

Political Paradoxes, Art, and Homo Sacer

**THE SYNTHETICO-PARADOXICAL CHARACTER OF FASCISM:
CAN ART DISRUPT THE FASCIST PROJECT?**

David Casciola

Abstract

In this paper, I interrogate the question of how aesthetics might be used in terms of an antifascist project. The exposition includes two main steps. First, drawing on the work of Umberto Eco and Sven Reichardt, I introduce a perspective on fascism, in which I identify its character as synthetico-paradoxical. Then, I utilize Jacques Rancière's conception of aesthetics as politics to show how a decentralized understanding of what makes good art can disrupt fascism by appealing to the sense of re-recognition of the individual political subject.

Keywords: *Fascism, Aesthetics, Populism, Umberto Eco, Hierarchy*

I: Introduction

There is a sense in the popular imagination that ever since the fall of the fascist empires of Germany, Japan, and Italy at the end of the Second World War the threat of an extreme right-wing authoritarianism is a thing of the past and that the liberal democracies of the West would usher humanity into a new age of freedom and prosperity. This view is entrenched to such an extent that even Umberto Eco, an Italian philosopher and witness to Benito Mussolini's regime, claimed that, "if we still think of the totalitarian governments that ruled Europe before the Second World War, we can easily say that it would be difficult for them to reappear in the same form in different historical circumstances."¹ Eco's point here is that the fascist nation-empire regimes were largely products of the specific conditions of the early 20th century, even as he remained "concerned about the various Nazi-like movements that have arisen here and there in Europe."²

And yet, a closer look today reveals that the specter of fascism still haunts the modern post-industrial society. In response to the recent rise of right-wing authoritarian movements, Bat-Ami Bar On fittingly reminds us that "according to Arendt, it is mistaken to construe the

¹ Umberto Eco, "Ur-Fascism" *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. 42, no. 11 (1995), p. 2.

² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

Allies' military victory over the Axis as a victory over fascism."³ The second decade of the 21st century brought the presidency of Donald Trump, whose campaign had made allusions to the "anti-interventionist movement in the early 1940s to keep the US out of World War II that was associated with Charles Lindbergh and American fascist and anti-Semitic forces."⁴ At the very least, the *sentiment* of fascism is still thriving in the discourse of the conservative far-right parties in the United States and Europe. Whether this sentiment is well articulated or not, it has become obvious that right wing populists today are raising the fascist torch in contemporary politics.

A discussion of fascism is notoriously difficult due to the problem of defining fascism itself. Here I will take as my point of departure several points articulated by Eco in his "Ur-Fascism," as well as from the idea of fascism as a movement and *process-concept*, as developed by Sven Reichardt. I further develop this characterization of fascism into what I call its 'synthetico-paradoxical' character, meaning that fascist movements are synthetic insofar as they assemble their ideology from different aspects and standpoints of other movements, and that they do this in a way that is necessarily paradoxical. In my view, characterizing fascism in this way will reveal and help understand the nature of the difficulty one faces when dealing with fascism from a traditional liberal standpoint. As I see it, the difficulty in question is in that regardless of how acutely one exposes the paradoxes of fascist movements or disrupts their political programs in a logical way, these movements keep finding ways to co-opt (that is, to take up or appropriate) and synthesize these disruptions within their own perspectives, thus maintaining a fundamental paradoxicality as part of their essential nature as movements'.

One can legitimately ask here, "If logic cannot disrupt fascism efficiently enough, then what else can?" I argue that art and the aesthetic sphere can become an alternative avenue through which fascist ideological and political perspectives may be challenged and disrupted. For the purpose of this paper, I will draw on Darlene Demandante's interpretation of Jacques Rancière's 'aesthetics as politics' in order to explore the realms of aesthetics and artistic expression.⁵ For Demandante, aesthetics has to do with our perceptions of the social world, whereas artistic expression points to the ways we might disrupt social, political, or economic realities.⁶ We will keep in mind that, due to its synthetico-paradoxical character, fascism allows for its advocates to 'co-opt' and accommodate within its perspective the practices of artistic expression that can disrupt it, thus showing a capacity to turn art also into an instrument of its own. But we will seek to get the better of fascism and its notorious adaptability via Demandante's perspective on Rancière's conception of art, if we can only safeguard the latter from the conservative cultural elitism of the likes of Roger Scruton. For, cultural elitism can only play into the hands of the ethno-nationalist project of fascism and can crystalize into an aesthetic regime of artistic hegemony. In this relation, the Italian Marxist and social theorist Antonio Gramsci writes,

³ Bat-Ami Bar On, "But is it Fascism?" *Journal of Social Philosophy*, Vol. 50, no. 4 (2019), p. 412.

⁴ Douglas Kellner, *American Nightmare: Donald Trump, Media Spectacle, and Authoritarian Populism* (Rotterdam: Brill, 2016), p. 42.

⁵ Darlene O. Demandante, "Aesthetics, Politics, and the Embodied Political Subject," *Kritike*, Vol. 14, no.1 (2020), p. 141.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

The separation of powers, together with all the discussion provoked by its realisation and the legal dogmas which its appearance brought into being, is a product of the struggle between civil society and political society in a specific historical period...the Church is taken as representing the totality of civil society (whereas in fact it is only an element of diminishing importance within it), and the State as representing every attempt to crystallise permanently a particular state of development, a particular situation.⁷

Gramsci here suggests that the State crystalizes as a hegemony of power and control over civil society. I draw a parallel between how the State bureaucracy becomes ‘entrenched’ and how normative aesthetics – i.e. what counts as ‘good’ art – becomes entrenched in the same way when it is co-opted by fascist movements as they crystalize into a State hegemony.

Still, it is also through art that a true disruption of fascism can occur. I argue that a radical decentralization of normative aesthetics – by rethinking art as a sort of political speech – would undermine the concept of ‘gatekeeping’, so that as a society we might be able to come up with a more genuine sort of art *qua* art. In terms of theory, I will seek for the possibility for such a decentralization through the thought of Walter Benjamin, who alludes to a visceral, personal reaction of the audience to a piece of art,⁸ which is consistent with Rancière’s conception of aesthetics as a political perception. My aim will be to show that disrupting the barriers of what counts as ‘art’ through decentralization and leveling all aesthetic hegemony will allow art to subvert the fascist State hierarchy and reveal paths of resistance to it.

II: Fascism and Populism

As I indicated above, fascism is a difficult term to define. Is it just authoritarianism? Totalitarianism? Or any political ideology with a distinct, far-right conservative positioning? As a beginning, I will focus on the fourteen common features of fascism identified by Umberto Eco, as well as on Sven Reichardt’s characterization of fascism as a movement (as opposed to a particular form of government with specific features). In terms of a historical analysis, these two perspectives on fascism are complementary: Eco’s input is based on a first-hand experience with Italian fascism, whereas Reichardt’s expands beyond its Western European instances to include Japanese fascism. In “Ur Fascism,” Eco calls fascism a “*fuzzy* totalitarianism, a collage of different philosophical and political ideas, a beehive of contradictions.”⁹ For his part, Reichardt characterizes fascism as a *process-concept* that relies on “global relations among fascisms [which] has drawn out its character as an inter-imperial phenomenon subject to radicalization.”¹⁰ For him, fascism is characterized not by a static monolith of a specific (though possible contradictory) ideology, but instead by interrogating fascism-in-action “as a genre – an ensemble of overlapping and intersecting practices and attitudes... [rather than] as a *strictly*

⁷ Antonio Gramsci, “Selections from the *Prison Notebooks*,” In *On Violence: A Reader* eds. Bruce B. Lawrence and Aisha Karim (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 168.

⁸ See Jules Simon, “Aesthetics and Politics: Reflections on Love and the Origins of Fascism,” *Filosofia*, Vol. 63, (2018), pp. 133-145.

⁹ Umberto Eco, “Ur-Fascism,” p. 4.

¹⁰ Sven Reichardt, “Fascism’s Stages: Imperial Violence, Entanglement, and Processualization,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 82, no. 1 (2021), p. 88.

logical ideology [emphasis added].”¹¹ Subsequently, Reichardt goes on to develop this conceptualization of fascism out of the historical context of the interconnections between the German, Japanese, and Italian fascist empires of the first half of the 20th century.¹² Thus, while Eco focuses on the sufficient qualities of fascism as a political *regime*, Reichardt focuses on how we might identify and analyze fascism as a political *movement*. For our purposes here, these two conceptions will help us gain some insight into the contemporary features of fascism and how these might play into fascism’s appropriation of different sorts of aesthetic regimes and artistic practices.

For Eco, fascism is a distinctly nationalist and totalitarian enterprise.¹³ As a movement it can be taken up in different national contexts, but the specific ideologies and theories that it might embrace locally do not matter as much as its dedication to the ethno-nationalist State. To explain why distinct fascist regimes might resemble each other despite their apparent differences, Eco appeals to the notion of Wittgensteinian language games, which work based on similarities such as the ones exemplified in the letter sequences *abc*, *bcd*, *cde*, and *def*.¹⁴ Eco notes “a sort of illusory transitivity, a family resemblance between [*def*] and [*abc*].”¹⁵ The first and last term resemble each other only insofar as they relate to their intermediary terms [*bcd* and *cde*] to which they bear a strict resemblance. In the same way, fascist regimes bear their resemblances to each other not necessarily by the nature of the strict resemblances they have in terms of their constituent parts (for example specific ideologies or certain sorts of state institutions), but because of this sort of intermediary mediation of relations. They bear a sort of transcendent recognition: “Fascism became an all-purpose term because one can eliminate from a fascist regime one or more features, and it will still be recognizable as fascist.”¹⁶ In fact, this view of the similarities between various sorts of fascisms complements with Reichardt’s conception of fascisms as movements. The conjecture here is that we do not need to identify (perceive) different specific qualities of fascist regimes to define fascism; rather, we can identify fascism as an aesthetic regime that is represented by how it presents itself. In different historical, social, and economic conditions this presentation will be different, but we could still identify it by pointing to the similarities between different fascist movements. Here I do not mean to relativize the character of the fascist movements, but to point to the various distinct ways in which they might arise. Fascisms are not limited to right armed salutes and jackboots; their formation is dependent on the social and cultural context in which they take shape. But besides their cultural contingencies, we must still be able to recognize them as fascisms based on the structural and conceptual frameworks they utilize.

Reichardt identifies seven ‘tipping points’ that characterize the progress of a fascist movement toward a new stage in its development.¹⁷ There are similarities between this sort of developmental framework and Eco’s characterization modeled on Wittgenstein’s language games based on family resemblances. Fascist movements begin as movements in “small

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 88.

¹³ Umberto Eco, “Ur-Fascism,” p. 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁷ Sven Reichardt, “Fascism’s Stages: Imperial Violence, Entanglement, and Processualization,” p. 90.

intellectual circles, usually oriented toward the tenets of Italian fascism,”¹⁸ and develop in the direction of a violent opposition to the “prevalent forms of government.”¹⁹ These movements go on to develop further as working to destroy and appropriate the state against which they violently rebel. Reichardt describes the stages of fascism as follows,

In the *first phase*, we can identify initially small intellectual circles, usually oriented toward the tenets of Italian fascism... This *second stage*, involv[es] militancy against prevalent forms of government...

In the *third stage*, in which events in Italy and Germany set the global tone, mass movements arose... Once a regime, fascism in the *fourth stage* was characterized by what tended to be a brief period of seizing power...

The *fifth stage* saw the development of fascistic ‘mediatory dictatorships...’ [which] aestheticized the sacred exaltation of the leader, the awe-inspiring uncanniness of the repressive apparatus, and the popular, carnivalesque spectacles of their base-oriented mass organizations...

[The] *sixth stage* coupled tendencies to disempower domestic conservative allies and effect a self-perpetuation of fascist machinery with pressure toward radical colonial wars of destruction...

In its last, *seventh stage*, finally, fascism removed all limitations on genocidal policy.²⁰

As fascist movements progress through these stages mutating from ideas in the enclaves of conservative intellectuals into the street violence of mass movements, they eventually find themselves in the structures of the states which they initially opposed. The transitory and pliable nature of fascist movements is what makes providing a concrete definition of just what it means for a movement or individual to be fascist or fascistic so difficult. It is also this nature that enables fascist movements to co-opt so many different strategies, practices, and *aesthetics*. This allows fascism to easily permeate through different social groups and to become the very nature of a social organization, especially in our age of mass media. In particular, the ubiquitous character of mass and social media in our age provides an environment for the fascistic ideas to flourish and disseminate, even as the aesthetic character of fascist movements leaves them open to and susceptible to interrogation by artistic disruptions.

Despite its definitional ‘fuzziness’, Eco delineates fourteen characteristics which are typical of fascism and can be considered as determining the sense of something like an ‘Eternal Fascism.’ Each of these characteristics alone is *sufficient* for the qualification of a movement as fascist; but at the same time none of them is individually *necessary* for such a qualification. Taken together they form a popular view which manifests itself as a heuristic for identifying fascistic tendencies and movements. They also point to the synthetico-paradoxical character of fascism as drawing on social frustration (of the middle class), popular elitism, and selective populism.²¹ And finally, they explain why fascism is a pliable and malleable political force which can uniquely co-opt the features of other political, social, and economic ideologies into its own perspective.

Eco describes one particular feature of Ur-Fascism as “individual or social frustration,” pointing that “one of the most typical features of the historical fascism was the *appeal to a*

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 90.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 90.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 90-93.

²¹ Umberto Eco, “Ur-Fascism,” pp. 6-8.

frustrated middle class, a class suffering from an economic crisis or feelings of political humiliation, and frightened by the pressure of lower social groups.”²² Fascism appeals to individuals who have been disaffected and as a result feel that their society has left them behind. Thus, fascism reaches out to the dominant social or economic class which sees its dominance as threatened by policies that seek to redress the failings of equality, equity, and justice. Subsequently, this appeal to frustration crystallizes into a popular elitism. As Eco notes, “elitism is a typical aspect of any reactionary ideology.... [which] cruelly implies *contempt for the weak*.”²³ What characterizes the elitism of Ur-Fascism is that it places the citizen of the nation above all other citizens. At the same time, the party members are above the citizens, whereas the party leaders are above its members. Thus, the fascist movement advances a hierarchy that engenders a disdain in its members not just for the Other, but also for those immediately above and below each individual’s own position within that hierarchy. This is indicative of one of the paradoxes that fascism maintains and utilizes: a fascist movement demands a mass of people who are simultaneously weak enough for a leader to conquer and at the same time the greatest people in the entire world. “For Ur-Fascism, however, individuals as individuals have no rights, and the People is conceived as a quality, a monolithic entity expressing the Common Will. Since no large quantity of human beings can have a common will, the Leader pretends to be their interpreter.”²⁴ Thus, in fascist movements, individuality melts away into the totality of their social identities; whereas the ‘Common Will’ becomes aestheticized in the realization of the Leader as the people’s voice. In a statement that seems much more prescient today than in 1995 Eco said, “[t]here is in our future a TV or Internet populism, in which the emotional response of a selected group of citizens can be presented and accepted as the Voice of the People.”²⁵ This means that the ‘Voice of the People’ becomes an aesthetic representation of the (supposed) ‘will of the people.’ We must note, however, that this is a false actualization because the ‘people’s will’ can never be agreed upon due to the diversity of interests in the society. In this way, we come to another paradox of the fascist project: the fascist Leader uses this false crystallization of the Will of the People to become the Voice of that which cannot form a coherent voice. Fascist dedication to the Leader as personification of peoples’ will demonstrates the anti-parliamentarianism and anti-democratic nature of fascist movements, as well as their ‘populist turn’.

Federico Finchelstein says that populism “is a form of democracy that is nonetheless authoritarian.”²⁶ For him, the tension between the radically democratic nature of populism and the threat of authoritarianism as a dictatorship of the majority is characteristic of the contemporary version of populism. Finchelstein contends that contemporary populism began to take its shape after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 pointing that “populism has been often a democratic consequence of the fall of dictatorships rather than the creator of a new dictatorship.”²⁷ These contemporary strains of populism give rise to a paradox: “the new

²² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁶ Federico Finchelstein, “Populism without borders. Notes on a global history,” *Constellations*, Vol. 26 (2019), p. 419.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 419.

populists are extreme nationalists”, “form a new international right-wing bloc based on the similarity of their xenophobic politics,” and “share a common enemy in the democratic legacies of the Enlightenment.”²⁸ Eco’s Wittgensteinian games come handy here again – to characterize these new right-wing populist movements, which may differ in their national peculiarities but still bear a number of similarities that allow to classify them as populist. Finchelstein denies that populism is fascism, despite both being similar insofar as they both have populist leaders who “equate their voice with that of the people,”²⁹ while appealing to a notion of direct democracy that is not to be mediated by supposedly corrupt institutions of liberal democracy. However, Finchelstein notes, “when populism becomes a power regime the crisis of political representation is not reduced but often increased.”³⁰ Thus, despite claiming that it represents radical democracy, when populism ascends politically it is the populist leader, not the people, who takes control. As fascist movements adopt a populist agenda to serve their popular elitism they dovetail with right-wing populism forming a synthetic regime that uses a proletarian aesthetic in service of a fascist agenda. As Finchelstein puts it: “Populism is the opposite of pluralism in politics. It works in the name of an imagined majority and dismisses all views that it considers come from the minority.”³¹ This definition of populism indicates that it is an essential part of fascist movements and that its paradoxical nature serves more or less as the foundation for these movements. In this sense, it also becomes clear that fascist movements cannot achieve their goals if they remain purely intellectual or ideological trends in the halls of academies or think tanks – what they need is to actualize themselves as social movements driven by real people.

A good sense of the connection between contemporary populism and fascist movements can be found in Cas Mudde’s definition of populism: “*an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people.*”³² The connection here must be clear: Mudde’s conception of populism offers a broad understanding of the ideology as it is used by different kinds of political organizations. What I want to highlight here is how Mudde’s definition points to the development of fascist movements today. As discussed above, some of the characteristics of fascist movements are appeals to a (supposed) will of the people, and potentially the connection between populism and fascism is indicative of how the ‘populist zeitgeist’ allows for the creation of an illusory will of the people. In this regard, Mudde very indicatively notes that, for populists, “*perceptions* seem to be more important than *facts*.”³³ This links directly to what I intend to show in my discussion of the aesthetics of the political process below, namely, that perception is integral to how we understand the individual political subject’s connection to their political and social world. I will specifically maintain that contemporary fascist movements create an image or perception of themselves – perhaps an aesthetics – which appeals

²⁸ Ibid., p. 420.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 420.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 420.

³¹ Ibid., p. 422.

³² Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004), p. 543.

³³ Ibid., p. 553.

to contemporary populism and enables them to take on the populist zeitgeist to advance their own political project.³⁴

The different versions of fascism seek to create a monolithic society that reinforces the state structures they have taken over. They take an ‘aesthetic turn’ by creating a paradox that focuses on the body of the subject of social action now understood as political individual of mass movement. As Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi puts it, “the body, along with intellectual symbols and moral rules, i.e. psyche and society, equally participates in many of the social facts that make up the human world.”³⁵ The body is thus part of the movement of the social-political practices which integrate aesthetics into the fascist political project. Falasca-Zamponi brings this thought even further, drawing on “Walter Benjamin’s notion of aestheticized politics” and arguing that “fascism’s aesthetic understanding of politics was founded on the sublimation of the body and the alienation of sensual life.”³⁶ By aestheticizing politics, fascism turns the general totalitarian project of the complete domination of the social realm into a project that it actualizes at the level of each political subject’s individuality. In this sense, fascism becomes truly totalitarian not just because it puts the political or social realms into the service of the fascist state, but because even at the individual level the very aesthetic conception of the self begins reinforcing the logic of the authoritarian fascist project.

In the remainder of this paper I intend to show that conceptualizing fascisms as movements and processes as opposed to static regimes is appropriate, as it will help revealing their synthetico-paradoxical nature. Fascisms have displayed a unique capacity to appropriate different concepts, practices, and aesthetics, which do not necessarily require logical consistency other than in their own specific ideologies. This consistency is built as an orientation into a total ethno-nationalist reformation of the State. Whether this state is monarchical, democratic, or parliamentary is of little concern to the fascist movements, so long as such a reformation serves their larger project of total political domination.

III: Aesthetics

At first glance, it does not seem that there is a clear-cut connection between aesthetics and politics. But Darlene Demandante’s analysis of Jacques Rancière makes a different point:

Aesthetics is the sense perception of social realities – ways of perceiving, doing, and making of the various actors involved in the social and political realm, the part of those who have no part, the worthy and the unworthy subjects, those who are counted and those who are excluded...³⁷

The sensible (or the aesthetic) realm is integral to the political realm because it is through the faculty of sensibility itself that political subjects are perceived. Indeed, it is through this act of perception (or recognition) that political subjectivity is constituted. As Demandante puts it, “Aesthetics is politics in as much as it has to do with the move to be perceived and recognised as subjects who were not originally counted as parts of the community and thus it challenges

³⁴ I am indebted to one of my anonymous reviewers for suggesting the connection with Mudde’s scholarship.

³⁵ Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, “Fascism and Aesthetics,” *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory* 15 no. 3, (2008), p. 351.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 353.

³⁷ Darlene O. Demandante, “Aesthetics, Politics, and the Embodied Political Subject,” p. 141.

structures of exclusion.”³⁸ Aesthetics and politics are thus linked because our political subjectivity is created when we are recognized. Aesthetics, then, opens up a possibility for a disruption of the political structures and hierarchies because it allows us to recognize their paradoxes and inconsistencies. If politics “primarily has to do with what is made visible, perceivable, and speakable by existing symbolic and material divisions, separations, and hierarchies within society,”³⁹ then aesthetics determines the manner in which we communicate in the political realm and becomes a language of political discourse. We see the effects of this type of aestheticization of politics in contemporary discourses, in which the value of a political argument is not determined by its logical consistency, but by the extent in which it conforms to the perception of its fundamental ideology.

For its part, the relation of art to ‘pop’ culture in its more general sense appears paradoxical, especially when treated of hierarchically. Andy Hamilton notes in this regard that, “although high culture is an elite product, it also has a communal reference.”⁴⁰ This apparent tension between the high culture and the ‘popular’ culture of the broader community becomes particularly important within the sense of ‘culture’ advanced by Roger Scruton, according to which “the culture of a civilization is ‘the art and literature through which it rises to consciousness of itself and defines its vision of the world.’”⁴¹ What is at stake here is that art and its aesthetic representation are understood as integral to the cultural identity of a society, insofar as art represents a form of actualization of a tribal self-identity. It must be pointed, though, that Scruton’s conservative position creates a binary between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ culture, which Hamilton critiques because “a simple polarity of high and popular culture ignores the popular classics, and avant-garde genres arising from popular culture.”⁴² In other words, opposing high and popular culture ignores the interplay between the two, in which they pull from each other in a shared cultural and artistic ecosystem.

Furthermore, Hamilton takes issue with the elitism and cultural ethnocentrism that arise from Scruton’s conservative aesthetic position.⁴³ This criticism is motivated by the effects of globalization, which have made it plain that views of strict cultural hegemonies are ultimately just elitist mythologies. Different cultures borrow from each other just like high and popular cultures do. Hamilton suggests that the way to disentangle Scruton’s conservatism is to disregard high art and instead to refer to the classics as “excellencies of their kind.”⁴⁴ Scruton maintains that a sort of elitism is still required for the developments of these ‘classics,’ but he allows for their accessibility to the common folk, as they are no longer private property of the upper class.⁴⁵ This is a semi-decentralization of aesthetic products that still maintains a level of elitism, for while the common folk may benefit from the insight of the arts, it is not produced for them or about them. What Scruton offers here is an access for the lower classes to the

³⁸ Ibid., p. 142.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 142.

⁴⁰ Andy Hamilton, “Scruton’s Philosophy of Culture: Elitism, Populism, and Classic Art,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 49 no. 4 (2009), p. 390.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 390.

⁴² Ibid., p. 391.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 392.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 400.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 401.

experience of the upper class, which plays into the hands of the fascist project of melding the classes into a single class through a singular experience of high art whose sense is defined by the social elites. Thus, on Scruton's view, it is ultimately culture in a certain elitist sense that determines what is allowed as high art and at once acts as a gatekeeper for the kind of artistic projects which are allowed as 'relevant.'

Taking into account Umberto Eco's paradoxes of fascism and the populist elitism which characterizes fascist movements, we can see how they align with Hamilton's critique of Scruton's philosophy of culture. Fascist movements utilize the creation of an 'aesthetic upper class', and without a radical decentralization of such an aesthetic hierarchy, the conservative cultural hegemony which Scruton appears to advocate essentially becomes the cultural foundation of the fascist project. The kind of 'aesthetization' thus advanced creates its own logic in which the 'low' or 'folk art' paradoxically elevates itself to the level of a highest art of a nation, whereas the 'high art' of the elites becomes accessible to all who take a part in the nationalist project. In this way, fascist aesthetics appropriates the artistic process in service of a continual reconstitution of the fascist movement and state, by formalizing the concepts of 'good art' and 'bad art', "and then forcing them into a hierarchy."⁴⁶ Such a hierarchization of the cultural milieu is only made easier when a culture already has its own established hierarchy, as fascist movements are ready to co-opt it to justify their ideology and recruit more people to adopt its terms.

Spencer Bradley argues that "fascism functions through binaries, as a moralization and legitimation of a specific type of humanity... [and] the creation of institutionalized subjectivity as a member of the accepted social norms or existing as the 'other.'"⁴⁷ In this way, by means of aesthetics and its peculiar language, fascist movements manipulate and force culture into conformity with their own hierarchies and systems. They create the binary of good and bad art, by which they can sanction both all art that is useful for their project as 'good' and all art that is not as 'bad'. The content of art in this sense is not important; what matters is its conformity to the fascist system. In this way, as fascism co-opts different sorts of art and aspects of culture, it dictates the language of culture and frames the future aesthetic conversations and creations. And as "artistic works are given legitimacy as artistic works when culture accepts it,"⁴⁸ fascist movements thus self-position themselves as the dictators of cultural legitimacy, whereas the cultural elitism of the existing hierarchical social system only serves to enable them.

In effect, the goal of fascist art is to establish its own cultural hegemony. This view comes from Antonio Gramsci's conception of political hegemony, which conceives of "the State as representing every attempt to crystallise permanently a particular state of development, a particular situation."⁴⁹ Fascist art works in a similar way: as the State creates a political hegemony by formalizing a particular position or stage of the complex of political, economic, and social development, so art, when formalized and forced to conform to a strict structure of

⁴⁶ Spencer Bradley, "The Face of Modern Art: The Creation of Fascist Art." *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* 22 no. 1, (2015), p. 81.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁴⁹ Antonio Gramsci, "Selections from the Prison Notebooks," p. 168.

what is ‘acceptable’ or ‘palatable’, becomes totalitarian and serves the ends of the fascist project.

Rancière’s conception of aesthetics as politics can be seen as suggesting a way of overcoming the fascist view of art via “what he calls aesthetic modernity or the aesthetic regime of arts as a period where democracy has become a real possibility.”⁵⁰ In particular, Demandante argues that Rancière constructs a counternarrative to the traditional interpretation of the history of art as moving “towards the perfection of a medium, for example, from classical to abstract painting, or the metaphysical/teleological view about the end of art.”⁵¹ On her view, for Rancière, art is not a teleological endeavor, and there can be no final piece of art that will complete the project of aesthetics. The progression of different sorts of artistic expression – for example, from realism to romanticism – is not a development in the craft in the same way as something like agriculture would develop. Instead, artistic development is more of a dialectical process⁵² which is the manifestation of a conversation between a society or culture and its critics. Art thus possesses a critical power, which is indicative of its potential to disrupt hegemony. Art, for Rancière, is not about perfection, but about representing the paradoxes of a political hegemony.

The problem that remains here is that paradoxes are fundamental to the nature of fascism and that fascist movements can thus easily accommodate the paradoxes that artistic expression could reveal. These paradoxes can just be adopted within the fascist project and art would become appropriated for that project’s purposes – artistic expression revealing the paradoxes of fascism would fail to disrupt fascist movements because of their synthetic nature. It is thus not a surprise that the intellectual theorizing which according to Reichardt characterizes the first stage of fascism advances an aestheticized populist elitism which is also highly appealing to the disaffected social groups. By such populist aesthetics, these groups can coalesce into a movement that mobilizes to turn fascism from something conceived in the minds of conservative intellectuals into a mass social and political movement. What is important for us here is that fascist movements do not have a specified aesthetics or even sorts of aesthetics; they would take anything that seems to ennoble the nation and put it to the task of reinforcing their violent logic. The ultimate goal of these movements is to transform the government which they initially opposed into a tool for a national-imperial purpose.

IV: Fascist Co-Opting

Fascist movements do not co-opt aesthetic properties and characteristics to simply further their political ends. I contend that this concept of co-opting – taking on some aspect or property of another movement (a set of social norms, a cultural sphere, etc.) and utilizing it to further their own purposes – is in fact foundational for the fascist movements. It is because of the fundamental paradoxicality of fascisms that they are in the unique position to co-opt aspects of other movements, including ones that pursue goals contrary to their own. This for instance is indicated in the far-right’s apparent obsession with the Russian Revolution and Lenin, as well

⁵⁰ Darlene O. Demandante, “Aesthetics, Politics, and the Embodied Political Subject,” p. 143.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁵² Obviously, there are technological developments that enable new or different modes of artistic expression such as photography and digital arts.

as in the pursuit of social recognition (on the part of the disaffected middle class as integral to fascism) to justify political and social violence.⁵³

Ironically, there is a certain transposition of means and goals within the traditional oppositions of the broader political spectrum at the moment. The left has seemingly abandoned the heritage of the Russian Revolution while the far-right has appropriated its anti-status-quo spirit.⁵⁴ As David Ost puts it: “Today Lenin is often appropriated by the right. Not the conservative right but a reactionary, radical populist right that has suddenly burst back into relevance by the sputtering crisis of neoliberalism.”⁵⁵ The populist far-right has looked to the communist revolutionary leader and authoritarian figure of Lenin in admiration for his “determination to attain state power... [and] to smash [the system].”⁵⁶ It is this sentiment of wanting to destroy the system and reconfigure state power for their own ends that the contemporary versions of fascist movements take from Lenin’s legacy. While they certainly disregard the ultimate goal of leftist revolution this demonstrates that nothing is to be excluded with regard to what fascist movements might want to co-opt in order to further their goals. And this is not limited to the sphere of political revolution. As Ost points out, the anti-institutionalism and anti-intellectualism of far-right movements can be traced back to the cultural revolutions of the Soviet Union in the wake of Lenin’s death.⁵⁷ While the Soviets purged the supposedly bourgeoisie intelligentsia from their universities and cultural institutions in an effort to create a truly proletarian culture, the far-right has worked to curtail the pluralistic university which enshrines the liberal-progressive left.⁵⁸

Fascist movements appropriate not only leftist revolutionary strategies; to justify their violent agendas, they also draw on the liberal ideas of self-recognition. Cécile Lavergne argues that violence can be a justified and meaningful form of political protest only when it gains a recognition for those who are oppressed in some way.⁵⁹ The point here is that, if all other avenues for recognition have been blocked, violence is the last resort for political expression. In this regard, Lavergne notes, fascist movements draw on a provision in the social philosophy of Axel Honneth that “if subjects and groups construct their identities and achieve a degree of autonomy only through struggles for recognition, then it means that there might be a moral justification for violence.”⁶⁰ The justificatory motive here is Hegelian in the sense in which there is a fundamental struggle for politico-social recognition and when the nonviolent forms of this struggle are exhausted the only option left is violence in some form. Two sides of violence are acknowledged here: one that denies the recognition of the self (trauma), and one that continually asserts this recognition (action).⁶¹ In this sense, self-identity – “the way in

⁵³ David Ost, “The surprising right-wing relevance of the Russian Revolution.” *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Thought*, Vol. 24 (2017), p. 516.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 516.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 516.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 517.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 522.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 522.

⁵⁹ Cécile Lavergne, “Questioning the Moral Justification of Political Violence: Recognition Conflicts, Identities and Emancipation,” *Critical Horizons*, Vol. 12, no. 2 (2011), p. 211.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

which individuals themselves see their own singularity and worth”⁶² – appears as integral to the justification of violence and fascist movements make use of it for their own ends and development.

What the apparent popularity of fascist movements points to is a loss of the characteristic self-identity of the middle class. If the 20th century was the century of the middle-class, the 21st century now appears to be the century of its disappearance. Here we can recall the characteristic frustration of the middle class from Umberto Eco’s discussion of fascism. This frustration is a result of a certain lack of, or violence to, the self-identity of the middle-class individual. Typically, the members of the middle class see themselves as the primary social group of a liberal democratic society, and they are the first group whose rights are extended in full. But as the society further liberalizes and more social groups (the working class, women, racial, religious, and other minorities) have their rights extended, a considerable number of the members of the middle class perceive this as an assault on their position. Here, I do not mean to say that this is what makes them fascist but that it provides for their predisposition to fascist thought. Thus, looking back to ‘when times were good’, they could reimagine and see the conservative past through rose-tinted lenses. It is to be noted here that much of what is happening in such a retrospection is a kind of *aesthetic perception*. In a sense, much of the middle class finds itself in the position of romanticizing both how their world was before other people started sharing in its socio-political wealth and how they might return to their dominant social position in that world. This is where the fascists enter the stage to appeal to the middle-class sense of an average ‘working person,’ despite the fact that they are anything but such people (we recall how fascism originates ideologically in elite, conservative intelligentsia). Thus, I am back again to the theme of paradoxes that reinforces the populist elitism which fascism entails. These paradoxes do not seem to bother much of the middle class, not least because people are not fundamentally logical automatons but are looking for a way to reassert their identity. This reassertion now is not done by way of logical analysis or construction but by an assertion of their recognition.

The use of ‘looking back’ with its intrinsic aesthetic aspect is important here. In accordance with Jacques Rancière’s conception of aesthetics as utilized within our perceptions of social realities, aesthetics can be seen as integral to politics. It is aesthetics in this sense that takes on a formalistic character and creates an artistic hegemony which crystallizes in the formation of fascist art. Thus, along the lines of this aesthetics as politics, which promotes a particular type of artistic hegemony, fascist art advances and reinforces the totalitarian nature of its political project, while also demonstrating that aesthetics and politics together enact a cycle of continuous mutual reinforcement. A result of this political appropriation of aesthetics is that art fails to disrupt fascism because, even if it reveals the paradoxes of fascism, fascism’s synthetic and paradoxical nature weakens the effects of these disruptions by subsuming the potentially disruptive art into its own project. The question that arises here is: Is there anything at all that art can offer for an antifascist project, if art is at the constant risk of being co-opted by the fascist movements?

⁶² Ibid., p. 214.

Fascism's resilience to artistic disruption reveals fundamental shortcomings of its liberal critique. As Gramsci puts it, "liberalism's weakness ... is the bureaucracy – i.e. the crystallisation of the leading personnel – which exercises coercive power, and at a certain point it becomes a caste."⁶³ Artistic hegemonies produce a similar effect: they create their own artistic bureaucracy that promotes what is deemed socially acceptable, but this bureaucracy in turn becomes a source of weakness as well. More particularly, in a liberal-capitalist economic system this weakness is rooted in that such bureaucratized hegemonies are largely motivated by profit. When art is tied to what will create the most profit (as opposed to the sort of artistic expression which is motivated by art *qua* art), it loses its ability to reveal the paradoxes of hegemony and social order. Likewise, when this ability is lost, fascism can much more easily turn art into a tool for the purpose of establishing its own political hegemony. Art, then, would not be in a position to advance the sort of radical aesthetics as politics envisioned by Rancière. Demandante writes that "the definition of politics as having to do with challenging hierarchies and changing the distribution of the sensible through the assertion of equality by individual subjects and communities, as well as Rancière's focus on the writings of the proletarians in his archival work, demonstrate the connection that he proposes between aesthetics and politics."⁶⁴ But if fascist movements are able to co-opt art and integrate it into a cultural hegemony, then art would in fact do the opposite – it would fortify the fascist political project and its totalitarian status. It is therefore only by extricating artistic work from the motivations of profit and hierarchical hegemonies that art could achieve the kind of political disruption which Rancière conceived of as proper to democracy. For art to function in the aesthetic-political process it must be able to disrupt hierarchies, not become subsumed within them.

Now even if art were able to properly disrupt fascist political projects, it would still need to deal with fascism's synthetic and paradoxical nature. While this may be more difficult for the totalitarian side, it still poses the question of how we might be able to engage in an efficient disruption of right-wing authoritarianism. Jules Simon interprets Walter Benjamin's notion of 'authentic art' as presenting "experiences *indirectly* and thereby as resistance to or negation of a totalizing, fascist political world" pointing that "one of the functions of 'good' or authentic art is to create shock and renewal in such a way that a process of judging of the world begins to occur."⁶⁵ There is still a sense of disruption here but instead of targeting the hegemonic order directly, the disruption is aimed at the audience of art. Because fascism appeals to the self-identity of its typical political subject, that self-identity is what must be disrupted. Visceral and shocking reactions reveal the problems that are truly unavoidable for fascist movements. This is linked to the idea of embodiment discussed earlier – while fascist projects may use embodied subjects as a means for advancing their own agendas, art that demonstrates to the audience of political subjects their own embodiment serves to properly disrupt the fascist movements themselves. Indeed, when its political hegemony is disrupted, fascism would simply venture to co-opt that disruption within its own synthetico-paradoxical project. But the aesthetic disruption at an individual level along the avenues of art can disrupt fascism's very capacity for co-opting

⁶³ Antonio Gramsci, "Selections from the Prison Notebooks," p. 169.

⁶⁴ Darlene O. Demandante, "Aesthetics, Politics, and the Embodied Political Subject," pp. 142-143.

⁶⁵ Jules Simon, "Aesthetics and Politics: Reflections on Love and the Origins of Fascism," *Filosofia*, Vol. 63 (2018), p. 144.

because it disturbs the process of recognition on which the fascist movements draw in their totalizing advances.

Artistic expression will not disrupt the specific hegemonic structure of fascism, because even if art forms its own aesthetic hegemony fascism would quickly co-opt it. This is indeed an apparent paradox in fascism's operation that allows it to appropriate something that reveals its inconsistencies and contradictions to its own advantage. But fascism can and must be disrupted at the lower level of individuals. Art can possibly achieve this through Benjamin's conception of 'good art', on the condition that in this process we cannot assign a gatekeeping role for what is considered good art. For, such a gatekeeping itself creates hegemonies – of what is considered good or acceptable – on its own. That is, when art advances such type of value judgment, even if it does so in its own way, it becomes a part of a totalizing process and thus a totalized tool of a hierarchy. Thus, if good art (or indeed art itself) is to disrupt the aesthetic-political perception of its audience, all the barriers which might restrict it ought to be broken down, in service of what can thus be called an anarcho-aesthetic project. In our view, it is this kind of decentralized anarcho-aesthetic art that can help reveal the synthetico-paradoxical nature of fascism at an individual level and that can thus help establish the self-recognition proper of the subject as such.

V: Conclusion

Fascist movements are not necessarily exemplified by any particular type of regime or state system. They are socio-political movements and *process-concepts*. Their unique synthetico-paradoxical character enables them to synthesize social, political, and aesthetic approaches of other movements that may even be radically opposed to them. Indeed, the paradoxes that constitute the character of fascist movements do not appear to disturb them as one might expect at first. Instead, such paradoxes appear to fuel their advancement in a synthesis that fosters a stronger bond with the variety of populations they target. The liberalization of modern democratic societies feeds into the machine of the fascist movements allowing them to capitalize on the vulnerability of a middle class that is alienated from its own self-identity. Fascist movements take advantage of the middle class precisely by co-opting its idealized aesthetics. This co-opting, which is part of a process of establishing artistic hegemony, completes the fascist project and reinforces its totalitarian logic on a broader scale in society and culture. While in the perspective of art we backed up with Rancière and Benjamin artistic expression seems to provide a way to disrupt fascist movements, we also acknowledge that the totalization of art in a liberal-capitalist hegemony would prevent it from disrupting fascism in a meaningful way and at the same time from safeguarding itself from being co-opted and subsumed back into the fascist political project.

Thus, the positive answer to the question at issue here can only be a radical decentralization of artistic expression, in which art has abandoned any possible gatekeeping function. That is, only when all the barriers on what is considered 'good art' are removed, such that individuals are free to create and experience art as individuals, only then a visceral and embodied reaction to art becomes possible that disrupts the fascist project without being co-opted by it. By liberating art from any artistic hegemony, and thus allowing individuals to engage with art in a kind of personalized artistic experience, individuals can disentangle

themselves from the nets of the fascist movements. This disentanglement could lead to a recognition which is not necessarily asserted through an explicitly political movement, but a recognition asserted through expression of individual's own particularity, a recognition which as such liberates them from the totalizing conditions of fascism.