



Ruth Ben-Ghiat. *Italian Fascism's Empire Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. 420 pp. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-01559-4.

Reviewed by Giacomo Lichtner (University of Wellington)

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Films in Search of a Formula: Italian Empire Cinema as “Imperial Debris”

If readers of this book want to understand both the essence of propaganda in Fascist Italy and the organic interdisciplinarity of Ruth Ben-Ghiat's remarkable research, they should turn to page 20. They will find a 1936 photograph of a Milan street corner plastered with the epiphenomena of a symbiotic relationship between marketing, popular culture, and politics: an advertisement for the autarchic “Victory Butter”; the marmoreal “M&M” of confectionary company Motta referencing the Duce's initial; a film poster of tenor Beniamino Gigli in the drama *Non ti scordar di me*; and, above Gigli, Mussolini's own infamous three-quarter profile, also compelling Italians to “Remember!” the sanctions imposed by the League of Nations a year earlier. Fascist propaganda, including imperial and racial propaganda, suffused Italian culture and society, relying on and fostering an obedient blend of persuasion, conformism, censorship and coercion. Its “tropes and iconographies migrated throughout the public sphere and into the fabric of everyday life” (p. 26). Having taken in the intricate textures of that image, readers should go back to the start and read every word of the book.

Ben-Ghiat's *Italian Fascism's Empire Cinema* analyzes nine famous and less well-known films made between 1927 and 1942 that deal directly with Italy's colonies. These are impeccably contextualized within the transnational concept of empire cinema on the one hand, building on Ann Laura Stoler's notion of “imperial debris,” and within the broader humus of Fascist propa-

ganda about the empire, race, and gender, on the other hand.[1] The tantalizing result sits alongside Stephen Gundle's *Mussolini's Dream Factory* (2013) and two recent histories of Fascist consensus—Paul Corner's *The Fascist Party and Popular Opinion in Mussolini's Italy* and the late Christopher Duggan's *Fascist Voices* (both 2012)—as another crucial piece in the puzzle of Italian popular culture during, and under, the Fascist regime. This is an investigation long overdue, which will undoubtedly help a scholarly and general readership address Italy's imperial past, on the one hand, and acknowledge the complex layers of identity that competed or colluded to define Italians under Mussolini's dictatorship, and beyond.

This elegantly written and theoretically sophisticated study, beautifully supported by numerous illustrations, is structured in eight chapters that move along concurrent thematic and chronological paths. Chapter 1 stakes out the field of study, drawing the many different strands of the investigation into a coherent methodology. This is a particular strength of the book—and one readers of Ben-Ghiat's oeuvre will be familiar with—that manages to engage the discourses of both cinema and history, and of both Italy and its European context, with exceptional clarity and efficiency. Ben-Ghiat maps out how spectatorship, gender, conceptions of modernity and technology, and of course race, collide with Italy's imperial ventures, its own historical and political references, and its representation and construction through film. Film thus emerges as a popular interface that mediates and reinter-

prets past and present, as well as identitarian and ideological tropes.

Chapters 2 to 8 apply this methodology to Italian empire cinema, focusing on specific themes and periods. Chapters 2 and 3 highlight Italy's imperial connections, with both the colonies and the European colonial models it sought to emulate and respond to, while discussing Mario Camerini's *Kif Tebbi* (1927), and empire cinema up to the invasion of Ethiopia. Chapters 4 and 8 home in on the Fascist version of the cult of aviation, wrapped into dreams of conquest both symbolic and territorial. Sandwiched between these initial chapters and the two sections on World War Two (chapters 7 and 8), are two chapters dedicated to the imperial body, which discuss in depth *Lo squadrone bianco* (Augusto Genina, 1936), *Sentinelle di bronzo* (Romolo Marcellini, 1937), *L'esclave blanc* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, completed by Jean-Paul Paulin, 1936), and *Sotto la Croce del Sud* (Guido Brignone, 1938).

While each of the chapters in this book is equally impressive in the effortless but painstaking parallel analysis of both the filmic texts and their production, these latter two chapters, 5 and 6, have the most to offer. The texts Ben-Ghiat discusses there sit at the heart of a successful effort to unsettle and normalize the invasion of Ethiopia, which contains within it crucial, and perhaps still unresolved contradictions of Fascist Italy in regard to gender, and especially race. In particular, the simultaneous construction of the colonies as a place of military and sexual conquest, where moral and social norms do not apply, and as a place of pre-civilized innocence, ripe for a *mission civilisatrice* that predated Fascism, speaks to the coexistence of different and sometimes contradictory forms of racism, which would later infuse Italian policies towards its Jewish population. Newsreel images such as these consecutive shots (<https://networks.h-net.org/africa-orientale-gondar-antica-capitale-etiopica-stills>) in the Istituto Luce's *Africa Orientale. Gondar antica capitale etiopica* (1936), [2] acted as the not so subliminal counterpoints to popular songs like *Faccetta Nera*, to imperial adventure board games, to racist comics, and also to the titillating and forbidden relationships of the feature films discussed by Ben-Ghiat: aspects of a single racial discourse that lies at the core of Fascist totalitarianism (p. xxiv).

This racial discourse is one of the areas of further investigation which this rich book points to, explicitly or implicitly. Another is the subtlety of the language of em-

pire. The nine empire films Ben-Ghiat delves in belong mainly to the war film genre, intermarried here and there with those of exotic adventure, romance, and melodrama. It would be fascinating to expand it to the traces of empire scattered elsewhere in Italian cinema of this period (or indeed beyond). Ben-Ghiat understands those traces, as she amply demonstrates when she references the fleeting mention of an *ascaro* (a colonial soldier) in Luigi Zampa's *Vivere in Pace* (1946—Zampa would continue to pepper his films with references to Africa, notably in *Anni difficili* [1948] and *Anni facili* [1954]), but the hunt for those fleeting footprints is beyond the scope of this work. Another area that needs further exploration is the role of the Italian monarchy in empire cinema, and imperial propaganda more generally. As Mark Seymour shows in Robert Aldrich and Cindy McCreery's forthcoming *Royals on Tour: Politics and Pageantry in Colonies and Metropolises* (2017), King Vittorio Emanuele III (referred to in Ben-Ghiat's book on only one occasion and as Vittorio Emanuele II, in a rare editorial slip-up, p. 27) traveled to the colonies much more frequently than Mussolini. The monarchy's relative absence from the cinema of period is an intriguing indicator of a broader institutional and cultural ambiguity in the triangular relationship between Italians, the Duce, and the king he had made into an emperor. This is work that remains to be done.

As Ben-Ghiat writes in her epilogue, such a pivotal moment in the history of Fascist Italy, steeped in such pervasive propaganda, could not but leave a difficult legacy, not least in cinema: *we wish to bury memories of Africa coexisted with longings to return there—which films of the immediate postwar period could and did not address* (p. 297). Much scholarship has in recent decades addressed Italy's colonial past, and the vast, heinous crimes committed during it. At the popular level too, the invasion of Ethiopia is not repressed, as evidenced by the widespread 2016 coverage of the *0,000981* Italians still pay on each liter of fuel as a result of a 1935 tax meant to support their forefathers' colonial venture. Yet in spite of this reemergence, Italy's postwar discourse on its former empire remains a postcolonial, rather than a post-imperial discourse: as early as 1946, the colonies were repositioned as *memory objects* (p. 299), distant, foreign, once again exotic, and thus able to be discussed selectively, without addressing the issue of guilt and responsibility. In bringing this cinematic history back to life, Ruth Ben-Ghiat treads a path of uncompromising empiricism and subtle textual analysis, which connects the multiple spaces of history and film and significantly advances our understanding of Fascist Italy.

Notes

[1.] Ann L. Stoler, ed., *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

[2.] *Africa Orientale. Gondar antica capitale etiopica*, in *Giornale Luce*, 12/02/1936,

Archivio Storico Istituto Luce, B0833, <http://www.archivioluce.com/archivio/jsp/schede/videoPlayer.jsp?tipologia=&id=&physDoc=11547&db=cinematograficoCINEGIORNA&findIt=false§ion=/> (accessed March 30, 2017).

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