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Unmaking of Fascist Aesthetics

Kriss Ravetto

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Amid the charged debate over whether-and how-the Holocaust can be represented, films about fascism, nazis, and the Final Solution keep coming. And in works by filmmakers from Bertolucci to Spielberg, debauched images of nazi and fascist eroticism, symbols of violence and immorality, often bear an uncanny resemblance to the images and symbols once used by the fascists themselves to demarcate racial, sexual, and political others. This book exposes the "madness" inherent in such a course, which attests to the impossibility of disengaging visual and rhetorical constructions from political, ideological, and moral codes. In a brilliant analysis with ramifications far beyond the realm of film, Kriss Ravetto argues that contemporary discourses using such devices actually continue unacknowledged rhetorical, moral, and visual analogies of the past. Against postwar fictional and historical accounts of World War II in which generic images of evil characterize the nazi and the fascist, Ravetto sets the different, more complex approach of such filmmakers as Pier Paolo Pasolini, Liliana Cavani, and Lina Wertmüller. Rather than reassuring viewers of the triumph of the forces of Good over the forces of Evil and the reinstitution of ethical values, these filmmakers confound the binary oppositions that produce clear and identifiable heroes and villains. Here we see how their work-complicating conventions of gender identity, class identifications, and the economy of victim and victimizer-disturbs rather than reassures the audience seeking relief from a sense of "bad history." Drawing on history, philosophy, critical theory, film, literature, and art, Ravetto demonstrates the complex relationship of thinking about fascism with moral discourse, sexual politics, and economic practices. Her book asks us to think deeply about what it means to say that we have conquered fascism, when the aesthetics of fascism still describe and determine how we look at political figures and global events.

Kriss Ravetto teaches film history, criticism, philosophy, media, and gender studies in the Department of Critical Studies at California Institute of the Arts.

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