

**Creating Fascists Through the “Theatre of the Masses.”**  
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On April 28, 1933, Benito Mussolini called for the establishment of an original Italian theatre of the masses for masses. In Rome, he appealed to the Italian Society of Authors and Editors (SIAE): “We must prepare a theatre of masses, a theatre able to accommodate 15,000 or 20,000 people” (Cavallo 16). His call came amidst despair that Italian theatre was in a state of crisis; the theatre of the masses would be a cure. But Mussolini’s concern for an art form feared to be dying was not what inspired his call; rather, it was his belief that the theatre was an ideal means for cultivating a nationalist, Fascist spirit among the Italian people. The mass theatre, heaving off the dead weight of French and bourgeois tradition, would forge a unified Italian citizenry poised to soar to historic heights. The new Italian masses would stand behind the government as it reached the pinnacle of all achievements, artistic, economic, political, and imperial.

One year and one day after Mussolini’s request, a group of loyal artists led by director Alessandro Blasetti answered the call. They staged a grandiose spectacle on the banks of the Arno River in Florence. The show was simply called “*18BL*,” the model number of the Fiat artillery truck, affectionately named Mother Cartridge-Pouch (*Mamma Giberna*), who was the protagonist of the epic drama. With a chief creative staff of fifteen, an amateur cast of 2,000, brilliant lighting effects, tons of war machinery, and a budget of approximately 349,000 lire, the spectacle was meant to usher in a new age of Italian theatre, all the while celebrating the history, present triumph, and future of Fascism. An estimated 20,000 spectators were in attendance for the historic performance.

However, despite the wealth of time, resources, and excitement applied toward its realization, *18BL* flopped. The public was disappointed, critics were dismayed, and a similar

spectacle was never staged again. An enthusiastic supporter of mass theatre, playwright and member of the Italian Academy Massimo Bontempelli was disheartened by the display. He contended that the play was too “real” to cultivate the spirit necessary to bond the masses. For Fascism relied on a mythology of a collective national pride built on a sense of shared identity. Bontempelli promoted art that would call forth a primordial spirituality that recognized this shared identity—an intrinsic *italianità*. Schnapp’s study of *18BL* is a comprehensive report on the performance that considers its failure within the specific context of Italian Fascism’s mystical brand of collectivist nationalism.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on Schnapp’s observations, I will discuss the performance’s limitations specifically in light of fascist ideology and aesthetic theories; but this example of propaganda theatre also poses questions relevant to more general explorations of the theatre as a medium for cultivating national identity. As Schnapp points out, the style and logistics of *18BL* were incompatible with Fascist spirituality. But I think there are larger reasons for the show’s failure. It might also be possible that *18BL* revealed inherent limits to theatre’s political power. The failure of this particular piece of theatre could perhaps suggest that the material reality of live performance—the on stage presence of living and mechanized bodies and the truths they tell—could alter reception to such an extent that it undermines attempts to mold collectives committed to a nationalist ideologies. In the case of *18BL*, the dual goals of cultivating a nationalist identification and inspiring citizens to act in its name were more than the show could achieve.

While fascism in the first part of the twentieth century took varied forms and was inflected by various extreme ideologies, nationalism was always central to it. As Reinhard Kühnl cautions in “The Cultural Politics of Fascist Governments,” other aspects of fascism “can only be understood when they are analyzed as integral elements of the whole” (30). The whole,

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all descriptions of the performance come from Schnapp’s *18BL*.

perhaps especially for Italy, was its nationalism. Roger Griffin defines fascism's core myth as "palingenetic ultranationalism."<sup>2</sup> He explains, "'Palingenetic' refers to the myth of 'rebirth' or 'regeneration' (the literal meaning of 'palingenesis' in Greek)." While the myth of palingenesis is too universal to "define a political ideology" on its own, it begins to form the basis of fascist doctrine when combined with the "radically anti-liberal stance" of ultranationalism (13). In Italy, all citizens' duty was to the State; they were to subject themselves to the cause of rebuilding the Empire, a quest justified by Italy's so-called cultural supremacy. The State's regeneration and expansion was so central to Fascism's cause that leading historian of Italian Fascism, Renzo de Felice, has argued that the party would sacrifice itself for the greater good of the state if necessary.<sup>3</sup> Of course, the party did aim to avoid such sacrifice through a total fascistization of the masses, in which the theatre was to be a vigorous protagonist. And it is here that we turn to the role of the arts in general and mass theatre more specifically. Mussolini believed the theatre to be the ideal means of hailing subjects; it would instill in the masses a metaphysical yearning and willingness to act for national palingenesis.

Fascist leaders imagined that whether gathering to watch a propaganda play or standing below Mussolini's balcony in the *Piazza Venezia*, citizens could believe themselves to be active participants in democratic masses when they were, in fact, mere spokes in a rolling totalitarian wheel. In *Fascist Spectacle*, Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi delineates the strategy employed by fascist regimes. Referencing George Mosse's discussion of Nazism, she writes,

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<sup>2</sup> Griffin's definition applies not only to Italian Fascism, but concepts of generic fascism as well, here designated with the lower case "f." When referring specifically to the Italian case, I use the upper case "F."

<sup>3</sup> For de Felice, this was a principal difference between Italian Fascism and the Russian and German totalitarian regimes, as he writes in *Breve Storia del Fascismo*: "Se infatti, sia in Unione Sovietica che nella Germania nazista, lo Stato sarebbe stato subordinato e quindi fagocitato dal partito, nell'Italia fascista si sviluppò un processo inverso: al centro del regime era lo Stato, con il partito confinato per certi versi in una posizione secondaria, pronto, se necessario, a essere del tutto sacrificato se le superiori esigenze della costruzione e della salvezza dello Stato lo avessero richiesto" (41-42).

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 homogenous political body. (5)

By most accounts, the masses deified Mussolini, and he certainly used his popularity to great advantage in shaping not only the new order but also the “new Italian.”

The theories of Gustave Le Bon greatly influenced Mussolini’s vision of himself as the father-artist who would mold the masses. Le Bon negatively characterized the masses as feminine, passive, and impressionable. This characterization was shared by many of Le Bon’s contemporaries, and they all, according to Falasca-Zamponi, “shared a common premise: they believed that a gathering of people would cause the blinding of the individual minds participating.” Mussolini and artists in favor of the theatre of the masses viewed the crowd’s blind irrationality in a positive light: crowds, having “a propensity to be governed by feeling [...] are quick to act” (18). Inspired by the right display, the right story, the right leader, the Italian masses would do all they could to rebuild the Empire because their feelings of loyalty and intrinsic Italianness (*Italianità*) would be called forth by the overwhelming emotional display.

Bontempelli, the aforementioned intellectual, writer, theorist, and decorated Fascist, strongly supported Mussolini’s conception of the theatre of the masses for this very reason. He claimed that the new (Fascist) art, “must be entertaining, even when its roots are in suffering; it must cover with smiles the saddest of things and with wonder the most banal. It must be a miracle rather than a chore, an act of magic rather than the bustle of official business” (*Primer* 220). In the weeks following Mussolini’s call to the SIAE, Bontempelli wrote, “I believe, as I have been saying for years, in the advent of a theatre for masses, a theatre of primordial passions and linear actions whose correspondents, whose most intense collaborators, will be the

passionate, excessive, and overflowing public that we have begun to get acquainted with in the stadiums” (Bontempelli 389-90). An intellectual born just after the *Risorgimento*, Bontempelli was as committed to the revitalization of the nation as he was to artistic renovation; these were inseparable tasks. As Schnapp has shown, Bontempelli “set the intellectual tone for the entire era,” and crucial for him was

the activation of the mass spectator within the spectacle. In action—not the superficial “agitation” of, say, the futurists, but instead the sort of deep physical, emotional, and spiritual “action” resulting from a direct confrontation with elementary natural forces lodged in the dark recesses—lay salvation... (*18BL* 42)

With such concepts central to Fascist cultural debates and propagandistic efforts, the creators of *18 BL* forged ahead.

Immediately following Mussolini’s SIAE speech, intellectuals turned their attention to the theatre in public polemics; these debates in effect engendered *18BL*. By November of 1933 planning meetings for the annual *Littoriali* of Culture and Art were in session; the proposal to the government included a plan for the type of mass spectacle Mussolini envisioned. Alessandro Pavolini, a militant Fascist with a strong interest in cultural affairs, was chosen to organize the endeavor. He recruited Blasetti and a staff of young playwrights, directors, designers, and critics. By December, they decided that an *18BL* truck would be the hero of the story; plot sketches quickly followed. Three significant moments in Fascist history would comprise the spectacle’s three acts: the capture of Trieste and Trento during the Great War, the 1922 labor strikes, and the draining of the Pontine marshes. Designing and building of the theatre began in February of 1934. Delays and then inclement weather pushed the performance date back one week. With construction of the theatre entrance completed at mid-day, the performance went on at 9:30 P.M., April 29, 1934.

The originally designed theatre created the first difficulties for Blasetti and the rest of the creative staff. Blasetti envisioned an equal, unified audience; his designs for the theatre drew inspiration from ancient sources, contemporary Italian experiments, the Gropius/Piscator Total theatre, and the “theatre of the future” of Norman Bel Geddes. Schnapp describes, the director “had initially dreamed of building an amphitheater that would turn the conventional Greco-Roman theater inside out, placing the audience at the center of a crater, surrounded by a circular upward sloping stage” (59). The site’s location in a gully on the riverbank required an alternative realization. The north bank became the seating area, which betrayed Fascism’s elitism despite Blasetti’s impossible hope of creating equal visibility throughout the large auditorium. The seating area had two sections; the “popular” had less expensive unassigned seating on the periphery, whereas Fascist dignitaries and elite audience members were front and center. Moreover, the physical space required separate entrances to the two seating areas. The double riverboat-bridge, originally intended as the sole entrance to the theatre, became a grand processional entrance for the elite, which the popular audience would gaze upon as it entered from a blind alleyway on the other side of the Arno (64-65). Already the ideal of the collective was forsaken, albeit for partly logistical reasons, to the reality of Fascism: hierarchy.

Likewise, the masses had poorer views of the stage itself. The steep southern bank became the stage of gargantuan proportions: about 200 meters wide and 150 or 300 meters deep, depending on whose records and estimates are accepted (60). The slope was built up and down to create twelve backstage and staging areas for moving the huge machinery and numbers of cast members. Light helped focus spectators on the appropriate areas, and Blasetti envisioned “a shadow play in reverse, with figures rising up and disappearing rapidly over the horizon line. The actors and machines, that is, would be viewed in profile from below” with the help of

pyrotechnics, searchlights, and battery-powered beacons (61). The metallic grandeur, however indebted to films of Dreyer and Eisenstein and Appia's theatre, was perfectly suited to the Fascist attempt at combining Wagnerian anaesthetizing emotionalism with the modern machinery that would bring about Fascist Italy's triumph. But the practical realities of staging such an enormous spectacle left much to be accomplished. Those seated in the popular area could hear but not see well, precluding, according to Schnapp, any "instinctual attraction to the mass of protagonists on stage" (80). Despite some ambitious plans, the attempts to draw the crowd together in a unified whole was betrayed by the lesser experience given to the masses. In short, the reality of Fascism's elitism, instead of the collective ideal, came through in the theatrical space.

The "chance" that can determine theatrical meaning also intervened in *18BL*'s efficacy. The finale of Mother Cartridge-Pouch's story required her to meet a tragic demise on the roadside. Unable to revive her failing engines, workers were to push the truck into the swamp, where she would become part of the landfill upon which a new road to a new town was being built. The play would end with Cartridge-Pouch in the mud, drums and music, and the twinkling lights of the new fascist town shining in the distance. A "heroic trumpet call" would call the stadium lights back on (75-76). During the actual performance, however, the mother truck was reluctant to die. After several minutes, Blasetti had to turn off the lights and call more actors onto the stage, who finally pushed the truck into her grave,

...but many spectators had already departed and the intended tragic effect had been buried long before the truck. The closing whimper is best described by Maurri: "it ended as it had to end: with sparing and awkward applause from the front rows, with a witticism or two muttered under the breath, and with an indulgent grin on people's faces as they exited. The few who had donned black shirts has lost their usual self-assurance..." (81-82)

Thus, the practicalities of housing and presenting such a mass display called forth underwhelming enthusiasm and even mockery. The very form meant to inspire faith in the national collective not only failed to do so, but also left the Regime's leading thinkers and artists in a position to reconsider this new Fascist art form.

Bontempelli found *18BL* difficult to defend. In his review, published the day after the performance, he wrote:

But it truly wrings my heart to feel myself obligated to confess that this attempt, in both its aspects (as a theatrical form and as an exaltation of our national passions) was almost wholly unsuccessful.

[...] The authors of *18BL*, provided with real trucks, real hills, a real sky, real soldiers, real *Balilla*, real cannons, real horses, have lost every sense of theatrical effects, and have given a spectacle in which all the real things seemed like shams. With explosions and roars of every kind, the show was mute; with all the men and horses and machines that ran, it generated a still world. With so much intensity of passion and history was born a series of empty spaces into which the spectators felt themselves on the point of falling.

I was long perplexed if I should hide or in some way mask the painful truth. But it would be unworthy of this great and honest attempt, victim above all of a mistaken aesthetic. (Bontempelli 390)

Taking up Bontempelli's comments, I would like to discuss reasons for the show's failure that Schnapp, who tends to highlight the technical and logistic difficulties, does not.

First, as Schnapp does point out, there was a problem in subject matter: *18BL* was a story of accomplishments past. Cartridge-Pouch's death offered the opportunity for the passing of the torch to the next generation of loyal Fascists. But the next generation did not want to simply take a torch, or as Schnapp phrases it, they thought, "youth ought to *make* history and not take their place in it as if setting upon a throne" (121). But their lack of enthusiasm, however particular, points to what the larger ideological issue at play. *18BL* ultimately failed in its

attempt to “exalt national passions” because it was simply too honest: it inadvertently revealed truths that a citizenry would find hard to “get behind.”

Though Bontempelli faulted the aesthetic of the show, his critique actually alludes to the ideological problem implicit in the show’s realism. While *18BL* was not realist in the way we tend to think of the genre, Bontempelli pointed to the realism—or, perhaps more accurately, the materiality of the performance—to explain its shortcomings. The use of *real* people, machines, and settings, he explained, did nothing to inspire the crowd. It did nothing to call forth the primordial sentiment that was to bind the masses. Bontempelli would have preferred a celebration of Fascist values (we would probably call it “ideology”). But what did a bunch of trucks and soldiers do to celebrate ideology? After all, the futurist heyday was past; machine worship was not in vogue as it would have been twenty or even ten years earlier. The play did not actually depict the ideals that united Fascists; it celebrated the means. This was not simply a problem of aesthetics. Instead, the aesthetic betrayed Fascist nationalism’s reality: it was not a primordial spirituality binding Italian citizens but actually a conquest only possible through war and destruction. It comes as no surprise to me that the spectacle left much to be desired. *18BL* banked in part on the reality of conquest to inspire the crowd, as war and conquest are the cornerstones of nationalist ideology. But in an odd way, *18BL* was therefore too honest to be inspiring.<sup>4</sup> Of course, this interpretation is largely influenced by my own response to Fascist ideology. Given the Regime’s success and relative popularity, though, many loyal Fascists—who would certainly have been in attendance—might have accepted the violence inherent to the

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<sup>4</sup> In 1935, in fact, Mussolini launched his Ethiopian invasion. Many Italians supported the endeavor initially, but, as Stanley Payne reports in *A History of Fascism*, over time “the increasing military activism was disconcerting and indeed frightening to millions of Italians [...] There was no particular increase in political opposition [...] What was developing instead was a growing uneasiness and a kind of internal psychological distancing from the radicalization of Fascism...” (243). Reports of the troops’ use of mustard gas on African citizens, in fact, drew protests (Smith 199).

national quest for palingenesis. They may well have looked upon explosions with awe and on *Mamma Giberna* with nostalgia and affection. Indeed, Bontempelli never doubted the ideology of *18BL*; he did not criticize it outright for revealing truth, only for failing to inspire.

Even the most ardent Fascists, however, were evidently not inspired; the expansive goals of the spectacle practically doomed it to failure. The creators of *18BL* did not merely wish to reinforce patriotism. They wanted to celebrate all the glory that was Fascism, reinvigorate the citizenry, and inspire them to carry on the Fascist revolution. While Cartridge-Pouch's struggle celebrated Fascism's coming to power, it didn't convince audience members that the revolution had been fully achieved. As Schnapp points out, "it cannot envisage a time when such heroic exertions will no longer be needed" (98). After twelve whole years of Fascist revolution, the apotheosis of struggle for the nation was no longer enough.

Many times in the course of writing this paper, I have wondered if Fascism's nationalism and uses of art were too peculiar or extreme to offer as hallmarks for formulating larger theories on the theatre's role in creating a national identity. But it is clear to me that *18BL*'s mistake, which was in many ways nothing more than the revelation of reality, gave away the truth of Fascist nationalism as it also suggests to us a real conundrum of theatrical performance. Fascist spectacle has a great reputation for manipulation, which is particularly curious given the impossibility of controlling audience perception. This instability of meaning seriously impacted *18BL*. Technical difficulties and conceptual errors intensified the effect. The depiction of fascist conquest presented a reality Blasetti did not intend; many members of the audience saw this reality and could not approve. And in these troubled days, I cannot help but think that this is not a problem unique to fascist nationalism. Today, for instance, many Americans might be swayed by the rhetoric of democracy. Our administration is doing a good thing, we might believe, by

spreading freedom and democracy. But when we see the nightly news report of how freedom and democracy are being spread—with bombs, tanks, street combat, and prisoner abuse—reality clashes with our ideals. The “mistaken aesthetic” Bontempelli referred to was clearly more than that: it was a material representation of what Fascism was. And, perhaps without fully realizing it, the masses disliked both the performance and the reality it displayed.

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