BOOKS

View From Abroad

The fusion of art and politics continues to confuse and inspire. Michael Ignatieff reviews *Visions And Blueprints,* a book dealing with an early 20th century attempt at this mix

In neutral Zurich in 1916, Lenin lived just across the street from the Dada cabaret. Across the Spiegelgasse would waft nonsense incantations ('the cows sit on telegraph poles and play chess'). As Lenin busied himself at his desk, did he cock an ear to Dada? Did he hear their chants and rhymes as a welcome provocation of bourgeois normality or dismiss them as juvenile subjectivism? The Bolshevik relation to the artistic avant-garde was always ambiguous: Lenin was no philistine, but Gorky was closer to his taste than Mayakovsky, and while Moscow was the European capital of the avant-garde in Lenin's time, even in the early 20s art that was not solidly in the service of the revolution - Akhmatova, Mandelstam, Pasternak - was savaged with the sneers ('subjectivist', 'decadent') that Zhdanov was to erect into an official aesthetics.

The Soviet case is surely the most important in the fraught 20th century relation between 'progressive' art and 'progressive' politics. Since this relation forms the central theme of this marvellously wide-ranging collection of essays it seems a major lapse in judgement that the Russian case receives only glancing notice in articles on *Battleship Potemkin* and Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution.*

The collection does neglect the Soviet case, but it does dispose of the left-wing conceit which supposes that those who are in the forefront of artistic innovation and provocation are necessarily on the Left. For every Breton or Picasso, there was a Pound or Marinetti. Raymond Williams points out - in an introduction which gives us yet another reason to lament his death - that the key modernist impulse in art, hatred of bourgeois normality, could just as easily pass into a cult of the elite as into membership of the Communist Party. Marinetti and Mayakovsky may have both wanted to smash the dead hand of bourgeois tradition but one ended in Italian fascism, the other in Soviet agit-prop. When in 1912 the Stockholm Workers' Commune held a torchlight procession to celebrate August Strindberg's 63rd birthday, they claimed him for the movement, not knowing that Strindberg was in fact a convinced Nietzschean. Just as often as a modernist like Goncharoya or Rivera sought inspiration from popular culture, other modernists like Ortega Y Gasset would positively defend the incomprehensibility of the elite artist to the masses: 'The new art has the masses against it, and will always have them against it. It is essentially unpopular: more than this: it is anti-popular.'

Visions and Blueprints repeatedly brings out the ironic contrast between an artist's avant-garde reputation and the often reactionary reality of his or her personal politics. Nowhere is this contrast more scathingly drawn than in Naomi Segal's 'Sexual Politics and the Avant-Garde', a feminist critique of the Surrealists, whose celebration of the convulsions of desire frequently turned out to be hymns to the violence of phallic aggression. Only Marcel Proust, the homosexual, and Virginia Woolf, the bisexual woman, managed to find, in Segal's words, 'emancipation from the dominant discourse of patriarchy'.

While the collection always illuminates the relation between art and politics, it rather neglects the art of politics itself. The 20s and 30s are among the most startlingly innovative periods in the theatre of modern politics. Soviet agit-prop was, after all, a drastic innovation in the arts of popular mobilisation. The 19th century had created the mass popular party; it was the 20th century which created all the art forms we call propaganda. In this, modern art played a crucial and under-appreciated role.

The great Svengalis of modern political communication - Goebbels and Speer - deserve a key place in any history of modernism's ambiguous encounter with politics, and unfortunately they are absent here. Frank Whitford's essay on 'The Triumph of the Banal: Art in Nazi Germany' misleadingly portrays Nazi aesthetics as the revenge of petty bourgeois philistinism on the cosmopolitan avant-garde. While that certainly captures the impetus behind the famous exhibition of degenerate art, it entirely neglects the Hitler who used to sketch fantastic modernist cityscapes in his Vienna sketchbooks; it neglects Speer, Goebbels and Riefenstahl, who combined the latest techniques in architecture and in searchlight and microphone technology to produce the unsurpassed *Gotterdammerung* of modern art: the Nuremberg rally. When modernism can end in political disaster of this scale, one begins to appreciate how rare, how contingent and how important it is when all that is best in the modernist impulse does align itself with an untarnished cause. •

Scrabrrrrnunng: **Filippo Marinetti combined futurist art and writing with political support for Mussolini's fascism**

***Visions And Blueprints: Avant-garde culture and radical politics in early 20th century Europe,* edited by Edward Timms and Peter Collier, MUP (£29.50 hbk).**