1-1-1975

The Cult of Beauty

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In angry disputes you argued and struggled; Now leave your wilderness of thinking! Feel this with me: that all the arts have only one home and one desire. Each in its heart seeks beauty alone.

Countess Madeleine in CAPRICCIO by Richard Strauss and Clemens Krauss

The stage has been set as an eighteenth century salon in a chateau near Paris. A delightful afternoon is drawing to a close, an afternoon filled with witty and thoughtful repartee on the nature of opera itself by Flamand, a composer, Olivier, a poet, La Roche, a producer, and others. Now, after the finest ensemble argument scene in the whole of operatic literature, the EWIGWEIBLICHE Countess Madeleine, patroness of the arts, steps forward to encourage the three creators of opera to set into production what they have been creating with their heartfelt arguments all day long—an opera about a composer, a poet, a producer, a patroness, a diva, and assorted secondary characters in the process of creating an opera. Here in his last opera Richard Strauss, at the age of seventy-eight and in the ninth catastrophic year of the Third Reich, reaffirmed, in a romanticization of the style of Gluck or Mozart, the Wagnerian ideal of the inseparability of music, text, and production for music drama, the union of the purely aesthetic, of the meaningful or referential, and of the the historical contexts.

The aesthetic and political ironies are striking. They were evoked, several years ago, by Ken Russell in his BBC film biography of Strauss, “Dance of the Seven Veils.” Russell used his baroque-camp visuals to ex-
ploy the political irony: over an actual film of the septuagenarian Strauss conducting his “Alpine Symphony” was superimposed a scene in which an SS officer is raping, ostensibly, the composer’s wife. Clearly, the implication is that the high priest of beauty was blind to the heinous crimes surrounding him. Literally, Frau Strauss was never raped by an SS officer, but in a certain sense everyone in Germany was; and Russell wanted to say that anyone who turned his back on such crimes was also guilty of them.

Russell, like Lord Acton’s hanging judge of history, sought in art to reverse the judgment of the Nuremburg Trials, where Strauss was de-Nazified. Although some critics regarded Russell’s film essay as vulgar excess, many in opera circles felt that Strauss was finally getting justice. Strauss was not, indeed, an admirable person; but this does not distinguish him from many great artists either. Perhaps he has drawn down upon himself a greater share of disdain because, not content merely to practise his art in its purest form, he argued, in that art itself, for an art without argument. Such forthright fascists as Pound and Celine have fared better, perhaps because their art and their beliefs are integrated into a coherent and consistent, albeit perverse, whole. Strauss seduces us with his bourgeois sounds and with the libretti he used while the morality of his life betrays both. Hence the consistent fascism of Pound and Celine seems preferable to the rather obtuse accommodations to which Strauss lent himself.

It is still the old question of art for art’s sake as opposed to art in the service of something other, higher, than art. Clearly, in CAPRICCIO, the Countess speaks for Strauss when she says “Each [of the arts] in its heart seeks beauty alone.” At some other time, in other circumstances, this might have passed as an acceptable evocation of an already old artistic tradition. But in 1942, in Dresden, in the last stages of the most abominable regime ever, this operatic premiere seems heartless to the point of immorality, like the Grosse Pointe Hunting Club’s Great Depression nostalgia party celebrated even while Detroit is in a real depression.

But art practised for art’s sake has a more terrifying aspect; for the artist who intends a safe and ostensibly harmless product creates the means to control people. So it is no surprise that in our times, Strauss’ moral problem—Is there a special relationship between the cult of beauty and fascism?—is as lively as ever. Susan Sontag has been struggling with the issue for over a decade, during which time her aesthetic positions have taken a radical turn toward photography. Now pornography pleases her apetite which has
of the septuagenarian Strauss imposed a scene in which Strauss's wife. Clearly, the implied blindness to the heinous crimes never raped by an SS officer was; and Russell wanted such crimes was also guilty.

Riefenstahl's "fascist trilogy." Riefenstahl, for her part, claims the first two, "Triumph of the Will" and "Olympia," though produced for the Nazis, were the expression of an apolitical artist who felt that the subjects, the Nuremberg party rallies and the 1936 Berlin Olympics, were simply and intrinsically beautiful. She assumes no responsibility for their propaganda value.

In the 1960's, Sontag exalted form over meaning, that is, she implicitly accepted Riefenstahl's position. Now she puts meaning first. Why the turnabout? The answer is implied in her review.

Photography, she explains, is a popular art form that makes an appeal more immediate, more purely sensual, less cerebral than that of high art. Its visual images speak the language of the average man. In this particular photograph book, the language is beautiful bodies in action and it would be unnatural not to have a sensual response to the images, as it would be unnatural to remain indifferent to the sensual beauty of the Olympic runners and divers, or to the Nazi party on the march. Yet however strong, however natural, our immediate response, we cannot forever suppress the meaning of these visual images; we realize, eventually, that historically this beauty points to the Holocaust and to Europe in ruins. And with that insight comes moral nausea, guilt, for the meaning of those beautiful images is taboo and revulsion is the normal reaction to any taboo to which we have been properly socialized. Beauty in itself, then, may be amoral but the particular form and the historical circumstances of beauty necessarily affect us morally.

Yet the question abides: Why did Sontag change her mind? In AGAINST INTERPRETATION and in STYLES OF RADICAL WILL, her work of the mid-sixties, she accepts beauty and—with Genet-like logic—ugliness for their capacity to create new sensibilities. Thus new culture is created. But what went wrong? Why now return to the old culture with its bourgeois emphasis on meaning and morality?

The question can be dealt with more simply in relation to pornography. Now pornography can be arty, but it is rarely art. It aims to please an appetite which has various levels of compromise. Sometimes it
is gross and gives us a sense of guilt even while pleasing us. Sometimes it is "beautiful" and "frees" us to understand our "sexual personalities." This view of pornography as therapy has become a liberal canon, possibly because of the writings of aestheticians like Sontag:

The only thing to be regretted about the close-ups of limp penises and bouncing breasts, the shots of masturbation and oral sexuality, in Jack Smith's "Flaming Creatures" is that they make it hard simply to talk about this remarkable film; one has to defend it... "Flaming Creatures" is a triumphant example of an aesthetic vision of the world—and such a vision is perhaps always, at its core, epicene. But this type of art has yet to be understood in this country. The space in which "Flaming Creatures" moves is not the space of moral ideas, which is where American critics have traditionally located art. What I am urging is that there is not only moral space, by whose laws "Flaming Creatures" would come off badly; there is also an aesthetic space, the space of pleasure. Here Smith's film moves and has its being.

This is vintage Sontag, the critic at the defense of the new sensibility. And from our vantage point, ten years later, who would deny that the new sensibility has triumphed? Defending limp penises, bouncing breasts, and bisexuality is hardly AU COURANT for the critic today; we are liberated. Just four years ago Alice Cooper, in his drag outfit, ripping heads off dolls, parading around with boa constrictors, was shocking; now he's doing spots on TV game shows. Will that be the fate of Linda Lovelace, Georgina Spelvin, and the other heroines of the liberated middle class? Is it the true talent of American mass culture to reduce all shock to blandness? Is there anything left for which the limited sexual imagination of erstwhile urbane people can aspire? Alex Comfort, in THE JOY OF SEX, has given the stamp of approval on bondage, and it will not be long before the chains, the black leather outfits, and the other toys for sado-masochism become standard features of mass culture rather than the exclusive possessions of the sexually bored of the urban centers.

This phenomenon now disturbs Sontag, perhaps because Christopher Isherwood's experiences of the 1930's have persuaded her to asso-
While pleasing us. Sometimes it did our "sexual personalities." Become a liberal canon, possibly like Sontag:

"About the close-ups of breasts, the shots of pubic hairs, in Jack Smith's films make it hard simply to like Sontag's "sexual personalities." It is a triumphant and pathetic understanding of the world—and its core, epicene. "Isherwood's 'The World in the Evening,' much of what she said in her recent NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS article can be seen in the following short excerpt from his DOWN THERE ON A VISIT:

Waldemar is a convinced anti-Nazi—but perhaps chiefly because that is the way the people whose opinions he respects happen to feel. If he had ever been exposed to the influence of a personable big-brother type of Nazi youth leader, I wouldn't care to answer for the consequences. As for himself he had grown accustomed, like every Berliner, to brown uniforms, mass meetings, police raids, street fights and beatings; to him, they come under the heading of "politics"—the manner in which things get done. He is a good natured, happy-go-lucky, easy-going boy, and I don't think that he is personally capable of serious cruelty; but it is obvious that brutality in others doesn't particularly shock him. Again and again I have noticed in boys like Waldemar this rather sinister instinctive acceptance of sadism; they don't have to have read one page of Kraft-Ebbing, or even know what the word means. I'm sure that Waldemar instinctively feels a relation between the "cruel" ladies in boots who used to ply their trade outside the Kaufhaus des Westens and the young thugs in Nazi uniforms who are out there nowadays pushing the Jews around. When one of the booted ladies recognized a promising customer, she used to grab him, haul him into a cab and whisk him off to be whipped. Don't the S.A. boys do exactly the same thing with THEIR customers—except that the whipping is in fatal earnest? Wasn't the one a kind of psychological dress rehearsal for the other?

But now the Nazis are in power. And now I have to admit to myself that I have never been seriously involved, never been a real partisan; only an excited spectator. . . . When I first came to Berlin, I came quite irresponsibly, for a thrill. . . . However, having thoroughly explored the Berlin night life and
begun to get tired of it, I grew puritanical. I severely criticized those depraved foreigners who visited Berlin in search of pleasure... My indignation was perfectly sincere and even justified; Berlin nightlife, when you saw it from behind the scenes, was pitiful enough. But have I really changed underneath? Aren't I as irresponsible as ever, running away from a situation like this? Isn't it somehow a betrayal?

Clearly, in the face of the "anything goes" society, the author reacts puritanically, searching for meaning and even for guilt because he has not committed himself to a righteous cause.

The evil of Germany in the 1930's was objective, palpable, and oppressive even to a committed outlaw like Genet. Even in his inverted world of good and evil, Nazism takes on an ultimate character which seems to negate the ordinary human definition of evil, just as the medieval VIA NEGATIVA denied the use of the human term "good" to describe the unknowable transcendent "good" of God; new terminologies are needed, without which Genet, in THE THIEVE'S JOURNAL, can hardly cope with the Nazi phenomenon:

In order to get to Antwerp I had just gone through Nazi Germany, where I had stayed a few months. I walked from Breslau to Berlin. I would have liked to steal. A strange force held me back. Germany terrified all of Europe; it had become, particularly to me, the symbol of cruelty. It was already outside the law. Even on Unter den Linden I had the feeling that I was strolling about in a camp organized by bandits. I thought that the brain of the most scrupulous bourgeois concealed treasures of duplicity, hatred, meanness, cruelty and lust. I was excited at being free amidst an entire people that had been placed on the index. Probably I stole there as elsewhere, but I felt a certain constraint, for what governed this activity and what resulted from it—this particular moral attitude set up as a civic virtue—was being experienced by a whole nation which directed it against others.

"It's a race of thieves," I thought to myself. "If I steal here, I perform no singular deed that
It was objective, palpable, and palpable, and even for guilt because he was objective, palpable, and even for guilt because he was objective, palpable, and even for guilt because he was objective, palpable, and even for guilt because he was objective, palpable, and even for guilt because he was objective, palpable, and even for guilt because he was objective, palpable, and even for guilt because he was objective, palpable, and even for guilt because he was objective, palpable, and even for guilt because he was objective, palpable, and even for guilt because he was objective, palpable, and even for guilt because he was objective, palpable, and even for guilt because he was objective, palpable, and even for guilt because he was objective, palpable, and even for guilt because he was objective, palpable, and even for guilt because he was objectiv...

Genet is talking about a confrontation with the ultimate. In a hypocritical bourgeois society, the practicing thief (as opposed to the covert thief in tie and jacket) emerges as a hero whose actions bespeak undisguised actuality. Here the good burghers are not only thieves, which they always have been, but now they revel in their forthright banditry. The scholastic theologian, because of the human separation from God, could only speak about Him in well-chosen but still elusive terms; but for the mystic who stood directly before the Ultimate, words and all knowledge were irrelevant. In the “anything goes” society there are no mysteries, thus historico-cultural with its moral traditions is seen as a decadent hindrance to the actualization of the new perceived realities.

Then what is left but death, the surrender to an irresistible death wish? In her review of THE LAST OF THE NUBA, Sontag points out that Riefenstahl’s films “The Mountain” and “The Blue Light” honor an irresistible force which ultimately leads to death. Their theme is the abandonment of rationality for feeling under a charismatic leader. In “Triumph of the Will” this theme is obvious. However, “Olympia” presents a more subtle case. Since it is about the Olympic Games, it appears neutral; without any feelings of guilt, film buffs can claim it as a consummate work of art. Yet the fascist theme is there. Throughout, Hitler is a presence under whose auspices beautiful bodies struggle for the sake of struggle. Of course, the games just happened to have been scheduled for Berlin in 1936, but the film appropriates them as Hitler’s show. And like the “cruel ladies” of Berlin, who had by this time been replaced by the Storm Troopers, the Olympic warriors of the games will soon surrender themselves to another mysterious or aesthetic extravaganza, the European Gotterdammerung of 1939-45.

The Nuba too are a beautiful people in the process of dying, and the great ceremonies of their culture are the male wrestling matches and the funerals. For Sontag, then, the very subject of Riefenstahl’s picture book is part of the tradition that gave us “Olympia” and “Triumph of the Will.” “Death tripping” has been part of our popular and middle-brow culture for several years. TRISTAN UND ISOLDE, GOTTERDAMMERUNG, and PARSIFAL seem to be campus favorites at the moment. TRISTAN is probably Wagner’s most united work, the one in...
which music and theme collaborate best; yet that its theme of the love-death as irresistible as orgasm itself should become so popular seems a bit disturbing in historical perspective.

Our opening quotation expresses, in an innocent and nostalgic way, appropriate to a lady in white silk dress, exactly those ideas we now associate with men in black SS uniforms. It is all there: the struggle, the abandonment of thought, the surrender to feeling. The countess might appear to be a Führerin of artists, the eternal feminine, sexuality sublimated. The words are there, interpretations can be made, but the music, which is so delicate, seems to negate, some would argue, any case that this opera serves fascist themes. We frequently hear the platitude that the surging emotionalism of Wagner's and Strauss's music is fascist, but the former's became "fascist" when it was used by the Nazis, especially when blasted over the concentration camp loudspeakers. Music alone is not political; however, the music drama tradition emphasizes the importance of the interrelationship of words and music. The style and coloration of the music does not necessarily indicate political intent. For example, in 1938 Strauss employed the dramatic, full-blown Wagnerian musical style to challenge fascism with his critically-acclaimed, but still rarely performed, anti-war opera, Friedenstag. On the other hand, Capriccio (1942) and the earlier Ariadne auf Naxos (1916) show that proto-fascist themes could subtly operate within the music of neo-Mozartian nostalgia.

Ariadne is an opera within an opera. The prologue takes place in the wings of the palace theater of the richest (and perhaps most vulgar) man in Vienna in the late-eighteenth century. Members of a commedia dell'arte company and of an opera company are milling about talking shop. Suddenly there is disconcerting news from the majordomo: in order for a fireworks display to be given at 9:00 sharp, the commedia and the opera seria, Ariadne, will have to be performed simultaneously. The news chagrins the composer and delights the comedians. Thus as the actual opera within the opera progresses we have Zerbinetta and her companions attempting to cheer up the mournful Ariadne with song and dance. The contrast of musical and theatrical styles is pure delight. The seductive final scene of the whole double opera attempts to achieve transcendence over this bourgeois vulgarity. Ariadne longs for a kingdom where all is pure, in fact, the kingdom of the dead, for all that surrounds her, she says, is corrupt. So she awaits a messenger of the gods to take her to the kingdom of the dead. Indeed, a god does come to her—Bacchus, not a messenger of death but a refugee from the wiles of Circe. Ariadne has her identity, but they fall in light of Zerbinetta, while o pumped out by the small Me

What does this all marriage that Gluck had to take on operas such as Iphigenie in Aulis, an artist transcending bourgeois individual to Dionysian emotion is the tradition of Riefenstahl's decade of Ariadne's pre-emotional state of intellectual.

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that its theme of the love-wiles of Circe. Ariadne has no idea who he really is, nor does he know her identity, but they fall madly in love much to the matchmaking delight of Zerbinetta, while one of Strauss's most romantic tunes is then pumped out by the small Mozartian orchestra. End of the opera.

What does this all mean? Is it a parody of the conventional marriage that Gluck had to tag onto the conclusions of his Paris-period operas such as IPHIGENIE EN AULIDE? Does it represent the romantic artist transcending bourgeois vulgarity? Or is it the surrender of the individual to Dionysian emotionalism? If it is the latter, it appears to be in the tradition of Riefenstahl's early films (which were produced within a decade of ARIADNE'S premiere): blindly following the leader to an emotional state of intellectual abandonment ultimately leading to death.

The thirst for decadence had its apocalyptic element: the decay of the old order would introduce a new age of youthful innocence—whether it be Arcadian aestheticist, communist, anarchist, or fascist. Despite the ironic elements of word and music in his operas, Strauss was dead serious in his aestheticist vision and its ultimate meaning. However, he had the misfortune of living on after that vision had palled within the repellent realities of the New Order elevated to power in Germany. In that situation, he was reduced to being a purveyor of nostalgic pleasure, a role which he accepted. He readily admitted his concern for keeping the theaters filled with people paying to hear his works, and popularity he had during the Third Reich, even though he was persona non grata with the Nazis because of his collaboration with Stefan Zweig on THE
SILENT WOMAN. Strauss at worst was an archetype of the hypocritical bourgeois artist. With him beauty came to exist for its own sake and its meaning was hermetically sealed within the work itself; in Riefenstahl's work, on the contrary, beauty had a direct and terrifying propagandistic meaning. Yet Strauss could be useful for the Nazis; the purveying of pleasure can be used for political control. One is reminded of the scene in Godard's "Sympathy for the Devil (1+1)" where the owner of a pornography store reads from MEIN KAMPF while customers peruse the merchandise. Strauss created an art of acquiescence.

For the Susan Sontag of the mid-1960's, aestheticism was an ideal, but for the Sontag of the mid-1970's, aestheticism is suspect and subject to the question "What does it mean?" This is an absolute turn-about and probably a traumatic one for her. Art for art's sake was all right until it started wearing chains and black leather, which appears to be a warm-up for the real thing. The Nazi Holocaust was truly the unthinkable in its scale. Massive nuclear destruction might be more total, but it would probably be the result of ineptitude rather than of calculated evil sustained by civilized institutions for a prolonged period of time. The Holocaust was an ultimate experience, the greatest challenge to the relativist position. The art of the Nazi era cannot be judged in purely aesthetic terms (although most of it would be easily so condemned); the enormity of the crimes of that era demand that we evaluate the relationship of the arts to those crimes themselves. For Sontag, what was good for sixties is not good for the seventies. Movies like 'The Night Porter,' books like SS REGALIA, and sado-masochistic sex were not popular (at least not out in the open) ten years ago. These new styles do mean something, if we can build on the imagery of Isherwood, and just might be a dress rehearsal for the real thing.

So we are once again being asked to think about what we enjoy. The liberal faith has been that fascism is avoidable in an informed and thinking society, and Sontag has used her position as a tastemaker to put us back on that track. However, the tone of her review is somewhat crusading, almost as though we are teetering on the brink. The German attitude toward de-Naziification since the war has been a kind of soft censorship of things Nazi, and the danger of carrying the anti-relativist argument too far is the demand for censorship. Since a major civilized nation once bought the Nazi world view wholesale, we are right in being a bit nervous when we see a new interest in fascist trappings here. The situation demands that artists and intellectuals not acquiesce (which Strauss found rather lucrative) or use the fascist technique of censorship; rather,
rchtetype of the hypocritical exist for its own sake and its work itself; in Riefenstahl's and terrifying propagandistic the Nazis; the purveying of One is reminded of the scene 1)" where the owner of a while customers peruse the sceence.

1960's, aestheticism was an aestheticism is suspect and ?" This is an absolute turner. Art for art's sake was all leather, which appears to Holocaust was truly the unjunction might be more total, titude rather than of calcul for a prolonged period of the greatest challenge Eazi era cannot be judged in would be easily so condemng demand that we evaluate neselves. For Sontag, what nities. Movies like "The Night o-masochistic sex were not years ago. These new styles do gery of Isherwood, and just think about what we enjoy, oidable in an informed and sition as a tastemaker to put her review is somewhat cruthe brink. The German ati been a kind of soft censor theying the anti-relativist arguance a major civilized nation we are right in being a bit trappings here. The situation demands a higher creative responsibility. Liberal society holds a very delicate balance. The "cruel ladies" are a far cry from the Storm Troopers, and the challenge to the open society is to guarantee through the merits of liberalism itself that the Troopers do not come to power. To use censorship would seem to make the coming of the Troopers inevitable.

Published by ScholarWorks@GVSU, 1975

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