

Introduction: occupations

Let us not speak ill of evil. It is too easy.
– Hélène Cixous

On one level you wanted to conceal yourself in Hitler and his works.
On another level you wanted to use him to grow in significance and strength.

– Don DeLillo, *White Noise*

I A SHORT HISTORY OF FASCINATION

This is not another book about Hitler. That is to say, for all its interest in Hitler (and Hermann Göring and Maréchal Pétain), this book attempts neither to detail the piteous and terrifying reality of the Nazi leader nor to reconstruct in coherent form the impact fascist thought had upon modernists who conducted their creative work during the 1930s and 1940s, repudiating, embracing, or paying no heed to the movement's ideological profanations. Much important work has recently taken up these questions, and I will draw upon these discussions of fascist aesthetics, reactionary modernism, "Hitler-in-us" theories, spectacle and performance in the politics and visual culture of modernism, and the ceaseless project of "explaining Hitler." As such, an eccentric gathering of critical and archival sources serve the findings in this book.

This project concerns itself with the fascist dictator as constructed, reflected, and imagined by four artists who – though working during the period generally recognized as "modernist" – claim vastly different places in the canon, if indeed they appear there at all. While Gertrude Stein resides firmly in the pantheon of high modernism, Janet Flanner remains on the other side of the divide, having fashioned her own monumental status out of the rough stuff of journalistic reportage. Though she photographed innumerable luminaries of literary and visual

modernism, Miller's post-war photography is the focus of these pages, presenting as it does an implicit riposte to Leni Riefenstahl's propagandist masterwork, *Triumph of the Will*. Riefenstahl avidly filmed herself and Hitler, and to this day remains an outlaw to modernist recuperation, though film scholars and historians invoke her infinitely imitable aesthetic and her resolute aversion to culpability. I apply a rather liberal definition of modernism, staying more or less within a traditional period of 1900–1945, working outside the canon more than in it, and engaging closely with the era's homegrown innovations in visual culture and dictatorial authority. Close textual analysis is critical to my study but the circumstances and motivations of these cultural productions are equally so.

This project offers a diverse and contradictory picture of the modernist political imagination by looking at the protean phantom presence Hitler held in the era's visual and literary output. To the extent that he serves as a metonymy of aspiration and resistance, Hitler also functioned for these four women as a haunting muse figure. By labeling him as such, I refer to the muse's ability to clarify, to *demonstrate* certain artistic truths for the artist – as in the Latin *demonstrare*, from *monstrare*, meaning to point out or show. The root *monstrare* also supplies the etymological source for “monster,” so that what emerges is a figure who inspires but also terrifies, whose power is creative and destructive. As muse, Hitler represents the artist's own embedded otherness; he is subjected to the scrutiny that attends the muse's conventional position as object: gazing at his physical presence, anatomizing him in corporeal detail, the women under study here represent the dictator for their own ends, subjecting him to individual acts of creative authority. They proceed by conventions of dismemberment and fantasy, projection and reanimation, deploying considerable artistic agency and displaying a fascinated ambivalence toward his person, his dramatized presence, and the political apparatus that glorified him. Hitler appears in their work as a hyper-developed example of modernism's fixation on spectacle, visual irony, fame, and self-mythification; in response to this iconicity, they approach from oblique angles, seeking details of human existence, but readily supplying fiction where lived reality is not forthcoming.

Debates about the various trajectories of identification at play between Hitler and his followers are part of larger questions of fascism itself. An enormous body of philosophical and political theory seeks to make sense of the interrelatedness of leader and follower, fascism and modernism, aesthetics and politics, explaining fascism in terms of surface

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spectacle, anti-Semitism, myth, the trajectories of modernity, a future-oriented technologized rule, or a nostalgic reclaiming of Hellenic classicism. Where Wilhelm Reich's *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933) hypothesizes a hypermasculine leader swaying the feminine masses, Alice Yaeger Kaplan's *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life* (1986) posits a virile, phallic follower lured by the maternal promise of fascism as a "new mother," whereby the leader performs as "a woman of sorts." While historians such as George Mosse, Walter Laqueur, and Robert Paxton address Nazism's concentrated masculinity and its patriarchal organization of family and nation, film scholar Kriss Ravetto effectively deconstructs film history's transformation of "fascist sexuality into an effeminate, homosexual, campy aesthetic of death, decay, and fatal feminism."¹

Parsing out the libidinal underpinnings of totalitarianism was a central project of Frankfurt School theorists Wilhelm Reich, Theodor Adorno, Erich Fromm, and Max Horkheimer, whose writings adapted contemporary psychoanalytic theory to understanding the desire for domination by what Freud – long before Hitler's arrival – dubbed "the great little man." Among the most frequently cited works of Frankfurt Theory on fascism is Adorno's "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda," which argues that individuals idealize the fascist leader as a surrogate for self-idealization. "They do not," he claims, "really identify themselves with him but act this identification, perform their own enthusiasm, and thus participate in their leader's performance."² Stressing the importance of erotic drives and human desire – something Marxism, they felt, failed to do – the Frankfurt School made a case for the central place of sexual repression in the crowd's eager embrace of an eroticized authoritarian leader.

Early on, Walter Benjamin, an occasional member of the Frankfurt School, recognized the symbolic, aesthetic, and identificatory dimensions of the fascist political process. In the epilogue to his seminal essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), Benjamin posits fascism as a form of aestheticized politics, the legacy of the deauraticization process and the aestheticism of *l'art pour l'art*. Identification is central to this dynamic: so great is the desire of the masses to be represented by the beautiful machine of fascism, its own death is worth the spectacle: "[Mankind's] self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order," he concludes, "This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic."³

Throughout the book, I make recourse to theoretical and historical work on fascism, Nazism, and Hitler, though my reliance upon archival material is greater still. Susan Sontag's 1974 essay "Fascinating Fascism" figures implicitly in the pages that follow because her work presents such fertile terrain for the exploration of fascist aesthetics and the cult of masculinity. Implicitly because, despite her rich readings of Nazism's romantic excesses, its dynamic of idealization and surrender, she speaks only briefly of the specific allure of Hitler, characterizing him less for the attraction he held for the masses than for the dramaturgy of order and control that sustained his image. To Sontag, Hitler is more seer than seen, characterized by his likes and dislikes and not for his aggressive, entrancing figuration within Riefenstahl's visual field. Nonetheless, my work proceeds from the foundations laid by her work because Sontag moves headlong into issues of representation and historical reference, eroticism and taboo in ways that must be acknowledged in any work addressing the visual lexicon of fascism's appeal. Though my premise owes much to the spirit of her work on fascism, I also range beyond Sontag to offer a broader exploration of the complex relationships among masculine authority, modernism, women's creativity, and agency.

Kaja Silverman's work on identification, idealization, and masochism serves as an inherent theoretical undercurrent in these pages. Drawing upon *The Nature of Sympathy*, a 1913 work by German philosopher Max Scheler, Silverman elucidates the sacrificial dynamic performed during the seductive encounter between self and other. By way of example, Silverman offers Scheler's allegory of a snake and a squirrel, an allegory drawn, in turn, from Schopenhauer:

A white squirrel, having met the gaze of a snake, hanging on a tree and showing every sign of a mighty appetite for its prey, is so terrified by this that it gradually moves towards instead of away from the snake, and finally throws itself into the open jaws ... plainly the squirrel's instinct for self-preservation has succumbed to an ecstatic participation in the object of the snake's own appetitive nîsus, namely "swallowing." The squirrel identifies in feeling with the snake, and there-upon spontaneously establishes corporeal identity with it, by disappearing down its throat.⁴

Scheler's anecdote parses out two modes of identification – idiopathy and heteropathy. The former is enacted – as in the case of the snake – by way of "total eclipse and absorption of another self by one's own." The latter – with the squirrel – demonstrates excorporative identification, whereby one "surrenders his or her customary specular parameters for those of the other."⁵ In the chapters ahead, the move to identify with or incorporate

Hitler is, among other things, a strategic bid for volitional representation by what is monumental and supremely empowered. In Silverman's example, giving over to the snake enacts an appropriation of the snake's powers as well as a neutralization of its threat. The allegory of the snake and the squirrel shows above all that the movement toward the snake (the sinister entity) is a consensual, albeit self-indicting, act.

I do not offer these four artists as case studies in order to promulgate a new theory of dictatorial allure or to offer a single theoretical explanation to account for their very wide-ranging experiences and expressions. My hope is to put a finer point on questions of identification and fascination as they relate to the artist – broadly defined – and the leader figure, and to open up new regions for the study of modernism. Quite specifically, I ask how Gertrude Stein, Janet Flanner, and Lee Miller see in Hitler the possibility of establishing their own creative and intellectual agency through the act of dissecting the totality he comes to represent – an artificial totality exemplified in the kind of spectacular iconography Leni Riefenstahl advanced in *Triumph of the Will*. My interdisciplinary approach foregrounds the affinities among figures not usually considered a constellated entity, in order to illuminate a thematic unity that spans film, poetry, prose, photography, and journalistic reportage.

Where the chapters of this book are monographic, offering case studies of particular artists, they also attend to broader discussions of the relationship among artists and dictators, modernism and fascism, authority and representation. To the degree that their visions of Hitler are similarly filtered through subjective reimaginings and experimental applications of their respective media, their work proves meaningfully interconnected. Though fascism's reliance upon the visual spectacle – parades, rallies, public displays of the dictator's body – makes its cinematic and photographic representations more amenable to exposition, written treatments offer equally rich assessments of Nazism's visual apparatus. Thus, each chapter demonstrates the era's dense intermedia exchange, in which visual and verbal forms of representation were richly imbricated. Theater, cinema, opera, photography, even nineteenth-century forms of visual technology rejuvenated one another, merging arts from high, low, and the avant-garde. As this project demonstrates, the body, most specifically the body of the fascist, was scrutinized in many formats, its potent spectacularization making it a ready subject of investigation and rendering its projections and articulations a central image in modernist visuality. Though smaller in scale, Göring's theatricality in the front row at the Nuremberg Trial – as reported in Flanner's *New Yorker* articles – is no less

vivid than Riefenstahl's mesmerizing Hitler performing for the masses at the Nuremberg rally. Indeed, Riefenstahl's extreme, penetrating close-ups predict and produce Flanner's intimate attentiveness to Göring's every look, gesture, and body part. Of different proportions, their scrutiny of the fascist body (one in the stadium, the other in the dock) intermingles identification, visual pleasure, and the subjective consolidation of authority.

Although Stein and Flanner employed the written medium, and Miller and Riefenstahl the visual, each woman made liberal use of other forms of representation. Many of the conclusions I draw come from Riefenstahl's lengthy memoir and other texts, Miller's correspondence and written war reports for *Vogue*, Stein's moments before the camera, and Flanner's early training as a film critic. For Stein and Flanner, the visual spectacle persists in the verbal, while their subjective ways of "framing" the dictator are granted extensive interpretive detail. In all, their productions come to demonstrate what Sontag observed of *Triumph of the Will* – that "we find ourselves seeing 'Hitler' and not Hitler," that authorial command over the subject matter proves so conspicuous that content itself comes to play a formal role. Notably, Riefenstahl and Miller both vehemently denied any aesthetic exertion in their documentation of Hitler, his environments, and his aftermath: the former insisting that *Triumph of the Will* was a "pure historical film," the latter maintaining that in photographing the *mises-en-scène* of Nazi horror, she was "busy making documents and not art." For her part, Flanner wrestled with a deep envy of fiction writers, whose work she felt held greater inherent value than that of factual reportage. For Stein, disparity exists between her extensive experimental writing and the blunter terms of her correspondence, though the two forms of expression are thoroughly interconnected. For all four women, the worlds of fact and fantasy, artistic embellishment and historical accuracy were never as discrete as they themselves believed or would have others suppose. In this sense, proximity to the extreme illusion and idealism that sustained Nazism seems to irrevocably compromise any "documentary gaze" or claim to objectivity that approaches it.

So as I present a short history of modernist fascination with the dictator, I also show how these women insinuated themselves in that history, exercising agency and promoting their own intricate political, intellectual, and aesthetic agendas. Each chapter grapples with what is most problematic about the effort to understand their individual appropriations and visions of Hitler and other dictators. Together, they investigate the structures and metastructures of representing Hitler, considering not

only how symbolic meaning and aesthetic codes inhered in his image but also how intervention and identification may occur outside the scope of fascist ideology. In this sense, their examples de-essentialize fascination with Hitler, showing that it transcended national, religious, political, and gender boundaries. Finally, these chapters try to get inside the imagination of artists whose political dimensions vary greatly but whose work moves us to acknowledge that there are subjective and unconventional ways to reconcile with the politics and power.

The shadow of the dictator looms large over modernism. Imperialist visions and criticism of capitalistic Western democracy, representations of charismatic power and the seductive dictator, and idealization of the past run throughout the work of Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, and David Jones. Hostility toward liberalism and democracy, to advanced industrialism, materialism, modern rationalism, and progress, nostalgia for pre-modern cultures, and disdain for the idealism of bourgeois modernity characterize many modernists who responded with ambivalence and even contempt to their own historical moment. In *Modernist Writing and Reactionary Politics*, Charles Ferrall draws attention to Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Lawrence, and Lewis, as well as to a host of other reactionary modernists, propagandists, active sympathizers, and fellow travelers,⁶ explicating how their political opinions impacted their literary production. Ferrall directs our view to some of the thematics of reactionary modernism, such as anti-Semitic imagery in Eliot's early poems and in Pound's cantos, sexually aggressive language and engagement with a eugenical discourse in Yeats, and homosocial authoritarianism in Lawrence's leadership novels. The yearning to submit, to "yield to a more heroic soul" guides the protagonist of *Aaron's Rod* (1922), the first of D.H. Lawrence's leadership novels – followed by *Kangaroo* (1923) and *The Plumed Serpent* (1926) – and thematizes an anxious loss of masculine authority and urgent need to imagine solutions for a degenerated Western civilization. In these prescient works, Lawrence suggests the redemptive allure of a fascistic brand of male supremacy that is personal and resonant with contemporary possibility. Lawrence's appeal to a politics of virility preceded the rise of the Nazi party by several years; indeed he died in 1930, a few months before some of the early Nazi victories in the Reichstag, but his highly charged novels foretell the promise of masculine fellowship that would become a significant strain in Nazi political thought. In 1939, the English poet David Jones composed a twenty-page essay expressing sympathy for pre-war Germany and for Hitler (both men fought in the Battle of the Somme where they

both sustained leg wounds). Jones was moved by Hitler's speeches and by his ability to interpret the ills of contemporary society and the Western world, but he ceased to admire Hitler once his horrendous application of that ideology was underway. The ideological passions of Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos* (1948), railing against Jewish abstraction and Jewish finance and glorifying Mussolini's struggles, present one of the most egregious and outstanding examples of reactionary modernism. From his political theories in *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* (1935) to his Rome radio broadcasts, Pound praised Hitler and Mussolini as guardians of Europe against a Jewish conspiracy.

The case of T.S. Eliot is still unsettled. Arguing that Eliot's writings are anti-Semitic, many critics exemplify their assertions through vigorous exegeses of his poems such as "Gerontion" (1920) and "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar" (1920), and his essays and lectures, in particular *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (1934), which includes his highly contentious declaration that "reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable."⁷ Issues of the academic journal *Modernism/Modernity* have been dedicated to parsing out the thorny issue of Eliot's anti-Semitism, with experts from both sides weighing in. Eliot's defenders turn to his sympathy with Jewish refugees and personal friendships with Jewish people, placing his remarks about "free-thinking Jews" into a more specific context, and highlighting his odium for Vichyite anti-Semitism; opponents cite his admiration for *Action Française* leader Charles Maurras and the unsavory references to Semitic character scattered throughout in his published prose and private correspondence.

Wyndham Lewis saw neither myths, nor the past, nor notions of metaphysical truth as balms for a culture disrupted by the values of bourgeois modernity. Lewis's celebration of power and irreverent admiration for Hitler combines a fierce pursuit of detail and prurient affection for the human quirk. Based on a series of newspaper articles meant for a British readership, *Hitler* (1931) satirically and rather sloppily considers the tensions between Nazism and Communism, offering a close reading of Hitler's appearance, and looking at Nazi conceptions of race and Hitlerian economics. Lewis shiftily announces, "It is as an exponent – not as critic nor yet as advocate – of German National-socialism or Hitlerism, that I come forward."⁸ His 1939 work, *The Hitler Cult and How it Will End*, recants earlier hopes that the virility of fascist politics would eradicate an effeminate Western democracy. With *The Hitler Cult*, Frederic Jameson explains, Lewis reversed course and produced

an “anti-Nazi counter-blast.”⁹ Again, the result is juvenile and clumsy; the text makes no attempt to consider intellectually what had become of Hitler in the intervening eight years. Indeed, *The Hitler Cult* offers an absurd, feminized Hitler more prescient of Chaplin’s Great Dictator, Adenoid Hynkel, than of Yeats’s “rough beast” of “The Second Coming.” Far from Lewis’s admired phenomenon of the earlier work, his later Hitler is “a dreamy-eyed hairdresser, who reads Schiller, without understanding him, in between haircuts,” a “*German Joan of Arc* ... who ‘hears voices’ and receives *supernatural guidance*.”¹⁰ Lewis’s work suggests that Hitler – real or imagined – is an inadequate answer to the grossly malfunctioning liberal democracy and the hollow promises of liberalism and progress.

Little consistency exists among modernist writers expressing ideological leanings. What emerges is a strange mingling of abstraction, desire, apocalyptic denouncement, and utopian promise. These are highly recognizable names in the canon, writers who manage to transcend the scandal of their fascist leanings, implying that in the scheme of modernist literary-historical studies, aesthetic value may ultimately out-merit unsavory politics. In *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (2007), Roger Griffin acknowledges these “usual suspects” of “individual modernist writers and intellectuals” caught up in the dense, intransigent complex of fascism and modernism, but adds that his own book “suggests that the many acts of ‘betrayal’ by the clerks of humanism in its liberal or socialist permutations have to be seen in the context of its abandonment by countless more obscure artists and intellectuals, and by a large proportion of educated ‘politically’ aware citizens.”¹¹

The sum of Hitler’s mythic power was far greater than that fascination of the modernists who were drawn to him or even of the Nazi party members who supported him. Indeed, the Hitler who appears in the work of Miller, Flanner, and Stein differs dramatically from Riefenstahl’s iconic Hitler, or from the political Hitler of Ian Kershaw and Joachim Fest, highlighting that the myth affected people who would never have imagined belonging to the Nazi party. Until the insightful provocation of “Portrait of a National Fetish: Gertrude Stein’s ‘Introduction to the Speeches of Maréchal Pétain’” (1996), Wanda Van Dusen’s breakthrough work on the poet’s Vichy collaboration, women modernists were rarely considered through as exacting a political lens, let alone one capable of magnifying their ambivalent responses to the authoritarians and despots of the day. Among women modernists, poet Mina Loy received relatively early scholarly attention for her fascination with Filippo Tommaso

Marinetti and the politics of Italian Futurism, whose promotion of racial purity and eugenicist philosophy were a far cry from Loy's Victorian upbringing. According to Carolyn Burke, Loy "was intrigued by Marinetti's *parole-in-libertà*, or words-set-free, a poetic form, he claimed, which liberated language from the patterns of linearity."¹² More recently, with an approach favoring moral complexity over likability, scholars such as Phyllis Lassner, Barbara Will, Erin Carlston, and Laura Frost have recognized the integral part that political affiliations play in the legacy of female modernists; their work holds a close lens to contradictory urges, problematic alliances, and discomfiting enterprises. Because of such scholarship, modernism's repertoire of political narratives is expanding, becoming more textured and complex: protagonists and antagonists are no longer so clearly defined. Carlston's *Thinking Fascism: Sapphic Modernism and Fascist Modernity* (1998) and Frost's *Sex Drives: Fantasies of Fascism in Literary Modernism* (2002) argue that modernists who exhibit fascist leanings – erotically, culturally, aesthetically – are not fascist per se. As Carlston puts it: "fascism itself could supply the vocabulary and methodology of even the most rigorously antifascist critiques." And, indeed, her work demonstrates how Djuna Barnes, Marguerite Yourcenar, and Virginia Woolf engaged with the "themes and images also found in fascist work," and effectively demonstrated the "relation between fascist and nonfascist modernity."¹³ Along similar lines, Frost explains that writers such as Virginia Woolf, Christopher Isherwood, Jean Genet, and Jean-Paul Sartre did not "subscribe to fascist politics but nevertheless produce[d] fictions of eroticized fascism." Frost recasts the attitudes of these and other male and female modernists toward Hitler specifically and Nazism in general, arguing that Marguerite Duras and Sylvia Plath "explore fantasies of an erotic, masochistic relationship to Nazism and in so doing work toward a more capacious understanding of female desire."¹⁴ That their explorations are enacted at the level of the imaginary, the fictional, and the poetic remains crucial to their appropriation of the erotic techniques of masochism; as Frost is quick to point out, volitional positioning differs dramatically from the brutal realities of Nazi victimization.

I share Frost's preoccupation with the nature of Nazism's allure for female modernists, but move outside the erotic framework she isolates, incorporating study of the aesthetic, intellectual, and professional meanings realized through their interest in dictators. With the women I examine, identification trumps desire, while identificatory relations are staged