Paul Schultze-Naumburg, “Art and Race” (1928)

Abstract

Paul Schultze-Naumburg (1869-1949) began his artistic career as a painter who joined the Berlin Secession during the German Empire. At the end of the nineteenth century, he also began to work as an art critic. He advocated the ideas of the *Lebensreform* movement and *Heimatschutz* architecture and published a series of books at the beginning of the twentieth century that championed traditionalism in architecture. The success of his books made him an influential art theorist and also a sought-after architect, who was commissioned to build a residence for Crown Prince Wilhelm, the Cecilienhof in Potsdam, in 1912. Schultze-Naumburg rejected the movements that shaped modern art and architecture in the Weimar Republic, above all the Bauhaus and *Neues Bauen*, as “un-German.” He became increasingly radicalized ideologically and politically and, from the mid-1920s onwards, moved closer to National Socialism, whose racist cultural theory aligned with his own views. His book, *Kunst und Rasse* [*Art and Race*], was published in 1928, from which some excerpts are presented here. Schultze-Naumburg was friends with Hans F. K. Günther, a well-known German racial theorist of the time, whose influence on his thinking is evident in these passages. He also introduces the idea of artistic “degeneration,” which was to become a decisive component of Nazi art policy. Schultze-Naumburg joined the NSDAP in 1930 and used his influence to remove the works of the Bauhaus and other artists he considered “degenerate” from public exhibits and art schools. In 1932, he was elected to the Reichstag as a member of parliament for the NSDAP.

Source

Introduction

It is a matter of daily observation that works of art are subject to judgments differing from one another to such an extent, indeed contradicting each other so thoroughly, that one would scarcely believe such an emotional divergence possible. The customary explanation, that tastes simply do not agree, is hardly satisfying. For the emotional orientation from which the artistic judgment derives cannot be purely accidental, falling now this way, now that, but must have as its basis a regularity that can be exposed and recognized, at least in broad terms. Should it be possible to prove that every artistic judgment is at least in part bound to race, then we will have made a good start on overcoming the torment of apparently unfounded and therefore incomprehensible contradictions.

To this end, it will be initially demonstrated how the relation between the physicality of the artist and his work is one of inextricable dependence, and how impossible it is for him to surpass the conditions of his own corporeality. A recognition, however, of this close relation simultaneously establishes the contrary procedure, which allows us to draw inferences from the artwork (or the judgment of such) to the artist (or the one making the judgment). Thus is it possible to gain information about the racial basis of the population not only from works of the past; rather in regard to the present, too, it is possible to arrive at interpretations of artistic products which explain certain things that would otherwise remain enigmatic.

My own observations of this sort have their beginnings nearly thirty years ago. By changing my place of residence and settling in the countryside, I became subject to a series of perceptions explainable by noting that a certain type of behavior, certain judgments and capacities, must somehow be tied to the specific population groupings. The groups were clearly distinct from one another in physical appearance, though they occupied more or less the same geographical location. Little of ethnology was known at that time so I could be guided only by that which clearly and unmistakably appeared to my own eyes: that

there were two different kinds of people living there, which I identified according to the historical origins of the locality as the Sorbs (Wends) and the Franks. The former were the original inhabitants of the area and were subordinated by the Franks, who pressed in upon them from the south and the west. This process of colonization was well established everywhere. I was only a little astonished that the physical and mental characteristics of these two populations, despite a thousand years of living together, had been maintained to such an extent that they continue to this day to be clearly distinct. Having found my investigation of the particularities of each of these two groups to be extraordinarily instructive, I turned my attention to ethnology, the development of which was being powerfully stimulated at the time by modern biology.

My fascination with ethnological studies has stayed with me. It became truly fruitful, however, only as I supplemented it with the doctrine of heredity, without which these observations would lack a proper context. From a phenomenon so clearly observed and understood in context, there then developed the designation of the *homo alpinus* and the *homo nordicus,* the representatives of which confronted me as Wends and Franks. Numerous measurements demonstrated to my satisfaction that, at least in regard to predominant type, it remains possible today to distinguish those with rounded from those with elongated heads, even if considerable intermixing has substantially effaced the distinction. (As, in general, the length-versus-breadth index cannot legitimately claim the importance still commonly attributed to it. It is certainly one of the many indications of race, but not *the* indication.) It is of course not without aesthetic significance that the narrow face of the northern type corresponds to the elongated skull, as likewise the alpine habitat harmonizes with the broad skull.

Racial interpretations became so familiar to me over time that I could not avoid relating them to my work as a specialist. The original plan, however, of devoting a chapter of a new edition of my *Cultural Investigations* (1922) to these racial observations had to be abandoned, since the topic had come to exceed by far the range of a single chapter. A separate volume would not have fit into the structure of that work, which was complete in itself, and thus I was happy to accept the proposal of the Lehmanns Verlag and have it appear independently as a book.

For it to be useful by itself, it was necessary to supply it with a rather short introduction to the central problems of ethnology and the law of heredity, as well as the basic features of racial hygiene. Perhaps those already familiar with these doctrines will nevertheless be interested in the treatment of the relevant questions from the point of view of art, while taking into account that one cannot assume even in educated circles a knowledge of the basic doctrines.

This lack of knowledge is most clearly evidenced by the fact that many people tend to fly into a passion even at the mere mention of the racial idea. And the less knowledge they have, the more bitterly they quarrel and fight. There is, however, no better means of subduing and reconciling the conflict than an honest attempt to become acquainted with the problem as a whole. The result is that a question previously answered on the basis of belief and opinion becomes subject to natural scientific examination, thus allowing at least those who make an honest attempt to find a common ground for discussion.

Chapter III: Racial Inferences of Contemporary Art

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Art, however, offers us instruction not only concerning the races that make up a people and, through a process of internal variation, more or less change its essential type; it also yields information concerning higher or lower instances within races or racial mixtures. The attempt will be made in the next chapter to depict how and under what circumstances changes in the body of the nation have appeared over the last hundred years and how they may be recognized in art. Let us take as a given the presupposition that this

downward selection has taken place to a considerable degree—here on the basis of the otherwise unerring testimony of art. The question remains as to the reasons a people could, over a relatively short period of time, cease to venerate a highly evolved and noble human type to which an earlier time had willingly subjected itself, even if not all of the individuals composing the people were able to emulate the somewhat alien type in their own lives.

It is very instructive to wander through the art of the present with this idea in mind. For this purpose the form of customary art criticism, which is usually concerned with examining and determining the intensity and clarity of expression, is inappropriate. The extent to which contemporary artistic activity can be considered a genuine cross-section of our entire culture and the population underlying it will be left undecided for the moment. But if we assume that art is in fact to be regarded as a summarizing expression of our time, it is difficult to overlook the extraordinarily significant conclusions it suggests.

The most important problem is always the human type: how it confronts us in the paintings and sculptures not only as predominant but as dominant. As the central characteristic it is evident that the representation of the Nordic type in German art today can be found only as a very rare exception, and then as a rule only in lower instances. In matters of human representation, exotic foreign characteristics prevail. Within the latter type, however, it is noteworthy that there is a strong inclination not to represent the nobler instances of the type, but unmistakably those that approximate primitive humans, extending all the way to the grinning mugs of animal-like cave-dwellers. Moreover, we see a preference for and an emphasis on the symptoms of degeneration, as they are known to us from the multitude of the downfallen, the sick, and the physically deformed.

The activities chosen for representation in contemporary art, and which in every art are extremely characteristic of an era, refer more or less to a physical and moral nadir as well. Were one to name the symbols that find expression in the majority of the paintings and sculptures of our period, they would be the idiot, the prostitute, and the sagging breast. One has to call things by their right name. Spreading out here before us is a genuine hell of inferior human beings, and one sighs in relief upon leaving this atmosphere for the pure air of other cultures—in particular that of antiquity and the early Renaissance in which a noble race struggled to express its own longings in art. It is necessary to assume that the reader is acquainted with the representations filling today's art exhibits and the horror chambers of museums, those works about which the master advertisers are always crying "unheard of, unheard of." This book can do no more than refresh the memory with a few small illustrations and evoke an idea of the world into which the creators of these pictures are attempting to lead us.

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Should one search for an overall impression of contemporary art, it is above all that of utter chaos, of a planless and rootless mess, of an uncreative groping for sensations, of an utter lack of genuine, unpretentious humanity, and the absence of truthfulness of any kind. To this belongs the somewhat childish preference for wholly removed stages of sociological development, the nearly perverse ogling of alien races and their behavior. Whoever walks through an art exhibit these days has occasion enough to ask himself whether the Negro admixture about which the paintings literally boast is really based on an actual mixing of blood, or only on the outrageous renunciation of the painter's own racial instinct. Genuine Negro art can naturally be of great moment and give us remarkable glimpses into the process by which human culture developed, even if it cannot satisfy the longings of those belonging wholly to another race. Artificial Western imitations of Negro art, however, vacillate between the silly and the disgraceful.

Wherever a race degenerates, racial feeling has to disappear as well, and wherever racial feeling disappears, the ideal type rooted in every genuine race is also lost. If any further proof were needed of how the population living within our borders is now experiencing an unsuspected racial decline, it would

have to be the atrophy of the feeling for physical beauty in art.

We are confronted with the fate of a people to whom a large share of Nordic blood was entrusted, with the question of whether they are going to live or die.

There are indeed sufficient numbers of human ostriches with their heads deep in the sand thinking, oh, it won't be that bad. Every era has regarded changes as dangerous and threatening, and it is not likely to be any different with us. If those with their heads in the sand were to take the trouble of acknowledging the many observable historical cases of the rapid decay of great cultures and empires, they would draw an entirely different conclusion. The fate of the Roman Empire, a consequence of its own racial degeneration, may be taken as the clearest warning. Many of those who are conscious of the magnitude of the tragedy merely hinted at here will perhaps be inclined to regard them as inevitable, against which human will is powerless. It is of course impossible to know whether the culture and art of the race to which one is devoted are approaching their decline. There has been no shortage of gloomy prophets willing to predict it. In this regard, however, everything depends on which race is threatened with such a fate. It is in the soft nature of one to submit passively to its doom, whereas the mightily inspiring ethos of another dictates that it rise in Promethean defiance of the gods. Since our people remain sufficiently endowed with this heroic blood, they must, from the deepest reach of their being, ask the question: how can I avoid this fate? And is there any possibility at all of putting a spoke in the wheel of world history?

The sociological point of view discloses that a developmental stage has been reached in which much that has been hidden in obscure drives has now crossed the threshold into consciousness. Thought has succeeded in raising to some extent the veil concealing the secrets of the renewal of the human race, and it is becoming possible to sense that something other than mere accident determines the rise and fall of nations and will determine what kind of race is one day to inhabit the planet.

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