

Increasing conflicts on national identities in Culture

The Louvre's exhibition '*De l'Allemagne 1800 à 1939 - de Friedrich à Beckmann*' from April to July 2013

Speech and debate held by Dr. Marie-Louise von Plessen on behalf of the ECP's annual meeting in Edinburgh, 27.9.2013

In European affairs, morality has become a political concern. Especially in France of the Fifth Republic, the priority is on transparency within all government branches. Yet, French extremist parties both left and right tend to mobilize their voters' against international cooperation. Thus, the idea of Europe is treated as an external enemy coming from within to inflict and destroy identity based on national values.

Already, the effect of this political climate overshadows cultural activities. An example is the international media debate on last summer's Parisian cultural event, co-financed on equal terms by France and Germany, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Elysée Treaty. Signed by President De Gaulle and Chancellor Adenauer, the French-German alliance affirmed reconciliation between two former arch enemies who had made war against each other for centuries. Flanking the highest ranking French and German Ministers, the magnificent ceremony smoothed the way for Europe's postwar integration. So much for the noble intentions.

The 'Cultural Scandal' concerned the finalized concept of the exhibition 'De l'Allemagne' held in the Louvre from April to June 2013. The highest ranking French and German ministers attended the grand opening. The show was named both after Germaine de Stael's famous book 'De l'Allemagne', initially banned by Napoleon's censors in 1810 and published in 1813, and after Heinrich Heine's reply to Mme de Stael from his Paris exile in 1833. Yet the initial concept's trans-historical short turn, not to narrate the evolution of German Art from 1800 to Expressionism but rather as it came out, "From Goethe to Hitler," provoked a nasty clash between the two chief curators: While the director of the German Institute of Art History in Paris had been excluded from any further influence on the exhibition's completion, and this for an entire year, the Louvre's director general was angered by what he saw as Francophobe reactions in the German press.

The misunderstanding argued a common ground, namely a well researched history of German art from *Caspar David Friedrich to Max Beckmann*. Initially, the Louvre show meant to incite curiosity about unknown German masterpieces through 140 years. Yet the result was met with unusual media criticism, stretching far beyond the borders of '*la Grande Nation*'. Reviews split German, French and European master minds in a way that recalled the arch-enmity of yesteryear.

The Louvre curators changed the previously agreed concept because for a more drastic vision of the chosen period. The event to memorize European cohesion by the 50 years anniversary of French and German approach collided with contrary agendas. In presenting German national culture, the Louvre favored a prestigious and provocative intellectual genealogy. Consequently, the show moved straight from Romantic German masterworks to Nazism

ending in the disastrous year of 1939. Nietzsche's philosophical distinction between the exuberant *Dionysian* against the *Apollonian* principle of Beauty was applied as a conceptual tool. Even though Goethe's universalist thoughts, along with the Classicistic reception based on Greek and Roman antiquities, were included, the French curators left out German Secessionism, Dada and Expressionism with Franz Marc's Blue Riders' group. Nor did they include the Weimar and Dessau Bauhaus' powerful modernist impulse of the 1920^{ies}.

Instead, after a cursory look at the masters' artifacts related to historicity, landscape and religion, after omitting even a "fast food" presentation of the complicated relations between 'throne' and 'altar' in German palatial residences, the show passed by the apocalyptic representations between the two World Wars. These were the works of Beckmann, Grosz, Kolbe and Dix. Emphasized was the photographic series of damaged features of WW I-victims, caused by gas injuries - les '*gueules cassées*'. Thereafter, Billy Wilder's and Robert Siodmak's 'Men on Sunday' film classic of 1929 was juxtaposed with Leni Riefenstahl's 'Olympia' film of 1936. Only one apocalyptic seascape by Otto Dix related to the crucial year of 1939 as announced in the title.

The exhibition started and ended with Anselm Kiefer new creation to serve this thematic purpose evoking the Rhine, German myth and fairy tales, Hitler and Nazi-idiosyncrasy, commanded for an octagon in the Louvre's exhibition wing.

This recent case study on German art, dealing with national identity held in France's first art institution, raises some question marks.

First: Is there any true *national*, that is, *German Art* to be exhibited without evoking the epoch's specific context, that is ongoing conflicts between *throne(s) and altar(s)* in a multi faced cultural landscape of 54 different German sovereignties to be annexed to the German Empire in Versailles in January 1871, after three previous unifying wars fought in 1864 against Denmark, in 1866 against Austria, in 1870 against France? Can history be told straightforwardly *by Art only* to foster intercultural and transnational dialogue? Can Art, deprived of historical facts, contribute to an image of nationhood beyond ideologies that mental history conserves?

Did the Louvre art historians' selective view turn the show into a platform beyond history in order to present German patriotic and religious art, from 1800 onwards, instead of emphasizing the intense cultural transfer between two European neighbors, albeit beyond battlefields? In fact, when does Art stretch beyond political events?

Second: Does a curator's teleological focus on national artistic heritage in France's main museum justify a choice of art works stretching from the end of the Ancien Régime toward Hitler's Third Reich, which unleashed a global catastrophe in 1939? Some critics saw in the Louvre's peculiar vision of an unknown neighbor a *mere blasphemy*. The Paris exhibition scandal may have been caused by a crisis in European cultural cohesion. Again, this kind of hostile reception seemed to emphasize a German '*Sonderweg*' under Angela Merkel's leadership. On this "separate path," the Federal Republic of 2013 was once more diverging from its European neighbors – a strong Germany lording it over the weaker rest.

The Art News paper, on the other hand, understood the Louvre's 'De l'Allemagne' show as 'Bildung' for the sake of mental refinement and moral development – as an educational improvement, a timely message in a global cacophony of European uncertainties.

But there is more: with populism gaining momentum in local, regional and even in national elections in EU member states, stretching from the Greek Golden Dawn movement via the Hungarian Jobik party to Finish Populists, national problems of the 19th century, issuing in international conflicts, seem to arise again. Instead of fostering European cohesion, National Art and heritage get institutionally abused as thematic fountains from which to draw material on national identity.

Take the example to stir patriotic nostalgia from actual Russia: The Putin administration has invested large sums in the reanimation of national identity by reviving memories of the Battle of Borodino on the occasion of its 200 years anniversary. Since 2012, two new museums in Moscow were established to commemorate the battle and the spectacular victory on September 7 1812, when Napoleon's Grande Armée lost 70 000 soldiers to General Kutusov. His brave retreat to save his army turned the Russian defeat into a victory, while the French army went into terminal decline on its disastrous march on Moscow. Current nationalist propaganda sees this battle as even more decisive than Stalingrad. Borodino was even invoked to justify the condemnation of the Pussy Riot dissidents (Le Figaro, 27.7.2013, p. 12).

The patriotic Borodino set up is a populist mean to teach national history by political propaganda. Yet to understand national Art, you also need to be instructed on national history. If historical facts are deliberately omitted, no comprehensive interpretation of a nation's history is possible. But the message of Art is *per se* transnational and transcends national borders.

In order to draw masses by mere provocation, you attract more visitors to the Louvre by ending the show in 1939 than by concluding with the non spectacular year of 1963, when the Elysee treaty was signed. Even though the provocation did attract media attention, visitors were startled by the abuse of precious art works for political purposes. In the guest book, many French commentators noted that they felt betrayed by being left alone left alone with their ignorance of historical complexities. This in fact is good news. You can hype your message with visual means, but clear-headed visitors will not easily fall victim to manipulation. Thus, facing increasing conflicts on national identities, culture managers must be courageously authentic and not follow populist temptations.

With lack of trust in political representatives and institutions, an alarming decline of participation and rise in prejudice against democratic procedures is spreading in various EU member states, as in Greece, in Italy, in Poland, in Spain, in Portugal. In France, after the former budget minister concealed his Swiss bank account earlier this year before parliament, morality has become a new priority. By presidential order, all Ministers had to publish their real-estate holdings, their bank accounts, wealth and life insurance. Did this presidential order really increase trust in politics!? The president's insistence on transparency can also generate

the opposite of what he hopes for: even less trust in the political class. Those who profit from declining confidence in parties and institutions are, of course, the extremists.

Will Europe's identity become an endangered species in this process?

The extremist parties gain adherents by stirring fear of globalization, joblessness, loss of community values. They castigate the growing power of the Brussels administration and the intransparency of the European bureaucracy. Right wing demagogues pretend to solve economical and social problems by pretending to defend nationhood. They manipulate fears of international cooperation. The European spirit, emerging from Brussels' headquarters, is depicted as the devil that will destroy national identity. Obviously all shifts to strengthen European bodies towards more supranationality *does* shrink the sovereignty of the national-state.

Given this outline, 'Otherness' becomes a fatal weapon to serve national prejudices. Thus, cultural cooperation, though based on scholarly agreement between acting partners, turns into a battleground for national pride and prejudice. This immoral state of cultural affairs is to be observed in various EU nations and member states where European values are endangered.

Therefore, cooperation in culture should dare focus on national prejudices. Only multinational units of experts and visual expertise can implant and enforce a European spirit of cooperation. At least in cultural affairs, new conflicts recalling issues that provoked a series of national wars throughout the 19th century, will gain attention. But did we not evolve beyond the age of nationalism, in an enlarged Europe without national borders? As the past is part of the present, history should be told by joint perspectives.

Emerging from a common European history, yesterday's enemies have grown into today's partners. The prescription is simple enough: Respect cultural diversity as a critical path to further peaceful cohesion on this continent.