

## “Fiume o Morte!”: Occupation in 10,000 Pictures

By Jovan Semi Pjević

“Fiume o Morte!” grabbed my attention at the very start of the year. The title, the official poster and the striking synopsis all hinted this was a slightly different kind of a documentary coming out of the Balkans. Historical documentaries are often dull, even when the story itself is compelling.

I watched it for the first time in May at the Beldocs International Documentary Film Festival and was genuinely delighted and pleasantly surprised; it swiftly climbed into my top five films of the year. It has kept that position ever since, and I watched it again at the European Film Festival Scanorama. If it has somehow passed you by, do yourself a favor and watch it. You won't regret it.

Through staged reenactments, the film summons Gabriele D'Annunzio: a poet, playwright, journalist, aristocrat and soldier. Director Igor Bezinović uncovers this lesser-known episode in European history and shows how D'Annunzio's performative politics resulted in an attempt to establish a new state after World War I, while simultaneously incubating early fascist impulses.

During the occupation, D'Annunzio and his circle took more than 10,000 photographs. Bezinović makes inventive use of that archive. He recruits people from the streets to recreate images from that strange period, bringing them closer to the audience while also commenting on how certain tendencies and ideas persist. It's hard to root them out completely.

The director doesn't approach history from the safe distance of an expert eye – he leaps into it with a microphone and a sly smile. The result is bizarre and feels like a living archive: a mixture of traditional reconstruction, partly vox pop and partly staged spectacle. The film is stubborn in its refusal to be neatly styled, which sometimes works against it.

Those who take part in the reenactments are not passive informants, but co-authors. You can feel Bezinović's affection for the city of Rijeka, once known as Fiume. It's the film's true protagonist: Rijeka's streets and its citizens, with their frequent eccentricities, create an atmosphere rarely seen in similar documentaries. You can feel its real soul.

However, given that the film deals with a proto-fascist figure – Mussolini regarded D'Annunzio as an exemplary fascist – the humor that shapes the film's storytelling can, at times, diminish the gravity of the subject matter. For some viewers, its overall playfulness may act as a buffer that softens the impact instead of sharpening it. The relationship between satire and sober documentary precision is occasionally fragile, protecting the viewer from the violence and truly awful ideas at the heart of the film.

Yet even this unevenness serves the film. Bezinović uses it to suggest that history, or rather a nation's collective memory of it, is messy, chaotic, inconsistent and often simply wrong. The film offers traces, not conclusions. It shows how events can be packaged and sold, or erased and forgotten.

I must also praise the exceptionally original score. Giovanni Maier and Hrvoje Nikšić have woven the narrative's identity into the music with great skill and authenticity. Although the documentary has noticeably bigger budget than expected, I didn't anticipate that this duo

would gift the audience with unforgettable pieces. Nothing less was to be expected from Hrvoje, who dominated the hard-rock scene in Yugoslavia, while Giovanni gives it a hint of classical elegance. Both have worked with the director before, and this is certainly their finest collaboration to date. Cinematographer Gregor Božić has also created a distinct visual identity. The film is undeniably beautiful to look at. Bezinović located sites to recreate the photographs from the occupation – Božić shaped them visually.

“Fiume o Mortel!” is less a straightforward historical reconstruction and more an attractively packaged demonstration of how certain stories are told: how historical figures become mythologized, how perceptions change over time, and how citizens can reclaim the narrative. It asks its audience to notice the mechanisms of persuasion that remain very much present today. This 112-minute film is a vividly crafted civic experiment that interrogates the performative origins of political power. It’s brave, sometimes chaotic, but urgently necessary.