Throughout this essay I do not capitalise the term fascism when referred to the phenomenon in general. I capitalise it only when referred to a specific national movement (i.e. Italian Fascism).


For Griffin the prolonged cultural disruption of modernity, identifiable especially with the classic forces of secularisation, reached a «liminoidal» stage in the second half of the nineteenth century, similar to those described by anthropologist Victor Turner in premodern societies as giving birth to «revitalisation» movements. And just like in premodern times, a vast array of veritable religious movements sprung out from the crisis of modernity, seeking new forms of transcendence aimed at revitalising it. These movements Griffin defines as «modernist» and classifies as «epiphanic», which are essentially all those aesthetic-creative-intellectual movements most schol-
ars would recognise as part of the modernist Weltanschauung and «programmatic» ones, «in which the rejection of Modernity», Griffin writes, «expresses itself as a mission to change society, to inaugurate a new epoch, to start time anew». And on this theoretical basis Griffin argues that both Italian Fascism and German Nazism can be considered as political-programmatic forms of modernism which produced thoroughly modernist regimes and cultures, quite aside from the place that modernist aesthetics played in their image politics or the support they gave to, and received from avant-garde artists or modernist intellectuals and movements.7

While each transition in Griffin’s book merits sustained analysis, one of the most striking elements of Griffin’s theory is the qualification of modernism – and hence fascism – as a mental attitude towards the transcendence of time, a volistic rapture in the fabric of modern temporality equally identifiable for Griffin with what Frank Kermode famously called a «sense of an ending», Reinhart Koselleck posited as an obsession with «new time» leading to the imaginary projection of «temporalised utopia», and Peter Osborne most succinctly quipped the «futural» orientation of modernist «politics of time». And, on this theoretical score, Griffin highlights the congruence of his theory with a wave of cultural studies of fascism that have examined and/or compared all facets of fascist and Nazi ideologies, image politics, ritual cultures, and social engineering policies. In his conclusions, however, Griffin issues a double challenge to scholars of fascist culture that cannot be ignored. On the one hand, he invites them to trace modernist movements far beyond the spatial confines of Europe and temporal ones of interwar fascism. On the other hand, he also argues that his primordialist theory puts to rest the purely «aesthetic» view of modernism which he regards not only as reductive – compared to the archetypal one he proposes – but also as responsible for the wrong turn taken by many scholars towards the endorsement of postmodern theory, attitudes, or epistemological principles.10

Accepting this double challenge, I return here to re-consider the ideal-typical traits of what I have called the «fascist historic imaginary», and to explore its relation to the discursive and mental phenomena we call postmodernism/postmodernity.

1. The Fascist Historic Imaginary

On 24 May 1929, Benito Mussolini responded to Benedetto Croce’s opposition to the Concordat with the following words: «No wonder, gentlemen, if side by side the shirkers of war we find the shirkers of history, who, having failed – for many reasons and maybe because of their creative impotence – to produce the event, that is, to

6 Ibid., 61–64.
7 Ibid.
9 Griffin, Modernism, 342 and 347.
10 Ibid., 345.
make history before writing it, later on consume their revenge diminishing it without objectivity or shame.»

On the surface, Mussolini’s analogy between shirkers of war and shirkers of history connected Croce’s opposition to the Concordat to the conspicuous absence of the Great War and Fascism from Croce’s recently published Storia d’Italia dal 1870 al 1914 (History of Italy from 1870 to 1914). Yet behind the polemical jab directed toward the philosophical champion of liberalism, there also lurked the suggestion that the ideological dichotomy between Fascism and liberalism entailed two opposite conceptions of the relationship between res gestae (the actual deeds) and historia rerum gaestarum (the narration thereof): Fascism made history by producing «events», liberalism wrote it to unmake them. Overnight, in fact, Mussolini’s aphoristic sentence was transformed into one of the most popular fascist mottoes, «il fascismo fa la storia, non la scrive» (Fascism makes history rather than writing it), thereby losing its polemical bite but sharpening its ideological stakes. Turning temporal succession into all-out opposition, the slogan projected an image of Fascism as merging its rejection of political representation (liberalism) with the obliteration of historical representation (historicism). In so doing, however, the motto seemed to also reach into a rhetorical unconscious sedimented beneath the modern temporalisation of history. The fascist idea of history-making mobilised the notion of historic-ness inscribed, since the dawn of modern historical culture, in the discursive notions of «historic event», «historic site» and «historic speech».

Semantically, these expressions were born of the differentiation introduced by late eighteenth-century British historians between the adjectives «historical» and «historic», assigning to the former the meaning of «belonging to the past» and to the latter that of being «epochal», of «forming an important part or item of history; noted or celebrated in history», in a word, history-making. Although this distinction was formalised in two separate adjectives only in English, the semantic difference between a historic eventful-ness and historical fact-ness developed around the same time and as clearly in German (historisches Ereignis and historische Tatsache), Italian (evento storico and fatto storico) and French (événement historique and fait historique). We can therefore inscribe this semantic distinction among the many that Koselleck has described as marking the birth of modern historical semantics. Yet compared to the replacement of Historie by Geschichte, which marked in German the

13 Oxford English Dictionary, 259. Despite the fact that no romance language has ever coined an analogue of the adjective «historic», the notions of «historic event» and «historic speech» have appeared in all European languages to differentiate between the temporal attribution of «pastness» to (historical) facts and the perception of «epochalness» in (historic) events. The Italian expressions un evento storico and un discorso storico for example carry the same semantic charge of a historic event and a historic speech.
The historic event does not emerge from the stream of the transcendental flow of History (capital H). It takes place exclusively in our consciousness. We define an event «historic», irrespective of whether it happened in the past or the present temporal plane, when we perceive it as opening up a new epoch by making a previously undetected meaning of history suddenly present in the mind of the observer without the mediation of historical representation. Hence, also, the discursive association of historic-ness with «speech» (immediate signification) and «site» (presence of the past). In the notion of historic-ness, therefore, we literally perceive history as immanent rather than transcendental.

Mussolini’s polarisation of history making and history writing mobilised this immanent notion of historic-ness, projecting the idea of Fascism as a historic agent whose acts were not merely significant in the eyes of History (and historians) but, rather, actively signifying history in the present. Accordingly, the logic of Mussolini’s speech effectively reified the ideological opposition between liberalism and Fascism into an ontological dichotomy between historical and historic conceptions of agency, representation and consciousness. To the inscription of liberal ideology under the sign of the «historical» (fact, representation, consciousness) corresponded the projection of a fascist historic agency that acted upon historical facts, representations, and consciousness in order to nourish an entirely new form of historical consciousness, a historic imaginary that spoke history only in the historic present tense and inscribed historical meaning under the immanent rubric of presence, rejecting altogether the transcendental horizon of historical time. In perfect self-referential fashion, the very birth and diffusion of the motto derived from the speech both enacted and revealed the existence of the historic imaginary referred to by Mussolini in his historic speech.

Lest we dismiss Mussolini’s advocacy of a fascist historic imaginary as a mere cipher of fascist rhetoric of virility, we need to recognise immediately that the immanent conception of history it evoked inscribed itself within the intellectual context of a modernist challenge to the transcendental notion of historical consciousness that had been articulated at least since the times of Friedrich Nietzsche’s second Unzeitgemässe Betrachtung, «Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben» (1874). Mussolini’s polarisation of the «historical» and the «historic» resonated particularly with Nietzsche’s antidotal opposition of the «un-historical» sense to the three forms of historical consciousness created and cultivated by a century of historicism (antiquarian, monumental and critical). In fact, in The Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life Nietzsche did not attack historiography per se, but, specifically,

15 Ibid., 103.
the excessively historical form given to memory in Western culture. To this «burden of history», as Hayden White has famously termed it, Nietzsche opposed the observation that all action depends, in the final analysis, on the «un-historical» decision to escape the narrative spell of either monumental, or antiquarian or critical forms of historical consciousness, and that this insight into the un-historical essence of life could be obtained only by reorienting oneself «towards art and religion», making them equally relevant to the nourishment of what he called the «suprahistorical».17

Mussolini’s opposition of making and writing history took Nietzsche’s critique of historical-ness a step forward, and, so to speak, elevated the «un-historical» from the mere «art and power of forgetting and of enclosing oneself within a bounded horizon», to a mental disposition on a par with the suprahistorical orientation of consciousness towards «what bestows upon existence the character of the eternal and stable», that is, of historic presence.18 And in this respect, Mussolini’s speech act bore all the marks of a mythopoetic disposition towards transcendence as posited by Griffin. Yet the logic of Mussolini’s 1929 attack on Croce was also properly historic, in the sense that it sought to simultaneously enact and historicise a modernist form of historical consciousness in which language and force had abandoned the realm of historical crisis and entered that of historic eventfulness.19 More specifically, Mussolini’s conflation of liberal ideology and historicism under the sign of «shirkerness» referred the fascist claim to have destroyed the boundary between the res gestae and historia rerum gestarum to the historical-intellectual context of the Great War. In this respect, the historic logic of the speech points our attention away from considering it either a mere polemic with Crocean historicism or a mythopoetic expression of innate transcendentalism, and towards a very specifically immanent reconfiguration of historical consciousness, operated during the war by Fascism’s prime philosopher and Croce’s philosophical nemesis, Giovanni Gentile.

2. A Modernist Philosophy of History

Since the early 1890s, Giovanni Gentile and Benedetto Croce had been tied by an intense personal friendship and strategic alliance for the construction of a neo-idealist philosophical front seeking to dethrone positivism from its perceived cultural-political hegemony. By the first decade of the new century, their journal, La Critica, had become a fundamental point of reference for the political-cultural revolt of young Italian intellectuals known with the comprehensive label of antigiolittismo, from the name of the most prominent and recurrent Prime Minister in those times, Giovanni Giolitti.20 Yet although Croce greeted Mussolini’s seizure of power in 1922

18 Nietzsche, «On the Uses and Disadvantages», 120.
19 B. Spackman, Fascist Virilities: Rhetoric, Ideology, and Social Fantasy in Italy, Minneapolis, MN 1996, 123.
20 E. Gentile, «From the Cultural Revolt of the Giolit-
with timid optimism, and personally recommended Gentile for the post of Minister of Education in the first fascist government, he rapidly turned against both after the assassination of the Socialist leader, Giacomo Matteotti, in 1924. By early 1925 the two ex-allies found themselves on opposite sides of both political and intellectual barricades, as authors of the «fascist» and «antifascist» manifestoes of Italian intellectuals.21 These antithetical manifestoes sanctioned publicly a profound ideological split over the question of continuity between fascism and liberalism, but they also revealed the signs of a deeper and longer-lasting erosion in the common intellectual front the two philosophers had constructed before the war.

Between 1912 and 1914, Gentile had elaborated a systemic reform of Hegelian dialectics that he had named attualismo (Actualism), but that Croce had denounced as a form of «idealist mysticism».22 Essentially, Actualism posited the spirit as neither immediate nor transcendental, but immanent and mediated in the act by which we posit something as an object of thought and, in the active process of thinking, overcome its objectivity recognising it as our individual spirit. Read in reverse, Gentile argued, the individual act of thought was also the only way in which the eternal spirit revealed itself to itself. The result was an immanent circle of compenetrations between theory and practice, philosophy and religion, thought and will, and so forth, in which Croce identified the mystical essence of Actualism.

Croce’s condemnation of Actualism has enjoyed paradigmatic status in most reconstructions of Gentile’s thought, but it has also tended to obscure the much more dialogical relationship the two philosophers maintained on the plane of their reflections on the philosophy of history. Any cursory glance at the titles of Gentile’s production between 1897 and 1914 reveals immediately his philosophical system had evolved directly from his copious writings on the relationships among philosophy, history of philosophy and philosophy of history.23 This line of inquiry, however, had not been exhausted in the creation of Actualism before the war, but had continued during the war and had climaxed in November 1918, when Gentile published what is widely regarded as his most influential piece, Politica e filosofia.24 In this text, Gentile merged his reflections on the Italian experience of the Great

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War with an original discussion of the very first theorisation of historic-ness proposed by Immanuel Kant in his Der Streit der Fakultäten (The Contest of Faculties) in response to the historic event of his own times: the French Revolution. For Kant, the «enthusiasm» of the millions of «onlookers» of the Revolution had transformed its «historical facts» into a unique «event» that he proposed calling a «historical sign» – that is, a «signum rememorativum, demonstrativum, prognostikon» – of the transcendental notion of History that Kant among others had begun theorising in those years. With the French Revolution, history had spoken its transcendental language to the consciousness of its «readers» rather than its «protagonists», because, for Kant, the readers of today (1798) represented the readers of yesterday and those of tomorrow. The revolutionary event had thus proven the eternal law of progress through the impression it had left on their consciousness, and, in so doing, it had signified the contemporaneous presence of all temporal dimensions – past (signum rememorativum), present (signum demonstrativum) and future (signum prognostikon) – in the historical consciousness of the masses, even more than that of Great Men.25

Positioning himself before the signum of his own times – the Great War – Gentile read the Italian resistance (after Caporetto) and victory in the war as the historical sign of a collective reorientation of the historical imagination toward immanence rather than transcendence. For Gentile, the mind had always oscillated between a notion of history belonging to the past, and one of history belonging to the present, «but, most of the time», he wrote, «we only see the former, which is actualised in a historiography that presupposes entirely its object; and thus, only with great effort we are able to see the latter, which presupposes nothing, because it creates its object».26 Quite predictably, the concept of «history belonging to the past» coincided, for Gentile, with the positivist conception of the «historical fact» determined in past-time and past-space and it corresponded to our «representation of ourselves to ourselves beyond the heat of passion and action, since the fact is given as accomplished». During the war, instead, there had taken place a reorientation towards «history belonging to the present: that is, history that is all present and immanent in the act of its construction».27

This reorientation had taken place on the Italian war-front: the moral-military resistance of the Italian army had «fulfilled the Risorgimento» in the sense that it had only been possible thanks to the fact that the Italian soldiers had internalised the historiographical image of the present conflict as a «fourth war of independence» formulated and propagated by the intellectual war-front. The victory, therefore, represented the defeat of all forms of transcendentalism (Catholic, Kantian and Marxist) by an immanent form of historical imagination. At last, on the Italian bat-
tlefields the historical past (the Risorgimento) and historic act (the victory) had come to coincide in the consciousness of political leaders, intellectuals and masses. And thus, the Italian experience in the Great War had acquired for Gentile a universal value: it constituted not only the *signum rememorativum, demonstrativum* and *prognostikon* that had superseded both French Revolution and Italian Risorgimento, but also the historical sign that the Kantian distinction between «onlookers» and «actors» had been definitively overcome. On the Italian total-war front, soldiers, along with intellectuals, Catholic masses and political leaders of the «home front», had experienced history as immanent rather than transcendental. For Gentile, the stage was set for the birth of a new political subject whose philosophical vision would be funded entirely on history belonging to the present. Hence, since Actualism had correctly anticipated this reorientation of the historical imagination, Gentile concluded his essay by claiming that Actualism had overcome Marxism (historical materialism) with a more «realistic» philosophy of history.28

Despite its appearing as it did at the end of Gentile's most influential political-philosophical text, this unorthodox claim to «realism» has been largely ignored by scholars of Actualism.29 My own scandalous proposition – given Gentile's rather discredited and quite obsolete philosophical discourse – is that Actualism correctly interpreted the phenomenological detachment of that form of collective mentality we call «historical consciousness» from the transcendental horizon of historical time precipitated by the experience of the Great War. Clearly, there is no measuring instrument to register this detachment at the individual or collective level. Yet Gentile's analysis was surely not isolated. His immanent notion of historical consciousness resonated with two very different, but for this very reason quite telling, discursive fields: the psychological analysis of the *déjà vu* effect, which had impassioned social scientists in the first decade of the century, and «generational» theories emerging from the war conflict on a European scale.

Among the protagonists of the debate on the *déjà vu* we find Henri Bergson, for whom the phenomenon was definitive proof that perception and memory are distinct but contemporaneous experiences of reality – one «actual» the other «virtual».30 Under normal circumstances we are pushed by our orientation towards «action» to keep this double apprehension of reality along distinct neurological-psychological paths, privileging perception, except when the two paths cross due to a sudden «lapse in our *élan vital*» and we experience a present moment in the form

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28 Ibid., 156.
29 Even the most recent study on Gentile's relationship to Fascism, F. Vander's *L'estetizzazione della politica. Il fascismo come anti-italia*, Bari 2001, dedicates no more than a cursory look at «Politica e filosofia». By contrast, Gentile himself would later refer to the fundamental thesis of this article – the obliteration of the autonomy of philosophy from politics – as having established Actualism as the natural ideology of Fascism well before their political encounter in 1922.
of an indefinite past.\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Fin-de-siècle} psychologists classified the \textit{déjà vu} as a case of «false recognition», but Bergson opposed this positivist definition calling it a «memory of the present» that could thus be understood as a perception experienced in the virtual form of the past. The key point he derived from his analysis was that our consciousness is constituted by an «oscillation» between a self that experiences the «virtuality» of the past, and another that entraps the present in the form of the past – which incidentally coincided with the positivist misapprehension of the \textit{déjà vu} as false recognition.\textsuperscript{32} Therefore, while his analytic definition recognised the possibility of two simultaneous psychological orientations, he also advocated for the one («memory of the present») that allows us to intuitively apprehend the virtuality of both present and past. Conversely, he argued, to insist on considering the phenomenon under the guise of false recognition contributed to pernicious attitudes of apathy, fatalism and «spectatorship of one's actions».

As Paolo Virno has rightly suggested, Bergson's analysis of the \textit{déjà vu} provided a theory of memory that constituted the necessary intellectual bridge between Nietzsche's untimely meditation on the burden of History and all post-Marxist «philosophies of history».\textsuperscript{34} And, although Virno does not consider this relation, the parallel paths of Gentile and Bergson's immanent reforms of philosophy found a perfect point of conjunction in their combined critiques of transcendentalist notions of historical consciousness and memory. Gentile's advocacy of a reorientation of consciousness towards «history belonging to the present» built upon, and presupposed, the experiential orientation towards the experience of virtuality in memory theorised by Bergson. At the same time, Gentile's reflections also participated in another key intellectual context emerging from the experience of the Great War.

In the aftermath of the war, all over Europe there sprung «generational theories» of history that responded to the projection of a «lost generation» as a corporeal interruption in the historical succession of generations provoked by the millions of youth dead in the war, and simultaneously enacted a reorientation of consciousness away from the vertical line from past to future and in favour of the horizontal time of the «age-cohort» also associated with «youth».\textsuperscript{35} According to Robert Wohl's \textit{The Generation of 1914}, the spreading of «youth-generational» discourse climaxed with Karl Mannheim's \textit{Ideologie und Utopie} (1929) but had nowhere been more pronounced than in war-time and post-war Italy. Ranging from the wholesale rejection of all things past and the autotelic celebration of masculine youth and self-generation famously cultivated by Marinetti's futurists, to the «youth party» imagined by Prezzolini and Papini, but extending even to young historians such as Adolfo Omodeo, the transversal «generational» discourse developed by the Italian intelligentsia in the aftermath of the war not only included Benito Mussolini himself, but played a

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 113.
  \item \textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 135.
  \item \textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 136.
  \item \textsuperscript{34} P. Virno, Il ricordo del presente. Saggio sul tempo storico, Turin 1999, 11. My translation.
  \item \textsuperscript{35} R. Wohl, \textit{The Generation of 1914}, London 1980.
\end{itemize}
key role in the intellectual appeal that Fascism exercised over a number of intellectuals in the early years of the movement.\textsuperscript{36}

Grounded in this historical-intellectual context, Gentile’s immanent reform of historical consciousness appears to have been simultaneously modernist and «realistic». It certainly proposed a new way «of imagining, describing, and conceptualising the relationship obtaining between agents and acts, subjects and objects», «events and facts», described by Hayden White as the landmark of all modernist conceptions of history.\textsuperscript{37} And it just as surely participated in that intellectual shift from the cultural critique of narrative to that of «historical consciousness» itself, that White has indicated as characterising the response of the modernist sensitivity to «the experience of a different ‹history›» brought about by the Great War.\textsuperscript{38} Finally, it epitomised the post-World War I evolution of that sensitivity towards what T. S. Eliot called a new «historical sense» that would involve «the perception, not only of the past-ness of the past, but of its presence».\textsuperscript{39} Thus, with Gentile, as with the generational theorists, we find a form of modernism quite more rooted in the experience of the Great War as a «modernist event» – defined by Hayden White as events that resist the «narrative fetishism» of traditional historiography\textsuperscript{40} – than in an innate «mythopoetic» function or «palingenetic» reaction to a modernity constructed «discursively as decadence».\textsuperscript{41} Nor does this supposed reaction appear aimed at «transcending» Chronos (clock-time) with «temporalised utopias».\textsuperscript{42} Gentile’s modernist reflections were grounded in the experience of the Great War’s historical reality, did not conjure up any form of liminoidal decadence – as Griffin would have it – and were specifically aimed at de-transcendentalising modern historical semantics.\textsuperscript{43}

\section*{3. Fascist Historic Culture}

Endorsing the immanent principles of actualist philosophy of history, Italian Fascism transfigured the idea of «history belonging to the present» into the mental image of fascist historic agency evoked by Mussolini in his 1929 speech. It conceived and presented itself as a historic agent whose acts possessed the qualities of immediacy and unmediated signification we commonly attribute to historic events.

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{36} Ibid., 160–202.
\bibitem{38} Ibid., 20 and 51.
\bibitem{41} Griffin, \textit{Modernism}, 73 and 117
\bibitem{42} Ibid., 81.
\end{thebibliography}
Just like a historic event, the fascist act of representation was aimed at giving «presence» to the past in the mind of the observer, thereby eliding the medium of narrative between historical agency and consciousness. Conversely, fascist discourse conceived the subject as endowed of a historic imaginary that collapsed agency and representation along the lines traced by actualist philosophy. In plainer words, Fascism did not seek legitimacy from History (i.e. the transcendental whole of human affairs) by inserting itself into a progressive narrative line that connected the fascist present to an Italian past and future. It was the past that received trans-temporal presence and meaning in fascist historic action – whether at the level of representation, discourse, or policy.

In the beginning the fascist historic imaginary coalesced around the celebration of the March on Rome as the historical sign that confirmed the momentous reorientation of the historical imagination toward «history belonging to the present» posited by Gentile in 1918. The March on Rome was ritualised as the historic event that ushered in not merely a new epoch, but an epoch-making subject, a historic agent. This agent, of course, assumed immediately the imaginary semblance of Mussolini, the history making Duce. In fact, the image of fascist historic agency found in Mussolini’s historic speeches its first and long lasting rhetorical incarnation. The «historic» encoding of Mussolini’s word was just as much an affair orchestrated from above, as it was dependent on the willing participation of a mass audience. In fact – as we have seen – the reciprocity of this process was no better instanced than in the never-ending transformation of Mussolini’s historic speeches into mottoes. At the same time, it was in the visual representation of recent national history that the connection between actualist philosophy of history and the formation of a resolutely fascist historic imaginary found the most proper means of expression.

While offering a philosophical roof to sustain the fascist subordination of history writing to history making, actualist philosophy of history found prominent expression in those public sites of historical representation where image- and ritual-politics, Duce and masses, fascist present and recent past, futurist aesthetics and popular-cultural rhetorical codes effectively met during the regime. A historic mode of representation was thereby developed and implemented in history museums, monuments, exhibitions, and anniversary commemorations where the fascist historic imaginary was made visually «present» to the Italian masses. This cultural project involved a large number of agents: Mussolini, of course, but also museum curators, modernist critics, journalists, and avant-garde artists who fought against all forms of historical culture, while at the same time seeking to make the identification of Fascism and historic-ness a phenomenological reality for the Italian masses. In turn, the visualisation of fascist historic agency presupposed a widespread liter-

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44 See C. Fogu, The Historic Imaginary. Politics of History in Fascist Italy, Toronto 2003, chapters II–V.
acy of Latin-Catholic rhetorical codes among encoders (Mussolini, fascist intellectuals and artists), re-coders (the mass media) and final decoders (the ritual actors-spectators of commemorative events, the viewers of historic exhibitions and museums). Accordingly, the institutionalisation of a historic mode of representation in both image and ritual politics kept reinforcing the consolidation of the collective historic imaginary it presupposed.

Both aesthetically and ideologically the formation of the fascist historic imaginary climaxed in 1932, and precisely, in the «Mostra della rivoluzione fascista» (Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution, henceforth MRF), an exhibition organised to celebrate the fascist decennale – the tenth anniversary of the March on Rome – and collectively designed by 34 of Italy’s most militantly fascist, but also talented artists. The MRF was conceived as a celebration of fascist historic agency, imaginary and representation. In fact, it was perceived as a historic event in its own right aimed at superseding the one (the March on Rome) it celebrated.\footnote{Set up by a team of journalists, historians and 34 of Italy’s most well-known artists, the MRF constituted a modernist Gesamtkunstwerk of exceptional artistic quality, which also managed to attract over three and a half million visitors.} It not only put on stage a historic representation of the fascist historic imaginary, but it did so self-referentially. That is, in its central and final room – the «Gallery of Fasces» – the MRF stylised the revolutionary period in ten pilasters shaped as fascist militants raising their arm in the Roman salute, each representing a revolutionary year (1914 to ANNO I, that is, year one of the fascist era). And with this stylisation of revolutionary time, the MRF projected the temporal form of the decennale onto time itself, transfiguring the idea of fascist historic agency into a fascist unit of historic time: the decade. As the regime’s measure of a historic annulment of time, the mental image of the decade offered an imaginary solution to Fascism’s most agonising problem: the tension between the mortality of Mussolini’s body and the seeming immortality of the cult of the Duce. Yet with this stylisation of historical time the MRF also superseded the historic imaginary it put on stage. Beginning with Mussolini’s hyperbolic projection that «in ten years Europe will be fascist or fascistised!» uttered on the steps of the MRF at the end of his inaugural visit, the temporal image of the decade was projected towards the future and became ubiquitous in fascist discourse, ritual and image politics throughout the 1930s and up to the final demise of the regime.\footnote{See Fogu, The Historic, chapter VI.}

Fascist discourse, of course, did not invent the temporality of the decade. Already in the late nineteenth century Russian intellectuals referred to their distinct and successive generations in terms of decades («the men of the 1820s», «... of the ’40s» etc.), and American newspapers would refer to the «roaring twenties» even before that decade was over. Yet the fascist decade was neither retroactive nor generational, but represented instead a stylisation of time devoid of referent and projected towards
the future. In comparative terms, then, the fascist decade constituted, per se, Italian Fascism’s answer to the utopian time of its totalitarian rivals: the chiliastic «one thousand years Reich» of German Nazism and the revolutionary «Five-Year Plans» of Russian Bolshevism. And, in so doing, the restructuring of the fascist historic imaginary around the decade alerts us to an important factor of distinction in the relationship between Italian Fascism and modernism.

Seen from Griffin’s perspective, fascist historic culture in the 1930s, at last, came to organise itself around a properly «futural» form of temporality (the decade). This form, however, could not have been more thoroughly aesthetic and cultural, demonstrating quite plainly the continuous role that aesthetics played in translating epiphanic forms into programmatic forms of modernism and vice-versa. In fact, the fascist decade may be the most pristine example of a «stylisation of politics», in which we may identify the aesthetic cipher of fascist modernism. And not by chance we may remark that the identification of fascism as a «style of rule» has also become a minimum common denominator among otherwise incompatible theories of fascism. For Alexander De Grand, for example, Fascism and Nazism were connected by a «generic fascist style of governing», while for Stanley Payne, the «stylistic mark» of fascist tendencies was their generic «radicalism» and «revolutionarism» that can be equally ascribed to Stalinism.47 Sure, in both cases we can hear the echoes of «generic» (De Grand) and «totalitarian» (Payne) theories of fascism, but it is a distant and unobtrusive echo, and the convergence on style is more remarkable. This reference allows Marxist-inspired scholarship to find its way back to questions of agency and regime-building – away from ideological and structural determinisms – and liberal historiography to confront head on the ideological markings of fascism. Quite clearly, in the notion of fascism as a style of rule, political historiography may have finally found a point of conjunction with the cultural historiography inspired by the Benjaminian thesis regarding the fascist «aestheticisation of politics», most forcefully proposed by Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi.

For Falasca-Zamponi the best expression that defined the aesthetic horizon of fascist politics was the idea of «giving style» to the Italian populace.48 To give Italians style was at the root of the fascist idea of totalitarianism expressed with the term fascistizzare (to fascistise). Whatever the object, be it the working class, the school, or even women, to fascistise meant more than to collectivise under a hierarchical and authoritarian order, and not always to destroy the boundary between public and private, as in a purely political understanding of the totalitarian phenomenon. To fascistise as an act of «giving style» referred all fascist politics to the sublime act of Mussolini’s shaping of the Italian masses into a «beautiful whole». In this respect, it

confirmed an essentially aesthetic impulse underpinning all programmatic forms of fascist modernism, and conversely, the lack of interest in giving programmatic form to a fascist aesthetics. As well known, Fascism did not express, create, or identify itself with a defined set of aesthetic principles identifiable as a style, nor did it impose an artistic style or state-art principle. Yet this did not mean that the goal of giving style to the masses remained without an aesthetic referent. On the contrary, the absence of a style to be identifiable as «fascist» points to a connection between fascist stylisation of politics and a «normative» notion of style masterfully theorised by Ernst Gombrich in his classic entry on «style» in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*.

Departing from a secular tradition of rhetorical and aesthetic commentaries, Gombrich distinguishes in this essay a descriptive and a normative notion of style. The former is the classic notion of style intended as «a certain consistency of traits encompassing different art objects» or «discursive artefacts». The latter, instead, is not derived from either rhetoric or art history, and it clearly belongs to a mass-cultural environment. The normative or volistic notion of style consists, on the side of the artist, in the search for a «synaesthetic impact that activates in the viewer processes of analogical association» and, on the side of the audience, in the perception of a «consistency and conspicuousness that makes a performance or an artefact stand out from a mass of «undistinguished» events and objects». Clearly, for Gombrich, the normative notion of style presupposed the existence of a mass society dominated by styles degraded into fashions (undistinguished events and objects). In fact, the normative conception of style, Gombrich concludes, is opposed to the descriptive one and aims at «stripping the term style of all adjectives». Although Gombrich did not associate normative style with any specific phenomenon or movement, one is struck by its resonance with the futurists' refusal to abide by a descriptive notion of style and their obsessive search for synaesthetic affects. Equally self-evident is the applicability of Gombrich's notion of normative style to fascist stylisation of politics. As often quoted, just before coming to power, Mussolini had denounced democracy for having «deprived people's lives of «style»» and thereby identified Fascism with bringing «a line of conduct» back «in people's lives». Giving them style, then, was not to shape the masses according to a predefined style, but rather to activate a synaesthetic nucleus of response in the Italian masses. But what about the stylisation of time in the self-referential futurised decade? How did it function in a normative sense?


51 Ibid., 353.

52 Mussolini made this affirmation in a speech delivered in Milan on 4 October 1922, see B. Mussolini, *Scritti e Discorsi*, vol. 2, Milan 1934, 375.
4. Post-historic(al) Culture

Notwithstanding repeated declarations of death for all forms of historical consciousness and related calls by prominent philosophers and intellectuals to endorse a «postmodern» attitude towards time and life, faith in Enlightenment ideals and historical progress has remained alive at all times since the end of World War II, and is still shared by millions of people – not only in the West. Yet it is also undeniable that over the past six decades this faith has had to compete with an adversary much more corrosive and insidious than philosophical propositions. What may have initially belonged to the collective imaginary of the Russian intelligentsia – the decade – has been appropriated by the fashion-system to become the principal unit by which most people (at least in the West) count, segment and account for the passing of time. «The ’50s», «the ’60s» are no longer labels directed to generations of writers, but to specific life forms whose distinguishing referent is always a style (of clothing, haircut, car, or acting), but whose common signified is never progress or historical evolution, but always mere seriality and repetition. Fashions simply follow rather than evolve from each other, and always return. The stylisation of time operated by the fascist historic imaginary in the 1930s may have thus constituted the crucial step in the transfiguration of the «generation-decade» into the «fashion-decade» that has come to imprint what we may properly term the post-historical imaginary of our age with a serialised «mode retro» form of temporality.

Quite likely the transfiguration of the fascist decade from futural to retro in the post-war era may have had something to do with the unique place that Italy – that is, «made in Italy» – has assumed in the post-industrial imaginary on a global scale. Whether embodied in design or material products, a normative idea of Italian style has come to function as antidote and parasitical other to the homogenising idea of fashion itself. The bearer of Italian fashion, whether woman or man, is not simply «in style»; she or he is constructed as «having style», in the «normative» sense of seeking to produce «synaesthetic» effects on the viewer, in order to be recognised as «distinct» in the mass of seemingly undistinguishable fashion consumers.53 Lest we want to give in to dangerously essentialist and profoundly racist notions that Italians have style in their blood, we cannot but recognise that this cultural construct is the last offspring of a normative-style imaginary that might be the most enduring legacy of Fascism qua modernism. Unencumbered by either racial or social-modernist utopias, the normative conception of style that sustained a fascist politics of distinction in 1920s–1930s Italy has found fulfilment in the post-war construction of Italian style as the sign of style tout court. Quite appropriately, accompanying this transfiguration of Fascismo-Stile into Italia-Stile, we also find an accommodation and domestication of the fascist historic imaginary itself into a post-historic form of imaginary rotating around «historic events» as markers of a collapse between the generational and the historical.

53 E. Gombrich, «Style», 283.
It is hardly disputable that one of the principal traits that separates post-war/industrial generations among themselves and from previous ones is their explicit acknowledgement of the role that historic events have played in the formation of their distinct generational imaginaries. The «Holocaust», «1968», the «fall of the Berlin Wall», and, of course, «9/11» just to cite the key events that have marked four successive generations of Westerners, have all been explicitly perceived, described and treated as «historic» – on different imaginary and discursive levels of course. At the same time, none of them has been transfigured into the birth of a historic agent as the March on Rome had been by Italian Fascists. On the contrary, the formation of generational imaginaries after the Great War has been haunted by a recurrent and obsessive image of «the end of history» – albeit endowed with the cinematic promise of infinite new beginnings.

First (re-)articulated by Alexander Kojève in lectures given in Paris in the late 1930s but published only after the end of the war (1947), this quintessential Hegelian trope has incarnated itself into a series of icons that has percolated at all levels of mass culture. From Adorno’s famous equation of Auschwitz with «the end of poetry», to more recent ones associating it with «the end of the Enlightenment» and modernity, to the popular association of 1968 with «the end of ideologies», to the identification of the fall of the Berlin Wall with «the end of communism», and the ubiquitous «everything changed with 9/11», an already post-historical imaginary has been matched by the rise of post-historic semantics. Quite perceptively, Paolo Virno has posited a strong correlation between Bergson’s analysis of the déjà vu and Kojève’s positing of two modes of survival in the post-historic(al) age: an animalistic one dominated by an eternised present similar to the false recognition and an attitude of «snobbism» that privileges the virtual (form) over the actual (content). To survive – and yet choose between animality and snobbism – beyond the «ends» of Enlightenment, Modernity, ideologies, and history, seems to be the categorical imperative of successive but repetitive forms of our post-historic(al) imaginary.

At first sight, the relationship between the formation of a historic culture during Fascism and the generational seriality of post-historic(al) imaginaries may appear one of mere analogy and vague philosophical affinity. Just like the former in Gentile’s, the latter has found philosophical articulation in another revision of Hegelian philosophy of history, Kojève’s. And whether or not Kojève ever read a word of Gentile’s work, his idea of a «new animality» connected to the transformation of history into «environment» continued the de-trascendentalisation and de-temporisation of historical semantics initiated by his predecessor. Yet in the repetitive return of a post-historic(al) semantics to the mental image of the end of history we


55 Ibid., 147.
may also capture a more historical connection to the evolution of fascist historic culture itself. The serialised image of the end of history does not so much refer to the decline of modern historical semantics. It captures instead very precisely the demise of the fascist idea of historic agency in the development of fascist historic culture itself. The contemporary post-historic(al) imaginary gives mental form to the «historic infinitive» tense projected by Italian Fascism in the late 1930s, which had replaced the actualist «historic present» of the 1920s. Accordingly, from the perspective developed in this article, the postmodern condition, famously defined by Jean François Lyotard as a widespread «incredulity toward metanarratives», may be more fruitfully re-formulated as a post-historic(al) condition marked by imaginaries that prevent the experience of both historical transcendence and historic immanence.56 Yet as this article should have made amply evident, to live with a post-historic(al) imaginary, and even to trace its aesthetic-philosophical horizon does not mean to abandon historical scholarship, historicism, or the activity of writing history. Rather, it means to accept the proposition that modernism and fascism may have both registered and played a key role in widening the distance between the temporality of historical writing and the turn of modern consciousness towards an immanent experience of historical time.


ABSTRACT

The Fascist Stylisation of Time

Stimulated by the publication of Roger Griffith’s Modernism and Fascism (2007), this piece revisits my 2003 study of fascist politics of history in Italy to identify the ideal-typical traits of what I call the fascist «historic imaginary» and explore its relations with its relation to the discursive and mental phenomena we call postmodern/postmodernity. I argue that the fascist mental orientation towards time does not reside in what Griffin calls «a mental attitude towards the transcendence of time,» but in a de-temporalisation of historical time and an immanent conception of the relationship between res gestae and historia rerum gestarum. I further contend that this de-temporalisation has very specific connections with the postwar stylisation and serialisation of historical time into the «temporality of the fashion decade» as well as with the perception of «historic event» (i.e. Holocaust, Fall of the Berlin Wall) as recoding the image of the «end of history».

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