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| **Nazi Modernism** |
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| Nazi Modernism is not a contradiction in terms, even if Nazi-era rhetoric and propaganda directed against Entartete Kunst powerfully suggested that this was the case. Indeed, in addition to inaugurating a new style of political leadership (borrowed from Fascist Modernism) based on myths of national regeneration and the exploitation of culture to achieve political ends, National Socialism left its indelible aesthetic imprint everywhere and became synonymous with all things new, technologically advanced, and ‘modern’, including the invention of the first operational jet fighter and ballistic missile, the ‘People’s Car’, the first national highway system, the *Autobahn*, and fashion and footwear innovations spearheaded by Hugo Boss and the Dassler brothers, Adolf and Rudolf. |
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Recent scholarship has unearthed not only a wealth of modernist cultural activity deemed central to Nazi ideology and self-representation in Germany and Nazi-occupied Europe, but the work of leading scholars and curators has revealed dynamic and surprising links between cultural production in Nazi Germany (1933-1945) and Modernism—not only in the obvious areas like film, architecture, and design, but also in the unexpected realms of music, painting, and sculpture.  The appeal exerted by National Socialism over leading Modernist intellectuals and artists can be charted across a spectrum of behavior that ranges from mere self-serving flirtation with Nazism to overt and enthusiastic collaboration with the cultural apparatus of the Nazi regime. Nazi Music The ambivalence of Nazi tastemakers toward Modernism was never more apparent than in the regime’s relationship with Richard Strauss, the leading German composer of the twentieth century, whose signature works include *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1896), *Salome* (1905), and *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911), and Carl Orff, whose wildly popular *Carmina Burana* (1937) was the most successful large-scale musical composition of the Nazi era. Despite the existence of reservations on both sides (Joseph Goebbels refers to Strauss as a ‘decadent neurotic’ in his diary, while Strauss considered Goebbels a ‘pipsqueak’), Strauss was appointed by Goebbels to serve as the first president of the *Reichsmusikkammer* in 1933. *Carmina Burana* reflected Orff’s interest in medieval German poetry and, despite its unusual rhythms, appealed to the Nazi predilection for an idealized, quasi-mythical German past. The composer’s use of historical texts in a modernist composition was, however, acceptable to the Nazis because Orff’s innovative technique was cast in a variation on Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk* that he called ‘elementare Musik’ which was based on the unification of the arts. Nazi Film The technically innovative Leni Riefenstahl (*Triumph of the Will*, 1935), Veit Harlan (*Jew Süss*, 1940), and Josef von Báky (*Münchhausen*, 1943) belonged to the pool of talented filmmakers (that also included the Hollywood directors Douglas Sirk and Fritz Lang before they emigrated in the mid-1930s) who worked with the Film Department in Joseph Goebbels’s Ministry of Propaganda and the People’s Enlightenment. Nazi Architecture and Design While the stripped, modernizing Neo-classicism of Paul Ludwig Troost and Albert Speer has come to be emblematic of the representative buildings of the Third Reich, Modernist architecture also played an important role in the Nazi reconstruction of Germany. Indeed, the closure of the Bauhaus under pressure from the Nazi government during the directorship of Mies van der Rohe and the subsequent emigration of Mies and former director, Walter Gropius, to America have overshadowed the work of Bauhaus and other Modernist architects, designers, and artists who remained in Germany and accepted the patronage of the Nazi state and its cultural organs. Thus much of the architectural output of the Nazi era was either directly inspired by Bauhaus principles, such as in the bridges of the vast *Autobahn* network (to which Mies himself submitted designs for bridges personally approved by Hitler), or are distinctly modernist in design, such as the *Reichsluftfahrtministerium*, which was designed by Ernst Sagebiel (who apprenticed under Erich Mendelsohn), or the buildings and designs of Sergius Ruegenberg, Eduard Walther, Gustav Hassenpflug, and Joost Schmidt. The design features of Nazi advertising, furniture, and household objects were also shaped by Bauhäusler Herbert Bayer, Kurt Kranz, Hein Neuner, Otto Rittwegen, Paul Wolff, Wilhelm Wagenfeld, Christian Dell, Wolfgang Tümpel, and Grette Willers. Other prominent modernist architects who served the regime included Paul Bonatz and Peter Behrens. The latter was an early and outlawed Nazi Party member in Austria and the teacher of Gropius, Mies, and Le Corbusier. Behrens’s designs for the reconstruction of Berlin were greatly admired by Adolf Hitler. Nazi Sculpture Along with architecture and design, sculpture in the Third Reich was the art form least distorted by Nazi proscriptions on Entartete Kunst. The leading sculptors of Nazi Germany were divided into two groups—the older generation of classicizing Modernists led by Georg Kolbe and Fritz Koelle, and younger, more ideologically influenced sculptors led by Hitler’s favorites, Arno Breker and Josef Thorak. Despite Kolbe’s being one of Germany’s most decorated artists during the Nazi dictatorship, his canonical status survived the war intact. The same cannot be said of Breker and Thorak, whose careers will be forever associated with their work on behalf of the Party, e.g., Thorak’s sculptures for the German pavilion at the 1939 Paris Exposition and Breker’s sculptures for the New Reich Chancellery. Nazi Painting Bauhaus artists Kurt Kranz and Wilhelm Wessel joined original members of the Neue Sachlichkeit, Christian Schad and Rudolf Schlichter, in continuing their careers even after the 1937 attack on Entartete Kunst. In order to maintain a high degree of consensual participation in exhibitions, the Nazi regime lowered the bar for showing in even the most prestigious art exhibitions to mere membership in the *Reichskammer der bildenden Künste*. Since all professional artists were obliged to join, this was an essentially meaningless credential, except for a relatively small number of artists purged for racial or political reasons. Thus Modernist artists who continued to exhibit their work in Nazi Germany do not fit neatly into the binary of collaboration or inner emigration. They comprise a group that includes Georg Schrimpf, Franz Radziwill, Erwin Henning, Erich Glette, Tom Hops, Rudolf Nerlinger, Oswald Poetzelberger, Leo von König, Werner Gilles, Ernst Schumacher, Carl Schwalbach, Max Unold, Wolf Panizza, Willi Geiger, Oskar Coester, and Carl Theodor Protzen. Still other dissident or even ‘degenerate artists’ who had been living under a de facto *Ausstellungsverbot* found restrictions on their work were lifted with their conscription into the Wehrmacht and their recruitment into combat art units. A comparison of this latter kind of work with paintings exhibited in the official Great German Art Exhibitions offers a glimpse behind the curtain where the complex reality of artistic production in Nazi Germany is visible. Here ambivalence towards Modernism was unconcealed and the censorship or management of artistic production was improvised, chaotic, and inconsistent. |
| Further reading:  (Herf)  (Griffin)  (Guenther)  (Hake)  (Koepnick)  (Lane)  (Petropoulos)  (Van Dyke) |