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**Fascist Political Aestheticism:
A Vitalist Critique of Walter Benjamin**

By Edwin Tucker

This paper is an attempt to reexamine the European fascist phenomenon as it developed between the world wars within the context of philosophic irrationalism. Specifically, this irrationalism was typified by vitalism, a "life philosophy" that had recognizable precursors throughout the nineteenth century. This philosophy placed value upon a nonrational means of knowing and experiencing, emphasizing subjective intuition, which perceives reality in its unending flux. These ideas appealed on an aesthetic level to fascists as an accurate description of the artistic process and complemented a contemporary view of the aestheticization of life. During the first decades of the twentieth century, vitalist thought was increasingly politicized in a response to the perceived failures of European liberalism and socialism. The centerpiece of political vitalism was the concept of myth as a socially galvanizing force. Additionally, myth had an aesthetic application as representative of a body of intuited images. The first section of this paper will explore the vitalist paradigm, which will serve as an example of the transition from subjectivist vitalism to political vitalism in the thought of Henri Bergson and Georges Sorel. The next section will examine how political vitalism entered fascist thought after World War I, with a particular emphasis on the place of aesthetics in the fascist mindset. The purpose here is threefold: first, to develop a definition of fascist vitalism; second, to explore the social and political power of aesthetic myth; and finally, to present myth as the great motive force behind fascist political aestheticism; that is, as the core of aesthetic, political action. The final section of this paper will involve some general observations regarding the German fascist, or Nazi, perpetration of the Holocaust. These observations will be made within the context of fascist, vitalist, political aestheticism as developed in this discussion, in an attempt to offer another approach to the subject of the Holocaust and to test the efficacy of this fascist/vitalist argument.

A Vitalist Paradigm

Vitalism is representative of the general, anti-intellectual atmosphere that pervaded Europe during the last half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. This philosophy represented a revolt against reason or the notion, most characteristic of the Enlightenment and later found in nineteenth-century positivism, that reason and the rational workings of the mind would answer myriad questions and provide a much-needed balm to the anxieties people suffered in the modern world. An overall malaise in European society of the *fin de siècle* spawned extreme resentment and suspicion of the crushing onslaught of industry and technology, the advent of a new world of the middle class, and the extension of the franchise in most European countries. The horrors of World War I confirmed the worst fears regarding the merciless advance of modernity and inspired the search for what Georg Lukács called the "third way." Liberalism and Marxism, the two universalist children of the French Revolution, became associated with the failures of modernity. In this atmosphere, the idea of turning back the clock to a simpler time, fomenting a rebellion against the "false" reality offered by reason and science, and moving toward secular (and nonsecular) spirituality appealed to many in immense ways. The soil was tilled and fertile for an embrace of irrationalism and myth. Vitalism was an alternative to liberal idealism and Marxist materialism that emphasized people's subjective life experiences. For some, these experiences provided the best way to glimpse the true reality of life.¹ Vitalism proved a powerful idea with its heavy stress on human intuition and inner consciousness as capable of comprehending the hidden essence underlying objective reality; throughout the continent, many notable thinkers adopted a vitalist outlook. The blind striving of anti-intellectual Will in Schopenhauer's thought and later Nietzsche's Dionysian principle are powerful early examples of this subjectivist turn in European philosophy. This discussion, which explores the affinities between vitalism and fascism, will focus on the later vitalism of Henri Bergson and the subsequent modifications made to his thought by Georges Sorel.

The connection between the vitalism of Bergson and that of Sorel forms the nexus of what might be termed the vitalist paradigm. This paradigm demonstrates in the most systematized fashion the intellectual turn

¹Georg Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, trans. Peter Palmer (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1981), 412.

to irrationalism that typified Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most importantly, this paradigm elucidates the process whereby vitalist irrationalism became both politicized and aestheticized in fascism. The fascists, like the vitalists, engaged in a search for answers as Europe emerged from the destruction of World War I. In their violent reaction against Enlightenment rationalism, they demonstrated a clear affinity for vitalist ideas. It is unnecessary, and is in fact quite misleading, to suggest that vitalist ideas entered the fascist mindset solely by way of the Bergson-Sorel connection, although Sorel had a great influence upon former syndicalists-turned-fascists Georges Valois and Enrico Corradini.² Instead this paper will attempt to show that facets of Bergsonian and Sorelian vitalist thought are strikingly similar to those found in fascism. Without attempting to prove some tenuous linkage between Sorelian myth and Hitler's *Weltanschauung*, this paper will focus on the language of fascist and proto-fascist writers and thinkers to demonstrate how the spirit of vitalist irrationalism and myth formed the basis of their thought. It is first appropriate to trace the philosophical essence at the heart of the vitalist paradigm by turning to the ideas of Bergson.

During this era in which Freud began his explorations into the inner depths of the human psyche and Nietzsche called for a "transvaluation of values," Henri Bergson was busy delivering lectures on the purely subjective nature of reality, emphasizing the creative powers of human intuition over the rational mind. Amidst the sort of popular enthusiasm which today would most likely be afforded only to the latest pop-psyche guru or entertainment-world icon, Bergson began the first of a series of lectures at Paris's College de France in the 1890s. Bergson utilized such terms as "duration" and "intuition" to refer to the reality existing beneath or hidden from the world of rational concepts, quantitative calculation, and intellectualized language and symbols. Bergson's system begins with his discussion of duration, or *durée*, which represents the unending flux of reality. As this definition implies, temporal reality is in a constant state of movement and becoming. In an attempt to quantify this reality and make sense out of it, our rational minds are compelled to cut out segments of the flux and arbitrarily assign rational concepts to them. An example of this rational conceptualization is apparent in Bergson's criticism of the concept of time. For convenience sake, we have

² Mark Antliff, *Inventing Bergson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 159.

assigned segments of time identifiable to us as seconds, minutes, hours, and so on. We utilize the clock in order to recognize and quantify these segments, and as a means to relate one spatial point to another. In this sense, we are attempting to intersect time and space by placing time into the spatialized realm—that is, in the realm of objects that exist simultaneously with each other and can be subjected to quantification.³ For Bergson, the problem with the spatialization of time is that the true essence of duration, the “succession of states, each of which announces that which follows and contains that which precedes it” is thereby interrupted.⁴ The pure movement of duration, the succession of irreducible moments that is “the very fluidity of our internal life” is halted.⁵ In its place one finds merely a succession of adjacent time segments bereft of their interconnectedness, like the movement of a film slowed down and stopped so that only a single frame is visible.

Bergson suggested that only the intuitive faculties of the mind are capable of experiencing the reality of duration, and this experience continually takes place in the immediate. The rational mind is analytical, and while “analysis operates always on the immobile. . . intuition places itself in mobility,” or duration.⁶ Intuition represents inner consciousness before the process of intellectual conceptualization, which uses language to assign rationalized signs and symbols to reality. Bergsonian intuition perceives the flow of duration in its mobility, thereby glimpsing reality in its truest form. Clearly, this represents a repudiation of the power of intellect to perceive the reality beneath appearances, an open challenge to the Enlightenment. In post-World War I Germany, radical-conservative opponents of the Weimar government such as Carl Schmitt, Hans Freyer, Ludwig Klages, Oswald Spengler, and Martin Heidegger formulated their criticisms in highly vitalistic language.⁷ Klages devalued the “law of intellect [which] secedes

³ Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, trans. F. L. Pogson (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1919), 108.

⁴ Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. T. E. Hulme (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1949), 25.

⁵ A. R. Lacey, *Bergson* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 28.

⁶ Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 41.

⁷ For an in-depth discussion of these theorists and their propagation of decidedly irrationalist, mythic, and vitalist views, see Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) and several essays in Richard Wolin's, *Labyrinths: Explorations in the Critical History of Ideas* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995).

from the rhythm of cosmic life" and held that intellect succeeded, eventually, only in destroying the magic quality of life. In a similar sense, Max Scheler described an intuition that could locate the hidden essences of reality, impenetrable to the rationalizing mind.⁸ Placing itself within duration, intuition perceives reality in its unending flow and, therefore, in its eternal succession of moments. This places the perception of reality continually in the immediate. For Bergson, intuition had the potential not only to perceive the flow of reality or duration in the immediate, but also to act within it. The immediate, intuited, or unreflective act takes place when the mind, free from the barriers erected by conceptualizing intellect, places itself within duration. In this context, the mind comes into contact with the spatial world: the world of objects. Here, then, is where the truly free act takes place, in the immediate and before the confusion engendered by the intellect can take effect.

That the intuited act is a creative act is also apparent in Bergson's philosophy. In Bergson's most famous work, *Creative Evolution* (1907), he introduces the *élan vital*, a purposive, evolutionary, and creative force with which individual, subjective intuition was capable of creatively interacting.⁹ This is a later idea of Bergson's that was received with consternation by some of his followers, Charles Péguy and Sorel among them, who viewed it as just the sort of conceptualizing use of language that Bergson had railed against so convincingly. Nevertheless, this idea was considerably popular, and *Creative Evolution* became a "best-seller" in a very modern sense. The *élan vital*, "before which and outside of which there is nothing," is important for its emphasis on the primacy of the creative impulse.¹⁰ The creative, intuited act mimicked the creativity inherent in the *élan vital*. Earlier, Hegel's aesthetic theory had conceived of the artistic process involving a noncognitive aspect that approximates to some degree Bergson's nonrational intuition as the seat of aesthetic creativity. Hegel proposed that the unity of subject and object or Idea, the realization of which was the avenue toward human freedom, entered into human consciousness through religion and art.¹¹ One finds this Hegelian valuation of aestheticism echoed powerfully in the Romantic movement and

⁸ Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, 523-4, 479.

⁹ Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra & Cloudesley Brereton (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1935), 103-9.

¹⁰ A. E. Pilkington, *Bergson and His Influence* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 19.

¹¹ Charles Karelis, "An Interpretive Essay," in G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to Aesthetics*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), xxv.

in an equally irrationalist sense by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Intuition aided the artist in the "displacement of the practical categories, the useful symbolic representations that come between the mind and reality," in favor of pure intuitive, creative images unfettered by rational conceptualization.¹² Bergsonian intuition not only provided the key to reality but also the creative life impulse that actualized it. After the turn of the century, Bergson's ideas, in particular the value placed upon the unreflective and intuitive act, heavily influenced the thought of Georges Sorel, who saw in Bergson's subjectivism a way to revitalize the revolutionary ardor of the Marxist proletariat by emphasizing the power of myth. The transition from Bergsonian, subjectivist vitalism to the mythic, political vitalism of Sorel is crucial to the understanding of similar intuitive/mythic and aesthetic developments in fascist thought.

The purely subjectivist aspects of Bergsonian thought find an application in the objective, social realm with Sorel's vitalist theories for social action and revolution. Foremost among these theories was his idea of myth. In the 1890s, the Marxian Sorel had become increasingly disgusted with the gradualism of the French socialists led by the main Dreyfusard, Jaurès. Sorel had lost faith in the proletariat, the sine qua non of the hoped-for revolution, with their consistent weakness when confronted by the co-opting comforts of bourgeois capitalism. The workers were too susceptible to the temptation to betray their proletariat materialism and adopt the more secure bourgeois materialism they were supposed to despise. It was not until he began attending Bergson's lectures in the 1890s that Sorel's idea for myth reached fruition. For Sorel, myth represented the means by which the lapsed proletariat would find new courage for the coming revolution. It consisted basically of an "idea," in this case the violently inspirational idea of the general strike, that would dominate the minds and motivate the actions of workers. This myth was a call for violent action, not a promise of a utopian future but an indicator of what the future could be once the myth had been served. It was a symbol, a goal toward which every conceivable energy would be directed in the hope of its fulfillment. In this regard, Jeffrey Herf cites Clifford Geertz's "autonomous process of symbolic formulation" as representing the point at which "ideologies transform sentiment into significance and make it socially available." In this sense, myth is the

¹² Pilkington, *Bergson and His Influence*, 13.

“symbolic formulation” of a secular faith the meaning of which is so pregnant with emotion and intuitive feeling that it has the potential to become politically useful or “socially available.” As Herf cogently points out:

Ideologists do this with symbolism, metaphor, and analogy. If they do their job well, they can bring discordant meanings. . . into a unified framework that renders otherwise incomprehensible social conditions meaningful and makes political action within those settings possible.¹³

Sorelian myth required the unquestioning faith of the workers, and represented the necessary catalyst to unreflective and immediate action, and as such, rejected any intellectualizing aspects of Marxist dogma. Sorel viewed Marxism itself as a myth, in that it intimated a future condition of which no one could be assured.¹⁴ For Sorel, Bergson had supplied the intuitive impetus missing from Marx’s never completely formulated theory of action: no confusing discussion of economic materialism with its overly rationalized language and concepts, but rather an emotional, violent and wholly intuited action on behalf of an idea which may never actually come to pass.¹⁵ Myth, Sorel wrote, “produces an entirely epic state of mind and at the same time bends all the energies of the mind to that condition necessary to the realization of a workshop carried on by free men.”¹⁶ Sorel agreed with Bergson when he argued that “those moments. . . when we made some serious decision, moments unique of their kind which will never be repeated”¹⁷ were truly the moments in which the intuited act effected reality, and this impulse was the hallmark of the Sorelian Myth. Obviously the myth was meant to appeal to the collective, in this case the proletariat, and it required that the unreflective acts of the collective have an impact in the spatial, objective realm. The application of Bergsonian subjectivism to Sorel’s theories altered

¹³ Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*, 16.

¹⁴ Antliff, *Inventing Bergson*, 157.

¹⁵ Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, trans. T.E. Hulme and J. Roth (New York: Collier Books, 1950), 126.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 248.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

the import of Bergson's meaning, most significantly by positing the notion of a collective intuition and a collective creative impulse.

There was an unmistakably aesthetic dimension to the relationship between myth and unreflective political action in Sorel's thought. To intuit myth, and thereby be moved to political action, is tantamount to a creative act. In the same sense, the artist intuits the flow of reality and is moved to represent this intuition in art. Indeed, Modernist art took philosophic solace from Bergson's announcement that true reality existed beneath appearances. This served as a confirmation that art was no longer shackled to "the useful symbolic representations that come between the mind and reality" and could freely explore the depths of being and convey with intuited images that which is not empirically manifest. Richard Wolin demonstrates that in Ludwig Klages' *On Cosmogonic Eros* (1922), the author made a differentiation between aesthetic "image" and "representation." In Klages' work, according to Frankfurt School theorist Walter Benjamin, "Representations pertain to the 'intellect,'...which is characterized by 'utilitarian views' and an interest in 'usurpation.' The image, conversely, is a direct expression of the soul and relates to the domain of 'symbolic intelligence.'"¹⁸ Benjamin's interpretation of Klages shares a recognizable affinity with the Bergsonian creative process, both devaluing rationalized representation and championing intuited image. Sorel insisted:

use must be made of a body of images which, by intuition alone, and before any considered analyses are made, is capable of evoking as an undivided whole the mass of sentiments which corresponds to the different manifestations of the war undertaken by Socialism against modern society.¹⁹

For Sorel, this body of images constituted his sense of myth. Image, the constituent element of myth, communicates directly with the soul and exercises a spiritual/nonrational push to political action. Benjamin was not

¹⁸ Wolin, *Labyrinths: Explorations in the Critical History of Ideas*, 65. Benjamin's use of the term "symbolic intelligence" need not confuse the issue here. Clearly, he is referring to a sense or intuition that does not spring from the rational mind.

¹⁹ Sorel, *Reflections on Violence* (Glencoc, Illinois, 1950), 140, in Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991), 186-7.

immune to Sorel's ideas and suggested that there was a "need to 'expel moral metaphor from politics and to discover in political action a sphere reserved one hundred percent for images.'" ²⁰ Terry Eagleton adds, "What matters is the *élan* of an image, rather than the exactitude of a theory, and to this extent Sorel 'aestheticizes' the process of socialist revolution."²¹ Myth exists as imagery, the intuition of which spurs on the artist/worker to the creative, political act. It is suggestive of the method by which irrationalism could be politicized and even aestheticized into a powerful social force. The value of unreflective political action operating on a collective level, and performed on behalf of a ready-made, ideological myth was not lost on the early fascists. Sorel's ideas had a palpable influence on Mussolini, who wrote that Sorelian myth represented the "faith to move mountains, because it gives the illusion that the mountains move. Illusion is perhaps the sole reality of life."²²

Fascist/Vitalism: Myth, Aesthetics & Politics

Before this paper moves into a discussion of how vitalist intuition and aesthetic myth became facets of European fascism after the First World War, it is necessary to arrive at a workable definition of fascism as used here. This present discussion will concern only the fascist movements of the period between the two world wars and will focus specifically on Italian Fascism and German National Socialism. Still despite these restrictions, fascism remains a somewhat slippery term to adequately define.²³ However, as a convenient and reliable point of departure, fascism can be defined as a brand of political and cultural particularism. Philosophic particularism is inextricably tied to the development of conservative and proto-fascist European thought since the French Revolution, a subject that Ernst Nolte has

²⁰ Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism," in *One-Way Street* (London, 1978), 238. Quoted in Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*, 187.

²¹ Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*, 187.

²² Ernst Nolte, *Three Faces of Fascism*, trans. Leila Vennewitz (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 161.

²³ The problems in using terms such as "totalitarian" or "fascism" to describe German National Socialism and Italian Fascism are dealt with in a chapter entitled "The Essence of Nazism: Form of Fascism, Brand of Totalitarianism, or Unique Phenomenon?" in Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation*, 3rd ed. (London: Edward Arnold a division of Hodder & Stoughton, 1993); see also H. A. Turner, ed., *Reappraisals of Fascism* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1975), and Eugen Weber, *Varieties of Fascism* (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1964).

ably documented. Within fascism, the mythic meanings attached to the future, nation, and race, and especially the anti-Semitic myths, are therefore best understood in the context of Nolte's theories.²⁴ In *Three Faces of Fascism*, Nolte develops the idea of fascism as anti-transcendence or anti-universalism. He uses "transcendence" to denote any abstraction of thought or life that sought to reach beyond or transcend man's obsession with quotidian experience and the particular differences in peoples toward universal concepts such as equality and justice.²⁵ The counterrevolutionary and fascist reaction to this notion is to defend and promote the particular differences a transcendent impulse seeks to eliminate. In a concise manner, this explains fascism's touting of racial and nationalist themes and its rejection of Marxism, democracy, capitalism, liberalism, and individualism. Especially in Germany, racial particularism and an objection to the essential universalism of the "brotherhood of man" tenet in Judaism formed the philosophic framework for the persecution of the Jews. While this definition of fascism as anti-transcendence runs the risk of remaining too broad, it has the advantage of providing an all-encompassing first principle that is undeniably compelling. As a kind of "first principle" or launching point for a study of the fascist phenomenon, anti-transcendence clarifies the basic similarities between German National Socialism and Italian Fascism—that is, a denial of universalism and an embrace of particularist inequality.

In making a case for the vitalist aspects within fascism, or in providing a definition of fascist vitalism, it is of vast importance to acknowledge the tremendous influence exercised by aesthetics and myth on the fascist movements. This section will explore the place of aesthetics within fascism by first examining the fascist aestheticization of life as it developed from a more general European phenomenon. Second, any discussion of fascism and aesthetics must, at some point, touch upon the ideas of the Frankfurt School social critic, Walter Benjamin. A German Jew who witnessed the rise of fascism, Benjamin is important for his critique of fascism as the aestheticizing of politics. For this discussion, Benjamin's views of art's aura are reexamined within the context of myth as a socially binding force. Third, the nature of fascist myth will be discussed, and a typology of fascist myth

²⁴ This despite Nolte's conclusions which place far more weight upon the anti-Bolshevism and anti-Marxism of fascism than upon its anti-Semitism.

²⁵ Nolte, *Three Faces of Fascism*, 429-33.

will be attempted identifying the various mythic themes as either regressive or progressive, and as potentially powerful tools for a fascist "neo-auratic" indoctrination of the masses. Because of the close relationship between aesthetics and myth, various fascist art forms will be discussed as they relate to fascist, mythic themes. Finally, it will be demonstrated how the fascist, vitalist impulse for political action rather than static representation in art is more indicative of the fascist aesthetic—that is, the aesthetic of political action to create the regenerated world of the myth.

Aestheticism was crucial to fascist self-perception, and bearing in mind the aesthetic value Sorel placed on myth as a "body of images," it is interesting to note the degree to which the fascists similarly viewed themselves as artists and their movements as representative of an aesthetic. During the nineteenth century, the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche was instrumental in developing the idea of aesthetic life. Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* pronounced that "only as an aesthetic phenomenon are life and the world justified eternally."²⁶ Additionally, Hegel viewed art as integral to the perception of Absolute Spirit.²⁷ In the last decades of the nineteenth century, attempts to transform art into a social and political force were myriad. While most modernists were delving into pure subjectivism, for example, the German Expressionists, some artists were attempting to make their art into a socially binding, intersubjective, or collective experience. An interesting development in Cubism was the unanimist theory of Jules Romain, which claimed that through art the "individual could directly experience the thoughts of others and so participate in a collective consciousness."²⁸ This is also suggestive of the creative, intuitive, harmonic relations between members of the collective in the aesthetic theories of Paul Signac of the modernist *Action d'Art* group. Life itself was seen to be aesthetic. This idea of aestheticized life also found its way into the fascist mind, as Peter Reichel writes:

Hitler understood aestheticization in real, though superficial, terms as "beautification of life" as

²⁶ Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 123.

²⁷ Karelis, "An Interpretive Essay," in G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to Aesthetics*, xxiv-xxvi.

²⁸ Antliff, *Inventing Bergson*, 40.

production of a pseudo-reality which was supposed to influence the perception as well as the image of reality of millions and concede to them visually and symbolically what was denied to them in reality.²⁹

Here is a concise insight into the making of myths. For Hitler, the production of this "pseudo-reality" was an artistic endeavor, and clearly, the statesman qualified as artist. Peter Viereck quotes from Hans Blunck's attempt in 1938 to explain National Socialism to the rest of the world: "This government, rooted in opposition to rationalism, is well aware of the nameless longing of the *Volk* it governs, of their dreams that sway between heaven and earth, which can be explained and expressed only by the artist." Indeed, as Viereck points out, most of the highest-ranking Nazis fancied themselves artists at one point or another, and D'Annunzio in Italy was considered an artist first, a statesman second.³⁰ In truth, they were one and the same. Reed Way Dasenbrock states that fascism "seemed to give mythmakers, hence artists, an important role in social life."³¹ The association of "statesman" with "artist" is a clear indication of the attempt to aestheticize politics, thus securing the place of artists in the fascist movements. The intuitive, creative process surrounding the formation of a myth that would transform the world became the singular aesthetic of fascism.

In what is now a famous dictum, Walter Benjamin likened fascism to "political aestheticism," and it is appropriate here to discuss the meaning of this term. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin suggests that the authenticity of a work of art reflects "its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be." Paramount to art's authenticity was the degree to which it "was integrated in tradition," or the degree to which it served a social function. Benjamin referred to this social function as art's aura. Mechanical reproduction had destroyed the aura of art by shortening the distance between the perceiver and

²⁹ Bahr, "Nazi Cultural Politics: Intentionalism vs. Functionalism," in *National Socialist Cultural Policy*, 5.

³⁰ Viereck, *Metapolitics*, 155, 152-164.

³¹ Reed Way Dasenbrock, "Paul de Man, The Modernist as Fascist," in Richard J. Golsan, ed., *Fascism, Aesthetics, and Culture* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1992), 235. Quoted in Matthew Affron and Mark Antliff, eds., *Fascist Visions: Art and Ideology in France and Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 6.

the perceived, by making the object available with a plurality of copies, thereby detaching the work of art from its base in tradition.³² These developments led increasingly to the idea of *l'art pour l'art* divorced from any social context; an idea identified with a bourgeois attitude toward art, bereft of cultic value and of a purely exhibitiv value.³³ Benjamin held that "non-auratic," *l'art pour l'art* represented the "consummation" of fascism, in that the fascists appropriated art devoid of social context in order to make it a servant to politics.³⁴ For Benjamin, a logical corollary to this development was fascism's attempt to aestheticize politics by "giving [the] masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves."³⁵ This was how fascism represented political aestheticism, not only by making political use of art, but also by aestheticizing political action. However, the relation of vitalist myth to fascism as both the political subject matter of art and the aesthetic motive force of politics suggests a slight problem in Benjamin's thesis. Myth itself took on an "aura," or social function, so that, instead of appropriating "non-auratic" aesthetics, the fascists were attempting to return a mythic aura to art. Indeed, "autonomous art" suggested to the fascists the bourgeois, decadent idea of the individual cut off from the social, collective whole and art as emancipation from tradition. Benjamin argued that fascist aesthetics occupied the position of art after its desubstantialization by modern technology. However, rather than standing autonomous, for its own sake, a new or renewed set of cultic symbols and meanings and a new mission was assigned to fascist aesthetics. Theodor Adorno wrote that "all requisite progress beyond the subjective point has entailed regress because it has meant either assimilation to past art or the arbitrary positing of a new order by the subject."³⁶ In aesthetic and political terms, the passage of fascist vitalism beyond the subjective point culminated in an arbitrary positing of

³² Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968), 242, 222-4.

³³ In much the same way, Theodor Adorno suggested that art had a subjective meaning and a social function, but differed from Benjamin by denying that art could ever shake off its social, cultic meaning. While agreeing on the effects of reproduction and the desubstantialization of art, Adorno still asked, "How can art, a human artefact, exist for its own sake?" Quoted in Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C Lenhardt, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 32.

³⁴ See also Russell A. Berman, *Modern Culture and Critical Theory* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 39.

³⁵ Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 241.

³⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 45.

myth as an organic, pseudo-objective reality. Myth, therefore, represented the neo-auratic realm of fascist aestheticism: the social basis for the externally directed aesthetic *Weltanschauung* of fascism. Benjamin referred to the end of art's aura, but fascism sought to restore a new aura to art, as Adorno termed it, an aura of psychologism, art as a vehicle for the psychology of the masses.³⁷ This is an aesthetic sensibility that continually creates. Renato Poggioli writes of the idea of transition in aesthetics, or the sense of belonging, to an "intermediate stage, to a present already distinct from the past and to a future in potentiality which will be valid only when the future is actuality." Important in this idea is the Bergsonian durational sense "that every age attains the fullness of its own time, not by being, but by becoming, not in terms of its own self but of its relative historical mission."³⁸ This is true of the Futurist aesthetic that finds inspiration in the myth of the future itself. Jeffrey Herf has argued vigorously that the fascists selectively appropriated aspects of modernity, particularly technology, and essentially saw themselves as a movement of the future.³⁹ This future is indeterminate and is created by a strong people conscious of what Hegel called their divine spirit. As Eugen Weber states, fascism represents "the most obvious form of the social energy and the will to power which create history."⁴⁰ In sum, the neo-auratic function of fascist aestheticism included art's portrayal and transmittal of a mythic sensibility to the collective and the instigation of the unreflective, motive force necessary to actualize the myth.

In order to understand fascist myth, it is appropriate to reiterate the nature of myth and delve briefly into its importance to the fascists. Myth exists as an abstract concept, or pseudo-objective reality, imbued with symbolic meaning to such a degree that the concept is no longer primarily realizable in an intellectual and rational manner but as an instigative "body of images," a secular faith. Jeffrey Herf alludes to fascist mythmaking in his *Reactionary Modernism* when he discusses what Theodor Adorno termed the "jargon of authenticity," a situation "in which certain absolutes such as blood, race, and soul were placed beyond rational justification," that is, within the

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

³⁸ Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968), 72-3.

³⁹ Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*, 1-17.

⁴⁰ Weber, *Varieties of Fascism*, 34.

realm of nonrational myth.⁴¹ Myth is realizable only by the intuitive faculties of the mind, and it can hold its magical meaning only for those members of the particularist collective who believe it. The fascists understood this and often wrote about the importance of a mythic mindset. After the First World War, Oswald Spengler, who would have a profound influence on fascist thought, suggested in his philosophy of morphology that all external accomplishments or institutions were indicative of the mythic, inner soul or "life" of a people. In his *Der Untergang der Abendlandes*, Spengler wrote that the creation of myths, by his definition the products or *Gestalt* of a national intuition, was indicative of cultural renewal, and as Herf points out, "Spengler clearly implies that Germany's soul stands at such a turning point."⁴² Eugen Diederichs, editor of the journal *Die Tat*, used the oft-repeated word *Geist* to reflect the inner essence, the mythic, hidden quality of the German *Volk*. The following is his prescription for Germany: "The adoption of an irrational, emotional, and mystical world view by each individual German would automatically produce the desired results. At the very least it would create a new community of thought."⁴³ In addition, the mythic qualities of the particularist nation and race were celebrated. Fritz Nonnenbruch, a writer for the engineering journal *Deutsche Technik*, appealed to the mythic powers of race when he wrote, "Where the race speaks, the intellect can offer no resistance. Appeals to the intellect bring disharmony. Appeals to the will of the race bring unity, harmony and creation."⁴⁴ Alfred Rosenberg, often called the theorist of the Third Reich, wrote in *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*, "This is the task of our century: to create a new type of man out of a new myth of life."⁴⁵ The mythic language of fascism utilized such terms as "blood," "soil," "race," and "nation," among others. In a 1937 speech, Hitler proclaimed:

⁴¹ Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*, 13. Adorno is quoted by Richard Wolin, review of *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil*, by Rüdiger Safranski, *Los Angeles Times Book Review* (12 April 1998): 6. This is a term Adorno used to negatively characterize Martin Heidegger's thought.

⁴² Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*, 52, 54.

⁴³ Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology*, 55.

⁴⁴ Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*, 209.

⁴⁵ Weber, *Varieties of Fascism*, 155.

The main plank in the National Socialist programme is to abolish the liberal concept of the individual and the Marxian concept of humanity and to substitute for them the *Volk* community, rooted in the soil and united by the bond of its common blood.⁴⁶

Hitler's use of symbolically meaningful abstractions such as *Volk*, soil, and blood in a political context, dialectically opposed to the universal and rational concepts "liberal" and Marxian, indicates the fascist sense of authenticity. Mythical abstractions take the place of rationalized concepts. Myths of the nation, traceable in Germany to Fichte's idea of the national "I" and manifested in Italy as the wholly mythic *Risorgimento*, were demonstrated in the language of fascists like Maurice Barrés, who spoke of the "soil and the dead," Charles Maurras and his mythic praise of "*D'esse France*,"⁴⁷ and Prezzolini and Papini in Italy. Hans Freyer advocated nationalism as a secular religion creating a "strong, structured unity that seizes and encompasses the individual completely. . . a reawakening of shared constants of willing and believing."⁴⁸ These terms became the myths of a secular religion available to the faithful in a nonrational manner. They were meant to inspire on an intuitive level and provide the avenue through which all of the irrational energies of the fascist collective were constantly directed in the immediate.

In an attempt to identify specific mythic themes in the fascist movements of the interwar years, certain qualities emerge which suggest two basic categories of myth: regressive and progressive. Fascist myth exhibits a regressive aspect that essentially looks to the past. Regressive myth recalls the glory of an earlier age or represents the fascist desire to return to a pre-Enlightenment age before the advent of European idealism and universalism. In its celebration of the past, this concept tends to bolster the particularist identity of the collective, convincing the collective of its superior moral or racial qualities and the importance of its world-historic mission. The progressive myth looks to the promise of the future and is more in keeping with Sorel's idea for myth as a direct spur to unreflective and violent action

⁴⁶ Alan Cassels, "Janus: The Two Faces of Fascism," in *Reappraisals of Fascism*, ed. Henry A. Turner (New York: New Viewpoints, 1975), 70.

⁴⁷ Nolte, *Three Faces of Fascism*, 63, 53, 102.

⁴⁸ Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*, 76, 125.

on behalf of a future condition. Progressive myth represents a call for regeneration of the world through the violence and force springing from a collective will to create. As suggested earlier, the place of myth as the seat of neo-auratic aesthetics serves not only to aestheticize politics, but also to politicize art. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect these regressive/progressive aspects of fascist myth to have a consequent influence on fascist aesthetics. Some scholars have suggested that in this regressive/progressive dichotomy exists the basic philosophic demarcation between German National Socialism and Italian Fascism. The substantial variance in aesthetic taste demonstrated by the Italian adoption of modernism in the form of Futurism and the Nazi repudiation of all forms of modernism appears to confirm this view.⁴⁹ If German National Socialism and Italian fascism are truly cut from the same cloth, how is this apparent inconsistency to be explained?⁵⁰

In the regressive/progressive typology of myth outlined above, the ultimate goal of myth is the aesthetic creation of a new world that venerates the past and is constantly moving into and becoming the future; therefore, the apparent inconsistency in aesthetic taste in Italy and Germany is really beside the point. Indeed, by adopting this typology, it can be suggested that, in their utilization of myth, both regimes exhibited equally regressive and progressive traits.⁵¹ The "palingenetic" theory of Roger Griffin offers a potential solution to this problem. Griffin writes, the fascist "thrust towards a new type of society means that it builds rhetorically on the cultural achievements attributed to former, more 'glorious' or healthy eras in national history only

⁴⁹ Goebbels flirted briefly with the idea of a modernist aesthetic for the new regime but ran into persistent opposition from Rosenberg and his *Kampfbund für Deutsche Kultur*. At the Nuremberg Rally in 1934, Hitler declared that the modernists were "corrupters of art" and labeled all modernism, including Futurism, *Entartung* or degenerate. See Ehrhard Bahr, "Nazi Cultural Politics: Intentionalism vs. Functionalism," in *National Socialist Cultural Policy*, ed. Glenn Cuomo (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 15.

⁵⁰ Alan Cassels has suggested that, in general, the fascist phenomenon is Janus-faced: with a corporative, progressive side representative of Italy, in contrast to the nihilistic, regressive side of Nazism. See Alan Cassels, "Janus: The Two Faces of Fascism," in *Reappraisals of Fascism*, 69-92.

⁵¹ Nazi Germany's apparent thoroughly regressive tendencies are most problematic here. In his *Reactionary Modernism*, Jeffrey Herf convincingly argues for the modernist and technological aspects of National Socialism. Herf's argument suggests that the Nazis selectively exempted technology from their otherwise comprehensive condemnation of modern society (capitalism, materialism, science, and industrialism) by associating it with the mythic language of organic nature and insisting that technology was a force to be intuited; see the chapter "Engineers as Ideologues," 155-190.

to invoke the regenerative ethos which is the prerequisite for national rebirth."⁵² Myth inspires an intuitive faith in a reality that has not yet come to pass. Sorel's Myth of the General Strike and the mythic sense in Futurism clearly anticipate reality in this manner. The particularist myths of nation and race in their many varieties are reflective of the ideal qualities of the past, those qualities which constitute the fascist's appeal to their own special nature (Rosenberg's *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* forms the exegesis of the racial myth). However, in the context of fascism's reaction against the modern world, myth necessarily centers on the hope for a regeneration of the special particularist qualities. Regeneration implies an on-going process and movement toward a not-yet-realized environment. This sense of the myth is in keeping with the vitalist view of reality's infinite and immediate becoming, its continual emergence. It is also the capability of myth to function as a motive force that serves as the common binding element of fascist vitalism. In this respect, fascism between the world wars was necessarily a movement looking to the promise of the future, engendering a sense of hope, which suggests its seemingly incongruous, widespread appeal. Fascist art portrays the mythic particularism of fascism by alternately suggesting its regenerative potential and emphasizing its uniqueness. In this sense, fascist art portrays mythic qualities considered timeless, or that hearken to the past, and those suggestive of the future.

The regressive aspects of myth and art are apparent during the period of Nazi hegemony in Germany (1933-1945). Art served a social, cultic, or neauratic function by celebrating the mythic particularism of National Socialism and the inherent, superior qualities of the German people. Such myths were ideally meant to be transmitted to the masses, and the power of art to perform this function is clear in a rather histrionic passage from Peter Viereck's *Metapolitics*: "A Nordic hero-saga, a Prussian march, a Bach composition, an Eckehart sermon, a Faust monologue, are only diverse utterances of one and the same soul, the collective race soul of the blond godlike children of Atlantis."⁵³ For specific glimpses into the mythic symbolism of Nazi art, music and theater provide two typical examples. The potential social significance of music was a subject addressed by Hegel's

⁵² Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London: Routledge, 1991), 47. Quoted in Affron and Antliff, eds., *Fascist Visions: Art and Ideology in France and Italy*, 10.

⁵³ Peter Viereck, *Metapolitics* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1965), 236.

aesthetic theory and his idea of the dimensional aspects of the various art forms. While Hegel viewed the three dimensions of sculpture as best suited for a sensual enjoyment of art and the two dimensions of painting as best suited for strictly visual contemplation, nondimensional music was best suited to convey feelings and emotions.⁵⁴ Hegel pointed out that music exists temporally rather than spatially and requires a certain amount of noncognitive, one could suggest, intuitive, appreciation. In the nineteenth century musical giant Richard Wagner, National Socialism found a grand communicator of the noncognitive, fascist myth in music; the particularism of nation and race finding expression in the mythical subject matter of his operas. Wagner had attested to the essentially cultic content of music "[insisting] that the highest goal of all theater is ritual, referring to himself variously as priest, wizard, magician."⁵⁵ The state of the theater in Nazi Germany is also indicative of the overwhelming attention paid to the ritual, cultic function of fascist art. Goebbels made a significant attempt to return theater to its cultic origins as early as 1933. This was the institution of the *Thingspiel*, or open-air theater. More an excuse for parade-ground pageantry and theatrical mass demonstration, the *Thingspiel* served a clearly ritual purpose with its emphasis on the spectacle:

[T]he pageantry and the military ornamentation had a coercive, fascinating and narcotic effect on the audience [with] [f]laming torches, richly braided uniforms, thousands of voices chanting in unison, and a drummed cadence interwoven with medieval fanfare.⁵⁶

Art had the potential for being a truly powerful, intuitive disseminator of fascist myths. How successful or unsuccessful these attempts were at indoctrinating the masses is problematical. However, as Alfred Rosenberg remarked, "Aesthetics was never an end in itself; it has always been,

⁵⁴ Karelis, "An Interpretive Essay," in G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to Aesthetics*, xix.

⁵⁵ Michael Meyer, *The Politics of Music in the Third Reich* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 319.

⁵⁶ Bruce Zortman, *Hitler's Theater: Ideological Drama in Nazi Germany* (El Paso: Firestein Books, 1984), 12.

consciously or unconsciously, the embodiment of a nation's racial soul."⁵⁷ The racial soul of Nazi Germany amounted to a myth, and the aesthetic portrayal of this myth in art provided an intuitive experience for the artist as well as for the true believer.

The progressive aspect of fascist myth is apparent in a pre-fascist, but in many ways proto-fascist, artistic movement that was imbued from its inception with a vitalist, mythic quality. Its subsequent sanction by the Italian fascists suggests that Futurism occupied some not inconsequential common ground with fascism. Although Futurist art espoused Sorelian themes of action and will to violence, this movement developed independently of political fascism in Italy and tended less toward an openly particularist philosophy and more toward a technological, regenerative myth of the future. As Filippo Tommaso Marinetti declared in 1909 in his "Manifesto of Futurism," "We intend to exalt aggressive action. . . . Except in struggle, there is no beauty. No work without an aggressive character can be a masterpiece. Poetry must be conceived as a violent attack on unknown forces, to reduce and prostrate them before man" and "Art, in fact, can be nothing but violence, cruelty, and injustice."⁵⁸ These statements essentially echo Sorel's valuation of violence in his landmark book *Reflections on Violence*, published in Italy in 1908. They also describe the aesthetic method of Futurism: a willingness to "employ intuition both to capture the emotive force of political violence and to forcibly oblige the spectator 'to be at the center of the painting,' to relive the intensity of the battle."⁵⁹ Violence becomes the means by which the fascist myth can alter the world. A pure aesthetic of the beauty of violence is central to Futurism, and this could not fail to appeal to a Mussolini steeped in the writings of Sorel:

Violence was not only the vehicle of social revolt and regeneration; it was the authentic source of creative energy in a fascist order, with the ability to transform the individual. Thus, far from being an art-for-art's-

⁵⁷ Fritz Nova, *Alfred Rosenberg, Nazi Theorist of the Holocaust* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1986), 88. My italics.

⁵⁸ F.T. Marinetti, "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism," in *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. Umbro Apollonio, trans. R. Brain, R. W. Flint, J. C. Higgitt and C. Tisdall (New York: The Viking Press, 1973), 19-20, 23.

⁵⁹ Antliff, *Inventing Bergson*, 164.

sake attitude that excluded all other values from the political agenda, the fascist aestheticization of violence had a moral import that was crucial to the fascist project.⁶⁰

For German fascists, the *Fronterlebnis*, made mythic in the writings of Ernst Jünger, among others, operated as an instigator of intuitive political action by mythologizing the collective and heroic experience of political or military combat. The motive force of Futurist violence, the instigative myth that propelled this artistic vision, was simply the myth of the future. Giovanni Lista suggests that while the Futurists occasionally spoke in the language of syndicalism,⁶¹ their enthusiasm was directed toward the relativistic promise of the future, and it was this Futurist myth that complemented Mussolini's regenerative vision of Italy's future. In describing Marinetti's 1910 manifesto entitled "Our Common Enemies," Lista writes:

Marinetti preconceives the creation of a common front uniting, beyond all class distinction, the futurist revolt to the revolutionary aspirations of anarcho-syndicalists...Marinetti rests yet again on the idea of the future, considering it as absolute myth, and thus generative image in itself of the action necessary for change. . . . The myth of violence and elation for the future of humankind is assumed as such, without indicating in any way the world that would be born out of revolutionary action.⁶²

Of importance here is art's absolute servitude to a mythic philosophy based on the creative power of intuited action, and the sense in which Futurism represents a neo-auratic art form by inciting the collective to create by means of violence. As mentioned earlier, the fascist myths taken as a whole are regenerative in nature, in that in a complementary manner, they incite

⁶⁰ Matthew Affron and Mark Antliff, eds., *Fascist Visions: Art and Ideology in France and Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), introduction 5.

⁶¹ As had Mussolini before his *volte-face* and adoption of fascism.

⁶² Antliff, *Inventing Bergson*, 164.

political action to achieve a regenerated people, nation, or world. Eugen Weber, writing of fascism's perception of a "manifest destiny" and its characteristically "deliberate activism," continues, "when, instead of providing a reference for traditionalists, history becomes the justification of collective, national, or racial evolution and change, when it becomes the only absolute reference of the will to power, then it is the basis of Fascism."⁶³ The mythic history of the particular, unique, and superior qualities of the nation and race were the motive forces at work in fascism. The inspiration to alter the world as it is and work toward actualizing the fascist *Weltanschauung* is the purpose of the particularist myth. These myths were representative of hidden *Geist* or energy, which like the *élan vital* runs underneath and through reality. The myth was truly the will to power of the fascist movements, the spur to unreflective action, and the promise of evolutionary change, or indeterminate and relative movement toward an unforeseeable goal which is created as it progresses.

A question remains whether all myths, regressive and progressive, could incite a person to violent action. An answer is contained in the relation between aesthetic myth and the instigative potential of technology. A symbiotic relationship exists between myth and art, in that myth, which operates on a vitalist intuitive level of images, is the seat of neo-auratic aestheticism. As such, it is concerned with the creative "beautification of life," and art, as few other human endeavors, can elicit a series of responses through its representation of those images. Thus, as mentioned earlier, myth can provide the impetus to politicize art, and art can provide the emotional foundations for aestheticizing politics. Therefore, it is possible that the aesthetic portrayal of certain myths, which might not ordinarily move a person to action, may in fact provide the instigative key for transforming these mythic images into political action. In the twentieth century, photography and film are obvious examples of the influence of technology on art, the greatest influence being this media's ability to affect and sway the viewer's emotions and in some cases to inflame the viewer to action. Film and photography then can exercise a certain covert control on an intuitive, mythological level. It is with photography and film that Benjamin's criticisms of the effects of mechanical reproduction take on their full meaning. The photograph of a work of art allows art to be removed from the original's

⁶³ Weber, *Varieties of Fascism*, 33-4.

authentic place in space and history and brought into situations and locations where it would not ordinarily be found, thus destroying its aura; however, in the destruction of aura is a dialectical creation of a new aura. Ernst Jünger's published collection of photos depicts, according to Jünger, the *Gestalt* of objective phenomena, the surface appearance of things and something more. Jeffrey Herf quotes from Jünger's *Der Arbeiter*: "in the *Gestalt* lies the whole, which encompasses more than the sum of its parts. . . . In politics everything depends upon bringing *Gestalten* rather than concepts or ideas. . . into the conflict."⁶⁴ The images or *Gestalten* conveyed in this manner are injected with meaning in the instant click of the camera shutter. Thus the subject is mythologized. The photograph elicits an emotional response from those able to recognize the inner essence in the object depicted. Again, this is suggestive of intuitive, mythic qualities, the meaning of which are apparent only to those prepared in advance to see them. Reminiscent of the power of the *Fronterlebnis*, Jünger suggested that photography captures, for all time and in a single image, the exact moment of danger or violence that promises to deliver modern man from the boredom of bourgeois society.⁶⁵ It delivers shocks to the system, capable of rousing man from his apathy and goading him to action. Quoting Freud, Benjamin saw the potential for a traumatic effect upon the consciousness in repetitive exposure to these kinds of shocks.⁶⁶ These images would become more palatable to the viewer over time, thereby anesthetizing the viewer. Benjamin remarks that in film the shock effect upon the eye of continually grasping and registering moving images has an equally shocking effect on the mind, distracting it and forcing it to absorb material rather than disseminate or analyze it.⁶⁷ Thus, Benjamin concludes that photography and film allow for a certain amount of "covert control" by means of their distracting capabilities, and that "reception in a state of distraction...symptomatic of profound changes in apperception, finds in the film its true means of exercise."⁶⁸ Powerful mythic symbols are

⁶⁴ Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*, 101.

⁶⁵ See also Jünger's essay "On Danger," in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 369-72.

⁶⁶ Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations*, 163.

⁶⁷ Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 240-1.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 242.

evident, for example, in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, which features

Hitler's descent from the clouds, the cathartic applause welcoming the charismatic leader. The visions of the medieval city, the unified folk including contingents of peasants in their traditional costumes, the rough-and-tumble life in the encampment, the mass chorus of the Work Front, the demonstration of the Hitler Youth, the celebratory display of banners, torchlight processions, and a sound track that mixes Wagnerian strains with patriotic songs and martial anthems.⁶⁹

Several particularist myths of the nation and race can be glimpsed: the emergence of a godlike leader from the clouds, the myth of the country and the people, the symbols of national pride, racial purity, and strength. All these symbols are in place and designed to hypnotize. Anesthetization, control, and instigative potential are crucial to the propagandistic value of the photographic medium, and therefore constituted a valuable social tool for the fascist. The aesthetic representation of the myth of the nation, eliciting all the symbolic images and emotional power associated with it, could conceivably cause one to pick up a rifle rather than bask in an inactive satisfaction of superiority. Yet it is important to note, art operates merely as an expedient to the active aesthetic of political violence.

Within the context of fascist/vitalist myth, the meaning of Benjamin's idea concerning political aestheticism takes on a more clearly delineated significance in relation to the image versus representation dichotomy. This meaning tends to relegate "representative" art, in spite of its powerful instigative potentiality, to a position of secondary importance in favor of a violent aesthetic of intuitive political action. The limitations of art to properly feed the vitalist impulse are inherent in the cognitive requirements for art appreciation and Bergson's view of the artistic process. Hegelian aesthetic theory posited a cognitive aspect in the appreciation of art which art allows only through contemplation. Similarly, Adorno insisted that art requires

⁶⁹ Berman, *Modern Culture and Critical Theory*, 99.

knowledge or a cognitive faculty of judging in order for the spectator to become aware of either the truth or the falseness contained in it.⁷⁰ However, this cognitive aspect suggests both a nonvitalist valuation of reason over intuition and passive appreciation over action. For Bergson, every expressive, or artistic, medium represents the end of the process, whereby subjective intuition becomes spatialized in the objective realm.⁷¹ However, once intuition becomes spatialized in this way it can no longer lay claim to being what it was, intuition. The symbiotic relationship between myth and aesthetics assigns an important neo-auratic function to art, namely, to elicit intuitive, unreflective, and violent action on behalf of the myth. Yet, the wholly intuitive aspect of vitalism places the spatialized, intuited art form in an objective realm where it ceases to move; that is, it is no longer in a constant state of becoming, which is the foundation of vitalist ideas of reality. This is not to say that through spatialization art becomes hypostatized; it still has a relation to the intuition, but now it becomes only “an indirect conduit to the artist’s fundamental self, and all expressive mediums can only ‘suggest’ an intuition, which is inexpressible.”⁷² This recalls Ludwig Klages’ dichotomy between rationalized representation and intuitive, mythic image, Klages referring to the latter as a product of the “soul.” Fascist/vitalist aesthetic expression, then, must naturally seek a less cognitive avenue, namely, intuited and immediate action. The perpetual unreflective, intuitive act or series of acts performed in the service of aesthetic myth indicates the Benjaminian sense of political aestheticism in the fascist movements: the aestheticizing of politics. The aesthetic quality of fascist vitalism rests less on a contemplative appreciation of aesthetic beauty or form and more on an active, intuitive expression of political will. The import of this meaning takes on a chilling effect as this paper moves to a discussion of how German fascist politics were aestheticized during the Second World War.

⁷⁰ Karelis, “An Interpretive Essay,” in G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to Aesthetics*, xxv; Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 22.

⁷¹ Antliff, *Inventing Bergson*, 46-8.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 49.

The Aesthetics of Horror and The Holocaust

In the twentieth century, rife with examples of genocide, the Holocaust remains a singular event, for the horror and scope of the Nazis' murderous intent. The almost inexplicable nature of this event notwithstanding, attempts to piece together an explanation of the Holocaust continue. It is in this spirit that this paper proceeds to a discussion of the Holocaust, not to offer another monocausal interpretation, but to suggest merely one piece of the puzzle. This discussion does not tread into new territory in regards to this subject, but rather will attempt to present some observations from a slightly different point of view.⁷³ These observations should, therefore, be read not as an attempt to encapsulate the Holocaust but as an attempt to explore the role of fascist myth and aestheticism in its perpetration. The fascist/vitalist valuation of the aesthetic of action over that of representation on behalf of particularist myth represents the point of departure for this section. As stated earlier, this places a distinct emphasis on a reading of Walter Benjamin's ideas concerning political aestheticism as the "situation of politics which Fascism [renders] aesthetic"⁷⁴—that is, the aesthetic of political action. This is not to suggest that an equally horrific "war against the Jews" did not take place in the arts. National Socialist anti-Semitism in the arts is undeniable, exhibited in such films as *The Eternal Jew* (1940) and as a main exclusionary principle in the *Gleichschaltung* imposed by the Nuremberg Laws (1935). Nevertheless, the translation of anti-Semitic sentiment into political actuality required the aestheticization of political action through anti-Semitic myth, and it is this aspect of the Holocaust that will be addressed here. In addition, as this discussion narrows its focus to the Holocaust, it is necessary to limit the scope of fascism to a strict focus on National Socialist Germany, although it is still the intention here to speak of the particularist, mythic characteristics of fascism as an inseparable whole.

The fascist/vitalist progression of Germany toward the "Final Solution" of the "Jewish problem" is apparent in four steps. The first step involves the development and subsequent fascist politicization of anti-Semitic or

⁷³ The view attributing a basic irrationalism to the fascist movements can be traced back to Thomas Mann and other of his contemporaries. Any discussion of the irrationalist tendencies in National Socialism must, at some point, take into account Georg Lukács' *The Destruction of Reason* and George Mosse's *The Crisis of German Ideology*.

⁷⁴ Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 242.

“victimization” myths. In Germany during the period of the Nazi rise to power, anti-Semitic myths recalled ancient or regressive prejudices about the Jews and incited a progressive or regenerative violent reaction against them. These myths served to demonize the Jews as the eternal victimizers and enemies of the German nation. A correlative to this demonization was the creation of an image of the Jew as an impersonal, ubiquitous abstraction of evil. Identified as the elusive, poisoning influence lurking within Germany and threatening to destroy it from without, Jews became the target of the unreflective, violent, political action of the Nazi collective with all of the instigative power of the anti-Semitic myths aligned against them. Here, this discussion will delve briefly into the statements and actions of the perpetrators themselves to demonstrate the influence of anti-Semitic myth as a potential, motive force for genocide. Finally, the goal of fascist, aesthetic myth is to re-create or create anew the world within the parameters of fascist, racial particularism. The power of the myths to demonize Jews clearly implied that this act of creation would necessarily require the elimination of the Jews. Additionally, indications that some perpetrators took a degree of aesthetic joy in murdering Jews points to an aesthetic of violence and torture in the perpetration of the Holocaust. In this sense, the Holocaust becomes fascism’s negative, regenerative aesthetic of horror, the aesthetic project toward which every effort was concentrated.

Anti-Semitic myths fall into an altogether variant typology, which rather than celebrating recognized positive attributes of the particularist, fascist collective, suggests the elusive, evil forces working and plotting against the collective. These are the myths of victimization, and interestingly, they represent the foundations of German fascist victimhood. This profitable and compelling theory of the fascist sense of victimization is indicated in a recent article by Omer Bartov. Exploring the causes of modern genocide, Bartov argues that its origins, “as well as its long-term consequences, are thus deeply rooted in a history of metaphors of evil, or, perhaps, of evil metaphors claiming to be history.”⁷⁵ Jews became an abstracted metaphor of evil to the Germans. They represented in truly mythic proportions the malevolent, impersonal, and crafty force that had victimized the Germans throughout history. These myths had been in existence for centuries: from the Middle Ages, the legends of Jews drinking the blood of gentile children, or

⁷⁵ Omer Bartov, “Defining Enemies, Making Victims: Germans, Jews, and the Holocaust,” *American Historical Review* 103, no. 3 (June 1998): 809.

sacrificing Christian children on the Sabbath, to late nineteenth and early twentieth century myths, which depicted the Jews as the organizing principle and lifeblood of every imaginable life-sapping facet of modernism, including Marxism, Bolshevism, democracy, and individualism. The anti-Semitic myths judged the Jews responsible for such recent catastrophes as the *Dolchstoß*, the worldwide depression, and strongly intimated that Jews were aiming to conquer the world as illustrated in the elaborate forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Bartov describes the *Dolchstoßlegende*, the “stab-in-the-back legend,” which suggested that at the end of the First World War (1918), the undefeated German armies, on the verge of victory, were treacherously sold out by Jews and traitors at home who surrendered to the allies. This legend fostered the idea that the “real enemies” of Germany, the Jews, had been lurking and plotting on the home front all along, or

were perceived as having shirked the fighting and thus. . . excluded themselves from that community of battle increasingly celebrated by the fighting troops. This was a grim, probably inevitable glorification of one’s helplessness, of pain and death, just as much as of heroism and sacrifice; it was, that is, a glorification of victimhood.⁷⁶

The fascist use of the *Dolchstoß* myth was apparent to Ludwig Lewisohn in his “The Revolt Against Civilization,” in which he wrote, “incredible as it may appear to sane people elsewhere in the world, this myth is believed. . . it is clear today that they [the Germans] will act according to their myths. They have begun. The scapegoat is being slain; the Jew is crucified.”⁷⁷ The myth of the victimizing Jew gained renewed strength through Hitler and the National Socialists, who breathed new life into it. In the second volume of *Mein Kampf*, Hitler writes:

It is the inexorable Jew who struggles for his domination over the nations. No nation can remove

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 774.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 125.

his hand from its throat except by the sword. Only the assembled and concentrated might of a national passion rearing up in its strength can defy the international enslavement of peoples.⁷⁸

For Hitler, every German was a potential victim:

The black-haired Jewish youth lies in wait for hours on end, satanically glaring at and spying on the unsuspecting girl whom he plans to seduce, adulterating her blood and removing her from the bosom of her own people.... In his systematic efforts to ruin girls and women he strives to break down the last barriers of discrimination between him and other peoples.⁷⁹

For the Nazis, the consciousness of race was part of one's political consciousness, and these mythic, racial hatreds, the result of Germany's purported victimization, were essential to the task of creating an enemy.⁸⁰

Anti-Semitic myth created an image of the Jew as the ubiquitous enemy of Germany, which helped to foster a sense of "the Jew" as an impersonal, abstracted whole. These myths, which sprang from an acute sense of persecution and victimization at the hands of Jews, had no other purpose but to create and define an identifiable enemy. With the Myth of the General Strike, Sorel had not encountered the problem of requiring an enemy as the focal point for the mythic, violent, and intuitive energies of the proletariat. The social and economic basis of what remained essentially a Marxist myth meant that there were already a familiar series of stock enemies, foremost being the bourgeois capitalist. By revitalizing the latent, and often not so latent, anti-Semitic prejudice in Germany that had existed for centuries, Hitler and the National Socialists were able, in Bartov's terminology, to successfully define their enemy. The Jews were the "true culprit" against

⁷⁸ Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews: 1933-1945* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986, 1975), 157.

⁷⁹ Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: A History of the Jews in Europe During the Second World War* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985), 26-7.

⁸⁰ See the introduction to George Mosse, *Nazi Culture* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1966), xx.

whom all of the fury and pain resulting from this descent into victimhood could be unleashed. There were other enemies but none in whom so much had been invested on a mythic scale. Additionally, these myths tended to create an image of "the Jew" as an impersonal whole, ubiquitous, corrupting, and eventually destructive to the German spirit. A popular Nazi metaphor for Jewish evil involved the "Jew as parasite" or "Jews as bacilli," which both demonized the Jews and furthered the image of the Jews as an abstract mass. How widespread were these beliefs among "ordinary" Germans? This is an almost hopelessly problematic question; however, in light of the *Protocols* selling 120,000 copies by 1920 and the electoral successes of the National Socialists in the 1930s, it is not surprising that statements from Germans at the time demonstrate an undeniably mythic conception of the Jews.⁸¹ Daniel Goldhagen quotes the following from Melita Maschmann, a member of the girl's division of the Hitler Youth:

Those Jews were and remained something mysteriously menacing and anonymous. They were not the sum of all Jewish individuals. . . . They were an evil power, something with the attributes of a spook. *One could not see it, but it was there*, an active force for evil. As children we had been told fairy stories which sought to make us believe in witches and wizards. Now we were too grown up to take this witchcraft seriously, but we still went on believing in the "wicked Jews". . . . In preaching that all the misery of the nations was due to the Jews or that the Jewish spirit was seditious and Jewish blood was corrupting, I was not compelled to think of you or old Herr Lewy or Rosel Cohen [childhood friends and acquaintances]: I thought only of the bogeyman, "the Jew."⁸²

⁸¹ Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews*, 47. The Nazis won fourteen million voters or 37.4% in 1932. The National Socialists actually lost some ground the next year when Hitler was asked to become Chancellor.

⁸² Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 88-9. My italics.

The Jew could be easily abstracted in this way because he seemed to profit "by dint of being both distinctly and irreversibly alien and capable of such mental and physical dissimulation that made him appear 'just like us.'"⁸³ In this respect Jews could be lurking anywhere, the elusive "enemy in our midst," posing an invidious threat. For many Germans, the sense in which "*die Juden sind unser Unglück*" was readily apparent to anyone who believed the myth. The myths that promoted fear, anxiety, or powerful resentment, once complimented by a living, breathing enemy, provided an outlet for political action.

It is essential to determine how the perpetrators of the Holocaust felt about their actions; whether in their own descriptions and recollections there is a recognizable mythic quality. A few examples will follow, which while certainly not exhaustive, nevertheless make a plausible case. It is clear how politically vital anti-Semitic myth was to the perpetrators in transforming the Jews into an abstracted, impersonal mass from a statement quoted by Bartov. Franz Stangl, a death camp commander, says that he "rarely saw them as individuals. It was always a huge mass...they were naked, packed together, running, being driven with whips."⁸⁴ Hans Stark, an SS man at Auschwitz, recalled the following in 1964 in regards to his superiors and his mythic indoctrination:

They did not let us think. They did that for us. Every other word was: "Everything is the fault of the Jews; the Jews are our misfortune." That was hammered into us. And as far as the orders for special treatment [murder] were concerned, we accepted them quietly.⁸⁵

In another case quoted by Goldhagen, the job of killing Jewish men, women, and children was evidently eased by reminding the troops that their homeland would be under allied aerial bombardment.⁸⁶ This is an interesting case of

⁸³ Bartov, "Defining Enemies, Making Victims," 779.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 785.

⁸⁵ Quoted in Bernd Naumann, *Auschwitz: A Report on the Proceedings Against Robert Karl Ludwig Mulka and Others Before the Court at Frankfurt* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), 46-7.

⁸⁶ Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 212.

quid pro quo stemming from the idea that the omnipresent Jew was apparently to blame for the allied attack. The nature of the orders given to killing squads and troops was often highly reminiscent of the supposed victimization of the Germans, and hence mythic. Field Marshal Reichenau issued a directive to the troops on October 10, 1941 which earned praise from Hitler for its ideological/mythic correctness. It read:

The most essential aim of the campaign against the Jewish-Bolshevist system is the complete crushing of its means of power and the extermination of Asiatic influence in the European region. . . . [T]he soldier is not merely a fighter according to the rules of the art of war, but also the bearer of an inexorable national idea and the avenger of all beastialities inflicted upon the German people and its racial kin. Therefore the soldier must have full understanding for the necessity of a severe⁸⁷ but just atonement on Jewish subhumanity.

In addition, the Jews were not to be so easily eradicated, and an addendum to the myth held that once the tables were turned and the victimizers of the Germans were themselves victimized and persecuted, the Jews would most certainly seek their revenge. This is evident in the remarks of certain perpetrators in regard to the orders not to spare even Jewish children. Bartov cites the following from Heinrich Himmler:

In my view, we as Germans, however deeply we may feel in our hearts, are not entitled to allow a generation of avengers filled with hatred to grow up with whom our children and grandchildren will have to deal because we, too weak and cowardly, left it to them.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Quoted in Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews: 1933-1945*, 124.

⁸⁸ From a speech given by Himmler to a group of army officers on May 5, 1944. Quoted in Bartov, "Defining Enemies, Making Victims," 785, n. 22.

Far from an unpleasant experience, for some the extermination of the demonized Jews was an honorable, cleansing action:

We must finish matters once and for all and finally settle accounts with the war criminals. . . . I do not know if you. . . ever saw such frightful kinds of Jews in Poland. I am grateful for having been allowed to see this bastard race close up. If fate permits, I shall have something to tell my children. Syphilitics, cripples, idiots were typical of them. One thing was clear: they were materialists to the end. They were saying things like: "We are skilled workers, you are not going to shoot us." They were not men but monkeys in human form.⁸⁹

In this particular example, the Jews are viewed as not only criminal and diseased, but also as the eternal materialists, the epitome of modern rationalism. In every case cited, this "aesthetic project" is associated with some facet of anti-Semitic myth, all springing from the central, instigative victimization myth: Jewish demonization, Jewish revenge, and the "Jew" as abstracted, impersonal mass.

Creating a *judenrein* world, a world without Jewish influence, was the regenerative goal of the anti-Semitic myths. Using Benjaminian language, the neo-auratic function of the fascist anti-Semitic myths made readily available the images of Jewish evil and enervating disease and provided the intuitive spur to take violent action against them. A regenerated nation was the creative goal of the myths. This nation would reflect the regressive, particularist qualities of its mythical past and realize the progressive *Weltanschauung* of the nation of the future. This nation had to be created utilizing the intuitive, violent aesthetic of political action, and from an aesthetic standpoint, ridding the nation of the poison within was tantamount to the realization of artistic form out of raw material. It is possible to denote a certain violent, mythic aesthetic in the often brutal cruelty of the German perpetrators, amounting to another form of political aesthetics: an "aesthetic

⁸⁹ Quoted from a letter written by an *Einsatzkommando* sergeant in Ronnie S. Landau, *The Nazi Holocaust* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dec, 1992), 189.

of horror.”⁹⁰ Daniel Goldhagen devotes several chapters of his book to the idea of Jewish “work” as a bizarre method used by the Nazis to ridicule, debase, and finally exterminate some Jews.⁹¹ A myth espousing the notion that “Jews regard all labor as punishment,” is found in abundance in Nazi propaganda, and it is tempting to regard the pointless labor in the work camps, which often comprised Jews lugging bricks or stones from one side of the camp to the other side and back again, as representing an aesthetic sense of creating a world in which the old assumptions are turned upside down. This was a new world in which Jews labored. As a survivor of the Majdanek camp reports, “Work was actually unproductive, and its purpose was exhaustion and torture.... Afternoon work was the same: blows, and blows again. Until 6 p.m.”⁹² To the perpetrators, the evidence that a new world was in the process of being created was apparent in this reversal of the anti-Semitic myths. The German fascist revenge was becoming actualized.

Conclusion

It is a long and arduous trek from Bergsonian vitalism to the Nazi death camps, but hopefully not one without some small reward. The current debate concerning the Nazi period, and specifically the Holocaust, has centered on the acts of the “perpetrators,” in order to demonstrate what moves individuals, whether they be “ordinary Germans” or not, to commit acts of genocide. Rather than find some common, universal law applicable to the phenomenon of genocide or attempt to demonstrate the moral bankruptcy of a particular nationality, this paper has trained its focus on the philosophic foundations of European fascism in a search for answers. As with other questions of historical cause and effect, it becomes clear that fascism has its antecedents and that this thoroughly European movement did not emerge from nothing, but rather as a hoped-for solution to a troubled time. What this discussion has referred to as “fascist vitalism” took its impetus from a general dissatisfaction with the modern world: the egalitarianism and universalism of

⁹⁰ See Wolin, *Labyrinths*, 111-112. This is a phrase originally used by Karl-Heinz Bohrer to describe a modernist aesthetic that values “suddenness” and “rupture” of the “normal” course of reality, very much in tune with Jünger, and with Bergson’s “moments...when we made some serious decision, moments unique of their kind which will never be repeated,” from Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 238-9.

⁹¹ See Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, 283-323.

⁹² Yehuda Bauer, *A History of the Holocaust* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1982), 213.

the French Revolution, the advance of technology and increased urbanization of the Industrial Revolution, the rise of the middle class, all of which by the late nineteenth century had been attributed, in one sense or another, to Enlightenment "rationalism." The vitalists were primarily concerned with reversing, or easing, the debilitating effects of the modern world by locating "true" reality in the irrationalist realm of intuition and myth. Located within the *demesne* of the artist, intuition and myth exhibited aesthetic value, and the aestheticization of life emerged as either escape to the ivory tower or release from the demands of "reason." Vitalist irrationalism appealed to the fascists, who sought a political solution to the post-World War malaise and emphasized an active, violent will to create history. The aesthetic, mythic elements of vitalism suggested a way not only to utilize art to further a political agenda, but also to aestheticize politics, reconnecting the collective to its hallowed traditions and pointing the way to re-create and reform the world. With fascism, politicized, irrationalist aestheticism was given free rein to affect the world, and this is suggestive of Jean Genet's apt association of fascism to theater.⁹³ It was a theater of horror, and when the lights were raised after the final act, the world found itself irreparably scarred.

⁹³ Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1980), 103.