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Title: Book Review: *Queer Ventennio. Italian Fascism, Homoerotic Art and the Nonmodern in the Modern* by John Champagne

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John Champagne. *Queer Ventennio. Italian Fascism, Homoerotic Art and the Nonmodern in the Modern*.
Oxford: Peter Lang, 2019. Pp. 310. ISBN 9781789972245 (softcover); ISBN
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Although Italian fascism promoted an exasperated ideal of heterosexual and patriarchal virility throughout its twenty years, John Champagne's compelling book shows how some writers and artists of that era—notably Giovanni Comisso, Filippo de Pisis, Corrado Cagli, and Umberto Saba—managed to represent their homoeroticism in ways that did not clash with the official culture of the regime. Indeed, most of these intellectuals were often, if not staunch fascist militants, at least acquiescent to Mussolini's dictatorship. In this sense, Champagne notes how at that time, Italy, unlike other large Western countries (including democratic ones), did not have any punitive legislation against “homosexual acts,” and that despite the regime openly persecuting “effeminate” men, it left enough freedom to male homoeroticism, as long as it did not offend public decency. In this legislative vacuum, queer intellectuals often found a space to express their unconventional desires. Yet they also looked for alternative models of sexuality in the archaic dimension and thereby resorting to myths.

In the Introduction and first chapter, Champagne expertly traces the methodological lines of his research. To begin, he dismisses what he calls “paranoid hermeneutics,” which is that interpretative attitude that tends to identify as *tout court* fascist every cultural product created in the context of Mussolini's regime (15). This critical framework—which instead of identifying fascism as an articulated, contradictory, and conflictual historical phenomenon, flattens any difference between its various manifestations, looking instead for an “essence” capable of inhabiting every time and place—appears unable to account for the complexity of the object of its study. Against this perspective, and against the temptation to reduce the aforementioned authors' works to forms of “homo-fascism,” Champagne calls for the investigation of their “unexpected” qualities. He, therefore, formulates a critical method called *Queer Unhistoricism*, which attempts to be “historical” without being “historicistic”: that is, this method situates the cultural products of interest in their appropriate historical context, without freezing them through the filter of fixed and indubitable parameters. To do this, Champagne proposes five models of male homoeroticism (the “modern sodomite,” the “third-sex model,” the “homosexual,” the “pederastic couple,” and the “warrior-brother”). He employs this set of models in his research, not because they are universal, but because they *de facto* belonged to the way in which the intellectuals he treats perceived desire, sometimes recalling classical Greco-Roman forms of homoeroticism.

In subsequent chapters, Champagne effectively explores several cases. Comisso (1895-1969) is treated first in his works *Gioco d'infanzia* (Childhood Game, 1965) and *Amori d'oriente / Oriental Love in Action* (1949). In these novels, the theme of homoeroticism is conveyed by plots that mix fictional and non-fictional elements. These stories are often filtered through the *topoi* of a pagan and vitalistic myth, and they are complicated by a melodramatic style, orientalist fantasies, glimmering misogyny, and a distinctive sense of humor. Champagne also dedicates several pages to Comisso's participation in the *impresa di Fiume* (The Italian Regency of Carnaro, in 1919-1920), during which homosexuality was widely tolerated. In fact, Comisso offers a precious testimony of the *impresa* with *Il porto dell'amore* (The Seaport of Love, 1924), in which the evocation of the erotic adventures experienced by D'Annunzio's legionaries are mixed with both nationalistic and libertarian stands. What seems to strike Champagne most about Comisso is his anticipation, in narrative form, of many current Queer Theory topics of debate. Champagne also highlights his intrinsic iconoclasm, which leads Comisso not to refuse the patronage of the fascist regime, but neither to take its *grand récit* too seriously.

In the next chapter, Champagne analyzes instead the nude males drawn by de Pisis (1896-1956), as well as his semi-autobiographical erotic-metaphysical novels—*La città dalle 100 meraviglie* (The City of A Hundred Wonders, 1920), *Roma al sole* (Rome Under the Sun) and *Le memorie del marchese pittore* (The Memoirs of the Painter Marquis)—written in the 1930s, but published posthumously in 1994 and 1989, respectively. The author underlines how de Pisis' opus seems to be pervaded by an intense camp sensibility, understood as “an exploration of how value is determined in a capitalist culture” (148). For Champagne, then, de Pisis does not take an open politicized stand, but offers a non-oppositional proposal for the alternative world of “a queer nation” (149).

The case of Cagli (1910-1976) is perhaps the most extreme among those in *Queer Ventennio*. Cagli was first an enthusiastic supporter of the regime (to which he contributed with many artworks, to the point that he is still remembered as one of the main mural painters of the *ventennio*); second, a fugitive in the United States after being persecuted in 1938 because he was a Jew; and, finally, an enlisted soldier in the American army during Second World War. In this sense, his “case illustrates [exemplarily] the way in which the designations fascist/anti-fascist do not always do justice to the complexities of history” (198). Cagli mostly translated his homoeroticism into figurative representations that referred to subjects of classical and biblical mythology. Although fascism also used myth to its advantage, according to Champagne, Cagli's works indicate universal (that is, *not necessarily fascist*) themes such as the original and polygonal essence of desire, the beauty of the male body, and the glorification of human work. In fact, “by definition, myth, primordia, and primitivism are “universal” or at least universalizing; primordia is the provenance of all human life” (200). In this sense, Cagli found in Mussolini's regime a political subject that promoted attention to themes in which he, too, like many other intellectuals at that time, was interested, but which he expressed beyond the ways fascist ideology appropriated them. Champagne notes that also Saba's (1883-1957) short novel, *Ernesto* (1975), seems to convey the same sense of Cagli's use of myth. Published posthumously, this work expressed the idea “that there is something cosmic, mystical, and perhaps even primordial in homoerotic desire” (269-270). In other words, homoeroticism is for both Saba and Cagli a universal occurrence. It is for this reason that, according to Champagne, it can be so effectively represented in the form of myth.

In conclusion, the greatest merit of *Queer Ventennio* lies in its attempt to free the above-mentioned intellectuals from any form of critical reductionism, which could aim to squash the totality of their cultural production to fascist aesthetics. Champagne's attempt is all the more appreciable the more it situates fascism within the broader context of early 20th-century Italian culture, demonstrating how certain archetypes persisted regardless of any specific political orientation. Where Champagne's book seems relatively lacking is in its underdeveloped treatment of fascism itself. In one passage, for instance, the author seems to give in to the temptation of a reductionist hermeneutics, formulating a sort of “metaphysics of fascism,” defining it as a product of the mere “fear of limit experience,” and expressing “by elevating cruelty to a way of life, and by living that cruelty via the literal and absolute destruction of the Other's body” (93). This reads as an oversimplification of an incredibly complex phenomenon. In addition, the bibliography of *Queer Ventennio* is somewhat in need of additional historical contextualization of Italian fascism. The deepening of this subject could have helped the author to stress the *relativism* that characterized Mussolini's movement from the beginning, and which to a certain extent could also explain the level of minimal “tolerance” that made it possible for intellectuals such as Comisso, de Pisis, and Cagli to express their homoeroticism between the folds of an openly homophobic political regime. Nevertheless, this lack naturally does not erase at all the many merits of this excellent work.

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