The Board of Editors Statements on Fascist Studies

Fascism and Art History: A Paradigm Shift

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A central issue animating fascism studies in the field of art history is a historical analysis of the long *durée* of avant-garde tendencies and their relation to fascist regimes and insurgent fascist movements throughout twentieth-century Europe. This approach runs counter to the standard narrative in art history, which has separated the development of European modernism into discrete chronological categories. Such period histories encompass the so-called *belle époque* before August 1914; the First World War and its immediate aftermath; the interwar era, which witnessed the rise of fascism and the Soviet Union; the cataclysm of World War Two; and the period following 1945 dominated by the emerging Cold War. While such bifurcations acknowledge great upheavals that arguably initiated profound shifts in the cultural politics of a given era, these chronological divisions take no account of artists or critics who were forced to negotiate the changing political landscape. In art history this has led to tidy narratives that arguably distort the historical record: to cite one instance, the study of Italian Futurism is still dominated by books focusing on the generative phase of the movement before World War One, with too little attention being given to Futurism's subsequent involvement with Mussolini's regime, which only ended with the death of the Futurist *chef*, F.T. Marinetti in December 1944.

Art Historians who have researched the interrelation between various fascisms and the avant-garde also alert us to the need to examine an artist's or critic's ideological views closely before considering that person's relation to the broader political landscape. Such careful study has significant rewards, for without it we fail to fully understand why such prominent artists as the German Expressionist Emile Nolde, the Swiss architect Le Corbusier, or former Futurist Mario Sironi thought their brand of cultural politics compatible with fascist precepts. In like fashion art historians are also beginning to examine the aestheticized politics of fascist ideologues, thus advancing what has been termed

the ‘cultural turn’ in fascism studies; my own book *Avant-Garde Fascism* (2007) deals with France. This has led to a more profound understanding of the fascists’ appropriation of the art of the past, which, to paraphrase Roger Griffin in *The Nature of Fascism* (1991) operated as a palingenetic myth in fascist narratives of collective regeneration and nation building.

While the short space allotted for these reflections prevents me from referring to the large body of rich scholarship devoted to such issues, I do wish to alert readers to a few examples. Emily Braun’s study of Mario Sironi (2000)—arguably the most prominent modernist affiliated with Mussolini’s regime—is a benchmark publication in our discipline: in that volume Braun examined how the political views informing Sironi’s production before and during World War One informed his avid embrace of fascism in the war’s immediate aftermath, and the central role given to myth-making in his subsequent cultural production. This case study has a counterpart in James van Dyck’s recent monograph on the German artist Franz Radziwill (2010), whose peculiar brand of ‘reactionary modernism,’ cultivated during the 1920’s, elicited approval and condemnation among factions within the Nazi Party in the 1930’s. Just as Braun measures Sironi’s evolving aesthetic against alternative avant-garde styles, each claiming the fascist mantle, so van Dyck reminds us that cultural policy under Hitler’s Nazis was not monolithic, but instead riven by competing constituencies all vying for hegemony under the restrictive parameters of National Socialism.

With regard to palingenesis, art historians have recently examined the central role played by Mussolini’s regime in transforming the urban landscape of not just Rome (the subject of numerous studies), but also of cities and towns throughout Italy in order to underscore the regenerative links connecting the fascists to the Imperial Rome of Augustus and other eras of national glory. Claudio Lazzaro and Roger Crum’s anthology *Donatello among the Blackshirts* (2005) is exemplary in this regard, as is Medina Lasansky’s *The Renaissance Perfected: Architecture, Spectacle, and Tourism in Fascist Italy* (2004), which focuses on Mussolini’s politically motivated ‘restorations’ of such iconic Tuscan locales as Sienna, Arezzo and San Gimignano. In sum, art historians now identify fascist movements in Europe as dynamic entities composed of individuals and constituencies promoting a plurality of aesthetic genres, often in conflict with each other and sustained across period divides.