

Fascinating Fascism

Susan Sontag (1975) · Selected Excerpts

Susan Sontag was an American writer, critic, and public intellectual. This essay analyses the filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl and argues that fascism has a distinctive aesthetic that persists beyond its political defeat.

VOCABULARY

Pageantry: elaborate ceremony and visual spectacle

Dramaturgy: the art of dramatic composition; here, the theatrical staging of politics

Virile: having traditionally masculine qualities; strong, forceful

Dissolution: breaking down, dissolving, coming apart

Alienation: feeling disconnected from society, others, or oneself

Proscribed: forbidden, banned, condemned

Insinuate: creeping in gradually, subtly, without direct announcement

THE DEFINITION

“ *Fascist aesthetics... flow from (and justify) a preoccupation with situations of control, submissive behavior, extravagant effort, and the endurance of pain; they endorse two seemingly opposite states, egomania and servitude. The relations of domination and enslavement take the form of a characteristic pageantry: the massing of groups of people; the turning of people into things; the multiplication or replication of things; and the grouping of people/things around an all-powerful, hypnotic leader-figure or force.*

— p. 91

PLAIN ENGLISH:

Fascist art and imagery come from an obsession with control, obedience, extreme effort, and enduring pain. Fascism celebrates two opposite things at once: total self-importance AND total submission. You see this in fascist spectacles: huge crowds of people treated like objects, all arranged around one all-powerful leader.

“ *The fascist dramaturgy centers on the orgiastic transactions between mighty forces and their puppets, uniformly garbed and shown in ever swelling numbers.*

Its choreography alternates between ceaseless motion and a congealed, static, 'virile' posing. Fascist art glorifies surrender, it exalts mindlessness, it glamorizes death.

— p. 91

PLAIN ENGLISH:

Fascist theatre shows the relationship between powerful leaders and their followers (who are like puppets, all dressed the same, in growing crowds). The movement alternates between constant action and frozen, 'manly' poses. Fascist art makes surrender look noble, celebrates not thinking, and makes death look beautiful.

✂ **Sontag says fascism celebrates both 'egomania and servitude' (extreme self-importance AND total submission). How can someone feel both at once? What might that feel like?**

WHAT FASCISM OFFERS

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National Socialism—more broadly, fascism—also stands for an ideal or rather ideals that are persistent today under the other banners: the ideal of life as art, the cult of beauty, the fetishism of courage, the dissolution of alienation in ecstatic feelings of community.

— p. 96

PLAIN ENGLISH:

Fascism offers things people still want today: treating your life like a work of art, worshipping beauty, obsessing over bravery, and escaping loneliness through intense feelings of belonging to a group.

✂ **'The dissolution of alienation in ecstatic feelings of community'—escaping loneliness through intense group belonging. Is this desire dangerous? Or just the fascist version of it?**

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There is a general fantasy about uniforms. They suggest community, order, identity (through ranks, badges, medals, things which declare who the wearer is and what he has done: his worth is recognized), competence, legitimate authority, the legitimate exercise of violence.

— p. 99

✂ **Think about uniforms you've seen (military, sports, school). What feelings do they create? When does uniform appeal become dangerous?**

THE REHABILITATION PROBLEM

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The rehabilitation of proscribed figures in liberal societies does not happen with the sweeping bureaucratic finality of the Soviet Encyclopedia, each new edition of which brings forward some hitherto unmentionable figures and lowers an equal or greater number through the trap door of nonexistence. Our rehabilitations are smoother, more insinuating.

— p. 83-84

PLAIN ENGLISH:

In Soviet Russia, banned people were officially erased and then officially brought back. In Western democracies, we do it more subtly. Fascist figures get slowly rehabilitated without anyone announcing it; it just happens gradually, and then suddenly they're acceptable again.

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The line taken by Riefenstahl's defenders, who now include the most influential voices in the avant-garde film establishment, is that she was always concerned with beauty.

— p. 84

✂ **'She was just interested in beauty' is how people defend Riefenstahl. Is this a valid defence? Can art be separated from what it serves?**

THE MISHIMA CONNECTION

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The eroticism of Nazism is more and more visible. In another context, it emerges from the preoccupations with physical perfection and death that animate such overwrought works as... Mishima's Confessions of a Mask and Sun and Steel.

— p. 100

Sontag identifies Mishima as exemplifying the same fascist aesthetic she finds in Riefenstahl: the obsession with beautiful bodies, discipline, pain, and death. She sees in his work the fusion of eroticism and violence that characterises fascism's appeal.

✂ Sontag connects Mishima to fascist aesthetics through 'physical perfection and death.' As you read Mishima later, look for: situations of control, extravagant effort, endurance of pain, glamorization of death. Note any connections you find:

OVERARCHING QUESTIONS

These questions connect Sontag's ideas to the unit's central themes. Take your time with them.

1. Sontag wrote this in 1975, but says fascist ideals 'are persistent today under other banners.' If fascist aesthetics can exist without fascist politics, how do we recognise them? What should we look for?

2. The desires Sontag identifies (for beauty, courage, belonging, meaning) are real human needs. Fascism offers one way to meet them. What other ways exist? How do we create intensity, belonging, and meaning without the death cult?
