

Affect and the Fascist Image: Waldemar George's "Aphorisms on Dictatorship"

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The year is 1933. In Germany, Adolf Hitler has just become chancellor. In Italy, Benito Mussolini since 1925 has been enjoying his termless reign, while in the Soviet Union Josef Stalin is promulgating the "Socialism in One Country" position. Against this backdrop of political unrest and the rise of authoritarianism across Europe, the Parisian art critic, curator, and editor Waldemar George (1893–1970) penned his "Aphorisms on Dictatorship," an elliptical set of statements that argue for the affective powers of charismatic political leaders and advocate for France's adoption of a hierarchical dictatorship spiritually aligned to the likes of Mussolini's as the only solution to the stagnant positivism and materialism of France's Third Republic.

Born Jerzy Waldemar Jarocinski, the son of a banker in Łódź, George was a well-connected polyglot émigré who had studied at the Sorbonne and quickly transitioned into a career as a journalist.¹ His work as a translator for the French military during the First World War earned George his French citizenship, and during the conflict he began to cultivate an antimilitant socialist position for feminist and pacifist publications like *La voix des femmes* and *La forge*, where he could be read alongside anarcho-syndicalists like Georges Sorel.

Ultimately, George would carve out a niche for himself in the art world, where he made a quick ascent to an editorial position at the widely read *Amour de l'art* from 1920 to 1926. He would later found his own journal, *Formes* (1929–1934), which he then consolidated with *Amour de l'art* (1935–1939). Though his radical idealism and dramatic romanticism never left him, in the 1930s, George grew to believe that Fascism, not socialism or communism, was the solution to an atomized political reality (a political evolution not uncommon on the fringes of the extreme anarcho-syndicalist Left at the time). After witnessing life under Fascism first-hand during multiple trips to Italy (during a 1933 visit he even met with Mussolini to propose a joint Italian-French museum of "Latin art"), George was convinced that in France, too, a

¹ Yves Chevrefils Desbiolles has written the most comprehensive biography of George. See Yves Chevrefils Desbiolles, *Waldemar-George critique d'art: Cinq portraits pour un siècle paradoxale: Essai et anthologie* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2016). His research was preceded by that of Matthew Affron, "Waldemar George: A Parisian Art Critic on Modernism and Fascism," in *Fascist Visions: Art and Ideology in France and Italy*, ed. Matthew Affron and Mark Antliff (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 171–204.

single charismatic leader empowered by the spiritual and aesthetic values of Catholicism and the classical past could combat a bland, egalitarian, rationalistic, and bureaucratic Republicanism, catalyzing a holistic societal renewal that would inspire not only interclass unity but, important to him, the return of a more meaningful and aesthetic regime that would appeal to more than just the elite of Paris.

Convinced of a Fascist future, by the early 1930s George had begun to incorporate its ideals into his aesthetic program. Fascism, for George, was more than a convenient political platform; it was a cohesive symbolic structure. He would illustrate this point in “Aphorisms on Dictatorship,” which appeared in the art dealer Paul Guillaume’s *Les arts à Paris* in 1933. Here, in a purposefully obfuscating style that would become this protean writer’s trademark, he provides few direct statements but rather a set of suggestions or meditations on the differences between the imposing but ultimately uninspiring formal power of a hereditary monarchy, the homogeneity of calcified totalitarianism, and the charismatic power and popular appeal of a dictator who can cultivate passion and instill a sense of meaning all at once.

Recycling for new purposes the populist language he had first rehearsed in the pacifist journals of his twenties and reviving his earlier interest in propagandistic images, George mounted an abstract defense of Fascism as not so much a political but a psychological need, arguing that the “man in the street” craved the symbolic simplicity of dictatorship. The vague psychosocial analysis of the dictator was a common subject at the time, explored by Sigmund Freud and later by Georges Bataille in his writings for *Critique sociale*; it was preceded by the writings of Mussolini’s touchstone, Gustave Le Bon, whose *L’évolution actuelle du monde: Illusions et réalités* of 1927 developed upon his earlier crowd psychology to account for a contemporary political world marked by the rise of authoritarianism and populist movements. If the people had been exhausted by a democratic process that was protracted and complex, the simplified figurehead of the dictatorship, Le Bon wrote, was more easily intuited, “more intelligible.”²

Of special interest today is the privileged role *the image* would play as a persuasive element for a crowd, which, as Le Bon writes, “thinks with images, and each image evokes a chain of others, without needing a link to the first.”³ Much French art-critical commentary related to the Fascist spectacle across the Alps was focused on the psychological effects of the Fascist image. For instance, in his review of the 1933 Fascist exhibition in Rome, the painter Maurice Denis marveled at the “systematic deployment” of certain colors, deformations, and light schemes to “move and impassion the public.”⁴

In the article translated below, George appears to have been testing this principle of visual transference by producing for his readers an art-historical analogy that contrasts the harmonious and “fascist” *School of Athens* by Raphael to the dehumanized “democracy”

² Gustave Le Bon, *L’évolution actuelle du monde: Illusions et réalités* (Paris: Flammarion, 1927), 141.

³ Gustave Le Bon, *La psychologie des foules* (Paris: Alcan, 1895), 24.

⁴ Maurice Denis, “Les besoins collectifs de la peinture—Les problèmes d’aujourd’hui,” in *L’encyclopédie française*, vol. 16 (Paris, 1765), 70–71, cited in Jacques Bauffet, Madeleine Bonnard, and Bernard Ceysson, *L’art dans les années 30 en France*, exh. cat. (Saint-Étienne: Musée d’Art et d’Industrie, 1979), 91.

found in the works of the Swiss painter Ferdinand Hodler, whose 1911 mural *Unity* depicts a Protestant uprising and served as George's primary reference point.

George argues that in the composition by Raphael each of the figures—all representing different philosophical and theological strands, contemporary and ancient—retains his individuality while nonetheless contributing to a harmonious heterogeneity. This harmony, built on the conservation of both a rich classical and Christian past, provides an intellectual and compositional concordance analogous to the Fascist capacity to bind a set of particularities into a universal whole. In contrast, George denounces the stultifying “Fordist” uniformity displayed in Hodler's *Unity*, wherein a “Protestant” and socialist equality has deindividuated humankind and built a “Machine-state.” Praising the “fascist liberty... whereby the individual takes part in power, in the sphere of cooperation and within his syndicate,” George was convinced that the “Latin” cohesion expressed by Raphael—and in the Fascist state “conducted” by a dictator—was capable of unifying while also safeguarding individual difference, a position that was reinforced by his own identity as a Jew who at once sought to assimilate within a so-called universalist European position while also maintaining his ethnic singularity as such.⁵

For historians, George's ethnicity and his profession of Fascism does raise a series of difficult questions about this unique “nonconformist” character, whose political proselytizing (of which “Aphorisms on Dictatorship” is only one example) earned him many enemies among the Surrealists and other left-leaning artists. The short “Aphorisms on Dictatorship” was in a sense the prolegomenon to a more detailed theoretical treatise on Fascism and Catholic universalism, *Humanisme et l'idée de la patrie*, which George would publish two years later, forever tarnishing his reputation as a critic.⁶ Despite his eventual disavowal of Fascism in 1938 (the year Mussolini allied himself with Hitler) and his persecution by the Nazis during the occupation (he found shelter within the structures of a Catholic church), George's public romance with Fascism would forever haunt his postwar reputation as an art critic in Paris, with his case serving as one of the many examples of interwar intellectuals who had used their platform to advocate for the destruction of democracy and the return of a single authority.⁷

George's article is presented along with the cautious preface written by Guillaume, the director of *Les arts à Paris*, who withholds direct support while also clearly granting George the benefit of the doubt by contextualizing his aphorisms within a landscape of political and moral apathy and the loss of confidence in Republican institutions.

⁵ George's Judaism did not prevent him, like so many other wartime and interwar intellectuals, from professing his reverence for the Catholic faith, and though he did not “convert” to Christianity until he was on his deathbed, he also never disavowed his Judaic heritage. See Yves Chevrefils Desbiolles, “Waldemar-George: Les Paradoxes d'un non-conformiste,” *Archives Juives*, vol. 41, no. 2 (2008), 101–17.

⁶ His romanticized account of the charismatic Mussolini is detailed in his article “Une entrevue avec M. Mussolini,” *La revue mondiale* 5 (May 1, 1933).

⁷ He would burn the extra publisher's copies of *Humanisme et l'idée de la patrie* after 1938. See Chevrefils Desbiolles, “Waldemar-George.”