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# Of Fasces and Fascists: On the Role of Aesthetics in the Development of 20th-Century Italian Fascist Ideology

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# Of Fasces and Fascists

Thomas Rowland

# Of Fasces and Fascists: On the Role of Aesthetics in the Development of 20th-Century Italian Fascist Ideology

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## Abstract

This project explores the relation between 20th century Italian Fascist ideology and aesthetics, investigating the influence of the latter in the development of the former. To this end relevant literature, speeches, manifestos, and figures are consulted[1]. I contend that aesthetics held a significant role, directly affecting the formation and development of Fascist ideology. However, I further argue that aesthetics was not the nature of Fascism, only an important tool. Socio-political developments lead to my conclusion that aesthetics was a significant component of Fascism which imploded under political pressures in the 1930's, becoming subservient to an ideological component best interpreted as a civic religion. As such, I dismantle the intuitive notion that aesthetics were simply reflective, with artists as coerced mouthpieces of a totalitarian regime. But I also dismantle the modern academic consensus that Fascism is inherently aesthetic – a politics of spectacle. This project therefore provides a theory on the relation of aesthetics and Fascist ideology, further illuminating the nature of Fascism and outlining how politics can be aestheticized – plus the potential dangers of this.



Key words: Aesthetics; Fascism; Philosophy; Politics; History;


Dedicated to myself for enduring & friends, family and all true believers for supporting. SF!

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Cover illustration: Female volunteer kissing the flag of the Italian Social Republic; Recruitment poster of the 10th Assault Vehicle Flotilla.

# 1. Introduction

Fascist ideology is distinct in its radicalism, extreme attitudes to others, and historical legacy – particularly given the notions we have as modern scholars looking back in time. For instance, when intuitively thinking of Fascist Italy as a totalitarian, chauvinistic and aggressive state responsible for much bloodshed, it is easy to overlook the formation of that state and its ideals before such violence. The views and desires of citizens and would-be Fascists before and during the regime are overshadowed by the later actions of the state, which occupy our attention and horror. But it may be a misstep to approach the regime this way, leading us to mischaracterise the artefacts and values of Fascism as empty propaganda, or the cooperation of citizens as inspired only out of fear rather than from authentic support. The same, it seems to me, holds for aesthetics and artists in the Fascist epoch. Perhaps it was not that artists, art critics, poets, theorists, and other such positions depicted whatever the state demanded, as a mere puppet for party-approved ideals. Perhaps aesthetics and artists were involved in Fascism, and the Fascist ideology had aesthetics as a core component.

It is this possibility I will be elucidating as I attempt to answer the research question: 'To What Extent Did Aesthetics Influence 20th-Century Italian Fascist Ideology?'. My hypothesis is that aesthetics played a significant and constitutive – not passive or reflective – role in this ideology, but never as more than a useful tool. This hypothesis distinguishes this project from most literature on the Fascist aesthetic which, as I will later argue, often misestimate the significance of aesthetics for Fascism. This project therefore focuses on the relation between the two spheres of the Fascist ideology and aesthetics. By the former sphere I mean the ideals, maxims, and charters upon which the National Fascist Party (hereafter: PNF) programme and various Fascist departments were built. This takes place in the political domain, wherein (political) identities and power relations are constructed and implemented. By the latter sphere I mean intellectual aesthetic concepts – harmony, order, proportionality –

which shall be further detailed in section 2. The domain of the aesthetic is comprised of the artworks, novels, architecture, dress, and arguments or doctrines that feature reference to relevant categories, such as sublimity, representation, and taste.

I will therefore be arguing that this sort of aesthetics was a central component in Fascism and should be considered a significant contributor to the development of Fascist ideology. Utilising a philosophical perspective is useful in this, enabling normative considerations on the nature of politics and aesthetics, as well as descriptive considerations on how these two might interact. This allows for a better analysis of the aesthetical elements of Fascism, revealing more of the nature of Fascism and the role of aesthetics therein. However, I will argue that this role is not unlimited, and criticise modern literature that mistakenly overestimates aesthetic elements, primarily due to overlooking ideological and religious convictions in Fascism, which I argue dominate the aesthetic component. An example of an exaggerated work is Sontag's *Fascinating Fascism*, which attempts to bring out Fascism's theatrical components through adult magazines, gay bars, and the sexual appeal of SS uniforms. To me, this is an awkward conflation of authentic themes in Fascism and the irrelevant role plays of sexual deviants. Not only does Sontag treat National Socialism and Fascism as the same thing, and take Fascism's mystifications at face value, both lazy yet common mistakes, she lacks reference to the actual state and ideals of Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy. Her work simply traces how the artefacts of such regimes have become erotic, detailing the dramatic essence of such artefacts, and thereby concluding 'Fascism is theatre', and that sadomasochism was a key part of Nazi symbolism rather than just a non-correlated fetish (Sontag, 1975, pp. 16-19).

Making progress on this project's goals in a more accurate way than this work necessitates the difficult task of detailing Fascism, particularly because of the variety in the

Fascist school.[2] Despite focusing only on Italy's Fascism we must still detail this Italian Fascist ideology (hereafter: Fascist ideology) in order to understand what we are discussing. Yet, this is an ideology that largely died with its sympathisers almost a century ago. Even as historical experts in the field, De Felice and Ledeen admit to producing fallible interpretations at best (De Felice & Ledeen, 1976, pp. 36-45); identifications and clarifications of Fascism can be understood differently, under a different light. As such, this project will attempt to grasp the essence of the Fascist ideology, without falling to the endless maze of interpretation that is entailed by an all-encompassing account. Witt draws upon relevant literature to give an excellent summary of precisely this essence, which I now paraphrase (Witt, 2001, p. 5).

The Fascist ideology is: rejecting enlightenment values and rationalism; understanding individuality (the notion and value of 'self') as the fusion of the masses; faith in a natural, strong, mystical and virile leader; emphasis and self-identification as 'spiritual', not 'political'; viewing life as struggle in which violence is a beautiful salvation and a strong will is heroic; worship of technology, speed and modernity (especially pertaining to warfare); opposing decadence; extoling strength and sacrifice; embracing a military joy and disdain for 'weak' pacifism; and ideals of ethnic or cultural supremacy – be it in race (typical of Belgian/Walloon Fascism), religion (typical of Romanian Fascism) or the nation-state (typical of Italian Fascism). These elements are the most significant in Fascist ideology, and though this may not envelop every microscopic detail, it sufficiently envelops the key tenets of the ideology this project focuses on. The Fascist ideology can hereby be generalised as one which focuses greatly on conquest – in aversion to peace and understanding hedonists and pacifists as corrupt and weak, but also in extolling heroism, struggle, sacrifice, and other such military categories. However this ideology is not just a warmonger's philosophy, also

[2] See Weber, 1964 for a complete outline of the Fascist school.

containing elements of transcendence in its focus on the spiritual and appreciation of the virile, the strong, but most of all the new – which would be devoid of the 'impure and stagnant' political climate Fascism reacts against.

Schnapp adds to this that Fascism merged "nineteenth-century organic nationalism … with a Marxism stripped of materialism; … 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'" (Schnapp, 1996, p. 237). Fascist ideology was somewhat paradoxical then, having strong syndicalist tendencies – a descendent of Marxism – but from an anti-materialist – and thus anti-Marxist – platform. There was always a buffer space required between these conflicting ideals, which is why it was sometimes claimed that "Fascist ideology is nothing if not a chameleon" (Schnapp, 1996, p. 238). This buffer is a primary reason why the Fascist movement attracted poets and artists associated with both Futurist and traditionalism. Futurism was obsessed with modern society and technology and found traditionalist sentiments nothing more than dreary nostalgia. Yet, Fascism managed to incorporate Futurism's love of modernity alongside the traditionalist's appeals to the glory of Rome.

This often-contradictory setting of Fascism explains why the Fascist movement so quickly incorporated radical art into its propaganda, and why it incorporated romantic militaristic elements. The black shirts and violent but moving slogans of the elite shock troopers named *Arditi* (The Daring) were already potent, but only more so with the many rituals built around them in marches, ceremonies, songs, etc. None of this has an inherently rational appeal - it is not part of a sound argument that is to be pondered upon and discussed. As I will discuss in subsection 2.2, this is rather a primal aesthetic appeal, which stirs peoples' emotions and inspires their energy and commitment. Whether or not a Fascist wears a black

shirt has no bearing on the validity of his arguments – that validity comes rather from having correct arguments – but it is spectacular, a display of power through a clean-cut militant unity, an example in Fascist art being Mario Sironi's 1943 *Squadra d'azione* (Action team). Here, the multitude of men becomes one whole, visually united by blackshirts, but more properly and totally united in sharing and moving towards one common goal: Fascism.

*Figure 1: Mario Sironi, Action team*

It is often assumed that Fascism was culturally barren or that it damaged artistic integrity, with art as a mouthpiece of the state. George Steiner is the harshest of those voices, claiming Fascism produced "no great work of art… [it] is too vile and scurrilous an ideology to produce those charities of the imagination which are essential to literate art" (Steiner, 1961, p. 45). But this assumption requires ignorance of the involvement in Fascism of artists like Mario Sironi and Enrico Del Dobbio; writers like Curzio Malaparte, Giovanni Gentile, and Julius Evola; poets like Filippo Marinetti, Ezra Pound and Gabriele D'Annunzio. Indeed, I find the literature on Fascist aesthetics often exhibits this ignorance, either missing the importance of aesthetics for Fascism, or over- or under-emphasising it. I personally distinguish three phases in the scholarship on Fascist ideology and aesthetics, based upon widespread assumptions on the relation and use of aesthetics to Fascism. This is a trend I have noticed in my research and serves here to remind that different approaches deliver different results, that this topic is not necessarily settled – we may yet be missing revelations.

The first, early period, spans from the formation of Fascist Italy in the 1920's to the 1980/90's. This group, with few exceptions – namely Walter Benjamin – operates on the unchecked assumption that aesthetics has little political normativity and was a mere tool of a totalitarian regime, if considered at all. The second, middle period, runs from the 1980/90's, particularly with the publishing of Emilio Gentile's *Fascism as Political Religion* in 1990, to the 2000's. Here, more rigid approaches are left behind for more differentiated, culturally-based views, wherein the importance of aesthetics is realised, with various authors attempting to determine the specific aesthetic character of Fascism, as a key part of its value and ideals. As this notion was new then, a clear gradation on the strength of the role of aesthetics is visible – George Mosse, for instance, takes a more general, reference-based understanding of aesthetical influence, whilst Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi cites the use of myth and ritual as changing the course of history. The third, most recent period is the dominant paradigm from

the 2000's to the present day, following the renewed interest Gentile brought to the nature of Fascism. Here, Fascism often becomes over-aestheticized, with Fascist norms described as if dictated by aesthetic norms (the inverse of the first literature period) or Fascism being portrayed as inherently aesthetic, rather than political, due to Fascism allegedly being empty in every other way. I believe this understanding is the mistake of those overly eager to distance themselves from Fascism or to confirm their biased, which is addressed in sections 4 and 5; at this stage I will first specify how this project understands Fascism.

In philosophical terms, Fascist ideology is an outgrowth of romantic aspects, heavily influenced by Georges Sorel and his ideas about the motivating power of 'myths', as well as the works of Sergio Panunzio, Paolo Orano, Enroco Corradini, Angelo Olivetti and Robert Michels (Schnapp, 1996, p. 237). Early Fascism was largely influenced by the Italian syndicalist movement, with Italian national syndicalists and nationalists uniting as the *Fasci di combattimento* (Italian Fasces of Combat), the Fascist-nationalist group Mussolini founded in 1919 (Affron & Antliff, 1997, pp. 4-8).[3] All these groups were influenced in some way by Sorel, an unorthodox French Marxist who argued romanticised myths and ritual would motivate the masses more effectively than rational, logical arguments (Sorel, 1999, pp. 108-113). With people having an irrational, emotional side they are, for Sorel, responsive to irrational, emotional (romantic) energies, images, and ideals. The anti-materialist (and thus anti-Marxist) sentiment Fascism development demanded a rejection of rationalism, for this was considered an obstacle to Fascist values of heroism, spirituality and creativity (Ben-Ghiat, 1996, pp. 293-4 & 299-301). This negation of rationalism creates a reliance on the sentiment-evoking mass-moving messages Sorel promotes, of which aesthetics is the prime

[3] See Roberts, 1979 for more on this evolution.

specimen, being inherently emotional and not necessarily rational whilst also possessing the power to create all manner of words and images that appeal to one's intuition.

Per Sternhell, this Sorelian influence gave rise to something deeply rooted in Fascism: the desire for a spiritual, physical, moral, social, and political regeneration. This all-encompassing regeneration manifests itself only in total and complete, violent and overwhelming rebellion – that Sorelian 'general strike' – against all social sickness: decaying morals, debased faith, empty constructs (such as individualism), homosexuals, drugs, and all the other evils of the liberal bourgeois (Sternhell, 1976, p. 339). Violence was not just a tool for the Fascist's goals, but a core virtue required for the continuation of the Fascist state long after the victory of Fascism in Italy. In more detail, Fascist aestheticization of violence held a moral significance that was essential to Fascism; "To be truly beautiful, Sorelian violence had to express the creative and moral transformation of each individual; [alongside its myths of renewal and rebirth, Fascism thus came to extol destruction as] the essential precondition to reconstruction" (Affron & Antliff, 1997, p. 5) All must be destroyed to be renewed by Fascism – if nothing is left to renew, Fascism has no legitimate goals/purpose remaining.

In the mid-1930's Fascism evolved from a radical, reactionary movement to one more heavily focused on inspiring Italians to restore national greatness. Futurist aesthetics became more mixed with (neo-)classical Roman heritage, despite the contradictions between them. The aesthetics and ideology of Fascist Italy are therefore remarkably Janus-faced, often extolling elements that are contradictory to one another or criticising themes in foreign works that are present in Fascist-approved pieces. Respective examples of this are the aforementioned acceptance of *both* the nostalgia of the glory of Rome and the technological beauty of modernity; or Jewish-Italian Fascist Enrico Rocca's criticism of German writer Alfred Döblin's *Pegaso* as featuring a 'cold, anti-sentimental realism' despite Rocca's own promotion of a purely ethical realism that is just as cold and anti-sentimental (Billiani &

Pennacchietti, 2019, p. 134). Utilising aesthetics in different ways was therefore an essential component of the Fascist ideology in terms of moving and convincing the diverse masses of Italy to support Fascism, as well as ensuring Fascism's continued relevance and coherence amidst its own contradictions. Despite this divergence of style and usage, Fascist aesthetics were consistent in their content as if bound to a set of convictions, detailed in section 4. As such, it seems the aesthetic certainly had some influence in the Fascist ideology – though it remains to be seen how the aesthetic and political interplay, and how significant a role aesthetic has in this. I now progress towards clarifying this by exploring how politics and aesthetic can interrelate, and what this signifies.

## 2. The Political and the Aesthetic

In this section I first clarify and philosophically develop the general relation of the political and aesthetic, detailing how relevant concepts interrelate and specifying the understanding of aesthetics utilised in this project before going on to address the role of aesthetics specifically in Fascist ideology. There are many interpretations of this general relation and the literature lacks a dominant position, beyond a general acceptance of some undefined overlap between these two spheres in the social world. As such, I first outline and break down relevant literature, which I evaluate to later provide an account of aesthetics, and its political influence, to be utilised in this project. This literature is a selection of authors, but that does not mean any significant positions on the topic are overlooked. Each text has been picked for its relevance to this project's focus and its own consulting of contemporary discourse, to ensure well-informed, relevant points of consideration. The goal of this section is to define the aesthetic and the political; to elucidate how aesthetics could hold influence over the political realm; to reveal how this influence should be normatively understood; and to contemplate the political impact aesthetics can have on society.

As a systemic map, subsection 2.1 covers important considerations on how politics and aesthetic can interrelate, and what this entails. Crispin Sartwell's *Political Aesthetics* clarifies the properties of aesthetics and politics, and what these entail, to show that aesthetics can influence politics in a variety of ways and that a substantial amount of the normative power of politics – such as securing public approval – stems from aesthetics. Having shown that aesthetics can hold significant influence over politics, it must be considered whether this influence is justified. Frank Ankersmit's *Aesthetic Politics: Political Philosophy Beyond Fact and Value* addresses this consideration, by way of opposition to an ethically informed politics, à la John Rawls. Against that politics of facts and values, Ankersmit defends an aesthetic model wherein legitimate representation is the driving force of politics. But to involve representation is to involve the public domain, which politics represents, making the reception of political messages/images a fundamental constraint. Murray Edelman's *From Art to Politics* illuminates exactly this, through the imperative revelation that aesthetics does not just represent realities – it creates them, causing possible worlds to become actualised. In his detailed analysis of society, politics and art, Edelman shows how representation can make or break political paradigms, for it delivers the narrative by which political entities become admirable, or damnable.

Subsection 2.2 focuses on Walter Benjamin's notion of aura, and the Fascist usage/exploitation of it, which is extremely relevant to any work on Fascist aesthetics. This sub-section features secondary reference to Rainer Rochlitz's *The Philosophy of Walter Benjamin*, and primarily consists of Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* and *Small History of Photography*. These texts concern the nature of art, its societal place and function, and the phenomenological concept of aura. Upon this foundation, Benjamin warns that an aestheticized politics serves to anaesthetise the masses, making them find meaningful expression in empty spectacles and speeches rather than a revolt which

would actually improve their situation. Martin Jay's *"The Aesthetic Ideology" as Ideology* follows up on this, challenging the dangers of aestheticizing politics. By describing the many ways that politics can be aestheticized – with the Fascist approach one of many – Jay denies Benjamin's warning, arguing that aestheticizing politics rather enables resistance to totalitarianism. Upon the considerations of both sub-sections, I conclude the section with this project's understanding of the political relevance of aesthetics and transition to analysing Fascism proper.

One important caveat is the definition of aesthetics, and how it relates to works of art and the artists that made them. This project is not simply examining paintings, so 'art' and 'artists' are insufficient terms on the surface. An aesthetic is embodied in many crafts – paintings, sculptures, poetry, novels, propaganda posters, fashion etc. – which is hereafter referred to as 'aesthetic work(s)'. The aesthetically-based people who engage in such endeavours – painters, writers, designers, creators etc. – are hereafter referred to as 'artist(s)', with emphasis on the multiple facets and manifestations of the aesthetic domain. I will refer to a painting here, a novel there, rather than only one kind of aesthetic work, because different kinds provide different perspectives that cannot always be used interchangeably. Yet, it is noteworthy that this project considers all types of aesthetic works of the Fascist regime and understands this conglomerate to embody the Fascist aesthetic in its meanings, allegories, stylistic choices, public reception, governmental handling and so on.

### 2.1. Political Aesthetics' Interrelations and Implications

To begin, Sartwell reminds us that all sorts of regimes, from democratic to communist, use(d) and repress(ed) art for propagandistic purposes, that art has political themes and can thus be used, or exploited, for political purposes. However, it is not simply that art has a political nature exploited by various regimes – political ideologies are

themselves aesthetic. To paraphrase Sartwell, not all art is political, but all politics is aesthetic: ideologies are aesthetic systems and that is what moves or fails to move people, and the aesthetic expressions of a regime are central in the cognitive content and political goals of that system (Sartwell, 2010, pp. 1-2). Political understanding is thus not simply comprehending the texts, speeches and claims of a party, but also the aesthetic context of these, for that determines their meanings and public reception. A political system has to answer to someone – be it a democratic electorate or a supreme leader – and aesthetics are essential in achieving a good reception. Just as one might be compelled to purchase something after watching an advertisement, one might be compelled to vote or support policies in a certain way based upon the strength of the appeal of these aesthetic expressions.

As an interesting illustration of this Sartwell turns to Thomas Jefferson, the former architect and third American president, who described optimal architectural constructs with the same aesthetic categories as an optimal government. His statements about the ideal design of a portico (Richard, 1995, p. 47) are packed with aesthetic reasoning – namely of harmony – that are equally applicable to the political domain. Just as the portico requires an additional column if too much ground is covered, in Jefferson's American Republicanism, the burdens of representation and protecting the people are held up by each state and one federal government, as a "sacred distribution" (Calhoun, 1960, pp. 375-6). This relies on the very same appeal to harmony, to proportionality; each state is the pillar to the government that is the portico. And so, the formation of American Republicanism gives a good illustration of the similar reasoning between aesthetics and politics. Sartwell claims this is also the reason why, when John Adams was asked to write the Declaration of Independence, he preferred Jefferson write it, for Jefferson's prose style was more beautiful (Sartwell, 2010, p. 4).

The broader meaning behind this illustration is that the aesthetic is an inherent part of the political, on account of their similar logic. Therefore, a political description "is not

complete without an appeal to characteristically aesthetic values" (Sartwell, 2010, p. 49); aesthetic properties are a significant and enhancing component of politics. Rather than unveiling purely descriptive content, the aesthetic illumines and forms its own normative content, developing the truth claims and maxims of a political order/ideology. Because of the normative influence that aesthetic attributes are here taken to hold, determining the success and appeal of political projects, "there is no politics without aesthetics [and] no politics that can thoroughly dominate or domesticate aesthetics … political systems of both power and resistance … are aesthetic environments" (Sartwell, 2010, p. 81 & 235). As I understand Sartwell, politics and aesthetics remain distinct here, like pleasure and pain, contradicting yet informing one another. In this way, aesthetics treats political matters as aesthetic environments, not purely political doctrines; considers the design of politics, not the politics of design; and asserts that all politics contains some aesthetic properties that makes it more sensible (Sartwell, 2010, p. 11).

This is an interesting book, with useful cases, but Sartwell is too vague. He spends a page on one topic, before leaping to the next. He does not succeed, I think, in *explaining* political aesthetics, but does a great job of *unveiling* its facets, that we may explain it ourselves. This is indeed the purpose of the book, to clarify the properties of what is aesthetic, to simplify this complex issue of aesthetic properties in political systems. The most important point here is that the aesthetic properties which hold (normative) influence over political aspects are not exclusively objective, subjective, or cultural – they are features of a framework that implicates a little of all three (Sartwell, 2010, p. 6). This means aesthetics holds influence on the normativity of political matters – any political system utilises aesthetics in its expressions, which are designed to secure approval. As for the specific interaction of the political and the aesthetic; "if the political is where the identities and interests that constitute the political are themselves forged, then political aesthetics will yield

a richer and more specific sense of how this occurs, of the ways that identities and interests are actually formed" (Sartwell, 2010, p. 9). In other words, by understanding political aesthetics we can reveal the methods and goals of the various objects that make up the political domain but are not yet understandable in their presence alone. If aesthetics informs politics, understanding the aesthetic categories behind political expressions helps predict and elucidate the various meanings and demands of politics.

This notion of aesthetic politics may be troublesome for us, as post-enlightenment (post-)modern scholars who naturally find political conceptions to have a strong ethical dimension to them. Yet Ankersmit breaks with this ethical approach in favour of such an aesthetic approach, stating that: "Politics is not a department of ethics, but something else … Political decision-making presupposes the political "Bildung" [(community-based self-cultivation)] of the electorate and is powerless without it". (Ankersmit, 1996, p. 10 & 17). This reduction of politics to ethics is primarily the legacy of Rawls, who instilled this modern understanding of ethics as the foundation of political philosophy (Ankersmit, 1996, p. 3). That understanding is widely present in academia today, yet remains disputable, as modernity has brought various changes to the structure of the political domain, not least in depoliticising it. From the growth and alphabetization of the common folk, to the increased prevalence of global/transnational communication, and so on, comes the dissolution of once-firm boundaries between state and public, ruler and ruled, etc.; politics has become less political (Ankersmit, 1996, pp. 84-5). Thus, rather than the state being a strong arbiter that can – and should – have profound influence over every citizen, political actions are rather a series of bureaucratic anonymities, driven more by quantitative convenience than legitimate dictates.

Against this de-politicised, ethical politics, Ankersmit makes the case for an *aesthetic* politics – beyond fact and value. This aesthetic politics holds an intuitive appeal in the way a work of art displays a harmonious integration of its various components. Such a display led

the philosopher Friedrich Schiller to believe only the aesthetic state could do justice to *all* man's faculties, and leads Ankersmit to argue that an aesthetic politics is able to provide vast political meaning because of the oppositions utilised within the aesthetic sphere itself (Ankersmit, 1996, pp. 17-8 & 100-1). Though Schiller wished aesthetics to surpass ethics only to *motivate* proper moral conduct – Ankersmit's intent here is to *replace* the ethical dimension of politics with an aesthetic dimension. This is a promising goal, though I believe far more evidence is needed that such a drastic, encompassing replacement is desirable. Still, more agreeable is the notion that aesthetics: "provides the mind with the right moral orientation" (Ankersmit, 1996, p. 22). In this sense, the notion of representation is greatly important, and even serves to render the ethical dimension obsolete. Indeed, Ankersmit shows that political and aesthetic representations far more similar than ethical representations. Neither political or aesthetic representations encourage an empirical or ethical approach, but rather emphasise credible, legitimate representations of the depicted reality – in politics this reality is the thoughts and actions of the citizens (Ankersmit, 1996, pp. 35-7). In the aesthetic interpretation of politics, this legitimacy, as well as political power, stems from the (aesthetic) boundary between the representation (i.e. state) and the represented (i.e. electorate). Upon this reasoning, Ankersmit concludes that "political insight is not part of the realm of facts and values, but of aesthetics" (Ankersmit, 1996, p. 16). As such, legitimate political power originates in the aesthetic gap between the representation and the represented, making the nature of political power aesthetic (Ankersmit, 1996, p. 18).

Key in this account is the degree of autonomy, the extent to which the representation freely determines the way in which it represents the represented, in the same way a painting is free to depict this or that subject in one way or another, rather than a fixed, bureaucratic

approach.[4] Furthermore, the distinction and opposition between an ethical and an aesthetic politics is useful not only in illustrating our current bias to ethical norms in politics – which Ankersmit shows can be undesirable – but also in showing that ethics/aesthetics have that influence over the political realm. The categories of aesthetics do have political power, they influence the desirability and legitimacy of political happenings, serving, so to speak, as the blueprint from which political boundaries stem. This signifies the (potential) influence that aesthetic can have over ideologies, and suggests that, even if aesthetics would be kept out of politics, something less preferable would take its place – such as ethics.

Edelman takes a more sociological approach to this matter of representation, examining the way in which political beliefs are constructed and influenced by art, referring to 'art' in a way that is interchangeable with this project's use of 'aesthetic works'. He first defines politics as an indirect drama, where people understand a subject– from foreign atrocities to exemplary public servants – by way of images and models deduced from art. In other words, rather than being the original invention of the observer, the "models, scenarios, narratives, and images into which audiences for political news translate that news [come from] novels, paintings, stories, films, dramas, television sitcoms, striking rumours, even memorable jokes" (Edelman, 1995, p. 1). This influence is often overlooked though, as we assume observation is objective and forget that the contextual framing of the subject impacts our own (political) judgement (Edelman, 1995, p. 2 & 14). The narratives and images that are fixed to a given political event influence how that event is conceived, based upon the longstanding tradition of norms and morals present within all societies. As Edelman puts it, "art is the fountainhead from which political discourse, beliefs about politics, and consequent actions ultimately spring [as part of] a complex causal connection" (Edelman, 1995, p. 2). Art

[4] This is essentially a merging of Machiavelli with Schiller, who ascribed objectivity to aesthetics by grounding beauty in freedom. For Schiller's aesthetic politics that targets harmony, rather than the conflict targeted here, see Schiller, Friedrich; *Kallias, or, On the Beautiful* in Fidelio Journal of Poetry, Science and Statecraft, 1:4 (1992), pp. 53-56.

does not directly determine politics but shapes its manifestations insofar as art forms ideals about good, evil, authority, bravery, leadership, and other such notions that have bearing on one's (political) considerations.

Therefore, aesthetic works shape political conceptions, due to their power over social capital, but does not simply *represent* reality. Rather, art *creates* realities and worlds, with people's perceptions following the narratives and meanings of aesthetical works. This gives aesthetics a central role in the political world, as the political meanings of its works are not dictated by political leaders, those leaders comply with their meanings. Not each and every possibility is conceivable, "so we search for a model that resolves ambiguities and reduces possibilities to one or a few. Art supplies the menu of models" (Edelman, 1995, pp. 7-8). When one tries to understand a political event, or take a political action, it is thus inevitable that art's models impacts one's perception and judgement. This may be in the negative sense of making a political figure appear less capable in contrast to depictions of idealised leaders, or in a more positive sense of enforcing a particular belief of reality through novels that extol a certain creed. Regardless of the sense, art "evokes idealizations, threats, and beliefs about the proper places of masses, leaders, obedience, heroism, evil, and virtue" (Edelman, 1995, p. 9). Through its images, relevant narratives are developed and normalised, which shape political thought and cause divergence due to different people endorsing different models of those narratives. However, art can sometimes also break through all these entrenched narratives, biases, and stereotypes. This is when the new insight of an artist has such validity or usefulness that it serves to remake the world, challenging the common political assumptions and making another model of meaning conceivable (Edelman, 1995, pp. 12-3).

The key point in Edelman's work is that art holds the position of supplying and shaping the images that build up constructions of the (political) world. This unique position entails political significance in that art would then hold substantial influence over the ideas,

images, and therefore constructions, upon which the political sphere is heavily dependent. By way of comparison to some ideal political figure in a novel, the standing of past and present political figures is affected, seeming to be inept, heroic etc. In the same way, the celebratory works of art – from newsreels to novels – that dominate the topic of WWII cause the war to seem a mighty triumph of good against evil, whilst the immense toll on the victims of the war, the desecration of justice in punitive executions, and the Allies' own atrocities (such as the US's abusive internment of Japanese Americans) are not recalled. As this sort of influence is so prevalent in the world, Edelman is right to conclude that: "there can be no politics without art [… to] construct and transform beliefs about the social world, defining problems and solutions, hopes and fears, the past, the present, and the future" (Edelman, 1995, pp. 4-5). Again, aesthetics does not exercise a *direct* control over politics; it determines the images, narratives, and models upon which political thought – and the social world – becomes coherent. As such, art is "an essential and fundamental element in the shaping of political ideas and political action … [providing] the cognitive and emotional resonances such political actions carry" (Edelman, 1995, p. 6). In short: art holds a particular position of influence over the images and models that in turn influence political thought. Political figures and actions achieve a reputation based primarily upon the narratives that depict them.

To summarise this subsection, aesthetics has political significance due to its potential to impact the political domain in a variety of ways – with normative influence the most important here. From making specific political actions seem appealing in determining its coherence, to more societally focused consequences in the power of representation, the aesthetic domain affects and enhances political paradigms, adding to its meaning, receptibility and appeal. The primary political relevance of aesthetics, and a major part of their interaction, is thus the prescription of meaning, making actions and/or ideas comprehendible and desirable, with both being necessary for successful political endeavours.

## 2.2. The Political Significance of Aura

Benjamin's work is especially relevant to this project, not just because of his thought but also due to his unique eyewitness position, as a Jew who fled Nazi Germany in 1932. This brings us closer to this project's focus, for Benjamin's subject is particularly Fascism. He clarifies how the interrelation of politics and aesthetic can act upon the external world, the dangers this poses, and the way in which aesthetics can be used as a form of control. He also describes the (mechanical) transformation of concepts and values once integral to art, which was originally a cultish object of ritual. Indeed, "the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual – first the magical, then the religious kind", and it is this original use which gives authentic art its unique value (Benjamin, [1936] 2005, p. 9). However, with the advent of mechanical reproduction, this connection to ritual is broken, and "the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practise – politics" (Benjamin, [1936] 2005, p. 10). In other words, historical progress caused art's original basis in cultish ritual to be severed and have art's function change, not least because modern mechanical art does not – and cannot – depict 'aura', only phony spells of personality dictated by film industry money (Benjamin, [1936] 2005, pp. 15-8). Yet that original function of art, the aura which brings to life the reality of the depiction, remains (subconsciously) desired by us.

This notion of 'aura' can be understood as "the authenticity of a thing… the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced" (Benjamin, [1936] 2005, p. 6). This a distant transmission, from the observed to the observer, to share itself on the level of its own unhidden existence, which grants a certain and clear observation. Indeed, aura is a "peculiar weave of space and time: the singular appearance only of distance, however close it may be. ... [taking part in an] appearance – that is what it means to breathe the aura" (Benjamin,

[1931] 2015, pp. 83-4). This is a matter of resonance, of 'closing the gap' between here and there, now and then, observer and observed. The aura of an aesthetic work allows the subject to come closer to reality, to the observer – a work without authentic aura can only ever be brought physically close to the observer's eyes, the phenomenon within will never live. The authentic aura of a thing reveals its (ontological) nature totally, as if the viewer were God.

In Benjamin's musings, we see this sort of authenticity has been lost, artificially replace by the modern and mechanical. Indeed, in early photography, people did not dare to look at the pictures for long, being unsettled by the vividness of the depicted figures as if the observer was herself observed by those faces. This vivid authenticity naturally relied upon many technicalities, such as choosing a location for the right amount of light exposure, but moreover was a matter of the model not living "out of the moment, but rather right into it; during the long duration of the recording, the model grew … into the image and thereby appeared in the starkest contrast to those apparitions on a snapshot who, in turn, fit a transformed world" (Benjamin, [1931] 2015, pp. 71-2). In simpler terms, these antiquated images still hold a lasting impression, for their subjects were often normal people going about their daily life, which is captured along with the essence of the person and the age.[5] This was captured in the slow operations of the old cameras, showing even such minute details as the posture of the subject or the atmosphere of their environment. In this, the observer feels compelled to find concurrence, between the actuality of her own time and life, and those embedded in the subject of the image. Truly, we: "are compelled to find the inconspicuous place in which, in the essence of that moment which passed long ago, the future nestles still today, so eloquently that we, looking back, are able to discover it" (Benjamin, [1931] 2015, pp. 66-7). This is a phenomenological experience, such as the deep immersion Proust felt

[5] This trend is exemplified by Sander, August; *People of the 20th Century: A Cultural Work of Photographs Divided Into Seven Groups* (1920's).

upon his madeleine and tea, feeling as if the memories he observed were real: not a memory of there and then, but real life here and now. The modern snapshot which mechanical development has delivered is instead quick and trivial. Not capturing something genuine, modern photography concerns that which is just as artificial as its photosets. The spirit behind the work of art before, and in the mechanical age would be: slow, genuine, meaningful, in the spirit of the age; quick, artificial, convenient, in the profit of the producer. This too has political/societal implications first in aesthetics becoming a commercial tool, and second in the dangers of interpreting aesthetic categories.

First, with the destruction of distance through the decline of aura, a thing is no longer understood as if it were communicating itself to God, but rather to the receiver of an advertising strategy. Innocent perceptions of authentic depictions of truth – truth being the proper language and goal of art, and revelation its proper essence (Rochlitz, 1996, p. 47 & 66 & 82) – are not manifested amid the mercantile chaos of modernism; what replaces the original, primitive basis of ritual behind a work of art is not an autonomous aesthetic experience, but politics (Rochlitz, 1996, p. 149). No longer a source of contemplation, aesthetics in the public realm serves as an anaesthetic, to purposefully induce and enforce politico-economic heteronomies upon a targeted audience (Rochlitz, 1996, pp. 117-9).

That anaesthetic function makes this second point more potent. The spirit of the work of art, "having conquered mechanics, reframes its precise outputs as analogies of life. The more the crisis of contemporary society escalates, and the more stiffly its individual moments confront each other as inert polarities, all the more so is creativity … turned into a fetish" (Benjamin, [1931] 2015, p. 91). With aura in decline, it is no longer a *need* for proximity, but a *sense* of identity, a mere semblance of authenticity, of politico-cultural authority. Photographs in particular have a dangerously objectifying power, for they can legitimate any scene – and thus an ideal – if not accompanied by a caption. An image can be viewed – and

have its depictions misconstrued – in many different ways. The spirit and meaning behind an aesthetic work can therefore encourage whatever atrocities observers see reflected in their observations. Without explanatory words to direct and normatively describe the depicted phenomena, the cognitive function of the image is far less assured than its sensual function of enjoyment, making the meaning more likely to be misconstrued (Rochlitz, 1996, pp. 153-4).

Thus, in Benjamin's understanding art has an important element of a unique existence: its history, various owners, physical condition etc. are all aspects of originality in which art is given life (Benjamin, [1936] 2005, p. 5). In terms of political significance, this culminates in the diminishing of art's social significance into a commodity, as it ever more easily accessible, and to a mass audience rather than a select few (Benjamin, [1936] 2005, pp. 21-2). This is part of the transformation of art's function – as quantity begins to supersede quality, so too will change the manner in which the ever-greater numbers of spectators participate. In this way, art becomes a form of control, distracting the masses and inducing tasks – acts or inclinations. Whilst the public are in that absent-minded state of idle examination, they can be bombarded with suggestions through (ap)perception, leading to at least the consideration of some task or ideal (Benjamin, [1936] 2005, pp. 27-8).

In this way, Benjamin describes Fascism as exerting social organisation over the masses, through the messianic promise of a chance for those masses to express themselves in spite of the modern climate, with art drained of aura (Benjamin, [1936] 2005, p. 29). This promise means, as the inevitable logical consequence of utilising (aesthetic) expression to organise the masses, that Fascism aestheticizes politics, encouraging an aesthetic yoke over all aspects of societal life, and controlling political involvement through cultish myth. And this aestheticization, for Benjamin, leads only to war. Only war could set a sufficiently large goal for masses whose self-alienation has reached such degrees that their own destruction became aesthetically pleasing – which is precisely why Fascism rendered politics aesthetic

(Benjamin, [1936] 2005, pp. 30-1). The *l'art pour l'art* tradition (art for art's sake) is subsumed under Fascism, shifting to *fiat ars – pereat mundus* (Let art be created, though the world perish) as part of a destructive spiral driven by the desire for that pacifying aura that has been so long deprived. Rather than individuals lost in deep contemplation of the aura in older art forms, Fascist aesthetics adapts to a collective consciousness. By "cloaking politics in auratic rituals and aestheticized rhetoric, fascism sought to impose passivity … fascism seeks to overcome the socio-political dissension caused by capitalism by imposing an aestheticized ideology on the fragmented and pluralistic flux of contemporary society" (Affron & Antliff, 1997, p. 11).

Therefore, following the shift from art's original cultish, ritual purpose, and the subsequent changes in an ever-modernising society, the connection of art, and thus its participants, to aura, to the genuine representation, was severed. Yet, we still crave that aura, for we as beings have not innovated as fast as our technology and still depend upon the meaning that aura envelops – a meaning potent enough for art to have its cultish function in the first place. And this can be exploited, with Fascism allegedly doing just that, consolidating power through an aesthetic yoke whereby the masses accept and support their own enslavement because they find meaning in hollow expressions. This notion returns in the later sections, and the following text clarifies it further.

Jay argues, instead, that politics *can* be aestheticized without being Fascism, or prone to war, by re-evaluating the nature of aesthetics, finding aesthetics and politics can connect in many non-problematic, non-Fascist ways. The first step in this process is a clarification of the normative notion presupposed in the term 'aesthetic'. In the *l'art pour l'art* tradition which Benjamin focuses on, the core of aesthetics is its claim to autonomy, having itself as its own end and meaning. Politics aestheticized in this way would be quite indifferent to non-aesthetic claims, as its sole criterion of value is aesthetic freedom. This in turn implies the

suppression of "those aspects of the aesthetic, such as sensuous enjoyment and bodily pleasure, which link art and mundane existence; instead, formal considerations outweigh "sentimental" ones" (Jay, 1992, p. 43). In other words, the distinction between mundane aesthetic aspects and more intellectual aspects that are further removed from non-aesthetic realms is furthered, with the latter here being desired and the former being problematic.

Another notion of 'aesthetic' is drawn between the image and the word. Should aesthetics be empowered by the image, of sensual pleasure and irrational emotional impulse, rather than the word, of rational criticism and illusion-free deliberation, then spectacle comes to dominate the public sphere. This means a "reduction to spell-binding spectacle and phantasmagoric illusion" (Jay, 1992, p. 45) where the masses are unable to speak or criticise, being so captivated and dictated by grand spectacles. A further stance concerns the act of an artist shaping previously unformed matter – imposing forms upon the subject per the artist's will. Here, political merit is determined solely by the elitist egotism of the artist, who actively dictates the form to be held by the otherwise directionless, passive matter. Both these stances are relevant to the Fascism this project targets, with Mussolini describing how the masses are a passive matter in his hands that he mingles with but feels aversion to. In a 1922 speech, he proclaims that Fascism's task is "to make [the masses] an organic whole with the Nation … much as the artist needs raw material in order to forge his masterpieces … Doesn't the sculptor sometimes break the marble out of rage, because it does not precisely mold in his hands according to his vision?" (Falasca-Zamponi, 1997, p. 21). Here, Mussolini is an artist-politicians, striving to create a beautiful system from his material: the masses.

The understanding of 'aesthetic' Jay promotes cites aesthetics not "as the opposite of reason, but rather as its completion, not as the expression of an irrational will, but as the sensual version of a higher, more comprehensive notion of rationality, not as the wordless spectacle of images, but as the realization of a literary absolute" (Jay, 1992, p. 46). In other

words, aesthetics is not some substance-less abstraction, antithetical to reason and metaphysics, but rather the ultimate culmination of both. Aesthetics in the public sphere thus becomes a Schillerian "social and political model, ethically grounded in an assumedly Kantian notion of freedom" (Jay, 1992, p. 47). One art critic, Paul de Man, specifies aesthetics as a notion that appeals to the pleasure principle, enabling the concealment of what is or is not true under the desire to secure pleasure and avoid pain, i.e. prioritising experience over ethics. However, this means an aestheticized politics would forever be "seductively promising sensual pleasures, such as oneness with an alienated nature, it could never deliver" (Jay, 1992, p. 48).

Having explored these notions, Jay then denies that the interaction of aesthetics and politics is a negative matter, offering three positive conceptions instead. The first draws upon the aforementioned distinction between image and word where the former concedes a deceptive masking of violence in its illusions and the latter an increased sensitivity and resistance to that violence. This suggests that aesthetic influence creates "politics informed by the skills of reading literature [which] will be less prone to tyranny than one that is not" (Jay, 1992, p. 53). The second hosts the aestheticization of politics occurs only under the aesthetic category of the sublime, which ensures a reflexive political mode. This means, in an aestheticized politics, "the sublime acknowledges the unpresentability of what it tries to present [and] stops short of attempting to realize theoretically inspired blueprints for political utopias" (Jay, 1992, p. 54). The third conception follows Hannah Arendt's notion that the capacity to judge – from one's own view as well as others – allows one to orientate himself in the public realm. To facilitate this, aesthetic imagination is employed, which "allows participants in the process to put themselves in the place of others without reducing the others to versions of themselves. [This] produces a kind of intersubjective impartiality that … mediates the general and the particular" (Jay, 1992, p. 55).

With this, Jay clarifies the ways in which the normative content 'aesthetic' could be understood, and de-mystifies the aestheticization of politics. We see that this process is not always negative, as there are at least three positive alternatives. Moreover, this process is not necessarily a part of Fascism, given the number of ways in which aesthetics and politics can link, and therefore be part of a non-totalitarian political system. This last point demands the clarification that in Benjamin's thought it is not the aestheticized politics that necessitates war, but rather the aestheticization practised by Fascism. As such, not all aestheticizations are Fascist; it may be that political identity is dependent on – and formed by – aesthetic judgement,[6] which would necessitate the aesthetic component in any political system. As Jay argued, this aesthetic component could enable dissent and resistance, rather than suppress the masses and secure the Fascist regime. This seems feasible, for expression is key in the aesthetic domain, and there are many different ways to express something or view an expression. Benjamin therefore seems to be heavy-handed in citing aestheticized politics as Fascist, though his points on aura and aesthetically induced passivity remain credible and important to this project.

Finally, I will now clarify the way this project shall utilise aesthetics and its interrelation to politics; it is a matter of normativity - (political) norms are reflected by the artist's hand. Every aesthetical work – from poems to sculpture – holds some value/meaning that influences our perception, whether a deliberate allegory from the creator or the subjective projections of one's own mind. Aesthetic works are therefore never empty of normative content given their unique power of representation, which allow us to understand and employ an aspect of life previously incoherent, inconceivable to us. The practise of aesthetics is a mission wherein one finds the freedom to communicate with the other. The artist invites her audience to experience a representation of (part of) the artist's vision, trying to appeal to the

[6] See Ferguson, 2007 for more on this argument.

observers, who bring their own subjective perspectives to that representation. In this representation of the world – or something within it – as seen by the artist, we can be shown normative maxims we did (or could) not think of before. This notion is best captured in Schiller's Kallias letters:

> The phenomena of nature and the acts of human life are nothing more than appearances, [… true] reality must be sought for beyond the objects perceived immediately by the sense, the substance and speech and principle underlying all things manifesting itself in time and space through these real existences, but preserving its absolute existence in itself. Now, the very special object and aim of art is to represent the action and development of this universal force [... freeing truth] from the illusory and mendacious forms of this coarse, imperfect world, and cloth[ing] it in a nobler, purer form created by the mind itself. Thus the forms of art, far from being mere appearances, perfectly illusory, contain more reality and truth than the phenomenal existences of the real world. The world of art is truer than that of history or nature. (Schiller, 1902, p. ix).

The relation to the other in the artistic world is thus of the upmost importance. Every instance of aesthetics contains normativity due to the reflection and understanding of the way in which to view the world. In this Schiller-inspired understanding, aesthetic artefacts envelop suggestions for how things ought to be and is the attempt of the artist to share a vision or message. This is often as simple as finding a certain (mental) image pleasing and capturing that on the canvas. What is more relevant to this project are more intellectual aesthetics: sculptures that promote military ecstasy, poems that extol a heroic sprit, visualisations of harmony, myths of supremacy and so on. This is, I believe, most conducive

to the considerations addressed in this section, and thus a good account to utilise in this project. Aesthetics will hereby be taken as providing the means to which one can receive, experience, and interpret various values and/or experiences that can be most relevant to political ideals. This transmission of visions turns aesthetical works from pleasant trinkets to important sources of normativity – often without an agenda, but always with the potential to be meaning-dictating propaganda, and therefore be exploitable by artists or states.

## 3. Fascism's Historical Context

Having addressed the general and philosophical interrelation of the political and the aesthetic, I now transition to this project's focus of Fascist Italy, beginning with the context of Fascist ideology's birth. This is noteworthy, for Fascism was birthed in very turbulent times, amidst the devastation of WWI. Italy joined the Allied Powers in 1915 upon promises of receiving South Tirol, Istria, and much of Dalmatia as territory. Yet this was later overturned due to the Allied Powers' interest in a sovereign Yugoslav state, leaving many Italians feeling robbed and cheated, a 'mutilated victory'. With around a million dead and another million injured, the outrage of patriots and veterans was intense. Post-war Italy featured profuse amounts of images of mutilation, death, and redemption, interpreting the wounded or lifeless Italian soldiers as symbols of a great, holy sacrifice (Gumbrecht, 1996, p. 261) . This is referenced in a letter from Mussolini on the 1st January 1919, which formulates the Fascist programme upon three fundamental points: contesting Italy's mutilated victory, renovating Italian national life, and 'closing the street' to those who betrayed Italy (Gumbrecht, 1996, pp. 260-1). Additionally, the conclusion of WWI induced a sacred notion of heroism amidst this furious sense of betrayal, uniting many Italians against the external, 'anti-Italian' enemy. It also meant the notion of national regeneration achieved greater political recognition, under observations of war's sacredness and mystifying the values of

comradery. WWI strengthened this notion, with politics claiming the function of national regeneration, as the expression of a spiritual revolution inspired by a totalising conception of life (Gentile, 1997, pp. 37-9).

Previously, politics lacked this protagonist role and was rather the object – not agent – of regeneration, subservient to distant fables of revolution. That shift came primarily though soldiers who, never far from death, now wondered what they had fought for. This feeling that the sacrifice of the Italian people was mutilated greatly fostered distrust of the political order, damaging trust in the liberal system and creating demands for a new style of governance, which would provide the spiritual unity, moral renewal and military strength that many felt Italy lacked (Falasca-Zamponi, 1997, p. 5). Such a context shows why the Fascists could obtain popular support, particularly with King Vittorio Emanuele III's cooperation, but also confirms Fascism had legitimate political grievances, something more than mere coercion. By this I mean to say that, rather than being the tyrannical system we recall as modernists, Fascism began as a system of probable solutions to real problems, same as any other political ideal. This is especially important given this project's emphasis on the *voluntary* involvement of artists in the practise and development of Fascism. That hypothesis becomes much more compelling when we consider that Fascism was – or appeared to be – a legitimate response to the issues of this time.

Regardless, the Fascist ideology was successfully rooted in Italy with the 1922 March on Rome, an event of the PNF and Fascist sympathisers. These black-shirted militias took strategic positions to enable a siege of Rome, demanding the ousting of the Liberal Union government – under Luigi Facta – and the transferring of power to Mussolini. This event succeeded, with Mussolini being appointed prime minister – but this continuation of parliamentary democracy was not what the Fascists fought for, instead desiring "a total transformation of society, an elimination of their enemies, and the emergence of the dynamic,

forceful Italy" (Kedward, p. 47). Following the murder of the socialist Giacomo Matteotti, who had published scathing critiques of Mussolini, this desire was granted, with a truly Fascist regime formed on January 3rd, 1925. This contextual development of Fascism is further clarified by Ruth Ben-Ghiat who notes the appeal of Fascism to "interwar intellectuals as a 'spiritual revolution' that would establish a new 'moral order' in Europe" (Ben-Ghiat, 1996, p. 293). I refer to this article for the remainder of this section, given its utmost relevance to this project, as a piece deconstructing the fascist ideology from an aesthetic perspective and addressing the interregnum context and the Fascist climb out of that in great detail with ample reference to key figures and texts, which I shall now utilise.

Fascism was expressed in the doctrine of the 'ethical state', especially against the democratic and socialist societies, where the focus upon the population was material, such as ensuring food, unlike the spiritual focus of Fascism, which promised a moral revolution. This supposed was persuasive to many Italian intellectuals who came to agree with Fascist Italy's education minister (1936-1943) Giuseppe Bottai's claim that "fascism was the only movement capable of finding a 'new political and spiritual equilibrium' to counter the twin threats of 'democratic levelling and communist annihilation'" (Ben-Ghiat, 1996, p. 294). This focus on the spiritual bore particular relevance, given that the 1920's and 30's featured enough political and economic instability to make Oswald Spengler's prophecies of civilization death (Spengler, 2013, p. 31) seem imminent, with Europe's values and institutions in irreversible decay. Modernisation and the advancement of technology was creating a society where a new type of being was demanded, one more in line with the increasingly mechanical and efficient spirit of the new world. Indeed, many at the time referred to this period as an interregnum, a point in history between "that which was and that which is to be" (Ben-Ghiat, 1996, p. 295).

This ‘interregnum’ climate naturally has political connotations, in the actual state of the world, but also in the populace’s beliefs of how to achieve a better state. With the idea that this period in history was an empty space, desire for something new was abundant. Philosopher Adriano Tilgher phrased this well in 1913, stating: “man has created an absolutely new and original science, technology and economics, and has revolutionised the world [yet,] in his soul he has remained a good century behind. … This new world requires a new spirit” (Ben-Ghiat, 1996, p. 295). This ‘new spirit’ came to be considered as the negation of what already was, in the anti-ideological and anti-enlightenment mindset of Fascism. This matter was certainly exploited to increase support, with Mussolini framing the Fascist doctrine as the antidote to political and spiritual decline in Europe. As the crisis worsened with the Wall Street Crash of 1929, this messianic aspect become more intense and effective with Mussolini presenting Fascism as the only system capable of breaking the interregnum. This strategy was so effective that many intellectuals – and members of the public – came to see the whole crisis as positive, for it had blessed the Italians with “kindling for the fire of the new revolutionary consciousness” (Ben-Ghiat, 1996, p. 296). Not *all* intellectuals, given the *Manifesto of the Anti-Fascist Intellectuals,* wherein Benedetto Croce describes Fascism and culture as contradictory, that Fascism only uses culture as a matter of exploitative convenience (Schnapp, 1996, pp. 236-7). Nonetheless, Fascism had secured the support of a substantial amount of the intellectual class, who were eager for a solution to the crises of their times, largely for the following two points.

First, Fascism claimed to be the political expression of modernity as an anti-ideological ideology based upon facts, new and flexible enough to adapt old ideas to modern circumstances (Ben-Ghiat, 1996, pp. 296-7). In other words, Fascism had the benefit of a fresh start, free to select only valuable ideas thanks to not yet having any obsolete elements or counter-productive commitments. The reactionary nature of Fascism against the dominant

materialistic rational ideology of the time also made it more interesting, as a new approach for a new time. Second, Fascism offered a redefinition of the category of modernity, with Mussolini promising a nationalised version that would allow the preservation of spirituality. This allowed a balance between the benefits of technological development and the danger of excessive standardization, leading to acceptance for the latest modernist designs of Walter Gropius and Adalberto Libera as well as honouring the spiritual grandeur of Rome (Ben-Ghiat, 1996, p. 297).

Thus, Fascism was a new and stimulating option which also allowed the balancing of contrary but important elements via careful deconstructions and redefinitions. This again explains the unique, Janus-faced blend of Fascist aesthetics, as the intellectual class was just as divergent in the question of embracing modernity versus tradition. This made it desirable to reconcile under a new approach: spirituality, not materialism; community, not utilitarianism; unity, not freedom, and all such measurements promoted in Fascism. With this, Fascism offered not just a political model, but the blueprint for a new, better civilization (Ben-Ghiat, 1996, pp. 298-9). This context helps clarify the background appeal and successful growth of Fascism, enabling the next section, which focuses on the aesthetic influence in that background.

## 4. Fascism's Aesthetic Background

In this section I will discuss illustrative cases of relevant, aesthetically significant events, figures, and ideas, to examine the existence, and extent, of influence that aesthetics had on the development of Italian Fascism, starting with what may be the establishment of the first Fascist state. Gabriele D'Annunzio, a poet, soldier, and influencer of Fascism, was enraged at the betrayal of the promises made to Italy in WWI, discussed in section 3. On the 12$^{th}$ of September 1919, he donned a splendid outfit complete with cape and sabre and drove to Fiume, a city on the Istrian peninsula, with stolen army trucks and 2000 volunteers. When

ordered to stop by an Italian general, he “theatrically offered up his medal-covered chest to the general and dared him to shoot him on the spot” (Emmerson, 2019). This was not the first time D’Annunzio had engaged in such escapades, having performed a “daring propaganda flight over the enemy city of Vienna in 1918, [dropping] thousands of pamphlets (some hand-written) warning the Austrians to surrender now to the unstoppable force of the Italian spirit” (Emmerson, 2019). Under the pretence of defending the Italian populace of Fiume, this escapade was successful, and the occupying Allied forces withdrew. However, the (liberal) Italian government refused to annex the city, so D’Annunzio instead declared Fiume to be an independent state (Ledeen, 1977, pp. 73-7).

From this newly captured ‘Italian Regency of Carnaro’, D’Annunzio attempted to form a counterpart to the League of Nations, granting recognition to Soviet Russia, arming Irish rebels, and generally supporting any group deemed separatist or oppressed. Those in the Regency’s administration capture well the artistic spirit of freedom and passion that dominated Fiume for 17 months. There were many intellectuals, artists, and bohemians from varied backgrounds, most notably: Léon Kochnitsky, a Belgian poet who headed Foreign Affairs; Harukichi Shimoi, a Japanese diplomat, and Guido Keller, D’Annunzio’s ‘action secretary’ and fellow former fighter pilot, as well as a nudist, vegan, yoga instructor. Keller’s actions consisted of matters like asking asylums to send all their inmates to Fiume as citizens and dropping an inscribed chamber pot on the parliament building in Rome, which likened the government’s value to said pot. Whilst ineffectual, these striking actions served to cloak “the protagonists of Fiume in an aura of aesthetic self-admiration. In essence, Keller’s goal became ‘to assault Europe with daring and elegance’, and he celebrated D’Annunzio [as] an artist whose inspiration has made dreams real” (Gumbrecht, 1996, p. 266). But this aesthetic of action, gesture and style was hollow - mere theatrics with little possibility to actualize the grand depictions and hyperbole that captured Fiume. So began the 1920 Bloody Christmas

(Ledeen, 1977, pp. 198-200), when D'Annunzio's feat was denounced by Italy and his men were driven back by naval bombardments and an army assault led by General Caviglia. This ended the occupation and established the city as a free state – until it was re-conquered by Fascist Italy in 1924.

The story of Fiume has a clear aesthetic element to it, from the spectacle that captured the city, to the bohemian lifestyles and the constitution which declared music and art as central components of Fiume. This influenced Mussolini's Fascism, which bears the same demonstrations of action, with redemption as the expression of that action (Gumbrecht, 1996, pp. 261 & 269-70). Flamboyant parades, the strong yet dashing daredevil leader-figure, orderly and militant uniforms, moving speeches from a lofty balcony to shape the passive masses, using aeroplanes, flags and national imagery as propaganda, the worship of Futurism's 'speed', the cult of virility, the men of 'destiny'; this was aestheticized politics à la Fascism. But how relevant is the potently aesthetic Fiume to Fascist Italy? Are D'Annunzio's claims to the invention of Fascism (Gumbrecht, 1996, pp. 253-4) justified, or is Margherita Sarfatti[7] right to describe D'Annunzio's exploits as marvellous "mere episodes" (Gumbrecht, 1996, p. 254)?

Fiume and Fascist Italy do differ, particularly in the former's Dionysian approach of free love against the latter's campaign of anti-decadence and heroic struggle. But D'Annunzio was certainly important to Mussolini; correspondence between the two was frequent and many of the ideals and laws behind this regency appear to have been adopted by Mussolini's Italy to make up the Fascist ideology we are examining. Indeed, the "rise of Italian fascism owed much to D'Annunzian flair. But it was better organised. The squadristi paramilitary gangs … were channelled into political action: hired out as anti-socialist

[7] Sarfatti was a biographer and mistress of Mussolini, and key in the *Novecento Italiano* (Italian 20th Century) movement, which sought an aesthetic style based upon the narrative of the Mussolini regime.

agitators, or as strike breakers, and then as the shock troops of the fascist movement" (Emmerson, 2019). Some historians, such as Renzo De Felice, cite Fiume as merely a symbol of Fascism, which was "the attempt of the rising petite bourgeoise to assert itself as a new class [with only Mussolini] having had the 'charisma' necessary to 'mobilize these masses'" (Gumbrecht, 1996, p. 254). However, more perspectives give greater weight to Fiume than mere symbolism. Through Emilio Gentile we see that Fascism understood the Risorgimento – the unification of Italy from 1848 to 1871 – as an incomplete revolution, with D'Annunzio's march on Fiume and Mussolini's march on Rome being a continuation of that process (Gumbrecht, 1996, p. 254). Michael Ledeen adds that Fiume was a watershed point in the development of the new, visual politics of the twentieth century, enabled by blending the 'sacred' and the 'profane' – higher ideals utilised through symbols as political goals to inspire men and women to risk their lives to achieve them (Ledeen, 1977, pp. 202-3). In other words, the main commonality between Fiume and Fascist Italy is Fiume's development of mythic spectacles – applying and actualising grand narratives to daily life and political agendas through reinforcing visuals and exalting myths – that were used in Fascist Italy.

The essence(s) of Fascism detailed in section 1 (particularly following Witt) allow us to understand the details of this process better as a revolution against social sickness, weakness, corruption - the Fascist fights until death comes for him or his enemies. Witt adds that both "Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler envisioned themselves as artists, with Mussolini, despite having no personal interest in art, claiming that "everything depends on dominating the mass like an artist"" (Witt, 2001, p. 6). This depiction of Mussolini as artist-politician is not a stretch, as Falasca-Zamponi demonstrates through the March on Rome, where some 26,000 Fascists (Falasca-Zamponi, 1997, p. 195) threatened revolution with occupying Rome. In reality, King Vittorio Emanuele III refused to acknowledge a state of siege, and accepted Mussolini's demands to form his own government. Yet the Fascist

narrative portrayed this as a real insurrectional act, a glorious and violent seizing of power (Falasca-Zamponi, 1997, pp. 1-2). This retelling of an event so significant for Fascism in turn affects the form Fascism came to hold, for narratives order reality and construct meanings; they do not just describe events but directly impact social and historical processes (Falasca-Zamponi, 1997, p. 3). And so, Fascism's symbolisms – such as the myth of a grand, violent, and revolutionary act – came about because of the nature of Fascism, but in turn such symbolism shapes the Fascist identity, creating a particular frame of reference – in this case Fascism as revolutionary. This is the primary way in which the aesthetic could have been a significant component in the formation and development of the Fascist ideology, in the same way the mould decides the form of molten steel. Indeed, Mussolini viewed aesthetics and politics as so inextricably linked that a politics not influenced by aesthetics is impossible; this link was a central element in his political vision which depended on the normative power of the aesthetic (Falasca-Zamponi, 1997, p. 15 & 204).

This mixing of aesthetic and politics is not restricted to this myth either, as shown by Ezra Pound, a pro-Fascist poet whose perspective is useful as an artist involved with the Fascist regime's cultural projects which blur the boundaries of aesthetics and politics, as David Barnes discusses. Early accounts of Pound, like much of the early Fascist aesthetic literature, tend to ignore/oversimplify his political engagement, and do not consider the aesthetic perspective (Barnes, 2010, p. 20). Yet, Pound's cantos 72 and 73 detail key Fascist figures and glorify a Fascist attack on Canadian soldiers (Ross, 1997, pp. 3-19). Featuring both the Futurist Marinetti and traditionalist Manlio Dazzi, canto 72 captures Fascism's Janus-faced "futuristic modernity and imperialistic nostalgia… a kind of genetically modified nostalgia, injected with masculinistic vitalism and modernistic technophilia" (Barnes, 2010, p. 22). As such, Fascism is centred between two overwhelming sentiments - the traditionalist's languidness and the Futurist's obsessiveness. Both have aesthetic elements to

them in understanding a certain political model as desirable, and in the sentimental nature of both longing for a glorious past or brave new future. These cantos were written towards the end of Fascist Italy, being published in 1945 – however Pound was nonetheless involved in early Fascism. In the 1930's he wrote to many editors to distribute his pro-Fascist writings – such as *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*, which portrays Mussolini as a righteous statesman alongside stories where Pound approves the bombing of not-yet-Fascists and forcing anti-Fascists to drink castor oil (Barnes, 2010, p. 30). Pound also had communicated with significant figures such as Dazzi, Sarfatti, Marinetti, and D'Annunzio (Barnes, 2010, pp. 23-5 & 31). Therefore, this poet provides a good example of an artist voluntarily supporting Fascism, rendering politics aesthetic in the way Benjamin discussed, and Pound's words help us understand why. Especially important is his claim that "Italy has twice civilized Europe. … Each time a strong, live energy is unleashed in Italy, a new renaissance comes forth" (Barnes, 2010, p. 30). In short, that the vigour of the Fascist doctrine allowed the blending of political desires for past and future; as in the end of section 3, that this untainted spiritual revolution offered a new paradigm. This begs the question of what Fascist doctrine existed, if any, and how this should be understood under an aesthetic perspective, which the rest of this section addresses.

The influence of artists does appear to have impacted Fascism, given the use of aesthetic categories such as essence and proportion as well as the constant beautification of the ideology. Mussolini's 1923 Milan speech proclaims "those who say fascism, say first of all beauty", and his 1924 PNF address defines Fascism as a "doctrine of force, of beauty." (Falasca-Zamponi, 1997, p. 16). Nonetheless, depicting Fascism as inherently aesthetic and therefore distinct from all other political movements in lacking an ideology, which Ulrich Schmid argues (Schmid, 2005, p. 2 & 12) seems excessive. As I will now attempt to prove, Schmid unveils much on the nature of Fascism, its use of myth and aesthetics, and thereby

Fascism's aesthetic roots. Yet he is mistaken to call Fascism an aesthetic phenomenon; it is more plausible to view Fascism featuring aesthetics as a significant component and politically useful tool, but not ideologically lacking or aesthetically dependent. Just like any legitimate political group or ideology, the facets of Fascism were formed around Fascist grievances with the political system. There is little inherently aesthetic about governmental inability to act, national divisions, the harsh conditions of losing a war, or opposing any of these matters. Fascism was a legitimately political reaction to the harsh issues of that time, comparable to other political systems, albeit with a different/stronger use of aesthetics. That use of aesthetics through allegorical myths is not so problematic to make Fascism ideologically barren, however. All political and economic systems feature some conception of myth, Liberalism has Enlightenment, Capitalism has the Invisible Hand, Socialism has social contract theory, but none lack ideological consistency for deriving meaning from this; indeed, these myths seem to strengthen their appeal by providing additional ideological consistency.

Schmid's argument is based upon the stylistic preferences of Fascism and the political use/impact this style has. Distinct from other ideologies, Fascism imposed a proper behaviour blueprint through aesthetics in portraying some things as noble (heroism), or degenerate (pacifism), and through heavy use of allegory and myth. Noteworthy is Schmid's claim that one's background impacts their interpretation of Fascism, which augments my three-fold division in section 1: the early overlooking of the role of aesthetics, followed by the discovery and varied approaches to that role, leading to the current over-emphasis of that role in Fascism. To paraphrase (Schmid, 2005, pp. 127-8), historians focus on results, not questioning if Fascism should truly be described in terms of political content, sociologists look to societal behaviour, understandings of individuality, and the organisation of public and private domains. Art theorists are quick to state their oppositions to a Fascist artist's ideas and style, dismissing them out of hand as mere kitsch and being unnecessarily unreceptive. This

last point hints at the bias that exists in the literature, but also suggests Fascist aesthetics have not been taken seriously enough. Schmid is right to state how promising it is to consider aesthetics as not mere illustration, but a constitutive factor of Fascism (Schmid, 2005, p. 128). In this way, aesthetics is an important tool for Fascism's engagement with the public/political realm and can thus clarify the nature of the Fascist ideology.

The final, in my view, valid contribution of Schmid is that despite the variety of styles in the Fascist aesthetic, there is a consistent inclination to allegory, which Schmid explains as part of the core goal of Fascist aesthetics. Fascism sought "to replace reality with its own demiurgic project. Reality was … 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" (Schmid, 2005, p. 133). As such all works of Fascist aesthetics have some allegorical focus, for instance Enrico Emanuelli's novel *X-Ray of a Night*, which denounces modernist materialism and sees the Fascists introduce spiritual responsibility in modernity (Ben-Ghiat, 1996, pp. 304-309). Mino delle Site's 1932 *Il pilota aliluce* (The pilot of light) is also a good example as a (futurist-style) painting that embodies avant-garde technological prowess and heroic power through its use of clear lines, specific colouration, and metaphors of flight (Schmid, 2005, pp. 132-133).

*Figure 2: Mino Delle Site, The pilot of light*

Regardless, the use of allegory in Fascist aesthetics enables this goal of creating a certain reality, in representing a more beautiful possible world. The allegory becomes a desirable model for the future social reality, affecting people's behavioural patterns and providing a myth-based legitimation of whatever is represented (Schmid, 2005, p. 134). The Fascist aesthetic lays out (parts of) the Fascist ideology in a visual, clear, sensual manner, dictating what is pure or degenerate. As Schmid puts it, "art represents the metaphysical vision of a total state [through] ritual, representations and symbols … the fascist state *was*

what it seemed" (Schmid, 2005, p. 137). Thus, Fascist aesthetics operated with the design of Fascism as its very essence, and a source of its ability to sway the masses. Life had to imitate art, as Fascist art defined not only the design of life, but also its behavioural patterns; repeating the captive strategies of the medieval Catholic church, where the believers were overwhelmed by the beauty of sacral art (Schmid, 2005, pp. 139-40).

Despite these important points, Schmid concludes that Fascism is: "a phenomenon of style. In Fascist systems a 'pure' ideology which would offer itself to structuralistic description can hardly be found" (Schmid, 2005, p. 138). In other words, per Schmid, Fascism lacked a set ideological doctrine and was a loose conglomeration of various notions and visions, as a blueprint for all life that was not limited in any way, for the primary purpose of fascist art was the manifestation of what was represented. Indeed, "Fascism tried to adopt any artistic style which seemed efficient and powerful enough to fulfil the purpose of political propaganda and corporate design" (Schmid, 2005, p. 139).

These points are enlightening in the process of Fascism's development, and the significance of aesthetics in that. However, Schmid, and Falasca-Zamponi, in particular both employ an excessive aestheticization. As part of the relevance of rituals, myths, cults and speeches, Falasca-Zamponi refers to Fascism's lack of doctrinal boundaries at its foundation in 1919 (Falasca-Zamponi, 1997, p. 4) and Schmid refers to the accounts of various historians to support this notion (Schmid, 2005, pp. 127-8). Yet, even if there was no clear record of the doctrine of Fascism, that does not mean there was no orally transmitted doctrine known privately to Fascists, in a setting akin to Hitler's Munich beer hall. Regardless, it *is* the case that the Fascists had a doctrine before 1932 (Gregor, 1979, pp. 205-7). On June 6 1919, the *Programme of the Italian Fascist Movement* was published in the newspaper *Il Popolo d'Italia*, a Fascist-orientated paper founded by Mussolini after his resignation from the socialist paper *Avanti!* over his adoption of a pro-war position (Maulsby, 2014, pp. 136-8). In

this programme, a clear overview is given already of the various demands and visions of the Fascist platform. Stating Fascist solutions to political, social, military, financial problems (Delzell, 1971, pp. 12-3), this 17-point Fascist manifesto circulated two years before the formation of the PNF, and three years before the March on Rome. The aforementioned problems, that Fascism had set itself against, were elaborated further in 1920, under the *Postulates of the Fascist Program*. This outlined the general aims of the Fascist program – such as gathering support for the war effort – and specific matters, from pledging an 8-hour working day legal maximum, to calling for sufficient executive power to combat excessive bureaucracy (Delzell, 1971, pp. 14-7).

Therefore, not only was there a clear written base of Fascist doctrine – and potentially more orally – but this doctrine had substantive ideological convictions in what it stood for and against. The pledges made by the Fascist programme seem to have at least as much ideological elements as aesthetic, though the Fascist aesthetic was always more present in action than in doctrine. It is true that this programme partially consisted of airy speeches and ill-defined points, but that reflects its action-orientated nature. In Mussolini's words: "if we wish to act, we must grasp reality in its broad essentials, without going into minute details" (Delzell, 1971, p. 8). After all, rather than play the electoral game and use lengthy manifestos and political subterfuge, the Fascist plan was first to simply besiege Rome to enforce their demands. Still, in the consolidation of the PNF the Fascist doctrine was further detailed, with a new programme covering each of its facets in November 1921 (Delzell, 1971, pp. 27-37). This programme was later enforced with the creation of a new legislative organ, the Fascist Grand Council, in 1928 (Delzell, 1971, pp. 75-7) – such an endeavour would be pointless if Fascist doctrine was lacking until 1932.

In this way, I find Schmid, and anyone who employs a similar approach, is mistaken to deny that Fascism: "had a clear structure and hence can be compared to any other political

phenomenon such as communism or liberalism" (Schmid, 2005, p. 128). Falasca-Zamponi is likewise too heavy-handed, assuming a lack of ideological substance (despite evidence to the contrary) and over-emphasising aesthetic categories instead.[8] Fascist ideology clearly had aesthetic roots in its birth and development, but it seems these were not the only roots; Fascism's doctrinal/ideological convictions played a large role too, contrary to the addressed claims of part of the existing literature. Thus, the power of representation in shaping the Fascist identity is important but should not be obsessed over to the point that we risk pushing our assumptions as modern scholars over the authentic understandings of Fascists at the time. One must consider relevant socio-historical factors in an impartial manner to avoid falsity, especially given the aforementioned lamentation on many approaching Fascism with bias and forming conclusions so as to appear unsympathetic. I will apply this impartial approach to the Mussolini regime in the following section, clarifying the significance of aesthetics for Fascism plus what this reveals about the normative make-up of Fascist ideology.

## 5. Aesthetics in Mussolini's Regime

Though Mussolini himself had no great interest in art (Witt, 2001, p. 6) , he expressed uncertainty on the possibility of separating 'Italy' and 'Art', realising that Italy's pride in its aesthetic accomplishments would be conducive to the Fascist ideal of historical supremacy (Flint, 1980, p. 49). In other words, Mussolini recognised the cultural and political role of art, and how the masses were moved by it – making it an effective tool. Kate Flint shows that under the Fascist regime, artists had three options. They could support Fascism, with grand murals for Mussolini and the PNF using approved styles that were orderly, disciplined, and

[8] Soucy makes the inverse criticism that Sternhell takes "too much of Fascism's rhetoric at face value, thereby ignoring many of the rationalizations and mystifications perpetrated by such propaganda"; Soucy, 1995, p.10. This augments my argument that authors often mishandle Fascist aesthetics; the propaganda should be rationally investigated but understood as part of a quasi-spiritual doctrine, prone to mysticism and exaggeration.

resembling the new, Fascist spirit. Entering state-organised art competitions was also significant, for the topic of these competitions was decided each year with the explicit aim of orientating "Italian pictorial art towards a Fascist-political conception" (Flint, 1980, p. 51). Second, they could remain neutral, evading the regime's influence as best they could – though this in itself could be a political statement in retreating from the party, and encouraged the provincialism many Italian painters had previously tried to discard. Third, they could oppose the regime through non-promoted art styles, such as the expressionism in various art circles around Rome, or the exhibitions of the anti-fascist *Gruppo dei Sei* (group of six), both in 1929. The official art of the Fascist regime was not monolithic however, with many styles being incorporated in the Fascist aesthetic, provided the content was appropriate. Neither abstract nor modernist art was considered degenerate in Fascist Italy until the late 1930's, unlike in Nazi Germany, and thus the avant-garde, revolutionary Fascist ideology attracted equally revolutionary new art forms. In particular, the influence of Futurism on Fascism was striking, with Marinetti having a close friendship with Mussolini and the ambition to make Futurism the official art of Fascism (Flint, 1980, p. 50). Such connections meant that a condemnation of modernist, abstract art would be a Fascist self-condemnation, another reason why the Fascist aesthetic is such a blend of styles: a neo-classical modernism.

Flint focuses on those artists who supported Fascism in their aesthetic labours, labours of interest to the Fascist regime given their potential as propaganda. The might and right of Fascist Italy could be demonstrated to the world in its architecture and exhibitions, showing both the regime's success and power, and the intuitive merits of the Fascist ideal. But it was also hoped that the Italians would be transformed along with the content of art. Dino Alfieri, director of the Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution (itself an aesthetic display used for political purposes and propaganda), called for "art as shall exalt the people and which the people, advancing towards higher aims, will understand" (Flint, 1980, p. 50). Of note is that

this art would here be understandable to those who were *already* advancing towards higher aims, not vice versa; art that makes sense to those who accepted the Fascist spirit. A year after Alfieri's statement, and four years after the alliance with Nazi Germany, Mussolini had become suspicious of the arts' ability to foster individuality, and the governmental Department of Contemporary Art was established in 1940, with the authority to regulate and restrict the style and content of art. This department's function was promoting and multiplying the artistic energy that "contributes to *defining* the physiognomy of contemporary Italian civilisation" (Flint, 1980, p. 51, emphasis added). It is highly likely this was a watershed in the role and nature of aesthetics in Mussolini's regime.

The daily press also compounded the development of the Fascist aesthetic, with Mario Soldati reporting how America was populated by people whose taste and capacity to discriminate had been replaced with a blind impulse to consume, as part of a capitalist consciousness (Ben-Ghiat, 1996, p. 298). Gaetano Ciocca discussed how Stalinist Russia showed the horrors of a people suffering for trying to overturn millennia-old traditions and thereby tempting the wrath of fate (Ben-Ghiat, 1996, p. 298). With these negative images of the 'other', as perceived by Fascist intellectuals, non-Fascist societies could be denounced, in favour of the values and beliefs that composed the Fascist culture. This official culture of the Fascist regime in the 1930s reflected a forward-looking revolution, whilst the intellectual circles debated on developing a modern aesthetic reflective of the Fascist spiritual revolution.

Fascist writers thereby defined the qualities of Fascism, such as 'spirituality', giving artists a large role in how Fascist values were to be understood. But these values also shaped and directed the Fascist literature's dimensions. A return of realism in Fascist novels was celebrated as the product of the individual creativity that comes about through the spiritual – the Fascist writer should never lose sight of the individual but transfigure and interpret on an inter-personal level. The spiritual ethos of Fascism thus demanded that the writer be more

than a mere reporter, a disinterested non-personality, that he replicate this ethos with "psychologically complex characters whose actions were motivated by ethical or social concerns" (Ben-Ghiat, 1996, p. 301).

Indeed, many novels of American Realism and German *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) were studied by Fascist writers in an effort to surpass them, to develop a new, superior version of modernity. In this process, we find a sentimental nostalgia (the same as Dazzi's in Pound's Fascist cantos), in which what matters, according to critic Luigi De Crecchio, is: "that objectivity which permits an autonomous existence for its characters who have human qualities linked to the spirituality of the artist" (Ben-Ghiat, 1996, p. 304). These studies, then, delivered many criticisms of harshness, coldness, inhumaneness, frigidity, and anti-sentiment, promoting instead a 'spiritual' realism, an approach that revolves around one's individuality and morality. This is a freer, warmer, more aesthetic Fascism which was not the end product, as the regime after the Pact of Steel had developed into something quite different. Indeed, the Ethiopian war and alliance with Germany in 1936 ended much of "the cultural and ideological experimentalism of the early 1930s. Censorship of literature and the press increased, and intellectuals were now discouraged from starting independent publications" (Ben-Ghiat, 1996, p. 310). It seems to me that Schmid's hypothesis of inherently aesthetic Fascism is conceivable only before this event. Though such developments did not remove the aesthetic elements of Fascism, they did diminish them; Fascism became much more of a civic commitment than a beautiful system, shifting the balance between modernity and the national spirit to the latter, with the search for the 'spiritual' now taking place in myths of historical supremacy stemming from the Roman empire, and in the ever-growing need of conquest, primarily directed toward Ethiopia.

The Fascist regime's handling of aesthetics thus changed drastically towards the 1940s, with Italy's situation changing for the worse due to a disastrous series of campaigns. It

seems reasonable to think this precarious situation is why aesthetics and its works were no longer given free reign and seen as an important milestone of the Fascist spirit – instead becoming a controlled, potentially dangerous element to be regulated and diminished. Indeed, the PNF attempted to establish control over artistic life to "protect the artistic patrimony of contemporary art and to explain all its useful, educative content to the nation" (Flint, 1980, pp. 50-1) i.e. to dictate what was acceptable art, and what messages should (not) be taken from it. Based on this divergence in the handling and opinion of aesthetics – and it subsequently being dictated – we can distinguish two distinct regimes before and after the events of 1936. An early, freer one which draws parallels with D'Annunzio's Fiume, where aesthetic themes and styles are heavily present and encouraged, but none being outright excluded – with modern abstract, 'degenerate' art being tolerated, for example. Then, due to the changes of circumstance and the alliance with Nazi Germany, a later regime became distinct. A much colder – and thereby less subversive – aesthetics was implemented by the party, dictating what styles were not acceptable and curbing the influence of the aesthetics that had been at play since the birth of Fascism.

As to why this occurred, certainly concern over the normative power of aesthetics is the primary factor – the Fascist regime was partially built upon this power, so could eventually be threatened by it. But it is likely a more complicated story. Following the works of Benjamin and Gumbrecht, we see that the Fascist aesthetic, through constant allegories of redemption, provided an aura to masses who had long been deprived of it; the salvation of a broken, beaten Italy by the saviour, Mussolini, and the means to a better future, Fascism. This meant that, in the late 1930s, the Fascist regime became self-destructive; only endless war and conquest could ever sate and continue the impressions and frenzied expectations of salvation with which Fascist aesthetics captured the masses (Benjamin, [1936] 2005, pp. 29-30). Just like D'Annunzio's Fiume, Mussolini's Italy used an aesthetic of redemption without

successfully delivering the worldly manifestations of the anticipated results. As such, "starting in the mid-1930s, Mussolini found himself under increasing public pressure to identify new objects to be redeemed and to stage new acts of redemption" (Gumbrecht, 1996, p. 269). The spell of Fascism had not been broken – on the contrary, the Fascist aesthetic that secured the acceptance of the masses and intellectual classes continued to demand results that were no longer being delivered; the defeat of the impure and the redemption of the pure.

Moreover, since the Fascist ideology was not teleological but rather reactionary, a force to react against was always needed. But Italy already had the Fascist regime, its Fascist 'revolution' had already happened and been used as propaganda in the exhibition halls of Rome for many years. There was nothing left to purify *within* Italy, no further political materials for aesthetic redemption. Therefore, "fascism could neither offer new goals to be conquered after the 'redemption' of the nation in 1922 nor guarantee that the state of being 'redeemed' would last for ever. This is probably the main reason why Italy conducted a brutal war of conquest against Ethiopia … whose strategic and politico-economic goals failed to persuade many even in the inner circles of government" (Gumbrecht, 1996, p. 269). The Fascist aesthetic thereby collapsed, with the political no longer able to meet the demands of the aesthetic, and the Fascist war machine born from the necessity of ever greater conquest.

Regardless, monumentality and myth remained at the core of Fascist aesthetics in both the early and late regime, following Mussolini's claim in 1922 that, from then onwards, an 'age of myths' would reign. These myths constructed and popularised the various convictions and values of Fascist ideology, and were then reinforced by constant visual symbolism (Flint, 1980, p. 50). The elements common to the Fascist style were precision and clarity, solidness and simplicity, clean colours and strong models, largely due to the Fascist demand that art should not be a bourgeois privilege but understandable to all (Flint, 1980, p. 51). This is also why murals were a dominant art form in Fascist Italy, as these depictions of

regional or national topics – heroes, war, labour – came in a manner of myth-telling that was like an open book for the masses. In the later regime, these 'masses' grew to mean specifically Italians, with extra-Italian influences denounced as Jewish, particularly after the Italian racial laws were implemented in 1938, in the run up to the Pact of Steel alliance between Italy and Germany. In December 1938, the 'Italianity' debate – the proper extent to which non-Italian influences should exist within the Italian nation and peoples – peaked. The education minister Bottai, referred to in section 3, denounced the influence of the international, anti-traditional, and Jewish, but claimed that Italian good sense and tradition meant Italian artists suffering those influences were not immediately 'diseased'; the dominant position in this debate.

Generally speaking, Mussolini's regime certainly subjugated art to its political purposes. This is shown in the typical Fascist mural, which features "inseparability of painting and propaganda; reliance on national tradition in form and style, and a deliberately public function" (Flint, 1980, p. 53). Like many in the middle period of my distinction of the literature in section 1, Flint affirms that the political and aesthetic are distinct, even if they are intertwined, and that Fascism exploited this link to spread and enforce Fascism upon the masses, finding support in myth-based narratives and constant, inescapable visual reinforcement that pierced public and private life. An example of this mural style propaganda is Arnaldo Carpanetti's 1933 fresco of the 1927 labour charter. This piece demonstrates Fascism's national unity through a varied mass of workers, industry leaders, soldiers, families and so on. The powerful background structures of docks and factories allude to an industrial significance that further adds to Fascism's credence and strength.

*Figure 3: Arnaldo Carpanetti, The labour charter*

George Mosse's considerations align with my own summary of the literature, also being written in what I described as the middle period, when the scholarship became "increasingly aware of the role aesthetics played in [fascism's appeal, a link which] could open up new dimensions in our understanding of fascism" (Mosse, 1996, p. 245). Where once Fascist aesthetics was written off as empty propaganda, and not properly examined, here we see an understanding that such aesthetic may – and likely does – play a large role in explaining and affecting the appeal of Fascism, and the specifics of its ideology. Indeed, though Nazi aesthetics have received greater attention than Fascist, "it was Italy which successfully pioneered the use of aesthetic sensibilities for political purposes" (Mosse, 1996, p. 245). Understanding those sensibilities helps us understand the doctrine of the regime, a notion that I feel is correct but is largely missing in the present-day literature. Before the middle period, this approach was not taken; Fascism was quickly trivialised for having a

ridiculous, exaggerated style that was not realised to be a key part in the appeal and basis of Fascism. It was not realised that "the fascist aesthetic itself reflected the needs and hopes of contemporary society, [that it was] the means through which most people grasped the fascist message, transforming politics into a civic religion" (Mosse, 1996, p. 246). This notion of civic religion is addressed in section 6, but Mosse here understands Fascism as a nationalism made religion, with "its aesthetic articulat[ing] this faith just as it did for the older established religions" (Mosse, 1996, p. 251).

When examining the Fascist aesthetic, the culmination of already existing elements into a politically convenient compound is quite noticeable. The ideal of beauty, defined as the good, true, and Holy, was the centrepiece of this aesthetic, and fulfilled the "longing for a set standard of beauty [that] was deeply ingrained in the European middle classes" (Mosse, 1996, p. 246). Thus, this ideal connected the aesthetic element of beauty with political, ethical, and theological categories, in an uncertain context wherein clear standards were desired. From this it follows that a potentially apolitical aesthetic became political, and that becoming a 'beautiful politics' made Fascism more appealing to the masses. For, as Fascists realised before all others, the nineteenth-century instantiated "a visual age, the age of political symbols, [which became] more effective than any didactic speeches" (Mosse, 1996, p. 247). In other words, the progress of the world ushered in a new period in which visual politics – spectacular demonstrations, rousing speeches, impassioned pledges – was by far the most effective manner of gaining popular support.

Additionally, this populism prompted Fascism to integrate "the masses into a so-called spiritual revolution which represented itself through a largely traditional aesthetic" (Mosse, 1996, p. 247). But this reference of the aesthetic was too grand to be limited to politics alone – Fascism's depictions of the ideal also permeated into the every-day lives of individuals. This ideal, representing virility and discipline, was an aggressive masculinity; the

new, strong and beautiful fascist man was Mussolini's hope for a fascist future, and symbolised a disciplined and committed Fascist mind (Mosse, 1996, p. 250). Every man was expected to train himself, to become the 'new Fascist man', the embodiment of the modern, triumphant Fascist spirit, and thereby making his own body a reminder to all of the dynamic strength of Fascism.

This new man was the subject of much of Fascist aesthetics, as it was essentially an aesthetic manifestation of Fascism: a beautiful, superior man, from a beautiful, superior system. Pippo Rizzo's 1929 *Schermidori* (Fencers), shows two such men endowed with fighting spirit, courage, and strength. This is demonstrated in their action in duelling, lack of face shielding and the strong, clear lineation used in the painting. Also observe the protrusions of light, a common Futurist technique, which align with the fencers' hands in a manner akin to Atlas holding up the Earth. This is analogous to the Fascist ideal that the strong Fascist man brings security and prosperity to the nation, whilst the weak pacifists would allow corruption and decay, as in section 1. A further example is Enrico Felisari's 1940 *Il seminatore dei gloriosi destini* (The sower of glorious destinies). In a notably harsh style, Mussolini sows seeds alongside other hard-working, muscular men. The seeds represent the coming of a better future, and the new Fascist men, who understand the Fascist worldview and are physically capable of acting upon it, can plant the seeds and secure their culmination. Additionally, one of Eugenio Baroni's statues at the Foro Mussolini sport complex is noteworthy. Many Fascist statues remain there, but this sculpture of a youthful, adventurous, and virile man well captures the physical and mental beauty of the new Fascist man. Composed in his goals, he hails the new dawn and his comrades under the eagle's gaze.

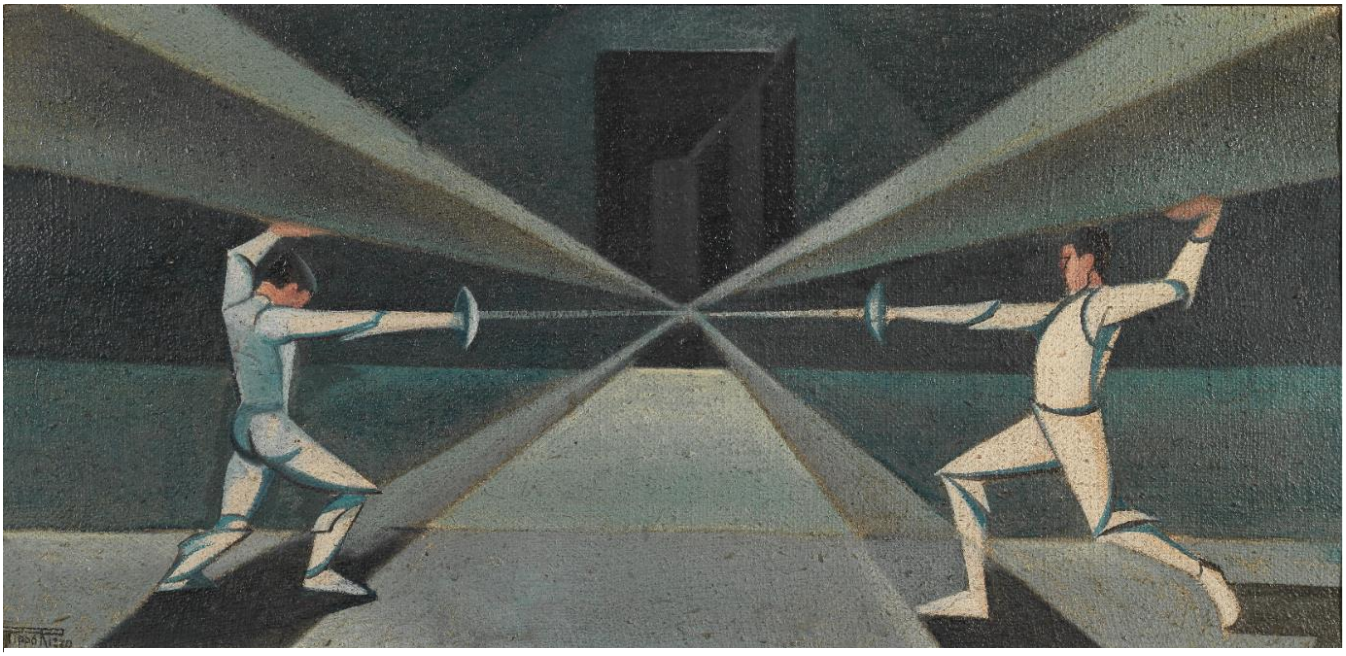

*Figure 4:Pippo Rizzo, Fencers*

*Figure 5: Enrico Felisari, The sower of glorious destinies*

*Figure 6:Eugenio Baroni, Foro Mussolini statue*

The Fascist aesthetic behind such works drew strength from an already existing consensus – this chameleon-like ability to extol whatever would garner the most support was indeed one of its greatest strengths. Fascist politics however did invent something new: "a political party based upon a civic religion which encompassed all aspects of life" (Mosse, 1996, p. 249). This was a spiritual revolution, open to those who could see the world in the way required by the Fascist spirit. As part of this politics, aesthetics "shaped the fascist view of man, of his surroundings and of politics. It was a cement which held fascism together … traditional in its forms and dynamic in its movement, fascist aesthetic reflected fascism

itself[, symbolizing] a revolutionary dynamic which was supposed to lead to a better future" (Mosse, 1996, p. 251).

An interesting suggestion, which I will discuss in the following section to conclude this project, is that the "aesthetic of fascism should be put into the framework of fascism as a civic religion" (Mosse, 1996, p. 245). In other words, per this suggestion, Fascism shared civic religion's primary concern with the nature of state and nation and referred to Sacral beauty for justification, as Fascism was "a faith which could not be explained solely in rational terms, something historians in the past forgot" (Mosse, 1996, p. 246). This point finds support in Mussolini's descriptions of the spirit of Fascism, which are detailed in the next section, in which I discuss the revelations of the Fascist aesthetic upon Fascism's nature.

## 6. The Nature of Fascism

In section 2, I covered different ways in which the political and the aesthetic can interact with one another, as well as possible implications of this. In section 3, I explained the context relevant to any work on Fascism, detailing the important factors of Fascism's birth and what impact these had on the (desirability and structure of the) Fascist ideology. In section 4, I investigated the formation of the Fascist ideology, in the roots and doctrine of the Fascist regime, showing a heavy – but not exclusive – aesthetic influence alongside the ideological component that some authors claim to be non-existent. And in section 5, I explored the Fascist regime proper, from the regime's handling of aesthetics as first empowering, and then subversive, to the possible roles artists had in the regime, and the way in which the Fascist aesthetic created a model of beauty that citizens were expected to comply with, in the 'new Fascist man'. In this final section, I conclude from all this that the aesthetic component we have examined in the Fascist ideology and regime was significant,

but only as a tool – especially after 1936. Fascism certainly used aesthetics to further its political goals and capture the minds of the masses, but despite the understandings of some present-day literature[9] that Fascism was an aesthetic phenomenon, I argue that this aesthetic component was not so strong as that. Though the controversial claim that Fascism was a religious phenomenon would require its own thesis; following Emilio Gentile, I argue that Fascism's aesthetic content was normatively equal, then post-1936 dominated by an ideological content which is most plausibly understood as a civic religion. I will thus answer my research question with the finding that aesthetics did play a significant role, and thereby reveals some of Fascism's structure, but was not so strong as to make Fascism an exclusively aesthetic phenomenon.

This investigation is best done by applying the discussions and revelations of earlier sections to the more foundational Fascist doctrine, which does not so easily yield to whatever theory is applied to it. In what follows, I use Charles Delzell's translated collection of all keynote Fascist speeches, manifestos, programmes, and pledges. The 1932 *Doctrine of Fascism*, for example, proclaims:

> The Fascist conception of life is a religious one, in which man is viewed in his immanent relation to a higher law, endowed with an objective will transcending the individual and raising him to conscious membership in a spiritual society. Those who perceive nothing beyond opportunistic considerations in the religious policy of the Fascist regime fail to realize that Fascism is not only a system of government but also and above all a system of thought.
>
> In the Fascist conception of history, man is man only by virtue of the spiritual process to which he contributes as a member of the family, the social group, the

[9] The worst offenders are Schmid; Falasca-Zamponi; and Witt. Additionally, Andreotti; Barnes; and Billiani & Pennacchietti follow this trend to a lesser degree. All are listed in the bibliography.

> nation, and in function of history to which all nations bring their contribution. Hence the great value of tradition in records, in language, in customs, in the rules of social life. (Delzell, 1971, p. 93)

This Doctrine, the most foundational blueprint of Fascism available, here describes Fascism as action *and* thought; a political framework with the ideal content of an organic conception enveloped in a certain life-view and philosophy which expresses 'higher' truths and exerts a spiritual influence. It is for this reason that "many of the practical expressions of Fascism … can only be understood when considered in relations to its general attitude toward life. A spiritual attitude" (Delzell, 1971, p. 92). In other words, Fascism is not just vitriolic action and dynamic violence, not such spectacle and speeches, but also a 'higher' philosophy that requires that specific understanding of reality for its principles to also be understandable. This account reaches its religious peak, bearing a striking resemblance to Dharmic Buddhism, in stating that Fascism sees individuals and generations bound by a common mission which:

> suppressing the instinct for life closed in a brief circle of pleasure, builds up a higher life, founded on duty, a life free from the limitations of time and space, in which the individual, by self-sacrifice, the renunciation of self-interest, by death itself, can achieve that purely spiritual existence in which his value as a man consists. [Unlike other doctrines which place the centre of life outside man, in Fascism] by the exercise of his free will, man can and must create his own world. (Delzell, 1971, p. 92)

The aesthetic element is still present in this doctrine, a part of this quasi-sacred spiritual process. Fascism demands man to be active, to be victorious, to be superior in all ways. But it makes the same demand of the nation, and of mankind – hence culture becomes sublime, and a nation's value is determined by its prowess (Delzell, 1971, p. 93). Aesthetic

endeavours are a core part of this, given their normative potential through allegory and symbolism, reinforcing or denouncing those norms which are part of the moral judgements that the Doctrine states no action is exempt from. Still, despite the utility-based presence of aesthetics, the doctrine here appears to be more a phenomenon of zealotry than aesthetics, even stating that the Fascist conception of life is a religious one (Delzell, 1971, p. 93).

Flint also touches upon Fascism's special relation to religion, specifically Catholicism. Early Fascism was opposed to both, with Mussolini writing the anti-clerical novel *The Cardinal's Mistress* in 1909, accusing the clergy of occupying Rome through the Vatican. However, Mussolini recognised the use of existing propaganda apparatus in Catholicism, leading to the later affirmation of the Vatican in his 1921 first Chamber of Deputies speech (Delzell, 1971, pp. 24-5) and the 1925 reconciliation between the regime and the Vatican (Flint, 1980, p. 51). In Mussolini's acts as politician-artist, we see a blurring of politician and prophet, where Mussolini is as infallible as the Pope, Christ-like in calling himself the masses' flesh and spirit, and often depicted as a prophet, with figures focused on broadcasts of his speeches as if to a priest's sermon (Flint, 1980, p. 52). Two pieces of art from the 1939 Cremona Prize, a contest of Fascist-favouring art, demonstrate this last point well. The first is the second-place piece, Luigi Stracciari's *ascoltanti il parole del duce* (Listening to the words of the Duce), the second is the winner, Luciano Ricchetti's *In ascolto* (Listening). These pieces demonstrate that thoughtful reverence of Mussolini and his words, through the focus of groups – respectively, a village featuring a group of the PNF's youth movement from 1937 onwards, the *Gioventù Italiana del Littorio* (Italian Youth of the Lictor) and a family. Both are huddled around the radio, being as close as possible to the words of their *Duce* (Leader); the family's neighbours loiter at the door to also hear these words that are portrayed as a gift. The subjects are average citizens of Italy, with stereotypical family

compositions and a typical village scene – and these therefore easily-relatable figures all face the radio, not even the babies look elsewhere, but render respectful attention unto the Duce.

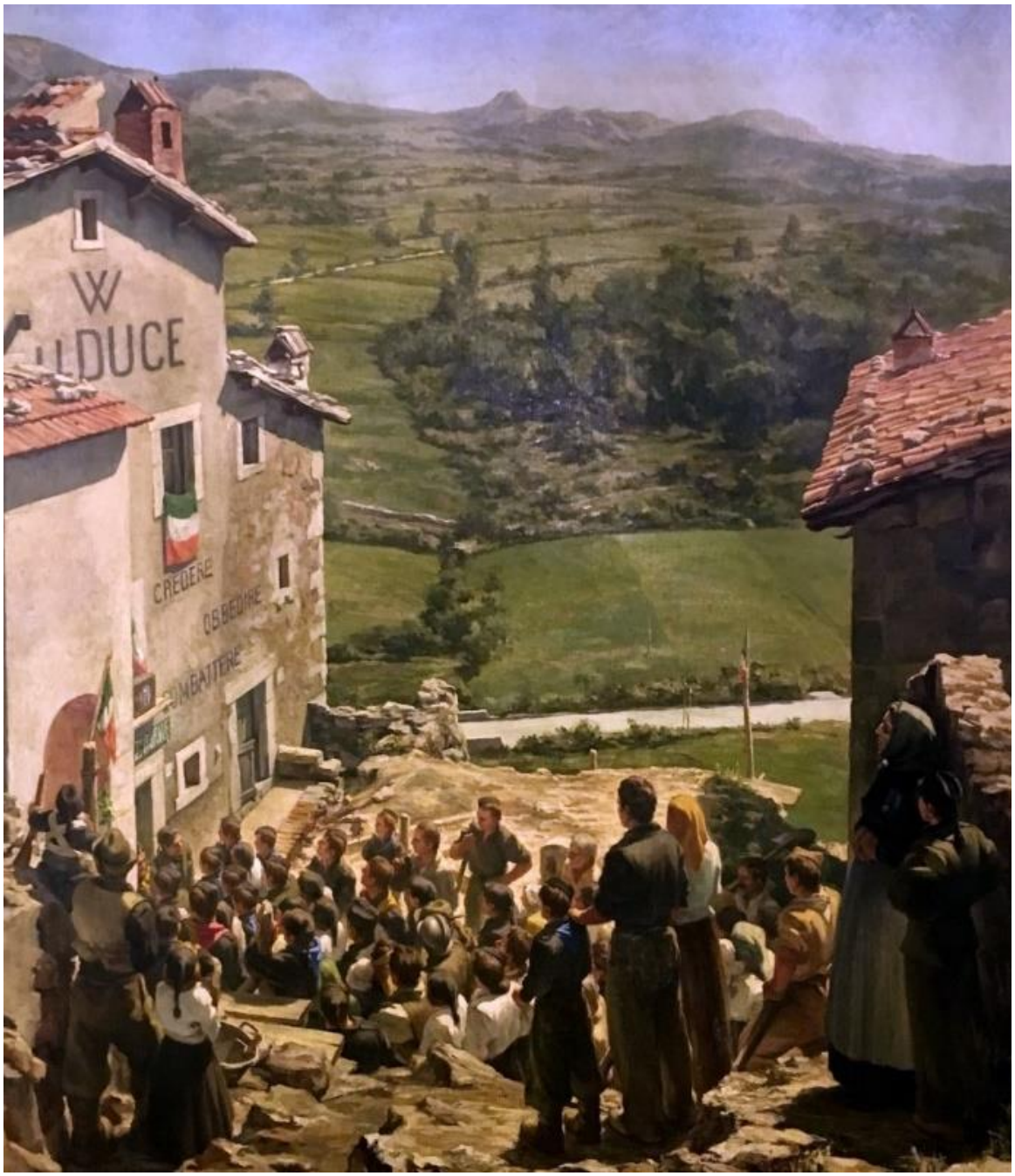


*Figure 7: Luigi Stracciari, Listening to the words of the Duce*

*Figure 8: Luciano Ricchetti, Listening*

Of additional note is the importance of martyrdom in Fascism and Catholicism. Mussolini inflated the number of Fascist martyrs and appealed to the name of these dead – and those of WWI – to affirm Fascism's values. Fascist violence was saintly and moral, and the Fascist ideal was consecrated in the blood of Fascist youths. This cult of death and martyrdom thus played a huge role in the Fascist regime. Indeed, the PNF's statutes "reserved important honors for the fallen in Fascism. … Every party branch also kept a shrine where the memory of the dead rested. Pennons of Fascist groups were named after the fallen. The regime often dedicated to the memory of single martyrs the inauguration of new works or classrooms in schools. And the Fascist Association of Families of the Fallen, Disabled and Wounded for the Revolution was constantly represented at official Fascist festivities" (Falasca-Zamponi, 1997, p. 22). Additionally, the 1932 'Exhibition of the Revolution' which celebrated the tenth anniversary of Fascism in Italy, had as centrepiece the 'Sacrarium of the

Martyrs', which deified Fascism and its martyred legions (Affron & Antliff, 1997, p. 15). Fascism drew justification in such sacrifice; the blood of the fallen comrades consecrates the Fascist ideal, makes it more Holy and worthwhile, just as in Catholicism, where the martyr's blood strengthens the faith (Flint, 1980, p. 52). There is also a resemblance between the idealisation of Mary in Catholicism, and of motherhood in Fascism, with both depicted as an ideal standard for women, providing and securing the future (Flint, 1980, p. 52).

The previously examined allegories that were both potently aesthetic and of great importance in Fascism's success seldom lacked these more theological themes of sacrifice, devotion, and Mussolini as divine redeemer. But, as is common in the Fascist aesthetic, this Catholic symbolism was blended with another opposing source: Pagan Rome. From this source comes the ever-present symbols of the Fasces and the lictor, as well as the monumentality that delivered a Benjamin-esque aura of grandeur and served as the embodiment of Fascism's "faith, of its force, its size and its power" (Flint, 1980, pp. 52-3). However, this monumentality was strikingly unique, especially in contrast to the Nordicism of Nazi Germany; here, the Mediterranean character of Italy was extolled, the spirit of which Fascist architect Carlo Rava claimed would "guarantee the regaining of pre-eminence" (Flint, 1980, p. 53). Such monumental character lies in the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, Rome, designed in 1937 by Giovanni Guerrini, Ernesto Padula and Mario Romano. This is one of the best-known examples of Fascist architecture, with its strikingly neo-classical yet modern littorio style. The symmetry of the building, nine arches wide and six high on all four sides, alongside the thick, straight marble columns gives a pure and powerful impression. Each statue represents a specific domain, from philosophy to navigation, each serving as a visual and ideological reinforcement of Fascism's absolute spiritual campaign against all that is impure, degenerate. The Milan Central Rail station designed in 1931 by Ulisse Stacchini demonstrates similar themes. The building's decisively straight contours make a powerful

impression and exude an aura of monumentality, of strength that will not decay. The station is also significant for still having Fascist symbols, such as the Fasces and eagles that demonstrate a strong nation whose symbols will last for millennia, and still be imposing even then – à la Albert Speer's ruin value theory.

*Figure 9: Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana*

*Figure 10: Milan station body*

*Figure 11: Milan station detail*

Luigi Montanarini's 1940 mural *Apoteosi del Fascismo* (Apotheosis of Fascism), also holds many significant details. The banners and lictor of the Roman empire, alongside the battleships and aeroplanes, represents the Janus-faced nostalgic modernism of the Fascist aesthetic ideology. The masses and symbols – from the Fasces to the flags and figures – signify Fascism's specifically Mediterranean-Italian character via key parts of Italian history.

*Figure 12: Luigi Montanarini, Apotheosis of Fascism*

In this light, it is not evident that Fascism's aesthetic content is normatively dominant, and it is more plausible that Fascism is revealed to be a civic religion, as Gentile suggested. He summarises: "Fascism was born as a charismatic movement [… united by] a state of mind, an experience of faith which took shape in the myth of a new political religion … risen through the purifying fire of war, consecrated by the blood of the heroes and martyrs" (Gentile, 1997, p. 41). This manifests itself in a regime that, whilst harbouring strong and

consistent aesthetic categories – such as the allegories discussed in section 4 – nonetheless seems more skewed towards the actual redemption than the mere depictions of it. Thus it can be said that the Fascist State has the nature of a church, exalting the sacrifice of its martyrs, reaffirming the heroic, noble philosophy they died for, and looking with reverence to the coming of the new Fascist epoch, a spiritual awakening in the coming of the new Fascist man (Gentile, 1996, p. 53).

Naturally, these matters are not so straightforward. This cultish practice of death, redemption, sacrifice, and honour is truly present in Fascism; in understanding life as struggle, a continuous conquest towards the virility and potential of the new Fascist man, sacrifice becomes necessary to make history progress (Falasca-Zamponi, 1997, p. 31 & 33). In this, the prominence of soldiers in the Fascist columns, as well as the previously discussed impact of WWI and the mutilated victory, is important. It is no coincidence that ex-Arditi (elite shock troops) feature so heavily in (former Arditi commander) D'Annunzio's Fiume and Mussolini's Italy, nor that the blackshirts were modelled on the Arditi, who became largely Fascist sympathisers, with a minority of socialists (Salvante, 2016). Those who were never far from death and God in the trenches would develop a certain understanding of life, in which comradery, sacrifice, struggle and death were all appreciated as necessities to survive, to succeed. This theory is backed up by the doctrines and policy of the regime. According to the *Doctrine of Fascism*, much like the soldier, a Fascist "conceives of life as duty and struggle and conquest" (Delzell, 1971, p. 99). The same text later compares citizens to soldiers, with an individual in the Fascist regime organised in the same way as a soldier in a regiment (Delzell, 1971, p. 105). Additionally, Mussolini's regime aimed to:

> produce a homogenized and unified polity that would then be ready for combat. A new order would be established in which fascist Italians, in the name of the nation and its *duce*, followed their duty as citizen-soldiers. … And the new style that

> fascism invoked sought to transform the people into warriors. For this purpose … the regime resorted to other myths and rituals in addition to those surrounding the Godlike figure of Mussolini. (Falasca-Zamponi, 1997, pp. 89-90)

This focus on turning citizens into soldiers with a view to conquest is also reflected in the first article in the *Statute of the National Fascist Party*, which describes the PNF as a "civil militia, under the order of the DUCE, in the service of the Fascist State" (Delzell, 1971, p. 77). This militant element also applies to Fascism's opposition of liberalism and democracy as being weak, peaceful, feminine, and self-definition as strong, virile, and manly (Falasca-Zamponi, 1997, p. 23). And it applies to Fascism's extolling violence and depiction of war as man's only hope, only reason for living, only will; only war could clean away the rotten and passive, and secure the healthy and strong (Falasca-Zamponi, 1997, p. 31). A key goal of Fascism was thus the transformation of the masses into soldiers, a great army that could conquer and prove the virility and prestige of Italy (Falasca-Zamponi, 1997, pp. 40-1). Thus, Fascist norms appear to stem at least as much from a zealous ideological conviction or the punitive vision of a combatant of a most deadly and hellish war at least as much as the discussed aesthetic component. At any rate, the key point for this project is that, whilst we have previously seen that the aesthetic component was significant, it is seemingly dominated by this zealous conviction of conquest, might and supremacy.

Such a notion of the supreme Duce as a strong warrior leading the masses, who as in section 2.2 are moulded in his hands like the marble of a sculptor, is reflected in more artistic works, such as Alfredo Ambrosi's 1930 *Aeroritratto di Mussolini aviatore* (Aerial portrait of Mussolini the aviator). The outline of Mussolini seamlessly blends with the image of Rome, reflecting the Fascist ideal of a strong nation under a strong leader, as well as the highly personal nature of this role, as per accounts that only Mussolini had the charisma to be Duce (Gumbrecht, 1996, p. 254). The Palazzo Braschi pictured in 1934, designed by Cosimo

Morelli takes this theme to its extreme. Mussolini's former political HQ is adorned with a series of *si* (yes) for the 1934 PNF vote, as well as Mussolini's face. The face appears omniscient, peering down upon all, never breaking its concentration upon, and connection with, the masses. This again reflects the unique role of the Duce, unrestrained to mere politics and present in all aspects of societal life, to the point of mass intrusion.

*Figure 13: Alfredo Ambrosi, Aerial portrait of Mussolini the aviator*

*Figure 14: Palazzo Braschi (1934)*

Additionally, Primo Conti's 1929, *La prima ondata* (The first wave) depicts Mussolini as a brave, gallant commander, towering above others and thereby perceiving what they cannot. The colours of Italy and the black of the Arditi intertwine; the nation uniting with the soldiers, marching over a representation of communism, a prime target of the Fascist legions.

*Figure 125: Primo Conti, The first wave*

Therefore, I find a Palingenetic-Zealotic account of Fascism, built upon the work of Mosse and Gentile, in addition to Roger Griffin and Stanley Payne[10], the most promising from these revelations of the Fascist aesthetic. Such an account cites Fascism as utilising the framework of civil religion, rooted primarily in myths of radical revolution towards an all-encompassing spiritual rebirth/redemption of nation and citizens, expelling all that is depicted as corrupt and mediocre. This project adds to that debate by defining the contents of the redemptive allegories that are an essential part of the Palingenetic myth, and in revealing new implications of Gentile's civil religion theory, through its domination of the aesthetic domain.

## Conclusion

To conclude, from writers who are too quick to distance themselves from Fascist ideals and persons to give a fair and thorough examination, to unchecked and temporally distant assumptions on integral components in the topic of Fascism, the scholarship has made mistakes on the specifics of Fascist ideology. Based upon this literature I have summarised three distinct groups in the approach and results of previous works. Moreover, I have tried to show that the most recent group is often flawed in overapplying aesthetic categories and inaccurately dismissing ideological convictions in Fascism. Whilst this group does not employ the unchecked assumptions of the other groups, as aesthetics is no longer assumed to be irrelevant, it does not match with the picture that Fascist doctrine and figures provide. As such, despite the present-day scholarship, within the complex normative components of Fascism I believe a zealous ideological conviction is just as significant as the discussed aesthetic component, with socio-political developments, particularly in 1936, leading to the domination of the aesthetic component.

[10] See Griffin, 1991 & Payne, 2003.

Aesthetic elements are truly present in the doctrine and development of Fascism. But they could not accurately be called more than a means in the Fascist system, a tool of control over the masses and a (temporary) solution to the contradictions of Fascist narratives; such as constructing the proper identity of Italians who were united only in 1861, a mere 61 years before Mussolini's March on Rome. Political reconciliation between myths of Roman grandeur and supremacy of the 'Mediterranean spirit', with divergent cultures and histories across Italy's regions seems impossible in actuality. But, moving the masses with a grand spectacle, inspiring them to act and comply encourages the desire for the spirit of Fascism which created, and is extolled by, these captivating spectacles.

Swept into a puritanical frenzy and entranced by the Fascist aesthetic, when the regime could no longer manifest the grand and pure scenes that had so often been depicted, war – and (self-)destruction – was the only possible outcome. Encouraged by depictions of Fascism as Redemption, and Mussolini as Redeemer, just as the regime was built upon myths and allegories of martyrs, conquest and triumph, blood was demanded: from those who had not yet been redeemed or who had failed to redeem. In this case, the false prophet was executed and crudely hung from a gas station for all to see, breaking the political spectacle that induced symbols and rituals, festivals and celebrations, from which Fascism grew (Falasca-Zamponi, 1997, p. 185). Thus ends the captivating spectacles of Italian Fascism.

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