

***Fiume o morte!* How much Fascism?**

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Introduction: A film about the sixteen-month occupation of Rijeka (September 1919 – January 1921)

Fiume o morte!, a co-production by Croatia, Italy, and Slovenia, is a cinematically skillful film about Rijeka's occupation. It was declared the best European documentary of 2025. The film centers on the Italian proto-fascist Gabriele D'Annunzio's occupation of Rijeka, which lasted from September 1919 to January 1921. Director Igor Bezinović employs unique techniques, blending feature documentary elements with a film about the process of filming. Preparations for shooting become part of the film itself, as Bezinović, often the narrator, gives instructions to the amateur actors, turning these interactions into an integral part of the documentary.

Bezinović uses interesting visual techniques. A good part of the film's material is photographs from that time. In the film, we learn that during the occupation of the city of Rijeka, D'Annunzio's photography section took over 10,000 photographs. The film is a re-enactment of this documentary material.

The film begins with photographs and postcards showing the old bridges in Rijeka that D'Annunzio had demolished. The photographs of the demolished bridges are placed in close-ups so that today's bridges can be filmed alongside them. Unusual techniques and a chronologically consistent story create an artistic counterpoint.

D'Annunzio first visited Rijeka in 1907, when his play – depicting Slavs as thieves and Croats as wolves – was performed. He later served in World War I. At the war's end, with the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Rijeka's fate was determined during the Versailles negotiations.

The film depicts the Italians, expelled from Rijeka after World War I peace talks, wanting to return and conquer the city with partial local support. The next sequence, portraying D'Annunzio's occupation of Rijeka, shifts to a feature documentary style with changing *naturščik* leads. The occupation begins when the ailing 56-year-old D'Annunzio embarks on his adventure, writes to young Mussolini, and then launches the *Fasci di Combattimento*. Mussolini draws strong motivation from this episode for his later actions.

A comedy about fascism

The ‘adventure’ of the occupation of Rijeka begins with the reconstruction of the first photograph of D’Annunzio, in which he puts on his coat, assisted by one of his soldiers. 186 Sardinian Grenadiers await on the road between Venice and Rijeka – in the town of Ronchi, in which Gabriele is delirious in a fever the night before the occupation is reconstructed. Attention was paid to every detail, including the car model in which Gabriele D’Annunzio was riding. Humorous elements, which will be discussed in more detail here, also relate to the discussion of which model of the red Fiat convertible was in question.

In the film, the actors take turns playing D’Annunzio. Among them, Ćenan Beljulji stands out, who was nominated for the Golden Studio award. In the film, it is emphasized that Ćenan is a ‘škovacer’ – scavenger; he is the driver of the Rijeka utility company Čistoća. The legendary speech on the balcony of the palace in Rijeka at the Governor’s Palace, which marked the beginning of the sixteen-month occupation of Rijeka, was performed by this actor. Igor Bezinović insists on comedy here as well – now through the counterpoint of belonging to the classic working class, the proletarian Ćenan, and D’Annunzio’s belonging to the upper class, and he emphasizes this comedy by filming the ‘audience’ made up of Ćenan’s wife and son, in counterpoint with the masses who came to listen to D’Annunzio’s speech in 1919. According to the media, everyone had a great time during the filming of this movie.¹

It is now clear that many film techniques were used for comedy, giving the episode an impression of benignity, such as emphasizing D’Annunzio’s bald, unsightly appearance, yet always surrounded by women. Additionally, Bezinović highlights marginal details, such as the Fiat model or the number of trucks D’Annunzio used – “26 stolen trucks, but only 16 reached Rijeka,” the narrator notes. The film also features grandiose scenes in Venice filmed on gondolas.

The impression of benignity and inappropriate comedy of this historical event sometimes arises from the undifferentiated presentation of the film’s comic elements and the real event, which the people of Rijeka have bitter memories of, and which is historically negative. Thus, the reconstruction of footage of D’Annunzio’s walk along Rijeka’s main road, Korzo, carries a tone of sympathy and benevolence, blending the relationship to the real event with the director’s sympathy for the actor Ćenan.

Bezinović’s focus on humorous motifs – such as soldiers’ antics or playful reenactments – creates an atmosphere that often diverges from explicit anti-fascist critique, and can undermine a clear condemnation of the occupation. The original footage glorifies youth and nationalism; the lack of consistent authorial commentary risks weakening the film’s critical message.

The soldiers in the original footage are represented by bare-chested women in the modern version. The photographs are funny – the soldiers hold the “horns” of their colleagues behind their backs, some have their faces soaped up as if they were before shaving, and the soldiers are smiling. They are photographed in everyday poses, during lunch and brunch, while boxing, and while theatrically playing war like children, and while wrestling.

In one scene, Bezinović reconstructs a favorite tavern where D’Annunzio socialized in the evenings. His favorite soldier, Baron Guido Keller, played by singer Lovro Mirth, also appears. It is pointed out that D’Annunzio and Keller were cocaine addicts, always ready to

¹ Lazarin, Branimira. 2025. Igor Bezinović: D’Annunzio je u Rijeku došao da je pripoji Italiji. *Novosti*, 22 January 2025.

party. Here, the salute “Eia, eia, eia, alalà,” initiated by D’Annunzio and later taken over by the fascists, is repeated.

The film also paid attention to fashion details, with serious costume design that was also awarded. D’Annunzio wore an Arditi uniform with a tie, although he was not part of those units in World War I. Music was also paid attention to. The song “Giovinezza” is performed several times in the documentary, so we keep humming it after the film. Mussolini later adopted this song as the anthem of the fascist party. In short, after the film, viewers are left with a fascist song and a fascist salute in their memory.

How much fascism?

This central question emerges as the film traces the roots and echoes of fascist ideology, asking whether the comedic and artistic choices clarify or obscure the dangers of this legacy. The fascists directly referred to D’Annunzio’s occupation of Rijeka and took over many motifs – such as the greeting, the music, and the ideology. The occupation itself was violent. The film shows a failed referendum, which was violently canceled, the introduction of a violent statute for the city of Rijeka, the cancellation of the carnival, and the order that all adults must join D’Annunzio’s army, with a clear position stated in the statute that “whoever is not with him is against him.”

Bezinović attempts to criticize fascism – an urgent issue in Croatia – yet the film’s anti-militarist message remains muted. While the documentary includes relevant questions for today’s militarization, these moments are secondary, blurring the argument that art must confront resurgent fascist tendencies more directly. Bezinović draws parallels between D’Annunzio’s proto-fascist rule and contemporary extremism, using examples like the Rijeka Armada to illustrate how historical motifs of violence and nationalism persist. This connection is where the film’s argument is sharpest, demonstrating the present relevance of its critique – even as other comedic or artistic choices sometimes diffuse its impact.

However, Bezinović attractively, but not completely honestly, connects two times – fascist Rijeka and modernity. In the film, we see footage of Armada fans walking together, lighting torches, and singing before the match. An actor ‘sneaked’ among them, dressed in uniform, representing D’Annunzio. It is clear that the fans are unaware that the actor is approaching them from behind. The thesis about Armada and the contemporary forms of pro-fascist efforts that appear in Armada’s outbursts could have been presented in many ways. For example, every year to mark the day of the fall of Vukovar, the Armada fires torches and performs the Ustasha salute “For the Homeland, Ready.” But Bezinović opted for an attractive, but forced, motif.

There is also a reconstruction of the sports games organized during the occupation of Rijeka. The games were shown in a cheerful tone. Military games in the Rijeka area of Drenova were shown comically, with dancing and singing, although in real events, there were injuries every day because they were conducted with real weapons.

Part of the games took place in Porto Baroš, on the Rijeka coast. These are also the most spectacular photographs of the occupation, which continue to celebrate youth, joy, and mythologize. A detail that appears in that part of the film could have been an excellent entry point for criticism of the aforementioned “financial legion,” as D’Annunzio called it. These are the Italian industrialists from Trieste, Banca Commerciale Italiana, and the Masonic lodge Grande Oriente d’Italia, who financed the occupation and to whom all industry was to be handed over when Rijeka became Italian.

The film stated that today Porto Baroš is owned by a German company that will build a luxury marina for 230 mega yachts, and that the terminal is currently in Danish and Filipino hands. It is also stated that there is still a Shipyard on 3 May (Danubius, as described in the film). The problem of economic policy is a parallel between 1919 and today that Bezinović detected but did not elaborate on in depth, only mentioning it in the film. In public appearances, such as the aforementioned award ceremony for the European Oscar, and in interviews, he emphasized this dimension much more.²

To paraphrase the Slovenian theoretician who dealt with fascism, Rastko Močnik, the question is not whether fascism exists today, but ‘how much fascism?’ And a good question posed in this peripheral motif is: what is the connection between the economy and the rise of fascism, and why, today, as in the time of D’Annunzio, do we see the liberal center accept and promote the policies of the extreme right? We will return to that.

However, the film quickly moves on to more cheerful themes, which will certainly play a role in the film's popularity, but they also take away from its credibility and depth. The film continues with legionnaires bathing on Rijeka's beaches, and features further reconstructions of amusing photographs of young people in bathing suits and at leisure. As Bezinović states, there is only one photograph of political prisoners from that time, who issued a pamphlet calling for the fight against D’Annunzio’s occupation. Retaliation for the deaths of Italians in Split is also mentioned. These murders led to the destruction of non-Italian shops in Rijeka. But even here, comical moments are insisted on – such as the devastation of the Swedish consulate, by mistake, after which D’Annunzio's administration sent a diplomatic note of apology. It is only mentioned in passing that, as part of this action, all sympathizers of the Slavic Rijeka were ordered to leave the city within 24 hours.

The Rijeka Constitution and the End of the Occupation

One of the mythical moments of D’Annunzio’s occupation of Rijeka, which was uncritically celebrated by anarchist theorists, was the proclamation of the “Constitution” or the statute of the city of Rijeka, entitled “Carta del Carnaro.” One of the best-known examples of such uncritical celebration was given by Peter Lamborn Wilson, better known under the pseudonym Hakim Bey, in his popular manifesto, *TAZ: Temporary Autonomous Zones*. Bey is the anarchist author of the concept of “temporary autonomous zones” – spaces of freedom from state oppression, zones that are formed and disappear quickly enough that state institutions fail to “capture” and institutionalize them.³

It is an ode to freedom, which is defined as freedom from the oppression of the state apparatus. Bey devotes one chapter to the episode of the occupation of Rijeka, considering D’Annunzio's occupied Rijeka a “temporary autonomous zone”⁴ of freedom due to the alleged absence of a strong state, with emphasized artistic elements as “principles” of artistic organization contained in D’Annunzio’s constitution. Music and religion are cited as the foundations of an anarchist and artistic social order. In this example, however, one can see how apparently humanistic ideas can be an ode to violence.

Historically more important than poetry and music is the Italian nationalist position that Rijeka is an Italian municipality, therefore very much tied to the state apparatus – but the Italian one. Even more important is that this constitution contains all the elements of a corporate fascist state, as the fascists would create in Italy in the 1930s with Mussolini

² Lazarin, *Igor Bezinović: D’Annunzio je u Rijeku došao da je pripoji Italiji*. *Novosti*, 22 January 2025.

³ Bey, Hakim. 2003. *Privremene autonomne zone i drugi tekstovi*. Zagreb: Naklada Jesenski i Turk.

⁴ Bey, *Privremene autonomne zone*, 33–49.

coming to power in Italy.⁵ D'Annunzio constitutionally declares Rijeka an autonomous city under Italian rule. However, Italy will soon want to get rid of D'Annunzio, which will lead to an armed conflict between this alleged Italian patriot and his motherland. The paradox is contained in the fact that patriotism is expressed against one's own motherland.

However, before we conclude the chronology of this historical episode, it should be noted that the film also describes Marconi's visit to Rijeka. Guglielmo Marconi was awarded the Nobel Prize for his discoveries in radiophony. Marconi also shouts through the radio receiver "Eia, eia, eia, alalà." And here Bezinović does not miss a humorous shot. The amusing scene captures legionnaires holding cell phones in a reconstruction of a photograph with Marconi.

In short, this marks the end of the occupation of Rijeka. Under the Treaty of Rapallo, representatives of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes ceded parts of Dalmatia to Italy. In 1920, Rijeka became independent, the so-called Free State of Fiume. Italy had to respond by expelling D'Annunzio and his administration.

Arturo Toscanini, a famous composer, was D'Annunzio's last guest. The string of celebrities of the time in Rijeka only shows that Bezinović does not elaborate enough in the film, but that he mentions in interviews that D'Annunzio was strongly supported by his home country, not some anarchist, as Hakim Bey, for example, portrays him. Italy is nevertheless forced to attack D'Annunzio, who refuses to leave Rijeka. A five-day war is fought on Christmas Day 2020. And these war scenes are partly depicted comically. Comic elements include a singer on horseback, the first death – a legionnaire shouting "Morto si, vivo no!" ("Dead yes, alive no!"), the unnecessary destruction of all the bridges in Rijeka, and then the conversations on the Korzo between amateurs playing Legionnaires who have decided to stay in Rijeka and fight for D'Annunzio and random passers-by who ask in amazement what is happening. A passerby tells a young man in uniform that he does not look good in that uniform and that it would be better for him to have fun in a more appropriate way, by going out with his peers and a girl. The depiction of the young men who died at the end of the occupation is given a dose of seriousness and drama, in counterpoint to D'Annunzio, who is shown eating a rich dinner while the young men freeze on guard, fight, and die. Twenty-two of D'Annunzio's soldiers, 25 Italians, and five civilians (including one woman) died.

A sort of epilogue in the film warns of how alive the fascist legacy is, but this makes the film's comedy even more problematic. A bust of D'Annunzio was placed in Trieste on the centenary of the occupation of Rijeka. Although Bezinović concludes that we will not erect a monument to him, in the film, he lists everything that remains of him as material heritage. Remains of a mural, the graffiti "Morto si, vivo no!," a relief of D'Annunzio's head on a villa, a pillar near the Governor's Palace with an eagle, one picture...

The unbearable lightness of fascism

The film's comic tone certainly contributed to its success. But such a depiction of fascism goes hand in hand with the unbearable ease of forgetting and the dangerous historical revisionism that has been the goal of right-wing politics in recent decades, which equates Nazism and fascism, criminal policies of absolute inequality, with communism, an ideology that begins with ideas of justice and equality but ends in the crimes of Stalinism. The danger of equating communism and fascism is linked to the relativization of fascist crimes. The idea that all revolutions are bloody and end badly leads to the equalization of Nazism and fascism as

⁵ Patafta, Daniel. 2006. Privremene vlade u Rijeci (listopad 1918. – siječanj 1924.). *CPS* 38(1), 197–222, 211.

ideologies that are fundamentally based on absolute inequality, and ideologies that begin as visions of a better and more just society.

All revolutions are 'bloody,' and if that is the case, then seeking something better means seeking something worse, concludes the French philosopher Alain Badiou.⁶ Or, as the Croatian philosopher Boris Buden warns, every progressive idea is doomed in advance due to the historical experience of revolutionary terror.⁷ Such relativizations, which can be encountered in the public space in the form of reminders "neither left nor right", "everyone is the same", or general neutrality, are also contributed to by documentary filmmaking that does not want to choose sides, remains at a "safe distance" or prefers the easier path of comedy rather than analytical research into the causes of fascism.

Although this was certainly not the film's goal, the effect of sympathy and relativization was achieved in the desire to make a popular film, in which Igor Bezinović, judging by the awards the film received, succeeded. The unintended effect – humming a fascist song, laughing while watching the film, the impression of benignity with which we leave the cinema – carries with it serious problems. Such a depiction is aided by the insistence on interpreting fascism as a project of historical figures and their specific activities, rather than the structures and political environment that enabled such persons to rule.

The film emphasizes D'Annunzio's eccentricity as the decisive factor in the success of the fascist cult of the leader. His personality characteristics are shown to be crucial in the success of fascist ideas, which the masses readily accept. But the intersection of psychological structure and political structures is not explained. It is not clear why this kind of psychology 'emerged' in fascism. Admittedly, this is a common problem in the depiction of anti-humanist policies and historical crimes. This is how Vladimir Putin or Donald Trump are portrayed today. Many analyses of today's war events are reduced to references to personal ideology, individual will, irrational personality characteristics, childish stubbornness, narcissistic vanity, and egoism.⁸

"Unbridled psyches for unbridled capitalism"⁹ – Lordon and Lucbert make a good point in their text, which examines the frequent tendency to understand fascism as a consequence of the activities of specific historical figures. For some psychopathological figures to have the opportunity to shine on the historical stage, their messages or activities are not sufficient, let alone decisive. However, interpretations often psychologize, often unconsciously, and mythologize the psychological characteristics and decisive moves these actors make on the historical stage, presenting them as 'strong' and 'decisive' although criminal. Lordon and Lucbert warn that the key lies in socio-historical structures that determine and favor certain characters, not in madmen who 'set the world in motion.'

Fascism does not 'start with madmen,' fascism begins with structures. Socio-historical structures determine which instinctual drives are permitted, they distribute permissions, and in doing so, they favor the trajectory of certain psychic structures — those that are best suited to exercise these permissions, with all the more vigor as they receive the full endorsement of an order of

⁶ Badiou, Alain. 2010. *The Communist hypothesis*, translated by Macey, David, and Steve Corcoran. London & New York: Verso, 2.

⁷ Buden, Boris. 2018. *Destrukcija kulture sjećanja je temelj naše stvarnosti čorsokaka*. *Civilno društvo*, 28 January 2018.

⁸ Soltý, Ingar. 2025. *Liberal delusions won't save Ukraine*. *Jacobin*, 3 March 2025.

⁹ Lordon, Frédéric, and Sandra Lucbert. 2026. *Unbridled psyches for unbridled capitalism*. *Communis*, 3 January 2026.

domination. We can therefore go so far as to say that social structures select the psychic structures that are appropriate to them.¹⁰

In Bezinović's film, those elements that could give a different picture, such as economic and political structures, are suppressed in favor of psychologization – from the insistence on an unsightly exterior in counterpoint to the effect that this fascist has on the masses, to the emphasis on various episodes as key in historical upheavals. After all, the film also states that D'Annunzio was only a 'backup' choice for the occupation of Rijeka, so another fascist could have taken his place. Also, the Italian government supported this occupation as long as it suited them, so an individual's characteristics could not be decisive in a clash with the Italian state apparatus. What is hidden in the psychologizations and insistence on fascism as a result of the policies of individual narcissistic lunatics and the inflammable masses is the role of liberal elites.

Fascism is a project of the elites. Israeli historian Ishay Landa, in his study *The Apprentice's Sorcerer – Liberal Tradition and Fascism*, described in detail the very close connection between fascism and economic liberalism.¹¹ Support for Hitler was very weak, while the elites did not support him. When elites decided that the threat of Bolshevism was greater than the threat of Nazism, they embraced Nazism. Fascism attracted many intellectuals and high-ranking politicians. Winston Churchill, whom we remember as an opponent of fascism, nevertheless said that fascism "has rendered a service to the whole world [...]", described Mussolini further as "the greatest law-giver among living men".¹² The admiration stems from the fact that Nazism and fascism ensured the fight against the greatest opponent of the European elites of the time, Bolshevism.

The fascist cult of the leader is often described as a cult associated with the mindless masses of the people, who are 'looking for a leader.' But Landa will show the connections in the very foundations of ideology, as well as the historical connection between liberalism and fascism. Namely, Landa concludes that the fascist cult of the leader is not a simple antithesis of liberal individualism, but that the fascist cult of the leader reveals its latent truth, the paradoxical fact that liberal individualism is exclusive. Liberals often tell us that individuality, creativity, freedom, genius, and the like are not for everyone. These are messages from John Locke to Margaret Thatcher, and her maxim: "society does not exist, there are only individuals – men and women and their families."

Landa exposed the 'secret connection' between liberalism and fascism: the structural, irreducible tension between the capitalist-liberal order and the mass democracy threatened by communism in the interwar period. Max Horkheimer's famous adage, "Whoever is not willing to talk about capitalism should also keep quiet about fascism"¹³, sums up the point. The economic order that prevails in liberal democratic societies in times of crisis embraces anti-humanist ideas to avoid revolutions, workers' revolts, and social conflict. The process of social consensus resulting from negotiation between social groups was best described by the Italian Marxist and theorist Antonio Gramsci as hegemony. Hegemony is the result of the spontaneous consent of the masses to the dominant political-economic direction.¹⁴ Capitalist society is one in which we are atomized and in constant competitive relations, with cyclical

¹⁰ Lordon and Sandra, *Unbridled psyches*.

¹¹ Landa, Ishay. 2010. *The apprentice's sorcerer. Liberal tradition and fascism*. Lieden & Boston: Brill.

¹² Cited in Lanada, *The apprentice's sorcerer*, 25-26.

¹³ Horkheimer, Max. 2005. *The Jews and Europe*, in *The Frankfurt School on religion: key writings by the major thinker*, edited by Mendieta, Eduardo. New York: Routledge, 225–241, 226.

¹⁴ Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. *Selection from the prison notebooks*. New York: International Publishers, 12.

economic crises that give rise to pro-fascist and fascist policies. That is why it is important, in the depictions of historical fascism, to expose all the elements of its causes, as they are visible to us today from a historical distance.

To conclude, the presentation of D'Annunzio's occupation of Rijeka, without a materialistic analysis of the causes that led to it, remains incomplete and problematic. Although the film was skillfully shot, it failed in its intention to show fascism in its authentic form, for which it was necessary to move away from fascist documentary material and to resort to interpretations of its causes. One could answer that it was not the author's intention. However, what remains behind this film could be used for completely different purposes, even for conflicting intentions and ideological views, as in the case of *Fiume o morte!*

At that time, in Croatia, two films were made that should be linked to the film *Fiume o morte!*. One of them is *The Thing To Be Done (Ono što treba činiti)*, by Srđan Kovačević from the beginning of 2026. The film deals with the cheap migrant labor on which capitalists on the European semi-periphery get rich. The rights of disenfranchised workers are defended by activists gathered at the Workers' Counseling Center in Slovenia. The film shows how the problems with the pro-fascist treatment of migrant workers like slaves, without any labor rights, are legally supported, tacitly accepted by the ruling structures. These are not excesses but structural conditions for maintaining the current order – from the structural necessity of the relationship between the rich countries of the center and the poor periphery of capitalism, the function of cheap labor in lowering the price of labor, and up to inequality within individual countries and class differences (between exploiters and exploited).

The second film is *The Peacemaker*, by Ivan Ramljak, a dark portrayal of the murder of Josip Reihl Kir, the chief of the Osijek police, who was killed in 1991, whose tragic fate defies current Croatian myths about the 1991–1995 Croatian War of Independence. The film points to the role of nationalism in homogenizing people during the conflict. In doing so, it exposes the narrative of nationalism as an organic, emergent chauvinistic policy that comes 'from below' from the people, and whose 'spark' is lit by narcissistic lunatics. Such a narrative was also evident in interpretations of the 1991 conflict between Serbs and Croats in Vukovar. Instead, Ramljak and his collaborators, Drago Hedl and Hrvoje Zovko, point to the role of Croatian political elites in instigating nationalist conflicts that served their interests at the time. The film offers a thorough analysis of the causes of the rise of nationalist policies.

Still, both films are characterized by a serious tone, though Kovačević's also includes some comedic elements. The connection between these films should serve as a conclusion to this review: it is difficult to authentically portray the problems of nationalism or fascism in a humorous tone.

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