



## REVIEW

**Annalisa Zox-Weaver:** *Women Modernists and Fascism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, ISBN: 978-1-107-00852-6, 236 pp.

In *Women Modernists and Fascism*, Annalisa Zox-Weaver takes up the case of the artistic careers of four modernist female artists – the filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl, writer Gertude Stein, journalist Jannet Flanner and photographer Lee Miller. Zox-Weaver examines their personal, but mainly professional, encounters with fascist ideology and aesthetic, and argues that these artists engaged Hitler in a very specific way – as a muse.

The author places her analysis mainly in the context of modernist visual culture and media. Its focal point is Hitler as a screen upon which the masses could project their fantasies and desires. Similarly, the four female artists used this screen to project their own dreams of success and recognition.

“This is not another book about Hitler,” Zox-Weaver makes clear from the very beginning (“Introduction: A Short History of Fascination”). This distinction between Hitler as a historical figure and his representation is important; likewise, the author distinguishes between studies of Hitler as a magnet for the masses, including psychological and sociological studies of fanaticism, and the study of Hitler as an odd lure for some artists’ souls. It is certainly a difficult task to draw such dividing lines, that is, to separate Hitler himself from his phantom-like presence permeating the recesses of the high modernist imagination. Drawing a border between Hitler’s personal and imaginary influence, however, begs further questions: for example, should Riefenstahl, who knew Hitler personally, unlike the remaining three authors, be included in the study? Nevertheless, the contribution of Zox-Weaver’s book lies precisely in diving into such complex matters: the ephemeral, muddy depths of artistic imagination during one of the most difficult eras of the twentieth century.

In the area of scholarship on modernism and World War II, Zox-Weaver certainly takes a new perspective by pushing beyond the familiar conceptual framework through which the relationship between fascism and artists is usually examined; previously, it was mainly on the grounds of yearning for patriarchal authority, such as in Sigmund Freud’s *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1922), or in Wilhelm Reich’s *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933) (Zox-Weaver includes these sources). Zox-Weaver’s interdisciplinarity takes her even beyond current conceptual frameworks on women and fascism – ranging from historical studies – e.g. Martin Durham’s *Women and Fascism* (1998), to studies in psychology and/or sexuality – see, for example, Laura Catherine Frost’s *Sex Drives: Fantasies of Fascism in Literary Modernism* (2002), Erin Carlston’s *Thinking Fascism: Sapphic Modernism and Fascist Modernity* (1998) – both included in Zox-Weaver’s book, or a collection of essays edited by Dagmar Herzog, *Sexuality and German Fascism* (2004). Although the author’s major concern is with female agency of artists, Zox-Weaver does not quite rely on seminal studies that investigate the complexity of women’s engagement in

the fascist public sphere, such as Claudia Koontz's *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics* (1987), Victoria de Grazia's *How Fascism Ruled Women* (1992), or Thomas Carl Austenfeld's *American Women Writers and the Nazis: Ethics and Politics in Boyle, Porter, Safford, and Hellman* (2001). It seems that Zox Weaver finds better disciplinary affinity with film, media and performance scholarship, especially with Kriss Ravetto's *The Unmaking of Fascist Aesthetics* (2001). However, her analysis would profit from engaging with Ravetto's study more intensively (for example, Ravetto's argument on fascism and "fatal feminism" seems fascinating, but only briefly mentioned on page 3). Although she employs Susan Sontag (e.g. Sontag's essay, "Fascinating Fascism"), Zox-Weaver's analysis would profit from engaging with feminist theorists more – especially with film theorists, such as Patrice Petro (*Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany*), or Laura Mulvey ("Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"), who are both mentioned only once.

Zox-Weaver offers a brief overview of some male artists of modernism, such as Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, or D.H. Lawrence. She does not analyze their work in depth, but uses them rather for comparison: instead of seeing fascism as representing masculine control over fragmented society or subjectivity, as the aforementioned male writers of modernism may have seen it (for example, this is an argument in Charles Ferrall's *Modernist Writing and Reactionary Politics* (2001), in which he argues that these writers favored the elitist and autonomous aestheticism of high culture, gendered as masculine, over mass culture, gendered as feminine; Zox-Weaver includes Ferrall's study in hers), the four women artists turned to Hitler in order to claim their own authorial control. However, it is likely that a further, more in-depth inquiry may problematize this comparison; after all, the complexity of Hitler's influence on male or female artists of this time, encompassing psychological, political, as well as artistic motifs, hardly allows for a faultless compartmentalization.

The book starts with Riefenstahl. This choice is understandable. Riefenstahl celebrated fascist aesthetics, basking in Hitler's admiration, but also manipulated his image most ostensibly. Thus, in the first chapter, "In her image: Leni Riefenstahl's Cinematic Hitler," Zox-Weaver argues that Riefenstahl supplants Hitler as a historical figure by a "celluloid Hitler," a projection screen for her own "desire for absolute authority and self-creation as an icon" (25).

Although Riefenstahl's infamous opus, *Triumph of the Will* (1935), stands at the center of the first chapter, Zox-Weaver traces the development of Riefenstahl's image-manipulating strategies back to her previous work, namely to *The Blue Light* (1932), where Riefenstahl started to assert authorial control over images by feminizing them. For example, in *Triumph*, the audience watches Hitler as an image, an object of the gaze, while simultaneously watching him as a subject of that gaze, desiring his own image. Or, Riefenstahl creates a montage of close-ups of Hitler's body, such as his hands, depicted as soft and feminine. Importantly, Riefenstahl, as a director, remains in control of Hitler's feminized image. She even inserts herself into the screen, disclosing herself behind the camera as "one professional woman on the job," as Janet Flanner later described her article "Führer-I." By these artistic strategies, Riefenstahl, as Zox-Weaver concludes, "undercuts the leader's authority over the ritualized scenes with his submission to the camera's commanding gaze" (25).

The second chapter, entitled "Stein's Secret Sharers: Great Men and Modernist Authority," addresses Gertrude Stein's lifelong fascination with male figures of authority, ranging from such monumental personages as George Washington, Napoleon, or Caesar, to those who tragically aspired to replicate such monumentality in the twentieth century, Hitler, Mussolini, and Pétain.

The mere fact that Stein, a Jewish and lesbian writer, could be included among those who woo Hitler as a muse is a fascinating premise. Thus, the chapter on the complicated case of Stein, following the chapter on the more obvious case of Riefenstahl, starts delving into the complexity of Hitler's appeal, one that worked, arguably, even on those least likely to be affected. Zox-Weaver looks at several instances of Stein's identification with "great" men of history that led to her narcissistic, albeit ironical, self-fashioning as a "great" artist. Tracing Stein's life oeuvre from her early "Patriarchal Poetry" (1927) to the later *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937), Zox-Weaver argues that Stein proceeded from "a rejection of" to "introjections into" the patriarchal power structure

(61). She summarizes this kind of self-fashioning by the following question: "If a leader can be a writer, [Stein] seems to ask, why not a writer a leader?" (77).

This chapter is rich in terms of the quantity and variety of examined primary sources. The author analyzes first Stein's correspondence with Bernard Faÿ, her translator into French, a pro-Vichy conservative, with whom, despite their different political leanings, Stein shared her admiration of "great" men of history. Then, Zox-Weaver proceeds to analyze Stein's posthumously published novel, *Mrs. Reynolds* (1952), which is interpreted in terms of creating a "shared psychic space" between ordinary people and dictators (Hitler appears here as Angel Harper and Stalin as Joseph Lane) (96). Here Zox-Weaver's analysis of Stein uniquely contributes to the study of the modernist psycho-political landscape.

Finally, Zox-Weaver connects Stein to the remaining three female authors by analyzing her self-fashioned "increasing photographic availability" (100). This kind of self-staging can be found in photographs of Stein's forays into Hitler's domestic space at Berchtesgaden, in which she employs what may be modestly called "mimicries of Hitlerian authority" (61). Zox-Weaver argues that Stein engaged the visual media in order to explore "what power looks like" (62). In these photographs, Stein projects herself into the figures of authority in different ways; for example, she poses in a high window, reminiscent of Riefenstahl's shots of Hitler staged above the crowds. Most fascinating, however, is Stein's posing with the American GIs in Berchtesgaden, creating one of the aforementioned mimicries of Hitler's typical gesture. This photograph, depicting Stein and the GIs with hands uplifted, attracts attention precisely due to its oddity; unsurprisingly, it was chosen to be placed on the cover of Zox-Weaver's book. What is surprising, however, is to find out that Stein herself commented on this strange case of mimicry: "We all got together and pointed as Hitler had pointed," in an article, "Off We All Went to See Germany," published in *Life* magazine in 1945 (104). Undoubtedly, it is difficult to assess the profundity of Stein's fascination with authority and decide whether Stein's fascination is with the visual display of power or simply power itself. Nevertheless, Zox-Weaver concludes that Stein finally erases the border between "identification and parody" (61).

The figure of Stein, in this study, contrasts starkly with other female modernist figures who addressed fascism in their work. Most famously, this is the case of Virginia Woolf, who coined the term "subconscious Hitlerism" in *Three Guineas* (1938). Unfortunately, connections between Stein and Woolf are not explored further; Woolf is mentioned only briefly in the introduction. However, Zox-Weaver deserves praise here precisely for her challenging of the conventional, widely-accepted perspective on Stein, one that holds that Stein's revolutionary experimentation with language, especially her anti-patriarchal breaking of the linear form, automatically cancels out her conservative political predilections.

Janet Flanner, an American journalist, who wrote for *The New Yorker*, provides the subject of the third chapter, "A face inappropriate to fame": Janet Flanner, the 'Führer' Profiles, and the Image of the Fascist Leader." Zox-Weaver attributes Flanner's concern with fascism to her elitist concern for high culture. As the war proceeded, *The New Yorker* started increasingly turning its attention to politics (once even considering Mussolini as a correspondent), the developments that made Flanner, likewise, shift her attention from art connoisseurship to politics. She was commissioned, for example, to cover the first Nuremberg Party Rally in 1933 (where Hitler was elected) as well as the later Nuremberg Trial of Goering in 1946-7. She traveled to the places of the worst war atrocities, including concentration camps.

Of the four artists in question, Flanner was probably the least to woo Hitler as a muse. The author explains that her fascination was rather with Goering, an art connoisseur and collector, whose outward polished appearance at the Nuremberg trial embodied the high art that Flanner appreciated. Zox Weaver explains Flanner's attraction to Goering's self-fashioned spectacle, one that masked his inhuman side, by her conviction that the outward manifestations of aesthetics and a higher degree of civilization are necessarily interrelated.

Zox-Weaver uses the aforementioned equation between aesthetic appeal and civilization to shed light on Flanner's perspective on Hitler. The culmination of her career as a political cor-

respondent for *The New Yorker* was her three-part “Führer” profile, in which Hitler, especially in comparison to Goering, fails as a visual icon. Hitler simply cannot deliver; he “takes the worst photographs in the world,” Flanner comments (131). However, Zox-Weaver draws attention to Flanner’s interesting hypothesis concerning Hitler’s zero visual appeal: “His nothingness, Flanner hypothesizes, can serve as the source of everything—he can be all things to all people, bear the projections of the masses and fulfill their destinies while uninterruptedly generating and disseminating an ideology of hate” (124).

In a way, Flanner makes the weakest case for Zox Weaver’s argument because she did not see Hitler as a muse. However, Zox Weaver still holds that Flanner “affiliates herself with some of the ideational roots of fascism” (109). The fact that Flanner fits so uneasily in the argumentative line of this study probably led Zox-Weaver to include a postscript to this chapter (other chapters are not so concluded), which, in spite of offering a fine précis of Flanner’s case, seems rather superfluous.

Fortunately, Zox-Weaver does point to other reasons, besides sharing aesthetic ideals with the Nazi leaders, for including Flanner in her study. First, it is Flanner’s expertise on the Nazi leaders, which, Zox-Weaver claims, ensured her professional career rise. However, the *The New Yorker*’s turning to politics was independent of Flanner’s writing and thus can hardly be solely attributed to her influence. The second reason seems more sound, as it is based on Flanner’s artistic efforts, shared among all four figures of Zox-Weaver’s study, to disrupt, iconoclastically, the fascist mise-en-scene by “putting herself in the picture” (139). This is the case, for example, of her reported entry into Hitler’s office, posing as “Herr Doktor T. von Nürnberg,” or a photo from Pétain’s trial, in which she occupies the center. Thus, by claiming the spotlight, she diminishes Pétain’s visibility and importance.

Finally, “Berchtesgaden Is Burning: Lee Miller, iconicity, and the demise of the Nazi leader,” is the subject of the fourth, closing chapter. To some extent, the structure of Zox-Weaver’s book thus follows the historical timeline: starting with a chapter on Hitler’s rise, and Riefenstahl as an artist inspired by that rise, it closes with his fall, and with Miller, who proclaimed herself to be a “sur-render specialist” (178).

Lee Miller was an American war correspondent for both the British and American editions of *Vogue*. She was a photographer herself, but also a model for many artists of her time. Occupying the same artistic circles, and embodying the multiple roles of muse, colleague, collaborator, or lover to such artists as Man Ray, Picasso, or Jean Cocteau, gave rise to Miller’s appetite for a career of her own.

Zox-Weaver traces Hitler’s appeal on Miller far back in time. She casts a Freudian eye on Miller’s family background. Miller posed often for her father, Theodore Miller, who took stereoscopic images (unlike photography, stereoscopic images could achieve gratifying life-like plasticity) of his nude daughter in poses reminiscent of antique statues. However, Zox-Weaver then draws a rather strained comparison between the doubleness of stereoscopic images and that of Miller herself as an artist: “In the spirit of the stereopticon, Miller merged dualities and antitheses, fashioning herself as a point of convergence for multiple discourses” (160). Luckily, another inference drawn from the examination of Miller’s family background is more fitting. Zox-Weaver infers that very early on Miller became aware of the difference between the subject and object of art.

This chapter, containing numerous photographs of and by Miller, is certainly the most visually engaging. “[Miller’s] look” in images by George Hoyningen-Huene, one that “merged classical aesthetic with *femme moderne*,” show well how Miller “mobilized her own beauty” (156). Photographs taken by Miller as a war correspondent – the scenes of WWII atrocities, such as London after bombing, or the concentration camps – are not included. Zox-Weaver rather focuses on those photographs that contain what Garrett Stewart calls an “embedded auto-icon” (150). For example, it is a photograph of the treasurer of Leipzig’s dead family in a room with Hitler’s painting.

The chapter culminates in an analysis of Miller herself as an “embedded auto-icon,” especially tableaux featuring Miller in Hitler’s domestic space – for example, in Eva Braun’s bed. Thus like Stein and Flanner, Miller also visually stages her own fascination with being “at home with Hitler” (19). Unfortunately, this photo is not included. What is included, however, is a chilling photograph,

*Lee Miller in Bathtub*, by David E. Sherman. Zox-Weaver claims, in the “Acknowledgement,” that her study was inspired by precisely this photograph. It comes from a series of photos Sherman and Miller took in Hitler’s Munich home after the American troops had taken it over. Miller is depicted there as casually taking a bath in Hitler’s own bathroom. The thoroughly private, domestic scene is disrupted by a picture of Hitler, taken by his only official photographer, Heinrich Hoffman, which rests displayed on the tub ledge. A number of intentionally placed objects, such as Miller’s military-style boots, or the statue of Venus in the staged scene create a strange mix of admiration as well as denunciation of fascist aesthetics and ideology. Zox-Weaver’s conclusion on Miller’s artistic strategies is similar to that on Riefenstahl: “In these pictures, the viewer sees the domestic spaces of Hitler and Braun, but even more so sees Miller, within the frame, directing the composition, or both” (187).

As Zox-Weaver shows, “The shadow of the dictator looms large over modernism” (7). Nevertheless, the relevance of her study reaches beyond the field of modernist studies; as a study of intricate workings of artistic inspiration, it gains importance in our contemporary society, where screens and images continue to proliferate, often beyond our control. Zox-Weaver ends by disagreeing with Ian Buruma, who holds, in “The Indescrete Charm of Tyranny,” that dictators have “become obsolete” (194). If dictators, as infinitely mutable screens, keep re-appearing in new manifestations and translations, we may start making comparisons between other (semi-)dictators and their shadows as well. This may be the right time to introduce dictator studies to our curricula.

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