



## THE MUSES IN THE MINISTRY OF TRUTH

Taught by Nat Kernell

Regimes and religions have never been shy about enlisting art and literature to push agenda, promote causes and lure the unwary. Often the medium is not the message, at least not the only message. An image or a myth can be far more effective than a reasoned argument in shaping beliefs in a nation or community, particularly if said beliefs would not stand up to scrutiny and the believers are true believers who lack the mental capacity to hold opposed ideas in their minds at the same time without becoming confused (one definition of intelligence). When a cowboy president costumed in a "mission accomplished" flight suit, helmet tucked with military precision under arm, struts onto the desk of an aircraft carrier as cameras roll, he has opted out of rational persuasion in his determination to "sell" a war during a re-election campaign. The word "cowboy," by the way, is a propagandist's buzz word which, unlike a more abstract term like "reckless" or "simple-minded," does not invite rational debate.

Propaganda does not have to be bad art or literature. Vergil's *Aeneid*, one book of which we will read in this course, is a magnificent poem that is also patriotic propaganda. Ditto the "Regulus" ode of Horace, which crosses the line separating factual truth from falsehood. What makes Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, a Nazi propaganda film, so disturbing is its powerful imagery. If it were kitsch art like "Hitler in Armor," we could laugh at it. Picasso's *Guernica* has so much kick that we don't think of it as propaganda for the (lost) Republican cause in Spain; rather his muralistic masterpiece emblazons a brutal atrocity on people's minds. The painting at the top of this page, a "remake" of a mural painted in Rockefeller Center and destroyed, draws mixed reviews. Is it powerful art or blatant propaganda designed to ingratiate the artist, whose name was Diego, with his commie pals? At least it packs considerably more of a colorful wallop than what's in front of you when you walk through the front door of 30 Rock now.

Propaganda art can even become satire, as in the "nostalgic socialist realism" of Komar and Melamid. At the same time, as we will see, "Stalin and the Muses" has a dead-serious message about Orwellian rewriting of history. In its grandiose neoclassicism the satire of Komar and Melamid merges with kitsch, a sidebar topic in a course like this. Kitsch is garishly bad art with vulgar and sentimental appeal, and it is easy to see why kitsch art and propaganda art have an overlapping fan base. What is the difference between good and bad art? Don't ever let anyone tell you "good" and "bad" are meaningless criteria in literature and art—but that's another conversation.