The Avant-Garde and the Breakthrough to Totality

For all that Rolland and d’Annunzio took opposite positions in relation to the French Revolution, they both claimed to speak in the name of the “people” or the “nation.” Moreover, they foreshadowed the ultimate expression of the new mass politics, inaugurated by the French Revolution, in the rival revolutionary movements that emerged from the chaos and carnage of the First World War. The Bolsheviks in Russia and the Fascists in Italy both recognized the importance of mobilizing the masses through the elaboration of a civil religion. This “aesthetics of politics,” pioneered in the French Revolution,¹ had a theatrical, performative character, which dramatized the myths and ideologies of political movements and regimes through mass spectacles, processions, parades, and festivals. As the most revolutionary form of nationalism, the various Fascist movements could appeal to the whole tradition of nationalizing the masses across the nineteenth century, culminating in the militarization of society in the Great War. The Fascist movements were born of war, and they mobilized for war. From first to last the Fascist aesthetics of politics was an aesthetics of war. War embodied the heroic, sacrificial antithesis to the decadence

of bourgeois society and consecrated the rights of the collective over the individ-
ual. D’Annunzio and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti personify the Fascist cult of war,
both in terms of its double image of heroic sacrifice and fascination with technology,
as well as in terms of the two types of avant-gardism that the two writers made their
own: the paramilitary vanguard of heroic sacrifice, and the avant-garde of artists as
the shock troops of national regeneration and Fascist revolution.

My starting point is Georges Sorel. His Reflections on Violence (1908) provides
not only the mobilizing myth of breakthrough, but also a sublime ethic of vanguardism congenial to the revolutionary extremes of the Left and the Right. Sorel
advocated the regenerative power of heroic struggle in the service of a Nietzschean
revision of Marxism, which would transform slaves into warriors. Directed to the
revitalization of the class war against the reformism of the Socialist parties, his
doctrine of violence found its greatest resonance on the right, to which he was in
turn increasingly drawn after 1908 by his disappointments with revolutionary syn-
dicalism. The Bolshevik seizure of power rekindled his hopes, however, of a total
transformation of bourgeois society by the proletariat. In his introductory letter to
Reflections, addressed to Daniel Halévy, Sorel explicates what we might call the
Gnostic roots of his profound alienation from the contemporary world: “The pes-
simist regards social conditions as forming a system bound together by an iron law
which cannot be evaded, so that the system is given, as it were, in one block, and
cannot disappear, except in a catastrophe which involves the whole.”

Sorel took as his prime exemplars of “armed pessimism” primitive Christianity and sixteenth-
century Calvinism. The Calvinist’s desire to establish the kingdom of God by force
was driven by the mobilizing force of an absolute will-to-deliverance. This will-to-
deliverance is one with the will to myth, which alone has the power to incite men
“to prepare themselves for a combat which will destroy the existing state of things”
(50). Unlike the theoretical constructions of utopia, myth cannot be refuted, since
it is identical with the convictions of a group. That is, its function is to create and
constitute the identity and solidarity of the group. Myth empowers by endowing its
adherents with the consciousness of the creative freedom realized in action. The ef-
fективity of myth is accordingly revealed in the active present of heroic action. Myth
qua faith is self-validating, since heroic struggle is its own highest value. As the
great epoch of Calvinist militancy demonstrated, “in the warlike excitement which
accompanies this will-to-deliverance the courageous man finds a satisfaction which
is sufficient to keep up his ardour” (37).

Sorel’s own will-to-deliverance, it is clear, is religious not utopian. It is deliber-
ately antiutopian because intellectualism announces not just the decay of religion
but that of society as a whole. Sorel cites Renan: “An immense moral, and perhaps

2. Georges Sorel, Reflections on Violence, trans. T. E. Hulme and J. Roth, with an introduction by
Edward A. Shils (New York: Collier Books, 1961), 33. Parenthetical page references in the text refer to
this edition.
intellectual, degeneracy will follow the disappearance of religion from the world.” And adds that Renan dreaded the loss of the “sentiment of sublimity” (228). Measured against this yardstick, Sorel (like Nietzsche) reduces the life of society to just two possibilities—decadence or renaissance under the aegis of myth—just as he reduces human being to the two possibilities of (bourgeois) inauthenticity or (proletarian) authenticity. The two states are incommensurable, separated by the sentiment of sublimity, that is to say, by the will-to-deliverance, which brings with it the liberating and energizing experience of salvation, capable of sweeping aside all the contradictions of modernity and its piecemeal reformism through the complete transformation of self and society. Sorel’s hunger for the infinite is such that he embraces “absolute revolution”: “Parties, as a rule, define the reforms that they wish to bring about; but the general strike has a character of infinity, because it puts on one side all discussions of definite reforms and confronts men with a catastrophe” (46).

Sorel presents the essence of chiliastic expectation: the promise of the breakthrough to totality, in which the General Strike holds fast the absolute moment of pure duration that breaks the spell of profane time. “For the real Chiliast, the present becomes the breach through which what was previously inward bursts out suddenly, takes hold of the outer world and transforms it.”

This longing for deliverance, this will to myth, was not confined to the “Nietzschean existential school of thinkers, cultural critics, and artists”; it found its most striking manifestation in the spontaneous enthusiasm that greeted the outbreak of war in August 1914. Robert Wohl refers to the feverish and intoxicated feeling that possessed Italian intellectuals, who saw in the war “a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to destroy the Giolittian regime, to throw off the fetters of bourgeois existence, and to open the way toward some ill-defined but radically different future.” Günter Berghaus speaks of a whole generation of young Italians who greeted the war as the culmination of their dreams: “The grandiose metaphors of guerra come festa, of war as a mystical, orgiastic experience of the Darwinian/Nietzschean principle of Life as Struggle, of war as a cleansing process beneficial and vital for a

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4. “Salvation” is Sorel’s last word in Reflections on Violence: “It is to violence that socialism owes those high ethical values by means of which it brings salvation to the modern world” (249).
5. Jean Davignaud describes Sorel’s concept of the General Strike as having “the character of a festival in the course of which official time is destroyed to give way to a new time, that of the proletariat itself, which according to sociologists is a time ‘ahead of itself’, a creative time of liberty.” Jean Davignaud, “La fête civique,” in Histoire des spectacles, ed. Guy Dumur (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), 254. The structural parallels to Benjamin’s concept of “Jetztzeit” or to the “situation” of the situationists, as well as to Carl Schmitt’s “sublime” concept of “exception” are evident: “In the exception the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition.” Carl Schmitt, Political Theology (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), 36.
healthy organism...finally appeared to become reality." Although the Great War inevitably disappointed the redemptive dreams it aroused, it also radicalized the inchoate longings for total revolution. Here Sorel played a crucial role as a theorist of the vanguard. His conception of a fanatical and chiliastic revolutionary sect, constituted by an elite of dedicated warriors, bound together by a sublime ethic of crisis, and called to the historic mission of restoring vitality to a dying civilization did indeed become reality in the Bolshevik vanguard party in Russia and the paramilitary fasci in Italy.

It has not been sufficiently remarked that Reflections on Violence also consists of an inquiry into the nature of the sublime, but as an ethical rather than an aesthetic category. Sorel does not follow Nietzsche’s reduction of ethics to aesthetics in The Birth of Tragedy. Nevertheless, Sorel’s own version of heroic pessimism also demands the stripping away of the veils of illusion to reveal the real reality beneath appearances, which for him is the state of war as the condition of the sublime. By the state of war, Sorel means the irreversibility of catastrophe, which allows no evasions. Only from the sublime passage of death will the New Man and the New World be born. It hardly needs stating that Sorel’s activism and voluntarism break with the spectator-based theory of the sublime and insist like Nietzsche on the rejuvenating energies released by the transcendence of the principle of self-preservation. Sorel’s ethic of combat as transformative “inner experience” (Ernst Jünger) affirmed the ethic of war. D’Annunzio and Marinetti married this ethic to an aesthetic of war. Even though this aesthetic took very different forms for the two poets, they shared a common will to realize the revolutionary goal of translating art into political action. D’Annunzio provided Mussolini with a model of the symbols and ceremonies of the rebirth of the nation through blood and sacrifice, which d’Annunzio had elaborated in Fiume; Marinetti’s futurists offered Mussolini the


10. The March on Fiume on 12 September 1919, d’Annunzio’s “sacred entry” into the city at the head of 2,500 soldiers and veterans, and occupation of the city for fifteen months form one of the more bizarre and remarkable episodes of the postwar period, which already indicated the Italian government’s growing loss of control of the armed forces. The occupation finally collapsed in January 1921 after the Treaty of Rapallo between Italy and Yugoslavia in November 1920 recognized the demands of the Italian citizens of Fiume (representing some 58 percent of an ethnically mixed population), leading to Italian annexation in 1924. Judgments on the significance of the whole adventure vary. S. Talmon (The Myth of the Nation and the Vision of Revolution [London: Secker & Warburg, 1981], 499) is dismissive of d’Annunzio’s “operatic dictatorship” and his motley collection of soldiers, idealists, freebooters, and bohemians: “They improvised a kind of revolutionary-collectivist utopia, inspired by the exclusive, true general will of the nation: they unfolded a new style of politics—a mixture of patriotic cult, civil religion and artistic licence.” George Mosse, on the other hand, stresses the historical significance of d’Annunzio’s political theatre: it announced the new political age that had reached maturity at Fiume. For the first time since the French Revolution “the aesthetics of politics had been used once again as a principal means of governance.” George Mosse, “Fascism and the French Revolution,” Jour- nal of Contemporary History 24 (1989): 15. Roger Griffin considers the “transformation of political life into a continuous display of civic liturgy,” staged by d’Annunzio, as the dress-rehearsal for Mussolini and thus the first “fully fledged expression of fascism in action.” Roger Griffin, “Staging the Nation’s
images of heroic technological modernization. D’Annunzio and Marinetti epitomized the “double image” of Italian Fascism: the potent combination of political myth and deadly technology, fused by the conviction that all great values arise from the creative destruction of war. D’Annunzio’s vanguard of paramilitaries and Marinetti’s avant-garde of futurist poets, painters, and musicians formed a core component of the Fascist Party, which claimed for itself the role of vanguard and executor of the General Will of the nation.

The two vanguards, d’Annunzio’s Arditi and Marinetti’s futurists, coalesced in 1919 with the launching in Milan of the Fasci di Combattimento. For a brief period in 1919 and 1920, d’Annunzio and Marinetti shared the leading role with Mussolini in creating the ultranationalist movement that became the prototype of the European Fascist movements. Michael Mann defines the generic features of all these movements “as the pursuit of transcendent and cleansing nation-statism through paramilitarism.” Mann’s definition contains four key components, three of which present an escalation or totalization of the dominant political ideology of the modern era, that of the nation-state: the nation conceived as the integral or organic nation of the one and indivisible people, defined against its external or internal enemies; the state conceived as the bearer of a moral project of national development with state power embodied in the leader and the party elite; transcendence conceived as the overcoming of the conflicting interests and contradictions of modern society. Paramilitarism provided the specifically new, Fascist component: the violent, grassroots vehicle of integral, cleansing nationalism that enforced cultural or racial nationalism. Paramilitarism’s appeal as the vanguard of the nation to both the street and the elites meant that Fascist movements were always more than a party: “Fascism was uniformed, marching, armed, dangerous, and radically destabilizing of the existing order.” As was the case with their Communist rival, Fascist regimes were characterized by a dialectic between “movement” and “bureaucracy.” Fascism cannot be dismissed as the extreme, aberrant product of nationalism and the tensions of modernization. On the contrary, it must be recognized, Mann insists, as the major political doctrine of world-historical significance created in the first half of the twentieth century and as such lying at the heart of European modernity, precisely through its claim—like its Communist enemy and rival—to be a total solution to the ideological, political, and economic crises of Europe after the First World War. Mann does not add the necessary corollary to his claim for the world-historical significance of Fascism, that Fascism—like Communism—necessarily


failed because its totalizing ambitions were inadequate to the complexities of modernity. This does not alter the fact that its mass appeal as a movement of high ideals, with a special attraction for the young and for students, needs to be taken seriously, that is, grasped from inside.\textsuperscript{13}

In order to grasp this mass appeal from the inside, we need to recognize that it involves two distinct but inseparable dimensions of the sublime in politics: the \textit{sacralization} and the \textit{staging} of power, both clearly present in Italian Fascism. The significance of Fascism's theatre of politics is not fully recognized, Emilio Gentile argues, if it is reduced to mass spectacle and mass manipulation and labeled "aestheticization of politics," without acknowledging at the same time the "consistent link between the theatricality of Fascism and its culture as a totalitarian movement and modern political religion."\textsuperscript{14} Gentile stresses the vital role of the "modernistic avant-garde intelligentsia" and of d'Annunzio in particular in the Italian search for a political religion of the nation. Thus Marinetti could claim in an interview in 1932 that he and Mussolini were the creators of a new world: "[Mussolini] is in politics exactly what I am in art. He has realized an essentially Futurist programme that calls for (\textit{réclame}) confidence in the future of Italy, daily heroism, love of danger, violence considered as an argument."\textsuperscript{15} D'Annunzio brought the myths, rituals, and symbols born in the trenches and staged in Fiume to the construction of a national religion: "To assume its sacred nature, the Italian nation had to pass through trial by sacrifice and be sanctified with the blood of its children."\textsuperscript{16} Violence and sacrifice demonstrated not only the irresistibility of myth as an indispensable engine of political mobilization, as Le Bon, Pareto, and Sorel believed, but more generally the dialectic between the desacralization and resacralization of political power in modernity.\textsuperscript{17} As the "first European experiment since the French Revolution seeking to instrumentalize a new civic religion," Italian Fascism's affirmation of myth as the source of the meaning and purpose of collective life attributed to myth a synthesizing power that embraced artistic creation and religious and political movements.\textsuperscript{18} That is to say, the aestheticization at work in the Fascist theatre of politics owed its undeniable mass appeal to the performative reunion of art, religion, and politics that was achieved in its staging of the myth of the rebirth of the nation.\textsuperscript{19}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 1, 3.
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Emilio Gentile, "The Theatre of Politics in Fascist Italy," in Berghaus, \textit{Fascism and Theatre}, 73; Gentile, \textit{The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy} (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Gentile, \textit{Sacralization of Politics}, 15.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 153–54.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 84.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Griffin, "Staging the Nation's Rebirth," 11–29.
\end{itemize}
The political influence of d’Annunzio and Marinetti had passed by the beginning of the twenties. Marinetti had already resigned from the Executive Committee of the Fascist Party by 1920; in 1922, d’Annunzio retreated to the monumentalization of his legend in his villa, Il Vittoriale degli Italiani, on the shore of Lake Garda, dedicated to the victories of the nation. Mussolini ensured the support of d’Annunzio through the steady flow of state funds, sponsorship, and subsidy of his collected works under the patronage of the king, by declaring Il Vittoriale a national monument in 1924 and furnishing it with the military relics of d’Annunzio’s wartime exploits, the prow of the warship Puglia, the torpedo boat of the attack on the Austrian navy, and the plane used in the flight to Vienna.20 It was only appropriate that Italian Fascism reached its inglorious end in Mussolini’s puppet Republic of Salò, 1943–45, with its capital in the neighboring commune to Il Vittoriale. And Il Vittoriale itself, d’Annunzio’s theatre of memory? Already in 1933, Mario Praz could describe it as a final monumental expression of the decadent movement:

> It is Péladan’s Montségur . . . translated into actuality: at the Vittoriale, also, there is a “décoration panthéonique des religions,” a combined atmosphere of the shrine of Parsifal, of a princely palace, and of an aesthete’s paradise, with casts of Greek statues, emblematic trappings, Franciscan symbols, objects of worship and war; a vast collection of bric-à-brac to which many different cultures and periods, arts, religions, and nature herself, have contributed.21

Even more ironic than d’Annunzio’s retreat to his origins in fin-de-siècle decadence and symbolism was Marinetti’s desire to monumentalize his place in Italian history. For all his undiminished military ardor, which led him to volunteer at the age of sixty for Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia and to accompany the Italian forces in Russia in the Second World War, his compromise with official fame was a pathetic spectacle. He was made a member of the Italian Academy, and in 1929 secretary of the Fascist Writers’ Union. Not only did futurism gain recognition as a privileged state art (even though this meant very little in practice), but Marinetti, who had launched futurism by declaring war on the museum, ended by campaigning for state funding for a museum of futurism!

**Benjamin and the Aestheticization of Politics**

Benjamin seems to have been the first to have perceived and highlighted the aesthetic dimension of the Fascist cult of war, in “Theories of German Fascism,” his

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20. Mussolini is reported to have said of his financial support for his earlier rival for power: “When you have a rotten tooth you have two possibilities open to you: either you pull the tooth or you fill it with gold. With D’Annunzio I have chosen the latter treatment.” Quoted in Fred Licht, “The Vittoriale degli Italiani,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 41.4 (December 1982): 318–24.

1930 review of the volume *Krieg und Krieger* (War and Warriors), edited by Ernst Jünger (apart, that is, from Jünger himself). Benjamin derives this aesthetic dimension from the inability of capitalist societies to find constructive social uses for technology or art. The cult of art for art’s sake thus stands in an essential relation to the cult of war and the unleashing of the pure destructivity of technology. Of the contributors to *War and Warriors*, he writes: “The most rabidly decadent origins of this new theory of war are emblazoned on their foreheads: it is nothing other than an uninhibited translation of the principles of *l’art pour l’art* to war itself.”

It is interesting that Carl Schmitt arrived at the same judgment in 1930 in relation to the book Jünger was then writing, *Der Arbeiter* (The Worker). Schmitt suggested to Jünger that his thinking exemplified the “system” of belief for the sake of belief, morality for the sake of morality, *l’art pour l’art*, and work for the sake of work.

But does Benjamin’s “translation of the principle of *l’art pour l’art* to war itself” fully capture the total experience that Jünger and his comrades in arms sought on the battlefield: war as the highest revelation of being, war as the apocalypse of bourgeois civilization? What could be more decadent, Benjamin responds, than these bourgeois cravings for the downfall of the West. He quotes from *War and Warriors* a Dionysian hymn to war that surpasses human understanding: “inhuman, boundless, gigantic in its Reason, something reminiscent of a volcanic process, an elemental eruption,” “a colossal wave of life directed by a painfully deep, cogently unified force” on battlefields that have already become mythic (2: 314). Out of this landscape of death is born, in the words of Jünger’s brother Friedrich, “the type of soldier schooled in those hard, sober, bloody and incessant campaigns of attrition” (2: 318), who casts aside the despised “bourgeois” principle of self-preservation. This new man—the prototype of Jünger’s Worker—is the war veteran, the shock trooper of Fascist total mobilization. His face bears, in Benjamin’s words, the features of death, just as the “apocalyptic face of nature,” at once archaic and modern, is revealed on the battlefield, as described by Jünger, where man and nature, life and death fuse in the ecstasy of combat: “That is an intoxication above all other,…a madness without inhibition or limits, comparable only to the forces of nature. Man is like the raging storm, the roaring sea and the crashing thunder. Then he merges into the whole, he races towards the dark gates of death like a projectile towards its target.”

In 1936 Benjamin could add the second element, which was not yet apparent in 1930, to his analysis of Fascism: the combination of the decadent theory of art

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with monumentalism. “Nothing is more instructive than this self-contradictory hybrid.”\footnote{Walter Benjamin, Gesammelte Schriften (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), 3: 488.} It is as if Benjamin had already anticipated the theory of ruins developed by Albert Speer,\footnote{Albert Speer, Inside the Third Reich (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970), 55. I return below to Speer’s theory of ruin-value in relation to the Pyramids.} Hitler’s architect and director of ceremonies, or foreseen the ultimate expression of monumental decadence in the ruins of Germany’s bombed cities. Benjamin’s interest lies in fact elsewhere: in the mass character of Fascist aestheticization, not only aimed at the masses but also executed by the masses—but not of course in the interests of the masses. The monumentalizing of the masses casts a spell over spectators and actors at the same time as it paralyzes the possibility of critical thought or action. That Benjamin’s contrast between the function of Russian and German mass parades and festivals was illusory by 1936 does not affect the guiding opposition of enlightenment and propaganda, so central to his “Work of Art” essay.

In the age of the masses, Benjamin writes, the masses come face-to-face with themselves “in great ceremonial processions, great rallies, and mass sporting events, and in war, all of which are now fed into the camera.”\footnote{Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, vol. 4, 1938–1940, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al., ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 282. Benjamin is referring here to Marinetti’s glorification of war.} How the masses come face-to-face with themselves is the question: will it be through self-recognition, effected by the politicization of art, or through self-alienation, effected by the aestheticization of politics? To rephrase the question: what form must collective experience take if it is to counter the regressive, ritual spell of Fascist propaganda? In asking how art can come to the aid of political enlightenment, Benjamin is posing the question that Schiller had already famously attempted to answer 140 years earlier. Confronted by the regression of the French Revolution to the frightful kingdom of blind, destructive forces, Schiller sought to demonstrate that the problem of political practice could only be solved through the intermediate realm of art, “because it is only through Beauty that man makes his way to freedom.”\footnote{Friedrich Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, ed. and trans. Elizabeth Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 9.} Beauty for Schiller lies between Kant’s sublime of nature and the true sublime of moral autonomy, each of which exceeds the aesthetic, whose proper realm is confined to the beautiful concordance between art and nature. The double reference of representation—to both politics and art—is therefore central to a “beautiful” conception of aesthetic politics, which respects the aesthetic distance, the gap between the represented and representation as the condition and safeguard of the space of legitimate political power and of the political and aesthetic creativity that springs from the permanent debate on representation.\footnote{F. R. Ankersmit, Aesthetic Politics: Political Philosophy beyond Fact and Value (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996); Marc Richir, Du sublime en politique (Paris: Payot, 1991).} Such an aesthetic politics, espoused by Benjamin in
the form of distraction as the safeguard of aesthetic distance, resists the “sublime,” totalitarian temptation—in Benjamin’s terms, the aestheticization of politics—to eliminate the gap in the name of the supposed identity of leader and people or party and proletariat. Kant’s theory of the sublime can therefore be read as political in intention, when he condemns the self-alienation that passes for religion and consists of superstitious submission to and worship of a fearful and despotic deity. In turn, Nietzsche’s theory of the sublime, which reverses Kant’s theory of the sublime, can be read as the prototype of the goal of Fascist aestheticization: the collective identification with and surrender to power in and through ecstasy and terror beyond self-preservation.

But how in practice is Benjamin’s progressive politicization of art to distinguish itself from a regressive aestheticization of politics? Both share the same origin: the First World War and the shattering of tradition, mirrored in the avant-garde’s assault on the work of art as aesthetic object. If Benjamin praises Dada’s “ruthless annihilation” of aura, he is obliged at the same time to acknowledge that Fascism has appropriated “the reactionary elements of Futurism, Expressionism, and to some extent Surrealism.” And do not the avant-garde, film, and Fascism share the same “destructive, cathartic” interest in the liquidation of the value of tradition (3: 121)? Again, how can Benjamin appeal to the revolutionary possibilities inherent in technological reproduction, when its effects seem better suited to totalitarian purposes, based as they are on the “sense for sameness in the world” (4: 256), and the substitution of “mass existence for a unique existence” (4: 254), a substitution as applicable to its recipients as to the reproducible work of art? Benjamin must admit that the star and the dictator emerge as victors before the camera (4: 277). Nevertheless, film offers the only possibility of reaching the masses and answering the question that Benjamin had already posed to himself in a fragment associated with “The Work of Art”: how can forces, which in the political sphere lead to Fascism, have a beneficial function in the domain of art? His answer: art is the sphere in which social conflicts, even more than individual conflicts, can be resolved. He insists that the “devastating power latent in the tendencies pacified within it” does not invalidate art (3: 139). But if Benjamin is to counter Nietzsche and his disciples, d’Annunzio, Marinetti, and Jünger, it must be on their grounds—collective intoxication—and not on that of individual aesthetic judgment.

Benjamin’s starting point is therefore the matrix of the masses “from which all customary behavior towards works of art is today emerging newborn” (4: 267). The catalyst for a “different kind of participation” is the film. Technological reproduction has not only destroyed the illusion of the autonomous work of art and of the autonomous subject of reception; it has also transformed the extremely backward attitude of the masses to a painting by Picasso into a progressive response to a

Chaplin film. This new kind of participation replaces the old contemplative reception. Individual absorption gives way to collective distraction: “A person who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it…. By contrast, the distracted masses absorb the work into themselves” (4: 268). Benjamin presents distraction as the antithesis to tragic catharsis and as the antidote to the sublime, taking Chaplin as his model for film as the antitragic, antitotal work of art—in short, the birth of film from the matrix of the masses against the birth of tragedy from the spirit of music. Where Nietzsche dreams of a state founded on music, Benjamin dreams of the cinema as the school of the new collective subject of history, immunized à la Chaplin against the seductive power of Fascist aesthetics—the school, in which authentic, that is, collective, experience would once again become possible. The interplay of individual and collective reception and of pleasure and playful appraisal in distraction point the way to the overcoming of the splitting of authentic experience (Erfahrung) into debased experience (Erlebnis) and information (the newsreel). Film as medium thus plays a strategic role for Benjamin in breaking the fatal hold over the masses of the Fascist theatre of politics. It is not in itself, however, politicized art, as the other of the aestheticization of politics. That remains beyond the ambit of “The Work of Art” essay. At best, film can play an intermediary role with respect to innervation against the shocks of modern life, that is, through a subconscious habituation that helps to immunize the masses against self-alienating absorption into the spell of the Fascist collective.

In looking for a “different kind of participation,” Benjamin recognizes but only partially comes to grip with the challenge posed by what Frederic Spotts calls the new style of Nazi politics, which transformed spectators into participants:

What Stalin accomplished through terror, Hitler achieved through seduction. Using a new style of politics, mediated through symbols, myths, rites, spectacles and personal dramatics, he reached the masses as did no other leader of his time. Though he took away democratic government, he gave Germans what they clearly found a more meaningful sense of political participation, transforming them from spectators into participants in National Socialist theatre.

The locus classicus for the Nazi fusion of art and politics is Goebbels’s open letter of April 1933 to the conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler: “We who are giving form to modern German politics feel ourselves artists entrusted with the lofty responsibility to form from the raw masses a full and solid image of the people.” This image

32. I owe these last points to György Markus.
The Will to Power as Art

of the people was to manifest itself as the national community reborn through participation in the National Socialist theatre of politics. The ability of the Nazi festivals to channel and to harness the longing for communal belonging through mystic communion with the Führer and with the Volksgemeinschaft lay, Jean-Paul Sironneau argues, in their appeal to the archaic instinct for domination. Outside observers, who spoke of hysteria or collective intoxication, failed to recognize the strength of the desire to escape the self in fusion with a social whole (Sironneau refers in this context to the function of Orphic and Dionysian cults). It is not by chance that Benjamin’s indictment, in the epilogue to “The Work of Art” essay, of a mankind that delights in its own destruction revolves around the key terms of “spectator” and “participant”: “Mankind, which in Homer’s time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic” (4: 270).

Benjamin’s paradoxical conclusion brings out into the open the ambiguity of his use of the term “aestheticization.” The juxtaposition of contemplation and experience refers to two very different aesthetic pleasures in relation to the subject’s own annihilation, which belong to the theory and history of the sublime. To resume: in Burke the ruling principle of the sublime is terror, the strongest emotion we can feel, defused through the pleasure afforded by the contemplation in safety of the sufferings of others in tragedy or in life. Kant transformed Burke’s passion for self-preservation into a “quite different kind of self-preservation,” moral not physical in nature, with a corresponding distinction between a misunderstood sublime, rooted in terror and fear, and a true sublime, arising from the conquest of terror. It is only in Nietzsche’s theory of the sublime in The Birth of Tragedy that mankind experiences supreme aesthetic pleasure in its own annihilation, in the form of the intense terror and ecstasy experienced through the release from the principle of individuation in collective intoxication. This elimination of contemplative distance between spectator and participant makes the Nietzschean sublime into an transaesthetic category, for which Nietzsche’s term is the Dionysian intoxication through which we experience our oneness with the ultimate ground of being, which he later identified with the Will to Power. Fascist “aestheticization” is directed to this same Dionysian possession through the annihilation of contemplative distance and the transcendence of the self-preserving individual in the community of the nation and in the mobilized, uniformed, marching masses.

36. For Germany, see Klaus Vondung, Magic und Manipulation: Ideologischer Kult und politische Religion des Nationalsozialismus (Göttingen: Vandenhoek & Ruprecht, 1971); and for Italy, Gentile, Sacralization of Politics. Thus if we are to speak of the Fascist aestheticization of politics, it is in terms of art’s subordination and regression to ritual in the service of an ideological cult and a political religion.
Benjamin leaves us with a paradoxical formulation that needs unfolding. It compresses into a final paradox the whole genealogy of the Fascist aestheticization of politics that indeed has its origins in Nietzsche and fin-de-siècle decadence but ends with Hitler’s seizure of power. To understand Hitler after 1933, to understand the totalitarian dimensions of “aestheticization,” we need, on the one hand, the German counterpart to d’Annunzio and Marinetti—Jünger, aesthete, war hero, Nietzschean—and on the other, the Nazi mobilization of the masses through the medium of film. Jünger completes the Nietzsche-inspired trajectory from the overcoming of decadence in prewar France and Italy to the postwar vision of the totalitarian state as total work of art in Der Arbeiter (1932). Its analogue in film is the monumentalizing of the masses in Leni Riefenstahl’s Triumph of the Will (1935).

The State as Work of Art: Jünger’s Der Arbeiter

Jünger’s new man is the Worker, who is capable of facing and welcoming the terrifying annihilating reality of the world as the Will to Power, revealed in the Great War.37 The Worker’s “heroic realism” separates him from the “bourgeois” individual who anxiously clings to life and security as his highest values. The parallel to Heidegger’s distinction in Being and Time between authentic and inauthentic Da-sein, the few and the many (das Man), is evident. In each the deciding criterion is the resolute readiness to look death in the face. The only aesthetic adequate to “heroic realism” is thus the sublime, the sublime that explodes, according to Heidegger, every true aesthetics, even that of Kant, because it “explodes the very subjectivity of the subject,”38 pointing beyond the subject, beyond the aesthetic realm, to the beauty that is nothing but the beginning of the terrible (Rilke). The contemplation of the modern world in all its dynamism and relentless discipline, Jünger tells us in “Total Mobilization,” arouses mixed feelings of pleasure and horror, as we are forced to grasp that we are inescapably caught up in this frantic process. We must submit to the total mobilization that seizes and rolls over us; it is the mysterious and compelling imperative of the age of the masses and machines. The Great War with its war economy was but the preparation for the gigantic harnessing of energies already evident in Russia and Italy, a work process dictated by the pressure of the masses. Their emergence signifies the new “democracy of death” that has canceled all distinctions between soldiers and civilians, war and peace. The wars of the Worker, rational and merciless, await us.39

In Jünger’s apocalyptic perspective, progress with its naive cult of the machine, driven by the rival gods of socialism and nationalism, will pulverize the remnants of the old world and finally itself to reveal the identity of the “left” and the “right”: “It is a grandiose and frightful spectacle, to observe the ever more similar masses caught in the nets of the World Spirit.” This is the moment of destiny for Germany, the Germany that came face-to-face with itself in the war and recognized with Nietzsche that “this world is the will to power—and nothing besides! And you yourselves are also this will to power—and nothing besides!”

This recognition makes the Worker the deadly enemy of bourgeois society, because bourgeois society is the negation of the state as the highest means to power. In the Worker State the Work Plan takes the place of the constitution, and total mobilization of the population from cradle to grave replaces conscription. The army knows neither individuals nor the mass, dismissed by Jünger as the twin faces of the identity of democracy and anarchy. Just as the individual is replaced by the Worker as type, so are the masses by what Jünger calls the organic construction. As type the Worker appears in the dual but ultimately identical form of the master, as in the elite military orders, or the slave, as in the labor battalions. It goes without saying that labor service entails the readiness for self-sacrifice. Jünger’s highest exemplar of the hero seems to be the suicide bomber, when he defines his heroic realist as the human type who is capable of blowing himself up with pleasure and affirming this act as a confirmation of order. This human type in Jünger’s image will lead Germany’s revolution against the bourgeois world, a revolution that equates order with death and destruction and in which living dangerously demands the high cruel pleasure of annihilating the abstract intellect.

Jünger (writing in 1932) makes a special point of declaring “individual” artists and abstract intellectuals traitors. There will be new persecutions of the heretics, whose belief in the duality of blood and spirit, power and justice, man and nature, has fueled their secret wish ever since the world war to bring about the downfall of the “Reich” and its coming world empire.

In fine: Jünger regards the struggle for world power as a sublime spectacle, inhabited and transfigured by death. In Jünger’s universe the fallen soldier alone lives, because he has conquered time; he belongs to eternity, whereas the bourgeois,
the civilian, remains the victim consumed by time. This obsession with death and
sacrifice goes to the heart of the Fascist sublime: it signifies the total rejection and
negation of the values of bourgeois society in the name of the implacable absolute,
born from the killing fields of the Great War—the God of Death and “nothing be-
sides.” The invasion of bourgeois space by the “elemental powers” of war has shat-
tered forever the illusions of peacetime and separated masters from slaves: for the
one, death becomes the extreme moment of self-discovery; for the others, the mass
of fearful victims, however, there awaits the “democracy of death.” This transfigur-
ing reversal of death into the highest form of life elevates sacrifice to the supreme
value of a heroic cult that acquired all the trappings of a state religion in Fascism.
National Socialism drew much of its strength from its perpetuation of the infinite
debt of death to the war dead, becoming in its turn the death machine that de-
manded ever more sacrifices to its millenarian myth of salvation and regeneration,
involving a coming apocalyptic conflict as the passage to a new world. Nothing dis-
tinguishes Jünger’s apocalypse from that of the Nazis: neither the latter’s unlimited
goals nor even the glaring disproportion between goals and means in the coming
struggle for planetary power.

For Jünger it is useless to seek to justify the Will to Power other than as an aes-
thetic phenomenon. War is simply and supremely the total work, as “purposeless”
as the pyramids or the cathedrals. This comparison, advanced in “Total Mobiliza-
tion,” is not as arbitrary as it might seem. These three sublime manifestations of the
Will to Power proclaim the conquest of death and time. Moreover, only the great
politics of planetary war will make art in the grand style possible once again. Jünger
expounds his vision of the total work adequate to the masters of the planet in the
chapter “Art as the Shaping of the Work World” in The Worker. Needless to say,
the age of the Worker and of planetary-imperial plans totally excludes the art and
politics of bourgeois individualism, which never recognized or comprehended the
arts of the state: sculpture, architecture, and drama. Jünger has nothing to say about
drama, since his interest lies with the art of space against time, the space in which
totality appears as archetypal Gestalt. In the new planetary space of the Worker,
opened up by the downfall of the individual, Gestalt acts as the great creative prin-
ciple, capable of grasping life in its totality and giving it form through a fusion of the
organic and the mechanical in organic constructions. Thus the total mobilization
that transforms life into energy and “grasps the earth as its elementary material”
calls for Gestaltung in order to give form to world domination (Herrschaft). But
just as man fuses with the machine in the organic construction, so life given form
resembles death in Jünger’s utopia of extinguished individuality.

What then is Jünger’s alternative to the art of individualism, of the traitors who
will never grasp the identity of art with the highest fulfillment of the life force?
Instead of the absurdity of our museum culture, Jünger proposes “the great sacral
landscapes devoted to the cult of the gods and the dead” (225). It is of course the
dream of all “great” rulers to perpetuate themselves in “monuments immune to
the attacks of time” as similes of the eternal (232). The nearest parallel in the Third Reich were Hitler’s plans for Totenburgen, cities of the dead, intended to mark the frontiers of the new Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals, from Norway to Greece. 44 The monuments would serve as the eternal reminder of the unification of Europe under the leadership of its core people. The “future was marching with the past in the eternal present of the race, and the movement was leading toward the immobility of stone.” 45 This petrification “eternalizes,” Benjamin observes, imperial power: under the gaze of their Fascist masters “the difference between the slaves, who built the pyramids out of blocks, and the proletarian masses on the squares and parade grounds, who build blocks before the leader, is minimal” (3: 389). The petrification of life is also Jünger’s highest ideal; it corresponds to the supplanting of the individual by the typical. The individualistic world of economic competition, historical progress, and sovereign creativity comes to rest in the type as eternal archetype: “There is nothing more self-evident, more uniform and—from an individual standpoint—more symmetrical than grave or temple landscapes, in which simple or constant proportions, monuments, the orders of columns, ornaments and symbols are repeated in solemn monotony and surround life with definite and definitive images” (238). Such a world, as for instance the spectacle of the great pyramids at night, induces fear not admiration in the stranger. In such a world all movement is controlled by the frightful logic of a closed, incomparable unity (239). As Jünger puts it, the art of the empire will be the art that replicates the metallic physiognomy, the love of mathematical structures, and the lack of psychic differentiation of the Worker. We can best understand Jünger’s “organic construction” if we substitute for the uniform, solemn monotony of the rows of temple columns the serried ranks of the Worker in the rigid order of the parade ground: the type as clone of what Lewis Mumford has called the megamachine.

In The City in History (1961) Lewis Mumford speaks in passing of the inner trauma of the city, “the trauma of civilization itself, the association of mastery and slavery, of power and human sacrifice.” 46 He returned to this theme four years later in the essay “Utopia, the City, and the Machine.” There Mumford discerns at the very beginning of urban civilization “not only the archetypal form of the city as utopia but another coordinate utopian institution essential to any system of communal regimentation: the machine.” 47 The city and the machine together project the institution of kingship as “the godlike incarnation of collective power,” based on a

44. There is a direct link from the monument to commemorate Hindenburg’s victory at the battle of Tannenberg on the Eastern Front in 1914 to Hitler’s Totenburgen. Hitler visited the monument in 1933 and transformed it into Hindenburg’s mausoleum in 1934. Robert Savage has drawn my attention to the connection.

45. Eric Michaud, Cult of Art, 212. For the architect Wilhelm Kreis’s drawing of a Totenburg, approved by Hitler, see Spotts, Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics, 117.


coalition between military might and religious myth. The utopia of the city springs from its founding conception as a home for the gods: “To inhabit the same city as a god was to be the member of a super-community: a community in which every subject had a place...as part of a hierarchical structure representing the cosmos itself.” The city with its monuments to sacred and secular power could not have come into being, however, without its other utopian institution, what Mumford calls the platonic model of all later machines, the machine composed of human parts. This machine takes two, interchangeable forms: the labor and the military machine, with the common characteristic that they enabled a concentration of energy in great assemblages of men. Organized as a “unified working whole” according to a strict division and specialization of labor under administrative supervision (the platonic model of all later bureaucracies), the labor machine made possible the execution of projects on a scale that was not surpassed until the Industrial Revolution. The most striking example remains the Great Pyramid at Giza, which already demonstrated the efficiency and perfection of the machine in the age of its invention. But if the utopian city transformed the humble human community into a gigantic collective work of art, the price, says Mumford, was “total submission to a central authority, forced labour, lifetime specialization, inflexible regimentation...and readiness for war.” The archetypal machine thus represented an “ambivalent triumph of human design.” On the one hand, it “created a visible heaven in the great city, exalting the human spirit as it had never been exalted by man’s works before.” On the other hand, the labor machine and the military machine nourished and sustained the imperial dreams and paranoid fantasies of rulers. It is not by chance that Mumford singles out the Pyramids as the archetypal product of the machine, composed of living but rigid human parts in the service of divine kingship. Where Mumford sees the expression of a totalitarian concentration of political, economic, military, and bureaucratic power that was not to be replicated until the modern period, Jünger, as he contemplates the ruins of lost civilizations, senses in these stones symbols of the everlasting: “the deeper unity of life” beyond the distinction between masters and slaves. Even more, he declares the incomprehension and objections of “individuals” to his vision of the totalitarian state utterly irrelevant. If the individual can only recognize in his exposition “the description of a situation, in which art is made by machines and in which the world appears as the setting of a new insect species,” such a misunderstanding leaves him indifferent (245).

Jünger’s fascination with the Pyramids found its contemporary complement in Speer’s theory of ruin-value, which he developed to satisfy Hitler’s desire for monuments that would speak to future generations of the greatness of the empire.
“Hitler liked to say that the purpose of his building was to transmit his time and its spirit to posterity. Ultimately, all that remained to remind men of the great epochs of history was their monumental architecture.” How appropriate that Speer illustrated his theory in 1934 with a drawing of the Zeppelinfeld at Nuremberg—the setting of the party rallies—in a state of romantic decay: “its columns fallen, the walls crumbling here and there, but the outline still clearly visible.” Hitler accepted the logic of Speer’s prospective memory and gave orders that the important buildings of the Reich were to be erected in keeping with the principles of the “law of ruins.” We observe in Hitler and Jünger the same will to eternity in stone. Jünger’s aestheticism is directed to the totality of life as Gestalt. Life finds its meaning in the petrification and eternalization of great sacral landscapes, dedicated to the religion of death, the sublime landscapes that speak to Jünger of the deeper unity of life and death. It is this sublime unity of life and death that was celebrated in the great ceremonial gatherings of the National Socialist Party, which presented and enacted in the union of the Leader and the people the rebirth of the new Germany.

**Hitler’s Triumph of the Will**

If we can speak of Stalin as the invisible producer of the show trials of the 1930s, Hitler, with his architect, designer, and director Albert Speer, was the highly visible producer of the Nuremberg party rallies, devoting considerable attention to finding the definitive form for each part of the ritual. He commissioned the filming of the 1934 rally, he decided the title, and he chose Leni Riefenstahl as the director. All forms of communication and propaganda were summoned to create a Gesamtkunstwerk: “The Nuremberg Party rallies were the pinnacle of achievement and the most powerful examples of the political aesthetics of National Socialism and the artist-politician Adolf Hitler.” Hitler was very conscious of his double audience, the party and the people. Through the staging of the identity of the Leader and the assembled party he wanted to affirm the identity of the Leader and the nation—“One Nation, one Leader, one Reich, Germany” (camera shots 148–51). And this was realized brilliantly by *Triumph of the Will* (1935), which received international recognition at the 1935 Venice Film Festival and at the 1937 Paris Film Festival. The film has been hailed as “the supreme realization in cinematic form of the Nazi political religion. Its artistry…is designed to sweep us into emphatic identification

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with Hitler as a kind of human deity. The massive spectacle of regimentation, unity and loyalty powerfully conveys the message that the Nazi movement was the living symbol of the reborn German nation.” The power of the film derived above all from its credibility as a “true” documentary (as opposed to a restaging of events, as in Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin*)—a credibility that underwrote Goebbels’s words from the opening ceremony: “May the bright flame of enthusiasm never be extinguished. It alone gives light and warmth to the creative art of modern political propaganda.” The political aesthetics and the political religion of National Socialism are predicated on the enthusiasm that “rises from the depths of the people” (Goebbels, shot 120). *Triumph of the Will* undoubtedly succeeded in producing and conveying this collective experience of enthusiasm through the mirroring of the masses in their Leader and of the Leader in his masses, a mirroring in which the “pleasure of seeing and being seen no longer implied any externality”: “The assembled people gave birth to its now visible soul while the Führer beheld the formation, before his very eyes, of the people he had bought into the light of day in accordance with his vision.” The act of creation through which the vision received its living body is thus simultaneously a *creatio ex nihilo*, in which in Hitler’s words the banner of rebirth was torn from nothingness (shot 205), and a collective (Dionysian) projection of wishes into the (Apollonian) dream vision of the savior. This reciprocity of desire and vision was raised to a higher power of projection as the audience expanded to the millions of Germans outside the ranks of the party. Hitler reminds the “Work-Soldiers” of the Reich Labor Service “that not only the hundreds of thousands at Nuremberg are looking at you, but, at this moment, that all of Germany is looking at you” (shots 161–63).

Franz Dröge and Michael Müller argue that the staging of the masses as the medium of the aestheticization of politics involves a double process of self-observation, in which the masses are overwhelmed at the same time as they overwhelm themselves in the self-experience as mass. The transformation of politics into the staging of the rapturous communion of the Leader and his people—“flesh from our flesh, blood from our blood” (Hitler, shot 207)—tied the goal of transforming the individual into the “charismatic national community” to the overcoming of the self in the collective experience of the mass. However, it is only in Riefenstahl’s masterful condensation of the seven days of national rebirth into two hours that this communal act of faith becomes a total work of art. Although it is

57. See Griffin, “Staging the Nation’s Rebirth,” 16–35, for the concept of the charismatic national community.
clear that the two dimensions of this sublime theater of politics, the aesthetic and the religious, can scarcely be separated—and in this sense “aestheticization” applied to Fascist politics must be regarded as a deficient concept—it will be helpful for analytic purposes to distinguish the two dimensions in relation to *Triumph of the Will*. For Hitler, the reader of *Le Bon* and the student of Catholic ceremony, the power of the image over the masses was all important. Riefenstahl was quick to grasp the unrivaled effectivity of film as a medium of propaganda precisely in terms of the primacy of the image, which she reinforced and magnified through the new visual possibilities offered by camera perspective. Riefenstahl’s exploitation of what Alexander Rodchenko called in 1928 the most interesting viewpoints in the modern world—the views upward from below and downward from above58—fused the power of the image with the image of power. In the view upward from below, Hitler appears in solitary resolution against the background of the sky. The dominance of the view from above is established in the opening sequence showing Hitler’s descent through the clouds, which open onto the panorama of historic Nuremberg and the marching columns in the streets below crossed by the shadow of his plane. The vertical hierarchy of the gaze transmitted by the camera transformed the national audience into a privileged participant in the reciprocal mirroring of the Führer and the adoring masses. In canceling the difference between observers and actors, and thus the aesthetic space of semblance and play, the Nazi aestheticization of politics set out to destroy this critical, distancing function of the aesthetic and replace it with the mobilizing power of the image.

*Triumph of the Will* is thus the very antithesis of the hopes Benjamin entertained in “The Work of Art” regarding the critical, distancing effects of the camera as the instrument of the mutual penetration of art and science, capable of transforming the whole function of art: “Instead of being based on ritual, it [art] begins to be based on another practice—politics.” Not only does *Triumph of the Will* present politics as ritual; it exemplifies in disturbing fashion precisely what Benjamin claims for the camera, when he likens the cameraman to a surgeon who cuts into the patient’s body. The image produced by the cameraman “consists of multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law,” the law of montage. Riefenstahl does indeed assemble the mass-body of the people from multiple fragments. Christian Crouse sums up the surgical technique of the film:

The camera can edit as the surgeon can cut; if its discerning eye sees only a face or a hand or a leg, then the chosen appendage is the only reality, the only representation of a human being. In film as in life, the body dismembered by art and politics is repieced onto the larger body of Nazism; bodies reconstructed give their life over to the omnipotent swastika with its four stiff legs marching in a cyclical pattern, anonymous

bodies reduced to be part of an amalgamated mass, ... agglomerated bodies used as building blocks of pyramidal empire.\textsuperscript{59}

Crouse’s summary of the Nazi theatre of politics needs unpacking in order to show how the montage of the mass-body served the sacralization of power and its empire of death. We can speak of an aestheticization of the body here in the sense of the cut that decomposes and recomposes the integral image of the human being. Riefenstahl de-individualizes the participants by focusing on the part and the collective whole, the monumentalized mass. The second perspective is undoubtedly the more important, but some of her most telling shots capture the whole in the part: the SS guard outside Hitler’s hotel becomes the swastika emblems on their helmets, the eagle and swastika insignia on their buckles, and the line of black jackboots (shots 29–31). The panorama of the men of the Reich Labor Service breaks down into images of shovels and boots. The lengthy sequence (shots 281–324) of the SA, the SS, and the Labor Service marching in review through the center of Nuremberg alternates between close-ups of the party leaders and long shots of the cheering crowd and the marching troops, in which the crowd metamorphoses into the raised hands of the Nazi salute and the paramilitaries into marching legs or more abstract patterns of bodies and shadows or bodies and equipment, enhanced by the black-and-white photography.

Siegfried Kracauer’s 1927 reflections in \textit{The Mass Ornament} were prompted by the coordinated movements of the Tilly Girls, a troupe of dancers who functioned as “indissoluble female units,” performing intricate mathematical demonstrations. Kracauer attributes a magic force to these mass ornaments, composed of thousands of bodies, drained of life and shaped into patterns comparable to the aerial photographs of a city. They give aesthetic pleasure because they imbue material with form. As such, the ornament is an end in itself, in contrast to the “moral units” formed by soldiers.\textsuperscript{60} When Kracauer goes on to read this—rational rather than organic—surface phenomenon as a reflection of capitalist production that destroys personality and national community, he is only superficially right. Not only did the biomechanical man of Taylorism fascinate Communists and capitalists in equal measure; the Worker as soldier constituted the “moral” unit of National Socialism, ready to sacrifice “personality” to the “national community.” The driving force of the totalitarian megamachine was, as Mumford has shown, state power long before capitalism.

As befits Jünger’s organic construction (neither organic nor rational), Riefenstahl’s use of the camera’s surgical techniques of de-individualizing and dismembering the body goes together with the animation of the inanimate, for instance


in the shots of the standards of the SA and the SS. As the official reports of the Nuremberg rally emphasized, these standards, consecrated in the blood of the Nazi martyrs (shots 271–80), took on a life of their own, indeed a life-giving function of their own, as they circulated through the paramilitary formations.\footnote{Sabine Behrenbeck, Der Kult um den toten Helden: Nationalsozialistische Mythen, Riten und Symbole (Greifswald: SH-Verlag, 1996), 363–66.} In similar fashion the camera’s movement from Nazi symbols—predominately gigantic eagles and swastikas—to the masses and back is a recurrent structuring feature. The film begins with an image of a Nazi eagle presiding over the film title and concludes with a giant swastika covering the entire screen, which dissolves into the final sequence—with a huge, superimposed swastika—of men of the Labor Service marching into the future. This sequence captures very clearly the essence of National Socialism as a “movement”: the symbol of power fed by the lifeblood of the mobilized masses. Hitler’s final words in the film, on the movement as a “living expression of our people, and therefore a symbol of eternity” (shot 357), are no contradiction: the eternity of the Thousand Year Reich was death. Not only was the Nazi movement born of the Great War; its conception of the national community was cast in the image of the front soldiers.

The contrast between movement and eternity is central to the film: the moment of the “mechanical and the lithic sublime”\footnote{Iain Boyd White, “National Socialism and Modernism,” in Art and Power: Europe under the Dictators, 1930–1945, ed. Dawn Ades (London: Thames & Hudson, 1995), 262.} is that of the monumentalized mass, “controlled by the frightful logic of a closed, incomparable unity.” The spectacle of endless columns marching to the beat of military music, however imposing, finally exhausts, whereas the central scene of the commemoration of the war dead remains unforgettable. In aerial perspective, Hitler, flanked by the leaders of the SA and the SS, Lutze and Himmler, makes his way to and from the war memorial between the rigid ranks of the massed paramilitaries. The sacred space marked out by the Führer’s path from the living to the dead takes us to the heart of the Nazi religion of death, which drew both its seductive power and its destructive energies from what Alexander Schuller calls the will to give back to death its anthropological primacy against secular modernity’s denial of death. This sacred space thus formed the mythic center of the movement, where the celebration of the identity of the living and the dead symbolically transformed the living into an army of the dead, dedicated—like the SS—to give and to take death.\footnote{Alexander Schuller, “Mythos Mord: Über den Totalitarismus,” Merkur 593 (1998): 661–72.} The cult of the dead hero made the hero’s life a prelude to the sacrifice that imposes on the living the moral duty to give this sacrifice meaning through further sacrifice. In a leader of Das Reich, 27 December 1942, Goebbels prepared the Germans for the imminent fall of Stalingrad: “The army of the fallen have not laid down their arms. They are marching in the ranks of the fighting soldiers. They stand as admonition and
national conscience over the whole nation and make their demand audible in their eternal silence, which cannot be overheard.”

But the cult of heroic death also demanded the numberless, ever-growing invisible body of victims, sacrificed to the cult of death that elevated murder to a mythical act and mass murder to the programme of totalitarianism.

64. Behrenbeck, Der Kult um den toten Helden, 530.