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Il Selvaggio 1926-1942: Architectural Polemics and Invective Imagery

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(Article begins on next page)



Figure 36: Top right: 'Dal vecchio al nuovo testamento'. 'Un progetto di mezzo secolo fa' (From the old to the new testament. A project of half a century ago). Bottom left: Mino Maccari, etching picturing a condensed inventory of architectural modernism. September 1934. Reprinted from *Il Selvaggio: 1924-1943* (1977, vol. 11: 126).



Figure 37: ‘Abilmente camuffati alcuni noti architetti del gruppo piacentiniano hanno deciso di difendere ad ogni costo l’architettura della chiesa di Cristo Re in Roma’. (Cleverly disguised some notable architects of the ‘piacentinian’ group have decided to defend at any cost the church of Cristo Re in Rome). November 1934. Reprinted from *Il Selvaggio: 1924–1943* (1977, vol. 11: 143).

Whereas Maccari’s volcanic imagination does not cease to generate jibes about Piacentini’s recent commissions, such as the Brazilian university campus (‘Piacentini al Brasile e viceversa’, 1935) or the infamous project for the demolition of Spina dei Borghi (Fig. 38), satirical illustrations of architecture gradually prevail over polemical writings, which are increasingly limited to brief notes included in the ‘Gazzettino’. In December 1935 a cartoon entitled ‘Razionalsanzioni’ (Rational sanctions) (Fig. 39) accompanied a rhyme in which the modernist architect, his steel buildings as well as the idea of a motorized and hyper-urban modernity are all curtailed in the wake of the regime’s autarchy measures that limit the use of iron in the building trades. Against the backdrop of modern

skyscrapers, an angel carrying an aureole is breaking an automobile, driven by a tiny architect, into two pieces.

The polemics became increasingly rarefied and condensed in a few but powerful graphic signs: images definitely took over words. Thus, an entire page of the August 1936 issue is devoted to a large colour illustration entitled ‘Un’indigestione di razionale’, picturing a personified version of Italy in the act of carrying an enormous belly filled with a chaotic multitude of modern miniaturized buildings (Fig. 40). And on March 15, 1942, a vindictive caricature of a disembowled Piacentini attacked by a horde of houses wielding pickaxes officially closes *Il Selvaggio*’s architectural polemic (Fig. 41).



Figure 38: Mino Maccari, 'Questioni spinose. L'Accademico Piacentini toglie la spina ai Borghi e ce la ficca nel cuore' (Thorny questions. The Accademico Piacentini removes the thorn from the Borghi and sticks it in our heart). June 1936. Reprinted from *Il Selvaggio: 1924–1943* (1977, vol. 13: 240).



Figure 39: 'Razionalsanzioni' (Rational sanctions). December 1935. Reprinted from *Il Selvaggio: 1924–1943* (1977, vol. 12: 215).



Un'indigestione di Razionale

Direttore responsabile MINO MACCARI

Soc. An. Poligrafica Italiana - Via della Guardiola, 22

Figure 40: Mino Maccari, 'Un'indigestione di razionale' (An indigestion of rational). August 1936. Reprinted from *Il Selvaggio: 1924–1943* (1977, vol. 13: 248).



Figure 41: 'L'itala architettura all'architetto che per sete dell'or la distruggea, gridi e sia il grido fausto benedetto, mors tua vita mea'. (The architecture of Italy, to the architect who destroyed it for the sake of his thirst for gold. Cry, and the propitious cry be blessed: your death, my life). March 1942. Reprinted from *Il Selvaggio: 1924–1943* (1977, vol. 19: 179).

Between Words and Images: Symmetries and Collisions

While there is extensive recent research on the relationship between art and satire (Sironi 2012), studies on architectural cartoons and caricatures as forms of social and political commentary have been sporadic and largely unscholarly. A systematic approach to this topic has only just begun to surface among architectural, cultural and urban historians (Ratouis and Baumeister 2011; Rosso 2015)¹¹. As is clear from the texts I have quoted in this article, the terms of the architectural writings of *Il Selvaggio* often remain vague, and none of the texts by Maccari and his collaborators ever addresses concretely the architectural features of the buildings and projects they cite. Whereas they are clear about what they stand against, it is often difficult to understand what they stand for.

The personification of the polemic against Piacentini and other prominent figures of the architectural establishment was only one aspect of a broader attack on the regime. Landscape, architecture and the city – and their visual counterparts – all played a crucial role in the ideology of *Il Selvaggio*. Architecture is not rejected *per se* but it is seen as a microcosm of society, continually and programmatically used as a platform to express a dissent that informs the broader fields of politics and culture. This is reflected first and foremost in the invention of the fictional or idealised *Strapaese* landscapes whose particular subject iconography and graphic style together convey an identical message, where the verbal and the visual are in ideal harmony. The values of geographical rootedness promoted by the journal are represented in the rural imagery of the drawings and etchings by Carrà, Soffici, Rosai, Maccari, Galante and Lega, whose repeated representations of Tuscan landscapes privilege the key iconographic elements of cypress and pine trees, haystacks, rolling hills and anonymous farm buildings. At the same time, the preference for the crude language of woodcuts and linocuts, with their deliberately undefined contours and shapes, emphasised the unsophistication dear to Maccari and his collaborators (Cesarini 1997: xi–xii). Furthermore, the paraphrasing of an archaic graphic style borrowed from the works of the anonymous self-taught artisans, as in ‘La Cometa infesta’ (Fig. 13), ‘Sogno di un giovane architetto’ (Fig. 14) or ‘Il Senso dell’architettura nelle stampe popolari’ (Fig. 26), is the result of a deliberate choice meant to attain the maximum transparency between content and expression, in an almost functionalist mode.

The same aspiration informs the use of the German or French language for some of the captions to convey unequivocally the perceived foreignness and alien nature of those modernist architectural works whose pictures are being celebrated throughout the contemporary architectural press. At the same time the rhetoric of calamity and destruction reiterated by the journal, as a reaction to disembowelments, is the product of a brilliant reworking of that kind of sensationalist imagery of natural and accidental catastrophes, such as floods, earthquakes and fires, diffused throughout the popular almanacs and illustrated periodicals of the second half of the 19th and into the early 20th century.

One of the most original yet underappreciated achievements of *Il Selvaggio* is the unconventional way in which Maccari and Longanesi deliberately use or emulate late 19th-century typography as a weapon to illustrate their alternative version of a contemporary architectural and artistic aesthetics. What is entirely original, compared to the same use in other contemporary art and architectural magazines, where it is primarily aesthetic, is the intentionally programmatic employment of this kind of pictorial material. Longanesi’s personal obsession with the 19th-century ephemeral culture, which is also at the heart of *L’Italiano*, emerges in the magazine’s obstinate attempt to show the 19th century’s ability to anticipate the future, thereby giving recognition to a neglected cultural patrimony. Thus, the faux-naif use of old prints derived from popular illustrated journals, agrarian almanacs and *ex-voto* images, can be interpreted as an original and ironic form of 19th-century revivalism as well as an anti-conformist response to that homogenization of taste and culture that was perceived as one of the ill effects of state-sanctioned centralization and propagation of mass culture.

The rediscovery of 19th-century popular illustrations is far from nostalgic, and was not merely a counterpart to the more refined and cultivated language of etchings, woodcuts and drawings signed by notable artists published in the magazine. Maccari and Longanesi were well aware that, by proposing these materials, they were explicitly acknowledging a paternity of those modern movements of art and architecture, though not one always overtly admitted by their supporters. Far from being an innovation, the functionalist, primitivist or surrealist lexicon of modern art and architecture can be recognised as having some of its roots and sources in those unsophisticated products of anonymous art (‘Alle fonti del surrealismo’, 1939). In so doing, Longanesi and Maccari predate later post-war critiques of modernism and show how a well-established figurative anonymous tradition was re-appropriated and re-contextualized by modernism, undercutting its claim to being a schismatic break with the past. This is clear when, in ‘Come sarà la nuova via Roma a Torino?’ (Fig. 18), ‘Senso dell’architettura nelle stampe popolari’ (Fig. 26), as well as in ‘I parenti poveri’ (Fig. 29), Maccari and Longanesi trace back the origins of an alternative version of architectural modernity to the language of the popular art of the previous century, or when they identify a paradoxical 19th-century predecessor to modern abstraction in one of the projects published by Carlo Dossi among its inventory of ‘nutty’ entries to the architectural competition for the Vittoriano.

Conclusion

The main interest of the architectural polemics published in *Il Selvaggio* resides in the graphic language and communication techniques used to substantiate the authors’ dissent towards certain foibles of fascism. The disparity between the arguments contained in the writings and the varied repertory of graphic materials and literary registers deployed by Maccari and his collaborators could not be greater. Whereas the amateurishness of their architectural criticism leaves us disconcerted, we are intrigued and fascinated by their rich and eclectic language of puns, jokes, etchings and cartoons.

It is in the satirical cartoons, in the short stories and rhymes, that their aversion to fascist official culture and rhetoric is best expressed. Maccari and Longanesi, united by a similar social and formative background (Guerrieri 1977), creatively plunder the whole varied expressive catalogue of visual and textual satire, caricature and parody. This is manifest in their clever manipulation of graphic materials - as in the rotated photograph of Fahrenkampf's Shell Haus, as well as in the etchings where they synthetically condense the whole diverse phenomenology of modern architecture in the reiterated shapes of squared towers and polished modern bathroom fixtures. In Longanesi's inventory of 'unintentional rationalist' prototypes exemplified by derogatory photographs of modular water sinks, public urinals and unadorned backyards of popular housing blocks, *Il Selvaggio* overturns the *objet trouvé* aesthetics and the cult of ordinary things congenial to the artistic and architectural avantgardes, and uses it to deflate modernist myths of functionalist de-ornamentation and building standardization.

The representations of architecture in *Il Selvaggio* are of particular interest because of the non-specialist nature of the periodical, in which irony and sarcasm are used to voice concern about a variety of political and cultural issues, including Italy's architectural and artistic identity and patrimony. As with any other instances of social, political and cultural satire, each of Maccari's and Longanesi's cartoons, eclectic montages, short stories and rhymes is informed by a specific and unique set of historical circumstances. The semantic instability of this kind of material, its ambiguity and the richness of possible meanings, are what makes this study fascinating as a field of investigation.

Competing Interests

The author declares that she has no competing interests.

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Notes

¹ This article is based on the close scrutiny of the magazine *Il Selvaggio* in its 1977 *facsimile* edition (*Il Selvaggio* 1977). This publication consists of six volumes that group together all the issues published between July 1924 and June 1943 (Vol. 1: 1924–1925; Vol. 2.1: 1925–1926; Vol. 2.2: 1926–1928; Vol. 3: 1929–1932; Vol. 4: 1933–1936; Vol. 5: 1937–1943). The volume numbers of *Il Selvaggio* in the list of references refer to the years of publication of the journal. The pages in the 1977 compilation have been consecutively numbered and the numeration begins anew in each of the six volumes. The items in the list of references therefore use this re-numbered pagination and not the numbers of the original individual issues.

² *Orbace* is a Sardinian rough woollen cloth used to make fascist uniforms.

³ The original text reads: 'l'affermazione risoluta e serena del valore attuale, essenziale, indispensabile della tradizioni e dei costumi caratteristicamente italiani, di cui il paese è insieme rivelatore, custode, rinnovatore'.

⁴ Besides contributions from Morandi, Maccari and Longanesi and the most assiduous journal's contributors such as Ardengo Soffici and Ottone Rosai, *Il Selvaggio* published etchings and drawings by Carrà and several other artists, such as Italo Cremona, Luigi Spazzapan, Enzo Righetti, Amerigo Bartoli Natinguerra, and Filippo de Pisis. Furthermore, it devoted entire issues to Luigi Bartolini, Renato Guttuso, Orfeo Tamburi, and Leo Longanesi.

⁵ The original text of Maccari's article 'Giorgio Morandi', cited by Aguirre (2013) and published in the Bolognese newspaper *Il Resto di Carlino* on June 8, 1928, reads: 'Perché l'arte di Morandi è arte italianoissima, che ha radici di profonde nella tradizione nostrana più preta ed è nutrita di quelle stesse linfe vitali che ci dettero nel mondo e che solo potranno ridarcelo'.

⁶ The original text reads: 'Per noi un disegno, un'incisione, un'acquaforte valgono come un articolo, servono alla nostra campagna "selvaggia" come e più della prosa'.

⁷ The original text reads: 'per andare a Strapaese non c'è che una strada, e si chiama Fascismo'.

⁸ The famous photomontage would be published in *Quadrante*, 1(2), June 1933, with an added strip depicting Giovanni Muzio's Palazzo dell'Arte at the Milan Triennale.

⁹ The original text reads: 'Partendo da una retorica concezione del romano e del barocco, lo stile piacentiniano è venuto man mano "aggiornandosi" alla recenti tendenze dell'architettura razionale tedesca e olandese, assumendo un falso carattere di tradizione e di moderno'.

¹⁰ Bardi's article 'I "selvaggi" e l'architettura', published in *L'Ambrosiano* on April 19, 1933, is partially reprinted in Tentori (1990: 352–353).

¹¹ When this article was in the final proofreading stage, the following work, dedicated to architectural caricatures, was published: Gabriele Neri, *Caricature architettoniche. Satira e critica del progetto moderno* (Macerata: Quodlibet, December 2015).

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