

▶ RICHARD SHORTEN

MODERNISM

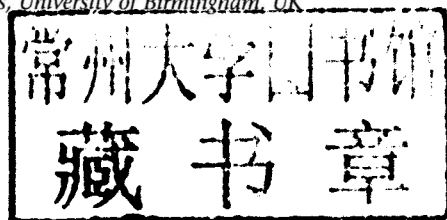
AND
TOTALITARIANISM

Modernism and Totalitarianism

Rethinking the Intellectual Sources
of Nazism and Stalinism, 1945
to the Present

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Modernism and ...

Series Editor: **Roger Griffin**, Professor in Modern History, Oxford Brookes University, UK.

The series *Modernism and* invites experts in a wide range of cultural, social, scientific and political phenomena to explore the relationship between a particular topic in modern history and 'modernism'. Apart from their intrinsic value as short but groundbreaking specialist monographs, the books aim through their cumulative impact to expand the application of this highly contested term beyond its conventional remit of art and aesthetics. Our definition of modernism embraces the vast profusion of creative acts, reforming initiatives, and utopian projects that, since the late nineteenth century, have sought either to articulate, and so symbolically transcend, the spiritual malaise or decadence of modernity, or to find a radical solution to it through a movement of spiritual, social, political – even racial – regeneration and renewal. The ultimate aim is to foster a spirit of transdisciplinary collaboration in shifting the structural forces that define modern history beyond their conventional conceptual frameworks.

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Series Editor's Preface

As the title *Modernism and ...* implies, this series has been conceived in an open-ended, closure-defying spirit, more akin to the soul of jazz than to the rigour of a classical score. Each volume provides an experimental space which allows both seasoned professionals and aspiring academics to investigate familiar areas of modern social, scientific or political history from the defamiliarising vantage point afforded by a term not routinely associated with it: 'modernism'. Yet this is no contrived makeover of a clichéd concept for the purposes of scholastic bravado. Nor is it a gratuitous theoretical exercise in expanding the remit of an 'ism' already notorious for its polyvalence – not to say its sheer nebulousness – in a transgressional fling of postmodern *jouissance*.

Instead, this series is based on the *empirically* oriented hope that a deliberate enlargement of the semantic field of 'modernism' to embrace a whole range of phenomena apparently unrelated to the radical innovation in the arts it normally connotes will do more than contribute to scholarly understanding of those topics. Cumulatively the volumes that appear are meant to contribute to a perceptible paradigm shift slowly becoming evident in the way modern history is approached. It is one which, while indebted to 'the cultural turn', is if anything 'post-post-modern', for it attempts to use transdisciplinary perspectives and the conscious clustering of concepts

often viewed as unconnected – or even antagonistic to each other – to consolidate and deepen the reality principle on which historiography is based, not flee it, to move closer to the experience of history of its actors, not away from it. Only those with a stunted, myopic (and actually *unhistorical*) view of what constitutes historical ‘fact’ and ‘causation’ will be predisposed to dismiss the *Modernism and ...* project as mere ‘culturalism’, a term which due to unexamined prejudices and sometimes sheer ignorance has, particularly in the vocabulary of more than one eminent ‘archival’ historian, acquired a reductionist, pejorative meaning.

Yet even open-minded readers may find the title of this book disconcerting. Like all the volumes in the series, it may seem to conjoin two phenomena that do not ‘belong’. However, any ‘shock of the new’ induced by the widened usage of modernism to embrace non-aesthetic phenomena that makes this juxtaposition possible should be mitigated by realising that in fact it is neither new nor shocking. The conceptual ground for a work such as *Modernism and Totalitarianism* has been prepared for by such seminal texts as Marshall Berman’s *All that is Solid Melts into Thin Air: The Experience of Modernity* (1982), Modris Eksteins’ *Rites of Spring* (1989), Peter Osborne’s *The Politics of Time: Modernity and the Avant-Garde* (1995), Emilio Gentile’s *The Struggle for Modernity* (2003), and Mark Antliff’s *Avant-Garde Fascism: The Mobilization of Myth, Art and Culture in France, 1909–1939* (2007). In each case modernism is revealed as the long-lost sibling (twin or maybe even father) of historical phenomena from the social and political sphere rarely mentioned in the same breath.

Yet the real pioneers of such a 'maximalist' interpretation of modernism were none other than some of the major aesthetic modernists themselves. For them the art and thought that subsequently earned them this title was a creative force – passion even – of revelatory power which, in a crisis-ridden West where *anomie* was reaching pandemic proportions, was capable of regenerating not just 'cultural production' but 'socio-political production', and for some even society *tout court*. Figures such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Richard Wagner, Wassily Kandinsky, Walter Gropius, Pablo Picasso, and Virginia Woolf never accepted that the art and thought of 'high culture' were to be treated as self-contained spheres of activity peripheral to – and cut off from – the main streams of contemporary social and political events. Instead, they assumed them to be laboratories of visionary thought vital to the spiritual salvation of a world being systematically drained of higher meaning and ultimate purpose by the dominant, 'nomocidal' forces of modernity. If we accept Max Weber's thesis of the gradual *Entzauberung*, or 'disenchantment' of the world through rationalism, such creative individuals could be seen as having set themselves the task – each in his or her own idiosyncratic way – of *re-enchanting* and re-sacralising the world. Such modernists consciously sought to restore a sense of higher purpose, transcendence and *Zauber* (magic) to a spiritually starved modern humanity condemned by 'progress' to live in a permanent state of existential exile, of *liminoid transition*, now that the forces of the divine seemed to have withdrawn in what Martin Heidegger's muse, the poet Friedrich Hölderlin, called 'The Flight of the Gods'. If the hero of modern popular

nationalism was the Unknown Warrior, perhaps the patron saint of modernism itself was *Deus Absconditus*.

Approached from this oblique angle modernism was thus a revolutionary force, but was so in a sense only distantly related to the one made familiar by standard accounts of the (political or social) revolutions on which modern historians cut their teeth. It was a 'hidden' revolution of the sort referred to by the 'arch-aesthetic modernist Vincent van Gogh, when he mused about the sorry plight of the world in his letter of 24 September 1888 to his brother Theo. In one passage he waxes ecstatic about the impression made on him by the work of another spiritual seeker disturbed by the impact of 'modern progress', Leo Tolstoy:

It seems that in the book *My Religion*, Tolstoy implies that whatever happens in a violent revolution, there will also be an inner and hidden revolution in the people, out of which a new religion will be born, or rather something completely new which will be nameless, but which will have the same effect of consoling, of making life possible, as the Christian religion used to.

The book must be a very interesting one, it seems to me. In the end, we shall have had enough of cynicism, scepticism and humbug, and will want to live – more musically. How will this come about, and what will we discover? It would be nice to be able to prophesy, but it is even better to be forewarned, instead of seeing absolutely nothing in the future other than the disasters that are bound to strike the modern world and civilisation like so many thunderbolts, through

revolution, or war, or the bankruptcy of worm-eaten states.

In the series *Modernism and ...* the key term has been experimentally expanded and 'heuristically modified' to embrace any movement for change which sets out to give a name and a public identity to the 'nameless' and 'hidden' revolutionary principle that Van Gogh saw as necessary to counteract the rise of nihilism. He was attracted to Tolstoy's vision because it seemed to offer a remedy to the impotence of Christianity and the insidious spread of a literally soul-destroying cynicism, which if unchecked would ultimately lead to the collapse of civilisation. The term 'modernism' thus applies in this series to all concerted attempts in any sphere of activity to enable life to be lived more 'musically', to resurrect the sense of transcendent communal and individual purpose being palpably eroded by the chaotic unfolding of events in the modern world even if the end result would be 'just' to make society physically and mentally healthy.

What would have probably appalled Van Gogh is that some visionaries no less concerned than him by the growing crisis of the West sought a manna of spiritual nourishment emanating not from heaven, nor even from an earthly beauty still retaining an aura of celestial otherworldliness, but from strictly secular visions of an alternative modernity so radical in its conception that attempts to enact them inevitably led to disasters of their own following the law of unintended consequences. Such solutions were to be realised not by a withdrawal from history into the realm of art (the sphere of 'epiphanic' modernism), but by applying a utopian artistic,

mythopoeic, religious or technocratic consciousness to the task of harnessing the dynamic forces of modernity itself in such spheres as politics, nationalism, the natural sciences, and social engineering in order to establish a new order and a 'new man'. It is initiatives conceived in this 'programmatic' mode of modernism that the series sets out to explore. Its results are intended to benefit not just a small coterie of like-minded academics but also mainstream teaching and research in modern history, thereby becoming part of the 'common sense' of the discipline even of self-proclaimed 'empiricists'.

Some of the deep-seated psychological, cultural, and 'anthropological' mechanisms underlying the futural revolts against modernity here termed 'modernism' are explored at length in my *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (2007). The premise of this book could be taken to be Phillip Johnson's assertion that 'Modernism is typically defined as the condition that begins when people realize God is truly dead, and we are therefore on our own.' It presents the wellsprings of modernism in the primordial human need for a new metaphysical centre in a radically decentred reality as well as for a new source of transcendental meaning in a godless universe, and in the impulse to erect a 'sacred canopy' of culture which not only aesthetically veils the infinity of time and space surrounding human existence to make existence feasible but also provides a totalising worldview within which to locate individual life narratives, thus imparting it with the illusion of cosmic significance. By eroding or destroying the canopy of culture, modernity creates a protracted spiritual crisis which provokes the proliferation of

countervailing impulses to restore a 'higher meaning' to historical time that are collectively termed by the book (ideal-typically) as 'modernism'.

Johnson's statement seems to make a perceptive point by associating modernism not just with art, but with a general 'human condition' consequent on what Nietzsche, the first great modernist philosopher, called 'the Death of God'. Yet in the context of this series his statement requires significant qualification. Modernism is *not* a general historical condition (any more than 'post-modernism' is), but a generalised revolt against even the *intuition* made possible by a secularising modernisation that we are spiritual orphans in a godless and ultimately meaningless universe. Its hallmark is the bid to find a new home, a new community, and a new source of transcendence.

Nor is modernism itself necessarily secular. On the contrary, both the wave of occultism, Theosophy, and the Catholic revival of the 1890s and the emergence of radicalised, Manichaeic forms of Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and even Buddhism in the 1990s demonstrate that modernist impulses need not take the form of secular utopianism, but may readily assume religious (some would say 'post-secular') forms. In any case, within the cultural force field of modernism even the most secular entities are sacralised to acquire an aura of numinous significance. Ironically, Johnson himself offers a fascinating case study in this fundamental aspect of the modernist rebellion against the empty skies of a disenchanted, anomic world. A retired Berkeley law professor, some of the books he published, such as *The Wedge of Truth*, made him one of the major protagonists of 'Intelligent Design',

a Christian(ised) version of creationism that offers a prophylactic against the allegedly nihilistic implications of Darwinist science.

Naturally no attempt has been made to impose 'reflexive metanarrative' developed in *Modernism and Fascism* on the various authors of this series. Each has been encouraged to tailor the term modernism to fit their own epistemological cloth, as long as they broadly agree in seeing it as the expression of a reaction against modernity not restricted to art and aesthetics, and driven by the aspiration to create a spiritually or physically 'healthier' modernity through a new cultural, political, and ultimately biological order. Naturally, the blueprint for the ideal society varies significantly according to each diagnosis of what makes actually existing modernity untenable, 'decadent' or doomed to self-destruction.

The ultimate aim of the series is to help bring about a paradigm shift in the way 'modernism' is used, and hence stimulate fertile new areas of research and teaching with an approach which enables methodological empathy and causal analysis to be applied even to events and processes ignored by or resistant to the explanatory powers of conventional historiography. I am delighted that Richard Shorten, a major expert on the evolution of the term totalitarianism, has contributed a volume to this series which presents it in a refreshingly unfamiliar context.

Roger Griffin
Oxford, UK

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