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Re-enacting Classical Antiquity in the Theaters of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany

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Abstract

The forms of popular and mass theater developed in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany reached back to classical antiquity to reinvent theater as a secular rite. At first glance, the use of the theatrical medium is at odds with the classicizing monumentality that characterized the cultural expression of fascist regimes. Theatrical performances are by their very nature ephemeral events; unlike monuments, they do not leave their mark on civic space, and can barely provide a testament to generations to come. Drawing on performance theory and cultural history, the author argues that these antiquity-inspired performances provided powerful sites of re-enacting the myth of national rebirth. Fascist regimes used open-air theaters and forms modelled on Greek theater, whilst also tapping into the notions of performance that had been developed within the traditions of the theatrical vanguard to offer the experience of a reborn past. These performances brought forth grandiose visions of classical antiquity through living bodies and helped to embed the imagined past into a mythicized present. The intertwining between the theatrical medium and classical reception allow us to demonstrate the significance of embodied practices in shaping fascism's political radicalism.

Keywords

fascism – fascist aesthetics – classical antiquity – classical re-enactment – performance – ancient drama – Thingspiel

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In 1932, Mussolini inaugurated a white marble obelisk at the entrance of the Foro Mussolini in Rome, a new sports complex constructed for the 1940 Olympic Games that he was ardently bidding for. The design of the venue connected the present moment to the imperial fora of Roman antiquity, but the obelisk also contained a message to be unearthed by the generations to come: a Latin text written on parchment in a box built into the base of the obelisk, the so-called *Codex Fori Mussolini*. Composed by classical philologist Aurelio Giuseppe Amatucci, the text recounted Italy's recent history under Fascism. Two years later, on 29 April 1934, the single theatrical spectacle *18BL* took place on the bank of the river Arno in Florence. The performance was directed by the filmmaker Alessandro Blasetti in celebration of the *Littoriali della cultura e dell' arte* [Lictorial games of culture and art], the competitions for university students organized by the Fascist Party. In the show, two thousand amateur actors performed a three-act play featuring gymnastic demonstrations, mass choreographies, and choral singing before an audience of over twenty thousand. The protagonist was not a human character but the eponymous *18BL* truck manufactured by FIAT. The staging deployed military trucks, artillery, and aviation resulting in a mechanized maelstrom that ended up confusing rather than enthusing the crowds. Despite its failure, the spectacle went down as a concrete realization of Mussolini's idea of the 'Theater of (and for) the Masses'.

These two instances have received attention in their own right,¹ but their comparison can be illuminating in manifold ways. The *Codex* is divided into three sections: the first focuses on Italy during the First World War and the ensuing political unrest until Mussolini's seizure of power. The second presents the reconstruction of the country under Fascism, referring, among others, to building projects and the excavation of antiquities. The third section praises the work of the *Opera Nazionale Balilla*, the youth organization with the mission to build the new generation of Italians. Similarly, *18BL* had a tripartite structure: the first act dramatized the battles Italy fought in the First World War and its victories over Austria-Hungary; the second showed the country in disarray in the aftermath of the war, paralyzed by strikes and political conflict, ending with the victory of the Fascist movement. The third act celebrated the beginning of a new era, alluding to the draining of the Pontine Marshes with farming areas and new towns developed on the reclaimed land. The show

1 For the Latin text alongside an English translation and commentary, see Han Lamers and Bettina Reitz-Joosse, *The Codex Fori Mussolini: A Latin Text of Italian Fascism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016). On *18BL*, see Jeffrey T. Schnapp, *Staging Fascism: 18BL and the Theater of Masses for Masses* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), and Jeffrey T. Schnapp, '18BL: Fascist Mass Spectacle,' *Representations* 43 (1993): 89–125.

closed with a reference to the town Littoria which had been inaugurated by Mussolini two years before. Both in the *Codex* and *18BL* the advent of the Duce marked a climax in the narrative. The ending of the first section of the *Codex* reads: 'At this time by some divine command and will, a MAN appeared', and a few lines later: 'This man was BENITO MUSSOLINI'.² In the third act of *18BL*, a man referred to as 'the Commander' arrives on horseback and orders trucks and bulldozers to fill in the landfill and create a road to Littoria. Although this figure is not named explicitly, it represents Mussolini himself leading the country to the exodus from the drama.³ The comparative reading between the *Codex* and the *18BL* spectacle is necessitated not only by their conspicuous similarities in terms of narrative structure and content but also because, read in conjunction, these two instances represent two interlaced facets of Fascism: on the one hand the turn to classical antiquity, and on the other hand the embracing of modernity bringing forth a new era. Both the classical-looking obelisk and its *Codex* as well as the futuristic aesthetic of *18BL* aimed at monumentalizing the historical present of Italy under Mussolini. The Fascist official Alessandro Pavolini, who conceived and oversaw the development of *18BL*, viewed this performance as the basis for a theatrical institution where experimentation would give rise to a 'new Aristophanes or Aeschylus'.⁴

Similar narratives that frame the rise of the Nazi regime as the dawn of a new era were prevalent in Germany. A notable example is the staging of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* at the Staatliches Schauspielhaus at the Gendarmenmarkt in Berlin which formed part of the cultural program for the 1936 Olympic Games.⁵ Using the ancient trilogy as a vehicle, the director Lothar Müthel offered a perfect illustration of the Nazi worldview. The conflict between an old chthonic religion and the values of the *polis* depicted by Aeschylus was presented as a transition from a world of primitivism into a new civilized order. In opposition to the archaic imagery in the staging of the first two plays, the classicizing aesthetic of

2 Lamers and Reitz-Joose, *The Codex Fori Mussolini*, 87.

3 Equestrian representations of Mussolini in visual art and photography emulated the portrayal of imperial rulers in the Hellenistic tradition or saints in Christian iconography. On Mussolini and the equestrian motif, see Diane Yvonne Ghirardo, 'Città Fascista: Surveillance and Spectacle,' *Journal of Contemporary History* 31, no. 2 (1996): 357–358.

4 Pavolini quoted in Schnapp, *Staging Fascism*, 68.

5 See Hellmut Flashar, 'Griechische Tragödie unter der Herrschaft des Nationalsozialismus,' *Inszenierung der Antike: Das griechische Drama auf der Bühne der Neuzeit 1585–1990* (München: C.H. Beck, 1991), 164–180; Erika Fischer-Lichte, 'Hailing a Racial Kinship: Performances of Greek Tragedies during the Third Reich,' *Tragedy's Endurance: Performances of Greek Tragedies and Cultural Identity in Germany since 1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 143–181.

the third part, *Eumenides*, established a transhistorical analogy between classical Greece and Nazi Germany. The looming presence of the replica of Phidias's statue of Athena Parthenos on the stage is typical of the monumentality that unambiguously portrayed the Third Reich as a rebirth of Greek civilization.

At first glance, theater as a live medium defies the aspirations of Italian Fascism and Nazism to immortalize themselves in art. As opposed to the monumental architectural constructions like the Foro Mussolini, performances are transient events and, as such, they cannot be deployed to leave a permanent mark on history. Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg proclaimed architecture to be the 'first art' in the Third Reich as it could recover the spiritual and artistic values embodied in Greek and Gothic forms.⁶ Rosenberg's remarks might be attributed to his own background in architecture, but certainly a great deal of resources were expended under Hitler and Mussolini to erect buildings in imitation of Graeco-Roman architectural styles.⁷ At the same time, both regimes used theatrical performances and spectacles to surround themselves with the splendor of the classical civilizations. In a similar manner to the 'stripped classicism'⁸ of Fascist architecture that blended modernism and classicism, Greek theater provided the model for developing new types of open-air and mass theaters. However, in the literature on classical reception under fascism theater has been granted low priority. Indicative of this lack of attention is Johann Chapoutot's comprehensive study on National Socialism and antiquity which makes brief references to theater.⁹

The present article demonstrates that the theatrical medium was vital to anchoring the fascist present into the classical past, not despite but rather because of its ephemerality. My task here is to not to offer an analysis of specific

6 Alfred Rosenberg, *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts: Eine Wertung der seelisch-geistigen Gestaltenkämpfe unserer Zeit* (München: Hoheneichen, 1930), 386.

7 Aristotle Kallis, 'Futures Made Present: Architecture, Monument, and the Battle for the "Third Way" in Fascist Italy,' *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* 7, no. 1 (2018): 45–79, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22116257-00701004>. See also in this special issue, Jonathan Spellerberg, 'Enacting the Mythical through Architecture: Nazi Assembly Architecture as Performative Practice,' *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* 12, no. 2 (2023): 305–330.

8 On the notion of 'stripped classicism,' see Roger Griffin, 'Building the Visible Immortality of the Nation: The Centrality of "Rooted Modernism" to the Third Reich's Architectural New Order,' *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* 7, no. 1 (2018), 9–44, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22116257-00701002>.

9 Chapoutot mentions the 1936 *Oresteia* and the genre of *Thingspiel* as an imitation of Greek choral theater. See Johann Chapoutot, *Greeks, Romans, Germans: How the Nazis Usurped Europe's Classical Past* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016, originally 2008), 165 and 204–206.

theatrical productions,¹⁰ but to explore the affordances of live performance in terms of actualizing the ideology of national rebirth through the re-enactment of the ancient past. To this end, the discussion focuses on Italy and Germany as in these two countries fascist movements rose to power and were able to implement reforms in theatrical institutions and culture. The analysis considers the production of ancient drama alongside genres that strove to emulate the formal and performative properties of Greek theater. Both modes of appropriating classical theater were part of a larger effort to develop forms of popular and mass spectacles that would befit the new era of fascism. Working at the conjunction of cultural history and performance theory, I advance the argument that the theaters that invoked classical antiquity contributed to producing a new temporality by embedding the past in the present moment of the performance. The examples under examination suggest that there is an embodied dimension to the ideology of national rebirth which can be used to foreground the performative nature of fascism. To move from a cultural to a performative approach to fascism, it is necessary to look at the critical and conceptual frames within which theater and performance under fascist regimes has been studied thus far.

Theater and the Cultural Turn in Fascist Studies

The study of theater in fascist cultures inevitably intersects with the scholarship on the theatricality of fascist politics, first addressed within interpretations of fascism as a secular religion. George Mosse drew attention to political gatherings, rallies, and festivities in the Third Reich as a powerful mechanism of inculcating ideology throughout society.¹¹ In a similar vein, Klaus Vondung

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- 10 I have undertaken this kind of work elsewhere; on ancient drama in Nazi Germany, see Eleftheria Ioannidou, 'Chorus and the *Vaterland*: Greek Tragedy and the Ideology of Choral Performance in Inter-War Germany,' in *Choruses, Ancient and Modern*, eds. Joshua Billings, Felix Budelmann, and Fiona Macintosh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 327–346. On Greek theater in Fascist Italy, see Giovanna Di Martino, Eleftheria Ioannidou, and Sara Troiani, eds., *A Hellenic Modernism: Greek Theatre and Italian Fascism*, *Classical Receptions Journal* 16, no. 1 (2024); Eleftheria Ioannidou, 'The Sweet Vitality of Dancing Bodies: Classical Embodiment, Modernist Poetics, and Fascist Visions in Sophocles' *Trachiniae* at Syracuse in 1933,' in *Revel-Azione: Politics of Poetry and Poetry of Politics in Modern Italy*, eds. Enrico Serventi Longhi and Roger Griffin (Lausanne: Peter Lang, forthcoming 2024).
- 11 George L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1975).

opposed critics who viewed Nazi rituals and ceremonies as mere instruments of propaganda, pointing to their symbolic function that worked to instill faith in Nazism's apocalyptic worldview.¹² Another pivotal contribution to this debate was the work of Emilio Gentile who linked political theater under Mussolini to the sacralization of politics.¹³ Like Vondung, Gentile brought to the fore the role of political spectacles in shaping the secular cult of Italian Fascism. In stressing the function of spectacles, Gentile cautiously warns against the critical pitfall of reducing fascism's theatricality to mere histrionics:

Certainly, the theatrical aspects of Fascism can often appear grotesque and as purely instrumental in the mystification of the collective. Mussolini was not in the habit of hiding the fact that mass spectacles had a manipulatory function. Nevertheless, an analysis conducted along these lines is, in my view, too limiting and misleading, above all because it undervalues the consistent link between the *theatricality* of Fascism and its culture as a totalitarian movement and modern political religion.¹⁴

The approach expounded by critics who underscored the symbolic function of spectacles beyond their propagandistic aims had methodological implications for research into the cultures of fascist regimes. The value of this approach lies in that it challenged the Debordian perception of fascism as a 'society of spectacle' that held sway within Marxist analyses. The same perception was echoed in the argument that the profusion of spectacles attested to the apotheosis of aesthetic form in the absence of coherent ideological content.¹⁵ Such arguments can be traced all the way back to Walter Benjamin's much-quoted idea that fascism aestheticized politics,¹⁶ as well as to

12 Klaus Vondung, *Magie und Manipulation: Ideologischer Kult und politische Religion des Nationalsozialismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1971), and Klaus Vondung, 'National Socialism as a Political Religion: Potentials and Limits of an Analytical Concept,' *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 6, no. 1 (2005): 87–95.

13 Emilio Gentile, *Il culto del littorio: La sacralizzazione della politica nell'Italia fascista* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1993).

14 Emilio Gentile, 'The Theatre of Politics in Fascist Italy,' in *Fascism and Theatre: Comparative Studies on the Aesthetics and Politics of Performance in Europe, 1925–1945*, ed. Günter Berghaus (New York: Berghahn, 1996), 73 [original emphasis].

15 On the relationship between form and content, see Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Susan Sontag, 'Fascinating Fascism,' in *Under the Sign of the Saturn* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980, originally 1974).

16 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969, originally 1935), 217–251.

Adorno and Horkheimer's invocation of fascism to lay bare the mechanisms of manipulation in the mass culture of the early postwar period.¹⁷ Yet, it is necessary to distinguish between the mass culture of capitalism which disperses collective energies in favor of individualist escapism and fascist political spectacles which were focused on galvanizing the body politic. As Vondung puts it with reference to Nazi spectacles, 'behind the forms there was faith.'¹⁸

Since the 1990s, the sporadic interest in the theater of fascist regimes gave its place to systematic approaches that developed within the so-called cultural turn in fascist studies. The specialized literature demonstrated that theatrical production under fascism was far from monolithic, encompassing diversionary entertainments, stagings of classic dramas, historical plays, and new dramatic writing. Moreover, the ongoing discussions about theater's reform drew on divergent ideas and models, combining tradition and modernist aesthetics.¹⁹ The plans to develop Mussolini's Theater of the Masses utilized the latest innovations in theatrical technology but also engaged with discourses about reviving Graeco-Roman theater in the open air that had been put into practice in the festivals organized at ancient sites. The research on theater under the Nazis highlights the continuities between the Nazi genre *Thingspiel* and the choric theaters of the proletarian movement.²⁰

Based on the understanding of fascism as a cultural as well as a political phenomenon, critics directed their attention to the ideological function of fascist theaters rather than viewing them as part of the propaganda machine. Although theater under the Nazis was subjected to a coercive censorship regime, as Gerwin Strobl points out, the message could not be fully controlled given that performances are not finalized artworks.²¹ On the other hand, the

17 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,' in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1997, originally 1947), 120–167.

18 Vondung, 'National Socialism as a Political Religion,' 89.

19 On Nazi theater, see Glen W. Gadberry, ed. *Theatre in the Third Reich, the Prewar Years: Essays on Theatre in Nazi Germany* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995); John London, ed. *Theatre under the Nazis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Gerwin Strobl, *The Swastika and the Stage: German Theatre and Society 1933–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). On theater under Italian Fascism, see Gianfranco Pedullà, *Il teatro italiano nel tempo del fascismo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1994); Emanuela Scarpellini, *Organizzazione teatrale e politica del teatro nell'Italia fascista* (Milan: LED, 2004).

20 Evelyn Annuß, *Volksschule des Theaters: Nationalsozialistische Massenspiele* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2019). Also, Henning Eichberg, 'The Nazi *Thingspiel*: Theater for the Masses in Fascism and Proletarian Culture,' *New German Critique* 11 (1977): 133–150.

21 Strobl, *The Swastika and the Stage*, 74.

relatively lax censorship of theatrical productions in Fascist Italy indicates no strict ideological control over the stage.²² Irrespective of whether performances had a propagandistic goal, their function should be sought in what Patricia Gaborik calls 'fascism's *strategic aestheticism*, a conscientious recourse to aesthetics that went beyond the tactical; the elevation of spiritual valor over immediate propagandistic efficacy'.²³

A significant contribution of the cultural approach is that it focused on art and culture to shed light on fascism's radical utopianism. Roger Griffin's definition of generic fascism as a form of palingenetic ultranationalism was followed by a flow of publications that explored the role of artistic and cultural expression in the diffusion of the myth of national rebirth.²⁴ In the field of theater studies, the emphasis on myth-making linked back to earlier analyses of fascism as a political religion. Along these lines, Günter Berghaus looks at ritualistic theater and public festivities through an anthropological lens that helps to foreground the role of rituals as a response to the crisis of individualism and the desire to foster a sense of collective identity.²⁵ An important proposition made by Berghaus is that ritualism offers a pertinent conceptual framework for understanding the function of theater under fascism, including performances that were not openly fascist in their content or form. Although Berghaus does not discuss productions of ancient drama, there is a clear parallel between the use of symbols and dramaturgical patterns derived from the Christian liturgy he identifies and the turn to Greek theater to reinvent mass rituals for the people.

One of the arguments put forward by scholars working on fascist theater is that once the regimes consolidated their grip, they abandoned theatrical experimentation in favor of traditionalist dramas. This view is corroborated by certain developments that occurred in the process of reforming theater in both fascist regimes; after the mid-1930s the Nazis promoted heroic tragedy instead of mass choric drama.²⁶ Similarly, the failure of *18BL* boosted performances of

22 Mabel Berezin, 'The Organization of Political Ideology: Culture, State and Theater in Fascist Italy,' *American Sociological Review* 56, no. 5 (1991): 639–651.

23 Patricia Gaborik, *Mussolini's Theatre: Fascist Experiments in Art and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 19 [original emphasis]. See also in this special issue, Patricia Gaborik, 'Mussolini's Cesare: Propaganda, Pedagogy and the Dramatization of History,' *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* 12, no. 2 (2023): 165–182.

24 Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991).

25 Günter Berghaus, 'The Ritual Core of Fascist Theatre: An Anthropological Perspective,' in *Fascism and Theatre: Comparative Studies on the Aesthetics and Politics of Performance in Europe, 1925–1945*, ed. Günter Berghaus (New York: Berghahn, 1996), 39–71.

26 Strobl, *The Swastika and the Stage*, 65–88; Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theater* (London: Routledge, 2005), 158.

ancient amphitheaters as a more suitable version of popular theater.²⁷ However, a panoptic view of theatrical production reveals a symbiotic relationship between classical forms and modernist aesthetics all the way through, especially in Fascist Italy where the state displayed an eclectic stance that consistently reconciled experimentation with traditionalism. The extent to which fascism distanced itself from tradition and valued innovation cannot be considered independently of the cultural dynamic of fascism as an ideology that simultaneously worshipped the past and embraced modernism across the board. In that regard, it is important to investigate how the use of traditional dramatic forms, including classical drama, fitted in with the regimes' programs of renewal.

There is a lot to be gained from discussing the function of theatrical performances under fascism against the backdrop of recent research on ephemeral architecture. Pier Luigi Tucci examines temporary constructions that provided the setting for public celebrations, focusing on the tribune in Via dei Trionfi created by the sculptor Giuseppe Ciocchetti to flank the military parade organized in celebration of Hitler's visit to Rome in May 1938. The tribune combined Roman and royal symbols with modern military references presented in the classical-looking reliefs. The theatrical qualities of festive architecture were noticed by contemporary art critics, who stressed the ability of temporary sites to transform their surroundings through the interaction with the crowds. Tucci argues that the effect of these constructions were the memories they impressed upon the spectators, concluding that '[t]emporary buildings lived less long, but more intensely, than permanent ones.'²⁸ In a way similar to ephemeral architecture, theatrical performances that invoked classical antiquity left little to no traces behind, but they nonetheless enabled participants to experience the fusion of past and present through bodily affects. The consideration of architectural monumentality in relation to the transient nature of artistic and political performances opens new avenues for understanding how fascism reconstructed classical antiquity as a living present.

Griffin identifies the definitional elements of a fascist theater as the preoccupation with the victory over decadence and the nation's imminent rebirth.²⁹

27 Schnapp, *Staging Fascism*, 125.

28 Pier Luigi Tucci, 'Ephemeral Architecture and *Romanità* in the Fascist Era: A Royal Imperial Tribune for Hitler and Mussolini in Rome,' *Papers of the British School at Rome* 88 (2020): 337.

29 Roger Griffin, 'Staging the Nation's Rebirth: The Politics and Aesthetics of Performance in the Context of Fascist Studies,' in *Fascism and Theatre: Comparative Studies on the Aesthetics and Politics of Performance in Europe, 1925–1945*, ed. Günter Berghaus (New York: Berghahn, 1996), 22.

Consequently, he argues, not every theatrical production that took place under the fascist regimes articulated a truly fascist worldview. Griffin refers to classical or escapist plays as examples of non-fascist theaters. However, as already discussed, the theatrical performances and political events staged by the regimes were treated as communal rituals. Their power as a tool for indoctrination relied precisely on forging a sense of collective identity rather than promulgating the ideology. From this perspective, it can be argued that the classical performances gave form to the core myth of national regeneration despite the lack of an overt ideological content. To understand their effect, it is necessary to look beyond the narrative and representational apparatus of theater, drawing on theories that elucidate its affective and experiential dimensions. Stagings of classical drama and other antiquity-inspired theatrical performances had an inherently ideological function as they embodied what fascist communities envisioned themselves doing: revivifying the classical past.

The Return of Greek Theater and Cultural Renewal

In opposition to the traditions of neoclassicism that saw Graeco-Roman civilizations as paragons of artistic and cultural achievement, fascism's recourse to the classical past was distinguished by the desire to surpass the great ancestors. Turning to idealized versions of Greece and Rome, the regimes of Mussolini and Hitler did not only proclaim themselves as descendants of the classical civilizations but strove to frame the era that started with their seizure of power as a reborn antiquity.

The promotion of outdoor theaters modelled on classical antiquity under fascism was a continuation of a long process of reviving the performance and sports cultures of Greece in the modern era.³⁰ Since the turn of the twentieth century, performances in the open air were used in art and political movements to counter the negative effects of Taylorism and re-introduce meaning to the fragmented experience of urban life. The affordances of the open-air spaces, enhanced by the atmosphere of theater festivals, promised to negate the chronometric imperatives of industrialized modernity and forge an organic connection with time and place. When fascist regimes rose to power, they instituted artistic and political festivals to produce a new chronopolitical order.

30 On the revival of Greek theater and sports, see Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*; Nadine Rossol, *Performing the Nation in Interwar Germany: Sport, Spectacle, and Political Symbolism* (London: Palgrave, 2010).

Along these lines, both Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany assimilated and institutionalized the production of ancient drama in the open air as well as theatrical forms modelled on Greek antiquity. The turn to Greek theater served them in breaking away from the spectating norms and conventions of psychological theater which they associated with a pervasive cultural crisis.

Greek antiquity provided a reference point within the discourses of aesthetic and cultural renewal that underpinned the attempt to reform theater in fascist states. The use of Greek theater drew on the legacies of classicism in each country as well as on the diverse versions of Graeco-Roman antiquity deployed by the regimes. It is worth noting that although the culture of Italian Fascism relied heavily on the Roman past, the state endorsed the production of Greek drama in the open air. In the case of Nazism, on the other hand, the dialogues with Greek theater followed a different path: the open-air performances promoted within the official culture were not centered on ancient drama but rather sought to incorporate formal characteristics and communal aspects of Greek theater. Drawing upon ideas about the origins of Greek tragedy, initiated by Nietzsche's emphasis on the Dionysian in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), the Nazis conceptualized open-air performance as a communal ritual. Their aspirations to create completely new forms can be viewed as a response to the hefty influence of Hellenism on German intellectual life and art.³¹ This rivalry with Greek antiquity accounts for the relatively small proportion of stagings of ancient drama in Nazi Germany.³²

The efforts to create a theater for the popular masses under Italian Fascism became entangled with the production of ancient drama in the open air which had started about a decade earlier. In the early years of the *ventennio*, Mussolini showed interest in the productions at the Greek Theater of Syracuse which had been initiated by the Committee for Classical Performances founded in 1913 by count Mario Tommaso Gargallo with the involvement of the classicist Ettore Romagnoli.³³ In May 1924, Mussolini attended the double-bill perfor-

31 Eliza Marian Butler, *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany: A Study of the Influence Exercised by Greek Art and Poetry over the Great German Writers of the Eighteenth, Nineteenth, and Twentieth Centuries* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958, originally 1935).

32 For data on the production of Greek drama in Fascist Italy, see in Di Martino, Ioannidou, and Troiani, *A Hellenic Modernism*. On Nazi Germany, see Thomas Eicher, Barbara Panse, und Henning Rischbieter, *Theater im 'Dritten Reich': Theaterpolitik, Spielplanstruktur, NS-Dramatik* (Leipzig: Kallmeyer, 2000), 293–295.

33 There is a parallel between Italy and Greece with regards to the use of ancient theaters. The first official use of the Ancient Theater of Epidaurus for a modern performance took place in 1938 during the para-fascist dictatorship of Ioannis Metaxas. Sophocles' *Electra* was the first play to be staged at the ancient theater at the initiative of Kostis Bastias,

mance of *Antigone* and *Seven against Thebes* at Syracuse during his tour to Sicily and expressed his support for the Committee's work.³⁴ It was probably at his behest that the committee was consolidated into a national institution in 1925, renamed as *Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico* [INDA; National Institute of Ancient Drama]. This development was part of a restructuring of the theater sector aimed to bring the lyrical and dramatic arts under the administrative control of the state,³⁵ but it also gave Greek theater a central place in the program of cultural reform. INDA was tasked with organizing a Greek drama festival at Syracuse alongside stagings in Roman theaters and sites in Sicily. By 1927 the institute had grown into a considerable cultural force and was put in charge of classical performances in all Greek and Roman sites in Italy, including productions of contemporary plays based on ancient history and mythology and spectacles inspired by classical antiquity.³⁶ The broadening scope of INDA's activities concurred with the gradual process of its fascistization; in 1929 archaeologist Biagio Pace, a member of the Fascist Party, replaced Gargallo as president and the Institute was moved to Rome. By the late 1930s, INDA was assimilated into the Ministry of Propaganda, with its goals reaching far beyond its original mission of reviving Greek drama at the theater of Syracuse.

the director of the Chamber of Letters and Arts founded by the Metaxas regime under the purview of the Ministry of Education. In Spain, theatrical performances of classical drama were staged at the Roman Theaters of Mérida, Sagunto, and Italica as part of the Falange's attempts to construct a uniform national identity grounded in Romanness, including a production of Plautus' *Aulularia* in October 1939 to commemorate Franco's rise to power. Unlike Italy and Greece, however, ancient theaters in Spain were not used for stagings of classical plays exclusively. See Vasileios Balaskas, *The Sociopolitics of the Revivals of Classical Drama in Greece, Spain, and Italy in the 20th Century* (PhD diss., Universidad de Málaga, 2022).

34 See, e.g., 'Mussolini al Teatro greco di Siracusa: Anche le tragedie moderne?' *Giornale d'Italia*, Rome, 18 May, in *Rassegna Stampa*, 1924, Archivio Fondazione INDA.

35 By the 1925 decree INDA was made a formal institution (*ente morale*). On theater's restructuring, see Pedullà, *Il teatro italiano*, 44–75.

36 The Syracuse Festival featured productions of Greek tragedy, occasionally in a double bill with satyr drama. An exception was the production of Aristophanes' *Clouds* together with Sophocles' *Trackers* in 1927. Latin plays were staged in other ancient theaters in Sicily, such as Plautus' *Miles Gloriosus* at the Greek Theater of Taormina in 1928. The classical spectacles *Panathenaea* (1936) and *Mistero Dionisiaco* (1938) were presented at the ancient temples of Paestum. On the spectacles at Paestum, see in this special issue, Sara Troiani, 'The Classical Performances at the Temples of Agrigento and Paestum: From Performances of Ancient Drama to the Re-Enactment of Myths and Rituals in Archeological Sites,' *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* 12, no. 2 (2023): 142–164.

Throughout the *ventennio*, the Syracuse Festival provided a stable basis for the production of ancient drama in the open air. Although INDA maintained an exclusive focus on Greek drama, its productions could be easily reconciled with the doctrine of the *romanità* as they served Italian Fascism in creating large-scale spectacles harkening back to the classical past. In line with the Regime's policies aimed at elevating the masses by means of high art, the stagings of ancient drama were openly linked to the project of national regeneration. The president of the Theater Directorate of the state Mario Corsi praised the work of INDA in the following words:

By taking the large masses outside the closed halls of everyday shows to breathe this atmosphere of art and wonder, not only does one achieve an exquisite cultural and artistic work, but a political idea is also realized, because arousing a heroic and religious sense of life in the souls of the crowds heightens spiritual values, which, like in ancient Greece, need to be looked after with much care as they constitute and will always constitute the indomitable forces of a Nation that wants to move forward.³⁷

The nationalist use of ancient drama was more evident in the stagings that took place at the restored Roman Theater of Sabratha in Italy-occupied Libya in the 1930s, which were outside INDA's purview. The site was excavated by the archaeologist Giacomo Guidi under the support of the governor Italo Balbo during the campaign in North Africa.³⁸ Following the completion of the restoration works, the venue was inaugurated with a performance of *Oedipus Tyrannus* in a translation by Romagnoli in 1937, attended by Mussolini himself. The following year, the theater of Sabratha hosted a staging of Euripides's *Iphigenia in Tauris* in the lyrical version by Manlio Faggella. These stagings offered an opportunity to celebrate Fascism's colonial ventures in the region, described by Corsi as a fusion of the Greek and Roman past with the forward-looking vision of a rebuilt empire:

37 Mario Corsi, *Il teatro all' aperto in Italia* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1939), 102 [my translation]. The passage is a quasi-quotation of the opening words inaugurating the new, Fascist committee in 1929 in INDA's journal *Dioniso*. See in this special issue, Giovanna Di Martino, 'The Living Archive: Archiving and Documenting Classical Performance during Fascism,' *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* 12, no. 2 (2023): 183–205.

38 Guidi died in 1936 and the project was completed by Giacomo Caputo. See Corsi, *Il teatro all' aperto in Italia*, 178.



FIGURE 1 Mussolini at the performance of *Oedipus Tyrannus* at the Roman Theater of Sabratha in March 1937
SOURCE: MARIO CORSI, *IL TEATRO ALL' APERTO IN ITALIA* (MILAN: RIZZOLI, 1939), 179.

When, shortly before the sunset of that 19 March 1937, the Duce entered the illustrious monument and took his place at the top of the orchestra arch, at the marble parapet where the Roman senators sat twenty centuries ago, the public had the impression that three great eras of world history were represented at that very moment in the Theater of Sabratha: the Greek one through the spectacle that was about to start; the Roman one, whose ancient power and incomparable spiritual prestige was attested to by the glorious building, and that of the new Italian Empire, impersonated by the Man who wanted the Empire and knew how to build it.³⁹ (figure 1)

The movement of staging Greek drama in the open air was not as prominent in Germany as ancient amphitheaters were not available to be repurposed. Instead, the Nazis developed new concepts for outdoor spectacles that could compete with the mass spectacles of Italian Fascism without being tied to ancient drama. The Nazi regime endorsed the performance of the new dramatic genre *Thingspiel* which arose out of a larger cultural phenomenon of outdoor choric theater, formerly associated with the proletarian movement.⁴⁰

39 Corsi, *Il teatro all' aperto in Italia*, 180. [my translation]

40 On choric theater, see Annuß, *Volksschule des Theaters*; and, Matthias Warstat, *Theatrale Gemeinschaften: Zur Festkultur der Arbeiterbewegung 1918–1933* (Tübingen and Basel:

The name of the genre was coined by Carl Niessen, a theater professor at the University of Cologne, and it was derived from the word *Thing* that denoted a place of gathering for old Germanic tribes. *Thing* plays took their themes from German history and emphasized the idea of the *Volk* community through the deployment of large speaking choruses. The *Reichsbund der deutschen Freilicht- und Volksschauspiele* [Reich Association of German Open Air and Folk Plays], an organization founded in 1932 to promote *Thingspiel* performances, secured Joseph Goebbels's support in carrying out plans for the construction of outdoor amphitheatrical spaces of large capacity all over Germany. Of the over four hundred *Thingstätten* [performance sites] initially planned, sixty-six were built in locations of historic significance. The architectural form designated for the production of the new genre was also conceived by Niessen who based his ideas on Greek and Roman amphitheaters. The architects who created the *Thingstätte* in Heidelberg described it as a synthesis of a Greek and a Roman amphitheater, whilst the influence of Epidaurus is mentioned by architect Werner March who constructed the Dietrich-Eckart-Freilichtbühne at the Reichssportfeld in Berlin.⁴¹

As Evelyn Annuß observes, the references to classical theater helped to legitimize the adaptation of the choric form to the ideology of Nazism.⁴² Yet the historical associations and stylistic similarities between this genre and the earlier choruses of socialist spectacles cast doubts about the suitability of *Thingspiel* in promulgating party ideology. As a result, Goebbels decreed a ban on choral speaking in 1936 and gradually withdrew state funding for the construction of new theaters. Despite these controversies around the genre, the production of a *Thing* play was included in the official program of the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. On 2 August *Das Frankenburger Würfelspiel* [The Frankenburg Dice Game] by Eberhard Wolfgang Möller was performed at the Dietrich-Eckart theater. The staging of the *Oresteia* in the Staatliches Schauspielhaus the following day encouraged audiences to view the new genre as the modern counterpart of Greek tragedy. In the program of the cultural activities for the Olympics, a picture of the Dietrich-Eckart-Freilichtbühne was published next to a drawing of the theater of Dionysus in Athens described as the 'theater of Lycurgus'. The depiction of the two venues as mirroring one another invited the viewer to recognize the transhistorical analogy, also established by the program of the events and, as already discussed, the staging of the *Oresteia*. (figure 2).

A. Francke, 2005); and, Matthias Warstat, 'Community Building within a Festival Frame: Working Class Celebrations in Germany, 1918–1933,' *Theatre Research International* 30 (2005): 262–273.

41 Annuß, *Volksschule des Theaters*, 209 and 349.

42 Ibid., 199.

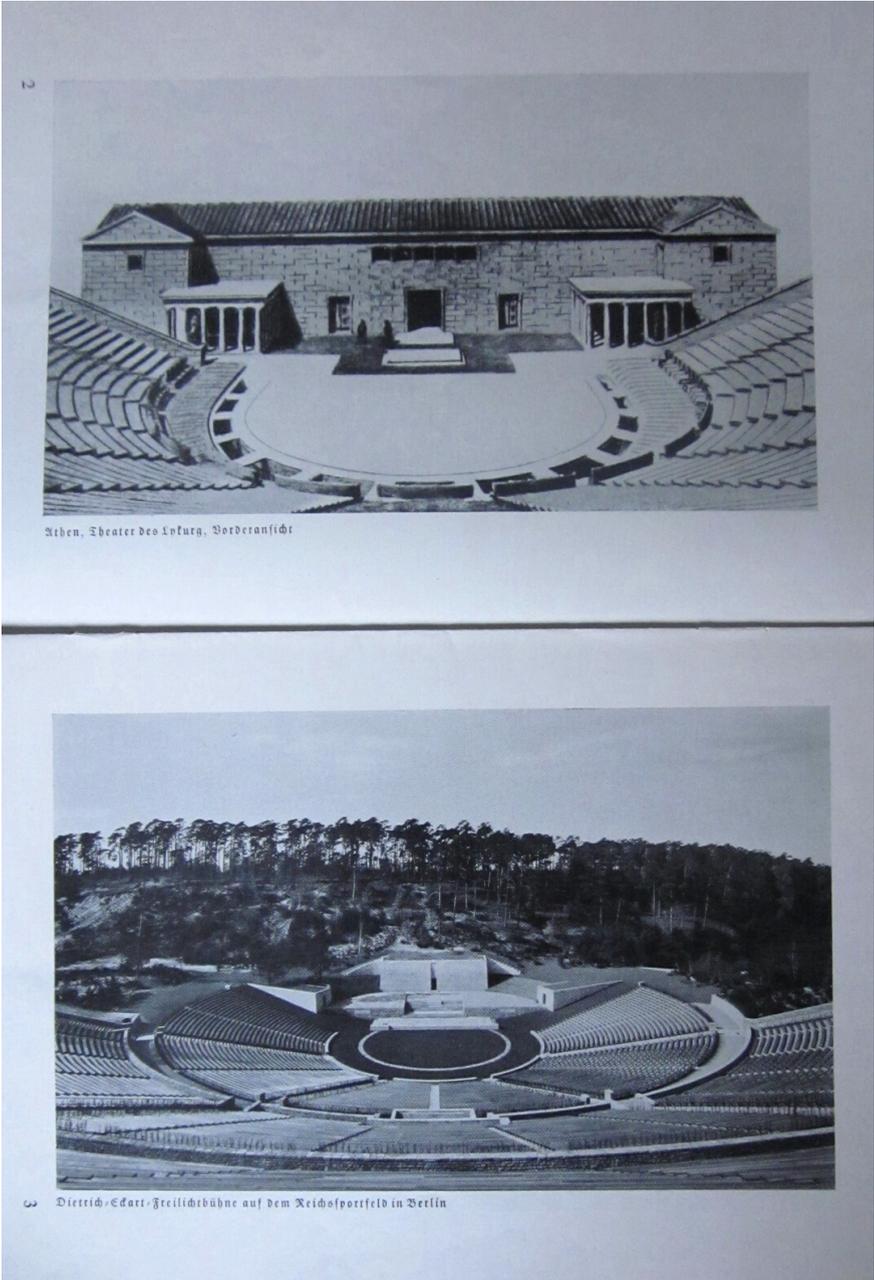


FIGURE 2 Image of the Theatre of Dionysus in ancient Athens and the Dietrich-Eckart-Freilichtbühne, cultural programme of the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games
SOURCE: THEATERSAMMLUNG, STADTMUSEUM BERLIN

By borrowing formal and stylistic elements of Greek theater, the new genre served the Nazi aspirations to construct a modern mythology. This rivalry with classical antiquity was not limited to the circles that promoted the *Thingspiel* movement but is also noticeable in the approach of the *Reichsdramaturg* Rainer Schlösser. Schlösser was an opponent of choric mass theater and advocated instead for a new drama in the fashion of Greek tragedy. What he had in mind was not an imitation of ancient prototypes but, again, a new form that would recreate Greek tragedy: ‘The new folk drama will no longer be able to be a popular drama but will rather have to strive for a tragic severity like the one that was known in antiquity, for example. But one should not understand this reference to ancient tragedy to mean slavish imitation.’⁴³ Notably, Schlösser remarked that the cultic folk drama of the future should have the capacity to elevate historical facts to a mythical universal ‘super-reality’ (*Überwirklichkeit*).⁴⁴ Like in the case of *Thingspiel*, the recourse to the tragic form did not enable a total break with historical time but rather strove to dissolve history into a mythicized present.

In fascist cultures, in sum, the forms of theater that invoked classical antiquity assumed an ideological function that was tied to their form rather than the content they carried. The meaning of the performances lay beyond the political message of the ancient dramas which often contradicted the doctrine of fascism outright. Constitutive of this meaning were the formal properties of Greek theater—open air, amphitheatrical spaces, choruses—that structured the experience of the audience. The use of Greek theater by fascist regimes attests to the deeper connection between fascism and form observed by Mabel Berezin.⁴⁵ In this vein, it can be argued that the new forms modelled on Greek theater were key to connecting the promise of cultural renewal to the embodied experience of a revived past. How then might we appraise the experiential dimension of theatrical performances in terms of reinforcing the ideology of fascism? In the following section, I turn to the new paradigm of theater that emerged through the modernist experimentation of the early twentieth century and discuss its input in the making of fascism’s politicized aesthetics.

43 Rainer Schlösser, *Das Volk und seine Bühne: Bemerkungen zum Aufbau des deutschen Theaters* (Berlin: A. Langen, G. Müller, 1935), 58. [my translation]

44 Schlösser, *Das Volk und seine Bühne*, 55.

45 Mabel Berezin, ‘Cultural Form and Political Meaning: State-Subsidized Theater, Ideology, and the Language of Style in Fascist Italy,’ *Cultural Sociology* 99, no. 5 (1994): 1237–1286.

Towards a Performative Turn in Fascist Studies

Since the beginning of the twentieth century the expansive crisis of representation in aesthetics and politics spawned a new aesthetic paradigm, including a new self-understanding of theater. No longer focused on the representation of the external world, theater was redefined as a form of collective action produced in and by the presence of a live audience. This conceptualization of performance was linked to the desire to reintegrate art and life which permeated the politicized aesthetics of the theatrical avant-garde. The quest to transform passive spectators into co-creators placed the emphasis on the performance as a shared event. In this spirit, theater makers devised new spatial configurations and modes of physical acting, whilst relying on strong sensory stimuli and tactics of provocation to energize audiences. In the manifesto of the Futurist Variety Theater, F.T. Marinetti coined the term 'body-madness'⁴⁶ to oppose the focus on psychology and inner life of contemporary drama. Interestingly, the bodily aesthetics proposed by Marinetti was grounded, among others, in 'heroism [and] life in the open air', terms that evoke the revival of Greek theater, which was starkly at odds with Futurism.

According to Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, modernist aesthetics enhanced self-reflexivity, drawing attention to art as a process.⁴⁷ Yet the break with the fictional immersion of the well-made play and naturalism, and the emphasis on the performance event did not necessarily favor self-reflexivity. In the theatrical experimentations of the early twentieth century, from Max Reinhardt's Theater of the Five Thousand to Futurist forms and the practices developed in the interwar period, such as Artaud's Theater of Cruelty, the performance was redefined as a totalizing experience presupposing the spectator's cognitive, emotional, and sensory involvement. To immerse the audience not in the fiction but in the live event itself, theater makers strove to recreate performance as a ritualistic act, drawing on antiquity, medieval and popular traditions, or non-Western theatrical forms. The efforts to revive Greek drama in the open air contributed to producing a new aesthetics based on the performative by necessitating a break with the proscenium arch and the conventions of illusionistic representation.

The mobilizing potential of theater was not lost on fascist regimes. Mussolini contrasted theater to cinema, arguing that the former provided a more

46 Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in Rainey Lawrence, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman, eds. *Futurism: An Anthology* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 162.

47 Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, 'The Artist to Power? Futurism, Fascism and the Avant-Garde,' *Theory, Culture and Society* 13, no. 2 (1996): 40.

effective educational apparatus that could stir collective emotion.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the fusion of art and life exalted by the avant-garde as a basis for social and cultural transformation was shared by fascism which found in ritualistic theater a tool for dissolving the bounds of the self and fostering collective identities. The mass performances and spectacles organized by fascist regimes operated on the sensory and physical level to the point of overwhelming audiences, like in the case of *18BL*. In certain genres, techniques of agitation from the earlier political theaters were deployed to encourage the participation of the audience. For instance, the performances of *Thingspiel* blurred the boundaries between spectatorship and participation by inviting spectators to join in choral singing or to perform as extras.⁴⁹

The conceptualization of performance as a shared event is key to understanding not only fascist theater but the theatrical nature of fascism, more broadly. The new self-definition of theater as a totalizing experience that contains the audience corresponded to the emergence of a new political aesthetics in the interwar period. To understand these interconnections, we need to relate the new performative paradigm to Benjamin's considerations about cinema as a form of mass entertainment. For Benjamin, the possibility of mechanical reproduction enabled by the technology of film deemphasized the cult value of the artwork—its 'aura'—drawing instead attention to its social function. Less attention has been paid to Benjamin's suggestion that the aura can also be found in the unrepeatably encounter between the actor and spectator in the theater. As he notes, in opposition to the live event, the camera thwarts the actor's ability to adjust their performance to the audience and, therefore, ensures the distancing and self-reflexive operation of cinema. However, Benjamin acknowledges that cinema was not the first medium to undermine the artwork's aura; in fact, the reorientation towards art's social function was already initiated by avant-garde movements like Dada, Cubism, and Futurism that sought to reintegrate art and reality. What is more, this reintegration is understood by Benjamin in terms of a crisis of representation resulting in 'parliaments, as much as theaters, [to be] deserted'.⁵⁰ According to Benjamin, fascism responded to the crisis of representation but, rather than seeking to reintegrate art and life like earlier modernist movements, it collapsed politics into aesthetics.

48 Benito Mussolini, 'La parola del Capo del Governo,' *Bollettino della Società italiana degli autori ed editori* 8 (1933): 7–9.

49 Eichberg, 'The Nazi *Thingspiel*,' 139.

50 Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' 249.

The aestheticization of politics is a contested idea within the literature on fascism,⁵¹ but it nonetheless offers a useful framework for understanding the recourse to ritual that characterized fascist performances and political spectacles. The ritual and festive frameworks developed within the performance cultures of modernism to involve spectators as participants were congruent with the emergent faith in the masses as co-creators of social change. Fascism did not dispense with the politics of mass mobilization, in neither theater nor the political arena, but relied on participation to elevate the spectacle into the cult artwork of the new age. The aura of performance events was no longer seen as rooted in unrepeatability and uniqueness but in their dynamic character co-created through the energy of the masses.

As already discussed, the search for alternatives to bourgeois culture that drove the aesthetic theories and practices of the avant-garde dovetailed with the classicizing visions of fascism. This is particularly evident in the case of Nazism which conjoined the pursuit of cultural renewal with discourses of degeneration in assaulting the artistic experimentation of Weimar culture as the product of deranged and racially inferior artists. Greek antiquity furnished the means to build an Aryanized art that would remedy the cultural degeneration of the previous decades. The ritualistic forms of performance that sought to recreate Greek theater represented a resurrection of the heroic form that matched the emergence of a regenerated nation.⁵²

To understand how the antiquity-inspired theaters of fascism worked to reinforce the idea of cultural and national rebirth, I will now draw on premises of performance theory. As Fischer-Lichte posits, performances as live events do not produce meaning by solely engaging their recipients in semiotic or hermeneutical processes.⁵³ Instead, the semioticity of theater is intertwined with materiality, consisting of spatial, corporeal, and tonal properties that contribute to the performance's meaning-making without forming part of its semiotic system. This blending of materiality and semioticity means that performances implicate the real into their aesthetic effect. Arguably, different forms

51 A useful remark is made by Emilio Gentile, *The Struggle for Modernity: Nationalism, Futurism, and Fascism* (Westport: Praeger, 2003), 42–43, who argues that the emphasis on the aestheticization of politics does not equal an aestheticization of fascism that loses sight of political motivation.

52 In the antisemitic propaganda film *Der ewige Jude* [The Eternal Jew] (1940), theater is described as the utmost arena of Jewish expression. The footage portrays 'degenerate art' as a fall from the statues of Greek antiquity and other classicizing artefacts into the culture of the Weimar Republic.

53 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2008).

of performance historically incorporate materiality into their artistic design to varying degrees. Fascist theaters inherited the legacies of the theatrical avant-garde in drawing attention to the material properties of the performative event. In mass theaters, the process of semiotic decoding was undermined by the large dimension of open-air sites and the theater-in-the-round format which entailed that, during the performance, the spectators could see each other as well as maintain visual contact with the natural surroundings. Considering the antiquity-inspired performances in light of these propositions, we can deduce that the ritualistic character, the mass dimensions, and the outdoor spaces simulated the revival of the classical past without referring to the theme of national rebirth.

The braided relationship between materiality and semioticity that defines the performance can be further related to the workings of spectatorship as analyzed within cognitive theory. The concept of theatrical doubleness coined by Bruce McConachie is particularly pertinent.⁵⁴ Doubleness refers to the condition of the spectator who is immersed in the fictional world of the dramatic action, whilst also being able to experience the real time-space within which the performance occurs. According to McConachie, doubleness is located in cognitive functions that occur independently of whether the performance seeks to immerse or to distance. I contend that the mass theaters promoted by fascism encouraged spectatorial doubleness, but they did so in ways that fall outside the dualism of distancing and immersion. To challenge the binarism implied in McConachie's analysis, it is necessary to take into account a notion that prevailed in the aesthetic and cultural discourses of the early twentieth century: that of *ecstasis*. Rather than immersing audiences in the dramatic narrative or distancing them in a Brechtian sense, the movements of the historical avant-garde relied on collective energy to induce heightened states of consciousness and bodily arousal. Their methods were deployed by fascism not solely for purposes of political manipulation but because the radical vision of fascism was fundamentally ecstatic. This understanding of fascist theaters allows us to recognize that the modes of spectatorship they encouraged were more complex than usually admitted. Berghaus observes that 'fascist theatre could fulfil the function of leading the spectator out of the everyday sphere and away from the realities of an alienated existence in societies undergoing major structural crises in the aftermath of the First World War'.⁵⁵ However, the anti-naturalistic theaters promoted under fascism did not merely break with

54 Bruce McConachie, 'Falsifiable Theories for Theater and Performance Studies,' *Theatre Journal* 59, no. 4 (2007): 553–577.

55 Berghaus, *Fascism and Theatre*, 5.

the everyday by means of escapism but rather sought to create a mythic reality which, at the same time, was bound to the time and space within which the performances occurred.

To elucidate the effect of antiquity-inspired performances under fascism, we need to appraise their relevance in the context of early-twentieth century political radicalism. Kimberly Jannarone links the efforts of vanguard practitioners to activate the 'passive' spectator with Gustav LeBon's theory of the crowd, which also made an impact on Hitler and Mussolini, as well as their intellectual forebear George Sorel.⁵⁶ It is hardly surprising that the mass theaters of fascism drew on practices of activating the audiences developed within the theatrical avant-garde. However, as Jannarone observes, the activation of the audience did not constitute a form of empowerment. Although I agree with the proposition that performances can activate without promoting emancipatory politics, I believe it is equally important to recognize that the theaters of fascism afforded their audiences a sense of empowerment, especially considering the institutional, political, and ideological parameters of their reception. To a large extent, the turn to the classical past in the performances of fascism worked to reinforce an organic connection of the individual spectator to a strong and revitalized national community.

It is possible to link the notion of theatrical doubleness to fascism's temporal *Doppelbödigkeit* [ambivalence]—a term originating in theater that literally means to be standing on a double floor. Fascist movements embraced a mythic past, whilst also inhabiting the future-driven historical time of modernity.⁵⁷ In the case of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, this mythic time was furnished by Graeco-Roman antiquity. Subsequently, the classical past played a key role in reformulating earlier Romantic perceptions of the nation. The belief of Romantic nationalism in the immutable essence of the nation morphed into the idea of the nation as an ahistorical essence that breaks into historical time. Although the mythologies of fascism were embodied in different forms of artistic and cultural production, theater offered a particularly powerful site for blending history and myth. The antiquity-inspired theaters of fascism did not merely thematize (if at all) but affectively instantiated the utopias of fascism. These utopias, temporalized in the present of the nation, could be experienced in the spatial, material, and corporeal present of the performance.

56 Kimberly Jannarone, 'Audience, Mass, Crowd: Theatres of Cruelty in Interwar Europe,' *Theatre Journal* 6, no. 2 (2009): 191–211.

57 Roger Griffin, 'Fixing Solutions: Fascist Temporalities as Remedies for Liquid Modernity,' *Journal of Modern European History* 13, no. 1 (2015): 5–23.

So far, I have tried to foreground the complexity that characterized spectatorship in the theaters of fascism as arising from the blending of utopian imaginings with the materialities of performance. In that regard, performances provided an effective means to bridge the gulf yawning between utopia and reality by offering an experience of the classical past. These observations can provide the basis for a revised definition of fascism that highlights the performative dimension as an integral component of its myth-making process. Fascism, then, can be regarded as a form of palingenetic ultranationalism that not only imagines the return of the nation to a mythicized past but re-enacts and embodies this past in the historical moment of the present.

It is appropriate to conclude this section by looking at how major protagonists of fascism conceptualized the possibilities of the theatrical medium. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler uses an example from theater to stress the importance of oratorical skills. He remarks that evening shows tend to be superior to matinéés. In his view, the difference cannot be attributed to the actors as the same occurs in the cinema, but to the atmosphere that induces a different state of mind. Hitler also compares the atmosphere in the theater to that in the Catholic church; what is more revealing than the analogies drawn between theater, politics, and religion, is his remark that atmosphere is fundamental to influencing the freedom of human will and curbing the resistance of those ‘who are still in full possession of their mental and volitional energy’.⁵⁸ His conclusion that historical changes ‘are not brought about by the written word’ is symptomatic of the broader shift to a performative culture within European thought in the early twentieth century.⁵⁹ The Führer famously pictured himself as a great architect leading the reconstruction of Germany,⁶⁰ but, as demonstrated by the careful crafting of his political speeches, he also envisioned himself as a supreme performer channeling the energies of the crowds into serving a new political religion. The crowds summoned to enact the mythologies of this religion set the stage for tragic histories to unfold.

58 Christian Hartmann et al., ed., *Hitler, Mein Kampf: Eine kritische Edition* (Munich: Institut für Zeitgeschichte, 2016), 1201 [my translation].

59 Hartmann, *Hitler, Mein Kampf*, 1203.

60 In his memoirs Albert Speer notes that Hitler confessed to him that he wished he had become an architect. See Albert Speer, *Erinnerungen* (Frankfurt am Main and Berlin: Verlag Ullstein, 1969), 94.

Conclusion

For a long time, it was held that fascist movements deployed symbols and rhetoric excessively as a kind of 'aesthetic overproduction' to offset the lack of ideological content.⁶¹ Contrary to this view, the body of literature on fascist cultures has demonstrated that fascism, despite its inherent contradictions, was a radical ideology that sought to produce an alternative modernity. Under Italian Fascism and Nazism, theatrical performances, festivals, displays, rallies, and political celebrations were used to promote political programs aimed at transforming culture and society. The classical references and symbols deployed in political and cultural events framed this transformation as a revivification of the ancient past. What I have proposed in this article is an understanding of theatrical forms based on classical antiquity as performative iterations of the fascist mythology of national rebirth. Far from offering *panem et circenses* to the masses, open-air and mass theaters worked towards reifying political utopias. In that regard, the antiquity-inspired theaters and spectacles in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany allow us to analyze how live events contributed to producing a mythic reality which was, at the same time, firmly grounded in the historical present.

Considering cultural production as the field where political imagination takes its concrete shape, theatrical performances deserve particular attention as embodied practices. Edith Hall stresses the ability of theater to materialize political imagination: 'All art can narrate or represent revolution but only drama has the potential to *enact* through form and content radical, optimistic, changes in power relations which would be impossible in the society producing the drama.'⁶² Whilst Hall refers to emancipatory political projects, theater's ability to concretize collective utopias (or dystopias) is equally present in totalitarian contexts. The practices of galvanizing the masses within fascist theaters responded to the calls for participation that were widespread in the cultures of the theatrical vanguard and political radicalism alike. It is common to dismiss the claims to empowerment made by fascism as counterfeit, as it is common to regard fascist spectacles as downright manipulative. However, to understand what rallied people to the causes of these movements, it is necessary to recognize the emotive and affective impact that live events had on their audi-

61 Jeffrey Schnapp, 'Epic Demonstrations: Fascist Modernity and the 1932 Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution,' in *Fascism, Aesthetics, and Culture*, ed. Richard J. Golsan (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1992), 3.

62 Edith Hall, 'Towards a Theory of Performance Reception,' *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 12, no. 1 (2004): 79 [original emphasis].

ences. The bulk of theories of affect rest on assumptions that performances provide liberatory practices by enabling audiences to imagine different possibilities for the future. Yet, as the case of theater under fascism demonstrates, performances can also give form to ill-defined and destructive futural visions. By analyzing the role of antiquity-inspired performances in re-enacting the mythologies of fascism, this article hopes to invite reflection on the epistemologies of affect.

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