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Title:

Book Review: Aesthetic Modernism and Masculinity in Fascist Italy by John Champagne

Journal Issue:

[gender-sexuality/italy, 2 \(2015\)](#)

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Publication date:

July 2015

Publication info:

gender/sexuality/italy, "Reviews"

Permalink:

<http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/book-review-aesthetic-modernism-and-masculinity/>

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Champagne, John. *Aesthetic Modernism and Masculinity in Fascist Italy*. New York, Routledge, 2013. Pp. 221.

ISBN 978-1-13-880815-7 and 978-0-415-52862-7. \$ 48.95 (paperback). \$ 140.00 (hardcover).

One of the main goals of Mussolini's regime was to reshape the Italians. The mass organizations, the colonial enterprises, the racial laws, and the Fascist wars were all considered palingenetic tools aimed at creating the *Romans of modernity*, as Emilio Gentile would put it. The Fascist propaganda and the Fascist educational apparatus offered a male ideal model and wanted the Italians to conform. John Champagne, in his book *Aesthetic Modernism and Masculinity in Fascist Italy*, suggests that focusing our attention on "the fascist determination to produce a 'new man'" (4) we lost sight of the ways in which fine, performing, and literary arts produced, provoked, and resisted this "new man." Champagne argues that art is "a site of the production and reproduction of modes of perception that both ratify and resist gender and sexual norms" (5). In his book he is particularly interested in this gender/sexual resistance. Champagne criticizes Barbara Spackman's *Fascist Virilities* for not analyzing representations of virility and masculinity in the art, music, and literature of the Fascist time. For him these were precisely the spaces in which several Italian artists were able to express "a more complicated and contested view of masculinity than the one proffered by kitsch photos of a bare-chested Mussolini skiing" (7). Looking at largely forgotten works and artists, Champagne suggests that masculinity in Fascist Italy was a highly contradictory construction and that we need to recognize this complexity. Analyzing only mass culture, Fascist speeches, official art, and propaganda we risk to miss that, even under the Fascist regime, there existed an Italian gender/sexual heteroglossia. *Aesthetic Modernism and Masculinity in Fascist Italy* aims at queering the conceptualization of the Fascist man. It invites us to rethink labels, investigate the queerness of various artistic artifacts, and understand how dominant Fascist narratives on masculinity need to be problematized further: "the relationship between fascism, modernism and masculinity is much more complex and contradictory than we might initially suspect" (43).

Champagne's book is organized in five chapters. The first deals with debates around Fascist modernism and explores the relationship between transnational capitalism and Italian Fascism. One point made in this chapter is particularly relevant: Fascist ideology was contradictory and somehow incoherent, and this incoherence gave space to the emergence of socio-cultural constructs, not always perfectly in line with Fascist diktats, which produced polyvalent representations of masculinity. The second chapter examines three plays by Luigi Pirandello (*Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, *Enrico IV*, and *Come tu mi vuoi*) and, arguing against authors such as Maggie Günsberg, Mary Ann Ferse Witt, and Martin Purchner, shows how these three plays are "troubled and troubling accounts of what it means to be a man," more than stories presenting a normative Fascist masculinity (43). These plays "in their undecidability ... in different ways and to different extent, bring to crisis the fascist ideologies around sex and gender" (68). All in all, Pirandello's plays "deconstruct male identity in ways that the fascists must have found disconcerting, given their own plans for Italian masculinity" (69). The third chapter, probably the most convincing of the book, examines "pictorial representation of the male body" portraying "a 'dangerous' masculinity that in some cases advertised the appeal ... of the male body as object of the gaze" (70). Champagne underscores how painters, such as Filippo de Pisis, Carlo Carrà, Mario Maffai, Alberto Zivieri, Giuseppe Capogrossi, and Guglielmo Janni, were "working in an idiom that cannot be easily appropriated by discourses of either virility or nationalism" (70) and how the works of art these artists produced under the Fascist regime suggested queer and homoerotic atmospheres far beyond the supposedly official sober masculinity presented by mainstream artists of the time (101). Chapter four deals with music. Champagne focuses his attention on the Jewish composer Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco and on his musicalization of Walt Whitman's *Calamus*. The aim of this section of the book is to show how an Italian Jew tried "to counter fascist propaganda ... in a way that may have gone unnoticed by Il Duce and his supporters" (122). Whitman's "polyvocality," his "availability to be read as both 'for' and 'against' fascism" (137) allowed Castelnuovo-Tedesco to resist the regime setting into music the queer verses of the American poet. The

last chapter, devoted to Giorgio Bassani's works (*Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* and *Gli occhiali d'oro*), analyzes the queerness of the narrative voices of both novels and explores the relationship between non-normative masculinity and Jewishness.

Champagne's work brings back to light some forgotten artists, shows the polyvalent representations of masculinities in Fascist Italy through the lenses of queer theory, and underlines how the ostentation of the Fascist male body turned it into an object of pleasurable and voyeuristic speculation, objectification, and consumption. He underscores how transnational influences affected the Italian artists, complicating our understanding of anti-Fascist resistance in the arts and pushing us to think about the ways in which the absence of an official Fascist art gave space to heterodox ideas. However, other aspects of the book are not particularly convincing: the connection between the first contextualizing chapter about Fascism, modernism, and capitalism and the rest of the book as well as the relationship between the main argument Champagne is making and the chapters on Castelnuovo-Tedesco and Bassani could have been spelled out more clearly. Additionally, I find the use of two novels written in post-Fascist Italy to reframe Fascist masculinities a questionable choice. The book seems to suffer at times from overtheorization, while a more careful historicization would have made Champagne's argument more cogent. A stronger conclusion reiterating the main points made in the book rather than adding more would have also been helpful. However, all in all, Champagne's book is important in pushing us to think about masculinity (and femininity?) in Fascist Italy as contradictory, unstable, and multiple. *Aesthetic Modernism and Masculinity in Fascist Italy* is a provocative study that invites us to be bolder and to continue looking with a queer and queering gaze at the Italian past and present.

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