Introduction

At 10:55 on the morning of October 30, 1922, in a sleeping car of the DD17 train coming from Milan, Benito Mussolini arrived at the Termini station in Rome. With him he carried the written proof of the mandate bestowed on him by the king to become the new prime minister of Italy. After a brief stop at the Hotel Savoia, Mussolini headed to the Quirinale for a meeting with King Vittorio Emanuele III. He returned to the Quirinale that same evening with a list, to be approved by the king, of the ministers participating in his "national government." Amidst praises for Mussolini from newspapers, politicians, cultural personalities, and industrial elites, fascism's reign in Italy began.

The circumstances leading to Mussolini's proclamation as prime minister were quite unusual. Only a few days earlier, on October 27, 1922, a group of fascists had mobilized with the plan of marching on Rome and occupying the capital. The leaders of the march held their headquarters in Perugia, a city one hundred miles from Rome, while Mussolini remained in Milan. The core of the fascist forces was located on the outskirts of the capital, from where, according to the scheme, they would all be ready to converge on the city on October 28. Luigi Facta, the prime minister at the time, decided to proclaim martial law in Rome in order to protect the city. And although there were some doubts about the army's behavior in case of a clash with the fascists, from a military point of view Mussolini's Black Shirts were unlikely to be victorious. However, the unexpected happened. The king refused to sign the decree that established the state of siege. Mussolini, who had been negotiating with the government for a nonviolent satisfaction of his power demands, was invited to participate in a coalition dominated by conservatives and nationalists. Mussolini rejected the offer and imposed the condition that he form his own government. The king accepted, and on October 29 Mussolini was summoned to Rome, where he was officially proclaimed prime minister the following day. On October 31 the Black Shirts, who had been waiting for the order to march, reached the capital (many by special trains) and paraded before Mussolini and the king. The violent takeover of Rome thus never took place, and the Black Shirts' march-parade ended up being the choreographic appendix to Mussolini's legal appointment as prime minister.
Though the episode of the march unfolded along these peculiar lines, the fascist regime never accepted this historical account of its ascent to power. On the contrary, it elaborated its own interpretation of the march and always called the events of late October 1922 a “revolution.” In his Milan speech of October 4, 1924, Mussolini proclaimed: “Like it or not, in October 1922 there was an insurrectional act, a revolution, even if one can argue over the word. Anyway, a violent take-over of power. To deny this real fact . . . is truly nonsense.” A few months earlier he had told the Grand Council gathered at Palazzo Venezia: “Fascism did not come to power through normal means. It arrived there by marching on Rome armata manu, with a real insurrectional act.” Fascist rhetoric made of the march a mythical event in the history of fascism. October 28 became the date of one of the most important fascist celebrations, the anniversary of the March on Rome, first observed in 1923 in a four-day commemoration. In 1927, the new fascist calendar identified the pseudo-march as the epochal breakthrough of fascism: years were counted beginning with October 29, 1922, year I of the “fascist era.” In 1932 the regime remembered the Decennial of the Revolution with great pomp and later established a permanent Exhibit of the Revolution. In sum, although the march never occurred, and although behind the scenes Mussolini had actually tried to avoid an armed insurrection, the regime took the march to mark the beginning of the fascist epoch. By transforming a choreographed rally into a glorious event, fascism made of the March on Rome a symbolic moment in the construction of its own revolutionary identity. The mythicization of the March on Rome became a narrative device in fascism’s elaboration of its own historical tale.

Jean-Pierre Faye claims that history, in the process of narrating, produces itself and that discourses, while telling about actions, at the same time generate them. In this book I will look at fascism’s official symbolic discourse—manifested through images, rituals, speeches—as a text that narrates fascism’s epics, that recounts its story. I will also interpret fascist discourse as producing, through a work of weaving and plotting, its own happening. In this context, the mythicization of the March on Rome appears as the opening prologue to fascism’s creation of its own story/history.

NARRATIVE AND REPRESENTATION

This cultural approach to the study of Italian fascism is founded on a notion of narrative as intersubjective discourse that takes place within a social space and a historical time. We resort to narration in our everyday world as a way to describe objects and events. Through these narrative presenta-
tions we establish mutual understanding with members of the collectivity to which we belong. A crucial means for social recognition, narratives also provide us with ways to organize reality and construct meanings: we make sense of our experience by telling stories that draw from a common stock of knowledge, a cultural tradition that is intersubjectively shared. In this process we develop personal and social identities as subjects of communication, social actors in the life-world in which we take part. As Habermas explains, people "can develop personal identities only if they recognize that the sequences of their actions form narratively presentable life histories; they can develop social identities only if they recognize that they maintain their membership in social groups by way of participating in interactions, and thus that they are caught up in the narratively presentable histories of collectivities." Following the critique of the traditional view of language as transparent and reflecting an existing reality, Habermas emphasizes the pragmatic dimension of language as communication. He suggests adopting a practical notion of speech acts as mediating and creating social meanings. Within this context, what Austin calls the performative quality of language, its ability to bring about a change, becomes another important feature of narratives. When we speak we indeed do more than describe events. We also produce actions, which then exercise profound consequences on social and historical processes.

The performative character of language draws attention to and dramatizes the relation between power and representation. Not only are there unequal positions from which discourse unfolds, as Habermas warns, but narratives of power are also able to create new categories of understanding, frames of reference, forms of interpretation that naturalize meanings and in turn affect the course of social action. Moreover, if we assume that power cannot subsist without being represented—if representation is the very essence of power, its force—then narratives also produce power while representing it. Because we normally tend to identify sense with reference, content with form, and reality with representation, the fact that events seem to narrate themselves self-referentially doubles the authority of power, whose discourse purportedly tells the truth. Power becomes both the producer and the product of its own discursive formation. The power of narrative and the narrative of power form an explosive combination.

This book takes the power of discourse, including its nonlinguistic forms (rituals, myths, and images), as an essential element in the formation of the fascist regime's self-identity, the construction of its goals and definition of ends, the making of its power. By examining cults, symbols, and speeches, this study looks at the process through which fascism shaped its contours,
delineated its purposes, negotiated its meanings, and built its authority. Mussolini's regime unfolded over more than twenty years, and at its foundation on March 23, 1919, the fascist movement had no clear doctrinal boundaries; though rooted in revolutionary socialism, it echoed nationalism's appeal to potency via a struggle between nations, not classes. Following the dictum that the movement was supposed to produce a doctrine, not vice versa, fascism opposed ideological orthodoxy, the party system, and, more generally, bourgeois political life. Although the movement turned into a party (the Fascist National Party) only two years after its foundation, and though it became a governmental force in 1922, it still vowed to maintain the feature of political and ideological flexibility that had characterized the movement's previous experience. Only in 1932 was an official fascist doctrine elaborated.

This is not to say that fascism's identity was always in flux; certainly a core of assumptions and values, although loosely structured, continuously operated within fascism. Indeed, no movement can ever be said to be fixed, an objectified and objectifiable entity. Nor do self-proclamations, such as Mussolini's denial of a permanent political stance, necessarily convey the truth or postulate reality. But the moment proclamations become public and are shared intersubjectively, they acquire a power of their own, they cast and frame prospective actions, and they make the speaker liable to its referent, whether it is to embrace, retract, eradicate, or assail it. Although no locutionary act can be taken at face value, the choice of things to speak of cannot be dismissed either. When fascism chose to define the March on Rome as a "revolution," this decision was not without consequences, both for the internal building of the movement and the determination of its future deeds. Whether or not a fictional trope, the invocation of "revolution," as any form of self-representation, bound and guided fascism's claims to political rule and channeled its demands for change. The new meanings created by representations affected fascism's self-definition, the developmental trajectory of Mussolini's regime, and the formation of its public identity. More than mere means of political legitimation, rituals, myths, cults, and speeches were fundamental to the construction of fascist power, its specific physiognomy, its political vision.

The importance of cultural forms in the history of the fascist regime is increasingly recognized, although studies rarely address the relation of mutual influence between fascism and its symbolic practices. Systematic analyses of the creative impact that cultural elements exercised on the evolution of fascist power are wanting. One notable exception is the work of the Italian historian Emilio Gentile, who, following George Mosse's pioneering
study of the cultural roots of Nazi Germany, has examined the fascist regime's symbolic aspects under the category of the sacralization of politics. Both Gentile and Mosse situate the origins of fascism's political style within the historical context of nineteenth-century Europe. At this time, and in the wake of the French revolution, the traditional embodiment of the sacred and its institutions (church and monarchy) were defeated, the myth of Christendom was shattered, and the hierarchical model of social relations had been liquidated. The modern, secular notion of politics, which was co-extensive with parliamentary representation, became the target of critical appraisals about its ability to unify the polity around common goals, particularly in view of the new social groups and classes asserting their political voice. In his discussion of the German case, Mosse connects the appeal of political symbolism to increasing elite and middle-class fears about formlessness in society. Mass democracy seemed to engender anarchy in political life: the recourse to rituals and myths would help establish an orderly social world. The possibility of unifying around national symbols ensured the cohesion of otherwise inchoate "masses," their shaping into a homogeneous political body. Participation in public festivals refurbished national spirit, whereas rituals and ceremonies cemented the unity of the nation. Under the impulse of nationalistic sentiments, and thanks to the new political style, life could resume a form, an order.

In Italy, the critique of parliament and democracy, from which fascism originated, was rooted in the historical reality of the post-Risorgimento. The unification of the state in 1861 had not been followed by a genuine integration of the country's diverse population, and over the years the liberal political class had failed to heal the division between state and civil society despite various attempts at forging a civil and national spirit. At the beginning of the twentieth century, disillusionment over the liberal system and its inability to create a national consciousness among Italians fostered the demand for new forms of political style and government. Organizational questions on how to control and channel the political participation of workers associations, socialist parties, and unions paralleled the search for novel values that would endow Italy with the spiritual unity it had been lacking. Some voiced the need for spiritual ideals and moral renewal; others made more aggressive requests for expansionism and military strength.

The clamoring for new models of political rule became more strident in Italy at the end of World War I, after the experience of the trenches and the collective mobilization of human and material resources seemed to have unified the Italians in their common sacrifice for the nation. The heroic sense generated by the war needed to be preserved in a form of politics that would
raise itself above the traditional opportunistic games of petty politicking, then identified with the liberal government of Giovanni Giolitti. Politics of the piazza (open-air meetings), popular during interventionist rallies, became a legacy of the war years, and many invoked it in opposition to the democratic process of public debate and representation of interests as staged in parliamentary discussion. Speakers and protagonists of the piazza developed their own specific rhetoric and adopted new forms of symbolism to reach people's emotions directly. They addressed massive, “oceanic” assemblies within open urban spaces. The poet and writer Gabriele D’Annunzio offered a tangible example of this technique in his short-lived regency in Fiume. In this contested city on the Adriatic, from September 1919 to December 1920, D’Annunzio created a unique experiment in political rule that stood as a model of antiliberal politics. Based on a dialogue with the crowd and drawing on his oratorical mastery, D’Annunzio’s regency in Fiume exalted idealism and heroism, spiritual values and aesthetic gestures, social renewal and political rebirth. The poet delivered speeches that superseded the traditional division between religion, art, and politics and encouraged the audience to take up a heroic role. Songs, processions, meetings, military celebrations, and other ritualistic occasions dominated life at Fiume, where the general atmosphere was charged with enthusiasm, excitement, and gaiety.

With the aim of giving “style” back to Italy, Mussolini’s movement appropriated many of D’Annunzio’s invented myths, cults, and ceremonies. Since the fascist movement’s beginning in 1919, reliance on symbols and rites had been its driving motif, connecting its search for a different style in politics to a repudiation of democratic political forms. The call for a renewed model that would counteract democracy’s formal procedures and parliamentary institutions became one of the identifying features of a movement that claimed to “represent a synthesis of all negations and all affirmations.” In his speeches and writings, Mussolini expressed discomfort with the traditional categories of politics. He invoked symbolic means and forms that would excite emotions in the people. He underplayed traditional and rational laws in favor of a more direct involvement of the polity in public life. Thus, in its twenty long years in power, the fascist regime, after dispensing with democratic procedures and establishing a dictatorship in 1925, tirelessly invented symbols, myths, cults, and rituals. Italian fascism, well before German Nazism, revolved around the myth and cult of the leader; Mussolini—the Duce—occupied a central role in the fascist regime’s symbolic world. Over the years the regime rewrote the history of ancient Rome
and made of it a myth, which it celebrated yearly. War, as potentially regenerative and also expressing the virility of the country, became another cultural myth of fascism. In general, violence signified rebirth and renewal for the fascists; thus, they mythicized the March on Rome as a “revolution,” a bloody event with a purifying effect. Rituals of dressing, speaking, and behaving also entered the domain of everyday life and of private individual bodies. These rituals assumed a prominent role, especially in the second decade of the regime, when rules of conduct were supposed to shape the Italians into fascist men.

Emilio Gentile argues that festivals, symbols, rituals, and cults were the necessary instruments of fascism’s sacralized version of politics. For Gentile, the festivals of the nation, the anniversaries of the regime, the cult of the Duce, and the consecration of symbols all participated in creating fascism’s lay religion. The erection of buildings and the remaking of the urban landscape, as well as the invention of new rituals and the establishment of pageant celebrations, were intended to contribute to the sacralization of the state under the aegis of the fascist government. The existence of the state depended on people’s faith in it. Faith in the state was assured by a mass liturgy whose function was to educate the Italians, making them new citizens and imparting a higher morality. At the same time, the image of fascism as national religion helped shape the characteristics of the regime by stressing values such as faith, belief, and obedience. Gentile emphasizes the link between fascism’s symbolic politics and national sentiments, and he interprets this link as part of a more general phenomenon characterizing political modernity.37

I share Gentile’s cultural-political analysis of the historical context in which fascism’s appeal to symbols took place; however, I believe the analytical category of “politics as religion” does not exhaustively convey the nature of Italian fascism, its peculiar cultural content. Although Mussolini’s implementation of symbolic politics unfolded in an era that witnessed a common impulse toward nation-building, references to “lay religion” alone cannot explicate fascism’s unique turn, its original totalitarian culture. The sacralization of politics does not account for Mussolini’s singular approach to governing, his ambiguous sense of morality, his idiosyncratic relation to the polarized concepts of spirit and body, reason and emotion, active and passive, public and private, masculine and feminine. As we shall see, Mussolini’s pursuit of a beautiful, harmonious society coexisted with the indictment of stasis and the exaltation of struggle as the fundamental rule of life; his conception of the “masses” as a passive material for the leader-artist
to carve was counterpoised by his belief in people’s active, symbolic participation in politics. Mussolini displayed contempt for the “masses’” female, emotional irrationality and sensitivity yet also expressed scorn for democratic, dry, rational discussion. His solicitation to popular, public involvement in fascism was coextensive and simultaneous with an operation to deny the private while politicizing it. His negation of the individual in favor of the state envisaged an exception for the self-referential, self-creating subject: the manly artist-politician.

How can we interpret the apparent contradictions at the core of fascism’s cultural and political identity, these hybrid couplings, this nondescript coexistence? Gentile’s sacralization of politics recognizes some of Italian fascism’s discrete dimensions but fails to explain the logic of their interconnectedness and to exhaust adequately their significance within fascist cosmology. In this book I propose that the notion of aesthetic politics will further illuminate the shady links between fascism’s belief in the leader’s omnipotence and its conception of the “masses’” as object, between the artistic ideal of harmonic relations and the aurtic embracement of war, between the construction of “new men” and the focus on style, between the reliance on spectacle and the attack on consumption, between claims to the spiritual functions of the state and the affirmation of totalitarianism. In his 1937 account of the “essence and origin” of fascism, Giuseppe Antonio Borgese addressed the aesthetic disposition present in Mussolini’s regime. Borgese specifically underscored Mussolini’s identification of the statesman with the artist and his idea of the state as a work of art. He emphasized the implosion of means and ends in the regime’s pursuit of its political project and warned of the surrender of ethical values implicit in fascism’s ill-defined aesthetic vision. Despite this beginning, however, the aesthetic character of fascist politics has been subsequently marginalized and reduced to a corollary position, whereas considerations of aesthetics and politics have enjoyed a legitimate status in scholarly accounts of German Nazism. National Socialism indeed differed from Italian fascism in several ways, if only because of the centrality of the racial question in Nazi doctrine. Yet Italian fascism developed much in advance of National Socialism and provided a model for Hitler’s own elaboration of political style. Within this context, the significance of Italian fascism’s aesthetic approach to politics is all the more compelling.

But what characterized fascism’s aesthetic politics? And how does the reference to aesthetic politics contribute to our understanding of Mussolini’s movement? Walter Benjamin’s philosophical-cultural analysis of art and mechanization in the modern era provides a theoretical platform on which to formulate an answer to these questions.
AESTHETICS AND POLITICS

Benjamin considered fascism's aestheticization of politics at the end of his 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In this essay, Benjamin was interested in establishing the consequences of the loss of "aura" in modern artworks. Aura, intended as a quasi-religious halo, characterized traditional works of art, which, being nonreproducible, unique, and authentic, created an aesthetic distance between the public and themselves and led the audience to a general state of passivity. With the development of technological means of reproduction, Benjamin believed, the work of art had lost its distancing aura and its status of cultic object. Deprived of its mystical halo, the work of art enhanced an active attitude in the public and became a potential tool in social struggle.

The political function of the artistic work motivated Benjamin to tie art to fascism's politics. Benjamin noted that in the case of fascism technology, paradoxically, was not leading to the complete decline of aura and cultic values. On the contrary, he thought fascism was able to utilize the remnants of auratic symbols and their mystical authority both to keep the "masses" from pursuing their own interests and to give them a means to express themselves. With fascism, politics was "pressed into the production of ritual values" and became a cultic experience. The logical result of this process, claimed Benjamin, was the introduction of aesthetics into political life. Fascism's meshing of aesthetics and politics had, then, two consequences. First, it culminated in war, because only war could give the "masses" a goal while diverting them from challenging the "traditional property system." Second, and most important, it gave preeminence to the pursuit of total aims without any limits from laws, tradition, or ethical values. As in the "art for art's sake" (l'art pour l'art) movement, which defined art as an enclosed space completely separated from the rest of the value spheres, aesthetic politics was involved in the creation of a work of art and thus claimed absolute autonomy. In the fascist case, said Benjamin, fiat ars-pereat mundus (let art be created even though the world shall perish) had become fascism's creed and influenced its actions. Art was not a means but rather an end, as the futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti demonstrated in his exaltation of war:

War is beautiful because it establishes man's dominion over the subjugated machinery by means of gas masks, terrifying megaphones, flame throwers, and small tanks. War is beautiful because it initiates the dreamt-of metalization of the human body. War is beautiful because it enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of machine guns. War is beautiful because it combines the gunfire, the cannonades, the cease-fire, the scents, and the
stench of putrefaction into a symphony. War is beautiful because it creates new architecture, like that of the big tanks, the geometrical formation flights, the smoke spirals from burning villages, and many others.\textsuperscript{45}

Benjamin, not unlike theorists of political religion, argued that the loss of tradition and the decline of religious authority constituted critical elements in the "auraticization" of fascism. In contrast to those theorists, however, Benjamin added another crucial element to the understanding of fascism's approach to politics, an element that links fascism closely to the \textit{l'art pour l'art} movement: the prevalence of form over ethical norms. It is the presence of this element, I will argue, that characterizes Italian fascism's aestheticized politics; and it is the emphasis on form (intended as appearance, effects, orderly arrangement) that helps to explain fascism's cultural-political development. This does not mean that the difference between theories of fascism as political religion and as aestheticized politics resides in the assertion of, respectively, the presence or absence of ethics in Mussolini's movement.\textsuperscript{46} Attention to the formal aspects of fascist politics does not imply that fascism rejected ethics and spirituality. Rather, the emphasis on form underscores the fate of fascism's claims to ethics, the place of these claims within fascist culture. No doubt fascism presented itself as auras in opposition to "disenchanted" democratic governments in the same way that the \textit{l'art pour l'art} movement was driven by spiritual aims against the commercialization of art. But the \textit{l'art pour l'art} movement's reaction to the commodification of art under the conditions of capitalism entailed the cutting of any links of art to social life. As Richard Wolin writes: "\textit{L'art pour l'art seeks a restoration of the aura though within the frame of aesthetic autonomy.}\textsuperscript{47} Similarly, fascism's aim to respiritualize politics unfolded from a position of absolute self-referentiality that inevitably led the regime to privilege in its actions the value of aesthetic worth over claims of any other nature. Within this perspective, then, one needs to reevaluate the trajectory and role of spirit in fascism. Fascism's pretensions to spirituality and religion require testing against the equally fascist invocations of artistic bravura.

Aesthetic considerations were indeed central to the construction of fascism's project, and they reached deep into the heart of fascism's identity, its self-definition, its envisioning of goals. But lest we conflate aestheticized politics with fascism and Nazism or interpret any application of aesthetics to the political realm as unequivocally negative,\textsuperscript{48} we need to spell out the peculiarities and implications of fascism's relation to aesthetics. In particular, we ought to begin questioning the meaning of aesthetics and its identification with art, an equation that is itself the result of a specific historical shift.
Aesthetics, in fact, originally applied to nature; its etymological source, the Greek term *aisthítikos*, refers to what is perceived by feeling. As the realm of sensation through smell, hearing, taste, touch, and sight, aesthetics concerned our ability to experience and know the world through the body. It represented a mode of cognition founded on the material dimension of the human. When in the eighteenth century it developed into an autonomous discipline within Western philosophy, aesthetics still maintained its primary link to the body, the material. However, in a complex operation at the height of the Enlightenment process, modern aesthetics began to be concerned increasingly with cultural artifacts (then available on the market as commodities) and was subsumed in the artistic field. Nature was displaced by human-made objects as the realm of application for aesthetics’ cognitive functions. Art and aesthetics overlapped. Although art still involved sensory experience and feelings, aesthetics’ original meaning of bodily perception underwent continuous challenges. On the one hand, once art developed into an autonomous discipline and was raised to the status of theory it suffered from abstraction and formalization under the aegis of aesthetics. Born as a discourse of the body that would complement the philosophy of mind, aesthetics turned the natural into its opposite—an intellectual object. On the other hand, art’s self-proclaimed role of representing the expressive dimensions and communal desires of humans—against the purposive rationality of the bourgeois, capitalist world—led art to pursue autonomy from the functionalization of everyday life. With the *l’art pour l’art* movement, this move culminated in the attempt to reduce the sensual and impose form. One strand of modern art thus cut loose the senses, and avant-garde artists declared their independence from nature through the fable of autogenesis—the belief in *homo autotelus*, who creates ex nihilo and self-referentially.

Cornelia Klinger argues that the fable of autogenesis reproposes the myth of man’s irreducibility to the servitude and yoke of the senses, and it is a typically modern response to the critical dualism between culture and nature. This dualism constitutes the matrix for a whole string of binary oppositions characterizing Western thought: mind and body, reason and emotion, active and passive, public and private. Furthermore, says Klinger, such polarized concepts ultimately incorporate the dualism of gender, in which the rational, spiritual, “cultural” man confronts the irrational, sensual, “natural” woman. In order to realize his aspirations to boundless creativity but also to freedom, man needs to overcome the feared laws of nature, with their impositions of limits and closures. Interestingly, Klinger also shows that the cultural tensions inscribed in Western thought are reasserted in modern aesthetics’ concepts of the sublime and the beautiful as they have been
developed from Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, beginning in the second half of the eighteenth century. The dilemma of man's "sublime," limitless struggle with feminine, "beautiful" nature reappeared then in full extension. Stretched to its extremes, this dilemma gives way to, among others, the modern artist's God-like claims to creation and the consequent displacement of the body's relationship to the world, the negation of the senses, the emotions, the feminine.

I suggest that in order to explain fascism's version of aestheticized politics, we need to focus on this split between aesthetics and the senses. More specifically, I contend that if we want to understand the idiosyncrasies at the center of fascism's identity, we need to interpret fascist aesthetics as founded on the sublimation of the body and the alienation of sensual life. Mussolini's aspirations to transform Italy and create it anew was yet another variation on the theme of the God-like artist-creator. And although fascism relied on people's feelings and sentiments (much as art came to appear as the refuge from instrumental-rational society), it still strove to neutralize the senses, to knock them out.

In his discussion of the spectacle of war valorized by Marinetti, Benjamin mentioned fascism's sensory alienation. He interpreted this alienation within his general theory of the loss of experience and the transformation of sense perception characterizing modernity. According to Benjamin, in the age of crowds and automatons, bombarded by images and noises, overwhelmed with chance encounters and glances, we need to put up a "protective shield" against the excess of daily shocks hitting us. In this process, our system of perception ends up repressing our senses, deadening them as in an "anaesthetic" procedure, and we lose the capacity for shared meaning. For Benjamin, this alienation of the senses was a condition of modernity, not a creation of fascism. However, he believed that fascism took advantage of modernity's contradictions by filling the absence of meaning left by the loss of experience, thus enforcing the crisis in perception.

I would like to stress Benjamin's point further and add that fascism actively strove to impel and actuate sensory alienation. In a time of new technologies, filmic panoramas, dioramas, and world exhibitions, fascism offered a phantasmagoria of rituals and symbols—"big tanks," "flights," and "burning villages"—flooding the senses. With photographic images and newsreels, appearances on airplanes and motorbikes, and speeches from balconies and extravagant podiums, Mussolini dominated the fascist spectacle. Festivals, rituals, and ceremonies punctuated the fascist year, and permanent and ephemeral art celebrated the regime's accomplishments. Iconographic symbols in several forms and shapes filled public spaces, from walls and build-
ings to coins and stamps. Radio and cinema constantly recorded fascism's deeds and periodically reported Mussolini's speeches, thoughts, slogans, and proclamations. With fascism the senses were truly excited, although also fundamentally denied. Though posters of Mussolini looked down on people from every corner, the regime rejected the dreamworlds of mass consumption as the receptacle of wants and desires; celebrations united people in a common cult, yet materialism and happiness became the main targets of fascism's antidemocratic stance. Fascism turned sensory alienation into the negation of human nature, the depersonalization of the "masses," the deindividuation of the body politic, as evidenced in Mussolini's identification of the "masses" with dead matter, a block of marble to be shaped. In this apotheosis of the senses' denial, the conception of the "masses" as raw material meant that one could smash the "masses," hit them, mold them: there would be no pain, no scream, no protest, for there were no senses involved. In fascism's representation, people were disembodied and became alive only under the hands of the sculptor-leader, who then channeled popular enthusiasm toward communal rituals. The figure of the artist implied by this metaphor presents the alter ego of the mass object: the omnipotent, manly creator who, as the fable of autogenesis suggests, self-creates himself. Fascism's artist-politician, not unlike the independent nineteenth-century exponent of l'art pour l'art, claims full autonomy to his creative will and substitutes his artistic vision for the disenchanted world of democratic governments. Guided by an aesthetic, desensitized approach to politics, Mussolini conceived the world as a canvas upon which to create a work of art, a masterpiece completely neglectful of human values. I would argue that fascism's conception of aesthetic politics here reveals its truly totalitarian nature.

Claude Lefort claims that at the heart of totalitarian politics lies the idea of creation. The world-transformer, the artist-politician of a totalitarian state, aims at founding a new society on fresh ground and free of limits from laws, tradition, or ethical values. This new creation is built upon the suppression of any division between state and civil society. It eliminates the existence of autonomous social spheres and turns out to be, in the intention of its producers, a unitary whole. In order to maintain the unity of the whole, parts need to be sacrificed. Any possibility of conflict dissolves within this context, because differences are denied in the name of a state of harmony that appears to constitute the core of the totalitarian idea of a beautiful society.

Mussolini strove to fulfill this model of the totalitarian artist in order to forge fascist men. In accordance with his belief in struggle, however, he
ensured internal uniformity and harmony by establishing difference through an external war. Imperialistic drives subtended fascism's historical unfolding. But fascism's pursuit of war was not connected to the need to divert the "masses," as Benjamin suggested. Rather, fascism's raison d'être, its understanding of social relations, and its view of the world were founded on the worship of action, the exaltation of conflict, the continuous assertion of man's ability to control and transform reality and impose his will without limits. Fully entrenched in the modernist dilemma of creation/destruction, fascism offered its own ambiguous response to the contradictions of cultural modernity by coalescing the incongruous and reconciling the incompatible. The hybrid offspring of turn-of-the-century political events and culture, the fascist movement reflected its protagonists' struggle to imagine and establish a novel form of government that would redefine life, rejuvenate politics, reinvent social relations, and revive cults and traditions. Thus, fascism burst open Italian society in order to mold it. It exploded the humus of everyday life by imposing new practices. It crushed individual freedom in the pursuit of a collective whole. It bent people's will to engage in military enterprises. It assaulted democratic procedures and exalted one man's rule. It destroyed in order to construct a totalitarian state and a totalitarian society. Spurred by an aesthetic vision of the world, fascism wanted to remake Italy and the Italians. In the process, as we are going to see, it made itself.