

## The invisible war on nature: the Abyssinian war (1935–1936) in newsreels and documentaries in Fascist Italy

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This contribution to the special issue focuses on newsreels and documentaries that were produced concerning the Second Italo–Ethiopian War (1935–1936), commonly known as the Abyssinian War. It aims to contextualise LUCE's filmic production on the war, so as to create a framework in which the institute can be understood not only as being part of a wider politics of propaganda in Fascist Italy, but as an example of a modern socio-technical organisation that enabled the discursive construction of East African nature as 'Other' and therefore helped to justify colonial war as a process of sanitised creative destruction aimed at replacing a previous, negative 'first nature' with a positive, Fascist and Italian 'second nature'. The article draws on archival documents from Mussolini's government cabinet, and on LUCE documentaries and newsreels; these sources are used to create a background against which LUCE's concern with the Second Italo–Ethiopian War can be understood.

**Keywords:** Fascism; Ethiopia; Abyssinia; newsreels; film

### Introduction: nature, Fascism and newsreels

Newsreel and documentary production was a state monopoly in Fascist Italy, controlled through the LUCE institute, set up by Mussolini's regime. The institute was a highly organised, well-funded organisation closely linked to the regime's ministry of culture and propaganda. Its cameramen and photographers documented every aspect of life under the Fascist regime, from public parades to Mussolini's speeches, to the building of new urban centres, to Italy's colonial expansion and imperialist projects in Libya, East Africa and elsewhere.

In this article, I focus on newsreels and documentaries that were produced about the Second Italo–Ethiopian War (1935–1936), commonly known as the Abyssinian War. I aim to contextualise LUCE's filmic production on the war, so as to create a framework in which the institute can be understood not only as being part of a wider politics of propaganda in Fascist Italy, but as an example of a modern socio-technical organisation which enabled the discursive construction of East African nature as 'Other' and therefore helped to justify colonial war as a process of sanitised creative destruction aimed at replacing a previous, negative 'first nature' with a positive, Fascist and Italian 'second nature' (Caprotti 2006, 2011a; Cronon 1992).

The article draws on archival documents from Mussolini's government cabinet, and on LUCE documentaries and newsreels; these sources are used to create a background against which LUCE's concern with the Second Italo–Ethiopian War can be understood.<sup>1</sup> The rest of

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this introduction presents a discussion of the link between the visibility of newsreels, war and Italian Fascism's construction of nature with respect to East Africa. Visibility is understood here as a practice performed by human subjects using a range of representational tools and technologies, and involving both human and non-human subjects (Rose 2001). The second section then gives a brief outline of the Second Italo–Ethiopian War. The third section sets the scene for a consideration of propaganda newsreels and documentaries by examining the organisation of propaganda in Fascist Italy. This is followed, in the fourth section, by a closer look at the way that cinema was controlled under the regime. The fifth section focuses on the LUCE institute per se, and its central role in newsreel and documentary film-making for the national audience. The sixth section examines the role that LUCE newsreels and documentaries had in the formation of a specific, and yet fragmentary, Fascist 'cinematographic' identity. Based on this contextualisation, the final section analyses selected newsreels and documentaries linked to representations of the war in Ethiopia. Three main, salient characteristics are highlighted within the final section. These characteristics are found within filmic images of the military campaign in what was to become Italian East Africa, and they are of particular interest when considering the link between nature, Fascism, war and newsreels. The first theme is the absence of war – hence the title of this article. By 'absence of war', I mean the almost total non-appearance of images and themes related to fighting and the damage, pain and blood of war. The Second Italo–Ethiopian War was, veritably, an 'invisible' war on film as far as actual fighting was concerned. This also reflects earlier representations of other wars involving Italy. For example, the 1911–1912 Libyan war was also represented in such a way as to elide scenes of battle and fighting (Berruti and Mazzei 2011; Berruti and Presenti Campagnoni 2011; Lasi 2011). The argument presented here is that this absence, especially in newsreels focusing on the Second Italo–Ethiopian war proper, points to a sanitised construction of a military process of creative destruction which hinged on obscuring the human costs (on both sides) of the military campaign through which a Fascist 'second nature' was imposed on Italian East Africa.

This leads to the second analysed theme: LUCE's justification of war as a means to bring Fascist 'civilisation' and order to a previously chaotic and underdeveloped African 'first nature', a Promethean project which lent itself well to filmic representation (Carta 2013b). The third theme focuses on the 'home front', and the representation (in newsreels) of the Italian public's reaction to the war. In this respect, LUCE was an instrument used by the regime to construct, and represent, national consensus for the regime's colonial aims – in this regard, the representation of domestic support for a war constructed as bringing a new Fascist nature to East Africa can be seen as a visual mechanism through which the regime constructed myths of Italians as harbingers of a 'benign colonialism'. Newsreels and documentaries were foils for a Fascist military enterprise characterised by atrocities and institutionalised disregard for human dignity.

Italian Fascism has been interpreted as a deeply modern phenomenon (Ben-Ghiat 2003, 2004; Fuller 2007). In the context of this article, this can be seen in the regime's approach to nature, both in terms of specific social constructions of nature by a range of actors from 1922 onwards, and in the regime's focus on the *engineering* of new 'natures' (Binde 1999; Carta 2013b): from the new Fascist citizen, to refashioned cities and New Towns (Ghirardo and Forster 1985; Ghirardo 1989; Atkinson and Cosgrove 1998; Caprotti 2007; Fuller 2007) to land reclamation and hydro-engineering projects in Italy and its colonies (Fuller 1996; Binde 1999; Caprotti and Kaïka 2008; Renes and Piastra 2011). In broad terms, the regime's approach to nature can be characterised as modern because of its rationalisation and compartmentalisation of nature as an epistemological 'category' through which the experience of nature could be ordered, understood and changed. As argued by Latour (1993), the interface between modernity

and nature is characterised by twin processes that enable modern actors to conceptualise their own agency when that is linked to nature. Latour describes these mechanisms as ‘purification’ and ‘translation’. The former refers to the modern tendency to construct ‘things’ as *either* ‘natural’ *or* ‘social’. A key corollary is that whatever is then relegated to the former, ‘natural’ sphere is then seen as inherently devoid of any characteristics of the second, ‘social’ (or ‘human’) sphere. The latter process, that of translation, relates to the set of mechanisms through which what Swyngedouw (1999) terms socionatural reality is rendered as a set of dichotomous and purified natural *or* social objects.

Italian Fascism’s modern construction of nature is central to the way in which colonial wars and colonising projects were conceptualised and represented (Ben-Ghiat 2003). As has been argued by scholars working on the link between nature and colonialism (Davis 2007), colonising initiatives in the twentieth century were often predicated on the construction of the colonial ‘Other’ and of the landscape of lands to be colonised as negative, at times empty, sterile and unordered (Atkinson 2008). This pre-colonial and pre-Fascist ‘first nature’ was therefore conceptualised as negative, in turn justifying the application of modern rationality and technology to the naturalised colonial ‘Other’ and the areas in which they lived, in order to bring about a positive, rational, and technologically enlightened ‘second nature’. It is at this juncture that war (especially mechanised war) becomes a key way in which ‘first nature’ can be transformed into ‘second nature’. Through a struggle against ‘natural’ constraints and limitations (Harvey 1996), Italian Fascism could present war as a civilising and even humanitarian mission. Through processes of purification, areas that were to be annexed by Italy could be constructed as ‘natural’ and therefore as almost primordial, ripe for paternalistic exploitation and transformation. This is seen not only in Fascist Italy’s colonial wars, but also in the regime’s attempts to bring about positive and productive, Fascist ‘second natures’ in other projects, such as land reclamation (Binde 1999) and the construction of New Towns (Kargon and Molella 2008).

At the same time, it can be argued that one of the key features of Fascist Italy’s colonial wars was their representation – on screen, in newspapers and in speeches. As Carta (2013a) has shown with regard to the representation of Sardinia in ‘ethno-Orientalist’ travelogues, the representation of the ‘Other’ and of ‘exotic’ locales is intimately connected with deployment of specific representational techniques. With regard to the war in Ethiopia, the production of discursive accounts and images of the war was part and parcel of a process through which the regime’s ambitions in foreign lands were justified, predominantly to the domestic public (Caprotti 2009). At the same time, the production of newsreel accounts of wars such as the Second Italo–Ethiopian War enabled the proliferation of images of the campaign. The production and propagation of these images is key to the regime’s modernising project to institute a Fascist ‘second nature’ in East Africa. This is because the image can be seen as an essential part of the processes of purification and translation: through the newsreel image, pre-Fascist Ethiopia could be presented as a land that was primordially natural and therefore not ‘civilised’. In turn, Italy’s troops, technology and matériel could be presented as the modern, rationalising means through which primordial Africa could be elevated to modernity: redeemed, in the words the regime used to describe land reclamation. At the same time, and as argued below, the production of images of the war by institutions such as the LUCE institute was crucial in that the war itself could be elided from much of the visual coverage, which focused instead on the characteristics of Italy’s ‘civilising’ mission. The following briefly sets the scene with an outline of the regime’s entry into the Second Italo–Ethiopian War.

### **The second Italo–Ethiopian War (1935–1936)**

Italy's costly and complex invasion of Abyssinia was not the first time that the East African territory had been the recipient of unwanted attentions: Rodgers (1984), for example, has chronicled the 1867–1868 Abyssinian 'expedition' by British imperial forces, mainly Indian troops. This 'expensive little war' was initiated through the excuse of freeing a group of British captives held in Abyssinia. In 1896, the Italian government attempted (and resoundingly failed) to colonise the territory, in part because of French military aid to Menelek (Woolbert 1934). The Italian defeat at Adwa in 1896 was utilised by Mussolini as a historical date which justified vengeance on Ethiopia – much as the Versailles Treaty became a key theme in Fascist rhetoric which described Europe's Great Powers as striving to keep Italy from acquiring promised lands, status, power and colonies.

The Fascist regime's war of 1935–1936 in Ethiopia took place against a backdrop of increasing Italian ambition and mounting international tension. The war was a symptom of Mussolini's attempted projection of power outside the national sphere.<sup>2</sup> The Second Italo–Ethiopian War was precipitated by border tensions resulting from a military build-up and clashes in the Ogaden desert between Italian Somaliland and Ethiopia in 1930–1934. However, the war between Italy and Ethiopia was a consequence of the Fascist regime's drive to acquire colonial possessions. Mussolini infamously claimed that expansion in Africa would enable Italy to gain a 'place in the sun'. In 1935, following what amounted to a reluctant diplomatic 'all clear' from Great Britain and France (whose strategic interests lay not in protecting Ethiopian sovereignty but in retaining Italy as a potential ally against Germany), Italy invaded Abyssinia. In October of that year, Italian forces began a two-pronged attack on Ethiopia from Eritrea in the north and Italian Somaliland in the East. Several months of fighting ensued, culminating in a declared victory on 7 May 1936. Italian armed forces' documented use of mustard gas, concentration camps and mass executions has since put paid to the widespread myth that saw Italy as a 'benign' colonial power.<sup>3</sup> Italy's previous colonies of Eritrea and Somaliland were subsequently merged with Ethiopia, to form Italian East Africa (*Africa Orientale Italiana*).

As Del Boca (1996) has argued, Mussolini's regime effectively hid the war's atrocities from the Italian public. This was achieved through careful information management; the effective control of statements released by Italy's two main military leaders in East Africa, Pietro Badoglio and Rodolfo Graziani; and domestic propaganda aimed at advertising the war as a fulfilment of Fascist (and, by definition, Italian) imperial ambitions, and as a step forward in Italy's 'civilising mission' in the colonies. The following takes a broad historical view by analysing Fascist propaganda politics, and the role of newsreels and documentaries in constructing Fascist identity. This context provides the structural backdrop to LUCE's 'invisible' portrayal of war in Ethiopia, and its justification of Fascist colonialism in East Africa.

### **Propaganda and Fascist Italy**

Mussolini gained power in 1922, but the early years of the regime did not see much in the way of organised propaganda drives or propaganda legislation. It took nearly a decade for the regime to start organising and institutionalising propaganda in Italy. For example, the regulation of the press was finally set out as a series of dispositions on 26 September 1928 (De Felice 1995). Some of the regulations focused on restricting press coverage of 'natural' events that could not be controlled, and which were therefore interpreted as negative in light of Fascism's totalising emphasis. For example, coverage of floods and other natural hazards could:

... create unease and depress the public spirit.... The exaggerated and alarmist narration of such events could give the false impression that the Italian people have not yet reached that level of maturity which looks reality in the face with a strong and virile spirit. (De Felice 1995, 556)

What was uncontrollable, what belonged to a pre-Fascist 'first nature', and what was unsavoury, or illegal within the regime's supposedly 'total' grasp on Italy, was obscured in an attempt to present specific, ordered visions of Fascist 'reality'. This was also the case with coverage of the war in Abyssinia, as will be shown further on. What was unpalatable (war itself) was not screened, leading to an 'invisible war'.

Several institutional changes were introduced as the regime engaged with the propaganda potential of film. In particular, 1934 was important for the organisation of cinematography. On 6 September 1934, a law was passed which legislated the foundation of the Under-Secretariat for press and propaganda, under the supervision of Mussolini. The Duce's son-in-law, Count Galeazzo Ciano, was appointed the first Undersecretary for press and propaganda. Cole (1938) notes that he was, like many propaganda officials in the expanding new Undersecretariat, a foreign service diplomat 'on loan' from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The link between professionals from the diplomatic corps and the regime's portrayal of wars abroad is an interesting aspect of the link between propaganda, film and war.

After the Under-Secretariat was formed, a Division of Cinematography was established, and the Under-Secretariat eventually became the Ministry of Press and Propaganda on 24 June 1935. In 1937 it was renamed the Ministry of Popular Culture (also known by the abbreviation *MinCulPop*) (Thompson 1991). The foundation of the ministry can be situated in a context of increasing emphasis on the importance of propaganda by Mussolini's regime as the 1930s wore on. Indeed, Del Boca (1986; see also Tancredi 1999) estimates that at the time of the Second Italo–Ethiopian War, political messages had potential outlets in Italy through 530,000 private and 11,000 public radios, 81 daily papers, 132 political periodicals and several LUCE documentaries and newsreels.

Sixteen organisations and corporations were placed under the ministry's direct supervision from 1936 onwards, including the LUCE institute.<sup>4</sup> By October 1936, the Ministry was segmented into six areas: propaganda, cinematography, tourism, theatre, Italian press and the foreign press (Cole 1938). It is interesting to note that among the responsibilities of the latter division was the need to eliminate 'foreign' opinions, which were deemed opposed to Fascist 'truth'. From 1935 onwards various newspapers were banned, including most British newspapers because they had supported sanctions against Italy passed by the League of Nations as a result of its invasion of Ethiopia (Cole 1938).<sup>5</sup>

The institutional development of the Ministry of Popular Culture shows increasing attention to propaganda and information management in the 1930s. The regime aimed to control film, radio and the press. The extent to which information management and propaganda under Mussolini's regime were successful in their aims is not clear. However, the regime did not limit itself to attempts to control and manage information. It also produced information, through documentaries, newsreels, radio and publications, which helped to construct 'alternative' realities concerning events such as the war in Ethiopia. The following section focuses more closely on cinema and newsreels in Fascist propaganda.

### **Cinema, newsreels and propaganda**

The Fascist regime attempted to favour Italian film production, which had been heavily affected by the First World War and competition from US film production corporations (Brunetta 1979;

Nowell-Smith 1986). In 1914–1919, for example, Italian cinematic production declined from 1027 films per annum to 295 (Bertellini 2002). Nonetheless, the 1920s saw production rates fluctuate wildly. At the same time, the average length of Italian-produced films doubled. These fluctuations can be seen in the fact that although 1316 films were produced in 1920–1931, in 1920 there were 415 films produced, compared with only two in 1931. The regime's interventions into the national film industry came at the juncture of a time of economic uncertainty in the industry, and an increasing focus by the regime's ministries and officials on the use of propaganda and the moving image to represent and justify Fascist policies and initiatives at home and abroad.

Efforts by Mussolini's regime to bolster the national film industry and engage in film propaganda were paralleled in other countries.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the regime attempted to realise the enormous potential for spreading political-ideological messages to what was a significant national cinema-viewing audience. Part of the focus was on multiplying the physical locations where the regime's images could be projected and propagated, by building thousands of cinemas throughout the 1930s. Indeed, Sorlin (1996) estimates that more than 3000 cinemas were already operating in Italy by 1929. The construction of cinemas, coupled with support for the film industry and the production of newsreels, documentaries and films by the regime's cinematographers, was a significant effort, and had tangible effects on the size of the national cinema-going audience in the 1930s. Indeed, 40 million cinema tickets were bought per annum by 1940. This is nearly 50% higher than the number bought five years previously (Thompson 1991). It can be argued that the regime was effectively placing increasing numbers of Italians in front of the cinema screen in the 1930s: this would prove crucial to the use of newsreels to justify the Second Italo–Ethiopian War to the national audience. However, Italian cinema screens in the 1930s generally showed films, preceded by newsreel screenings. This was significant, since the latter carried the most overt and explicit political-ideological messages and enabled the regime's cinematographers to present visions of 'Fascist' reality, including around Italy's colonial wars. Mussolini was quick to appreciate the propaganda potential of the silver screen: a speech by the Duce in 1927, for Fox Movietone News, was the first ever political speech on screen (Sorlin 1996; Ricci 2008). Eight years later, Italian cameramen were to put newsreels' propaganda potential to the test, shooting from military aeroplanes, battlefields and towns in East Africa.

### **LUCE and the production of propaganda newsreels in Fascist Italy**

The Fascist regime's main newsreel propaganda organ was the LUCE institute (*L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa*, or Union of Educational Cinematography). The institute was founded by royal decree-law 1985, promulgated on 5 November 1925.<sup>7</sup> The decree placed the institute under the direct control of the government, and was kept under close scrutiny. This is exemplified by the fact that on the occasion of LUCE's first three years of activity, Mussolini sent a congratulatory letter to LUCE director Filippo Cremonesi (Mussolini to Cremonesi, 7 October 1927<sup>8</sup>). By the 1930s, the LUCE institute was producing four newsreels a week. In 1934, for example, 208 LUCE newsreels were produced (Report to Mussolini, 25 March 1935<sup>9</sup>). This was significant in terms of image propagation, because from 1926 the screening of educational features in cinemas was made compulsory, and newsreels were made compulsory viewing in cinemas from 1927. This, coupled with the increasing numbers of individuals attending cinema screenings, signifies that exposure to newsreels was far higher than exposure to other propaganda, for example that propagated through the theatre. Elwin (1934, 144), for example, stated that:

After the press, it is the programmes of the L.U.C.E. which are, to my mind, the most important instruments for mass propaganda in the hands of the Italian Government, for these reach all strata of the population.

Echoing this, the British government went as far as to express concern at the effects of Italian film propaganda outside Italy's borders (Ellwood 1982).

The Fascist regime saw cinema and newsreels as useful propaganda tools: 'Newsreels were effective ... not in advertising Fascism, but in reinforcing or articulating existing ideas and in convincing audiences that the country was on the right path' (Sorlin 1996, 52). Indeed, LUCE's reels can be seen as socio-technical tools that were turned towards specific perceptions of reality. Newsreels actively participated in constructions and representations of the regime and its policies and projects, both at home and abroad. They became part of a constructed reality represented as truth: as Phillips (1999) argues in reference to documentary film, this was a form of mediated reality.

The LUCE institute underwent several rounds of organisation and reorganisation in the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, LUCE was reorganised in 1934, a year before the Abyssinian War. This round of restructuring resulted in LUCE moving away from a 'cultural' focus and towards covering more current events and Fascist initiatives (Report to Mussolini, 25 March 1935<sup>10</sup>). It resulted in the institute being segmented into several sections. The film production section's remit included newsreels, films, special effects and animation, control services for negative and positive copies, and the *Rivista LUCE*, a cinematographic initiative aimed at showing how Fascism had 'renewed' Italy through a variety of public works and enterprises which had brought modernity to the country. The inspection service was charged with verifying that cinemas screened LUCE newsreels, which (as shown above) were compulsory viewing.

### Fascism and the newsreel image

The distribution of LUCE newsreels and films can be interpreted as an instance within the construction and propagation of a Fascist interpretation of reality at home and abroad. LUCE aimed to generate a cinematic, visual presence in cinemas and city squares, wherever the moving image could be screened and 'Fascist' reality idealised. Free showings of specific propaganda reels were organised in order to increase this exposure. Importantly for the scope of this paper, LUCE aimed to construct Fascism and its modernising impulse for a 'national' audience, conceived as being composed by both citizens in Italy proper, and 'colonists' and colonised populations in Italy's colonies. For example, the LUCE film *Duce* was screened in Italy's 76 provincial capitals as well as in the colonial cities of Tripoli, Benghazi, Mogadishu, Asmara and Rhodes (Distribution report, 1931<sup>11</sup>). It was screened to audiences at home and in the colonies on the '28th', a date replete with symbolism: 28 October was the anniversary of the March on Rome. In addition to being shown in cinemas, the film was screened in secondary schools and railway depots, and copies of the film were given to the Opera Nazionale Combattenti (ONC), a national veterans organisation. Colonists, colonial subjects, schoolchildren, railwaymen and land reclamation workers throughout Italy and its colonies could thus be symbolically united in a national, Fascist construction of the Duce and made to feel a part of the Fascist national project.

A further example of LUCE's creation of colonial spectacle is the focus on urban screenings of *Il Ritorno di Roma* ('The Return of Rome'), a 1926 documentary. One of the first filmic depictions of the Fascist trope of continuity between the Roman epoch and Fascist Italy, the documentary constructed a historical justification for colonialism in Africa (Brunetta 1979). The documentary's impact was generated through a range of outlets aimed at maximising audience

exposure. These included four free public screenings in Rome, as well as projection of the documentary in 209 cities and towns throughout Italy between 25 April and 2 May 1926. Significantly, on the evening of 25 April there were 41 simultaneous screenings in 41 provincial capitals (Cabinet head, minister of colonies, to Chiavolini, 8 May 1926<sup>12</sup>). Overall, between 25 April and 10 June free screenings were held in 812 different locations. LUCE estimated that the documentary's propaganda reached a minimum of between three and four million people. There were also plans to distribute the documentary to 1240 towns and villages so that the film could be shown in thousands of piazzas all over the country (Cremonesi to Mussolini, 4 May 1926<sup>13</sup>). This was a continuation of the theme of screening movies with high ideological content in public spaces to large crowds of spectators: around 60–70,000 people saw the documentary in Rome's Piazza Colonna on 2 May 1926 (Cabinet head, minister of colonies, to Chiavolini, 8 May 1926<sup>14</sup>). On the same day, 30,000 people viewed it in Milan's Piazza del Duomo. Overall, hundreds of thousands of people spectated at screenings of Fascist film, documentary and newsreel propaganda in cities and towns, in cinemas and schools as well as piazzas. These audiences were spectators to the regime's filmic justifications of its colonial ambitions. In addition to documentaries and film, newsreels were utilised and propagated in a similar fashion, showcasing Italy's projects and colonial wars in an attempt to construct a unified, national image of Fascist 'progress'.

As the symbolic and idealised figurehead and embodiment of Fascism, Mussolini featured consistently in newsreels, and his cinematic presence was made real for thousands of people in audiences spread all over Italy. The figure of the Duce on screen was exploited by the LUCE institute to represent evidence of public support for the Second Italo–Ethiopian War, as will be shown below. Indeed, the need for 'intense ... propaganda for war in Africa' resulted in the institution of a 'Photo-Cinematographic Department for Oriental Africa' within the institute (Report to Undersecretary for war, the navy, air force, colonies and head of the M.S.V.N., date unspecified<sup>15</sup>). This can be seen as an example of the regime's awareness of the need to utilise the moving image to represent its colonial endeavours in specific ways. The following examines newsreels and documentaries produced during the war more closely, focusing on the role of newsreels in the representation of colonial war as a process of creative destruction aimed at instituting a Fascist 'second nature' in the people and landscape of East Africa.

### **Newsreels and the Second Italo–Ethiopian War: absence, civilisation and consensus**

LUCE produced several newsreels, documentaries and photographic records of Italy's war in Abyssinia. The section below focuses on newsreels and documentaries produced by LUCE during the Second Italo–Ethiopian War proper. My archival research has revealed that over 50 newsreels and documentaries were produced by LUCE in the run-up to, during and in the first few months after the war. In addition, LUCE also employed photographers whose work resulted in the publication of over 3500 images concerned with the war.<sup>16</sup> The following focuses on three key themes that emerge from analysis of the war newsreels and documentaries produced by the institute. The common thread which runs through all three themes is the deeply modern project of presenting the war as an enterprise through which pre-colonial African 'nature' was replaced with a civilised, technologically advanced Fascist 'second nature'. These themes highlight the key techno-social role which the moving image played in a process of purification of imaginations and representations of East Africa, resulting in the conceptual separation of a pre-Fascist, negative landscape ripe for transformation through mechanised war, technology and Fascist 'civilisation'.



The first analysed theme is perhaps counter-intuitive: the *absence of war*. The theme focuses on an aspect of newsreels and documentaries produced during 1935–1936, which is enlightening in view of the events that LUCE claimed to be reporting. During the 16 months in which the analysed reels and documentaries were filmed, over one million men were engaged in fighting throughout Ethiopia, over 300,000 combatants died, and Ethiopian cities and villages were occupied – and many others were bombed and destroyed. And yet, war footage is rare in LUCE newsreels: what prevails is images in which war is (strangely) absent. The argument here is that by sanitising war by not showing scenes of military struggle, the regime's cinematographers were able to construct the violent struggle for Ethiopia as a straightforward and positive process of creative destruction. The second theme focuses on the parallels between the war and Fascist Italy's 'civilising mission', in which civilisation, progress and development were represented as becoming part and parcel of a new, Fascist 'second nature' in Ethiopia. At the same time, the war was justified on the domestic front, and attempts were made by the regime (through LUCE) to represent Italians as united behind Mussolini in the conquest of Ethiopia (Stefani 2007). Thus, the third theme deals with the representation of home support for the war, the argument being that LUCE was utilised to literally project constructed consensus onto the national canvas.

### *The absence of war*

In LUCE's coverage of the Second Italo–Ethiopian War, the main subject and protagonist (the war itself) is strikingly absent. Although some newsreels and documentaries portrayed scenes of war, and although LUCE photographers produced 'action' photographs during the war, the majority of newsreels skirt around the issue of fighting, death and destruction. This may be an obvious point to make with regard to an institution charged with producing propaganda newsreels. However, what is striking about this absence is that in the war Italy's forces were victorious. No serious defeats were suffered by Italy's armies during the course of the Ethiopian campaign. Therefore, it could be expected that LUCE's newsreels would portray scenes of fighting leading to Italian victory. This was the case with regard to coverage of other wars: newsreels produced in 1940–1942, for example, contain ample footage of fighting and associated themes. However, newsreels about the 1935–1936 war are surprisingly silent on the theme of fighting. There are some exceptions to this observation. For example, a February 1936 newsreel, of slightly more than two minutes in length, shows an Italian assault on an enemy position on the Eritrean front (Giornale LUCE B0835, 19 February 1936). However, the fighting in the newsreel is always at a distance: there is footage of the artillery bombardment to which enemy positions are subjected, but there are no scenes of actual fighting. The assault itself is depicted as an artillery and aerial bombardment, followed by an orderly advance by both troops and light tanks. At the end of the newsreel, Italian soldiers are shown marching calmly into captured enemy territory.

Instead of war, LUCE utilised metaphorical images which alluded to war, and which were reassuring at the same time, presenting an image of an orderly, rational enterprise. This emphasis made the actual violence and destruction of war a side note, and highlighted a constructed notion of inevitability and 'progress'. For example, newsreels often focused on preparation and logistics. For example, a 1936 newsreel (Giornale LUCE B0879, 6 May 1936) about the penetration of Italian armed forces in Ethiopia and the capture of the city of Dese<sup>17</sup> begins with wide panoramas featuring military encampments. The footage employs a colonial gaze from the outset: the opening screen shows the outline of a soldier holding a rifle whilst sitting astride a

camel, shaded by a palm tree. The first few seconds of the newsreel are also overtly Orientalist, focusing on the armed forces' 'African' characteristics: camels and dromedaries used for transport, and *Ascari* (colonial) troops. The focus then shifts to columns of Italian and colonial troops heading into Ethiopian territory, ostensibly to capture what is described as an 'important centre', namely Dese. As mentioned, there is no footage of the battle for this important settlement. The only instances of suggested violence are scenes of Italian and colonial soldiers running to attack villages composed of thatched huts. War, instead, is alluded to through the camera's focus on Italian soldiers, rifles at the ready, sheltering behind rocks; and footage of organised, calm troops setting up machine guns. Italian Air Force aeroplanes are shown flying over this landscape in which the 'enemy' is invisible: troops point their guns, smoke rises in the distance, and aeroplanes patrol the sky. The invisibility of the colonial 'enemy' is part and parcel of the symbolic 'cleansing' of people from landscapes due for conquest (Schein 2009). In turn, the aeroplane is a symbol of Italian superiority over Ethiopian forces, a sign of technological domination. For example, another newsreel, from April 1936, focuses exclusively on the return of Vittorio and Vito Mussolini (the Duce's son and nephew) and Galeazzo Ciano (a bomber squadron commander) from a flight over Addis Ababa: the pilots are represented as aviator heroes, and the camera focuses on the Fascist death's head symbol on an aeroplane's fuselage (*Giornale LUCE* B0877, 29 April 1936). The symbol is clearly appreciated by Ciano, as is the slogan underneath it, which read *La Disperata* ('The desperate'), the nickname of the bomber squadron he commanded in Ethiopia. Ciano was later elevated to the position of Foreign Minister (on 9 June 1936) after his return from Ethiopia, a hero in the Fascist pantheon (Cole 1938): the figure of the aviator during the war has been described as a metaphor for civilisation (Stefani 2007). Nonetheless, it is clear from first-hand and other accounts that the use of aerial bombardment (conventional, gas and incendiary) was a key tool used for the subjugation of the Ethiopian landscape and for the destruction of villages and towns. Both Mussolini's sons, Vittorio and Bruno, 18 and 17 years of age respectively, volunteered for the air force during the campaign. In a written account from 1936 (Mussolini 1936), Vittorio recounted some of the violence implicit in the use of the Italian air force over Ethiopia:

In order to gain greater visibility, we had to burn mountains, plains, and villages ... it was a lot of fun, and the resulting effect was tragic, but beautiful ... all the Adi Abo was alight for days, since the fire advanced inexorably. During the night ... it was an unforgettable spectacle, something infernal. (Mussolini, 1936, in Stefani 2007, 64)

The colonial 'enemy' does make an appearance in the newsreel. Dese is tellingly referred to as a key city for the 'Ethiopian Empire'. This can be seen as an attempt to make the Ethiopian 'Other' into a formidable foe which Fascist military might could face and overcome: it is more impressive to overcome an Empire (the reality represented by LUCE) than thousands of Ethiopian troops armed only with pre-1900 rifles. As the newsreel progresses and Italian troops are shown capturing Dese, Ethiopian troops are finally shown in detail: the reel focuses on captured troops, and in particular on individuals bearing scars from the fighting. However, the newsreel also features four instances when Ethiopians are shown bowing submissively to Italian military authorities. Ethiopian women, on the other hand, are shown applauding Italian troops as they enter the conquered villages, highlighting the focus on Italian masculinity and on the presentation of eroticised images of colonial women which has been widely noted by scholars of Italian and European colonialism (Hyam 1990; McClintock 1995; Stefani 2007). At the end of the newsreel, an Italian flag is shown being planted in a conquered field. Following this, the camera zooms in on the flag, and an Italian soldier's rugged face appears next to it. However, the

image of Ethiopian troops that was constructed through newsreels is one of defeated individuals. Italian soldiers, on the other hand, are portrayed as disciplined members of an organised, liberating force. Therefore, in this newsreel, the violence and military action of war is absent: the domination of Ethiopia is presented as a logical consequence of the application of Fascist technology, order and logistics to the Ethiopian landscape.

### *War and Italy's 'civilising mission'*

As seen above, war was largely absent in LUCE newsreels concerning the Second Italo–Ethiopian War produced at the time of the conflict. However, as may be expected from propaganda produced by the invading forces of a state with colonial and imperial ambitions, newsreels and documentaries showed various examples of ways in which the war brought Italian Fascism's 'civilisational' impulse to bear on 'backward' Ethiopia. This myth of a benign, progressive Italy bringing roads, rational New Towns and *espresso* to East African colonies was propagated by LUCE, and has lasted to this day in Italian public opinion. Indeed, it is only recently that 'new' historiographies of Italian colonialism have challenged this simplistic and ideologically loaded view (Stefani 2007). Through LUCE, the war was portrayed as a necessary invasion, a period of creative destruction required in order to provide enlightened Italian authorities with a clean slate on which to impress Italy's progressive, technological and educational mission in Africa.

A documentary from 1936, titled *L'Avanzata delle truppe italiane* ('The advance of the Italian troops'), exemplifies the types and range of 'civilisational' images presented on screen to audiences in Italy. The footage, 12 minutes in length, begins with an aerial view of the city of Asmara, in Eritrea. This is quickly followed by scenes of houses and various buildings. This may not seem remarkable, but what is interesting is that the documentary focuses on the electric and telephone wires criss-crossing the air over the houses, exemplifying the twin axes of Fascist technological networks: electrification and the installation of networks of communication. In turn, it can be argued that the visualisation of these networks is an example of the visual and symbolic role of notions of ordering and rationalisation of landscapes previously constructed as wild and untamed. Subsequently, the camera shows workers busy installing telephone lines in the colonial city. The focus then shifts to the military advance into Abyssinia. The documentary makes the point that Italian military communications were technologically superior in a way that aided the control of a vast desert territory: there is ample footage of military outposts in the desert, interspersed with scenes where reconnaissance aeroplanes fly over the landscape. Air force aeroplanes are also shown dropping packages with messages for officers in desert areas, helping to maintain speedy and constant communications over unfamiliar territory. Technology, exemplified by aviation, helped to figuratively master Ethiopia 'from above' (Rochat 2000; Caprotti 2011b, 2011c), and indeed the documentary includes images of various landscapes taken from the air, highlighting the role of the airborne technological gaze in surveying and dominating a soon-to-be colonial landscape.

As stated, LUCE documentaries about the war focused in large part on the perceived *benefits* that would accrue to conquered populations through defeat to superior Italian armies. Thus, the process of creative destruction through which a negative African 'first nature' was replaced with a positive Fascist 'second nature' was represented as an essentially positive and edifying evolution. For example, the documentary described above is in large part concerned with Italian forces' march into Abyssinia. However, towards the end of the documentary there are also scenes that aim to justify the advance into Ethiopian territory. In one such scene, Italian soldiers

are shown chest-deep in a muddy hole, undergoing strenuous physical exertion whilst digging a well. The results of their efforts are shown a few seconds later, with scenes of water disgoring from a pipe linked to the well. The vignette concludes with the screening of Italian soldiers in a group, witnessing the working of the newly installed water pump at the well. Fascism's 'civilisational', positive and modernising colonial influence is clearly showcased in the documentary, which shows Italian forces making water available, on tap, in a desert environment. This is achieved through Italian engineering and labour, and through a reworking and ordering of an unordered (and unproductive) African nature by rational, technologically advanced colonial forces. The recalcitrant, sterile desert is bent to Fascist power, which causes water to flow from the ground freely.

The link between war and Fascism's 'mission' in Ethiopia is made even clearer in a newsreel from March 1936, which focuses on the organisation of logistical support for the Italian advance on the Somali front (Giornale LUCE B0846, 11 March 1936). The focus of the newsreel is mainly on army food provision. However, the reel begins with footage of trenches on the front. The camera then shifts to consider Italian soldiers working on water pumps by the side of a river: nature being channelled and dominated by Fascism in the wake of advancing troops. As has been pointed out by several scholars (Kaïka 2006; Renes and Piastra 2011), representations of networks of water are a highly symbolic form of representation of techno-social modernity.

### *Newsreels and the representation of the Italian public's reaction to the war*

As seen earlier, LUCE newsreels and documentaries about the war in Ethiopia focused in large part on Fascist Italy's victories in the campaign, and on the regime's 'civilising' effects on Ethiopia, through modern technology, planning and scientific knowledge. The propagandistic aims of these filmic artefacts in respect of the domestic, Italian audience are clear: LUCE attempted to transmit an image of a victorious, almost effortless war. The foe (the Ethiopian 'Empire') was constructed as inferior and disorganised through rhetorical visual means, and promptly vanquished (on screen, at least) through the representation of Fascist Italy's superior armed forces and technology. However, LUCE also produced newsreels about the Italian public's reaction to, or more accurately support of, the war. These reels were produced at the same time as the institute was commissioning footage of the advances from Eritrea and Italian Somaliland into Abyssinia and Ethiopia. The reels acted as a filmic 'mirror' for the Italian public: LUCE presented the domestic front with images of a country enthusiastic about the war, rejoicing in the army's advances, and united behind the Fascist regime in the conquest of a territory to be annexed by the Italian Empire.

The war was, initially, represented as an endeavour made possible by the efforts of every Fascist citizen. Several LUCE products covered 'voluntary' donations, in late 1935 and 1936, of precious metals required by the regime in order to support the war in Ethiopia.<sup>18</sup> It must be noted that the institute was also involved in documenting the more mundane collection of scrap metal and other items (including war medals), which could potentially be used for the war effort.<sup>19</sup> The most publicised donations, of gold, silver and other metals, took place at times in highly public locations. LUCE's cameras highlighted the ceremonies staged in city squares: citizens were shown placing their wedding rings on piles of other 'donated' rings. For example, a documentary from 1935, titled *L'atto di fede del popolo italiano* ('The Italian people's act of faith'), focused on the main ring donation ceremony, held at the Vittoriano monument in central Rome. The monument, also known as the 'Altar of the Motherland' (*Altare della Patria*) was the stage on which mainly married women and men (nuns are also shown donating rings) donated gold rings

as an 'act of faith' towards Fascism and Italy's Ethiopian war. Images of individuals placing their rings into a bronze container are interspersed with footage of Italian and colonial troops marching in Ethiopia. The documentary then focuses on Mussolini, speaking to the gathered crowds from a podium. The Duce is heard lauding the war, and claiming:

The war we began in Africa is a war of a poor people, a proletarian people, a struggle we will endure until the end. We will need time, but when you are engaged in a struggle it is not time which matters, but victory.

Then Mussolini walks towards the crowds, and footage shows women clamouring to place their wedding rings directly into his hands. The documentary's overt message is clear: public support for the regime's war aims. The aims which underpin this overt message were LUCE's attempt to represent and mirror a Fascist 'reality' to Italians themselves: a reality in which the Second Ethiopian War was justified, and around which there existed (at least on screen) a clear consensus and unity of purpose.

LUCE was also active in representing Italian consensus and unity in supporting the foundation of an empire seen as the start of a new, colonial era of Italian and Fascist history. In this light, the screening of constructed consensus serves to justify and rationalise a war that other newsreels, as seen earlier, depicted as a harbinger of progress and of Fascist 'second nature' to Ethiopia. For example, a newsreel produced a week after Italy declared victory in Ethiopia, in May 1936, shows Roman women celebrating the outcome of the war (Giornale LUCE B0883, 13 May 1936). The women, wearing civilian and militia clothing, are shown streaming into the square in front of the Quirinale building in Rome, acclaiming the king, who made an appearance from a balcony. The newsreel focuses almost exclusively on the female crowd's jubilation, and on their celebration of a Fascist victory: there are parallels with reels showing Ethiopian women acclaiming Italian troops, as already noted. Another example of the filmic construction of domestic support is a documentary produced for a Spanish audience. The documentary, *La marcha de la civilización: el surgir de un imperio* ('The march of civilisation: the emergence of an empire'), shows the various stages of the war. The final scenes focus on a powerful image, by showing Mussolini speaking, at night, from his balcony on Palazzo Venezia in Rome. The building is illuminated, and the square below the balcony is thronged with people listening to Mussolini's words as he declares victory in Ethiopia, and the birth of an Italian Empire. This moment was constructed as the culmination of a national and progressive struggle to annex Ethiopia and to turn its pre-Fascist nature into a modern, Fascist colony.

### **Conclusion: an invisible war**

The representation of war in LUCE newsreels and documentaries in 1935–1936 is interesting in light of the institutional, political and ideological context in which the regime's propaganda institutions operated in the 1930s. War (in this case, the Second Italo–Ethiopian War) was constructed in specific and deeply modern political-ideological ways, and used as a metaphor by LUCE's cinematographers. Fighting, violence and destruction (the quintessential characteristics of armed struggle) were hidden, invisible, in the regime's representation of the military campaign in East Africa. Rather, war was used as a foil for something else: the imposition of a Fascist 'second nature' on a country constructed as primitive, sterile and ripe for domination. The tool through which a pre-Fascist 'first nature' was separated from a subsequent, idealised Fascist 'second nature' was the showcasing of the war as a mechanism through which Fascist 'civilisation' was brought to bear on the colony. In turn, this was carried out by utilising the war as an example of a modern process of creative destruction: the bringing of technology and

rationality to bear on a new colony and on its Fascist development through the machinery of warfare. Acts of war themselves remained largely hidden in LUCE's newsreels: the war was thus idealised and mythologised. As Del Boca and Labanca have argued with regard to the production of photographs about the war by the LUCE institute:

LUCE ... did not only document military conquest, but also the domination of nature: the 'new Italian' not only dominated the 'barbarians' of Abyssinia, but also nature. Nature was bent to the will of Fascism, which punched holes through mountains and was not afraid of laying asphalt strips though the Danalia desert with its volcanoes, lava flows and basalt flats. (Del Boca and Labanca 2002, 15).

The effects of this process of deletion of the subject (and here the subject is not only war, but those it obliterates, namely colonised peoples) stand in stark contrast to the dark reality of the Abyssinian War. Through an 'invisible' cinematographic war in Ethiopia, the Fascist regime not only neutralised the unpalatable aspects of war, but deleted the presence of Africans from Ethiopia and from the East African landscape. In so doing, newsreel and documentary production became a process of 'Othering' through which the dominated and colonised could only be seen, and understood, in the key of Fascist domination: as subjugated populations, conceptually placed into the category of an Ethiopian 'first nature' which, by virtue of its 'primitive' character, had to be eliminated and replaced with a compliant and progressive Fascist 'second nature'.

## Notes

1. This article is based on historical documents from Mussolini's personal government archive, the *Segreteria Particolare del Duce*, and in particular from the *Carteggio Ordinario* (SPDCO) and *Carteggio Riservato* collections (SPDCR), held at the Central State Archive (ACS) in Rome. Newsreels and documentaries were sourced from the LUCE Institute's Historical Archive. Please see the bibliography for hyperlinks to the full LUCE newsreels. All translations from the Italian are the author's, as are any resulting errors.
2. A tendency which resulted in action as varied as Italian intervention in the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), and support for Palestinian groups (Williams 2006).
3. Poison gas was used in Ethiopia by the Italian Air Force until 1939 (Mignemi 1982; Del Boca 1996, 2005).
4. Other organisations placed under the ministry's remit included the national tourist industry organisation (Ente Nazionale per le Industrie Turistiche, or ENIT), and the national radio broadcast corporation (Ente Italiano Audizioni Radiofoniche, or EIAR).
5. Most British and American newspapers were readmitted in May–August 1937.
6. This was the case in Italy, even though propaganda was not as widely utilised and developed as in Germany or the USSR (Reeves 1999).
7. In 1924 the LUCE Institute's founder, journalist and lawyer Luciano de Feo, had in fact founded the *Sindacato Istruzione Cinema*, or Union for Educational Cinema, a small independent company which was the precursor of the LUCE Institute (De Grazia and Luzzato 2002; Brunetta 2003). At the time of LUCE's inception, the President was Senator de Michelis, the Vice-President was Marquis Paulucci de Calboli and the Director-General was De Feo (Brunetta 2003).
8. Mussolini to Cremonesi, October 7, 1927. ACS, SPDCO. B. 1251, f.509.797/1.
9. Report to Mussolini, March 25, 1935. ACS, SPDCO. B. 1251, f.509.797/1.
10. Ibid.
11. Distribution report, 1931. ACS: SPDCO, B. 1251, f.509.797/1.
12. Cabinet Head, Minister for Colonies to Chiavolini, May 8, 1926. ACS, SPDCO. B. 1251, f.509.797/1.
13. Cremonesi to Mussolini, May 4, 1926. ACS, SPDCO. B. 1251, f.509.797/1.
14. See note 12.
15. Report to undersecretary for war, the navy, air force, colonies and head of the M.S.V.N., date unspecified. ACS, SPDCO. B. 1251, f.509.797/1.
16. For LUCE's own analysis of photographic representations of the war, see Del Boca and Labanca (2002).
17. Dese is referred to as 'Dessie' in the newsreel.

18. For analysis of marriage ring donation ceremonies, see Berezin (1997) and Falasca-Zamponi (1997).  
 19. See, for example, the photographic record of scrap and household metal collection: LUCE, *Roma – Raccolta Metalli per la Patria*, November 20, 1935 (seven photographs).

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