

Dictating the screen: Censorship mechanisms and cultural engineering in Mussolini's Italy

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Abstract

The early twentieth century rise of fascism in Italy profoundly impacted its film industry. Recognizing cinema's power to shape public opinion, Mussolini's regime implemented strict measures to control film production, particularly by consolidating organizations under Fascist University Groups. The industry produced ideological "black" films containing authentic propaganda, alongside escapist "white telephone" comedies and romances. Most films balanced fictional plots with subtle state messaging. This paper explores the structural and cultural changes in Italian cinema during Mussolini's authoritarian regime and analyzes how this period of intense censorship and cultural engineering catalysed the emergence of Italian Neo-realism in the 1940s.

Keywords: Black and white telephonic films, Cine Gufts, Fascist cinema, Mussolini, Neo-realism

Introduction

Pope Gregory XV made a choice that gave rise to the term 'propaganda'. In 1622, he released the "Papal Bull Inscrutabili Divinae", which established the "*Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* (the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith)" to bring together those who had been separated from the Church during the Reformation (Reeves, 1999). In contemporary history, the interplay between politics and cinema has been intricate. Cinema has often acted as a propaganda tool because of its excellent ability to reproduce images and recreate historical events to reflect the social setup. Politicians have long recognised the powerful properties of cinema and have used this media tool to convince people of different opinions (Tiwari, 2002).

Following World War I, the rise of fascism in Italy sought to instal an anarchic government that would employ the military when required to transform Italy into an entirely new society. However, the effects of fascism were different in Italy. The impact of fascist rule varied depending on socio-economic status, political beliefs, gender, and ethnicity. A brutal fascist government caused economic hardship and the denial of basic human rights to many

Italians. Others believed that authoritarian control was worth paying for since fascism brought stability, prosperity, and a sense of national pride (as demonstrated during the 1936 conquest of Ethiopia) (de Grand, 2000).

The way that the effects of fascist rule varied regionally reflects the historical difference between rural and urban areas, as well as across the northern and southern regions of Italy. Fascism brought about an external change in Italian society, as seen by the establishment of a one-party state that asserted control over all spheres of life, particularly the family, money, education, and leisure. The fascist government's control over information, the prevalence of rituals and spectacles that dictate public life, and the sect that has grown around its dictator, Benito Mussolini, are all examples of this. The extent to which Italian society has been altered by fascism is debatable. Unlike the totalitarian regimes of Hitler and Stalin, Mussolini's dictatorship was an authoritarian one. Governments in Germany and Russia aimed to impose control over citizen's private ideas and beliefs as well as their outward actions (Paxton, 2005). Under Hitler's rule, for example, a German was not allowed to criticize the "Führer" in front of members of his relatives for fear they might contact the authorities. In Italy, Mussolini wanted to stifle any dissent against the regime while allowing people a little freedom in forming their own opinions. Unlike Germany, Mussolini did not expel its intellectuals under this system of governance. They were treated with greater tolerance by the administration as long as they refrained from stirring up the populace with their beliefs.

The differences between Russia, Germany, and Italy echoed in the film trade. Mussolini's approach to governance was unsustainable. Germany and Russia both wanted to use film and political agendas to create a powerful propaganda tool. According to Stalin, "Cinema is the most powerful art" and Russian filmmakers produced hundreds of propaganda films about Russia and their leaders (Taylor, 2009). Similarly, in Germany, Hitler used movies to brainwash people about racial inferiority and embellish their right to power.

Unlike the film industries of Stalin and Hitler, Italy's ideological and cinematic forces have never been able to collaborate harmoniously. Luigi Fredi, who oversaw Italy's cultural authority, never made the connection between the country's political inclinations and the film sector.

Measures of Fascist propaganda

In 1926, the government nationalized the production of television series and documentaries, turning them into tools of state propaganda. Propaganda cinema has long been associated with Italian cinema throughout the Fascist era (1922–43). Historians and academics of popular cinema frequently ignore this film. In another dimension, this indifference is also reflected by Carlo Lizzani, who said that hundreds of films made between 1938 and 1943 should not be remembered or regretted, even if they were lost, because they just record ordinary places in a dirty and dull environment (Brancaleone, 2021).

Recent studies on Italian films from the Fascist era, however, show that while many of the films include patriotic and nationalist themes, only a small percentage among the more than 700 films released during that time can be classified as "fascist." It is said that the Fascists interfere very little in entertainment cinema. Government intervention is mainly economic rather than cultural. Its main goal is to encourage a crumbling industry and help create movies that can compete with Hollywood at the box office.

The cultural outcome of the Fascist intervention was mainly negative and manifested in the form of censorship and suppression of anti-national ideas. Peter Bondanella asserted that fascist cinema was not an ideological propaganda, but promoted a thriving commercial cinema based on the Hollywood model, including a star system and genre-oriented themes (Bondanella, 2005).

"Black" films contain fascist propaganda that upholds fascist beliefs and causes. Rather than being feature films, these are typically shorter news clips that are screened in theatres before to the main film. On the other extreme, directors have created "white phone" movies that range from light comedies to serious romances. The vast majority of films made during the Fascist era are actually war movies with fiction and heavy propaganda, but generally in between the Black and White bands. When the Italian cinema firm Istituto Luce was established in 1924, the fascist regime created a stunning backdrop with the slogan "Cinematography is the strongest weapon" to display Mussolini behind the camera (Ricci, 2008).

The Italian ambassador, Giacomo Paulucci di Caboli, dispatched a theatrical group to the Chigi Palace in 1924 to create a short film on Mussolini after he found out that Mussolini had to make the trip to Naples to attend the Worldwide Immigrant Exposition. In Naples, Mussolini was shown documentaries and science-educational films, which he was so impressed with that he quickly realized the great potential of the film for popular approval (Beertellini, 2013). The first famous newsreel in Italy, *Giornale LUCE*, was established in 1927 and continued to broadcast the news that the fascist government wished to convey until 1945. At first, newsreels were released once a week.

The Fascist administration attempted with censorship boards and political organizations to regulate the film industry. LUCE, or "L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa," or "The Educational Film Union," was in charge of all Italian film productions from 1925 until 1929. Its main objective is to promote the creation of instructional and documentary films with the goal to improve public awareness of the connection between politics and cinema. Instead of concentrating on the commercial film sector, this group concentrates on news.

The government created the law in 1933 to safeguard Italian films' integrity overseas. These rules prohibit the dubbing of Italian films into other languages. All international films must also be dubbed into Italian, resulting in the foreign producer's money. The government collects this levy and uses the money to fund Italian cinema (Nicoli, 2011).

Established in 1934, the "Direzione Generale per la Cinema" (General Directorate for Cinema) was a fascist-led censorship board that was supported by the state (Ricci, 79-80). They were responsible for reading and editing screenplays, awarding prizes to filmmakers who supported the state cause, and supervising the importation of foreign films. A few American movies were prohibited because they might offend Italians. This censorship committee's primary objective is to alter Italian films so they do not conflict with the government, not to outright ban those that do not support fascist philosophy. Banco di Lavoro's state-run film section will pay up to 100% of any project that has a pro-fascist message penned by the original screenwriter. The Italian film production and distribution company "*Ente Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche*" (ENIC) took over the entire film industry in 1935. In 1938, ENIC tightened its limitations on the number of foreign movies which may be imported into the country. The variety of well-liked American films that distributors can purchase is significantly reduced because this is the only method through which foreign films can be imported. In the same year, Mussolini founded *Centro sperimentale di cinematografia*, a professional film school that still operates today.

Mussolini established Cinecittà, Italy's first film company, in 1937 to assist filmmakers in creating films with fascist themes. Since April 21 is regarded as the founding day of ancient Rome, the opening date is noteworthy and establishes a connection between the magnificence of Italian cinema and Ancient Rome. Mussolini established himself as the chief choreographer of Italian cinema by placing a photograph of him behind the camera quoting Lenin's quote, "Film is the most powerful weapon" on the set of Cinecittà.

With almost 35% of the population illiterate and few newspaper readers, movies have rapidly emerged as a highly successful medium for information dissemination (Garofalo, 2015). Mussolini himself evaluated the films and images before clearing them for publication. In Italy, propaganda infiltrated many facets of daily life. In 1935, the public was told by a newsreel service that a small rural town had utilized a brand-new movie projector for agricultural propaganda. Propaganda highlighted the accomplishments of Italian medicine, demonstrated how to prevent illness, and extolled the virtues of land clearing and the construction of new cities (Harland and Liguori, 2016). However, propaganda encompasses censorship in addition to show.

Mussolini was featured in more than 1,100 of his visual broadcasts and more than 11,000 of his pictures. However, it was uncommon to see incidents and circumstances that emphasized the Italian spirit in Luce's newsreels, documentaries, and photography. With the outbreak of World War II, there is a more need for the Army, Navy and Air Force with cinematographic facilities to show their propaganda. For that they created the Ministry of War, with the task of documenting the events of the war with photographs and films. This must be done with the undeniable objectivity of the camera (Kallis, 2011).

The images have all been subjected to extremely stringent censoring; evidence of this can be found on numerous prints, and the negatives have been preserved with the label "Confidential." Handwritten annotations draw attention to the Italian troops ripped clothes and shoes. However, due to stringent censorship regulations, the frontal image had to demonstrate the Italian soldiers' valour and gallantry. As a result, images that painted an unduly vivid picture of the conflict were prohibited.

Cine Gufs

In 1926, the Italian cultural association Circolo del Convegno headed by Ferrieri in Milan incorporated a film society for its literary and theatrical activities. This new organization became known as the *Cinecon vegno*. Ferrieri was instrumental in creating the cine clubs, which greatly influenced the reorganization of the Italian film industry following the disastrous 1920s. As far as their objectives of film associations, it focused on the organization of conferences and screening events in the hopes of encouraging the publication of more works about cinema. The national secretary of "*Gruppi Universitari Fascisti*" (Fascist University Groups) and the recently appointed secretary of the Fascist Party made the first significant attempt to restructure these institutions. The plan, which was aimed at all Gufs, essentially described a youth filmmaking training program to prepare the next generation for the big endeavours of Italian society.

The Cinegufts underwent a second significant phase of remodelling in 1934, which was the most pivotal year for Italian interwar filmmaking. Luigi Freddi was put in charge of the "*Direzione Generale per la Cinematografia*" (General Directorate for Cinema), which was established in September 1934 with the goal of coordinating, centralizing, and expanding state policies pertaining to the motion picture industry. During his inaugural address, he stated: "The State overviews. The State helps. The State rewards. The State controls. The State incites". Freddi had an idealistic conception of the state apparatus and its relationship with the film industry and sought to integrate the masses through a uniform, national experience of the media. The General Directorate for Cinema immediately sent out an edict to all the local government offices in order to centralize all amateur filmmaking activities under the Gufts through units that would become known as Cinegufts. Many films produced by the Cinegufts were documentaries that touched upon local realities, usually commissioned by local institutions to depict their role in the life of the region. Many directors of the neorealist generation were trained in and created their first films for the Cinegufts. The search for a new realism that took shape in the years between the two wars cannot be understood without a serious consideration of the process of the politicization and institutionalization of amateur cinema by the fascist regime (Mariani, 2018).

Fascist films

Gennaro Righelli's "*Canzone dell'amore*" (The Song of Love) was the first Italian sound picture. Mario Camerini and Alessandro Blasetti became the dominant figures in Italian film after the introduction of the talkies. Vittorio De Sica acted in Camerini's films, and Cesare Zavattini wrote the scripts. Blasetti's approach to filmmaking was distinct. The picture he

made on Garibaldi, "1860" is his finest. He portrayed Mussolini's Blackshirts as Garibaldi's Redshirts in the original version. "Vecchia guardia" written by Blasetti, is a sort of documentary that chronicles Mussolini's ascent to power. Additionally, Blasetti created "La Corona di ferro" which at the time was a call for world peace (Landy, 1986).

In a 1933 manifesto titled "The Glass Eye," journalist Leo Longanesi urged Italian filmmakers to shoot films with an Italian theme and carry their cameras into the streets. The left-leaning Italian fascist thinkers connected to Vittorio Mussolini's cinema journal had this goal in mind. On the other hand, these filmmakers approached their objective from a Marxist rather than a Fascist standpoint.

The combination of fiction and fact, imagination, and documentary immediately became the standard for popular wartime movies. Augusto Genina, Rossellini, and Francesco De Robertis all made contributions to this quest for realism in their war films. Rossellini, Genina, and De Robertis war films adhered to the "documentario romanzato" (fictional documentary) method, which were based on romantic, emotional and fictional themes (Shiel, 2006).

Conclusion

Under Mussolini's fascist regime, Italian cinema produced films that were characterized by their abstract nature, aiming to portray an idealized vision of Italy. This cinematic approach was heavily influenced by the Hollywood style, which often presented a narrative detached from the complexities of real life. The so-called "white telephone" films, a genre that emerged during this period, exemplified this trend by focusing on glamorous lifestyles and romanticized narratives, thereby reinforcing the regime's propaganda. These films served not only as entertainment but also as tools for the state to project a specific image of national identity and cultural superiority, aligning with the fascist ideology that sought to unify and elevate the Italian populace through a curated cinematic experience.

In stark contrast to the escapist narratives of the fascist era, the Neo-realist movement emerged as a significant response within Italian cinema, advocating for a more authentic representation of everyday life. This movement sought to strip away the glamour and artifice that characterized earlier films, instead focusing on the struggles and realities faced by ordinary people. By emphasizing social issues and portraying the lives of the marginalized, Neo-realism aimed to transform cinema into a medium that was not only entertaining but also socially relevant and beneficial. Its influence extended beyond Italy, inspiring filmmakers in various countries, including India, to adopt similar approaches that prioritized realism and social commentary, thereby reshaping the landscape of global cinema.

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Conflict of Interest

The Author does not have any potential conflict of Interest(s).