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"The Greatest Film of the Fascist Era": The Distribution of *Camicia nera* in Britain

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Abstract: *During the Fascist era in Italy, the state-controlled L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa produced newsreels and documentaries promoting the regime's achievements. By the 1930s, LUCE's films were screened to Italian immigrant audiences abroad in order to engage spectators already sympathetic or potentially allied to the Fascist agenda. In this article, I discuss the distribution and reception in Britain of* Camicia nera *(1933), a film produced by LUCE to mark the tenth anniversary of Mussolini's rise to power and often referred to as "the film of the Decennial". Employing records retrieved from state archives and contemporary British sources from the period of the film's release, I revisit the history of one of the most important official films of the Fascist era and offer a new perspective on the dynamics and actual applications of Italian propaganda operations abroad during the 1930s.*

Introduction

> This film honours our cinema. Regardless of its highest aim, amongst its many merits it has above all an indisputable and fundamental value: the desire to represent Italian life in its truest form. This seems sadly ignored, with very few exceptions, by our cinema, which consists almost exclusively of trite comedies and imported films: now at last there comes a clear and decisive message that is vibrant and heartfelt. (Gromo 3)[1]

The enthusiasm surrounding the "film that honoured Italy's cinema" cannot be overstated. On 23 March 1933, the state-produced *Camicia nera* (*Black Shirt*, Giovacchino Forzano, 1933) was given a special launch when it premiered simultaneously in twenty-two cities across Italy (*Il Popolo d'Italia*, "Le solenni" 1). The date of this extraordinary event is not insignificant. Much anticipated, *Camicia nera* was proclaimed "*il film del Decennale*" ("the film of the Decennial") because it had been envisioned as a celebration of ten years of Fascism since the March on Rome, the insurrection by which Benito Mussolini had come to power in October 1922 (*Il Giornale d'Italia*, "*Camicia nera*" 5; Sacchi 3; *Il Messaggero*, "*Camicia nera*" 3; Gromo 3). Originally scheduled for release on 28 October 1932, the day of the tenth anniversary, production had delayed the film's premiere by some five months.[2] *Camicia nera* was finally publicly exhibited for the first time in front of selected audiences on the occasion of the fourteenth anniversary of the founding of the *Fasci Italiani di Combattimento* (Italian Fasci of Combat), the forerunner of the Fascist Party. The twenty-two screenings were attended by numerous state officials and dignitaries and the national and foreign presses, and were met with great success. *L'Eco del cinema* declared it "the greatest film of the fascist era", and stories were reported in the press of rousing audiences in packed-out cinemas ("La voce del mondo" 1). In

Turin, "frequent thunderous applause and cheering greeted the most salient scenes, some of which—of a strong polemical tone—provoked cries of 'bravo!'" (Gromo 3).

Camicia nera was produced by the state-controlled LUCE company. It was distinct amongst LUCE's productions not only because of its status as "the film of Fascist Italy", but also because, unlike the majority of official films that were short to medium-length documentaries, it was a feature-length fiction film (*La Stampa*, "Il film" 5). As other scholars have highlighted, it is because of these unique qualities that *Camicia nera* was marked out for a special release (Brunetta 131–2). In fact, in the run up to the film's release, the Italian press reported that the simultaneous premieres across Italy would coincide with three more in the European capitals Paris, Berlin and London (*La Tribuna*, "Il film" 6). In the event, and as Benedetta Garzarelli has noted, the coordinated foreign premieres did not happen, although the film was screened in each of these cities later in 1933 ("Cinema e propaganda" 147–66). It is the circulation of the film abroad that I focus on in this article; specifically, I investigate the distribution and reception of *Camicia nera* in London. It was not uncommon for LUCE's films to be circulated in foreign markets. In fact, the regime aimed to target both Italian immigrant communities and foreign nationals through its propaganda activities overseas, and it made use of diplomatic channels to do so. Yet, the circulation of official films abroad during this period remains an underdeveloped field of enquiry.

Indeed, whilst the literature about Italian cinema and culture during the Fascist era is substantial, work placing the history of LUCE and its productions at the centre of a discussion of the dynamics of Fascist propaganda is much more limited, especially when we consider non-Italian publications. In this regard, it is perhaps of note that, whilst there is a vast quantity of extant audiovisual material in LUCE's archive, comparative documentation neither abounds nor is comprehensive. This may be, then, one issue confronting the undertaking of, for instance, a systematic study of LUCE's production strategies, or of the company's international transactions and the circulation of its films overseas. Wider historical studies investigating propaganda and the Italian diaspora during the Fascist era have likewise largely failed to detail thoroughly the ways in which LUCE's films were put to use, alongside other official material, by Italy's supporters abroad. Two studies, however, are of special note. The first is Guido Tintori's analysis of the distribution of a number of LUCE's productions in the U.S., in which he outlines the complexities involved when the Italian Office for Foreign Affairs set about trying to circulate official films within the circuit of diplomatic delegations spread out across a vast area (Tintori 61–84). This complex logistical exercise was initiated in 1934 and necessitated the implementation of detailed plans in order to secure the efficient distribution of films across the major Italian consulates in the U.S. Despite concerted efforts, however, bureaucracy, ineffectual systems and problematic relations with commercial middlemen were obstacles to the films' penetration in that country. In Europe, Benedetta Garzarelli has studied the distribution of LUCE's films in France, and of *Camicia nera* in Paris, Berlin and London. In the first case, Garzarelli concludes that Fascist film propaganda in France achieved "contradictory results" (*Parleremo* 99–112). Although a dedicated itinerary was established to guarantee the distribution of documentaries and newsreels amongst the Italian consulates in France, only a small number of delegations proactively organised screenings of official films when the system was later abandoned (105). With regard to *Camicia nera*, Garzarelli contends that, while the film was

welcomed by the authorities in Germany and was a commercial success, its appeal was much more limited in the democratic countries, where censorship and lack of commercial backing prevented its exploitation beyond privately organised, official screenings ("Cinema e propaganda" 147–66).

Both of these case studies provide us with insights into the strategies employed, and some of the political considerations involved, in the distribution of Fascist propaganda films abroad. I want to build on this work in this article by taking into account the particular context of *Camicia nera*'s exhibition and reception in Britain, and specifically in London. Employing a range of primary sources, including records retrieved from state archives and newspapers from the period of the film's release in Britain, I revisit the history of one of the most important official films of the Fascist era and offer a new perspective on the dynamics of Italian propaganda operations abroad during the 1930s. In the first section, I discuss *Camicia nera* in the context of LUCE and of its production in order to establish the particular characteristics of the film that both set it apart from the majority of official film productions and that led to the atypical plans for its circulation. A case study of the film's distribution and reception in London forms the second part of the article. Here, I analyse the strategies employed to circulate the film, the actions taken by the Italian authorities in London, and responses to the film by its majority Italian audiences.

LUCE and *Camicia nera*

The LUCE company had been established some seven years prior to the making of *Camicia nera* and its roots lay squarely in nonfiction production. The company's history can be traced back to the entrepreneurship of a journalist interested in cinema's educational potential (Laura 13–22).[3] In 1924 Luciano De Feo established the *Sindacato Istruzione Cinematografica* (SIC), a private company with the purpose of producing documentaries that could be used in schools to teach practice-based technical subjects. However, the backwardness of the Italian educational sector, and the view held by many teachers that the cinema was an unsuitable commercial medium that provided lowbrow entertainment, did not facilitate the development of SIC's didactic project. Given the educational sector's resistance to the classroom cinema, De Feo was forced to seek alternative markets for his productions. Fortunately for De Feo, who already had connections with government officials, the need to locate new audiences for his educational films coincided with the ambitions of the relatively recently elected Duce to broaden support for his government amongst the Italian population. In a bid to bring his filmmaking enterprise to the attention of Mussolini, and with the help of Giacomo Paulucci di Calboli, Chief of Staff at the Office for Foreign Affairs, De Feo set about producing a short documentary depicting the activities of the leader. The finished film was projected for Mussolini at a public screening. Impressed by the audience's positive response to the documentary and reminded of cinema's potential to promote political and ideological consensus, Mussolini was persuaded to support De Feo's filmmaking enterprise.

Government interest in De Feo's company brought about a series of transformations from the mid-1920s. Its name was changed from SIC to *L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa* (LUCE) and the Duce proactively encouraged state investment in the private company. By the

end of 1925, LUCE was completely state-owned. Initially De Feo continued to act as LUCE's general manager. However, the presence on the board of directors of two senior government figures (the Commissioner General for Emigration Giuseppe De Michelis, who acted as president, and Paulucci di Calboli as vice-president) guaranteed the government's control over LUCE's activities. Within a few months, a number of subject-specific film libraries or *Cinemateche* were instituted and LUCE's nonfiction productions began to be divided up according to their topics. The first of these film libraries, the *Cinemateca Agricola Nazionale*, contained productions documenting aspects of national agriculture. Likewise, the seven other libraries that followed in 1926 and 1927 recorded features of national life and a wide range of institutional, commercial, educational, military and cultural activities. Amongst them were the film libraries for art and religious education (*Cinemateca per l'Arte e l'Istruzione Religiosa*), national culture (*Cinemateca di Cultura Nazionale*) and military education and propaganda (*Cinemateca Militare d'Istruzione e Propaganda*) (Laura 34). This systematisation of LUCE's output clearly marked out its films as nonfiction productions, and it ordered and presented the films, and the variety of aspects of life in Italy that they represented, under national and official terms.

By the late 1920s, LUCE's presence on Italian screens was becoming more dominant. LUCE's output was extended in 1927 with the introduction of weekly newsreels (*Cinegiornali*), which provided Italian audiences with up-to-date national and international news and items related to current affairs and to cultural, religious and sporting events. Across both the documentaries and the newsreels, the images of Italy reproduced by LUCE's official productions were those of a modern nation confident in its future and proud of its glorious past. As such, the films depicted the industrialisation and urbanisation of the country whilst also celebrating the iconography of ancient Rome. Both implicitly and explicitly, Mussolini was portrayed as the creator and the embodiment of this reimagining of the nation state; he is pictured, for instance, passing new laws in parliament or operating agricultural machinery. In 1926, the screening of LUCE's films was made compulsory in all Italian cinemas, which amounted to more than 2,400 by 1937, or nearly 4,000 if we account for those cinemas that offered only seasonal programming (see Caldiron 643 Table 5). By the early 1930s, the period during which *Camicia nera* was produced, LUCE had become one of the most pervasive tools within the regime's industry of persuasion.

From the outset, *Camicia nera* was conceived of as a special production that would be distinct from the typical nonfiction output that filled LUCE's film libraries. As mentioned above, the year of its production marked the tenth anniversary of the March on Rome. Accordingly, it was amidst this atmosphere of celebration that LUCE decided to launch a competition to find a film script that would commemorate the decennial of the regime's founding. In the event, the selection committee received a total of 168 scripts (Laura 74). Although many contained "valuable ideas and effective elements", however, none was actually selected (Minghetti 20). Subsequently, the committee decided to cancel the competition and instead gave the task of writing and directing the "film of the decennial" to the well-known Italian playwright Giovacchino Forzano, himself an unofficial member of the selection committee and a close friend of Mussolini. As Patrizia Minghetti has detailed, the film soon became a subject of controversy, not least because the producers failed to meet the deadline for its release by five

months, which had originally been timed to coincide with the anniversary celebrations in October 1932. The film's ever-increasing budget was also cause for concern, finally amounting to a total of almost four million lire, an exorbitant sum for the time. Controversies apart, the significance of the film for the regime was underscored by the fact that Mussolini himself suggested corrections to the script and the reediting of certain scenes (Minghetti 20–7).

In contrast to LUCE's typical output, *Camicia nera* presented the ideology of Fascist Italy within a fictional narrative. As the first introductory intertitle explains, the film's epic narrative provides a "summary of Italy's history from 1914 to 1932", thereby foregrounding the transition from an earlier, pre-Fascist era, marked by extreme poverty, to a period of war, revolution and rebuilding concluded by the establishment of the new regime (*Camicia nera*). Embodying these profound political and social changes is the protagonist, "the blacksmith" and his family, whose story is at the film's centre. Consequently, the narrative follows the vicissitudes of their lives, from the struggle of daily life in the Pontine Marshes in the early 1910s to the sacrifices and victories of war as the blacksmith enlists and fights for his country, and ultimately to the reward of a new, modern and prosperous life under Fascist rule as the blacksmith is provided with a job working the land and a newly built house in the city of Littoria. In a way that emphasises to the extreme the achievements of the regime, the climax of the film melds the fictional story with present-day reality, as footage of Mussolini's actual inauguration of Littoria, the city designed and built in 1932 on the reclaimed land of the Pontine Marshes, concludes the film. Indeed, some historians argue that the speech Mussolini delivered at the inauguration was written with the final scene of *Camicia nera* in mind (Laura 76).

This combination of fact and fiction is not unique to the film's concluding sequence. In fact, throughout the film the historical episodes are illustrated with newsreel and documentary footage so that the nonfiction material outweighs that of the newly shot scenes depicting the life of the blacksmith. As Laura has suggested, it is of note here that the statute governing LUCE provided that it produced educational films and at the same time prevented it from financing fictional films made for commercial exploitation (74). Stylistically, there is a clear divide between the fictional and nonfictional elements of the film that is most evident in the third and concluding part of the film. In his attempt to create a realistic representation of contemporary Italy, the director Forzano chose to use nonprofessional actors, the crew consisted of technical personnel experienced in documentary filmmaking, and the fictional scenes throughout present a visually sober representation of the protagonist's actions (76). In contrast, the segments utilising newsreel footage in some ways present a more manipulated image and, in the final section of the film, this effect is magnified through the adoption of the style of Soviet montage. To give an example, in the film's third part, titled "The Reconstruction", rapid editing and superimposition are employed to emphatically display the regime's power and strength in rebuilding and improving the nation's economy and living standards. Emphasising the dynamism of the regime's reconstruction of Italy, titles such as "11,000 new classrooms in 2,700 municipalities" and "6,000 new buildings accommodate 215,000 people" are superimposed onto contrasting and angular shots of newly built houses, hospitals and schools. Montage sequences are interspersed with slower-moving scenes of the blacksmith's new life, thereby fusing together the two worlds of fiction and nonfiction before the climactic inauguration scene of Littoria. What resulted was a

peculiar mix of fact and fiction, although this does not detract from the uniqueness of *Camicia nera* as the first attempt made by LUCE to produce a fictional propaganda film.

Camicia nera in London

In mid-April 1933, the London-based weekly Fascist newspaper *L'Italia Nostra* ran the first of a series of articles about *Camicia nera*. On the 14 April, an article published on the front page of the newspaper under the heading "The Success of the Film 'Camicia nera'" described the positive critical and popular reception of Forzano's film in Italy and announced its imminent screening in London, thanks to the proactive organisation of the local Fascio ("Il successo" 1). Emphasising the enormous interest in the film in Italy, not least evidenced by the more than one million lire it had taken at the box office in less than ten days, the author confirmed that negotiations to screen the film in a London cinema at the end of the month had just been concluded. Noting not only the meaning it would hold for Italians, but also the film's technical and artistic qualities, the article assured readers that the screening would without a doubt bring together the entire Italian colony to witness this real and interesting representation of life in Italy. Given the fact that the newspaper had always received official support and had become, by the 1920s, the "official organ of the Italian Fascio" in Britain, this enthusiasm for the film is perhaps unsurprising.

As mentioned earlier, *Camicia nera* was not the sole LUCE production to be distributed overseas and, like the documentaries and newsreels before it, its circulation was facilitated by networks of Italian embassies and consulates in the countries in which it was shown. An analysis of diplomatic records held in the national archives evidences that, typically, LUCE's films were couriered through diplomatic channels and their distribution was ultimately supervised by diplomats and officials. According to a letter sent by the Italian embassy in London to the Propaganda Office in Rome, this method of distribution caused several problems (ACS, envelope 123). Firstly, when receiving films by diplomatic courier, the embassy experienced great difficulty in obtaining authorisation from the British Foreign Office to legally import the films and also to attain the customs tax exemption normally granted to educational films. Furthermore, the Italian embassy was asked on multiple occasions by the Foreign Office for clarification as to the specific use of those films received by diplomatic courier. Due to the propagandistic nature of LUCE's documentaries and newsreels, directives from Rome clearly indicate that embassies and consulates were restricted to organising nontheatrical screenings of the films, and this often resulted in private exhibitions involving members of the local Italian community or invited authorities. It is for these reasons that LUCE's films circulating within the diplomatic circuit were rarely submitted to the local board of censors or subtitled for foreign audiences. An examination of the diplomatic correspondence relating to *Camicia nera* in early 1933 evidences that it was distributed abroad using these same diplomatic channels, although its special status amongst LUCE's films, indicated by the emphasis placed on the desire to widely exploit the film, is unmistakable.

On 24 March 1933, the day after the premiere of *Camicia nera* in Italy, the Italian Foreign Office sent a message to its ambassadors in Paris, Berlin and London instructing them to

make preparations for the screening of the film in each of the capital cities (ACS, envelope 68). The directive was clear. In this exceptional case, the ambassadors themselves were asked to evaluate the suitability of *Camicia nera* for local audiences, either in its original form or in a re-edited version, following an initial private screening of the film for invited guests. Any cuts or alterations to the film deemed necessary by the ambassadors had to be approved by LUCE's Director General in Italy, and any screening of the film, in whatever form, would proceed only if deemed practically and politically expedient. There was therefore a clear intention to exploit the film on a wider basis following the initial private screening. As Garzarelli has suggested, each of the ambassadors responded to the directive in different ways ("Cinema e propaganda" 150). In Paris, the instruction was followed diligently by the ambassador, but, despite a private screening for invited guests in June 1933, the film failed to obtain a certificate from the censor on several occasions over the course of more than a year and, consequently, was not exploited commercially in that country. In Berlin, *Camicia nera*'s commercial distribution was facilitated by the domestic political situation following Hitler's rise to power earlier in 1933, and after the first private screening of the film in April it met with great critical and popular success across Germany. In contrast, and according to Garzarelli, London represented, from a propagandistic perspective, "the most disappointing" attempt to circulate *Camicia nera* abroad. Indeed, she suggests that the "passive management" of the London embassy, where "the very special nature of the film's promotion abroad seemed to completely escape [them]", resulted in only a short-lived attempt to commercially exploit the film in Britain (159). Whilst it may be true that the embassy had a "totally evasive attitude" to this task, which it delegated entirely to the local LUCE representative, the suggestion that miscommunication had led to mistakenly identifying *Camicia nera* as a typical LUCE film destined for distribution solely amongst the Italian diaspora, and thus also to its customary treatment in terms of how it was circulated, is not entirely accurate.

The week prior to the screening, *L'Italia Nostra* published an extended article celebrating the "success of our cinema" and detailing at length the plot of this "captivating vision of renaissance Italy" ("Un successo" 3). Interestingly, the review opened with a discussion of the Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution that had been running in Rome for the past four months, but whilst it was noted that hundreds of thousands of Italian and foreign visitors had been able to see this display of the "new face" of Italy, the article also suggested that many Fascist supporters both at home and abroad had been unable to witness the spectacle in the capital city. Consequently, it was deemed necessary to produce a record of Mussolini's achievements that could be rapidly disseminated around the world. "To this end," posited the article, "not for vulgar publicity but to satisfy a universally felt need, the great Fascist film of Italy 'Camicia nera' was conceived" (3). In this way, the Italian diaspora in London was introduced to the idea that the film had been produced for, and specifically addressed, both foreign supporters of Fascism and dispersed groups of Italians like themselves. Moreover, the article clearly shows that the Italian officials in Britain were absolutely aware of both the special status of *Camicia nera* and of its potential to address and appeal to foreign audiences.



L'ITALIA NOSTRA

ORGANO VFFICIALE DEI FASCI ITALIANI NELLE ISOLE BRITANNICHE

No. 222. LONDRA, VENERDI', 28 APRILE 1933. DUE PENCE

Roma attraverso i secoli nella Conferenza di Padre Pio Ciuti alla Sede del Fascio

Una Generosa Donazione all'Ospedale Italiano per un Letto "Benito Mussolini"

O. G. I. E.,

COMUNICATO

L'INCONTRO DI IERI SERA ALL'ALBERT HALL

Grande attesa per le Rappresentazioni di Domani del Film "Camicia Nera"

Due Spettacoli in Mattinata al Polytechnic Theatre

Altri supplimentari nel pomeriggio al Portland Hall

Figure 1: Front page of *L'Italia Nostra* announcing the screening of *Camicia nera* in London. *L'Italia Nostra* 28 Apr. 1933: 1. Photograph by the Author.

On the eve of the London premiere, *L'Italia Nostra* heralded "great expectations" for the film and was keen to stress that *Camicia nera* was not a retelling of political events pure and simple, but rather an "exquisite drama of love, of faith, of self-denial and of courage written by a world-famous writer" ("Grande attesa" 1). In anticipation of large crowds, the London Fascio had arranged for multiple screenings on the 29 April. Two, including the main premiere, were to take place in the morning at the suitably large and "stylish" Polytechnic Theatre centrally located in Regent Street, and two during the afternoon at the more modest Portland Hall in Great Titchfield Street. This optimism, it is reported, was due in part to the success the film had already been enjoying in Berlin, where a distribution company had requested fifty copies of the film in order to screen it simultaneously in fifty German cities. The fervour was also buoyed by the amount of attention the film was receiving, especially in terms of its technical merits, from the British press, which, it is noted, was "generally unwilling to dedicate much space to non 'British' things" ("Grande attesa" 1). Curiously, *Camicia nera* is conspicuous by its almost total absence in the mainstream British press, a fact that highlights the propagandistic value of the Italian newspaper. An understanding of the conditions surrounding the distribution of the film in Britain, however, helps to elucidate the difficulties faced in relation to publicly exploiting the film in London and indicates reasons why notice of the screenings may have been limited in the main to the Italian press.

On Saturday 29 April, the day of *Camicia nera*'s London premiere, the film screenings were attended by the authorities of the Italian colony and prominent figures from the Anglo-Italian sphere, as well as children from the London-based Italian schools and the organisation for Fascist youth, crowds of local Italians and "numerous" British citizens ("'Camicia nera' a Londra" 1). *L'Italia Nostra* reported on the audiences' "enthusiastic reception" of the film, commenting on the intense emotion felt during the performance, which erupted into loud and enthusiastic applause on several occasions (1). Such was the desire to see the film that long queues had formed outside the cinemas and "several hundred" people had to be turned away from the already packed-out theatres. Subsequently, the Fascio received requests from the public to rescreen the film, and in the week following the premiere, its secretary undertook negotiations to exhibit the film on another occasion. On the 12 May it was announced that *Camicia nera* would be projected again in three consecutive screenings on 22 May at the Portland Hall, and cinemagoers were advised to arrive early if they wished to secure a seat ("Il film della rinascita" 1). Shortly after this latest round of screenings, which were once more received with "enthusiastic applause", *L'Italia Nostra* made yet another announcement that, due to persistent demand, the film would again be screened in London three times in succession on 27 May before being distributed in the provinces ("'Camicia nera' giudicata", 26 May, 3).

The apparently unqualified enthusiasm with which the Italian colony received *Camicia nera*, the positive British response, and the Fascio's positioning of the film as a production specifically made for the diaspora of Fascist supporters, belie the ambivalent attitude towards emigration and host nations that is apparent within the text itself. This is perhaps most clearly illustrated through the subplot about the blacksmith's sister, a character that represents the thousands of poverty-stricken Italians in the pre-Fascist era that contemplated leaving their country for a better life abroad. The struggle she faces to convince her father that emigration is the answer to their troubles drives her character throughout the first and second parts of the film. By the film's final section, she is seen living abroad with her husband and daughter where life is no better. They are unemployed and broke, and when her husband seeks work in Tunisia he is told that as an immigrant he will be paid half the salary of the local workers. After being advised that the only alternative is to change his nationality and to become a French citizen, he becomes outraged and leaves with a sense of hopelessness. In its concluding sequences, the film's message to those Italians who chose to leave their country in times of hardship is clear. Following an intertitle announcing "the emigrants' return for the Decennial", the blacksmith's sister and her family are seen descending one of the buses organised by the regime to transport emigrants back to Italy. At their destination of Littoria, the family find "the country shipshape and in order" and they look on in wonder at the regime's newly built city.

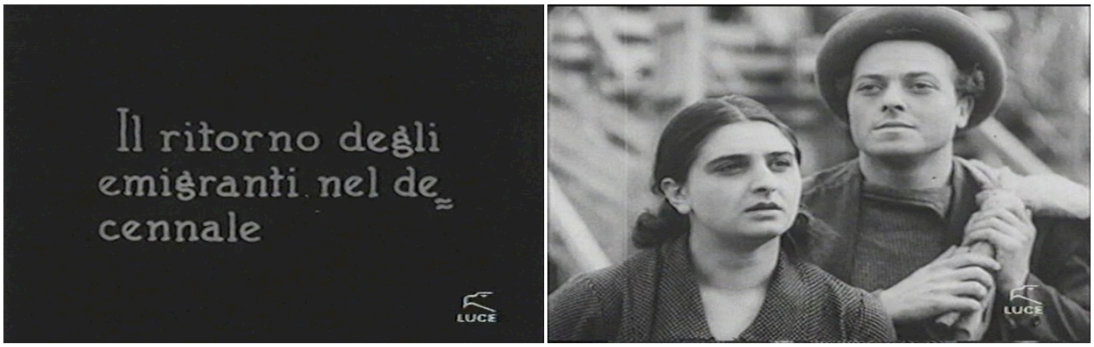


Figure 2: "The emigrants' return for the Decennial". ***Camicia nera*****. LUCE, 1933. Screenshot.**

In the closing minutes, the allegory reaches a climax as Mussolini addresses a crowd that has gathered to witness the inauguration of the city. As if directly addressing the emigrants, he states: "It is appropriate on this occasion to remember that once you needed to cross the Alps or the oceans in order to find land to work. Today that land is here, only half an hour away from the capital".

In reality, the Italian regime had a contradictory attitude towards the Italians abroad. On the one hand, Mussolini supported their return; on the other hand, he perceived the Italian diaspora as fundamental to his plan to export Fascist ideology. However, in its attempt to emphasise the achievements of the Fascist regime, *Camicia nera* also underscored the shortcomings of life as an immigrant Italian and advocated the repatriation of Italy's citizens. With respect to Italian émigrés, then, *Camicia nera*'s story emphatically underlined one side of the regime's paradoxical policy and directly questioned their choice to remain abroad. Despite *L'Italia Nostra*'s claim that "numerous" British citizens attended the London screenings, it is likely that the audiences consisted mainly of Italians from the local colony and members of the local Fascist association. A lack of direct testimony from contemporary audiences complicates any real understanding of the more nuanced response to the film that we might expect compared to that reported by *L'Italia Nostra*. However, a partial record of the responses from a section of the audience has survived within the pages of the Italian newspaper.

Shortly after the first of the London screenings, one member of the Italian colony initiated a project that recorded the contemporary reaction to *Camicia nera* and its impact on London's Italian community. At the start of May, the Director of Education for the London Italian schools, Elisa Baisi, set an essay on the topic of *Camicia nera* for the nearly 1,000 children from sixteen schools across the capital who had attended the initial screenings. Over the course of three weeks in May, extracts from this work were published in the Italian newspaper. Predictably, all the comments reported by *L'Italia Nostra* expressed great admiration for the Duce's achievements as witnessed in the film, yet they remain an interesting account of some of the contemporary responses to the film, particularly in relation to the children's immigrant status. Typical of the tone of many of the extracts, a twelve year-old girl wrote:

> Before watching *Camicia nera* I loved the Duce, but after having seen the film I love our magnificent Duce even more because he has created so many beautiful facilities: big

> hospitals, buildings, bridges, streets and schools. Out of a village where there was malaria he made a big and beautiful city! In the speech he gave in Littoria he said that in 1934 there would be another city; and in 1935 another again. Many Italians will live there, perhaps even many from abroad who have decided to return to the Fatherland. ("Il film della rinascita" 1)

Similar to many of the thirty-five responses chosen for publication, and as we might expect, the girl writes about Mussolini and the Fascist regime in terms of adulation. Certainly, some of the essays evidence a sense of identification with the characters on-screen. Recalling the moment in the film when the blacksmith's son is told that his father has gone to work abroad, one boy recounts: "It was exactly as it happened at my house when my father left my mother and my brothers in London and went to Italy to fight for his country … How I loved this film!" ("'Camicia nera' giudicata", 26 May, 3) Comparisons can also be made in the children's reflections on the vision of a renewed Italy and their own links to the home country. One boy commented: "I was so happy to see once more the beautiful Italian streets! I felt as if I was back in my country and I forgot about London" ("'Camicia nera' giudicata", 19 May, 3). Another child writes: "Duce, I will always be one of your faithful even though I live abroad, and because I live abroad I will be even more of a … 'Black Shirt'" ("'Camicia nera' giudicata", 26 May, 3). Others still made comments directly about the situation of Italian emigrants. Mirroring the ambivalent position of the film towards emigration, a boy relates: "There was a particular point in the film that made me almost … angry. A woman wanted to emigrate at any cost. The poor woman didn't really know what it meant to leave her own country and live under a sky that did not belong to Italy" ("'Camicia nera' giudicata", 19 May, 3). In their naivety these observations expose the paradox that the screening of *Camicia nera* to an audience of Italian immigrants seemed to create. In its attempt to promote the regime's great achievements, the film criticised the majority of its London's audience as deluded citizens in search of a better life outside their fatherland.

Conclusion

Following its premiere in London, at the beginning of June *Camicia nera* was projected in Oxford at an event organised by the Oxford University Fascist Association. As *L'Italia Nostra* reported, four hundred students and "friends of Italy" attended the screening, which was followed by a talk titled "Recent impressions from Italy" given by a prominent figure from the London Fascio ("Da Oxford" 6). On the 11 of June the Fascio of Liverpool and the local Italian consulate presented the film to "a crowd of Italians, local fascists and representatives from the nearby Italian colonies and Fasci" ("Da Liverpool" 6). As these screenings and those organised in London by the Italian embassy in collaboration with the local Fascist association suggest, in Britain the importance of *Camicia nera* for propaganda purposes was not underestimated and the film was given a high public visibility.

An analysis of *Camicia nera*'s circulation abroad focused only on the disappointing failure of its theatrical and commercial exploitation fails to provide a full understanding of the use of moving images within the propaganda activities promoted abroad by the Italian

authorities. The analysis of the foreign distribution and reception of the film I presented in this article brings to the fore the necessity of refocusing the discussion on a grassroots history that takes into consideration a range of primary sources in order to achieve a more rounded understanding of the international social and political context in which the film was shown and of its audiences. This case study of the screenings of *Camicia nera* in London opens up far-reaching questions related to how diasporic audiences negotiated the regime's nationalistic ideology and antiemigration propagandistic rhetoric. These questions, I would argue, call for a comparative approach to much needed case studies of the international circulation and reception of "the greatest film of the Fascist era".

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Notes

[1] All translations from the Italian are by the Author.

[2] For a discussion of the scandal surrounding the film, see Minghetti (20–7).

[3] This is the most comprehensive history of LUCE. Information about LUCE's history discussed in this article comes primarily from this source. On De Feo's company, SIC, see pages 13–22.

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