

Architecture and the Novel under the Italian Fascist Regime

Francesca Billiani • Laura Pennacchietti

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Grazie Alistair, grazie Georgios

Preface

The Book and Its Designs

This book forms part of a wider research project entitled, *Modernism, Modernization, and the Arts under European Dictatorships*, funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). Drawing on a wide-ranging set of modernist journals and artefacts—spanning public building, films, theatre plays, artworks and novels—this research project explored how the Italian Fascist regime's participation in an aesthetic movement (modernism) and in its transformation into a social phenomenon (modernization) created a distinctive system of the arts, which, in the 1930s, also had a profound influence across the whole of Europe. Specifically, this book analyses the relationship between the novel and architecture as one of the key expressions of the system of the arts under the dictatorship.

The project as a whole started from several working hypotheses which have been tested across the Fascist system of the arts and are visible in the website. As it has been established, during the Ventennio, not dissimilarly from what it did happen in other 1930s totalitarian regimes, the Italian Fascist regime created totalitarian aesthetic apparatuses together with new forms of social and cultural patronage for the control of the individual/citizen in the social sphere, seeking mass consensus and the constitution of the 'New Man' as the foundation of a modern collective

social identity. In its claims, the regime adopted modernist aesthetics in a variety of forms and across various artistic fields, albeit not unproblematically and unilaterally, as the privileged paradigm for the modernization of the public sphere. In doing this, the idea of modernity encompassed progressive as well as reactionary forces.

Taken as a whole and despite their different ideological orientations, the official debate on State art as well as that on liberal arts shared a similar concern: the imperative of using the arts as a platform for fostering social modernization in the civic sphere to accommodate the new Fascist Man shaped by the regime's anthropological revolution. In the theory and in the practice of the modernist/Fascist dialectics of modernity and modernization, architecture, the novel, the visual arts, realism, the theatre, the newsreels and the futurist avant-gardes functioned for the regime and for Italian writers, artists and intellectuals, as core drivers for building a new society. In this project, we therefore argue that these debates and artistic expressions were of key importance for the existence of the regime, for they played a foundational role in shaping the aesthetics orientations of Italian culture, in creating its transnational profile, and in strengthening the power of the arts during political repression. Realism across these artistic fields in particular was the key aesthetic principle for such a construction and for creating a new national novel embedded within the international field.

To fulfil its aims, the project produced several outputs, including this book, and a [website-database](#) which collects, displays and more importantly connects information about circa [180 artefacts](#). The website also features [five interpretative hypotheses](#) about the role the novel, architecture, visual arts and cinema played in the construction of the arte di stato. The hypotheses function as the project's conceptual framework since they describe the main lines of enquiry developed throughout. The general and overarching hypotheses and the individual artefacts analysed in [short essays are connected through a set of 12 cardinal principles, two or three associated to each hypothesis](#). Each artefact has been selected as representative of one of the hypotheses, and is linked to an essay in which it is analysed in light of the appropriate principle. Such principles are shaped in the total work of art, which was designed to represent modern forms of total power and technologies different from those championed by the

avant-gardes. In the 1920s and 1930s, the total work of art found its implementation in: (1) the new theorization of the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity; (2) the sacralization of the new man's total politics through the arts; (3) the construction of the new man's urban reality; (4) the new man's/citizen's media manipulation; and (5) the legitimization of the artist/intellectual participation in the civic sphere.

The website also contains a database of journals, which have been used as sources for the project and the chapters of this book. The website functions as a [collective book](#) which has been written by Francesca Billiani, Silvia Colombo, Gianmarco Mancosu and Laura Pennacchietti.

This book and the website-database share a similar conceptual design, which is at the same time rhizomatic and dialectical. The book and the website-database are arranged according to a clear-cut and linear structure, which is organized around a series of conceptual kernels and principles spanning all chapters. The book then can be read as a stand-alone reflection on the intersections between architecture and the novel during the Fascist regime; but it can also be read alongside the website, which can provide further background illustrative examples of these artistic interconnections. It is a manifold and versatile book, both in its conception and in the way it can be read and understood, and it addresses multiple audiences who can navigate its various levels. Finally, readers can enter the virtual space of the book and of the website through various entry points. The online book has direct links to pages and sections of the website-database. In short, the two can exist separately or they can form part of a wider discourse on the dialectics of modernity and the role of the arts under a totalitarian regime.

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About the Authors

Francesca Billiani was the principal investigator of the project and Laura Pennacchietti the main research assistant. Billiani is the author of Chaps. 3, 4, and 6 and Pennacchietti of Chaps. 2, 5, and 7. The introduction and conclusion have been written by Billiani with the support and input of Pennacchietti. Both authors have read and commented on each other's chapters and on the overall structure of the book.

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