



Monica Cioli, Maurizio Ricciardi, Pierangelo Schiera (eds.)

TRACES OF MODERNISM

*Art and Politics from the
First World War to Totalitarianism*

campus

Monica Cioli, Maurizio Ricciardi, Pierangelo
Schiera (eds)

Traces of Modernism

Art and Politics from the First World War to Totalitarianism

Campus Verlag
Frankfurt/New York

About the book

Traces of Modernism deals with central elements of the “crisis of consciousness” that marked the transition from the 19th to the 20th century and which became manifest in a dramatic way during the First World War and the revolutions that followed. The book examines the complex relationships and interconnections in the interwar period between new social and political visions (ideology of planning, the “New Man”, the total state) and the artistic-intellectual avant-garde, from Italian Futurism to Bauhaus to their Soviet adherents. At the center of the book is the machine, which serves as a metaphor of modernization and order, yet it also represents a connective link and thus became a key term of the new century.

Vita

Monica Cioli is an Associate Fellow at the German Historical Institute in Rome.

Maurizio Ricciardi is Professor at the University of Bologna.

Pierangelo Schiera is Professor Emeritus at the University of Trento.

Contents

Monica Cioli, Maurizio Ricciardi, Pierangelo Schiera: The Individual and the New Man. An Introduction

I. From Modernity to Internationalism

Pierangelo Schiera: The Great European Crisis between Modernity and Modernism

1. Civilization and/or Modernity
2. Modernism in Post-war Society
3. A “new man” in a New Society: towards Political Totalitarianism
4. Art and Technology in the Utopian/Dystopian Discourse

Sophie Goetzmann: French Artists at the Art Gallery “Der Sturm”. Herwarth Walden and German Nationalism during the 1910s

1. The French Contribution: Internationalist Provocation or National Interest?
2. Championing German Art: A Contradiction?

Andrea Meyer-Fraatz: Splav Meduze (The Raft of the Medusa) by Karpo Godina. Traces of the Avant-Garde More than Half a Century Later

1. The Historical Background of Avant-garde in East and Southeast Europe

2. The plot
3. The Film's Relationship to Historical Avant-garde
4. Three Historical Layers
5. The Film's Openness to Various Interpretations

Roberta Ferrari: Charade of Democracy. From the Crisis of Individual to a Modernist Civilization

1. Unrest and Integration
2. Reconstruction, Plan, and New Civilization
3. Democracy and the Modernist Civilization

II. Human Engineering

Éric Michaud: The Many Lives of the New Man, 1914-1945

1. The New Man on the Front Lines
2. New Man, Old Europe
3. New Men, New Bodies
4. Towards "a Being that Resembles Utopia"

Maurizio Ricciardi: The Discipline of Freedom. High Modernism and the Crisis of Liberalism

1. The "Man" without Sovereignty
2. A Psychological Engineering
3. Freedom as Control

Eckhart J. Gillen: From Utopian Designs for the New Order to the Ideology of Reconciliation and Stalinist Humanism

1. Technics Determine Everything
2. Return from the Cold

3. Party Cadre Determine Everything

Francescomaria Tedesco: Between Futurism and Anthropophagy. Transculturation and Postcolonialism

1. Transculturation and the Mirror Dance
2. Cannibals in Place de Clichy
3. Asymmetry

III. Machine and Order

Fabio Benzi: Machines, War, Mechanical Art, and the City. The Influence of Futurism on the French Avant-Gardes and their Aesthetics

1. Italian Futurism: an Avant-Garde of Machines and Rising Cities
2. The "Subject": Mechanical World and the City
3. The Futurist Intersection with Art Déco

Monica Cioli: At the Origins of Technopolitics. The European Avant-gardes before and after the First World War

1. Italian Futurism: The Triumph of Technology
2. After the War: The Machine Age
3. The Spiritual Dimension of the Machine
4. Epilogue

Anja Schloßberger-Oberhammer: Kazimir Malevich's Visit to the Staatliches Bauhaus (Dessau) in 1927. Reconstruction (of the Failure) of an East-West Modernist Encounter

1. Introduction: The state of leftist art and artists in the late 1920s
2. From Collaboration to Competition—the Smear Campaign against the GINKhUK
3. The Encounter of Malevich and the Bauhaus in the Light of Smear Campaigns in the East and in the West
4. Bauhaus Book No. 11—Malevich’s The World as Objectlessness
5. Conclusion: Eight years later. Daniil Kharm’s poem “On the Death of Kazimir Malevich”

Silvio Pons: When Socialism was Modern.
Gramsci, Stalin and the Post-war Era as “Passive Revolution”

1. Soviet Socialism and Interwar Modernity
2. Gramsci as an Historical Witness
3. Industrial Civilization and Hegemony
4. Socialism, Americanism, and “Passive Revolution”
5. Conclusions

Appendix

Authors

The Individual and the New Man.

An Introduction

*Monica Cioli, Maurizio Ricciardi,
Pierangelo Schiera*

The “traces” of modernism that we will discuss here are not limited to the artistic, literary, or philosophical movements that developed from the end of the 1800s to the Second World War. Although these too are significant and worthy of consideration, we believe that the category of modernism can also be used in a more general sense, above all to designate a new cultural climate that, while finding particular expression in the above-mentioned movements, also had a political sphere of reference, in both an ideological and an institutional sense.¹ Thus our discourse regards the uses that the concept of the “modern” had in the turbulent passage from modernity to modernization, which saw major changes in the West in the fields of economy, society and politics—during and after the age of transition that Reinhart Koselleck had called the *Sattelzeit*.² Everything was then translated into the full-blown superiority of the culture and civilization attained and produced by cultured and civilized states—which Karl Lamprecht and others, recording the “künstlerischer Charakter der Zeit”, called *Kulturstaaten*.³ This historical-universal vision would be counterbalanced by Oswald Spengler’s formidable proposal of the decline of the West.⁴

Our aim when talking of traces of modernism is not to propose a new and different periodization through which to

read the motives and the structures of political modernity or of art at the time. We are not talking about modernism as an “epoch” that was different to or succeeded the modern age (Neuzeit) or the modern. Likewise, Christof Dipper, using the category of the modern to describe the dominant models of order that started to take root in the second half of the 1800s, claims that he is not proposing a new name for what is otherwise called contemporary history. We argue that modernism doesn’t simply emerge through the ways in which consolidated traditions—usually described as pre-modern—are called into question, but also as a constant redefinition of modern tradition. The term “modernism” encompasses a wide range of things that are all closely connected to the semantics of the term “crisis”.⁵ The traces of modernism show the intensification and modification of processes that were already present in the classic age of modernity, but which are now exposed to the persistent rhythm of modernization. We aren’t aiming to present a complete picture of these processes, but rather to identify some important traces of our present within them. First, the traces that we are trying to show are not limited to the European experience and are not confined within national borders but express a definitive connection between Europe and the United States on the one hand and Europe and Russia on the other. Unlike the modern they are not therefore the expression of a “European self-observation”,⁶ but rather the increasingly evident signs of a destructuring of the European framework. Some of these traces were already present at the beginning of the modern age, therefore just after the epochal shift between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that had redefined the political, institutional, and cultural order of Europe. The affirmation of the individual, but also the social necessity of disciplining individuals, was a process that coincided with the birth of modernity. The period we cover in this book

saw an acceleration of these processes of individualization and at the same time their more or less radical critique, to the point of searching for a “new man”.

On a similar macro level, alongside efforts to reorganize the major powers at play—from the economic powers of a new capitalism based on “interests”, to the political powers of the bureaucracy of the administrative mega-states—there arose the partly late-romantic, partly neo-scientific idea of a new conception of the world. This conception was released from the overly ideological dualism between individual and society and was instead inspired by the figure of the “new man”, able to live in a future that was already present in the democratic dimension, but which would soon take on a totalitarian hue.

Thus concepts such as “modernism” and “modernity” are useful, considering the latter as “the figure that for centuries has characterized the pre-history and history of man as individual, liberal and then constitutional, free but with class belonging”.⁷ Modernism would instead cover the attempt to overcome—if not overturn—all of this in a totalizing vision, based on solid technological premises and promises, which were relatively indifferent to the beliefs—or myths—of the individualistic Prometheism of the liberal-constitutional era or of the dialectic of enlightenment. The totalitarian “political discourse” was encouraged, in a triangulation whose aims were already set: from the arrival of the masses on the political scene; the organization of the old civil society into elites; and the projection of elitist criteria onto the masses; to the search for the “new man”.⁸ Once the liberal individual, and their rights were in crisis, it became fundamental to create the unknown subject, the new man.⁹

Perhaps it is too simple to say that the avant-garde period coincides with the end of the individual epoch (that started with the French Revolution) and the beginning of the epoch

of sociality,¹⁰ but there was certainly a common movement which dragged the old idea of modernity towards a freer and more reductive modernism. The potential connection between sociology and the artistic avant-garde has perhaps never been on the agenda, but it is one of the issues we raise here. The problem that unites classical sociology is precisely this redefinition of the individual in the face of the radical transformations brought on by capitalism. The individual is clearly the controversial and constant centre of French sociology: from the socially disciplined individual of Emile Durkheim¹¹ to the *Homme total* of Marcel Mauss.¹² Classic German sociology has been rightly said to “remain vehemently faithful to the individual”,¹³ with this tension embodied in a particularly characteristic and interesting way in the work of Georg Simmel, who makes an intriguing analogy with geometry to account for the “interactions” or reciprocal actions of individuals. This geometry of individuals finds another analogy in the *Kunstaustellung*, which Simmel considers to be “Miniaturbild unserer Geistesströmungen” and the “symbol of our transitional epoch”.¹⁴ At the base of Simmelian sociological aesthetics is a constant attempt to resolve the problem of the “multiplicity of forms of modern culture”¹⁵ as expressions of individuality that cannot ever claim absolute legitimacy.

In 1901, Georg Simmel noted that the concept of the individual was in crisis due to the presence of two individualisms that were beginning to collide, having different conceptions of the relationship between freedom and equality. The historical concept of the individual was constituted just before the universal claims of these two principles. Freedom historically signified the unlimited deployment of one’s own individual capacities, but this at the same time entailed the tendential and increasingly differentiated development of different personalities. It

thus entered into an increasingly evident contradiction with equality. It is precisely this collision that resulted in the declaration of the principle of brotherhood, in order to recuperate, at least on an ethical plane, that which the conflict between individual affirmation and its own universalization had put into crisis on the political plane. In the course of the 1800s, however, this ethical moment assumed an organizational, if not administrative, form that aimed at the depersonalization of relations that could not be trusted simply to the division of labour. It showed the necessity of cooperation in pre-eminently organizational terms, in such a way as to leave individuality free of any obligation and any contact with other individuals. The more the individuality tends to become liberated from personal constraints the more its organizability and its being necessarily organized is affirmed. We are not interested here in Simmel's reconstruction of philosophical genealogies to demonstrate the conflict between a rationalist individualism founded on the primacy of the will and one that, from Goethe to Nietzsche, would fully valorize the difference between one man and another, to the point of considering egalitarianism as almost a violent act. What interests us is not so much the ontological difference between the two individualisms as the internal tension in the way the relationships between individuals are considered. At the beginning of the 1900s, they find themselves caught in a tension between the affirmation of an "ideal of equality and the equating [*Gleichberechtigung*] of societal elements", leading to a formal concept of liberty, and the constant reaffirmation of the necessity of "naturally given command and obedience".¹⁶

This tension, which is internal to individualism, is one of the traces of modernism that we want to bring to the fore. It led to the powerful acceleration of the social rhythms of modernity, producing the complex effect of calling into

question the consolidated certainties of liberal individualism. This is very clear in the different if not opposing ways in which the paintings of Rembrandt were understood between the 1800s and the 1900s. The first way that we consider can be found in a book that both explicitly and implicitly influenced the German culture of the Wilhelminian Empire. The 1890 book *Rembrandt als Erzieher* proposed the idea of the individual as national rather than international, cultural rather than scientific, male rather than female, and German rather than Jewish.

For its author, Julius Langbehn—but also for many other people, given that already by 1908, the year after his death, it had reached its forty-eighth edition—“education about individualism and inside individualism” set about rediscovering a specifically German historical-cultural position which seemed to have been lost. The opposition between the learned intellectual, who would necessarily have an international perspective, and the artist, who would necessarily express the national dimension of culture, indicated a particular way of constituting the individual. The reference to Rembrandt served to identify the clearly fantasmatic element which was required for the self-recognition of German individuality. “Rembrandt is the prototype of the German artist”, precisely in his capacity to express his Dutch belonging, or rather in his affirmation of the “localism of art”.¹⁷

Simmel’s modernism appears exactly in the manner in which it is detached from this national appropriation of the Dutch painter, proposing, thanks to Rembrandt, a conciliation between the two concepts of the individual mentioned above. Simmel identifies a break between the Dutch painter and the Italian painting of the previous centuries. We are not interested here in how well-founded this judgement is from the point of view of art history, but rather in the clear difference it demonstrates between the

static nature of the classic portrait and the dynamic nature of Rembrandt's portraits. "The Classical portrait captures us in the moment of its present", while in the Dutch painter "the representation of the ideal individual" would be completed "by the abstraction from all of its singular moments of life", to the point where the "generality [*Allgemeinheit*] of the individual human being means the accumulation of these moments that somehow retain their historical order".¹⁸ This intrinsic dynamic of the portrait would make the pictorial problem in Rembrandt solely "the depiction of the totality of a human life".¹⁹ Thus individuality itself becomes movement, with a dynamic that retains within it all of life's singular moments, ending up revealing the character of the man that, from the twenties onwards, would assume an ever-greater relevance, presenting itself as a totality in movement. Since, for Simmel and others, "a life is a whole life in each single moment as Life", life itself reveals the image as dynamic and totality. We must emphasize the crucial importance of the concept of totality that precedes that of totalitarianism and doesn't necessarily anticipate its political contents. Modernism is caught up in this search for totality, for it must confront the disintegration of the movements in contemporary society, with the aim of recomposing an individuality that wouldn't destroy differences and therefore wouldn't destroy singularity.²⁰ But contradictorily this search moves not so much towards a totalitarian aesthetics, as to one of indifference, because no individual manifestation of the universal truly represents it. However the elements of modernism that run through Simmel's sociology show that for him, and for many of his contemporaries, studying society also means stabilizing the coordinates of a discourse on the rules of coexistence and power that preside over the relationships between the individuals that live in it.

This could mean a new politicization with respect to the traditional one of modernity. We can rightly ask if there is in some way an analogous problem for our avant-garde artists, of politicizing the artistic-cultural “centre of reference” of which they consider themselves to be the protagonists.

This long introduction is needed to explain the structure of this book, which includes both historical-political and historical-aesthetic essays, aimed at reconstructing the crisis and critique of the classical ways of reading and understanding the world that had prevailed during the age of modernity: does the rhythm of the world change? The problem is identifying what Niccolò Machiavelli called the “qualities of the times”. This was also the problem posed by Leonardo da Vinci, who was, as Patrik Boucheron wrote, “the man of the machine” and since “the mechanism of the world [was] out-of-sync” then “the secret mathematics of world rhythms” had to be found. And as Machiavelli noted at the advent of modernity, the “ways of acting” had also changed.²¹

This quote is not an end in itself or useless. The idea was to apply a sort of “quality of the times” (which was nothing other than *Zeitgeist*) to modernism—in the decline of modernity—thus releasing “traces” of new ways of acting.

A second important aspect is the intertwining of art and politics in the modern West, in the historic experience of communication, particularly in its more modern version, i. e. that concerning the public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*).²²

We were struck by two aspects, which are often interwoven but are also fundamentally independent. First, art as propaganda, and second, art as a separate field (which runs parallel with science) for observing and deciphering the world, and, in particular, society.

Thus it is clear that releasing society from its tight bond with the ancient regime (*societas civilis sive status*), after

leading to an initial phase of conflict (*Auseinandersetzung*) between State and society, led to the strengthening of both, independently of one another. This happened, on the one hand, through the expansion of the means of and opportunities for intervention by an increasingly bureaucratic State and, on the other, through the growing organization of economic and social interests. Sociology and social studies (*Sozial- und Staatswissenschaften*) became the modern form of political theory and doctrine, since society became the leading—if not the only—site of political action.²³ Society is speaking by and of itself through the forces that compose it and give it its substance. Consequently, the new discourse became fully autonomous, distancing itself from traditional and “natural” discourses (one for all the so-called “natural rights”, but also the science of law that came from it and, at least partly, even from economic science²⁴). The discourse of art and culture was key, among all these discourses, so it is no surprise that the character of modernism was first assigned to the sphere of art and culture. The avant-garde movement was trying to take the lead in the analysis of social reality and in the proposal of new and alternative visions of needs and their solutions.

The essays in this book reinforce the initial idea, which was to identify “traces of modernism” as a pattern in the complex and difficult processing of the “crisis of conscience” in the passage from the nineteenth to the twentieth century in Europe (and perhaps across the Western world), and was dramatically confirmed by the First World War between 1914 and 1918, and by the revolutions that followed it.

To reconstruct these traces, we decided to highlight three emblematic moments into which the collected essays would be organized: the first was internationalism; the second was methods of engineering applied to human society; the

third was the “machine” for producing order. It must be noted that this categorization is to a certain extent artificial and corresponds to the editors’ desire to try to find new ways of looking at the discourse on modernism, rather than to the choices made by the authors of the essays to concentrate on one or other of the moments.

In his introductory essay, *Pierangelo Schiera* retraces the central issues in the crisis of modernity and the answer that modernism gave to them. He discusses pre-war internationality, and then focuses on the decline of the West and its immediate result in the totalitarianism which took over Europe. This trend was characterized by the lack of any optimistic idea of progress and marked by an almost dystopic vision of evolution as an end in itself, moving towards a future which was open to the global space but which lacked identity.

The question of nationalism versus internationalism is the core of *Sophie Goetzmann’s* contribution on the art gallery “Der Sturm” from Herwarth Walden, in which she analyses the attention that French artists paid to Berlin in the years preceding the Great War, and emphasizes the intertwining of national identities and the international dimension in the artistic movement of the avant-garde, with particular reference to France and Germany.

Andrea Meyer-Fraatz discusses *The Raft of the Medusa*, a neo-avant-gardist Yugoslavian film by Karpo Godina (1980), showing not only what was happening among a group of South-European artists after the Great War but the various international contacts of the artistic and literary avant-garde at the time.

Moving from the death of Queen Victoria at the peak of the crisis of modernity and towards the birth of modernism *Roberta Ferrari* looks at Great Britain. The strengthening of the state’s functions to expand individual opportunities and planning were two instruments which were thought to be capable of producing a “new civilization” in the urgent

attempt to rethink democracy. After the Great War, Beatrice Potter's thought, and in particular her analysis of the stabilization of the Soviet system drew attention to a concrete alternative to capitalism and its ongoing crisis, while radically reconsidering ways of living in society. She proposed a new image of "character": which, in other words, was called the "new man".

The second part of this book is more specifically dedicated to the topic of the new man, as well as to the topic of the new societal projects from the 1920s up to what we define as "high modernism". However we do not claim to give definitive answers to what we defined simply as the "traces of modernism".

Éric Michaud invites us to look at the war as a "frontline experience", and at the millions of war wounded and disfigured people as a cathartic image of division between the old and the new. This physical, bodily experience breaks the Christian, spiritual conception of the new man, dominant since the beginning of the twentieth century. It is the artist, then, that personifies the "new man" and who traces the future of the world's reconstruction in their work.

Maurizio Ricciardi's contribution engages with the incessant dialogue between *modernity* and *modernism* and is interested in the answers the social sciences offered to the crisis that was underway. His initial statement, that the market, industry and planning are forms of abstraction, independent from the immediate consent of the individual finds its full "concreteness" in Karl Mannheim's project. To him the plan was an anthropological trend—i. e. the trend of individuals to act according to a plan—which allowed for a way out of the crisis. Ricciardi's contribution also helps us to better understand Potter's interest in the Soviet plan, as discussed by Ferrari.

Starting from the positive images of the machine and technology in the works of Alexander Deineka and Nikolaj

Dolgorukow, *Eckart J. Gillen* also focuses on the Soviet Union. While Western Europe was experiencing the crisis of 1929, the Soviet Union found itself at the peak of a contradiction between forced industrialization and agrarian collectivization. In this context Stalin pushed the artists of the time to abandon technology and return to a new “humanism”.

Francescomaria Tedesco focuses on the poet and playwright Oswald de Andrade, founder of the Antropofágic movement, in order to show how the futurist and modernist European movement was assimilated and cannibalized by the Brazilian movement in search of an identity, hundreds of years after the country’s independence. Taking inspiration from de Andrade’s movement, this essay contributes to discourses around trans-culture and postcolonialism.

Strongly connected with the other sections of the book, our third topic is the machine in the avant-garde, analysing the meaning of order as well as that of modernity-modernization that is implied within it.

Fabio Benzi analyses images of the machine and of the modern city that were developed in Italian futurist clubs, which went on to influence many European avant-gardes, especially in Paris. For the futurists, the influence of the mechanical modernist vision on applied arts in Paris in 1925 was the realization of a utopian vision that they had been promoting since 1915 in their manifesto, *Ricostruzione futurista dell’universo*.

In some way, the triumph of the machine also marks the modernist transformation of the state: *Monica Cioli’s* essay examines this issue, looking at the concepts of the machine and of order among European avant-gardes in the 1920s. As the Bauhaus school aimed to show, the liberal and constitutional state of the nineteenth century finally dies giving way to the machine state, to planning and to

abstraction as a new “measure” and a new way of seeing social conflicts (*De Stijl*).

Anja Schloßberger-Oberhammer analyses the 1927 meeting between Kazimir Malevich and Walter Gropius at the Bauhaus in Dessau. The Russian artist was denied a teaching post not because of his different ideological beliefs, but because of the defamatory campaign mobilized in the East against Malevich and in the West against Gropius and Bauhaus in general.

Silvio Pons focuses on Soviet modernization through the lens of one of the main characters of communism, Antonio Gramsci. Pons’ thesis is that if Soviet modernity had failed in relating mass politics and hegemony after the Great War, the Gramscian concept of “passive revolution” could be considered as key to seeing the links between global modern transformations and the hegemonic failure of the Soviet construction of socialism.

In conclusion, it is difficult to say whether the “traces” of modernism collected and contextualized here lead us to a specific result. However it is somewhat clearer that modernism should be conceived of as being an incomplete process, the symptom of a major transformation that was taking place rather than its consolidated end. It seems to us that these traces reveal the presence, in modernism, of different subjectivities and problems, which contribute towards delegitimizing traditional lifestyles and traditional ways of thinking and acting: for example, that of the old conceptual coupling of state and society in which the historical and constitutional process of Western modernity culminated. On the other hand, the implied reference to Hazard²⁵ and the explicit reference to Koselleck above show that the fundamental value of so-called “Western modernity” was its capacity to assimilate new data that from time to time appeared during this period, through the

generation and de-generation of particular lifestyles and ways of thinking.

The triumph of the machine and the modernist transformation of the state can also be seen as a further symptom of the degeneration of the modern state, also in its nineteenth-century liberal and constitutional form, towards new forms which embraced an always-increasing sociality.²⁶ Thus, the coupling as “machine-plan” is very evocative, and opens up a dramatic juncture: between the new man, on the one hand, and the total state, on the other. This is all part of a perspective based on an idea of evolution that assigns the destiny of politics itself to collective forces which are decreasingly in syntony with the rational practice of bourgeois progress. The machine is not only the symbol but also the instrument of this evolution, from which it derives, as a not simply a historical but also an almost natural and at the same time prosthetic projection of “old man”/man of the past.

It was another epoch, as Machiavelli and Leonardo thought. With other machines.

This book comes out of a conference held in Rome in 2015 thanks to the funding of Gerda Henkel Stiftung, to whom we are very grateful. We would also like to thank the German Historical Institute, that hosted the conference and is funding this book. We are grateful to its Director Martin Baumeister for believing in this project. Finally, we are grateful to Roberta Ferrari for the discussions she had with us.

Translated by Roberta Ferrari

I. From Modernity to Internationalism

The Great European Crisis between Modernity and Modernism

Pierangelo Schiera

The topic “Decline of the West” could be seen as fundamental in the evolution of the last century, continuing on a trajectory that is now moving into globalization. My goal here is to examine the cultural components of this process, paying particular attention to the arts and avant-garde artists, as a key factor for them was being either for or against modernity, a factor that arose from the deep crisis of the idea of progress at the end of the nineteenth century. I argue that the still rather vague and confusing concept of political modernism can play an interesting role in my reconstruction, putting emphasis more on evolutionary than progressive lines of development. All of this clearly has to do with totalitarianism, the main political event of the twentieth century. As a result, traces of modernism will appear in a relative confusion of proposals and results, but with the common denominator of a basic confidence in evolution, that is, with the view that things must change in order to match the new conditions of history.

1. Civilization and/or Modernity

The Decline of the West is a famous two-volume work by Oswald Spengler, published between 1918 and 1923.²⁷ The

book is a paradigm shift in how we view history; instead of dividing history into the traditional linear “ancient-medieval-modern” periods, Spengler proposes a new organization, dividing it into epochal units of high cultural meaning, which produce, as their final stages, civilizations.

During the last century, while the Occident did perhaps decline, it did not lose stature, despite the tremendous convulsions of totalitarianism and the acts of terrorism that took place. The Orient, on the other hand, did go through the process of (or was forced to go through the process of) modernization, under the pressure of internal as well as external forces. The contradictory trends of despotism (from the East) and democratization (from the West) could intersect and become a sort of hybrid, which seems to be characteristic of how we intend globalization to work. But it is not yet clear whether this view of globalization, which we consider a new form of modernization, will eventually and necessarily pass through the westernization of the rest of the world.

This is the point at which we find ourselves today, after a succession of cultural crises that have marked the prior century of Western civilization.²⁸ We have certainly learned that any new development should necessarily be of a cultural nature—not only of an economic, social, or financial one.²⁹ This is why our main goal should be working to understand the complex reasons underlying the recurring crises of the twentieth century. One key venue through which this can be achieved is through close examination of modern art, particularly through avant-garde artists. Historical research starts from the present, but knowing the past is integral to a better understanding of the future. In principle, this is at the root of what it means to be avant-garde.

A new culture, then. But how many civilizations have existed on earth? Eight, as argued by Spengler, or twenty-

one, as argued by Toynbee?³⁰ This is not a rhetorical question. Every day we question what it means to be a civilization, in sudden defence of our way of life. We defend ourselves when we encounter the offences made by other cultures, offences that are sometimes egregious, employing forms of attack including terrorism, so impudent to defy the ancient traces of our own culture: our classics.

It is neither reason nor incoherence—but being for or against modernity in the uncertainty of its persistence in a regime of progress—that implies a perspective of project/performance by men like those defined by Max Weber as a product of capitalism and its spirit. This perspective is also implied by the “change of biological paradigms between the 19th and 20th century”, in line with the evolutionary theories of Spencer and Bergson, among others, with reference to politics and its future.

The *Nymphéas* by Claude Monet or Matisse’s flat colours (with their self-aware loss of perspective) certainly did not kill art, which instead became, in the age of its mechanical reproduction, a mass phenomenon where the avant-garde found fertile ground to blossom. A similar loss of perspective has also impacted the world of politics, with the entry of the masses into political involvement beyond any socio-liberal attempt to extend suffrage or welfare policies. The progressive development of these events was undermined by the outbreak of both the First World War and the Russian Revolution. Further, the sudden collapse into totalitarianism caused the many dreams and desires of both women and men to become concentrated in a single dictatorial centre. These events could be defined with the politically ambiguous but provocative term of modernism: modernism can be seen as the confluence of different expectations that had arisen from the *fin de siècle* crisis and subsequently cultivated in pre-war times in literary and

artistic milieus with a particular interest in the destiny of man in society.

One example of the popularization of social Darwinism at the end of the nineteenth century is Lytton Strachey's conclusion in *Queen Victoria*: "when, two days previously, the news of the approaching end had been made public, astonished grief had swept over the country. It appeared as if some monstrous reversal of the course of nature was about to take place."³¹ Those were the years of Bloomsbury, whose critical spectrum went beyond literature and the arts, extending to economics and the social sciences, in relative symbiosis with the commitment of the Fabian Society. It was a real reversal of the bourgeois world, in the sense of Marx-Engels's dictum in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*: "All that is solid melts into air." This is also the title of a book by Marshall Berman about modernity and modernism,³² which has largely inspired my arguments here.

A comparison between the concepts of modernity and modernism is relevant for our purposes, especially in the political- and cultural-historical context emphasized here. The main characteristic of the great crisis of the *fin de siècle* was of an economic and social nature. The neo-capitalist upswing of the new industrial revolution in the second half of the nineteenth century that led Marx to diagnose an implosion of capitalism and the liberation of the working class towards communist society was supported by two massive political pillars—the social question at home and imperialism abroad—with major impacts upon the interested social forces. If the capitalist "construction" continued to hold, indifferent to the needs of the subordinated historical subjects, it also became necessary for the bourgeoisie to change its marks of identity, becoming more and more *élite* in relation to the transformation of the proletariat en masse.³³

The complex developments of biology, demonstrated by the confusing history of evolutionism ranging from the micro-evolutive approach of Haeckel's Darwinism to the rather mutationist one of De Vries,³⁴ show that man himself could no longer be seen as he had been up that point: so also changed the legitimation of the social sciences, where the ancient predominance of law was overcome by increasing interest in sociology.³⁵ At the same time, the world witnessed the emergence of the machine, that, along with man occupying a growing importance in social and economic relations, had a massive impact upon the cultural field, as seen, for instance, in the Futurist movement in Italy.

Monica Cioli also applies the qualification of "modernist" to fascism in its initial phase, arguing that a pillar of the Futurist movement (in its complex interconnections with fascism) has always been the continuous cross-reference to the "machine", that in any case became a sort of transversal myth for the avant-gardes of the time.³⁶

2. Modernism in Post-war Society

It was a very rich scenario indeed, during and after the Great War, strengthened by the results of the Versailles Treaty, which had given end not only to two empires (Deutsches Königsreich and Kaiserliche und Königliche Doppelmonarchie) but also to two dynasties (Hohenzollern and Habsburg) that had marked a great part of European modern history. This treaty was used by the French to vindicate the famous defeat of Sedan in 1870, imposing a veritable *Diktat* on Germany, in both economic and cultural terms. This resulted in Germany being neither defeated nor integrated, entering, with the Weimar Republic, the worst moment in its modern history.³⁷

Italy, too, one of the victorious allies, experienced a melancholy and depressing exit from the First World War that certainly explains the rapid acquisition of power by the fascists. From the beginning, one of Mussolini's priorities had been the international qualification of Italy on the European scene, above all in the fields of science and art, through the participation (but also self-organization) of international congresses and exhibitions. In this context, a primary role was played—already present in pre-war times—by futurism as a principal movement of the avant-garde, in part for its connections with other European movements.³⁸

At the end of the war, enthusiasm for a natural development of human and social evolution had waned, getting a sort of compensation only from the pragmatic American doctrines of Taylorism and Fordism. These methodologies to improve labour productivity not only fulfilled the need to restructure human labour in modern automobile factories (famously, the Ford Model T, 1908–1927, included assembly-line production instead of individual hand crafting) but also became models of scientific organization in public and private life, beyond the old border of the working class (workers and blue-collar), in perfect synchronicity with the formation of the middle-class myth of an average standard of living.

Can we call this modernism? Marshall Berman's definition is applicable: "I define modernism as any attempt by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization, to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it." This is a broad and unfragmented concept of modernism corresponding to "an open and expansive way of understanding culture".³⁹ This view of modernism is not reductive—it is not applicable only to the mere aesthetic and artistic aspects of life, such as architecture, arts, and literature. In fact, the

extraordinary adventures of contemporary science also fall under modernism, along with its transformation into technoscience. It is possible to situate the monumental political events of the 1900s in this modernist atmosphere characterized by a sort of new original sin; this is to say that modernism functioned in such a way as to reduce the distance between dreams and needs, making sure that the long-standing bi-polarism between culture and nature becomes a totalizing one in the name of a futuristic, optimistic vision of mankind.

The political mood of the West at the end of the war was one of general crisis, that, from a “modernistic” interpretation, could also be interpreted as the end of ideology, suggesting that modernism could be intended as a sort of anti-ideological point of view.⁴⁰ This had deeper cultural roots, concerning in particular the epistemological transformation that took place between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from Charles Darwin to the fading of classical mechanics, the considerable spread of biology, and the birth of psychoanalysis. Such an anti-ideological view could eventually be seen as an effect of the *trahison des clercs*,⁴¹ giving birth to very different ways of seeing the world and the objects within it.

In the age of modernism, the definitive overcoming of positivism corresponded to the emergence of the new dimension of technoscience, the technological, and the social context of science.⁴² The same is true for politics, above all for the dramatic events in the period between the world wars, beginning from the involvement of the masses in politics, the establishment of the élite and the conclusive eruption of totalitarianism,⁴³ both in its literary demise in utopian or dystopian works as well as in its much more dramatic concretization in various European countries. Paradoxically enough, in counterbalance to this, in science (particularly biology) as well as in politics, the idea of a

“new man” was about to be conceived, a man able to attain all his dreams thanks to the techno-socio-philosophical bridge represented by the machine. Such a “new man”, arising from an alliance between the masses and its zenith, the élite, would be the result of a collective but also a mechanical—and artificial—movement: the product of an evolution which should have been (biologically) inscribed into human and social nature, but which ultimately needed the machine in order to be formed. This would occur without either further individual progress, as happened to the man of the Enlightenment, or any societal measure, as a moral-practical key for human behaviour.⁴⁴

In the phenomenal engraving by Albrecht Dürer (*Melencolia I*, 1514), one of the most prestigious icons of early modernity, the various tools of the *homo faber* lie at the angel’s feet, useless and forgotten. Now, in modernist times, the machine plays the role of a bridge between the masses and its new needs and desires, thanks to the commitment of the élite and, as we will see, the avant-garde.

3. A “new man” in a New Society: towards Political Totalitarianism

Here lies, in my opinion, the principal difference between modernism and modernity. While modernity has, for centuries, delivered the code of behaviour for the individualistic, liberal, and constitutional man in his triumphal history of progress (a free man but at the end a class-man), modernism could serve as a means to overthrow, if not reverse this in a totalizing projection based on technological premises and promises, with relative indifference toward the credences (and myths) of the individualistic prometheism of the constitutional-liberal