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Degenerate Art What digital technology is doing to the graphic arts.

In the heyday of fascism there was a travelling exhibition in Germany which was the culmination of a massive campaign against modern art. If you have seen some of Adolf Hitler's own paintings, you will know the sort of primitive representational chocolate-box style he liked. If you have seen the sort of pompous architecture which dominated the film *Triumph of the Will* which showed the 1935 Nazi party Nürnberg gathering you will remember the inhumanity and soullessness which was taken as an expression of the collective ideals attributed by Germany's rulers to their populace. Curiously, Some of Joe Stalin's henchmen, in particular Zhdanov and Stalin himself also applauded similar crude inhumanity in the arts. This was in stark contrast to the deep humanity which had pervaded post-revolutionary art in the early Soviet Union, and indeed most of European and Europe-influenced art at the time. It was also a dominant influence on Australian art. It became widely known as social realism because it depicted the reality of ordinary men and women in their day to day activities,

Despite taking its origins in reality, social realism had none of the chocolate-box style saccharine sweetness which made art a mere imitation of reality. Actually, from the middle of the 19th century this type of representation in the graphic arts had been largely taken over by photography which was much better at doing it, as well as being a lot cheaper. However, apart from a middle period in Greek sculpture, the extreme naturalism of the sterile periods in the representational arts never took on. Right from the beginning, starting with stone age cultures, artists had emphasised the features of reality which had special significance for them and for their society. This is seen in the highly stylised depictions of Egyptians, of African, Maya and Celtic tribal people.

Yet it is precisely the slavish imitation of reality which turned on people like Stalin and Hitler. Because of the power they wielded in their societies they could inflict their narrow tastes in the arts on the whole of their political system, using the slogan of "I don't know much about art, but I know what I like". And if Hitler liked something, that was it. For those who disagreed there was always the concentration camp. Unfortunately, under Stalin, much the same went. Except that for those who were not yet well known there was considerable support in various institutes, galleries and conservatoriums. That's why, despite the hassles that beset composers of genius like Shostakovitch and authors like Solshenitsyn who had a world-wide reputation, these artists were still maintained by the state

In our societies, no-one goes to the concentration camp or the gulag if their artistic work falls foul of the taste of the high and mighty. They merely find life hard. Particularly in the disciplines which rely on financial support from public or private institutions there isn't much future for those whose work costs money to produce and who aren't in the mainstream. And the mainstream in the graphic arts is nowadays firmly centred on the computer screen and the digital mouse..

If there is one area where you would think the new digital technology would do a lot of good it is graphics. Parents who let their toddlers loose on a computer with a colourful graphics program are often astounded how these kids take to the machine. And kids who only previously covered sheets of butcher paper with crayon scribbles

can, by virtue of a mouse and very little instruction, produce quite tolerable - if not artistic – drawings.

A colour printer completes this picture, particularly if you can afford the high-grade paper which goes with it. So far, so good.

Music, too, can be produced with little effort. A drum machine, or a computer programmed as a drum machine, will faithfully reproduce the same rhythm or even melody over and over again, at levels which will drive the neighbours berserk.

But therein lies the catch. Artistic effort, like any other, is not about producing showy but meaningless effects easily and quickly. Art, as many have remarked before me, is 1% inspiration with the rest being perspiration. The same goes for any other endeavour requiring originality. The secret very often lies in making the outcome look easy regardless of having required a massive investment of energy and thought to get it there. Almost invariably, all artistic endeavours require endless and often boring practice to produce an ultimate effect which may well appear to have been achieved effortlessly.

Modern technology, if nothing else, often permits us to follow the original creative process. With oil paintings x-rays often allow us to look below the top layers to discover the tortuous path that led the painter to arrive at the final product. Often this path is seen to have been very thorny indeed. Consider that even before this particular effort the artist probably spent many years practising and arrived at the style which is embodied in the work you are looking at – a style which may well change with the artist's development, but will always show the traces of this development.

Now compare this with the products of the instant art produced on a computer screen by someone fiddling with a mouse. Even better, compare the pretty but content-less art produced by aboriginal painters pushed into accepting European styles with the vibrant paintings produced by aboriginal men and women who illustrate their heritage and their dreaming.

But let me get back to computer generated art (if that's what you call it.). Recently we had a French TV doco which analysed the cartoons, or should I say animated films, of Walt Disney. From the early ones which were, I believe, largely drawn by him or at least influenced by his ideas, to the later full length which were largely the work of the European artists he employed , these animated films showed strong personality traits which come through even though these films were laboriously generated by hundreds of artists.

To-day's animated films still show some of these sparks of genius, particularly in the work of Japanese animators. These could not be called cartoons. But by far the largest amount of investment goes, amongst other things, into awful stuff for kids which is devoid of images but features cardboard cut-out non-characters with moving lips mouthing inane scripts. The characters, if you can call them that, are always outlined in black, which allows the computer program to fill them in with colours. But even more money – much more – goes into electronic games. This industry now turns over billions of dollars and much of it is located right here in Australia.

Of course we are told that this gives work to artists who would otherwise be unemployed. Both our graphic artists and our kids deserve better. This is particularly true as the subject of these games is nearly always violence and extreme violence at that.. Computer programs are good at that.

Tomes have been written about whether violent videos and games do harm to kids. Isn't it time entertainment technology were used to do some good instead?