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book review of

Avant-Garde Fascism: The Mobilisation of Myth, Art, and Culture in France, 1909–1939 by Mark Antliff

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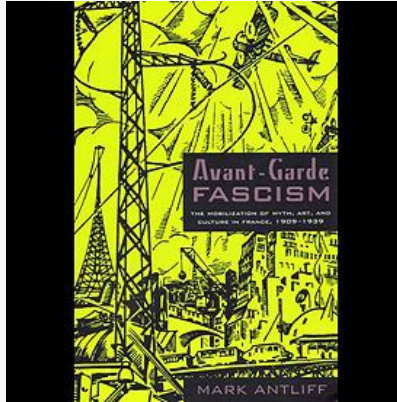
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Avant-Garde Fascism: The Mobilisation of Myth, Art, and Culture in France, 1909 – 1939. Mark Antliff Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007. 376 pp.; 67 b/w illustrations; bibliography; index. \$84.95 (cloth); \$23.95 (paperback) ISBN 978-0-8223-4034-8

In the aftermath of World War II, it was often difficult to appreciate the political complexity of modernism. Although many modernist or avant-garde artists sympathised with, or actively promoted fascism, the work of such artists was presented during the 1950s in Europe and America as defending humanist ideals of freedom against the powers of political oppression. This picture of modernist art as inherently radical, liberal or politically progressive was seriously questioned during the era of postmodernism, and has been further challenged in the last twenty years by art historians who have undermined the dichotomy between modernism and fascism. Mark Antliff's book *Avant-Garde Fascism* belongs to a series of recent publications arguing that European modernist art and extreme right wing movements such as fascism, far from being diametrically opposed, were in fact closely interrelated.

Antliff has been working in this field for many years, beginning with his 1993 book, *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde*, followed by a co-edited, 1997 anthology *Fascist Visions: Art and Ideology in France and Italy*, both publications explored the connection between avant-garde culture and fascist politics. Both were important contributions to a growing field of study showing the historical connections between modernist practice and right-wing thought, including Andrew Hewitt's *Fascist Modernism* (1993) and Romy Golan's *Modernity and Nostalgia* (1995). Since Antliff's anthology first appeared, several new book-length studies on the topic have been published, most notably Emily Braun's *Mario Sironi* (2000), a monographic study of the modernist Italian fascist artist. What Antliff's most recent book adds to the field is an examination of Georges Sorel (1847–1922), the French intellectual widely credited with giving birth to the ideas behind European fascism, and his influence upon right-wing writers and thinkers in France between 1909 and 1939. The focus of the study is writing about aesthetics and art works in several right-wing French journals published during this period. Antliff's primary thesis is that modernist and avant-garde theories of art and creativity were central to French fascist discourse, and in particular to its mythologization of violence.

As Antliff relates, Sorel drew upon Marxism, syndicalism, and Henri Bergson's critique of rationalism to develop a political theory in which the general strike would become a "myth" leading to a class war, and an overthrow of parliamentary democracy. In this Sorel and the fascists he influenced shared something with the Bolsheviks, with the difference that the class war they envisaged would lead not to the abolishment of private property and the dictatorship of the proletariat, but rather to a system in which workers and capitalists perceived their common role as producers who collaborate to bring about a new, collective society. The chief target of Sorelian discourse, and of the fascist ideas that he inspired, was a parliamentary system perceived as decadent, corrupt and incapable of inspiring the kind of heroism that Sorel and his followers saw as essential to a healthy, thriving society. As Antliff stresses, Sorel emphasized both violence and its representation. Because of the importance placed not just on actual violence, but also on its transformation into myth, art and aesthetics took central place in this theory, which meant that artists, writers, composers and other artistic laborers were given a central place in his vision of how a new society would emerge. It is this emphasis on myth and representation in Sorelian theory, and its aestheticization of violence that justifies the emphasis placed in Antliff's study of Sorel and his followers on discussions of art.

The book begins with a study of how modernism and fascism are related. In chapter 1, Antliff outlines five areas where modernism and fascism can be shown to share concerns: ideas of cultural regeneration, avant-garde techniques of montage, notions of secular religion, primitivism, and anti-capitalist ideas of time and space. Following the work of historian Roger Griffin, Antliff argues that hyper-nationalist forms of cultural re-birth were an essential component of both fascism and certain concepts of modernism. As evidence, he cites the example of the Italian artist Mario Sironi, who used modernist painting techniques to propagandize the link between the dynamic present of fascism and the ancient past. Again citing an Italian example, Antliff shows how visual effects of montage were used in propaganda displays during the fascist period to promote Mussolini's government, thus contesting the often-presumed association between avant-garde techniques and left wing politics. The idea of secular religion sees Antliff turn once more to fascist Italy, and he cites the 1932 design of the Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution as instantiating a secular liturgy of fascism. Primitivism links fascism and modernism in that the interest in an earlier, simpler time is shared by both movements, and made into an explicit theme in the work of several avant-garde artists; and anti-rationalist critiques of capitalist ideas of abstract time and space, such as an aggressive valorization of the regional and "concepts of sacred, cyclical or revolutionary time" are also common to both movements (54).

Antliff's survey of recent developments in the field is an extremely useful and incisive summary of the commonalities between modernism and fascism. I would question, however, identifying the 1930s work of the Italian artist Ardengo Soffici or the German painter Ferdinand Staeger with modernism except in the most qualified way, in that their conventionally-painted celebrations of the rural peasantry and the military laborer are a far cry from avant-garde aesthetics in a stylistic sense. Similarly, the discussion of the pro-Nazi, German expressionist painter, Emil Nolde, is important as a case study of the connection in one artist's case between modernist primitivism and fascism. Nolde failed, however, to gain approval from prominent right-wing critics for his borrowings from Oceanic art, as the primitivism favored by fascists did not celebrate difference in the way proposed by modernists, such as Pablo Picasso. These exceptions do not undermine Antliff's general point

that "many of the paradigms that spawned the development of modernist aesthetics were also integral to the emergence of fascism" (21).

The subsequent four chapters focus on the thinking of four French authors, Georges Sorel, Georges Valois, Philippe Lamour and Thierry Maulnier, whose ideas, it is claimed, illustrate this nexus between modernism and fascism, and, in particular, demonstrate how the aestheticization of violence was a central part of this unlikely pairing. What the chapters have in common is a detailed, fine-grained analysis of individual texts and broader theories by each individual author, and the milieu in which they worked. The findings reached in each chapter are the result of painstaking research and discussion of important background information that puts the authors' assertions into the broader context in which the ideas were formed. Antliff has succeeded in demonstrating that ideas of creativity and art common to several modernist or avant-garde critics and artists were closely aligned, in the work of the French writers he studies, with extreme right wing and fascist beliefs. His scholarship is impressive and this book makes an extremely important contribution to the literature in this area. My main criticism is that many examples of the art that Antliff's right-wing authors cite do not fit the description of avant-garde or modernist art. Furthermore, for a book that puts art at the center of its argument, there is little analysis of art objects. This is not surprising perhaps for a book whose subtitle reads "The Mobilization of Myth, Art, and Culture in France, 1909–1939": the focus is not so much art itself, but on how art was utilized. However, the strong claim that it was modernist and avant-garde aesthetics specifically that were central to French fascist thought is not always supported by the accounts given of the art works that Antliff's subjects chose to promote.

In chapter 2, Antliff examines Sorel's contribution to the journal *L'Indépendance*, where he promoted ideas of labor militancy, a return to artisanal traditions, the heroism of ancient Greek warriors, and Christian belief in an effort to generate a mythic notion of creativity that would lead workers to an anti-capitalist and anti-democratic social revolution. The countertype to this idea of creativity was the Jew who, in Sorel's anti-Semitic theory, was the anti-artist. One of the art works illustrating Sorel's ideas in this chapter is *The Christ of the Blood*, a 1911 crucifixion by the Spanish artist, Ignazio Zuloaga y Zabaleta, a work not written about by Sorel, but presumed similar to a lost painting by the same artist that he did discuss. Antliff refers briefly to Sorel's remarks on the latter painting's compositional structure, and its adherence to past masters, including Michelangelo and El Greco. Although the work in question, with its powerful sense of three dimensionality and symmetrical arrangement of form, could be usefully compared to the work of those masters, it is not clear how it relates to the aesthetics of modernism and the historical avant-garde, which raises the questions of how modernist paradigms are at play here. A more detailed discussion of this and other images in the chapter could have demonstrated how actual objects, as well as concepts of art, were "mobilized" by Sorel, and how images were distorted when they were put to use in this fashion.

In chapter 4, Antliff discusses the writings of Philippe Lamour, whose cult of youth transformed Sorelian discourse about class war into an epic conflict between generations. Italian fascism had boasted of the youthfulness of its major political figures, in particular Mussolini, a feature that was promoted as evidence of the movement's dynamic, revolutionary nature. Similarly, as Antliff argues, in Lamour's thinking, the "theme of rejuvenation through heroic violence was transformed into a Sorelian version of generational revolt" (171). One of

the means by which Lamour sought to propagate such ideas was through promoting an avant-garde machine aesthetic. For example, he claimed that the industrial appearance of the Eiffel Tower was a factor that related it to the anti-individualist, collectivist ethos of a post-democratic society that would be brought into being through new technology. Antliff also discusses Lamour's ideas of montage in film and photography, and his interest in the work of the German photographer Germaine Krull, whose modernist images adorned the pages of Lamour's journal *Grand'Route*. It is fascinating to see how the disorienting, unconventional photographs by Krull, which are reminiscent of the work of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Aleksander Rodchenko, could illustrate a pro-fascist journal. However, it is unclear why Antliff describes these images as being related to montage, as they use other modernist devices such as unusual point of view, lack of focus and double exposure that are not, strictly speaking, montage effects, the latter of which involves the putting together of two or more disparate images as in the work of the Dada artists Hannah Höch or John Heartfield.

Chapter 5 examines the thought of Thierry Maulnier and deals with the latter's idea, drawn from Sorel and other contemporary sources, of "classical violence." The writers for Maulnier's journal *Combat*, who railed against traditional academicism and abstraction as well as socialist realism as decadent types of conformist art, argued for a return to classical tradition which would retain both a sense of respect for order as well as a strong element of Dionysian energy, a vital, instinctual power related to the thinking of Bergson and Friedrich Nietzsche. In the pages of *Combat*, one could read accounts of the paintings of Paul Cézanne, the sculpture of Charles Despiau and Aristide Maillol, as well as the architecture of Charles Perret, art works and buildings in which Maulnier and his colleagues saw the ideal fusion of revolutionary and classical impulses central to their definition of "ethical violence." With Cézanne, there is a well-established tradition of speaking about his work as a fusion of order and disorder, even if over the decades the emphasis in writing about the artist has swung alternately between the two poles. When it comes to Despiau and Maillol, however, it is difficult to appreciate from Antliff's account precisely how they satisfy the definition of avant-garde art or supported the ideal of classical violence set out by Maulnier. Although Antliff argues that Maillol's *The Three Nymphs* (1930–1938) embodies the fusion of sensuous particularity and Apollonian form by virtue of the artist's generalization of his peasant models into classical templates, the missing piece in this argument is precisely how the viewer (or the critic writing for *Combat*, for that matter) might have made that connection at a visual level. What aspects of the work were particularly reminiscent of the particularity of the regional peasant? And how might this have specifically been related to Dionysian energy? Without a more thoroughgoing analysis of the art objects that are held to embody these ideas, it is difficult to say.

That said, Antliff clearly demonstrates that he is sensitive to the subtle complexities of the readings and misreadings of literature and art by the writers he studies. For example, he insists in chapter 3 that the fascists were extremely selective in their reading of Le Corbusier; even though his architectural and town planning ideas were promoted by Georges Valois, the French architect actually held rather different ideas about social classes and their urban organization than Valois suggested. Equally, Antliff points out that Phillipe Lamour was enthusiastic about certain aspects of Germaine Krull's photography, but not others, such as her poignant studies of French homeless people which were far removed from the fascist writer's fervent celebration of the virtues of industrial labor. It is precisely this subtlety of concrete, historical analysis, alongside the admirably detailed and finely textured account of the use of

aesthetic ideas in French fascist thought, that makes this book such an important study in spite of its sometimes unfocused attention to the specifically visual dimension of art objects.

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