

Proposal for an iconographic reinterpretation of the fascist legacy in Italy
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Browsing the stands of an antiquarian market in Bologna, I discovered a small book. In 1938, the PNF- Fascist National Party, produced a pamphlet entitled *La cultura fascista* (Fascist Culture) dedicated to young people attending political training courses. The short text discussed the importance of fascist culture and how to approach it.

I quote from the original text: "The culture of a period is made up of its creations in both the kingdom of scientific knowledge and that of artistic creation. Fascism already has a clear and precise position on these two forms of spiritual activity. The typical characteristics of fascist culture can be defined today, and they will become even more evident in the future". End of quotation.

One of the most significant errors that characterised the Italian post-war period was the negation of the existence of a fascist culture during the twenty years of fascist rule. In attempting to erase it, the existence of a culture during the dictatorship was negated in order to reduce its value in the post-fascist period. This produced for fascist culture to be restored and revived many times until today. As we know, from the 1950s the narrative of Italy has been fundamentally that of a country of *résistance*, a right and proper definition, but this served to negate that same country, before the liberation, was an oppressive, colonialist, fascist and tyrannical country. The involvement of many intellectuals and artists to the fascist regime, more or less convinced but always explicitly declared, has permitted that those same intellectuals and artists built a sort of new innocence for heritage of fascist culture. Erasing everything that fascism created in the cultural context, the artists and the intellectuals don't have to answer why they themselves had contributed largely to its creation.

Over time, fascism built a complex, articulated and rhetorically very significant culture, which was not the background for Mussolini's politics, but was in fact a fundamental tool for the construction of the "uomo nuovo fascista" "new fascist man" and for the realisation of all the regime's communication and propaganda projects. The reject of this obvious reality made it impossible for many years to carry out any real studies on fascism. This research has developed in some ways in the political and economic fields but has been practically absent in the cultural context until the end of the XX century.

We cannot negate the strong responsibility of the disciplines related to art and archaeology in the creation of all the oppressive models of the regime, first the racist ones, then the nationalist and colonial ones. Even today, the common belief is that fascist art, such as "Il Novecento", the artistic movement created by Margherita Sarfatti, or the works of Mario Sironi or rationalist architecture,

first of all must be considered masterpieces and, cannot be subjected to truly radical critical analysis, nor can they be removed or erased from our landscape. To support these positions, all iconographic and symbolic meanings, even the most evident ones, have been removed.

The cultural legacy that fascism left in Italy, for another century after its end, is not only monuments, buildings and public works of art, but also a sort of aura of untouchability that surrounds any work from the Mussolini period, considered a work of high quality, that can only be evaluated based on this absolute truth.

In Italy, in many public places, including institutional places representing the Italian state, there are still works of fascist art for which discussions continue to be held regarding their aesthetic value, leaving their iconographic significance completely in the background.

I would like to cite as a significant example the fresco by Luigi Montanarini in the main hall of the CONI headquarters (Olympic National Italian Committee) in the Foro Italico in Rome, entitled Apotheosis of Fascism. The mural, painted around 1940, represents Benito Mussolini on a hill surrounded by black shirts, with various military and paramilitary formations from the Fascist period. In the upper part, a warplane drops bombs, and below, a submarine emerges from the sea. This painting forms the backdrop to the big room where all the most important Italian sporting events, taking place in Rome, are presented, such as international tennis championships or Olympic ceremonies. The work represents the significance given to physical training for young people during the Fascist period. The room was, in the fascist period, the Academy of Men's Gymnastics, a place where boys were trained to become the future soldiers and fighting forces of Italy, both at home and in the colonies. The painting clearly shows that the intention is to glorify muscular force, violence and war.

Can we imagine a painting that glorifies war and violence, as a backdrop for Olympic ceremonies or generally official international events?

Why can Montanarini's painting remain in Italy in the same place where it was during the Fascist dictatorship? The first answer can be found in the attitude that art history continues to have in Italy, even today, regarding the works of art from this period. Continuing to judge them as masterpieces, expressions of a specific historical period, without in any way connecting the formal and aesthetic choices with the content. This position intentionally omits how this contradicts the bases of the constitution of the Italian republic

When Charles Burdett invited Giulia Grechi and me to collaborate on the video essay that will accompany the release of his upcoming book on the legacy of fascism, my first consideration was how important it was to produce material useful of speaking to all generations about the strongly negative influence that this legacy has on our present. Giulia and I decided to combine Charles's fascinating and necessary text, with the work of contemporary artists who have been working on the legacy of fascism and Italian colonialism for some time. As Giulia will explain very well in his speech after me, this choice was dictated by the need to position ourselves regarding colonial archives.

I would like also to add that using the works of contemporary artists corresponds to the need to consider art as a fundamental tool for trying to read the fascist legacy in depth and to be able to find all possible forms of re-semantisation. The last 30 years have shown, on several occasions and in different places, that even in Italy, artists' interventions can be much freer than academic disciplines, which are still too often linked to a conservative vision. The works you will see in the video, show how the artists' gaze can discuss the sacralised vision of fascist culture in Italy. The choice made with Charles Burdett, and video maker Isabella Gaffè to give visibility to the artists' works in harmony with the text, proposes an idea of shared memory and collective action, which we believe is one of the necessary paths today to truly discuss in depth an heritage, that is now extremely dangerous, and which continues to infect Italy's public spaces.

Some of the works of art in the video are clear examples of how art can be used to a critically reinterpretation of the legacy of fascism in Italy. The works of Giovanni Morbin, a series of photographs entitled *Saluto Romano* (Roman Salute), highlight the importance of understanding the origins of some symbolic gestures that are still repeated until today keeping the same political value. Giovanni began this work by looking at the real origin of this gesture, which was created in Fiume by D'Annunzio in 1920. The writer and fascist activist made the gesture during a speech after his failed attempt to occupy the city and annex it to Italy. And Mussolini was present.

In Morbin's series, the volume of air created by raising the arm in the Roman salute becomes concrete, materialised through a collage of white opaque paper superimposed on vintage photos of people from the Fascist period performing the salute. The artist makes real and concrete a gesture that seems almost innocent in itself, but in the reality imposed a certain distance, forbidding physical contact between bodies.

Giovanni's work helps us understand how fascist education passed through small gestures, permeating every part of the body with the precise intention to dominate bodies in order to shape minds.

Another example of work of art in the video essay are some sequences of the video *Wasn't Built in a Day* by Salvo Lombardo and Daniele Spanò. In this work the dancers, using the irony, show how the rigid marble architecture of Rome's EUR district can be reinterpreted, highlighting its violent masculine and patriarchal values. This work of Lombardo and Spanò invite to reflect on the symbolism of the rationalist modern fascist architectural form. The analysis of this architecture continues to be only from an aesthetic point of view and not for its shape strongly dominant and assertive.

These two examples, among the many works featured in the video, serve to demonstrate how only a collective effort, involving many different figures, such as scholars, researchers, artists, writers and many others, express the potential today to create an effective and meaningful discourse on the fascist legacy in Italy, to re-emerging the ghosts of the Italian empire, to begin a real process of re-somatisation.

I would like to conclude by thanking all the artists who generously contributed to this video, making it a fantastic experience for us.