricacies of our perception. Looking at the shocking examples of notions of aesthetics during the time of the Soviet Union or Nazi Germany brings to light exactly how the oppressors' notions of aesthetics and aesthetic ideals served as the foundation for the immorality of either Stalin's Great Terror or the Nazi's Holocaust. The similarities aren't constricted only with propagandistic imagery but encapsulate language modification and vocabulary alteration. This paper's branching out into linguistics is the product of the convergence of aesthetics and ethics and serves as the reflection of this synthesis. Aristotle's debate with Plato puts questions about aesthetics at play. What's the best way to think about imitation and depiction? Is there truly any use of art? Can mimesis be an essential part of our nature, or should we discard it as a vain attempt to get to the truth? Does the depicter have the power to portray reality better than simply recollecting factual history? Leaning more in favor of Aristotle, I began to see his distinction between poetry and history, the importance of concepts of catharsis and imitation, and the emotional effect of art through the main drivers of

fear, pity, and catharsis. Aristotle's concepts are as timeless as Nietzsche's comments, and both further challenge the reader to use their knowledge about aesthetics and ethics to understand the issue in the contemporary light.

Looking at the different types of propaganda shows the reader that the connection between our actions and the images we see every day is everpresent. Exploring how we get lost and lose our sense of self and moral beliefs in the sea of Advertisements is the addition to the project that diverges itself from politics. Advertisements link the product with our evaluation of self-worth and standing in the social hierarchy, straight out lie to us in our faces, and establish unattainable aesthetic ideals (surreal beauty standards) that deepen our negative self-image and suffering. Though apolitical, the type of propaganda that advertisements portray is equally dangerous, effective, and demolishing as the Aesthetics purely serving the political aims. Furthermore, the inclusion of ads as a form of propaganda puts us back into the position of the present life. Much like the disinformation campaigns and Russia's firehouse of falsehood, advertisements, too, mainly occupy the digital world. Being bombarded by trolls and fake invented news alongside advertisements persuading users to buy unnecessary products puts our attention at war. Looking at the detrimental effects of social media (comparing oneself to others' unreal but convincing happiness) has put our brains in constant struggle.

Exploring the inner workings of the interdependence of aesthetics and ethics has left me with more questions. This paper aims to provoke thought and clarify this complex relationship through various examples. Still, most importantly, it seeks to bring awareness to the reader, to look beyond just looking. To give rise to more questions and urges one to question reality more. Awareness of how much effect various aesthetic concepts and mediums have on one's ethical attitudes, opinions, and judgments is a substantial step towards living a more examined life.

This work represents the synthesis of philosophical concepts of aesthetics and ethics and a personal attitude toward poetry, censorship, and Russian authoritarianism. Poetry against history is the first instance that establishes the field of aesthetics as something more than it appears on the surface. It holds power to reimage reality, reanimate history, and evoke emotions to increase our moral perception of an event. The depicter and artist that holds this power, therefore, should not only be aware of the influential abilities that they pose but strive to express themselves even more universally. Another subsequent inquiry from this project can be to look at how artists and creators internalize this power to shape our ethical understanding of the world and what can be done to direct the currents of expression towards the side of morality. I would only love to allow my reader to use the knowledge and questions gathered here as they see fit. However, they should make sure that the use will be aesthetic.

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