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Marches on Rome: Historical Events and Creative Transformations

Elizabeth Leake

Introduction

This paper offers a set of observations about a handful of cinematic and literary representations of life in Fascist Italy against the background of the March on Rome and, more in general, of Rome as the stage for the public display and embodiment of Fascist rhetoric. For the historian of Fascist Italy, of course, there are myriad sources to consult on the beginning of Year One of *l'era fascista*, October 28, 1922: personal and official correspondence, archival documents, memoirs of the protagonists, diplomatic reports, report of eyewitnesses, journalistic accounts, and so on. Moreover, the secondary literature is immense. For the scholar of literature and cinema, instead there is considerably less, and in fact the texts I consider here represent much of what actually exists. This material provides a privileged point of view to look at certain dimensions of historical events that are not easily captured by other sources.

Thus this paper takes general knowledge of the historical context of the march for granted, focusing instead on the representational strategies that these texts employ.¹ While I will examine them roughly chronologically, what emerges is a relationship of affective influence, by which I mean that there is an internal logic to their chronological relations: they grow and (d)evolve from the seeds of their predecessors. For analytical purposes, it makes sense to claim a provisional endogenous rationale in which one group of texts emerged from the previous one. But the analytical device is my own. It is not my argument that there is an intentional logic embedded in these texts; there was no plan on the part of the later authors to acknowledge and expand upon what earlier authors had done. Nor can I easily claim that the passing of time has created the necessary conditions for this phased development. More simply, I contend that the texts in this archive can be grouped roughly into three phases. This, however, is not a gratuitous exercise. Grouping them thus helps illuminate questions related to memory about historical events and, more in particular, about the March on Rome.

¹ As mentioned, the historiographical literature on the march on Rome is vast. For obvious reasons, it is not the purpose of this paper to discuss it. Even taking it into account with any pretension of completeness goes beyond its limits. This does not mean that I haven't heavily relied on that body of work as the necessary historiographical counterpoint implicit in my analysis. Besides the texts cited below, see, among many others, Giulia Albanese, *The March on Rome: Violence and the Rise of Italian Fascism*, trans. Sergio Knipe (London: Routledge, 2019); Richard R. B. Bosworth, *Mussolini*, new ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2010); Maura Canali and Clemente Volpini, *Gli uomini della marcia su Roma: Mussolini e i Quadrumviri*, (Milan: Mondadori, 2022); Patrizia Dogliani, *Il fascismo degli italiani: una storia sociale* (Turin: UTET, 2008); Patrizia Dogliani, *L'Italia fascista, 1922–1940* (Milan: Sansoni, 1990); Marcello Flores and Giovanni Gozzini, *Perché il fascismo è nato in Italia* (Rome: Edizioni Laterza, 2022); Mimmo Franzinelli, *Squadristi* (Trent: Oscar Mondadori, 2009); Emilio Gentile, *Fascismo: storia e interpretazione* (Rome: Edizioni Laterza, 2002); Eric Hobsbawm, *Il secolo breve* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2006); Adrian Lyttelton, *La conquista del potere: il fascismo dal 1919–1929* (Rome: Edizioni Laterza, 1982); Salvatore Lupo, *Il fascismo: la politica in un regime totalitario* (Rome: Donzelli, 2000); Antonino Repaci, *La Marcia su Roma* (Milan: Rizzoli Editore, 1971); Claudio Segrè, *Italo Balbo: A Fascist Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Angelo Tasca, *Nascita e avvento del fascismo: l'Italia dall'armistizio alla marcia su Roma* (Venice: Neri Pozza, [1938] 2021); Pier Giorgio Zunino, *Interpretazione e memoria del fascismo: gli anni del regime* (Rome: Edizioni Laterza, 1991).

The ideological stakes are most explicit in the earliest texts, made by contemporaries of the march, more or less within the decade of its occurrence. These are Umberto Paradisi's 1922 documentary *A noi! (To us!)*, Emilio Lussu's political memoir *Marcia su Roma e dintorni* (1931, *March on Rome and its Outskirts*), and the films *Camicia nera (Blackshirt)* by Giovacchino Forzano (1933) and *La vecchia guardia (The Old Guard)* by Alessandro Blasetti (1934). In other words, to state the obvious, these are texts that take the march extremely seriously. In a second phase, an overlapping body of texts shifts the focus from substance to process; these do not necessarily assess whether or how the march was important; rather, they emphasize how contingent it was, and how disappointing. These include again Paradisi's documentary *A noi!*, as well as Gian Carlo Fusco's book *Mussolini e le donne* (1973, *Mussolini and Women*), Giacinto Reale's collection of memoirs *La marcia su Roma: racconti squadristi di lotta e di rivoluzione* (2021, *The March on Rome: Squadristi Accounts of Struggle and Revolution*), and Antonio Scurati's novel *M. Figlio del secolo* (2018, *M. Son of the Century*).

Later still, films in the third phase will depict the march as something quite ridiculous: Dino Risi's *La marcia su Roma* (1962), Augusto Tretti's 1971 *Il potere*, and Nanni Moretti's *Aprile* (1998). In this second transition, moreover, we will observe how the March on Rome becomes one particularly important instance of the broader category of marches, in the plural, making it less exceptional than its original supporters—and detractors—believed; not only is the March on Rome ridiculed, but insofar as it is part of a series of marches that in turn are ridiculed as well, its singularity is diminished. Later, I will argue that observations such as these make for slippery terrain to the extent that they minimize the march's actual significance (if it was not so important, why the fuss, why call it a scandal, an outrage, an assault on democracy, and so on). And this, ultimately, is part of my point—that ridicule may or may not lead to reckoning.

Discussing these sources in this sequenced organization does not mean that the trajectory is strictly linear. As we will see, Emilio Lussu's 1931 *Marcia su Roma e dintorni* uses ridicule as a political tool with which to counter the bombast of Fascist rhetoric—but not because it does not see the march as a serious political threat. And the question of disappointment belongs, as mentioned, to analyses of the contingency of the march, but is also an ingredient of ridiculing representations. Moreover, it is not limited to a particular moment in time; Mark Cousins's 2022 film *Marcia su Roma* also deals explicitly with the affective fallout of the failure of Fascism to reach the positive potential insinuated by films like *A noi!*. In broad strokes, a diachronic examination of these texts nonetheless reveals the ways in which each contains, *in nuce*, the covert elements that will characterize their successors. Thus understandings of the march that posit an uncertain outcome contain the seeds of readings of the march as a disappointment; these, in turn, enable a later reading of the march—and marches more in general—as risible enterprises doomed to humiliating failure.²

The goal of my examination is to understand what these different depictions teach us about the march. Although historians have long recognized satire, irony, mockery and parody—which share some of the features of ridicule—as legitimate objects of critical examination, disappointment, too, can be a compelling entry in the historiographical archive, both illuminating events themselves and offering space for reflection on the political potential of collective identity formations rooted in affect.

² There are also, predictably, a number of texts that reference the march *en passant*, like Totò's *Destinazione Piovareolo* (1956), and the later *Totò Diabolico* (1962), in which he makes a pun on the similarities between *marxista* (Marxist) and *marcista* (marcher). Similarly, there are films that employ the march as a simplistic plot device with which to justify a character's travel to Rome (see Mario Chiari's episode, *Dopoguerra 1920*, in *Amori di mezzo secolo*, 1954).

For though as an analytical instrument disappointment shares the limits of the affective turn in the social sciences, it can be useful nonetheless as a source of insight into the nature of relations between the political and the social fields after the March. Understood as “social-psychological space that exists in between and through individuals and in which patterns of interpersonal and collective behavior are embedded,” the social field is by definition fluid, creating and undoing libidinal investments, alliances, and antagonisms.³ Though the terms of his argument are different, Gramsci recognized the centrality of affect in the political sphere: “L’errore dell’intellettuale consiste nel credere che si possa sapere senza comprendere e specialmente senza sentire ed esser appassionato” (The intellectual’s error consists in believing that one can know without understanding and, especially, without feeling and being impassioned).⁴ Affect (*essere appassionato*, in Gramsci’s language; public *involvement*, for social scientist Albert Hirschman; *the passions*, in Chantal Mouffe’s work, which has been central to my thinking here) is foundational to the formation of the collective affinities on which social and political identities are based.⁵ The emergence of disappointment as a key term in literary and cinematic representations of the march after it took place makes plain three things. First, it underscores Fascism’s supreme ability to mobilize passion in the construction of political subjects. Second, it elucidates the repercussions for relations among Fascists of the modification or withdrawal of affect, that is, the ways the march caused Fascist alliances to change from within. Finally, it clarifies that withdrawal is nonetheless not succeeded by conversion; the Fascists disappointed in the outcome of the march did not consequently turn to antifascism. If passion makes fast one set of social-political identities, disappointment is distinct for the ways it unmoors them, loosening previously strong alliances and reappraising their significance.

The March as a Momentous Event

Emilio Lussu’s *Marcia su Roma e dintorni* was written in 1931 and immediately translated and disseminated abroad; the Italian edition came out in 1933. Like in his *La catena (The Chain)*, published in 1930, and his *Un anno sull’Altipiano (A Soldier on the Southern Front)* from 1937, Lussu’s goal in these memoirs is expressly pedagogical. Using irony, sarcasm, and a subjective perspective, he aims to educate his readers about the dangers of Fascism. In *Marcia su Roma*, Lussu deals very parsimoniously with the march. He refers to the fact that it was originally Gabriele d’Annunzio’s idea; he mentions Prime Minister Luigi Facta’s talk with the king, Vittorio Emanuele III; Facta’s insistence that the march be considered an insurrection; the king’s refusal; Facta’s resignation, creating a power vacuum; and the king’s invitation to Mussolini to form a government. But the argument ends there, and if the discussion of the reaction of the government and the king is synthetic, to say the least, the description of the march itself is virtually absent. Lussu also recounts that at first there were doubts about whether or not the “March on Rome” was just a figure of speech, a metaphor for a Fascist entry into power. Clearly, he conveyed the idea that the event itself had been all but spectacular. In doing so, not only does Lussu prefigure what

³ Eva Pomeroy and Lukas Herrmann, “Social Fields: Knowing the Water We Swim in,” *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, Online advanced publication, May 15, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00218863231174957>.

⁴ Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), 3:1505. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

⁵ Albert O. Hirschman, *Shifting Involvements: Private Interest and Public Action* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); Chantal Mouffe, *Politica e passioni: il ruolo degli affetti nella prospettiva agonistica* (Rome: Lit Edizioni, 2021).

would become a subsequent attitude about the march, namely, that it was the result of contingency, but suggests that it was in essence irrelevant. Fascism had seized power, but its foundational myth, the march, was poppycock. Taking seriously the possibility that the March on Rome was simply an expression rather than an actual planned event means denying it any claim not just to inevitability but also to legitimacy as an enterprise of substance and moment. And in fact, in spite of its role front and center in the book's title, the March on Rome is conspicuously absent from Lussu's book, which is primarily concerned with the "dintorni," the outskirts, that is, with the specifics of Fascist authoritarianism, episodes of Blackshirts' violence, including the attack on his house and his own arrest, and the discussion of Fascist attitudes and typical behaviors. In other words, though the book deals very directly with its repercussions, the March stands in metonymic relation to the events it engenders. It is a shorthand term for Fascism's rise to power—a figurative expression, effectively.

This is not the case with a film from the same period, Blasetti's *Vecchia guardia*, which focusses much more closely on the march. This film is a hagiographic vehicle for the message of the glories of sacrifice. The film centers on the activities of Fascists and their families on the eve of the March on Rome in a small Italian city. The squadristi are led by an attractive, responsible young man from a respectable family. His younger brother Mario is a scamp who serves as a kind of mascot for the squadristi and who longs to grow up quickly in order to be able to join them in their activities. Just after he sneaks onto the truck as it is leaving to carry the Fascists to Rome, Mario is shot and killed, becoming the first Fascist martyr of the march. His memory lives on, inciting the brothers' elderly father to espouse the Fascist cause and join the convoy heading toward Rome in spite of his age, infirmities, and professional responsibilities. In *Vecchia guardia*, Mario's tragic sacrifice serves to tighten family bonds vertically, across generations, and horizontally, as Mario's older brother and his sweetheart become engaged on the eve of the march. More importantly, it conveys the message of the inseparability of Fascist and family life.

Blasetti, of course, was beloved by the regime, and this film contributed to his reputation as a brilliant fabulist of political awakenings (see the films *Sole* [1929] and *1860* [1934], for example); *Vecchia guardia*'s small town setting, its apparently unexceptional family, and especially its message of Fascist political engagement as the natural evolution of family feeling endowed the film with a broad appeal while depicting Fascism as coterminous with, and in the service of, the traditional family. The march recapitulates all these meanings by underscoring the social cohesiveness of its participants, their compassion, and the redoubling of their individual political commitments, in whatever forms those may take.

Another film, Forzano's 1933 *Camicia nera* (*Blackshirt*) follows a little boy and his rural family over the decades, beginning when the boy's father, a blacksmith (shades of Benito), leaves to fight in World War I, is wounded, and loses his memory. His family awaits his return, which occurs after the sight of an Italian flag jolts him euphorically back to awareness. Subsequently, the story of the family runs apace with the story of Fascism, following the blacksmith's return as a veteran, and ending with his son's full ascent to Fascist manhood. Though elided in the events between the Biennio Rosso (1919–21) and the elections of November 1922, the march stands as the turning point between an era of radical social and political turmoil and one of increasing order and well-being, starting immediately in Fascism's first year. In *Camicia nera*, Fascism is portrayed as inevitable a political maturation as is the boy's biological maturation. Just as surely as the little boy (and the little flag he carries) will grow, Fascism will inexorably sweep the nation and uplift it. In other words, as in *Vecchia guardia*, the inseparability of family life and Fascism—the superimposition of social and political identities—are front and center, here grafted onto the

metaphor of maturation. Unlike in Lussu's book, in both *Vecchia guardia* and *Camicia nera* the March on Rome is much more than an expression—it is unstoppable and life-altering, like a force of nature.

The March as the Result of Contingency

Despite their differences, all three of these texts are founded on the conviction that the March on Rome marked a watershed moment in Italian history. Both *Camicia nera* and *Vecchia guardia* were produced with the goal of promoting Fascism. They depict the march's snowball effect as even children and the elderly scramble to take part alongside the young and vigorous—it was inevitable, these films seem to say, that Fascism would grow, gain speed, and cover increasing terrain.

And yet the element of contingency involved in the march's execution was well known to those who were at least initially opposed to it. Like Giolitti, King Vittorio Emanuele, as well as Orlando, Amendola, and Nitti, all felt that a policy of appeasement was the best line of defense. Allowing Mussolini to enter into a coalition would, it was hoped, both prevent a revolution and permit competing liberal parliamentarians to “scuttle each other,” as Denis Mack Smith puts it.⁶ What remained to be seen was whether the king would agree to declare a state of emergency. (Yes.) Would he actually sign the decree and make the state of emergency official? (No.) Would Facta resign in time for a new government to form that would keep Mussolini out of it? (No; he resigned too late.) So, borrowing terms from Michael André Bernstein, where the early films express *backshadowing* (meaning that the success of the march was inevitable in hindsight, so we should have known better than to underestimate its impact), the historical record, instead, suggests *sideshadowing*—the march consisted of a concatenation of events, each of which might have gone differently and thereby changed the outcome.⁷

Mack Smith describes the march as a strategic gamble; though the outcome was never at stake, the public relations optics most decidedly were. Though Mussolini was appointed prime minister,

[he] was not satisfied with something so unspectacular as a royal appointment. He needed to develop the myth of a march on Rome by 300,000 armed fascists to enforce an “ultimatum” he had given the king, and eventually a legend was invented of Mussolini on horseback leading his legions across the Rubicon. In reality there were fewer than 300,000 fascist militiamen ready to march, many of whom had no arms at all and would have been quite unable to stand up to the garrison troops in Rome with their machine guns and armoured cars; indeed 400 policemen proved sufficient to hold up the fascist trains long before they reached Rome. Mussolini subsequently admitted this in private with amused satisfaction. His fascist squads did not arrive in Rome until 24 hours after he had been asked to form a government, and only after General Pugliese had orders to let them through. But the photographers were waiting to picture their arrival and the myth was launched of fascism winning power by an armed insurrection after a civil war and the loss of

⁶ Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 51.

⁷ Michael André Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018).

3,000 men. These fictitious 3,000 “fascist martyrs” soon took their place in the government-sponsored history books.⁸

Similarly, the documentary of the march officially sanctioned by the Fascist party, Paradisi’s *A noi!* (1922), starts out with a story of the March as a milestone in political mobilization—but it ends much more prosaically. Combining footage of another documentary (*A Napoli coi fascisti d’Italia* [*In Naples with the Fascists of Italy*]), with new footage from all around Italy, the film is divided into three parts. The first shows hundreds and hundreds of Blackshirts of all ages striding purposefully, but not joylessly, in unison. Their orderly processions are followed by enthusiastic crowds in many parts of Italy: Naples, Sicily, Puglia, Dalmazia, Trieste, the Veneto, Abruzzi and Molise, Emilia Romagna, Lazio, and more. The cameras are stationary, giving the impression that the waves of marchers are endless and inexorable. In the second part, marchers travel toward Rome on multiple means of transport. But once they arrive, their time is clearly their own, and the order that characterized their travels devolves as they eat, drink, and write letters home.

In the third reel the documentary seems at a loss as to what to do with the marchers. The new government has been formed, and the focus shifts to Mussolini’s activities. The marchers are not absent from these scenes; rather, they are either kept far in the background of the shots, providing a faceless mass of Fascist supporters, or they are shown sitting around, wandering about, and chatting together. Wherever Mussolini is, the film seems to reveal against its own will, the marchers are not. In the third section, the documentary almost completely loses interest in them, focusing instead on urban architectural spaces, such as the Quirinale and the Vittoriano, deployed to underscore the connection between Fascism and ancient imperial Rome. Perhaps none of this is surprising; after all, Paradisi evinces a clear understanding of the rhetorical moves crucial to the film’s success as a party vehicle, namely an emphasis on the national character of support for Fascism. His film shows us Blackshirts from all around Italy, with extra attention given to the territories “redeemed” in World War I, along with a focus on Rome not just as the party’s rightful political home as the seat of the government, but as its symbolic home as the site *par excellence* of Italian empire. Important for the purposes of this argument, however, are the ways the marchers are initially exalted—for a solid third of the film—then dropped unceremoniously. Having reached their destination, there was nothing left for them to do but wait for orders. “Now what?” they seem to ask. Turning the film’s attention away from the marchers, Paradisi effectively undercuts the film’s earlier position about their crucial role as protagonists of the events.

Though the film’s story (what happens) and the narrative discourse it uses to tell the story (the temporal logic of departure, travel, and arrival) progress in apparently unmediated collusion, thereby naturalizing the successful conclusion of the sequence of events, the film’s structure addresses the question of contingency nonetheless. The filmmaker’s emphasis on the processes of the march belies the shift from a focus on order, symmetry, and goal orientation (reels one and two) to images of Brownian motion unconnected by any clear narrative motivation besides the broad, overarching mandate to represent the days of and after the march (reel three). In doing so, the film underscores the impact of the unpredictability of human activity. What began as order devolved into disorder. If the marchers were initially the interesting thing about the march, they proved in the end to be an only temporary, secondary concern for the film.

Thus, contrary to its ostensible intentions, *A noi!* reminds us of the fragility of the gamble or *coup de théâtre* that the March on Rome ultimately was. But then again, serendipity is a central

⁸ Mack Smith, *Mussolini*, 54.

feature of all revolutions and coups. As social scientist and inveterate *possibilista* Albert Hirschman eloquently put it:

Following in detail the process of a revolution gives us a strong feeling...for the many might-have-beens of history, for narrowly and disastrously missed opportunities as well as for felicitous and surprising escapes from disaster; as a result, the event-minded historian is less likely than the sociologist to declare that, given such and such a structural condition, the outcome was preordained.⁹

Even the March's official emissary, presumably against his own intentions for the film, cannot avoid an almost Hirschmanesque awareness that things might have gone differently.

Mark Cousins's 2022 documentary *Marcia su Roma* implicitly makes a similar point in its analysis of the many cinematographic interventions performed by Paradisi in his film. Cousins's point is that the edits, which are numerous and egregiously in the service of Fascist propaganda, move *A noi!* out of the orbit of documentary and into the realm of fiction. Not a dispassionate recording of the events of the march, *A Noi!*'s editing strategies serve the express political purpose of glorifying the march as a massive and unqualified success, as Cousins's analysis convincingly demonstrates. This emphasis on the blatant manipulation of visual sources shows how much Paradisi had to work in order to create his image of the march as the adamantine fundament of the Fascist era. It is not my contention that Paradisi made a blunder, but rather that he was operating largely in real time. A century later Cousins shows that for Paradisi, too, the march in fact could have ended differently, not with a bang but with a whimper.

The March as a Disappointment

The political motivations of Paradisi's assertive editing are clearly for the greater glory of the march; what interests me are the bets that he is hedging. In this, *A noi!* deviates from the message of several of the texts produced during the Ventennio by supporters of Fascism, like *Camicia nera* and *Vecchia guardia*, for which the key terms would seem to be momentum and inevitability. But after the fall of Fascism a number of literary and cinematic texts endorsed the covert narrative that undergirds *A noi!*, in which the march was not the deciding factor that led inexorably to Mussolini's entry into the government, but rather one of a series of events whose outcomes were up for grabs.¹⁰ When it is the marchers themselves who are doing the writing, the march itself is seen not only as the fruit of contingency, but also as anticlimactic in its effects. This second set of texts, written by supporters of Fascism, glosses over the march not the better to emphasize its glorious results à la *Camicia nera*, but rather to express the disappointment of the marchers after the fact.

It is crucial to note that disappointment is not connected in any way to anti-Fascism. On the contrary, the texts' interlocutors are strictly intramural. For example, in a recent collection of Blackshirts' memories, a nostalgic operation by an author in the orbit of neofascist Casa Pound

⁹ Albert O. Hirschman at a 1980 conference talk, "In Defense of Possibilism," quoted in Michele Alacevich, *Albert O. Hirschman: An Intellectual Biography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 102.

¹⁰ Similarly, Lussu's downplaying of the importance of the march, like his initial remark about whether it was simply a rhetorical expression, not an actual historical episode, and his focus on the *dintorni* instead, suggests that the assumption of inevitability was not shared by all contemporaries. Lussu thus anticipates the narrative that gained momentum after the fall of Fascism.

movement in Rome, the feeling of disappointment is explicit and palpable. One marcher, writing in 1925, noted

È troppo presto per prevedere come si orienteranno i giudizi della storia intorno all'esito su ricordato (della Marcia); ma è certo che molti fascisti hanno appreso con doloroso stupore la decisione di Mussolini. Avevano trascurato i loro affari, accettato una disciplina ferrea, rischiato la vita, anche sanguinato, convinti di fare, o almeno preparare una rivoluzione, e si accorgevano di aver provocato una comunissima crisi parlamentare!

It's too early to predict how history will judge the success [of the march]; but what's certain is that many Fascists were pained and surprised by Mussolini's decision [to send them home immediately after the March]. They had neglected their work, they had submitted to iron-clad discipline, risked their lives, even shed blood, convinced that they were making—or at least preparing—a revolution, only to realize they had instead merely provoked a banal parliamentary crisis!¹¹

For another, writing in 1939,

Eravamo come smarriti e svuotati del nostro spirito d'azione e d'entusiasmo, come offesi ed umiliati dall'avvenimento che ignoravamo nei suoi particolari, e che si era conchiuso all'infuori di noi, i quali, in quel momento, sospettavamo di essere stati deviati sopra un binario morto, misera riserva di truppa o di ricalzo, nell'ora decisiva della battaglia...Era questa dunque la rivoluzione? A quell'età avevamo ancora un concetto decisamente romantico della rivoluzione, e eravamo partiti dalle nostre case con sentimenti che fortemente contrastavano con quella soluzione che ci parve, quella notte, troppo borghese, burocratica, ufficiale.

It's as though we were lost and emptied of our spirit of action, of enthusiasm, as though we had been offended and humiliated by an event whose details were unknown to us and that had taken place without us, outside of us, [so that] we had the suspicion of having been sidetracked like miserable reserve troops or reinforcements right at the decisive moment of battle...Was this the revolution? At that age we still had a decidedly romantic view of revolution, and we had left home with feelings that conflicted strongly with an outcome that seemed to us too bourgeois, too bureaucratic, too official.¹²

Despite the glaring differences in the intentions, historical context, and formal qualities of Reale's and Paradisi's projects, both countenance the question of disappointment, whether explicitly or implicitly. Reale seems to pick up where Paradisi leaves off with the marchers, giving them voice after the dust has settled and the effects of the march have become clear.

Others, too, writing at very different historical moments and from ideological positions quite distant from those expressed in Reale's book or in the films, describe the same profound sense of

¹¹ Giacinto Reale, *La marcia su Roma: racconti squadristi di lotta e di rivoluzione* (Florence: Passaggio al Bosco 2021), 321. Passaggio al Bosco is associated with the Italian neofascist movement known as Casa Pound.

¹² *Ibid.*, 322.

disappointment among the squadristi from almost the minute the march was over. Consider the way Gian Carlo Fusco, who was a journalist and screenwriter in the 1960s and 1970s, known in particular for his biting sarcasm, puts it in his 1973 novel, *Mussolini e le donne*. He, too, characterizes the march not as the beginning of a new era but the end of an old one, after which the marchers were unceremoniously demobilized for fear that their laddish behavior (and worse) might sully the new prime minister's reputation:¹³

La prima preoccupazione di Mussolini, subito dopo la marcia su Roma, fu levarsi dai piedi i "marciatori." Rispedendo a casa, con una manciata di scudi e molte belle promesse, tutti quei tipi...che avevano già cominciato a mettere in agitazione le notti romane. La mattina del 30 ottobre, a sole 48 ore dal "trionfale ingresso" nella capitale, tutti i muri della città apparvero letteralmente ricoperti di manifesti tricolori, sui quali si leggeva: "Fascisti! Il Quadrumvirato Supremo d'Azione...vi ringrazia per la magnifica prova di coraggio e di disciplina e vi saluta...Smobilitate con lo stesso ordine perfetto col quale vi siete raccolti per il grande cimento, destinato—lo crediamo—ad aprire una nuova epoca nella storia italiana. Tornate alle consuete opere, perché l'Italia ha—ora—bisogno di lavorare tranquillamente per attingere le sue maggiori fortune. Viva l'Italia! Viva il Fascismo!"

Quella specie di benservito, così sbrigativo e perentorio, suscitò, negli interessati, un profondo senso di delusione e di malumore. Ma a parte alcune timide manifestazioni di protesta e qualche caso di aperta ribellione...le squadre si lasciarono caricare, piuttosto docilmente, sulle tradotte in partenza dalle stazioni suburbane di Roma-Trastevere and Roma-Tuscolana.

Mussolini's first concern right after the March on Rome was to get rid of the "marchers," sending [them] home—with a handful of coins and lots of nice promises...On the morning of October 30, only 48 hours after the "triumphal entrance" into the capital, all the walls of the city were literally covered with tricolor placards that read "Fascists! The Supreme Quadrumvirate...thanks you for your magnificent display of courage and discipline, and salutes you...Demobilize with the same perfect order with which you gathered for the great trial, destined, we believe, to open a new epoch in Italian history. Return to your usual occupations because Italy now must work calmly to reach its goals. Long live Italy! Long live Fascism!"

Being given the boot like that, so hastily and peremptorily, produced a deep sense of disappointment and bad feelings among those involved. But apart from a few timid protests and a handful of cases of open rebellion...the squads allowed themselves to be loaded docilely onto the military trains departing from the... Rome-Trastevere and Rome-Tuscolana stations.¹⁴

¹³ Film history bears out Mussolini's desire to extricate the narrative of his ascent from the march, or rather, the marchers; the march is almost never depicted in films of the 1930s and 1940s because Mussolini was eager to distance the party from its squadrista origins. Besides *Camicia nera* and *Vecchia guardia*, a significant exception is *Redenzione* (1943, dir. Marcello Albani), written by none other than Roberto Farinacci; it ends with the protagonist's conversion from communism to Fascism, symbolized by his joining the march.

¹⁴ Gian Carlo Fusco, *Mussolini e le donne* (Palermo: Sellerio, 2006), 61–62.

Fusco's satirical tone notwithstanding, what he describes is a sense of having been instrumentalized for a goal not shared—that is, the marchers contributed to an outcome that they had not sought and found utterly uninteresting (a cabinet change instead of a revolution), and were not even thanked for it, as it were.

Writing forty-five years later in his novel *M. figlio del secolo* (2018, *M. Son of the Century* [2022]), Antonio Scurati describes the surprise of the exhausted marchers who suddenly find themselves rejected by the forces whose victory they helped to enable:

Stremati dalla stanchezza subentrata alla tensione nervosa, scalcianti come cani in chiesa, dopo aver macinato altri chilometri per le vie del capitale [...] senza nemmeno accorgersene, gli squadristi del fascismo, i protagonisti carnali di una storia fantasma, si erano ritrovati in treno a masticare i succhi gastrici della loro vittoria.

After racking up additional miles throughout the streets of the capital... the fascist squadristi—overcome by exhaustion that had taken over from nervous tension, kicked out like dogs in church, the flesh and blood protagonists of a phantom story—found themselves on the train before they knew it, bitterly swallowing the gastric juices of their victory.¹⁵

These narratives, written at very different moments by very different actors, express the common sentiment that the marchers were essentially used and then thrown away, instrumentalized for their willingness to embody the threat of physical violence behind the projected coup. As we have noted, there were two iterations of the contingency narrative after the war: “the march could have failed” (Paradisi, Lussu, Cousins, each in different ways), and “the march was irrelevant because Mussolini was poised to enter the government one way or another.” Insofar as both narratives discount the contribution of the marchers, it is not hard to imagine that they might have exacerbated the feelings of disappointment of the participants: first they were told by Mussolini that they were no longer needed; and then historical accounts contended that their participation had ultimately been irrelevant to the outcome.

Nor is disappointment the exclusive preserve of the rank and file. One year after the march, Fascist quadrumvirs Cesare Maria De Vecchi and Italo Balbo both expressed frustration at its outcome (“was the Revolution carried out for you alone, or for all of us?” Balbo wrote to Mussolini in 1923).¹⁶ Attilio Teruzzi (vice president of the Partito Nazionale Fascista in 1923) resented that Mussolini had immediately placed the party in a secondary position to the government prefects. As Victoria De Grazia puts it: “Teruzzi, like many Fascists, had fallen for the fantasy that fascism was a political revolution, that it would get rid of the old ruling class and make way for them. He was not alone. That Mussolini had sold out to the bourgeoisie, the Church, or the monarchy was routine talk.”¹⁷ Whether framed as a personal or a political disappointment (and we can fairly assume that there was considerable slippage between the two), we note the effect of the teleological thinking being rehearsed here. Irrespective of its articulation in a memoir or fictional form, both

¹⁵ Antonio Scurati, *M. Il figlio del secolo* (Milan: Bompiani, 2018), 598; *M. Son of the Century* (New York: Harper, 2022), 545–47.

¹⁶ Victoria De Grazia, *The Perfect Fascist: A Story of Love, Power, and Morality in Mussolini's Italy* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 83.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

kinds of accounts employ a subject in space and time. Thus a narrative that concludes “in the end, my presence might not have mattered/didn’t matter” is one that at once endorses a collective history that expunges personal agency, on the one hand, and reinstates collective history at the center of personal narrative, on the other, in the very same gesture. It sets the terms for a withdrawal of emotional investment in Fascist leadership on the part of the marchers without the promise of a substitute in which to reinvest.

The March as Ridiculous

The step from the glorification of the marchers to an emphasis on their disappointment was short but has interesting and long-lasting repercussions, as the theme of the disappointment of the marchers was transformed into a robust subgenre: the ridiculous march. Not necessarily centered on Rome, these are contemporary iterations of the theme of the March on Rome that play with its tropes in order to deflate its triumphant rhetoric. No longer focused closely on the marchers, it is marches themselves that are demonstrated to be risible enterprises, for the ways they establish expectations for political change, which then spectacularly fail to materialize.

Consider, for example, *Amori di mezzo secolo*, episode 3 (“Dopoguerra 1920,” directed by Mario Chiari, 1954), in which Alberto Sordi portrays a small-town Blackshirt so committed that his every expression—even in love—is a Fascist slogan; once he arrives in Rome, however, he spends all his time in a nightclub wooing the dancers. Or Dino Risi’s 1962 film, *La Marcia su Roma* (*The March on Rome*), in which old friends played by Vittorio Gassman (he’s a down-and-out veteran who joins the party soon after it is formed) and Ugo Tognazzi (a farmer) meet up by chance and decide to join the Fascists as they travel to Rome in a convoy from Orte (a hill town fifty miles north of Rome). The journey toward Rome depicted in *Camicia nera* as an unstoppable force of destiny here is blocked by, among other things, a flock of sheep, a herd of cows, and an oxcart. Instead of Fascist tenets being fully interiorized and implemented, as in the earlier films, Tognazzi and Gassman regularly cross items off a scroungy crumpled list of the elements of the Fascist platform dating from the 1919 founding of the Fascist Party in Milan’s Piazza San Sepolcro. And far from evincing the almost hieratic commitment undertaken by Mario’s father and brother in *Vecchia guardia*, our characters do nothing but inflict—and themselves suffer—a series of indignities, to the point that they lament: “Chi eravamo prima? Io uno zero e tu un altro zero. E adesso? Un paio di zeri” (Who were we before? I was a zero and you were another zero. And now? A couple of zeros.) Fed up with the whole ordeal, the two sarcastically refer to the Fascist slogan “O Roma o morte” (either Rome or death) with their own decidedly less dramatic slogan, “O Roma o Orte” (either Rome or Orte), and abandon the March.

With Augusto Tretti’s grotesque 1971 comedy *Il potere* (*Power*) we move from the realm of ridiculous to the realm of the demential. The episode devoted to the rise of Fascism depicts a march of six old men, of whom several used to sell chickens in their shops, accompanied by a puppy. Though the road to Rome passes in front of their town, they at first take it in the wrong direction, slumping slowly and painfully away from the city before reversing course. When they eventually arrive at their destination, the king himself, wearing a foil crown with an elastic chin strap like a children’s birthday party hat, opens to them the “Porte di Roma” (Gates of Rome). Later in the episode, when Fascism has given way to postwar democracy, they don’t miss a beat, becoming absurdly rich by selling industrially produced chickens. Plus ça change.

Or consider Ettore Scola’s 1977 film *Una giornata particolare* (*A Special Day*), which is set against the backdrop not of the March on Rome but of Hitler’s visit to Rome in May 1938. Though

all of Rome is agog with the arrival of Hitler, complete with a review of the troops and impassioned throngs of spectators, once the apartment building empties out we see little more of the historic meeting of dictators. Ultimately the film is more interested in the idea of Sofia Loren's character having sex with a stranger, played by Marcello Mastroianni. Mastroianni's character, we learn, must depart for internal exile at the end of the day. But for the rest of the characters (Loren, her numerous Fascist family members, and the Fascist inhabitants of the massive apartment building in which they live) at the end of the day nothing has changed. Taken together, these films point to two overlapping themes: the march as ridiculous (or indeed demented), and the march as an anti-climax. Gassman and Tognazzi are still zeros; the old men sold overpriced chickens before and after; and, though a different march, nothing has really changed at the end of the "special day."

Perhaps the clearest example of the tendency to ridicule the concept of the march is Nanni Moretti's 1998 *Aprile*. Against the backdrop of the elections of April 1996, the victory of Silvio Berlusconi and the famous "sdoganamento" (official sanction) of the Fascists—that is, the entry into the government coalition of Alleanza Nazionale (the new name of the Movimento Sociale Italiano, the party of reference for postwar Italian neofascism)—Moretti's character struggles to realize a film about the current Italian political situation. Umberto Bossi and members of the Lega Nord are planning to declare the secession of Northern Italy, which they call "Padania," from the rest of the nation. To do so, they organize not a march on Rome but a flotilla that converges on Venice—three days of navigation down the river Po to reach the Lagoon, where the independence of Padania will be solemnly declared. Though Moretti is afraid that he and his camera crew will be mowed down by an armada of boats on the river, their fears are unfounded; there are only a little ferry and a motorboat to contend with. These are blasting music from their speakers, some of the boaters are waving flags and hands, and the whole thing looks more like a cut-rate pleasure cruise for elderly retirees than a revolution. Later, in Venice, there are more boats and more supporters, but Moretti can't be bothered to show up himself to film the rally. After this, he abandons the project on Italian politics to make a musical about a Trotskyist pastry maker in the 1950s. Moretti's ultimate loss of interest conveys a clear message: the threat of a Fascist resurgence is real, but its expression as a modern-day march borders on the pathetic.¹⁸

If disappointment in an event stems from an originary reverence for it, ridicule would seem to take as its targets both the event and the disappointment it produces. Whereas the films of Scola, Moretti, and Risi present the marches themselves as risible and pathetic (or totally absurd, in Tretti's case) for the ways in which they fall miserably short of producing the change they promised, their gullible protagonists, too, are subject to critique, for having bought into the promise in the first instance. Seen in that light, ridicule might be considered positive for the ways in which it invites self-questioning: and yet none of our protagonists seem to have learned anything, making the marches double failures.

¹⁸ Somewhat facetiously, I note an American variation on the *marcetta ridicola*. This one, which depicts not Fascist Blackshirts but neo-Nazis in brownshirt, and is not an attempted revolution but a protest picket, can be found in *The Blues Brothers* (John Landis, 1980). The group in question here is the Illinois chapter of the American Socialist White People's Party (or a-s-w-p-p/asswipe for short). In Nazi uniform, tight formation and carrying flags with swastikas, they hold up traffic, including the car in which Jake and Elwood Blues (the Blues Brothers, played by John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd) are travelling. Jake, himself hardly a model citizen, mutters, with a mix of disdain and boredom, "I hate Illinois Nazis," and Elwood guns the engine, the car lurches forward and the protesters leap comically into the river. The connection to my argument, of course, is loose; I mention the scene to point out how thoroughly the elements of a ridiculous march have entered into pop culture: the pomp, the bellicose postures, the (ostensibly) audacious spirit, the parading, and the square jaws initially displayed by the Nazis that here turn abruptly into a desperate, chaotic retreat.

Imaginative Understandings

What kind of work do these texts perform when they represent their respective marches? They are of course not histories but rather what we might call, with E. H. Carr, “imaginative structures” through which unexpected and unexamined aspects of the past emerge. Of these, I want to focus on what their insistent *diminuzio anti-aulico*—moving from the sublime to the disappointing to the absurd—teaches us.

As we have seen, Fusco and Reale are explicit about disappointment, as is Scurati when he concludes his discussion of the March with a bitter comment about hungry marchers “swallowing the gastric juices of their victory.” Scola implies it indirectly in the forlornness with which Antonietta’s *giornata particolare* ends; she slumps despondently into her chair after her family returns, not exalted by the day’s events but rather unchanged in their boorishness. Risi goes further, ending his film with a brief scene in which the king, on the balcony of the Quirinale as the marchers pass, asks the admiral next to him what he thinks of the Fascists: “Crede che mettiamo il paese in buone mani? Mi dica fuori dai denti quale è il suo parere perché siamo ancora in tempo a sbatterli fuori”(Will the country be in good hands? Tell me truthfully, because there’s still time to get rid of them). The king ultimately concludes that inaction is the best course to follow: “Ma sì, proviamoli per qualche mese” (Okay, we’ll try them out for a few months). Revolution, in these texts, far from foreclosing reaction, only begets it.

What these texts demonstrate are some of the ways that ridicule or derision can elucidate aspects of an event through its imaginative reconstruction. Those failed marches, those ridiculous marches, and the mini genre that they engender: these, too, are instructive not in spite of being cultural artefacts, but rather precisely because they are cultural artefacts. With historical accounts, the march appears as the result of a highly contingent concatenation of facts; with aesthetic products, it figures as a symbol. But that does not disqualify such marches from contributing to the historic record. Instead, with Carr, we note that history is not a recording, but an evaluating, of events: we cannot dispense with the need for interpretation. In other words, if history’s “meaning” becomes “implicit and self-evident,” then what matters is the “primacy and autonomy of facts.”¹⁹ However, this supposedly neutral and “self-evident” version of history is improbable at best, and would exclude sideshadowing, contingencies, and, consequently, disappointment as irrelevant to historical inquiry. By viewing history as both events and their recounting, the recurrence of disappointment in narratives about the march can be understood to point to ridicule as a logical sequel, finding its expressive home in aesthetic representation.

From the perspective of the squadristi, for example, the apparent bait and switch in unofficial attitudes about violence might have been distressing. Weak political institutions meant that almost since the inception of the party, Italian law enforcement had been happy for Fascists to do the dirty work.²⁰ And the nature of group “imprinting”—that is, the idea that only the members of one’s group could be trusted, in part because each member had seen violence committed by the others—divided the world into friends to be kept close and enemies to be destroyed.²¹ Before the march, the Blackshirts had been told in the PNF’s “Regolamento di disciplina per la milizia fascista” (“Protocol for the Fascist Militia”) that

¹⁹ E. H. Carr *What is History?* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 22.

²⁰ Marcello Flores and Giovanni Gozzini, *Perché il fascismo è nato in Italia* (Rome: Edizioni Laterza, 2022).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

[t]he fascist militiaman has his own moral compass which partakes not of conventional family, political, or social morality. For him, honor is like for the knights of old, a law that is held up, but can never be attained, of limitless perfection susceptible perhaps to being excessive, ferocious, harsh, absolute justice, outside of, and always above, formal and written law.²²

Just a few months after the march, the Blackshirts were incorporated into the new *Milizia volontaria per la sicurezza nazionale* (Voluntary Militia for National Security), and thereby subordinated to the state apparatus and to a very different set of expectations. Such a *volte-face* meant that the march was merely “l’epilogo di una pluriennale strategia della violenza come fattore di cultura e lotta politica” (the epilogue of a yearslong strategy of violence as an influence on culture and political struggle), leaving the squadristi, one supposes, adrift socially as well as tactically.²³ Disappointment, of course, was already rampant in the years following World War I, both among the rank and file soldiers who had returned home to an ungrateful community and an unexciting job, and those in more exalted positions.²⁴ Even quadrumvir Emilio De Bono, a major general during the war, expressed a sense of devaluation, neglect, and ingratitude at war’s end.²⁵

What Carr terms “imaginative understanding[s] of what goes on in the mind of the other party” conceptualize the marchers as an affective community as much as a political one.²⁶ Here I note that ridicule does not act exclusively in the service of critique; it can also signal the elaboration of mourning. The march was apparently, for some participants, most significant precisely as a non-event, but a non-event so important that it inaugurated a genre. As an example of Albert Hirschman’s “many might-have-beens of history,” the sense of exclusion felt by many after the march denotes decathexis without either recathexis or enmity. Those who experienced disappointment and withdrew investment in the Fascist cause neither reinvested in anti-Fascism nor turned against the Fascists. Chantal Mouffe articulates a similar idea with the terms *antagonism* and *agonism*:

Mentre l’antagonismo costituisce una relazione noi/loro in cui le due parti sono nemiche che non condividono alcuna base comune, l’agonismo costituisce una relazione noi/loro in cui le parti in conflitto, pur ammettendo che non esiste una soluzione razionale al loro conflitto, riconoscono comunque la legittimità dei propri rivali. I quali sono “avversari,” non nemici. Ciò significa che, sebbene in conflitto, percepiscono sé stessi come appartenenti alla stessa associazione politica, condividendo uno spazio simbolico comune all’interno del quale si svolge il conflitto.²⁷

While antagonism constitutes an us/them relationship in which the two parties are enemies who share no common ground, agonism constitutes an us/them relationship in which the parties in conflict, while admitting that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their rivals, who

²² “Partito Nazionale Fascista, Comando Generale: regolamento di disciplina per la milizia fascista,” *Il Popolo d’Italia*, October 3, 1922, 2. Cited in De Grazia, *Perfect Fascist*, 80

²³ Flores and Gozzini, *Perché il fascismo*, 77.

²⁴ See, among others, Federico Chabod, *L’Italia contemporanea* (Turin: Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi, 1961) 19–26.

²⁵ De Grazia, *Perfect Fascist*, 55–56.

²⁶ E. H. Carr, *What is History?*, 27.

²⁷ Mouffe, *Politica e passioni*, 27.

are “adversaries,” not enemies. This means that, although in conflict, they perceive themselves as belonging to the same political association, sharing a common symbolic space within which the conflict takes place.

In this way disappointment, which elucidates the mechanisms by which antagonism and agonism are imbricated, shuffles the deck, changing identities and, consequently, relations of “us” and “them.” Previously, opponents of Fascism were the nemeses to be destroyed because they posed a threat to the existence of the “us.”²⁸ After the march, tensions arose within the bosom of the party as well, such that some former marchers saw adversaries (agonists) where previously there had been alliances: this is yet another example of the extreme porosity of the social and political fields.

The hybrid documentary-fiction film by Mark Cousins seems to make a similar point in its intermittent insertion of staged scenes in which well-known contemporary Italian actor Alba Rohrwacher appears. Looking into the camera, she sits somberly on what is later revealed to be a film set. At first her character, Anna, recalls in very simple language her initial pride in—and her passion for—what Fascism was doing for Italy. By the end of the film, she expresses dismay and estrangement from Fascism, wondering what Italians have become. Although nothing about Rohrwacher’s appearance or behavior has changed at the end of the film, we learn that she has been speaking from beyond the grave. Though these are perhaps inelegant solutions to the problem of how to depict disappointment, they are not unmotivated. First, the whole film is ultimately a reflection on political cinema writ large (starting with the inevitable citation of Mussolini on cinema as *l’arma più forte* of political propaganda). Cousins is copping to his own narrative fiction: we are not to attribute any truth value to the Rohrwacher character since she is an actor playing a part. Having pointed out the editing manipulations that prevail throughout *A noi!*, Cousins is making a note of his own. Indeed, though advertised as a documentary, *Marcia su Roma*’s thoroughgoing self-consciousness seems intended to call into question the very possibility of documentary as a category. Second, though the character of Anna did not participate in the march, she tells us that she saw *A noi!* in the cinema in Rome, linking cinema and the march as the linchpins of her initiation into political subjectivity, establishing the march’s primacy in the development of her affective arc from initial enthusiasm to disappointment.

What goes on in the mind of the other party? Carr’s “imaginative understanding” here is embodied by Anna, in spite of the infrequency of her appearances and the simplicity, bordering on banality, of her comments. The film’s self-consciousness is balanced by Anna’s presence; for as much as it is more disruptive than it is informative, it is nonetheless exactly the element in the film that critiques the fetishization of the intense intimacy between ideology and visual culture that both *A Noi!* and *Marcia su Roma* perform. It is precisely the paucity of her interventions and the single-mindedness of her theme that accomplish this counterbalancing critique. Socialist politician Rino Formica scandalized many when he declared “la politica è sangue e merda” (politics is blood and shit); he was considered a provocateur who used lurid language to express the rather banal concept that politics is not for the faint-hearted, for it is a hard and unfair game.²⁹ But he was saying more than that: by reverting to that specific language, he was also pointing to the fact that the motivations behind political action are personal, embodied, individual, and unpredictable.

Anna is meant to invoke a real person, inconsistent in her response to a changing political stage, whose political allegiances alter based on her changing attitude, moods, passions, and gut

²⁸ Ibid., 21.

²⁹ Cited in *Reset* nos. 64–68 (2001): 215. Recall Gramsci’s interest in the passions: Formica was a Socialist very much in the Gramscian tradition.

feelings. She is meant to demonstrate how human action—Anna’s fear, maternal instincts, and cinema-going habits—make for history’s “narrowly and disastrously missed opportunities as well as for felicitous and surprising escapes from disaster.”

Democracy Deflated

My argument—that disappointment after the march placed participants in an adversarial but not antagonistic relationship to Fascist leadership—has been largely focused on cinematic and literary presentations of the march and its sequelae. Though these works focus almost exclusively on the marchers themselves, one need not have been a participant for this shift to occur; Fascism, here, is a family affair. Films like *Vecchia guardia* do not countenance the possibility that the death of the boy Mario might ultimately have been a useless sacrifice, but they underscore the roots of political identity in the social field nonetheless. Similarly, in *Camicia nera* the parallel growth of the child and of Fascism are coded as natural and inextricable, placing the father who recovers from amnesia at the sight of the Italian flag, though not himself a Fascist, in the role of political, as well as biological, progenitor. The marchers in *A noi!* are seen writing letters home. The categories of us/them, to use Mouffe’s parlance, are expansive relationally, and I would add temporally as well. That Fascism’s ability to mobilize passion as the motor of political engagement was not delegitimized, in this scheme, has far-reaching repercussions.

For disappointment, if it is not harnessed by an alternative cause, can do one of two things. If it is sharp, it can create distance between the subject and the event, in response, perhaps, to what one historian described as the “diffuse sense of shame” felt by many Italians after the war.³⁰ If it is mild, it can help the subject make peace with the event by demonstrating its limits, namely by humanizing it. But making peace—reconciling with an event—obviates the need for accountability. And herein lies the rub: lack of accountability points to the continuity between Fascism and republican democratic antifascism, a decathexis without recathexis. Furthermore, it deflates democratic processes and weakens the sense of belonging to a democracy. The high levels of fiscal noncompliance in Italy compared to other western European democracies, for example, suggest that there is a significant degree of disenchantment, indeed of disavowal, of Italy’s identity as a democracy. It is almost as though Italians are living in a perpetual September 8, 1943, when the state collapsed, and all bets were off.

Fast-forward to January 6, 2021, the storming of the Capitol by a mob in Washington, DC. This, too, was an event that signified the shift from the certainty of victory to the disappointment of defeat. It, too, could be described as a *colpo di teatro*, in this case complete with costumes—we all remember in horror the guy in the Viking costume. Nor was there an easy return to the “usual occupations” (Fusco’s *consuete opere*) for the rioters, either: some cannot go to their children’s little league games anymore because they’re being ostracized by their communities—or because they are behind bars. And this stroke of theatricality was accompanied by no small dose of absurdity: recall, for example, the interview with Elizabeth from Knoxville, who is shown weeping into the camera, truly astonished that Capitol Police would be so brutal as to mace her as she forcibly entered the building. When asked by her interviewer, “Why did you want to go in?,” she replies with a mix of tears, rage and self-righteousness: “We’re storming the Capitol! It’s a Revolution!” The distance between the grandiose dreams of the rioters and their personal

³⁰ D. Pasquini, *Ansia di purezza: il fascismo e il nazismo nella stampa satirica italiana e tedesca (1943–1963)* (Rome: Viella, 2014). Quoted in Andrea Martini, *Fascismo immaginario: riscrivere il passato a destra* (Rome: Laterza, 2024), 27.

inadequacy with respect to those goals is glaring. And once again the ridiculing of these inept marchers has begun. There is even a remix online with funky music to accompany the words: “I got maced . . . I got maced . . . I got- I got- I got maced.”

And yet, despite the fact that the use of ridicule helps maintain some distance from the events and keep them in perspective, the invasion of the Capitol and the related events share the logic of contingency discussed above: things could well have ended another way. It’s too early to say if January 6 marks a shift in historical time, after which an epistemology of disappointment will dominate. Although the rioters (even the word choice is telling) ran the gamut from parents pushing strollers to body-painted cosplayers, one of the dominant narratives among those arrested is that they are “political prisoners”; those who escaped arrest complain that they are neighborhood outcasts.³¹ What seems clear is the direction that the disappointment of supporters of the march on the Capitol will take—it has not faded away, but radicalized. The events of January 6 were the result, among other things, of a disappointment so prevalent that it attained critical mass that day. Despite the passage of three years of criminal trials and two impeachments of the rioters’ leader, a certain normalization of January 6 has occurred. It can be no surprise that the events of that day did not unite the country in shock and horror. Far from disappearing, the polarization of the electorate that preceded the riot has only worsened: that there could be a future president who might be convicted of the crimes of attempting to overturn election results, obstructing certification of an election, stealing classified documents and falsifying business records is apparently of little concern to many tens of millions of voters. Where in Italy the disappointed marchers were neither fully reconciled to their adversaries nor persuaded into new political alliances by their antagonists, the American political Left has an opportunity to leverage the rioters’ disappointment for its own purposes (recall, again, Gramsci: “l’errore dell’intellettuale consiste nel credere che si possa sapere senza comprendere e specialmente senza sentire ed esser appassionato” [the intellectual’s error consists in believing that one can know without understanding and, especially, without feeling and being impassioned]). Events grounded in social-political/affective investment, like the March on Rome and the events of January 6, 2021, are exceptional in their adaptability for an evolving ideological deployment. One thing, however, is chillingly clear, and that is these are not bloodless academic meditations, but rather reflect a real anxiety about the current political moment, in which we are immersed not as scholars but as citizens.

³¹ Jonathan Lewis, cited in Christa Case Bryant, “How Public Divide over January 6 Could Shape 2024- and Beyond,” *Christian Science Monitor*, January 5, 2024.