The foul attempt to censor and suppress Dana Schutz's painting of Emmett Till

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24 March 2017

The campaign to censor and suppress *Open Casket*, white artist Dana Schutz's painting of murdered black youth Emmett Till, on racialist grounds is thoroughly reactionary. Artists must speak out against this anti-democratic effort, which has the most sinister implications. The arguments being used are worthy of the Nazi officials who banned Jewish artists from playing or conducting classical music on the grounds of their "un-German" spirit.

Schutz's painting, based on a photograph of the 14-year-old Till, who was savagely murdered in Mississippi in August 1955 for allegedly flirting with a white woman, is included in the current 2017 Whitney Biennial (at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City).

The protests began March 17, the first day the Biennial was open to the public, when one African American artist stood in front of Schutz's work, blocking it from view for several hours. Other individuals have taken similar action.

This was followed by an open letter to the Whitney's curators and staff, written by British-born artist Hannah Black and signed by two dozen other black artists. The letter, widely reported on in the media, demanded not only that the painting be removed from the Biennial, but that it "be destroyed and not entered into any market or museum." Tellingly, the open letter was initially signed by both black and white artists and museum professionals, but, according to one media account, "after consideration, the white cosigners were removed."

This deplorable communication contends that *Open Casket* "should not be acceptable to anyone who cares or pretends to care about Black people because it is not acceptable for a white person to transmute Black suffering into profit and fun, though the practice has been normalized for a long time."

There are no grounds whatsoever for the malicious and slanderous claim that Schutz is making use of "Black suffering" for "profit and fun." (In fact, the artist has indicated that the painting will not be sold.) On the contrary, Schutz is clearly responding to and seeking to direct the attention of the public toward an appalling crime. Her effort is an entirely legitimate and *admirable* protest against racist violence, with obvious political connotations in the present circumstances of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim bigotry whipped up by the Trump administration.

Schutz has the right to paint about whatever subject she chooses. The murder of Till outraged millions and helped ignite the civil rights movement, which also involved the participation of large numbers of white youth. Taking only white artists into account here, the heinous crime inspired Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs and, more recently, Emmy Lou Harris to write songs, and others, like Joan Baez, to sing them. Rod Serling based an episode of the television program, the *U.S. Steel Hour*, on the case. Critics suggest that the murder helped inspire Harper Lee to write *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In 1956, novelist William Faulkner condemned the killing in an essay, "On Fear." Should all those works by "non-Black artists" now be expunged from the culture as illegitimate and, if possible, "destroyed"?

The open letter continues: "Although Schutz's intention may be to present white shame, this shame is not correctly represented as a painting of a dead Black boy by a white artist—those non-Black artists who sincerely wish to highlight the shameful nature of white violence should first of all stop treating Black pain as raw material. The subject matter is not Schutz's; white free speech and white creative freedom have been founded on the constraint of others, and are not natural rights. The painting must go."

Hannah Black and her co-signatories see the world entirely through the prism of race. This blinds them to the decisive social realities. They echo those extreme Zionists and similar tendencies who use a history of racial or religious oppression to justify their own reactionary communalism.

Schutz has no reason to feel "shame" for the murder of Till, who was a victim of Jim Crow racism, racism kept alive and incited by the American ruling elite for the purpose of dividing the working class and the poor. Behind the apartheid-like system in the South, and Till's killing, stood the oppressive and brutal reality of American capitalism, the same system that oppresses the working population of every color and national background.

The "subject matter," Till's horrific death, does not belong to African American artists or anyone else. It is the common "property" and responsibility of those who oppose, in Lenin's phrase, "*all* cases of tyranny, oppression, violence, and abuse."

The claim that "free speech" and "creative freedom," which, according to Black, have unfairly privileged white artists and "constrained" others, are not "natural rights," is ominous and threatening. It suggests that Black and her racially obsessed colleagues have every intention of seeing to it that those rights are suppressed.

The program of ethnic or racial particularism in art and culture, which insists that the various peoples and nationalities are incapable of communicating with and understanding one another, is thoroughly repugnant. It is part of the "anti-Enlightenment"

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tradition, which rejects rationalism, democracy, egalitarianism and universality. As Richard Wolin observes in *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism*, "According to the Enlightenment worldview, the essence of human dignity lay in the ability of men and women to transcend particular attachments, which were perceived as intrinsically limiting. To accede to the promised land of Reason meant consciously abandoning all partial allegiances and elevating oneself to the standpoint of the 'universal.'"

Historically, such national-particularist views have been advanced by the political right—above all, by the conservative French and German ideologists who helped inspire Hitler and Nazism. Today, the practitioners of identity politics follow in these extremely tainted footsteps—and their views are fraudulently presented as "leftist."

Leaving aside the quality of Schutz's painting, a central question is this: Can an artist cognize a reality that is not immediately, subjectively, his or her own?

All progressive art and philosophy of the last several centuries answers in the affirmative. Art answers it in abundant practice. Men have written (or painted or composed) about women, women about men, Jews about non-Jews and non-Jews about Jews, whites about blacks and blacks about whites, Westerners about Asians and Asians about Westerners.

The experience of other human beings is accessible to us, not absolutely, of course, but relatively. Human thinking, including artistic creative thinking, is capable of reflecting reality accurately and richly enough to form the basis of work that conveys essential truths. Otherwise, all artistic activity would cease; it would have no meaning and no possible audience. "What serves as a bridge from soul to soul is not the unique," Trotsky pointed out, "but the common."

Nor would we have world culture if artistic life were ethnically rooted, we would have a series of isolated, discrete narratives only comprehensible to the members of this or that "tribe" and impenetrable to the rest of humanity. Of course, class society and social inequality distort the situation, and have given to some a more advantageous position, but that is not the fault of art or the artists.

Without the permission of Hannah Black and her smug, postmodernist friends, people in various parts of the globe have been translating Shakespeare's plays and performing them for many years. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* has sold millions of copies over the past 170 years and been translated into dozens of languages, including Esperanto.

Richard Wright's *Native Son* has also been translated into many languages. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which, for all its historically inevitable limitations, exposed the horrors of slavery, sold 300,000 copies in the US in its first year and one and a half million copies in Britain; it has been translated into 60 languages. Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* has been translated into over 50 languages and at least 700 editions have been published worldwide. Examples could be provided from every part of the globe. Indian, Chinese and Japanese cinema have spoken to men and women everywhere.

In the form of images, art contains objective, relatively universal truth. Dana Schutz is as intrinsically capable of grasping the truth of Emmett Till's murder, and perhaps more so, than Black and her co-signatories, who appear to be immune to genuine empathy or compassion. They seem to have sympathy only for themselves. They want the franchise, a monopoly on images of black people "in torment and distress." The letter describes the issues as involving a "high-stakes conversation," which hints at the money and prestige involved.

The issue of the kinship of this selfish, exclusivist-communalist chauvinism to the outlook of the Nazis is not raised lightly. This is where the irrationalist politics of blood and nation inevitably leads. And, in any event, Black and her allies bring the historical parallel to mind with their astounding and disgraceful demand that Schutz's *Open Casket* be "destroyed." They don't indicate whether they have a bonfire in a public square in mind, but why not? Once you say A, you will eventually say B.

Let us recall how the German fascists reasoned.

Nazi cultural official Hans Severus Ziegler curated a "Degenerate Music" exhibition in 1938, directed against "Jewish" and "Bolshevik" influences, and argued in the accompanying brochure that "Cultural politics calls upon us to care for the soul of the people, to foster its creative powers and all the values of character and conviction that we gather under the general term, 'the folk.' The politician and the cultural politician have the same goal: the creation of a strong nation and the securing of its material and spiritual well-being, the safety of its external existence and the nurturing of its inner existence." The Jews, Ziegler claimed, had been hard at work attempting "to infiltrate all German thought and feeling, and to palm off on the Germans all kinds of novel ideas stemming from the Jewish race."

"No other law," asserted Ziegler, "exists for a people but that its development be realized *organically*," i.e., without "outside" interference. He urged every individual "who feels a creative urge within him [to] take counsel from [his] racial conscience."

In the same spirit, the Nazis prohibited Jews from playing or conducting the music of Bach, Beethoven, Mozart and other "Aryan" composers.

Changing what must be changed, how different is this from the outlook of our contemporary identity politics fanatics, who, like white supremacists, would call a halt to race mixing and who see racial (and gender) questions as the "foundational consideration for art"?

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