# **Designing Dictators**

How Hitler, Mussolini, Lenin, Stalin and Mao so effectively spread their messages to the masses.

### **BY CHRISTOPHER BENFEY**

OW did a practice as vile as branding become so valued, indeed, the very mark of value? Officials in the past have branded slaves and criminals – remember Milady's fleur-de-lis in "The Three Musketeers"? Samuel Maverick didn't brand his cattle, but dictionaries are vague about whether he was the first maverick or his cows were. Today, cities and colleges have joined toothpastes and soft drinks in the battle for "brand loyalty." Steven Heller's "Iron Fists" makes a sophisticated and visually arresting comparison between modern corporate-branding strategies — slogans, mascots, jingles and the rest — and those adopted by "four of

## IRON FISTS

Branding the 20th-Century Totalitarian State. By Steven Heller. Illustrated. 223 pp. Phaidon Press. \$90.

the most destructive 20th-century totalitarian regimes": Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, the Soviet Union under Lenin and Stalin, and Mao's China. As he pursues his four "case studies," Heller, by means of unsettling images and shrewd analysis, amply restores the vileness to branding.

"Iron Fists" has the dimensions and dazzling illustrations of a coffee-table book, but its subject will fit uneasily among Monet's waterlilies or Fabergé eggs. Heller, who was a senior art director at The New York Times for many years and now writes the Visuals column for the Book Review, brings a graphic designer's perspective to these disturbing proceedings. He is aware that comparing supposedly "benign" corporate brands with governmentdisseminated propaganda may seem a stretch: "A popular brand of frozen food or laundry detergent is not forced down the consumer's throat with an iron fist." Still, as he notes, "the design and marketing methods used to inculcate doctrine and guarantee consumption are fundamentally similar." His aim is not to diminish the insidiousness of the regimes under scrutiny, but rather to reveal why they were so effective.

Three of Heller's dictators considered themselves artists and eagerly participated in marketing their brands. Mao fancied himself a poet and master calligrapher; Mussolini wrote a pulp novel and portrayed himself as a hypermasculine sex symbol. Hitler was an aspiring architect and avid watercolorist before adopting what Heller calls his "sociopolitical art project." The Führer sought to control all aspects of the Nazi brand, from the swastika "logo" to his own image, with mustache but without glasses. Heller argues that Mao with his "Mona Lisa smile" and Lenin with his proletarian cap functioned in much the same way as "trade characters" like Joe Camel or the Geico gecko, putting "a friendly face on an otherwise inanimate (or sometimes inhumane) product." Like modern corporate competitors, these leaders borrowed freely from one another, with Hitler taking the straight-armed Roman salute from Mussolini and Mao adopting Socialist Realism from the Soviets.

Some of the most interesting pages in "Iron Fists" explore the ambiguous place of avant-garde art in rigidly designed societies. Mussolini and Lenin were more accommodating of modernist impulses than Hitler, who declared war on "degenerate art" while making an exception for the filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl's "paradigms of heroic

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Berlin 29. April — 20. Juni 1937 · Ausstellungshallen am Funkturm

<sup>&</sup>quot;Give me four years' time"; a photomontage from 1937.

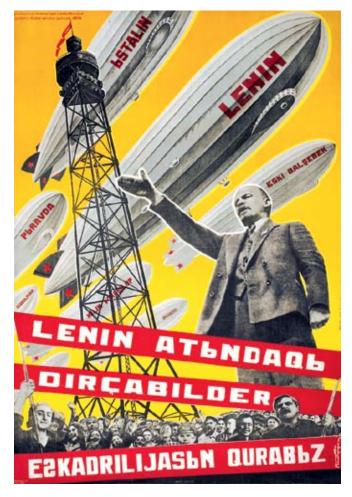
branding." The temporary "fusion" of Fascism and the technology-embracing art movement known as Futurism led to some terrific pro-Mussolini visual design before Il Duce settled for neo-Classical "Roman" kitsch instead.

The early years of the Soviet Union provide some of the best examples of art flourishing amid utopian hopes for a new society - in Rodchenko's posters (including his famous promo for "Books" in 1924). El Lissitzky's remarkable children's books and Eisenstein's films. All four regimes ended up suppressing individual creativity as a threat to the total control they sought. When the regimes fell in turn, their brands were retired. The swastika, an ancient symbol whose meaning, Heller says, "was forever changed when the Nazis co-opted it." is now banned in Germany except for "artistic, scientific, research or educational purposes." Mussolini's body, so central to his national image, was hung from an Esso gas station, an inadvertent premonition, perhaps, that oil companies would henceforth rule the world.

For the most part, Heller's prose is as clear and uncluttered as the graphic design he admires. He takes no ideological position and does not distinguish between repressive regimes of the right (sometimes called "authoritarian") or the left. Nor does he advance any overarching theory about the destiny of art in totalitarian regimes, though he leaves no doubt about the grim fate of ordinary citizens. Given his dark subject, he can be forgiven for abusing adjectives like "infamous," "horrific," "diabolical" and "heinous," though such words lose some of their power with the third or fourth repetition. They also obscure the continuity between branding campaigns of the past and our own battles over flag pins and the Pledge of Allegiance.

Heller makes no claims to a comprehensive survey, but one wonders why Imperial Japan, at least as "infamous" as Fascist Italy and with an interesting record of artists roped into the cause, was spared. One might also cavil about the material's organization, which places the Nazis first, according them a third of the book, even though Lenin's revolution and Mussolini's Fascism predate Hitler's rise.

Still, as Heller makes clear, the Nazis were the supreme masters of branding, both at the figurative level, in the vicious propaganda campaign he calls the "branding demonization" of the German Jews, and in a literal sense, as the Nazis "resorted to the most degrading branding technique imaginable." My German grandparents, with a big "J" stamped across their exit passports, were among the lucky ones. Those less fortunate, as Primo Levi wrote of the inmates of Auschwitz, were branded with an indelible tattoo: "This is the mark with which slaves are branded and cattle sent to the slaughter, and that is what you have become. You no longer have a name; this is your new name."



"Let's build a fleet of airships in Lenin's name"; a poster from 1931.

## **Consenting Adulterers**

The characters in this novel pursue short-term happiness without regard to long-term consequences.

### BY DANIELLE TRUSSONI

NE of the better moments in Christina Schwarz's third novel occurs halfway through, when a man named Kaiser asks if it's "more important to be happy or to be good." In "So Long at the Fair," the tussle between happiness and goodness — defined by slippery people like Kaiser quite simply as passion versus fidelity — moves through the lives of two generations of Wisconsin couples. Hot and heavy e-mail messages, secret liaisons and false promises all take their toll. This kind of "happiness" is not, it seems, all it's cracked up to be.

That isn't news. Marital misery - and

**Danielle Trussoni,** the author of "Falling Through the Earth: A Memoir," is writing a novel. the explosive consequences of adultery — has always been the stuff of drama. But although Schwarz diligently explores this theme, showing how indiscretions in the past influence choices made in the present,

#### **SO LONG AT THE FAIR** By Christina Schwarz.

244 pp. Doubleday. \$24.95.

"So Long at the Fair" has all the urgency of a soggy romance.

Moving between 1963 and the present day, Schwarz introduces a cast of characters in Madison and the small town of Winnesha, 30 miles away. The 1960s story, a slim and simplistic depiction of sexual betrayal and revenge, is set against a more complex recent narrative. In this second story, Ginny, a landscape architect, quietly yearns for a child while her feckless husband, Jon, is having an affair with a coworker, a single woman called Freddi.

As in her first novel, "Drowning Ruth," Schwarz shows a knack for evoking the landscape of the upper Midwest, with its meadows and prairies of bee balm and Indian paintbrush. And her characters convincingly seek out local treats like bratwurst, funnel cakes and root beer floats while driving to summer music festivals. But when it comes to writing about relationships, Schwarz's prose turns saccharine. "I can almost sense you here beside me on the bed," one lover e-mails to another, "your warm largeness, your flipperlike feet, your brown-sugar eyes. You are the bittersweet chocolate to which I press my tongue." This odd bit of banter evokes an equally odd response: "He closed his eyes, allowed himself to swell with the thought of her. She resembled a fox. ... She was like sugar, like nicotine; the more he got, the more he wanted."

Although the two stories intersect in minor ways - Ginny and Jon are the children of characters we see in 1963 - they don't inform each other in any significant or interesting fashion. The motivation for the events of the 1963 revenge plot is mostly unexplored, and its characters remain one-dimensional. This back story may have been intended to add tension to the main narrative, but its abundance of flashbacks and subplots is distracting, slowing rather than speeding the pace. Schwarz's readers soon become bogged down in what feels like a long slog through treacherous terrain. For a short novel, "So Long at the Fair" is just that so. so long.