

eScholarship

California Italian Studies

Title

Men and Machines, One Heartbeat? Technological Bodies in Fascism's Empire Cinema

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9qt141dr>

Journal

California Italian Studies, 12(2)

Author

Negri, Sabrina

Publication Date

2023

DOI

10.5070/C312256476

Copyright Information

Copyright 2023 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Men and Machines, One Heartbeat? Technological Bodies in Fascism's Empire Cinema¹

Sabrina Negri

The cinema is true; a story is false. [...]
But I prefer to say that their truths are different.

—Jean Epstein, “The Senses 1 (b)”

Among Benito Mussolini's numerous aphoristic remarks, his declaration that cinema is the most powerful weapon stands out as one of the most cited. Mussolini's definition implies a common ground between filmmaking, propaganda, technology, and warfare; nonetheless, a casual viewer of fascist-era films would be hard-pressed to find explicit references to this interconnectedness. In fact, fiction films made at the time rarely dealt with the realities of the regime. The paradox of a dictatorship that considered cinema its strongest weapon and yet decided to limit its direct intervention on the artistic process of filmmaking did not go unnoticed in the writing of later commentators. Carlo Lizzani, for instance, famously defined fascist cinema as an absence, its a-fascism mirroring the unattainability and ambiguity of the regime itself, while Cesare Zavattini lamented the lack of any form of cinematic resistance to the rise of the regime.² For him, the erasure of fascism from the screen also prevented any forms of opposition on the part of filmmakers.

In more recent years, several scholars have challenged this supposed invisibility, showing the different ways in which fascist ideology informs even the most apparently apolitical features of the era; in addition to this, a number of films produced in Italy in the 1930s, more directly attuned to the celebration of fascist values, show that the influence of the regime's propaganda on fiction filmmaking was sometimes hardly invisible. In this essay, I will examine the complex ways in which some of these titles work through their own commitment to fascist ideology by focusing on what Ruth Ben-Ghiat has labeled Italian fascism's empire cinema—that is those films, mostly shot in the Italian territories of Eastern Africa between the end of the 1920s and the early 1940s, that deal directly or indirectly with the regime's colonial dreams.³

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

² Carlo Lizzani, “Il consenso silenzioso,” in *Cinema italiano sotto il Fascismo*, ed. Riccardo Redi (Venice: Marsilio, 1979), 68–69; and Cesare Zavattini, “Poesia, solo affare del cinema italiano,” *Film d'oggi* 10 (1945).

³ Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Italian Fascism's Empire Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015). Even though I will focus on fiction filmmaking, the corpus also includes some documentaries. See, among others, Federico Caprotti, “The Invisible War on Nature: The Abyssinian War (1935–1936) in Newsreels and Documentaries in Fascist Italy,” *Modern Italy* 19, no. 3 (2014): 305–21; Giuseppe Fidotta, “Ruling the Colonies with Sound: Documentary, Technology and Noise in *Cronache dell'Impero*,” *Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies* 4, no. 1 (2016): 111–25; Gianmarco Mancosu, “Quando il cinema si fa regime: L'istituto LUCE e l'oltremare fascista,” in *La conquista dell'Impero e le leggi razziali tra cinema e memoria*, ed. Carlo Felice Casula, Giovanni Spagnoletti, Alessandro Triulzi (Rome: Effigi Edizioni, 2020), 83–96; and Gabriele Proglia, “Il cammino degli eroi: The Empire as a Mark of Modernity. Representations of Colonial Power in a Famous Regime Documentary,” *Modern Italy* 21, no. 3 (2016): 289–303.

After a decades-long neglect, Italian colonial films have recently undergone a process of rediscovery initiated in the 1990s and continuing to the present, in conjunction with renewed historiographical interest in the broader category of fascist cinema and in the Italian colonial enterprise itself. Even though I am undoubtedly influenced by these scholarly works, to which I will refer extensively throughout my essay, my approach is somewhat different insofar as I am particularly interested in some of the formal strategies adopted by these films, which create moments that contradict the apparent optimism of their narratives. Therefore, my approach to fascism's empire cinema is stylistic rather than cultural, as I intend to use film analysis as an epistemic tool to unveil a level of meaning that might be hard to see if one stops at the level of diegesis or representation. Even though this approach is far from revolutionary, being in fact one of the staples of cinema studies, it has recently been neglected in favor of a more culturally oriented analysis.⁴ Nonetheless, if it is only from a truly interdisciplinary perspective that this period of film history and of history *tout court* can be studied in all its complexity, the hermeneutic potential of stylistic analysis should not be underestimated.⁵

When I use the term “stylistic,” I refer to Noel Carroll’s third definition of the term “style,” that is, the “style or form of the individual film” as opposed to the personal style of a director or the general style of a period, movement, or school:⁶ in other words, style in this sense refers to the way in which each film works through its formal articulation to deliver its narrative, ideological, and/or aesthetic point.⁷ While a period-style analysis of the entire colonial corpus would be a much welcome endeavor, such a study is beyond the scope of this essay, and would present several methodological problems involving issues of authorship and production history. In fact, despite having been discussed as a corpus since their first release, these films were made by directors and writers whose histories and ideologies could not be more different from one another. Moreover, notwithstanding the thematic similarities among these titles, the production histories of colonial fiction films differ greatly. For instance, Augusto Genina was initially planning to make *Lo squadrone bianco* (The White Squadron, 1936) in France; even though the production was eventually moved to Italy, funding came from several sources, including international ones. On

⁴ See, for instance, Immacolata Amodéo, “In the Empire’s Eyes: Africa in Italian Colonial Cinema Between Imperial Fantasies and Blind Spots,” in *Empires and Boundaries: Rethinking Race, Class, and Gender in Colonial Settings*, ed. Harald Fischer-Tiné, and Susanne Gehrman (New York: Routledge, 2009), 166–78; Ruth Ben-Ghiat, “Italian Colonial Cinema: Agenda and Audiences,” in *Italian Colonialism*, ed. Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 179–92; Maria Coletti, “Il sogno imperiale: I film coloniali del Fascismo (1935–1942),” *La Valle dell’Eden* 6, nos.12–13 (2004): 152–65, and “Cinema coloniale italiano: L’Africa immaginata,” in *La conquista dell’Impero*, 97–104; and Giuseppe Fidotta, “Fascist Imperial Cinema: An Account of Imaginary Places,” in *Cine-Ethiopia: The History and Politics of Film in the Horn of Africa*, ed. Michael W. Thomas, Alessandro Jedlowski, and Aboneh Ashagrie (East Lansing: Michigan University Press, 2018), 27–43. There are, of course, some notable exceptions: see, for instance, Marie-France Curriol, “Documentary Strategies and Aspects of Realism in Italian Colonial Cinema (1935–1939),” in *The Italianist* 34, no. 2 (June 2014): 122–41. The author does indeed propose a period-style analysis of Italian colonial cinema, identifying realism as the stylistic trend that unifies this body of films.

⁵ Among the several theoretical works that influenced my approach, I would single out John Belton, “A Case for Close Analysis,” in *Film Criticism* 40, no. 1 (January 2016), <https://doi.org/10.3998/fc.13761232.0040.104>; David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1991); Noel Carroll, “Film Form: An Argument for a Functional Theory of Style in the Individual Film,” in *Engaging the Moving Image*, ed. Noel Carroll (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); and Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

⁶ Carroll, “Film Form,” 93.

⁷ In this sense, “style” and “form” are basically synonyms: for this reason, following Carroll’s lead, throughout this essay I will use the two terms interchangeably.

the contrary, the idea for Mario Camerini's *Il grande appello* (The Last Roll Call, 1936) came from Luigi Freddi himself and the film received lavish funding from the Ministero per la Stampa e la Propaganda, the Ministero per le Colonie, the Ministero dell'Aeronautica, and the Ministero per la Guerra, thus making it a more traditional propaganda film—at least, on the surface.⁸ While it is certainly possible to group these films under the same label, a comprehensive analysis of the period-style of empire cinema would have to take into consideration all these issues, which cannot be explored in depth in this work.

Rather than locating an Italian colonial period-style, then, I want to bring forth the ideological complexity that underlies the films in the colonial corpus by arguing that one of the places where it emerges is in fact the formal treatment of some key moments in these films. In particular, I will focus on four titles that present areas where the seemingly indestructible construction of ideology cracks and allows for feelings of anxiety and uncertainty to slip through: in addition to the already cited *Lo squadrone bianco* and *Il grande appello*, I will discuss *La nave bianca* (The White Ship) by Roberto Rossellini (1941) and will briefly show how a similar argument can be made even for Mussolini's beloved film *Luciano Serra, pilota*, by Goffredo Alessandrini (1938).⁹ Despite their seeming alignment with the discourse surrounding both the colonial and the war effort, these films display an indirect and often contradictory treatment of fascist themes and ideals, such as the creation of a “new man” and the modernization of the country. I will argue that the ambivalence towards these ideals emerges especially from the stylistic treatment of various forms of technology, particularly when associated with the human (usually male) body. The mediation of the camera, which is in itself a symbol as well as an instrument of the regime's discourse on technology, creates and reveals rhetorical strategies that both confirm and challenge the centrality of the new man in the imperial effort, thus mirroring the regime's own ambivalent attitude towards modernity.

Cinema, Fascism, and the Colonial Dream.

When Italian cinema from the Ventennio started emerging from the invisibility to which the outcome of World War II and the demise of Mussolini's rule condemned it, the absence of the regime from the films of the era seemed to be one of its main features. Even though the promotion of fiction films as a means of entertainment rather than propaganda was certainly one of the peculiarities of Italian fascism's treatment of the media industry, recent scholarship has shown how the relationship between cinema and fascism cannot be read exclusively in light of this hands-off approach, to the point that, rather than cavalierly detached from the creative issues of filmmaking, the government's mode of interaction with the film industry has been defined as schizophrenic.¹⁰ In fact, Mussolini's attitude towards the regime's intervention in film production was complex and inconsistent, as it mirrored the diverse positions of different officials involved with cultural and propaganda issues. Furthermore, the regime's control over film production and reception changed immensely over the twenty years of fascist rule: the *laissez-faire* attitude of the

⁸ Ben-Ghiat, *Italian Fascism's Empire Cinema*, 82.

⁹ Even though Rossellini's film is usually not included in the corpus of Italian colonial cinema, it nonetheless transfers many of the colonial themes to the new context of Italy's entrance into World War II, with compelling stylistic and ideological consequences. That is why I believe that empire cinema is a better definition than colonial cinema for this group of films, insofar as it includes titles that deal with the imperial dream without necessarily taking place in colonial territories.

¹⁰ Vito Zagarrò, “Schizofrenie del modello fascista,” in *Storia del cinema italiano*, ed. Orio Calderon (Venice: Edizioni Bianco e Nero, 2006), 37–61.

early years made way for a stronger presence at all levels of cinema practices in the 1930s, with the promulgation of protectionist laws, the adoption of a stronger financing role, and even the centralization of all cine-clubs.¹¹ Despite the near-complete absence from the screen of black shirts or fasces, then, the regime was strongly committed to the shaping of a national film culture, which in turn would shape the collective attitude towards Mussolini and his politics, thus making a simple binary opposition between propaganda and escapism in fascist cinema ultimately untenable.¹²

In this context, when dealing with individual films or genres, scholars have focused on the emergence of fascist themes and values even in those titles that seem to embody the escapist soul of Italian cinema in the 1930s more overtly. For instance, the frequent representation of collective means of transportation (especially trains) in comedies or melodramas has been read as a commentary on the issue of class in Italian society,¹³ while the emergence of an Italian star system, modelled after Hollywood, has been interpreted as functional to the promotion of the fascist man (or woman) as opposed to the American one.¹⁴ Nonetheless, there are some fiction films that embody the propaganda efforts of fascist officials more directly. Despite making up a small fraction of the overall Italian film production, these titles received great attention on the part of the press, especially because of the regime's direct investment in some of them. The corpus of fascism's empire cinema, constituted by no more than a dozen titles, is part of this group.

Empire cinema, due to its subject matter and location, might seem more attuned to the promotion of fascist values than the comedies or melodramas that were popular in Italy in the 1930s; in fact, the space of the colonies afforded the regime different ways to rehearse its own relationship with cinema as a technology, a mythmaking tool, and a means to create a fascist model of society in the colonies themselves through film exhibition.¹⁵ However, as works whose closeness to the regime's agenda is more apparent, these films are also a privileged place to observe the emergence of contradictions and anxieties related both to the imperial dream and to the broader process of modernization undergone by the country under the fascist rule, for which the colonies served as testing ground. As Maria Coletti points out, colonial cinema displaces to the African territories the conflict between the old and the new order, the traditional and the modern, that is at

¹¹ For a detailed overview of the history of cinema during fascism, including a long discussion of the interplay between regime and industry, see Gian Piero Brunetta, *Il cinema italiano di regime: Da 'La canzone dell'amore' a 'Osessione'* (Bari: Laterza, 2009); for a discussion of the financing role of the state during the Ventennio, see Daniela Manetti, *"Un'arma poderosissima": Industria cinematografica e stato durante il fascismo 1922–1943* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2012) and Marina Nicoli, "Entrepreneurs and the State in the Italian Film Industry, 1919–1935," in *The Business History Review* 85, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 775–98; for a study of the relationship between the regime and the cineclubs active in Italy during the fascist rule, see Andrea Mariani, "The Cineguf Years: Amateur Cinema and the Shaping of a Film Avant-Garde in Fascist Italy (1934–1943)," in *Film History* 30, no. 1 (2018): 30–57.

¹² On the relationship between propaganda and escapism in fascist cinema see, among others, Alessio Gagliardi, "'Educare' o intrattenere? Propaganda, mass media e cultura di massa," in *Il fascismo italiano: Storia e interpretazioni*, ed. Giulia Albanese (Rome: Carocci, 2021), 255–79; and Steven Ricci, *Cinema and Fascism: Italian Film and Society, 1922–1943* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008).

¹³ Ricci, *Cinema and Fascism*.

¹⁴ On the Italian star system during fascism, see Stephen Gundle, "Film Stars and Society in Fascist Italy," in *Re-viewing Fascism: Italian Cinema, 1922–1943*, ed. Jacqueline Reich and Piero Garofalo (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2002), 315–40, and *Mussolini's Dream Factory: Film Stardom in Fascist Italy* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013). On Hollywood's influence on Italian cinema, see Maria Grazia Fanchi and Francesco Pitassio, "Genealogie e famiglie allargate," in *Schermi di regime. Cinema italiano degli anni trenta: la produzione*, ed. Alessandro Faccioli (Venice: Marsilio, 2002), 12–31.

¹⁵ On film exhibition in East Africa, see Ben-Ghiat, *Italian Fascism's Colonial Cinema*, 55–62, and Gianmarco Mancosu, "Watching films in Italian East Africa (1936–41). Fascist ambitions, contradictions, and anxieties," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 26, no. 3 (2021): 261–90.

the core of the myth-making practice of fascism.¹⁶ The portrayal of technology in empire cinema reflects the contradictions intrinsic to the fascist ideology of progress, and the technological mediation of the camera allows for this ambivalence to emerge without being explicitly stated. In particular, the formal treatment of the male body is at the core of this complex tension between celebration and doubt.

The relationship between technology and masculinity is one of the pillars of the construction of the fascist “new man.” Mussolini’s body itself had been likened to a machine. In his 1922 biography of the Duce, aptly titled *L'uomo nuovo* (“The New Man”), Antonio Beltramelli describes Mussolini’s “occhi ultradinamici che gareggiano con la velocità delle automobili delle pianure lombarde” (“ultra-dynamic eyes that race with the speed of the automobiles of the Lombard planes”) and his “testa quadrata, nuovo proiettile o scatola piena di buon esplosivo” (“square head, a new bullet or box full of good explosives”).¹⁷ This typical futurist description, bringing together masculinity, aggressiveness, power, speed, and technology finds its equivalent in the way in which male characters in imperial cinema are often introduced. Despite the diminished influence of futurism on fascist aesthetics after the end of the twenties, imperial films are still indebted to the imagery and formal strategies of the movement, thus revealing an even deeper thematic and ethical debt. This connection is hardly surprising: the colonial effort was in fact a celebration of Italy’s modernity on different levels, from warfare to the “modernizing mission that would deliver the Africans from backwardness, slavery, and chaos.”¹⁸ Masculinity was central to this mythology, to the point that the colonization of East Africa was tied to the construction of “an authentically fascist virile identity”—in other words, to the construction of that “new man” of which Mussolini himself was the template.¹⁹ Manhood and technology are therefore connected in the name of modernity, but modernity itself was contested during the fascist era, as it was both hailed as a carrier of innovation and prestige, and also blamed for debauchery, crime, and weakness.²⁰ This contradictory vision is reflected in the cinematic relationship between men and machines in colonial and war spaces, thus bringing to the fore the anxieties that such an impossible model cannot help but to provoke.

In addition to this, the centrality of colonial territories in these films provides the directors with exceptional opportunities for location shooting, thus contributing to the creation of a style that, by being finely attuned to the subject matter, is able to show the deep-rooted inconsistencies in the ideals it supposedly showcases. For instance, as many scholars have noticed, most of these films deal with the fantasy of starting over in a “virgin” space—which, of course, in reality was hardly an empty canvas for the regime’s imperial dreams. As Jean A. Gili points out, “Italian cinema does not convey the reality of a conquest, or the establishment of an Empire, but rather the ghost of a colonial dream and maybe, more broadly, the African dream as a solution to the

¹⁶ Coletti, “Il sogno imperiale,” 153.

¹⁷ Antonio Beltramelli, *L'uomo nuovo* (Milan, Rome: Mondadori, 1922), v-vi. Cited in Alessandra Parodi, “‘Generazioni di laboratorio’? Tentativi di costruzione dell’uomo nuovo come ‘uomo sano’ nel regime fascista,” in *L'uomo nuovo del fascismo. La costruzione di un progetto totalitario*, ed. Patrick Bernhard and Lutz Klinkhammer (Rome: Viella Editrice, 2017), 47–66.

¹⁸ Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922–1945* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 126.

¹⁹ Sandro Bellasai, “The Masculine Mistique: Antimodernism and Virility in Fascist Italy,” in *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 10, no. 3 (2005): 317.

²⁰ Parodi, “‘Generazioni di laboratorio’?,” 66.

problems of the metropolis in an unlikely *elsewhere*.”²¹ In more recent years, Giuseppe Fidotta defined Italian colonial cinema as a solipsistic product of fantasy:²² nonetheless, the fantastic “elsewhere” of the colonial enterprise is far from a dreamscape, nor does it provide a solution to the motherland’s problems. The clash between ideal and reality, illusion and truth, is what creates anxieties and fears both in the films that allude to the colonial enterprise and the history to which they indirectly refer. The desert is one of the clearest examples of the “elsewhere” evoked by Gili: in French and British colonial cinema, as well as in Hollywood’s orientalist fantasies such as *Morocco* (Josef Von Sternberg, 1930), the desert has been central to the allegorical construction of narratives of rebirth. We will see how in *Lo squadrone bianco*, which is certainly influenced by those international experiences, the desert exceeds this symbolic function to become instrumental in expressing anxieties related to both the colonial enterprise and the role that the fascist “new man” has in its construction – anxieties that, in different ways, emerge also from *Il grande appello*.²³

Men, Machines, Fathers, and Sons: *Lo squadrone bianco* and *Il grande appello*

In his essay, “Placing Cinema, Fascism, and the Nation in a Diagram of Italian Modernity,” James Hay investigates the role of cinema and its interdependence with other technologies in the formation of Italy as a modern nation.²⁴ One of the places where Hay locates the intersection of fascism, nation, and different spheres of cultural production is the so-called “white telephone” cinema. He criticizes the interpretive tradition that sees the white telephone simply as a symbol of bourgeois life and escapism on the basis that, in so doing, it overlooks the object’s literal significance: the white telephone is, before anything else, a telephone. In the fascist era, and in fascist cinema in particular, the telephone is more than a symbol of the wealth associated with long-distance communication, as it becomes part of a network of “mechanisms, such as cinema and telephony, for overcoming distance, for defining the extensions of national territory/empire, and for coordinating movement among places—and doing so in a way that made Rome central to the map/network of nation and empire.”²⁵ Both telephone and cinema, as physical embodiments of the technological achievements that made the imperial dream possible, are therefore instrumental to its creation and narration.

Hay’s intuition sheds light on the relationship between cinema, technology, and fascism by showing that fascist discourse over progress, technology, and modernity ran as an undercurrent even in those films that would be later discarded as exemplary of the removal of fascism from the screen, and that what would be considered as the symbol of this removal might in fact be read as the place where this discourse could emerge on the surface. Given the centrality of the empire in both the nation-building and the modernization mythologies of fascism, it is unsurprising that

²¹ Jean A. Gili, “I film dell’Impero Fascista,” in *L’ora d’Africa del cinema italiano 1911–1989*, ed. Gian Piero Brunetta, Bruno Corsi, Jean A. Gili (Rovereto: Materiali di lavoro – Rivista di studi storici, 1990), 108. Emphasis in original.

²² Fidotta, “Fascist Imperial Cinema,” 28.

²³ For a cultural and psychoanalytic analysis of the desert in *Lo squadrone bianco* representing “fascist Italy’s colonial anxieties, spatial anxiety, and crowd anxiety,” see Cecilia Boggio, “Black Shirts/Black Skins: Fascist Italy’s Colonial Anxieties and *Lo squadrone bianco*,” in *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to Present*, ed. Patrizia Palumbo (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 279–98.

²⁴ James Hay, “Placing Cinema, Fascism, and the Nation in a Diagram of Italian Modernity,” in *Re-Viewing Fascism*, 75–93.

²⁵ Hay, “Placing Cinema,” 82.

colonial films display technology in an almost obsessive manner. In his discussion of the role of telephony in fascist-era films, Hay touches upon a moment in one of the most important and controversial colonial films, Augusto Genina's *Lo squadrone bianco*, which tells the story of a man who decides to join the troops in Tripolitania after the failure of his romantic relationship:

Squadrone bianco [...] begins with a telephone conversation between two lovers—a male character whose jealousy and suspicion prompt him to phone, and a duplicitous femme fatale who uses the phone to put him off. This scene involves one of the very few white telephones in Italian cinema during the 1930s, and the telephone does fetishize both female sexuality and her upper-class privilege, imaged in the opulence of her boudoir. But the film goes on to condemn her modern environment, where relationships (like the one between the central couple) are formed and individuals are distanced (the man deceived) through telephone conversations. The sphere of the telephonic gets contrasted in this film with the North African desert, an utterly empty environment, devoid of telephones, where relationships get formed more directly but where the lack of reliable communicative and navigational technology becomes as formidable an enemy as African “rebels.” As a colonial film that works to map Italy's new “empire,” *Squadrone bianco*'s discourse about the parameters of telephonic space is also a discourse about the most contested zones of national sovereignty.²⁶

Hay's analysis reveals how the telephone, in addition to being a technology to be celebrated as carrier of progress, is also an object to be feared for the same exact reason. This shows how an object that had become the signifier of the removal of fascism from the cinema of the Ventennio is in fact the embodiment of both the hopes and the fears associated with the regime's discourse on modernity. However, there is more than what Hay shows in this scene from *Lo squadrone bianco*. Technology here is also a threat to the main character's conformity to fascist ideals of manhood.

Lo squadrone bianco opens with a highly stylized rhythmic montage of shots of the protagonist, Mario Ludovici, driving his car at night. Technology is therefore foregrounded in the film from the very beginning, in the form of both transportation and cinematic technology. Both were key to the mythology of fascism as a means to connect the distant places of the empire and to celebrate its achievements. It is not by chance that aviator Italo Balbo, one of the regime's darlings who had been appointed governor of Libya in 1934, contributed to the production of *Lo squadrone bianco*. The Luce newsreel detailing the preparations for his transoceanic flight is one of the clearest examples of the regime's desire to showcase “la più moderna prova di quanto sappia organizzare e attuare, anche in questo campo, l'Italia di Mussolini” (“the most modern proof of what Mussolini's Italy can organize and get done in this field too”).²⁷

The opening of *Lo squadrone bianco* is reminiscent of the quick-cutting style that can be found in many Luce newsreels, including the one I just mentioned, which alternates between long pan shots of airplanes and quicker, closer shots of men working on them. Both examples are openly indebted to the Soviet school of montage, which had an enormous influence on the modernist style

²⁶ Hay, “Placing Cinema,” 87.

²⁷ “I preparativi alla partenza della Crociera Atlantica del Decennale,” July 1933, Archivio Luce, Giornale Luce B/B0299, <https://patrimonio.archivioluce.com/luce-web/detail/IL5000010469/2/i-preparativi-fino-alla-partenza-della-crociera-atlantica-del-decennale-1.html>.

of Italian films starting in the late 1920s, including colonial documentaries.²⁸ This stylistic closeness between two ideologically opposite national cinemas should not surprise. As Piero Garofalo explains in his essay, “Seeing Red: The Soviet Influence on Italian Cinema in the Thirties,” the impact of Soviet cinema on Italian culture was significant. He writes:

While only a very limited selection of the Soviet avant-garde production circulated in Italy, these texts resonated among Italian cineastes of the period. This crucial exposure to the Soviet film scene was possible because Fascism took a broadly pragmatic approach to the emergence of the Leninist state, which the Italian regime perceived as paralleling its own seizure of power. In fact, the Bolshevik Revolution provided a functional example of societal interpellation from which Fascism transposed practices to its own consensus-generating machinery.²⁹

In addition to this, Soviet cinema shared key traits with other European modernist movements, including Italian (and fascist-friendly) futurism. Not only the pedagogic possibilities unveiled by Russian filmmakers attracted and intrigued the Italians, but also, and especially, the two movements saw cinema and its convergence of art and science as the real art of the machine age.³⁰

Going back to the opening of *Lo squadrone bianco*, the Soviet-style rhythmic montage with which our protagonist is shown driving his car at high speed seems completely consistent with the presentation of a man at ease in the role of a futurist male – aggressive, fast, comfortable in his sports car to the point that his body is perfectly attuned to the machine it inhabits. His race is intercut with shots of a ballroom, where a woman dances leisurely with another man. This space is presented stylistically in a very different way, with slow pans and long shots emphasizing the morally questionable luxury of female bourgeois life. This contrast is consistent with the presentation of male power and upper-class female frivolity that one might expect from a film from the fascist era; yet, this comfortable opposition is questioned in the following shots, those of the telephone call described by Hay.

In fact, the conversation between our protagonist and the woman, who in the meantime has left the ballroom and is at home in an opulent apartment, is hardly a conversation. Genina only shows the man speaking, and we can only infer his lover’s responses from his words. The phone call is presented in a single shot of unusually long duration, with no cuts or camera movements: the only cut happens at the end of the conversation and is to a close-up of the woman’s hand putting down the (white) phone to close the call. This choice is significant for several reasons. Firstly, the long, uncut shot contrasts sharply with the presentation of Mario in his car. As the quick cutting introduced him as a man in power, so the long shot lets us witness his defeat with no interruptions. He is no longer attuned with the technology that he is using; instead, the distancing effect of the telephone is the cause of his loneliness and misery, as Genina’s choice to only show his side of the conversation confirms. Secondly, the content of Mario’s words is significant. In addition to hearing that his lover Cristiana does not want to see him, we also learn that he had to drive three hundred kilometers to be there, and that he has to leave the following morning. The issue of distance is therefore reinforced immediately in the film, but the contribution of technology to its resolution is questioned. Interestingly, communication and transportation technologies feature prominently in the dialogue that Mario and Cristiana have at her place, where the man goes after she unplugs the

²⁸ Fidotta, “Ruling the Colonies with Sound.”

²⁹ Piero Garofalo, “Seeing Red: The Soviet Influence on Italian Cinema in the Thirties,” in *Re-Viewing Fascism*, 139.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 142.

phone. Trains, car drives, phone calls, and telegrams are cited obsessively by Mario as proof of her infidelity. Technology, rather than reducing the distance, is the measure of its greatness and irreducibility, and might even help to create it.

The opening of *Lo squadrone bianco* sets the stage for the fascist discourse on the new man. However, in doing so, the film's early scenes question its validity at the very moment in which they establish its parameters. This tension is created at the level of style, with the formal contrast between the first presentation of Mario and his following appearances. This strategy is put in place in other colonial films as well, thus opening breaches in their solid ideological conformity to fascist ideals.

A scene from *Il grande appello*, for instance, presents a more explicit sight gag with similar consequences. At the beginning of the film, an Italian soldier is standing on the pier in the port of Genoa, where a ship has just docked. As he learns that he will soon be leaving for Djibouti, he is reading Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's *Come si seducono le donne* ("How to Seduce Women"), the handbook for the futurist lover. A close-up of the book's cover is followed by the counter-shot of the soldier's face; following his look, the camera tilts from his close-up to a cannon that is being loaded on the deck. The sexual subtext of this pair of shots is clear: the soldier, who is portrayed as young and naive, wishes he had the sexual power of a war weapon. The connection between war, machine, and masculinity, which is one of the most popularized futurist concepts, is established with extreme synthesis and elegance by a single camera movement and mocked at the very moment in which it is created.

The soldier's arrival in Djibouti, where his plan to woo the local women will be comically frustrated, testifies to his questionable adherence to the fascist ideal of masculinity, besides evoking the desirability of forbidden interracial relationships. However, while gently making fun of the soldier, the camera movement connecting his look to the war weapon also seems to make fun of the ideal of the futurist (and fascist) man-machine itself, and certainly stages the anxiety that such an ideal can arouse. As with the opening of *Lo squadrone bianco*, what is particularly interesting about this moment is the way in which it constructs meaning through film style, thus creating moments of tension between narrative and form. It is the technology of cinema that creates figures of men-machines that are, however, questioned at the very moment in which they are created.

The rest of *Lo squadrone bianco*, shot on location in the Libyan territories of the empire, differs greatly from the urban Italian opening, offering extreme long shots of the desert that is presented as a spiritual place more than a tangible one. The cut from Cristiana's apartment to the Libyan camp greatly emphasizes the distance, both physical and existential, between the two spaces: the light is suddenly blinding, and the long pan shots foreground the emptiness and openness of the new location. As Coletti points out, the narrative structure of *Lo squadrone bianco* is built on a series of dialectical oppositions, of which the most apparent is that between the city and the desert, the space of defeat and that of rebirth, and the abruptness of the shift between the two spaces is the clearest articulation of the opposition between them.³¹ The dialogue mirrors the message that had already been conveyed by the camera. To the newly-arrived Ludovici who says that he has enlisted because he is trying to forget, his native attendant replies, "Voi potere. Nostra vita è stare nel deserto. Nel deserto, uomo dimenticare tutto" ("You can. Our life is in the desert, and in the desert man forgets everything").

Despite the rhetoric of the fresh start associated with colonial spaces, *Lo squadrone bianco* also evokes the fears and anxieties arising from those very discourses. The long pan shots

³¹ Coletti, "Cinema coloniale italiano," 100.

celebrating the Méhariste troops and their camels are highly reminiscent of those used in Luce documentaries to show off the technological achievements of Italian modernity, such as the airplanes in the newsreel discussed above. A parallel is therefore created between human/animal troops and machines, both portrayed as products of the Italian genius and command of the instruments afforded by technological advancements. But those same images, integrated with some impressive aerial shots, also convey the smallness of the troops in the vastity of the desert. The feeling arising from these views is that of agoraphobia, meant as fear of an immeasurable, and therefore unknowable, open space. The dialogue, though disguised as a celebration of the troops' skill, works in conjunction with the images to evoke this fear. As Mario is told by an older Captain, there is only one brave soldier who knows his way through the desert. If he dies, his comrades are lost.

A moment towards the end of the film stages this contradiction even more overtly, and goes so far as to question the validity of colonial propaganda itself. Ludovici's squadron, led by Captain Santelia, is lost in the desert. Meanwhile, a group of Italian tourists (including a regretful Cristiana, whose arrival is significantly introduced by a telegram) is visiting the main camp. Official dispositions require that they are welcomed cheerily despite the circumstances. A speech from an officer to the visitors is intercut with shots of planes on patrol in the desert to find the lost squadron. While this would be a perfect moment to celebrate the harmony between the power of the Italian army and the tranquility of the camp, which is even able to host tourists from the motherland, Genina instead contrasts the artificial rhetoric of the official with the reality of the hostile land that, despite all proclamations, has yet to be conquered. As the officer declares emphatically that, "Il deserto [...] non esiste più: la civiltà l'ha ucciso" ("The desert no longer exists: civilization killed it"), a cut to a solitary plane getting smaller and smaller in an incommensurable space unveils the emptiness of his words. Aerial shots of the squadron, exhausted and tiny in comparison to the immensity of the desert, mark once and for all the vacuity of the imperial discourse surrounding the conquest of what is in fact presented as an unconquerable space. The juxtaposition of the officer's words to these shots is in fact an ironic commentary on the hollowness of those very words, thus questioning the reliability of the propaganda apparatus itself.

The relationship between Ludovici and Santelia also fits within the ambiguity of *Lo squadrone bianco*'s adherence to fascist ideals. If Ludovici's goal in enlisting was that of forgetting the rejection he suffered from Cristiana, in the colonies he is actually faced with another rejection, that of Captain Santelia's, who sees Ludovici as an inadequate substitute of the deceased Lieutenant Bettini. The idea of the desert as a space of rebirth as a different man is therefore questioned by the repetition of the pattern from which Ludovici attempted to escape. The interactions between Ludovici and Santelia, formally a surrogate of a father-son relationship, are not devoid of homosexual undertones, thus emphasizing the doubling of the structure of rejection that opened the film and stressing Ludovici's sense of inadequacy.

Ludovici's process of growth from spoiled kid with "pubescent aspirations to adulthood" to full-blown colonial hero confirms these inconsistencies.³² While the drive behind this progression is his desire to be accepted and appreciated by the idolized Santelia, the turning point is Santelia's death in the desert during the battle with the rebel group their squadron had been chasing. Significantly, though, the key battle is hardly focused on Ludovici's heroism. The confrontation between the two squadrons is instead shot in an almost abstract way, with no extra-diegetic music

³² Giorgio Bertellini, "Colonial Autism: Whitened Heroes, Auditory Rhetoric, and National Identity in Interwar Italian Cinema," in *A Place in the Sun*, 258.

and an emphasis on the desert wind that gives the entire sequence a dream-like quality. Again, Genina's direction foregrounds the desert and its pervasive and almost hypnotic presence, rather than individual acts of courage; in contrast with the film's rhetoric, Ludovici's return as a hero seems more like the outcome of ideological necessity than of dramatic progression.

Despite all its ambiguities, the father-son relationship in *Lo squadrone bianco* is resolved positively, with the younger Ludovici becoming the father figure for other officials at the military post. The rise of the new hero, however artificial it may be at the level of narrative progression, is fairly unproblematic at the ideological level. Ludovici becomes Santelia, to the point of emulating his posture and being framed similarly by Genina's camera. If he fails to be the futurist man that he seemed to be at the very beginning of the film, Ludovici nonetheless manages to embody the fascist ideals of supremacy and command in the colonies while guaranteeing the continuity between the old and the new generation. Significantly, though, this entails breaking the ties he has with the fatherland, embodied by the opaque figure of Cristiana. According to *Lo squadrone bianco*, the new man is alone in his heroism, thus renouncing his role as father and breadwinner—a common pattern in colonial narratives, and in itself revelatory of the ideological contradictions surrounding the status of the fascist male, who is supposed to be homo-social and *pater familias* simultaneously. Unsurprisingly, one of the many reasons that prevented the construction of a fascist society in the colonies was the failure to convince women and families to move to the newly conquered territories.

Other colonial films are even more ambiguous in their depiction of the new generation as bearer of the fascist values of modernity that colonial cinema nominally celebrates. *Il grande appello*, for instance, is similar to *Lo squadrone bianco* and other colonial films insofar as it stages what Marcia Landy calls a drama of conversion.³³ Giovanni, an Italian who lives a corrupt life in the French colony of Djibouti, is brought back to the fascist values of probity and loyalty to the fatherland after meeting Enrico, the son he had abandoned as a child. Significantly, Enrico works in Addis Ababa as a radio operator. His mastery of technology, which he puts at the service of the fatherland, make him the model of modernity that the regime wants to promote. But this modernity also destroys family ties, as the natures of father and son are irreconcilable and will lead to an irreparable fracture. Enrico will repudiate his father and, crucially, there will be no on-screen reconciliation even after Giovanni's redemption. In this sense, as Ben-Ghiat and others have noted, even the narrative of *Il grande appello* is not as in line with the regime's rhetoric as its production history would suggest. Significantly, the zealous fascist journalist Telesio Interlandi, writing for the newspaper *Il Tevere*, called Camerini's film "an abortion."³⁴

This ambivalent attitude towards modernity and the new man encapsulates the anxieties that progress inevitably wrought, and for which the colonies were the perfect theater; considered as an empty space, the new Italian Africa could stage the drama of the struggle between fascism's two souls, innovation, and tradition, which have always been in a precarious balance. *Lo squadrone bianco* and *Il grande appello*, despite their conventional narratives, work through the feelings associated with inhabiting colonial spaces, both literally and metaphorically. In both films, technology is a focal point of fascist anxieties toward modernity and progress, its ambivalent attitude with respect to the values that these historical transitions bring with them, and the tension between the desire to present Italy as a modern nation and the fear of the effects of modernity on

³³ Marcia Landy, *The Folklore of Consensus: Theatricality in the Italian Cinema, 1930–1943* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 192.

³⁴ Telesio Interlandi, "La patria in appello," *Il Tevere*, Nov. 28, 1936. Reproduced in Gili, "I film dell'Impero Fascista," 54.

a country that was still mostly rural and anchored in tradition. As we saw in *Lo squadrone bianco*, the imperial dream itself is questioned, or at least populated with ghosts of defeat and unconquerability. The desert of official rhetoric and that portrayed by Genina are very different spaces, and history will prove the anxieties evoked by Genina's stylistic treatment of the colonial territories as well-founded.

“Men and machines, one heartbeat”: *La nave bianca* and *Luciano Serra, pilota*

The contradictory treatment of the colonial space in *Lo squadrone bianco* recalls similar strategies in other examples of empire cinema. The contrast between glorious proclamations and terror-evoking realities is worked through in the style of these films, offering a much more ambiguous depiction of the imperial dream. The battlefield is the place where these concerns filter more forcefully through the fabric of a narrative of undisputed command and control. *Luciano Serra, pilota* and *La nave bianca*, though produced in different contexts and offering different narratives of Italian supremacy, both stage battle scenes that, in their stylistic treatment, challenge the overt optimism of the stories they tell.

Roberto Rossellini, who directed *La nave bianca*, was also Alessandrini's assistant director on the set of *Luciano Serra, pilota*, where he learned the craft of location shooting. Rossellini puts this experience to work in *La nave bianca*, which was advertised as an experiment in “documentary fiction.” In fact, *La nave bianca* is mostly shot on location with non-professional actors; besides, it features some battle footage from the Luce documentary *La battaglia dello Jonio* (*The Battle of Ionian*)—a common practice in colonial cinema, also derived from Soviet filmmaking.³⁵

The film's narrative thread is very tenuous. What Rossellini is interested in is the interaction between the men and the machine, especially the warship enclosing them for most of the film. The relationship between the characters and the space they inhabit is at the core of the neorealist aesthetics (and ethics) of which Rossellini will be the champion, but in *La nave bianca* this interaction is based on completely different premises. The ship is portrayed as a mechanical body that functions in harmony with the flesh-and-blood body of the soldiers. “Uomini e macchine un sol palpito” (“Men and machines, one heartbeat”), reads a sign in the interior of the ship. And the wounded body of the ship, attacked by an enemy fleet that remains virtually invisible for the whole film, is mirrored by the wounded bodies of the soldiers.

This parallel between the human body and the mechanical body is made particularly explicit when Augusto, the main character, is wounded and undergoes surgery.³⁶ As the doctors prepare him for a blood transfusion, the sailors try to restart the engines to respond to the enemy attacks. The sound of engines and cannons is the only accompaniment to this sequence. The totality of the ship is broken down by editing, as is Augusto's body on the operating table; the different parts of the machine and their survival are all indissolubly tied to the survival of the human body. The bombing from the ship's cannons is violent and made even more intense by the quick pace of editing: the machine is defending itself and the soldiers it hosts, including Augusto. As the battle ends, the surgery is also completed.

³⁵ *La battaglia dello Jonio*, 1940, Archivio Luce, D000304, <https://patrimonio.archivioluce.com/luce-web/detail/IL3000052424/1/-11076.html>.

³⁶ Interestingly, the vast majority of empire films portray scenes of medical treatments, including surgery and vaccinations, thus furthering the relationship between technology and human body that is at the core of both fascist discourses on the new man and the anxiety that they produce.

The ship itself has a twofold function: that of attacking the enemy and of defending its sailors. As much as this relationship might seem harmonious, it is destabilized by Rossellini's style, which creates a sense of claustrophobia and impending doom with its quick cuts, close shots, almost complete absence of dialogue and music, and insistence on dead bodies alongside damaged machines. Human survival and mechanical efficiency are portrayed as interdependent. The battle, rather than celebrating this communion, shows the destruction of the human that can derive from it.

After the battle, Augusto is transported to the hospital ship. Here, the film's discourse on the human body takes a different turn. Rows of wounded and mutilated soldiers are shown through the same pan shots that the regime usually set aside for parades of aircrafts or officials in uniform, and that Rossellini himself had used to showcase the military power of the warships in the opening of the film. This formal choice is in line with fascism's celebration of the "mutilati di Guerra" ("war wounded"), testified by Luce newsreels such as *La casa del mutilato*.³⁷ This sentiment is also found in futurist writing: Marinetti's *Come si seducono le donne* includes a chapter titled "Donne, preferite i gloriosi mutilati!" ("Women, Give Preference to the Glorious Amputees!") where he praises the "fusione di Acciaio e Carne" ("fusion of Steel and Flesh") created by surgery on the war wounded.³⁸ But the celebration of the man-machine, as we have seen in the sight gag from *Il grande appello*, also hides a sense of anxiety pertaining to the limits and the fragility of the human, and in this context especially male, body. From this perspective, the use of the same formal strategy to portray the warships and the mutilated bodies of the soldiers also creates a direct connection between the two, thus suggesting a cause-and-effect relationship that is hardly celebratory of the war effort, but rather emphasizes its destructive consequences.

The parallel between human and mechanical bodies is also reflected in the portrayal of perceptual apparatuses. The periscope functions as a mediating agent between the sailors and the object of their vision. Shots of officials looking into the periscope are crosscut with counter-shots of the sea from which the attack is being launched, but the empty sea shows no trace of the enemy. As Paul Virilio points out, "To the naked eye, the vast new battlefield seemed to be composed of nothing." Modern war presupposes a perceptual separation between attacker and attacked: "As sight lost its direct quality and reeled out of phase, the soldier had the feeling of being not so much destroyed as derealized and dematerialized, any sensory point of reference suddenly vanishing in a surfeit of optical targets."³⁹ *La nave bianca* stages this visual emptiness that cannot be filled by the perception afforded by mechanical apparatuses. The enemy is invisible and can be identified only by the flightpath of the bombs. Eye, periscope, and shells have the same function – that of identifying the object of perception in an empty space. But this emptiness is there, and no periscope or bombs are able to populate it. At the end of the battle, only columns of smoke, standing for the wounded enemy ships, can be seen on the horizon. It is this emptiness, the failure of both organic and mechanical perception, that embodies the anxiety of men at war and the looming sense of doom; significantly, half of the Italian battleship fleet had been lost before Rossellini even finished his picture.

The emptiness of the sea mirrors the emptiness of the colonial space but, unlike the latter, cannot be filled with the desires of the colonizers. World War II puts an end to the colonial fantasies of the 1930s and to the fascist desire for undisputed command. In fact, a closer analysis

³⁷ "Gli allievi el convitto nazionale," 5 April 1939, Archivio Luce, Giornale Luce B/B1491, <https://patrimonio.archivioluce.com/luce-web/detail/IL5000019176/2/gli-allievi-del-convitto-nazionale-1.html>

³⁸ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Come si seducono le donne* (Milan: BUR Minima, [1916] 2015), 152.

³⁹ Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (London: Verso, 1989), 19.

of the perceptual modes that empire films put into play proves that these fantasies themselves are less solid than advertised. Even *Luciano Serra, pilota*, the film whose title was chosen by Mussolini himself, is in this respect more ambiguous than its reputation suggests. Despite being a celebration of the semi-mythical figure of the aviator and of Italy's mastery of aerial war, *Luciano Serra* displays surprisingly few aerial shots, which are the emblem, as Noa Steimatsky writes, of "a modernist desire [...] for a controlling, unifying perception poised to crystallize reality as an aesthetic object."⁴⁰ This "unifying perception" is denied for most of the film, and especially in the long key sequence of the final battle: the sky and the earth are both shot from ground level, emphasizing the distance between the aestheticized elegance of the Italian airplane's flight and the chaos that reigns on the ground. Above and below are separate realms, inhabited respectively by colonizers and colonized, between whom no reconciliation, however violent, is possible at the level of perception. Luciano Serra's declared uneasiness with being on the ground embodies the distance between the fantasy of a conquered sky and the reality of an unconquerable territory. The absence of an aerial point of view that would organize the battlefield perceptually and give it legibility seems to give shape to all the anxieties surrounding the colonial mission and the ideals associated with it.

Conclusion

Fascism's empire films are one of the most evident examples of the tension between alignment and uncertainty with respect to fascist ideals of modernity, masculinity, and technological progress, and a mirror of the regime's own conflicting approach to these issues. Each in their own way, these films let feelings of doubt and fear slip through the tight fabric of imperial narratives, thus questioning the a-fascism that Lizzani and Zavattini ascribe to the cinema of the Ventennio and demonstrating once more that reading fascist cinema in terms of a simple binary opposition between propaganda and entertainment is misleading. In fact, while being entertainment films with a clear propagandistic goal, these films also expose the contradictions that are intrinsic to the very ideology they celebrate.

Whether it is enough to see a glimpse of resistance in these aligned narratives, I would not dare say. Nonetheless, it is significant that anxieties and doubts emerge more forcefully from the formal structure of some scenes, rather than from their dialogue or their plots. In the article I cited at the beginning of this essay, Zavattini claims that fascist cinema was much freer than one would imagine; in different circumstances, Mario Camerini too suggests that censorship's grip was looser than one might think.⁴¹ Besides, once a screenplay was approved, little authority was exercised on the production process. Of the over 700 films produced between 1930 and 1944, only one was not distributed at all, a few were subject to minor changes, and a couple of others such as Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione* (1942) escaped the censors and were later withdrawn from circulation.⁴² In a regime where scripts were subject to state control, but the production process was comparatively left alone, film form can become an area of ideological freedom where meaning can be conveyed without the aid of potentially dangerous language. A filmmaker's formal choices can therefore affect narration to the point of contradicting it, engendering doubt and uncertainty even in those narratives that the regime considered safest for the dissemination of its ideology.

⁴⁰ Noa Steimatsky, *Italian Locations. Reinhabiting the Past in Postwar Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 13.

⁴¹ In Jean A. Gili, "Film storico e film in costume," in *Cinema italiano sotto il fascismo*, 143.

⁴² See Jacqueline Reich, "Mussolini at the Movies," in *Re-Viewing Fascism*, 13.

If these gray areas might not be enough to dissipate the specter of collaboration (for which directors like Camerini would later apologize), they nonetheless show once again the ideological complexity of fiction cinema during the Ventennio. Empire cinema, by fictionalizing very recent events, helped the regime write its own imaginary history while making it. The presence of subtle moments of hesitancy remains as a historiographical trace of the ambiguities of fascist-era cinema, including the films that were supposed to unproblematically embody the regime's colonial dreams.