

Un posto al sole. Combattenti e coloni in Africa orientale

CHIARA OTTAVIANO (ed.)

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In the series of cinematic documents she dedicates to *The Daily Life during Fascism*, Chiara Ottaviano, after editing DVDs on children, women, country people and clerks (see *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 27(1), March 2007) has just published a disk dealing with fascist colonialism. A latecomer in the competition between European powers to partake of Africa, the Italian kingdom came to an agreement with Britain, which left it the main part of Somalia (1889). From that base it attempted, in 1896, to conquer Ethiopia but suffered a humiliating defeat at Adua. Public opinion (at least those who expressed their point of view in the press) reacted violently and claimed revenge. In 1911, taking advantage of the weakness of the Ottoman Empire, which exerted a formal authority over Libya, Italy declared war to Istanbul. A long, hard and expensive campaign resulted in the takeover of the country by Rome. The war provoked an outburst of jingoism, the Italians were so keen on knowing what was happening that the three main film producers, Ambrosio, Cines and Comerio sent operators to follow the operations. All they could shoot were the hindmost positions of the army, but that was enough to enthuse the public, some journalists proved delirious about the little they saw on the screen. Libya was not doomed, the Italian army, at the expense of heavy losses and massacre of countless natives,¹ kept control over the coast and the main cities, but did not enter the inland. Mussolini was certain to please his fellow citizens when he announced, in October 1935, that he would conquer Ethiopia, vindicate Adua and give Italy an empire. Despite the deployment of 400,000 men and 800 planes, it took the Italian army seven months to reach the capital, Addis Abeba. The Italians killed, destroyed the villages which were considered rebellious, transported the local leaders, persecuted the priests of the dominant, Coptic religion—a branch of Christianity—but the greatest part of the country remained beyond their control.

A state institution, the *Luce* institute, which produced the only authorized newsreels, chronicled the war in its weekly issues and made a series of documentaries about the new colony. Chiara Ottaviano has drawn from that rich archive the film clips edited in her DVD. Several criticisms were levelled at the two previous disks, it was noted that the origin of the documents was not clear and that it was difficult to come across a specific item in the middle of a chapter. These flaws have been corrected. A caption identifies every piece at its beginning, while an appended chapter specifies where the document has been taken from. On the other hand, any item is accessible separately. Extracts from 18 films shot between 1934 and 1946 illustrate the origins of the conquest, the myth of a rich, submissive country conveyed by the cinema, the attempts to populate and exploit the colonies. The soundtrack of most pictures consists of a brief commentary and a long, banal musical score. The musical accompaniment has been replaced by a voice over which provides complementary information and stresses the lies of official propaganda—but it is possible, and very easy, to cancel the voice and hear the original sound; if you are well-informed, I advise you to prefer that solution, the poor quality of the music tells a lot about the making of the films. As it is, the DVD is an excellent document. My only reservation has to do with the late introduction of the films dealing with Somalia, shot in 1934 but edited in the last chapters of the disk, those devoted to development of the colonies; this fits in with the plan of the DVD, but Somalia was different from Ethiopia and those who don't know the history of Italian imperialism are likely to miss the point.

Technically, the films are perfect, the *Luce* operators were first-class professionals, the lighting is excellent, the pictures are always sharp. But the content is very poor, the film-makers were obviously disconcerted and had trouble finding what ought to be shot. The first piece, in the DVD, shows the Italians listening to Mussolini's speech announcing that Italy is at war. It is a wonderful movie, which conjures up the atmosphere of the time and calls to mind some images of King Vidor's *The Crowd*. Nothing of this kind in Ethiopia, the pictures of the natives are short, awkward, motionless, at the best outlandish. Operators make up for it by lingering on landscapes; they would like to film Italians but there are none, except soldiers or officials who impose their ceremonial. The mean musical scores I have mentioned are consonant with the pictures; Italian film-makers lacked inspiration where the colonies were concerned.

The spoken part of the newsreels, usually short, tries to make do for the mediocrity of the pictures. The little it tells is significant. In November 1937, over uninteresting pictures of a native digging a deep hole, a voice says: 'Instinctively we think about the mineral and agricultural potential of this huge barbaric empire still closed to civilisation'. Such are the dominant themes: a land of plenty that will welcome millions of Italians, and a poverty-stricken country, 'Women whose life isn't much different from that of beasts of burden', 'Miserable people who, until yesterday, lived in slavery and ignorance'. Italians often complained that they were despised by other people and ill-treated when they were obliged to emigrate; in Ethiopia they met with the revenge of the poor who can oppress the poorer. That may explain why film-makers did not feel at ease, they had difficulty looking sympathetically at people they had been instructed to scorn.

Italy's Ethiopian adventure was a disaster, it cost a lot, few Italians emigrated and they were obliged re-embark after a few years. The films do not show the reality of a bloody conquest, the conditions of the natives, or the failure of the settlement. Yet, by scrutinising the documents, it is possible to find clues. Several shots show Italians and natives working together in mines or in the fields, but detecting the fake is not difficult. Here are natives pushing a heavy truck; on the side, in the foreground, an Italian gives a hand—but where he is, his effort is useless, he is here for the picture only. We visit new houses built for the Italian immigrants—and we note how limited the pan-shot of the camera is: impossible to go further, there are merely a few lodgings. The most impressive film, *The New Addis-Abeba*, deals with the erection of a separate European district in the capital. Under the pretext that they are unhealthy hundreds of Ethiopian huts are set on fire, with all what is inside; the film stresses at length this destruction and does not conceal the pleasure the Italians take in reducing to nothing a huge sector of the city.

The DVD ends with a prodigious document, a film shot in 1946 to celebrate Italian colonialism and demonstrate that Italy must retain her empire. The cheek of a defeated country, which ignores the conquest, the thousands of victims, which wants to keep the inheritance of fascism, is impressive. The last straw comes with the final sentence. While Italy is negotiating American economic help, the commentary condemns 'those who set themselves up as "masters" of colonisation after degrading and destroying full populations with alcohol and guns'.

PIERRE SORLIN

University of Paris-Sorbonne Nouvelle

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