

The Ghost of Mussolini, Douglas Harper, Visual Sociology seminar series 2008.

Douglas Harper is a professor of Sociology from the University of Pennsylvania and author of a few books which take the visual in social science seriously. In his lecture he showed us about 200 beautiful pictures he took around Rome in a hunt for the 'ghost of Mussolini'. The methodology of his presentation was almost linear, in a sequence going from the panorama, to the streets, the buildings, the details of the facades, the bas-reliefs, the statues and images, all rendered with natural light and fixed 28 mm lens, from a non-intrusive digital camera. The idea was to make evident the authoritarian project of Mussolini's Rome, fully embedded in the linear, bold, rational, efficient distinctiveness of the modernist architecture.

How come, Harper asked, nobody in Italy seems to bother about this heritage? How is it possible that the most evident and arrogant traces of the Fascism have not been demolished, nor at very least there has been a serious discussion of national pacification like in Germany?

In the discussion, questions were asked about the methods, as well as on the objectives of the project. These highlighted both tensions within the Fascist ideology (e.g. Futuristic dreams of technology and speed versus agrarian policy), but also in the cultural project of identity (*homo italicus*) linked to the ancient Roman empire, which Mussolini clearly preferred, versus the ideal of whiteness expressed by Hitler and part of the Italian Fascist establishment.ⁱ The presentation made clear that there is continuity in the Fascist architecture both in recalling the past and projecting this in the future tense of the Italian history. This is even more evident as, at the time of writing this article, a crowd of straight hands (the typical Roman and Fascist salute) has been seen again in Piazza Venezia, once Mussolini's headquarters in the capital, cheering the new mayor of Rome, the neo-ex-fascist Mr. Alemanno. His victory is even more significant as his support comes mostly from the outskirts of Rome, to which Mr. Alemanno promised to deliver a tough program of 'clearance' against abusive markets (for 'abusive markets' read immigrants), criminality (again, read immigrants), and Roma camps (needs no read)ⁱⁱ.

Although there are many well rehearsed arguments about both the possibility of a 'reading' of the city as a text and about the reactionary disposition of architecture, the attribution of memories appear to be a

ⁱ this double standard of the racial policy of the Fascism is well documented also in the iconography of the Fascism, see for instance Gillette, A. (2002), Dyer, R. (1997).

ⁱⁱ In Thesis VII, Walter Benjamin so remarked: '...One reason Fascism had a chance is that, in the name of progress, its opponents treat it as historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge – unless it is knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable', in Lowy, M. (2005).

more complicated process: not linear or straightforward, but fragmentary and disorderly like scattered traces of the past of the city piled up without an inventory (freely quoted from Benjamin and Gramsci).

Piazza Esedra, for instance, near the Termini station (another of Mussolini's projects, finished well after the end of the Duce) is well known as the historical 'Square of the Left', where people from all over Italy (shall I say 'used to'?) meet in order to march across the capital: I remember the hundreds of thousands demanding recognition of the rights of unmarried couples (yes, still there!), or the disarmament from Pershing and Cruise missiles, or students and trade unions for the national strike against Mr. Berlusconi's policy, all gathering across the same straight and wide streets wanted by Mussolini for his empire's parades. On a different note, Circo Massimo, wanted by Mussolini in order to build a physically strong youth for the future fascist elite ('citus, altius, fortius' - swifter, higher, stronger - the Latin motto was also imprinted on the fascist aircraft), has been seen more recently participating in celebrations of sport events such as the winning of the football premier league by the hosting team - La Roma, in fact.

What all these examples hopefully show is the sense in which memories and symbolism of architectural forms are incessantly iterative, complementing and re-enforcing, often in an inconsistent manner, a sense of identity of a place. A reading of the Rome of Mussolini gives space to a wider reflection, for instance on how this has made an impact on the very Italian society and cultural heritage as well as, at the same time, on the fact that moments of Italian history have attached inconsistent meanings to these very monuments, streets and buildings.

'The city does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of hand' writes Italo Calvino famously (2002/1974), 'the city is overwritten in ways that are both there and opaque', echoes Les Back (2007). In other words, the past can be thought as 'open', not completed, a promise for different and competing futures.

Once again, the objectivity of the lens seems flared, and the relationship between the viewer and the viewed never set in stone. Of this unexpected, and yet fascinating, trip into Fascist Rome, I will particularly remember the photo of one of the many white bas-reliefs celebrating the adventures of Italian Fascism covered by multicolored graffiti, another layer on the many others in the 'Urbe'.

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