

## PROLOGUE

### A Sword of Damocles over the Age in Which We Live

Nazism is without parallel in the history of modern Europe. No political idea has been condemned as unconditionally as National Socialism. Having exerted enormous attraction in the years between the wars, it was transformed into the ultimate political pariah. Since 1945 its admirers have been few, its apologists even fewer.

Nazism, however, did not lose its hold on people's minds. During the postwar period it became the antithesis of civilisation, a profound and cautionary experience that possessed an enigmatic vitality. 'Nazism, like Lucifer in Christianity, has refused to grow old,' writes the novelist Carl-Henning Wijkmark. 'It is a past that clings on tenaciously in the present, a sword of Damocles over the age in which we live.' He sees it as a powerful myth with a glamour capable of casting a spell even on those who reject it: its attraction is that of a nightmare. The journalist Joachim Fest was thinking along similar lines in his major biography of Adolf Hitler. He talked of 'undiminished contemporaneousness'. Decades after his death Hitler still continues to cast a shadow over our age: he surfaces in splenetic political debates, haunts us in art and literature, and is an obligatory item in the cabinet of horrors of popular culture.<sup>1</sup>

The dark mythic nimbus of Nazism encourages us to take a quasi-religious view of it: it is always judged by absolute criteria. In her book on Knut Hamsun, the author Sigrid Combüchen writes: 'The very concept of Nazism has catastrophe built into it. It is the only ideology that cannot be discussed with any degree of nuance; its adult followers must be reckoned as part of that catastrophe, cannot be described as slightly Nazi or very Nazi, understandably Nazi or partly Nazi.'<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, however, the unconditional nature of the condemnation has led to the development of a peculiarly living relationship with National Socialism, that deadest of all ideologies. Instead of being consigned to the rubbish dump of history, Nazism has become the antithesis of the postwar era; it was everything that we are not. This could be described as a counterphobic response, an intense concern with

something we want to condemn, a case of repulsion breeding closeness. Nazism has become a point of negative orientation.<sup>3</sup>

Few people have evoked the relationship between Nazism and the world that followed it as suggestively as the Canadian artist Melvin Charney. In 1982 he was invited to contribute to the Kassel *documenta*, one of the most prestigious exhibitions of international contemporary art. He proposed a two-part installation. The first part would consist of five façades placed along a well-known street in the city, each façade representing one period in the history of modern Germany. The second part would be erected right opposite Kassel railway station and would take the form of a façade reflecting the railway entrance to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Charney wanted to produce a symbolic symmetry between the entrance to the Nazi death camp and the entrance to the railway station in an ordinary West German city. The idea of creating a mirror relationship between wartime and the postwar period proved to be profoundly controversial and led to protests from the people of Kassel. Charney's proposal was stopped and his project now only survives as a photomontage and drawings.<sup>4</sup>

In one of these drawings Auschwitz is depicted against the backdrop of a postwar cityscape with its endless rows of tower blocks and office buildings. In this drawing from the start of the 1980s Charney was expressing something that was both universal and typical of its time. He was a representative of the way the late twentieth century thought about Nazism, especially with regard to the growing fascination with the Holocaust during the last decades of the century. Like other people during that period, his view of the Third Reich was one that was critical of modernity: National Socialism had been anything but an atavistic reaction against modern society and its death camps had, in fact, been well-oiled industrial killing machines, a foul result of technical and rational modernity.

Melvin Charney may have been trapped in a web of contemporary interpretations but he did succeed in capturing something that was universal in the postwar world: the omnipresence of Nazism. The double exposure of the emblematic death camp against a background of postwar functionalist architecture was highly effective. We can interpret it as saying that the lines of history must pass through the gates of the Nazi hell in order to run forward to our own times. Or, conversely, when postwar Europeans look back on their recent past they see the shadowy outline of Auschwitz.

Melvin Charney was asking the big questions about the links between then and now, between the Third Reich and postwar Europe,

between the experience of Nazism and the post-Nazi world. These are the major questions this book will be concerned with.

## Notes

1. C.H. Wijkmark, 'Skönheten och odjuret', in I. Karlsson and A. Ruth (eds), *Samhället som teater: Estetik och politik i Tredje riket* (Stockholm: Ordfront, 1999), 383; J. Fest, *Hitler: Eine Biographie* (Munich: Ullstein Taschenbuch, 2000), 13.
2. S. Combüchen, *Livsklättaren: En bok om Knut Hamsun* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 2006), 15.
3. Cf. D. Diner, *Kreisläufe: Nationalsozialismus und Gedächtnis* (Berlin: Berlin-Verlag, 1995), 95–111.
4. M. Charney, *Parables and Other Allegories: The Work of Melvin Charney 1975–1990* (Montreal: Centre canadien d'architecture, 1991), 127–28; M. Liljefors, *Bilder av Förintelsen: Mening, minne, kompromettering* (Lund: Argos/Palmkrons förlag, 2002), 147–52.

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