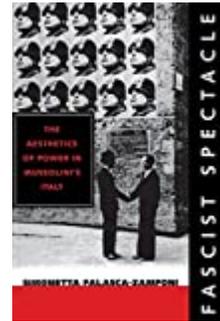


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi. *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. xi + 303 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-22677-7.



Reviewed by Federico Caprotti (School of Geography and the Environment and St. Antony's College, University of Oxford)

Published on H-Italy (April, 2003)

Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi's book is a significant contribution to the cultural emphasis which has arisen in research on Italian fascism in recent years. *Fascist Spectacle* traces and analyses the manner in which the regime's self-identity was dynamically formulated at home and abroad, and the way in which its power was produced. This is done by utilising the concept of aesthetic politics, through which Falasca-Zamponi focuses on fascism's aesthetic character and the contradictions and problematic relationships present beneath the regime's aesthetic manifestations. Fascism's cultural products are used to shine a light on its inner contradictions.

The concept of aesthetic politics which Falasca-Zamponi develops is largely based on Walter Benjamin's theorization of the perception of the work of art in the modern era, explored in his 1936 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction".[1] Fascism is seen as having preserved an almost pre-modern auratic distance between the work of art and the audience, thus inhibiting critical interaction between the two. Falasca-Zamponi analyses various forms of fascist discourse—in its linguistic (speeches) and non-linguistic (images, symbols) forms—in this light.

The focus on the aesthetic manifestations of fascism is both a strong point and one which raises certain ques-

tions. Myths and symbols are understood by Falasca-Zamponi as tools utilised for fascism's self-definition. In chapter 2 she analyses the myth of Mussolini, according to the idea, outlined in chapter 1, of the leader of fascism as the artist-creator shaping the modern plastic masses. The spotlight is placed, in the third chapter, on various symbols and myths interpreted as having been used for the formation of fascism's identity. The focus is, specifically, on the myth of Rome, the fascio symbol, fascist dress and linguistic choices, the Roman salute, and the Roman step. The chapter, however, does not seem to reconcile the outlined aesthetic manifestations with the theory outlined in the introduction and in chapter 1. Emphasis is placed almost exclusively on the role of symbols in the formation of fascist identity, to the detriment of the understanding of spectacle—as outlined by Guy Debord—as a social relation between people, mediated by images.[2] In fact, for a book which uses the word "spectacle" in its title and which is aimed at analysing the production of fascist spectacle, there is surprisingly little explanation of spectacle and its application to the study of fascism. More reference to Debord would have been useful; instead, his theory is only mentioned in a footnote. As a result, linkages between fascist issues outside the cultural-aesthetic sphere and fascist symbols and myths are not convincingly made. Furthermore, the sym-

bols and myths on which Falasca-Zamponi focuses in the third chapter seem to be the more “apparent” aspects of the external aesthetic character of fascism, which can result in characteristics, such as the Roman step, taking on exaggerated proportions in the reader’s mind.

Fascist Spectacle usefully focuses on the idea of struggle as a way for fascism to alleviate and reconcile its internal dilemmas. Creation and destruction are identified as the modern processes through which fascism’s internal conflicts were expressed. This characteristic is outlined in the introduction, and developed in chapter 5. The chapter is a highly interesting outline of fascist struggle, moving away from concepts of military war as struggle, to introduce various creative and destructive fascist projects and policies as examples of internal struggle. The Battle of Wheat, Mussolini’s addresses, and other examples are all used to make the point. Illustrations are used well throughout the book, but they really shine in this chapter. Newsreels from the LUCE institute are both analysed in the text and used as illustrations. The increased use of cinematic propaganda resources is welcome in studies of Italian fascism, and Falasca-Zamponi shows how they can be used to good effect.

An insightful point made by Falasca-Zamponi, drawing on groundwork laid by previous studies, is the way in which fascism conceptualised women and their role in the fascist project.[3] Part of chapter 1 focuses on elite theory and the way in which Mussolini, as the artist-creator, can be seen as influenced by ideas of the masses as irrational and imbued with negative female characteristics. Following from this, chapter 4 focuses closely on fascism’s view of the body and the private sphere in Italian life. The analysis of the fascist conceptualisation of women is particularly useful when considering the linkages that can be made between fascism as a modern phe-

nomenon and the development of the contested identities of women in the modern era. In particular, chapter 1 outlines the way in which modern dichotomies such as the split between culture and nature can be identified as stories of domination of a womanly nature by a manly culture. This point contributes to interdisciplinary studies which place women as the central point of the analysis of the gendered project of modernity.[4]

Fascist Spectacle makes good use of archival material, in the form of documents, speeches, newsreels, and documentaries. An interesting variety of published sources is also used, such as newspapers and fascist journals. Detailed notes and bibliographical references complete the backing for the arguments presented in the book. Falasca-Zamponi makes a very convincing argument for the importance of researching aesthetics and its link to politics, not only with regards to fascism but also as a useful tool for analysing the present era. *Fascist Spectacle* was first published in hardback in 1997: her concluding arguments for greater attention to aesthetic forms of politics are especially valid in the present climate.

Notes

- [1]. In W. Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999).
- [2]. G. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1995).
- [3]. V. De Grazia, *Le Donne nel Regime Fascista* (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 1993).
- [4]. See, for example, D. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1994); and *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (London: Verso, 1992).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-italy>

Citation: Federico Caprotti. Review of Falasca-Zamponi, Simonetta, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini’s Italy*. H-Italy, H-Net Reviews. April, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7406>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.