



Actualism and the Fascist Historic Imaginary

Author(s): Claudio Fogu

Source: *History and Theory*, Vol. 42, No. 2, (May, 2003), pp. 196-221

Published by: Blackwell Publishing for Wesleyan University

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3590881>

Accessed: 02/05/2008 00:39

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://mc1litvip.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=black>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We enable the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

ACTUALISM AND THE FASCIST HISTORIC IMAGINARY

CLAUDIO FOGU

ABSTRACT

This essay argues that, just like liberalism and communism, fascist ideology was based on a specific philosophy of history articulated by Giovanni Gentile in the aftermath of World War I. Gentile's actualist notion that history "belongs to the present" articulated an immanent vision of the relationship between historical agency, representation, and consciousness against all transcendental conceptions of history. I define this vision as historic (as opposed to "historical") because it translated the popular notion of historic eventfulness into the idea of the reciprocal immanence of the historical and the historiographical act. I further show that the actualist philosophy of history was historically resonant with the Italian experience of the Great War and was culturally modernist. I insist, however, that the actualist catastrophe of the histori(ographi)cal act was also genealogically connected to the Latin-Catholic rhetorical signification of "presence" that had sustained the development of Italian visual culture for centuries. Accordingly, I argue that the fascist translation of actualism into a historic imaginary was at the root of Italian fascism's appeal to both masses and intellectuals. Fascism presented itself as a historic agent that not only "made history," but also made it present to mass consciousness. In fact, I conclude by suggesting that the fascist success in institutionalizing a proper mode of historic representation in the 1920s, and a full-blown historic culture in the 1930s, may have also constituted a fundamental laboratory for the formation of posthistoric(al) imaginaries.

I. INTRODUCTION

Some years ago Hayden White proposed that the main appeal of fascist ideology resided in its "vision of history." For White, this vision was theoretically alternative to liberal historicism and Marxist materialism even though it was also rooted in the evolution of nineteenth-century historical culture. In the thought of Martin Heidegger and Italian fascism's prime philosopher, Giovanni Gentile, as well as in the "intuitions" of Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini, White saw the resurgence of "something like Schiller's notion of the historical sublime or Nietzsche's version of it," that is, a vision of the historical past as a sublime "'spectacle' of 'confusion,' 'uncertainty,' and 'moral anarchy,'" a vision that White believed romantic theorists and historians had championed in order to legitimize the "visionary politics" associated with the revolutionary events of their times. According to White, throughout the nineteenth century this romantic appreciation for "history's meaninglessness" had been subjected to the combined crossfire of historicism, positivism, idealism, and Marxism which—*notwithstanding* a celebrated antagonism—contributed as a whole to the "desublima-

tion” of the historical imagination, and subordinated “written history to the category of the ‘beautiful’” in order to authorize a “realistic” politics. In White’s account, therefore, fascism turned out to rescue a romantic vision of history from a prolonged subordination to a realist politics of historical representation.¹

To date White’s provocative essay remains the sole attempt to define the philosophical shape and historical genealogy of a fascist poetics of history applicable to both Italian fascism and German Nazism. White’s argument, however, has not found much echo or support among historians of either the fascist or Nazi regimes, ideologies, or cultures.² In addition, for some scholars White’s praise for a romantic theory of history that he himself associates with fascist ideology has only confirmed long-held suspicions concerning the political implications of his own critique of narrative realism and historical truth.³ Yet, White’s historical

1. Hayden White, “The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation,” in *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 72-75.

2. For the Italian case, most general studies of fascism have long explored the central role of Gentile’s philosophical system, *attualismo* (actualism), in the definition of fascist ideology, the organization of intellectual consensus to the regime, and—more recently—the formulation of a proper political theology for the “cult of fascism.” By the same token, the “visionary” horizon of Mussolini’s aesthetic politics has received quite a bit of attention in recent studies of fascist image-politics and mass culture. Nonetheless, nothing like a specific appreciation for “the historical sublime” has transpired either from the study of fascist ideology, or the cultural impact of actualism, or the evolution of fascist historical culture. See the particular studies of fascist historical culture by Pier Giorgio Zunnino, *L’ideologia del Fascismo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1980), 63-123; Renzo De Felice, “Gli storici italiani nel periodo fascista,” in *Intelletuali di fronte al Fascismo: Saggi e note documentarie* (Rome: Bonacci, 1985), 190-243; Armando Saitta, “L’organizzazione degli studi storici,” in *Federico Chabod e la ‘nuova storiografia’ italiana dal primo al Secondo Dopoguerra, 1919–1950* (Milan: Jaca Book, 1984), 511-513; Massimo Miozzi, *La scuola storica romana, 1926–1943* (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1982); Delio Cantimori, “Note sugli studi storici dal 1926 al 1951,” in *Storici e storia* (Turin: G. Einaudi, 1971), 268-280, and “Gli studi di storia moderna e contemporanea,” in *Cinquant’anni di vita intellettuale italiana 1896–1946* (Naples: Edizioni scientifiche italiane, 1950); and Antonio Casali, *Storici italiani fra le due guerre: La Nuova rivista storica 1917–1943* (Napoli: Guida, 1980). See as well the more general studies by Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), and Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini’s Italy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997). On German-Nazi historical culture, see Karl Ferdinand Werner, *Das NS-Geschichtsbild und die deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1967); Karl Ferdinand Werner, “Die deutsche Historiographie unter Hitler,” in *Geschichtswissenschaft in Deutschland*, ed. Bernd Faulenbach (Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1974); Karen Schönwälder, *Historiker und Politik: Geschichtswissenschaft im Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt: Campus, 1992); and Karen Schönwälder, “The Fascination of Power: Historical Scholarship in Nazi Germany,” *History Workshop Journal* 43 (1997), 133-153. On academic studies of the Bismarck era, see Assunta Esposito, “La valutazione dell’opera di Bismarck nella Germania nazionalsocialistica attraverso l’esame della storiografia e della pubblicistica,” *Storia Contemporanea* 9 (1978), 663-681. On the teaching of history, see Horst Gies, *Geschichtsunterricht unter der Diktatur Hitlers* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1992); Rainer Riemenschneider, “L’enseignement de l’histoire, en Allemagne, sous le ‘IIIe Reich,’” *Francia* 7 (1979), 401-428; and Gilmer Blackburn, *Education in the Third Reich: Race and History in Nazi Textbooks* (Albany, N. Y.: State University of New York Press, 1985). Finally, on German-Nazi sites of memory and history see the two volumes by Rudy Koshar, *Germany’s Transient Past: Preservation and National Memory in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, N. C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), and *From Monuments to Traces: Artifacts of German Memory, 1870–1990* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000).

3. Carlo Ginzburg, “Just One Witness,” in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the ‘Final Solution,’* ed. S. Friedlander (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

reconstruction of the fascist challenge to nineteenth-century historical culture points to a fruitful avenue of discussion of fascism and historical theory.

For White, fascism paralleled in politics the scientific “revolution” of Freudianism because it had understood correctly that the formation of historical consciousness was based on “what Freud called ‘reaction-formation’ to the apperception of history’s meaninglessness.”⁴ For White, therefore, the truth first divined by romanticism—that the formation of historical consciousness did not conform to the bourgeois law of transitivity between realist representation and rational understanding—and only later brought to the foreground by fascism and psychoanalysis, must have appeared self-evident to many in the early 1920s.⁵ How else, White asks, can we account for “the appeal of fascism not only to the masses but to any number of intellectuals who had certainly been exposed to a culture of history that explained and understood the past to the very depths of all possibility”?⁶

Unfortunately, White’s analysis has very little to do with the intellectual appeal exercised on his contemporaries by Heidegger’s philosophy of being, or the mass appeal generated by German Nazism in the early 1930s. As several scholars have underlined, Hitler’s movement and regime subscribed to an apocalyptic view of history in which German history overcame itself in the eschatological projection of a Third Reich. And, in practice, Nazi politics of history were dominated by a combination of opportunism, moralistic commentary, and racism, which allowed the appropriation of any part of the German past for eternal values’ sake.⁷ But White’s account is appropriate to the evaluation of the relationship between Gentile’s philosophical system—*attualismo* (actualism)—and the mass appeal exercised by Italian fascism from the mid-1920s onwards.⁸ Exploring first the ideological coherence between Mussolini’s famous motto that fascism “makes history” rather than writes it and Gentile’s actualist philosophy of history, this essay confirms White’s fundamental proposition that there existed a properly fascist vision of history whose central challenge to nineteenth-century historicism consisted in debunking the notion of historical consciousness itself. However, the essay also argues that fascist politics of history were culturally modernist rather than romantic, psychologically rooted in the experience of the meaningless present of the Great War rather than the projection of a meaningless past, and genealogically connected to the longevity of Latin-Catholic rhetorical codes in Italian historical culture rather than a reaction to the realist saturation of nineteenth-century culture.

4. White, “The Politics,” 72-75.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, 95-96.

7. On the Nazi apocalyptic view of history, see George Mosse, “Death, Time, and History: Volkish Utopia and Its Transcendence,” *Masses and Men* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1980), 69-86. For its dissemination in Nazi education, see Blackburn, *Education*, especially 22-41.

8. Henceforth, whenever I write “fascism” I intend Italian fascism.

II. THE FASCIST HISTORIC IMAGINARY

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 make history before writing it, later on consume their revenge diminishing it without objectivity or shame.

Benito Mussolini, 1929

It was with these words, delivered to the fascist senate on May 24, 1929, that Benito Mussolini responded to Benedetto Croce's opposition to the Concordat—the conciliation pacts between the Vatican and the Italian state—and simultaneously offered a spectacle for which the whole fascist intelligentsia had been waiting: a direct intellectual confrontation between the “Duce” of fascism and the “Laic Pope” of liberalism.⁹ 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* and *historia rerum gestarum*: 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, it does not write it), thereby losing its polemical bite but sharpening its ideological stakes.¹⁰ 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 fact, the fascist motto “fascism *makes history*” captured the rhetorical core of Mussolini's 1929 speech as well as its philosophical connection to actualist philosophy of history.

As Barbara Spackman has recently argued, Mussolini's speeches were central to the construction of a fascist discursive regime founded on a “rhetorization of violence” intimating that “words should submit to the law of action and tend toward praxis.”¹¹ Mussolini's rhetoric consistently interrogated and rewrote the opposition between language and action in such a way that actions could be understood “not as prediscursive but as part of the discursive formation itself.”¹² In the speeches that marked the construction of the regime, Mussolini had relied on a “rhetoric of crisis” aimed at “stockpiling violence” discursively in order to

9. “Non ci meravigliamo, signori, se accanto agli imboscanti della guerra troviamo quelli della storia, i quali, non avendo per molte ragioni e anche per la loro impotenza creativa, potuto produrre l'evento, cioè fare la storia prima di scriverla, ora consumano la loro vendetta diminuendola senza obiettività o vergogna.” Benito Mussolini, “Risposta al Senato sui patti lateranensi,” in *Scritti e Discorsi* (Milan: Hoepli, 1939), VI, 117, my translation.

10. Carlo De Frede, “Il giudizio di Mussolini su Croce,” *Storia e Politica* 22, no. 1 (March 1983), 122.

11. Barbara Spackman, *Fascist Virilities: Rhetoric, Ideology, and Social Fantasy in Italy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 133.

12. *Ibid.*

“present the state of things beyond the time of discussion.”¹³ His 1929 response to Croce, however, differed radically from earlier examples in this respect. Mussolini’s argumentative register in this speech actively “epochalized” the historical connection between the “event” of the Concordat and the Mussolinian “speech-events” that had marked its making—from the speech of June 1921 before the liberal Chamber of Deputies, to the speech before the Grand Council of Fascism in early 1929 to the speech of May 13, 1929 before the fascist Chamber of Deputies.¹⁴ Mussolini’s *histoire événementelle* of fascist speech-events opened a window onto an epochal conception of the relationship between *res gestae* and *historia rerum gestarum* irreconcilable with any version of historicism, positivism, materialism, or idealism, and irreducible to the myth-making horizon of fascist historical discourse. To paraphrase Spackman, the rhetorical appeal of Mussolini’s juxtaposition of liberal history-writing and fascist history-making rested on its sudden stockpiling of *eventfulness* and, in so doing, it pointed toward a popular-cultural source of fascist rhetorics of virility.

As the motto—“fascism makes history, it does not write it”—would make explicit, Mussolini’s rhetorical conflation of speech and epochal eventfulness referred the idea of fascist history-making to the notion of *historicness* inscribed, since the dawn of modern historical culture, in the discursive expressions “historic event” and “historic speech.” Semantically, these expressions were born of the differentiation introduced by late eighteenth-century historians between the adjectives “historical” and “historic,” assigning to the former the meaning of “belonging to the past” and to the latter that of “forming an important part or item of history; noted or celebrated in history.”¹⁵ Yet, the discursive notion of historic eventfulness has never coincided with this learned definition which presupposes a transcendental conception of history (that is, the historic event is important in the eyes of history itself). On the contrary, we normally define an event as “historic” when we perceive it as belonging primarily to the internal sphere of consciousness, insofar as we experience 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.¹⁶ In the historic event, therefore, we literally perceive history as immanent rather than transcendental.¹⁷

Mussolini’s polarization of history-making and history-writing mobilized this immanent notion of historicness, projecting the idea of fascism as a historic agent whose acts were not merely significant in the eyes of history (and historians) but,

13. *Ibid.*, 133 and 123. On the crucial function of Mussolini’s speech-events for the formation of fascist aesthetic politics, see also Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle*.

14. Mussolini, *Scritti e discorsi*, 105-110.

15. *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 “epochal-ness” 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.

16. Suffice it to think of the revisionist spell exercised by defining historic events of our times, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall.

17. Even in spoken English the semantic distinction between “historical” and “historic” is often lost.

rather, actively *signified* 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 liberal ideology's "historical" corresponded fascist ideology's "historic" which depicted an agency that *acted* upon historical facts, representations, and consciousness. By the same token, Mussolini's speech ascribed to the fascist subject a *historic imaginary* rather than a "historical consciousness," an imaginary that declined history in the present tense and inscribed historical meaning under the immanent rubric of *presence* against the transcendental horizon of historical Time.

Lest we dismiss Mussolini's advocacy of the fascist historic imaginary as a mere cipher of fascist rhetorics of virility, we need to recognize 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. It is not so much that Mussolini's polarization of the "historical" and the "historic" resonated with Nietzsche's famous opposition between the "historical" and the "supra-/un-historical"—and along this path, with a whole series of dichotomies between literary modernism and historicism, spatial form and linear time, speech acts and narrative writing.¹⁸ Rather, as White himself has recently suggested, the evolution of a modernist conception of history in twentieth-century literature and philosophy was intimately associated with the widespread experience of the Great War as a "modernist event."¹⁹ That this perception may have united much of the European "generation of 1914" is a fact that finds few dissenting voices after Paul Fussell's study of the connection between modernist poetry, memory, and the Great War.²⁰ In the case of the Italian intelligentsia, however, the connection between modernist sensitivity, the (memory of the) Great War, and fascist militancy was even tighter. As Walter Adamson has documented, for Italian artists and intellectuals militancy in the modernist cultural front coincided with a collective "search for new secular-religious values" before the war, with an active interventionist stance in the months preceding the Italian entrance in the war, and with an endorsement of fascism, after the war, as the movement that had defeated Italy's "internal enemy"—however defined.²¹ Read in this light, the logic of Mussolini's attack on Croce was properly *historic*, in the sense that it sought to simultaneously enact and historicize a modernist form of historical consciousness in which language and force had abandoned the

18. Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" [1874], in *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 57-123.

19. Hayden White, "The Modernist Event," in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 21-22.

20. Among these dissenting voices is Jay Winter's in *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

21. Walter Adamson, "Fascism and Culture: Avant-Gardes and Secular Religion in the Italian Case," *Journal of Contemporary History* 24 (July 1989), 411-436; "Modernism and Fascism: The Politics of Culture in Italy, 1903-1922," *American Historical Review* 95 (April 1990), 359-390; "The Language of Opposition in Early Twentieth-Century Italy: Rhetorical Continuities between Prewar Florentine Avant-Gardism and Mussolini's Fascism," *Journal of Modern History* 64 (March 1992), 22-51; and *Avant-Garde Florence: From Modernism to Fascism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

realm of historical crisis and entered that of historic eventfulness.²² Mussolini's conflation of liberal ideology and historicism under the sign of "shirker-ness" 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. More precisely, the historic logic of the speech pointed away from the mere critique of Crocian historicism and toward the actualist philosophy of history elaborated during the war by Croce's philosophical nemesis and fascism's prime philosopher, Giovanni Gentile.

III. ACTUALIST PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

Any cursory glance at the titles of Gentile's production between 1897 and 1914 reveals immediately that the principal thematic nucleus around which his philosophical system evolved was the relationship between philosophy, history of philosophy, and philosophy of history.²³ The "absolute immanentism" in which Gentile identified the kernel of actualism found its preactualist formulation in the "circular union" of "philosophy" and "history" that Gentile had elaborated in the first decade of the century. In the seventeen texts—two books and fifteen essays—specifically devoted to the topic, Gentile managed to articulate the circularity between philosophy and history from every possible angle: from the mutual penetration of philosophy and the history of philosophy, to that between philosophy of history and history per se.²⁴ In fact, the philosophical genealogy of Croce and Gentile's fateful detachment from one another can be traced to their earliest exchanges in the late 1890s on the question of history and, in particular, to their antithetical evaluation of Marxism as a philosophy of history. For Croce, what was dead in Marxism was its philosophy of history, even though its materialism was alive as a useful historical methodology. For Gentile, the opposite was true: as materialism, Marxism was mistaken; as the last speculative philosophy of history, it needed to be overcome.²⁵ It is not surprising, therefore, that

22. Spackman, *Fascist Virilities*, 123.

23. See in particular: *La filosofia di Marx* (Pisa: E. Spoerri, 1899), now in Giovanni Gentile, *Opere filosofiche* (Milan: Garzanti, 1991), 97-234; "Il concetto della storia," *Studi Storici* 8 (1899), 103-133 and 169-201, now in Gentile, *Opere: Frammenti di estetica e di teoria della storia* (Florence: Casa editrice Le Lettere, 1992), I, 3-52; and *La riforma della dialettica hegeliana* (Messina: G. Principato, 1913), which collects earlier essays on history, "Il concetto della storia della filosofia" (1907), and "Il ciclo di filosofia e storia della filosofia" (1909), now in Gentile, *Opere filosofiche*, 247-430.

24. In order of publication: "I primi scritti di Benedetto Croce sul concetto della storia" (1897); *Il materialismo storico* (1899); *La filosofia di Marx* (1899); "Il metodo storico nelle scienze sociali" (1901); "Filosofia e storia della filosofia" (1902); "La storia come scienza" (1902); "Il problema della filosofia della storia" (1903); "Il concetto della storia della filosofia" (1907); "Il circolo della filosofia e della storia della filosofia" (1909); "Il concetto della grammatica" (1910); "Il valore della storia e il formalismo assoluto" (1910); "Il concetto del progresso" (1911); "Il metodo dell'immanenza" (1912); "Il problema delle scienze storiche" (1915); "L'esperienza pura e la realtà storica" (1915); "Politica e filosofia" (1918).

25. Giovanni Gentile, "Benedetto Croce: Il concetto della storia nelle sue relazioni col concetto dell'arte," *Studi Storici* 6 (1897), 137-152, now in Gentile, *Opere: Frammenti di estetica e di teoria della storia* II, 121-136. For a detailed commentary on the intense dialogue between Croce and Gentile on the problem of history, see Michele Biscione, "Il tema della storia nella corrispondenza

Croce's 1913 condemnation of actualism revolved precisely around a critique of an undeveloped aspect of Gentile's philosophy of history.

While attacking actualism for its mystical flattening of all conceptual distinctions, Croce pointed his finger at the implicit antithesis Gentile had posited between "past and present." By "reducing everything to the sole distinction between past and present," Croce contended, actualism resolved itself into a reversed "absolute positivism." Everything was in the present-act, nothing in the past-fact. With this a priori distinction, actualism could not but end by identifying history (*res gestae*) "with the series of images of historical facts that have been given at various times, no matter whether generated by historians or poets, by men of intelligence or idiots." Hence, actualism produced for Croce "a full immersion in a motionless present, devoid of oppositions." Its mystical essence was both cause and consequence of its negation of all "philosophical distinctions" on the basis of the a priori polarization of past and present.²⁶

Croce's critique of actualist time touched a central nerve in Gentile's system. In response to this challenge, Gentile at last turned away from the speculative problem of the "circular" relationship between philosophy, history of philosophy, and philosophy of history, to face the more analytic question of the relationship between *res gestae* and *historia rerum gestarum*. This development was reflected in Gentile's first publication dedicated entirely to this problem in 1915, "L'esperienza pura e la realtà storica" ("Pure experience and historical reality"), and was translated into full-blown theoretical terms in 1918 in his most influential political-philosophical text, "Politica e filosofia" ("Politics and Philosophy"). By no means the final statements from Gentile on the matter, these two texts nevertheless provide a basic perimeter that enclosed within a coherent philosophy of history all the "circles" (between philosophy and history of philosophy, philosophy of history and history itself) articulated by Gentile in previous and future writings. Most significantly, they offer an answer to Croce's objections rooted in Gentile's original reading of the grandfather of idealism: Immanuel Kant.

In the first text—"L'esperienza pura e la realtà storica"—Gentile addressed himself specifically to historians elaborating an actualist conception of historical experience in explicit response to Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*. According to Gentile, Kant had left this concept "obscure" because he had construed experience as the medium that connected subject and object through the "sensible qualities" belonging to both.²⁷ Identifying experience instead with the *act* of thought, Gentile claimed to remain faithful to the Kantian "Copernican revolution of philosophy that established the subject at the center of conscious-

Croce-Gentile, 1896–1899," *Rivista di Storia della Storiografia Moderna* 4, no. 3 (1983), 3–43. For a comprehensive and insightful discussion of the development of Gentile's theory of history from the early writings on Marx to the essays published in the mid-1930s, see Antimo Negri, "Il concetto attualistico della storia e lo storicismo," in *Giovanni Gentile: La vita e il pensiero* (Florence: Sansoni, 1962), X, 1–220.

26. Giuseppe Prezzolini *et al.*, *La Voce: 1908–1913: Cronaca, antologia e fortuna di una rivista* (Milan: Rusconi, 1974), 512, 515, 515, and 510.

27. G. Gentile, "L'Esperienza pura," quoted in Gentile, *Opere filosofiche*, 410.

ness,” while divesting it of the transcendental dualism between reality and consciousness that Kant had been unable to overcome. Pure experience, Gentile argued, “cannot be transcended,” because everything Kant conceived as noumena is in the very act of thought, that is *autoctisi*, immanence of subject and object, sense and intellect. By contrast, Gentile recognized that the actualist collapse of experience and consciousness in the pure act had been anticipated by Kant in his *Der Streit Der Fakultäten* (*The Conflict of the Faculties*, 1798) and, in particular, in the section dedicated to the contest between philosophy and law.²⁸

In this justly famous discussion, Kant conjoined philosophical speculation with observation of the historical phenomenon that marked his own time, the French Revolution. The philosopher, however, was not concerned with the “facts” of the Revolution, or how they were to be judged, but solely with “the attitude of the onlookers as it reveals itself *in public* while the drama of great political change is taking place.” For Kant, this attitude was characterized by “disinterested sympathy” mixed with “the *passion* and *enthusiasm*” that all people direct exclusively toward the ideal and the moral. This enthusiasm was the sign of the Revolution’s Sublime. It made “historical facts” coalesce into a unique “event” that Kant proposed calling a “historical sign”: that is, a “*signum rememorativum, demonstrativum, prognostikon*.” 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 contemporaneity of all temporal dimensions—past (*signum rememorativum*), present (*signum demonstrativum*), and future (*signum prognostikon*)—in the historical consciousness of the masses, rather than of Great Men.²⁹

In this text Kant produced the first philosophical theorization of historic eventfulness—albeit from a transcendental point of view. And, quite consciously, Gentile considered *The Conflict of the Faculties* to be an unfinished “fourth critique” of history, which he aimed to correct and complete.³⁰ For Gentile, in fact, by thinking “historical experience” from the point of view of reading historical signs, rather than writing history, all distinctions between reality and representation, past and present, evaporated immediately. The “progress” of history revealed itself as immanent in the movement of thought during the act of reading. From the point of view of actualism, reading a history book, a historical document, or a historic event were all activities belonging to the transtemporal “presence” of experience. Because we can never transport ourselves to the past, we always make that past “attuale” (actual) by thinking its content within “our present awareness of thinking ourselves thinking the object.”³¹

28. Negri, “Il concetto attualistico,” 81.

29. Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties* (New York: Abaris Books, 1979), 182, 183, and 181; original emphasis.

30. Negri, “Il concetto attualistico,” 45.

31. *Ibid.*, 412, 412, 422, and 426.

Elaborating upon the Kantian definition of historical experience, Gentile concluded that the very word “history” contained the essence of his actualist philosophy of history. Actualism, he argued, did nothing more than unify the two meanings of the word “according to which history is on one occasion the entire complex of historical facts and on another their representation” into one: “history is the only thinkable reality, and the only science because it is consciousness of itself.”³² From this perspective, the difference between historiography and art appeared to Gentile “analogous to the difference between the experience of being awake and that of dreaming,” the difference being that the philosopher can judge the artist and the conscious man the dream, but not vice versa, since “every experience can only be judged by a superior experience, that overcomes it, and therefore cannot recognize other value [to the inferior one] than being an integral part of itself.” And, upon these premises, Gentile proceeded to explain the polarization of past and present.

To think, to read, or to write history means to “devalue all old experiences on the basis of new experiences,” according to the same principle by which we may interpret a dream by “reconnecting it to the whole history of our individuality” only within the experience of being awake. All the distinctions we make between “real and fictional facts,” past and present, are concretely born in the experience of reading “and come to the surface of consciousness according to the rhythm of its development.” For Gentile, then, the actualization of history corresponded to the moment, in reading, when the subject awakens from the absorption in the “narrative of historical facts” and begins to “pour on [the] preceding reading the entire mass of judgments already organized by [his/her] culture and individual experience.” The Gentilian event, therefore, was no longer the sublime eruption of a historical sign from the transcendental continuum of history, which Kant had identified with the eye of the “disinterested onlookers” of the French Revolution. For Gentile, it was the immanent condition of every individual act of reading that dissolved the medium of representation between thinking and writing into a historical self-generation.³³

Situating the subject of history (both *res gestae* and *historia rerum gestarum*) in the experience of reading, “Pure Experience and Historical Reality” gave philosophical expression to the Kantian notion of historic eventfulness while at the same time inverting its value. Abstracted from the historical context of the French Revolution, Gentile’s notion of historical sign embraced both events and documents, thereby replacing the founding notion of transcendental history with that of the reciprocal immanence of the historical and the historiographical act. However, this essay still left obscure a central question concerning the relation-

32. *Ibid.*, 422 and 425. This statement plainly reveals Gentile’s debt to another eighteenth-century founder of the “philosophy of history,” Giambattista Vico. Given the scope of this work I have left aside any discussion of Vico’s fundamental influence on Gentile’s theories of history and aesthetics, but, to put it in plain terms, one could also argue that Gentile always read “Kant according to Vico.” For an appraisal of Gentile’s relationship to Vico, see Giovanni Gentile, *Opere. Opere storiche. Studi vichiani* vol. XVI. *La vita e il pensiero* vol. IX, 57-188.

33. G. Gentile, “L’Esperienza pura,” 423, 424, 425.

ship between *res gestae* and *historia rerum gestarum*. What conception of representation and agency did the identification of historical experience with the semiotic activity of reading signs imply? The answer to this question would come in “Politica e filosofia,” a text in which Gentile completed his modernist philosophy of historical experience, drawing on his own reading of the Great War itself as the “historical sign” of a momentous re-orientation of the historical imagination itself.

IV. HISTORY BELONGS TO THE PRESENT

“Politica e filosofia” proposed that actualism had surpassed its idealist precursors because it had not only dissolved the fundamental dichotomy they had maintained between history and philosophy, but also because in so doing actualism allowed the “resolution of philosophy into politics.” As a *philosophical history* (of philosophy), actualism had acknowledged the Italian Risorgimento—the process of national unification between 1848 and 1860—as the historical realization of philosophical modernity. For Gentile, Italian patriot-thinkers had overcome the Renaissance dichotomy between spirit and nature by means of the very “idea of a concrete Italy . . . which had become an active idea, producing itself its own realization.” As a *historical philosophy* (of history), however, actualism had also recognized that the conscious unification of politics and philosophy had not taken place in the Risorgimento but in the contemporaneous development of Marx’s “philosophy of praxis.” Historical materialism had incited the proletariat to unify on the basis of a correct understanding of human action as the unity of “will, ends, and program” in order to dissolve the state. For Gentile, the historical importance of Marx’s philosophy of history rested on its having become “the critical consciousness of the communist movement that refers itself to Marx.” The crucial goal of actualism, therefore, was nothing short of unveiling the implicit “philosophy of Risorgimento politicians” within a counter-Marxist philosophy of history.³⁴

This task Gentile took up in the central section of “Politica e filosofia” where he elaborated the reciprocal immanence of philosophy and history with unusual clarity, but also in an unprecedented direction. For the first time, Gentile presented the identity of philosophy and history as the *consequence* of a preliminary choice between two opposite orientations of the historical imagination. “One moment,” Gentile wrote, “history *belongs to the past*, the next moment it *belongs to the present*; but, most of the time, we only see the former, which is actualized 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.”³⁵

Quite predictably, for Gentile the concept of “history belonging to the past” coincided with the positivist conception of the “historical fact” determined in past-time and past-space, and it corresponded to our “representation of ourselves

34. *Ibid.*, 150, 156, 157, 157.

35. G. Gentile, “Politica e filosofia,” 145, my emphasis.

to ourselves beyond the heat of passion and action, since the fact is given as accomplished.” But this means that, from the perspective of positivism, history ends up being identified with a naturalism, that is, with an “irretrievable past that does not depend on us, but conditions us.” Against this view Gentile instead proposed that “the historicity of history is intelligible only if we orient ourselves toward the opposite concept of history belonging to the present: that is, history that is all present and *immanent in the act of its construction*.”³⁶ This was the mental reorientation that actualism had labored to induce philosophically and that now, in 1918, Gentile believed had been historically realized on the Italian war front.

Quite literally Gentile read the Italian victory in the Great War as the historical sign of a collective reorientation of the historical imagination toward history belonging to the present. In the first place, Gentile saw this victory as the result of a successful reaction of the Italians to two events in October 1917 that endangered not only the Italian war effort but also his whole philosophical enterprise: the Bolshevik Revolution, and the defeat of the Italian army at Caporetto. According to Gentile, the political success of the October Revolution had interacted with the contemporaneous psychological trauma suffered by all Italians over the military defeat at Caporetto to feed the specter of an “internal enemy”—a transcendental historical subject bent on overwhelming Italy itself. The intellectuals and the army fought this internal enemy, and in so doing did battle with the transcendentalist conception of history itself. After Caporetto, then, the internal enemy that the Italians had successfully fought against was not only their intrinsic Catholicism, or simply the revolutionary appeal of the October Revolution, but the very transcendental conception of the “historical sign” articulated by Kant in the face of the revolution of his times.³⁷ For Gentile, the moral-military resistance of the Italian army had “fulfilled the Risorgimento” by internalizing the historiographical image of the present conflict as a “fourth war of independence” formulated and propagandized by the intellectual war effort. 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 battlefields the historiographical and historical acts had come to coincide in the consciousness of political leaders, intellectuals, and masses. In this way the Italian experience in the Great War acquired for Gentile a universal value. It constituted not only the *signum rememorativum*, *demonstrativum*, and *prognostikon* that superseded both the French Revolution and the Italian Risorgimento, but, more radically, the Kantian distinction between “onlookers” and “actors” had been definitively overcome. On the Italian war front, intellectuals, Catholic masses, and political leaders had experienced history as immanent rather than transcendental. For Gentile, the stage was set for the

36. *Ibid.*, 148, my emphasis.

37. Leninism, Gentile argued in a related article, was unrealistic because it “negated the political substance common to all individuals, groups and social classes,” just as much as Kantian liberalism had become obsolete because it had maintained a distinction between moral and political action. G. Gentile, “Lenin,” in *Guerra e fede: Frammenti politici* (Naples: Riccardi, 1919), 441-442.

birth of a new political subject whose philosophical vision would be founded entirely on history belonging to the present. Moreover, 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.³⁸

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.³⁹ This is unfortunate. Gentile’s claim deserves attention on both historical and philosophical grounds precisely because it pointed towards the overcoming of Marxist philosophy of history as the terrain upon which actualism and fascism met and sustained their ideological alliance throughout the *ventennio* (the twenty years of Italian fascist regime, 1922–1943). Gentile’s polarization of “history belonging to the present” versus “history belonging to the past” could not have theorized and anticipated the polarization more explicitly; indeed, it anticipated the polarization of fascist history-making versus liberal history-writing enunciated by Mussolini ten years later (1929). In this respect, the enduring resonance between the popular image of fascist historic agency and actualist philosophy of history suggests that actualism may have entered much more directly into the intellectual genesis of fascist ideology than most scholars have recognized.⁴⁰ If, as Zeev Sternhell has repeatedly argued, the principal ideological roots of Italian fascism were planted in the intellectual humus of the “antimaterialist revision of Marxism,” in Italy this humus was fertilized by actualism.⁴¹ Gentile was not only the principal Italian protagonist in the “reinterpretation of the ideological

38. *Ibid.*, 156.

39. According to most accounts—including Gentile’s own—“Politica e filosofia” constituted the key text in the fateful encounter between actualism and fascism. Considering its publication in the nationalist journal *Politica*, Augusto Del Noce has argued that this article plainly signaled Gentile’s definitive detachment from liberalism by proposing actualism as the “critical consciousness” of a nationalist-liberal movement *in fieri* which Gentile would later identify with fascism (Augusto Del Noce, *Giovanni Gentile: Per una interpretazione filosofica della storia contemporanea* [Bologna: Il Mulino, 1990], 360). By the same token, Gentile’s most recent biographer, Giovanni Turi, has insisted on “Politica e filosofia” as the founding text of that Risorgimentalist interpretation of fascism, which Gentile developed with two articles on Mazzini published in the same nationalist journal in 1919 and then elaborated in most of his fascist period writings (Gabriele Turi, *Giovanni Gentile: Una biografia* [Florence: Giunti, 1995], 254). In fact, 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. These readings in hindsight have certainly rendered justice to the crucial role that this text played in the ideological encounter of actualism with fascism, yet they have also obscured a much deeper level of conjunctural convergence between actualist philosophy of history, the Italian response to the war-trauma, and the formation of a specifically fascist imaginary.

40. Intellectual historians of fascist ideology have consistently neglected the importance of Gentile’s prolonged flirtation with Marxism between the 1890s and the early 1920s. See, for example, Emilio Gentile, *Le origini dell’ideologia fascista (1918–1925)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1975), especially 397–418, and Del Noce, *Giovanni Gentile*, 283–296.

41. Zeev Sternhell with Mario Sznajder and Maria Asheri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 12. Not even Sternhell, however, includes Gentile among the principal figures of Marxist revisionism. Compare with Antimo Negri, “Attualismo e marxismo,” in *Giovanni Gentile: La vita e il pensiero* (Florence: Sansoni, 1961), IX, 189–218, and Del Noce’s discussion of Sternhell’s thesis in *Giovanni Gentile*, 7–16.

corpus associated with Marx's thought," but was specifically the only one who had focused his attention on Marxist philosophy of history. Therefore, if—as Del Noce claims—there was a “pre-established harmony” between actualism and fascism before their ideological encounter in 1922, this harmony had developed on the terrain of the historic imaginary that Gentile theorized in 1918.⁴²

Indeed, Gentile's claim to realism may have had even more historical substance than the philosophical anticipation of fascist history-making. The conjunctural connection between the actualist exorcism of the defeat at Caporetto and the fascist claim to the historic imaginary that emerged from the Great War finds significant support in the literature concerning the early development of fascist *mentalité*.⁴³ By all accounts, the prolonged retreat that followed the defeat at Caporetto had produced a collective shock of unprecedented proportions throughout the Italian military, but its effects on the intellectual war effort had been equally momentous. In the first place, most studies of the Italian war experience confirm that Caporetto and the prolonged retreat that followed it produced a collective shock of unprecedented proportions throughout the Italian army, and its lasting effects on the intellectual and political home fronts were equally momentous. In addition, some scholars have also suggested a specific connection between the shock of Caporetto and the formation and early mass appeal of fascist ideology.⁴⁴ In particular, Elvio Fachinelli has argued that as a result of Caporetto there rose an “image of an endangered fatherland, dead or under deadly threat,” which spread rapidly throughout the home front and survived well after the victory, “traversing the entire aftermath of the Great War.” Rather than subsiding with the military counterattack, this image had provoked a very ambivalent reaction in both soldiers and civilians. On the one hand, the perceived death of the fatherland had been feared because it represented the “loss of the supreme value for which all Italians had fought;” but on the other it had also been desired, “or even accomplished, in the imagination of some, insofar as the fatherland had been the cause and origin of the colossal and useless pains they had suffered during the conflict.” It was, in fact, by tapping into this widespread ambivalence and opposing to it an “obsessive denial” of the death of the fatherland that the early fascist movement managed to achieve so much support among war veterans.⁴⁵

42. Del Noce, *Giovanni Gentile*, 268.

43. Giovanna Procacci, “Aspetti della mentalità collettiva durante la guerra: L'Italia dopo Caporetto,” in *La Grande Guerra: Esperienza, memoria, immagini*, edited by Dino Leoni and Camillo Zadra (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1986), 261-289.

44. See Elvio Fachinelli, “Il fenomeno fascista,” in *La freccia ferma: Tre tentativi di annullare il tempo* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1979), 135-152; and, for a specific study of the “mental world” of Italian soldiers, Antonio Gibelli, *L'officina della guerra: La grande guerra e la trasformazione del mondo mentale* (Turin: Bordighieri, 1991), especially 3-16 and 76-121. On the decisive contribution of modernist intellectuals to the creation and multifaceted development of an Italian “myth of the Great War” and its different impact on soldiers, see Mario Isnenghi, *Il mito della grande guerra* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1989), especially 329-394. There is no specific study in English on the Italian “experience” of the Great War.

45. Fachinelli, “Il fenomeno fascista,” 143. Fachinelli's hypothesis finds historical support in the studies cited above, which confirm that an ambivalent feeling toward the military near-catastrophe of Caporetto was born of the interaction between the conflicting war mentalities of interventionists and

Seen from the ethno-psychoanalytic perspective developed by Fachinelli, Gentile's theory of the historic imaginary sought to exorcise the same ambivalence against which the fascist mentality arose, and it did so at the very same time as fascism began attracting the support of war veterans by transposing the "ideal of fatherland onto an absolute plane, entirely unknown until then."⁴⁶ In fact, this conjunctural configuration of forces is further supported by Fachinelli's corollary observation that the most lasting appeal exercised by fascism over large sectors of the Italian population throughout the *ventennio* was rooted in its ability to transform and institutionalize its obsessive denial of the death of the fatherland into an "archaic annulment of time."⁴⁷ Just as in archaic communities, the fascist movement responded to the ambivalent perception of the death of the founding value-figure of the nation-state with ritualized denials; moreover, once in power, it institutionalized a proper "catastrophe of the sacred." The fascist regime transposed the fatherland under the "mythic sky" of its Roman origins, while colonizing the collective time of Italians with "omnipresent rituals reaffirming the existence and greatness of the fatherland against the periodic resurgence of doubt concerning its destitution." Hence, Fachinelli concludes, the fascist annulment of time not only prevented the development of a proper form of historical consciousness, but forced the regime to "move just like the tight-rope walker on the rope," stepping precisely upon the fine line between mythic affirmations of eternal time and ritual negations of historical time.⁴⁸

Fachinelli's study of the origins and evolution of the fascist annulment of time confers both historical and theoretical texture to the connection between Gentile's notion of "history belonging to the present" and the self-identification of Italian fascism with a historic imaginary. The actualist philosophy of history and the fascist historic imaginary were indeed joined at the hip of an intersecting exorcism of the war-trauma. From this perspective, the instantaneous mistranslation of Mussolini's historic speech into the popular motto "fascism makes history" may be the best confirmation of the enduring connection among the formation of the fascist historic imaginary, the war-trauma, and the actualist philosophy of history elaborated by Gentile in its aftermath. By the same token, throughout Gentile's fascist writings and expressly in his 1935 theorization of "The Transcendence of Time in History" one can locate precise textual traces of a continuous dialogue between actualist philosophy of history and the fascist "annulment of time" during the *ventennio*.

However, this enduring connection also suggests a crucial qualification to Fachinelli's thesis. The mass appeal of the actualist-fascist annulment of time was neither as "archaic" as Fachinelli posits it to be nor anchored solely to "obsessive denial." Rather it was rooted in the cultural resonance between

noninterventionists. In particular, see Giovanni Belardelli, *Il mito della "Nuova Italia": Gioacchino Volpe tra guerra e Fascismo* (Rome: Lavoro, 1988), 67-75, and Isnenghi, *Il mito della Grande Guerra*, 261-296.

46. Fachinelli, "Il fenomeno fascista," 147.

47. *Ibid.*, 166.

48. *Ibid.*, 148-149.

Gentile's *modernist* philosophy of history and the Latin-Catholic roots of Italian visual culture. This is what I will demonstrate in the following section.

V. ACTUALISM: BETWEEN CULTURAL MODERNISM AND HISTORIC SEMANTICS

Seen from Hayden White's metahistorical perspective, Gentile's claim to have overcome dialectical materialism with a more "realist" philosophy of history offered much more than a polemical response to Croce's famous motto that "all history is contemporary history." Historically and philosophically, "Politica e filosofia" situated itself at a crucial juncture between the speculative and analytic traditions in the philosophy of history. While Gentile's prewar texts had belabored the speculative tradition of Kant, Hegel, and Marx, seeking to purge it from its transcendental error, the notion of history belonging to the present referred exclusively to the analytic relationships among historical agency, representation, and consciousness.⁴⁹ But Gentile's later notion of "history belonging to the present" theorized a collapse of *res gestae* and *historia rerum gestarum* that may best be conceptualized as a *catastrophe of the histori(ographi)cal act*—in the original Greek sense of "catastrophe" (from the verb *katastropheo*, meaning "to unify two distinct entities at a higher level"). With this catastrophe actualism fit all the historical-theoretical parameters of a quintessentially modernist philosophy of history.

It certainly proposed a new way "of imagining, describing, and conceptualizing the relationship obtaining between agents and acts, subjects and objects, events and facts," described by White as the landmark of all modernist conceptions of history.⁵⁰ Also, it surely participated in that intellectual shift from the cultural critique of positivist historiography to the cultural debunking of "historical consciousness" itself that White has indicated characterizes the response of the modernist sensitivity to "the experience of a different 'history'" brought about by the Great War.⁵¹ Finally, it epitomized 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 pastness of the past, but of its presence."⁵² In fact, with the notion of "history belonging to the present" actualism matched its avant-garde brother, futurism, on the plane of a common deconstruction of the notion of representation, and simultaneously provided a key element for the for-

49. From this perspective, actualism did not resume the tropological course of nineteenth-century philosophy of history, replacing Crocian "irony" with an updated version of the romantic "historical sublime"—as White has a bit too hastily proposed. Rather, it may have provided one of the main philosophical bridges between speculative and analytic philosophy of history. See White, "The Politics," 74.

50. Hayden White, "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth," in Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation*, 49.

51. *Ibid.*, 20 and 51. See also Hayden White, "The Modernist Event," in Sobchack, ed. *The Persistence of History*, 21-22.

52. T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), cited in James Longenbach, *Modernist Poetics of History: Pound, Eliot, and the Sense of the Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 7.

mation of a properly fascist form of modernism.⁵³ The actualist catastrophe of the histori(ographi)cal act connected the fascist rejection of representative democracy to the futurist theory of aesthetic self-generation with the elimination of the medium of (historical) representation between (historical) agency and (historical) consciousness. Yet, for all the modernist thrust with which actualism came to interrupt the transcendental course of modern historical semantics, it also gave theoretical light to a submerged paradigm of historic semantics that had been in the making since the dawn of modern historical culture.⁵⁴

As Reinhart Koselleck has long pointed out, the latter quarter of the eighteenth century marked the momentous invention of “modern historical semantics,” a process identified with the “transcendentalization,” “temporization,” and “singularization” of “History” pursued by both nineteenth-century historiography and philosophy of history.⁵⁵ From the 1770s onwards the terminological displacement of *historie* by *Geschichte(n)* in the German language marked, according to Koselleck, the general and definitive replacement of a longstanding Latin-Christian conception of *historia magistra vitae* (history as life’s teacher) by the singular notion of History as a “universal relation of events,” a new “articulation of past and future,” and a transcendental whole “always more than any account made of it.” The capitalization of History in German philosophical circles “reinterpreted the criterion of epic representation and transformed it into a category of the Historical,” setting in motion a semantic revolution which led to the emergence of transcendental singulars such as Freedom, Progress, Justice, and Revolution in modern Western culture. On the representational front, the temporization of *geschichte* expressed itself in the syntactical limitation of historical narration to the past tense.⁵⁶

Koselleck’s reconstruction of the mainstream development of modern historical culture is accurate, but the assertion that this late eighteenth-century revolution definitively “replaced” the Latin-Christian conception of history does not do justice to Koselleck’s own account of this conception’s centuries-long “persistence” and “elasticity.”⁵⁷ Assuming that the rhetorical topos of *historia magistrae vitae* “dissolved itself within a modernised historical process,” Koselleck does not explore its permutations in modern popular culture or philosophy. By contrast, the very semantic differentiation between the adjectives “historic”—important in the eyes of history itself—and “historical”—belonging to the past—intro-

53. On fascist modernism, see Walter Adamson, “Modernism and Fascism: The Politics of Culture in Italy, 1903–1922,” *American Historical Review* 95 (April 1990), 359–390; and “Fascism and Culture: Avant-Gardes and Secular Religion in the Italian Case,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 24 (July 1989), 411–436; Emilio Gentile, “The Conquest of Modernity: From Modernist Nationalism to Fascism,” *Modernism/modernity* 1 (1994), 55–87; and, from the perspective of critical theory, Andrew Hewitt, *Fascist Modernism: Aesthetics, Politics and the Avant-Garde* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

54. For the history of modern “historical semantics,” see Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985).

55. *Ibid.*, 31.

56. *Ibid.*, 28, 26, 27, 31, 31, and 32.

57. *Ibid.*, 22.

duced by late eighteenth-century historians appears much less as an original invention than the warding off of Latin-Catholic rhetorical codes permeating popular culture by the modern guardians of bourgeois high culture. The notions of historic speech and historic event referred instead to a common rhetorical core firmly rooted in the Latin-Catholic didactic conception of *historia magistrae vitae*: the subordination of temporal consciousness to the reciprocal immanence of meaning and presence in reading facts as historical signs.

Seen from this perspective, Kant's conceptualization of the French Revolution as the historical sign of transcendental History constituted not only the first philosophical theorization of historic eventfulness, but also an explicit attempt to inscribe the Latin-Catholic notion of historicity into the transcendental path of modern historical semantics. Rather than dissolving the ancient conception of history into the modern one, Kant extracted the epic from *historia* and transposed it onto the transcendental *Geshichte*. With this philosophical operation Kant set the discursive evolution of both modern historiography and speculative philosophy of history on a transcendental narrative path throughout the nineteenth century. Yet—although only further research on the sites of historic institutionalization in nineteenth-century historical culture can give us a sense of its scope—there is at least one compelling reason to suspect that the development of modern historical semantics did not prevent the parallel evolution of a popular historic imaginary. This reason is actualism. Gentile's philosophy of history translated historic semantics into modernist syntax while at the same time foregrounding their Latin-Catholic rhetorical roots.

The concept of "history belonging to the present" translated philosophically the early modern notion of "historic present" invented by British grammarians to indicate the use of the present tense instead of the past tense frequently made by classic authors in order to make "vivid" their narration of past events.⁵⁸ In fact, the genealogical connection between Gentile's philosophy of history and the ancient signification of *vividness* was inscribed in the very etymology of the term *actualism*. Actualism derived from the Latin *actus* (and its later synonyms and derivatives *actio*, *actualis*, *actualitas*) which, in turn, translated the Greek term *energía* as used in philosophy (Aristotle) in opposition to *dynamis* (potentiality).⁵⁹ *Actus* was the "vis efficax quae in aliquo agit," the active force aimed at producing an effect; it was opposed to *páthe*, the passive quality of potentiality. At the same time, in Latin rhetorics *actus* meant also "figura" and "ornamentum orationis," indicating "vigor of style."⁶⁰ The concept of *actus*, therefore, did not simply translate *energía* but recorded also the Latin confusion of *energía* with its rhetorical double: *enàrgeia* (vividness, palpability). Neither of the two terms, in fact, had given birth to Latin etymological equivalents, but their hybridization in Latin-Catholic popular culture was important in the discursive construction of the modern idea of historicity and its deflection in the actualist philosophy of

58. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 259.

59. Henrico Estienne, *Thesaurus Graecae Linguae* (Paris: Royal French Institute of Typography, 1831), III, 1064.

60. H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), I, 564.

history. Actualism and the discursive notion of historic eventfulness found their cultural premises in the rhetorical construction of “presence” in Latin-Catholic visual culture.

As the early modern grammarians’ definition of the historic present testifies, the genealogy of the term *historic* led directly to the ancient rhetorical connection between ancient historiography and the “cluster of meanings” attached to the Greek term *enàrgeia*.⁶¹ “If you were a classical historian,” Carlo Ginzburg reminds us, “you were supposed to convey the truth of what you were saying by using *enàrgeia*, in order to move and convince your reader.”⁶² *Enàrgeia* was the principal rhetorical quality requested of historians, playing the role that “evidence” would later play in modern historiography. Often, Greek historians achieved *enàrgeia* by using what later grammarians called the “historic present,” but this syntactical operation referred to a much more complex “rhetorical scene.”⁶³ In Greek culture, *enàrgeia* did not simply mean “vividness” but indicated a unified representational effect of reality and truth achievable by both visual and literary means (painting and sculpture as well as prose and historiography). In short, *enàrgeia* rhetorically interpreted the very idea of truth in terms of the viewer/reader’s perception of “presence” in both artistic and literary mimesis.

This unified rhetorical core of *enàrgeia* did not survive intact in Latin-Catholic culture, but was divided into a number of interconnected terms that separated the reality-effect of discursive *enàrgeia* from its visual effect of presence. The discursive link between *enàrgeia* and the signification of historical truth was translated in Latin rhetoric by the sequence *evidentia in narratione* (narrative vividness), *illustratio* (description), and *demonstratio* (to point at an invisible object).

61. Carlo Ginzburg, “Ekphrasis and Quotations,” *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 20 (March 1988), 3-19. In the ensuing discussion of the relationship between *enàrgeia* and Greek-Latin historical culture, I rely also on Andrew D. Walker, “Enargeia and the Spectator in Greek Historiography,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 123 (1993), 353-377; G. Zanker, “Enargeia in the Ancient Criticism of Poetry,” *Reinisches Museum für Philologie* 124 (1981), 297-311; A. J. Goodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography: Four Studies* (Portland, Ore.: Areopagitica Press, 1988); and James Davidson, “The Gaze of Polybius,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 81 (1991), 10-24. In addition, my argument is informed by Sande Cohen’s critique of Ginzburg’s essay in “Desire for History: Historiography, Scholarship, and the Vicarious (on C. Ginzburg),” *Storia della Storiografia* 30 (1996), 68-69, as well as the work of several scholars who have studied the rhetorical and mental implications of the relationship between word and image in Western culture. Some of these include Murray Krieger’s discussion of *enàrgeia* as the sign of “literature’s impulse to become visual,” in *Ekphrasis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), especially 67-89; as well as Roy Park, “‘Ut Pictura Poesis’: The Nineteenth-Century Aftermath,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 28 (Winter 1969), 155-164; James Heffernann, “Space and Time in Literature and the Visual Arts,” *Soundings* 70, no. 1-2 (Spring/Summer 1987), 95-119; and Joseph Frank, “Spatial Form in Modern Literature,” *Sewanee Review* 53 (1945), 221-240. See also W. J. T. Mitchell’s theoretical insights on the relationship between word and image in “Spatial Form in Literature: Toward a General Theory,” in *The Language of Images*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); and *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

62. Ginzburg, “Ekphrasis,” 7.

63. As Walker explains, the truth-presence effect of *enàrgeia* in Greek historiography was often achieved by complex descriptions of the reactions of viewers to the events under narration in order to invite the reader to identify with the emotions of the “onlookers.” Walker, “Enàrgeia,” 357.

This sequence gave paradigmatic status to the epistemological foundations of classical historiography (historical narrative—description—vividness/truth) but, at the same time, destabilized the relationship between written discourse and the immediate signification of truth.⁶⁴ On the visual front, instead, the Greek association of presence and truth was dramatically reinforced in the Latin conception of *imago* (image).

The original referent of *imago*—the mortuary statues of Roman emperors—revealed a semantic affiliation of this term to the Greek “word/idea/thing *kolossos*, which tied visual representation to the mimetic substitution of an absentee” (the dead person).⁶⁵ Yet, whereas the Greek *kolossos* conferred to its referent the attribute of intermediary between presence (life) and absence (death), the Latins attributed to the Imperial *imago* “a properly metonymic role, being considered as part of an identity.”⁶⁶ In the Latin *imago* we find not only *evidentia* (*enàrgeia*) but also *actus* (*energèia*): the affective force necessary to perceive the fusion of representation with its referent. *Imago*, in fact, evolved to signify the “real presence” of the representational referent in all visual representations. It was this signification of “real presence, in the strong—the strongest possible—sense of the word,” that came to constitute the rhetorical foundation of the Catholic conception of representation.⁶⁷

The intensification of *enàrgeia* in the Latin concept of *imago* recorded therefore a paradigmatic caesura not only between Greek and Latin rhetoric but also between Greek and Latin-Catholic visual cultures. Via the dogma of transubstantiation and ritual practices such as that of the “King’s two bodies,” the Latin notion of *imago* was appropriated by the Catholic Church and codified in the powerful motto that sustained its massive production of religious imagery: *invisibilia per visibilia* (to make the invisible palpable through images).⁶⁸ For centuries, throughout the Catholic world, the production of and response to ever more affective forms of verisimilitude—from high art to ex-votos, icons, and religious waxworks—was dominated by a mixture of fear and attraction for “the ontological fusion” between the image and its prototype.⁶⁹ That this reinforcement of visual *enàrgeia* in Latin-Catholic culture entailed a subordination of the discursive to the visual at the level of high art production we may readily apprehend from the longevity of the Latin motto *ut pictura poesis* (poetry must follow painting) in modern culture. However, the endurance and consequences of this subordination in popular culture may best be inferred from the emergence of the

64. Paradigmatic in this respect was Quintilian’s famous definition of *evidentia*. For Quintilian, in fact, *evidentia* in *narratione* secured only “the appearance of palpability” and was therefore equally useful to those who strive to “obscure the situation” and “those who state the false in lieu of the true.” Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* IV, 2: 64-65; cited in Ginzburg, “Ekphrasis,” 15.

65. Carlo Ginzburg, “Représentation: le mot, l’idée, la chose” in *Annales ESC* 6 (November–December 1991), 1224.

66. *Ibid.*, 1224.

67. *Ibid.*, 1230.

68. David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 161-191.

69. *Ibid.*, 77 and *passim*.

modern conception of historic eventfulness. Unmistakably, the rhetorical line that connects historic semantics to the ancient “scene of *enârgeia*” passes through the formation of a visual paradigm of historical consciousness: a historic imaginary grounded in a mixture of fear and attraction for the ontological fusion of *historia rerum gaestarum* and *res gestae* (image and reality). Far from dissolving under the weight of historical semantics, the Latin-Catholic rhetorical tradition found its most stable recoding ever in the discursive notions of historic speech and event, which fused the epic and the didactic elements of *historia magistra vitae* in the association of “immanent meaning” and “epochal eventfulness.” It was this Latin-Catholic yearning for making history (visually) present that the actualist philosophy of history theorized, and fascist politics of history translated, into a full-blown historic culture.

VI. FASCIST HISTORIC CULTURE

Endorsing the immanent principles of actualist philosophy of history, Italian fascism transfigured the idea of historic eventfulness into the mental image of fascist historic agency. That is, 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. 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 of the actualist catastrophe of the histori(ographi)cal act. In fact—to address White’s question directly—it is precisely in the institutionalization of a *historic culture* that was as resonant with the sensitivity of modernist intellectuals and avant-garde artists as with the Latin-Catholic roots of Italian popular culture that we may locate one of the principal keys to the appeal that fascism exercised on both masses and intellectuals.

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 ritualized 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 words was just as much an affair orchestrated from above as it was dependent on the willing participation of their mass audience. In fact, 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 histo-

ry and the formation of a properly fascist historic imaginary found the most proper means of expression in the mid- to late 1920s.

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, modernist aesthetics and Catholic rhetorical codes effectively met during the regime. The catastrophe of the histor(iograph)ical act was implemented in history museums, monuments, exhibitions, and anniversary commemorations where the fascist historic imaginary was made visually “present” to the Italian masses.⁷⁰ This cultural project involved a large number of agents: Mussolini, of course, but also museum curators, modernist critics, journalists, and avant-garde artists, all of whom sought to make the identification of fascism and historic-ness a phenomenological reality for the Italian masses. In turn, the visualization of the fascist historic agency presupposed a widespread literacy of Latin-Catholic rhetorical codes among encoders (Mussolini, fascist intellectuals and artists), recorders (the mass media), and final decoders (the ritual actors-spectators of commemorative events, the viewers of historic exhibitions and museums). Accordingly, the institutionalization of a historic mode of representation in both image and ritual politics kept reinforcing the consolidation of the collective historic imaginary it presupposed.

The reciprocal resonance and amalgamation between Latin-Catholic rhetorical codes, modernist sensitivity, and avant-garde aesthetic principles was as necessary a condition for the elaboration of a historic mode of representation as for the consolidation of a properly fascist historic imaginary in 1920s–1930s Italy. Without the longevity and widespread literacy of Latin-Catholic rhetorical codes, Mussolini’s invocation of fascist history-making would have remained within the realm of fascist rhetorics of virility and would never have been transformed into the popular motto that sustained the mental image of a fascist historic agency. Without the translation of modernist intellectuals and avant-garde artists, Gentile’s actualist philosophy of history would have remained a dead letter, rather than providing the intellectual tightrope that sustained the formation of a historic mode of representation in 1920s Italy. The evolution of fascist historic culture was therefore just as much the result of fascist cultural politics as the offspring of the mass-imaginary that sustained them. This evolution, however, was neither linear nor devoid of irony.

Both aesthetically and ideologically the formation of the fascist historic imaginary climaxed in 1932—more precisely, in the 1932 Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution (MRF), an exhibit organized to celebrate the fascist *decennale* (the

70. I have discussed some aspects of fascist historic culture in “To Make History: Garibaldianism and the Formation of Fascist Historic Imaginary,” in *Making and Unmaking Italy: The Cultivation of National Identity around the Risorgimento*, ed. A. Ascoli and K. Von Henneberg (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 203–240, and “*Il Duce Taumaturgo*: Modernist Rhetorics in Fascist Representations of History,” *Representations* 57 (Winter 1997), 24–51. My monographic study on fascist historic culture—*The Fascist Politics of History*—is forthcoming from University of Toronto Press (2003).

tenth anniversary of the March on Rome). The MRF was a historic(al) exhibition aimed at representing the “revolutionary” coming to power of fascism between November 1914 (foundation of Mussolini’s newspaper *Il popolo d’Italia*) and October 27, 1922 (March on Rome). It was collectively designed by thirty-four of Italy’s most militantly fascist, but also talented, artists, and it was undoubtedly the most the most successful propaganda event staged by the regime, drawing more than 3,800,000 visitors. Merging avant-garde aesthetics and historic semantics, the exhibition’s itinerary gave visual expression to the transfiguration of the historic event (the March on Rome) into historic agency. At the same time, the MRF was also conceived as a historic event in its own right aimed at superseding the one (the March on Rome) it celebrated.⁷¹ 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 stylized the revolutionary period in ten pilasters shaped as fascists raising their arms in the Roman salute, each representing a revolutionary year. And with this stylization 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*.⁷²

Neither the MRF nor Italian fascism, of course, invented the temporal idea of the decade. Already in the nineteenth century Russian intellectuals referred to their distinct and successive generations in terms of decades (“the men of the 1820s,” “...of the ’40” etc.), and American media would refer to the “roaring ’20s” even before that decade was over. Yet, as the regime’s measure of a historic annulment of time, the fascist decade was unique insofar as it was neither retroactive nor generational but represented instead a stylization of time projected towards the future. In fact, demonstrating a very concrete impact of the MRF on the evolution of the fascist historic imaginary, in the 1930s the temporal image of the decade became ubiquitous in fascist discourse, ritual, and image politics, thereby constituting Italian fascism’s modernist answer to the utopian time of its totalitarian rivals: the apocalyptic “thousand-year” Reich of German Nazism and the modernizing “five-year” plans of Russian Bolshevism.

Yet, with this stylized unit of historic time projected toward the future the fascist historic imaginary also lost its original connection to history belonging to the present. While winning its war against the “historical,” in the 1930s the fascist historic imaginary shifted its predicative form from the historic present to the historic infinitive. In so doing, it split right down the middle: on the one hand, the stylized time of the historic decade projected towards the future; on the other, the serialization and museification of all past and present time—including the “fascist revolution” itself. Intellectually this process corresponded to the waning of Gentile’s philosophical-political star. With this fraying of the actualist tightrope that had sustained its formation, the fascist historic imaginary itself

71. Set up by a team of journalists, historians, and thirty-four 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.

72. See my analysis of the exhibition in “To Make History.”

began oscillating between the regimentation of the present in the form of the past, and the projection of history into the future. Contrary to Gentile's prediction, then, the fascist mind had reoriented itself from history belonging to the past to history belonging to the present only to find itself oscillating between the present belonging to history and history belonging to the future.

Yet it is precisely in this return of the repressed—this oscillation—in a new form, that we may find the most compelling reason to consider Gentile's philosophical intuitions beyond the geographical-temporal boundaries of fascist historic culture, and in the light of the new forms of temporality that have developed in our so-called postmodern era. I will conclude this essay by exploring the meaning of Gentile's philosophy of history for our own time.

VII. POSTHISTORIC(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 and is still shared by millions of people—not only in the West. 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 in the West count, segment, and account for the passing of time. "The '50s," "the '60s," and so on, are attached to specific life forms whose distinguishing characteristic is always a style (of clothing, haircut, car, or acting). But most telling is that the movement from one decade to the next is never progress, or historical evolution, but always mere seriality. Fashions simply *follow* rather than *evolve from* each other, and they also always return. Could it not be the case that the stylization of time expressed in the fascist historic imaginary in the 1930s may have constituted a crucial step in the transfiguration of the "generation-decade" into the "fashion-decade" that characterizes what we may properly term the *posthistoric(al) imaginary* of our age?

This question is blatantly rhetorical and provocative. Its verification and transformation into a specific research agenda lies well beyond the scope of this essay. However, that fascist historic culture may have constituted the privileged point of reference for the formation of a posthistoric(al) form of imaginary merits some final remarks in view of the direct support it finds in recent studies that have explored significant areas of continuities, mutual appropriations, and imaginary transfigurations between fascist visual culture and postindustrial mass culture. Film studies have been at the forefront of this research, revealing, for example, the enduring contest between fascist and bourgeois rhetorics of virility in the recoding of the fundamental image of the *femme fatale* from silent film, through

fascist movies, to postwar feminizations of fascism.⁷³ Similarly, the analysis of fascist advertising and industries has highlighted specific continuities between corporate-fascist and corporate-capitalist image-politics in the postwar era.⁷⁴ In general, all studies of fascist visual culture have highlighted the continuities, connections, mutual influences, and responses between the Italian-fascist imaginary and the evolution of capitalist-consumer mass culture at large, before, during, and after the fall of fascism. Seen in this context, and considering that the practice of segmenting time in decades has become a mass phenomenon only in the postwar era, the transfiguration of the fascist unit of historic time into serialized *retro*-time may appear not only possible but even probable.

In addition, to confirm the plausibility of a very direct connection between the evolution of fascist historic culture and the diffusion of a postmodernist sensitivity dominated by the temporality of fashion, we do not need to resort to far-fetched alliterations, nor to Susan Sontag's warnings about "fascinating Fascism."⁷⁵ This connection and collusion is inscribed in the unique place that Italy—that is, "made in Italy"—has assumed in the postindustrial imaginary on a global scale. Whether embodied in design or material products, the idea of Italian style functions as an antidote and parasitical other to the idea of fashion itself. The bearer of Italian fashion, whether woman or man, is not simply *in style*; she or he *has style*, in the "normative" sense masterfully defined by Ernst Gombrich as seeking to produce "synaesthetic" effects on the viewer, and thereby as being recognized as "distinct" in the mass of seemingly undistinguishable consumers.⁷⁶ Lest we want to give in to dangerously essentialist and profoundly racist notions that Italians have style in their blood, we cannot but recognize that this cultural construct is the last offspring of a normative-style imaginary that might be the most enduring legacy of fascist modernism. Unencumbered by either totalitarian or modernist utopias, the normative conception of style that sustained a fascist politics of distinction in 1920s–1930s Italy has found fulfillment in the postwar construction of Italian style as the sign of style *tout court*. Isn't it quite plausible, then, to identify in this iconization of Italy *as style* the symptom of a posthistorical imaginary that has responded to the fascist stylization of time with the transfiguration of the decade into a serialized mode of *retro*-time?

There is corroborating evidence for the plausibility of this hypothesis in the symptoms that characterize the formation of a posthistoric form of imaginary. It is hardly disputable that one of the principal traits that separates postwar generations among themselves and from previous ones is their explicit acknowledgment of the role played by historic events in the formation of their imaginaries.

73. Kriss Ravetto, *The Unmaking of Fascist Aesthetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

74. Karen Pinkus, *Bodily Regimes: Italian Advertising under Fascism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

75. Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1980).

76. Ernst Gombrich, "Style," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan Co. & The Free Press, 1968), XV, 283. I owe to Carlo Ginzburg the prescient suggestion to look into the connections between Italian fascism and the "normative" conception of style.

The “Holocaust,” “1968,” the “Fall of the Berlin Wall,” just to cite the key events that have marked three successive generations of postwar Europeans, have all been explicitly perceived, described, and treated as “historic”—on different imaginary 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 was by Italian fascists. On the contrary, the formation of generational imaginaries after World War II has been haunted by a recurrent and obsessive image of “The End” of history—naturally, with all of its cinematic promise of infinite new beginnings.

First articulated by Alexander Kojève in lectures given in Paris in the late 1930s (but published only after the end of the war, in 1947), this quintessential Hegelian trope has incarnated itself into a series of icons that have percolated at all levels of mass culture.⁷⁷ 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,” the postmodern (Western) imaginary has been consumed by historic semantics. To survive, then, beyond the end of the Enlightenment, modernity, ideologies, and History seems to be the categorical imperative of successive but repetitive forms of posthistoric imaginaries.

At first sight, the relationship between the formation of a historic culture during fascism and that of posthistoric imaginaries may appear one of mere analogy and philosophical affinity. Just as the former found philosophical articulation in the thought of Gentile, the latter gained expression in another revision of Hegelian philosophy of history, namely, that of Kojève. Whether Kojève ever read Gentile’s work, his idea of a “new animality” connected to the transformation of history into “environment” continued the de-transcendentalization and de-temporization of historical semantics initiated by Gentile.⁷⁸ Yet in the repetitive return of posthistoric semantics to the mental image of the end of history we may also capture a more historical connection between the rise of posthistoric imaginaries and the evolution of fascist historic culture as a whole. The idea of the end of history does not so much refer to the decline of historical semantics. It captures instead the historical demise of the fascist idea of historic agency in fascist historic culture itself. Posthistoric imaginaries institutionalize the historic infinitive projected by Italian fascism in the 1930s. In the final analysis, and from the perspective developed in this essay, the postmodern condition, famously defined by Jean François Lyotard as a widespread “incredulity toward metanarratives” may be more fruitfully reformulated as a *posthistoric(al) condition marked by imaginaries that prevent the experience of both historical transcendence and historic immanence*.⁷⁹

University of Southern California

77. Alexandre Kojève, “Introduction to the Reading of Hegel,” *Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit Assembled by Raymond Queneau*, edited by Allan Bloom [1947] (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 147-152.

78. *Ibid.*, 147.

79. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 28.