

# ITALIAN FASCISM AND CULTURE: SOME NOTES ON INVESTIGATION

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**Resumen:** In the following article we will illustrate some of the most actual and fertile tendencies in the study of Italian fascism and of its relationship to culture. We will start off from the viewpoint that fascism in Italy succeeded in obtaining a high degree of popular support. Following Renzo De Felice, it could be argued that mass *consenso* (consensus) was crucial to Mussolini's survival. Presenting itself as the only choice for the new Italy, fascism did thus in a very real sense reach a certain degree of – albeit unstable- gramscian *egemonia* (hegemony). The latter was in its turn the consequence not only of the use of force, but also of a careful orchestration of public life and, on a higher level, of aesthetics, of culture. Hence, in a second part of our study, we will turn to some of the most interesting, so-called 'culturalist', studies of fascist, mostly visual, culture. We will conclude with an analysis of Italian fascism as a form of secular myth, as a political religion in which the mentioned fascist aesthetics also played a crucial role.

**Palabras Clave:** culture, fascism, Gramsci, Italy, Mussolini, myth.

## 1. THE LEGACY OF RENZO DE FELICE AND ANTONIO GRAMSCI

The past two decades, the study of Italian fascism has more and more been oriented towards a 'cultural', inner understanding of the phenomenon. There seems to be a growing awareness that 'fascism' in general, i.e. the generic notion, and more specifically the Italian variant, was as much the product of economic and social determinants as it was a state of mind, an ideology that also comprised 'culture' in a broad sense. Of course Italian fascism was first and foremost an ideology in the abstract sense of the word, but it could also be argued that

domains such as visual propaganda, the written word, the arts et cetera were central components in the establishment of what can effectively be called 'fascist culture'. This awareness might at first sight seem obvious, but it has not always been regarded as such.

In fact, it is only since the quite controversial and even provocative, but nonetheless very convincing Mussolini-biography by Renzo De Felice<sup>1</sup> that the notion of popular consensus has been the subject of open and vivid debate. Following the publication of the 1974 volume entitled *Mussolini il duce: Gli anni del consenso 1929-1936*, numerous studies have appeared concerning De Felice and the notion of consensus, almost dividing the historiography of Italian fascism in two camps: a pro- and an anti-defelicean one<sup>2</sup>. However emotions might have run high, today there seems to be some sort of silent agreement concerning the existence of a – albeit limited- consensus, in the form of a sort of 'give-and-take' situation: the fascist government seems to have obtained and consolidated power by means of a subtle combination of coercion on the one and more or less 'spontaneous' collaboration by the population on the other hand.

It is the nature of the notion 'spontaneous' that contains the solution to the dilemma: how did the fascists, who were notoriously violent, trick the Italian population into letting themselves being governed? De Felice, who is considered the godfather of (Italian) historiography of Italian fascism, did not have a clear reply to this question. How can we then find an answer to the problem of the apparent spontaneity of consensus? A possible answer to this question are the theories put forward by another Italian intellectual: Antonio Gramsci.

Contrary to De Felice, Gramsci did not only influence the historiography of Italian fascism. His importance goes far beyond that, as important currents in European and Anglo-Saxon contemporary, mostly left-wing, critical thinking bear the imprint of his thinking<sup>3</sup>. It would take us too far, in the context of this limited study, to illustrate the various ways in which Gramsci was of pivotal importance to modern historiography, and Theory in general. Rather, we will focus on one crucial notion of his verbal instrumentarium: the concept of hegemony or *egemonia*.

Gramsci's thinking can be defined as an evolved kind of Marxism, which has distanced itself from 'economist' Historical Materialism and which takes into account the importance of 'ideological superstructures' (Marsh; Stoker, 1995: 252-255). The mentioned notion of hegemony has been defined in various ways, not in the least due to the fragmentary nature of Gramsci's prison writings, the *Quaderni del carcere* (Gramsci, 2001, 1-4)<sup>4</sup>. Femia (1975:29) adopted the notion in a very broad, all-encompassing sense and saw *egemonia* as

“a situation wherein a social group or class is ideologically dominant”.

Such a definition, interesting as it may be, does not provide a satisfactory tool for a profound investigation of fascism. It is in the work of Walter L. Adamson that we find a more satisfying definition:

“...hegemony refers to the consensual basis of any given political regime within civil society, i.e., roughly what Weber meant by legitimation, though with a greater sensitivity to the interweaving of consent and culture. Hegemony in this sense is nothing less than the conscious or unconscious diffusion of the philosophical outlook of a dominant class in the customs, habits, ideological structures, political and social institutions, and even the everyday 'common sense' of a particular society” (Adamson 1980:627)<sup>5</sup>.

As has been said concerning De Felice, power is not only obtained by force (coercion), but as much so by controlling thought, by the development and the spreading –in an active or in a passive way- of a discourse containing the elements that legitimize the exercise of power. In order to obtain and maintain power, the ideological superstructures (politicians,

institutions, the *Stato*) are often supported by civil society or *società civile* (Bates, 1975: 353). This social group then consists of an intellectual upper or higher middle class which helps refine and spread the ideological discourse.

Antonio Gramsci did not explicitly define Italian fascism as a regime which obtained a high degree of hegemony. Rather, he spoke of a 'lower' form of hegemony, more sustained by the use of coercion, namely Caesarism, *cesarismo*<sup>6</sup>. In this regard however, there is a fact that needs to be taken into consideration, namely that Gramsci developed the notion of hegemony as a privileged eye witness of fascist politics, and violence<sup>7</sup>, in action: hegemony always being accompanied by a certain degree of consensus (Williams, 1960: 591), we can conclude that Italian fascism indeed obtained some degree of hegemony, even if the extent to which it did is subject to debate<sup>8</sup>. Indeed, if we adopt the defelicean thesis, Italian fascism obtained a certain degree of popular consensus and it relied not only on coercion, but also on active as well as passive indoctrination. To this we can add the observation, made by Eley (1984: 463), that hegemony was not static but dynamic, in the making, negotiable, as was in our opinion Italian fascism itself.

The central notion in the hegemony-debate is power, how to obtain and maintain it. Gramsci located power as much in coercion as he stressed the importance of language, of discourse, of culture in general. These last elements can be mighty weapons, especially in the hands of a dominant intellectual class. As Ghirardo (1996: 347) observed,

“Antonio Gramsci astutely recognized the importance of obtaining the spontaneous consent of the masses through non-coercive activities in order to maintain hegemony, but while he theorized it, Mussolini instinctively realized it and developed a broad range of initiatives designed to ensure consent and consensus. Gramsci recognized that for Mussolini to maintain hegemony, 'organic intellectuals' would be necessary to produce the means for achieving consensus. How they did so, has not been subjected to scholarly analysis”.

Initially, mainly force was used, but in order to control the minds of the Italian population, a more subtle kind of control was needed, namely control through rhetoric, discourse and visual symbolism and propaganda. Lears (1985: 590)

saw these as crucial factors in the establishment of fascist control over Italian society:

“The rhetoric of a dominant culture may contain more than clues to its hegemony. A number of historians and literary critics have begun to insist that language, the ground of meaning, is a contested terrain. Fredric Jameson complained that Marxists are too preoccupied with unmasking mystifications and too little concerned with the utopian promise often implicit in ideology. How can one explain fascism, he asked, without some reference to the longings it claimed to fulfil? This stress on the coexistence of ideology and utopia can be brought to a variety of cultural forms”.

## 2. SOME CULTURALIST APPROACHES TO ITALIAN FASCISM

The observations made on consensus and hegemony bring us to some recent studies which have shed new light upon the nature, the inner functioning, of fascist society, or at least on part of it. Rather than focusing on abstract ideological notions, these mostly quite limited case studies focus on fascist –for the most part visual- culture in some of its most diverse manifestations. They do not only look for the ‘fascist in culture’, but also for the ‘culture in fascist’, as they underbuild contemporary research into the cultural origins of Italian fascism, which has recently even been pinned down as a form of ‘political religion’ (cf. infra). In the following, we will illustrate some of the most interesting of these ‘culturalist’ studies on Italian fascism.

The most iconic researcher upon whom we investigate is Jeffrey Schnapp. Schnapp is the author of the acclaimed “Fascinating Fascism” (1996a). In this article in the April 1996 edition of the *Journal of Contemporary History*, in which researchers from around the globe explored the way in which fascism ‘aestheticized’ politics, Schnapp (1996b:238) made the following observation:

“Unable definitively to resolve the question of its identity by recourse to the utopias of theory and technology, eager to make the nationalist myths of the Risorgimento its own, fascism often sought answers to its identity crisis in the domain of culture”.

Indeed Schnapp underlines the fact that the fascist regime tried to create a new, ‘italo-

fascist’ identity through a large-scale control of culture, visual as well as purely intellectual. Apart from a study on the 1932 Exposition of the Fascist Revolution, the so-called *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* (Schnapp 2003), Schnapp’s thinking is best illustrated by his *Staging Fascism: 18 BL and the Theater of Masses for Masses* (1996a), in which he analyzes the fascist play *18 BL*, first staged in Florence in 1934.

This play, created by Alessandro Blasetti, was presented as a model for the new, fascist theatre. It was intended to ‘fascinate’ the public, the protagonist being a World War I army truck, *BL*. Thus, one of the major originary myths of Italian fascism, the Great War, was staged, but not for long. Whereas in Nazi Germany the so-called *Thingspiele*, a sort of interactive theatre comparable to *18 BL*<sup>9</sup>, had considerable success, *18 BL* failed miserably among the disappointment of the public and its creators. In his analysis of the case of *18 BL*, Schnapp illustrates how fascism tried, in a very literal sense, to stage itself, to show itself to the outside world. We will see that it did this in very different ways.

Schnapp’s study is a very useful tool for the analysis of fascist externality, for fascism’s ‘aesthetic predisposition’, but it has one major flaw, consequence no doubt of its narrow focus: the author convincingly illustrates what the fascists said and wanted, yet pays too little attention to what they accomplished, and did not accomplish. As has been said, from the point of view of propaganda and the aestheticizing of politics, *18 BL* was a flop. This last element seems to be taken into lesser account by Schnapp, who seems to be focusing very much on the intention, ignoring in some way the result...<sup>10</sup>

More convincing, on a slightly different level, is the work of the already mentioned Dianne Ghirardo. Apart from a study on the mentioned Exposition of the Fascist Revolution (Ghirardo, 1992), Ghirardo investigates how the fascist regime used architecture to enhance popular consensus and stimulate the creation of community feeling. This was already the case in her *City and Theater: The Rhetoric of Fascist Architecture* (Ghirardo, 1990), in which she pointed out that the so-called ‘new cities’ or *città nuove* were crucial elements in Italian fascism’s attempt to literally ‘reshape’ Italy. Beginning with an analysis of the reshaping of

Mussolini's hometown Predappio, near Forlì, Ghirardo proceeded into a general view of fascist town planning in Italy. From her study it becomes clear that fascism adopted whatever style could fit its needs. Even modernist, 'leftist' architecture in this way found its way into the fascist architectural language, as it was stripped of its ideological content. The 'new' architectural style, which would eventually culminate in the so-called *stile littorio*, was, through its association with the new regime, seen as fascist, and it was to enhance community feeling (Ghirardo, 1990:186-193).

Ghirardo's work is a very valuable illustration of the role of architecture in the creation of the new fascist man and society, myths central to fascist ideology (cf. infra). Ghirardo does not go so far as Schnapp did, and realizes that architecture, visual culture, was on the one hand a major factor in the creation of consensus –as becomes clear from her *Città Fascista* (Ghirardo, 1996)-, but that, on the other hand, it does not represent all of fascism. It was a means to an end, an assertion which of course does not imply that all goals embedded in architecture were necessarily met. Moreover, Ghirardo points out the difficulty of judging fascist architecture. It should be analyzed on its own means, as should indeed be all cultural manifestations, not in the least recent exploits:

“The most recent response to fascist building has been the plan to tear out via de Fori Imperiali (via dell'Impero) from Piazza Venezia to the Colosseum and recover the remains of the ancient Roman imperial forum: and in the process, the current state is no less selective about the history it chooses to display than Mussolini was in his” (Ghirardo, 1990:193).

The key word in recent studies of Italian fascist culture is self representation. Indeed, fascism relied highly on the image it presented of itself. It could be characterized, as Maria Rosa Chiapparo (2002: 416-417) asserted in her study of the fascist myth or 'Romanness' or *romanità* (cf. infra), as 'auto-referential':

“[...] nous utilisons le terme d'‘autoréférentialité’ pour indiquer la tendance du fascisme, et de toutes les dictatures en général, à se reconnaître comme système compact, distinct de tout ce qui est autre que soi, et qui communique à travers sa propre représentation, faite de symboles et de mythes”.

The fascist regime staged itself, placed itself in history and projected itself upon the future. The most obvious example of this historicist politics is the mentioned Exposition of the Fascist Revolution, held in 1932, ten years after the fascist March on Rome. In a very tangible way, through a collection of fascist memorabilia of the first hour such as Mussolini's original *Il Popolo d'Italia* office, this exposition presented the quasi-mythical story and genesis of fascism. As such, it was pivotal to the fascist appropriation of culture, an appropriation which, as we have argued, was central to the obtention of popular consensus or, as Marla Stone (1993:238) argued:

“The *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista* marked the heyday of aesthetic pluralism and fascist cultural patronage. Through a policy of aesthetic diversity and experimentation, the fascist regime succeeded in enticing a number of the best Italian artists into official culture. Government promotion of a modern representational language led to a vibrant, provocative exhibition which, in turn, encouraged mass support”<sup>11</sup>.

Another occasion to put the fascist regime within a historical framework was the bimillenary celebration of Augustus in 1937-1938. This event was studied by German researcher Friedemann Scriba (1995 and 1996), who offered a minute analysis of the way in which, mostly through a vast exposition entitled *Mostra augustea della romanità*, but also through a special collection of 'augustean' stamps<sup>12</sup>, the Roman and recently conquered fascist empire were presented as inhabited by the same, imperial spirit. Apart from relics and reconstructions of archaeological objects, the exposition also relied highly on the use of a modernist architectural framework. In so doing, it reminded of the 1932 Exposition, which fittingly was reinstalled in 1937 alongside the *Mostra augustea*, stressing once more the ideological identification between fascist Rome and antiquity, brought together in the notion of *romanità*<sup>13</sup>.

The mentioned studies of the fascist use of the aesthetic, of the existence of, in a sense, an 'aesthetic ideology', have led to an increasing interest in this field. It is to hope that research will continue, contributing to an ever developing understanding of Italian fascism and of the importance it attached to culture, an aspect which “was bound sooner or later to have its political consequences” (Mosse, 1996: 247).

Books such as Claudio Fogu's *The Historic Imaginary. Politics of History in Fascist Italy* (2003) and above all Lazzaro and Crum's *Donatello among the Blackshirts* (2005)<sup>14</sup> seem to continue exploring the vast field of fascist aesthetics, offering thick descriptions of small, but nonetheless significant, case studies. There are however also those who investigate fascist aesthetics on a more abstract, less case-oriented level. One example is Mabel Berezin, author of *Cultural Form and Political Meaning* (1994) and above all *Making the Fascist Self: The Political Culture of Interwar Italy* (1997).

Interestingly, in *Making the Fascist Self*, Berezin argues that fascism relied heavily on action, on form, in order to direct community life. For Berezin, fascism lacked ideological content, and this void was filled by an excessive stress on externalities. Italian community life, in itself sometimes characterized as a sort of *commedia dell'arte*, became for Berezin, when talking of the *ventennio fascista*, not so much the goal of political ideology as it was a main component of this latter. Public life, orchestrated by the fascist government, became for her a central agent in the construction of consensus. The following words, even if narrowly focused on the importance of theatre, give a good idea of her thesis:

“The fascist language of style was remarkably consistent over time. The language that central fascist figures employed to speak about fascism, its principal policy doctrine (corporativism), and its artistic production suggests that style was a formal and invariant component of fascist ideology, whereas content was contingent and dependent upon changing political and social circumstances. Given this view of fascism, the fascist theatre did not choose form over content; fascism was form itself” (Berezin, 1994: 1266).

On the whole however, Berezin's assertions don't yet seem solidly enough elaborated to stand the test, as she investigates a very huge, still largely unexplored field:

“Somewhat laborious in its form and self-evident in its content, ‘Making the Fascist Self’ is a wasted opportunity for furthering our understanding of the history of fascism. The avenues of research taken by Berezin are often original, but the whole interpretation appears to be built on brittle foundations, given that the author stubbornly contrasts a hypothetical

Church culture with an equally hypothetical ‘culture of the square’” (Luzzatto, 1999:328).

More successful in her intent was Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, author of *The Aesthetics of Politics* (1992) and *Fascist Spectacle: the Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (1997). It is Falasca-Zamponi, an adherent of Emilio Gentile's analyses of fascist myth and of fascism as a political religion (cf. infra), who really succeeded in ‘telling the fascist's story through their own words’. She offered a clear cut interpretation of the way in which under the fascist regime self representation, symbolism and public manifestations informed about Italian fascism itself, which sought to legitimize itself, to obtain power, not only through purely political means, but also through the language of aesthetics and through texts. For Falasca-Zamponi, fascism can in a way be characterized as a melodrama, as a ‘play’ in which, because of the absence of transcendence, the actors themselves, the Italian people, become the protagonists. In so doing, she clearly links her writings to the thinking of two of the most prominent researchers of modern mass society: Emilio Gentile and George L. Mosse (cf. infra)<sup>15</sup>.

The mentioned studies can be brought together under the common denominator ‘culturalist’, in that they try to inform about Italian fascism through an analysis of its use of the aesthetic, of fascist ‘culture’. The analysis of culture is a means in itself, but it is also often used to extrapolate to the field of politics and ideology, with varying results. This kind of research remains highly controversial, as it is of course a highly difficult task to reach out to a historical and ideological, more abstract level. The danger of an ‘inner approach’, i.e. of an approach that takes into account the fascists themselves, what they said about themselves and how they represented themselves, apart from whatever they created or did, is evident. It is therefore no wonder that researchers such as Bosworth (1998:27) have uttered warnings against an excessive culturalist approach, stating that

“in their determination to be apolitical and to treat Fascism on its own terms, the culturalist historians often credulously report what Fascism said rather than critically exploring what it meant”.

Let us now take a look at the above mentioned ‘higher, more abstract level’, at some of the

most interesting studies of fascist myth and ideology. More specifically, we will go into those which have promoted a vision of Italian fascism as a modern form of political religion.

### 3. CULTURAL FASCISM, MYTH AND POLITICAL RELIGION

Already in 1972, Cannistraro (1972: 118-119) pointed out that the roots of Italian fascism could as well be traced in the discourse developed by the intellectual artistic avant-garde (D'Annunzio, Marinetti, Corradini,...) as they can be linked to the purely political field. Indeed, fascist ideology, in a broad, Althusserian sense, can be seen as deeply embedded in such early-twentieth century intellectual currents as Futurism (Marinetti), Decadentism (D'Annunzio), literary nationalism (Corradini) and the Florentine avant-garde (Prezzolini, Papini, Soffici,...). These harboured ideas of national strength and unity, of force and virility<sup>16</sup>, and looked forward to an idealized future, at the same time glorifying the nearby (*Risorgimento*) and faraway (ancient Rome) Italian past. It is known that Mussolini himself came into close contact with some of the main representatives of these intellectual currents and that he absorbed and, if necessary, transformed part of their thinking<sup>17</sup>.

This phenomenon, which we could characterize as 'cultural fascism' –we use this denomination under the influence of the 1968-1969 study by Renee Winegarten-, has, for the Florentine avant-garde, been amply studied by Walter Adamson, author of *Fascism and Culture: Avant-Gardes and Secular Religion in the Italian Case* (1989), *Modernism and Fascism: The Politics of Culture in Italy, 1903-1922* (1990), *The Language of Opposition in Early Twentieth-Century Italy: Rhetorical Continuities between Prewar Florentine Avant-gardism and Mussolini's Fascism* (1992) and *Avant-Garde Florence. From Modernism to Fascism* (1993). Stressing the way in which Italian fascism was rooted in modernity, Adamson analyzed how Mussolini's movement coped, through a close reliance on a modern form of myth-making, with the chaos after the Great War. Inspired and guided by artistic and intellectual Modernism, Italian fascism developed into an ideology and regime which heavily relied on the use of modern, secular myth. In a Barthian sense<sup>18</sup>, it seems to have been a form of 'myth in the making', in that it did not only use and create myth, but did itself become a discourse, a myth.

Here, the mentioned intellectual climate was of crucial importance:

“Partly because of the terms in which they viewed early fascism, many of the intellectuals who embraced it failed disastrously to gauge its real prospects for significant change. They were not advocating or fostering myths but thinking in mythical terms themselves” (Roberts, 2000:202)<sup>19</sup>.

There is, among historians, a growing awareness of the importance of myth to Italian fascism. The myth of the Great War, the myth of the nation, the myth of the *duce*, the myth of a descendency of ancient Rome, all these and many more (the *uomo nuovo* and *Stato nuovo*-idea for example) have been amply studied and illustrated by such researchers as Emilio Gentile (1982, 1983, 1986, 1996a and 1999) and Pier Giorgio Zunino (1995 and 1999). These myths provided fascism with content, with a story, with a place in history. Through the 'mythical turn', fascism could inform about itself and its nature, in a less relative, more ethereal way. This permitted an ever less subtle, ever less critical discourse on fascism, which eventually, with the publication of the Doctrine of Fascism (now in Susmel, vol. 34:115-138), officially became a belief, a *fede*.

The observations made above finally bring us to the last point of this short study, namely the awareness that fascism was a 'political religion'. This idea was already anticipated by Dante Germino in his 1959 study of the totalitarian fascist party:

“They [totalitarian dictatorships] were political religions, imbued with a startling messianic quality. All three ideologies looked to the establishment of a final, perfected realm, the chiliastic termination of history” (Germino 1959:5)<sup>20</sup>.

However, it was not until the work of George L. Mosse and Emilio Gentile that Italian fascism was coherently defined as possessing a highly cultic, religious character. Mosse, who mainly focused on German Nazism, illustrated how, through massive orchestration of the masses, a phenomenon which had roots going back to the French Revolution (Mosse 1989), public life under fascism (in general) acquired a cultic, theatrical character. It was from this aspect that fascist regimes drew a lot of their appeal, as they spoke to the masses not only through rhetoric and verbal discourse, but in a way through the

masses themselves, which in a very tangible way became both the subject and the object of power. The aesthetic predisposition of fascism, which we touched upon at the beginning of this study, was thus also active on a higher level. The fascist masses became protagonists in the enactment of fascism, in the new religion and its cult, in the propaganda machine which was directed... to themselves. Central to Mosse's thinking was the process of 'nationalization of the masses' (Mosse, 1975), the way in which the nation put itself to the fore, filling the existential void provoked by increasing liberalism and secularization.

For the case of Italian fascism these ideas were brilliantly synthesized by Emilio Gentile in his still –in this domain- definitive *magnum opus* entitled *Il culto del littorio*, or *The cult of the lictor* (1993)<sup>21</sup>. This study is an all-encompassing analysis of the three central ideas of our article. The underlying idea is the conviction that Italian fascism was more than just the use of force, that it achieved a form of consensus. This idea permeates the whole book, which offers an incisive analysis of some of the most important myths fascism incorporated. Myth and consensus are one thing, an aspect that before Gentile had already been considered and accepted as crucial to the new ideology's success. However, Gentile combined these thoughts with the fascist stress on externalities, both on a lower (cf. supra the 'culturalist' studies) and on a higher (cf. supra the masses as aesthetic, active element in the creation of consensus) level, with an analysis of the cultic character of Italian fascist mass society. He sees fascism as action, as theatre<sup>22</sup>, as the enactment and at the same time as the creation of the 'fascist self', of the fascist 'new State' and 'new man' (Gentile, 1982).

Since the publication of *Il culto del littorio*, Emilio Gentile has moved on to more purely historiographical work on Italian fascism, such as his *La via italiana al totalitarismo* (Gentile, 2001a) and his *Fascismo. Storia e interpretazione* (Gentile 2002). Recently, he concluded that the essence of Italian fascism may well have been its 'totalitarian' coping with modernity (Gentile, 2003), but concerning the mechanism of Italian fascism as a cultural system, his 1993 work remains unsurpassed up until today. It is thanks to the growing awareness that fascism did indeed achieve a certain degree of consensus (Gramsci, De Felice) and to Gentile's stress on the aesthetic, cultic character,

in combination with the analysis of fascist mythology, that today the framework is available for further analysis of the various forms of visual and other forms of culture under fascism, and, on a higher level, of the fascist interest in aesthetics, in short that a 'culturalist' approach is now possible. Let us hope that future research will further develop this fertile domain.

Our investigation into the research on Italian fascism has shown how Mussolini's creation can also be approached from a cultural point of view. Fascism was first and foremost a political ideology, but the importance it attached to aesthetics makes it a very peculiar ideology in which culture was a central, defining element. More specifically the analysis of visual culture under fascism, of fascist self representation, symbolism and aesthetics is a very helpful tool for an ever more 'total' comprehension of a phenomenon that profoundly changed twentieth century values and truths, introducing charisma, aesthetic appeal, myth and semi-religious belief into politics.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> De Felice's Mussolini-biography consists of the following volumes: *Mussolini il rivoluzionario 1883-1920* (1965), *Mussolini il fascista: I. La conquista del potere 1921-1925* (1966), *Mussolini il fascista: II. L'organizzazione dello stato fascista 1925-1929* (1968), *Mussolini il duce: I. Gli anni del consenso 1929-1936* (1974), *Mussolini il duce: II. Lo stato*

*totalitario 1936-1940* (1981), *Mussolini l'alleato I. L'Italia in guerra 1940-1943. 1. Dalla Guerra "breve" alla Guerra lunga* (1990a), *Mussolini l'alleato I. L'Italia in guerra 1940-1943. 2. Crisi e agonia del regime* (1990 (2) and *Mussolini l'alleato II. La guerra civile 1943-1945* (1997).

<sup>2</sup> Some of the studies dealing with the controversy over De Felice's consensus-idea are: *Fascism. An Informal Introduction to its Theory and Practice. An Interview with Michael A. Ledeen* by Renzo De Felice (1976), *Renzo De Felice and the Controversy over Italian Fascism* by Michael A. Ledeen (1976), *Professor Renzo De Felice and the Fascist Phenomenon* by A. James Gregor (1978), *Il Mussolini di Renzo De Felice* by Adrian Lyttelton, Jens Petersen and Gianpasquale Santomassimo (1982), *Renzo De Felice and the Historiography of Italian Fascism* by Borden W. Painter, Jr. (1990), *Renzo De Felice: A Tribute* by Emilio Gentile (1997) and *Mussolini: reservations about Renzo De Felice's biography* by Denis Mack Smith (2000). See also Tranfaglia (1999: 65-70) and Settembrini (2001: 245-260).

<sup>3</sup> In this way, he has been pinned down as a typically Italian (Bellamy, 1990:324), but also as a Western (Eley, 1984) thinker.

<sup>4</sup> Communist leader Antonio Gramsci spent years in fascist prison, to eventually die there in 1937.

<sup>5</sup> Already in 1960, Gwyn Williams (1960: 587) made the following observation: "By 'hegemony' Gramsci seems to mean a socio-political situation, in his terminology a 'moment,' in which the philosophy and practice of a society fuse or are in equilibrium; an order in which a certain way of life and thought is dominant, in which one concept of reality is diffused throughout society in all its institutional and private manifestations, informing with its spirit all taste, morality, customs, religious and political principles, and all social relations, particularly in their intellectual and moral connotation. An element of direction and control, not necessarily conscious, is implied. This hegemony corresponds to a state power conceived in stock Marxist terms as the dictatorship of a class".

<sup>6</sup> For German Nazism, this idea was developed by George Mosse in his *Caesarism, Circuses, and Monuments* (1971). See also *Caesar, Caesarism, and the Historians* by Yavetz (1971).

<sup>7</sup> This 'eye witness' character is of course a great privilege for the study of fascism, but it has been known to have caused distortions of the kind we find in, for example, *The Fascist Dictatorship in Italy, Volume I* by Gaetano Salvemini (1928). Salvemini offered one of the first and most interesting studies of Italian fascism, but the excessiveness of his stress on fascist violence seems to be as much the consequence of the author's emotional involvement as it is the fruit of his historical objectivity. Significantly, the book starts with the following remark, made by Ramsay Muir in the preface: "In two great countries, they [Law and Liberty] have been dethroned." (Muir in Salvemini 1928:11).

<sup>8</sup> See also Ghirardo (1996: 367-368): “When I broached this and a related argument about the role of intellectuals and artists in Gramsci to Emilio Gentile recently, he responded by proposing that Gramsci’s whole notion of hegemony, and hence the role and function of intellectuals, derived from his observations of fascism”.

<sup>9</sup> For more information on these *Thingspiele*, a form of theatre developed under Nazism in which the public would participate through song and dance, see *The birth of Nazi drama? Thing plays* by Niven (2000).

<sup>10</sup> For more information on theatre under the Italian fascist regime, see *The Organisation, Fascistisation and Management of Theatre in Italy, 1925-1943*, by Thompson (1996) and *Theatre Politics of the Mussolini Régime and Their Influence on Fascist Drama*, by Cavallo (1996).

<sup>11</sup> For more information, see also the mentioned *Architects, Exhibitions, and the Politics of Culture in Fascist Italy*, by Ghirardo (1992) and *Anno X. La Mostra della rivoluzione fascista del 1932*, by Schnapp (2003).

<sup>12</sup> For more information, see *Augusteische Propaganda und faschistische Rezeption*, by Schumacher (1988).

<sup>13</sup> For more information on the myth of *romanità*, see *Fascist Doctrine and the Cult of the Romanità*, by Visser (1992), *A flexible Rome: Fascism and the cult of romanità*, by Stone (1999) and *Il mito di Roma (Da Carlo Magno a Mussolini)*, by Giardina and Vauchez (2000:212-296).

<sup>14</sup> For a review of Lazzaro/Crum (2005), see *Fascismo, storia e cultura visuale*, by Nelis (2005).

<sup>15</sup> In a similar way, the thesis of Falasca-Zamponi had already been formulated by Miro Gori in a study which limited itself to a very specific form of visual culture under fascism, namely cinema: “Inoltre il film, in quanto prodotto culturale, ha bisogno di un pubblico: deve essere visto. Dunque I cineaste cercheranno di corrispondere al bagaglio di credenze dell’udienza, alle sue aspirazioni e ai suoi desideri. Per questo, a buon diritto, possiamo considerare I film storici ‘espressioni’ della mentalità di una nazione, e quindi del sapere storico di una società in un preciso momento della sua storia” (Miro Gori 1988:10).

<sup>16</sup> For an analysis of the fascist ideal of virility, see *Fascist Virilities. Rhetoric, Ideology, and Social Fantasy in Italy*, by Barbara Spackman (1996).

<sup>17</sup> For an analysis of Mussolini’s relationship to the Florentine avant-garde and their review *La Voce* for example, see *Mussolini e “La Voce”*, by Gentile (1976). For an analysis of Italian Futurism from a socio-political viewpoint, see *The Political Culture of Italian Futurism: A General Perspective*, by Mosse (1990).

<sup>18</sup> Roland Barthes was one of the first post-war intellectuals to develop a coherent framework for the analysis for modern, secular myth, with the publication of his *Mythologies* (1957).

<sup>19</sup> Similar ideas had already been put forward by George L. Mosse in his *Fascism and the intellectuals* (1968).

<sup>20</sup> In 1938, Angelo Tasca (1999:553) already spoke of a “religione per i poveri”. The idea of a political religion had before already briefly been developed by Gurian in his *Totalitarianism as Political Religion* (1954).

<sup>21</sup> Gentile already anticipated on this synthesis in various previous articles, notably in 1990, with the publication of *Fascism as Political Religion*. Recently, he also published *Le religioni della politica. Fra democrazie e totalitarismi* (Gentile 2001b).

<sup>22</sup> This thesis Gentile also developed in his *The Theatre of Politics in Fascist Italy* (Gentile (1996b), elaborating upon some of the theses put forward by Berezin (cf. supra).