

## ***Il cammino degli eroi: the empire as a mark of modernity. Representations of colonial power in a famous regime documentary***

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This article examines the most important documentary film about the Italian 'victory' in Ethiopia, *Il cammino degli eroi*, by Corrado D'Errico (1936), the primary aim being to shed light on its complex iconographic system of representation. The first part examines the representation of the 'African Mussolini'. In the second part, the article analyses the 'conqueror's gaze' in the visual perspective employed by D'Errico in his account of the new Italian colony. The third part is devoted to arguing the juxtaposition between 'Italian Creation and Ethiopian apocalypse'. Finally, the last part of the article deals with the reasons for the Ethiopian war.

**Keywords:** Fascism; Ethiopia; empire; documentary; Mussolini

### **Introduction**

As several scholars have pointed out (Ben-Ghiat 2015; Mignemi 1984; Bottoni 2008), Fascism employed various media to spread its propaganda. At the same time, Fascism was not a monolithic entity with the ability to convey a ubiquitous customised message. In terms of 'discourse analysis' (Foucault 2007) or from the point of view of subjectivity, defining Fascism simply as a meaning-production machine is an oversimplification. It certainly was a totalitarian regime and through its organisation it attempted to exert a multifaceted control over Italian culture, from literature to movies, serving, as Ben-Ghiat has suggested, a double function: representation and change. However, stating that the regime exerted its power over everything that happened in Italy is different from implying that Fascism co-authored every film-maker's or writer's work.

At the same time, as Deplano (2015) has argued, it is appropriate to look at the propaganda machine from a wider perspective, beginning with the reconquest of Libya (1922–1932). From this perspective, indeed, one can identify a *longue durée* process of 'vulgarisation' of colonial topics or, in other words, the attempt to transform the perception of the overseas as an exotic land into a real life opportunity for Italians. In 1929, in an attempt to improve public knowledge and awareness of the colonies, the regime established the Istituto Coloniale Fascista (ICF), headed by Gaetano Venino, whose role was to involve the Gruppo Universitario Fascista (GUF) in colonialist propaganda and the organisation of the *Giornata Coloniale*.

From 1932 to 1936, Mussolini resolved to revamp his formerly mighty consensus machine. His speech from the balcony of the Palazzo Venezia on 9 May 1936 proclaimed the annexation of Ethiopia and the birth of the Italian Empire. The following year, the Ministero delle Colonie changed its name to Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, a clear sign of Mussolini's intention to make the colonial question a fundamental aspect of everyday life. Meanwhile, the ICF became the

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Istituto dell’Africa Italiana and Angelo Piccioli, head of its research department, was appointed to oversee colonialist propaganda. Among his projects were new primary school textbooks dating the Italian arrival in Africa back to the late nineteenth-century missionary expeditions led by, amongst others, Giovanni Miani and Guglielmo Massaja; educational cruises for adults and students; public exhibitions; and colonial literary contests. Cinema was one of the main tools employed to shape national consciousness.

As Ben-Ghiat (2015, 20) has noted, Fascism’s imperial cinema developed in parallel with films produced in other countries, while ‘shared needs to innovate in the realm of film propaganda kept circuits of international influence flowing among Axis and Allied nations’.. At the same time, the regime used every available medium as a tool for propaganda, such as newspapers, literature, radio and television broadcasts, etc.

This article examines the most important documentary produced on the occasion of the Italian ‘victory’ in Ethiopia, *Il cammino degli eroi*, by Corrado D’Errico, with music by Giovanni Fusco. Excerpts from the film, understood here as a colonial visual archive of previous productions by LUCE, are analysed and some reflections are offered. In this context, the expression ‘imperial imaginary’ is used to identify narrations of the Italian Empire in their entirety, focusing on intertwined and overlapping visual, oral and written levels.

### **The ‘African Mussolini’: time and space of Italian modernity**

One of the most prominent Fascist screenwriters and film directors, Corrado D’Errico was born in Rome in 1902. He began his career with several short films, such as *Stramilano* (1929), *Ritmi di stazione, impressioni di vita n. 1* (1933) and *La ragazza ladra* (1934), before making his feature-length debut with *Freccia d’oro* (1935), the dramatic story of a train robbery, which he co-directed with Pietro Ballerini. His short but influential career encompassed a variety of genres, including comedy: *I fratelli Castiglioni* (1937), based on Alberto Colantuoni’s book; *Stella di mare* (1938), the tale of a fisherman who pursues a musical career; and *Miseria e nobiltà* (1940), a love story between young nobleman Eugenio and Gemma, the daughter of a former cook. He also directed two adventure movies based on Emilio Salgari’s epic tales, *Capitan Tempesta* (1942) and *Il leone di Damasco* (1942) on the fight between the Christian alliance and the Muslim Turks during and after the 1571 siege of Famagusta.

Funded by the LUCE Institute to celebrate the colonial ‘victory’ in Ethiopia, *Il cammino degli eroi* was presented at the IV Mostra del Cinema di Venezia and received the Special PNF Prize for best socio-political film in 1936. The documentary can be regarded not only as both *part* and *outcome* of LUCE’s activity since its foundation in 1924, but also as a *visual archive* of several different narrative fragments on the Horn of Africa from its past productions. The latter interpretive perspective will be applied to the review of selected fragments of representation. As used here, the notion of archive is theoretically based on Stoler (2010); however, rather than seeing the materiality of the colony as being (re)interpreted by colonial bureaucracy through the archive’s records, it is the construction of the visual archive itself that is believed to ‘make’ the colonial world. Edward Said’s suggestions in *Orientalism* (1978) are of great relevance for the construction of narrative models – which in the case of *Il cammino degli eroi* relied on Italian and other colonialisms’ discourses – and the ‘creation’ of the colony. Fragments of previous visual discourses, such as the myth of Rome used during the 1911–12 colonial war in Libya (Proglia 2016) and by French and English colonialisms (Bénabou 1976; Freeman 1996, Hingley 1996), became part of the archive and were re-used for the Ethiopian war. In this perspective, the term ‘imperial imaginary’ means a series of discourses that re-signify previous fragments of cultural

memory in support of the goals of Fascist colonialist propaganda – introducing Italians to the state's new nature and role after the conquest of Ethiopia. At the same time, not only does 'imperial imaginary' describe a narrative practice of the regime, but also a set of images revolving around desires and fantasies as they may have been perceived by the documentary's audience.

*Il cammino degli eroi* strives to present Italy as a nation just as capable of conquering a piece of Africa as the other European countries, a distinct facet of LUCE's production since 1935: all Italian accomplishments in the Horn of Africa were celebrated in newsreels, from the Duca degli Abruzzi's journey to Somalia (*Viaggio del Duca degli Abruzzi*, 1935) to volunteers for Oriental Africa (*Volontari per l'Africa Orientale*, 1935), and troop deployment to Italian-built roads overseas (*Strade romane in terra d'oltremare*, 1936). The documentary featured German and French subtitles from its very first screening, as its intended audience was both European diplomats and Italians – to whom its message was directed without distinctions of class and place of origin. The first part showcases the social, economic and political goals achieved by the regime. It is only in the second half that war in Ethiopia is introduced.

Several scholars have analysed D'Errico's documentary. Courriol (2014) has framed her analysis within the larger context of visual production from 1935 to 1939, showing the relationships between fiction and non-fiction colonial-themed productions in terms of narrative strategies and realism. Ben-Ghiat and Bagnoni have suggested an interesting interpretive framework likening the camera to a weapon that effectively affirms a Fascist aesthetic in juxtaposition with Weimar rhetoric and Russian constructivism (Zagarrio 2004) as a defence against the 'bloody aggression' by 'savage hordes' (Ben-Ghiat, 2015, 72). Amodeo (2009, 168) focused her attention on *popolarismo* and presented the Italian colonial adventure as 'a populist movement having as its goal indiscriminate inclusion of all social classes and groups'. In this regard, the first part of the documentary – focusing on the representation of Italian factory workers in their home country – is an obvious prelude to the conquest of Ethiopian farming land that will be distributed to peasants. Dogliani (2008, 136) quoted *Il cammino degli eroi* in her social history research on the role of culture in the modernisation of the country, while Del Boca (1981) focused his attention on the exalted style employed in the Ethiopian epic narrative. Ellena (1999, 168) affirmed that the film is not a chronological tale of the quick invasion of Ethiopia, but rather the outcome of 'organisational effort and spiritual climate'.

According to Ellena, the narration discloses several time and space dimensions of Italian modernity. In fact, the documentary opens with the image of an 'African Mussolini' (Fig. 1) sculpted on a rock, whose profile is reminiscent of the Egyptian sphinx (Bosworth 2002). The statue, huge in size as was customary in 1930s political architecture, was erected near Adwa in northern Ethiopia where, in 1896, the Italian forces had suffered a shameful defeat at the hands of Menelik II, whose monument in Addis Ababa, together with the Lion of Judah's, was removed by order of Mussolini. The 'African Mussolini' seems to be looking upon the desert with a conqueror's gaze and pointing to the power shift in Ethiopia. Clearly, employing the public space for political and, in this case, colonial reasons was meant to send an unequivocal message to the world: that Mussolini and Fascism were able to conquer Ethiopia and control the desert, which was, in the European imaginary, a space of natural menace and bellicose populations. For the Ethiopian people, this representation was the sign of a new cultural order in their country.

Certainly, this representation of the Duce was not a sign of cultural contamination by the African context. As several scholars have argued (Poidimani 2009; Barrera 1996; Srgoni 1998; Nani and Petrugaro 2009), contact with the Ethiopian people – subjects of the empire to all extents and purposes – generated a complex law system aimed at preventing interracial relations. Hence, the 'African Mussolini' is not a symbol of introjection of African behaviours or symbolic fragments of non-European cultures in the Fascist sphere. On the contrary, this representation – which



Fig 1. The African Mussolini.

is so distant from both the Latin myth of Rome (Giardina and Vauchez 2008) and the idea of the Mediterranean as a Fascist zone of influence beyond Italy's borders (Trinchese 2005; Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop 2012) – needs to be explained as the internalisation of national and spiritual values through the adoption of an external symbol. In the Fascist regime's imaginary, Italians descended from the stock of Romulus and Remus and also had a close link with the Greek tradition through the mythical figure of Aeneas, who arrived on the shores of Lazio after the battle of Troy, as Virgil recounts in the *Aeneid*. Hence, there is not any 'imaginary' room for a link between the Fascist and the African tradition: the 'African Mussolini' is just an expression of the colonial conquest. In fact, the majestic sphinx-like profile is a symbol void of its original significance, a trophy of sorts to mark the new imperial status: the colony becomes an added space of narration in order to re-signify the representation of Italy and Italians. In terms of Foucauldian analysis (Foucault 2007), the shift from managing discourse – with its own rules and relations – to inventing a new present through a unique, *in fieri* narrative is quite clear. In ancient Egypt, the sphinx was entrusted with guarding the entrance to the Great Pyramid of Giza; then in Greek culture it was regarded as a mythical creature, a daughter of Orthrus and either the Chimera or Echidna, or perhaps Ceto; in Europe, it was revived by Raphael and other Renaissance painters. All these perspectives shared the view of the sphinx as a dangerous mythological guardian of the threshold, and the depiction of Mussolini as a sphinx in Ethiopia was certainly not a matter of chance. The 'African Mussolini' was not only the guardian of Fascist values and spirituality against cultural contamination by the African people but also a symbol of the aggressive Italian military stance against Ethiopian attempts at resistance. Furthermore, it represented Italy's pre-eminence among other European nations – and the birth of an empire equal to that of the pharaohs. The Fascist regime, in fact, envisaged using Ethiopia both to achieve broader domestic consensus and to show the entire world that the nation was armed and ready to fight a modern war.

Accordingly, it is understandable that a colonial documentary on the Ethiopian adventure essentially consisted of an exaltation of the Fascist regime's goals. The pompous, bombastic voice-over states:

You do not win the war with weapons only. Behind the troops, a gigantic machine is set in motion to ensure efficiency and strength. Flashing bayonets and victory flags waving are what the world sees, yet

victory not only rewards the impetuous ardour of the troops but also crowns the rugged, tough and sleepless efforts of ingenuity, will and perseverance that supported, protected and led them to their glorious goal. From the outset, meticulous planning ensured that equipment and supplies shipped to the expeditionary force, thousands of kilometres away from the motherland, would not experience any delay. Daily requirements were met through increased production in military plants. (All voice-over translations by the author)

Meanwhile, different images follow one another on the screen: the Latin gladius, a symbol of tradition; several working smokestacks, the hallmarks of achieved modernity; factory wheels turning and men carrying sacks on their backs: all represent the integration between technology and human knowledge. The ability to supply food to the nation and cater to its needs is symbolised by a gigantic industrial process that has men and women work in fast-paced environments and Fordist-like assembly lines. The Italian military ration was the output of an efficient manufacturing process as shown in the documentary, while military trucks and aircraft ‘provided transportation from the homeland (*madrepatria*) to the other shore.’ D’Errico opted for two different camera shots in this scene: while a long take of the manufacturing plants underscores the sequential nature of the industrial processes, a camera dolly zooms in, drawing the audience into the entropic movement.

The voice-over boasts:

Confident in their performance, conscious of their own civilising mission and the higher need for a new place in the sun, all kinds of Italians from all walks of life were struck by the desire to go to sea, all aristocrats were drawn to the work of weapons, thought, and blood.

In the background, thousands gather to see the troops off. Every man who is leaving the homeland is considered part of the nation. Fathers kiss their young children and husbands kiss their wives. Bruno and Vittorio Mussolini, Galeazzo Ciano, and Prince Umberto are among this boisterous crowd.

As affirmed by Frescani (210, 231–251), the debate on 1930s Fascist documentaries reveals that their intent was not to provide a fantastic narration or a realistic representation of the country; rather it was to document the present. Adopting the hypothesis of the colony as a space of (re) signification, the chronological progression of time from past to future is nullified by a *centrifugal* force: the conquest of Ethiopia has reset the timeline to a present continuum. The proclamation of the empire on 9 May 1936 marked the beginning of a new Fascist era and propaganda was integrated into a larger narrative in which past events, leaders and objects were deliberately used to forge an ego-boosting sense of belonging to a superior entity: the *patria*. Fascist party leaders were equated with Roman emperors and warriors, Risorgimento heroes, or even explorers of the past such as Massaja. A specific rhetoric of Italianness was devised, based on the employment of carefully selected past and present fragments of the national imaginary.

As regards linguistic and symbolic registers, the undifferentiated approach of propaganda was yet another hallmark of the magnetic power of Fascist colonial discourse: founding myths speak to everyone in the same way. Roger Griffin remarks that Fascism attempted to regenerate time through social engineering (1998); indeed, rather than developing an accurate, consistent, chronological narrative of Italy’s long history, empire celebrations served to legitimise and extol the virtues of a new Italianness – with its own leaders, myths and rituals. Further, providing a contrasting image to the European pre-Fascist discourse about Italy as a backward, ‘lazy’ country, militarily inactive and lacking national unity, the documentary attempted to prove the birth of a new aggressive, forceful and belligerent nation. The distortion of time and space is the outcome of a *centripetal* force that tries to re-invent Italy beyond narratives of national shame, as suggested by Patriarca (2010). A new idea of Italianness is offered and shared through public

rituals, a primary vehicle for the regime's propaganda: a wide range of values and beliefs – e.g., Italy's civilising mission – forge the national identity as strictly Fascist and imperial, allied to Nazi Germany and in antagonism to the other European countries. Fascist modernity is the result of a helical mechanism where centrifugal and centripetal forces act simultaneously and have interrelated, interdependent motion. Once again, the cult of the Duce is used as a propaganda tool to advance the new goals of Fascism. Accordingly, the 'African Mussolini' is the sign that Italy has reached a superior stage of development, civilisation and progress, made possible by colonialism and imperialism.

### A man's world, a conqueror's gaze

Gender opposition marks the boarding scenes: soldiers kiss their beloved wives and children and hug their relatives before embarking (Fig. 2). While wives and mothers wait for the ships' departure, several soldiers on the decks hold up posters of Mussolini and the men on the piers, some of them wearing colonial helmets, wave goodbye. As McClintock asserts, family metaphors offer 'a "natural" figure for sanctioning national hierarchy within a putative organic unity of interest', and 'a "natural" trope for figuring national time' (1995, 357). Clearly, colonial war was a men's thing, as Stefani acknowledges in her exhaustive work on Ethiopian-war memoirs (2007), to the extent that 'the colonial war in Ethiopia became the catalyst through which Fascism tried to channel Italian men's anxieties and desire for regeneration'. Africa became, then, the space for the solution of their identity crisis and for the full expression of their masculinity (40).

In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said describes the notion of 'imaginative geographies', arguing that the production of geographical knowledge in Europe relied on the mapping techniques that underpinned the imperial project, the outcome of several genealogies of power based on the centrality of the colonial role. Visuality, in particular, and the construction of a colonial gaze are essential to the representation of the Other and otherness, as demonstrated by Mirzoeff (1998). Similarly, Anderson (1991) has pointed out how different narrations can combine to lay the foundation of an imagined community; again, the internalisation and mental visualisation of



Fig. 2. A soldier hugs his mother.



Fig. 3. Massawa harbour, aerial view.

national myths and symbols are instrumental in building cultural borders. Several scholars have problematised the relationship between different forms of representation for the colony and the nation. Hall (1992), for instance, has pointed out the role of the colonies, and especially Jamaica, in providing the benchmarks for redefining British white masculinity, while Sinha (1995) has focused on the case of India in the same interpretive perspective and Martin-Marquez (1999) has analysed the issue as regards Spain and Morocco. Several Italian scholars have argued the mutual influence between colonial and domestic contexts in the construction of gender categories and genealogies (Sòrgoni 1998; Barrera 1996, 2002; Ellena 2010; Bini 2003; Campassi and Segà 1983; Surdich 1979; Poidimani 2009).

Walter Benjamin and, in particular, his view of the editing process as a historical method, can assist in understanding this. He speaks of representing an event with the indicative use of '*Lumpen und Abfall*' – 'rags and waste' – by which he means fragments from the past, to create a visual representation (*Zeigen*) of the present, where 'the tool of communication is the word, the object the thing, and its recipient the man' (Benjamin 1981, 60).

Several scholars have applied Benjamin's thought to analysis of new media (Tiedeman 1999; Buck-Morss, 1989; Jennings et al. 1999; Berger and Mohr 1975; Peaker 2000; Michals 2001; Lederman 2000) suggesting that the editing process plays a relevant role in proposing and imposing a specific narrative in every media narration. In this case, the visual production is the output of a careful and conscious manipulation of images and imposes a common level in which every observer in the audience is considered part of a community.

The coexistence of a subjective gaze and a shared image of the colony is also described, albeit from a different perspective, by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963). In his analysis of relationships during French colonialism and the Algerian revolution, he shows that despite the diversity of leading figures and adopted practices in the administrative and military management of the colony, the 'national propaganda machine' pursued the construction of a collective colonial imaginary and achieved the creation of a common, shared view of the territories located outside the national borders but within France's zone of influence. The subjective gaze and the common view of the colony are also two visual devices at play in *Il cammino degli eroi*.



Fig. 4. Mogadishu harbour, aerial view.

Part 2 of the documentary opens with the image of two anchors, immediately followed by an aerial view of Massawa harbour (fig. 3): the footage is accompanied by epic music. The camera moves from the ships to the nearby houses. After a few seconds, the visual narrative shifts to the other Italian landing site, Mogadishu (fig. 4). The speaker affirms:

The sudden energetic bustle in two harbours 6,000 miles apart interrupted the biblical tranquillity of the Red Sea and the angry vastness of the Indian Ocean. Not only did they serve as crucial bases for the Italian military operations, but also injected new life into the Ethiopian community.

Meanwhile, images of the landing are shown: cars, tractors, a '*Littorina*' train, a camel and a horse, trucks and supplies. Then Italian soldiers disembark from the ship, tiny cogs in the huge military machine. Unlike in the boarding scene, now they all look equal, without any difference as regards uniforms or emotions, as a result of the radical change of context. Indeed, for the first time since the beginning of the documentary, and from a higher vantage point than the Ethiopians', the camera introduces the Italian audience to the subject population: whether they are on a raft or helping with landing operations under the soldiers' gaze, they always act in unison and without any autonomy.

In light of the adopted theoretical framework, some interpretive suggestions may be offered. Both the panoramic view and the higher angle shots belong to the visual language of conquest. In the first case, the aerial shot is closely related to the idea of being able to monitor the entire African land. Hence, it is a metaphor for the colonial power, which is capable of controlling the Ethiopian people and all sorts of resources. The higher angle shots convey a comparison with the Ethiopian population, highlighting Italy's far greater development in terms of civilisation, technology and progress. These visual devices act in two different directions: showing all Italians as part of a collective community while, on the other hand, defining Italianness in comparison with Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Somali subjects.

### **Italian Creation versus Ethiopian apocalypse**

*Il cammino degli eroi* continues with an account of the infrastructures built by Italians, such as roads and railways. This is where the ongoing metaphor of the colony as a body, conquered with





Fig. 5. Italian military column.

the help of cars, trains and ships, can be observed. The contrast between colony and Italy, nature and technology, primordial life and progress is evident. The narration is sprinkled with a large number of symbols; cars, buses and lorries move along the roads as the voice-over describes the scene (Fig. 5):

Long freight trains on the upgraded tracks and fast lorries travelling on recently built roads assured the delivery of all supplies to the heart of the colony, while Somali trails were filled with powerful tractors able to haul equipment on navigable rivers.

The film-maker uses different kinds of camera movement techniques: a long take of workers in a mechanic workshop precedes other fragments, shot with a fixed camera, showing big tractors as they crawl through the farmland, followed by Italian soldiers on foot. 'The conquest proceeded,' narrates the voice-over, 'for several kilometres, in a country that bore signs of apocalyptic natural disasters.' Old Ethiopia is regarded as being akin to the end of the world; conversely, a new Ethiopia is generated or, better, 'created' by Italians. As the vehicles move forward, new streets are 'are born by the hour'. Over the course of a military campaign that lasted several months, 'hundreds of workers and soldiers' contributed to this 'Roman work'. Bass sounds accompany the attempt to pull a truck out of the sand, while military vehicles are shown crossing the rivers and climbing the hills. The battle against nature implies the tireless organisation of human efforts: several soldiers are shown pushing trucks, removing rocks that block the road, digging with shovels, building power lines and leading groups of Askari. Nature is eventually dominated: trees are cut, bridges are built over rivers, and streets spring up in the middle of meadows and forests. The physical strength of the Italian men – moving as a collective body, synchronising their arms and legs, projects and achievements – is a determining factor in the advance of the troops. Their goal is conquest, and a slow-motion panoramic shot allows the film-maker to provide a visual narration of the conquered land.

Timely, uninterrupted supplies in the most distant areas were ensured by aircraft. For the first time in the world, aircraft delivered supplies to entire military departments.

After these words, the view from a plane provides the audience with a new perspective on the African land: the military procurement system turns the advance of the troops into the symbol

of a progressive, continued and radical transformation of the country. At the same time, soldiers are part of a collective community and they are still part of the Italian nation even when deployed beyond its borders. Far from being compared to machines, they are used by propaganda to express the idea of Italian masculinity and the goal is achieved through images of their spouses mailing letters: the powerful nation can guarantee that all correspondence from Italy – symbolised by a mail-plane flying over Rome – will arrive in Africa after a few stopovers. The ‘Posta militare di Asmara’ delivers letters to every soldier and, from an emotional point of view, reconnects these Italians to their country, their families and their loved ones. The smiles on the soldiers’ faces, while they are sitting on the floor reading their mail, are a symbol of the country’s power, too.

Lines of communication with the motherland have been kept open at all times, and the soldiers never missed the comfort of mail.

Other representations of a new condition of modernity are provided: the LUCE Institute’s team is always on call, ready to write reports, broadcast news, and leave the country at a moment’s notice to chronicle the Italian adventures in Africa; thanks to a car equipped with projection screens (Fig. 6), LUCE is able to bring cinematographic news to every part of the world, from remote towns in southern Italy to Ethiopian villages; in the colony, wounded people are transported to the Italian hospitals on fully equipped buses. Moreover, soldiers can benefit from improved medical technologies and the African people are saved by the Italian vaccination programme (Fig. 7). Consideration for the underdeveloped Ethiopia is represented in these scenes through the depiction of children’s and women’s poor living conditions. There are no men in the crowd asking the Italians for help. This is a clear expression of two different and mutually connected ideas: Ethiopia is as miserable as its women and children; Ethiopia is feminised and, at the same time, she is just like a small child who needs to be educated by adults.

Hence, in *Il cammino degli eroi*, death, endemic diseases, hunger, poverty and violence turn Ethiopia into the archetype of the apocalypse. Conversely, Italy acts through its soldiers just as God did during Creation, giving life to inanimate or quite-dead lands and people. Thanks to its technological progress, Italy can radically transform the country and guarantee that Italian



Fig. 6. Car equipped with projection screen.



Fig. 7. Italian vaccination programme in Ethiopia.

expatriates will not only live new, happy and beneficial lives in Africa, but also that they are still part of the nation.

An additional interpretation may be suggested. First of all, the juxtaposition of apocalypse and modernity denotes the role and actions of a ‘secular religion’ – a term coined by Raymond Aron (1946) and later used by Frederik Voight, Alfred Cobban, Waldemar Guria, Franz Borkenau and Sigmund Neumann to describe modern ideologies. In the 1970s, other scholars such as George Mosse (1975) noted the important distinction between the ‘aesthetics of politics’ and the modern concept of political religion employed to describe European totalitarian regimes. Gentile (1990, 1993) proposed a differentiation between civic religion and political religion in his analysis of the ‘sacralisation of politics’. All these interpretations focus on the features of political religion in European contexts, but it can be supposed that the same mythical apparatus was mobilised for colonial wars, with the difference that the overseas territory was considered backward and uncivilised. Hence, as in the case of 1930s Libya as analysed by Burdett (2010), the Messianic utopianism within Italian Fascism played a relevant role in the representation of the Ethiopian country and people, and its eschatological views produced a dichotomous hierarchy where progress was opposed to barbarity, science to superstition, civilisation to un- or de-civilisation, good to bad. Furthermore, while political religion describes the public and private sphere – and could be understood as an invention of modernity – the colonial context can be described as being empty, inasmuch as the modern forms of life are not yet present. In this regard, the right and duty of civilisation is to free this land and its people from the ongoing apocalypse and the Italian colonisation of Ethiopia is regarded as a new Creation that generates bodies and lands, names and perceptions, emotions and social relations.

### Reasons for the Ethiopian war

The last part of the documentary is devoted to the war. As the date ‘13 Febbraio 1936’ scrolls across the screen, Italian soldiers are seen fighting in the aftermath of the Gondrad massacre: not far from Utok Emni, military generals had local Resistance leaders executed by hanging in

retaliation for attacking and killing scores of Italian workers. The voice-over introduces the notion of ‘enemy’:

Savage, confused hordes, incited by the criminal carelessness of a government that will soon shamefully collapse, assailed helpless pioneers – an outrageous act against the benefactors, committed by people who only know misery and robbery. Only weapons could quickly sweep away the bleak medieval residues nestled in the twentieth century. The powerful and efficient Italian army dazzled mankind with its unforgettable victory.

The conquest of Ethiopia entailed air raids, ground troop advances, explosions and a few combat injuries. All Ethiopians are shown dead in these scenes – perhaps an attempt to portray a defeated enemy. Gunshots, cannonades and voices are heard in the background. Large burned areas are seen from the plane. Columns of smoke rise to the sky as aircraft engines roar. Suddenly, a change of setting: in the streets of Rome, huge crowds are running towards Piazza Venezia to celebrate victory. It may be helpful to recall that during the liberal period and then during Fascism, the Vittoriano was the symbol of Italian identity, the site where hundreds of couples donated their wedding rings to fund the conquest of Ethiopia, thereby sealing the bond between Italian families and the Fascist regime. In the documentary, the Vittoriano is well lit and overlooking the overflowing square. The crowd moves in synch, as if it were one mind and one body: a representation of Italy where, supposedly, all classes were heralded as equal by the regime’s rhetoric. A voice over the loudspeaker announces the Duce, and Mussolini delivers his famous empire speech:

Beyond the mountains and the seas, listen! Marshal Badoglio has telegraphed: today, 5 May at 4 p.m., I entered Addis Ababa at the head of the victorious troops. [...] I announce to the Italian people and the world that peace has been re-established. [...] It is necessary I should add, that it is our peace, a Roman peace, which is expressed in these terms, the final and definite terms, Ethiopia is Italian.

The closing statement is ‘today the fecund Roman peace pervades the endless fields of the empire.’ Hence, there were many reasons for this war: from the duty to civilise the African people and turn them from enemies into subjects, to convincing the international community of the likelihood of Italy winning the war in Africa, where the military scenario was undefined and always insecure. Moreover, the Horn of Africa was the response to Italy’s own 1929 crisis and, more generally, to the issue of the South in terms of its underdeveloped economy, widespread illiteracy and slow progress. Finally, the conquest of Ethiopia was Mussolini’s own personal war: the regime celebrated its leader as the new father of the nation. From the Duce’s balcony, Italians seem to share a sense of belonging.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have provided an analysis of selected excerpts from the documentary *Il cammino degli eroi*, regarding it as the product of a complex narrative system of the colony developed by LUCE and in other fictional films, which can be described as an archive of various images belonging to a vast imperial imaginary. The close relationship and mutual influence between national and colonial narrations, even in the presence of different narrative strategies, is evident in all of them. The representation of the ‘African Mussolini’ is emblematic of the Italian attempt to signal a power shift in Ethiopia with a monument that became a visual sign of hegemony in the African country and new modernity and belligerence in Europe. The colony, on the other hand, is invented by a male and masculine gaze and, as a result of this invention, Italianness itself changes through the representation of places and spaces, bodies and nature. The opposition modernity-apocalypse is another theme around which the relationships Italy-Ethiopia and coloniser-colonised are narrated.

It is therefore possible to argue that different intertwining and overlapping visual fields of narration can be identified and that centripetal and centrifugal forces were at work behind the editing process of *Il cammino degli eroi*. Rather than being exclusive to D'Errico's work, references to Fascist myths and symbols were frequently employed in LUCE's narrations and probably by Italians themselves when describing the future colony. In this regard, the reasons for colonisation were not slogans around which discourses were developed, but narrative devices used for collecting various representations of the overseas territory. D'Errico may have postponed this topic to the end of the film to better explain not only the case for the colonisation of Ethiopia but also the whole colonial imaginary, the discourse underlying the beginning of a new Fascist era and a new Italian modernity.

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### Italian summary

Questo articolo analizza uno dei più importanti documentari prodotti in occasione della ‘vittoria’ in Etiopia, *Il cammino degli Eroi*, di Corrado D’Errico (1936). L’obiettivo che si propone è di studiare il complesso sistema di rappresentazione iconografica. La prima parte è dedicata alla rappresentazione del “Mussolini Africano”. Nella seconda parte, lo “sguardo del conquistatore” è analizzato nella prospettiva visuale impiegata da D’Errico per raccontare la nuova colonia italiana. La terza parte, poi, è dedicata a problematizzare la contrapposizione tra ‘crazione italiana’ e ‘apocalissi etiope’. Infine, l’ultima parte dell’articolo si occupa delle motivazioni, espresse nella pellicola, per la Guerra d’Etiopia.