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THE 20th CENTURY ICARUS: THE GLORIFICATION OF AVIATION IN ITALY BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS

1. Progress banned

In the battlefields of the First World War, where brutal new technological weapons had taken centre stage, the machine had shown its destructive character. Technology, which before had been considered a productive force, and which had represented the rationality of the world, was instead apparently only able to cause disaster. The machine became a symbol of irrationality and of insanity. It seemed that technology had become a value per se, and that it could challenge the control of any kind of authority. Furthermore, if during the 1920s the development of communications technology, cars and aeroplanes made it once again possible to believe in technology, the massive economic crisis of 1929 revealed that enormous forces had once again escaped human control. The crisis, a consequence of unprecedented economic growth, raised further doubts about progress and the future of humanity¹. For this reason, the intellectual atmosphere across the whole Europe during the interwar period was, generally speaking, against modernization².

In post-WWI Italy, pessimism concerning modernity manifested itself essentially in two escapist ways that both received the full support

¹ M. Biddis, *The Age of the Masses. Ideas and Society in Europe Since 1870* (Trowbridge and Esher: The Harvester Press, 1977), 185, 189-190.

² K. D. Bracher, *Il Novecento. Secolo delle ideologie* (Roma - Bari: Laterza, 1990), 196-199.

of the Fascist regime. On the one hand, it led to the glorification of the past, which offered roots, identity and cohesion in a world that seemed to have become irrational. The cult of *romanità*, which was the key motif of cultural policy during the second half of the 1930s, emphasized the study of antiquity in various fields. It was particularly visible in the arts and architecture that took inspiration from the Roman style. Yet it was also politically functional, as the heritage of the Roman Empire gave valid justification to the ever more aggressive foreign policy of Fascism³.

On the other hand, the rejection of modernization led to the mystification of the countryside as something opposite to modern, urbanized society. During the early 1930s, the press launched a huge campaign in favour of the countryside, inviting citizens to leave the towns, and return to work in the fields. The need to be self-sufficient in food production and the role assigned to the family as the basis of society were translated into propaganda against the rootless, degenerate city life. In the campaign of *ruralità*, the city became a symbol of lonely, sick people with pale faces and feeble bodies. The countryside, instead, was depicted as a pastoral paradise, the ideal environment for healthy, vigorous people, and the cradle of Italian national identity⁴.

2. Fascism and technology

Nevertheless, Italy became an industrialized country during the Mussolini era⁵. The reason for this was both obvious and simple: only an industrialized country could be politically important. Indeed, this had been Mussolini's aim since the very beginning of the foundation of Fascism. For this reason, there was no return to the model of a pre-industrialized society, as appealing as this utopia must surely have been.

An important impact in favour of the industrialization of Italy came from so-called modernist nationalism (a term coined by Emilio Gentile). The birth of modernist nationalism at the end of the 19th cen-

³ R. Visser, "Fascist Doctrine and the Cult of the Romanita", *Journal of Contemporary History* 27.1 (1992).

⁴ P. G. Zunino, *L'Ideologia del fascismo: miti, credenze e valori nella stabilizzazione del regime* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1985), 281-288, 300-309; R. de Felice, *Mussolini il Duce - I. Gli anni del consenso, 1929-1936* (Torino: Einaudi, 1974), 146-160; P. Morgan, *Italian Fascism, 1919-1945* (London: Macmillan, 1995), 101-104.

⁵ L. Salvatorelli and G. Mira, *Storia d'Italia sotto il periodo fascista* (Torino: Einaudi, 1980), 562-565.

ture coincided with Italy's first industrial revolution, which was accompanied by social transformation leading to the beginning of mass society, and by imperialism, which in Italy started relatively late, beginning with the unification of the country in 1861. Although it is true that Italian nationalism had aimed at the modernization of the country ever since *Risorgimento*, and promoted democracy and industrial economy as characteristics of a modern society, the biggest change between "old" and modernist nationalism was that the latter substituted democracy with imperialism. Technological progress gained an ever more important position in their programme, as the machine became a means of power, both of man over nature, and nation over nation⁶.

In order to justify a somewhat contradictory policy, which was both in favour and against modernization, Fascism attempted to purify technology of its decadent modernist aspects. The model came among others from Oswald Spengler, who right after the disastrous First World War had defended modernity by giving it a spiritual dimension. In *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (1918-1922), Spengler assigned to modern technology a particular *Geist*. According to him, technological innovations revealed the mysteries of the universe of God, and "the will of man to control nature". For this reason, technology was of a religious nature; it was aesthetic, mystic, and "Faustian"⁷.

Likewise, in the rhetoric of the Fascist leaders, progress was mystified. The ultra modern was fused with the primordial; the dehumanizing force of the insensitive machine was translated into a spiritual energy. As Roger Griffin wrote, the modernization of Italy was no longer a matter of economic efficiency or militaristic power based on capitalism. The technocratic, Promethean element of Fascism pioneered a healthy modernity, in contrast to the decadent modernity that manifested itself, in particular, in the United States. In Italy, technology was integrated into the nation's palingenesis and its autarky. Fascism was not merely modernizing the country, but reawakening the sleeping genius of the race. So the construction of motorways, the electrification of the

⁶ E. Gentile, *The Struggle for Modernity: Nationalism, Futurism, and Fascism* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 41-76.

⁷ O. Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes. Zweier Band: Welthistorische Perspektiven* (München: O. Beck, 1924), 619-630. As late as in 1954 also M. Heidegger contributed to the spiritualization of technology. M. Heidegger, *Questions Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Translated and with an introduction by W. Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 3-35.

railways, the *bonifica* and the resettlement of marshlands, the construction of new towns, and hydro-electrical power schemes, all received a special aura of religious mysticism⁸.

The spiritual character attributed to the machine by Fascism, Spengler, and many others during the interwar period, was not only designed to justify modernization; it was also a symptom of the will to recreate mysticism in a world that had been banalized by science during the past century⁹. For this reason also, it was aviation more than any other field of technology that was able to show the supernatural character of progress to worshippers left without religion.

3. Eyes in the sky

A concrete reason for the glorification of aeroplanes and pilots between the two World Wars was the significant progress that aviation made during that period. The first pioneering flights of the Wright brothers during the first decade of the 20th century were quickly followed by different forms of aviation and the establishment of civil airlines between the major European cities. Lindbergh's successful flight over the Atlantic in 1927 captivated public attention on both continents. It marked the final triumph of aviation, thanks to which the world had become small, and under the full control of humankind¹⁰. In Italy too, aviation made quick progress from the second half of the 1920s onward. The first regular airline route between Trieste and Turin was established in 1926, and in 1930 the national airline network was four times larger. Finally, in 1931 Italian pilots made their first flight over the Atlantic and became national heroes¹¹.

The development of aviation between the two World Wars turned out to be so promising that the aeroplane was among the few products of technology still able to arouse optimism about progress. It became the tool with which both men and nations could compete in skill and coura-

⁸ R. Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism. The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler*. (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2007), 241-245.

⁹ Ch. I. Glicksberg, *Modern Literature and the Death of God*. (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1966).

¹⁰ About the achievements of aviation and its popularity in the arts at the beginning of the 20th century, see R. Wohl, *A Passion for Wings. Aviation and the Western Imagination 1908-1918*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

¹¹ G. Mattiaoli, *Mussolini aviatore*. (Roma - Milano: L'Aviazione, 1939), 193-194, 249.

ge. At the beginning of the 20th century, aviation also aroused equal enthusiasm also among the public. Flying became both a proof of masculinity, and the characteristic of a hero. Mussolini was among the many who experimented with flying in one way or another. He flew for the first time as early as 1915, and later became a professional pilot, as did his two sons, Bruno and Vittorio, the former of whom died in an aeroplane accident¹².

Due to its popularity, flying also manifested itself also in the arts. In 1908, H. G. Wells published his prophetic novel *The war in the air*, which was among the first works of art dedicated to the glorification of modern aviation. Between the two World Wars, as flying grew ever more popular, aviation consolidated its position in the arts, too. The aerial perspective was in fashion in literature, painting and photography. Lindbergh's heroic flight was followed by an enormous number of books for young people that had aviation as their main theme¹³. Flight was mystified and exalted by such artists as the pilot and writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1900-1944), and the Russian painter Vladimir Tatlin, who designed and built his own flying machine, *Letatlin*, between 1929 and 1932¹⁴.

In the visual arts in Italy, the myth of aviation was mostly expressed by Futurism. The avant-garde movement was created as early as 1909 by the Italian writer Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, and its artistic program was based on the glorification of modernity, progress, and technology. During the 1930s, the movement, which had already grown anachronistic, included several hundred mediocre artists all concentrated on the glorification of aviation, which was assigned the name "aero-futurism"¹⁵. Yet one concrete proof of the special position given to the movement in Fascist Italy is that throughout the 1930s "aerofuturism" was constantly present in the most important exhibitions in the country, and in every single Venice Biennale, which was Italy's most important artistic institution at the international level. At many of the Biennales, Futurists

¹² Ibid.; B. Mussolini, *Parlo con Bruno* (Milano: Hoepli, 1941).

¹³ L. Goldstein, *The Flying Machine and Modern Literature* (Essex: Tiptree, 1986), 132-135.

¹⁴ Wohl, *A Passion for Wings*.

¹⁵ Ch. Baumgarth, *Geschichte des Futurismus* (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1966); C. Salaris, *Storia del futurismo* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1985); C. Salaris, *Artecrizia. L'avanguardia futurista negli anni del fascismo* (Scandicci: La Nuova Italia, 1992).

had their own exhibition, where they were able to show to the world their aviation inspired art¹⁶.

4. A portrait of Icarus

Interest in flying is probably as old as humanity itself. In Italy, the roots of the mystification of modern aviation are to be traced to the late 18th century. The first flight with a hot air balloon built a year earlier by the Montgolfier brothers, took place on 21st November 1783 in Paris. This was the greatest scientific achievement of the period, and it aroused attention all over Europe. In Italy, the neoclassical poet Vincenzo Monti (1754-1828) dedicated an ode to it entitled *Al signor di Montgolfier* (To Mister Montgolfier, 1784). In Monti's manifold symbolism, progress represented the augmentation of rationality, and technological achievement was a sign of the victory of reason over ignorance. Flight was not only a sign of the revolutionary character of a nation, it also testified the triumph of man over nature. Air travel becomes a mythical experience, as Monti compares it to the heroic voyage of Jason and the Argonauts. The Hot Air Balloon marked of the beginning of a new era, characterized by the unquestionable supremacy of the human being, who was now even ready to challenge the law of life and death¹⁷.

Between the two World Wars, as aviation developed, the pilot became a model for the Fascist hero. In a way he represented the ideal of the new man whom Fascism wanted to create at all costs. Yet, his roots are to be traced to an earlier work of writer and pilot Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863-1938). In 1910, D'Annunzio published a novel entitled *Forse che sì, forse che no* (Maybe, maybe not), which is to be considered one of the first examples of 20th century Italy's mystification of modern aviation. In his work D'Annunzio also presented a prototype of the pilot that was later copied and elaborated on by others. In the spirit of *fin de siècle's* decadentism, the novel tells the highly complicated love story of a man, Paolo Tarsis, and two sisters, Vana and Isabella Inghirami, of whom the first commits suicide and the second goes mad. To escape the

¹⁶ M. Härmänmaa, *Un patriota che sfidò la decadenza. F.T. Marinetti e l'idea dell'uomo nuovo fascista, 1929-1944*, (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum fennica, 2000), 133-145; M. Härmänmaa, "Il pilota futurista. Marinetti, il Futurismo e l'aviazione negli anni Trenta," *Trasparenze*, 31-32 (2007).

¹⁷ V. Monti, *Opere*. Ed. by M. Valgimigli and C. Muscetta (Milano - Napoli: Ricciardi, 1967), 735; R. Tessari, *Il mito della macchina. Letteratura e industria nel primo Novecento* (Milano: Mursia, 1973), 23.

torture of his daily life, Paolo cultivates a passion for wings. For Paolo, flight with an aeroplane most of all means detachment from his “secular” problems, particularly from those he has with the two women. Flying becomes a spiritual experience of purification. In the sky, in the heavenly loneliness, man “finds himself”, he overcomes his existential troubles, and when he returns to the earth, he is a morally elevated “superman”¹⁸.

Much the same ideas were presented some 25 years later by Julius Evola (1898-1974), an esoteric and mystic philosopher who was closely related to the regime¹⁹. In 1935, Evola, who had just experimented with flying, wrote a newspaper article in which he stated that cutting all contact with the earth and traveling far in the sky, in a “heavenly, non human loneliness” had the power to produce in everyone a sense of inner rebirth. A man who flies sees the world with different eyes. From the aeroplane Evola had himself seen everything, even the most certain and essential things of his everyday life, disappearing mysteriously behind and beneath him. Instead, he had found himself “subconsciously integrated into a reality much bigger than the one on the ground”²⁰.

Thus flying was to have produced the new spiritual aristocracy that modernist nationalism had dreamed, and to whom was to have belonged the right to lead the country²¹. Guido Mattioli, a Mussolini biographer who had the task of documenting Il Duce’s carrier as a pilot, writes in *Mussolini aviatore* (Mussolini the Pilot, 1939) that for Mussolini the experiences of the first pilots represented “a true revolution not only in mechanics, but also in the spirit”. Aviation meant first of all education of character, “detaching the body and the spirit from the mediocrity, to go ‘beyond’”. This was, according to Mattioli, the basic reason Mussolini had started to fly, although it was not the only one. For a leader of a nation flying was obligatory, as in order to work perfectly no other machine needed as much “concentration of the human spirit, and man’s willpower” as an aeroplane. As a consequence, only a pilot really understood what “governing” meant, and for this reason, the-

¹⁸ G. D’Annunzio, *Forse che st forse che no* (1910). Ed. by R. Castagnola (Milano: Mondadori, 1998).

¹⁹ M. Tarchi, “Julius Evola e il fascismo: note su un percorso non ordinario” in *Cultura e fascismo. Letteratura, arti e spettacolo di un Ventennio*. Ed. by M. Biondi and A. Borsotti (Florence: Ponte alle Grazie, 1996), 123-142.

²⁰ J. Evola, “Il volo e lo spirito” *Il Regime fascista*, 22.5.1935.

²¹ Gentile, *The Struggle for Modernity*, 41-76.

re seemed to be a necessary, intimate, spiritual connection between aviation and fascism; “every pilot would be an innate Fascist”²².

Yet it hardly can be said that flight represented an escape from reality, as it was a perilous adventure, not only for the first pioneers, but also between the two World Wars the deaths of pilots were commonplace (the most well-known cases perhaps being the death of Saint-Exupéry, and Bruno Mussolini). The courage of the flyer had already been glorified by Monti.²³ Likewise, the death of a pilot was also an ever-present motif in the literature dedicated to the glorification of aviation in the first half of the 20th century. In D’Annunzio’s aforementioned novel, one of the pilots, Giulio Cambiase, dies in an aeroplane race, and Paolo Tarsis, too, risks losing his life. In Mario Carli’s openly propagandistic novel *L’Italiano di Mussolini* (Mussolini’s Italian), the hero, Falco D’Aquilonia, an example of a perfect Fascist, is naturally a pilot, too. The novel ends with the death of Falco after a flight during which he has flown to a record height²⁴.

For Saint-Exupéry, the pilot was a hero, but only in a symbolic sense. The French writer wanted to dispel from the reader any idolatry of the pilot, and instead to explain the essential difference that separated the flyer from those who were destined to stay on the ground. In his essay *Terre des hommes* (1939), he wrote that a pilot was a hero not because he flew, but because by flying he contributed to the progress of the entire human race. Neither was the airplane important per se, but only as a part of technological progress. By flying, a pilot had taken responsibility for humanity and its wellbeing, and thus given meaning to his life²⁵.

In the Fascist Italy, pilots were National heroes, who were ready to sacrifice their lives to break records, thereby furthering the glory of the fatherland, as was the case with the aforementioned Falco²⁶, and with Bruno Mussolini. As Robert Wohl writes, these patriotic motives were already attributed to aviation before WWI. Flying was considered a sign of the vitality of a nation, and its development was also regarded as important for a country from a political perspective. However, alt-

²² Mattioli, *Mussolini aviatore*, 13–16.

²³ Monti, *Opere*, 735.

²⁴ M. Carli, *L’Italiano di Mussolini. Romanzo dell’era fascista*. (Milano: Mondadori, 1930).

²⁵ A. de Saint-Exupéry, *Terre des homes* (1939) (Paris: Gallimard, 1995).

²⁶ Carli, *L’Italiano di Mussolini*.

though Italy had been the first country in the world to use aeroplanes for military purposes in the Libyan war of 1911-1912, before WWII few believed that aviation could play a significant role in future wars²⁷. For many, just how destructive the flight of the new Icarus could actually be would come as a surprise.

5. The destructive Icarus

Although aviation made huge progress between the two World Wars, it is also well known that it did not produce any kind of “spiritual aristocracy”. On the contrary, and paradoxically, it was precisely during this period of history that Europe fell under the rule of barbarians. Finally, aviation lost all the spirituality that had once been attributed to it, becoming in WWII, a terrible means of mass destruction.

The connection between modern technology and human destructiveness is sadly clear. Militaristic goals have had a significant impact on technological research and development since World War I. During WWII, technology enabled the most horrible crimes against humanity, culminating in the genocide of the German concentration camps and in the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the USA. In addition to technological weapons even such seemingly innocent inventions as computers and the Internet were elaborated as military technology, and were only later released for wider use. Whether technology is always destined to be used as a destructive weapon is still to be seen. Some of the greatest technological achievements to date, such as the Internet and mobile phones, still seem to be used for peaceful purposes; however, there is no limit to the inventiveness of the human mind.

ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the glorification of the aviation in Italy between the two world wars. Under the Fascist regime the aviation was celebrated in different ways - not at least with the arts and in literature. Aviation got a particular spiritual aura, whereas pilot was considered a hero and a sort of a new superman. The aim of the paper is to demonstrate that, regardless the sublimity, aviation was nevertheless a vital tool of power, which ultimately contributes to validate the hypothesis about the destructive nature of technology.

²⁷ Wohl, *A Passion for Wings*, 258-259.