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### Fascist Aesthetics from 1940 to Contemporary Times

Anna M. Gellerman

*CUNY Bernard M Baruch College*

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In today's time, one would not commonly associate the adjective "fascinating" with fascism unless one was a far-right Nazi. Yet, author of *Under the Sign of Saturn*, Susan Sontag, claims that fascist aesthetics and their prevalence in literature and film is fascinating. Sontag sees pop culture as rehabilitative of fascist aesthetics in books and films, but contemporary works have proven that the rehabilitation didn't work. Internationally, society is as obsessed with models such as militarization and romanization of death as Nazi Germany was in 1940. The demand for these fascist aesthetics in literary works and movies proves that society is still massively compelled by these tropes despite attempts to eliminate them.

Susan Sontag's book discusses certain models and looks that were born in the fascist period of Nazi Germany. Sontag incorporates a quote from Leni Riefenstahl, a known film director during the Nazi era in her book; "I am fascinated by what is beautiful, strong, healthy, what is living" (Sontag 85). Sontag builds her thesis around this quote, stating that the fascinating aspect of fascism is the idolization of beauty and strength, unity, and glamourization of death (Sontag 91). She analyzed Riefenstahl's film, *The Holy Mountain*, and more specifically, the inclusion of the mountain, which is "supremely beautiful and dangerous" (Sontag 77). The mountain incorporated ideals of beauty, strength and romanticized death, as only the beautiful mountain may only be scaled by those destined of greatness. Scalars struggled to prove themselves in the "purity of the cold" (Sontag 87), knowing that failure resulted in death. This aesthetic originated from Nazi Germany trying to find a way out of its debt from World War I and regain power; Germany was waiting for a leader to "brave the cold" and achieve prosperity for this country. Similar to the character of the "rag clad outcast girl" (Sontag 77) Junta in *The Blue Light*, Hitler was able to scale the mountain of German hardship and

become the leader. In *Triumph of the Will*, Riefenstahl portrays unity through soldiers being so in sync that it seems “they were seeking the perfect choreography to express their fealty” (Sontag 87). This exemplifies the ideals of beauty of the mass, created through community solidarity and strength to match all the other soldier movements. The trope of togetherness was born because Germany’s citizens wanted a security of autonomy and prosperity after resenting having to pay reparations for World War I.

Sontag also discusses the model of power and the relationship between the “clean and impure” (Sontag 88). Riefenstahl photographed the Nuba tribe in *The Last of the Nuba*. Sontag captures men with “huge muscles bulging” (Sontag 89), engaging in wrestling matches. Athletic men fit the aesthetic of strength, beauty and power. While the strength is detailed in how muscular the men are, the beauty is detailed in the athletic male physique. This aesthetic traces back to artists depicting Nazis without body imperfections, leading to “their nudes look[ing] like pictures in physique magazines” (Sontag 92). The power of the Nuban tribe is exemplified through “success in fighting being the ‘main aspiration of a man's life’” (Sontag 89). Because of their traditions of wrestling matches detailing a power struggle between two men, the aesthetic of power is portrayed. The aesthetic of impurity, beauty and power came from needing separation between the look of natively German and Jewish. The “beautiful”, pure, and powerful Aryan race was seen as physical perfection, usually depicted by blonde hair and blue eyes.

The Schutzstaffel (SS) uniform was a significant addition to the model of beauty. Uniforms generally helped solidify the soldiers as a whole, adding to the uniformity aesthetic. The SS uniform in particular served as an “assertion of the righteousness of violence” (Sontag 99). Only the SS were allowed to be inside the concentration camps and hand out decrees of

violence against the Jewish people. While regular uniforms have an appearance similar to civilian clothing, SS uniforms were stiff, heavy, had gloves and various adornations, giving it a dramatic and menacing appearance (Sontag 100). The black color of the uniform hints not only at the “important overtones” (Sontag 99) in Nazi Germany, but also as a sign of death; the SS soldiers looked like Grim Reapers, bestowing death upon the “dirty” races. Because this uniform signified the authority to choose whether a person lives or dies in Nazi Germany, the uniform became God-like in the view of Aryan German citizens during this time period. This fascination birthed a sexual fantasy in many German women that still occurs worldwide today; the phrase “a woman likes a man in a uniform” is evidence enough.

George Mosse dives into the beauty model of fascism in his work, *Fascist Aesthetics and Society: Some Considerations*. According to Mosse, a pinnacle of beauty, birthed from eighteenth century Greece, was necessary for the European middle class. The need of the “good, the true, and the holy” (Mosse 246) is one of the most important ideologies of fascism because it adjoined Godliness to human life. This birthed worship of the Aryan, which set an ideal skin tone, body physique, hair and eye color for which German people strived. Emphasis was placed on body physique because of the idea that “human body indicates the structure of the mind” (Mosse 248). German men aspired to reach this level of beauty so they sculpted their body to the best of their abilities. Their bodies also showed the theme of togetherness through the synchronization of muscles, beauty and mind. Mosse argues that fascism would not have worked if not for the strictly defined aesthetic of beauty and power. It would be unacceptable to have an “unclear and ambiguous statement” (Mosse 249) such as multiple types of beauty. So, fascism devised a countertype of beauty, or the complete opposite of what fascist beauty ideals were. The

two biggest countertypes were the Jewish people or black people (portrayed by Germany and Italy, respectively). These groups were seen as of deformed body and mind. The most common stereotype of the Jewish person is a hooked nose, and this characteristic was used as an easy marking of deficiency. The fascist beauty model operated under a ‘clear distinction of friend and foe’ (Mosse 249), which ensured there was only one race an ideal citizen can be to be accepted.

Sontag and Mosse overlap on many aspects of beauty emphasis in fascist tropes. Both authors detailed how important it was to be seen as perfect and the peak of what man could achieve. The authors also share the view that fascist ideals will continue to be used in art, literature and media because of how indoctrinated these tropes are in international societies. Mosse offers a more insightful approach of a few aesthetics, even alluding to the Vitruvian Man. Mosse’s explanation of beauty ideals shows the reader that what started as a Greek explanation of geometry formed an ideal man and race due to the need of beauty standards. To this day, Eurocentric ideals are still admired and prioritized in the arts and beauty industries. People of color and women with hooked noses are still seen as inferior and unnecessary by the industries. Rhinoplasty is popular in black and Jewish women due to the set beauty standard of a small, pointy Aryan nose. While men are also targeted by Eurocentric standards, men also face the aesthetic of strength, detailed by their physique. Most models are lean or muscular, fitting the look of swimmers or divers, which Sontag mentions as admired (Sontag 93). If society was not compelled to find Eurocentric features as perfection, there would be more diversity and representation of other races, bodies, and features.

Benjamin Noys challenges readers to separate subconscious fascism from uncensored fascism in *Lord Horror*, a British graphic novel series from the 90s, that follows a “pre war

fascist and wartime Nazi radio broadcaster William Joyce” (Noys 305). Noys argues that despite the despicability of the aforementioned comic book, it forces its readers to face “fascinating fascism...without... a confrontation that is avoided in other, more ‘respectable’ treatments of fascism” (Noys 307). Instead of just adhering to fascist aesthetics, *Lord Horror* uses both the aesthetic and actual Nazism to challenge how accepting the readers will be. This is done under the presumption that society as a whole has become used to the incorporation of fascist tropes but no longer associates these tropes with the fascist movement. Noys calls the fascism in the novel “transgressive, sexual and carnivalesque” (Noys 307); though perverse and absurd, something about the novel is enticing to readers. The author argues that fascist tropes have become so common in international art, literature, and film that only when actual, uncensored depiction of fascism is used is when society rejects it.

Noys’ work has many similarities to Sontag’s, as they both discuss the concept of “fascinating fascism” and agree that fascism built a certain aesthetic still used today. Noys discusses the use of uniforms in *Lord Horror* similarly to Sontag, saying “[the uniforms] have an obscene beauty... an underlying fantasy of death” (Noys 310). However, Noys states that fascination with fascism exists because “it offers a political position on ambiguous works that engage with fascism” (Noys 316). While Sontag leaves the fascination of fascism at the aesthetics it produced, Noys argues that the fascination lies in society’s stance on works that exemplify fascist tropes or mention fascism, and how the stance wavers due to what degree of fascist ideals are shown. Most interestingly, Noys mentions a comparison of rock and roll and fascism in *Lord Horror*; “both were the twin revolutionary movements of the 20th century” (Noys 313). Despite Sontag explaining that pop culture rehabilitated fascism, Noys argues that

the most symbolic aspects of pop culture came from the reformation of fascism (Noys 313). Hence, Noys makes the argument that fascist ideals are so internalized by society that the compulsion of fascism is not recognized unless it becomes uncensored or consciously recognized.

J. Hoberman uses known movies in American culture as evidence for continued fascination of fascist ideals in current years in his article, *Fascist Guns in the West*. Building on Sontag's mentioned fascist tropes, J. Hoberman finds them present in movies such as *Rambo*, *Red Dawn*, and more. In these movies, Hoberman sees "vengeful patriotism, worship of the male torso, ... military fantasy" (Hoberman 64), which is almost identical to the fascist tropes Susan Sontag mentioned in her work. The author also uses *Red Dawn* and *Rambo*'s "goofy rituals of purification" (Hoberman 64), drinking deer blood and torture, respectively, as homage to the fascist aesthetic of differentiating between the pure and impure. The result of purification is an "American superkiller" (Hoberman 64); the only difference between this result and Nazi Germany's is the nationality that precedes; Germany's superkillers were the SS. Themes of purification are also in *Rocky IV* (Rocky witnessing fellow boxer Apollo's death), *Missing in Action* (Colonel James Braddock spending years as a prisoner of war for Vietnam), *Invasion U.S.A.* (Matt Hunter witnessing guerillas kill John Eagle in home invasion), and *An Officer and a Gentleman* (Zachary Mayo going through hazing).

Because of the incorporation of fascist models, Hoberman argues that these movies and various others would theoretically be put out by a fascist culture and enjoyed (Hoberman 68). The glamourization of death and emphasis on glorified surrender is portrayed in *Invasion U.S.A* and *Commando*. Besides just the final productions, fascist reminders were present in filming too;

Milus, the director of *Conan*, and the aforementioned two movies, “ran a set like an army... this wasn’t a movie, this was a battle” (Hoberman 69). When wanting to make a movie with a specific set of aesthetics, one may easily write themselves into the role of the strict and ambitious leader. According to this article, there is no extent to which fascist aesthetics are applied contemporarily and how. Films are portrayed very similarly to Riefenstahl’s and enjoyed by the public. Society’s want of war movies and super killers are due to ingrained fascist ideals. Hoberman differs from Sontag because she sees fascist aesthetics as diluting over time, but Hoberman argues that they never will die out.

On the contrary, Phyllis Lasner’s *Espionage and Exile: Fascism and Anti-Fascism in British Spy Fiction and Film* argues that contemporary times has called for a mutiny on fascist ideals through introduction of other tropes, such as minority casting, feminism, and accidental leadership. According to Lasner, more and more British authors and artists started using “Jewish characters or refugees” (Lasner 661) to contrast the portrayal of an Aryan race. Using characters beyond those that fit Eurocentric beauty standards allowed readers of the British spy fiction to connect and empathise for the characters. An Aryan character, according to fascist ideals, would never deliberately cause empathy, only awe. An opposite to the fascist trope of a man being born to be a leader was the emergence of men “without strong political or national loyalties” (Lasner 661). This incorporation built more character development, as these protagonists came to understand that neutrality takes the side of the oppressor and accidentally became leaders. British authors also started using heroines in their spy fictions, specifically women that would behave in “‘un-feminine’ ways without being punished for it” (Lasner 661). Using heroines combats the fascist emphasis on men and their physical and mental strength used in achieving success. These



authors proved that women can possess the same kind of strength as men, hence behaving un-womanly, and end up with the same success as men.

However much British spy fiction tries to fight fascist ideals, it is incorrect to make the argument that fascist ideals are completely replaced or even replaceable. Lassner gives no evidence of contemporary work completely void of fascist tropes. The most common British spy fiction would be Sherlock Holmes or Austin Powers, both with male leads who take on a powerful persona and have minds as powerful as tanks on a battlefield. While women and characters that don't look Aryan are starting to get lead roles in recent times because of diversity critics, they are still outnumbered and underpaid compared to the many Eurocentric looking actors. For example, even though Mark Wahlberg was paid 5 million to be in *All the Money in the World*, "his co-star Michelle Williams was paid \$625,000" (Metz 2018). Evidently, society is pushing back from integrating non-fascist ideals by criticizing movies that deviate from the standard that the fascist aesthetic has set. Criticism includes sexism, racism and less pay.

Supporters of Lassner may argue that fascist ideals are no longer used in contemporary works just because the main character does not fit a fascist aesthetic. Nonetheless, this does not mean that other prevalent tropes are missing. For example, *The Hunger Games* series follows a poor girl, Katniss, and her rebellion against the unjust system that the Capitol created. Despite the protagonist being a heroine and the population not synchronized to one cause, the Hunger Games series uses plenty of other fascist aesthetics. For example, death is glorified when the other nominees are killed in *Hunger Games*, when Katniss's sister, Prim, dies from a bomb attack (Collins 425), and when Katniss's team of rebels blows up mines full of civilians (Collins 238). The glorification of surrender is proven when the rebels sacrifice themselves in large

numbers as martyrdom. The synchronization of one group, the rebels, all have the same mindset and uniforms. The mockingjay symbol, which was adapted to be on all the rebel uniforms, serves as a symbol of domination and superiority, much like the SS uniforms. This symbol is what gave the rebels the right of violence to bomb Capitol children or blow up mines. The ideal of beauty and mind became associated with the rebellion, and those who did not join became seen as enemies, which defended the rebel violence. Straying from some fascist tropes is common, but works are not completely free of all fascist tropes, as every known work of literature or film contains at least one fascist aesthetic.

Susan Sontag explains different fascist ideals but incorrectly presumed that the fascist ideals would eventually die out. As contemporary literature and movies dictate, fascist ideals are still prevalent and lusted for by society. Despite diversity critics pushing for change of the fascist tropes incorporated, all works have dictated that eradication of all the tropes ingrained in society is impossible as of now.

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