

Review of “The 1930s: The Making of the New Man”  
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This summer visitors to Canada’s National Gallery in Ottawa encountered an extensive and thought-provoking exhibition of interest to Surrealist scholars. Entitled “The 1930s: The Making of ‘The New Man,’” the show focused on the relationship between art and biological imperatives, and the politics to which these were invariably subject in what might now be called the “long” 1930s (the late 1920s to the early 1940s).

Held between June 6 and September 7, 2008, “The 1930s” featured two hundred and six paintings, sculptures, photographs, works on paper, and a film, executed by an impressive range of artists such as Jean Arp, Vassily Kandinsky, Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dalí, Alberto Giacometti, Joan Miró, Diego Rivera, Max Ernst, Otto Dix, Lisette Model, Ivan Le Lorraine Albright, and Walker Evans. The organizing committee of the exhibition was chaired by the director of the National Gallery of Canada, Pierre Théberge. Jean Clair, former Head Curator at the George Pompidou Centre, Paris, and retired director of the Musée Picasso, acted as chief curator.

“The 1930s: The Making of ‘The New Man’” traced the rise of totalitarianism in 1930s Europe, particularly in Italy, Germany and Soviet Russia, and the “New Order” these regimes proposed. The exhibition focused on the idea of the “New Man” or “Superman,” the shining beacon of an immaculate and homogenous New World which was based on spurious sciences such as eugenics and employed to justify anti-Semitism and other forms of bigotry and racism. Consequently, the exhibition hinged upon the tension between discourses of illness, impurity and degeneration, as they applied to country and subject, and those of purity, regeneration and “renaissance” as they were used to justify totalitarian rule and, particularly in the case of the National Socialists, the creation of a “pure race.”

The conceptual focus was on the visual culture of the rising despotic and

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primarily fascist program, in which graphically powerful and relentless propaganda about the New Man was disseminated through communications routes and in various styles ranging from the classicizing to an appropriated visual language of abstraction, Cubism, Futurism, and other modernist styles. While the official propaganda materials displayed were the most conceptually direct, the exhibition equally examined the dissident and primarily avant-garde response from various countries and groups, who likewise appropriated and transformed the lexicon of biology, bodily perfection, and cultural and political hegemony to reflect and comment upon the newly instated scientific and social paradigms as they related to the human form and the embodied subject. As such, the exhibition equally showcased often familiar and canonical works of many important artists in light of issues of biomorphism, the *informe*, birth and regeneration, the mechanization of the body, and contemporary politics. Many of these works evinced an infinitely more sympathetic reflection upon issues of degeneracy and the victims of racial and biological determinist policies.

The exhibition comprised of nine sections purposely combined, side-by-side, both “official” art sanctioned or commissioned by various regimes, and vanguard and experimental works of the period. The thematic progression, suitably organic in its symbolism, was the trajectory from birth to death. Ultimately, the viewer was taken through the exhibition timeline from the original presumed optimism of the possibilities of nascent sciences and new political directions to the destruction and horror of final “solutions,” together with the horrific consequences of the Spanish Civil War and World War II.

The first of the exhibition modules, entitled “Genesis,” primarily considered the celebration of the natural world in the realm of the abstract, with a focus on the egg, the cell and the biomorphic. Hans Arp, Naum Gabo and Barbara Hepworth served as archetypes, with their smooth, solid stone creations rendered in flesh-like configurations, while Carl Strüwe and Karl Blossfeldt’s still extraordinary photographic magnifications of natural phenomena, such as fern-heads and snails’ tongues, pointed to the remarkably ordered world of nature in miniature. In the representational realm, works by André Masson, Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundeberg took as their themes the embryo, the seed, and the morphology of plants, while Salvador Dalí’s *Geopoliticus Child Watching the Birth of the New Man* (1943) became the veritable poster for the exhibition itself, with its “New Man” emerging from the soft, skin-like sack of an egg that is also the planet Earth.

“Convulsive Beauty” was the name of the following section, which considered issues of fragmentation and dissolution – in this context presumably appropriating André Breton’s famous phrase to reflect the then-current discourse of

both national and social degeneration and the violence of the interwar period. Here works by Picasso, Victor Brauner, Joan Miró, Gaston Lachaise and others parsed the grotesque and fragmented body, the dialectics of “perversion” and “inversion,” and thereby destabilized the rubrics of heroics, racial purity and physical beauty that formed the official line of the Nazis and other regimes. Some of the works visitors encountered were Giacometti’s famous bronze *Woman with her Throat Cut* (1932), Hans Bellmer’s hand-tinted photographs of his notorious dolls (1935-37), André Kertész’s fun-house mirror monstrosities (1932-33).

The next four exhibition modules decidedly shifted to the propagandistic aspects of the “New Man” project, both in its literal form, and via the left-leaning avant-garde response to the barrage of “official” art and doctrine. In the section “The Will to Power,” the viewer was confronted by Adolfo Wildt’s colossal 1925 heroic bronze head of Mussolini (*Portrait Sculpture of Benito Mussolini*), to be followed by other equally imposing images of the despot’s visage by Italian artists Thayaht (Ernesto Michahelles) and Gerardo Dottori—both in an immaculately appropriated syntax of Cubo-Futurism. Also on view was Renato Bertelli’s truly ingenious *Continuous Profile of Mussolini*, the three-hundred and sixty degree bust turned on a potter’s wheel. As a counterpoint to such heroics, this section also featured John Heartfield’s incisive satires on Nazi propaganda, including many famous photomontages which travesty Hitler, his New Man and the proposed German directives concerning family, commerce and science. Most notable was Heartfield’s well-known “X-ray” of Hitler with a belly filled with coins, entitled *Adolf the Superman Swallows Gold and Spouts Junk* (c. 1932).

The following sections considered the primarily German rhetoric of the New Man, featuring idealized Aryan bodies engaged in suitably wholesome (and frequently unintentionally homoerotic) activities. This was followed by “Mother Earth” where some works of art quite literally embodied the concept of the Mother/Fatherland, glorifying the farm worker and unambiguously indexing natalist policies and the emphasis on the family unit to produce “pure” offspring. Of particular interest was a 1937 triptych by “official” German artist Adolf Zeigler, chairman of the Reich’s Chamber of Fine Arts. Entitled *The Four Elements: Fire, Water, Earth and Air*, the work featured four robust classicizing female Aryan nudes. The poses were banal but the message clear as to fecundity and racial purity. It is no surprise this work hung above the fireplace in the Führer’s living room in his residence on the Arcisstrasse.

“The Appeal of Classicism” followed, as the exhibition focused on the style of choice in the domains of Hitler and Mussolini, intent on creating their respective “New Reich” and “New Rome.” A rare viewing opportunity was a later work by

Giorgio de Chirico after his turn from the Metaphysical School to a sort of kitsch classicism. Indeed, compared to his earlier work, the large-scale canvas displayed here, entitled *Two Mythological Figures* (1927) was not only uninspiring, but remarkably poor from a technical standpoint as well. Infinitely more aesthetically satisfying were Mussolini-supporter Mario Sironi's monumental classicizing Cubist-inspired figures. One can hardly avoid being struck by his colossal images with titles such as *Female Figure with a Book and a Machine Gun* (1936-38), rendered in earthy monochrome using a scraped-canvas technique.

From here the exhibition turned to the verso of doctrines of purity, order and proscribed beauty, and focused on issues of "degeneracy," the assertion of individuality, and the valuation of "imperfection." In painting, viewers encountered the language of the New Objectivity, the German movement intent on revealing the objective "truth" of post World War I society, including often disturbing portraits by Christian Schad, Otto Dix, and the extraordinarily penumbral and bulbous portraits by the American Ivan Le Lorraine Albright. Most striking were three portraits by the Dutch painter Pyke Koch, whose brush captured images of the so-called "New Woman." Far from the companion to the New Man, the New Woman represented the strong, sexually liberated, economically independent and stylish female type who emerged in the early twentieth century. This new figure was clearly daunting to Koch, who limned such ladies as threatening figures, as in his cadaverous *Mercedes of Barcelona* (1930) or his primate-like female attendant flanked by toy rifles at a fair (*The Shooting Gallery*, 1931). The most poignant of the images in this section, however, were the stark photographs of "real" people by August Sander, Walker Evans and Weegee, "humanizing" war, poverty and alienation. These photographs created what Roland Barthes called the *punctum*, the emotive "reality" point for the entire exhibition.

The New Man, envisioned by fascists and Communists alike, was nothing if not a cog in a well-oiled machine that was to be part of a new ideological "army." Indeed, the ideologies of both factions centred on concepts of large, organized groups of people, and hence the second-last module in the exhibition, entitled "Crowds and Power" focused on the horde as a phalanx and symbol of an intensely unified and rigidly-ordered society. This was exemplified nowhere better than in Boris Kustodiev's *The Bolshevik* of 1920, featuring a gargantuan Russian worker personifying the body politic and leading the "red" masses toward a brighter future, or in the continuous loop of excerpts of Leni Riefenstahl's 1935 Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will*, which faultlessly spectacularizes Hitler's vision of power, control and uniformity.

The final and most disturbing unit of “The 1930s: The Making of the ‘New Man’” was entitled “The Charnel House.” This section looked at the destruction left in the wake of World War II and the toll taken on the human population thanks, in large part, to the drive for the creation and expansion of the “master race,” and a seemingly insatiable appetite for power, destruction and territory. The cadaver and the skull were key motifs here, as well as the pained grimace and the flow of tears, as in Picasso’s *Weeping Woman* (1937). A surprising inclusion in this section was by Canadian painter Alex Colville, who worked during World War II as a war artist. His is the heart-wrenchingly flat depiction of anonymous and emaciated human remains in a work entitled *Bodies in a Grave, Belsen*, of 1946.

Also surprising was the fact that it was not until the very end of the exhibition, with works such as Colville’s, that the exhibition began to turn its eye toward issues of the “other”—specifically how “race,” ethnicity and sexual orientation were fundamental problematics around which the idea of the New Man was formulated. Indeed, there could have been no concept of a master race or “Superman” if there were no foil or object against which it was pitted. This fundamental dialogue was conspicuously overlooked in the exhibition, although there is an abundance of illustrative visual material from the “long” 1930s. Because the works of art presented here were sufficiently jarring and controversial, the exhibition organizers may have felt broaching this painful subject matter would have been too much for a “mainstream,” primarily touristic audience. Consequently, discourses of “race,” anti-Semitism, and sexual “deviance” were eliminated from the mix. The subject of “inferior” humans—those with physical disabilities or deformities—was treated with an extremely light hand, despite their being a crucial catalyst to the rubric of the salubrious master race and the New Man, and critical for understanding the conceptual foundation of the exhibition.

While “The 1930s: The Making of the ‘New Man’” raised many important questions and suggested significant connections and correspondences, there was also a regrettable dearth of in-gallery textual material that might have aided viewers in contextualizing the exhibition’s logic and content more readily. The construct of the New Man is complex and multifaceted, and more information on the works themselves and the show’s themes and sub-themes would have been welcome additions to an otherwise masterful gathering of important works of art. Nevertheless, there is much scholarly insight offered in the exhibition catalogue, a richly-illustrated 396-page soft-cover volume edited by Jean Clair, which includes essays by Éric Michaud, Laura Bossi, Sander L. Gilman, *et al.* As such, the catalogue will have to suffice for those who were unable to attend this extensive, erudite and visually rich exhibition.