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## Representing Bounded Bodies

Review Essay by Susan Mains

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*Bodily Regimes: Italian Advertising under Fascism*

Karen Pinkus

University of Minnesota Press, 1995

The images of fascist advertising are thus not 'dead', but are existing in a state of frozen animation. As long as western culture exchanges and values these printed ephemera as 'historical artifacts' or 'objects of collectionism', they will never fully awaken. Whether or not the reanimation of the figures produced under fascism is to be desired, it seems important to unlock the door and leave a passage open, in both directions (4).

An increasing number of efforts have been made to explore the intersections of imagery and materiality within the arts and social sciences. This has led to a growing recognition of the need to demonstrate the significance of representation in creating a particular notion of 'reasoned' ideologies. Representing reason has frequently involved a process of utilizing modernist ideals in a variety of media in an effort to delineate accepted forms of knowledge and behavior. As Escobar (1995, 106) notes, exploring the significance of these exclusionary discourses, in conjunction with specific localized examples enables an in-depth examination of the ways in which these practices occur: "The emphasis on discourse ... is intended to show how a certain subjectivity is privileged and at the same time marginalizes the subjectivity of those who are supposed to be the recipients of progress".

In *Bodily Regimes: Italian Advertising Under Fascism*, Karen Pinkus provides a thorough interrogation of the discourses and political economy of Italian advertising in the age of fascism. She expresses the ways in which the modernist agendas of fascist ideology sutured 'reason' with the paternalistic 'whiteness' of Aryan bodies. By focusing on the image of the body, Pinkus analyses the historical context of advertising and the ways in which this became intermeshed with political systems from the turn of the century through the 1930's. What Pinkus also achieves is a sense of how these bodies of work have provided a groundwork for imagery which

exists in Italian society today. Through the use of various theoretical frameworks *Bodily Regimes* conveys the complexity of re/creating identities and the methods by which fascist ideologies were stretched in order to maintain national and individual disciplinary practices. Pinkus goes beyond traditional approaches towards design history, and places Italian advertising "into the frame of a critique that spans a variety of disciplines including psychoanalysis, anthropology, feminism, art history, semiotics, and Marxism" (1).

The key themes which Pinkus highlights in this study are: firstly, institutions and images of the body; secondly, colonialism and the black body in advertising; thirdly, representations of whiteness; fourthly, the changing Italian economy and iconography; and finally, the gradual erasure, or 'disappearance' of the body from promotional images. These themes convey both ideological and temporal transitions in depictions of the body for a variety of commercial products/services. Pinkus focuses largely on the period of the 1930's and draws on advertisements from a variety of sources. By concentrating on this particular era she articulates in considerable depth the interweaving of fascist ideology under Mussolini, with efforts to 'target' particular consumers through identification with specific representations of the body.

To highlight this development of iconography and changing socio-economic contexts, the book opens with a discussion of the displacement of attention from institutions towards the body in the early 1900's, which simultaneously facilitated the formation of a regime for categorizing the individual in order to fit within the fascist ideologies of the state. Pinkus highlights that the bodies depicted in these advertisements adhered to specific concepts of race, class and gender, in a style which not only depicted human forms, but which expressed them as extensions of the products they were attempting to sell; "When I first began to look at images from the 1930's (posters, points-of-sale, *depliants*, postcards), I could not help but be attracted by what I perceived as their iconic simplicity; their clarity of line and shape; and the perfect equation between text, image, and product" (4). Pinkus moves beyond the aesthetic characteristics of advertising, however, by illustrating the very material impacts in which the repressive politics of such iconography was embedded.

By utilizing the theme of the body as a symbol for the objectification and control of society, Pinkus depicts the ways in which these modernist forms of expression helped to fuel (and feed off) the desires of an emerging mass consumerism. To analyze this in closer detail, Pinkus then examines the 'selling' of the black body,



and the interrelationship of racial images and Italian colonialism in Africa. As fascist advertising became more prevalent from the 1900's - 1930's, and the need to bolster Italian colonialist campaigns in Africa grew, images of blackness were shown in ways which attempted to control and appropriate other 'inferior' populations, in the same way that fascist politicians were attempting to control and manipulate resources and changing economic markets, particularly during the 1930's: "Images of the black body support the notion that the imperial moment was central to the shaping of the national conscience for an entire generation of Italians" (24). Efforts were made to ascertain widespread interest in Africa as a resource, which meant that it had to be 'sold' to the larger Italian population through the use of omnipresent and simple messages. Pinkus notes these messages were relatively simple (but effective) statements: "The unemployment problem in Italy would be solved, and the Italian 'Aryan' race would continue to thrive and grow. The optimism of the colonialist vision of the future depended precisely on the ability of the Italian race to subjugate another" (24).

According to Pinkus, this subjugation relied on a certain spatial and temporal 'distancing,' and leant itself to the creation of a particular geography of racial, gendered and ethnic identities: "For Italy, it was the encounter on 'black' or native soil that would shape notions of the body as a producer" (29). Turn of the century colonialist campaigns to educate the Italian population into understanding the necessity for 'civilizing' Africans, switched gear when Mussolini decided to invade Ethiopia during 1934-35, leading to a far more determined effort to establish power: "As an empire, Italy no longer could afford to arouse general 'interest' in racism; it had to sustain the firmest principles of separation and difference" (32). Part of these projects to delineate borders between legitimate Italians and inferior 'others' rested on gendered images which were reinforced through several advertising campaigns: "If the African male is made into a futurist, the female is represented as repugnant and vilified" (40). Pinkus highlights that while gradually switching from 'watercolor muted' style images of the 'native' to more abstract futurist designs, advertisers kept certain aspects of this exoticism in order to sell new commodities to the Italian market. This could be seen in advertisements such as those for *Facetta nera* ("little black girl") chocolates, wherein "the link between the smiling Negress and the sale of products is neatly made" (56). The meaning of this imagery—which depicted a black smiling woman, with music in the background and the chocolate name bordering the picture—shifted over time, from that of the sexually alluring woman who could be saved by the 'progress' of industry, to the reviled object of growing fascist sentiments. As Pinkus explains,

She contains a multiplicity of meanings related to the changes in the Italian national character over time, and more specifically, to the shifting relations with female sexuality. The satisfaction of male desire through the black body is no longer relevant because of the transference of the libido to fascist military glory (58).

Pinkus expands these ideas by delving more deeply into the idea of the 'Fascist body' and representations of whiteness, particularly in relation to the identities of Italian producers and consumers. "The sense of a national Italian (and specifically Aryan) identity that developed during fascism also permeates and is conditioned by the market itself... the brief period of colonialism still colors the rhetoric of public persuasion in Italy today" (3).

Pinkus then provides a closer examination of subjugation within the setting of Italy. She explores efforts by the Italian government to represent images of labor in order to convey the necessity of certain goods and services while attempting to erase any notions of class differentiation. Taylorist ideas formed an important function in controlling and molding the image of new factory workers (Figure 1):

The ideal Taylorized worker—a woman selling a Dopolavoro-sponsored cruise, for example—is almost never shown performing the particular time-unit task for which she has been mechanized. Instead she has been 'reassembled' by consuming leisure and enjoying the reification of the distance from her own labor value thanks to the benevolence of the regime, which allows her to imitate the class that had previously enjoyed such benefits exclusively (126).



Figure 1: From *Bodily Regimes*, p.127



Once more, a considerable aspect of this imagery relied on gendered divisions of labor in which,

The 'true' body of the fascist is the phallic body, existing in a state of preparedness for war. It was possible for women to occupy this position at certain moments in the history of the regime, as long as they were relatively malleable, capable of moving back to the mystical place reserved for maternity. Men, however, maintain only one position and their form is absolutely fixed. In short, male identity is legislated; female identity is subject to change (86-87).

Pinkus conveys the threat which women in the workplace were seen as posing to traditional structures of family and work. Attempts to alleviate this concern can be noted in advertisements such as those used to promote financial services in the late



Figure 2: From *Bodily Regimes*, p. 145

which leisure activities and images of sport could be seen as representing a certain "mastery of the instincts", in which "man ... instinctively strives for perfection" (188).

'30's (Figure 2), where the image of the white nuclear family gazes hopefully at a savings book which reflects light into the brighter future (assuming the continuation of the fascist regime).

Pinkus goes on to contrast these specific images of the body and labor, to more abstract designs which seek to discipline and bound the body in a far stricter sense. She conveys a process which seeks to reify and reiterate the autonomy of the Italian self. These are the ultimate, "rationalist" depictions of the human form; they represented "strategies of self-containment and protection against all forms of desire" (3). In this discussion Pinkus utilizes Freudian analysis to explore the iconography of sport in advertising. She conveys the ways in

From an iconography of distinctly defined human forms, Pinkus concludes with a discussion of the 'disappearing body'. This is a stage through which the body has presence in a liminal form; "In a significant group of advertisements from the 1930's, the human body seems to slip away, vanishing into thin air" (195). During this period the image of the body became less clearly delineated in visual images, and materials (such as rayon and tobacco), are shown in more abstract forms. This is described as a process of 'disavowal' a procedure which has very gendered implications of "affirmation and denial" (196). This erasure of the human form occurred in a period when public attention was becoming dispersed among an increasing myriad of images; "In advertising, the body figures its own disappearance or lapses in attention, almost as if it wishes to slip away from the grasp of fascist/market control. In other words, it is not coincidental that just when the regime achieves apotheosis of control ... the body vanishes" (237). It is important to note, moreover, that it is the 'bad consumer' who has a tendency to disappear, suggesting a larger 'moral problem' (238).

*Bodily Regimes* offers an in-depth analysis of a wide ranging complexity of social relations which deconstruct concepts of identity and difference within Italian fascism, leaving the body exposed in suspended animation. This is a thought provoking example of textual analysis which combines the discursive and material interrelations of a specific context, and is highly recommended for researchers of cultural studies (and more broadly, the social sciences), who are exploring issues of representation and identity. Pinkus provides an excellent opportunity to examine particular notions of diverse topics, such as science and industry, Freudian iconography, the psychopathology of sport and the tobacco industry. Through a focus on visual imagery there is a unique sense of the intricate process through which a particular ideology can be re-articulated and reinforced. In conjunction with analyzing a complexity of iconography Pinkus successfully integrates political economy, feminist and Marxist critiques. The irony of increasingly abstract identities becoming more important in maintaining the image of the ideal Italian citizen, conveys the significance of 'invisible' disciplinary practices, which sought to erase those who could not (or would not) submit to bodily regimes of various forms.

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