On 2 October 1935, Benito Mussolini stepped out on the balcony of Rome’s Piazza Venezia to address the largest rally in the fourteen years of the Fascist regime. Surrounded by microphones and movie cameras, Mussolini told his audience that «a solemn hour is about to sound in the history of the fatherland. At this moment twenty million men occupy the public squares of all Italy. Never in the history of mankind has there been seen a more gigantic spectacle. Twenty million men: one heart, one will, one decision.» The decision Mussolini referred to was that of invading Ethiopia, an act that would avenge the Italians’ defeat at Adwa by Ethiopian troops almost 40 years earlier. The regime had planned the invasion since 1934, and Italian soldiers stood ready at the Ethiopian-Eritrean border even as the Duce spoke. Yet Mussolini’s rhetoric, and his urgent tone, conveyed a sense of history being made at that moment, through a mass meeting of Italians with «the wheel of destiny».¹

As Claudio Fogu has shown, the dictatorship staked its claim to be revolutionary and modern on its creation of an «eventful» present, one «filled with epoch-making moments». The occupation of Ethiopia was certainly one of those. In real time, it set into motion a chain of destructive events that contributed to the outbreak of World War II, destabilising European relations and flaunting state sovereignty and multiple international protocols, including bans on the chemical weapons used by the Fascists in massive quantities.² In the fantasy time of the «historic imaginary», though, Ethiopia was the apotheosis of Italy’s ascent to destiny, and its presentation in Fascist propaganda bears out Pier Giorgio Zunino’s observation that Fascism was

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an «oneiric expression» – as much a utopian as a political project. Although Italy had already occupied Eritrea (1890), Somalia (1908), Libya (1912) and the Dodecanese Islands (1912), this was the first mass mobilisation of Italians since World War I. In keeping with the Fascist concept of violence as a generative and unstoppable historical force, the battlefields of East Africa would serve as laboratories of a culture of imperial command. Mussolini’s remark that the Ethiopian invasion represented the start of «a gigantic work of human reclamation» (bonifica umana) translates into battlefields conceived of as sites of national and individual rebirth.3

The récit of the past was crucial to this Fascist forward march. From the late nineteenth century onward, the pursuit of colonies had a huge symbolic as well as geopolitical importance, due to Italy’s Roman heritage, its late unification (1870), and its weak power position within Europe. Without colonies, Italy would always be Europe’s boot, never its heart or head, and dispossessed of the power, prestige and possibilities that came with overseas expansion.4 This sense of marginality had a temporal dimension that manifested in feelings of Italian «backwardness» with respect to the Great Powers, and colonies thus took on meaning also as potential theatres for the display of Italian modernity. This accent on prestige and modernity as well as economic exploitation made the Italians’ defeat by Ethiopian troops at Adwa in 1896 a devastating blow.5 The Italo-Turkish War for control of Libya (1911–1912) partly compensated for this earlier loss. It gave Italy a crucial outlet across the Mediterranean, and Italy showed off its state of the art aviation, employing the world’s first night and reconnaissance bombings – and the first embedded cameramen to record them. The modernity of this conquest contributed to its popularity. For intellectuals like Giuseppe Prezzolini and Giovanni Pascoli, the occupation of Libya had changed Italy’s image, vanquishing «the Italy of brigands and carnivals [...] of Adwa».6

For the Fascists, though, Ethiopia remained unfinished business, and Mussolini invoked what Avishai Margalit has termed «episodic memory», or the memory of past emotions (such as collective humiliations) to mobilise Italians for what could

have been a very unpopular campaign. In his 2 October speech, he presented the invasion of Ethiopia as a correction of a shameful event (the Italians’ defeat at Adwa in 1896) and a victory over a multitude of enemies: Italy’s own liberal past, the Great Powers who conspired with Ethiopia to keep Italy a marginal presence in the world, and an African nation that had vanquished Italy in collusion with those powers. He did not say that Italy had also mobilised an arsenal of chemical weapons and bomber planes that made Ethiopia «a field of experimental violence» for the next years. What mattered was that Ethiopia would serve as a watershed moment, a new phase of the Fascist revolution that would demonstrate Italy’s unity and modernity. For this reason Charles Burdett has emphasised the importance of Ethiopia as a metaphor for the palingenesis of Italy; «the site where the history of Italy and the history of Fascism would merge; [...] the mythical promised land that the Duce had pledged his people; the site that cancelled the memory of the Treaty of Versailles and established Italy as a great power.»

1. Mapping Fascist Empire Cinema

This essay looks at how Italian feature and non-fiction cinema on imperial themes engaged with these complex and vexed histories and the different temporalities they implied. I work from a specific conception of history here, privileging movies that narrate the histories then being created by imperial conquest. The troubled and transient protagonists of these present-oriented films are often in flight from their pasts; their destinies are fully tied to actuality, to the instantiation of a new era through imperial expansion. This focus on the present also motivates the documentary dimension of empire features, which incorporate indices of present-day reality (maps, non-fiction footage, non-actors, location shots, ethnographic material) in order to establish their authority as interpreters of that present. These are also war


9 For a fuller treatment of these themes see R. Ben-Ghiat, Italian Fascism’s Empire Cinema (forthcoming with Indiana University Press). On the relationship of film and history see R. Rosenstone (ed.), Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past, Princeton, NJ 1995; idem, History on Film/Film on History, New York 2012; P. Sorlin, The film in history: Restaging the Past,
films, entirely imbricated with the military as well as filmic bureaucracy of the Fascist era; they feature «real» military men, consultants and footage gathered by cameramen attached to the Armed Forces as well as the Istituto Luce, the state agency for photography and non-fiction film production. Michael Geyer’s description of the militarised European societies of the interwar period as ones in which «war ascribed status to individuals and lent meaning to the «work» of those who participated in it» fits the culture and character of the world of Fascist empire cinema, with its blurred lines between military and cultural practice.\(^\text{10}\)

Empire cinema developed in dialogue with contemporary foreign trends, from French colonial movies to British desert films to Hollywood Westerns. French and British cinema on imperial themes offer similar blends of documentary and fictional film conventions, and were at times equally pedagogical in their treatments of the new futures opened up for occupied countries by the imperialists’ civilising mission.\(^\text{11}\) But the movies made in the wake of the Ethiopian invasion were also fruit of a moment of reckoning among Italian professionals and officials with the possibilities of political filmmaking and the need to rise to the occasion of what seemed to all to be a critical historical juncture. Feature and non-fiction movies on imperial themes reflect the belief that the scale of the Ethiopian invasion and the stories it generated, could not be adequately communicated by traditional means of representation. The interest in using film to write these histories led one critic to call for the creation of «the figure of the cinematographic historiographer» and fostered reflections about the different roles that documentary and feature film could play in this regard and the relationship of cinema and war.\(^\text{12}\)

I use the category of empire cinema to designate the films that appeared in the years following the Ethiopian invasion, to draw attention to the distinct experience of this period of permanent mobilisation, state racism, autarchy, and new levels of state interference in everyday life. The drama of these years comes from the scale and pace of policy changes, and the violence of their implementation – and then

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from the rapidity with which things fell apart already from 1941 onward, when Italy lost most of east Africa to the British within a year of entering World War II. Easy to dismiss because of its short-lived nature, Italy offers the example of an empire that took shape during a dictatorship, without the buzz and drone of public internal opposition, but also without the benefit of a colonial culture analogous to those developed over centuries by France and Great Britain. Ethiopia was to let the world know what Fascist colonialism looked like, with harsh legislation and violence the totalitarian means of forcing through a colonial order. And myriad changes in cultural, social and international policy did follow upon the Ethiopian invasion. Waging war on a League of Nations member – which occasioned a global public outcry, Red Cross investigations and sanctions on Italy – created image management problems of a scale the regime had never faced before. This propaganda crisis, as well as the example of Nazi German policies, led to a restructuring of the Fascist cultural bureaucracy after 1936, including the creation of the Ministry of Popular Culture and Cinecittà, and the reorganisation of the Istituto Luce as an entity that worked in coordination with the Armed Forces. These developments provided the context within which empire cinema developed, influencing the entire chain of production and reception. One can cite the degree of attention (funding, publicity and censorship) given to imperial-themed films, the state’s promulgation of racial legislation from 1937 onward – a move that affected features’ story lines, reception and casting –, and the integration of all film forms in an ever-expanding propaganda apparatus marked, to a degree unknown before, by «contemporaneity and concentricity», to use Nicola Labanca’s terms for the coordination and interrelation among Fascist print, aural and visual media. In terms of their representations of colonial landscapes and subjects, these sound movies certainly developed out of the cinematic traditions of the silent era, which lasted until 1931 in Italy and thus throughout the first decade of Fascist rule. Yet empire cinema, as a production culture as well as body of works, bears the mark of later Fascism’s ideological priorities.

Indeed, empire films had weighty political demands upon them relative to the rest of Fascist-era cinematic production. They were to placate the international community, highlighting the humanitarian aspects of Italy’s colonisation, while also advertising Italian modernity and military strength. They aspired to compete with Hollywood and other foreign productions for the attentions of audiences abroad, and by demonstrating the benevolence and the authority of Italian rule, they also aimed to convince inhabitants of occupied territories to collaborate with the regime. And they were to mobilise Italians at home and in Italian communities abroad for

15 Ibid.
combat and settlement in the colonies. This was no small matter, considering that in the early 1930s, after ten years of Fascism and 40 years of Italian colonialism, fewer than 45,000 Italians had settled in the colonies, out of a population of 40 million. Although the occupation of Ethiopia and a mass transfer of 20,000 Italians to Libya in the late 1930s increased this number to over 300,000 by the end of the decade, the vast majority of Italians never set foot in Africa. *L’oltremare* remained just that, a realm «beyond», even for those who considered the Mediterranean «our sea». Finally, they were to display Italian modernity to a national and international public. The obsessive display of communications, military, agricultural, and medical technology in empire films, and the frequent recourse to non-fictional inserts of mass battle and labour – the twin pillars of the imperialist enterprise – asserted the Italians’ ability to impose a vision of modernity founded on the regimentation of bodies and the mastery and transformation of terrain.\(^\text{17}\)

### 2. Figurations of Time in Imperial Non-Fiction

Non-fiction cinema offers the clearest examples of how empire films sought to create for audiences a sense of the eventfulness and denseness of the imperial present. Permanent revolution also meant permanent mobilisation, for civilians as well as the military. The Istituto Luce served that goal by producing not only newsreels and documentaries but also discourses about the need to militarise the cinematic apparatus. Non-fiction cinema should not only document the war, but help to wage it, going beyond the external perspective of traditional combat journalism («eye on the war») to become «the eye of the war» (*l’occhio della guerra*), in the words of one Army official. This new mode of seeing, which had come out of World War I, united the gaze with the potential to inflict violence and positioned the camera operator alongside the bomber and machine gunner as a force for the creation of history.\(^\text{18}\) Aerial warfare had great importance here: the camera was made interchangeable with the machine gun on aerial bombers, when not conflated altogether, as in the *cinematragliatrice*, or «cinema-machine gun» which shot images at the same pace as bullets. As in the documentaries *Sulle orme dei nostri pionieri* (Luciano De Feo, 1936) and *Il cammino degli eroi* (Corrado D’Errico, 1936), the camera’s open lens is assimilated to the lethal blackness of cannon and gun barrels, and ready, like them, to shoot. This sense of being «within history», rather than a passive and external observer, is crucial to filmic renderings of the immediacy of imperial conquest.\(^\text{19}\)

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19 G. Bagnoni, «Cinema occhio della guerra», in: *Cinema*, 25 August 1936; B. Croce, «In AOI col reparto fotocinematografico dell’Istituto Nazio-
Off screen as well, Luce Africa Orientale Italiana (AOI, or Italian East Africa) became a symbol of Fascism’s employment of technologies of mobility to accelerate history. Critics and functionaries publicly praised the unit’s ability to send images to Italy as early as three hours after the conclusion of a battle. The emphasis on the speed with which events could be transformed into spectacle and the ability of audiences to follow the making of histories as they occurred, created a space for cinema as the co-creator of history and privileged medium of mass communication. The shortened time frame between the event and its consumption by viewers became a further guarantee of the veracity of newsreels and documentaries such as Da Adua ad Axum. Le tappe dell’avanzata italiana in A.O. (1936), which was advertised as the fruit of the mobile laboratories and other elements of Luce AOI’s modern infrastructure. «This is why cinematographic actualities such as those we can see tonight can be projected in Italian theatres so soon after the events they show have taken place», enthused La Provincia di Bolzano. This celerity in image production and distribution, and its claim to represent modern temporalities and actions both in front of and behind the camera, were as important to Luce’s authority as a purveyor of...
documentary reality as the actual content of its films, which were often dated in their visual and aural rhetoric.\textsuperscript{20}

Newsreels and documentaries about the Ethiopian conflict and the Italian empire privilege moments of collective mobilisation and interpellation in order to convey a sense of historical urgency. The visual tropes of convergence and standing at attention recur endlessly, often receiving aural reinforcement by martial music and high-pitched arrangements for strings that provide tension and suggest beehive-like activity in the service of the regime. The binding figure of Luce imperial films is the demonstration of collective assent through forward physical movement. The frenetic pace of the images, the filling of space with massed bodies and a camera eye that takes up the point of view of the anonymous viewer of Fascist events communicate not only the logic and mobility of total war – movement between and in the metropole and colonies – but a logic of totalitarianism that calls attention to the circulation of images and ideologies among different manifestations of spectacle. The rigorous attention to the collective also reflects the idea of empire-building as an agent of Italian nationalisation, with mobilisation for the war presented as the instantiation of a national destiny. The telegraphic tones of the narrator, usually the only voice (other than the \textit{Duce}) heard in Fascist newsreels, provides the former dimension, while the mute choreographed bodies enact the latter. Building on Fogu’s work, Steven Ricci argues that newsreels’ spectatorial address engages both registers, with the viewer posited as «the perceived author of the newsreel text and as historical agent responsible for the eventfulness depicted in the newsreel». Fascist propaganda framed the Ethiopian occupation as a moment so dense it required a new language for its narration. Nonfiction cinema’s popularity corresponded to the desire to convey this sense of immediacy, with the newsreel championed as the visual record «of the history that is being written every day».\textsuperscript{21}

A long newsreel made in December 1935 gave cinematic voice to this sense of national urgency and demonstrates how empire cinema played with this dual temporality in its address to the spectator. \textit{Gli italiani ricordino. I Sanzionisti sappiano. Come reagisce il popolo alle inique sanzioni} (What Italians should remember [and] Sanctionists should know. How the people are reacting to the unjust sanctions) develops the visual and aural rhetoric of national mobilisation that will feature so heavily in the coming years. The documentary chronicles the mass response to the regime’s call for the donation of metals to be melted down for the war, in defiance of the sanctions – including the famously successful solicitation of wedding
rings. The film conveys a climate of history being made through two recurring visual tropes: the creation of imposing piles of jewellery, toys, furniture, medals and trophies, and the frenetic, if tightly framed, movements of crowds of Italians eager to contribute. Although the focus is on the act of giving and the national scale of the enterprise – even Luigi Pirandello is shown donating his Nobel Prize – the driving music and nervous montage create an intense and unstable viewing experience. Visual relief is provided only by the phantom-like superimposed titles «ORO», «FERRO», «ARGENTO» («GOLD», «IRON», «SILVER»), which glide toward the heavens and then back towards the spectator, conveying an appointment with destiny and forging a spatial link between the viewer and his or her compatriots on screen. Renouncing these honorifics and material indices of the private realm is also a form of subjugation to the will of the Duce, a transfer of faith from the personal to the public sphere (fede meaning both faith and the wedding ring in Italian) that symbolically sanctions the war. That these humble objects and precious metals will become part of an industrial killing machine seems far-fetched: Italy is on the defence here, ever the «proletarian nation» mistreated by the Great Powers, never the aggressor.22

What, in this present and future oriented moment, are Italians supposed to remember? The title suggests that it is the same history of humiliation by the Great Powers evoked by Mussolini in his 2 October speech, and yet the film’s politics of recall are highly textured, designed to evoke an emotional response that goes well beyond anger at foreign powers. The Risorgimento, World War I and squadrist – other moments when Italians responded to the call of national duty – are referenced in the film through fleeting visions of objects and words of dense collective significance. The movie’s second frame shows an icon of rescue or terror, depending on the spectator’s personal experience: A lorry full of rowdy Fascists, with a banner («Gruppo Prati») showing local affiliation. The rapid passage of the truck through the frame simultaneously evokes and renounces squadrist’s violent past, showing the trucks now gainfully employed to ferry large objects to donation centres. Even the rowdy squadrist slogan «noi tireremo diritto» («we will keep on our path») has been domesticated, its violence now turned outward. Always a double entendre, since diritto means to have an erection («we will keep hard»), the slogan now appears with «ORO» underneath it. The capitalised «ORO», which evokes both wedding rings and orifices, indicates that Italians’ vital energies will be employed outward, not only in battle but funding the kinds of colonial exploitations pioneered by the Great Powers. «ORO» is a «film hieroglyph», as defined by Tom Conley, one that encodes histories of Italian victimhood and hollow aspirations. It is also a literally floating signifier of the links between public and private, metropole and colony that

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22 See Newsreel B0761, Giornale LUCE. On this campaign, P. Terhoeven, Oro alla patria. Donne, guerra e propaganda nella giornata della Fede fascista, Bologna 2006.
Fascism evoked and tried to erode.\textsuperscript{23} As so often in Luce films, there is a nod to the role of cinema in all of this: We see a poster for Alessandro Blasetti’s movie 1860 (1934), which celebrated the Risorgimento through the lens of Fascist populism, at the entrance to a movie theatre which was also a donation centre. This jokey \textit{mise-en-abyme} – the Luce film which shows a cinema participating in the activities that it is documenting while also running a feature film that engages in a similar use of the past – references the double messages embedded in so many interpellations delivered via Fascist cinematic propaganda. \textit{Gli italiani ricordino} sends a message to national audiences about the power of the cinematic apparatus to shape their experience of the recent past and present, and a message to Italian film professionals that the cinema will no longer be able to stand outside of the logic of military mobilisation.

3. Until the End of (Fascist) Time: The WWII Drama

It is not only cinematic technologies that create this sense of a dense and momentous present. In non-fiction and, especially, feature films, the experience of flight and aerial bombing is often represented as a moment of suspended time and at the same time of active historical creation. The cult of flight was a Euro-American phenomenon, but among Italians the marvellous strangeness of aerial landscapes allowed for an escape from the picturesque mode of viewing Italy. The Ethiopian War offered another moment of reflection and experimentation with the aesthetics of flight. The sinuous lines and chromatic effects of reconnaissance and bombing photos, such as this Air Force image taken over Adrigat in 1936 (see Figure 2), inspired not only Futurist \textit{aeropitture} but the cinematography of empire films.

Fascist and Nazi ideologues justified the violence of their revolutions as the means of a radical remaking of Italian and German societies.\textsuperscript{24} To many Fascists, bombing seemed to embody and accelerate the process of what the Fascists called \textit{bonifica} – reclaiming landscapes, peoples and societies by purifying them of pathology. The Fascist official Alessandro Pavolini’s chronicle of the work of his bomb squadron during the Ethiopian War is of great interest here. The bomber, in his view, was not just a military operative but an active agent of historical change, overriding the laws of nature: «A region is transformed under our eyes, with its patches of dark brush that one by one are incinerated», he comments of a bombing in Ethiopia. Instead of the poet or painter, the military commander, with his «clear eye, its precision multiplied by binoculars and calculations», would be the new bard of Fascist history – along with that of the cameraman and film director.\textsuperscript{25} At the root of the

\textsuperscript{23} T. Conley, \textit{Film Hieroglyphs: Ruptures in Classical Cinema}, Minneapolis, MN 2006, xxiv.


coupling of cinema and war during the imperial years lay a sense of urgency, which only the quick and mobile technology of film could adequately render the grandeur of Italy’s appointment with destiny (the return to Ethiopia) and the portentous moments on this path. Thus does Pavolini describe the textured temporality before the bombing of Adwa, site of Italian humiliation 40 years earlier: «History is a fluid that converges now in one area and now in another according to the times: that fills a vast atmosphere or concentrates on only one point. Right now we feel it focused on what is happening up here among us, in this little aerial cell ... Ciano [Galeazzo, Mussolini’s son in law] lowers his hand and pushes the little button. We all follow with our eyes the bomb’s hit.»

Empire film intervenes here, using its audio-visual arsenal to render the transformational energies of mass combat, the epic scale of the imperial endeavour and the power of the gaze to instantiate this destructive creation.

seal the victory are the empire film equivalent of the American Western’s cavalry – Roberto Rossellini’s *Un pilota ritorna / A Pilot Returns* offers the best example of how this sense of temporality is rendered in feature film. Made in 1942, it comes at a difficult moment in Fascist Italy’s last war. Italy’s East African Empire had already been lost (1941), and parts of Libya were passing back and forth between Allied and Axis forces. The Fascists had also faced serious setbacks in Greece, and casualties and losses were mounting in the Balkans and the Soviet Union, as were the numbers of the Italian prisoners of war. The film rotates around the vicissitudes of an Air Force pilot (Rossati, played by Massimo Girotti) on his first bombing missions, until British airmen shoot down his plane and he becomes a prisoner of war in Greece. There, he falls in love with Anna (Michaela Belmonte), an Italian doctor’s daughter, who assists Italian civilian refugees. But Rossati is at the mercy of his British and Greek captors, who shuttle him, along with other soldiers and civilians, through a series of shelters and concentration camps, before he is able to steal the British warplane that carries him back to his Italian base. His love story has no such happy ending. He and Anna have been separated by the same vagaries of war that brought them together. My reading of this film is focused on its skilful representations of the two temporalities of Fascist empire cinema: the time of war and another time appropriate to a country dealing with defeats; one marked by waiting – for bombs to pass, for refuge – and by memory, time on a human rather than mechanised scale. *Un pilota ritorna* thus builds on the purposeful forward movement of imperial non-fiction, but also tracks its undoing.

Planned at the vertices of the regime under the auspices of the regime’s Committee for War and Political Cinema, *Un pilota ritorna* was designed as Fascist Italy’s major entry into a film marketplace already well supplied with Allied and Axis aviation dramas. While keeping this international filmic framework in mind, *Un pilota ritorna* tells several Italian stories. One is about Fascism’s Greek occupation. The Italians had controlled the Dodecanese Islands since 1912, but mainland Greece had remained an elusive prize throughout the Fascist period. Mussolini’s 1940 invasion had intended to broadcast Italy’s autonomy within the Axis, but the power of Greek resistance led to Fascist retreats, and Italy ended up dividing the country with the Germans who intervened to secure victory. Already in 1941, when the movie was being filmed, the instability of Italy’s Greek occupation meant that Viterbo had to stand in for the Greek countryside and the «skies of war» were all

safely within Italy’s air zone. But, as we will see, this loose truth – Italy as Greece – aids in the articulation of another order of reality. For Italy is not only Greece: Greece is also an Italy marked by bombings, the wanderings of refugees and wrenching separations.

The other Italian story told by this film, that of a journey back to the senses by a young man educated for war, turns the formula of past empire films on its head. The conversion narratives of those films set in Italian Africa took Italian males made abject by emigration, impossible Italian women, or forbidden desires for women of other races, and purified them of desire, either through staging their deaths, in the case of older men, or through blackouts and crises that led to their rehabilitation for the purposes of Fascist war. Rossellini’s hegemonic male needed no such reclamation. Perfectly bland and bello at the start of the film – «Dear Mamma, I am here. I am all tanned from the sun. We lead a very peaceful life», Rossati writes to his mother before his first bombing mission – his journey to Greece is rather an undoing of a Fascist perfection based on years of learning what not to see, hear and say. Anna is the catalyst for this evolution, since it is through Anna that Rossati is drawn into experiences of war, suffering and love that go beyond what he knew before.

Rossellini narrates these two intertwining stories by shifting between two notions of temporality and history. One is the time of imperial conquest, measured out by instrument panels, countdowns and time logs and tracked on screen through whizzing tanks, planes cutting through the sky, newspaper and radio propaganda, and driving musical motifs. This accelerated time mimics «Luce style», with its verbal and visual rhetorics of convergence and inevitability. The other is an undirected time, tied to realms of nostalgia and memory, as in Rossati’s scenes with Anna, but also to war’s downtime, made up of transfers, boredom and waiting, as in a scene in which aviators ride bikes in circles on the tarmac in between bombing missions. The former adheres to histories of forward movement tracked by empire films; the latter limns a history that was not being written at all, or at least not by the victors. Rossellini needs both to recount total war, and to say that the director privileges one over the other, based on his future anti-Fascist work, would be assuming an attitude or ideology he did or could not yet have.

As one would expect from a film of the Committee of War and Political Cinema, the temporality and history of conquest belong most concretely to Rossati and his Italian comrades. This movie’s mandate involved showcasing Fascist aviation culture as well as technology, and Rossellini’s documentarist temperament translates into an attention to the quotidian, with a focus on the privileges of the officer’s life. Food, drink and pretty women abound and the Rationalist architecture of the airbase, like the neat formations of fighter planes, is far from the messiness of war. During bombing missions, the film manifests the time of war not only through the expected means of «action» footage (dynamic cross-cuttings among the plane’s
exterior, its instrumentation, the pilots, and the landscape they target), but through references to that peculiar slowing down of time experienced by aviators. A slow traveling shot of the cabin, repeated cuts to a clock whose hands show the passing of the minutes and the build-up to the dropping of the bombs bring to mind Pavo-\linebreak[0]lini’s sense of an appointment with destiny as his Disperata squadron targeted Adwa in 1935. As with many other works of empire cinema, in Un pilota ritorna the ability to make history is tied to the possession of advanced technology and the visual vantage point. These scenes emphasise the optical moment. Whether it is Rossati learning to «read» the aerial landscape, watching for enemy craft, or Rossellini placing the spectator in that chain of gazes familiar from so many Luce documentaries. The build-up to the act of bombing has particular importance in this regard. The eyes are the first link in a chain of violence that is here dematerialised, disembodied, its effects mere smoky scars on a distant landscape.

Yet Rossellini’s narration of war departs distinctly from contemporary Italian and Allied movies. The unconventional mode of storytelling tried out here features choppy and awkward transitions, moments of disconnect between sound and image, and camera work that calls attention to the cinematographic apparatus – all of which work against the illusionistic qualities that were the aim of classical cinema. This atypical narration and its jarring disturbances of the work that sound and image
do together allows Rossellini to isolate the role of the senses and to call attention to the subject’s location in space and in time. Rossellini’s trajectory reflects Rossellini’s ambivalent attitude toward Fascism’s war culture. On the ground in Greece, without the armoured shell of his plane, Rossati begins to learn another way of seeing and hearing, and another sense of history. And Rossellini experiments with another kind of spectatorial address, one that calls attention to the man behind the camera and to the power of the gaze, not only from the point of view of the targeter – here Rossellini could draw on Luce’s copious metadiscourse about its films – but from the perspective of the targeted. It is this double-sided reflection that distinguishes *Un pilota ritorna* from empire film culture and gives it the status of a transition film to Rossellini’s famous anti-Fascist works such as *Roma città aperta / Rome Open City* (1945) and *Paisà* (1946).

These meditations on audiovision and its role in narrating temporality begin well before Rossati takes his first journey. A scene in which Rossati and his fellow officers relax with some dancers provides a fine example. One of the women picks up a newspaper, telling the pilots that «there’s an article in the paper that talks about you». As she begins to read, she becomes the voice of the regime at its most rhetorical, and Rossellini offers strong audiovisual competition to her commentary. The camera leaves her, starting an almost 360 degree pan that reveals the reactions of her listeners (flirtation, boredom, impatience), while also making its own presence known through abrupt movements, and time slows down as we track the camera’s journey. Against this background, the woman reads, or tries to:

> Woman: You who are the winged heroes who plough the sky, bringing victory and glory through your hearts and your planes, offering without limits, beyond all human possibilities. You, cavaliers of...

> Officer 1, interrupting: I’m not even a cavalier.

> Woman, continuing: ... modern times, who offer all of yourselves, your houses, your spouses, and your destinies. Because the future has finally ...

> Officer 2, interrupting: Don’t bore us with this stuff.

In one way, this scene furthers an ethos of Fascist militarised masculinity: These officers are not interested in talk, but in doing their job. Yet Rossellini stages a disconnection here between ideology and its reception, between public/institutional narrative and private experience that will return again in the film.

In the meantime, we are back to war time, as signalled by a montage sequence that uses Luce-style footage of tanks and troops moving forward, a Fascist emblem and newspaper headlines to represent the conflict’s progress in a dynamic moving superimposition. The final bombing mission, like the montage sequence, confirms Rossellini’s mastery of the arts of Fascist film propaganda, but that mission ends with Rossati forced to parachute out of his plane. Surrounded by a swirl of Greeks and untranslated Greek language, he is taken to a British military outpost and then
to a makeshift concentration camp policed by Greek soldiers. Here, on a decrepit country property, he meets Anna and is exposed, seemingly for the first time, to the consequences of war «on the ground». As he mixes with bedraggled Italian women at the well, begins to take the full measure of the spectacle of human suffering and resilience around him. The dramatic music that accompanies the second pan of the film, this one a full 360 degrees, limns this emotional deepening, but he also hears children laughing: this is their life, their war-torn present. Enrique Seknadje-Askenazi sees in this moment the birth of Rossati’s capacities to be a witness, but recognises his ambiguous position: «He is a spectator of the drama of war [and] spectator in that drama.» Certainly, Rossellini designs one situation after another that brings Rossati into contact with the emotional and physical pain of others, as when a frame transition superimposes Rossati’s pensive downturned face and the ear of the ailing soldier on the preceding scene of a young son running inside the house in answer to his mother’s desperate call: they have been listening, and know that he is about to find out that his father has died. We are now in a slowed-down time of watching and waiting. As Rick Altman contends, the marking of an internal auditor on screen is an effective way of «luring the spectator into the diegesis», since «we are asked not to hear, but to identify with someone who can hear for us». *Un pilota ritorna* fulfils its propagandistic burden, soliciting viewers’ emotions about the plight of Italians who are in Greece but could be anywhere (the property strongly resembles a *casa colonica*), and presenting them with a protagonist who doubles the effect: the film’s intended audience of national spectators can feel for him, feeling not for the (Greek) other, but for other Italians: his care – and theirs – is also a patriotic act.29

The scene in which Rossati assists Anna and her father in amputating his comrade’s leg takes his participant-observer role to a new level, and reveals Anna’s role as the self-sacrificing woman of wartime. The doctor enlists Rossati as a nurse, and a white apron takes the place of his bomber jacket. Music designed to play to the emotions grows more sombre over the ten minutes of this scene, most of which builds tension around the horrific act that is to come: a man whose leg must be cut off while he is awake, cushioned only by a minor injection of painkiller and cognac. The camera draws back as the moment draws near, setting up a tableau that places a Greek guard in the foreground. We experience the moment of the cut not only through the patient’s virile grunt but also through the guard’s reaction: he cringes and covers his eyes. The guard’s placement in the scene draws audiences into the spectacle of a suffering humanity that is presumably beyond boundaries of ally and enemy. For the film also opens here to a humanitarianism that pits the

state against its servants, exposing the gap between «institutional histories of the body as a productive, politically worthy labouring instrument, and histories of subjectivity that examine the ways in which the human body is understood as a locus of pain, suffering, and injury». Italians bear the burden of both kinds of histories in Rossellini’s film – they are the only injured people seen in the film –, but the director also comments, through those Italians, on the war’s brutalisations of soldiers and civilians of any nation.

While Rossati remains intact and in his bomber jacket throughout most of the film, he, too, becomes more exposed and vulnerable. During the next leg of his journey, Italian soldiers and civilians led by Greek soldiers form one ragtag crowd that streams through the wrecked Greek countryside, intersecting occasionally, and detrimentally, with British troops. Long-view and panoramic shots emphasise the material and human toll of war: decimated villages, long lines of refugees and smoking ruins replace the abstract geometries of Greece as seen from aerial viewfinders. This setting, and proximity to Anna brings out Rossati’s humanity. He observes his weary compatriots, saying «to think that there are so many people in the world who wake up in a warm bed», and gets out a pocket watch his dead father gave him, adding that «my father used to let me listen to its tick-tock, holding it to my ear». As he holds it to his own ear, his eyes unfocused, he enters into the space of intimate memory and a different temporality than the countdown to violence tracked by the clock in his plane. Later on, Rossati asks Anna to flee with him to Italy, but both must do their duty – she to her father and his patients, he to his country. «I will wait for you always», sealing her place in that alternate and private realm. And with that, we are back in war time and Rossellini’s last showcasing of its brand of spectacle, this time through the pyrotechnics of night battle. «Our modernity is characterised by speed and war», proclaimed Critica fascista, and Rossellini shows in this film that he can serve as its poet. Rossati arrives at his home base safely, but wears an ambiguous expression in the movie’s final frame. Is he torn by his love for Anna, exhausted by his flight or haunted by what he has experienced on the receiving end of the war machine? It is left to the spectator to make that interpretive leap, but under his uniform Rossati has changed: part of him is «elsewhere», despite his reunion with the Patria.

In the tradition of empire films, the regime’s publicity machine framed the production of Un pilota ritorna as a martial endeavour. Cinema published a glowing account by screenwriter Rosario Leone of Rossellini as an imperial warrior, who had already logged «two hundred flight hours in the skies of Africa, Italy and the Mediterranean». On this shoot, Rossellini «always shared with the pilots assigned to the

film those flight risks that no one would ever think belonged to the profession of film director». Since those scenes took place in the skies above Viterbo, those risks came from the making of the film, not from battle, and the three soldiers who lost their lives were transporting explosives to be used in the production. Publicly, though, the film press tried to capture some of the excitement that inhered in past productions shot in Africa, speaking of sleepy Viterbo’s exposure to «the enormous motors of our airplanes that glorified the pages of heroism written by Italian pilots during the recent combats».32 And as with other films associated with the Committee on War and Political Cinema its launch was a highly orchestrated event, featuring many high political and military dignitaries and free screenings for air force person nel and soldiers. It did fairly well at major first-run theatres, but was among the least successful Committee films among Florentine audiences, staying only 48 days in theatres there, as opposed to an average of 63 days for its other films released in 1942.33

While critics’ assessments were almost universally positive, one review by the young anti-Fascist Giuseppe De Santis, merits attention. Writing in the review Cinema, De Santis found no fault with the film’s war scenes, which he deemed to be well edited, «clean and sober in their development». But Un pilota ritorna showed a

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33 Rome figures from Argentieri, Cinema in guerra, 49; Florence figures from La Nazione, compiled by A. Venturini. I thank Dr Venturini for sharing his research with me.
lack of «human penetration» and «acute perception of truths». This caused it to fail as propaganda, De Santis contended, with Rossellini’s «defects, limitations and errors» as a filmmaker – including his conflicting representations of temporality – also to blame. The severe critique reflected De Santis’ very different concept of realism: he formed part of a group of critics who looked back to the literary verismo of Giovanni Verga, whereas the documentarist vein of Rossellini «was immersed in actuality and searched for a truth purged of any novelistic artifice», as Mino Argentieri writes. But De Santis also had a very different conception of the function of propaganda, one linked to his anti-Fascist politics. Propaganda, for him and his colleagues, meant «creating a general conscience, without restrictions, so that every man would feel indissolubly linked to others in a relation of rights and duties. [...] Propaganda therefore would mean reawakening hope and knowledge in troubled souls.» This kind of propaganda and vision of film’s political function directly clashed with the indoctrinary aims of the dictatorship. But the severity of De Santis’ comments about Un pilota ritorna suggests a sense of anguish at a missed opportunity by someone who could be a kindred spirit. It cannot have escaped De Santis that Rossellini’s film was, in part, about a reawakening of the senses to take in, however timidly, the sufferings of others. The film’s ending undercuts this reawakening: Rossati returns home and he will bomb again. De Santis’ reference to its subject matter as «that particular splitting open of history (squarcio di storia)», expresses his distaste at the imperialist violence that it glorifies. Thus does De Santis use his review to ask Rossellini to reflect on the path he was taking by making films for the Committee on War and Political Cinema: «Each one of us will feel the precise duty to contribute everyday one small stone toward the construction of that future for which we should all feel responsible promoters; he will be conscious of this before he becomes involved in a tumultuous struggle that risks dragging his soul to a place devoid of any clear direction. The laws that lump humanity together, giving the intellectual the same functions as the soldier, are difficult to understand, if not beyond scrutiny altogether.»

We have arrived at a quite different moment from the optimistic days of the Ethiopian invasion. By 1942, Italy’s weak military position was all too evident, and the breach between the regime and the populace, amidst constant bombings and scarce food, had created the conditions for dissent to emerge, even in the pages of a review directed by Mussolini’s son Vittorio. Instead of mare nostrum, the Mediter-
Mediterranean had become «a sea of fear», and the staged bombings Italians fled in Greece-Viterbo alternated with real bombings that afflicted all of Italy. Teshome Gabriel’s contention that films may constitute an alternate historiography, one that narrates through fragments and the evocation of feelings and fears, has relevance here. For *Un pilota ritorna* is a film of fragments, and in the space between these fragments looms the spectre of loss: This pilot returned, but so many others did not. Rossellini’s film and De Santis’ critique of it testify to a new climate that developed in 1942, a year in which mounting civilian and military deaths called into question support for the dictatorship’s imperial causes and a visual regime that celebrated control of the gaze as a facilitation of violence. Rossellini’s film gestures to the undoing of the Fascist revolution in military defeat, to the shattering of Fascist dreams of a Roman-rooted eternity. It opens a new world of movement directed not at conquest but at finding shelter, and of waiting: for rescue, for bombings to pass, for a time of normality. Within Rossellini’s career, it prepares his exit from the universe of empire cinema into that of the Neorealist movement, which dismissed Fascist temporalities of revolution and eternity in the name of the everyday and of small events happening on a human scale.


**ABSTRACT**

The Imperial Moment in Fascist Cinema

This article looks at how Italian feature and non-fiction cinema on imperial themes engaged with themes of temporality as it asserted Fascism’s right to occupy Ethiopia (1936) and, during World War II, Greece as well. For the Fascists, cinema was a means of displaying the colonies as theatres of Italian modernity, rebuking rhetorics of Italian «backwardness». As I argue, the movies made between 1936 and 1943 reflect the belief of many film professionals and Fascist officials that the scale of the Ethiopian invasion, and the stories it generated, could not be adequately communicated by traditional means of representation; only the movie camera could adequately capture the dense and mobile Fascist present. I analyse Roberto Rossellini’s 1942 aviation drama, *Un pilota ritorna / A Pilot Returns*, as the apex of this form of temporal and cinematographic thinking, but also as a film that presaged the undoing of Fascism’s empire and its cult of Italian modernity.

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