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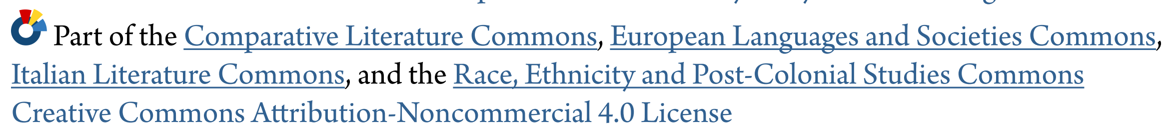
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Simone Brioni

Fantahistorical vs. Fantafascist Epic: “Contemporary” Alternative Italian Colonial Histories[1]

> The way one makes sense of history is important in determining what politics one will credit as realistic, predictable, and socially responsible.
> —Hayden White (73)

This essay analyzes how Enrico Brizzi’s *L’inattesa piega degli eventi* [The Unexpected Turn of Events, 2008], *La nostra guerra* [Our War, 2009], and *Lorenzo Pellegrini e le donne* [Lorenzo Pellegrini and the Women, 2012]—or THE ITALIAN FANTAHISTORICAL EPIC, as the author himself defines this large-sized trilogy of novels—represents Fascism and its colonial legacy in relation to the history of politics and soccer in Italy.[2] The premise of Brizzi’s novels is what might have happened if Italy had been on the winning side in WWII and had become a post-war superpower equidistant from both NATO and the Warsaw Pact.

If, according to Giorgio Agamben, being “contemporary” means not only understanding one’s own time, but also exploring the possibilities opened in the historical continuum through a uchronic freeplay, my aim here is to analyze the historical dimension Brizzi’s ITALIAN FANTAHISTORICAL EPIC evokes and the politics attendant to this construction of history. The article argues that Brizzi’s alternative past echoes recent historical events by portraying contemporaneity as an experience that simultaneously adheres to the present and remains distant from it. I analyze Brizzi’s trilogy in relation to Mario Farneti’s slightly earlier FANTAFASCIST trilogy (Lippi 26)—*Occidente* [Occident, 2001], *Attacco all’Occidente* [Attack on the Occident, 2005], and *Nuovo impero di Occidente* [New Empire of the Occident, 2006]—by highlighting the different ways each trilogy engages with alternative narrations of Italian postwar decades. Although both Brizzi’s and Farneti’s novels seem to follow the same premise as Philip K. Dick’s *The Man on the High Castle* (1962), the former proposes a mocking and the latter a celebratory depiction of Fascism and its imperialist agenda. Both authors thereby visibly embody what John Foot, along with other historians, has termed “Italy’s divided memory” and its constitutive ambivalence regarding the legacy of Fascism.[3]

A specific section of the article focuses on soccer, a crucial topic in the novels—especially in *L’inattesa piega degli eventi*—that provides a good example of how Brizzi connects the imaginary colonial environment to the social and political reality contemporary to the novel’s publication. My reading of Brizzi’s trilogy follows John Bale and Mike Cronin’s definition of sport both as “a form of colonial social control, … part of the ‘civilizing’ mission of imperialism, and thus an essential part of the colonial experiment” and “a legacy of colonization [in which there] remain symbolic power structures indicative of a continuing informal imperialism” (5). The analysis of how football and Italian politics are narrated in Brizzi’s trilogy highlights the strong link between history and sf themes and motifs, which Istvan Csicsery-Ronay recognizes to be the core feature of alternative histories: “If sf is free history, nothing can be freer of the facts than alternative history; and yet, so bound is it to the logic of historical plausibility and the rhetoric of historiography that sf is what offers it imaginative freedom” (103).

Sf, Colonialism, and the Italian Context. Before analyzing Brizzi’s ITALIAN FANTAHISTORICAL EPIC, it might be useful to discuss the relationships between the representation of colonialism and sf, with a particular focus on the Italian literary context. Sf scholarship has frequently pointed out that representations of “other” beings and places raise questions about otherness and its conceptualizations, and may therefore encompass, metaphorize, and reassess colonial and postcolonial anxieties. According to John Rieder, “colonialism is a significant historical context for early science fiction [since] utopian and satirical representations of encounters between European travelers and non-Europeans … form a major part of the genre prehistory” (2).[4] From the late Victorian experiment as H.G. Wells’s *War of the Worlds* (1897) to contemporary works such as Amitav Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995) and Kim Stanley Robinson’s *The Years of Rice and Salt* (2002), sf often mirrors the development of the Western cultures’ relationships with the other. Indeed, Wells’s novel conjures up the anxiety of his own society about the rebellion of colonized peoples through his tale of reversed colonization. One century later, Ghosh, and Robinson—although writing very different kinds of novels—purposely reflect upon the crimes of colonialism and the issue of racism in Europe, thereby turning the counterfactual possibilities opened by sf to different explorations of history. For instance, *The Years of Rice and Salt* manages—to put it in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s terms—to “provincialize” Europe (3-6) by imagining what would have happened if the Black Death plague had killed almost the entire European population. Among other things, the novel describes the resistance of the indigenous population in what we now call America against Muslim and Chinese invasions and the Muslim occupation of Europe. Thus, sf is significantly rooting itself in formerly colonized countries, announcing its role as a subversive writing praxis which, by recuperating narratives elaborated at the center of the Empire, implicitly questions and reverses their assumptions and original concerns about otherness (Hoagland and Sarwal 5-20).

Tellingly, both postcolonial theory and sf have remained marginal fields of study in Italy, entering the academy only in recent years.[5] The prescriptive centrality of historical and realistic novels in the

twentieth-century literary canon has marginalized fictions exploring alternative scenarios. Consequently, the connection between sf and colonial issues has remained largely unexplored. However, the origins of Italian sf in the early twentieth century that are linked to Futurist poetics display a significant connection to the Italian imperialist propaganda at the time. For instance, Daniele Comberiati argues that *Lo Zar non è morto* [The Tzar Is Not Dead, 1929]—written by a collective group of writers called *I dieci* [The Ten]—celebrated “the Italic genius in relation to the educated and formal Anglo-Saxon ‘stubbornness’” (“I romanzi” 473). This novel is set in a future in which members of the Italian secret service infiltrate the Soviet communist regime by putting into power a person who looks like the Tzar.

Another clear example is Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s African novel *Mafarka le Futuriste* [Mafarka the Futurist, 1909] —translated in Italian from French by Marinetti in 1910—, which, by displaying and employing such sf techniques as alternative history and narrative estrangement, reinforces many stereotypes about African people (Tomasello 83-140). In the first chapter of Marinetti’s *Mafarka*, Mafarka-el-Bar—a “civilized” African person, symbol of the Italian futurist and fascist revolution—stops a hundred African men who are raping women, not because he is altruistic or nonviolent, but because he is against the debilitating effects of sex and despises men who are “miserable slaves of the vulva” (3). The rape is described in graphic terms, which led to obscenity charges against Marinetti. To avoid the participation of women in the reproduction of the human species, Mafarka finally decides to generate mechanical offspring called Guzurman. According to Barbara Spackman, *Mafarka* uses a racist and violently misogynist rhetoric: “the vulva [is] not only everywhere present but also everywhere and always open to violence: the relation to matter is almost always figured as heterosexual rape, as sexual violence against feminized matter or against female characters” (56).

In the past twenty years, some Italian writers have employed sf strategies and points of view—especially indebted to US and UK novels—to question issues of power, social control, and normalization and to depict powerful allegories of Italian multiculturalism. According to Daniele Comberiati, these techniques have been developed through two sf genres: dystopia, which imagines the worst and most frightening society in which to live, and alternate history, which modifies the narration of historical record and shows the consequences of that divergence (“Distopie”).

Uchronia and Colonialism in Brizzi’s ITALIAN FANTAHISTORICAL EPIC. Brizzi’s trilogy is prominent among contemporary literary works that use alternative history to challenge imperialist narratives and reflect upon the Italian colonization of Africa. It features a character, Lorenzo Pellegrini, who epitomizes the stereotypical representation of the average middle-class Italian man as a superficial, frivolous person, a hopeless womanizer who works as a journalist writing about Italy’s favorite sport: soccer. The sf genre is explicitly evoked in *La nostra guerra* as the protagonist and first-person narrator notes that in his childhood’s comics—such as Federico Pedrocchi and Giovanni Scolari’s *Saturno contro la terra* [*Saturn Against the Earth*, 1936-1943]—the enemies of the nation are depicted as aliens, so that the comic book “imagined an invasion from Saturn by the evil dictator Rebo, a guy who had more than one point in common with the damned Führer of the Third Reich” (*La nostra guerra* 83). This passage alludes to the allegorical function of sf and provides an interesting clue to assess Brizzi’s use of alternative history to tackle the open problem of Italy’s colonial past.

La nostra guerra covers the years 1942-45 and describes Italy’s initial neutrality, then the Nazi Reich’s invasion of Northern Italy in 1942, which threatens to reduce the country to a German satellite state or colony. Italy allies itself with the British Empire, the US and the USSR, eventually winning in 1945. The consequence is a new colonial expansion: Mussolini grabs Nice and Savoy, Corsica, part of Bavaria, Northern Tyrol, and some of the French colonies in Maghreb and East Africa (*La nostra guerra* 640).

Lorenzo Pellegrini e le donne centers on Pellegrini’s adolescence during the 1950s and his love for a woman named Irene, whom he eventually leaves to carry on with his libertine life. *Lorenzo Pellegrini e le donne* also focuses on the issue of Italian national borders, showing the resistance to the Italian occupation in Tyrol at the end of WWII. This recalls the Italianization of linguistic minorities during Fascism, such as those in South Tyrol and Istria, and the bombings and terrorist attacks to reclaim South Tyrol from Italy that took place in the 1950s (Steininger 122-8). Pellegrini is in this Italian province because of compulsory military service, and one of his duties is—to paraphrase the words of one of his supervisors—to show the “light of Rome” to “rough mountaineers, simple creatures, ignorant about our Mediterranean ideals of beauty and truth” (*Lorenzo* 135). It is interesting that here the nationalist and colonialist policy of Fascism is not applied to dark-skinned people but to white (and Nordic) Tyrolers, showing how race is arbitrarily constructed to discriminate against the victims of colonial exploitation.

L’inattesa piega degli eventi is set in three places, Asmara, Addis Ababa, and Rome, in 1960. Pellegrini is now a sportswriter who is sent to the Horn of Africa to report on the local soccer league, Serie Africa. Pellegrini encounters African resistance to Fascism and becomes aware of the crimes of the regime, including the creation of a strict racial system that segregates and discriminates against colonized subjects. Eventually Pellegrini comes back to Italy to follow the winning team of Serie Africa, San Giorgio Addis Ababa, which has to face the champions of the Italian Serie A—a Juventus F.C. that is not much different from the real one at the time, including among its key players Omar Sivori and John Charles—and four other teams from Italian leagues in the so-called “Associate Republics” (i.e., former colonies that are now part of the Italian commonwealth). The novel is set in the

wake of the imaginary death by natural causes of Benito Mussolini on May 5, 1960—the same day as Napoleon's death in 1821—and before the beginning of the 1960 Summer Olympics in Rome.[9]

Soccer, Racism, and Italian Identity. The history of soccer does not only occupy a central role in *L'inattesa piega degli eventi* but is frequently evoked in the other two novels of the trilogy. For instance, *Lorenzo Pellegrini e le donne* focuses on an invented historical fact related to Italian soccer: the disappearance of the seaplane *Cygnus* on June 2, 1950, which was transporting the Italian national soccer team (mainly composed of the players of the so-called "Grande Torino") to the Brazilian World Cup, thereby merging the fictitious with historical fact.[10] In both real history and Brizzi's fiction, soccer player Valentino Mazzola and the rest of the team leave history to enter legend (and, as actually happened in 1950, Brazil loses the World Cup final to Uruguay).

The prominence of this topic in THE ITALIAN FANTAHISTORICAL EPIC mirrors the role of soccer as a "propaganda weapon" during Fascism (Foot *Calcio* 57) and the role this sport plays in the construction of the Italian national identity. According to Foot, the national soccer team "has always inspired classic nationalist sentiments" in a country that is frequently perceived as divided (*Calcio* 835).[11] This relation might be traced back to 1926, when "the regime institutionalized *calcio* as a Fascist game" and exploited it "domestically as a political soporific to develop a sense of Italian identity, and internationally as a diplomatic tool to improve the standing of the regime in the global arena" (Martin 2). Soccer triumphs and colonial propaganda were closely connected: the Italian success in the 1934 World Cup was a prelude to the imperial war in Abyssinia (1935) and the passing of the racial laws in 1938 (Gordon and London 46).[12]

As racism is an "ever-present" problem in Italian soccer (Foot, *Calcio* 571), it is no surprise that Brizzi chose this sport to link past and present experiences in his narrative. Significantly, many passages of *L'inattesa piega degli eventi* comment on the skin color and ethnic origins of the players, and the difference between Italy and other European national teams where soccer players of foreign origins are more frequent. Brizzi writes:

> Among the two-hundred, fifty -four players regularly registered at the tournament 1959-1960, half belong to the *gens italica*, twenty are Greeks, sixteen Spanish, ten Europeans of another nationality, seven Asians, and seven South Americans … do you realize the disproportion? … there are forty-nine Africans in the whole league! One out of five! While in France and in Portugal there are Africans who play in the national soccer team. (*L'inattesa* 377)

This passage mirrors the debate during Fascism about having *oriundi*, foreign players of Italian origins, play for the national team. During the 1930s "fascist ideals of an expansive, colonial 'great Italy', which included the Italian diaspora, linked in smoothly with this propagandist exploitation of the *oriundi*" (Foot, *Calcio* 857). However, *oriundi* were discriminated against after the 1934 World Cup (Foot, *Calcio* 857). The reflections about ethnic composition of the teams in Serie Africa also refer to the consequences of passing the racial laws. These laws are explicitly evoked by the reference to Árpád Weisz, an historical Hungarian Jewish coach who was "the great manager of the immense Bologna" for a decade (Brizzi *La nostra guerra* 13), who was killed in Auschwitz (Brizzi *L'inattesa* 517).

The existence of white-only teams in Serie Africa recalls both Fascism and the clamor concerning the first black Italian player on the national team, Mario Balotelli, whose presence since 2008 has raised controversy in Italy about national identity (D'Ottavio 170-76).[13] Like many of the black players in *L'inattesa piega degli eventi*, Balotelli was welcomed by "cries and monkey screams" when he entered Italian soccer pitches (*L'inattesa piega* 192). Pellegrini also alludes to the debate in Italy concerning those who do not want "indigenous athletes under the national colors" (*L'inattesa piega* 238). Moreover, an Italian white player wonders whether there are "real" French players in their "black" team, and Pellegrini argues that the Italy vs. France game was loaded "with meanings unrelated to soccer" (*La nostra guerra* 61), clearly recalling the final game of the 2006 World Championship in which the white-only Italian team won against the multi-ethnic French team. These passages seem to suggest that soccer is perhaps one of the fields in which the legacy of the racialized construction of national identity is more visible, but it might also be a "place where a different society can be proposed, where racism will be only an ugly memory" (*L'inattesa piega* 69).

Another significant passage of *L'inattesa piega degli eventi* both fictionalizes the sexual exploitation of colonized subjects in Italian colonies and evokes that which many migrants have to suffer in contemporary Italy. It features an Italian sergeant who does not want black players on his team but, at the same time, enjoys having sex with them (183).[14] This passage is also significant to show that soccer is a major place of homosocialization (Mieli 115), still a taboo topic in Italian soccer discourse.[15] It connects with another passage where an Italian colonist adapts a famous maxim attributed to the prominent nineteenth-century politician Massimo D'Azeglio to express his happiness about being freely able to enjoy sex with African women: "Once we have conquered Africa, let's conquer African women" (*L'inattesa piega* 160).[16] This is not only an ironic mirror of sexual exploitation in Italian colonies but also evokes the importance of the colonial enterprise to make white native Italians living in the Italian territory feel part of a newly unified country, which could be defined in opposition to the African otherness.

The choice of writing a novel about soccer to question the legacy of colonialism and institutionalized racism in Italy seems to respond to historian Angelo Del Boca's call for novelists to decolonize the Italian imagination by raising historical awareness of colonialism and its crimes through fictional narrative (43). Brizzi's aim to reach a broad audience is stated in *L'inattesa piega degli eventi* through Pellegrini's words: "soccer … [is] available to everybody, close to the authentic spirit of the

streets and bars" (429). One should add that Brizzi is one of the most popular writers of his generation thanks to his best-selling debut novel *Jack Frusciante è uscito dal gruppo* [Jack Frusciante Has Left the Band, 1994], which was translated in more than twenty languages including English and provides a vibrant portrait of Italian youth culture in the 1990s. *L'inattesa piega degli eventi* seems to address an audience widely familiarized with a popular Japanese *anime* (developed from a *manga* of the same name) about soccer, Yoichi Takahashi's *Captain Tsubasa* (1983-1986), known in Italy under the title *Holly e Benji*. Together with another 1980s classic, John Huston's film *Victory* (1981), it provided this audience with a widely fictionalized way of narrating soccer, revolving around highly stereotyped national identities.[17] Although *L'inattesa piega degli eventi* has no direct allusions to *Captain Tsubasa* or to *Victory*, Takahashi's and Houston's imaginary teams, made up by clearly identifiable and strongly characterized players, are remarkably similar to Brizzi's heterogeneous San Giorgio Addis Ababa team. Moreover, the novel re-stages Takahashi's typical narrative structure of the winning outsider: while in *Captain Tsubasa* Japan eventually and unpredictably wins the world cup against Brazil, in *L'inattesa piega degli eventi* San Giorgio defies all expectations to defeat Sivori and Charles's all-winning Juventus F.C.

Brizzi's representation of Africa functions merely to describe an Italian social and political reality. As Pellegrini notes, in Africa he finds "a more ancient, provincial and stubborn Italy" (*L'inattesa piega* 76). As spokesman for Brizzi, Pellegrini decides to "describe Ethiopia like a little Brazil" to appeal to his readership, but at the same time he erases the specificity of the African social and cultural reality (*L'inattesa piega* 302). In this regard, Silvia Camilotti argues that African characters occupy a secondary role in *L'inattesa piega degli eventi*, and therefore Brizzi does not "reverse the gaze" to show an African perspective on colonialism (58). This criticism is certainly a cogent and serious one, and it might lead critics to dismiss the claims of those who consider this novel an effective anticolonial narration.

If we consider the trilogy as the result of a complex negotiation with readers who might not be aware of the Italian colonial past, however, in a market with relatively few commercial novels on the topic, Brizzi's narration of colonialism in the novel might still offer points of interest. Camilotti responds to her own criticism by arguing that the racist language employed by many Italian characters against black and mestizo players provokes empathy toward the colonized and indignation towards the colonizers (56). She also remarks that readers learn about the experience of Italian colonialism through the eyes of Pellegrini, who gradually comes to support the African resistance (60). The intention to reveal the link between Italian colonialism and soccer can also be seen in Brizzi's homage to *mestizo* players such as Luciano Vassalo, an Ethiopian player of Italian descent (Derobertis 27). The soccer field in THE ITALIAN FANTAHISTORICAL EPIC acts as a mirror to the society surrounding it, a stage on which social and political dynamics are acted—those of the uchronic society of East Africa and of contemporary Italian society.

The Colonial Society in the Horn of Africa as Anamorphic Image of Berlusconi's Italy. *L'inattesa piega degli eventi* also represents political events of the past echoing present facts of Italian history. The preface of *L'inattesa piega degli eventi* states the obvious fact that the book "is a fictional novel" (8). This redundant insertion insinuates that Brizzi's alternative narration of history can also be read as a crypto-allegory of Silvio Berlusconi's Italy.[18] Significantly, Pellegrini clearly foresees the persistence of fascist rhetoric and imagery: "I grew up convinced that another *gerarca* [high-ranking official of the National Fascist Party (PNF)] would take hold after Mussolini, and that in any case Italy would remain in a black shirt till Kingdom come" (*L'inattesa* 347). This passage may sound like an allusion to Berlusconi who, as a television tycoon and the president of the A.C. Milan soccer team in the 1980s and 1990s, had widely influenced the imagination of Brizzi's own generation (tellingly defined by Alessandro Aresu as "generation Bim Bum Bam," after the popular television program in which *Captain Tsubasa*, among other cartoons, had been screened in Italy). It also meticulously constructs the cultural milieu leading up to Berlusconi's own engagement with politics and his uninterrupted centrality in the Italian political scene since 1994. The profile and the title of "knight" (*L'inattesa* 54) for Cavalier Venturi, one of the team owners of Serie Africa, may be another occult reference to Berlusconi, given the portrayal of the character as a vulgar *parvenu* and of his team as a "a gang of bullies favored by referees" (47).

Other references to Berlusconi's governments and the Italian political past can be detected in several moments of Brizzi's ITALIAN FANTAHISTORICAL EPIC. *L'inattesa piega degli eventi* mentions a controversial electoral law that would give "to the list with more votes, two-thirds of the seats available in the parliament" (*L'inattesa* 512). This fictional law recalls the absence of political freedom during Fascism, and it echoes the principles of Law 270 that Berlusconi's second administration approved on December 21, 2005. Thanks to this electoral law the coalition that obtains a majority of the votes on a national basis is automatically guaranteed an absolute majority of 340 seats (out of 630) in the lower chamber of Parliament. Moreover, Pellegrini ironically refers to Mussolini's "big indispensable constructions," which "would have never ended … at least until the last *gerarca* had filled its pockets" (*L'inattesa* 66), echoing Berlusconi's promises (and those of his predecessors) of a vast infrastructural plan for the country, including the controversial Messina Strait Bridge.

Another significant reference to the present day is one to an Italian film screened in East Africa in which "the images of a funeral, and erotic scenes in Roman interiors" are placed next to each other "such as when Caligula dies" (*L'inattesa* 452). As these kinds of associations were quite unlikely in films during Fascism (Forgacs 141-71), this passage might allude to Francesco Vezzoli's controversial video "Caligola" (2005), which assembled such sequences of images to criticize moral corruption in

contemporary Italy. This reference functions as a good example of the transmedial dimension of the text, which Wu Ming 1—a member of Wu Ming, a group of writers many of whom, like Brizzi himself, are based in Bologna—argues to be one of the main features of the "New Italian Epic" or a new form of contemporary Italian narrative to which Brizzi's work belongs (44).[19]

The conflation among the fictional past, the historical past, and present events is also evident in a passage from *L'inattesa piega degli eventi* where Pellegrini meets an Italian colonist in Asmara and tells him that he always carries a weapon with him because "the police say so. It is a right to defend oneself, and a duty not to lower one's guard" (103). As well as referring to Italy's fascist past and the militaristic ideal the regime advocated, this passage may evoke the *ronde padane*, the vigilantes allegedly organized for reasons of public safety and security by the Northern League, a separatist and xenophobic political party that ruled Italy for three terms together with Berlusconi's center-right coalition (1994-95, 2005-2006 and 2008-11). Similarly, the portrayal of the apartheid that Italy set up in the colonies echoes the criminalization against "illegal" migrants (mostly of African origin) at the time of the controversial 2002 Bossi-Fini law against immigration.[20]

The power struggle between Ettore Pavolini and Italo Balbo within the PNF in *L'inattesa piega degli eventi* may also recall those between Berlusconi and his main ally, Gianfranco Fini, the leader of National Alliance (AN), a party that derives from the post- and neo-fascist party Italian Social Movement (MSI). This fictional struggle stages one of the most striking features of Italian post-WWII politics: the substantial stemming of right-wing and center-right political experiences from the many sub-strains of Fascism. The death of Mussolini in *L'inattesa piega degli eventi* generates a coup that leads Italo Balbo—leader of the moderates within the PNF, supported by the US and the Vatican—to finally take power instead of Pavolini's radical fringe. Brizzi's imagined version of Italian history reflects upon the permanence in positions of power of some fascists in the aftermath of WWII: as historian Giorgio Galli notices, the Christian Democracy (DC)—the leading party in Italy for 50 years, since the end of WWII—were conditioned by conservative parties, including monarchist, neo- and post-fascist parties from the 1950s to the 1970s (359). Galli maintains that the Scelba law against the reconstitution of the PNF was approved too late for the 1952 election, favoring the relative success of the Monarchist National Party and the MSI (359). General Rodolfo Graziani—a MSI member and a previous fascist commander, who committed atrocities in Ethiopia and Lybia—obtained one thousand votes and entered in the local administration of Naples, Bari, Foggia, Lecce, Benevento, and Salerno (359). Galli also argues that the political support of MSI for the DC in 1959 was the result of a seven-year political agreement between the two parties, which aimed at legitimizing MSI as a conservative political force (378).[21]

At the same time, sf structures and narrative techniques inform the political and historical analysis developed in THE ITALIAN FANTAHISTORICAL EPIC. Among sf novels that might have inspired Brizzi's alternate history are time travel stories, such as Fritz Leiber's *The Big Time* (1958) or Jack Finney's *Time and Again* (1970) and its sequel *From Time to Time* (1995). These novels have, from a completely different angle, suggested that alterations in the past can only marginally deviate the flow of history, as the continuum of history tends to readjust itself. Rather than providing a fatalist or conservative representation of history and implying that no matter what happens, the course of history has already been determined, the alternative narration of the past urges the reader to reconsider rather than passively accept the dominant narration of history.

The reading of Brizzi's epic I am proposing here is different from that of Claudio Milanesi, who argues that Brizzi aims at a "substantial devaluation of the role of the left wing in the history of the country" (283), by conflating the experience of partisans and those of fascists into one another, to show that "the color of Resistance is presented as random, and … if things had gone a different way, resistance would have been fascist" (283). I also disagree with Łukasz Jan Berezowski, who describes all contemporary alternative history of Fascism—including Brizzi's novels and Gianpiero Stocco's *Nero Italiano* [Black Italian, 2003]—as pro-fascist narratives. Brizzi's trilogy shares many themes in common with Wu Ming and Vitaliano Ravagli's novel *Asce di guerra* [Axes of War, 2000], dealing with fascists who remained in their position of power even after the end of the WWII. Indeed, one of the members of Wu Ming, Wu Ming 2—a writer whom Brizzi thanks in acknowledgments with his given name, Giovanni Cattabriga (*L'inattesa* 517; *La nostra guerra* 644)—seems right to underline that the interconnection between colonial past and present in the trilogy raises questions about the discrimination of migrants in Italy and the colonial undertones that accompanied the institutional rhetoric used to promote the 2001 Italian military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan ("Enrico Brizzi").[22]

From this angle, the ending of *L'inattesa piega degli eventi* and the triumph of the moderate current within the PNF presents a political scenario of Italy that will plausibly lead to a country not much different from the one the reader knows, and one in which Italy's victory in WWII has only delayed, but by no means altered, the unavoidable development of a country geopolitically situated in the Western bloc with a Roman Catholic majority. At the same time, the echoes between the reader's world and Pellegrini's, culminating in a "prophetic" dream in *L'inattesa piega degli eventi* when the protagonist dreams of Mussolini signing the Pact of Steel with Hitler and Imperial Japan, opening a breach toward the "real" flow of history, may suggest that THE FANTAHISTORICAL EPIC is a dialectical image—in Walter Benjamin's sense—, obliquely telling Italy "as it is." In other words, alternative history as Brizzi uses it is a narrative device that functions differently from that of historical novels to reveal, through an "unexpected turn of events," the socio-political and deepest tensions of contemporary Italy.

Celebrating the "Immortal Spirit of Rome": Mario Farneti's FANTAFASCISM. In order to evaluate the politics attached to Brizzi's construction of history, it is interesting to read THE ITALIAN FANTAHISTORICAL EPIC in relation to Mario Farneti's trilogy. According to Emiliano Marra, Farneti's trilogy was the only commercial success in a conscious, albeit marginal attempt to write sf that revisited the history of Fascism in Italy in order to celebrate it, an approach that characterizes most stories in the 2000 anthology *Fantafascismo!* edited by Gianfranco de Turris. The first volume of the trilogy, *Occidente*, narrates how Italy allied with the US, won WWII, and conquered an empire that stretched from parts of Russia to Somalia. In *Attacco all'Occidente*, Farneti describes Fascism as the resistance to the barbaric Muslim invasion of Europe in 1992 (led by a sheikh who closely resembles Osama Bin Laden), and in *Nuovo impero di Occidente* as a fight against migration, prompted by the spread of a virus to Europe from Asia and China in 2012. The trilogy represents Italy as a unified whole threatened by external forces and foreign enemies, who have to be isolated and eliminated to restore the harmony that existed before their intrusion. Farneti's work provides a celebratory representation of Fascism, presented as the heir to the "immortal spirit of Rome" (*Nuovo impero* 296). Roman imperialism is frequently used as a synonym for Civilization, and honor is constantly represented as a sacred value for the fascists, who would die rather than go back on their word: "beyond the exterior manifestations of Fascism, which is expressed through massive assemblies and watchwords, there is a sacred Fascism that embodies better than any political doctrine ever conceived by a human mind, the ideals of *romanità*" (*Nuovo impero* 365). Farneti's ideal of *romanità* [Romanness] mirrors Benito Mussolini's definition of the term that he gave in a public speech in Trieste on September 20, 1920. According to historian Emilio Gentile, the Italian *duce* associated *romanità* with the timeless imperial destiny of the Italian race and Catholic culture to triumph over all others, whose mythical origins could be traced back to the Roman Empire (46-8).

Significantly, the main character of the trilogy, a young fascist named Romano Tebaldi, presents Mussolini as the ideal of *pietas* [piety] and *dignitas* [dignity] of ancient Romans (*Nuovo impero* 474). Farneti provides a similar eulogistic representation concerning living political figures, such as Ignazio La Russa—a prominent politician in Berlusconi's governments, minister of Defense from 2008 to 2011, and former member of AN—who becomes a professor at the Giorgio Almirante University of Addis Ababa in Farneti's fiction (*Nuovo impero* 93).[23] *Nuovo impero di Occidente* also assumes that the development of Fascism would lead to prosperity: colonies would become autonomous in 2008 and would reach independence in 2015 (49). To put it in blunt terms, Farneti introduces and triumphantly celebrates all of these features of the main archetypes of Ur-fascism, which—according to Eco—include the cult of traditions, the celebration of one's action for the action's sake, the fear of difference, the obsession with international plots, the macho celebration of men's physicality, the presentation of the enemies of the nation as simultaneously too strong and too weak, the idea that life is a permanent war, and the cult for heroism ("L'eterno fascismo" 38-45).

The "happy ending" of Farneti's trilogy is purposely ambiguous. Tebaldi states that he and his fascist comrades will "[restore] Rome and the entire planet, which will be governed by a right and legitimate order" (*Nuovo impero* 553). "Today," Tebaldi claims, "the seed of Fascism has sprouted and no force in the universe can stop it" (*Nuovo impero* 553). The novel closes with an "indigo and luminous aura, [which hovers] over [Mussolini's] crypt and spreads into the sky. Towards the West" (*Nuovo impero* 558). As Farneti explains in the author's note, this reference to the color indigo is connected to Lee Carroll and Jan Tober's parascientific idea about "indigo children … the representatives of a newly evolved human race" (*Nuovo impero* 566).

The unproblematized use of the concept of race in the celebration of Fascism demonstrates that Farneti's alternate history has the opposite political agenda to that of Brizzi, who instead offers an ironic depiction of Fascism. For instance, Brizzi recounts how Roberto Farinacci lost his arms by waiting until the last moment to detonate a hand grenade, thereby demonstrating his manliness (*Lorenzo* 10). Moreover, the novel narrates the inauguration of Mussolini as prime minister, showing that his most loyal collaborators, such as Pavolini, treat him like an idiot because of his Alzheimer's disease (*Lorenzo* 13). He is called "Mad Benito" by the foreign press when he laughs hysterically at his swearing-in: "A worrying preoccupation manifested itself in Rome, after the hangover of the inauguration festivities: the whole world was laughing at us" (*Lorenzo* 15).

Foot's *Italy's Divided Memory* has stressed how the absence of an Italian equivalent to the Nuremberg Trials, and Italy's political fragmentation after Mussolini's fall in 1943, has produced, unlike what has happened in Germany, a "divided memory." Italy was a defeated country that had nonetheless broken the alliance with Germany in 1943 and had consequently been invaded. This ambiguity made for a powerful polarization between a constructed "myth" of the Resistance and the explicit nostalgia for the Fascist regime, which was perceived by a part of the population as a harmless or legitimate political experience whose only mistake had been allying itself with Hitler. Brizzi's and Farneti's operations can thus be seen as symptoms of this constitutive and unresolved ambiguity pervading contemporary Italy's perception of Fascism and WWII. The alternate-history device can be employed either to inquire into the all-pervading crypto-fascism of current Italian society or to reiterate the self-reassuring narratives popularized outside academic historiography, by such journalists as Indro Montanelli or Giampaolo Pansa, whom historians of Italian colonialism such as Del Boca debunk.

THE ITALIAN FANTAHISTORICAL EPIC and Giorgio Agamben's "Contemporaneity." Farneti and Brizzi envision two different kinds of temporalities in their trilogies. Farneti is nostalgic for the immutable and unchangeable "values" of Fascism, and he sees them as animating a continuous development of Western civilization, which is nonetheless separated from the rest of the world. On the

other hand, to borrow François Hartog's terminology, Brizzi displays the co-presence of different regimens of historicity, thus creating a multi-layered dialectic image in which multiple spheres of time concurrently survive, obliquely grasping crucial cores of Italian identity. By blasting "a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history" (Benjamin 396), his Italian Fantahistorical Epic allows a restructuring of history to let repressed memories emerge and speak. The alternative history brings history to a standstill, a messianic arrest that stops the continuous flow of events and objects through time and allows one to think about history "the way it really was" (Benjamin 391). In the same way that Walter Benjamin's intellectual experiences had eroded the idealistic perception of history as a teleological continuum, *L'inattesa piega degli eventi* provides a different model of temporality to Friedrich Hegel's historical materialism and the teleological idea of history that it shares with its bourgeois counterpart, which has been used to legitimize the manifest destiny of Western colonial powers to occupy those countries that were seen as underdeveloped (Fabian 143-66).

Brizzi's alternative history looks at the present informed by the colonial past. The contemporaneity that Brizzi's epic portrays is similar to the one Giorgio Agamben expresses in these terms: "the contemporary is not only the one who, perceiving the darkness of the present, grasps a light that can never reach its destiny; he is also the one who, dividing and interpolating time, is capable of transforming it and putting it in relation with other times" (53). The dichotomy between darkness and enlightenment and the reference to a "repressed" relation with darkness that needs to be brought to light through contemporaneity evokes the beginning of the European capitalist development, which was based on the exploitation of the rest of the world. Brizzi seems to conceive of the relationship with history as "a singular relationship with one's time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it" (Agamben 41). Thanks to "this noncoincidence, this 'dys-chrony'" between past and present, Brizzi seems able "to see this obscurity by dipping his pen in the obscurity of the present" (Agamben 41, 44). By representing how the shadows of the colonial past extend to Italy at present, the Italian Fantahistorical Epic casts light on the present "darkness" or, to be more precise, on the fear of the "darkness" in the present.

NOTES

1. I thank Fabio Camilletti for his comments and collaboration on an earlier version of this article.

2. All translations from the Italian not available in published form are the author's.

3. Another important Italian forerunner for both trilogies is Guido Morselli's *Contro-passato prossimo* [Past Conditional: A Retrospective Hypothesis, 1975], a counter-historical version of WWI.

4. For other recent studies on the topic, see Kerslake and Langer.

5. See Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo's introduction to the edited volume *Postcolonial Italy* (1-30) and Arielle Saiber's "Flying Saucers."

6. As Maria Teresa Chialant has demonstrated, H.G. Wells's novels had a great influence on Marinetti's work.

7. Comberiati notes that a few "immigrant" Italians (e.g., Christiana De Caldas Brito, Amor Dekhis, and Miguel Angel Garcia) have started writing dystopias, in both sf and fantasy frameworks ("Distopie").

8. Along with Brizzi's trilogy, Comberiati mentions Maurilio Riva's *2022: Destinazione Corno d'Africa* [2022: Destination: The Horn of Africa, 2010], which also presents an alternative narrative of Italian colonial history ("Distopie"). Luca Masali's *I biplani di D'Annunzio* [D'Annunzio's Biplanes, 1996] and Tullio Avoledo's *La ragazza di Vajont* [The Girl from Vajont, 2008] have also employed sf to question the historical construction of the Italian national borders. These novels comprise, respectively, an alternative history of WWI continuing to 1921 on the North-East Italian border, with Austria-Hungary on the verge of winning the war and annexing the Italian *Nordest* (the regions of Veneto and Friuli-Venezia Giulia); and an alternate present or near future in which the Nordest has seceded from Italy and is dominated by a neo-Nazi regime enforcing ethnic cleansing.

9. In reality, the Ethiopian Abebe Bikila won the marathon, triumphing in the capital city of the country that had violently colonized his own.

10. On May 4, 1949 a plane carrying almost the entire Torino F.C. team crashed into Superga Hill near Turin, killing the plane's crew and all the players.

11. In this sense *L'inattesa piega degli eventi* is tied to other European artworks that questioned soccer and its ability to create racialized identities, such as Francisco Zamora Loborch's novel *El caimàn de Kaduna* [The Cayman of Kaduma, 2012] or Gurinder Chadha's movie *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002).

12. The importance of soccer both in the colonies and in Italy can be evaluated in relation to Garane Garane's autobiographically inspired novel *Il latte è buono* [Milk is Good, 2005], which describes the important influence of this sport in Somalia after Italian colonialism (103). Garane also compares the expert knowledge of some Italians of the names of soccer players to their ignorance of the history of their own country (67).

13. Fabio Liverani, whose mother was from Somalia, was the first black player to be called to Italy's national team, although he played only occasionally. The presence of Balotelli, a striker and top scorer, caused more controversy because he has unmistakably African features and much darker skin, plus a reputation of being an unmanageable player.

14. For a historical account of gender relations in Italian colonies, see Stefani p. 29.

15. Significantly, the Italian national soccer team manager from 2004 to 2010, Marcello Lippi, claimed that there are no gay people in professional soccer.

16. After the Risorgimento, d'Azeglio supposedly declared: "We have made Italy, now we have to make Italians" (Hobsbawm 44).

17. Some of these stereotypes—which are clearly depicted both in *Captain Tsubasa* and *Victory*—are Brazil's highly technical soccer, German concreteness, French "champagne" soccer, Dutch "total" soccer, Italy's *contropiede* [counterattack] tactics, and the centrality of a solid defensive block.

18. Brizzi wrote a satirical pamphlet about Berlusconi, *La vita ai tempi di Silvio* [Life in the Time of Silvio, 2009].

19. Wu Ming 1 recognises that alternative history is a common feature in many contemporary Italian novels—or as he called them, "New Italian Epics," including the ones written by his collective. It should be noted that the idea to employ soccer to talk of the Berlusconi era is also an important theme for the Luther Blissett Project—an informal community of artists, writers, and musicians from which Wu Ming generated; the real Luther Blissett, a

Jamaican British player, had been unsuccessful on the A.C. Milan team in the 1980s (see Foot, *Calcio* 802-3).

20. On this controversial law, see Dal Lago.

21. For a further analysis on the political presence of former fascists in Italy after WWII, see Sassoon.

22. This rhetoric is epitomized by one of Berlusconi's speeches delivered in an official visit to Germany on September 26, 2001, in which he claimed the superiority of Western civilization: "The West should be aware of the superiority of its culture and start a process of development for those parts of the world that have remained stuck as they were 1400 years ago" ("Berlusconi").

23. Giorgio Almirante was an Italian politician who signed the Manifesto of Race in 1938 and was the founder and leader of the MSI, a party that would later merge into AN.

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on Enrico Brizzi's *L'inattesa piega degli eventi* [The Unexpected Turn of Events, 2008], *La nostra guerra* [Our War, 2009], and *Lorenzo Pellegrini e le donne* [Lorenzo Pellegrini and the Women, 2012], a trilogy of alternative history novels that imagines what would have happened to the Italian empire if Italy had not allied with Germany during the Second World War. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben's reflections on contemporaneity (2009), I analyze how this trilogy represents Fascism and its colonial legacy in relation to the history of politics and soccer in Italy. I also compare Brizzi's trilogy to Mario Farneti's alternative history novels—*Occidente* [Occident, 2001], *Attacco all'Occidente* [Attack on the Occident, 2005], and *Nuovo impero di Occidente* [New Empire of the Occident, 2006]—which propose a celebratory rather than mocking depiction of Fascism and its imperialist agenda. This reading is useful to understand Brizzi's interpretation of the Italian political history after WWII and his attempt to decolonize the Italian imagination by using science fiction, a literary genre that was important for the promotion of the Italian colonial enterprise. The article also argues that Brizzi's and Farneti's different visions of Italy's alternative past embody what John Foot has termed "Italy's divided memory" and its constitutive ambivalence regarding the legacy of Fascism (2009).