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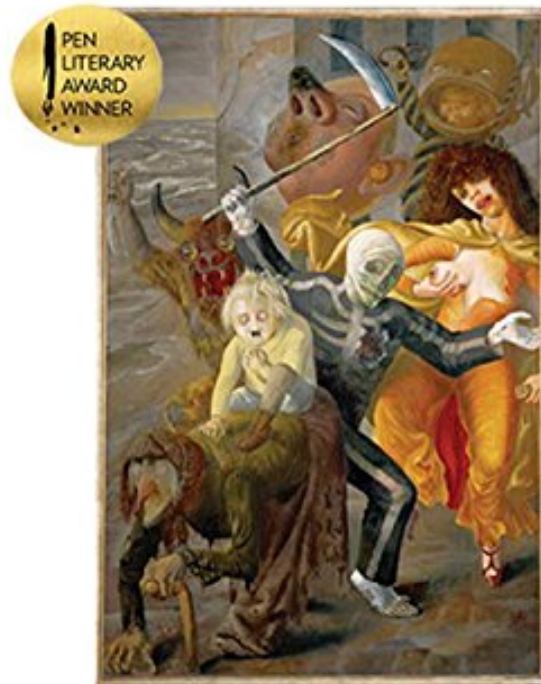
Theater of Cruelty: Art, Film, and the Shadows of War (New York Review Books Collections)

Ian Buruma

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THEATER OF CRUELTY

ART, FILM, AND THE SHADOWS OF WAR



IAN BURUMA

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Ian Buruma : Theater of Cruelty: Art, Film, and the Shadows of War (New York Review Books Collections)
before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Theater of Cruelty: Art, Film, and the Shadows of War (New York Review Books Collections):

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Essays on the Paradoxical Connections between Twentieth-Century

Art and Political Brutality

By NRLI ordered this book from after reading an article by Buruma about the connections between Emil Nolde and other German artists who were members of the Expressionist group Die Brücke (The Bridge) in the "New York Review of Books." Buruma discusses sensitively how these artists' interest in the irrational and the "German soul" intersected with the rise of Nazism, even though the artists themselves were rejected by the Nazis and dismissed as "degenerate." Nolde, a painter marked by his passionate use of color, was taken in by the romantic notions of a national spirit and joined the Nazis, but his art was still lumped into the category of "degenerate," and he was forbidden to paint. Buruma navigates the tensions between the powerful beauty of the art and the danger of the ideas with an articulate complexity and sense of paradox. His book is a collection of essays that explore this complexity, and should appeal to anyone interested in the connections between twentieth-century art and history.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Eclectic Selection

By Patrick Mc Coy20697541

Theater of Cruelty: Art, Film, and the Shadows of War (2014) is another collection of essays by Ian Buruma that have appeared in The New York Review Of Books from as long ago as 1995 to as recently as 2012, which is an eclectic set of topics much like his previously intriguing collection of essays, *The Libertine and the Missionary*. Buruma has a myriad of interests, but in his introduction he identifies certain trends in the subjects which he discusses in his essay: First of all, I am fascinated by what makes the human species behave atrociously. Animals kill other animals for food, and some animals turn on their own kind out of rivalry. But only humans commit acts of extreme and often senseless violence. He goes on to explain that: "A way to deal with our fearful fascination with power and cruelty and death is to act it out vicariously in art. hence the title of this book." The first set of essays concern German history and art: 1. "The Joys and Perils of Victimhood"-about the cult of victimhood associated with Jewish people since WWII's holocaust, 2. "Fascinating Narcissism: Leni Riefenstahl"-discussion of the Third Reich's favorite director, 3. "Werner Herzog and His Heroes"-a look at one of Germany's greatest directors, 4. "The Genius of Berlin: Rainier Werner Fassbinder"-a look at another celebrated German film director, 5. "The Destruction of Germany"-discusses how and why Germany was so heavily bombed in WWII, 6. "There's No Place Like Heimat"-looks at the work of East German "grand master of cinematic kitsch": Hans-Jurgen Syberberg, 7. "The Afterlife of Anne Frank"-discusses the legacy of one of the most famous diaries of all-time, 8. "Occupied Paris: The Sweet and the Cruel"-collaborators and the resistance in Vichy France, 9. "The Twisted Art of the Documentary"-which discusses propaganda and an unfinished propaganda film about the holocaust made by the Nazis. The next set of essays concern Japan: 10. "Ecstatic About Pearl Harbor"-about wartime diaries of Japanese intellectuals during WWII, 11. "Suicide for the Empire"-about kamikaze pilots and their motives in sacrificing their lives, 12. "Eastwood's War"-looks at his two films on the battle of Iwo Jima, 13. "Robbed of Dreams"-about the symbolic act of the opening a sushi restaurant in Palestine. I suppose the order must have been difficult to organize with so many different essays and subjects together in one volume: 14. "The Catty Chronicler: Harry Kessler"-discusses the diaries of Count Harry Clement Ulrich Kessler, Anglo-German, aesthete, publisher, art collector, world traveler, writer, part-time diplomat and socialite, 15. "The Believer"-in this essay Buruma takes Christopher Hitchens to task for his undefensible political shift to the right as chronicled in his book *Hitch-22*, 16. "The Last Bengali Renaissance Man"-an appreciation of legendary director Satyajit Ray, 17. "The Way Live Now: Mike Leigh"-an appreciation of the cinema of British director Mike Leigh, 18. "The Great Art of Embarrassment"-is an appreciative look at the films and plays of British writer Alan Bennett, 19. "The Invention of David Bowie"-analyzes the impact of Bowie on culture as presented by the Victoria and Albert Museum exhibition of Bowie's possessions from his personal archive, 20. "Dressing for Success"-is an essay on the life and times of the theatrical Japanese painter Tsuguharu Fujita, 21. "The Circus of Max Beckmann"-an appreciation of German painter Beckmann, 22. "Degenerate Art"-about the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition of the work of Ernest Ludwig Kirchner, 23. "George Grosz's Amerika"-an appreciation of an ex-pat German painter, 24. "Mr. Natural"-an exhibition of the work of R. Crumb leads to an appraisal of his career, 25. "Obsessions In Tokyo"-a very informed review of Japanese exhibitions that have taken place in the past and recently in 2013 in New York, 26. "A Japanese Tragedy"-is about the failings of institutions like government, media, and energy commissions that led to the tragedies of the post tsunami nuclear accidents, 27. "Virtual Violence"-is about Takashi Murakami's "Little Boy" traveling contemporary otaku art exhibition, and finally, 28. "Asiaworld"- discusses the future trajectory of China's government. It is a very eclectic collection of essays that shows Buruma's far ranging interests as well as his knowledge and expertise in these various subjects. His prose style is extremely readable and draws a number of interesting and original examples and conclusions. I'm always curious about what he will undertake as the subject of his next project.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Buruma's Theater of Cruelty

By Charlie Canning

Theater of Cruelty: Art, Film, and the Shadows of War is a collection of 28 essays and reviews written by Ian Buruma and published in the New York Review of Books over the years 1987-2013. About half concern topics related to Germany: the Weimar Republic, Nazism, the Holocaust, Germans in exile; while eight have to do with Japan and/or East Asia: Pearl Harbor, kamikaze pilots, Eastwood's two Iwo Jima films, theme parks. The remainder showcase artists living and working in Paris, London, Calcutta, and New York. Given the Germany / Japan focus of much of Buruma's longer work (*The Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan, Year Zero: A History of 1945*), it is hardly surprising that his shorter pieces should reflect this same interest. For the reader of *Theater of Cruelty*, this is undoubtedly a good thing because

when it comes to writing about the cultural manifestations of war and its aftermath in Germany and Japan, Ian Buruma is hard to beat. What sets Buruma apart from other historians is that he seems to have spent an equal amount of time in the library, the archives, the theater, the art museum/gallery, and the screening room. This gives Buruma's prose a richly layered texture to it that few others can match. The essays are generally of two types. In the first, Buruma pairs two seemingly disparate subjects or genres (such as an obscure Kawabata title and an art exhibition in "Virtual Violence" or 3/11 and a John Dower book in "A Japanese Tragedy") to develop his theme. The second type is a kind of "call and response" form where Buruma asks then (sometimes) answers questions that occur to him while considering an artist's work or milieu. In "The Afterlife of Anne Frank", for example, we learn of the long-running battle over Anne's legacy between her father (who wished to stress the universal message of Anne's writing) and the promoter and playwright Meyer Levin (who wanted to emphasize Anne's Jewishness). The "call and response" essays are rhetorical and the reader is left to come to his own conclusions. By noting a certain uniformity of style, I do not mean to suggest that all the essays and reviews in *Theater of Cruelty* are of equal quality, however. While most are informative and compelling, a few such as the review of Christopher Hitchens' *Hitch-22* ("The Believer") and "The Invention of David Bowie" don't quite come off as fully rounded treatments of their subjects. Better are the class of very accomplished introductions to the films of Herzog and Fassbinder and the art of Kirchner and Grosz. In these reviews of retrospectives and art exhibitions, Buruma shines. The best essays in the collection have Buruma's characteristic wide-ranging intelligence together with an added poignancy that comes with just the right pacing and development. Two that are especially noteworthy in this regard are "Occupied Paris: The Sweet and the Cruel" and "Dressing for Success". In "Occupied Paris: The Sweet and the Cruel", Buruma compares and contrasts two war-time diaries: One by Helene Berr, a university student studying English literature at the Sorbonne and another by Philippe Jullian, a young artist and writer from Bordeaux. Though both are living in Paris during the Occupation, are of the same age and have similar aspirations, their experiences come to be defined by one major difference: Berr is Jewish, Jullian is not. After setting up a structure that goes something like this: Helene = Jewish experience of shattered dreams and horrible death / Philippe = French ambivalence and grudging acceptance of German occupation, Buruma uses his two foils to discuss "the sweet" life enjoyed by the collaborationists and "the cruel" fate of those destined for Auschwitz. Helene has the last word. Though the ending is heartrending, what makes the essay truly memorable is the patience with which Buruma develops it. Buruma waits and waits and waits until he can slot in the final quotation at just the right moment. "Dressing for Success" is another gem. It begins with a very colorful look at Paris in the 1920s when Japanese painter Foujita was "at the height of his fame", known as much for his costumes (an early form of Japanese cosplay, it appears) as his paintings. In the 1930s, Foujita ("Fujita" in Japan) returned to Japan and began to express a "belligerent Japanese chauvinism" in both his costumes (he favored smart-looking officers' uniforms) and his art. The essay closes with a bittersweet rumination on Foujita/Fujita's departure from Japan after the war and his final years in France. Once again, nothing is rushed the beginning, middle and end of the essay are equally balanced and assured. Perhaps the most glowing review in the collection is "Eastwood's War" about Director Clint Eastwood's pair of films on Iwo Jima. Before Eastwood, the "rules" for making war films were patriotism, partisanship, and a dehumanization of the enemy: "But Clint Eastwood is the first director, to my knowledge, who has made two films of the same battle showing both sides from the perspective of individual soldiers with fully developed characters. Deftly, without polemics or heavy-handed messages, he has broken all the rules of the traditional patriotic war movie genre and created two superb films, one in English, the other in Japanese: *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters of Iwo Jima*. The latter, in my view, is especially fine." (181) What Buruma likes about *Letters of Iwo Jima* is that Eastwood's film is as much of a breakthrough in the Japanese war film genre as it is in the American one. It is not melodramatic as Japanese war films tend to be nor is it infused with overtly jingoistic notions of samurai spirit or other cultural myths. That Eastwood, a foreign director, was able to make "a film in which the characters, who speak in subtitled Japanese, are wholly convincing and thoroughly alive, is an extraordinary feat." (186) If Buruma has a blind spot in *Theater of Cruelty*, it is his failure to take into account the spiritual side of life. Apart from a rather summary discussion of Christian imagery in painter Max Beckmann's art, there is very little coverage of the spiritual in either art or religious institutions. While the religious elements of things like the Holocaust, Emperor-worship and the like are properly identified, they are seldom considered in their own right. The closest Buruma gets is an analysis of the propaganda-value of various belief systems that the state can use to further its interest and a parallel discussion of art either in acceptance or in opposition to this. But there is more to it than that. It is interesting to note the subjects Buruma doesn't treat. For all the allusions to Wagner and the German alpine soul in several of the reviews, there is no discussion of Lutheranism or the Confessor Church. Perhaps most surprising is the absence of Dietrich Bonhoeffer from the voluminous discussions of Nazism and Berlin. The same could be said about Buruma's writing on London. What about a consideration of T.S. Eliot or C.S. Lewis? Men go to war for politics but they seldom die for it. The name on their lips when they leave this world is either their mother's, their husband's or wife's, their child's or God's. As someone once wrote, few will waste their last breath mouthing "democratic socialism" (or "secular humanism", for that matter). It has too many syllables. "Jesus" is good because it has two. "God" has only one. From the review published in *War, Literature the Arts* 27 (2015).

Winner of the PEN/Diamonstein-Spielvogel Award for the Art of the Essay. Ian Buruma is fascinated, he writes, by what makes the human species behave atrociously. In *Theater of Cruelty* the acclaimed author of *The Wages of Guilt* and *Year Zero: A History of 1945* once again turns to World War II to explore that question to the Nazi occupation of Paris, the Allied bombing of German cities, the international controversies over Anne Franks diaries, Japan's militarist intellectuals and its kamikaze pilots. One way that people respond to power and cruelty, Buruma argues, is through art, and the art that most interests him reveals the dark impulses beneath the veneer of civilized behavior. This is what draws him to German and Japanese artists such as Max Beckmann, George Grosz, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Mishima Yukio, and Yokoo Tadanori, as well as to filmmakers such as Werner Herzog, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Kurosawa Kiyoshi, and Hans-Jürgen Syberberg. All were affected by fascism and its terrible consequences; all looked into the abyss and made art of what they saw. Whether he is writing in this wide-ranging collection about war, artists, or film or about David Bowie's music, R. Crumb's drawings, the Palestinians of the West Bank, or Asian theme parks Ian Buruma brings sympathetic historical insight and shrewd aesthetic judgment to understanding the diverse ways that people deal with violence and cruelty in life and in art. *Theater of Cruelty* includes eight pages of color and black and white images.

Buruma is enthusiastic and skeptical and unapologetic about his diverse passions. Though he writes of those who leapt before they looked, as a critic, Buruma is always firmly grounded." Booklist "Able to write with apparent ease and grace about a wide variety of subjects... Buruma displays a generosity of spirit that is often absent in the work of other cultural critics.... The author generally focuses on strengths of artistic works and maintains a hopeful view of history, though he seems to find it increasingly hard to do so. A unique intelligence encounters the uniqueness of art and culture. Kirkus (starred review) Praise for Ian Buruma's most recent work, *Year Zero*: *Year Zero* has a down-to-earth grandeur. Through an array of brief, evocative human portraits and poignant descriptions of events around the globe he hints, rather than going into numbing detail or philosophical discourse, at the dimensions of suffering, the depth of moral confusion and in the end the nascent hope that 1945 entailed. *The Wall Street Journal* [In *Murder in Amsterdam*], Ian Buruma addresses questions of political philosophy, moral accountability and mass psychology in the most rigorous possible way: journalistically... deftly [combining] interviewing and reflection. *The New York Times* Book Mr. Buruma is a journalist who reports all sides: those of the survivors, the veterans, the politicians, the left-wing pacifists and right-wing nationalists, the judges and the judged. *The Wages of Guilt* is subtitled *Memories of War in Germany and Japan*. But it is really far more, an exploration of the many and varied ways in which cataclysm has shaped national identity in our century. *The New York Times* "As generations with few memories of the second world war come of age in Europe and Asia, this luminous book will remind them of the importance of what Buruma terms 'mental surgeons', the politicians and warriors who reconstructed two continents left in rubble." --*The Financial Times* "Ian Buruma's wonderful book is about a time, immediately after the end of the war, which has somehow fallen between the cracks of history, and which the author has now devastatingly brought to light... This book is a compelling and astounding addition to the literature of the war, reminding us, as Buruma himself writes, 'Never Again'." --*The Daily Mail* "Mr. Buruma's analysis is correct. Many of the consequences of victory were grim. Normality returned in the decades that followed thanks to the grit and determination of those who pushed on past the horrors of 1945. Mr. Buruma's book honours their efforts." --*The Economist* "A stirring account of the year in which the world woke up to the horror of what had just occurred and--while some new horrors were being committed--began to reflect on how to make sure that it never happens again." --*The New York Times* Praise for Buruma's *The Wages of Guilt*: "Mr. Buruma is a journalist who reports all sides: those of the survivors, the veterans, the politicians, the left-wing pacifists and right-wing nationalists, the judges and the judged. *The Wages of Guilt* is subtitled 'Memories of War in Germany and Japan.' But it is really far more, an exploration of the many and varied ways in which cataclysm has shaped national identity in our century." --*The New York Times* "This thought-provoking inquiry has a powerful theme: people must be held accountable for the society in which they live." --*Publishers Weekly* "...absorbing and important..." --*Foreign Affairs* "As in *God's Dust* (1989), Buruma takes a psychological and cultural voyage into nationalism, guilt, and self-delusion -- in this case, of two of WW II's defeated Axis powers.... The book ranges wide and deep in its search for disparate voices in both [German and Japanese] societies: editors, intellectuals, writers, artists, activists. Buruma's easy familiarity with Japan enables him to dig under the skin of national attitudes in a way that is rare for a Western commentator.... All in all, a thoughtful, patiently assembled book that probes carefully and with moral toughness into precisely those painful truths." --Kirkus About the Author Ian Buruma is the author of many books, including *The Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan* (1995), *The Missionary and the Libertine: Love and War in East and West* (1996), *Murder in Amsterdam: The Death of Theo Van Gogh and the Limits of Tolerance* (2006), and *Year Zero: A History of 1945* (2013). He is the Paul W. Williams Professor of Human Rights and Journalism at Bard and a regular contributor to *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and *The New York Times*, among other publications.