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REFERENCES

Histories in Conflict: The Haus der Kunst and the Ideological Uses of Art, 1937-1955, Munich:

Sievekink, 2017. Sous la dir. de Sabine Brants, Ulrich Wilmes

Inventur: Art in Germany, 1943-55, Cambridge: Harvard Art Museums, 2018. Sous la dir. de Lynette Roth, Ilka Voermann

War and Art: A Visual History of Modern Conflict, Londres: Reaktion Books, 2017. Sous la dir. de Joanna Bourke

- 1 Amongst the different images of war that are currently being updated and analysed, one of them could serve as the starting point for this reflection, as it brings together old and new questions. The picture in question is *Die Heimkehr* [The Return], painted by the German painter Hans-Adolf Bühler in 1940. Rather than the actual painting, its reproduction in the form of a postcard is what is discussed in the book *Histories in Conflict: the Haus der Kunst and the Ideological Uses of Art, 1937-1955* (p. 209), in an interesting passage on the postcards that were sold during Nazi exhibitions (p. 181). Portraits of Adolf Hitler stopped being printed as postcards from 1940 onwards as they did not sell well, offering proof that ideological commitment, although it did exist, only partially relied on leader worship.
- 2 *Die Heimkehr* depicts a Wehrmacht soldier, his head on a woman's knees. The picture shows nothing of the horrors of war, at best evoking the soldier's weariness. Compared to other Nazi images of valiant bodies and heroic sacrifices, this painting shows a curiously snake-like and sinuous male body, its boneless anatomy free of any soldierly will. In the

context of fascism, this is surprising, as war was not a mere possibility, it was necessary, first and foremost, founder and creator. Only through war could social and racial purification be advanced.

- 3 However, the most intriguing character is probably the woman in her vestal-like white dress. Her hands are open, in a gesture that is reminiscent of the Virgin Mary in Annunciation scenes, evoking a rich iconography of acceptance and refusal, of compelled or unhappy acceptance. All of these elements resonate strangely in 1940 Germany, as the country was triumphing over Europe and entering a long conflict.
- 4 The publication of a picture such as *Die Heimkehr* is part of a wider movement that has been re-opening the question of art and war for the past twenty years. Periods that have been and are still as frequently examined as the wars of the 19th and 20th centuries are still revealing little-known sources, as demonstrated, among others, by the three books chosen from recent publications. All three belong to very different categories. *Inventur* is the catalogue of an exhibition at the Harvard Art Museum dedicated to German artists at the end of World War II. Its main goal is to make their works known outside of Germany and to demonstrate that German artists, directly after the war, presented their era with what Goethe called *antwortendes Gegenbild*, an answering counter-image.
- 5 *Histories in Conflict*, a collective book, is devoted to one place only: the House of Art in Munich, which was opened with pomp and circumstance in 1937 as Nazi art's major exhibition hall. The building was not damaged by bombings and was immediately reused, without any real interruption, when post-war West Germany was under reconstruction. The Nazi origin of the building is made obvious by its architecture, but it was consistently hidden in its new use. *Histories in Conflict* contributes to knowledge of the analyses of this exhibition space, in connection to the extremely useful online publication of the Nazi period archives on the subject: <http://www.gdk-research.de>.
- 6 *War and Art* is a collection of around twenty contributions that clarify some of the relationships between art and war from the 19th to the 21st century. The English-speaking world's experience of war is given the most attention (the Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraqi wars are central), although the book also examines Japan, Germany, France, Russia, Palestine and Lebanon. Through the angle of a visual history embracing a wider spectre, the book reviews canonical artworks, children's drawings, video games and mural paintings in abandoned fortifications. This approach, although it encompasses many different media, remains within the limits of the illustration of war, and does not venture to consider the possible relationship between wars and the images that do not show it.
- 7 All three of these books are richly illustrated and will most certainly introduce readers to little-known images. For example, in *Inventur*, the reader will discover Berlin-based artist Juro Kubicek's intriguing works. His father was Hungarian and his mother Czechoslovakian, and he worked in the propaganda service on the Eastern front, but started creating sardonic works at the end of the Third Reich. *Histories in Conflict* reveals original information about the commercial and advertising organization of the House of Art, as well as on its construction. The reader will discover, for instance, the concrete conditions for the combination of natural and electric lighting, which contributed to producing a homogeneous and ethereal space, the place of harmony that Nazi exhibitions aimed for (p. 238 and p. 248).
- 8 Certain questions recur in the publications devoted to art and war over the past few years. How do images prepare minds by vilifying the enemy? How do they kindle hate?

How does art offer a medium for reconciliation after the end of conflicts? How does it influence the memory of confrontations? The function of art which is best known and most developed in these books, is art as evidence of the disasters of war. During the period under examination, inaugurated by Francisco de Goya, one of art's main missions is to confront viewers with the reality of conflicts. Hence the hosts of ruins, mistreated and mangled bodies, the different expressions of fear and despair, which by contrast produce cold and distanced artworks¹ and raise questions about the efforts to make these disasters invisible (recent images by drones, for example). The image that all three of these books discuss is, unsurprisingly, *Guernica* – which was exhibited at Munich's House of Art in 1955, and used by art activism protesting the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in the United States. When historical discourses on art and war are built around the display of suffering, they seem perfectly well-established.

- 9 But other questions emerge here and there. They sparked this reader's interest, particularly in relation to a sentence written by Joanna Bourke in the introduction to *War and Art*: "the portrayal of universal suffering in war perpetuates the empty cliché that 'war is hell', devoid of political or ideological content" (p. 33). This sentence is interesting. On the one hand, it encourages one to avoid postulating a unique, achronical suffering that would be identical for all. To take two central examples from these (American and German) books, one could probably expound on the United States' particularity of being constantly involved in one conflict or another over the course of the 20th century, without ever, however, being confronted with army deployment on their own territory. One could analyse Germany's situation during the same period of time: the German civil population bore the weight of World War II much longer than the rest of Europe, which was occupied and plundered by Germany. To be more or less close to war, to experience wartimes differently, are crucial points for the analysis of these images.
- 10 The quote by Joanna Bourke also encourages us to question the political and ideological dimensions of war. The question surfaces in all of these books, lurking in the background without ever being confronted directly, proving how difficult it is to elaborate on this point. The subtitle of *Histories in Conflict* speaks for itself, evoking "ideological uses of art" from 1937 to 1955, without the reader ever knowing if ideological uses were typical of the Nazi period, or if they also took place at a later time, nor – and especially – what an ideological use of art is compared to others uses.
- 11 Handling the category of "ideology" has become difficult for us (those who write in the liberal context of the early 21st century). Western governments after World War II were built on the denial of ideology: the very opposite of past fascist regimes and contemporary communist governments. On the contrary, liberal regimes presented themselves as freed from what was construed as a particular form of political thought, and as being able to accommodate a wide variety of opinions (and art forms). Ideology has since become synonymous with a form of blindness, lack of discernment, and inability to let other ideas exist. *Histories in Conflict* and *Inventur* pay great attention to the post-war period, and thus examine works that were created at a time when "ideological abstinence" was emerging, to use the phrase coined by art historian Jutta Held when evoking the West German academic *milieu*.²
- 12 Thus, new research perspectives open up, asking two series of questions. On the one hand, to what extent do civil and military populations go to war for ideology, encouraged by political motives? Historians disagree on this point, and have suggested other reasons

to explain engagement in war (the feeling of having to defend oneself, loyalty to a peer group, the crossing of thresholds and the habituation to violence, etc.). In no way are these elements exclusive of political motivations. Was there, in this respect, a shift during the 20th century, something of a weariness regarding ideology? Can the accumulation of suffering wear out ideological motives? On the other hand, can art help us understand this political dimension? Is the visual sphere the best one for advancing the understanding of peoples' relationships to war, as well as their potential evolutions and inflections?

- 13 *Guernica* could in fact be at the centre of preoccupations once again, not as an exemplary image expressing suffering, but as an artwork that clearly took a position in its original context (against Francoists and in favour of the Republicans), but which, in its visual reality, displays a certain ideological indecision, as has been known for a long time now. In short, art seems adapted to making the evils of war understood. This no longer needs to be proven. Can art help us understand its political motives? This question is awaiting a more thorough reply.

NOTES

1. See for example David Cotterell's photographs of a military hospital in Afghanistan, commented in *War and Art*.
 2. Held, Jutta. "Die Aktualität des Bitterfelder Weges", *Das Kunstwerk als Geschichtsdokument*, Munich: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1999, p. 210-218. Ed. by Annette Tietenberg
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AUTHORS

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Jérôme Bazin is a lecturer and researcher at Paris-Est Créteil University. He is currently working on a visual and architectural history of the working class in Eastern and Western Europe. His publications include *Réalisme et égalité : une histoire sociale de l'art en République Démocratique Allemande, 1949-1990* (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2015) and *Art Beyond Borders: Artistic Exchanges in Communist Europe, 1945-1989* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016), which he co-edited with Pascal Dubourg Glatigny and Piotr Piotrowski.