

Forum: Early Fascism

Intellectual and Artistic Responses to Early Fascism—the Historians' Perspective

From Weimar Modernism to Nazi Modernism?

Roger Griffin

German Quarterly, v. 90, no. 3 (Summer 2017)

“Nazi modernism”? The words still do not roll off the tongue. The conventional narrative established in the history of interwar Germany and in the history of art has it that Hitler’s seizure of power marked a brutal caesura between an ultra-laissez-faire society hosting modernist experiments in every realm of culture and society, and an ultra-totalitarian one hostile to modernism to the point of persecuting it as if it were an ethnic group considered subhuman, and thus to be mocked, persecuted, banned, removed from society, forced into migration, and even physically exterminated. Modernism and Nazism are thus antithetical and irreconcilable.

Hitler appears to have endorsed this view. Writing in *Mein Kampf* (1925), he refers to cubism and Dadaism as “the morbid excrescences of insane and degenerate men,” external symptoms of political and cultural decay: “Just as one could hardly imagine sixty years ago that the greatness achieved by Germany at the time would undergo a political collapse, so it was unthinkable that there could be a cultural collapse that began to manifest itself in futuristic and cubistic art forms after 1900” (235). The closure of the Bauhaus, the prohibition of jazz and atonal music as “cultural Bolshevism,” the touring Exhibition of Degenerate Art, and the burning of modernist paintings by the Berlin Fire Brigade (an uncanny adumbration of Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*) all signalled to observers that the express train of Weimar modernism hit the buffers in 1933 with disastrous personal consequences not just for art, but also the artists who created it and the liberal intelligentsia who appreciated it. It is all too tempting to see the regime’s destruction of works of art in the late 1930s as presaging the mass destruction of human beings in the 1940s, leading the cultural historian Peter Adam to declare that Nazi art can and should only be seen through “the lens of Auschwitz” (Adam 9).

Yet looking beyond the propaganda speeches and the hagiographic portraits of Hitler, heroized soldiers, and curiously lifeless landscapes, humorless parodies of classical art, and asexual nudes exhibited in the paintings and sculptures of the House of German Art, anomalies start to accumulate. Gottfried Benn, famous Expressionist poet in the Weimar period and Nobel Prize nominee after the war, was briefly head of the Prussian Academy and spokesman for the evolution of a new human type under the Third Reich. Ernst Jünger, an extreme prose modernist, though he retained his distance from the Nazi Party and “actually existing” Nazism, nevertheless welcomed the arrival of a new type of regime that celebrated the war experience, myth, vitalism, technocracy, and the appearance of a new type of worker/soldier who had transcended humanism and individualism (see Petropoulos).

Nor was the opposition to modernist aesthetics as monolithic as generally assumed. In 1934 Berlin hosted an exhibition of Italian Futurist “aeropittura” at the behest of Goebbels (Berghaus 249), the most prominent protagonist of an anti-Rosenberg faction that insisted Expressionists such as Barlach and Nolde infused their works with the Nordic soul (Petropoulos). Goebbels was an avid Jazz fan and celebrated Edvard Munch as the incarnation of *völkisch* creativity (Prideaux 150–51). Both Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe, despite their being major Bauhaus architects, submitted modernist

designs to the Third Reich for the new Reichsbank before fleeing Germany. The “cathedrals of light” that Albert Speer created for Nuremberg Rallies and the visit of Mussolini in 1938 were inspired by the arch modernist of architectural utopianism, Bruno Taut (James F. Orum: *Early Fascism* Chakraborty 91–94). Carl Orff’s *Carmina Burana*, so beloved of TV talent shows, was written under the Third Reich and spectacularly performed by Karajan in the Berlin State Opera in 1941.

Nor are these to be dismissed as “one-offs.” Modernism can be found in mainstream Nazism. Richard Wagner’s vision of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and his resolve to bring mythic Germanic archetypes to life through art was a supremely modernist concept of art (Koss), no matter how much its fruits were enjoyed by Hitler and provided the backing tracks to Third Reich propaganda. A highly redacted version of the vitalist philosophy of Nietzsche, Europe’s supreme modernist philosopher (Gooding-Williams), was also appropriated by Nazism. Leni Riefenstahl’s two-part documentary on the Berlin Olympics displayed distinctly modernist elements in technique and aesthetic (Nichols). Modernist concepts of design left their imprint on bridges, factories, and airports (Adam), and such industrial artefacts as the Volkswagen (Wilk). Indeed, the conception and landscaping of the entire Autobahn system can be seen as modernist in spirit and style (Evans 235), as can the conception and design of the first ballistic missiles. This was not, as Jeffrey Herf (1984) would have it, “reactionary modernism,” but Nazi modernism tout court: their modernism.

Before we reach for paradoxical terms such as “reactionary modernism” or “antimodern modernism,” we should at least engage with Peter Fritzsche’s argument, formulated over two decades ago in “Nazi Modern,” to the point of questioning our assumptions concerning the Third Reich’s inherent antagonism to modernism. Certainly, it was fanatically opposed to “degenerate” modernism, and its propaganda equated the two. But if modernism is seen in terms of a radical impulse to renew a civilization which has lost its inner vitality, rootedness, and creativity, an entirely different perspective opens up. Once our focus shifts to “the degree to which Nazism was invested in the renovative or therapeutic traditions of western civilizations” (Fritzsche, “Nazi Modern” 3), and once modernism itself is seen not primarily as an aesthetic, but as a force that “breaks with the past, manufactures its own historical traditions, and imagines alternative futures,” then the Nazis are revealed as supreme modernists (12). They “made the acknowledgement of the discontinuity of history the premise of their fantastic political and racial designs” (11), and set about “the wholesale renovation of the body of the people” with unprecedented ruthlessness (14). In short, Nazism took Ezra Pound’s injunction to “Make it new” as a license to apply the principle of creative destruction to every aspect of Weimar Germany until a new world emerged.

My Modernism and Fascism (2007) can be seen as an exercise in following the clues given by Fritzsche, and by other scholars such as Emilio Gentile and Peter Osborne, to offer a radical reassessment both of modernism as a historical force, and the relationship to it of Fascism and Nazism. I argue that Nazi painting, architecture, technology, social engineering, and even its campaigns of eugenics and genocide, are to be seen as components of a vast experiment in creating a modernist state in which not just politics, the economy, and education, but morality, the Germanic race, civilization, and history itself would be regenerated. It was this programmatic modernism that encouraged the Nazis to inject eugenics and “racial science” into the arteries of the modern nation-state to enable it to transcend a liberal age responsible, as they saw it, for an epidemic of the physical and moral degeneracy that was afflicting Germany.

It was this modernism that encouraged Nazi architects, first and foremost Albert Speer himself, to make “stripped neoclassicism” the signature style of the regime’s new civic architecture, expressing the clean lines of a racially healthy modernity. In fact, this austere variant of neo-classicism, shorn of decoration or stylistic flourish, was used internationally in the 1930s for some civic buildings, and

derived from a dialect of modernism known as “the New Objectivity” (Bryant). In the context of the Nazis’ scheme for Germany’s rebirth as the hub of a new world civilization, stripped neoclassicism was supposed to symbolize the eternity of the Nordic race, whether it was deployed in a ministry building, an airport terminal, or the Great Hall of the rebuilt centre of Berlin, now transformed into Germania, the capital of a post-humanist world and political centre of the new total, Aryan, and modernist state (Griffin 2007, 250–335).