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Editor's Introduction:

Medium and Message in German Modernism

Even a cursory glance at the artistic projects and aesthetic conceptions that take shape in the German-speaking parts of Central Europe between 1890 and 1930 and that have since come to be viewed as indispensable to an understanding of German Modernism will yield an enormous variety of projects. From the early expressionist projects of the *Brücke* and the Viennese *Sezession* to the brutally satiric and anti-aestheticist indictments of a bankrupt bourgeois culture in Georg Grosz, Otto Dix, or Max Beckmann in the visual arts; from the second Viennese School of Schoenberg, Berg, Webern to the unique amalgamation of seemingly disparate and often brilliantly adaptive styles in late- or avowedly post-Romantic composers such as Mahler, Berg, Zemlinski, Korngold, or Kurt Weill; and from the post-Humanism of such dissimilar figures as the post-Nietzschean pessimist Oswald Spengler and the only slightly more upbeat projects of Max Weber and Georg Simmel to the epigrammatic concision of Karl Kraus and Ludwig Wittgenstein, German Modernism, characterized by a propensity for manifesto-style self-authorization, claims programmatic status for itself even as it comprises enormously diverse and distinctive figures. Many of these figures are charismatic and ambitious enough to be hailed as “representative,” yet representative of what? An effectively generalizing answer to that question is unlikely to materialize at the level of what these charismatic spokesmen of Modernism explicitly set forth as their respective aesthetic philosophy. Still, all is not lost. For even as the above-mentioned individual projects, movements, or schools (and many more could be listed) often pursue very disparate aesthetic visions, they all share an acute, preoccupation with their place in the history of aesthetics. In addition to presenting a rich array of artistic projects and formal innovations, German Modernism is distinguished by its reflexive awareness of how the artistic *medium* is itself transformed by massive technological (and consequently perceptual) advances. Were it not for the effortless availability of an entire musical tradition by way of the gramophone, could Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* have afforded to be so concisely allusive of traditional musical genres, giving listeners just a few seconds to discern the rhythmic signature of a waltz before moving on? In German Modernism, it is above all the changing value of the artistic medium—its susceptibility to technological reproduction and, hence, the changed perceptual and hermeneutic frames governing aesthetic experience—which now fundamentally transforms any *a priori* or inherited (bourgeois or even Romantic) conception of the value and significance of art. Indeed, the aesthetic practices thus transformed in turn feed back into and alter our ability to conceptualize art's significance in more richly differentiated and reflexive ways.

Principally focused on just three major figures of German Modernism—Mann, Schoenberg, and Adorno—though branching out in diverse ways from there, the essays gathered in this volume all offer distinctive appraisals of German Modernism. Some undertake more particular and locally attentive interpretations of major works and aesthetic programs, such as Janelle Blankenship's reconstruction of a post-naturalist, microscopic representation in the work of Arno Holz and a formally less radical though complex architecture of “media hierarchies” in Mann's *Magic Mountain*, or Ruth HaCohen's exploration of the layering of compositional, cultural, and theological frames in Schoenberg's *Moses and Aron*. Several of the essays written for this special issue consider how German Modernist writing at once seeks to realize an avant-garde aesthetic project of seemingly airtight formalist nature and, at the same time, undertakes a critical reflection on the limitations and ideological entanglements of the resulting Modernist aesthetic. Among these, Schoenberg's *Moses and Aron* and Mann's *Doctor Faustus* arguably stand out as exceptionally reflexive achievements, not only vis-à-vis their historical moment, but also with regard to how far art can or should go in its quest to loosen and redirect its formal-aesthetic heritage and to articulate a new conception of art that remains yet, well, “art.” While echoing the early Romantics' programmatic concern with the transformative potential of aesthetic experience, avant-garde artists such as Arno Holz and Arnold Schoenberg, yet also a more cautious and qualified Modernist such as Mann, simultaneously reflect on the inherent limitations of any

aesthetic philosophy *qua* philosophy, as well as on a Modernist aesthetic that remains necessarily haunted by the bourgeois aesthetic traditions against which it seeks to constitute its own futurity.

Schoenberg's own experimentation with sonorous extremes, as well as his calculated invocation—on the order of “mention” rather than “use” (to recall John Searle's distinction)—of bourgeois, grand operatic convention operates, as Ruth HaCohen details, at multiple levels. The anguished, dodecaphonal sonorities of *Moses and Aron* not only ponder the basic theological dilemma of how to furnish “a religious expression of the unrepresentable holy.” They also, simultaneously, conjure up, perhaps even bait, a long and unhappy genealogy of anti-Semitic music-criticism and musical aesthetics that deemed Jewish music deficient on account of its supposed “noisy element,” its lack of contrapuntal order, harmonic stability, and cadentially bounded *melos*. Similarly, Evelyn Cobley's essay explores the complex ideological entanglements of a Modernist hyper-formalism exemplified by the systemic rigors of serialism. Her principal text, Mann's *Doctor Faustus* (1947), is a fictitious *cum* critical attempt to address the status and limitations of high Modernism's aesthetic project, exemplified by the protagonist, Adrian Leverkühn's Schoenbergian pursuit of a rigorously systematic and internally cohesive mode of aesthetic production. Focusing on the unique collaboration between Mann and Adorno during the composition of *Doctor Faustus*, the author's last and perhaps greatest novel, Cobley identifies a fundamentally new paradigm of totality and “system,” one in which bourgeois aesthetic categories like “irony,” “genius,” or *ars inveniendi* no longer have any legitimate standing. Substantially cued by Adorno, Mann's novel instead traces the convergence of formal-aesthetic and politico-economic modes of totalization: “Adorno understood long before the impact of globalization became the subject of anxious debates that global capitalism and German Nazism operate on a totality that is no longer captured by modernity's metaphor of the harmonious whole but by postmodernity's destruction of distinctions through the radical convergence of all contingent elements.”

My own essay explores the changing status of the aesthetic image (*Bild*) in the construction of developmental narratives and focuses on how Mann's and Spengler's Modernist narratives of cultural crisis and disintegration draw out a deep-structural antagonism within the category of the image—seen here less as an aesthetic *object* than as an enduring, anthropological *function*. The tension or ambivalence so poignantly dramatized throughout Mann's *Magic Mountain* concerns whether it is ever permissible to treat the image as a strictly aesthetic category, that is, as a *formal* object and, in so doing, to sidestep its deep-seated anthropological *function*. What forces that crisis into the open is, for Spengler and Mann alike (with other figures, such as Georg Simmel, Max Scheler, Martin Heidegger, and the anthropologist Arnold Gehlen hovering in the wings) the decisive transformation wrought within art by the advent of modern media technology and a corresponding change in the artist's thinking about the limits and possibilities of representation. If, as David Ferris so lucidly puts it, “Modernism is the interpretation of autonomy that was reflected into art after its separation from cult and myth,” the literary image—ostensibly autonomous in its genesis and offering forever new interpretive returns to its bourgeois readers/connoisseurs—will yet retain within it the traces of the mythic force and volatility that it claims to have transcended. Thus through its enjambment of the (petit-) bourgeois image with modern media technologies—e.g., photography, x-ray technology, the gramophone—Mann's narrative reveals the latent, regressive or atavistic forces that had gone unacknowledged throughout much of the long (bourgeois) nineteenth-century and that, like the disease of tuberculosis itself, now erupt into the open. In significant measure, this sudden resurgence of conceptual tensions that had always been intrinsic to (if dormant within) the project of bourgeois narrative and *Bildung* is triggered by a technology-driven transformation of the very *medium* of representation. Hence it is imperative to take empirical inventory of this transformation of the very medium—and, consequently, of the very psychology of aesthetic perception—wherein German Modernism stakes its claims. Janelle Blankenship's essay in particular provides us with a rich and differentiated archive and account of the rapidly evolving debate in German Modernism—a debate prompted by the apparent, irreversibly altered status of aesthetic form and meaning in a cultural environment in which the “medium” has, perhaps decisively, slipped from the (already tenuous) control that a Romantic, expressivist aesthetic had long asserted over them.

Finally, this issue's intellectual concerns are appropriately and impressively complemented by two theoretical meditations on Modernist Aesthetics. David Ferris's contribution explores Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, that late and unfinished rumination of Modernism's troubled, iconoclastic response

to aesthetic history and what Benjamin calls the “catastrophe of tradition,” a response that ultimately winds up calling into question the continued possibility of art and aesthetics themselves. At the other end of the intellectual trajectory covered by the essays in this collection, Robert Kaufman—again taking Adorno’s supple and complex figurations as his point of departure—imagines a renewed call for art, specifically for a revitalized lyric art that pushes conceptual, discursive language beyond itself. Both essays thoughtfully explore the limits of aesthetics as a philosophical project, limits that may yet be reincorporated into critical theory (as evidenced by Adorno’s meditations on “The Essay as Form” or in contemporary American poetry) and so dramatize the need for connecting the practice of theory with an experimental, creative, and unabashedly artistic mode of writing.

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(Thomas Pfau, December 2005)