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Jeffrey T. Schnapp

Fascinating Fascism

The title of this volume is borrowed from an influential essay by Susan Sontag published back in 1974, during the heyday of what was then referred to as ‘camp’ and its more familiar high-culture counterpart, Pop Art.¹ Sontag’s essay was prompted by the recent publication of Leni Riefenstahl’s *The Last of the Nuba*: a lavish compilation of colour photographs of East African warriors that the famed director of *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia* had attempted to pass off as proof positive that her career had been an apolitical one, dedicated to the dogged pursuit only of ‘what is beautiful, strong, healthy, what is living’.² The accompanying biography relegated her earlier exploits as a movie star and nazi propagandist to mists no less dense than those that abound in the mountain films in which she starred and which she directed, from *The Holy Mountain* (1926) to *Lowland* (1941). Riefenstahl, it asserted, had been only ‘something of a mythical figure as a filmmaker before the war, half-forgotten by a nation which chose to wipe from its memory an era of its history’.³ A defender of art’s autonomy and integrity, she had been yet another victim of nazi philistinism.

Sontag rose to the challenge of debunking these claims. But she did not stop there. Having accomplished this initial task, her essay moved on to more contemporary targets:

. . . it is generally thought that National Socialism stands only for brutishness and terror. But this is not true. National Socialism — more broadly, fascism — also stands for an ideal or rather ideals that are persistent today under other banners: the ideal of life as art, the cult of beauty, the fetishism of courage, the dissolution of alienation in ecstatic feelings of community, the repudiation of the intellect, the family of man (under the parenthood of leaders). These ideals are vivid and moving to many people . . . because their content is a romantic ideal to which many continue to be attached and which is expressed in such diverse modes of cultural dissidence and propaganda for new forms of community as the

youth/rock culture, primal therapy, anti-psychiatry, Third-World camp-following, and belief in the occult.⁴

The 'fascination' that Sontag had in mind referred to a present threat: the threat posed by the fact that, precisely as historical memory of the cataclysms of the second world war was beginning to fade away, Italian fascism and German nazism seemed to be resurgent, at least to the extent that they were exercising a renewed hold over the contemporary popular imagination. Two cases in point were singled out for criticism in the essay's concluding half: the identification of fascism with heterodox sexuality in films such as Luchino Visconti's *The Damned* and Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising*, and the eroticization of nazi regalia in certain gay subcultures. Both were guilty of exploiting the 'natural link' between the 'sexual theatre' of sadomasochism and the political dramaturgy of fascism.⁵

Sontag's essay was thus intended as a countermeasure to the resurgent appeal of fascism's theatrical staging of the relation between slaves and masters. In it she wished to sound the clarions of Enlightenment reason and high modernism against what she viewed as dangerous mass-cultural trends; she wished to study and to unmask the mechanisms of fascism's fascination during the 1930s, in order to fight fascistoid developments in the 1970s. There is much to object to in Sontag's (sometimes brilliant) polemic: its too simple equations between cultural and sexual dissidence, between fascism and sadomasochism, between 'camp' and the fascist aestheticization of politics; its reductive analysis of contemporary mass culture; its tendency even to fall prey to fascism's self-mystifications. But there can be little doubt that the call that it issued scrupulously to investigate fascism's mechanisms of fascination was timely, particularly inasmuch as the mechanisms in question fell within the hitherto little-explored domains of media, spectacle, and culture. For reasons having to do with the urgent need to dismantle fascism's cultural and political claims, the earliest generation of postwar historians had shied away from any sustained exploration of fascist cultural forms. Assuming as axiomatic Benedetto Croce's notion, formulated in the 1925 'Manifesto of the Anti-Fascist Intellectuals', that fascism and culture were contradictory terms, it tended to favour political, social, and economic analysis, turning to cultural arguments only when they could be employed to buttress

the link between anti-fascism and 'authentic' forms of culture. It is perhaps no coincidence that Sontag's essay appeared shortly after a new wave of scholarship was beginning to surface in Italy: scholarship inspired by the pioneering work of scholars such as Ernst Nolte, George Mosse, and Renzo de Felice, that abandoned 'schematic interpretations, rigid determinism of an ideological and political nature, certain theses of a demonological type' in the pursuit of an archivally grounded, differentiated cultural history of Italy's fascist decades.⁶ As attested to by the articles that follow, this enterprise is still coming to fruition in a wide array of disciplinary areas, from history to the history of art, architecture, and urban planning, to literary history. Its heuristic assumptions, however, remain close to those that underpin Sontag's 'Fascinating Fascism': namely, that the most powerful tool for dismantling what Alice Yaeger Kaplan has aptly termed fascism's 'binding machine', with its slogans, mass choreographies, massive public works projects, and redemptive myths, is the disenchanting reconstruction of these binding operations as carried out in history, before, during, and after Italy's fascist decades.⁷ The operation is, by definition, delicate: to get inside fascism's power of fascination in order to break the spell. But, however delicate, analysis of the cultural domain is of decisive importance in coming to grips with a phenomenon as adaptable and omnivorous as fascism.

As is well known, fascist doctrine was built around a flexible body of beliefs combining the work of figures such as Georges Sorel, Sergio Panunzio, Paolo Orano, Enrico Corradini, Angelo Olivetti, and Robert Michels. It aspired to conjoin nineteenth-century organic nationalism, as found, for instance, in the literature of Italy's Risorgimento, with a Marxism stripped of materialism; and it sought to do so within the setting of a 'communal, anti-individualistic, and anti-rationalistic' political culture which 'represented at first a rejection of the heritage of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, and later the creation of a comprehensive alternative, an intellectual, moral, and political framework that alone could ensure the perpetuity of a human collectivity in which all strata and all classes of society would be perfectly integrated'.⁸ However consistent and comprehensive was this body of doctrine, fascism never possessed a philosophical system of its own, comparable to Marxism-Leninism, as it struggled to actualize itself as a full-blown totalitarian state and

to address such fundamental conflicts as those between its populist and élitist currents or between its cult of heroic individualism and its institutional summons to order. Nor did it always actively seek such philosophical underpinnings, despite the efforts of philosophers like Giovanni Gentile and Julius Evola, who sought to equip it with, respectively, a neo-Hegelian theory of state and a metaphysics. Rather, fascism was determined to remain a paradoxical creature: part doctrinal beast descended from the anarcho-syndicalist wing of anti-materialist Marxism and part chameleon. There was never much disagreement between its opponents and proponents on this point. The communist leader Palmiro Togliatti could thus fulminate from his Moscow pulpit:

. . . against considering fascist ideology as solidly constituted, finite, homogeneous. Fascist ideology is nothing if not a chameleon. Look at fascist ideology only in terms of the goal that fascism was aiming to achieve at that precise moment with that precise ideology.⁹

Such words echo those of a fascist technocrat like Camillo Pellizzi who denied the possibility that fascist ideology could ever be reduced to a stable corpus of doctrines:

Above all else fascism is and must ever increasingly become a 'way of life'. To cast it as dogma, however the word is understood, means to bind it with a chain that, if it is not immediately sundered in the process of acting, can only end up shackling and perhaps killing off all future development Our leaders and the Duce, first and foremost, have been spurred on and inspired from above. From that 'above' that resides in every man and from which gushes forth the will's creative surge. Dogma is unnecessary; discipline is enough. This is fascism's sole dogma.¹⁰

Improvisation, creative evolution, instinct reconciled with a higher intelligence, action in the service of life-force, infinite heterogeneity: the (counter-)dogma of late Romantic art theory. The convergence with an aesthetic doctrine is no accident. Unable definitively to resolve the question of its identity by recourse to the utopias of theory and technology, eager to make the nationalist myths of the Risorgimento its own, fascism often sought answers to its identity crisis in the domain of culture.

The articles gathered together in this volume alternate between exploring the régime's efforts at self-representation on both the local and the national levels, and reconstructing the efforts of individual artists to forge an 'art of fascist times' against the

backdrop of pre-fascist precedents. The volume opens with an introductory article on the historiography of fascism by George Mosse entitled 'Fascist Aesthetics and Society'. In it, Mosse maps out much of the territory occupied by the articles that follow, insisting upon fascism's status as a civic religion, emphasizing the key role performed by cultural forms in achieving political consensus, and setting out in general terms the distinctive features of fascist aesthetics with special reference to fascism's insistent recourse to stereotyping and rigid gender typologies.

Following Mosse's overview comes Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's '*I redentori della vittoria: On Fiume's Place in the Genealogy of Fascism*', which enquires into the inaugural role performed by D'Annunzio's oratory during the 1919 occupation of Fiume with respect to the myths of national redemption later formulated by fascism. The D'Annunzio-Mussolini link is, of course, well established. The article's deeper concern lies with the gradual emergence within D'Annunzio's writings, from his 1893 *Odi navali* to *La penultima ventura* (mostly composed in 1921), of the key structural features that would later define fascism's secularized theology of redemption. Foremost among these is the paradox contained in the title phrase 'The Redeemers of Victory' (cited from one of the Fiuman orations). Common sense might seem to dictate that it is losses, not victories, that demand to be redeemed. Yet, as Gumbrecht demonstrates, the opposite is frequently the case, whether in Christian theology or D'Annunzio's evocations of the Fiume adventure as a 'mutilated victory'. The article goes on to explore how the peculiar interplay between the redemptive hopes, acts, and always postponed attendant rewards gives rise to a tragic ethos that was constitutive in turn of fascism's historical outlook and characteristic modes of action.

In 'Expressionism as Fascist Aesthetic', Emily Braun traces an alternate genealogy for fascist culture: one that emphasizes not the classicism that would ultimately prevail as the more or less official art of nazism and, to a lesser degree, of Italian fascism, but Expressionism, championed by Goebbels up until 1934. Braun examines how certain aspects of the 'programmatic deformation of reality' practised by Mario Sironi were, despite their Germanic resonances, openly exploited by the Italian régime. A participant in the March on Rome, closely linked to Mussolini due to his work as a satirical and political illustrator

for *Il Popolo d'Italia* dating back to August 1921 (a collaboration that would cease only in October 1942), Sironi had devoted much of the 1920s to developing and perfecting a distinctive fascist form of vocabulary composed of massive chains, Roman daggers, bayonets, artillery shells; of male and female embodiments of the *patria*; of stone-chiselled images of Mussolini's head, the Italian peninsula, flags, eagles, stars, wedges, wings, columns, and Roman numerals, and of literally thousands of monumental variations on the lictors' fasces. He was, in short, one of the régime's key image-makers, and his figurative output, with its awkwardly massive bodies and roughly textured painterly surfaces, could not be dismissed out of hand. Braun examines the ways in which the 'Sironi problem' was handled in three intersecting domains: those of art history, biography, and fascist ideology. In particular, she looks into the ways in which critics systematically identified Sironi's work with the 'fascism of the first hour' (or, to echo De Felice's famous formula, with 'fascism as movement') in order always to imply that more classifying cultural options were representative of 'fascism as state'.

The notion that fascism represented a 'third way' with respect to capitalist and communist development was a key feature of the movement's self-definition. In contrast to the democratic leveling and standardization of life attributed to capitalism, and to the collectivism and materialism attributed to bolshevism, fascism claimed to be able to provide all of the advantages of accelerated modernization, without the disadvantages such as the loss of individuality and nationality, or of higher values such as the pursuit of heroism, art, tradition, and spiritual transcendence. The effort to transpose this notion into the domain of culture is the topic of Ruth Ben-Ghiat's 'Italian Fascism and the Aesthetics of the "Third Way"'. The article surveys the cultural debates of the early 1930s with particular attention to the Italian reception of experimental German and American cultural forms: forms praised for their use of montage, kaleidoscopic narrative technique, 'objectivity', and cinematographic realism, but sharply criticized for their inhuman austerity. It then moves on to demonstrate, through a detailed reading of a symptomatic work — Enrico Emanuelli's novel *X-Ray of a Night* (1932) — how fascist intellectuals attempted to marshal this battery of avant-garde techniques in the service of a distinctive fascist modernism.

Claudio Fogu's 'Fascism and *Historic Representation*' turns

our attention from the domain of literature to that of the public ceremonies that were so prominent a feature of daily life during Italy's fascist decades. It tells the story of the pageantry that accompanied the 1932 celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Giuseppe Garibaldi, hero and symbol of the Risorgimento. Those celebrations served as a prelude to the festivities of the *Decennale* and provided the régime with an opportunity both to affiliate itself to and to mark its distance from a key predecessor. The genealogical drama was played out in various acts under the personal guidance of Mussolini. It included the carefully-staged transfer of the entombed remains of Garibaldi's first wife, Anita, from Genoa to Rome; their burial beneath a new monument built in her memory; and that monument's inauguration by the Duce. Fogu reconstructs the behind-the-scenes manoeuvring that cast these events less as simple remembrances than as affirmations of the incommensurability between Garibaldianism and fascism. While insisting upon the kinship between Garibaldian red shirts and fascist black shirts, they buried the former and exalted the latter's primacy. In so doing, he suggests that fascism developed a distinctively modern, even *modernist* model for making the past present that stands in open contradiction with the historicist modes of the previous century.

If Fogu's argument concerns fascism's use and abuse of the Risorgimento, Diane Ghirardo's concern lies with the use and abuse of the Renaissance past. Her article, '*Città fascista: Surveillance and Spectacle*', examines the régime's transformation of Italy's public squares and streets into mass political arenas and sites for surveillance via a detailed analysis of two initiatives undertaken in Ferrara: the restoration in 1926 of the statues of Nicolò d'Este and Borso d'Este in the city centre and the renewal in 1933 of the Palio — Ferrara's traditional horse race pitting one neighbourhood against another — within the framework of the celebrations of the four-hundred year anniversary of the death of Ludovico Ariosto. Fascism's efforts to reshape and control public spaces in order to ensure the consensus of the Italian populace assumed four principal forms: the building of new iconographically 'fascist' buildings such as *case del fascio*, the strategic alteration of city plans (most famously, the carving of Rome's Via dell'Impero out of a medieval workers' quarter), the 'fascistization' of existing structures, and carefully-planned, but ephemeral mass choreographies. Ghirardo's Ferrarese case

studies belong to the third and fourth sort and demonstrate the shrewdness with which architects and civic officials exploited historical resonances in order to cast fascist power in the mould of the Este principate of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, much as the Este principate had recast itself in the image of Roman antiquity.

Krystyna von Henneberg's study of 'Architectural Syncretism and Improvisation in Fascist Colonial Libya' retraces the manifold ways in which, in the wake of Mussolini's declaration of Empire in 1936, architects tried to accomplish in stone what either could not be or had not yet been accomplished by military might: establishing the sovereignty of the African colonies' new Latin landlords by reshaping the environment. It studies how, on the one hand, Italy's architects imagined the colonies as a kind of empty site upon which the most radical visions of Modernist planning and social control could be implemented without resistance or hindrance. On the other hand, it shows the degree to which these utopian dreams actually gave rise to an architecture of compromise, far more sensitive to culture and context than the theorizations would have allowed. The article confronts in detail the case of Libya, where swerves away from the functionalist/rationalist norm abounded and harmonized with the régime's own stated policy (however disingenuous) of making a show of support and tolerance for Islamic tradition: a programme carried out via the reconstruction of mosques and the restoration of various cities' historical cores. Von Henneberg recovers the actual eclecticism, both comparative (*vis-à-vis* other colonies) and internal (within Libya), of the so-called architecture of Empire against the backdrop of architects' self-proclaimed adherence to the tenets of rationalism and functionalism. In so doing, she challenges and historicizes the distinction between 'modern' and 'non-modern' architectural discourses, by showing how, more than aesthetic constructs, both were social and political constructions that served particular interests and ends.

While von Henneberg's principal interest lies in the gap between theoretical statement and architectural practice, the volume's closing article, by Mia Fuller, is concerned with the symbolic, social, and ideological aims of fascist urban planners as they confronted the task of simultaneously designing two model cities: one the capital of Italian East Africa — Addis Ababa; the other a figurative capital — the new Rome of the *Esposizione*

Universale di Roma (known as EUR '42). In the first case, planners had to grapple with an already-built imperial centre, founded by the Ethiopian monarch, Menelik II, in the 1880s. Populated by a mix of Copts, Muslims, Jews, and Arabs, the fascist Addis that they envisaged was built around a new monumental core and a periphery made up of relocated native neighbourhoods. It aimed to render the white population as visible as possible to natives, while segregating the latter's residences, markets, and economic zones in the name of avoiding contact and contagion. In the case of EUR '42, the planners' goal was somewhat different: to create an architectural setting grand enough to host an 'Olympics of Civilizations' slated to be celebrated on the twentieth anniversary of the March on Rome. The constraints that shaped these two enterprises (neither of which was completed) are distinct. Yet 'Wherever You Go, There You Are: Fascist Plans for the Colonial City of Addis Ababa and the Colonizing Suburb of EUR '42' demonstrates not only how both city plans were meant to embody Mussolini's new imperial order, but also how EUR '42 was itself imagined as a colony. External and internal forms of colonization thus came to be intimately linked in the fascist imagination.

Notes

My title is doubly borrowed, first from Sontag (as indicated above) and second from the title of a conference entitled 'Fascinating Fascism: Culture and Politics during the *Ventennio*' held at Stanford University on 22–3 October 1993. The event was co-organized by Jeffrey Schnapp (chair of the Department of Comparative Literature at Stanford University) and Salvatore Sechi (then director of the Istituto Italiano di Cultura of San Francisco). But the lion's share of credit goes to Sechi and to the Istituto Italiano di Cultura, without whose financial support neither the conference nor the present publication would have been possible. I also wish to acknowledge the valuable contributions made by Renato Barilli (University of Bologna), Barbara Spackman (NYU), Marla Stone (Occidental College), Vittoria di Palma (Columbia), Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi (UCSB), Judith Silverstein (Stanford), and Stefano Albertini (Stanford). Limitations of space required that the present volume contain only a sample of the many excellent contributions that made the conference a memorable event, for which reason the editors ask the forbearance of the scholars whose work could not be included. Last but not least, I wish to acknowledge the financial support to the conference provided by Stanford's Center for European Studies and by the Departments of History, Com-

parative Literature, and French and Italian.

1. 'Fascinating Fascism', 73-105 in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York 1980). The term 'camp' refers to the appreciation of that which is generally thought to be vulgar, artificial, or kitsch.
2. From a 1974 interview in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, cited in 'Fascinating Fascism', 85.
3. From the anonymous introduction to *The Last of the Nuba*, cited in 'Fascinating Fascism', 74.
4. 'Fascinating Fascism', 96.
5. 'Between sadomasochism and fascism there is a natural link. "Fascism is theatre", as Genet said. As is sadomasochistic sexuality. . . .' ('Fascinating Fascism', 103).
6. Renzo de Felice, *Interpretations of Fascism*, trans. Brenda Huff Everett (Cambridge, MA 1977), 168.
7. Alice Yaeger Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life* (Minneapolis 1986), 24.
8. Zeev Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology: From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution*, trans. David Maisel (Princeton 1994), 6.
9. *Lezioni sul fascismo* (1935) (Rome 1974), 15 [my translation].
10. *Fascismo-Aristocrazia* (Milan 1925), 45-6 [my translation].

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