

HUI216

Italian Civilization

Andrea Fedi

9.0 Announcements

- <http://www.campo7.com/hui216>
 - All audio recordings from the lectures done so far are available for download, in short files organized by topics

9.1 James Hay, *Popular Film Culture in Fascist Italy* (1987)

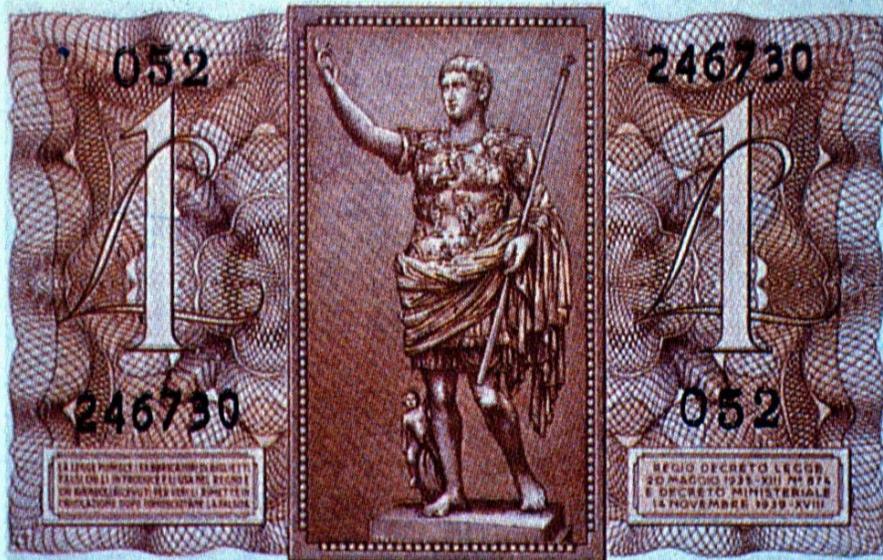
- A number of historical movies were produced in Italy during the 1920s and 1930s
- Some of the most interesting examples of that historical genre, so popular then, were movies based on Roman history
- It is not by chance that some of those movies were produced with the financial support of the Italian government

9.1 James Hay, *Popular Film Culture in Fascist Italy* (1987)

- Even when Fascist dictator Mussolini appeared in newsreels, he often presented himself like a cinematic character, the warrior/leader typical of those historical movies
- Fascist propaganda revived the idea, already introduced in Italian culture and society at the time of Italy's unification, that the newly formed Italian nation was called to a mission of civilization, to renew the glory, together with the victories and the conquests of the Roman State

9.1 Roman civilization became very popular in Fascist Italy

- References to Roman civilization became very common in Fascist Italy, in the arts, architecture and most prominently in the language
 - The word *fascismo* derives from the *fascis*, "A bundle of rods bound together around an ax with the blade projecting, carried before ancient Roman magistrates as an emblem of authority. [Latin, pl. of *fascis*, bundle.]" (*The American Heritage Dictionary*)
 - To learn more about the Roman fasces, visit this page
 - <http://www.livius.org/fa-fn/fasces/fasces.html>
 - The self-imposed title of Mussolini, "Duce," derives from the Latin *Dux* [=leader]
 - Consider also the words used to designate various fascist paramilitary units and their rankings (*milizia*, *manipolo*, *centurione*, etc.)



9.1 Fasces and other Roman icons

(from http://www.hist.uib.no/antikk/eftertid/fascdiv/page_01.htm)

9.1 The Roman fasces were the main icons of Fascist Italy http://www.hist.uib.no/antikk/eftertid/fascdiv/page_01.htm



9.2 *Scipione l'africano* (dir. Carmine Gallone, 1937)

- Relatively few historical films about the ancient world were produced during the 1930s, but one in particular -- *Scipione l'Africano*, which involves Scipione's (Scipio Africanus's) conquests in Africa during the Second Punic War -- received substantial public attention, having been the subject of one of the most extensive promotional campaigns in the Italian film industry during the 1930s
- The government helped procure astronomical investment capital for *Scipione* (about 12.6 million liras, the most ever spent on an Italian film before the war)
- Mussolini had taken great pride in the film before its release, once visiting the set, where he was hailed with chants of "Duce, Duce" by a costumed cast of thousands (many of whom were draftees for the Ethiopian campaign)

9.2 Fascism and the ancient Romans

- Despite much unfavorable aesthetic criticism about the film, critics and children alike seem to have recognized its cultural importance
- In a highly publicized special issue in August 1939, *Bianco e nero* published interviews with elementary-age school children about the film
- One young student explained that
 - The film illustrates the valor with which the ancient Romans fought and the courage that they exhibited. Now our Duce has reeducated the Italian people about the love of country and about the spirit of sacrifice, about order and discipline, restoring to Italy a new international prestige and reviving the Roman Empire.

9.2 *Scipione l'africano* and Mussolini

- There are few overt connections between the hero of the film, Scipione, and Mussolini
- Nevertheless, it is difficult to ignore the similarity between this movie's version of Scipione and the image that Mussolini held in the minds of the Italian public
- As one of the children interviewed for *Bianco e nero* attests
 - When you see the battlefield at Zama and a soldier says, "Troops, we have conquered Canne!" I thought about our Duce who said, "Let's conquer Adua!" And a few months later he said, "We've conquered Adua!" When Scipione talked to his soldiers before the battle, I remembered the Duce. In the movie house we always applauded Scipione and his men. I want to see the film again.

9.2 Scipio and the future glory of Italy

- In the film's epilogue, Scipione returns to his villa, where he is transformed again to a family man, surrounded by his wife and children
- His conquest and return invest the Empire with a new vitality, and in the final scene Scipione stands with a shaft of wheat (a symbol of fertility), exclaiming
 - Good grain; and tomorrow, with the help of the gods, the seed will begin

9.2 Mussolini as a classical hero

- Mussolini's appearances in early Italian newsreels and documentaries (and his public personality in general) conjure a pedigree of acrobats and "strongmen" from 1920s Italian films
 - Ajax, Samson, and above all, Maciste (often described in his films as "the good giant")
 - And, like the heroes of popular literary romances, these strongmen appeared in different films as basically the same personality (*Maciste in Hell*, *Maciste on Vacation*, *Maciste Against Death*, *Maciste in Love*, etc.)

9.2 Maciste -- Bartolomeo Pagano, the first actor to play the part of Maciste in Cabiria (dir. Giovanni Pastrone, 1914)



9.2 Mussolini and the Greco-Roman movie heroes

- Like these strongmen from the 1920s, Mussolini was part of an ongoing serial of movie appearances to which were attached such epitaphs as Mussolini-aviator, Mussolini at the thresher, Mussolini-athlete, and so forth
- One of Mussolini's most common personae in the newsreels and documentaries was that of the warrior
 - During the late 1920s and the 1930s, Mussolini appears in a variety of military uniforms
 - It is no coincidence either that Mussolini consciously associated himself with other warriors from Italian films of the mid-1930s, visiting the set of *Scipione* and lauding the spirit of Trenker's *Condottieri*

9.2 Mussolini and the Greco-Roman movie heroes

- In "Il Duce trebbia il grano nell'Agro Pontino" ("The Duce Threshes Wheat in the Pontine Fields," 1938) Mussolini appears bare-chested (itself a sign or a persona), inspiring his in-film audience of peasant workers with his prodigious display of strength and endurance, and demonstrating the "progress" of efforts to revitalize what was once a marshland
- The narrator all the while explains
 - "The Duce threshes without even the slightest signs of tiring. . . . It seems that work gives him greater vigor."
- It is this documentary that, as a number of Italian film historians have noted, aligns his role here with that of Scipione at the end of *Scipione l'Africano*

9.3 The plot of *Scipione l'africano* (from the notes of Regina Marcazzò-Skarka)

- *Scipione l'africano* is a long film with scenes that abruptly change from the Carthaginians to the Romans.
- Sometimes it may seem difficult to tell who is who. One clear distinction is the more elegant stance and demeanor of the Romans.
- The film begins showing text with an historical explanation of the two enemies attempting to be the rulers of the Mediterranean, Rome and Carthage. It explains how Carthage is winning with Hannibal's success at entering Rome's territory. The written introduction ends telling how 20,000 Roman soldiers were killed.
 - (In the credits in the beginning it is stated that soldiers of the Italian army were used as extras in the film.)
- The first scene begins with the fasces raised high into the sky, and the clouds as a backdrop.

9.3 The plot of *Scipione l'africano*

- Members of the Roman Senate talk about Scipio, and how he wants to meet with them. He plans to bring the war to Africa. The senators are skeptical.
- Then a man hints jovially that it would be good to send Hannibal out of Italy. His comments are met with unanimous cheers and hands raised in the air. The cheering continues with arms raised when Scipione appears and walks down steps with the crowds making room for him. The procession lasts about a minute with dramatic music.
- One soldier tries desperately to get through the crowd to get a glimpse of Scipio, saying, "I followed him through the war in Spain, at the very least I should get to look at him."

9.3 The plot of *Scipione l'africano*

- Then there's a dramatic scene with Scipio trying to convince the Senate to fight Hannibal in Africa. He tells them that Rome has to be free of him for once and for all, and that the only way to accomplish the victory would be to bring the Roman army to Africa.
- Someone expresses a concern that if the army goes to Africa to fight, there will be no one left to protect Rome.
- If the senators don't agree with Scipio, will he take it to the people? Scipio responds that he will do whatever he has to for Italy. Lots of arguing takes place and eventually many are yelling "Carthage! Carthage!"
- He walks surrounded by soldiers holding fasces and to cheers of thousands yelling "Scipione! Scipione!" There's a long scene with crowds of thousands with their hands raised like he is a God, and the music in the background is celebratory.

9.3 The plot of *Scipione l'africano*

- Then there's a surreal scene with Scipio with a woman and a baby, then a young boy. It's a scene of the perfect loving family: Scipione is dressed aristocratically and looking ready for battle, while his son puts on a special hat, trying to look like his dad.
- Next there's a scene with Hannibal and his people looking simple, low class and gruff.
- The Carthaginian soldiers leave their camp running haphazardly. Someone tells Hannibal about Scipio's plans.
- In the next scene the Carthagian soldiers come along grabbing women and terrorizing them, ripping their clothing and groping at their breasts. A little boy sits crying by a large column.

9.3 The plot of *Scipione l'africano*

- Next there is Scipio talking to his soldiers, then the soldiers marching and peasants running to see with excitement. Fasces are held high and people walk forward in slow motion looking proud at them. Scipio speaks of a real "patria" asking who will follow. Scores run forward trying to grab hold of one fascis.
- Then there's a scene where a woman is brought to Hannibal. She tells him how she heard he wanted children and she tells him she's not afraid. He grabs her and starts kissing her then the scene abruptly changes to the Romans boarding the ships to go to Africa. There's a wonderful send off with right hands raised and music.

9.3 The plot of *Scipione l'africano*

- There are a number of scenes with meetings of both the Romans and Carthaginians. There's also a jovial scene of Roman soldiers singing and cooking outside. There's a scene with Scipio then Hannibal talking to their own about strategy.
- Scipio and Hannibal meet on horseback but peace is not the choice of Scipio: he chooses to fight. He turns down Hannibal's proposal for peace and tells him to prepare for war, then scores of fasces are raised with dramatic music.
- The start of the battle is very dramatic with trumpets blown, Hannibal's troops on foot, elephants and Scipio sitting regally on his horse.
- The Romans shoot at the elephants and blood is squirting out. It gets very chaotic, the elephants are squealing and the soldiers are falling dramatically.

9.3 The plot of *Scipione l'africano*

- A soldier is seen being carried in an elephant's trunk. An elephant gets shot in the leg and falls to the ground dropping the soldier on its back. There is screaming.
- The Roman horsemen are told to advance. "Vittoria avanti" is the command. "Italia avanti!" (Move forward to victory, Italy forward). All of the different units move forward at a high rate of speed. They meet with the opposition and they fight from their horses, wounding their opponents with swords.
- "Chi vince?" the townspeople ask (who is winning?). One says Roman soldiers, seemingly surprised. A woman dramatically lifts a soldier's head and says who's winning, but the soldier is dead.

9.3 The plot of *Scipione l'africano*

- The battle continues with some soldiers on horseback and others on foot. The Romans look graceful and almost elegant while the Carthaginians look gruff and clumsy.
- In an intense battle on the ground, a Roman soldier holds the fasces high with great determination.
- After victory, Scipio is seen with classical Roman architecture in the background gracefully embracing his loved ones and the film ends.
- He says, "Good grain, and tomorrow with the help of the gods the seed will begin."

9.4 Italy in the movie *Scipione l'Africano*

- The movie *Scipione l'Africano* warns the viewer from the very beginning that the movie was filmed with the participation of soldiers from the Italian army, and that it was produced in Rome
- In the written scroll that sets the story before the opening scene, the fight between Rome and Carthage is characterized as a war between two nations ("nazioni"), two peoples ("popoli"), i.e. two civilizations, not just two states or two military powers
- From the very beginning the connections to Italy are multiplied, even exaggerated: for one thing all the actors speak the Italian language, and in fact right away, in the opening scenes, there are hints of different dialects (from the North, the center and the South of Italy!) in the pronunciation of various characters from the street

9.4 Italy in the movie *Scipione l'Africano*

- One of the men on the street discusses Rome's politics and the deeds of general Scipio, and says that he comes from Arezzo, using the Italian modern name of the city instead of its Latin name "Aretium"
- He also remarks that in his city they are preparing for the imminent fight, while in Rome all they do is talk
- Before the scene is over we also learn that volunteers in other parts of Italy are getting ready to defend Rome
- Clearly the fate of Rome is a major concern for all Italians, an exaggeration, historically inaccurate, but one which shows how the cultural connection with ancient Rome was played out in Italy in the first half of the 20th-century

9.4 Italy past and present in the movie *Scipione l'Africano*

- In fact the word "Italy" is heard in many scenes of this movie, while it is rarely if ever mentioned in *Spartacus*, and never once mentioned in *Gladiator* (if I'm correct)
- The continuity between past and present is insured also by references to the war fought by the Romans in Spain (at a time when Italian Fascists had recently volunteered to fight in Spain alongside Franco's army), and to the conquest of Africa (Italy had just conquered Ethiopia between 1935 and 1936)
- Numerous scenes have large crowds saluting general Scipio with their right hand lifted straight in front of them, a detail that, while being historically accurate, was also connected to the salute reintroduced in Italy by the Fascists

9.4 Italy past and present in the movie *Scipione l'Africano*

- The gatherings of large mobs in Rome must also have reminded the viewers of that time of the gatherings of similar mobs to hear and honor Mussolini or the heroes of the Italian army, the veterans of the various military campaigns that I mentioned before
- The Roman soldiers in the movie make reference to the fact that they are farmers and shepherds by trade, occupations still very common throughout Italy during the 1930s
- In this movie Rome represents the whole of Italy and its common interests, rather than the interests of the Roman citizens and of the Senate
- In fact it is evident that even the people from the lower classes are following very carefully the discussions that take place in the Roman Senate, and carefully evaluate all political decisions and their consequences

9.4 Italy past and present in the movie *Scipione l'Africano*

- When Scipio is organizing an expeditionary force to invade Africa and bring the war closer to Carthage, the Roman soldiers are shown marching at the rhythm of a quasi-operatic song with the following refrain:
 - "Chi ha chiamato? Scipione, Scipione... Chi ha risposto? L'Italia, l'Italia..." (= Who called? Scipione, Scipione... Who replied to that call? Italy, Italy...)
- While "Romans" is the term used more often to indicate the soldiers, at times we also hear the term "Italici" (Italics), a word commonly used to designate the peoples living in Italy in the pre-modern era, but also one that would have been used properly only at the end of the Roman republic, or at the beginning of the empire, when a real sense of unity inside the Italian peninsula was first developed, with the full support of the government and the backing of literature and the arts

9.4 Italy past and present in the movie *Scipione l'Africano*

- Rome and Italy are closely associated inside the speech given by Scipio before he leaves Italy to go fight in Africa
- Even Hannibal at one point says "La mia patria è l'Italia" (=My homeland is Italy), a remark which seems almost paradoxical, but is justified by the character who he makes it clear that only Italy is a land able to excite lively passions and strong feelings
- Living in Italy for 15 years to fight the war against the Romans, even he, Hannibal, has grown attached to that land. He says this with a strange sense of nostalgia, before leaving Italy to go back to Africa to defend Carthage, which he finds an ungrateful and unsupportive fatherland, not the ideal country that one could live or die for

9.5 Movie projects on Hannibal, to be produced by Sony, Fox

- I found some information on the Internet about Vin Diesel's biopic *Hannibal the Conquerer* (2006?), whose script is based on the novel by Ross Leckie. David Franzoni, from *Gladiator*, should provide the script
 - <http://filmforce.ign.com/articles/365/365989p1.html>
- The next article, from the Internet, mentions another movie project focusing on Hannibal, with Denzel Washington as the protagonist
 - <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/07/26/1027497410589.html>