

Style versus Ideology: Towards a Conceptualisation of Fascist Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT *Scholars of fascism have mostly come up with generic definitions and tried to define their topic by sketching out more or less elaborated lists of characteristics. This paper tries to come to terms with fascism not so much as an ideological but rather as an aesthetic phenomenon which has to be considered in its social functions. Fascism wanted to put life on stage – Hitler and Mussolini referred to themselves as “artists” who designed the state as a ‘gesamtkunstwerk’. Fascist aesthetics was eclectic in its stylistic preferences: It could deploy futuristic, expressionistic or neoclassicistic devices; using a formalized language of symbols, it did not depict but rather created reality. Fascist aesthetics reinstated art in its premodern social function. Art was not segregated from the public sphere and exiled to museums and exhibitions, but social life itself had to assume the fascist design which also included behavioral patterns.*

It is difficult to grasp the notion of ‘fascism’. The catastrophic experience of fascist movements triggered a whole range of theoretical approaches in the second half of the twentieth century. Many scholars tried to come to terms with this phenomenon which attacked the very core of the ideals of Enlightenment and eventually laid a good part of Europe in ashes. The explanatory impetus was so intense that scholars like Renzo de Felice and Wolfgang Ippermann were able to come up with highly differentiated classifications of theories on fascism only 25 years after the end of the Second World War.¹

Thus far, it has mostly been historians who have chosen to analyse European fascisms. This disciplinary focus has had a clear impact on the results of researching fascism. Many scholars have not questioned their presupposition that fascism could be described in terms of political content and institutional organisation.

These attempts at a structural description of fascist ideology often came to the conclusion that fascist party programmes are evasive and dim, if they exist at all. In Italy, a detailed wording of a ‘*dottrina del fascismo*’ was available only by 1932; in Germany, the programme of the NSDAP of 1920 was based on nationalistic slogans and renounced a detailed agenda of political issues.

The traditional generic definitions of fascism in the historical sciences have found a preliminary end in Stanley Payne’s tripartite definition from his *History of*

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Fascism. Payne splits the fascist reality into three groups: ideology and goals; the fascist negations; and style and organisation.² Already the very existence of the second category makes it clear that fascist ideology can hardly be conceptualised in positive terms. This important point has also been stressed by Norberto Bobbio, who called fascism an 'anti-ideology' for its prominent idiosyncrasies.³ Payne's definition may lead to a useful classification of fascism; it remains, however, unsatisfactory at the same time because it suggests that fascism had a clear structure and hence can be compared to any other political phenomenon such as communism or liberalism.

Interestingly enough, a good part of the latest research on fascism does not originate from historians, but rather from sociologists. These studies approach fascism from a different point of view. Fascism is no longer interpreted as a political ideology, but as a social culture. Sociologists focus on collective patterns of behaviour, on the social construction of individuality, on the organisation of public and private spaces, and on the regulation of interaction.⁴ Emilio Gentile's conceptualisation of fascism as a 'political religion' can be subsumed as well within this disciplinary category of research.⁵

Philologists and historians of art have mostly kept silent about fascism. Even the term 'fascist culture' seemed to many critics a '*contradictio in adjecto*'. Representing a widely spread opinion, George Steiner maintains that fascism has not produced a single work of art. Those literary critics who approach fascist texts usually make sure to state in their introductions that they share neither the artist's ideas nor the artist's stylistic predilections. Consequently, most works of art that were produced under fascism have been dismissed as mere kitsch.

However, it seems to be very promising to invert the usual approach to fascist aesthetics. More specifically, works of art should not be interpreted as 'illustrations' for a fascist ideology, but as constitutive factors in the social culture of fascism. Such an approach can be justified through the self-images of fascist leaders. In 1932 Mussolini stated in a conversation with Emil Ludwig: 'Politics is the highest of arts, the art of arts, the most godly amongst the arts, because it sculpts the most difficult, living material: man'.⁶ Earlier, Mussolini had already defined the essence of fascism as 'beauty' and referred to the March on Rome as to a piece of art.⁷ The same holds true for Hitler. In 1937 Goebbels hailed the *Führer* as the first artist to transform the state into a *gesamtkunstwerk*:

His whole work is proof of an artistic spirit: His state is a building of truly classic measure. The artistic creation of his politics puts him as deserved by his character and nature at the top of all German artists.⁸

The fascist project can be understood then as a total work of art where each element has to fit stylistically. Consequently, style in behaviour, clothing and manner of speaking are basic manifestations of the fascist reality. Thus, the fascist attention to everyday culture should be analysed against this background. Moreover, the stylistic imperatives made sure that individual loyalty to the system could be easily controlled. The campaign in Italy against the polite form '*Lei*' or the German *Hitlergruss* are only the most prominent forms of the fascist obsession with style. In fact, the fascist stylisation penetrated all aspects of life.

Yet, it was not only everyday culture that changed its style. The arts were also paid increasing attention by fascist leaders as artistic design was considered trend

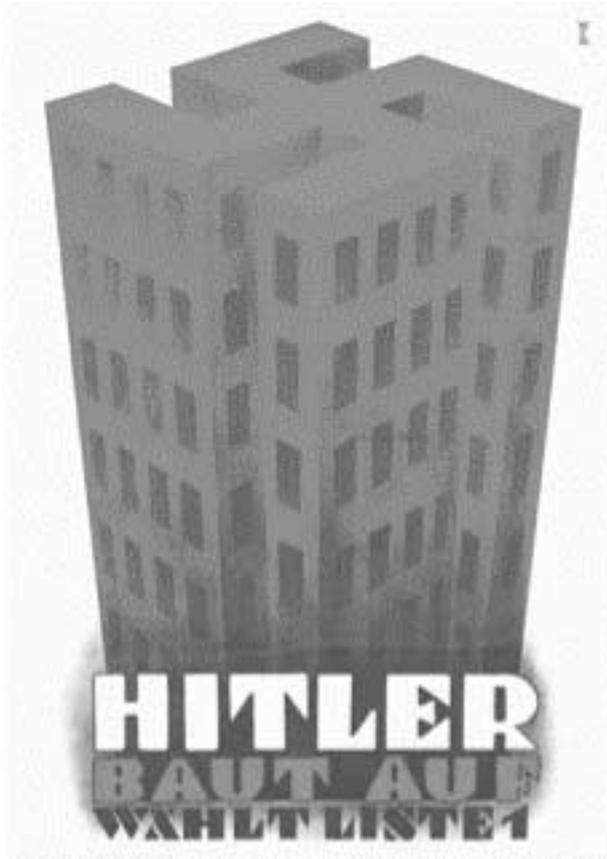


Figure 1. Willy Engelhardt: Poster for German Elections, 'Hitler Builds up'.

setting in defining public taste. Fascism cared intensely about its appearance and claimed the exclusive right to define the stylistic details.

The stylistic design of fascist aesthetics is far from being monolithic. There is a widespread cliché that identifies fascist aesthetics with monumental neo-classicism. Such an interpretation restricts fascist art to the personal taste of Adolf Hitler, who declared his profession in the 1920s as an 'academic painter'. However, the stylistic phenomenology of fascist aesthetics was in fact much broader. A comparative analysis of German and Italian pieces of art leads to troubling and contradictory evidence.

In 1933 Willy Engelhardt used elements of Bauhaus architecture to visualise Hitler's modernising position in a poster for elections (Figure 1).

In the same year Goebbels tried to integrate what he called 'Nordic expressionism' into the official Nazi art. For the defenders of fascist modernism, expressionism showed how art was striving towards Nordic elementary forms. But Goebbels did not succeed in overcoming Hitler's strong preference for monumental art. Hitler and his chief ideologue, Alfred Rosenberg, preferred a neo-classical style which differed from ancient Hellenism in terms of heroic attitude. By the end of 1934, expressionistic art was ostracised altogether as degenerate. Official art now preferred human bodies shown in mythological settings.⁹



Figure 2. Arno Breker: The Wehrmacht

One of Hitler's favourite artists was Arno Breker, who designed a whole series of allegories including 'the Party' or 'the *Wehrmacht*' for the *Reichskanzlei* (Figure 2). The heroic attitude became the most programmatic content in such official art. Thilo von Trotha, a close collaborator of Alfred Rosenberg, wrote in an article in 1934:

The beauty of the Nordic race includes heroism. Here lies a difference to Hellenic art, which often shows a Southern softness, which does not belong to the harshness of the Nordic-Germanic character. Heroic matter-of-factness, together with a Nordic ideal of beauty, must become the basis of a new age of art in Germany – otherwise art will continue to oscillate between Southern formalism and Asiatic chaos.¹⁰



Figure 3. Josef Thorak: 'Monument of Labour' for the Reichsautobahn near Salzburg

'Nordic heroism' meant toil, labour and monumental achievements. One of the most prestigious objects of Hitlerism was the *Reichsautobahn*, which had to receive artistic glorification.

Josef Thorak planned to erect a huge monument to the *Reichsautobahn* – the workers were meant to be 12 metres tall (Figure 3). The monument never materialised, but the plan was used later for commercial purposes: an advertisement by Mercedes-Benz from 1940 used Thorak's monument as background (Figure 4).

The merging of politics and business does not come as a surprise. National Socialism had to be 'sold' to the Germans. Hitler and Goebbels spread their ideology through a huge marketing campaign and with excessive use of brand symbols, namely the *swastika*. Mussolini also relied on the use of a corporate-like identity. The '*littorio*' was ubiquitous – from matchboxes to sewers, the fascist symbol reminded Italian citizens that the fascist movement was not a political party among others but a force which dominated all aspects of life.

While the official art policy in Germany only allowed a short flirtation with avant-garde forms and soon settled the situation in favour of anti-modernism, the situation in Mussolini's Italy was different. Emilio Gentile speaks about a 'modernist nationalism' which provided the basis for official Fascist culture. From early on, Marinetti tried to establish a special alliance between Futurism and Fascism, but eventually failed in doing so, for his own dreams of a republic of artists collided with Mussolini's idea of a strict hierarchy of power. The combination of technical imagination and avant-garde design is typical for the futuristic-

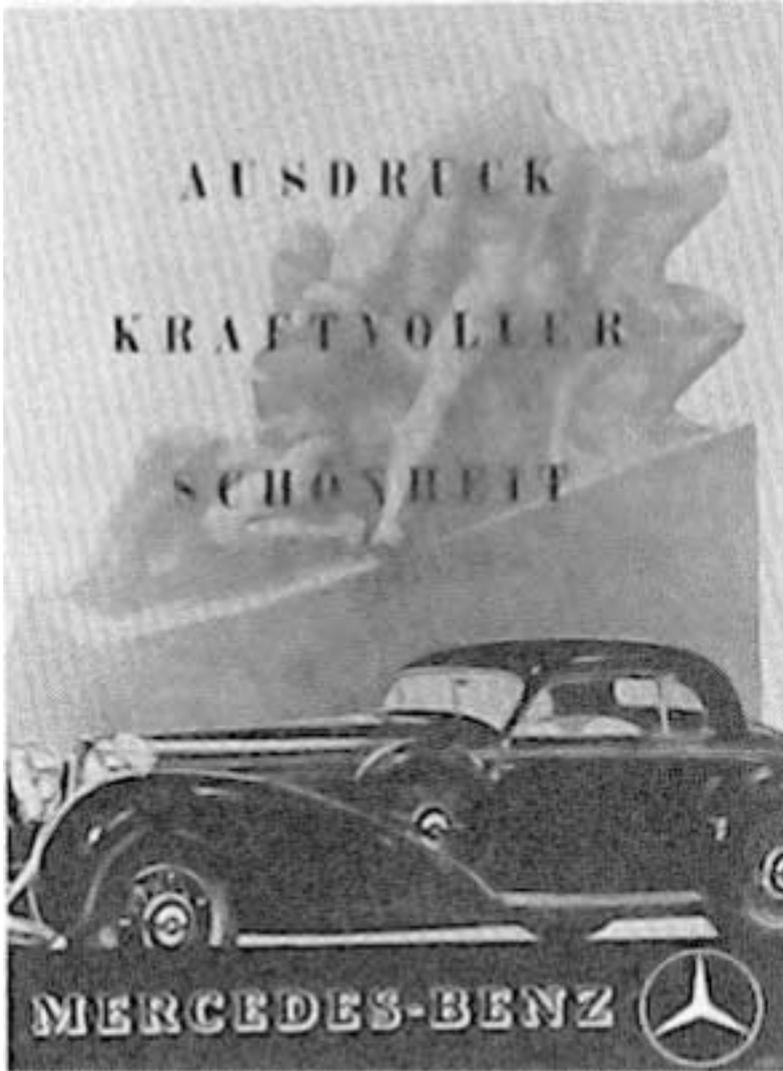


Figure 4. Advertisement for Mercedes-Benz, 'Expression of Powerful Beauty'.

fascist style.¹¹ A good example is the so-called *aeropittura*, that is, paintings which employ metaphors of flying.

Mino delle Site combined in his painting *'Il pilota aliluce'* (1932) (Figure 5) avant-gardistic forms with a heroic content. The clear lines and the carefully composed distribution of colours clearly recall cubistic models.

There are many Futurist paintings with Fascist content, but other styles suitably couched a Fascist meaning as well. A case in point is Mario Sironi, who tried to convey fascist ideology in Expressionism. Of course, Sironi had his futuristic roots, but in the 1930s he turned towards an expressionistic style, abandoning the clear geometrical forms of *aeropittura*.¹²

In 1943, Sironi created an illustration for a volume with the title *'Viva il duce!'*. This painting shows what is known as a *'squadra d'azione'* (Figure 6) in an



Figure 5. Mino delle Site: Il pilota aliluce

expressionistic style. Moreover, Sironi uses a quasi-religious language of symbols: 13 'black shirts' are on the van – the new Fascist messiah holding the flag and his disciples.

It is not by chance that Sironi resorts to an artistic technique which implies an allegorical meaning. In 1933, he had already produced a painting with the title 'Allegory of work' (Figure 7).

The strong inclination towards allegory can be explained by the ontological aspirations of fascist art: fascism wanted to replace reality with its own demiurgic project. Reality was not accepted as a given fact, but as a deficient material which had to be modelled and turned into beauty. Fascist art does not want to depict or represent reality – it creates reality. Thus, reality becomes a metaphor of itself – only selected aspects are able to make their way through the fascist grid of perception.

The classic definition of allegory is the *metaphora continua*, an ongoing shift from an actual denotation into a figurative mode of speaking. In a certain sense, the whole fascist movement can be interpreted as an allegorical project as it tries to reduce the empirical world to an abstract background and to supersede it with its own metaphorical reality, eventually becoming the exclusive frame of reference for individuals within the fascist project. Fascism narrates an allegorical tale which no longer allows for realistic denotation. The metaphoric level of speaking claims to be the only language which creates an acceptable sense of orientation in a world being reduced to the fascist project.

A good example of the dominant use of allegory can be found in the predilection of Nazi art for mythological patterns. It is striking that the Judgement of Paris is a very popular topic in Nazi art.¹³ There are some versions of the Judgement which seem to keep the original sense. Consider Georg Friedrich's or Adolf Ziegler's elaborations (Figures 8 and 9).

Friedrich and Ziegler couch their paintings in a neo-classical style which however departs from mere imitation of seventeenth- or eighteenth-century art. Ziegler in particular unties his approach from the traditional German imagination about ancient Greece. He completely renounces a detailed background – the scene seems to take place on a stage. Ziegler manages to stress the general meaning of the scene, which obviously can be interpreted as an allegoric prefiguration of Nazi eugenics.

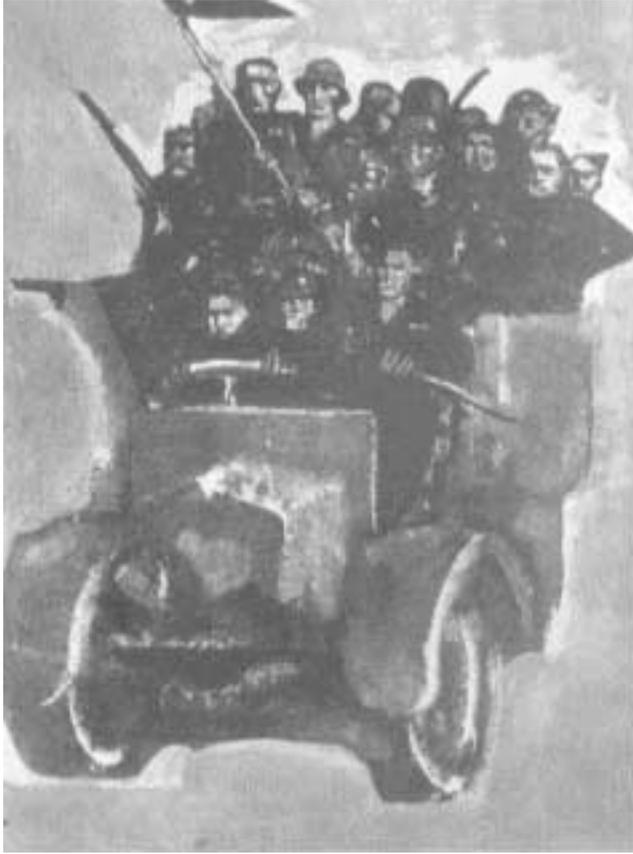


Figure 6. Mario Sironi: Squadra d'azione

This aspect becomes even clearer in Ivo Saliger's version (Figure 10). The allegorical content of the scene suppresses the mythological origin: the man looks, and the women are being looked at. The painting does not represent a rivalry of goddesses who chose a mortal to judge their beauty, but instead an average man who examines his eventual sexual partner – and thus decides upon the genetic quality of his children yet to be born.

The mythological allegory becomes a model for the future social reality, as the male leaders of fascism have to select their sexual partners carefully in order to breed a new and ideal mankind. The background of the scene is either neutral (Ziegler) or idyllic (Friedrich, Saliger): this kind of setting suggests that eugenic selection is self-evident or supported by nature itself. Nazi paintings of the Judgement of Paris provide a new interpretation of the 'natural' inclination towards the sexual partner. 'Natural' is no longer the spontaneous act of falling in love with an object of desire, but rather the deliberate choice of the most apt woman for the procreation of the race. The allegorical meaning of the Judgement of Paris defines a new pattern of behaviour in sexual choice – and this new behaviour is endowed with both a natural and mythological legitimation. The originary sexual drive is replaced by a carefully designed archetypal scene, which integrates the male spectator into the painting. This aspect can most clearly be seen in Ivo Saliger's



Figure 7. Mario Sironi: Allegory of Work

painting, where the young man sits with his back to the public – he is a mere extension of the real spectator, who seems to be entering the pictorial setting. The viewer's identification with the young man representing Paris is further fostered by his casual clothing, which by no means fits the mythological context.

Contrary to Italian Fascist art, Nazi paintings are – at least in the 1930s – clearly anti-modernist in style. But the prevalence of modernist or anti-modernist traits in officially acknowledged Italian and German art should not be interpreted in an exclusive sense. The Nazi and Fascist regimes opted for different aesthetic styles but adhered to a similar function of art: art provided the visible and palpable surface of a fascist ideology which was hard to grapple. It is not by chance that literature was not the leading genre of fascist arts. There are several reasons for this lesser importance. Literature is usually consumed individually. But fascism wanted to maintain a control in the process of reception. Therefore, it preferred the performative arts which could be staged in front of a mass audience. Furthermore, literature is not a 'hot' medium: it relies mostly on the imagination of the reader. This mode of reception runs counter to the fascist ideal of a careful design of the new state which by no means was to be left to individual initiative. Finally, literature encountered a severe problem if it was – like German painting – reduced to a pseudo-realistic mode: In the literary tradition, realism was closely connected to the rational discourse which was hardly compatible with the fascist doctrine. A good example is provided by the Nazi-novel, *All Bohemian Waters Flow to Germany*, written in 1937 by Friedrich Bodenreuth. The novel depicts the lamentable situation of the Sudeten-Germans among the Czechs. It is quite striking that the novel also gives the Czech side a voice, although their nationalism is



Figure 8. Georg Friedrich: The Judgement of Paris

rendered in a rational discourse. The German hero, a sentimental young man who joins Hitler's army, is neither able nor willing to argue against the Czech territorial claims. The two sides never find a common language in their confrontation; the German protagonist knows that he is right but he sublimates his own position in an irrational murmuring. In a letter to his father he appeals to intuition guiding his actions: 'The knowledge of emotion and blood is higher and deeper than the knowledge of reason, it is conviction'.¹⁴ The conversation between the Germans is restricted to a mere dropping of heavily overloaded semantic terms – and this discourse is being prepared, caught up and continued by the narrator:

Space. – Space.

Christopher was frightened at this word [...]

'Space. – What is space?' asked Christopher.

'Destiny', said Karl Fath. His voice was hoarse. His face was white and all of a sudden hollow-cheeked.¹⁵

Language is no longer a system of signs with clear denotations. Language is reduced to a few key concepts and becomes the only possible sphere of experience for the literary heroes. In Bodenreuth's novel a denotative use of language is still present, but it is always marked as false. The right use of language is demonstrated by the positive hero and the narrator, who blurs the borderline between direct speech and epic narration.

The strict distinction between what is true and what is false can be compared to the normative use of language in a religious context. Religious language follows ritual patterns, and its correctness very much depends on stylistic criteria. This argument can be developed even further. If Emilio Gentile's reading of the 'sacralisation of politics' is heuristically applied, conclusions can be made about the



Figure 9. Adolf Ziegler: The Judgement of Paris

theological purpose of fascist aesthetics. Art represents the metaphysical vision of a total state – this state appears neither in bureaucratic structures nor in legal regulations, but in splendid stagings of power. Goebbels stated programmatically that ‘the state will transform itself from a constitutional state into a state which will be basically a community of artistic creation’.¹⁶

Art carries out a pre-modern function in a fascist society. It can be likened to sacral paintings in the context of medieval Catholicism. These paintings were not perceived as ‘art’ opposing to ‘practical life’. Art was the essence of popular beliefs. No one could stand aside from this system of values and signs.¹⁷ Paradoxically enough, the pre-modern function of art is not only completed by anti-modernist, but also modernist works of art.

Fascist aesthetics is an instrument of revelation. The fascist state appears to people in rituals, representations and symbols. The fascists knew exactly that their apparition was basically their essence. To put it bluntly: the fascist state *was* what it seemed. As soon as the permanent show was interrupted, the whole system collapsed. This general orientation towards visibility and perception is also the reason for the preference in fascist art for allegories. The fascist state was something which was not palpable – it had to be represented. Fascist institutions relied on their representation, because they had no functionalist legitimation. The same held true for religious art: God had to be represented in His son – and His son could only be represented as man (*ecce homo*). God’s representation as man was an allegory for the Godliness of Jesus Christ. Similarly, the fascist state as staged in mass events, everyday culture and art was an allegory for the higher aspirations of fascism which were expressed in terms like Moeller van den Bruck’s ‘Third Reich’ or Mussolini’s ‘Spiritual Community’.



Figure 10. Ivo Saliger: The Judgement of Paris

Scholars attempting to explain the attractive force of fascism cannot give fascist aesthetics a wide berth. The look, the design and the rituals of fascism are not its secondary attributes, but its very essence. The average citizen had to be attracted by the beautiful spectacle and to be bound by ritual. This strategy is of course modelled upon religious patterns. It does not come as a surprise that fascist aesthetics carries out similar pragmatic functions to sacral art. To conclude, the significance of the stylistic dimension of fascism can be summed up in the following five points:

1. Fascism is, to a considerable extent, a phenomenon of style. In fascist systems a 'pure' ideology which would offer itself to structuralistic description can hardly be found. In other words, the fascist phenomenality cannot be split into form and content – the content is always given in a specific form. Mussolini was very conscious about this fact. In a speech from 1922 he stated:

Democracy has deprived people's live of 'style'. Fascism brings back 'style' in people's lives: that is a line of conduct, that is the color, the strength, the picturesque, the unexpected, the mystical; in sum all that counts in the souls of the multitudes. We play the lyre on all the strings, from violence to religion, from art to politics.¹⁸

Fascism advocates a holistic conception: ideological convictions, behavioural patterns and aesthetic representations melt into one life design, which encompasses the valid guidelines for all aspects of human existence.

2. Fascist aesthetics is not restricted to one specific style. For example, Nazi aesthetics cannot be reduced to the monumental/neo-classical style of official art in the late 1930s. Right after Hitler's rise to power, there were quite a few high officials in the Nazi administration who tried to integrate modernist tendencies into the design of the new state.

Another striking example is the case of futurism: in the 1920s Marinetti tried and partly managed to establish futurism as the official art of fascism. At the same time, a prominent tendency to represent the new Bolshevik ideology in futurist works of art could be observed in Soviet Russia.

Nor was fascist aesthetics intrinsically classicist. Fascism tried to adopt any artistic style which seemed efficient and powerful enough to fulfil the purpose of political propaganda and corporate design.

3. In many fascist societies a very ambivalent attitude towards modernism can be observed. On the one hand, modernism was associated with the political system that preceded fascism and therefore had to be rejected. On the other hand, fascism wanted to inaugurate a new powerful society – a modern society. Fascism aimed at an exclusive power of definition over the term 'modernity'. It is for this reason that fascism was engaged in a constant rivalry with other forms of modernism. Fascism wanted to establish a utopian model resembling a heroic past. Future and past were amalgamated into a timeless present. This conflation of chronology explains why many fascist theories went back to mythological roots and wanted to reinstate these cultural models in a radiant present which at the same time anticipated the future. Fascist modernism would then be – as Roger Griffin would have it – a palingenetic phenomenon.¹⁹ Symbols from the past were recycled in new strength. This holds true for the Myth of Ancient Rome in Fascist Italy or the revival of Germanic pagan rites as propagated by Himmler. Jeffrey Herf called this most aptly a 'reactionary modernism'.²⁰
4. Fascist realism should be treated in a similar way as scholars have analysed Socialist Realism under Stalin. The ideologically overloaded Realism, which can be observed in many works of art in the 1930s, is not a mimetic realism. It does not depict reality, but rather tries to annihilate the real reality and superimpose another, a heroic reality on the reality of facts. Fascist art does not imitate reality, but it creates reality. This is probably the main reason why fascist aesthetics always fought against pure forms. Abstract art like Suprematism or Cubism could not provide a model for what the new reality fascism wanted to create. Therefore fascist aesthetics resorted to a syncretistic mixture of styles: hyper-realistic figures were placed in a mythological setting; the background provided a limited field of experiment for modernist implementation of coloured spatiality. In literature, fascist realism stepped out of the traditional forms of nineteenth-century realism. The fascist hero is not portrayed as an individual character with a differentiated psyche, but as a prototypic figure which should facilitate the reader's identification with the protagonist.
5. Fascist aesthetics reinstates art in its pre-modern social function. Art is not segregated from the public sphere and exiled to museums and exhibitions. Instead, social life itself has to become art. Fascist art defines not only the design of life, but also its behavioural patterns. Fascist aesthetics had a clear pragmatic function, perhaps comparable to a trap. First, it should attract people to the fashionable outlook, and secondly tie them irrevocably to the

fascist project. In doing so, fascist aesthetics repeats the captive strategies of the medieval Catholic church, where the believers were overwhelmed by the beauty of sacral art. Design and ritual completed each other and defined a community with highly elaborated stylistic norms. The aesthetic rivalry between fascism and the church may well be one of the main reasons for the difficult alignment of these semantic projects, with both projects aspiring to provide a universal sense of life.

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