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Arno Breker's *Wounded Man*: Capturing the Essence of Totalitarianism

The era of the Third Reich is most often associated with images of war and the struggle within concentration camps. However, another factor in the development of the totalitarian regime of the Third Reich is the German art that was created and released during this time. Art created by German artists underwent intense changes both before and during World War II. Arno Breker was a German artist who created a multitude of sculptures under Hitler's commission starting before and during the events of World War II. His sculptures often depicted the perfect German man and carried many implications about what German culture should contain. Arno Breker's *Wounded Man*, completed in 1943, shows the impacts of German culture during the Third Reich through its totalitarian implications and ideals. These ideals are shown through the inspection of Breker's life and artistic transformations, the totalitarian concepts seen in *Wounded Man*, and the role that *Wounded Man* had within the ideology of Nazism.

Wounded Man was shaped by the forces of the totalitarian government of the Third Reich through the biography and artistic motivations of Arno Breker himself. Though the sculpture itself is what was accessible to the public, Breker's personal experiences and aspirations were an important step in the process of its creation. Breker was born into the family of a stonemason in 1900. He attended the Düsseldorf Academy of the Arts to study sculpture. He visited Paris in 1924 and during his studies thereafter, Arno Breker spent considerable time in Paris and would even come to consider the city his home when he officially relocated there in 1927. As such, he

not only interacted with his peers and instructors in Düsseldorf, but he was also exposed to French artists, in particular Auguste Rodin. During his period of artistic change, Breker was heavily influenced by Rodin's works. In his book *Artists Under Hitler*, Jonathan Petropoulos confirms that "although Breker imagined that he could reconcile classicism and modernism, his early work in many ways followed the tradition of Auguste Rodin and the French naturalists" (263).

Understanding Arno Breker's ascent as an influential artist of the Third Reich requires an explanation of the Nazi view of art. Hitler himself held very particular parameters on the art that was to be created under the Third Reich. Although Joseph Goebbels had his establishment in the Reich Chamber of Culture in 1933, Goebbels himself acted as a sympathizer to the modernist artists who Hitler hated so much. Goebbels was credited with encouraging modernist artists to return to Germany and was known for displaying modernist in his home (Petropoulos 5-7). Modernism was denounced by the regime, and by default, expressionism. The experimentation and radical breakthroughs that modernist art required were deemed unacceptable and to be removed from the culture entirely. Hitler, with the help of the Nazi regime, established this division between acceptable art and non-acceptable art with the twin art shows in Munich, *The Great German Art Exhibition* and the *Degenerate Art Exhibition*. The first show displayed what the Nazi regime considered to be true 'German' art. Built to showcase what Hitler favored in art, the exhibition displayed romantic statues imitating the classicism from Ancient Greek sculptors. The exhibition was clean, simple, and beautiful. The *Degenerate Art Exhibition*, apparently not even worthy of having the word 'German' in its title, displayed the types of works that Hitler despised - namely modernist pieces. These pieces were purposefully arranged in a way that would appear clunky. Some paintings were placed on the floor. Phrases meant to prove the

degeneracy of this art was written on the walls. Many artists were not even named in this exhibition.

The importance of the distinction between modernism and classicism is that Arno Breker was an artist who began his career as a modernist sculptor and morphed his style to fit within the Nazi regime. *Crouching Model*, an early work of his that depicted a kneeling woman, was abstract enough to be placed among the degenerate art collection by Nazi newspaper editor Alfred Rosenberg (Petropoulos 266). Though never completely abandoning his modernist tendencies, Breker made great changes to his style that landed him in favor of Hitler himself. Anointed “Hitler’s favorite sculptor,” Breker became an official member of the Party in 1937 and would go on to create German fascist sculptures for the regime.

Throughout his time in the Third Reich, Breker’s commissions were prominent in high prestige settings. The book *Die Neue Reichskanslei* shows a multitude of Arno Breker’s works in the high prestige settings of the new Reich Chancellery. Commissioned by Hitler to be built by architect Albert Speer in 1938, the Chancellery would be a large and beautiful establishment in Berlin for the office of the Chancellor of Germany. The building was filled with the neoclassical artwork which Hitler favored so much. Breker’s works were included in this prestige setting. For example, two great reliefs by Breker sit above the doorways of a massive domed room. One is a man holding a sword, while the other is a woman holding what appears to be a staff brandishing a swastika. These reliefs are massive and command the attention of the viewer. Breker’s sculptures also stand on the outside of the building, near the entrance. These works all depict the perfect Aryan man or woman, and thus had their place within the Reich Chancellery.

In his personal endeavors, Breker took an interesting stand. Although he became an official member of the National Socialist party, he never seemed to particularly believe in the motives of the Nazis. He resided in Paris while the Nazi regime took to parliamentary politics in Germany. Petropoulos gives accounts of the kinds of remarks that Breker would make when speaking about the Third Reich, often opposing it where he believed the government was unfit. In 1934, however, he did move from Paris to practice back in Germany, claiming that anti-German sentiments in Paris made him uncomfortable. In another conversation, he also apparently wanted to influence the changes being made in Germany. According to Petropoulos, however, there was another entirely separate reason for this decision. He writes that “these explanations come up short and are outweighed by the strong element of career advancement that entered into his thinking” (267). Thus the most important factor when considering Arno Breker is that he was an opportunist. There are accounts of Breker pulling strings and saving his Jewish friends from concentration camps or deportation, often people who had value to him. At the same time, he seemed to disregard others who suffered the same deportations and trips to camps. Breker did what he believed would further his career as an artist, regardless of what *side* his actions put him on.

The focus of this analysis, *Wounded Man* is a large-scale sculpture which depicts a nude male figure sitting low on a boulder. This figure is extremely lean and well muscled. With a downturned face of anguish, he covers his head with one forearm. The other elbow rests against his opposite thigh, and his hand is clenched into a near-fist. Contrary to the sculpture’s title, there is not a single obvious wound on the figure’s body. A bandage is wrapped around the figure’s head, possibly symbolizing an internal kind of trauma felt by Germany in response to its failure in World War I. Overall, the statue gives off an air of hurt, deceit, and revenge.

A viewer would not need to exercise much, if any, skill to notice the similarities between Breker's *Wounded Man* and Rodin's *Thinker*. Both share a hunched over position and the same squat. Breker has clearly found inspiration in the *Thinker*'s downturned face and contemplative expression. Of course, the sculptures have their differences as well. Where the *Thinker*'s figure is fit, the form of a clearly healthy man, Breker seems to have taken physique a step farther in *Wounded Man*. Breker seems to have taken his inspiration from Rodin and similar artists and mixed it in with elements of classicism to produce the kind of style he employed during the Third Reich.

Breker's *Wounded Man* shows the impacts of the totalitarian government of the Third Reich through the totalitarian ideals the sculpture represented. First, *Wounded Man* drove a huge racial message for the National Socialist Party. Hitler wanted art to picture the perfect German Aryan race, a representation of the Nazi Germany he was trying to create. The perfect Aryan was white, unblemished, and heroic - everything the Jews, or what altered image Hitler had been pushing of the Jews, were not.

Breker never sculpted the Jewish man or woman, or any other 'degenerate' group for that matter. Antisemitism was so strong that the degenerate could not be portrayed in the same context or space as the Aryan. In *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, Eric Michaud writes that "Nazi imagery never, or hardly ever, presented both the racially pure body of the people and that of the enemy at once. Indeed, if the volkisch Idea was to appear in all its purity, it was essential that no 'weak and mildewed' part of the people be there to defile the image" (49). The very idea of the two races mixing in the same space was so vile that such circumstances could not even be portrayed in marble and bronze casts.

Second, in the relationship between *Wounded Man* and its totalitarian implications, race and gender are intertwined. In a male dominated society, femininity was clearly viewed as subordinate. This was not original to the Third Reich, as anti-feminism was rampant in most places during the 1930s and 40s. However, the Third Reich used this subordination of femininity as another method to justify the discrimination of the Jewish population (Schüler-Springorum 1214). *Wounded Man* is masculine in every sense of the term. Breker's choice to make the figure physically fit was deliberate. *Wounded Man* is heavily muscled. Although the original work is inanimate bronze, the viewer feels as though the figure could stand up at any minute, ready for a fight, because the figure's muscles are clenched in what seems to be a display of obvious aggression. His veins bulge out from his skin in a display of athleticism. Though women can certainly be physically fit, these are all attributes typically associated with masculinity in National Socialism. This decided masculinity, as Michaud discusses in his book, came from a development around 1933 of the New Reich. Previously, women had held an important role in art as the mediators of the future generations. Symbolically, women were responsible for ensuring a fine offspring in the next generation. During the Third Reich, however, this balance shifted. Masculinity was more important within the goals of the regime and therefore the ideal form to be represented in art. With a policing of the forms that Third Reich art was allowed to take, male forms became more common. Michaud writes that "the ultimate goal was not the production of the Reich as a work of art, but the fabrication of a people composed of new men" (140). In combining this hegemonic masculinity with the antisemitism of the Nationalist Socialist Party, this clearly became a way to feminize Jewish men. The argument was made that degenerate Jewish men were biologically weaker and therefore more feminine than Aryan men (Schüler-Springorum 1214). The Aryan German man was tall, lean,

and fit. Contrasted by a perceived lack of fit physicality, lack of bodily heroic sacrifice, and lack of aggression, Jewish masculinity became illegitimate.

The German army was an important site of masculinization. In the article “Protean Masculinity, Hegemonic Masculinity: Soldiers in the Third Reich,” Thomas Kühne makes this argument about feminine coded masculinity. He writes that “since the nineteenth century, the army had been organized as a "school of manliness" that transformed "weak" (i.e., feminine) boys into "hard," real men” (para. 20). A great deal of Nazi men obviously would not be able to fit this stereotype. Kühne later goes on to explain the tactics that the regime’s army would go to accentuate this German concept of manliness. Where men would fail to fulfill this idealized concept of masculinity, Nazi army uniforms were designed to make them look taller, fuller, and stronger. Of course this would make the Jewish man, who bore no such uniform, seem to be the weaker, emasculated race.

Finally, Breker’s *Wounded Man* brings in religious connotations that are seen within Nazi totalitarian culture. Christianity and Nazism came at odds at some points within the Third Reich, where the Catholic church believed the National Socialist movement to be hostile toward Christianity. Michaud even concludes that “Nazism was incompatible with Christianity” (p. 55) due to its set in stone Jewish historical affiliations and further suggest that, had the Third Reich continued successfully in Hitler’s ideal form, Christianity would have been phased out completely.

Bringing this anti-Christian approach to art, Nazi approved art would not have contained Christian ideology. Instead, the Führer is depicted as a kind of “German Christ.” Michaud explains that “Nazi ideology and its ceremonies were very soon understood to be what they truly were and were analyzed accordingly: as replicas of Christianity and its rites” (56). Logistically,

if the Third Reich had removed all examples and practices of Christianity, the regime may not have been accepted by the large public. Even if Nazi ideologies had removed the essence of Christianity, its practices and ceremonies *resembled* Christianity enough to be accepted.

Wounded Man is a sculpture of the perfect figure with an uncanny resemblance to the genre of sculptures one might see in the Catholic church. The idolization of one central figure, much larger in proportion to any actual human, that is in every way a superior being. This figure was idolized as the Führer and contrasted with the hated Jew. When the Jew was represented in art, it was done in a purposefully morbid fashion. *Wounded Man* is a beautiful, godlike figure, contrary to the Jew, who would have represented the devil. In this way, the Nazi regime picks and chooses what parts of religious it wants to exploit and imitate. The concept of Christ as a whole was thrown out and replaced with the führer, while the devil was replaced with the Jewish population.

Wounded Man legitimized the totalitarian government of the Third Reich through its role in Nazi ideology. In the Third Reich, art was never just creativity. Instead, art had a specific job. Art had a purpose to shaping the minds of those within the sphere of the regime. After breaking down the class system, Hitler then needed to shape the masses into whatever mold he saw fit. Thus, the Nazi myth was created. The Nazi myth was all aspects of German society that are not true, but that the regime wanted the masses to believe was real. This society was Hitler's perfect utopia, where the enemy was erased and pure Germans thrived. The masses needed to be roused to this new reality. However, Nazi art did not depict the moment where reality had shifted. Nazi art instead only depicts the German utopia, as if society had always taken this form. Michaud writes, "Because Nazism invested art itself with the power to awaken, there was no need for art to depict the actual awakening. All it had to do was present the vision of the

Führer, the myth itself, in order to produce an awakening at the heart of that salutatory vision” (95.) In an earlier analysis, Michaud also writes on the importance of the placement of art in the Third Reich. A large statue of Hitler would be placed in correspondence with the statues created by Breker and other sculptors of the Third Reich. The placement was an authoritative one, which made Hitler the salvation to the masses, and who would make the German utopia concrete (Michaud 51-2). Art in the regime was a temporary fixture to make this shift possible.

Another ideal that art of the Third Reich employed was a concept of art being a savior to racially pure but otherwise ill Germans. Hitler believed that the increased mixing of peoples in Germany had effectively diseased the German brain. The German people had grown so used to sharing their living spaces with other races that corrupted their morals and entire thought processes. To remedy and reverse this, Hitler sought out to produce only the finest classical German art. Merely seeing and existing in the same place as this art was to be enough to save the German from degeneracy. As explored before, Breker’s *Wounded Man* takes on a godlike persona, the metaphorical and material savior to the German population.

Finally, *Wounded Man* aids the Nazi ideology of a mass society. For a totalitarian government to work, masses needed to be created. Hitler did not find individual expression normal. Modernist art only perpetuated this deviation of normalcy. Michaud makes a note on the words of demagogues denouncing modern expressionist art. He writes, “This slogan, which encouraged every individual to ‘express him or herself’ (*sich ausleben*), threw open ‘Pandora’s Box,’ allowing its howling demons to escape and spread (151). Hitler needed the masses to believe that individual expression was foul at its core. Individuality needed to be erased. Although *Wounded Man* is an individual figure, the figure itself has no name to distinguish him from other statues. He is not the figure of a famous man or real person. His identity is

unspecified. The only information the viewer gets is that the figure is hurt in some way, and that is only if the viewer gets to read the sculpture's title.

Moving from the era of the Nazi regime to the social sphere afterwards, it is important to note the controversy that surrounds Arno Breker. Breker's works during the Third Reich held so many fascist implications that many of his works were actually destroyed after the Reich's downfall. Even now, huge controversy has taken place over whether his remaining sculptures should be placed in museums. Some argue that his works which promote National Socialist ideals of the Third Reich should not be put on display for the public to view, as ideas themselves can be very dangerous. If they are to be displayed, they argue, they should only be displayed as historical artifacts of the Nazi regime. Others argue that, because Breker was one of the most talented sculptors of his time, his sculptures should be given the chance of public exposure. They should not be confined to a museum on Nazi culture, but should instead be put into a context of their own (Lander, 2006). Breker, for his part, never showed any guilt for the fascist works he created. He continued as a successful artist throughout the rest of this life. He believed himself to be the most talented sculptor of his own time and would never have dreamed of hiding his sculptures from the public or demolishing them.

In conclusion, Arno Breker's *Wounded Man* shows the impacts of the Third Reich through its totalitarian implications and ideals. These ideals can be shown through the inspection of Breker's life and artist transformations, the totalitarian concepts seen in *Wounded Man*, and the role that *Wounded Man* has within the ideology of Nazism. Breker's biography offers a wealth of information and insight in understanding his artistic motivations. An artist who changed his style to meet the regime's criteria of romantic neoclassicism, Breker also took extensive inspiration from Auguste Rodin and the French sculptors. His *Wounded Man* takes

quite a few similarities from Rodin's *Thinker*, but also contains some differences. In his *Wounded Man*, Breker instills several fascist ideals of the Third Reich. Finally, *Wounded Man* and art similar to it would have held a big role in the ideology of Nazism, particularly when it came to propaganda and influencing the masses. Even today, controversy surrounds his works over whether they should be given the same public spotlight as other works, or whether they should be denounced and removed from museums.

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