

Tzvetan Todorov

Avant-gardes & totalitarianism

Translated by Arthur Goldhammer

The history of modernity is characterized by an immense transformation: the transition from a world structured by religion to a world organized exclusively in terms of human beings and worldly values. This process of emancipation and humanization, which has been going on for several centuries, has taken two main forms. First came the project of replacing the divine absolute with a collective human absolute, what revolutionaries in France called 'the Nation.' Initial enthusiasm for this project began to wane, however, from the moment the Revolution engendered the Terror. The struggle for liberty had ended in the suppression of liberty: was this not proof that the project itself had been ill-conceived from the beginning?

Tzvetan Todorov is Directeur de Recherche honoraire at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris. He is the author of numerous publications, including "The Conquest of America" (1984), "On Human Diversity" (1993), "Facing the Extreme" (1996), "Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism" (2002), "Hope and Memory" (2004), and "The New World Disorder" (2005).

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Those who did not wish to turn back the clock but were still dissatisfied with the present then sought a second way, that of an absolute accessible to the autonomous individual. The search for this second way itself took several forms; the most influential of these identified the individual absolute with beauty and favored what Friedrich Schiller would call the aesthetic education of man. This doctrine was Romanticism, adopted first in Germany and then throughout Europe; it glorified the poet in place of the prophet and the work of art in place of prayer. "Beauty in its absolute essence is God," declared a spokesman for the movement.

The fact that Romanticism reserved such a role for art and poetry, exemplary incarnations of the beautiful, did not mean that it neglected other human activities: for Schiller and his successors, aesthetic education and political vision went hand in hand. One of the best examples we have of the desire to improve the human condition by action in both spheres is that of the German composer Richard Wagner. Influenced by the revolutionary ideas of Mikhail Bakunin, Wagner took part in political agitation in Dresden in 1848 – 1849. Forced into exile by the ensuing repression, he sought refuge in Switzerland, where he produced

two texts setting forth his ideas about art and its relation to society: *Art and Revolution* and *The Art Work of the Future*, both written in 1849.

These texts make clear that Wagner aspired to the absolute but did not seek it in traditional religion. Art seemed to him the absolute's best incarnation: it was "living religion represented."¹ On this basis, he suggested, a two-way relationship between artistic activity and social life is established. If art was to flourish, society must have the most favorable conditions for it. Now, Wagner's world, as defined by the Germanic states of his day, was far from satisfying those conditions. Hence, that world had to be transformed; revolution was essential. Wagner was interested in politics only to the extent that politics enabled art to flourish. For him, social revolution was not an end in itself but a means to artistic revolution, the foundation of a new edifice of the arts.

Why bestow such honor on artists? This is where the second part of the relationship between art and society comes in: "The supreme goal of man is the artistic goal," Wagner declared, and "art is the highest activity of man," that which crowns his earthly existence. "Genuine art is the highest form of freedom." Wagner shared the dream of the Saint-Simonians, who believed that machines would soon take over man's most arduous labors. Freed from exhausting chores, all would turn their attention to artistic creation in freedom and joy.

Art was not opposed to life, as another version of Romantic doctrine held, but

1 Richard Wagner, *Œuvres en prose*, vol. 3 (Paris: Éditions d'Aujourd'hui, 1976), 91; English translation by William Ashton Ellis, *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, vol. 1 (New York: Broude Bros., 1966).

rather the culmination of life. 'Artistic humanity' was synonymous with 'free human dignity.' Craft was to become art; the proletarian was to transform himself into an artist; the industrial slave was to metamorphose into a producer of beauty. The society of the future would no longer exist to serve art, as Wagner demanded for the present, because all life would have become artistic. Here art became the ideal model of society. There would no longer be any need to celebrate artists because everyone would be an artist. To be more precise, the community as a whole would freely decide how it was to live, thus adopting the attitude of the creator. "But who will be the artist of the future? The poet? The actor? The musician? The sculptor? Let us put it in a nutshell: the people."² Because this could be achieved only by a *common* effort, Wagner opted for the opposite of egoism, namely, *communism* – whose *Manifesto* had been published the year before by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels.

The failure of the revolutions of 1848 throughout Europe would sound the death knell of such dreams. Thereafter began a second major period in the history of the worldly absolute, from 1848 to World War I, during which the two paths, the collective and the individual, the political and the aesthetic, diverged. Baudelaire, though an enthusiastic commentator on Wagner, saw the hope that art might influence the world as an illusion. Meanwhile, Marx showed little concern for the aesthetic education of the individual. The two proudly ignored each other, though neither dreamed of renouncing the absolute.

Things changed again between the two world wars – the period to which I now turn. Two trends can be discerned, but

2 *Ibid.*, 19, 16, 243.

each can be described as an actualization of the Wagnerian project of a total work of art, one that would be coextensive with life itself and with the world as a whole. On one hand, avant-garde groups, such as the Futurists and Constructivists, differentiated themselves from the modernist movement in general by attempting to expand the limits of the work of art so as to act on society at large. On the other hand, extremist political movements modeled their plans for transforming society and humanity on the creative activity of the artist. This was true of Communism, Fascism, and Nazism.

Both avant-garde artists and political extremists saw violence as a legitimate means of achieving their ends more rapidly. They knew they were promoting revolution, which might well provoke resistance. That resistance had to be overcome – if necessary, by force. We see signs of this rapprochement of the two major forms of the worldly absolute – the political and the artistic – in Russia, Italy, and Germany. The convergence persisted until the end of World War II.

Avant-garde movements appeared in Russia around 1910 with the first glimmerings of abstraction in painting and Futurist experimentation in poetry. Initially, however, the gulf between art and society widened rather than narrowed. Painters were exhorted to forget the material world and to obey no laws other than the intrinsic laws of their art. Later, however, people began to question this divorce of art from the visible world of objects and the intelligible world of the senses – and therefore to question as well the quest for the absolute in the work of art as opposed to society. Some of those who questioned this divorce were the same people who had advocated it earlier.

The new turn took the name ‘Constructivism’ because its adherents eschewed artistic creation in favor of constructing objects and artifacts intended to become part of the environment. Their first group show was held in 1921, but the first manifestations of the movement date from 1915, when Vladimir Tatlin presented his “Counter-Reliefs” at the same time that Kazimir Malevich unveiled his “Black Square.” The “Counter-Reliefs” were assembled from a variety of materials; and the artist’s goal was not to reveal to the world the existence of a ‘work’ but rather to bring out the intrinsic qualities of the materials used in the construction.

The difference between Constructivism and earlier avant-garde movements was not political: all enthusiastically supported the ongoing revolution. It was rather in the relation between the work of art and its social context. According to one Constructivist theoretician, Boris Arvatov, even when earlier artists took nothing from life but its spiritual content or other essential elements, as in the case of Wassily Kandinsky and Malevich, they still “placed art above life and sought to render life in the form of art.” By contrast, Constructivism “placed life above art” and gave primacy to function at the expense of form. “Not the creation of forms of great ‘aesthetic’ value but utilitarian construction from basic materials,” he wrote. “Not autonomy of the thing as such, but richness of content.”³

In concrete terms, Constructivism transformed all forms of expression.

³ Boris Arvatov quoted in J.-Cl. Marcadé, *L'avant-garde russe 1907 – 1927* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), 19; “L’utopie objectalisée,” 1923, in G. Conio, *Le constructivisme russe*, vol. 2 (Lausanne: L’Age d’Homme, 1986), 46.

Instead of producing literary works, writers were urged to focus on the utilitarian value of language. For example, Vladimir Mayakovsky would eventually turn to the production of political slogans and advertising. In his autobiography, he defined his group's position as being "against fiction and aestheticism, for propaganda, for qualified journalism, and for opinion writing." Indeed, the materials he had in mind were not only language but also real events evoked by language: rather than imaginative literature, Constructivists preferred what they called 'factual literature,' drawn from the world in which the writer lived. Thus, literature no longer existed in a separate sphere; everyone could participate in its creation. "In the Commune, everyone was a creator," wrote another Constructivist theoretician, Osip Brik,⁴ who was repeating, perhaps unwittingly, an idea of Novalis: "Every man should be an artist. Everything can become fine art."⁵

The same could be said of the visual arts: their goal was no longer to produce paintings or sculptures but rather to transform the world through artistic action. Alexander Rodchenko, the leader of the plastic Constructivists, was as fervently opposed to easel painting as Mayakovsky was to fiction. "Non-figurative painting has left the museum," he declared in the course of a 1920 show of his work. "Non-figurative painting is *the street itself, the town square, the city, and the entire world.*"⁶ He chose to make posters and to design wallpaper and fabrics.

4 Quoted in Conio, *Le constructivisme russe*, 153; Osip Brik, "L'artiste et la Commune," in Conio, *Le constructivisme russe*, vol. 1.

5 *Foi et Amour* in Novalis, *Œuvres*, vol. 1, 341.

6 Quoted in Conio, *Le constructivisme russe*, vol. 1, 44.

Here, too, reality was preferable to the imagination – Rodchenko devoted himself more and more to photography. Tatlin, meanwhile, went from "Counter-Reliefs" to architectural constructions, such as his (proposed but never-built) tower intended as a "Monument to the Third International." Architecture was the logical culmination of the Constructivists' plastic experiments: inspired by artistic principles, the architect shapes the world by building real houses, life-sized cities, and landscapes.

The performing arts followed the same course. Arvatov spoke of the "fusion of theater with life in socialist society" as though it were self-evident. But what form was this fusion to take? In his view, the goal was no longer to stage plays in the traditional manner, even if the audience were expanded to a broad segment of the population. It was rather to give form to life itself, "to construct our way of life rationally."⁷ This was the best way for the theater to fulfill its propaganda function. In film, Dziga Vertov's theories of montage similarly reflected Constructivist aims. Merely by filming what existed and then proceeding to an audacious montage, Vertov created beautiful films without inventing anything: he simply reorganized the visible world. The material itself acted on the viewer, provided the filmmaker knew how to put it together in the right way. Thus, everything in the world became potential material for the artist.

The Constructivist theoretical project was pushed to its ultimate limit by yet another theoretician, Nikolai Chuzhak, who explicitly proposed "the construction of life" as the movement's goal. In articles published in the journal *LEF*, edited by Mayakovsky, in 1923 and 1929,

7 Arvatov, "Utopie ou science?" in Conio, *Le constructivisme russe*, vol. 2, 65–66.

he drew the consequences of this extension of artistic experimentation's benefits to all of life. As he saw it, two conceptions of art were in contention. One of these, the bourgeois conception, saw "art as a method for obtaining *knowledge* of life." The other, the proletarian conception, perceived "art as a method for the *construction* of life." The first view limits art to representation and invites us to contemplate the world; the second seeks to dominate and transform the material. In this we hear echoes of Marx's celebrated formula concerning the status of knowledge: "Until now philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point, however, is to change it."⁸ Now it was the frontier between the artist and the political activist that was being crossed. Art in the old-fashioned style might, at best, serve as a kind of preparation, a "timid apprenticeship in the formidable creation of a new way of life now under way." Chuzhak believed that the moment had come to "declare war on artistic literature," or *belles-lettres*, that is, on literature based on opposing literature to life when in fact the two ought to merge to the point of indistinguishability. It was high time, he argued, to dispatch "belles-lettres to rot on the rubbish heap of outmoded art."⁹ The new art was simply to be one more method of constructing life.

At first sight, art emerged the loser from its conflict with life. Instead of delving into his imagination, the artist now borrowed his materials ready-made. Instead of creating original artifacts, he settled for demonstrating the

intrinsic quality of existing materials, which he assembled according to pre-established rules. Instead of creating works for disinterested contemplation, he placed them in service of society, subject to "social command." But his submission was also a kind of victory, and his humility stemmed from a higher ambition: the artist now identified with the political actor who shapes society, the people, and individuals, in accordance with a preconceived design. The Constructivist project thus represented, at the same time, a death sentence for art and its apotheosis, since the artist no longer worked solely with words or colors but rather with human beings: he became an artist, engineer, and demiurge all rolled into one.

If the dream was to become reality, however, politicians would have to agree to share their power with artists. This did not happen: none of these grandiose utopian conceptions was realized. By the end of the 1920s, the last vestiges of the avant-garde in Russia were reduced to silence. The leaders of the movement were either punished – victims of the revolution they themselves had wanted – or else turned into obedient propagandists for the regime.

At the end of World War I, Germany experienced political upheaval similar to Russia's but with the opposite result: The revolution was crushed in bloody repression. The uprising of the (communist) Spartacists in early 1919 ended in failure; its leaders, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, were executed; and the liberal Weimar Republic was established. Yet a transformation of the arts had begun even as the political revolution was being prepared: a "council (*soviet*) for the arts" was established, and the architect Walter Gropius became its codirector. The council declared that

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8 Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Etudes philosophiques* (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1947), 11.

9 Conio, *Le constructivisme russe*, vol. 2, 39, 23, 170, 178; Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach."

“art and the people must be one” and that “art will henceforth be not for the pleasure of a few but for the welfare and life of the masses.”¹⁰

Once again, this project was reminiscent of Wagner’s some seventy years earlier. Like Wagner, Gropius seemed to want to compensate for the failure of the political revolution by launching a project in the arts (whereas, in Russia, the victory of the revolution had for a time facilitated progress in the arts). And again, like Wagner, Gropius dreamed of unifying the arts, though not in opera but rather in architecture, which he envisioned as absorbing painting and sculpture.

One week after the inauguration of the Weimar Republic in 1919, the Bauhaus was founded. This was a group of architects led by Gropius and committed to the same principles as the council. Art does not coincide with life, according to the Bauhaus manifesto, but rather aims to create a total work of art, an edifice “that will one day rise toward the sky, the crystalline symbol of a new faith.” This edifice would resemble a cathedral more than anything else: like the old religion, the new faith would need a temple. Both were incarnations of the absolute. But this project, with its religious overtones, was not maintained for long. Bauhaus theoreticians could not ignore the fact that the religious absolute had been brought down to earth. Modern man’s temple was no longer a cathedral. “Man has become God – his house is his church.”¹¹

10 In *Anthologie du Bauhaus* (Brussels: Didier Devillez, 1995), 51–54; quoted in E. Michaud, “L’oeuvre d’art totale et le totalitarisme,” in *L’oeuvre d’art totale* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 43, whose analysis I am following here.

11 *Bauhaus 1919 – 1969*, Musée National d’Art Moderne, 1969, 13; quoted in Michaud, *L’oeuvre*

Thus, the work envisioned by the founders of the Bauhaus gradually drew closer to everyday life. The goal was not only to build homes for people but also to transform their entire environment, from furniture and utensils to cities and landscapes. Such a program required knowledge of the ‘people’ for whom the artist worked: Gropius introduced courses in sociology and even biology at the Bauhaus. By transforming the setting in which people lived, one could perfect the people themselves. By producing objects for everyday use, artists could influence individual and collective ways of life.

In this period the Russians and Germans maintained constant contact. Kandinsky began teaching at the Bauhaus in 1922. The arrival of the Hungarian artist Laszlo Moholy-Nagy in 1923 introduced a significant new influence, as he was steeped in the ideas of the Constructivists. The goal, he declared in 1925, should not be to create a total work of art à la Wagner but rather “to synthesize all the moments of life, which is itself a total work of art encompassing everything else and annihilating all separation.”¹² The aim was no longer to produce art but to shape life. To build houses and cities was to organize a vital process. Thus architect-artists would henceforth fashion a new mankind.

Once again, however, Constructivist ambitions would run up against political power. The founders of the Bauhaus would not have been unhappy to carry out the architectural plans of the Nazis, who came to power in 1933, but the Na-

d’art totale, 47; *Anthologie du Bauhaus*, 110; Michaud, *L’oeuvre d’art totale*, 53.

12 Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, *Peinture, photographie, film* (Nîmes: J. Chambon, 1993), 78; Michaud, *L’oeuvre d’art totale*, 54.

zis chose to implement their own 'total work of art.' The political revolution did not need the support of revolutionary art.

In fact, there was a deep reason why the role of demiurge was not accorded to artists: political leaders reserved it for themselves. The identification of the political leader with the artist, each working with different material but in a similar spirit, reflected a long tradition but had yet to be transformed into a program of action. Plato compared the statesman to the painter, whose gestures mimicked those of the divine creator. "[N]o city could ever be blessed unless its lineaments were traced by artists who used the heavenly model They will take the city and the characters of men, as they might a table, and first wipe it clean." Elsewhere he compares the legislator to the poet: "We are ourselves authors of a tragedy, . . . the finest and best we know how to make. In fact, our whole polity has been constructed as a dramatization of a noble and perfect life [W]e also are poets in the finest of all dramas."¹³ The German Romantics, inspired by Platonic concepts of beauty, rediscovered this comparison of the statesman with the artist – an artist who works with an entire country as his raw material.

In any case, whether in Plato, in French revolutionary discourse, or in Romantic doctrine, the idea of applying artistic creation to social life remained just an idea rather than becoming a concrete project. The situation did not really change until the advent of the modern totalitarian state, in which the supreme leader wields the means necessary to re-

13 *Republic*, 500e – 501a; *Laws*, 817b. Quoted from *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (New York: Pantheon Bollingen Series, 1963).

duce the metaphor to its literal meaning. Once political religions supplanted traditional beliefs, the transformation of the individual and that of the state could be promoted in parallel. The new man and the new society both became works of art to be produced by the leader of the nation.

Mussolini was quick to seize on the parallel between political action and creative work. In November 1917, he wrote in *Popolo d'Italia* that "the Italian people is now a deposit of precious mineral. A work of art is still possible. It requires a government. A man. A man who combines the delicate touch of an artist with the iron fist of a warrior." In 1922 he described himself as the "sculptor of the Italian nation" and declared that "politics works with the most difficult and obdurate of materials, man." The politician, like the artist, must create the perfect work out of the most refractory material: marble in the one case, man in the other. To anyone who would listen, Mussolini explained that his goal was to create new Italians, to transform the Italian soul, to shape the masses, to mold an entire people. "The whole problem," as he put it some years later to Emil Ludwig, "is to dominate the masses as an artist does,"¹⁴ to turn a shapeless raw material into a masterpiece. To achieve this goal, he may use physical means (Mussolini embraced various eugenicist ideas that were in the air) or spiritual ones: the Great War had been a formidable educator, without which the new fascist man would have been inconceivable.

14 Quoted in *L'homme nouveau dans l'Europe fasciste* (Paris: Fayard, 2004), 7; quoted in E. Michaud, *Un art de l'éternité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 17; Emil Ludwig, *Colloqui con Mussolini* (Milan: A. Mondadori, 1932); quoted in *L'homme nouveau*, 284.

In peacetime, mass organizations, especially youth groups, would play an essential role and help transform the whole country into a vast laboratory of human experimentation.

Mussolini's project had one distinctive feature: *il Duce* was not content simply to be the artisan of Italy's renewal but portrayed himself as its most consummate product. He was both artist and work of art. In seeking to fashion a new man, he took his inspiration from his own image. In the beginning he sculpted his own image, as if he were a statue; the child of modest background transformed himself by a conscious effort of the will, so as to appear to his compatriots as a perfect man, an example for others. Mussolini never missed an opportunity to demonstrate that he was capable of doing the work of both peasant and worker. He also liked to demonstrate his mastery of sports, such as swimming and skiing, as well as his ability to write philosophy and literature. An editorial in *Critica fascista* flatly stated, "For now the regime's only great artist is its founder, Mussolini. All the speeches he has given and all the political articles and essays he has written suffice to show that he is our greatest contemporary writer of prose."¹⁵ This was more than just flattery. Once again, the association of art with politics was not fortuitous.

Mussolini found both inspiration and support in the contemporary avant-garde, especially the Futurists. The ideological proximity of the artistic and the political movements is obvious. To begin, both were fond of the military metaphor 'avant-garde,' the forerunner heralding the coming of the revolution and a new day. Both believed in the regenerative virtues of violence. Both sought to

exercise their influence over all aspects of society. Both bore the hallmarks of political religions. The Futurists recognized themselves in Mussolini and were pleased that he reserved an important role for cultural action in the fabrication of the new man. In this respect, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the Italian Futurist, resembled Mayakovsky, the Russian Futurist: both sought to place their talent at the service of the revolution.

Fascism relied on artistic action to transform society, to make it a spectacle worthy of admiration. Foreign observers noted the aesthetic aspects of Fascist political action. The French writer Robert Brasillach wrote that Fascism was "a kind of poetry, the distinctive poetry of the twentieth century (along with Communism, to be sure)."¹⁶ Particular attention was devoted to anything susceptible of being turned into a spectacle for the masses – holidays, parades, and indeed architecture, which was regarded as the supreme art because it encompassed all individuals and was available for all to admire. But the aestheticization of the political never became an end in itself; it always remained subordinate to the political objective. What became sacred under Fascism was not the beautiful but the state.

It has to be said that, in the eyes of *il Duce* himself, his project ended in failure: he did not succeed in transforming the Italians into new men or valiant Fascists, and he therefore believed that Italy would lose the war. He formulated even this failure in artistic terms, however: the problem lay in the material, too soft for its intended purpose. "What I lacked was good material," he told Galeazzo Ciano a few months before his death. "Michelangelo himself needed marble

15 February 15, 1927; quoted in *L'homme nouveau*, 82.

16 "Lettre à un soldat de la classe 60," in *Écrit à Fresne* (Paris: Plon, 1967), 140.

to make statues. If he had had only clay, he would have been a potter and nothing more.”¹⁷

With Hitler, the relation between political action and artistic activity was no less powerful, but it took a somewhat different form. As is well known, *der Führer* reserved a special place for Wagner, whose very name stands, in German-speaking countries, for the idea of the artist – not as one figure among others in society but as the very model of what society ought to be. Hermann Rauschning, in his book *Hitler Told Me*, reports, “Hitler refused to admit that he had precursors. He made only one exception to this rule: Richard Wagner.” This acknowledgment of Wagner was not an isolated act. On May 5, 1924, while in prison following an abortive attempt to seize power, Hitler wrote to Wagner’s son Siegfried to say that he found in Siegfried’s father “the spiritual sword with which we are fighting today.”¹⁸ Later he established a special relationship with the inhabitants of Bayreuth.

What accounts for this dubious privilege accorded to Wagner? Hitler had been fascinated by Wagner’s music from his youth in Austria. *Rienzi*, in particular, plunged him into a state of stupor and ecstasy. But his worship of Wagner did not end there. His best friend from this period, August Kubizek, reports that “Adolf sometimes recited by heart . . . the text of a letter or note of Wagner’s or read to me out loud from his writing, such as the *The Art Work of the Future* or

17 Galeazzo Ciano, *Diario 1939 – 1943* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1963), 445; quoted in E. Gentile, *Qu’est-ce que la fascisme?* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 393.

18 Hermann Rauschning, *Hitler m’a dit* (Paris: Coopération, 1939), 255; *Musique en jeu* 23 (1976): 60.

Art and Revolution.”¹⁹ Hitler himself claimed to have seen *Tristan and Isolde* thirty or forty times.

The special place accorded to Wagner’s youthful opera *Rienzi* suggests a possible explanation for Hitler’s attitude, particularly since his devotion to that work persisted throughout his life. Years later, the overture to *Rienzi* was regularly played at Nazi Party conventions. When Hitler visited the composer’s daughter-in-law, Winifred Wagner, in 1939, he spoke to her of the impact this opera had had on him. Kubizek, who witnessed the conversation, reports what Hitler said about hearing the work for the first time: “It was at that moment that it all began.” Hitler said much the same thing to his other friend (and favorite architect), Albert Speer: “While still a young man, listening to this inspired music at the Linz opera, I had the vision of a German Reich, which I would unify and make great.”²⁰

One might therefore assume that Hitler’s attraction to this opera was determined, above all, by its subject: how a powerful orator can capture the attention of a people and what dangers he ought to anticipate. But this explanation does not go far enough, as we can see from Hitler’s familiarity with Wagner’s other musical works as well as with his writings. Hitler, who in his youth dreamed of becoming a painter, could not have been unaware of Wagner’s general notions about the relationship

19 August Kubizek, *Adolf Hitler. Mein Jugendfreund* (Graz: L. Stocker, 1953), 101; quoted in B. Hamann, *La Vienne d’Hitler* (Paris: Editions des Syrtes, 2001), 88.

20 Kubizek, *Adolf Hitler*, 343; quoted in Hamann, *La Vienne d’Hitler*, 77; Albert Speer, *Journal de Spandau* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1975), 108; quoted in Michaud, *Un art de l’éternité*, 86.

between art and society. What attracted him was precisely the continuity between the two, the possibility that each might support the other. Though Wagner gave up on revolution in the streets to devote himself to the creation of a total work of art, his opera, the goal remained the same: to act on his people, to make his country great and prosperous. Similarly, Hitler, having experienced not revolution but war, gave up the practice of painting and committed himself to producing an even more 'total' work of art: the new German people. Unlike Mussolini, however, he did not put himself forward as an example of a successful 'work.' In his case, the gap between the guide and the masses was unbreachable. Hitler was an artist, not a work of art.

The resemblance of the two postures, that of the artist and that of the statesman, can be found in the work of other Nazi theoreticians. In 1929, Joseph Goebbels, who thought of himself as a writer and therefore an artist, wrote a novel entitled *Michael*, in which he borrowed Mussolini's simile: the people were like the sculptor's stone, material to be shaped. Two years later he insisted: "For us the mass is but shapeless material. Only the hand of the artist can bring forth a people from the mass and a nation from the people." After coming to power, he wrote an open letter to orchestra conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler in April 1933: "We who are giving shape to modern German politics think of ourselves as artists entrusted with the lofty responsibility of taking the brute mass and shaping it into a solid and complete image of the people." No work of art could be more total or more ambitious.

And the best preparation for the role of statesman was none other than practice in the arts. In April 1936, the Nazi party newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter*

published a front-page article entitled "Art as the Basis of Creative Political Power," which stated, "There exists an intimate and indissoluble connection between the Führer's artistic works and his great political work . . . His artistic endeavors . . . were the prerequisite for his creative idea of the totality."²¹ It was because he had been an artist that Hitler knew how to lead his people. It is worth noting, moreover, that a good half of the members of Hitler's first government had previously been involved in the arts. In 1937, Goebbels concluded: "All of Hitler's work is proof of his artistic spirit: his state is truly an edifice of classical composition. The artistic creation of his political work establishes his preeminence among German artists, a position he has earned by his character and nature."²² Wagner's dream seemed to be coming true at last.

Why is the artistic model so attractive to politicians? We know that since the Romantic crisis, artists, especially poets, have sought to occupy the place of priests, of being guides and educators of the people. In the eyes of Nazi leaders, artists also enjoyed this advantage over the servants of the old religions: they were not obedient to an independent Book or law but were free to define their own goals and their own ways of achieving them. This is the privilege of genius, the model of every artist: it spurns all rules so as to be totally free to create. By the end of the nineteenth century, liberation from the weight of tradition had

21 *Combat pour Berlin*, ed. Saint-Just (Paris, 1966, original 1931), 38; quoted in Michaud, *Un art de l'éternité*, 20, 62.

22 Quoted by Franz Dröge and Michael Müller, *Die Macht der Schönheit, Avangarde und Faschismus oder die Geburt der Massenkultur* (Hamburg: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1995), 57.

become the rallying cry of avant-garde movements in the arts. Cubists, Futurists, Dadaists, and abstract painters outspokenly asserted their right to shape the world according to their will.

Thus, for Hitler it was no longer enough simply to aestheticize politics, to stage triumphal marches and funeral processions, to combine dazzling lighting with stirring music. He had to fuse politics and aesthetics, subordinating all institutions and actions to the ultimate objective of producing a *Volk*, a new people – new in both a spiritual and a physical sense. The artist had become demiurge. “Anyone who fails to see that National Socialism is a religion doesn’t know anything about it,” Hitler said to Rauschning. “It is more than a religion: it is the will to create a new man.”²³ He conceived of this as a deliberate effort, like that of an artist in his studio or an inventor in a laboratory, on the scale of an entire nation.

The two principal means of carrying out this vast project were propaganda and eugenics. The propaganda effort could well profit from the example of artists, while the eugenics effort would depend on scientific progress. Both art and science were to be enlisted in support of the Nazi program. Eugenics meant eliminating defective individuals and inferior races as well as selecting the best individuals and controlling their reproduction. No longer was science content to interpret the world; now, in keeping with Marx’s dictum, it aimed to change it, to bring it closer to the desired ideal – an ideal that science claimed to have deduced rigorously from empirical observation. In this it resembled art: what was the work of the sculptor if not to bring forth from a shapeless mass of

stone or wood a perfect form, if not to shape clay or plaster in accordance with an idea of perfection?

Thus, what mattered was not so much art as such, although Hitler invariably emphasized its exemplary role; it was rather art in the service of life. Hermann von Keyserling, a Nazi fellow-traveler, said as much in the title of a speech he gave in 1936: “Life is an Art.” Germanic myths and legends of the sort that Wagner had exploited were invaluable, but it was, above all, the everyday life of the German people that would benefit from an infusion of myth and legend. Every individual would behave as an artist, at the appropriate level. Work must become creative; utilitarian activities must respect norms of beauty.

Hitler seized power in Germany after gaining a foothold in the 1932 elections. At almost the same time, Stalin, having defeated his rivals within the Communist Party, consolidated his absolute power and began to devote some of his attention to the situation of the arts in the Soviet Union. Previously, various schools had competed for the right to be seen as the foremost representative of the Communist Revolution. Stalin put an end to this squabbling by replacing a range of arts organizations with a single centralized ‘union’ per profession: a Writers’ Union, a Painters’ Union, and so on.

At the same time the slogan ‘socialist realism’ was imposed as the defining goal of Soviet art. At first sight a danger of incompatibility between the two terms seems to exist, since ‘realism’ appears to involve the relation of representation to reality and therefore to belong to the category of truth, whereas ‘socialist’ refers to an ideal and therefore involves the power of a work to promote the good. What if truth and goodness,

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23 Dröge and Müller, *Die Macht der Schönheit*, 273.

‘is’ and ‘ought,’ proved not to be so harmonious? What if realism did not lead to the defense of socialism? Stalin, who liked to discuss such questions with writers, believed such incompatibility to be inconceivable. “If a writer honestly reflects the truth of life, he will inevitably come to Marxism,” he insisted.²⁴

Andrei Zhdanov, a Party theoretician, provided the explanation of this inevitable solidarity, in a speech to the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934. Socialism was the Soviet future, he said, and the seed of that future already existed in the present. Writers who realistically reported what they saw around them must therefore include the socialist future. “Soviet literature must learn to show our heroes, must learn to project itself into our future. That future is no mere utopian ideal, because the groundwork for it is already being laid today as a result of conscious planned effort.”²⁵ But was that future so certain that it could be described as present? Yes, because progress is no accident: the future will unfold according to both the laws of history and the will of the Party (as set forth in its official plans). Hence, it is perfectly predictable.

Zhdanov also reminded the Congress that during a 1932 meeting with writers Stalin had bestowed a new definition on them: they were “engineers of the human soul.” In the Russian tradition, it was commonplace for the great writer to be awarded the role of teacher of the nation. Now the teacher was to be re-

24 Report by S. I. Sechukov, *Neistovye revniteli* (Moscow: Moskovskij rabochij, 1970), 339; quoted in V. Strada, “Le réalisme socialiste,” in *Histoire de la littérature russe. Le XXe siècle*, vol. 3 (Paris: Fayard, 1990), 20.

25 *Pervyj vsesojuznyj s'ezd sovetskikh pisatelej* (Moscow, 1934), 5.

placed by the engineer, and the methods of the humble craftsman were to give way to scientific knowledge of reality and of the masses whose soul it was the writer’s task to shape.

However, unlike the Constructivists, who toyed with the same image, Stalin denied all initiative to the specialists of the spirit. The Party was in charge of construction, the master builder; the writer-engineer had only to follow orders. The need to observe reality and describe it faithfully was not even mentioned. The role of the writer, like that of the Marxist philosopher, was not to interpret the world but to change it. The works of the 1930s that adhered most closely to this program were narratives of individual or collective education. By describing the promise of the present, the writer helped bring the future into being. As the Romantics had hoped, life imitated art. Thus, Nikolai Ostrovsky’s *How the Steel Was Tempered* was the story of a man whose Bolshevik faith enabled him to overcome paralysis and blindness, while Anton Makarenko’s *Pedagogical Poem* told of the transformation of a group of young vagabonds. Literature therefore ceased to search for an absolute of its own and subordinated itself to the propaganda needs of the Party, which stood alone in possession of a worldly absolute.

Much the same can be said of the other arts, which were denied any autonomous objective. Looking for an appropriate form, artists turned, as in Nazi Germany, to the pompous bourgeois styles of the nineteenth century rather than to the revolutionary art of the twentieth, which was deemed less effective. In practice, however, even such zealous propagandists as Mayakovsky, Vsevolod Meyerhold, and Sergei Eisenstein tangled with the Party, with the result that the first committed suicide, the

second was shot, and the third knuckled under and toed the party line.

When Stalin called Soviet writers “engineers of the human soul,” he was flattering them. In reality, they were mere technicians. The true creator of new souls, the blacksmith who hammered out a new nation, was of course Stalin himself, backed by his closest collaborators. The only true artist was the dictator – an artist close to God – since his work was the entire nation, with millions of people as his raw material. Paradoxically, we find confirmation of this idea in a text written by the greatest Soviet poet of the period, Boris Pasternak. In a poem significantly entitled “The Artist” and published in a Moscow newspaper on January 1, 1936, Pasternak drew a contrast between the solitary poet, who stays home and contemplates his soul, and the man in the Kremlin, Stalin, who was bringing to life the most audacious of dreams and who daily performed “a fugue in two voices,” combining “two extreme principles that know everything there is to know about each other,” poetry and power. He did not act as an individual would act because he was “a genius of action,” “an act of global dimension.”²⁶ What the traditional poet accomplished in his imagination, Stalin would accomplish on the scale of world history: altering the destiny of mankind.

From this standpoint, art in the narrow sense was merely one of the means available to the artist-dictator. To be sure, it was a particularly effective means, as Communist theoreticians noted and Nazi propagandists agreed. Education was another means of action, social pressure exerted through the family a third, and manipulation of informa-

tion a fourth. The state security organs, known successively as the Cheka, GPU, NKVD, and KGB, had every imaginable means of coercion at their disposal. Might they not turn out to be better “engineers of the human soul” than writers? Indeed, Maxim Gorky, the leading Soviet writer, described their agents in just those terms: “The GPU is not only the keen sword of the dictatorship of the proletariat but also a school for the reeducation of tens of thousands of people who are hostile to us.” After a visit to the White Sea-Baltic Canal, a gigantic project built by the labor of *zeks* from Soviet prison camps, he described it as a “miracle of reeducation,”²⁷ a successful transformation of human beings through labor, conveniently forgetting the fact that the canal bed was littered with the corpses of prisoners. Under totalitarianism, in Russia as in Germany, “work makes free.”

The physical transformation of the human race was not as important a part of the Communist project as it was of the Nazi project, but it did play a role. Evidence of this can be seen in Leon Trotsky’s *Literature and Revolution*, published in Moscow in 1924. In the conclusion of that work, Trotsky tried to imagine the socialist society of the future. The frontier between art and industry would be abolished – everyone would be an artist – and so would the boundary between art and nature. Indeed, the man of the future would not be content simply to reshape society; he would also transform nature to suit his desires. “The current location of mountains, rivers, field and meadows, steppes, forests, and coasts cannot be regarded as definitive.” The human demiurge was truly the

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26 O. Ivinskaya, *Mes années avec Pasternak* (Paris: Fayard, 1978).

27 *Belomorsko-Baltiiskij kanal imeni Stalina* (Moscow, 1934), 397; quoted in M. Heller, “Maxime Gorki,” in *Histoire de la littérature russe*, 78–82.

equal of God: he would create a world to suit his own convenience. It was in this context that Trotsky envisioned the transformation of the human element of the universe. This task would be entrusted, as we have seen, to educators, both of individuals and of society as a whole. It would also be shared by the organizers of communal life. "At the initiative of society, the family will be relieved of the tedious chore of feeding and raising children." Life in communist society could then advance not blindly but in a fully planned and controlled way.

But that was not all. Trotsky envisioned an even more radical way of obtaining the humanity he wanted: eugenics. Why should one shrink from changing the human race through selection and organic action, or what would today be called genetic manipulation? Scientific artificial selection would supplement natural selection: "Should the human race, which no longer grovels before God, the Czar, or Capital, capitulate to the obscure laws of heredity and blind sexual selection? When man becomes free, he will seek to achieve a better equilibrium in the functioning of his organs and a more harmonious development of his tissues." After a successful physical transformation, human beings "will achieve a higher level and create a superior biological and social type, a superman if you will."²⁸

Trotsky would later be deprived of power by Stalin and never have the opportunity to put his ideas into practice, though the Nazis did. In pursuit of the goal of creating a new man and a new society, Stalin made do with more familiar levers of power, among them the party, the police, educators, writers, and artists.

28 Leon Trotsky, *Littérature et révolution* (Paris: Julliard, 1964), 213, 215, 217.

It should be said, however, that the dictator was alone in identifying his work with artistic creation. The subjugated masses, whether in Stalin's Russia, Hitler's Germany, or Mussolini's Italy, failed to perceive the fusion of politics and art and were unaware that their lives were being shaped in accordance with a canon of beauty. The absolute in the name of which the state subjugated them, and which they were supposed to worship, wore a very different visage; it appeared as a collective, not an individual, ideal. In Fascist Italy, this new god was called the nation or the state; in Nazi Germany, it was the people; in Soviet Russia, Communism. In all three places, the high priests of the cult organized themselves as a political party. The average citizen of these states was not at liberty to shape his own life as a work of art, according to his own conception of beauty. He was obliged to conform to the common ideal. Where the dictator saw the fusion of two modern approaches to the absolute, the political and the artistic, the people saw only the imposition of a political absolute: the revolution, the party, the guide. The role of beauty was quite minor.

How are we to interpret this parallel between the ideas and forces that inspired both avant-garde artists and totalitarian dictators in the period between the two world wars? Following Walter Benjamin, it has often been noted that extremist political movements had a tendency to combine aesthetic and political considerations in two different ways: "Fascism naturally tends to aestheticize politics . . . The response of communism is to politicize art."²⁹

29 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1986).

What we see here, however, is a proximity that cannot be reduced to an instrumentalization of one project by the other. Rather, it shows us how to understand both as stemming from the same matrix. What dictators and avant-garde artists have in common is their radicalism, their fundamentalism. Both are prepared to start *ex nihilo*, to take no account of what already exists, in order to construct a work based solely on their own criteria. What differentiates them, by contrast, is the scale on which they work: that of an entire country, including its people, in one case; that of a book, a canvas, a stage, a house, a street, or, at most, a neighborhood in the other. What they have in common is their totalizing ambition, which recognizes no sacred boundary: the artist does not respect existing aesthetic canons; the dictator is ready to overturn all prior social norms. Faithful to the Promethean project that permeates all modernity, both artist and dictator propose to fabricate an entirely new art, new men, new peoples. Nothing is given; everything is the product of the will. Their ambition is infinite, yet it defines an enclosed space, because it recognizes nothing outside of it. Artists and dictators, intoxicated by pride, are united by the belief that they are masters of the entire process of construction – whether it be of works of art or of societies.

This comparison of Romantic and revolutionary projects also suggests a more profound relation between the two, going back to their origins in the nineteenth century. Consciously or unconsciously, Romantic thinkers embraced a Manichaean vision of the world: for them, artists and poets constituted the elite of mankind, and art played the role reserved for gnosis in ancient religious doctrine. The same can be said of utopian thinkers, who dreamed of collective

salvation, whether of all mankind or of a particular people. Political and aesthetic Manichaeism may find themselves at odds in certain circumstances, yet they share similar worldviews. Proponents of totalitarian doctrine may have been contemptuous of Romantic thinkers, just as Romantic thinkers may have spurned political engagement of any kind, yet both were caught up in the same historical movement. Karl Popper, who was aware of the similarity between political extremism and aesthetic extremism, ended his analysis of the origins of totalitarianism with these words: “The enchanting dream of a marvelous world is nothing more than a romantic vision.”³⁰

We now know the damage the dream of total revolution can do when the ideal that inspires it is political in nature. The utopian visions that proposed a radiant future in the place of present mediocrity turned into the totalitarian systems of the twentieth century, a remedy far worse than the disease they purported to cure. Today we spurn the peddlers of political dreams, the utopians who promised imminent happiness for all, because we have learned that such promises served to hide the sinister maneuvers of Lenin and Stalin, Mussolini and Hitler. We sometimes think of Romantic images of artistic perfection as the antithesis of those political dreams. In reality, that is far from the truth. The two were not simply associated or competitive; they grew out of the same conception of the world, the same conviction of possessing a recipe for the perfect creation, one that would not need to take any account of earlier ways of living or creating. Both posited a radical opposition between low and high, present and future, evil and good, and sought to

30 Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London: Routledge, 1945).

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eliminate the first term of each pair once and for all. But if the ideal ceases to be a horizon and turns into a rule of everyday life, disaster follows: the reign of terror. History teaches us that the Romantic dream – though infinitely less lethal than its inverted double, political utopianism – is doomed to disappointment nonetheless.