

BENJAMIN MUIR

*Modern Horrors in the Translated Works of  
Giorgio De Maria*

As Kevin Corstorphine points out in the introduction to *The Palgrave Companion to Horror Literature* (2018), an “area that tends to be critically neglected [...] is the presence of horror in literary Modernism.”<sup>1</sup> Perhaps even more critically neglected is the presence of modernism in literary horror. The broad association of horror with the Gothic, the Weird, and, more broadly, the Romantic tends to situate it squarely within the realms of pre-modernity, even where it may have temporally aligned with modernism. The intersections of modernism and horror, however, are exceptionally broad, and it could be argued that the historical travesties of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were so prominent in the collective consciousness as to make horror a precondition of modernism. Matthias Stephan writes that Joseph Conrad’s famous phrase “The Horror! The Horror!” “encapsulate[s] an entire vision of humanity from the latter part of the nineteenth century through the end of the First World War.”<sup>2</sup> Stephan argues that Conrad, Wilfred Owen, and T. S. Eliot, through the formal contrivances of their language and imagery, express horror as something sublime, resonant, and atemporal, as opposed to the baser neurobiological machinations of terror. While none of these writers were averse to depicting explicit violence or, indeed, even doing so dispassionately, Stephan posits that this imagery serves not violence itself, but the resonances thereof: the remembering, the recurrences, and the re-traumatisation that often dogs those intimate with the real-life frames of reference from which figures of horror are fashioned.

If real-world, tangible horrors are a precondition of modernism, however, it must then be argued that the prerequisite geopolitical, economic, and cultural

---

<sup>1</sup> Kevin Corstorphine, “Introduction,” in Kevin Corstorphine and Laura R. Kremmel, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook to Horror Literature* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Matthias Stephan, “‘The Horror! The Horror!’: Tracing Horror in Modernism from Conrad to Eliot,” in Corstorphine and Kremmel, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook to Horror Literature*, 181.

circumstances facilitating these horrors are a precondition of said horrors in turn. Andrzej Gąsiorek states that,

As the term implies, modernism was a response to the experience of modernity. [...] it was an integral part of a rapidly transforming society and was involved from the outset in that society's attempts to make sense of modern life and to imagine the different forms it might take. [...] But modernism also was frequently in thrall to reactionary political theories, and some of its most energetic proponents advocated deeply objectionable views at certain points in their careers.<sup>3</sup>

While it is clear that Gąsiorek is alluding to the less-than-stellar politics of Ezra Pound, William Butler Yeats, and Wyndham Lewis, among others, the extent to which modernity, modernism, and modern horrors (fascism and its consequences chief among them) intersect with and inform one another extends beyond the reactionary politics of multiple key individual figures of the modernist movement. According to Michael North, "Aesthetic modernism is at once part of the larger modern project of enlightenment, emancipation, and progress and a reaction against that project."<sup>4</sup> While, for instance, Eliot's comparatively moderate conservatism was likely more palatable to a liberal audience than Pound's fascism or Yeats's eugenics, North argues that the politics of all three "suggest a common European dissatisfaction, a sense of loneliness and dislocation matched by an equally intense feeling of oppression and conformity."<sup>5</sup> He concludes that the trio are "political failures, men whose lives veered back and forth between grandiose authoritarian fantasies and abject isolation, the very antitheses they had hoped to join," and that their aesthetic modernism fails to "resolve the problems left by social and political modernism."<sup>6</sup> To disentangle the myriad contradictions of modernism and fascism both, one must understand that those contradictions are the very same ones: one must understand that fascism is a form of sociopolitical

---

<sup>3</sup> Gąsiorek Andrzej, *A History of Modernist Literature* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), x-xi.

<sup>4</sup> Michael North, *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>5</sup> North, *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound*, 128.

<sup>6</sup> North, *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound*, 187-88.

modernity, if not modernism. While fascism was one of the foremost progenitors and exacerbators of modern horrors, it was, like its nemesis, communism, at least partially a response to the modern horrors that preceded it. While one might try to resolve these contradictions, one cannot absolve or understate their role as both reactions to and drivers of the sociopolitical ills of modernity.

Kevin Passmore notes the extent to which fascism influenced the course of modernity, arguing that:

Along with liberalism, conservatism, communism, socialism, and democracy, fascism is one of the great political ideologies that shaped the 20th century. [...] Yet how can we make sense of an ideology that appeals to skinheads and intellectuals; denounces the bourgeoisie while forming alliances with conservatives; adopts a macho style yet attracts many women; calls for a return to tradition and is fascinated by technology; idealizes the people and is contemptuous of mass society; and preaches violence in the name of order?<sup>7</sup>

Passmore also argues that, while Weberian critics view fascism as an anti-modern movement orchestrated by pre-industrial elites, and while Marxist critics tend to understand it as a tool of capitalists, both of these approaches are limited in that they ignore three key aspects of fascism: its radicalism, modern features, and preoccupation with technology.<sup>8</sup> He notes, likewise, that the roots of fascism are intellectually diverse and often contradictory at a glance. Passmore situates protofascism, which “drew on contemporary science [...] as well as irrationalism,” amidst a broad range of intellectual presuppositions of the time that later “became embodied” in fascism itself: “mysticism and scientism, traditionalism and modernism, reason and unreason [...] Some nationalists looked back to a rural paradise, while the Italian Futurists celebrated the machine age.”<sup>9</sup> From a Fascist prison in the 1930s, Antonio Gramsci described the spirit of Fascism as “strangely composite: it contains Stone Age elements and principles of a more advanced

---

<sup>7</sup> Kevin Passmore, *Fascism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 11.

<sup>8</sup> Passmore, *Fascism: A Very Short Introduction*, 14-18.

<sup>9</sup> Passmore, *Fascism: A Very Short Introduction*, 37-38, 39.

science, prejudices from all past phases of history at the local level and intuitions of a future philosophy which will be that of a human race united the world over.”<sup>10</sup> To this end, we can understand fascism as both product of modernity and influence on its subsequent trajectory—an influence responsible for some of some of the greatest recorded travesties in human history—as well as, by extension, the product of and an influence on modernism. “‘The horror’ then becomes emblematic of our age and an emerging theme throughout Modernism,” says Stephan, with reference to Conrad’s quote.<sup>11</sup> While fascism was not modernity’s only horror, it is perhaps the most salient and historically prescient. It is not, as in Conrad’s representation of the colonial nightmare of Leopold II’s Congo, a continuation of the horrors of centuries prior, but rooted in the particular circumstances of early twentieth-century European modernity. While it may have been a product of its time and place, regrettably, its consequences were not.

Fascism’s after-effects lingered in Italy many decades after its supposed dissolution and, indeed, continue to do so. One writer, in particular, captured the intersections of horror and modernity during the mid-century height and later waning of fascism: Giorgio De Maria. De Maria has been described as a “lost pillar of Italian modernism,” and this essay will discuss his first published short story and two of the three novels presently translated into English.<sup>12</sup>

De Maria was a Turinese writer, screenwriter, and musician born in 1924, during the early days of Italian Fascism. A leftist, iconoclast, and eccentric in his younger years, he was best-known for his work as the pianist of popular Italian avant-garde folk revival collective, Cantacronache, in which he often collaborated with the

---

<sup>10</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: The Electric Book Company, 1999), 627.

<sup>11</sup> Matthias Stephan, “‘The Horror! The Horror!’,” 181.

<sup>12</sup> Ramon Glazov, “About the Author,” in Giorgio De Maria, *The Transgressionists and Other Disquieting Works*, trans. Ramon Glazov (New York: Talos, 2022), 237. All subsequent references are cited parenthetically. It is worth noting that two of these works have only recently been published in translation. This means that outside of the notes and prefaces by Ramon Glazov, De Maria’s translator, there are few secondary sources available.

likes of Italo Calvino and Umberto Eco.<sup>13</sup> De Maria was also a novelist, who while frequently in famous company, garnered little renown outside Italy, where he commanded a modest cult following. De Maria struggled to get a foothold, occupying the uncomfortable space of writing works that were both undeniably literature, but also, broadly speaking, genre fiction.<sup>14</sup> Writing had become his main artistic pursuit after cramps of unknown origin brought his piano career to a halt. He wrote four novels and worked for Italy's national broadcast company, where he was commissioned to write a dystopian television script. He later retired from writing and converted to Catholicism after decades of outspoken atheism.<sup>15</sup> This coincided with an extended mental-health crisis, punctuated by delusions and persistent insomnia that he remedied with benzodiazepines. He never wrote fiction again, something his surviving family believe may have been related to his medication.<sup>16</sup> His career was defined by modernism as tradition, modernism as departure from tradition, and the persistent horrors of modernity as manifest in daily life, and he utilised these as the basis for metacommentary and satire.

### *“The End of Everydayism” (1958)*

It is strange that De Maria should represent the intersections of modernism and horror because De Maria's first ever published short story was, in fact, about modern art and eerily predicted certain aesthetic trajectories decades before their time. A work of speculative fiction in the most literal sense, 1958's “The End of Everydayism: A Tale of Art Fiction” tells the story of the titular art movement, one De Maria imagines taking place in the 1990s. A close point of comparison for this story would be one of the oldest intersections of horror and modernism, Robert W. Chambers's book of short stories *The King in Yellow* (1895), which combines the trappings of decadent fiction with weird fiction, horror, and a metafictional component that renders the titular character at once the titular villain of an excerpted play, a supernatural entity, and a potent symbol with the capacity to meddle in human affairs. Although closer in form and theme to De Maria's later

---

<sup>13</sup> Ramon Glazov, “Translator's Introduction,” in Giorgio De Maria, *The Twenty Days of Turin*, trans. Ramon Glazov (New York: Liveright, 2017), xiii.

<sup>14</sup> Glazov, “Translator's Introduction,” in De Maria, *The Twenty Days of Turin*, x.

<sup>15</sup> Glazov, “Translator's Introduction,” in De Maria, *The Twenty Days of Turin*, viii.

<sup>16</sup> Glazov, “Translator's Introduction,” in De Maria, *The Transgressionists*, xiii.

novel, *The Twenty Days of Turin* (1975), Chambers's collection shares with "The End of Everydayism" both a metafictional component and a preoccupation with the visual arts and aesthetics. Indeed, as a profoundly metafictional story, De Maria's story is a descendant of Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605-1615), Denis Diderot's *Jacques the Fatalist* (1796), and Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1760-1767), and its mock-nonfiction format, speaking retrospectively about a fictionalised art movement in a future where art is no longer appreciated, is an interesting precursor to works like Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000) and even Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962). "The End of Everydayism" is not unlike, but notably predates, several of the works of De Maria's collaborators Calvino and Eco. Most likely, its machinations are thanks to the example set by Robert Musil, who along with Franz Kafka and Thomas Mann were De Maria's chief influences, although Cervantes may also have a role, given that many of De Maria's works reference him.<sup>17</sup>

"The End of Everydayism" begins with an extract from a thirtieth-century encyclopaedia providing a working definition of "art," informing the reader that art concluded in the 1990s with the Everydayist movement and with the murder of the pope by the movement's founder, Emilio Eboli. The story then moves on to an extract from a fictionalised textbook on the Everydayist movement. Everydayism, as described by De Maria's fictional art historian Carlo Guiducci in his twenty-second-century book on the subject, is a form of conceptual art based around embalming cadavers in the verisimilitude of still-life images. Rather than making shock-value statements, however, the movement aspires to the lofty goal of eroding the distinction between humanity and art itself, with the use of the deceased being the most ethical means of doing so. Guiducci documents the last days of the movement, culminating in Eboli's assassination and artistic embalmment of the pope. Soon after follows the dissolution of art as a practice, brought on by the invention of something called "microcells," implied to be some kind of nanotechnology robbing humanity of the ability to appreciate art. As in Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, there is a good degree of narrative metalepsis.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> David Davis, "Interview: Ramon Glazov on 'The Twenty Days of Turin,'" *Weird Fiction Review*, 10 April 2017, <https://weirdfictionreview.com/2017/04/interview-ramon-glazov-twenty-days-turin/>.

<sup>18</sup> Metalepsis in a narratological context, according to Gérard Genette, is effectively the breakdown between text and paratext in a work of fiction, usually in the form of a frame

De Maria's work is extremely self-reflexive, and the demarcation between metafictional objects, narrative frame, and narration is hazy at best. The question of facsimile is always present, as the sections of Guiducci's book are interrupted by truncations and summaries of sections, as well as unexplained italic interruptions. (Ramon Glazov, the translator, is unsure of De Maria's intentions in these [*Transgressionists* xxvi]). Finally, the short story finishes with a pseudo-Latin signature, stating (roughly) "*Emilio Eboli made this in the year 1995*" (*Transgressionists* 158). It is impossible to infer which layers indicate text, and which are paratext.

The Everydayism movement that De Maria imagines as a product of the 1990s is eerily predictive of several actual visual-art developments of that era, including the works of Andres Serrano and the Young British Artists movement, which featured the use of bodily fluids and even corpses as a kind of shock art.<sup>19</sup> In Eboli's vision, however, Everydayism is something that Glazov, a writer from Perth best-known for his regular contributions to the *Guardian Australia*, describes as a "humanist" movement, with an agreeable warmth despite the incorporation of cadavers (*Transgressionists* xxvi). Emilio's ultimate decision to assassinate and embalm the pope is in protest to several developments: His successors in the movement subvert the warmth and humanism of Everydayism and corrupt it. One imitator covers Paris in corpses with the intention of shocking

---

narrative bleeding into the metatextual object and vice versa. Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1980), trans. Jane E. Lewin, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 234-37.

<sup>19</sup> Glazov erroneously refers to the Young British Artists as the New British Art Movement, and also refers to Banksy's work (*Transgressionists* xxiv). The Young British Artists movement was a product of the 1990s characterised by entrepreneurial attitudes and found objects. These occasionally involved preserved dead animals or bodily fluids. See Kate Bush, "Young British Art," *Art Forum* 43, no. 2 (2004). There is also a parallel with the 1990s works of American photographer Andres Serrano, whose "transgressive" works often included bodily fluids for shock value, such as his work *Piss Christ*, which involved a crucifix in a vial of urine. In the late 1990s, the Stuckist movement was founded to oppose what they viewed as a proliferation of vapid and commercial conceptual art. See Billy Childish and Charles Thompson, "The Stuckists Manifesto" (August 1999), <http://www.stuckism.com/stuckistmanifesto.html#manifest>. The Stuckists were partially motivated by the success of Young British Artists artist Damien Hirst, who used a preserved dead shark as an installation piece. The Stuckists, who preach a doctrine of "remodernism," would likely sympathise with Eboli.

the public, while another receives permission from legislators to lobotomise prisoners and use them as living structures in vapid works of conceptual art that resemble the Young British Artists' works even more closely. Eboli's pieces are vandalised and Everydayist originals are cleared from the streets. The new pieces become a hot property among art dealers and the movement becomes commercialised, leading to scandal as a shady art dealer sells the "artworks" to a Widows and Spinsters Society. It is implied that the lobotomised have been used as human sex dolls. Glazov states that it is "a story preoccupied with terroristic acts, antisocial transgression, creative despair, and—most characteristically for its author—a collapse of boundaries between the animate and inanimate as human beings are reduced to objects for sale and display" (*Transgressionists* xxvii).

In a manner of speaking, though, what De Maria is doing principally here is packaging the demise of modernism in favour of soulless commercial art as a horror story. De Maria is positioning us to sympathise with the Pope's assassin and embalmer in protest at the dissolution of something that the young anti-clerical author sees as sacred: modern art. It is ironic that De Maria is effectively using the toolset often retroactively associated with postmodern literature to protest a grim hypothetical postmodernity (that did, at least partially, come to pass). It suggests that artistic integrity can be maddening. De Maria's transgressions between text and paratext make it unclear whether we are indeed reading an extract from the 30<sup>th</sup> century where art is dead, or whether we are reading Eboli's 1995 confession of the pope's murder which is itself telling a speculative fiction story as justification. By Eboli's own admission, "It occurred to no one that Art had been responsible for that atrocious misdeed" (*Transgressionists* 208). While a frame narrative and unreliable narrator certainly predate modernism, there is a playfulness in the metafiction, metatextuality, and, indeed, metacriticism that De Maria is partaking of. This playfulness engages with the modernity that De Maria was experiencing, while looking towards (and dreading) subsequent developments. De Maria predicted, inadvertently, one of the most pressing art-criticism conundrums of postmodernity in visual art—which is to say, at what point does Duchampian anti-art come full circle and embody precisely the kind of institutionalised commercial product it intends to lampoon? What, then, is a transgressive and iconoclastic work of art when transgression for transgression's sake becomes tired facsimile? This is a theme so prescient in De Maria's work that it would feature even in the title of his next novel.



## The Transgressionists (1968)

De Maria's first novel, *The Transgressionists*, is humorously named, in that very little transgression takes place between its covers. It is the story of a white-collar worker who joins a clandestine cell of telepaths aspiring to world domination. These Transgressionists hone their powers not through a Faustian covenant with a higher being or a terrible innate power, but through mindfulness meditation, corporate slogans and petty acts of elitism and social aloofness. Glazov compares it to a kind of proto-*Fight Club* (1996), but unlike Chuck Palahniuk's anarcho-primitivist egalitarians positioned against the hollowness of vapid, individualistic consumerism (before their ironic devolution into cultish conformity), De Maria's *Transgressionists* combine the worst of effete social elitism, New Age philosophy, and radical individualism, to an ultimately unclear but equally self-indulgent and self-destructive end (*Transgressionists* 11).

While it is not entirely clear how they intend to progress from practicing their craft in a basement club to world domination, like many of De Maria's villains, the *Transgressionists* walk a fine line between all-powerful, contemptible, and pathetic. Glazov notes that they unleash waves of negative energy on their victims by reciting slogans and other meaningless drivel, such as when they use the Cinzano vermouth logo, "chin-chin," to fill their victims with incommunicable dreads—about which he furthermore states: "By English-speaking standards, this would be equivalent to causing mass panic by uttering 'FINGER LICKIN' GOOD' in a KFC outlet, or inviting a hapless victim to 'HAVE A BREAK, HAVE A KIT-KAT'" (*Transgressionists* xvi). De Maria, as part of the "old left," was sceptical of commercial mass culture and counterculture in equal parts, while he held fascist-adjacent schools of mysticism such as Evolianism in contempt. (Glazov states the *Transgressionists* are at least a "partial spoof of" Evolianism [*Transgressionists* xviii].) Likewise, De Maria's second wife's adherence to George Gurdjieff's mysticism was a source of endless frustration to him (*Transgressionists* xix-xxi). His daughter Carolina told Glazov that, humorously, upon the release of *The Transgressionists*, the leader of his wife's group of Gurdjieff adherents congratulated him, oblivious to the book being a satirical stab at them and their ilk (*Transgressionists* xx).

The intersections of far-right ideology, esotericism, and yoga have been obscured by, amongst other things, the rise of New Age counterculture in the 1960s. As

Kate Imy points out, however, fascists were largely responsible for the spread of yoga throughout the anglosphere, while Eviane Leidig notes that exchanges of ideas between Indian Nationalism and Nazi Germany are partially responsible for the fascistic ideological leanings of contemporary Hindu Nationalism.<sup>20</sup> Like many protofascist doctrines, right-wing mysticism was often concerned with the positioning of an elite against the masses, whom it regards with condescension if not contempt. De Maria sees esotericism not as one of rebellion or nonconformity, but rather as one of elitism, and for that matter, Evola himself would agree.<sup>21</sup>

De Maria emphasises the pettiness of the Transgressionists' transgressions: the group attempts (and mostly fails) to hone their power through, variously, not answering their boss, not blessing a church they walk into, not standing to attention when their supervisor walks by, and, most prominently, not buying the tabloid papers—something that, humorously, only one person in their cohort manages successfully to do. They complete “freestyle bodily undulations,” where they effectively dance against the rhythm of the music playing upstairs (*Transgressionists* 35). All of this allegedly helps them attain their ultimate goal of being a “battery of negative energies,” which would allow them to imbue even the word *goal*, when shouted at a soccer match, with such harmful resonances that it would severely traumatise those around them (*Transgressionists* 34). Despite this, there is no clear goal (no pun intended) for the collective as a whole, other than merely to lord it over unwitting civilians against whom they can leverage this power. The Transgressionists are in this way reminiscent of The Party in George

---

<sup>20</sup> Kate Imy, “Fascist Yogis: Martial Bodies and Imperial Impotence,” *Journal of British Studies* 55, no. 2 (April 2016): 320-43; Eviane Leidig, “Hindutva as a Variant of Right-Wing Extremism,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 54, no. 3 (2020): 215-37.

<sup>21</sup> It is worth noting that Italian Fascism went through three stages: initial, authoritarian, and Caesaristic-dictatorial (Alessandro Campi, “Italy,” trans. Cyprian Blamires, in Blamires and Jackson, eds., *World Fascism*, 1:345-50). In terms of position, rather than ideology, however, Mussolini’s party underwent significant ideological modification even between their debut and their rise to power, shifting focus from Sorelian populist warmongering (centring the working class) to explicitly elitist corporatism, though both mobilised a mythicization of Rome (Emilio Gentile, “The Fascist Party (Partito Nazionale Fascista; PNF),” trans. Cyprian Blamires, in Blamires and Jackson, eds., *World Fascism*, 1:226-227).

Orwell's *Nineteen Eight-Four* (1949), whose supposed ultimate aim is power for power's sake.

To attain the full capacity of their powers, the initiates of the cult must “transgress”—a ritual that is only vaguely alluded to throughout the majority of the book. This means effectively abandoning their former goals, lives, and dreams in service of hollow power via a spiritual quest of sorts. Once more, De Maria emphasises the bleakness and shallowness of those aspiring to elitism. For the protagonist-narrator, this means leaving his fiancé Lilliana at the altar, before embarking on a surreal trip through the Italian countryside. The trip begins with him walking with a sense of self-importance and culminates in protracted hallucinations of a discussion with the last of the Dauphins of France—it is telling that it is they with whom the Transgressionists identify—and in the ultimate revelation that the protagonist can, supposedly, unleash his new power on the unsuspecting public at will.

To laud his transgression, the protagonist and his fellow cultists celebrate by acting uncouth while playing bowls, maintaining exclusionary and esoteric conversation for no other reason than to be a nuisance to the public. The protagonist is given a new office job as banal as the one he started with, and now, bereft of his fiancé, or indeed of anything to look forward to, he anticipates the day they will enact their global coup. De Maria depicts the fascist will to power, the intersections of far right and esoteric thought, and individualist elitism as equal parts contemptible and pathetic. The unease that De Maria generates here is not existential horror at the threat of the Transgressionists and their imminent world takeover: it is horror at the hollowness, and the vapidness that one must embody to join their ranks. While De Maria would only publish two more novels, he was not yet done with highlighting the horrors of modernity and modernism, and the incongruent personal emptiness and pettiness of those responsible for them.

### The Twenty Days of Turin (1975)

The final and most famous of De Maria's novels maintained a cult following in Italy, but did not see translation into English until 2016, seven years after its author's death. Before translation, *The Twenty Days of Turin* had come close to going out of print even in Italy but was preserved by its fans. Like De Maria's earlier works, it remains eerily present despite its close encounter with the abyss.

*The Twenty Days* utilises the intentionally anachronistic romantic language that De Maria began to use in *The Transgressionists* but combines it with the more prominent modernist experimentations of “The End of Everydayism,” resulting in a hybrid form that would probably be labelled a kind of magic realism were it published today. While De Maria satirised art first, then esotericism, *The Twenty Days* goes straight for the throat of post-Fascist Italy.

Anna Cento Bull states that Italy in the post-war period was a “microcosm of the Cold War.”<sup>22</sup> The period between 1968 and 1988, in particular, was known in Italy as the Years of Lead. These decades saw the country’s highest death toll since the Second World War itself. It was a period defined by persistent, senseless political violence enacted predominantly by various neofascist factions, but also by the leftist Red Brigade. The Red Brigade and other Leftist paramilitary organisations avoided civilian casualties, targeting individuals on the Right for kidnappings and assassinations. The Neofascists were fond of bombastic acts of public violence, recalling the terroristic beginnings of Mussolini’s Italy: bombing public services, assassinations, and generally indiscriminate acts of terror. The Leftists’ violence was often used to justify the Rightists’ violence.<sup>23</sup> Due to fascist sympathisers within the police force and judicial system, these terrorists seldom saw conviction. Innocents were frequently scapegoated in their place. The few convictions that did occur were often decades later, when the perpetrators had so few years left that life sentences were meaningless.<sup>24</sup>

The Neofascists used a tactic they dubbed the *stragismo* or “Strategy of Tension,” derived from *strage* (“massacre”). The idea was cartoonish and vulgar: to simply commit violence until it elicited a suitable reaction, and to try and shift blame to the leftists.<sup>25</sup> Responding to popular sentiment swinging left in the 1960s, the

---

<sup>22</sup> Anna Cento Bull, *Italian Neofascism: The Strategy of Tension and the Politics of Nonreconciliation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (New York: Berghahn, 2011), 2.

<sup>23</sup> Bull, *Italian Neofascism*, 5.

<sup>24</sup> Alfio Bernabei, “‘Fifth Man’ Paolo Bellini Found Guilty of the 1980 Bologna Massacre,” *Searchlight*, 7 April 2022, <http://www.searchlightmagazine.com/2022/04/fifth-man-paolo-bellini-found-guilty-of-the-1980-bologna-massacre/>.

<sup>25</sup> Bull, *Italian Neofascism*, 4, 7; Giovanna Campani, “Neo-fascism from the Twentieth Century to the Third Millenium: The Case of Italy,” in Gabriella Lazaridis, Giovanna

ruling Christian Democratic Party betrayed the Italian Social Movement, the post-fascist party with whom they'd previously been allied when forming government. They then formed a centre-left coalition, which did little to halt the growing influence of orthodox leftism in the country. In 1968, the "The Hot Autumn" took place, seeing pervasive and widespread students' and workers' strikes organised by the universities and unions. The fascists were incensed that these protests continued unpunished, and believed the country was on the verge of revolution or collapse.<sup>26</sup> These Neofascist groups determined that if they caused enough chaos, it would elicit a law-and-order crackdown from the authorities, ushering back in the fascist mode of governance they so sorely missed. The Red Brigade was formed in the late 1960s as the left's armed response to ongoing fascist violence, particularly as a consequence of the 1969 fascist bombing of Piazza Fontana in Milan.<sup>27</sup> What followed was several decades of a deadly back-and-forth. It was effectively a clandestine civil war, where the fascist side used the threat of further civilian casualties as political leverage, while the left escalated targeted assassinations, ultimately culminating in the kidnap and assassination of former president Aldo Moro. The worst of the terror attacks overall was the 1980 Bologna massacre, carried out by the far-right group Armed Revolutionary Nuclei. Eighty were killed and two-hundred wounded. One of the ringleaders was charged only last year after decades of perversion of justice.<sup>28</sup>

How any of this relates to *The Twenty Days of Turin* will become evident as the discussion proceeds. Like De Maria's earlier work, *The Twenty Days* is a collision of modernist techniques with aesthetic elements borrowed from gothic and weird fiction. It is also, in a manner of speaking, a work of speculative fiction, or even social science fiction. In the original Italian it was subtitled "Inchiesta di fine secolo" ("A Report from the End of the Century"). The novel is set around the turn of the millennium, although no future technologies are mentioned, at least not in the sense of printed circuits, fibres, or wires. Although set in the future and

---

Campani, and Annie Benveniste, eds., *The Rise of the Far Right in Europe: Populist Shifts and "Othering"* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 32.

<sup>26</sup> Bull, *Italian Neofascism*, 3-4.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Drake, "Italy in the 1960s: A Legacy of Terrorism and Liberation," *South Central Review* 16, no. 4-17, no. 1 (Winter 1999-Spring 2000): 72.

<sup>28</sup> Bernabei, "'Fifth Man' Paolo Bellini Found Guilty of the 1980 Bologna Massacre."

allegorising current events, *The Twenty Days* also engages with the past, particularly the sense of political hauntology that engenders neofascism. What is Turin, a museum city, without its history, after all? What is horror without history? The gothic mode of the novel anchors it in place, and notably, a place mired in history and rife with phantoms. The modernist mode, however, anchors *The Twenty Days* in the present, at the time of its writing—a time during which those phantoms wander loose and impose themselves on the present. These phantoms are merely ideas, of course—those that haunt our cities, our books, and our consciousnesses. That makes them no less real, although De Maria might have imagined them as such.

In the first chapter, we're introduced to De Maria's protagonist-narrator. He's nameless, possibly unreliable, and, in the Beckettian or Pynchonian sense, less of a character and more of an archetype, bordering on a mere author mouthpiece. Although he is our narrator, we know little of him beyond the fact that he was originally from Turin and is a salaryman who enjoys playing classical recorder. His past is not even alluded to, unlike the protagonist-narrator of *The Transgressionists*, and he shares little of his feelings with the reader. This is, in a way, somewhat appropriate as we soon learn that the Turinese are an exceedingly private people. Our protagonist has returned to the city of his birth with the intention of writing a book about an occurrence ten years prior. This is the titular twenty days of Turin, described as a possible "collective psychosis" and resulting in several deaths.

The book begins with the protagonist interviewing the surviving sister of the first victim. From her accounts, we can infer a few things: ten years ago, the city of Turin was plagued by a bizarre phenomenon, where dozens of insomnia-ridden citizens roamed the streets at night in a fugue state amidst unseasonal heat and with the scent of vinegar in the air. The insomniacs have no memories of their nightly excursions. Following bizarre dreams, and apparently noticing the statues on the streets trading places, the first victim, appearing to be lucid, informed his sister of his intentions and went for a walk. From the forensics, it was determined that someone or something picked him up by the ankles and swung him like a bat against something solid, with the blunt-force trauma proving fatal. Although there were theoretically dozens of witnesses among his fellow insomniacs, none are

deemed reliable due to the collective amnesia among their ranks. None remember the night at all.

When speaking to other members of the town who were not affected by the epidemic, the protagonist discovers that on these nights they heard what sounded like metallic, inhuman war cries. When the protagonist finds an electronic-voice-phenomena enthusiast it is revealed that these noises can be translated into Italian. Two voices make boasts and threaten one another over seemingly trivial concerns. In a territorial dispute, they agree to fight it out, conversing thusly:

“I spy a few things moving in front of me that I can bring to smite you with!”

“They won’t be moving much longer! There’s not much life left in them to suck!”

“Using them as swords or maces sounds fine enough to me!”

“Affirmative! We’ll have to check that they’re good and solid first.”

“No objections there!”

“We’ll test them against the sidewalks.”

“*Whosoever useth the stone to kill shall himself as a stone be used ...*”

“On that we can all agree!”

“Let’s choose when to commence hostilities!”

“July the second! And we’ll clash only by night!”

“Challenge accepted! From July the second we shall do battle, and it shall be *our* battle!”

“Yes, we shall do battle! Challenge accepted!”

And then there was a scream. A terrible scream, followed by more screams, which resounded like echoes.<sup>29</sup>

A keen reader would begin to see the allegory of Italy’s Years of Lead here: civilian casualties in a battle raged by forces with interests outside the civilians’ own and incomprehensible to them. While Bull and Giovanna Campani note that 1960s Italian society was unusually beholden to ideology, the majority of citizens were not part of armed militias and it was terrorism, not cultural shifts, that most

---

<sup>29</sup> De Maria, *The Twenty Days of Turin*, 91-92.

Italians remembered in retrospect, according to a national poll quoted by Richard Drake.<sup>30</sup>

Although conceptual art, cryptofascist esotericism, and explicitly fascist violence are superficially difficult-to-reconcile as concepts, it is important to understand that these are all consequences of modernity, if not modernisms in and of themselves. While some argue that fascism is a counter-modernity, it must also be understood in its context as inextricable from the modern. Even if one maintains the position that fascism is anti-modern, the mutual ancestors of modernist and fascist thought need to be accounted for, particularly in the influence of Nietzsche and in turn of Sorel.<sup>31</sup> As Wolin notes:

Nietzsche's status as a prophet of twentieth-century power politics should neither be exaggerated nor sidestepped. In confronting the issue directly, one learns a lesson that has become familiar from the annals of literary modernism (Pound, Wyndham Lewis, Gottfried Benn, Paul de Man, and Ernst Jünger): one can be both a towering writer and thinker and politically a fascist—or, in Nietzsche's case, a protofascist.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Bull, *Italian Neofascism*, 1-13; Campani, "Neo-fascism from the Twentieth Century to the Third Millennium," 25-29; Drake, "Italy in the 1960s," 62-63.

<sup>31</sup> Passmore, *Fascism*, 35.

<sup>32</sup> Richard Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism: From Nietzsche to Postmodernism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 62-62. Contrary to Wolin's statements, Passmore argues that "Scholars have disagreed about the extent to which these great thinkers were themselves proto-fascist. The nub is that their ideas were appropriated and misappropriated by proto-fascists" (*Fascism*, 35). The same could be said of Sorel as of Nietzsche, who was, in fact, a syndicalist and would likely have been opposed to how Mussolini misappropriated his ideas. Sorel was, however, responsible for two of the major pillars of Italian Fascist thought: alongside the concept of the general strike and the endorsement of regenerative political violence, Sorel argued that revolution must be mobilised using a heroic myth, the relative truth of which is subordinate to its use, or even irrelevant. Mussolini echoed this sentiment almost verbatim during his speech prior to the March on Rome (Griffin, "Introduction," 1:3-6). It might also be worth mentioning another devotee of Sorel, Eliot. North mentions that Eliot referenced Sorel when articulating his own position and, in describing Sorel's politics as "ambidextrous," inadvertently offered a concise explanation for how Sorel became a



Regardless of whether or not we see fascism as a direct consequence of modernity or a particularly problematic strain of modernist thought, their inextricability is certain. In Anthony Giddens's words, "In the wake of the rise of fascism, the Holocaust, Stalinism, and other episodes of twentieth-century history, we can see that totalitarian possibilities are contained within the institutional parameters of modernity rather than being foreclosed by them."<sup>33</sup> To this end, De Maria's works consistently create a sense of unease or horror through the broader implications of various aspects of modern society. As in his discussion on art, however, De Maria also imagined the future trajectories of neofascism and of twenty-first-century radicalisation in particular.

De Maria describes an organisation called The Library, with ties to both church and state, and operating within Turin prior to the original twenty days and subsequent deaths. The Library was promoted by smiling, polite, clean-cut young men going door to door. By making a small donation, which would go towards caring for local invalids and the institutionalised, locals were able to read and submit confessional manuscripts. The smiling youths stated that this was to combat society's growing alienation. For another fee, the locals could be introduced to the anonymous authors of what they read, and thus become friends. An unspoken implication was that one could also confront those whose writings one took issue with. Following the catastrophe of the twenty days, the authorities had The Library and most of its contents burned, but our protagonist gains access to what remains of it, courtesy of the local mayor. From the remnants, he finds that the people who participated in The Library had aspirations not of the social but of the explicitly antisocial kind. The remnants included vitriolic, maddened rants of disproportionate rage, accounts of sexual aberrations, confessions of crimes, fantasies of committing crimes, and long-winded but harmlessly self-indulgent spiels. Our protagonist looks for explanations of the madness of those days, and instead he finds the equivalent of Facebook and Twitter, almost thirty years before they would be invented. Berard argues that "De Maria foresaw the way the internet—especially the portion of it defined by the pathologies of isolation—makes its users into consumers and creators simultaneously, fostering

---

progenitor of both modern anarchist and fascist doctrines (*The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound*, 95-96).

<sup>33</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), 8.

a paradoxical community of isolates mirroring their solipsisms at each other.”<sup>34</sup> De Maria’s own creations echo this sentiment; when interviewed on the subject, Turin’s mayor states:

Even those infamous contributions, those dialogues across the ether that were later purged by the library, helped break that cycle of loneliness in which our citizens were confined. Or rather they helped to furnish the illusion of a relationship with the outside world: a dismal cop-out nourished and centralised by a scornful power bent only on keeping people in their state of continuous isolation.<sup>35</sup>

Although the plague of insomnia coincided with the introduction of The Library, our hero cannot ascertain to what extent they are connected. Nobody is willing to talk about it due to their fear of exposure. According to Glazov, the Turinese are an exceedingly private people who have an unusually strong fear of mortification.<sup>36</sup> From blushing, through leaving the situation outright, to lashing out in anger, the Turinese, who purportedly crave connection, cannot escape their cultural fear of embarrassment. De Maria strongly implies that these violent, otherworldly forces are brought into existence by the aberrations of thought shared among the people. Diseases of the mind give way to real-world consequences. It is hard to not see parallels between what De Maria proposes and the events of the last decade: legions radicalised, led astray by particularly unsavoury online echo chambers and lured into the “seduction of unreason,” of fascism. As in the early twentieth century, and even today, the most troublesome aspect of modern thought continues to circulate in isolated communities, often leading to real-world violence. To this end, De Maria critiques the forward-thinking and communitarian aspects of fascism through The Library, though he is no less critical of the other side of the coin.

---

<sup>34</sup> Peter Berard, “‘Foul, Small-Minded Deities’: On Giorgio De Maria’s ‘The Twenty Days of Turin,’” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 7 February 2017, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/foul-small-minded-deities-giorgio-de-maria/#>.

<sup>35</sup> De Maria, *The Twenty Days of Turin*, 50.

<sup>36</sup> Davis, “Interview: Ramon Glazov on ‘The Twenty Days of Turin.’”

It seems that almost everyone, especially those with bureaucratic ties in Turin, knows more than the protagonist—even the children. The protagonist comes across a puppet show that the local kids watch, rapt. The show depicts an anachronous assemblage of Turinese historical figures from across the centuries taking part in a slapstick melee, sledging and trading insults with bravado as they bludgeon one another ceaselessly. Upon closer inspection, their cudgels are also puppets: smaller, stiff, and wooden. De Maria's protagonist informs us that, "The title of the entertainment was: *The Twenty Days of Turin*."<sup>37</sup>

This might not be any more eerie than any old-timey puppet show (admittedly, a mode with much potential for eeriness), were it not for the modus operandi of the murders themselves. De Maria is almost vulgar in his foreshadowing. Each of the figures depicted in the puppet show corresponds to a real statue in Turin. De Maria's continual historical references are quite Pynchonian in terms of how often they appear. The author refers to everything from classical music to fairly obscure facets of Turinese history. In the context of the story's trajectory, though, such references become an exercise less in mere allusion than in subtle, creeping disquiet. Despite the inherent fantasy of the scenario transpiring as a matter of plot, there is a bleak underlying realism to the violence, and indeed, *The Twenty Days* echoes its real-world precedent in grim and unexpected ways.

De Maria ever so gradually describes an insidious conspiracy throughout church and government, though he never elucidates the end which it might serve. Both institutions are complicit in facilitating feuding forces going to war in their streets—inhuman forces, "foul, small-minded deities" animating the historical statues of Turin.<sup>38</sup> They antagonise one another, brag, and ultimately go to war in the streets, fighting over more favourable territories. Their weapons of choice? The dazed sleepwalkers, who they use as human truncheons after feeding on their vitality, resulting in the widespread civilian fugue state. These beings, like the fascists whose violence punctuated Italy's years of lead, incorporate civilian deaths as part of their methodology. Their violence is pathetic, like a child stamping their foot in protest when it proves ineffective; their violence merely facilitates more violence and yet it is still celebrated by their supporters among the

---

<sup>37</sup> De Maria, *The Twenty Days of Turin*, 137.

<sup>38</sup> De Maria, *The Twenty Days of Turin*, 132.

“flesh and blood.”<sup>39</sup> As David Davis says of De Maria’s malevolent beings, “They’re omnipotent, nobody dares challenge them, yet they’re losers—much like humans who carry out gun massacres, only magnified in scale.”<sup>40</sup> De Maria creates a salient analogy for the disconnect between the general populace and the factions whose ideological bouts play out in blood, and for the ways in which the former are often collateral damage in the melees of the latter—the most virulent plague of the twentieth century (save, perhaps, for the Spanish flu). Likewise, given the Fascist fixation on a mythic, idealised past combined with modern technology and weaponry, De Maria’s depiction of the city’s statues bludgeoning its civilians to death seems almost vulgar in its explicitness as a didactic analogy. Were it not for the novel’s uneasy and often surreal atmosphere, it would run the risk of losing its effect, but because *The Twenty Days* manifests horror from both modernism and its intellectual precedents, it is a ghost story that understands that ghosts are only ideas of (and from) the past. The novel also stresses that (as in Mussolini’s myth of nationhood) this makes these ideas no less dangerous.

The significance of Turin and its history remains pressing today: the forces that are responsible for the twenty days represent at once a longing for and a manifestation of the city’s past, in a hauntological sense. Originally Jacques Derrida’s way of describing the ongoing influence of Marx, “hauntology” has since come to refer more generally to a powerful kind of nostalgia or longing for a past, imagined or real, and to how this longing is invoked.<sup>41</sup> In the context of early twentieth-century fascism, mid-century neofascism, and neofascism’s contemporary descendants, hauntology can be described as both a motivator and a tool for radicalisation. Mussolini’s ideology, while anchored in modern technology, utilised hauntology as a discursive tool and a rhetorical flourish to sway minds. The Italian *fascismo* is derived from the Latin *fasces*, meaning an axe tied to a bundle of rods and used in Roman judicial proceedings to punish criminals. It represents the rule of law and order—precisely what the neofascists of the 1960s and 1970s wanted to return to. Earlier, Mussolini himself proselytized the rebirth of modern Italy through an idealised image of the Roman Empire, as

---

<sup>39</sup> De Maria, *The Twenty Days of Turin*, 132.

<sup>40</sup> Davis, “Interview: Ramon Glazov on ‘The Twenty Days of Turin.’”

<sup>41</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994).

well as through Nietzsche's individualism and will to power, and Sorel's emphases on heroic myth and political violence.

Mid-to-late twentieth century Neofascists in Italy dreamt of a return to Mussolini's rule, and unlike Mussolini, who wanted a new kind of totalitarianism, their politics were less revolutionary and more blithely reactionary in nature. Contemporary Italian Fascists (including Mussolini's own granddaughter) continue this legacy to this day. In *The Twenty Days*, De Maria highlights the abject horror of this particular strain of modernism, while using modernism's metafictional toolsets to do so. De Maria enacts an intra-modernist critique of modern society. He does not do so in the service of traditionalism, being acutely aware of how this can engender and empower reactionaryism, nor does he do so from a futurist perspective, for the very same reasons. His satirical analogy in *The Twenty Days* understands the various and contradictory arms of Italian Neofascism. Though he might, as a leftist, have had any number of preconceived ideas as to how Turin could have dealt with its fascist violence problem, De Maria does not offer a solution. De Maria understands the historical and intellectual origins of fascist and neofascist thought, but he provides a materialist rather than an ideological critique: he examines the material conditions which lead to senseless, terroristic violence. *The Twenty Days* is utilitarian, and it is as blunt as the polearms of one of its animated statues. Therein, ultimately, lies its effectiveness: it is as if it turns the fasces back on the fascist.

Although a contemporary reader can interpret *The Twenty Days of Turin* as a work of historiographic metafiction, which taps into history but also problematises the recording thereof, it is important to understand that it was written not after the years of lead, but halfway through. To that end, it is less a postmodernist interrogation of history and historiography and more a very current (at the time) work of political art. We, as contemporary readers, have the privilege of hindsight, allowing us to read *The Twenty Days of Turin* as historical or historiographic. To its author, it was present, lived experience.