

Designing Dictators

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

BY CHRISTOPHER BENFEY

HOW 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.

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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 government-disseminated 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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“Give me four years' time”; a photomontage from 1937.

