

REVIEW ESSAY

A MIRROR FOR FASCISM. HOW MUSSOLINI USED CINEMA TO ADVERTISE HIS PERSON AND REGIME

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Renzo De Felice, professor of contemporary history at the university of Rome and leading historian of Fascism wrote, between 1965 and 1990, a monumental biography of Mussolini in seven volumes, which was completed, after his death in 1996, by an edition of his notes on the last months of the *Duce*. There were animated debates about some of his interpretations, but even his most determined adversaries acknowledged his honesty and the quality of his research.

De Felice followed his character step by step and, as Mussolini was both a prolific writer and an indefatigable speaker, it does not come as a surprise that the whole work amounts to some one thousand pages. No archival material escaped the critical look of the historian but, oddly enough, he did not take into account audiovisual documents, radio programmes, recorded speeches, photographs or films made during the fascist dictatorship. This sounds all the more surprising that Mussolini was intent on having his image widely spread in Italy and abroad. In 1925, ‘by my express will’, as he said to his ministers, the state took over from its trustees the *Luce* institute, a small cinematic firm, and turned it into a powerful centre of propaganda which diffused excellent newsreels, documentaries and photographs.

The biography’s publisher, Einaudi, in partnership with Mondadori, a subsidiary company of Berlusconi’s Fininvest specialised in audiovisual publications, decided to transfer the work from printed paper to four CD-ROMs¹ and to enrich it with the material De Felice had ignored. Chiara Ottaviano, head of Cliomedia, a Turin-based firm, selected 65 recorded speeches and songs, 1400 pictures, 50 film extracts, and edited the CDs. It was not an easy task. To begin with, there were few photographs

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and no films for the first period, from Mussolini's birth in 1883 to the institution of his dictatorship in 1924, the editors were obliged to make do with illustrations which document Italian political life and society at the time, but do not refer directly to the personage. More importantly, De Felice's conception of history does not fit in with a systematic use of audiovisual sources of evidence. All the Roman professor was able to say about the *Luce* institute was that it was 'in the hands of the regime' and that its films were 'almost regularly previewed by Mussolini'. The editors have noted, in the margin of each piece, references to some paragraphs of the books, enough readers click, these passages appear on the screen, but they are disappointing, the relationship between images and text is remote and even, at times, non-existent.

Many will rejoice: 'You see that audiovisual media are of little value for historians who can be content with using written sources'. Error of judgement, audiovisual documents do not merely complement or illustrate the biography, they point De Felice's weaknesses and help question some of his thesis. The Italian historian quotes extensively Mussolini's speeches, according to the edition of the *Duce's* works. He mentions thus long, well written passages that he comments at length. But these texts, carefully revised for posterity, have little in common with the talks Mussolini used to deliver, and films show what actually happened. In 1930–1931, when sound recording was still experimental, it looked essential not to lose a word, the *Duce* stayed stiff as a poker in front of the microphone, the operators did not care about the quality of the image and often let something, a flag, a passer-by, conceal the speaker. The first thing we realise, by looking at the screen, is that Mussolini and the film technicians learnt how to organise a public event and reached perfection as soon as 1933. From now on any appearance of the leader was a show settled by the dictator himself. Instead of the verbal flow heard in silence, applauded by order at precise moments, which was common to Nazi Germany and Soviet Union, the fascist ritual was an elementary dialogue between the *Duce* and the crowd. Mussolini separated a few words he articulated slowly and loud applause broke out, what mattered was less the meaning of the speech than the interplay between the balcony and the street.

One of De Felice main contentions was that, in a post-World War I Italy torn apart by violence, the fascists won because they were cleverer and better organised. Once they were in power their dictatorship substituted anarchic violence. Because of its leftist roots (Mussolini had long been a dedicated socialist) Fascism aimed at modernising the country, unlike Nazism it did not want to take revenge on the past, but looked at the future. The majority supported it, at least superficially, all the more that, with the conquest of Ethiopia, it had given Italy a colonial empire. Visual documents unveil an aspect of the consensus De Felice did not consider, because it is not adequately reported in written documents: Mussolini's histrionic ability pleased the Italians. The projection of *Luce* newsreels was compulsory in all cinemas and, as the Roman professor noted, the *Duce* checked the issues in which he appeared; he knew that everybody would see how he put out his chest and hold up this head, how satisfied he looked every time the mob shouted '*Duce, Duce*'. While Stalin was filmed from afar, like an idol, while the Nazis stayed motionless, petrified by Hitler's voice, the Italians took part in a game many enjoyed, since they got willingly crushed on their town's main square, without any police pressure, every time the leader visited them. This is a fundamental feature of Fascism, important to understand

its passing popularity, its fall, the long-lasting nostalgia many retained—and it is something that can only be experienced in front of a screen.

Who were Mussolini's most conspicuous supporters and whom did he singled out among his admirers? It is a query De Felice did not raise, as if it were self evident or unimportant. Let us scrutinise the crowd attending one of his meetings. Take first huge rallies open to the public: people whose clothes attest of middle class origins, with no workers or countrymen (easily recognisable at the time), with predominance of men. Close conferences for party members: only men. Now let us pass to those Mussolini wanted to see around him in propaganda photographs or films. A very interesting series is dedicated to the improvements Fascism realised in marshy areas. March 1932, the *Duce* celebrates the draining of a vast zone likely to provide land to hundreds of families; people pass in front of him, we can observe them closely, they are all men. September 1934, the *Duce* rewards, one by one, one thousand country people: men and men only. The ideal society the dictator wanted to show the entire world, in documents meant to be circulated everywhere, was a male lead society. Of course, at the time, in ill-developed countries, women seldom participated in public events. But we are not talking of the streets as they were, we are looking at images supposed to carry Mussolini's vision of the future. Yet there is nothing in De Felice's about fascist policy towards women, as if this were an irrelevant topic. Our films tell also a lot about the 'modernisation' of fascist Italy. Nazi or Soviet propaganda showed off up-to-date tractors, lorries, plants, assemble-lines. With the exception of FIAT cars and planes, there was nothing brand-new on Italian pictures, machines were rare and old-fashioned, spades were more common than tractors. De Felice quotes Mussolini's talks about progress and the improvement of Italian standard of life. Audiovisual evidence makes wonder whether that was more than slogans.

There is an aspect of Mussolini's actions that does not square with the Italian professor's idea of a Fascism more tolerant, less irrational than Nazism: it is the racial policy. De Felice notes that, before the Shoah, the meaning of the word 'race' was not straightforward, it was used to tell apart various breeds of human beings, but it was also an equivalent to 'people', it was not rare to say 'our race' instead of 'our people'. The *Duce*, De Felice went on, was anxious to unify a still divided peninsula, he wanted to persuade his fellow citizens that they shared the same origin, the same history and, despite noticeable differences, were a people. For that purpose he had recourse to 'race', telling them: 'you are neither Semites, nor Asians, your are Europeans, Arians'. Racism was not inherent to Fascism, it was introduced when Italy was carried by Nazi Germany. The evidence used by the Roman historian to make his point is very thin, but Mussolini was such a fickle politician that he may have fancied this theory of race. However, the *Duce* endorsed a racial policy before Hitler had him in tow. He made it clear the 18 September 1938, during a speech delivered in Trieste. The date is important: it was before the Munich agreement, at a time when many believed that Mussolini was the only statesman able to stop Hitler. There were, in the talk, reflections on the present situation of Europe and the announcement of measures taken against 'the world Hebraism'. De Felice skilfully divided the text according to the different topics it treated and did not quote word by word the passage dedicated to the Jews, which, on the other hand, can be heard on the CD. Not only does the film complete the book and help question De Felice's interpretation, but it is, by itself, a comment of the speech. Two features are of special interest. The first is what film

analysts call 'silence of the images': the *Duce* was not present on the screen, he was substituted by insignificant pictures of parades unable to catch spectators' attention, so that they could focus on the words. The other remarkable point is Mussolini's way of talking. Far from 'dialoguing' with the mob, he uttered his sentences in one breath. Listeners applauded briefly, their reserve showed how intent they were. On this occasion, the dictator, instead of indulging in a happening, delivered a political talk. After stating that most Italian Jews were loyal to their country, he stressed the necessity to isolate the 'world' Jews, unless they proved that they were not in the service of a foreign power—Britain was not named but was clearly accused of manipulating them. The speech, when heard as it was spread in 1938, awakened echoes that could not be inferred from its printed version.

De Felice began his biography in the early 1960s. There were then no record players; the *Luce* archives were open to the public but few, if any historians visited them. Thirty years later most film archives were easy of access and many audiovisual documents could be viewed in cassettes or CDs but De Felice had not changed his method of working and none of his students was invited to care about cinema. A great historian ignored a medium that had been of paramount importance for his hero. It would have been impossible to insert directly the audiovisual documents in a text conceived without any reference to them, so that the option chosen by the CD editors was the best, users can either ignore the pictures when reading the biography, see them as an independent part of the CDs, or confront the historic account with contemporary pieces of evidence. Films or photographs do not speak for themselves, they are mere propaganda items that provide only the fascist point of view, they must be located in their historical context. De Felice's punctilious biography is necessary but not sufficient, the four CDs, as they have been arranged, are excellent tools, easier to handle and much more complete than the eight printed volumes.

De Felice's approach being strictly political, the audiovisual items introduced in the CDs privilege official events and neglect the ordinary concerns of Italian citizens. To fill this blank Mondadori launched a series of DVDs dedicated to *The Daily Life under Fascism*, two of which, dealing the first, *The Italic Stock. Young arditì and prolific mums*, with childhood and motherhood,² the second, *In fields and offices*, with country people and clerks,³ are available. It is Cliomedia that again has chosen some 20 shorts, mostly produced by *Luce*. The DVDs seem to have been edited hurriedly, their presentation is far from perfect, users are badly in need of a list of the documents, either on the cover or, preferably, on the discs themselves. A printed leaflet with information about the criterions of selection would also be necessary. The presentation of each element is too brief: was it reproduced in full, or has it been abridged? Was it inserted in a newsreels, or was it an independent film? They fragments are separated by short captions which plagiarise the pictures but not place them in their context. Despite their shortcomings, the discs provide a rich, varied and in many respects extremely surprising documentation.

What the viewer cannot miss, when looking at the first DVD, is the importance of food. It is not strange to observe children having their meal in a holiday camp, but the repetition becomes quickly amazing. We visit nurseries, schools, colleges, mothers' homes and, every time, we are taken to the kitchen, not a small room but huge premises where enormous electric cookers stew pasta, vegetables, mashed potatoes, soups. It is not possible to ignore an impression of abundance, the

cooking-pots are full—but waiters measure rigorously the portions, nothing will be wasted. Our guided tour is not finished; we are taken to the dining-hall and see that everybody enjoys their dish. Such pictures have a lot to tell about a country where hunger was endemic, and where many seldom profited by a hot meal. It is propaganda, for sure, but not only. One film was dedicated to a ‘School for housekeepers’. The teaching was incredibly elementary, girls were taught how to hash onions, clean a pan, rinse a washbasin, these works had also a didactic purpose, they let catch a glance of a different life style, characterised by hygiene and healthy nutrition, uncommon in Italy, but accessible to the middle-class. Was it not an insult to those (nearly half of the population) who did not have running water? No. On the one hand spectators did not consider that films mirrored reality, they agreed that, too a large extent, they were fantasies. On the other hand, they were proud to be taken seriously. The liberal regime cared only about the upper middle-class, newsreels, for instance, showed exclusively royal festivities, horse and car races, mannequin parades, all events that did not appeal to ordinary citizens. The *Luce* items treated much simpler topics, food, school, work, home. Fascism was as much linked to business, banks and heavy industry as its predecessor—but it feigned to attend to the poorest.

Fascist propaganda was often dull; the same, simplistic catch-phrases were endlessly repeated. The *Luce* documents make it clear that the objective was less to impose a few ideas than, simply, to fill time and space, to be omnipresent. The numerous contradictions we encounter in the films show that ‘content’ did not matter. Let us consider two examples. Most films, in the first DVD, insist that a good mother is a housewife, that her place is at home, we have noted that even country women were not considered workers. Now, an entire film dealt with nurseries where mother could leave their babies while they were at work; expert nurses (the editing makes believe that there was one nurse for each baby) cared for the children and hand them back to the mums, fresh and smiling, in the evening. It was like saying: ‘We do our best to help mother have a job, but we want them to stay at home’. Other inconsistency. The second DVD evidences the fear of rural exodus and the will to settle as many people as possible in the country, because agriculture was vital for the equilibrium of the commercial balance, and because villagers were less prone to revolt than city dwellers. However, all facilities advertised by *Luce*, maternity hospitals, nurseries, canteens, could be found in cities only. ‘There is all you need in big towns, but you must stand aside’.

Provided they diffused Mussolini’s countersigns, and screened him as often as possible, the *Luce* people were relatively free. They were superbly equipped, acquired Bell & Howell cameras when private studios still used Pathé or Parvo and were the first in Italy to take advantage of a Western Electric sound system. Fond of their job, they were keen on making good, original pictures. Therefore, they did not hesitate to edit images inconsistent with fascist slogans. One film dealing with the draining and ploughing of a district in Latium opens with wonderful shots of hundreds of day-labourers running, with their spade, towards the place where the *Duce* is about to speak. There was an obvious contradiction between Mussolini’s enthusiasm about tractors, and the obvious fact that everything had been handmade, with shovels, picks and buckets. The shabbily dressed men contrasted strongly with the elegant fascist uniforms and the smart clothes of officials, two opposed worlds met but did not merge, the workers were put aside, the officials gathered behind the dictator who

behaved like a go-between, leader of the affluent, heading for the poor. The final part, with the unavoidable speech, fit in with the regime's policy and made tolerable the initial glimpse at the journeymen.

The editors of the DVDs emphasise an incident that took part the 15 May 1939. Mussolini paid two official visits to the Turin FIAT factories, in 1932 and 1939, every time to inaugurate a new plant. The first time he wore plain clothes, as did Agnelli, owner of the firm; everybody looked relaxed, Agnelli thanked his visitor and the *Duce*, who had not yet put his method in shape, delivered a brief talk. In 1939 the atmosphere had changed, war was nearing, all officials, including Agnelli, wore uniforms, the ceremonial was strict, Agnelli was content with inviting his workers to cheer the dictator and Mussolini began to utter a few words slowly articulated. No applause, it was only after a few sentences that the crowd approved. The editors quote a police report, which states that the silence was interpreted as a mark of opposition to the regime. Yet, on the film, the workers seem as enthusiastic as any other people, they shout and wave flags when the *Duce* arrives, they applaud at length after the initial sentences, therefore I shall risk another explanation. Most fascist celebrations took place in town centres where suburbanites were not used to going; the FIAT workers, not knowing the ritual, reacted as they would have done after an ordinary speech. If we only had the written document, the police report, the question would be settled but, thanks to the DVD, everybody is in a position to make up their mind.

The FIAT incident brings us back to the question of the addressees: to whom did Mussolini talk? The DVDs provide a probable answer. According to their clothes, the young ladies in the school for housekeepers, the children in holiday camps, the mothers attending nurseries belonged to the lower middle-class. Mussolini's visit to FIAT, the biggest factory in the peninsula, overshadowed his numerous inspections in smaller enterprises, which, however, were reported in the newsreels. Following him, we note that he was keen on coming into contact with middle-size industrialists whose firm was locally well known and influent. The newsreels stressed the quality of Italian small firms and the investments they made to improve their workers' life. The dictator felt especially comfortable with modest manufacturers and tradesmen, with clerks, salesmen, civil servants, railway employees, all people who expected from the state either protection against foreign imports or small privileges. Historiography has long shown that the middle-class profited by the fascism policy and was the main supporter of the regime. Films make the fact more concrete, they evidence the relationship the dictator had set up with his followers, they reveal how Fascism lured them by holding out the prospects of a better life.

Audiovisual sources give historians another access to the past. They are not truer than written documents—the ceremonies we watch on the screen are official interpretations, as biased as police reports or press articles; however; they enable us to witness directly how the ritual was organised and how it functioned. Vivid though it is such approach would be, by itself, of limited interest. But there is more: films are a different kind of evidence likely to question previously dead certainties. It is a pity that a 20th-century scientist such as De Felice did not understand what cinema could add to his excellent biography. Let us hope that historians, in the 21st century, will be more perceptive—more prone to open their eyes.

Notes

- 1 I, 1883–1925; II, 1925–1936; III, 1936–1943; IV, 1940–1945. The CDs are available from Cliomedia Officina, Via Galvani 2, 10144 Torino, Italy, www.cliomediaofficina.it, <http://www.cliomediaofficina.it>. The Italian publisher Einaudi sells a box with the four CD-ROMs and an anthology of Fascist documents, *Autobiografia del fascismo*, compiled by De Felice, €61.97/£40.
- 2 *Lo stirpe italico. Giovani arditi e mamme prolifiche*, 60 minutes.
- 3 *Nei campi e nelle officine*, 60 minutes. The price of these two DVDs is €9.90.

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