

Production of a 'degenerate' form

Vasudeva K Naidu is a Faculty with the Department of English, Salesian College, Sonada.

The National Socialists seized power in Germany in 1933 and immediately started their virulent attacks on modernist art but their most ambitious attack was on July 19, 1937, in Munich, where they organised the opening for an exhibition titled *Entartete Kunst* (degenerate art), in which were brought together more than 650 important paintings, sculptures, prints, and books. These works were confiscated from over thirty two state museums and were brought for display to vilify and denigrate the avant-garde art of that time. Never before and never since has there been an exhibition of this kind and scale, in the history of modern art. This exhibition attracted more than two million people with an average of twenty thousand people visiting each day and went on to tour for four years across Germany and Austria to be seen by a million more.

Interestingly, a day before the opening of *Entartete Kunst*, on July 18th, Hitler presided over the opening of the inaugural exhibition titled *The Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung* (The Great German Art Exhibition), under great pomp and ceremony just across the park from the dilapidated building which the next day would host *Entartete Kunst*. This exhibition brought together around 600 paintings and sculptures, a lot of which were personally approved by Hitler and Goebbels, to showcase the triumph of German art under the Third Reich.

Another interesting fact is that in spite of all the pomp and ceremony that The Great German Art Exhibition enjoyed, it barely got one-fifth of the crowd that went to see *Entartete Kunst*.

Why did *Entartete Kunst* enjoy such popularity? What could be the significance of the title *Entartete Kunst* for attracting such crowds?

The answers probably lie in understanding the etymological, epistemological and historical moorings of the word '*Entartet*' which traditionally has been translated as "degenerate" or "decadent". It is

essentially a biological term used to denote to a plant or an animal that has changed so much that it no longer belongs to its species.¹ This brief reflection will attempt to introduce the reader to this word in a particular context and hope to bring forth certain aspects of the historical implications 'Entartet' evokes in the discourse on race, psychiatry, eugenics, nationalism and (in the context of degenerate art) culture.

The term 'degenerate' has been in the public sphere of the German culture long before the National Socialist Party. The publication of Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man* in the year 1871 also marked the emergence of the German Empire, marking the intersection of the misconstrued application of Darwin's ideas with the blue-eyed and blonde haired Nordic-Aryan identity. This amalgamation would in coming decades be used to justify German racism.² But the conceptualisation of the degenerate first happened in the medical sciences, where the term was used in a specific context with regard to 'pathological alterations'.³

Benedict Augustus Morel (1809-1873) is generally considered to have originated the concept of degeneration in this more psychiatric sense... His major works published in 1857 and 1860 advanced the idea of there having been an original perfect type of the human race. Degeneracy according to Morel arose "from the influence of diet, toxins, climate, disease, and moral depravities of one generation" inducing "a high proportion of neurotics, criminals, and paupers in the next generation. The degenerative influence was then transmitted to the third generation, which had a high number of insane, mental defectives, and monstrosities. This in turn gave way in succeeding generations to defects of severe degree producing sterility and the eventual dying out of the tainted family."⁴

The notions on degeneracy would spill over into the public psyche with the publication of Max Nordau's *Entartung* (Degeneration) in 1892.

¹ Barron, S., & Guenther, P., *Degenerate art: the fate of the avant-garde in nazi Germany*, (Los Angeles: CA 1991), 15.

² Ibid, 15.

³ Walter, R. D., "What Became of the Degenerate?" *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* XI, 4(1956): 422-429.

⁴ Ibid, 423.

This book became notoriously popular, being widely read and discussed in Europe and America at that time, making Max Nordau a household name among educated late nineteenth century Europeans. *Degeneration* was so popular that it evoked a brilliant and scathing review of the book by George Bernard Shaw in 1895 from England.⁵ Nordau, a doctor and a prominent Zionist, borrows ideas from Morel and Cesare Lombroso (who popularised the theory of degeneration in the field of criminology in the 1870s) and applied them to the disciplines of art and literature. He vehemently denounces the modernist movement with vilified attacks on the Pre-Raphaelites, and figures like Henrik Ibsen, Emile Zola, Nietzsche, among others. According to Nordau, these 'so called' avant-garde artists and writers were not heralding the society towards a new era but rather towards a regressive past of deterioration. He tries to persuade his readers by reiterating:

The 'freedom' and 'modernity', the 'progress' and 'truth', of these fellows are not ours. We have nothing in common with them. They wish for self-indulgence; we wish for work. They wish to drown consciousness in the unconscious; we wish to strengthen and enrich consciousness. They wish for evasive ideation and babble; we wish for attention, observation and knowledge. The criterion by which true moderns may be recognized and distinguished from impostors calling themselves moderns may be this: whoever preaches absence of discipline is an enemy of progress; and whoever worships his 'I' is an enemy to society.⁶

For Nordau, whoever didn't fit in this category was a degenerate. He particularly takes up the case of Nietzsche, giving point by point analysis of how madness entered Nietzsche's thought, logic and writing. "The normal man with his clear mind, logical thought, sound judgement, and strong will, sees, where the degenerate only gropes..."⁷ Nordau's work was different from others writing on degeneracy because he managed

⁵ George Bernard Shaw, *The Sanity of Art. An Exposure of the Current Nonsense about Artists being Degenerate*, (London, 1908).

⁶ Nordau, M. S., *Degeneration*, (New York: D. Appleton and Company. 1895), 560.

⁷ Ibid, 541.

to integrate his criticism of these figures into an overarching positivist framework,⁸ but what would stick in the following decades would be the popularisation of the term 'degenerate', where Nordau certainly had a significant contribution.

Not surprisingly, by the time the National Socialists came to power, there was a comfortable assimilation between the 'degenerate' from medical sciences and the cultural 'degenerate' of Nordau. A good example to illustrate this is the work of Paul Schultze-Naumburg, an architect and racial theorist, who in 1925 published *Das ABC des Bauens* (The ABCs of Building) which was an attack on the Bauhaus School in Germany (famous for its modern approach to architecture). In 1928, Schultze wrote *Kunst and Rasse* (Art and Race), which would have a far-reaching influence in the Nazi scheme against modernism. Schultze- Naumburg exploited the popularity of Nordau's treatise to attack modern art as "entartet" by juxtaposing examples of modern art and photographs of deformed or diseased people, "to suggest that they were the models for the elongated faces of Amedeo Modigliani, the angular physiognomies of Schmidt-Rottluff, and the florid faces of Otto Dix. He railed particularly against the Expressionists, who he felt represented the inferior aspect of modern German culture."⁹ It has been argued that Schultze-Naumburg must have adopted this methodology from the study *Bildnerie der Geisteskranken* (Image-making by the mentally ill) published in 1922 by the psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn, in which he examined more than 5,000 works by 450 patients to demonstrate that the art of the insane exhibited certain specific qualities.¹⁰ Interestingly, in 1933 in Erlangen, there was an exhibition, one of the many precursors to *Entartete Kunst* where thirty-two paintings by contemporary artists were displayed along with works by children and the 'mentally ill'.

⁸ Aschheim, S. E., "Max Nordau, Friedrich Nietzsche and Degeneration", *Journal of Contemporary History* 28. 4(1993): 646.

⁹ Barron S., & Guenther P., *Degenerate art: the fate of the avant-garde in Nazi Germany*, (Los Angeles, CA,1991), 12.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 13.

This kind of juxtaposition gave legitimacy to a convenient establishment of synonymity between the avant-garde artist, the insane and the Jew, all interchangeable with the degenerate in Nazi Germany.

The ideas on degeneration continued to take hold throughout the late Nineteenth century way into the first half of Twentieth century in both Europe and America. In the case of Britain, as a result of Industrial revolution and mass migration to cities, there was a permanent underclass of poor people- who came to be categorized as beggars, thieves and prostitutes, always in poor health but reproducing rapidly. "The early defeats of the British army in the Boer War (1899-1902 confirmed for many, that degeneration had become a national problem."¹¹ Many argued that natural selection in the population of Britain has ceased to exist because public and private philanthropy has helped the weak to survive. Prominent intellectuals like Herbert Spencer gave a call for social Darwinism to take hold of the British society. Herbert writes:

[T]he well-being of existing humanity and the unfolding of it into . . . ultimate perfection, are both secured by that same beneficial though severe discipline, to which the animate creation at large is subject. It seems hard that an unskilfulness . . . should entail hunger upon the artisan. It seemshard that a laborer incapacitated by sickness . . . should have to bear theresulting privations. It seems hard that widows and orphans should be left to struggle for life or death. Nevertheless, when regarded not separately but in connexion with the interests of universal humanity, these harsh fatalities are seen to be full of beneficence. . .¹²

Similarly, Francis Galton, cousin of Charles Darwin, credited with the coinage of the term 'Eugenics', called for a "science of improving stock" that would study "all influences that tend in however remote a degree to give to the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable than they otherwise would have

¹¹ Childs D. J., *Modernism and eugenics: Woolf, Eliot, Yeats, and the culture of degeneration*, (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 9.

¹² Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics, Abridged and Revised* (1884), in *The Works of Herbert Spencer*, 21 vols. (Osnabruck: Otto Zeller, 1966), vol. i, 147.

had.”¹³

The Mental Deficiency Act of 1913 which allowed provisions to treat and institutionalize people who were deemed as “feeble minded” and “moral defectives” was an improvement on the Idiots Act of 1886 which made a legal distinction between “idiots” and “imbeciles”.

Eugenics had its own hold on many writers including Bernard Shaw, D.H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, W.B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, among many others. By the time the Nazis brought their Eugenical Sterilization Law, a soft distinction had already come about in England between negative and positive eugenics.¹⁴

The use of medical sciences, namely medico-psychological examination, where ‘examination’ became a transition from ‘inquiry’, according to Foucault, was aimed not at learning about the mechanism of knowledge, of what had taken place but rather took the role of a surveiller leading to the constitution of the domain of the abnormal. This medico-psychological examination acts as a new technique of individualization which mediates in the fabrication of a singularity, an identity, a “case”.¹⁵

A clear expert psychiatric categorization of what constitutes as insane also spills on what constitutes as degenerate leading to a clear reconstitution of the identity of the Jew or an ‘inbecile’. For Nordau, the avant-garde artists were ‘dangerous’ (particularly Nietzsche) because they seemed to threaten and endanger the order of things in an established society. Nietzsche is antithetical to Nordau’s positivist approach towards the world, where the former is at the forefront in problematizing everything Nordau held sacred- rationality, discipline, order and science, (‘All ordered society’, Nietzsche scoffed, ‘puts the passions to sleep’)¹⁶.

¹³ Galton, Francis. *Inquiries into Human Faculty*, (London: Macmillan, 1883), 24-25.

¹⁴ For more see, Childs, D. J. *Modernism and eugenics: Woolf, Eliot, Yeats, and the culture of degeneration*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the birth of the Prison*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 225-27.

¹⁶ Nietzsche, F. W., Common, T., Cohn, P. V., & Petre, M. D., *The Gay Science*, (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2020), 79.

And passions are dangerous for a society based on rationality and order. Passions symbolise chaos and a passionate individual can be termed as a “dangerous individual”, whose examination as Foucault notes, “must be considered at the level of his potentialities and not at the level of his acts”... “Similarly, the “delinquent” must be distinguished from the law breaker, since what is relevant to his characterization is “less his act than his life... legal punishment bears on an act; punitive technique on a life.”¹⁷In this line of analysis Foucault concludes, in *Abnormal*, that “expert psychiatric opinion makes it possible to transfer the point of application of punishment from the offense defined by the law to criminality evaluated from a psychological-moral point of view.”¹⁸

Hence, it becomes easier to categorize an entire race (the case of Jews for instance) or a class (as was the case in Britain) of people as a singular entity, a “case”, to be pigeonholed as ‘dangerous’, ‘alien’ and discardable, to be ‘institutionalized’ and separated from the ordered civilized society. *Entartete Kunst* was an exercise precisely of this kind of categorization of ideas manifesting as art.

These two very brief glimpses of discourses on degeneration and eugenics in Germany and Britain are only intended to introduce the reader to these terms. There is an entire plethora of work that has been done and is still coming on these concepts.

Even though degeneration is rarely used as a serious explanation for any human phenomenon now, it still persists in different forms as a weapon of prejudice in different societies across the world.

¹⁷ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the birth of the Prison*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 292.

¹⁸ Foucault, *Abnormal*, (New York: Verso Books, 2016), 16.