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*Grounds for Reclamation:  
'From the Swamps to the Days of Littoria'*

'Reclamation' in English in its earliest uses in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century referred paradoxically not to the taking back, but to the revoking of a claim, grant or concession, as well as to the act of renouncing vows previously taken. Nevertheless, in its more modern usages and already embedded in its earlier meanings, reclamation came to be associated with the act of a claim, specifically one involving the re-claiming of a right. Perhaps because of the duplicity of such meanings, the term soon went to court. Reclamation thus came to stand also for a legal appeal, for the action of protesting or expressing disapproval. From this followed the idea of an action of claiming back something formerly in one's legal possession or of re-asserting a previously held legal right. In a second meaning and still pertinent in contemporary usage, reclamation signifies the reassertion of a relationship or connection with something; the re-evaluation of a term, of a concept in a more positive way, as for instance in the reclamation of women's cultural heritage, including, for example, a reevaluation of the low status accorded to activities characterized as domestic crafts, etc. As another example, the use of the term 'queer' marks the reclamation of a term that had previously been used pejoratively in English-speaking countries: in this sense, one may understand the project of queer theory as one of reclamation. Many versions of feminism and postcolonial theory have pursued similar strategies. Reclamation, in this meaning, lives in a complex relationship with the notion of critique to the degree that it both protests against past practices, while insisting on strategies of recuperation. Aamir Mufti, for one, is critical of such endeavors: for him, some recent postcolonial work that has at its basis a recuperation or 'reclamation' of the traditions of colonized lands and peoples, succumbs to the aura of authenticity. Mufti writes in this context: «The hermeneutics of suspicion

are abandoned for the hermeneutics of reclamation»<sup>1</sup>. In a third usage reclamation describes the action, fact, or process of reforming a person morally and spiritually; the saving of a person from a way of life considered immoral or otherwise undesirable; therefore, by extension, also the colonial act of civilizing a people considered savage. In its most common usage today (though keeping in mind these other meanings), reclamation refers to the conversion of wasteland – especially of land previously under water – into land fit for use, cultivation or construction. Most recently, reclamation has become eco-friendly, to the extent that it also describes the recovery of waste products for reuse or recycling. One final note should be made. Despite the Latin origins of ‘reclamation’, the robustness of the term and its confluence of meanings in English do not translate directly into other European languages. In German, the broader sense of reclamation is covered by the term *Rückgewinnung* (a getting-back), while *Landnahme* (taking the land) refers to land reclamation and has a distinctively active, even military connotation. In French *récupération* attests to claims and traditions regained, while *assèchement* is reserved for what one does to the land: dry it out for use. In Italian and Spanish, *reclamazione/reclamación* signifies a protest or complaint. In Spanish, *recuperación* covers strategies of reclaiming lost objects (*recuperación de tierra* is reserved for land reclamation). Land reclamation in Italian is covered by the term *bonifica*, where its verb *bonificare* indicates the act of ‘making good and useful’, such as the clearing of mines, the economic act of providing a discount, and of course the recuperation of lands for productive use.

### 1. *Reclamation*

Reclamation’s political valences are uncertain, which makes it all the more important seriously to engage the term. My thinking about reclamation derives from a concrete study of Italian fascist uses of the term: as such, it is also helping me critically to think about aspects of fascism that in my opinion have been inadequately theorized. In particular, reclamation provides me with a conceptual apparatus for naming strategies geared to the ‘fascistization’ of Italian culture and society, strategies that do not rely directly on top-down actions by the State, but instead interact with the latter ‘from the ground up’, as it were. Beyond the case of Italian fascism, the concept of reclamation has found other terrains. It was central to

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<sup>1</sup> A. MUFTI, *The Aura of Authenticity*, in «Social Text», XVIII, 3, 2000, p. 92.

German National-Socialist agricultural policies, as well as to most incarnations of settler colonialism. Equally, however, Communist theory and practice in the shape of Soviet and Maoist agricultural policies, as also the American New Deal, put to use the idea of reclamation as a broad strategy of controlling nature and re-writing the category of the human. While my own use of the term saw its most interesting articulation during the inter-war period, some of its features may be detected already at the end of the Nineteenth century, and then again after the end of WWII.

My current research: *Grounds for Reclamation: Italian Fascism, Postfascism and the Question of Consent* is designed to do very specific work with – I hope – broader implications. In an immediate sense, it focuses on a relatively small geographic area during a relatively short historical period, the Pontine Marshes south of Rome during two phases of its existence: first, the region's reclamation under the fascist regime (roughly, from the late 1920s to the fall of Mussolini's rule in 1943); second, the recent 'reclamation of this reclamation' now taking place in Italy as part of a general wish to construct a political and cultural phenomenon that I would call post-fascist. I choose the latter term quite deliberately, this both to distinguish its characteristics from those of neo-fascism (a distinction important to be made and a significant part of my argument), but also to retain the word 'fascism' as a way to think about recent populist phenomena in the Italian political and cultural landscape (the Berlusconi phenomenon being one; more recent expressions in the Cinque Stelle movement being another). In this sense, the book tries to get a handle on a certain form of right-wing populism. But it also does more than that, to the extent that it puts this populism into the context of a much broader discourse of populist anti-politics in other national contexts (especially during the 1920s and 1930s).

The project's theoretical grounds depart from these first premises. Indeed, this project has led me to think about 'grounds' in wider terms, as they are invoked both literally as the making of a physical space and metaphorically as the making of a political or intellectual argument. It is the confluence of such literal and metaphorical invocations that are of special interest to me. As a result, I have been reading extensively in the disciplines of critical geography, ecology, landscape architecture, urbanism, architectural history and of course also cinema studies. In the humanities and especially in literary criticism, meanwhile, debates have been taking place between the 'hermeneutics of suspicion', or deep, below-the-ground reading, and 'surface reading', or what some have called the 'critique of critique'. I have encompassed such reading practices under the term of

‘hermeneutics of reclamation’. By this move, I have extended that term as I found it in Aamir Mufti’s work, which limits such a hermeneutic to recent postcolonial recuperations of authenticity. My claim will be that fascism literally makes the grounds for a ‘hermeneutics of reclamation’ and that this hermeneutic has the power continually to reclaim itself as a grounding for broader political agendas.

This brings me to the question of consent. It is a known fact that the Italian historiography of fascism after 1945 denied that fascism was a culture. The consequences of this position were devastating for the study not only of Italian fascism, but also for the ways in which the country came to terms with its past. The general contention was that fascism was a phenomenon imposed from above, and that – given the Italians’ impermeability to any form of government – the nation was neither affected nor even infected by fascism. The Resistance proved this clearly – so it was said, and therefore the Nation was pure insofar as it did not, indeed could not consent to the fascist regime. As is known furthermore, this discourse has been eroded, indeed disappeared in roughly the last 30 years. The parting shots were those given by Renzo De Felice, whose work has had a profound impact<sup>2</sup>. His multi-volume biography of Mussolini not only challenged comforting ideas about the lack of fascist culture and consent; in his prominence as a teacher, he trained a large number of historians of fascism who went on to study Italian fascism not only as a culture, but as a culture of consent. The master eventually took a perilous turn to the right, making himself into a TV-personality who advocated for ‘justice’ for ex-fascists. Not all of his students followed him down this path, therefore finally opening up a broader discussion about the impact of fascist culture in and on Italy.

Mussolini’s reclamation projects have not been studied as much as they should be; or at least not with the adequate theoretical/methodological sophistication they deserve. I have devised, as part of my study, *Ten theses on reclamation*. I would like here to focus on Thesis 3:

THESIS 3: Reclamation builds a vernacular landscape, one whose signs are grounded in the land and yet are radically ‘free’. The reclaimed land is ‘figurative’ to the extent that it *speaks* or *writes*: this is mostly in the language of realism, though other generic modes exist. Crucial is that the act of reclaiming land is inseparable from its language<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Cfr. R. DE FELICE, *Intervista sul fascismo*, Laterza, Bari 1975.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. S. STEWART-STEINBERG, *Reclamation*, in «Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon», III, 5, 2016, <<http://www.politicalconcepts.org/reclamation-suzanne-stewart-steinberg/>>

Fascism is from its first beginnings deeply implicated in the gathering together of land(s). Reclamation articulates a theory of landscape. In its broadest definition, a landscape is a portion of land that the eye can comprehend at a glance. Applications of such a usage have wavered between the land itself and the picture of that land, and between a 'natural' scenery and a politico-administrative unit, whereby these two uncertainties have remained intimately connected throughout its conceptualization: the land is both the thing itself and its representation, the grounds from which power emerges and the object upon which power comes into being in some other place/space. As a compound word, landscape yokes the land to a scape. In its most general meaning, land signifies a defined, bounded space, while scape is etymologically related to the suffix '-ship' or '-schaft', rendering thus the landscape into a collection or system of lands with an abstract or abstracted meaning: in other words, land is transformed into a concept. Comprehended at a glance, landscape is – in John B. Jackson's words – «a space deliberately created to speed up or slow down the process of nature»<sup>4</sup>. Jackson distinguishes between political and inhabited landscapes, the first artificial, the second the result of a 'natural evolution'. While the first comes about as the result of actions from above, the second develops from below: it is a vernacular landscape. Jackson views vernacular landscapes as on the defensive, encroached upon by the imposition of political strategies of surveillance, mapping and visualization. Jane Jacobs, whose theories of the ecological impact of the city on the countryside have been profoundly influential, echoes this position. For her, cities can only be saved if we renounce thinking about them as works of art, and instead think of them as natural creatures<sup>5</sup>.

I propose that reclamation considerably complicates such binarisms. Landscape is both imposed from above and developed from the ground up: reclamation 'builds' the traditional, the authentic, the vernacular. Turning to Mussolini's 'integral reclamation' – the so-called *bonifica integrale*, and in particular to the regime's architectural politics: fascism's famous 'Romanism', that is, its dedication to the return to an imperial past, was supplemented by ecological policies literally written in the ground as also by the recuperation but also the construction of an Italian vernacular past.

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<sup>4</sup> J.B. JACKSON, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, Yale University, New Haven 1984, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. J. JACOBS, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Vintage Books, New York 1961, p. 372-373.

Italian architectural modernism was predicated on both, the idea of the *tabula rasa* or the *ex novo* and on notions of space thoroughly soaked with meaning. If vernacular architecture, as the ‘architecture without architects’, is a form of building and inhabiting a space that comes into being from ‘the ground up’, then in fascist Italy, this was built on the idea of the farmhouse: in Tuscany, Puglia or the ‘native’ villages of the Italian colonies.

Paradoxically, it was also built on the idea of a vernacularism without ‘local’ knowledge; that is, on notions of the modular unit or what Benedict Anderson refers to as seriality as a necessary component in the project of building a nation. Giuseppe Pagano, fascism’s most important exponent of vernacularism, called for an «immense encyclopedia of abstract forms and creative expressions with obvious connections to the land, climate, economy, and technology»<sup>6</sup>.

It was the latter that would constitute both a vast reservoir of references, while yet allowing for the creation of something radically new. His vernacular ‘signs’ required paradoxically both, grounding in the rural earth and a radical unhinging from their contexts.

If signs then become the ground upon and through which to reclaim space and time, several consequences follow. First, the reclaimed landscape is always already figurative. In what Noa Steimatsky describes as the «surge of the everyday», where the marginal, the quotidian, the local come to speak in a universal language, such language has a broad range of genres at its disposal<sup>7</sup>. Steimatsky’s study of Italian neorealist locations detects a landscape that speaks in the lyrical mode. Akin to Erich Auerbach’s ‘mingling of high and low’ as fundamental to the act of literary mimesis, Mikhail Bakhtin’s ‘dialogical imagination’, or Fredric Jameson’s ‘antinomies of realism’, the logic of reclamation relies on strategies of realism as its central mode of expression. In the Italian case, late Nineteenth-century *verismo* and later neorealism gave a specifically theatrical, choral spin to the language of the land. Mussolini built cities as stage-sets, and this to the extent that such building enacted a dramaturgy of nature. In other words, fascist New Towns bore uncanny similarities to stage sets and indeed were thought to perform similar functions.

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<sup>6</sup> G. PAGANO, *Documenting Rural Architecture*, in «Journal of Architectural Education», LXIII, 2, 2010, p. 92.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. N. STEIMATSKY, *Italian Locations: Reinhabiting the Past in Postwar Cinema*, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis 2008, p. 69. I am deeply indebted to Steimatsky’s book in the pages that follow, with the difference that many of her reflections can be applied also to the period prior to 1945, that is, to the fascist era.

Second and related, the reclaimed landscape is always already a map. In this, reclamation effects two fantasy moves simultaneously. On the one hand, its mapping drive 'miniaturizes' and 'simplifies' – the terms are James Scott's – in such a way as to make possible local experimentation in order then to generalize<sup>8</sup>. Simplification speaks to rendering the land into observable, easily comprehensible modular and serial units.

This takes place from above and from afar, from airplanes for example, and therefore new technologies of vision are relied upon to generate this vision. From on high, miniaturization allows also for other possibilities: the turning of the land into a theme park. Not only have projects of reclamation been memorialized in theme parks and museums around the world, these projects themselves often bear uncanny resemblances to Potemkin Villages. Indeed, reclamation projects and their thematic representation are from the very beginning difficult to pry apart. Animated maps first appeared during the first years of reclamation's great successes, and they provide a fine example of these two forms of mapping: it is perhaps no coincidence that one of the first animated maps appeared in a film centering on surveillance and capture – Fritz Lang's 1931 *M*.

Animated maps subsequently became tools of landscape and boundaries, and war and movement. And: this 'mapping drive' immediately approaches Borges's 1946 fantasy of the exactitude of science, where the map covers and indeed becomes territory<sup>9</sup>.

Third, reclamation is a 'technique-concept', insofar as it condenses within itself ekphrastic strategies (reclamation is remarkably garrulous in its continuous need to tell us what it is doing) and transformative drives, showing and telling, an eternal present and a destiny<sup>10</sup>. As a technique, reclamation does the work of 'yoking' terms in such a way as to produce a technology of authenticity, just as it also produces an alibi for an authentic technology: its mode of operation is that of the rhetoric of the chiasmus.

Reclamation challenges not only notions of agency: are its administrators the true and empirically verifiable agents (and are we therefore in the

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<sup>8</sup> Cfr. J. SCOTT, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, Yale University, New Haven 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. J.L. BORGES, *On Exactitude in Sciences*, in «Collected fictions», Penguin Books, New York 1998.

<sup>10</sup> I borrow the idea of a 'technique concept' from Frederic Jameson: «It is, at least in part, of the very notion of point of view that we will be speaking here and throughout this theory of realism, speaking of it not only as a technique but also as a concept, indeed as something like a technique-concept [...] and finally as an ideology». F. JAMESON, *The Antinomies of Realism*, Verso Books, London 2013, p. 51.

discourse of ideology?), or does it work by the force of its own mysteriously compelling powers? Does it therefore have a sort of conceptual grasp on us? Certain is that reclamation does not produce a 'confusion' between reality and fiction – this would be James Scott's claim in his influential *Seeing Like a State*. His central thesis is that «the *legibility* of a society provides the capacity for large-scale social engineering, high-modernist *ideology* provides the desire, the authoritarian *state* provides the determination to act on that desire, and an *incapacitated civil society* provides the leveled social *terrain* on which to build». Legibility for Scott produces a distinction between 'facts on paper' and 'facts on the ground'. And this distinction in turn produces a confusion between fiction and fact, one caused by large-scale engineering, high-modernist ideology and an emasculated civil society. The problem with Scott's analysis is that 'fiction' is too easily equated with ideology; 'fact' is thereby preserved for analysis, while fiction gets banned to the realm of ideology. And so he writes: «I imagine that the greater the pretense of and insistence on an officially decreed micro-order, the greater the volume of nonconforming practices necessary to sustain that fiction»<sup>11</sup>. But, nor can reclamation be reduced to what Jean Baudrillard famously called the 'order of the simulacrum', which claims – against Scott's reclaimed claims for the order of the ground – that the ground has simply disappeared. In this sense, both Scott and Baudrillard, while arguing from opposite sides of the spectrum, agree: the ground has been lost and politically speaking it needs to be reclaimed. Both adhere here to a hermeneutics of reclamation. This, I would propose, generates a kind of theoretical swamp, to the extent that – at least conceptually speaking – the implicit desire is one that recuperates grounds. Let us say instead that reclamation mobilizes figure and ground, two terms that have been put to use in Gestalt psychology, as well as by media theorists, such as Marshall McLuhan.

McLuhan's famous dictum «The medium is the message» postulates that the figure (the medium) operates through its context (the ground). The message, which the medium conveys, can only be understood if the medium and the environment in which the medium is used – and which, simultaneously, it effectively creates – are analyzed together. At the same time, the idea of figure also refers to the content of a particular medium, while ground refers to the medium itself. McLuhan's aphorism can thus be read as an attempt to draw attention away from a preoccupation with figure/message to a consideration of the importance of ground/medium. In light of this, I propose that the concept of reclamation as figure of the

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<sup>11</sup> SCOTT, *Seeing Like a State*, cit., p. 5.



ground and as ground of the figure sits uncomfortably in the domain of the conceptual, indeed challenges conceptuality in significant ways, to the extent that it drains both the ground and the figure of their mutually supportive consistencies. Reclamation is materially close both to the land and all the ideological meanings it may and does evoke. In this sense, reclamation is conceptually unstable. For this reason, reclamation is the conceptual grasp of the mediatic image in the process of being drained of its grounds.

Fourth, reclamation projects rely on a form of the aestheticization of politics, one grounded in utopian desires that are always already the desire of and for 'administration'. What reclamation proposes is a direct connection between utopianism, administration and aestheticization. As Walter Benjamin well knew, the aestheticization of politics was closely connected to the crisis of representation, this to the extent that he understood that this also signified a crisis of the liberal political order. Reclamation addresses just such a crisis in the logic of representation (in all its significations). The concept provides a response in two, contradictory but nevertheless coexisting propositions. The first may be described as a radical refusal of all representation in favor of a 'logic of presentation', by which I intend a mechanism in the form of theatricality in and by which what is enacted is a desire for a sublimation or overcoming of representation in all its valences: aesthetic, political and epistemological. At stake here is a 'presentation', even an acting-out in the psychoanalytic sense – which is why we are dealing here with utopian, presentist desires. The affective effectiveness of, for instance, fascism's projects of reclamation resides at least partially in this presented but unrepresentable pleasure. Reclamation produces therefore a sort of short-circuit between the event and its registration. But a second logic is also in play, one of 'hyper-representation'. For, what is particularly arresting is that reclamation produces sites that are empty, in the sense noted above: signs are both grounded and yet detached from any signification. Timothy Mitchell, in *Colonizing Egypt*, argues that such sites of (re)presentation are at the very core of colonialism. Colonialism refers not only to the domination of and over a territory by an exogenous entity, but also to a new way of conceptualizing time and space, and a new way of manufacturing the experience of the real. Colonialism constructs the world as an exhibition, as a representation. For this reason, it produces a world divided into two: not only between the West and its Other, but also between representations and reality, things and plans. He writes:

Colonialism was distinguished by its power of representation, whose paradigm was the architecture of the colonial city but whose effects

extended themselves at every level. It was distinguished not just by representation's extent, however, but by its very technique. The order and certainty of colonialism was the order of the exhibition [...]. Modern politics was to reside within a reality effect, a technique of certainty, order and truth, by which the world seemed absolutely divided into self and other, into things themselves and their plan, into bodies and minds, into the material and the conceptual<sup>12</sup>.

In world exhibitions, museums, zoos, or the architecture of cities, 'things' increasingly appear to be built, organized or consumed as signs of something else, while nevertheless these signs evoke some more original and authentic idea or experience. And yet, as Mitchell insists, there is no exit from this structure, as the authentic is lived in and as a perpetual deferral. In this sense, reclamation is one conceptual tool (among others) to provide an intervention into the crisis of representation. It is the site wherefrom the world is re-ordered into a fluid dichotomy between things and plans.

Fifth, the concept of reclamation calls upon a particular use of the category of realism. To approach such usage, one may harness or yoke two texts: Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* and Michel Foucault's *Society Must Be Defended*. Auerbach and Foucault of course do very different work: the first traces the construction of a literary or aesthetic realism; the second the possible genealogy of a new discourse grounded in war, race and power. What unites these two thinkers is the discovery of 'reality' as a radical event, one that is 'grounded' in a shift to a very specific form of discourse (Foucault) and a style (Auerbach). Furthermore, both thinkers are constructing emphatically not histories of an idea (in the classic sense of the object of 'intellectual history'), but instead allegories of modernity. For this reason, neither of these texts can be read as teleological or positivist narratives, whereby origin and point of arrival are determined or indeed determinant. At best, one may find a contingent (but not necessarily arbitrary) *Ansatzpunkt* – which is how Auerbach describes it; or what Lacan and Freud describe as a suture point or *Knotenpunkt*, a knot of overdetermined meaning(s). Both proceed via a narrative of radical contingency in fields of force, in a movement that Gilles Deleuze names the rhizome. Edward Said names it according to the musical term of the contrapuntal – and, indeed, Auerbach and Foucault both invoke this term. At the basis of their work lies a fundamental curiosity in a paradox, one which they both engage and stage: on the one hand,

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<sup>12</sup> T. MITCHELL, *Colonizing Egypt*, University of California, Berkeley 1991, p. 171.

they emphatically do not think of realism as the adequation of ground and language, as the capture of reality in and through language. In other words, neither believe that we are dealing with a demystification of reality, in the sense of the critique of ideology. On the other hand, they also seem to be saying that language now finds its grounds, its intimate contact with the viscera of existence. Paradoxically, then, both think a fundamental split or radical rupture as the grounds of and for the real: the split is here the ground. Auerbach names this realism; Foucault biopower. Fredric Jameson, in his recent wonderful *Antinomies of Realism*, has in his own way marked this paradox in the name of a form of an antinomianism: the fundamental 'realist' conflict between showing and telling, description and narrative, raises the specter of the elimination of all law, whether that of the state or that of genre. Reading the two authors together therefore may allow us to engage another rupture: the one between aesthetic considerations and the concept of biopolitics. Auerbach's magnificent *Mimesis* is geared to a sweeping vision of Western literature as the work of representation. While the term 'realism' dominates the work, the latter is not for this either a 'theory' of realism, nor a teleological narrative of how the West conquered or captured reality in the claws of its language. What resides at the center of the text is a rupture, if not disruption, one that no dialectic can heal but which nevertheless finds a tenuous, unstable solution in the form of a promiscuous mingling of styles. Auerbach conceives of realism as the mingling of a 'high', tragic style with the low, comedic language of the people, the everyday, the ground even, in such a way as to lend the latter the gravitas of the tragic. In this process, genre abolishes its own laws, and the language or figure of power is displaced in favor of an unstable ground that speaks for itself. Foucault's *Society Must Be Defended* traces the birth of a new discourse, one of a subject who does not, cannot occupy a universal or sovereign position insofar as language itself is no longer sovereign. The subject ceases to be a universal subject: a surprising claim in light of standard narratives about modernity as that which makes possible the universal subject of rights. A discourse emerges that inverts the traditional values of intelligibility: an explanation of the world comes from below, and that explanation is confused, disorganized, obscure, haphazard. It develops entirely in the historical dimension, where truth becomes a weapon to be used in the service of partisan victory, as a discourse that is both: darkly critical and intensely mythical<sup>13</sup>. At stake for

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<sup>13</sup> Cfr. E. AUERBACH, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Princeton University, Princeton 2013; M. FOUCAULT, *Society Must Be Defended*, Picador, New York 2003.

both Auerbach and Foucault is a form of parrhesia, which in the Italian context of an avowed (neo)realism converts the materiality of the land into a discursive space wherein the land comes to speak for itself.

## 2. *Mediatic Ruralism*

Fascism's project of ruralization was an entirely modern one, geared not to a clean separation between town and country but to the mobilization of their new functions in the form of something Giuseppe Bottai called «urbanistica rurale»<sup>14</sup>.

While it certainly involved the frequently forced demographic transfer of urban, already industrialized, and often highly politically conscious (and at times, actively critical) citizens to agricultural regions, by the very fact that this was at all levels a project, one of massive social engineering, means that it cannot therefore be understood as a return to traditional, pre-industrial economic and social structures. In this sense, ruralization must not be understood as a return to nature, even while the regime heavily relied on the category of nature as a fundamental ideological component of its project. Fascist ruralization comprised instead a naturalization of nature because, and as both terms – 'ruralization' and 'naturalization' – already indicate, there seemingly existed a realm of nature that is more than itself, indeed an unnatural nature, one that therefore required active intervention in order to bend it in the right direction. If, then, the regime used a language to describe its project as one that would reclaim the authentic values of traditional (and virile) Italian rural life, it was nevertheless also the case that the justification for such a reclamation was not limited to the opposition to 'unnatural' and therefore 'perverse' life in all those sterile cities subject to a frightening range of diseases: industrial unrest, low birth rates, liberal democracy, communism, and other overly 'cultural' phenomena. Sterility pertained not only to the pathological environment of the cities. It had an equally destructive existence in the swamps: the *mortifera palude* posed as much a danger as did its urban counterparts to the health of the population and the social body as a whole.

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<sup>14</sup> *Urbanistica rurale*, so Bottai announced at the First National Congress for Urban Studies in 1937, «might appear to be a contradiction, but is not, because it expresses precisely our objective of giving a new meaning to relations between the city and the function of the country». Ora in M. FULLER, *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Fascist Plans for the Colonial City of Addis Ababa and the Colonizing Suburb of EUR '42*, in «Journal of Contemporary History», XXXI, 2, 1996, p. 401.

The language to describe such swampy, watery origin frequently relied on cosmological and eschatological metaphors. In a 1929 article written by Renzo Larco, for instance, the author, in obeying the lessons of geologists and therefore returning to far-away eras and the cyclical turning of centuries, asserted that Italy is a place founded in the idea of reclamation. Different from other nations, Italy had to make its post-Edenic geography by the sweat of its people's brow<sup>15</sup>.

If the reclamation of marshes became during the 1930s synonymous with fascist national regeneration, this was made possible by a process of formulating the idea of a 'fascist nature', grafted upon, but also supplementing a more primordial and destructive one. In such a vision, fascist nature was clean, healthy, and virile, while its primordial version was undifferentiated, malaria-infested, hence contagious and subject to forces of permeability and invasion, and therefore, of course, also feminine.

If at work were often simple binary oppositions, it was nevertheless also the case that equally at work were more subtle maneuvers that depended on strategies of displacement and supplementarity, whereby 'nature' could signify in many, often opposing, directions. The idea of 'giving back the land' to those who had 'earned' or 'deserved' it was in this sense a return of and to something that had never before existed. Such a project of ruralization was, from its very inception, therefore also militarized, indeed conceived as a war against nature and all its perceived negative offshoots. It is no coincidence that the Pontine reclamation project was in the hands of the committee for World War I veterans, the *Opera nazionale combattenti*.

No one contests today that film (along with architecture and urban planning) was the medium of choice for the regime, and this not only in the area of propaganda but also as a possible site for the making of a fascist culture. Both, LUCE and Cinecittà are fascist creations, thereby making possible an organized film industry dedicated not only to the production of so-called propaganda newsreels but also to the creation of a national and nationalist cinema. As critics such as Ruth Ben-Ghiat have pointed out, fascist cinema (as also literature) placed its bets on a return to the real, not a 'photographic' one, but rather on a reality infused with 'spirituality' – in other words, with utopian aspirations – but a realist aesthetic nevertheless and above all an aesthetic that would encompass

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<sup>15</sup> Cfr. R. LARCO, *L'Italia più nuova e il suo codice rurale. Alle basi della bonifica rurale*, in «Emporium. Rivista mensile illustrata d'arte e coltura», LXX, 419, 1929.

the 'masses'<sup>16</sup>. More directly, fascism was grounded in the notion of a vernacular language rooted in a thoroughly modernist soil. Indeed, it is precisely this modernist soil, or so I would argue, that provided the basis for fascist consent.

In a study of the aesthetics of neorealism, Karl Schoonover has argued that the model of vision proposed by neorealist cinema relied on a kind of 'shotgun seeing'. He proposes that post-War neorealism created a global, international community to view the War's ravaged body as outside spectator/witness. According to Schoonover, the new aesthetic contributed to the making of a global humanist community (largely a North Atlantic alliance) founded in the new values of international aid, of «relief, assistance, financial forgiveness, and dependency»<sup>17</sup>. Crucial – so Schoonover writes – to this new community is that it was grounded not only in the spectacle of the tortured and prostrate body, but also the fact that the seeing of such a body depended on the notion of a broadened (global) spectatorship that stood outside, beyond the sites of violence: «the status of being claimed by an outsider's eye is inherent to neorealism's definition from the start [...]. From its earliest definitions, the neorealist aesthetic has set out to offer its viewer the role of an outsider»<sup>18</sup>. One may, I propose, press Schoonover's claims into other services. While the constitution of a global, 'humanitarian' community may very well have been neorealism's function after 1945, it is also the case that this is not its earliest definition or indeed function. Neorealism, as cinematic practice, was already in place under fascist filmmaking. Here, too, such an aesthetic relied on a spectatorship as an external participant to the creation of a national culture - to the extent that such viewers were to be precisely both external and yet also present. Fascist neorealism, in this sense, set the stage for mass viewing as a form of participation. These new masses, however, found their form of embodiment in the fascist imaginary not as humans, but in the form of what Jeffrey Schnapp calls the 'metallized man', made concrete in the agricultural/military vehicle of the tractor and the truck<sup>19</sup>. Alessandro Blasetti, a film director who features prominently in Ben-Ghiat's narrative

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<sup>16</sup> Cfr. R. BEN-GHIAT, *Italian Fascism and the Aesthetics of the 'Third Way'*, in «Contemporary History», XXXI, 2, 1996.

<sup>17</sup> K. SCHOONOVER, *Brutal Vision. The Neorealist Body in Postwar Italian Cinema*, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis 2012, p. XXIV.

<sup>18</sup> *Ivi*, p. XXII.

<sup>19</sup> Cfr. J. SCHNAPP, *Staging Fascism: 18BL and the Theater of the Masses for the Masses*, Stanford University, Stanford 1996.

about the origins of neorealism in fascist culture<sup>20</sup>, was also the director of the ill fated – because a resounding flop – *18BL*, the grand theater project of the masses and for the masses, as recounted by Schnapp. The central protagonist of this theater experience was indeed a truck, a «single and collective personage» as Alessandro Pavolini described it: «As hard as the war, of the struggles of the fascist squadrons, and of building projects»<sup>21</sup>. It is worthwhile pursuing Pavolini's invocation of 'building projects', in order to situate the anthro-truck in the fascist, ruralizing ground. The 18B Fiat truck's name in Blasetti's theater spectacle was Mother Cartridge-Pouch, thereby combining both natural metaphors with military ones. Tellingly, the final act of this drama had its principal protagonist, the truck, commit a kind of sacrificial suicide by letting itself be dumped into the swamps of the Agro Pontino, all this again to confirm the close, even organic relationship between agriculture and war. It must be pointed out that such a truck actually was dumped into the originating foundations of Littoria/Latina and apparently now lies buried under its central square.

Countless newsreel documentaries were made by LUCE of the bonifica in the Agro Pontino (as also elsewhere), and every time Mussolini visited the areas, this too was recorded on film. By some calculations, between 1932 and 1944, 86 films were made of and in the Agro Pontino: 72 newsreels, 11 documentaries, one feature film (*Camicie nere*), and two combat films shot by the American Army. What is striking about the short newsreel films is the frequency in which the tractor appears as the main protagonist of the events being told. The means by which the machine is anthropomorphized are quite subtle, however, for the tractor is not seen here directly to replace humans and animals. Instead, such means effect an operation of dis-placement in such a way as to produce a fluid visual language of 'natural machines' or a 'machine nature'. A particularly good example of such a mediatic ruralism is provided by the 1942 newsreel *La metanizzazione delle trattrici*, about the conversion of tractors to methane fuel, whereby the tractor is superimposed on a line of oxen. Interestingly, the commenting voice-over describes the tractors as tanks fighting the battle of bread and of victory, while the oxen – who still make their presence known – are considered to be picturesque, but anachronistic. Similar, but more refined strategies – this because they rewrite the 'picturesque' as a modern vernacular phenomenon – are also at play in what must be

<sup>20</sup> Cfr. R. BEN-GHIAT, *Fascist Modernities: Italy 1922-1945*, University of California, Berkeley 2001.

<sup>21</sup> A. PAVOLINI, in SCHNAPP, *Staging Fascism*, cit., p. 51.

one of the finest of the films made by of the Pontine Marshes: the 1933 *Dall'acquitrino alle giornate di Littoria*<sup>22</sup>. There exist conflicting reports on who actually shot the film. Furthermore, I have not been able to certify who composed the music, though most likely it was Carlo Alberto Pizzini (1905-1981), composer of other music for the land, such as *Al Piemonte* and *Il poema alle Dolomiti*<sup>23</sup>.

*Dall'acquitrino* is over thirteen minutes long – an unusual length for newsreels such as this one. Quite remarkably, it is also to a certain extent a silent film, insofar as it relies almost entirely on its visual and musical vocabulary to convey the regime's message. In other words, this quasi-documentary lacks the typical 'propaganda' voice-over of more standard newsreels and reports. What *La metanizzazione delle trattrici* had achieved through visual displacements, this film accomplishes through a very complex series of musical displacements. The film provides diegetic sound, especially during its first minutes, that is, when we are being shown the pre-fascist times of the swamps: we hear the sounds of animals, humans, and other 'natural' noises, such as the sloshing of water or the crackling of a fire. These diegetic sounds are masterfully blended into the 'folkloric' notes of peasant musical culture in the form of the Italian *fal-sobordone* practice of improvisation. Cleansed of any immediate regional connotations, the music is infused with nostalgia but nevertheless associated with a pre-fascist past and for that reason difficult to place: is the sound in the film or on its surface? This remains uncertain until finally reclamation is under way, when all natural sounds are now clearly displaced into a musical score vaguely evocative of the stylistic orientation best represented by Sergei Prokofiev's roughly contemporaneous film scores, with echoes of Arthur Honegger's more 'machinist' pieces depicting, for example, the journey of a steam locomotive, and of Ottorino Respighi's symphonic works. After the swamps, musically speaking, a new era dawns on a (moderate) musical modernism wherein nature itself is now not simply aestheticized but thoroughly occupied. Language returns only during the final moments of the film, as Mussolini speaks at the inauguration of Littoria to the town's and the region's new inhabitants. Visually, the film is quite stunning and in support of its auidial message. It is remarkably similar to the final episode of Roberto Rossellini's 1946 *Paisà*, and it would be

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<sup>22</sup> *Dall'acquitrino alle giornate di Littoria* (1933), <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lmi-VuKCbEnk&t=571s>> (ultimo accesso: 23.09.2018).

<sup>23</sup> I owe thanks to Alessandra Campana, Emilio Sala and Emanuele Senici for help with issues pertaining to the musical score of the film.



difficult not to categorize *Dall'acquitrino* as an important early example of Italian neorealism. But what is so extraordinary about this film is that in the end it is about nothing beyond itself. The medium is here truly the message, for it not merely describes or captures the making of a land; it is that making. The final shot is that of the Littorial tower, one we are asked by Mussolini to gaze at during moments of hardship. As Diane Ghirardo and Kurt Forster have written:

[t]he tower constitutes at the same time a symbol of power and a 'call to action', as well as a stage for the Duce's pompous self-presentation; it is the emblem of his figure, one that detaches itself from on high on the town hall, concretely and symbolically, through the figure *delegated to represent* him. The gesture of the fascist salute... corresponds to the gestural function of the tower: to affirm the unity of the people and its loyalty and obedience to the Duce. The tower not only represents that ritual, but itself becomes ritual, a place of memory for power and order, the omnipresent and indestructible background of the Duce's *virtual* presence<sup>24</sup>.

The Littorial tower was famously 'empty', bearing no message beyond its existence and in that sense remarkably resembling our current cell towers disguised as 'ruralized' trees. It was during this same inaugural speech that Mussolini also pronounced the famous sentence «*È questa la guerra che preferiamo*», not recorded in this film: «this is the war we prefer». We must therefore ponder such a message, one seemingly embedded in both: in the grounds while yet utterly mediatic.

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<sup>24</sup>D. GHIRARDO, K. FORSTER, *I modelli delle città di fondazione in epoca fascista*, in «Storia d'Italia», Annali VIII: *Insedimenti e territorio*, a cura di C. De Seta, Einaudi, Milano 1985, p. 653.

