

AMANDA MINERVINI

Mussolini Speaks

History Reviewed

IF THIS COUNTRY ever needed a Mussolini, it needs one now,” said Senator David A. Reed of Pennsylvania, during a 1932 address to the U.S. Congress.¹ Yet what did Reed mean when he emphasized the need for “a Mussolini,” and what, in 1932, did “now” mean?

Reed, a senator and lawyer, was addressing President Hoover—with a perhaps surprising request for him to metamorphose into an Italian Fascist dictator. The United States, in those years, was still reeling from the market crash of 1929; the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1933 would be followed by the new president’s decision to implement the New Deal, inspired by socialist ideas, as a response to the Great Depression. In Italy, in contrast, Mussolini was celebrating his tenth year of rule and the solidification of his regime. Numerous artists, including Ezra Pound, competed in celebration of the Duce’s decennale. In 1932, then, one must begin by asking how precisely did Senator Reed perceive the Italian Fascist dictator? Was Reed invoking Mussolini as content, or as form?

In this specific moment, the senator’s major concern seemed not to have been so much the abdication of political rights in the name of a stronger, higher authority. He focused instead on the economy. In his words:

Mr. President, I do not often envy other countries their governments, but I say that if this country ever needed a Mussolini, it needs one now. I am not proposing that we make Mr. Hoover our Mussolini, I am not proposing that we should abdicate the authority that is in us, but if we are to get economies made they have to be made by someone who has the power to make the order and stand by it. Leave it to the Congress and we will fiddle around all summer trying to satisfy every lobbyist, and we will get nowhere. The country does not want that. The country wants stern action, and action taken quickly.²

Thus, in Reed’s view, “a Mussolini” would be a political figure who brings order and action, whereas Congress would “fiddle around all

summer.” If by “us” Reed meant “the American people,” and not just the members of Congress, it is clear that he was aware that, to enjoy their Mussolini, Italians had to abdicate their own political authority. If instead Reed meant to refer only to the political power of the Congress, perhaps he thought that the Gran Consiglio del Fascismo and the rest of the Italian parliament had limited powers. Hence, by advocating the coming of “a Mussolini” in 1932, Senator Reed hoped—according to some sort of magic—to gain strong political leadership in a time of economic crisis, but without having to abdicate political authority. And the senator from Pennsylvania was not alone: the American Liberty League, formed by a group of powerful businessmen in 1934, also supported a Fascist political model for the United States. As the Marxist journalists A. B. Magil and Harry Stevens noted, Reed “only voiced what many others were thinking.” Citing the report of a “well-informed” British journalist, Magil and Stevens add that “At that time, you could scarcely walk into a club or a drawing room anywhere in Washington, without hearing something like Senator Reed’s prayer for a Mussolini. Everywhere amateur fascists and parlor Whites were damning democracy between drinks.” Even the *New York Times*, they explain, “hinted . . . that some sort of fascist dictatorship might not be such a bad thing after all.” As the *Times* said, “A question frequently asked by foreign visitors here is ‘When are you going to have a dictator in the United States?’”³

Let’s leave aside for a moment the tricky contradictions of national dictator-envy in the United States and ask instead: Where did Reed and the others get their ideas about Mussolini’s political role in Italy? Reed’s political inclinations had long included anti-Italian sentiments: the immigration act he signed in May 1924 with Congressman Albert Johnson targeted East Europeans, including Italians, for whom the immigration quotas were reduced dramatically⁴ (although Reed would have made an exception for Northern Italians, whom he calls “an especially good class of immigrants”).⁵

Mussolini himself had indeed been making multiple references to keeping order while also keeping the parliament in place—for instance during his first appearance in the parliament in November 1922, and again in June. The *Congressional Digest*, which Reed probably read habitually, had dutifully reported the Duce’s words. And like many other Americans, Senator Reed too had been exposed to the powerful representations of the Italian leader in the papers as well as the newsreels.

In our own time and certainly since November of 2016, the United States has again seen a war on and through the media, one typical of authoritarian regimes, with the risk of violence against journalists intensified. According to some, we even live in a post-truth era. Ours is an age in which facts are forgotten in the spell of fake news, where the actual agendas of politicians are frequently ignored in order to focus on their stage presence and social media personalities. While certain forms of social media are new, a focus on the mediatic power of a given political figure is not. Looking back at how Hollywood and the international media depicted an authoritarian and mediagenic politician in the 1930s may well provide the distance necessary to obtain a clearer view of our present.

MUSSOLINI IN THE INTERNATIONAL MEDIA

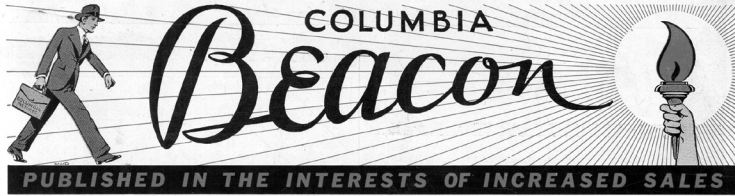
MUSSOLINI AND THE MEDIA had a long, shared history of mutual attraction. First a schoolteacher, then a successful journalist writing for the leading Italian newspapers, Mussolini became director of the Socialist paper *L'Avanti* in 1912. In 1914 he founded his own, *Il Popolo d'Italia*. Since very early on, Mussolini had been aware of the power of the media, and when he became dictator after the 1922 March on Rome, he welcomed the attention coming from the media, both on the page and on the screen. In 1924, he founded the Istituto Luce, a corporation that very soon became the main tool of Fascist propaganda. In 1937, Mussolini also created Italy's first film studio, Cinecittà, and that year his son Vittorio became a producer.⁶ His obvious intent was to foster the production of movies supporting the Fascist agenda. In a powerful visual statement, Mussolini placed a picture of himself behind a camera at the entrance of the studio with the phrase "Cinema is the most powerful weapon" in gigantic letters.



As Italian film scholar Gian Piero Brunetta has suggested, in Italy the figure of Mussolini was from the beginning so powerful on the screen that it may even have delayed the formation of a Hollywood-style star system,⁷ and this success on the screen reached beyond national borders. Pierlugi Erbaggio has shown that, in America, Mussolini was frequently and prominently presented in both silent and sound newsreels; he enjoyed success not so much as a politician with a clear agenda, but as a film star who could own the screen.⁸ A 1926 Hearst silent newsreel, *Mussolini Smiles*, shows the dictator's friendly interaction with the Italian king, Vittorio Emanuele, who told Mussolini a "funny story," regretting that the camera could not hear it. What mattered most, and what captured the attention of the camera and the audience, was the Duce's smiling face on the screen. There could be no better example of the international media's eagerness to portray Mussolini's figure without any real attention to his political role.

In this early newsreel, as in others from the time, the Italian dictator is principally a charming image for and on the screen. Though many silent-era icons sank below the horizon after the innovations brought by sound, political figures at times enjoyed greater success, and became "newsreel stars." Such was the case with the Duce. With sound, he did not lose points; to the contrary, his international success was made complete. In 1927 Mussolini was the first foreign politician to have appeared on Fox Movietone, one of the earliest sound newsreels. On April 20, 1927, Charles Pettijohn, general counsel for the Hays office and head of the Film Boards of Trade, met with Mussolini to propose filming him. He agreed immediately, reportedly telling Pettijohn: "Let me speak [through the newsreel] in twenty cities in Italy once a week and I need no other power."⁹ The frequent presence of Mussolini in the American press and on the screen in the United States demonstrates that his figure attracted attention even before the market crash of 1929. In these appearances, the most frequent attitude is admiration without political analysis, with the exception of the German-Swiss journalist Emil Ludwig, whose direct conversations with the Italian dictator were published as a series, "Mussolini Looks at the World," in 1932 in the *New York Times* and then as a book, *Talks with Mussolini*, that same year.

Also in 1932, the year of Reed's address to Congress, the former Fox Movietone cameraman Charles Peden wrote that, "among foreign public men the best performer is Mussolini. He can always be



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FEBRUARY 4th, 1933

No. 5

**IL DUCE, ITALY'S MAN OF HOUR, "STARS" IN FILM
RECORD OF ACHIEVEMENTS, PRODUCED BY COLUMBIA**

**Wheeler and Woolsey
Break Own Record In
"So This Is Africa!"**

"The funniest and best picture we have ever made."—Bert Wheeler and Robert Woolsey.

"Fast, snappy and plenty hot . . . riproaring comedy."—Motion Picture Herald.

"The best Wheeler and Woolsey offering to date."—Hollywood Variety Bulletin.

" . . . the best picture offered by these clowns since they hit the screen."—Hollywood Reporter.

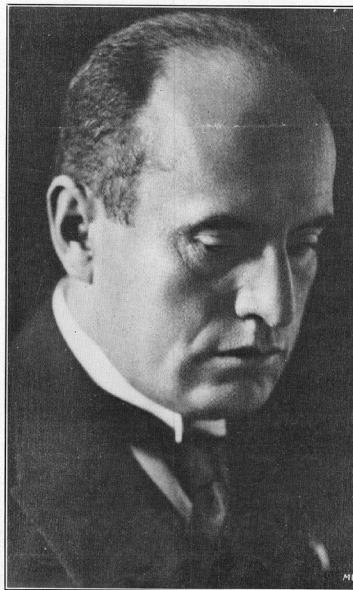
THAT'S what they all said about "So This Is Africa!" They were conservative. "So This Is Africa!" is better than the best comments presented above! (Continued on Page 3)

**GILBERT MILLER GOES
TO COLUMBIA STUDIO**

GILBERT MILLER, world famous stage figure and one of the leading influences in the American theatre, departed for Hollywood Tuesday, January 31st, to complete a recently signed contract with Columbia to produce and direct exclusively for the company. He will remain in California for ten weeks, following which he will return to New York or London. The title of his first screen venture will be announced upon his arrival.

The agreement between Mr. Miller and Columbia Pictures was signed several weeks ago while the

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Benito Mussolini, Premier of Italy

**"Mussolini Speaks!" Shows
Rise Of Blacksmith's
Son To Premier**

MUSSOLINI SPEAKS," a dramatically stirring and romantic life story of Benito Mussolini, Italy's great man of the hour, has been produced by Columbia Pictures as one of the outstanding offerings on the current season's program.

With this picture's early release Columbia once again introduces a striking innovation in screen entertainment, for never before has one of the leading figures in world affairs enacted his life's role on celluloid. Here, for the first time, are the true scope and power of the camera and microphone strikingly revealed.

AUTHENTIC STORY

The film was made under the personal supervision of Jack Cohn, with explanatory dialogue supplied by Lowell Thomas, world famous historian and commentator on human affairs.

"Mussolini Speaks!" presents an exclusive and authentic film autobiography of the Italian Dictator with the actual events in his colorful career serving as the incidents of the story. The camera first introduces us to Mussolini's birthplace and then carries us through such high-

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involving the Italian dictator. Their plan was to shoot a documentary, a celebratory biopic that would allow Americans "to see for themselves" what the Italian leader had accomplished in his country. This effort resulted in *Mussolini Speaks*, which was released in March 1933 and featured primarily footage purchased from the Istituto Luce. Though the final cut of the documentary does not credit a director, the director was in fact Edgar G. Ulmer, the Jewish Austrian filmmaker who had come to Hollywood in 1927 to assist F.W. Murnau, the prominent German director most famous for making *Nosferatu*, considered an Expressionist masterpiece.

On the poster of *Mussolini Speaks*, the Duce is referred to as the “Man of the Hour who is making history.” The poster also notes that the Italian dictator was “described and interpreted by Lowell Thomas,” who was, as we will see, much more than a narrator. Thomas, who would have been known to the American audience for his voice, also appears in full figure at the beginning of the documentary, thus connecting unambiguously his own image to that of the Italian dictator. Like the mighty Duce, the documentary itself possessed an unprecedented “box office strength.” On April 4, 1933, the *Motion Picture Herald* announced “Mussolini Bookings Pour In,” and indeed the film had a remarkable 175,000 viewers during the first two weeks of its world premiere in New York City. According to the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, “Audiences cheered time and again,” confirming that, as the *New York Sunday News* put it, Mussolini was a “born camera subject.” The documentary cost \$100,000 and grossed \$1 million in the United States (at a time when tickets could be bought for as little as fifteen cents).¹²

Mussolini Speaks runs seventy minutes. It is a compilation of Fascist ideas and ideals based on Mussolini’s 1931 speech in Naples, with the addition of a rather typical American fascination for Italian art, landscape, and wine.

Lowell Thomas introduces the documentary by saying that international eyes are now turned to Italy, because the country now has a true leader: “No matter his politics. What matters is personal magnetism”—thus saying clearly that the basis for Mussolini’s charisma is his appeal on the screen rather than the dictator’s actual politics. Thomas continues, saying that the documentary will show “how [Mussolini] changed from socialist to imperialist,” and how, as a modern Caesar, he has avoided assassination.” And then he says: “Let’s see for ourselves,” reinforcing the illusion that the documentary will represent reality as it is. The documentary goes on to show the entwined history of Mussolini’s life and of the rise of Italian Fascism.

After this biographical introduction, the film lets Mussolini speak for himself, and it is the aforementioned Naples speech that we hear. For anyone acquainted with the history of Italian Fascism, this was a typical speech, one in which Mussolini quotes himself extensively, reminding the crowds how he had once said “Either they will give us the power, or we will seize it,” and adding that this is a promise he has kept.

Perhaps what is most striking today is how the documentary plays with the original Italian soundtrack in an unusual way. Mussolini

speaks in Italian without subtitles, dubbing, or voice-over. He is allowed to speak for long stretches without interruption, and then Thomas repeats, and even imitates, what the dictator has just said. At times Thomas also introduces and anticipates what the Duce is going to say. Now we understand why the publicity campaign for the film announced that Lowell Thomas would *interpret* Mussolini, rather than simply act as the film's narrator. The American announcer does actually impersonate the dictator, acting like him, reproducing his tones, including the loudest exclamatory moments. Even in the early thirties, this is a curious choice. Subtitling techniques had not yet been perfected, but they were already available. In addition, *Mussolini Speaks* was made before the Italian dictator had prohibited the dubbing or any other alterations to Italian films circulating abroad (assuming that the footage from the Istituto Luce would be covered as "film" under this law). In short, Mussolini was fully aware that dubbing constituted an excellent tool to control meaning; in fact he would eventually create a dubbing law that made dubbing mandatory for all foreign films coming to Italy (and, as of today, Italy still dubs all its foreign films).

I would argue that this odd choice defers again to the magnetism of the figure of Mussolini: the cinematic figure inspired the opposite of a so-called objective narrative voice, and instead what I would call a "close contact voice," an act of ventriloquism that both betrays and enacts a wish for identification with the strong, masculine leader. Here is one more sign that the message was not as important as the messenger: Mussolini himself, in the flesh (or, since this is after all representation on the silver screen, as close to the flesh as possible, an attempt to retain all the power of Mussolini's "magic").

It is thus no coincidence that a scene in the documentary does, quite literally, depict Mussolini as a magician, the *deus ex machina* of a country in trouble. Lowell Thomas's voice qualifies precisely what the viewer is supposed to see in this footage: first, the land of the Romans, and volcanos that resemble the Inferno—this is the steam power used for Italian industry. Then we see art: Italy is also the land of "old famous Romantic art, of the marbles of Carrara, of Michelangelo." With these words, the camera shows the marble quarries in Carrara, used since the times of the Italian Renaissance, "from which Mussolini has been covering Italy with beautiful statues." After this, we are shown the majestic marble quarries being carved up by explosives, and we see chunks of marble rolling down toward the viewer.¹³ Then, all of a sudden, the



rocks invert their natural motion and start going upward again. Thomas calls the audience's attention to the chunks of marble running *uphill*, adding: "Well, maybe Mussolini is a magician too." Rather than a scene to dismiss as a joke (Thomas himself asks, "Or is the cameraman having a little fun with us?"), this playful turn is in fact representative of many instances of Mussolini's magic powers and "magnetism" throughout the documentary. We should ask instead what such a trick means, and what running the film backward accomplishes. Why should we be

shown that an exploding mountain can be put back together? And why break the narrative flow of the documentary with a shout-out to the cameraman (particularly since this sequence was actually done in the editing room)?

In the scene that immediately follows,¹⁴ the audience first sees Mussolini speaking about the importance of the arts, followed by the narrator's praise of the new buildings, including "Mussolini's Forum, built in the manner of the ancient emperors." Then, as Mussolini's speech comes to an end, Lowell Thomas comments, in an aside that will soon be echoed by Senator Reed: "This is a time when a dictator comes in handy." The filmic footage then shows the disastrous 1930 landslide and consequent destruction in the area surrounding Monte Vulture. Thomas praises Mussolini for the speed at which homes were rebuilt—better houses, this time with electricity—for the victims of the landslide. The mighty Duce was able to repair the damage: "Yes," Thomas emphasizes, "as if by magic."

For viewers who have just been shown chunks of marble going backward, the reconstruction after the Monte Vulture landslide suggests again that the Duce is more powerful than nature, the godlike author of a second coming, one where he can erase and rebuild magically, just as the Fascist revolution has done for the Italian state. This trick of montage also instills two more ideas: a mention of the cameraman emphasizes the deep ties between the contemporary media and fascism, and it underlines how the Columbia Pictures documentary is itself a homage to a dictator who loves cameras.

By going backward in time, the film's reversal imitates Mussolini's greatest obsession: connecting the roots of fascism to the Roman Empire, as if the dictator-magician himself were able to roll back the film of history, bringing Italy back once again to its Roman splendor, a time before the explosion of modernity and the trauma of World War I.

Thus spake Mussolini. And thus did Hollywood reply.

NOTES

The author wishes to thank Thomas Doherty, Brandeis University, for inspiring this project and for sharing his expertise with patience and generosity, and Jim Hicks, for his careful and considerate editing.

¹75 Cong. Rec. 9644 (1932).

²Ibid.

³Magil, A. B., and Henry Stevens. 1938. *The Peril of Fascism: The Crisis of American Democracy*. New York: International Publishers, 79–80.

⁴Lariccia, Ben. “The U.S. Italian Community and the Immigration Act of 1924,” in *La Gazzetta Italiana*, March 2017. “Immigration from Italy fell from an average of 216,000 per year in the period from 1905 to 1914, to just over 6,000 in 1924.” <https://www.lagazzettaitaliana.com/history-culture/8343-the-u-s-italian-community-and-the-immigration-act-of-1924> accessed on 8/13/2018.

⁵Reed, David. In 1922. “Shall We Substitute 5% of 1890 Census with 3% of 1910 Census as Quota Basis?” *Congressional Digest*, vol 2. no.1 (October): 303.

⁶On Vittorio Mussolini’s visit to Hollywood, see “Mussolini Jr. Goes Hollywood.” In Doherty, Thomas. 2015. *Hollywood and Hitler, 1933–1939*. New York: Columbia University Press, 122–136.

⁷Brunetta, Gian Piero. 1999. “Divismo, Misticismo e Spettacolo della Politica. Il Corpo e le Maschere di Mussolini,” in *Storia del Cinema Mondiale, l’Europa*, vol. 1, *Miti, Luoghi, Divi*, Torino: Einaudi, 535–42.

⁸Erbaggio, Pierluigi. “Mussolini in American Newsreels: Il Duce as Modern Celebrity.” In Epstein, Mark, Fulvio Orsitto, and Andrea Righi. 2017. In *TOTALitarian Arts: The Visual Arts, Fascism(s) and Mass-Society*. Newcastle Upon Tyne,: UKCambridge Scholars Publishing.

⁹Crafton, Donald. 1999. *The Talkies: American Cinema’s Transition to Sound, 1926–1931*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 96.

¹⁰Charles Peden, *Newsreel Man* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, 1932), 13, cited in Pierluigi Erbaggio, “Mussolini in American Newsreels.”

¹¹Tom Waller, “21 Big Newsreel Star,” *Variety*, 104, no. 3 (December 8, 1931): vol. 1.

¹²Lawrence, John Shelton, and Robert Jewett. 2007. *The Myth of the American Superhero*. Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 133.

¹³In the copy preserved at the UCLA Film Archives, this scene ends here. I have not been able to establish yet if what follows was part of the copies circulating in the American movie theaters in the 1930s. However, the scene I am going to comment on circulates on YouTube, where only ten minutes of *Mussolini Speaks* are visible. Since the motivating idea at the core of this project is to reflect on the long-term impact of such representations during the current political period, I think it is important to take it into consideration too.

¹⁴This scene is again part of the UCLA Film Archives copy.