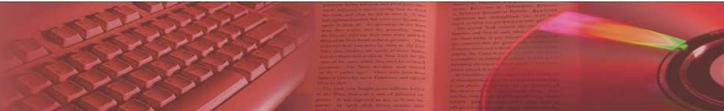


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

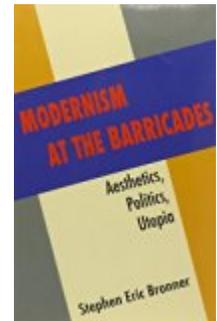


Stephen Eric Bronner. *Modernism at the Barricades: Aesthetics, Politics, Utopia*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. 216 pp. \$32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-15822-0; \$26.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-15823-7.

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## The Politics of Modernism

Modernism in the arts is usually treated from a purely aesthetic perspective, but Stephen Eric Bronner's focus in this thought-provoking book is on its political significance and impact. This is a large and important theme. His primary concern is with the visual arts, but other arts—including literature, music, theater, and film—are discussed as well.

The topic is covered in general terms in introductory and concluding chapters. Sandwiched between these are a series of essays focusing in detail on some particular artists and movements. There are essays on: attitudes to utopianism in the ideas of Marxist philosophers Georg Lukács and Ernst Bloch and in the work of Bertold Brecht, German expressionist painting, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's futurism and its relation to Benito Mussolini and fascism, Emil Nolde's relations with Nazism, André Breton and surrealism, Vladimir Tatlin and the avant-garde in the early years of the Russian Revolution, the role of writers in the Bavarian uprising in Munich at the end of World War I, and other topics. Many of these essays are based on previously published articles and reviews. They are invariably informative and interesting in themselves, but the topics seem somewhat arbitrarily selected in this context. The larger themes of the book are dealt with in these chapters, to be sure, but they are not developed or carried through in them in a sustained or continuous fashion. These chapters read more like a collection of materials for a more systematic and overall treatment of the political meaning and impact of mod-

ernism than such an account itself.

We get a full sketch of this overall picture in the first and final chapters of the book. In these, Bronner describes and discusses the nature of modernism and its politics in general terms. These chapters are, it seems to me, the most substantial and important parts of the book, and I shall focus mainly on them in what follows.

In the first and introductory chapter, Bronner sets out to specify the nature of the modernist movement in general terms. This is no easy task. Modernism was a ubiquitous but inherently amorphous cultural phenomenon. It was manifested in different branches of the arts in different forms, in different places, and at different times. It was not recognized as a movement at the time by the artists who are now identified with it; it has been identified as such only later and by hindsight. Trying to pin down and identify what constitutes modernism is thus fraught with problems and difficulties. Unfortunately, there is little discussion of these problems here; instead we get a series of vague and sweeping generalizations, and some rather breathless accounts of typically modernist attitudes and positions. The following passage is typical: "Modernism was an international movement that reverberated throughout Europe during the roughly fifty years prior to the rise of Hitler in 1933. It shattered traditional linguistic, visual, and theatrical conventions. It promulgated free verse, stream of consciousness, montage, photomontage, collage, and numerous other formal

innovations in order to illuminate experiences that older forms and devices could not (or would not) explore. Modernism also expanded our understanding of what constitutes art. New recognition was accorded the contributions of African and Oceanic culture, medieval painting and sculpture, and more. Modernists longed to transcend the limitations of a capitalist status quo and foster the longing for a liberating alternative” (p. 26).

Modernism rejected traditional artistic and cultural forms, and those who defended them, whom Bronner calls the cultural “philistines” (p. 7). It wanted to create “the shock of the new,” as Robert Hughes so well put it in *The Shock of the New: Art and the Century of Change* (1991). It was iconoclastic and rebellious, committed to novelty and innovation. It longed to transcend the status quo, and often embraced a utopian vision. It thus comes into confrontation with modernity, that is to say, with capitalism—and in this sense it is “political” (p. xiii).

An important feature of the movement, well brought out by Bronner, is that modernism was politically promiscuous; it could take either a left- or a right-wing form. Thus, for example, Pablo Picasso, George Grosz, John Heartfield, Brecht, Tatlin, Kazimir Malevich, and others of the avant-garde of the early years of the Russian Revolution were strongly committed to the left. Some, indeed, were actively involved in politics, like the writers Kurt Eisner and Ernst Toller, who played leading roles in the short-lived Bavarian Soviet in Munich in 1918 (the subject of chapter 9). Others, however, supported the increasingly powerful right-wing forces in this period. Marinetti, the Italian futurist, was closely associated with Mussolini; and Nolde, the German expressionist painter, was a strong nationalist and supporter of the Nazis, as Bronner describes in an interesting chapter on his work (chapter 6).

The explanation given by Bronner is that modernism was primarily concerned with form rather than content. It challenged and overthrew traditional artistic styles and methods. The purely formal character of modernist innovations meant that it could equally well serve quite different political causes. Indeed, according to Bronner, it is a mistake to regard artistic modernism as a political movement. He insists that cultural and political radicalism are “different phenomena with different logics,” and that they must be distinguished. Mere opposition to authority, particularly in the name of individual subjectivity, is a program that can be embraced by artists at either end of the political spectrum. “Attacking the cultural philistine was considered a political act by the mod-

ernists,” says Bronner, “because he [*sic*] appeared as the incarnation of all authority” (p. 9).

But the cultural philistine remained an abstraction for most modernists, and thus, as Bronner argues, “so was the philistine world that the modernists wished to transform. Its economic contradictions, political conflicts of interest, and institutional dynamics were rarely of interest” (p. 10). Only very seldom did modernist artists point to any concrete strategy of political resistance or connect with actual movements of resistance. Bronner mentions Diego Rivera, Billie Holiday, and Ethel Waters as exceptions, and observes that few European modernists were political in this way.

For this reason, the title of Bronner’s book is misleading. His theme is that modernism was in fact only very rarely “at the barricades.” Its cultural radicalism infrequently translated into political radicalism. As he observes, Friedrich Nietzsche rather than Karl Marx is the “seminal philosopher” of modernism (p. 14). Indeed, Communism was culturally conservative, except in the early years of the Russian Revolution.

As the twentieth century wore on, however, the nature of political authority changed, and so too the political significance of modernism. This theme is explored in Bronner’s concluding chapter, which describes the development and ultimate demise of modernism. In my view, this is the richest and most interesting chapter in the book. As Bronner shows, after a brief initial period, modernist experiments were suppressed in the Soviet Union, and by the end of the 1920s an orthodoxy of “socialist realism” had been imposed in the Communist movement. On the political right similarly, Mussolini soon cooled to futurism. The Nazis rejected Nolde and expressionism, despite his support for them. His work was included in the Nazi exhibition of “Degenerate Art” (1937) and he was banned from painting by Joseph Goebbels. Thus: “Classical modernism experienced a slow death at the hands of its enemies and quite a few friends, too. Mussolini began the process on the right, and ... the Communist International furthered it on the left.... All experimental culture now came under attack on the grounds that art should serve the particular policies advocated by the regime” (p. 145).

After World War II, with abstract expressionism, the center of gravity of modernism shifted to the United States. This movement, “for all its aesthetic contributions, had no politics and no utopian vision” (p. 147). Art was stripped of its wider political purpose, it lost its critical edge, it was increasingly incorporated into and

co-opted by the culture industry. Capitalist society too had changed, it had become more liberal, more tolerant. Even the most rebellious forms of art came to be incorporated by the culture industry. “The very idea of the new has been robbed of its critical character. Modern art no longer unleashes ... political fury or [a] sense of insurgency” (p. 149). Art retreated into the purely aesthetic sphere.

In response to what Herbert Marcuse called this “repressive tolerance,” art has become increasingly self-referential (p. 154). It rarely engages social reality or has any connection with social groups seeking emancipation. The advent of postmodernism has confirmed, amplified, and legitimized these tendencies. Bronner is particularly dismissive of current artists, like Damien Hirst, who nowadays pass for radicals in art: “Nonconformity, formalism, and inwardness legitimate liberal society. Cultural rebellion is applauded in the urban capitals of the modern world. Conservatives, provincials, and reactionaries still threaten the experimental artist, but they are on the defensive. Liberal society is the sandbox in which modernists safely build and admire their virtuosity” (p. 150).

Indeed, Bronner’s argument leads him ultimately to question the very character of modernism’s critique of modernity: “Whatever [the modernists] dislike of liberal institutions ... they popularized a new form of aesthetic pluralism. This not only expanded the range of experiential possibilities but also—strangely or, perhaps, dialectically—enabled modernism to provide a cultural content for political liberalism” (p. 159). Furthermore, “modernists may have believed that they were contesting modernity; but their efforts and their hopes were shaped by it. Their activities legitimated what they intended to oppose. Their critique, in short, presupposed its object.... These artists were essentially anarchists.... They opposed the “system” without understanding how it worked or what radical political transformation required or implied. Oddly, they never understood how deeply they were enmeshed in what they opposed” (pp. 2-3).[1]

In short, modernism was rarely “at the barricades” and, when it was, it often did not really understand the issues involved or why it was there. As Bronner himself puts it, “art can ‘speak truth to power,’ but only in the rarest instances does it offer an actual strategy of political resistance” (p. 154). Perhaps that is less of an issue than Bronner sometimes seems to imply. If I understand him correctly, he is not arguing that it should necessarily be political in this way. Rather, his main purpose is to clarify the ways in which modernism is, and is not, political, and to question some of the more exaggerated claims that are made for its politics by modernists themselves and their defenders. His argument is that its radicalism was, for the most part, cultural rather than political in character. Clearly that is not to deny that its challenges to tradition and authority had a major social and cultural impact and were bound up with the enormous social and moral changes that were occurring during this period.

As I said at the beginning, these points are mapped out in the introductory and concluding essays of this book. The middle chapters provide much valuable material for a more detailed elaboration of this story. It is to be hoped that Bronner will develop this in future works. On the whole the book is attractively produced. However, it includes a number of poorly reproduced black-and-white illustrations. These seem to have been selected somewhat arbitrarily. Some of the detailed discussion of particular works (e.g., by Nolde) would benefit greatly from more and better illustrations.

#### Note

[1]. Even the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), it turns out, was aware of this. During the Cold War, it covertly funded abstract expressionists and the British literary journal *Encounter* for this reason. Bronner does not mention this, but see Francis Stonor Sanders, “Modern Art Was CIA ‘Weapon,’” *The Independent*, October 22, 1995, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/modern-art-was-cia-weapon-1578808.html>.

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