Too Much Propaganda

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This book considers Jesuit architecture through the lens of ‘propaganda’ and vice versa. Fascinated by apparent connections between Nazi propaganda and Jesuit architecture, Levy asks whether we might usefully think of early modern Jesuit architecture in terms of propaganda. Conversely, she suggests that National Socialist architecture was indebted to the Baroque: ‘That Speer and Hitler self-consciously modelled the domed Great Hall… on a Roman building like St Peter’s… suggests that the historiography of the Catholic Baroque made it ripe for appropriation by a totalitarian regime’ (p. 2). In short, Nazi architecture and Jesuit architecture smack of demagoguery and mass manipulation and Levy sees ‘propaganda’ as the most appropriate mode in which to address these similarities. The real ambition of the book is greater than this, however. In the teeth of Hitler’s legacy that makes it ‘virtually impossible’ for propaganda to function as ‘a productive category of analysis’ (p. 2), Levy nevertheless wants to lift ‘propaganda’ into a ‘productive category’ for art historical analysis. The book fails in its avowed aims, but it should be welcomed as a courageous attempt to rethink old paradigms of Baroque architecture. In addition, it provides particularly stimulating historiographical discussion, and some useful work on Andrea Pozzo’s vault frescoes of S. Ignazio and on the Chapel of St Ignatius in the Gesù in Rome. I shall start with the book’s accomplishments, before discussing its principal failings.

Levy’s historiography is most exciting: the first chapter, on the historiography of the terms ‘Jesuit style’ (and its larger shadow, ‘baroque’), is particularly rich, and the second, on the term ‘propaganda’ (as opposed to ‘rhetoric’), is helpful. While Levy’s claims that, if effectively historically contextualised, the notion of a Jesuit style was ‘quite right’ and ‘extraordinarily fertile’ (p. 40) remain respectively banal and curiously vague, her argument that the (international) Society of Jesus was the focus of particularly intense suspicion during the nineteenth century is sharply focused. In the mid-nineteenth century a politicised discourse on architecture and a hostile political debate over the survival of the Jesuits converged in the concept of Jesuit style. Levy’s role is, therefore, part sleuth: ‘Although no one would claim today that a Jesuit Style existed, this term and its historiography still occupy a central if hidden place in our understanding of the Catholic Baroque’ (p. 15). Thus, born with its times, and useful to art history ‘the Jesuit style provides a piquant example of the art historical repressed’ (p. 41).

It is fascinating to learn that the term ‘Jesuitenstil’ (first used in 1842) was first fully defined by the young Jacob Burckhardt (in his entry for Brockhaus’s Allgemeine deutsche Real-Enzyklopedie of 1845). He argued that ‘the great pomp of their church style with its inner poverty brought all of church architecture of the time down with it, following the lead of the Jesuits, sacrificing everything, even the highest goods, to achieve raw effects’ (quoted p. 30). Here aesthetic style is a particular manner of thinking (or deceiving). The critique (like Croce’s later critique of Baroque) suggests that spiritual insincerity inevitably undermines Jesuit work from within. Levy’s take on this emphasises ambition, rather than moral corruption: ‘it is not surprising that in the search for stylistic coordinates, institutions like the Society of Jesus, which possessed what were perceived as clear goals, could anchor stylistic designations’ (p. 30). Levy identifies three major themes in anti-Jesuitism: the Jesuit ‘Ur-Author’ (the Society as author of its productions), ‘Jesuit architectural imperialism’ (Roman-style Jesuit architecture as a means to world domination) and the ‘conquest of minds and spirits through visual intoxication’ (‘excessive’ decoration as a strategy for mass manipulation). Levy rightly underscores the significance of the coincidence of Quatremère’s assessment of the Baroque as a principle of degeneration and Quinet’s of Jesuitism as decline in religion: ‘visual intoxication’ rapidly equated with material splendour and ‘decorative excess’ (a classic topos of decline since Vitruvius). The ‘nineteenth-century idea’ that material splendour could conquer souls, Levy argues, drew on the western tradition of mistrust of the senses, guided by a nineteenth-century (political) fear of Jesuit hegemony, which fed the notion that the Jesuits had a hold on the Baroque epoch. While Levy is quick to historicise much of
the ammunition fired at Jesuit art, she does not attempt to historicise or explain the (normative) notion of ‘ornamental excess’, simply asserting that it is ‘certainly found’ in some Jesuit churches (p. 34). Levy is happiest when using the term ‘propaganda’ in relation to totalitarian regimes. Much of chapter two is dedicated to discussion of the term ‘propaganda’ during and after National Socialism. Goebbels, as Minister of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda, found the word ‘left a bitter aftertaste’ (quoted p. 61), but then set to work ensuring that the term was only used positively. After the war, ‘propaganda’ was therefore readily associated with dubious ends, and was not used by the US administration in regard to its own actions. Levy is undoubtedly correct that the use of the term ‘propaganda’ by art historians shows that we are ‘heirs to the Cold War moral polarisation of propaganda’ (p. 62), but her wilful focus on propaganda and Naziism leads to some forced readings. For example, in her eyes, Panofsky’s 1934, ‘What is the Baroque?’ lets the Baroque off the hook: ‘in view of the Nazi rise to power Panofsky makes it seem inevitable that propagandas of the past recede in the face of the present, more potent ones’ (p. 5). Yet significantly, as Levy herself notes, Panofsky does not regard the Baroque as ‘propaganda’, or as the lesser of two evils, but rather as one of two great goods, as a second ‘climax’ after the Renaissance. Likewise, Levy’s reading of Wolfflin through her preoccupation with propaganda, is at once illuminating and limiting. For Levy, he is heavily influenced by early psychology of the mass and the fear of the crowd (‘the crowd as historical form’ [p. 55]). Acknowledging that Wolfflin never names the Jesuit style, she claims that ‘it lurks in the shadows’ (p. 37) and even suggests that he posits Jesuit psychology as the primary historical explanation for Baroque forms. Wolfflin, she says, ‘defines Baroque form as evidence of Jesuit techniques’ (p. 37) before suggesting that ‘The Jesuits remained a malingering ghost in his text as the organisers of mass persuasion, and the forms associated with them become the forms embodying the persuaded mass’ (p. 55). This is exciting stuff, reminding readers of the importance of the developing nationalism that gave rise to, and lies enshrouded within, art historical terminologies. For Levy, Wolfflin remains guilty of the ‘vague historical generalities about which he himself complained’ (p. 37). Maybe so, but when Wolfflin asks, ‘Is there aesthetic significance in the fact that the Jesuits forced their spiritual system on the individual and made him sacrifice his rights to the idea of the whole?’, his question is inherently sceptical (‘we still have to find the path that leads from the cell of the scholar to the mason’s yard’), since for him architecture gives an ideal enhancement of an epoch’s Lebensgefühl: the fundamental temper ‘cannot be contained in a particular idea or system’.2 Wolfflin’s Baroque is surely haunted as much by Hegel as by Jesuits, whereas Levy’s Wolfflin is haunted by the insistent ghost of propaganda. The key period for Levy is really the 1910s and 1920s: ‘While the term switched to Baroque in the 1880s, the notion that the Jesuits were central to seventeenth-century architecture persisted; and in the 1910s and 1920s, the Jesuit Style was regarded as a historical equivalent to modern propaganda’ (p. 16). Thus the fulcrum of Levy’s book is a leap from a twentieth-century German historiography of the Baroque to the early modern period; the connections between Jesuit art and propaganda. ‘I am concerned, ultimately’, she states, ‘with how the characterisation of Jesuits would be projected onto Jesuit architecture and onto the Baroque’ (p. 23). She further claims that her book addresses a ‘key lacuna’ in the study of art and propaganda in the early modern period – the problems that arise in applying the term ‘propaganda’ to works of art – ‘two categories that have resisted each other most obviously in the study of art as employed by the Nazis’ (pp. 11–12). For Levy this makes the treatment of Jesuit art a ‘paradigmatic case in art history’ (p. 10). Alas, the fulcrum is distinctly unsteady, as Levy veers between a conventional historical account and extravagant claims based on the notion of ‘propaganda’. Levy’s historiographical discussion, exciting and original though it is, is insufficient to bind (or unbind) the conventionally treated seventeenth-century architecture either to (or from) ‘propaganda’. Hidden within the book are two chapters which pay close attention to the art and architecture of the Jesuits, particularly a series of projects from the late seventeenth century by the Jesuits in Rome, celebrating their founder, St Ignatius of Loyola. Levy’s discussion of the circulation of engravings of the Chapel of Ignatius is one of the most interesting sections in the book. She demonstrates how the Jesuits, busy shipping engravings and pamphlets the world over, presented this as simply meeting the demands of an insatiable cult. However, her grip is weaker when she tries to rise to more abstract considerations. The Jesuits’ concern about St Ignatius’ lack-lustre cult, argues Levy, prompted their attention to his cult sites in Rome, from St Ignatius’ rooms in the Casa Professa, where Andrea Pozzo produced images of Ignatius as miracle-worker (c.1682–6), to his hallucinatory frescoes in S. Ignazio (1685–8). Unfortunately, she attempts to inscribe images and cults into a presentation of a ‘specular’ Ignatius, as ‘an interpellated and an interpellating subject’ (p. 155). Levy does, however, make some interesting observations on the Chapel of St Ignatius. She shows that the original arrangement of window and mirrors directed light onto the head and halo of the saint, for example, and argues that the allegorical figures of Faith, Religion and Heresy in the chapel collapse Ignatius’ life into the Society’s activities. Yet her analyses rarely rise above conventional iconography (apart from reiterative claims about interpel-
...and her conclusions simply return to the propaganda drum: ‘in the multifarious ways in which the chapel inscribes the viewer, it constitutes propaganda’ (p. 178).

Levy’s account of the Chapel of St Ignatius itself adds comparatively little to the work by Pio Pecchias and Berhard Kerber. For example, no new light is shed on what was at stake in the disagreement amongst the Jesuits over the suitability of Andrea Pozzo’s designs: instead Levy presents the issue as evidence for ‘Jesuit insecurities’ (p. 94) and reduces the issue to the flat comment that ‘in late seventeenth-century Rome, judgment of a work of art is, effectively, power’ (p. 97).

When was it not? Questions about the roles of Agostino Chigi, Carlo Fontana and Andrea Pozzo (in particular, why certain groups support one aesthetic and others another), whether there were opposing camps advocating greater or lesser material richness and how political alliances and generational divides informed aesthetic debates are not addressed. Instead of competing voices and factionalism within the Jesuits, Levy sees the disagreement as evidence of obedience and uncertainty: ‘they show that even within a culture that required obedience, the individual is always present, being formed . . .[and] how uncertain the Jesuits had become about who possessed the expertise to judge and . . . see a design to its completion’ (p. 99).

Remarkably, the Jesuits displayed the model of the Chapel of St Ignatius, and opened its site during construction to the public, recording visitors’ names and their comments. Levy suggests that the Jesuits’ strategically valorised ‘public’ discussion because it gave the appearance of freedom from institutional control, but this begs the question as to whether these visitors were all as aristocratic and powerful as those on the particular page reproduced by Levy, which teems with Cardinals’ names (Fig. 22). What sort of people constituted the ‘public’ conjured up by the Jesuits? Did the Cardinals deliberately valorise a particularly aristocratic or clerical ‘public’? Levy is not interested in these issues. The chapel, argues Levy, is the ‘trace of working’ in which ‘the architect himself, as subject, is produced’ (p. 108). Since this chapter is framed in terms of ‘the propagandist’, this rich evidence is simply used to adduce that ‘an antithesis between art and propaganda cannot be maintained, for the Jesuits actively cultivated the public discourse on art’ (p. 108). As for the ‘propagandist’, the argument goes as follows: since the Third Reich’s architects were not anonymous; ‘the anonymity of an architect cannot be considered a criterion for architecture that is . . . propaganda’ (p. 106). However, this does not cause the ejection of the term: ‘there is, nonetheless, in a work of propagandistic architecture self-consciousness about the architect’s relationship to the organisation’ (p. 107).

Ergo, the self-consciousness in the relationship between Jesuit architects and the Society indicates that propagandistic architecture is taking place there too. In this way a characteristic discerned by Levy within a relationship designated as ‘propagandistic’ is advanced to diagnose other (Jesuit) relationships in which she discerns similar characteristics. Chasing the chimaera of ‘propaganda’ means that Levy is uninterested in identifying what is distinctive to the Jesuits: she fails to ask of which architects and patrons’ relationships could ‘self-consciousness’ not be claimed. What, if anything, distinctive about the Jesuit Society is identified by denoting its architectural work as ‘propagandistic’? Levy eschews the (arduous) task of comparing Jesuit modes of working with those of contemporary religious institutions in Rome. Instead (understandably), she wriggles as if discomfited by her own argument: ‘In fashioning the design process, [the Society of Jesus] was doing something that is akin to propaganda. But even this appears tidier than I intend it to be’ (p. 109).

Unfortunately, the book does not examine how the Society differed from other religious organisations. Much of what Levy writes about the problems of discerning individual styles, the role of an institution, and patronal sponsor, is not only applicable to the Jesuits. Sadly, however, she does not engage with the literature on the religious orders more generally, and thus we miss the chance to understand by comparison precisely how Jesuit patronage differed from that of the Franciscans or Theatines, for instance. Eager to demonstrate that the Society exerted control which exceeded ‘ordinary controls’ (p. 79), the author inadvertently sets up a normative ‘ordinary’ from which it differs, without telling us where this ‘ordinary’ was to be found (indeed, one wonders whether the fifty resident fathers, in danger of death when the corridors collapsed in the Casa Professa in Naples, were aware that their Society ‘in its self-consciousness’ exceeded ‘ordinary controls’?). Detailed prescription, which Levy presents as peculiar to Jesuit practices, is common in non-Jesuit projects and contracts and, although the author contributes some useful information about and analysis of Jesuit architecture, there is too little here that is new to excite Baroque specialists.

The book is apparently ‘intended as a corrective – both to the containment of propagandistic art and to the neutralization of the Catholic Baroque’ (p. 10). Levy’s thesis depends on a notion of ‘neutralization’ to explain why, even more than Renaissance studies, Baroque studies have resisted critical politicised readings (Marxist criticism, the social history of art, etc.): ‘Italian Baroque studies today, especially around the Catholic church, remain fundamentally unaffected by political critique’ (p. 5). Levy claims that the Church after World War I was ‘neutralized’ (p. 2), which allowed art historians to view the art of the Catholic Baroque as an expression of sincere religiosity. Later she claims that ‘the neutralization of the baroque since World War II . . . has also tended to wrench aesthetics from its politics’ (p. 5). Levy’s fondness for the notion of ‘neutralization’
is curious in an art historian quick to appreciate the inevitable contingency of critical commentary. She claims that, since the end of the Cold War, ‘propaganda has been invoked in a more neutral fashion’ (p. 10), but that ‘such an approach irresponsibly misuses propaganda, for by neutralizing it, one abandons its essence’ (p. 10). Quite what she means by ‘neutralized’ is not clear (these claims are not substantiated through citation or references). It appears to cover everything from disingenuousness to political and academic naivety (which are, of course, anything but neutral). For Levy the absence of an articulated politicised critique in Baroque studies is the result of this ‘neutralization’. This risks, of course, seeing Catholicism and its interpretations as apolitical or beyond history (a notion that is hard to sustain, in spite of the Vatican’s adeptness at presenting itself as beyond history and politics). Might it not be Baroque’s rhetorical Catholicism that has caused the difficulties? Arguably, art historians have tended to withdraw from studying Baroque art, especially in its more flamboyant forms, through Puritanical (or at least, Protestant) distaste. Indeed, to see Catholicism’s triumphant articulation in Baroque art in terms of ‘propaganda’ (a term rarely applied to Protestant art) and nonchalant references to ‘excessive material splendour’ might be viewed as symptomatic of this.

The book’s fundamental failing is its lack of an adequate definition of propaganda (as opposed to a historiography of the word) or analysis of its operation, despite Levy’s heavy dependence on the notion: ‘It seeks to discover propaganda, unnamed but already in our midst, in the early historiography of the Jesuit Style in particular and the Catholic baroque in general’. This naming of propaganda ‘in our midst’ leads, she suggests, to a recognition that ‘the term’s invocation is a symptom of the powerful identity of the institutions responsible for propagandistic monuments as well as of difficult qualities (like excessive material splendour) possessed by the objects themselves’ (p. 10). This appears to be a circular argument, with propaganda apparently indexing ‘propagandistic’ institutions, while ‘excessive’ qualities simply reside in objects themselves. However, for Levy it makes the treatment of Jesuit art ‘a paradigmatic case in art history’ (p. 10).

Critical here is the inability to distinguish between propaganda and ideology in ways helpful to art historians: ‘my assessment of propaganda’s usefulness to art history is a methodological inquiry in which propaganda sets out a path that extends from the relationship of an institution to a work of art’s inception through its diffusion’ (p. 13). While ‘propaganda’ here seems to be simply a synonym for ‘ideology’, this is earnestly refuted by the author. Levy’s refusal to take more seriously Althusser’s notion of ideology is a serious limitation of the book. Suggesting that ‘the proximity – if not the dependence – of Althusser’s models of ideology on [sic] Christian models of subject formation points to its appropriateness for understanding visual propaganda in the Jesuit milieu in particular and the Catholic Baroque in particular’ (p. 110), she argues that ‘visual propaganda is . . . a means by which Catholic subjects were, to use Althusser’s term, interpellated’ (p. 110). However, Althusser was concerned with ideology (not visual propaganda), arguing that ideology transforms individuals into subjects by interpellation. If propaganda and ideology cannot be distinguished (Levy nowhere distinguishes between them, even while insisting on their difference), then why does Levy insist that ‘propaganda exists’? (p. 69) Instead Levy seeks to differentiate between art as propaganda and art as ideology, ‘because propaganda makes of art something that cannot be seen or is seen past . . . this is not art that is ideological, or art as a form of ideology, but ideology in the form of art’ (p. 9).

This leads her into awkward convolutions: ‘This formulation may suggest an outmoded view to Marxists, who have left behind the idea that artistic conventions do not impinge on the formal expression of ideology, that the aesthetic is a transparent bearer of ideology. This is not my view, but it is my view of how propaganda (problematically) functions, in art history, or not’ (pp. 9–10).

Levy demonstrates just how little of Althusser she has understood in her attempt to valorise authorial intention: propaganda should be distinguished by its ‘intended effect on the subject’, rather than its ‘rational or irrational, truthful or untruthful character’ (p. 113). Elsewhere she attempts to ‘extrapolate a subject-forming function of visual propaganda from Althusser’s definition of ideology’ (p. 116) to reinstate authorial intention within a structuralist account. However, for Althusser all ideology works in terms of appellation, regardless of intention or what the producer requires. Ideology, too, makes requirements of its subjects (that is how they are produced). More startlingly, she attempts to define ‘propaganda’ through its ‘too-muchness’: ‘Although this quality is not always present, in this potentially irrational situation [unspecified] it produces an effect (whatever its style may be) that shapes the individual, controls him, and deprives (or frees) him of himself. Whether overwhelming or not, like other rational processes, propaganda aims to make him a subject’ (p. 113). Confusion consequently abounds: ‘Arguably, the too-muchness, the hypnotic, is more endemic to the visual than to the textual forms of propaganda’ (p. 113). This begs the question as to whether, in Levy’s own terms of reference, this makes a Nazi poster more propagandistic than Mein Kampf.

Levy’s claim that propaganda is motivated and intended to be propaganda leads to the conclusion that ‘It is a message that demands to be read in a certain way’ (p. 118). Leaving aside the problem of intentionality, it fails to explain the success or failure of various such attempts and ‘demands’. In short, Levy’s clumsy handling of Althusser’s notion of ideology leaves her attempts to define propaganda gasping for air. Indeed, at times Levy seems to entertain remarkably Romantic notions about
art: ‘artistry’, she suggests, is ‘the place where human creativity and subjectivity burst forth’. Despite references to Derrida and Althusser, her artists (or ‘artistry’) here remain curiously free-floating, their institutional and ideological formations and constraints unacknowledged. Thus she suggests that propaganda often emerges in response to a threat: ‘Propaganda is often the mark of insecurity: when other ideologies compete for subjects’ (p. 118). Her subjects are telling: ‘during democratic elections; during the period of Konfessionalisierung’. Outside these periods of emergency, we seem to step back to business as usual, without propaganda intruding in our daily (democratic and harmonious) lives. Levy’s ‘propaganda’ reassuringly belongs to a realm separate from what she calls ‘real circumstances’, when we are subject to ‘rules or laws’ (p. 117).

Levy usefully emphasises the importance to the historiography of Baroque art of its (often unacknowledged) effects (such as suspicion), and she touches on the use of affect in the art itself. However, she skirts round interrogating affect as a category of analysis, seeing it as pertaining exclusively to the viewer (referencing David Freedberg’s ‘magisterial study’). In spite of this, however, she strives to locate ‘propaganda’ as a quality intrinsic to specific art and institutions, rather than regarding it, akin to superstition, as the mark of something in which we do not believe. Elsewhere, Levy seems to suggest that categories of response can illuminate circumstances of production: ‘In becoming aware of how calling a work propagandistic amounts to a particular type of response to the work of art, we may be able to open up the circumstances in which those works of art were produced to more fruitful and lively analysis’ (p. 10).

The author seeks to draw a distinction between rhetoric and propaganda on the grounds that, while propaganda is always institutionalised, rhetoric is not (institutions have a more ‘shadowy presence in the theory of rhetoric’, p. 11). This is why art historians speak of ‘propaganda’ to refer to art produced under Louis XIV (‘rather than discourse’), while they speak instead of ‘discursive structures’ in relation to the ‘far less powerful’ artistic academies and their theorists (p. 63). This is a bizarre argument and does not recognise that the academies and their theorists were as institutionalised as Louis XIV. Thus for Levy and the art historians she refers to without citing (a footnote refers us without explanation to Barzman’s The Florentine Academy), the issue seems to come down to relative institutional ‘power’, crudely understood. According to Levy, ‘Propaganda is produced in an institutional context to further the aims of that institution, to create subjects’ and this is ‘disturbing’ to art historians (p. 11). ‘This directedness, the interestedness of propaganda is a key way in which it is set apart from rhetoric as well as from art, in the Kantian sense’ (p. 11). That the idea of ‘art in the Kantian sense’ is also disturbing to most art historians nowadays, who recognise the inevitable subjectivity, interests and ideological engagement of artists, patrons or art galleries, does not give her pause. Unfettered by such cavils, Levy pursues an argument that is characteristically merely associative: ‘propaganda is also, unlike rhetoric, a phenomenon that is deeply connected to the rise of the modern urban masses’ and ‘the Baroque has long been perceived – and there is much evidence of such a perception in the period itself – as an art that appeals precisely to the masses’ (p. 11) or, if A is associated with x and B is associated with x, then A and B must be directly related.

Wilfully disregarding Foucauldian insights into language, discourse and power, merrily bypassing Judith Butler, Levy alights upon Jacques Ellul, an obscure sociologist, as intellectual guide. From Ellul, Levy draws ‘two central qualities’ relevant to propaganda’s ‘historical forms’: first, that ‘propaganda should be distinguished by its intended effect on the subject rather than by its rational or irrational, truthful or untruthful character’ (p. 113) and, second, ‘the too-muchness of propaganda’ (p. 113). This quality, Levy assures us ‘is not always present’, but in ‘this potentially irrational situation’ (and what situation is not such?) ‘it produces an effect (whatever its style may be) that shapes the individual, controls him, and deprives him (or frees) him of himself’ (p. 113). Then she steps back to add that, ‘like other rational processes, propaganda aims to make him a subject’ (p. 113), but quite how she wishes to distinguish it from those ‘other rational processes’ remains unclear.

For Levy ‘to abandon the study of propaganda to the notion that “everything” is propaganda is an unforgivable intellectual surrender, because propaganda exists’ (p. 69). Ellul argues that propaganda is necessary to ‘placate the ideological insecurities of man [sic]’ (p. 69). For Levy, then, ‘propaganda is neither good nor bad but necessary’ (p. 70). Levy further suggests that propaganda is a supplement (‘in a Derridean sense’) to art history, enabling art history to ‘consider its activity a positive if not a redemptive one’ (p. 70): ‘The work of art as a work of propaganda – the work that points incessantly, uncomfortably to its signified, at the expense of the signer – redeems the discipline’s attention to form. The work of art as propaganda is transparent, invisible, pointing incessantly to its faulty God (Nazism, Fascism, Jesuitism, in short, ideology)’ (p. 70). Why, one wonders, does propaganda, in Levy’s model, necessarily point to a ‘faulty’ God? If it is simply incessant and transparent, why could it not point to benign gods too? Might it not rather be that ‘propaganda’ is that which points to gods in which we do not believe? Incessant transparent pointing at our own gods might just be called ‘bad art’. Levy mistakes history for form. Claiming that ‘it is easy to strip away the art [of propaganda] to see the ideological substructure but nearly impossible to operate the process in reverse’, she argues that Speer’s work will always be read as Nazi architecture, but never unambiguously as good architecture (p. 70). However, this is a product not of this architecture’s being inherently ‘propaganda’, but of our his-
historical context and relationship to the Nazi regime. During the Reich, by those who shared his views, Speer’s architecture was indeed regarded as good architecture. Later in the same chapter, Levy herself states, ‘The rapid movement through the work of art to its ideological basis...is a denial of another experience of the object as art’ (p. 71), but nowhere does Levy examine the idea that describing any art as ‘propaganda’ is itself propagandistic. Although half the book is dedicated to this unsatisfactory attempt to reach a working definition of ‘propaganda’, Levy’s principal ambition is to launch propaganda as a ‘meaningful category in art history’, something she does not begin to address directly until halfway through the book (p. 118). She turns to the Jesuit ‘propaganda’ to demonstrate this usefulness, arguing that St Ignatius of Loyola is ‘the Jesuits’ primary figure for the interpellation of Catholic subjects’ (p. 118). For Levy, the ceiling of S. Ignazio, Rome and the Chapel of St Ignatius in the Gesù, Rome, ‘constitute propaganda insofar as they are clearly motivated and make visible the speculary, interpellative structure of ideology itself’ (p. 118). She makes interesting points about imitation and likeness in her discussion of portraits of Ignatius, textual and pictorial, suggesting that it is the Spanish Jesuit Pedro de Ribadeynera, whose hagiography of Ignatius was first published in Naples in 1572, who in his imitation of Ignatius, becomes his best effigy. Chapter five, ‘Diffusion’ (‘a key element in propaganda’, p. 184) is, however, not so much about diffusion of ideas, as about repetition of forms and the meanings that might be attached to such repetition. For Levy, ‘the identity of the design and who diffuses it does matter, even if non-Jesuit artists may not always be “consciously” imitating works, because the imitated works are Jesuit in origin’. While Levy is interested (briefly) in the impact on Jesuit identity of the encounter with the unhappily termed ‘non-Western architecture’ (p. 186), she does not consider it in relation to those groups with whom the Society had to reckon most sharply – the other Catholic religious institutions, especially religious orders. In relation to the vexed question of the distribution of Jesuit plans (focused on the well-known drawing attributed to Giovanni De Rosis, Plans for Jesuit Churches, c.1580), Levy argues that in the 1570s the Jesuits wanted standardised ‘guidelines’ and plans. Her discussion maintains the well-worn distinction between form and function, the former associated with the ideological core of imitation’ (p. 197) is footnoted to a general edited collection, rather than to some of the remarkable monographs focused on Baroque architecture in Rome which have posited some very interesting ideas about the relationship between architectural form, (innovative, conventional and quotational) and motives. Much of the force of the book depends on its critique of current art history. Claiming that her study is undertaken with ‘a higher degree of self-consciousness’ than that found in most art history (p. 6), Levy inveighs against benighted art historians: ‘in making the image the god, is art history not a modern form of idolatry? For what is idolatry if not the worship of the thing itself rather than the thing represented? Has art history not labored mightily to focus on the object, at the expense of that which lays [sic] behind, under, and over it?’ (p. 71). Although ‘art history’ and ‘art historians’ take a regular pounding in this book, Levy is short on specifics.
Even where references are provided, they are unhelpful. For instance the note following the claim that ‘the persistent denial of the Jesuit corporate author, even now, brings forcibly home how much rests on style as the direct manifestation of, among other criteria, including time and region, individuality [sic]’ (p. 73) refers us, without further orientation, guidance or page reference, to Stefano della Torre and Richard’s Schofield monograph on Pellegrino Tibaldi. Does Levy find these scholars guilty of denying the Jesuit corporate author or of regarding style as the direct manifestation of time or region, or do they make the claim advanced in the text?

While Levy professes dissatisfaction at ‘the crude and misleading terms in which previous writers have imagined the relationships between Jesuit Society, patrons, and artists’, she ignores case studies that have skilfully considered these issues (albeit not on her precise terms), such as Joseph Connors’s elegant analysis of the fractured relationships between the Jesuit Society (split generationally and ideologically), Bernini’s authorship and Pamphilij patronage at Sant’Andrea al Quirinale. Taking issue with ‘the tendency [in art history] to keep the goals, ideological assumptions and functions of artists and patrons distinct’, the author suggests that ‘only by joining the two can we arrive at an understanding of the Catholic Baroque that takes full measure of the institutions that produced it and the publics to which it was directed’ (p. 6). The point appears to be undercut by its footnote acknowledging that ‘studies around institutions (papacy, religious orders, academies, noble families, etc.) are at the core of Baroque studies and are too numerous to enumerate’ (p. 243, n. 15). Indeed, much recent scholarship has energetically illuminated the tensions between patrons’ and artists’ ambitions, the complex and divided institutional identities in which they worked, and the radically divergent meanings attached to art and architecture thereby produced. In other words, is it folly to seek to ‘arrive at an understanding of the Catholic baroque’, as if such an entity ever existed?

When Levy is not berating art history, it is the social sciences which come in for attack (in spite of her dependence on Jacques Ellul). Thus ‘the view commonly held in the social sciences of the propagandist [is] an anonymous figure acting on behalf of an organization’ (p. 106) and, again, ‘most social scientists consider the fine arts (and film) as forms of propaganda’ (p. 106). This would be news to most social scientists and such crude stereotyping does art history no favours.

Written in argumentative, often rhetorical tones (scattered with italicised terms), the whole reads like an assemblage of conference papers for non-specialist audiences. At times Levy’s syntax is as adrift as her logic, and the reader is left perplexed: ‘In 1869–70 the Vatican Council declared the Syllabus dogma with the main piece of business focused on declaring a position on papal infallibility, a venerable idea but one whose most tender political moment had arrived’ (p. 21).

Levy can be inattentive to seventeenth-century sources. In considering the extent to which the Jesuits regarded architecture ‘as producing their identity’, she turns to the rules on dress in Ignatius’ Constitutions. Architecture, she notes, is not on the list of ‘Helps’ in unifying distant members, but for Levy ‘it is abundantly clear from the practices that developed in the later part of the sixteenth century that it could have been’ (p. 203). Absence may be the same as presence for Levy, but surely the omission of architecture on his list indicates how Ignatius regarded it – in contradistinction to his emphasis on the individual Jesuit’s interior and exterior uniformity. In spite of Levy’s proclaimed interest in rhetoric, her responses to seventeenth-century documents can be naive. For instance, in regard to Carl Mauro’s ‘Ristretto’, she wonders, ‘was Bonacina just getting round to writing his memoir, which is so full of quotes and eyewitness accounts that it has the freshness of a document just dashed off on the moment?’ Such inattentiveness extends beyond the specific to the general architecture of the book. Levy’s concern with over-arching themes (identity, mimesis, propaganda, etc.) frees her to make statements of the sort, ‘Jesuit forms served both the Jesuit sense of identity and purpose and the shaping of Catholic subjects’ (p. 204), without having to pay attention to the specific nature of those ‘forms’, and quite how they might have done this. Indeed, discussion of form (as opposed to iconography) is missing.

In the last chapter, ‘Postscript from Berlin’, Levy returns to the vexed question of propaganda (via current evaluations of National Socialist art and architecture) with ever-more mystification and vagueness. ‘I have emphasized directedness as the crucial aspect of propagandistic art, that which distinguishes it from the goal (however delusional) of disinterestedness’ (p. 234). One wonders what religious art (of any period) could fail to be ‘propagandistic’ in terms of this definition? Of course the Jesuits strove for the success of their Society, and worked hard for its financial stability, its institutional spread, its social and political influence. To call all this ‘propagandistic’ takes us up a remarkably blind alley and this book leads us up this alley and parades us round it for over three hundred pages. The fact that such distinguished thinkers as Derrida and Althusser are evoked (often reductively) in this guided tour makes it no more enlightening. More important questions, such as how the Jesuits’ use of art and architecture differed from that of contemporary religious orders in Rome and beyond remain unaddressed here. However, Levy, undeterred, reiterates her indebtedness to Monsieur Ellul in believing that ‘propaganda corresponds more broadly to human urges, both to reach an audience and, from the audience’s perspective, to have the choices before us reduced, made understandable. When one considers the increasingly complex confessional choices that faced early modern men and women, propaganda is eminently understandable as a his-
torical phenomenon’ (p. 234). After 234 pages, then, having learned nothing of the nature of the ‘choices’ facing Early Modern men and women, we are told that propaganda is simply an (apparently patronising) response to a universal human ‘urge’ to have things simple. The question of why the formal complexity (as opposed to a ‘too-muchness’) of Baroque art might have been forged to do this remains unaddressed.

Notes

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‘Into Production!’

Brandon Taylor


In discussions of what critics once called the ‘avant-garde’, the question of how and with what degree of success ‘art’ shifted itself towards ‘life’ and perhaps finally dissolved there played a major and perhaps defining role. The Russian Constructivists were always the heroes and heroines of the story, and they continue to be, especially in American academia, where a certain resistance to bourgeois power is at the moment deemed an important credential. In Europe, by contrast, interest in keeping alive the prospects of an artistic avant-garde seems to be flagging. Let us then applaud the forensic scholarship that has gone into the making of Maria Gough’s book, The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution, which comes again at an old question but does so through the archives of the so-called laboratory phase of Moscow Constructivism, the phase of the early debates inside INKhUK (the Institute of Artistic Culture), and then continues into the post-laboratory question of whether artists could go into production – into a final eradication of the categorial distinction between art and Soviet industry. With the help of unexplored archives in Penza and Riga, as well as in Moscow and St Petersburg, Gough has provided us with perhaps the most careful analysis of these epochal debates so far published in the West.

As Gough reminds us, the slogan that came to be regarded as expressing the highest ambitions of the Constructivist group within INKhUK was, in the words of Aleksei Gan’s 1922 book Konstruktivism, ‘the Communist expression of material structures’. As Gan expressed it, the aim was nothing less than combining the requirements of ideology as formulated by the leaders of the world’s first socialist state with the demands of formal necessity. A fully achieved Constructivism would ‘scientifically ground its approach to the construction of new buildings and services that will be capable of meeting the demands of communist culture in its transitional state, in all its fluidity’. The implication was that any art worthy of the name Constructivism would be able to express in its treatment of material structures the transitionality of post-revolutionary culture by cleaving to a form of materialism rooted in the specificity of a particular historical moment. The eternal and imperishable ‘truths’ that still hovered around the remnants of bourgeois aesthetics and culture of his day, said Gan delightedly, ‘are beginning to rot, splendidly’.

Yet we need to be reminded that the laboratory debates of Constructivism were in one sense out of step with the October Revolution. Nearly four years had elapsed since the Revolution by the time of the thoroughgoing purging of the concept of composition that cleared the way for Constructivism to be born, and by March 1921 Lenin was leading the Soviet economy back into alignment with the market in defiance of strict revolutionary principles. That fact gives Constructivism a somewhat contradictory, if not impossible, context. For one thing, a new language of artistic activity needed to be invented. In its widest theoretical conception, the new Constructivist concepts and methods needed to work in harmony with each other to ‘mobilise elements of our industrial culture’ – the words are again Gan’s. First there was construction, a term which formed an opposition to composition in the intensive debates that had already taken place among Aleksandr and Vladimir Stenberg, Karl Loganson, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova and Konstantin Medunetski between January and March 1921. These early debates had rounded on the problem of what Gough calls ‘the modernist problem of motivation’, the need to justify and make expedient, both practically in material terms as well as ideologically, the organisation of aesthetic elements. However, the remaining terms proved far less tractable within the group. Although Rodchenko argued at one stage that the second term, faktura, was akin to a visible emphasis on surface values in painting, Gan rather quickly persuaded him that it must mean the working of materials in a wider sense. It would need to mean the smelting, pouring and shaping of cast iron, and could hence stand opposed to a much older sense of the term, in which it meant the visible working of material such as paint and clay as an index of authorial presence.