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# Introduction

## *Aufbruch*

‘Then you know your destination’, he asked. ‘Yes’, I said ‘I have already said so, “Away-From-Here” that is my destination.’ ‘You have no provisions with you’, he said. ‘I don’t need any’, I said. ‘The journey is so long that I will die of hunger if I do not get something along the way. It is, fortunately, a truly immense journey.’

Franz Kafka, *Der Aufbruch* [A New Beginning] (1922)<sup>1</sup>

The sense of an ending [...] has not diminished, and is as endemic to what we call modernism as apocalyptic utopianism is to political revolution.

Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (1966)<sup>2</sup>

Tomorrow has become today: the feeling that the world is ending has given way to the sense of a new beginning. The ultimate goal now stands out unmistakably within the field of vision now opening up before us, and all faith in miracles is now harnessed to the active transformation of the present.

Julius Petersen, *The Longing for the Third Reich* (1934)<sup>3</sup>

## NEW HORIZONS

This book is a sustained attempt to explore the profound kinship that exists between modernism and fascism. These two concepts are still widely assumed to be antithetical and oxymoronic when combined in the phrase ‘fascist modernism’, especially within the context of the regimes led by Mussolini and Hitler. Nevertheless, the second part of the book will present them as outstanding examples of the ‘modernist state’. The Leitmotif of the book is that a key element in the genesis, psychology, ideology, policies, and praxis of fascism was played by the ‘sense of a beginning’, the mood of standing on the threshold of a new world. It is a mood of heady expectancy which is the dialectical twin of the obsession with the closing of an era explored by the

English literary historian Frank Kermode in his seminal text on modernism, *The Sense of an Ending*, four decades ago. Whereas his focus was the significance of ‘apocalyptic time’ as a central topos of the modernist imagination, the theme of this book is the way the belief that transcendence can be achieved through cultural, social, and political transformation leaves its stamp on the ideology, policies, and practice of Fascism and Nazism.

The germ of the undertaking can be found in a passage written some 15 years ago in *The Nature of Fascism*, my bid to offer historians and political scientists a more useful definition than those currently available for investigating such issues as the relationship of Italian Fascism to Franco’s Spain, Hitler’s Germany, the Romanian Iron Guard, or the prospects of fascism’s post-war revival in old or new forms. In one section I spelled out the implications of seeing in the rebirth myth (the myth of ‘palingenesis’) not just the key definitional component of fascism, but the element that in the extreme conditions of inter-war Europe could endow some variants of nationalism and racism with extraordinary affective and destructive power. It contains the assertion that, far from being intrinsically anti-modern, fascism only rejects ‘the allegedly degenerative elements of the modern age’, and that its ‘thrust towards a *new* type of society’ means that ‘it represents an *alternative modernism* rather than a rejection of it’.<sup>4</sup>

In order to unpack this cryptic statement my original plan for a slim volume on fascist culture surveying ‘successful’ and abortive movements, both inter-war and post-war (such as Third Positionism and the European New Right), proved utopian. Instead, it has been necessary to devote considerable attention to re-conceptualizing ‘modernism’ (Part One), and to limit my detailed application of the resulting ideal type to the regimes of Mussolini and Hitler (Part Two), chosen both because of profound differences in their conception of the new national culture, and because they alone offer case studies not only in fascism’s utopian aspirations as a revolutionary project but its praxis as a regime. The aim is to cast fresh light not just on fascism, but on the nature of modernity and modernism as well, thereby providing the basis for future work, particularly by other specialists whose work impinges on some of the many aspects of this vast topic which have been necessarily omitted or neglected here.

Incongruously enough, a ‘kitsch’ image flitted through my mind on the day when after months of planning, grant applications, and draft proposals I finally embarked on ‘realizing’ this venture through the magic lantern of the computer screen. It was that of Leonardo Di Caprio and Kate Winslet perched precariously on the prow of the *Titanic*. They stand atop a structure as tall as a skyscraper, with a powerful breeze ruffling their hair, both enraptured by the dizzy sensation of ploughing a thin white line through the grey-blue vastness of the Atlantic. We are encouraged to feel that with every fibre of their being

they feel they are living at the cutting edge of time and space, surrendering themselves to the part metaphysical, part erotic sensation of imbibing with each gulp of air a foretaste of unlimited freedom and possibility, of becoming the master and mistress of their communal destiny.

The lovers-to-be are standing on the threshold of an unimaginable New Time, racing headlong towards the New World, an America more utopian myth than geographical reality. The poignancy of the scene, underscored by the tear-jerking Irish love-song that accompanied the closing credits, derives from the tragic-ironic gap between the exhilarating but drastically foreshortened 'field-of-vision' available to the young pair, and the spectator's knowledge that a horrendous fate awaits them just over the horizon. Yet there are other ways of interpreting this event.

When the actual ship went down on the 15 April 1912 it was a knee-jerk response for some evangelical Christians to interpret the disaster as a sign of the hubris of modern man, and some contemporary artists instinctively endowed it with more free-floating apocalyptic significance. Even a century on it is still tempting to see the sinking as presaging the imminent fate of Western civilization as a whole as it speeds on its maiden voyage headlong into two decades of catastrophic wars, dictatorships, and mass killing which so cruelly exposed the myth of unlimited progress on which liberal-capitalist-imperialist civilization was being built in the *belle époque*.<sup>5</sup> Doubtless, still more cosmic layers of symbolism contribute to the perennial fascination emanating from the ocean liner's fate. In the present context, though, the fact that my psyche plucked this scene from a film which so unashamedly transmutes a historical disaster into Hollywood melodrama suggests two alternative readings, both of which have an immediate bearing on the following 12 chapters.

One might be the subliminal acknowledgement that setting out to rethink the relationship between modernism and fascism is a 'high risk venture', not least because it involves constructing what once was a standard product of academic research but which is now regarded with considerable suspicion, namely a 'master narrative' of a vast and an intrinsically multivalent topic. I will return to this aspect of the book shortly. More importantly, the ecstatic moment on the prow of the *Titanic* can be seen as a *tableau vivant* for a particular way that human beings can experience time 'mythically' as pregnant with exhilarating potential for renewal and purification. Apart from my own sense of 'setting sail' which informed the composition of this preface, an important subtext of this study is the catastrophic impact on modern history that such an experience of time can have once translated from the realm of personal relationships and poetry into political and social aspirations to build a new society at all costs.

It is this mood that helped convince the revolutionaries of the French National Assembly they were not just changing the political and social regime in France,

but regenerating history, creating a new type of ‘man’, and starting time anew.<sup>6</sup> It is the state of mind that seduced Friedrich Nietzsche into believing his books were intellectual ‘dynamite’, blowing a hole in the oppressive rock walls trapping his contemporaries in the existing phase of cultural evolution, and thus opening up a portal into an entirely new kind of human history based on a ‘transvaluation of all values’.<sup>7</sup> It is a moment of higher consciousness captured in the Futurist Manifesto, when Filippo Marinetti, a decade before becoming a member of the first *Fascio*, claimed to be ‘standing on the last promontory of the centuries’ and announced the death of ‘Time and Space’. Indeed, one of the poetic symbols which he offers for the new consciousness was ‘adventurous steamers that sniff the horizon’.<sup>8</sup>

It will be argued in this book that – at least for its most committed, idealistic activists – fascism in the inter-war period was the vehicle for realizing the heady sense, not of impotently watching history unfold, but of actually ‘making history’ before a new horizon and a new sky. It meant breaking out of the ensnarement of words and thoughts into deeds, and using the power of human creativity not to produce art for its own sake, but to create a new culture in a total act of creation, of *poesis*. Fascism for its most ardent believers promised to be literally epoch-making.

In the event, the two movements that managed to place themselves at the helm of political power catastrophically failed to achieve the permanent transformation of society they craved, let alone bring about a sea-change in History itself. Mussolini’s Third Rome lasted only two decades compared with the 500 years of the Roman Empire, while the Reich that Hitler intended to last for a whole millennium lay in ruins after a mere 12 years. The Axis they formed led directly or indirectly to the deaths of millions, eventually leaving their nations in the rubble of broken promises and shattered dreams. Yet their ambitions, failures, and crimes against humanity remain unintelligible if due weight is not given to the role played in mobilizing their troops, both military and civilian, by consciously inducing a revolutionary experience of standing on the edge of history and proactively changing its course, freed from the constraints of ‘normal’ time and ‘conventional’ morality.

## THE QUEST FOR A ‘BIGGER PICTURE’

As the allusions to Nietzsche and Marinetti imply, the premise of this enquiry is that the ‘visions of the world’ (*Weltanschauung*, or *visione del mondo*) which conditioned the policies of the two very different fascist dictatorships established in inter-war Europe were both deeply bound up with intellectual and artistic modernism, but in ways that defy simplistic equations or reductionist formulae. Despite over half a century of sustained academic effort and

countless publications which have a direct bearing on this subject, a number of basic issues about how the states created by Mussolini and Hitler ‘fit into’ modernity are still far from being resolved to the satisfaction of most experts working in this area.

This book aims to provide a new analytical framework within which to resolve them more satisfactorily. Yet ironically, one of the factors threatening the credibility of this attempt to gain a synoptic grasp of the subject is that the type of ‘big picture’ this requires has generally become taboo in academic circles, and in some quarters is associated with the very ‘totalitarianism’ that fascisms embodied in their drive to remake society and history in their image.<sup>9</sup> However dubious such an association, the paradox remains that the staggering proliferation since 1945 of scholarship, secondary sources, and theoretical perspectives on every conceivable aspect of social reality, past and present in all branches of the humanities has not culminated in comprehensive explanations. Instead, a mood of growing self-consciousness has come to prevail within each discipline of the impossibility of achieving definitive interpretations. This, combined with the ‘cultural turn’ triggered by postmodernism and poststructuralism, has resulted in the delegitimization of all accounts of reality offered by earlier generations of experts which imply reductionism, essentialism, or ‘totalizing narratives’. As a result even works which display profound scholarship in their drive for an overview of a vast topic, such as Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (first published in 1951) or Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1945), now seem to belong to a different era.

Against this background the self-appointed mission to rethink the socio-psychological dynamics and scope of ‘modernism’, an extensively contested term, and then explore the relevance of its redefinition to two regimes whose praxis is assumed – though even this is a contentious assumption in the case of the Third Reich – to embody the world-view of ‘fascism’, another highly problematic term, is to go against the grain of the prevalent academic *Zeitgeist*. If not reckless, it is certainly what is known in German as ‘unzeitgemäß’ – ‘untimely’, or ‘unmodern’ – the term used by Nietzsche to characterize a series of essays which he knew were out of tune with the spirit of his age.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, let it be stated at the outset that this work, though undoubtedly speculative in its drive to syncretize different areas of the humanities into an overarching interpretative framework, has none of the totalizing pretensions of a ‘metanarrative’. The overarching interpretation it offers draws attention to its own constructedness, and the contested nature of its theoretical foundations, like a modernist building that deliberately exposes its lifts, supportive structures, and the tubing that supplies its power and plumbing. It is based on the premise that not only is there room in the human sciences for ‘lumpers’ as well as

‘splitters’,<sup>11</sup> but that they are indispensable to all fields of specialist research. It is in this spirit that the pioneer of reconstructing daily life under the Third Reich, Detlef Peukert, wrote: ‘Everyday experience never tallies exactly with large analytical or systematic hypotheses. At the same time, if experience is to be understood at all, *it cannot do without synoptic interpretation either.*’<sup>12</sup> Indeed, it seems to me self-evident that the constant dialectic between attempts to synthesize knowledge ‘nomothetically’ into big pictures – though not one big picture – identifying broad patterns in phenomena, and research that focuses on understanding particular aspects of reality ‘idiographically’ guarantees progress towards greater knowledge and understanding.

## FASCISM AS THE OFFSPRING OF MODERNISM

It is thus in an anti-totalizing, anti-essentialist mode of academic narration that this book explores its ‘synoptic interpretation’ of the intimate but complex relationship between modernism and the regimes of Mussolini and Hitler. It will be not be framed as a ‘hypothesis’, which implies criteria of testability and falsification, for as Karl Popper points out ‘historical approaches’ or ‘points of view’ *cannot be* tested. He adds soberingly that ‘they cannot be refuted, and apparent confirmations are of no value, even if they are as numerous as the stars in the sky’. For the ‘thesis’ that informs this book we will adopt the term that he proposes for ‘a selective point of view or focus of historical interest, if it cannot be formulated as a testable hypothesis’: namely ‘a *historical interpretation*’.<sup>13</sup>

At the core of our synoptic historical interpretation lies the proposition that, not only were Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany both concrete manifestations of a generic political ideology and praxis that has come to be termed ‘fascism’, but that fascism itself can be seen as a political variant of modernism. This peculiar genus of revolutionary project for the transformation of society, it will be argued, could only emerge in the first decades of the twentieth century in a society permeated with modernist metanarratives of cultural renewal which shaped a legion of activities, initiatives, and movements ‘on the ground’. In its varied permutations fascism took it upon itself not just to change the state system, but to purge civilization of decadence, and foster the emergence of a new breed of human beings which it defined in terms not of universal categories but essentially mythic national and racial ones. Its activists set about their task in the iconoclastic spirit of ‘creative destruction’ legitimized not by divine will, reason, the laws of nature, or by socio-economic theory, but by the belief that history itself was at a turning point and could be launched on a new course through human intervention that would redeem the nation and rescue the West from imminent collapse.

Whereas the night-time slumber of reason produces only imaginary monsters, the extreme actions that fascism's 'dreamers of the day' were prepared to take in order to realize their fantasies of a new epoch found expression in edifices of stone, technological inventions of steel, and the flesh and minds of would-be 'new men' ready to exact the 'sacrifice' – especially the sacrifice of the 'other' – demanded by the process of regeneration. In this context the poem by one artist exposed to the storm of modernity, William Butler Yeats, acquires a clairvoyant quality. Composed when he felt simultaneously drawn to and repelled by the apocalyptic yearnings for a 'new dawn' that spread throughout European society in the aftermath of the First World War, one section in particular adumbrates the horrors of the Second. Having famously evoked the anarchy of contemporary history where 'things fall apart' and 'the centre cannot hold' he gives vent both to his blend of hope and fear so characteristic of the modernist *imaginaire*:

Surely some revelation is at hand;  
 Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
 The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
 When a vast image out of the Spiritus Mundi  
 Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert  
 A shape with lion body and the head of a man,  
 A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
 Is moving its slow thighs, while all around it  
 Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.  
 The darkness drops again; but now I know  
 That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
 Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
 And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
 Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?<sup>14</sup>

Such lines have a bearing on an important distinction drawn by Frank Kermode in *The Sense of an Ending*. He stresses the difference between the poetic *fictions* used by artists to illuminate or articulate elusive aspects of contemporary reality, and politicized *myths*, which become incorporated into the ideological rationale for attempts to engineer radical transformations of that reality. To illustrate this distinction he cites Yeats, the bulk of whose visionary poetry is 'safely' confined to the realm of apocalyptic fiction, but who, when the political animal in him overpowered the artist, slipped over the invisible border into the realm of political, or rather metapolitical myth. This helps explain why the pioneer of the Celtic Revival also became 'enthusiastic for Italian fascism, and supported the Irish fascist movement' – the Blue Shirts.

It might be added as evidence of his openness to *scientized* fictions as well as politicized myths that in 1937 he joined the British Eugenics Society, a fact which assumes considerable significance in the light of the conception of modernism explored in this book.

Kermode calls Yeats a prime example ‘of that correlation between early modernist literature and authoritarianism which is *more often noticed than explained*: totalitarian theories of form matched or reflected by totalitarian politics’.<sup>15</sup> Forty years on, the correlation may have been noticed more widely academically, but both explanations and, more importantly, the synoptic interpretive frameworks needed to make sense of them, are still thin on the ground. It is the purpose of this book to help rectify this situation. It seeks to clarify the linkage between poetic and political modernism to which Kermode alluded in 1965, but which as a Professor of English he did not consider part of his brief to explore in any great depth.

In contrast, my own expedition into the terrain of the ‘modern apocalypse’ deliberately sets out to excavate the relationship that exists at an ideological and psychological level between two areas of reality that have for so long been dealt with by separate departments of the humanities. On the one hand, the role played in literary and cultural modernism by ‘apocalyptic’ fictions concerning the decadence of the contemporary world, its sense of permanent transition and crisis, and its need for renovation. On the other, the correlatives of such fictions in the ideologies of modern social and political movements bent on healing society from its alleged corruption and decadence.

These myths arguably play a central role in any form of political ideology, left or right,<sup>16</sup> which posits the radical socio-political renewal from a state of decadence, not just as a rhetorical device, but in a genuinely revolutionary spirit geared to permanent change and the improvement of society. However, this book focuses exclusively on the projects of national, social, racial or cultural cleansing and rebirth subsumed under the term ‘fascism’ and given concrete expression in the regimes of Mussolini and Hitler. They were myths that generated policies and actions designed to bring about collective redemption, a new national community, a new society, a new man. Their goal was rebirth, a ‘palingenesis’ brought about not through suprahuman agency, but engineered through the power of the modern state.<sup>17</sup>

If it can be brought to a convincing conclusion – though not, of course, closure – *Modernism and Fascism* should have the effect of complementing Kermode’s pioneering lecture series on ‘the sense of an ending’ in modern visionary literature. It offers an account of the complex links which this literary mood had to the powerful sense of inaugurating a *new epoch* expressed in the visionary schemes spawned by fascism in the first half of the twentieth century. This politicized, historicized ‘sense of a beginning’ will in turn be

implicitly linked with endings of a very different type than the one Kermode was concerned with. These are the agonizingly unfictional and unmythical endings, the shattering of hopes, lives, and bodies that particularly in the twentieth century some currents of social and political modernism – once implemented as the basis of state policy – have inflicted with such extraordinary physical and psychological ruthlessness on entire categories of human life in the pursuit of the regeneration of history and the inauguration of a new era.

## AUFBRUCH

It should by now be clear that this project is exploratory or 'heuristic' in the fullest sense of the term. It is posited on the need for regular attempts to break out of established conceptual frameworks so as to discover fresh horizons within which to 'revisit' even the most extensively scrutinized and obsessively documented episodes in modern history. It is an adventurous mood associated in German with the term '*Aufbruch*' with its connotations of literally 'breaking up', 'breaking out', and 'breaking open', a word which can refer both to the ending of a meeting when it 'breaks up', and 'irruption' or breaking *into* a new phase or situation, and hence a 'new departure'. It is the term used by Kafka as the title of the unpublished short story cited in the epigraph to this Introduction.

At the same time *Aufbruch* can also refer to the state of expectancy induced by the intuitive certainty that an entire phase of history is giving way to a new one. This meaning will prove to be crucial to our twin investigations of modernism and fascism. The premise of this book is that the two fascist regimes of inter-war Europe cannot be understood without taking into account the wide-spread conviction that the upheavals of contemporary history were the death throes of the modern world under the aegis of Enlightenment reason and liberal capitalism. But this was no 'cultural despair'. In the immediate aftermath of the First World War not just the avant-garde, but millions of 'ordinary people' felt they were witnessing the birth pangs of a new world under an ideological and political regime whose nature was yet to be decided. What the cultural historian Siegfried Kracauer claimed about the 'mood' of Germany in the early years of the Weimar Republic has a profound resonance throughout the Europeanized world wherever the experience of breakdown and need for transformation was particularly acute. As he says himself, it was a mood that

can best be defined by the word *Aufbruch*. In the pregnant sense in which it was used at the time, the term meant departure from the shattered world of yesterday towards a tomorrow built on the grounds of revolutionary conceptions. [...] People suddenly

grasped the significance of *avant-garde* paintings and mirrored themselves in visionary dramas announcing to a suicidal mankind the gospel of a new age of brotherhood. [...] They believed in international socialism, pacifism, collectivism, aristocratic leadership, religious community, life, or national resurrection, and frequently presented a confused mixture of these variegated ideals as a brand-new creed.<sup>18</sup>

A major premise of this book is that the mood of *Aufbruch* described here is to be seen as a defining component of a particular form of modernism, of a sense of breaking through to new beginnings no longer experienced by cultural elites or restricted to the realm of art and thought. Part One, 'The Sense of a Beginning in Modernism', will establish that even before the First World War imparted it with powerful populist and revolutionary impetus, the drive towards a new vision and a new era was expressing itself with increasing intensity throughout European society, not just in the sphere of avant-garde aesthetics, but in the realms of intellectual and cultural speculation about finding a new foundation for meaning or reality, social movements, popular initiatives to bring about a renewed sense of rootedness, community, and health, as well as revolutionary politics of both the left and right. Our analysis will seek to establish the premodern and 'primordial' ideological and sociological forces precipitating extremely heterogeneous modernist longings for *Aufbruch*, and to show how they were unleashed by a perceived crisis not just in contemporary society, but in the experience of history and time itself. On the basis of this characterization of modernism as a cultural, social, and political force born of a Western modernity in profound subjective and (after 1914) objective structural crisis, Part Two, 'Fascism's Modernist State', will consider the aspects of the Fascist and Nazi regimes illuminated by the account of modernism offered in Part One.

It is a journey which means criss-crossing traditional frontiers between disciplines, sometimes juxtaposing or syncretizing discrete areas of specialist knowledge and academic theory. Towards the end of the book many aspects of the relationship of Fascism and Nazism to modernity, still widely perceived as a flight from or assault on the modern world, should seem disturbingly 'natural' expressions of Western modernity at a certain point in its evolution. It will also be more intelligible why some of the most 'barbaric' acts of modern history were carried out by activists who felt they were at the cutting edge of history, pioneers of a new age driven on not by nihilism or cruelty, but by visionary idealism, a brand-new creed of redemption, purification, and renewal.

The process of elaborating the conceptual framework needed to explore fascism's modernism has demanded an entire part to itself. Though hopefully of intrinsic interest as a contribution to the conceptualization of modernism and modernity, its six chapters are primarily conceived as an elaborate analytical

framework with which to explore the peculiar permutations of modernity embodied in the regimes led by Mussolini and Hitler in Part Two. The litmus test of the book's value will be how far the policies and acts of these regimes in various spheres of society become more intelligible, more historically explicable as the argument unfolds without 'normalizing' them morally, let alone rationalizing them or diminishing the crimes against humanity they committed in pursuit of their dreams.

Given these goals, the focus of this Introduction should thus now move decisively away from the mood of *Aufbruch* bound up with the hazardous nature of the whole undertaking in an academic context, and shift to the sense of a new beginning cultivated by fascism itself in both its 'movement' and 'regime' aspect. In cinematic terms images from the Hollywood blockbuster evoking the Romantic, illusory 'new beginning' felt so passionately by the star-crossed pair on the prow of the *Titanic* could now dissolve into fascist ones. The sequence could start with the closing scene in Giovacchino Forzano's *Camicia Nera* [Black Shirt] (1933) which shows Mussolini inaugurating the



*Figure 1* The opening frame of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* has been seen as a subliminal evocation of the pagan sky-god Wotan descending to earth. But it can also be seen as the opening of a new historical era for Germany under Nazism.

Produced by Leni Riefenstahl Studio-Film, Berlin, 1935, Distribution UFA-Filmverleih.

reclamation ('bonifica') of the Pontine Marshes where a new city will soon arise, a symbol of the modernizing and modernist plans for the *bonifica* of the whole of Italy. This could fade to the moment in Alessandro Blasetti's *Vecchia Guardia* [The Old Guard] (1935) where Blackshirts set off for the March on Rome, the first steps to a New Italy, which in turn could merge into the closing moments of *Hitlerjunge Quex* when serried ranks of banner-carrying Hitler Youth march heroically into the new Germany in which the ultimate sacrifice of one of their comrades in the war against Bolshevism will be redeemed.

The closing shot could be the opening frames of *Triumph of the Will* (see Figure 1) with their famous images of Hitler descending from the clouds like a latter-day sky-God to land at Nuremberg where he will preside over the 1934 Party Congress. It follows these portentous words:

On September 5, 1934, 20 years after the outbreak of the World War, 16 years after the beginning of our suffering, 19 months after the beginning of Germany's rebirth, Adolf Hitler flew again to Nuremberg to muster the columns of his faithful followers.

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