The Total Work of Art in European Modernism

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This is the first book in English to treat the total work of art as a key concept in aesthetic modernism, and, as far as I can see, the first to attempt an overview of the theory and history of the total work in European art since the French Revolution. It is therefore both an ambitious and necessarily preliminary undertaking, in which my guiding concern has been to demonstrate the significance of the idea of the total work for modern art and politics. The term “total work of art” translates the German *Gesamtkunstwerk*, coined by Wagner in the wake of the 1848 revolutions. If the total work of art is usually understood as the intention to reunite the arts into the one integrated work, it is tied from the beginning to the desire to recover and renew the public function of art. The synthesis of the arts in the service of social and cultural regeneration was a particularly German dream, which made Wagner and Nietzsche the other center of aesthetic modernism, alongside Baudelaire and Mallarmé. A spectrum of questions is posed by the idea of the total work of art, which run counter to key assumptions of aesthetic modernism, such as the separation and autonomy of the arts. Separation foregrounds and privileges the internal logic of the individual arts and fails to recognize the countervailing quest for synthesis, especially in avant-garde theory and practice. Autonomy foregrounds the emancipation of the arts from social controls and fails to recognize the countervailing quest for a new social role for art, especially in avant-garde theory and practice. The total work, moreover, cuts across the neat equation of avant-gardism
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with progress and deconstructs the familiar left-right divide between revolution and reaction, or between the modern and the antimodern. Situated at the interface between art, religion, and politics, the total work of art invites us to rethink the relationship between art and religion, and art and politics, in European modernism.

The European reception of Wagner’s music dramas and ideas from the 1880s onward, led by the French symbolists, was the catalyst that drove the quest for synthesis of the arts and the utopian dreams of cultural and political regeneration. Standing at the center of what Heidegger called the long nineteenth century, Wagner united in his theory of the Gesamtkunstwerk the two main conceptions of the total work of art that emerged out of the shock of the French Revolution and the corresponding consciousness of a new historical epoch. I therefore argue for twin lineages of the total work, a French revolutionary and a German aesthetic, which interrelate across the whole epoch of European modernism, culminating in the aesthetic and political radicalism of the avant-garde movements in response to the crisis of autonomous art and the accelerating political crisis of European societies from the 1890s on. This critical period from the turn of the century to the 1930s forms the central focus of the present study. I explore these key years of the European avant-garde from two closely related perspectives: the meta-aesthetic and the meta-political. The search for a synthesis of the arts was tied to a vision of transcendence of the sphere of art in the total work of art. These projects expressed a common will to recover the lost public function of art, a will that pointed beyond the aesthetic revolutions of the avant-garde to political revolution as the promise of a complete reunion of art and life. I examine how this will to revolution played out in relation to the totalitarian movements of the interwar years, how, that is, the avant-garde’s utopian dreams of the total work found perverted realization in totalitarianism’s total work of art.

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The collapse of the ancien régime in France demonstrated in dramatic fashion the demise of what we may call the premodern Gesamtkunstwerk, which had attained its last flowering in the baroque integration of the arts. Church, palace, and opera house, and the pomp and splendor of religious services, courtly festivals, opera, and ballet, made the self-representation of absolutism into a theatrical celebration of social and religious unity. The French Revolution shattered these idols: churches became temples to national heroes (the Pantheon), palaces became national museums (the Louvre); the emancipation of art from service to throne and altar was proclaimed. The political and religious caesura of the French Revolution thus posed the question of the destination of art. From social patronage to the market, from the organic living totality of the setting of church and palace to the decontextualized setting of the museum and the retrospective gaze of art history, the liberating kiss of the Enlightenment ratified the cultural secularization of art, that is to say, the dissolution of the alliance of art, throne, and altar. Set free from patronage of the
court and from the ideological control of the church and religion, the newly gained autonomy of art becomes the source of the permanent but productive crisis that drove the quest for self-transcendence. Hans Belting speaks of art’s feverish self-interrogation in the space vacated by religion.\(^1\) Politics and art in the modern sense not only presuppose the loss of religious legitimation; they both also laid claim to the inheritance of religion in their own right.

The critique of bourgeois society and its alienations led to a plethora of countervisions of social solidarity, archaizing or futuristic in inspiration, from Romantic and catholic idealizations of the Middle Ages to anarchistic or early socialist utopias, from Saint-Simon’s benevolent régime industriel and Comte’s positivism to Marx’s classless society. In art we observe two main reintegrating tendencies: the social, the association and collaboration of artists, from the Nazarenes at the beginning of the nineteenth century through to the bohemian countercultures and the militant avant-garde movements of the early decades of the twentieth century; and the ideological, the search for a new social function for art. Both these tendencies found a common focus in the unifying idea of the total work of art, which runs through the whole period of modernism from the French Revolution to the Bolshevik and Fascist revolutions. The modern idea stands, however, in an inverse relation to its premodern predecessors, whose function was to express and celebrate the existing unity of society. The modern idea of the total work of art both intends a critique of existing society and anticipates a redemptive or utopian alternative.

The total work of art in modernity can thus be thought of as an ideal focus for the persistence of the sacred in relation to culture and power: “Ever since the death of God, the religion of art of the Romantics, the new priests and seers, had entrusted to the community of artists the heritage no longer assumed by the Christian church: namely the task of winning people over by rejecting the life of this world and offering in exchange an image of a better world to come, an image able to lead people toward physical and moral perfection.”\(^2\) In harmony with these romantic, totalizing tendencies, the total work of art articulates a critique of modern, aesthetically differentiated art. This countermovement to our customary understanding of modern art as an end in itself is crucial to an adequate understanding of the idea of the avant-garde, which received its decisive formative impulse from the Saint-Simonians when they launched in the 1820s the project of an artistic avant-garde marching in the vanguard of social change. They envisaged a “beautiful destiny” for artists, that “of exercising in society a positive power, a truly priestly function,” in association with scientists and industrialists.

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The artwork of the future was preceded by manifestos announcing its advent, usually in the form of philosophical-historical speculations. This is the case throughout the nineteenth century, from the French revolutionary debates on the function of festivals, Schiller and Hölderlin’s visions of aesthetic education, Schelling’s anticipation of a synthesis of the ancients and moderns that will consummate the modern age, Mazzini’s philosophy of music, Wagner’s union of art and revolution in the artwork of the future, and Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* up to Mallarmé’s “dreams of a poet.” But it was Wagner’s writings and music dramas, along with Nietzsche’s passionate advocacy and subsequent apostasy, that provided the inescapable reference point for all future developments. Wagner is perhaps unique among composers in that his extramusical influence has been even greater than his musical. The Bayreuth Festival, which was inaugurated in 1876 with the first complete performance of the *Ring* tetralogy, marked the beginning of the enthusiastic cult of Wagner and Wagnerism across Europe. In making the idea of a synthesis of the arts in the service of social and cultural regeneration a central focus for modernist artists, Wagner sets the stage for our investigation of the theory and practice of the total work of art in the avant-garde movements in part 2, and the path to the totalitarian total work of art in Italy, Russia, and Germany in part 3.

In the decisive years of the European avant-garde, from Marinetti’s 1909 futurist manifesto to the last manifesto of surrealism in 1938, we observe a far-reaching convergence between the idea of the total work and the spirit of avant-gardism. A recent comprehensive collection of avant-garde manifestos from this period identifies their common tendency as a totalizing impulse directed against all existing institutions. Let me highlight two main themes that emerge from the examination of the avant-garde from the point of view of the total work of art.

First, the dialectic of *analysis and synthesis* in avant-garde art has not received sufficient attention. The search for synthesis runs counter to the logic of differentiation and the corresponding self-reflexive explorations of the formal and technical possibilities of each of the arts, which attained a new stage of intensity with the simultaneous moves to atonality in music and to nonfiguration and abstraction in painting, immediately prior to the First World War. If this analytic line of the *absolute work* represents the historically more significant line of development, it needs to be seen nonetheless in terms of the countervailing will to the *total work*. When Wassily Kandinsky distinguishes between “two extremely powerful tendencies” in contemporary art—“a tendency towards the unification of the arts” as against “the tendency of each art to become immersed in itself”—it is in order to argue in his “Programme for the Institute of Artistic Culture,” for the Moscow

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institute of which he was briefly director in 1920, that analysis finds its justification in the service of synthesis. Oskar Schlemmer, one of the leading figures of the Bauhaus, neatly sums up the dialectic of analysis and synthesis, of absolute work and total work: “One of the emblems of our time is abstraction. It functions, on the one hand, to disconnect components from an existing and persisting whole, either to lead them individually ad absurdum or to elevate them to their highest potential. On the other hand, abstraction can result in generalization and summation, in the construction in bold outline of a new totality.” The creative search for alternatives to Wagner’s own theory and practice made the idea of the total work of art a screen on which were projected the most varied visions of aesthetic synthesis, which I attempt to map in terms of a typology of the theory and practice of the union of the arts in the theatre from fin-de-siècle symbolism through to Artaud’s theatre of cruelty in the 1930s.

The second theme of importance is the totalizing impulse of the avant-garde, based on the apparently irresistible analogy between the reintegration of the arts and the reintegration of society. This impulse appears particularly clearly in the search for an artistic mission and a social function that goes beyond the limits of autonomous art. While avant-garde programmes for cultural and political renewal are widely recognized, the religious or more generally the spiritual dimensions of avant-garde art have attracted comparatively little attention. It is not by chance that there is a strong connection between the total work of art and the question of sacred art in modernity. The idea of the total work of art highlights the ambiguous place of art between religion and politics. This applies as much to the aestheticism of the fin de siècle as to the revolt of the futurists and expressionists against their symbolist origins. Aestheticism’s religion of art, inspired by Wagner’s fusion of art and religion in Parsifal, found its extreme expression in Mallarmé’s and Scriabin’s projects for an ultimate theatrical Mystery capable of reuniting poet and people, composer and world. Kandinsky and his fellow artists in the Blaue Reiter affirmed “the spiritual in art.” The theatre reform movement from Alphonse Appia, Georg Fuchs, and Gordon Craig through to Artaud sought inspiration in the return to the sacred and popular origins of theatre. Hofmannsthal, Claudel, and Brecht in the 1920s reworked the religious tradition of world theatre for Catholic or Communist purposes.

Part 3 covers the same critical years of European modernism as Part 2 but with a new focus: the meta-political imaginary of the total work in relation to the totalitarian movements of the twentieth century. In part 2, Wagner provides the indispensable reference point. The French Revolution—and Nietzsche—are central to the argument of part 3. The political legacy of the Revolution, the entwined myths of revolution and nation, began to unravel in and after the 1848–49 revolutions and to separate into the two, increasingly hostile camps of socialism and nationalism, attaining their extreme expression in the rival totalitarian movements that emerged from World War I. It is therefore important to distinguish between continuities
and discontinuities in relation to the original French revolutionary paradigm. Continuity is most readily apparent in the generic and functional similarity between the French revolutionary festivals and the mass rallies and mass spectacles in the Russian, Italian, and German revolutions, predicated on their common function of mobilizing and manifesting the revolutionary dynamic of the masses. And yet, for all that the Marxist ideology of the Bolshevik Revolution and the ideology of the Fascist movements originate in the nineteenth century, it is clear that the totalitarian regimes constituted something radically new and that their total challenge to liberal society could only have come out of the total crisis of the Great War.

In terms of the radically new, my primary interest lies in the political activism of the avant-garde, which sprang from the presumed revolutionary affinity between the artistic avant-garde and the political vanguard, the source of the highly productive ferment of avant-garde experiments and expectations in the 1920s. That these expectations could embrace opposed ideological extremes appears particularly clearly in the sharply diverging paths of futurism in Italy and Russia. The Italian and Russian futurists did share, however, the same iconoclastic will to sacrifice the art of the past to the imperatives of modernization. Walter Benjamin’s famous opposition of the Fascist aestheticization of politics and the Communist politicization of art recognizes but underplays their common ground: avant-garde radicalism, driven by the desire to break through the limits separating art and reality, art and social or political action. In this sense the perversion of the idea of the total work of art in totalitarianism reveals a perversion latent in the hubris of aesthetic and political modernism.

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Now that I have sketched the framework of my inquiry, we can turn to the definition of the total work that underpins the present study. First, a couple of terminological clarifications are called for. Modernity stands for the complex of changes that produced a new kind of society and a new historical consciousness of a radical break with the past, symbolized by the caesura of the French Revolution. As Hans Blumenberg observes, “Modernity was the first and only age that understood itself as an epoch and, in so doing, simultaneously created other epochs.” Modernism as ism signifies historicist interpretations of modernity as a new epoch. Postmodernism signifies those interpretations of modernity that question or reject the grand narratives of modernism as progress, decadence, or nihilism, and signals in this sense the end of the epoch of modernism, which is used here as a period concept, denoting the age of European high culture from the French Revolution to the end of the Second World War, as opposed to the more narrow periodizations of aesthetic modernism ranging between 1848 and the 1930s, as well as those that extend it into the 1960s.

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I am treating the period 1890 into the 1930s as the core period of aesthetic modernism under the creative and critical sign of the avant-garde.

My definition of the total work builds on that of Roger Fornoff in his 650-page monograph, *Die Sehnsucht nach dem Gesamtkunstwerk* (The Longing for the Total Work of Art). Fornoff is the first to have undertaken a systematic historical and theoretical reconstruction of what he calls an aesthetic conception of modernism/modernity. It is truly a pioneering effort and establishes an indispensable reference for further investigations. Although I have a number of reservations, I shall be working with Fornoff’s definition, which captures the two essential elements of Wagner’s understanding of the Gesamtkunstwerk—aesthetic and social synthesis. The total work of art is characterized for Fornoff by four basic structural components:

i. An inter- or multimedial union of different arts in relation to a comprehensive vision of the world and society

ii. An implicit or explicit theory of the ideal union of the arts

iii. A closed worldview, combining a social-utopian or historical-philosophical or metaphysical-religious image of the whole with a radical critique of existing society and culture

iv. A projection of an aesthetic-social or aesthetic-religious utopia, which looks to the power of art for its expression and as the aesthetic means to a transformation of society

However important the political, social, or religious elements, the Gesamtkunstwerk remains explicitly aesthetic. Fornoff’s definition has, like all definitions, a double function. On the one hand, it aims to capture the defining core of the concept; on the other, as heuristic instrument, it is to serve as analytic probe. The core consists of the combination of two elements, an inter- or multimedial union of the arts together with a comprehensive vision of the world. The combination is determining: if we confine ourselves to the theory and practice of the union of the arts, the field loses

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all contours; if we confine ourselves to worldview, the field shrinks to the standpoint of the individual artist. Worldviews, comprising a utopian, philosophical, or religious image of the whole, thus look to and presuppose the socially transformative powers of art. We can rephrase the intention of Fornoff’s definition in the following way: the total work of art seeks to convey a world vision, anticipate a future utopian or redeemed state of society, and act as the medium of such a transformation. We find a comparable formulation in Marcella Lista’s definition of Wagner’s artwork of the future: the totalizing union of the arts, as the reflection of the deep unity of life, is directed to the goal of making aesthetic experience the yeast of a society to come. It was Wagner above all who made the idea of the synthesis of the arts in the service of social and cultural regeneration a central focus for aesthetic modernism. But if his works and his writings provide the dominant reference for subsequent developments, these appear primarily in the form of a search for alternatives to his own theory and practice. As Lista puts it, Wagner set in train a new exploration of the stage as the site of the totalization of aesthetic forms.

With reference to worldviews: the idea of the total work is tied to philosophies of history in which the total work appears as the artwork of the future; that is to say, it must pay tribute to modern historical consciousness by projecting its utopian or redemptive vision into speculative constructions of a once and future artwork. These projections, which all imply a fundamental questioning of the modern separation of art, religion, and politics, form the defining characteristic of the manifestos of the total work of art from Schelling through to Ernst Bloch’s romantic-revolutionary spirit of utopia or Artaud's theatre of cruelty. The importance of these aesthetic counterimaginaries is underlined by the “exceptional consensus that united all the thinkers of modernity” from Kant to Bataille on the subject of art, which made art what Jean-Joseph Goux has called the “unanimous utopia” (more exactly, the unanimous counterutopia to the scientific utopia) of the moderns. Such counterimaginaries or alternative modernities, whether aesthetic, political, economic, or scientific in nature, define the utopian horizon but also the dystopian limits of modernity. The complexity and pluralism of modern society both provoke and relativize all such retotalizing visions; in this sense they partake as discourses in the self-interrogation and debates at the heart of modernity’s cultural and political identity, which it is the function of high culture to articulate. Totalitarianism’s claim to a total resolution of the contradictions of modernity therefore signified the destruction of modernity’s high culture, just as the totalitarian claim to total power signified the destruction of democratic politics.

8. Lista, L’oeuvre d’art totale, 6.
9. Ibid, 5. Lista understands the persistent tendency to the totalization of the arts as the attempt to attain through art a form of universal truth together with initiatory and revelatory experience (289).
11. In the light of these remarks, it is necessary to highlight the contrasting role of literature, the modern art-form par excellence with its dependence on the market in place of patronage, as the bearer
In relation to Fornoff’s final point, the total work as the *aesthetic means to social transformation*, two comments are called for. The idea of the total work is associated from the beginning with the dream of reviving the civil religion and the art religion of antiquity. The collective dimension of *reception* is therefore integral to the idea of the total work and appears particularly clearly in the illusory project of the collective work creating its representative audience and vice versa. The “representative” audience, beyond all social divisions, is to give back to the artwork its lost social function. This populist notion lies at the heart of the dream of a participatory theatre and politics beyond representation. It is present in the pure, unmediated unity of Rousseau’s and Robespierre’s virtuous people, and in the romantic-revolutionary appeals of Michelet or Wagner to the spontaneous creativity of the people, to which corresponds the genius of the artist as the medium of the people’s deepest aspirations. The alliance between the people and the artist-genius (from Wagner to Mallarmé, from d’Annunzio to Mussolini and Hitler) is a recurrent feature of modernism and emblematic of what Habermas terms its “aesthetic core.”

My second comment is of greater import. Fornoff resists the extension of the concept of the total work, confining it to artworks, artistic projects and conceptions. By confining the total work to the aesthetic realm, Fornoff excludes the dimension of the political from his definition. This has two major consequences. Owing to his concentration on the German tradition, the French genealogy of the total work remains out of focus. We need to add to Fornoff’s theatrical and the architectonic archetypes of the total work that of the *popular festival*, modeled on the civil religions of antiquity. The French preoccupation with civil religion—from Rousseau to Robespierre, from Saint-Simon and Comte to Durkheim and beyond—sprang from the fear that the loss of the socially binding power of religion in post-revolutionary society would lead to anomie, atomization, and social disintegration. Rousseau’s opposition of the whole human being, incarnated in the community, to the fragmented existence of the socially alienated individual informs both the French and the German visions of a reconciliation of the individual and society.

The festival of the people adds a crucial dimension to the definition of the total work of art and thematizes the equally crucial question of participation. The...
function of the total work—as theatre or festival—is predicated on the overcoming of the (modern) separation of actors and spectators, producing, in Derrida’s paradoxical formulation, a theatre without representation. Thus the goal of the total work would be the elimination of all objectifying and distancing frames and boundaries in and through the participation—in ever-widening circles of totalization—of audience, community, people, or nation, which would have to await the new media of communication in the twentieth century for a full realization. And this brings me to the second consequence of the omission of the political. The other side to French thinking on civic religion appeared in the social psychology of the urban-industrial masses advanced by Gustave Le Bon and Georges Sorel, the prelude to the potent combination of manipulation and myth in the mass politics of Mussolini and Hitler. We cannot simply treat the Fascist aestheticization of politics as a perversion of the idea of the total work of art without examining the historical-genetic affinity of the total work and the totalitarian state. As the preceding points indicate, I am arguing for an intrinsic relationship between the total work of art and the avant-garde, as well as an undeniable affinity with totalitarianism, underpinned by the links between the artistic avant-garde and the revolutionary vanguard party. The perspective opened up by the idea and practice of the total work of art offers a necessary and long overdue complement and corrective to the purely aesthetic understanding of the critical years of European modernism.

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To recapitulate: the argument of the present study is structured in three parts. Part 1, “The Artwork of the Future,” traces the idea of the total work across the nineteenth century from the French Revolution through to the Wagnerism of the fin de siècle. Rousseau’s critique of representation in the theatre and in politics provides our starting point. His antitheatrical ideal of the popular festival inspired French revolutionary attempts to make such festivals central to the new civil religion of the nation (chapter 1). The Revolution triggered in turn intense discussions among German poets and thinkers on the possibilities of aesthetic politics and a new mythology for the new age (chapter 2). Both the French and the Germans looked to the public life of the polis in antiquity as models for the reintegration of art, religion, and politics: Sparta in the case of Rousseau and the French revolutionaries, Athens in the case of the Germans. The revolutionary festival and the festival drama thus figure as paradigms of the two main lines of the total work, which Wagner, enthused by the 1848–49 revolutions, sought to combine in the artwork of the future. Wagner’s inspiration for the artwork of the future and for a liberated humanity came from his vision of the Athenian polis as itself a work of art that found the supreme expression of its political-religious unity and identity in the tragic dramas of Aeschylus and Sophocles. The union of art, religion, and politics in Athenian tragedy is to be recreated in music drama, just as the modern synthesis of the arts, in which the orchestra takes the place of the Greek
chorus, is intended to give life and body to the vision of social synthesis (chapter 3). In their critical responses to Wagner, Nietzsche and Mallarmé articulate the two poles of the total work, the political and the spiritual respectively. Mallarmé’s grandiose idea of the Book as symbolist Mystery announces the avant-garde quest for a resacralized theatre; Nietzsche’s prophecy of the coming theatrical age of the political actor and the masses foreshadows the mass politics of the twentieth century (chapter 4).

In part 2 the quest for “the spiritual in art” (Kandinsky) forms the organizing perspective of our investigation of some of the most important avant-garde projects directed to a realization of the total work of art. The analyses of individual artworks and projects are grouped around four main themes. The first concerns the total work as symbol. Wagner’s *Parsifal*, one of the most important inspirations for the European symbolist movement, stands as the paradigm of the restoration of the symbolic function of art and of the will to the resacralization of the stage (chapter 5). The total work as *apocalypse* has as its focus the paradox of the impossible masterpiece. Mallarmé’s Book and Scriabin’s Mystery defy the possibility of realization. The idea of the absolute and the total work fuse here in a virtuality, which is fascinating in that the two projects present the pure limit-case for the transcendence of the boundaries of art and thus of the spiritual in art (chapter 6). The total work as *synthesis of the arts* is examined through three representative examples: Stravinsky’s collaboration with the Ballets Russes; Kandinsky and Schoenberg’s experiments with alternatives to the Wagnerian conception of the union of the arts in the music drama; and Bruno Taut’s manifesto for the crystal cathedral as the transcendent spiritual center of the city (chapter 7). The total work as the *regeneration of sacred theatre* is examined in relation to the theory and practice of Hofmannsthal and Claudel, Brecht, and Artaud. In conclusion I sketch out a typology of the implicit or explicit theory and practice of the union of the arts in relation to the theatre, which all respond directly or indirectly to Wagner (chapter 8).

In Russia, Italy, and Germany the avant-gardes formed the bridge between the nineteenth-century idea of the total work and the postwar revolutionary regimes and their totalitarian ideologies. In part 3, “The Sublime in Politics,” I trace one of the paths to the totalitarian total work with reference to the crucial role of d’Annunzio, Marinetti, and Jünger, the disciples of Nietzsche, in the Fascist aestheticization of politics. In relation to the Communist politicization of art, the crucial question concerns the tense relations between art and revolution, avant-garde and vanguard party, whose terminus was the Stalinist state, built on the destruction of the old Bolshevik and artistic elites. The Bolshevik Revolution thus presents the limit case for the Saint-Simonian destination of the avant-garde. If in comparable fashion the Third Reich marked the terminus for the aestheticization of politics, the Fascist total work of art arrived at its totalitarian “realization” in a form that to my mind is only partially captured by Benjamin’s concept of aestheticization. Although Odo Marquard in his typology of the total work of art derives the totalitarian total work of art from
Benjamin, defining it as the staging of the state of emergency, I want to argue that the aesthetic category that corresponds to the state of emergency is the sublime—a conception of the sublime, however, that comes from Nietzsche, not Kant. It is not only a question of the suspension and paralysis of the faculties in a state of terror; the creation of the new collective man demanded the sublime passage of death. To the last, National Socialism exalted the sacrificial death of the hero as the lifeblood of the national community. Bolshevism for its part staged in the show trials of the 1930s the liquidation of the enemies of the revolution—the sublime, purifying logic rehearsed by Bertolt Brecht in his didactic plays at the end of the 1920s. Not only is the sublime, if we follow Lyotard, the defining category of modern art; it is equally, if we follow Arendt, the defining category of totalitarianism. Arendt defined the novum of totalitarianism in terms of the terror that explodes “the very alternative upon which all definitions of the essence of government have been based in political philosophy, that is the alternative between lawful and lawless government, between arbitrary and legitimate power.” In his 1936–37 lectures on Nietzsche, “The Will to Power as Art,” Heidegger observes that the question of the sublime explodes every true aesthetics, even that of Kant, because it explodes the very subjectivity of the subject. As the liminal experience par excellence, the sublime signifies the abyssal ground of modern, secularized art and politics, which refers on the one hand to a meta-aesthetic imaginary, tied to the destination or the “end” of (aesthetically differentiated) art, and on the other to a meta-political imaginary, tied to the destination or “end” of (functionally differentiated) politics. In each case the redemptive claim to a transcendence of the defining limits and contradictions of the respective spheres was ultimately destructive in its consequences.

Nietzsche’s reversal or “taking back” of Kant’s theory of the sublime is central to the argument of part 3. Romain Rolland’s Théâtre du peuple and d’Annunzio’s novel Il fuoco represent in particularly clear fashion at the turn of the century the dual lineage of the total work of art. Both texts have in common in the context of fin-de-siècle decadence the theme of national regeneration: in the service of socialism with Rolland (1866–1944), who draws his inspiration from the French Revolution, and in the service of nationalism with d’Annunzio (1863–1938), who draws his inspiration from Wagner and Nietzsche. Each author dreams of the total work that will transcend the limits of the theatre to effect a sublime union of art and life through the mobilization of the masses (chapter 9). This is the guiding theme of the last two chapters: the path to the totalitarian total work in Russia (chapter 10) and in Germany (chapter 11).