

BOOK REVIEW

Iconografia della destra. La propaganda figurativa da Almirante a Meloni

by Luciano Cheles, Rome, Viella, 2023, 220pp +76 illustrated pages, €29.00 (paperback), ISBN: 9791254691939

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‘Deep roots are not reached by the frost,’ wrote J.R.R. Tolkien in *The Fellowship of The Ring*, the first in his series of fantasy epics much cherished by the Italian far right past and present. Expressed verbally and in visual form by neofascist parties and youth groups throughout the 1970s and 1980s – the most militant of whom attended ‘Hobbit camps’, where ancient lore took on ideological meaning – these words have been passed from one generation of neofascists to the next as a means to celebrate the endurance of far-right heritage and its roots in Italian Fascism. The current Italian government’s love of Tolkien – ‘a far-right icon’ according to *The Financial Times* – has caught the attention of international journalists following a recent exhibition at Rome’s National Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art. But, as Luciano Cheles’s insightful new book *Iconografia della destra. La propaganda figurativa da Almirante a Meloni* makes so clear, there are far more explicit examples of Fascist symbolism in the visual propaganda of the institutional right, the majority of which have gone unnoticed by the press.

Containing 230 colour images, Cheles’ book is structured around three chapters and takes in almost 80 years of far-right propaganda. The first chapter scrutinises the visual propaganda of the Movimento Sociale Italiano (the Italian Social Movement, MSI), the party founded in 1946 by former supporters of Mussolini, many of whom had been part of the Repubblica Sociale Italiana (Italian Social Republic, RSI). Cheles identifies the party’s use of religious imagery to present its ‘persecution’ in the antifascist Republic as political martyrdom, and its efforts to represent party leader Giorgio Almirante as the Duce’s successor through physical gestures (like a raised right arm) and the presence of oceanic crowds in photographs, which evoked Mussolini’s orations in Piazza Venezia. The incorporation of women into MSI visual communications is also examined, but deemed ‘a clumsy attempt to keep up with the times’ (p. 38) rather than a sign of social progress.

Chapter 2 examines the imagery produced by Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance, AN), and the ‘postfascist graphics of Gianfranco Fini’, who formally renounced Fascism in his famous 1995 speech in Fiuggi. The analysis here is astute: Cheles proposes that the aeroplane pattern adorning Fini’s tie in some of his campaign material resuscitated Fascist-era reverence of aeronautical machinery as ‘emblems of modernity and courage’ (p. 74), and presented Fini as a strong leader like Mussolini, who was often depicted in

an aeroplane cockpit as the 'pilot of a new Italy'. Cheles decodes seemingly trivial sartorial choices, revealing historic symbols loaded with ideological meaning. But his analysis considers form as well as content, identifying the Manichean categories that characterised Fascist-era propaganda at a compositional level – the front covers of *La Difesa della Razza* are used as an example. Cheles identifies the use of this form in a variety of AN campaign materials, which invited the electorate to cast their vote in the party's favour by pitting the 'good' candidate against the 'bad'.

The final chapter is dedicated to Meloni's party, Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI) and 'postfascism with a female face' (p. 113). Here the author expands his analysis internationally, showing how Meloni positions herself on the international stage by echoing the poses adopted by another female far-right leader, Marine Le Pen, or the staging of Meloni's 2022 piece for Fox News in front of glass garden doors, which presented her as statesmanlike through visual echoes of Obama in the Oval Office, doors to the Rose Garden ajar. Perhaps most significant, though, is the focus on the visual propaganda produced by far-right youth groups – a theme so often overlooked in scholarship. Cheles reminds readers in no uncertain terms why this is such a pressing issue: 'The calls to fascism are not juvenile outbursts, the folklore of good-timers, or goliardic displays, as some FDI leaders and their supporters would have us believe. They deserve attention because these young people, who so diligently cultivate the legacy of the past, are the future leaders of the party' (p. 129).

As this book makes clear, the signs and symbols of Fascism have been there all along for those who wish to see them. Stitched through visual communications including photographs, pamphlets, posters, building design, clothing, membership cards, logos, gestures and slogans, this important book exposes the intergenerational transmission of Fascist iconography from one leader to the next, each of whom declares themselves distant from Mussolini's ideology while clearly incorporating its iconography. In many ways, it is a plea for better visual literacy, calling on us to hone the skills that might allow us to see and call out these dog-whistles. Cheles notes that 'although ours is a culture dominated by images, we are less prepared to critically analyse them because visual studies are virtually absent from school curricula' (p. 167). This will, therefore, be an invaluable addition to the Italian-speaking classroom; hopefully an English translation is underway.