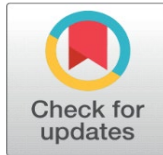
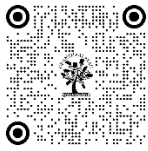


CINEMA IN ITALY AND GERMANY: IN AN ERA OF FASCISM

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ABSTRACT

The rise of Fascism and Nazism in Italy and Germany respectively brought about several changes in filmmaking in those countries in the 1930s and the 1940s. The Nazis were aware of the use of cinema as an instrument of propaganda and established their cinema institutions and brought cinema under the control of the Ministry of Propaganda. The primary task of Nazis was to reshape the imagination and perception of the masses according to their persuasions. The *Triumph of Will* (1935), directed by Leni Riefenstahl, was the filmic referent of Hitler's glorification in colossal style; it was a product of her intimate relationship with Hitler and her Nazi affiliations.

In Germany, due to state repression and persecution several left-wing and Jewish filmmakers fled to various European countries. In 1926 in Italy the production of newsreels and documentaries was nationalized by the government, bringing them under state control. The Italian cinema during the Fascist rule (1922-43) was traditionally seen as a cinema of propaganda. Recent research on the films produced in Italy during the Fascist period points out that only a few films can be called "Fascist", a huge number have nationalist and patriotic themes. It can be argued that the number of films produced was less important than the production ideology i.e. thematic concerns and degree of association with Fascist ideals. Under the Fascist rule of Mussolini, the kind of cinema being created was detached from reality and aimed at promoting an excellent image of Italy. It can be argued that restricting the intelligentsia and masses to a particular genre or style of cinema, which was away from reality, shows the authoritarian attitude and censorship intentions of the Fascist state.

Keywords: Nazi Cinema, Fascist Cinema, Ministry of Propaganda, Hitler, Mussolini



The rise of Fascism and Nazism in Italy and Germany respectively brought about several changes in filmmaking in those countries in the 1930s and 1940s. The Nazis were aware of the use of cinema as an instrument of propaganda and established their cinema institutions and brought cinema under the control of the Ministry of Propaganda. The primary task of Nazis was to reshape the imagination and perception of the masses according to their persuasions. In 1935, Leni Riefenstahl produced *Der Triumph des Willens* (*The Triumph of Will*), which was the cinematic version of Hitler's deification through colossal style, as a consequence of her intimate friendship with Hitler and her Nazi links. In Germany, due to state repression and persecution several left-wing and Jewish filmmakers fled to various European countries. In 1926 in Italy the production of newsreels and documentaries was nationalized by the government, bringing them under state control. The Italian cinema during the Fascist rule (1922-43) was traditionally seen as a cinema of propaganda. However recent research on the films produced in Italy during the Fascist period points out that only a few films can be called "Fascist", although a huge number have nationalist and patriotic themes. One can argue that the question of the number of films produced was not important but more relevant was the production ideology i.e. their thematic concerns and the degree of association with Fascist ideals. Under the Fascist rule of Mussolini, the kind of cinema that was being created was detached from reality and aimed at promoting an excellent image of Italy. It can also be argued that restricting the

intelligentsia and masses to a particular genre or style of cinema, which was away from reality, shows the authoritarian attitude and censorship intentions of the Fascist state.

1. DEVELOPMENTS IN GERMANY

When the Great Depression hit in the early 1930s, German films dominated the European market. Also, the films were created by a vibrant left-wing culture that was not part of the mainstream. Throughout the Weimar Republic, both the Social Democrats and the Communists endeavoured to establish parallel cultural networks via their respective literary, theatrical, and athletic pursuits. After the Nazi Party assumed power in 1933 the situation began to change. The Nazis established their cinema institutions and brought cinema under the control of the Ministry of Propaganda. The primary task of Nazis was to reshape the imagination and perception of the masses per their persuasions. It was quite evident that Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's Minister of Propaganda, were using cinema for propagandist purposes. They knew very well that films could captivate audiences, influence public opinion, and even cause people to believe in falsehoods.¹

About the Nazi party, Rentschler argued that many critics considered the films, newsreels, and documentaries produced under National Socialism's reign to be the lowest point in cinematic history due to the horrors committed by the regime. He also said that Nazi films' crowning glory was the methodical misuse of cinema's formative abilities for global devastation, state terror, and mass manipulation. He further stated that the studios were overseen by the Ministry of Propaganda, which also coordinated press reactions and scrutinized screenplays.²

The German cinema classified as *Tendenzfilme* during the Third Reich was meant to describe a film that portrayed strong themes and doctrines identifiable with Nazism which the Ministry of Propaganda wished to transmit at sporadic periods.³ To lead the Nazi army to victory over the world, Joseph Goebbels, in his first address as Minister of Popular Entertainment and Propaganda on May 20, 1933, said that German film had the obligation to do so.⁴ The most vital device of Goebbels' Ministry was the Reich Film Chamber which maintained almost exclusive control over independent and also state film production by centralizing film finance, inspecting all scripts before film-making, and enforcing up on all film workforce membership of affiliated party organizations.⁵ *Der Triumph des Willens* (*The Triumph of Will*, 1935), produced by Leni Riefenstahl because of her connections to Hitler and her Nazi affiliations, served as the filmic referent to the massive architecture that Hitler had commissioned. Hitler was shown in the Nuremberg Nazi party rally where a gigantic rectangular tribune was built. This architectural stage was designed to enhance Fuhrer's image as the saviour of the masses.⁶

In *The Triumph of the Will*, Susan Sontag argues that the document (the image) is no longer just a record of reality; rather, "reality" has been created to accommodate the image.⁷ The Nuremberg Nazi Party rally (1934) was produced for the film and served primarily as a highly artificial and well-planned piece of theatre. In other words, in the film, 'Actuality is not actual'; the cinematographic documentation of the occasion is extremely mediated; the matter is edited not to disclose the reality but a set of symbolic relationships with a precise political objective; the rally in becoming an illusion of 'reality' becomes 'documentary myth'.⁸ Another film *Olympia* (1938) was devoted to the Berlin Olympic Games of 1936 which Hitler tried to turn into a propaganda triumph.⁹ Both these films were amazing pageants, metamorphosing the Nazi leaders into a magnificent pantheon.¹⁰

In Joseph Goebbels's 1941 speech, "The Film as Educator", the propaganda minister inaugurated the Hitler Youth Film Works Programme. He spoke frankly about his tactical goals, the identical goals he had already implemented in the nationalized German film industry. He said that national leadership worthy of such an honour cannot shirk its

¹ Geoffrey Nowell Smith ed. *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, OUP, New York, 1996, p. 374

² Geoffrey Nowell Smith ed. *The Oxford History...*, pp. 374-379

³ David Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema: 1933-1945*, OUP, New York, 1983, pp. 2-3

⁴ Quoted in David Welch, *Propaganda and ...*, pp. 1-2

⁵ David Robinson, *World Cinema: 1895-1980*, Stein, 1981, p. 220

⁶ William Laird Kleine Ahlbrandt, *Twentieth Century European History*, West Publishing Company, U.S.A., 1993, pp. 337-359

⁷ Jill Neldes, ed. *An Introduction to Film Studies*, Third Edition, Routledge, London, 2003, p.197

⁸ Jill Neldes, ed. *An Introduction to Film...*, pp.197-199

⁹ William Laird Kleine Ahlbrandt, *Twentieth Century...*, pp. 338-340

¹⁰ David Robinson, *World Cinema...*, p. 220

responsibility to assist its citizens in all aspects of life, neither the difficulties they face nor the pleasures they enjoy. He also argued that one of the most important things is cinema in this regard, as it helps to beautify the few hours that a German citizen has after work time which is vital for recharging his spirit. Moreover, he stated that contemporary cinema is a first-rate national educational instrument and the extent to which it has an impact is on par with that of elementary schools.¹¹

In other words, he wants to keep film production ideology at this level of reception. Cinema of political propaganda increased from an average of ten percent to twenty-five percent in 1942, the year of the Nazis' utmost military extension in Europe.¹² Moreover, one can argue that the question of several films produced was not important but more relevant was the production ideology i.e. their thematic concerns and the degree of association to Nazi ideals, and the devastation they caused to the human race.

Due to state repression and persecution several left-wing and Jewish filmmakers fled to various European countries. Some finally landed in America. Several film industry personnel who remained in Germany died in concentration camps. Among the anti-Nazi artists and technicians, some who managed to escape the assault went on to work in Germany's film industry's entertainment sector. One of the most important things that fascism and Nazism did to the film industry wasn't the films produced in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, but rather the mass exodus they prompted in 1933 and again in 1940. The anti-Semitic and anti-communist activities coupled with too much state control of the film industry caused the exile of so many artists that it must have hurt German cinema as these artists would have enriched German cinema in better circumstances. This emigration served as a boon for the cinema of those countries who willingly and pleasantly accepted the refugees – Hollywood gained the most but other countries also had their share of luck.

2. FASCISM IN ITALY

Fascism took over Italy in 1922 when Benito Mussolini acquired control. Cinema, he said, like Lenin before him, is the most potent tool for influencing the people. It wasn't until 1926 that the government took over the newsreel and documentary industries. It is easy to see how Pudovkin and other Russian silent cinema greats impacted Italian director Alessandro Blasetti's 1929 film *Sole (Sun)*. Film theorists such as Umberto Barbaro and Luigi Chiarini adopted the ideas and views of Eisenstein and Pudovkin, who in turn influenced the neorealists who came of age after World War II, but in a circuitous manner.¹³

The Italian cinema during the Fascist rule (1922-43) has traditionally been seen as a cinema of propaganda. This cinema was, generally, neglected by mainstream film historians and scholars. Cesare Zavattini talks about the rejection of this cinema as the two decades of the fascist regime did not produce a single film which was a 3000-meter film out of thirty million shots. At other points, this apathy is also reflected by Carlo Lizzani who said that hundreds of films made between 1938 and 1943 should not be remembered or regretted, even if they are lost since they contained merely a record of ordinary places in a filthy and boring recipe book.¹⁴

However, recent research on the films produced in Italy during the Fascist period points out that out of over seven hundred films made, only a few can be called "Fascist", although a huge number have nationalist and patriotic themes.¹⁵ That the fascists did little interference in the film industry is a common argument. Initially, the government's meddling was more economic than cultural. Aiding in the production of films that could hold their own against Hollywood was its primary goal, which was the revival of a flagging industry.¹⁶ Censorship and the suppression of anti-national ideas were two of the most visible cultural outcomes of fascist meddling.¹⁷ Peter Bondanella, claims that fascist cinema was not a cinema of ideological propaganda but rather it favored a thriving commercial cinema based on the Hollywood model, inclusive of the star system, a group of significant auteur¹⁸ directors, and a genre-oriented theme.¹⁹ Famous cinema academic Morando Morandini

¹¹ Quoted in Karsten Witte "How Nazi Cinema mobilizes the Classics: Schweikart's *Das Fraulein von Barnhelm* (1940)" in Eric Rentschler ed., *German Film and Literature: Adaptations and Transformations*, New York, 1986, p.103

¹² Karsten Witte "How Nazi Cinema mobilizes the Classics...", p.104

¹³ Geoffery Nowell Smith, ed; *The Oxford History of Cinema...*, p. 334

¹⁴ Peter Bondanella, *The Films of Roberto Rossellini*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p.3

¹⁵ Peter Bondanella, *The Films of Roberto Rossellini...*, p.5

¹⁶ American Film Industry

¹⁷ Geoffery Nowell Smith ed. *The Oxford History...*, pp.335

¹⁸ (i) The prime author of a film. (ii) A director with a recognizable style.

¹⁹ Peter Bondanella, *The Films of Roberto Rossellini...*, p.7

argues that fascism's goal was not to persuade intellectuals and artists to accept its political stances, but to divert their attention away from the pressing issues of the day, the exclusive domain of the elected representatives.²⁰ Though, indeed, the 'official' cinema of the two decades of the fascist regime represented five percent of national production, the escapist film, or what Luchino Visconti dubbed "a cinema of corpses," continued to be the engine that propelled Italian cinema, except for the solo works of notable characters such as Alessandro Blasetti and Camerini. The comedic, melodramatic, and costume-cum-historical drama styles were more akin to Hollywood productions of the era, and the films' reliance on celebrity cults was a key component. In most cases, the comedies were pointless and trivial, with their plots centred on narcissistic, self-indulgent characters who live in a world of absurd affluence and communicate via the gleaming "white telephones" that gave the genre its name. Moreover, restricting the intelligentsia and masses to a particular genre or style of cinema, which was away from reality, shows the authoritarian attitude and censorship intentions of the Fascist state. Furthermore, one can argue that rather than the number of fascist films produced, more important and relevant was the production ideology i.e. their thematic concerns and the degree of association with Nazi ideals, and the devastation they caused to the human race. Under the Fascist rule of Mussolini, the kind of cinema that was being created was detached from reality and aimed at promoting an excellent image of Italy. The government had prohibited the portrayal of crime and immorality on screen. Neorealist films were a reaction against the disapprovingly called 'white telephone films' which were pretentious and in which characters talked on white shining phones.

Thus, one can argue that Fascist cinema in Italy and Nazi cinema in Germany was dealt with by these governments in a broad overall framework of Fascist ideology where state control was to be exercised on this media. The governments in these two countries tried to control them in their particular ways to achieve their objectives. They were also successful to the extent that their desired projections on celluloid were exhibited for a considerable period till neorealism as a cinematic movement tried to portray alternative moving images to audiences in Italy.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None

²⁰ Geoffrey Nowell Smith ed. *The Oxford History...*, p.354