

Janez Janša
Il porto dell'amore

“Everything in life depends upon the eternally new. Man must either renew himself or die.”
(Gabriele D'Annunzio)

1919. At the end of the First World War, a large part of Italian society perceived the victory as “mutilated”. Emblematic of this dissatisfaction was the situation of the town of Fiume in Istria, with a mainly Italian population¹, which had requested to be annexed to Italy in 1918. This sense of frustration later found an outlet in Fascism’s promise of glory. In September 1919, Gabriele D'Annunzio - poet, intellectual and charismatic man of action - led a handful of deserters to seize the city on 12 September. They held it for almost 16 months, until the Italian government, after having attempted to solve the issue with mediation and by siege, opted for the military solution. Between 24 and 31 December 1920, the Italian army attacked Fiume, taking it from the legionnaires despite their strenuous resistance, not surrendering to an inevitable defeat. D'Annunzio christened these events Bloody Christmas.

The Fiume episode, however, has long been blighted by the shadow of Fascism: D'Annunzio was considered to be a forerunner to the Fascist movement, and there are some elements of effective linguistic, rhetorical and cultural continuity between Fiume and Fascism (from “Me ne frego!” to *Giovinezza*, to the spectacularization of politics, to the corporative structure of society), and lastly the fact that many exponents of the Fiume movement later joined Fascism (the Futurists in particular). This shadow has never entirely faded, despite the work of numerous intellectuals and historians who have attempted, documents in hand, to re-interpret the episode in its own right. This is an operation that starts from a distant perspective. As Lenin declared, “There is only one man in Italy capable of starting a revolution. D'Annunzio.” And it was no coincidence that The Soviet Union was the only state that recognized the existence of Fiume. Institutional acknowledgement aside, the support for Fiume from the Dada Club in Berlin is also striking. The day after D'Annunzio captured the city, the club sent a telegram to the *Corriere della Sera*: “Conquest a great Dadaist action, and will employ all means to ensure its recognition. The Dadaist world atlas Dadaco already recognizes Fiume as an Italian city.”

But if we exclude these surprising reactions, we can see that it is above all in recent years that Fiume has begun to be treated with an attitude that differs from “irreverent underestimation” or “acritical apologia”². Renzo De Felice led the way (1978), underlining the prevailing role played by the

“firebrands” in the Fiume episode, the connection between revolution and celebration, and the predominance of a global driving force over purely local questions³. Other historians, from Nino Valeri (1967) to Michael Arthur Leeden (1975), from Mario Isneghi (1994) to Günter Berghaus (1995), have variously underlined the radical, libertine nature of the revolt, which was a melting pot of different ideologies, with a powerful vein of creativity and imagination, and characterized by a strong desire to intervene on all aspects of life⁴. Berghaus writes: “Between December 1919 and December 1920, Fiume became a little world of its own, a microcosm where radical dreams and aspirations were given an unprecedented chance to be lived out and experimented with... Groups of revolutionary intellectuals managed to assume control over the city and created a political culture, where spontaneous expression of beliefs replaced the tedious procedures of parliamentary democracy. Artistic fantasy and energy gave birth to a new 'aesthetics' of communal life, where the fusion of political and artistic avant-garde became a reality. A festive lifestyle replaced conventional social behaviour.”⁵

Fiume also attracted the attention of the anarchist thinker Hakim Bey, who in his legendary essay *T.A.Z.* (1985), on temporary autonomous zones, describes Fiume as “the last of the pirate utopias (or the only modern example)” and “the first modern TAZ.” He continues: “I believe that if we compare Fiume with the Paris uprising of 1968 (also the Italian urban insurrections of the early seventies), as well as with the American countercultural communes and their anarcho-New Left influences, we should notice certain similarities, such as: - the importance of aesthetic theory (cf. the Situationists) - also, what might be called “pirate economics,” living high off the surplus of social overproduction - even the popularity of colorful military uniforms - and the concept of music as revolutionary social change - and finally their shared air of impermanence, of being ready to move on, shape-shift, re-locate to other universities, mountaintops, ghettos, factories, safe houses, abandoned farms - or even other planes of reality. No one was trying to impose yet another Revolutionary Dictatorship, either at Fiume, Paris, or Millbrook. Either the world would change, or it wouldn't. Meanwhile keep on the move and *live intensely*.”⁶

Starting from this cluster of ideas, and a detailed examination of all the literary material produced by the protagonists in the Fiume undertaking, the Italian academic Claudia Salaris wrote her book *Alla festa della rivoluzione* (2002), which describes the Republic of Carnaro as a libertarian, aesthetic adventure. It was reading this book, and other first hand material, from the *Charter of Carnaro* to the text by Comisso, the title of which he then borrowed⁷, that led **Janez Janša** to start on the long process which generated *Il porto dell'amore*. The connection between historiography and reconstruction of history should not come as a surprise: at times history, in order to be staged once more, must first be

rewritten. At other times it is the reconstruction that rewrites history.

In actual fact, terms like “reconstruction” and “re-enactment” only partially describe *Il porto dell'amore*, which is a stratified, modular work based around a re-branding of the city of Fiume, including initiatives like the construction of a monumental interactive lighthouse in the port. And from the port area, the project spreads out through the narrow streets, winding up the hill, intersecting various references to the lost history of Fiume. Streets and squares are renamed and new features appear on the map of the city, such as the "Sacrarium of the Constitution", which holds a copy of a 1920 paperback edition of the *Charter of Carnaro*, the constitution of the liberated city. The new elements are laid out in the pattern of the Orsa Maggiore constellation, which is the emblem of the city in the coat of arms of the Italian Regency of Carnaro, designed by Adolfo De Carolis from a sketch by D'Annunzio. This all seems to point to an act of historic revisionism in dubious taste, but there are a few details which indicate a rather different hypothesis. The monumental lighthouse is a mobile, fragmented, joyful structure, well removed from the impenetrable monuments of Fascist architecture. It is a kind of architecture to be lived, that offers itself up to the variegated multitude of creative activities that went on in D'Annunzio's Fiume. Lastly, it is a construction that, like a minaret, is designed to convey a voice, broadcasting its message over the city and the sea every time a ship draws near. The voice recites articles from the *Charter of Carnaro*, the extraordinary constitution presented on 8 September 1920 when the Italian Regency of Carnaro was founded. Drawn up by the trade unionist Alceste De Ambris, the constitution was completed by D'Annunzio, who reinforced its utopian, and fundamentally literary nature, introducing the reference to music as a “religious and social institution”, and adding the extraordinary tenth corporation, which is thus described: “The tenth has no special trade or register or title. It is reserved for the mysterious forces of progress and adventure. It is a sort of votive offering to the genius of the unknown, to the man of the future, to the hoped-for idealization of daily work, to the liberation of the spirit of man beyond the panting effort and bloody sweat of today.”

The planned Sacrarium of the Constitution pays tribute to this bizarre document, which mingles proto-Fascist components with undisputedly modern elements, libertarian, anarchist and democratic ideals, and a rare acknowledgement of the key role played by artists in society. By the same token, changing street names not only means paying homage to the city's glorious past: by having the names in Italian, Slovenian and Croatian, Janez Janša (and his designer Bor Pungerčič) highlight the openness and cultural pluralism of a state whose armed forces enjoyed decorating their uniforms with different symbols and multinational insignia (as the surrealist legend Jacques Vaché did); and which set up the League of Fiume to oppose the League of Nations, in defence of the weakest: oppressed races and

peoples (including Native Americans and Afro-Americans), colonies and former colonies, and countries impacted by the Treaty of Versailles.

But more than a tribute to a historic moment that deserves to be recovered, or at least restored to authenticity, *Il porto dell'amore* actually feels like an act of love towards a place, that, at a certain point in its history, was hit by a wave of energy and poetry that no other place can lay claim to, and that its current guise of provincial town in a former Socialist country would never lead you to imagine. Fiume: Port of Love, City of Life, Universal Meeting Place, Great Opportunity, Fifth Season of the World, Rainbow City, Holocaust City Quarnaro «Future Sea »!, “Fiume: Symbol, Hub, Pole, Rainbow! [...] A little of everything has come to you, divine Fiume: purity, ardour, courage, vanity, cocaine, faith, hypocrisy, false currency, voracity, sacrifice.”⁸ And: “In the crazed, despicable world, Fiume is the symbol of liberty; in this crazed, despicable world, there is one pure thing: Fiume; one truth: Fiume; one love: Fiume! Fiume is like a splendid lighthouse shining in a sea of baseness...”⁹. What other city in the world has ever merited such an avalanche of epithets? *Il porto dell'amore* does not re-enact the events, or celebrate them; it attempts to reproduce an atmosphere, a sensation, a dream of liberty that lies at an immeasurable distance from the present day world, just as it lay at an immeasurable distance from the world that surrounded it in 1919.

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¹ According to a 1910 census, in Fiume there were 24,000 Italians, 15,000 Croats and 10,000 inhabitants of other nationalities.

² I have taken these expressions from the introduction to Claudia Salaris' book, to which I also owe many references that follow: see Claudia Salaris, *Alla festa della rivoluzione. Artisti e libertari con D'Annunzio a Fiume*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2002.

³ See Renzo De Felice, *D'Annunzio politico 1918-1938*, Roma-Bari, Laterza 1978.

⁴ Nino Valeri, *Da Giolitti a Mussolini. Momenti della crisi del liberalismo*, Milan, Il Saggiatore 1967; Michael Arthur Leeden, *D'Annunzio a Fiume*, Roma-Bari, Laterza 1975; Mario Isneghi, “La nuova Agorà. Fiume”, in Isneghi, *L'Italia in piazza. I luoghi della vita pubblica dal 1848 ai giorni nostri*, Milan, Mondadori 1994. Works quoted in Salaris 2002, quoted.

⁵ Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944*, Oxford, Berghahn Books, 1995; p. 139.

⁶ Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z. The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*, Autonomedia Anti-copyright, 1985, 1991. Available online at the URL http://www.hermetic.com/bey/taz_cont.html

⁷ Giovanni Comisso, *Il porto dell'amore*, Treviso, Vianello, 1924.

⁸ Mario Carli, *Trillirì*, Piacenza, Edizioni Futuriste di Poesia della Società Tipografica Editoriale Porta, 1922; pp. 165.

⁹ Gabriele D'Annunzio, from excerpts of the speech published in the «Bollettino del Comando di Fiume d'Italia» n.2, 13 September 1919.