

CINECENSURA

FILM CENSORSHIP DURING FASCISM

by Roberto Guli

If you think about films during Fascism, the first thing that springs to mind is the propaganda by the LUCE newsreels, the conservative “telefoni bianchi” light comedies, the prima donna behaviour of Valenti/Ferida, the Venice Film Festival and Cinecittà. If you think about censorship, we picture Mussolini in his screening room in Villa Torlonia examining the content of LUCE documentaries before sitting back to some light entertainment. The Duce enjoying Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936), giving it his blessing for screening, but censoring the scene in which “an imprisoned Chaplin involuntarily eats cocaine”. The Duce, alerted by the first scandalous film of the Venice Film Festival, the Czech *Ekstase* (*Symphony of Love*, 1933) by Gustav Machatý, bans it but comments upon the full nudity of the actress Hedy Kiesler (later known as Hedy Lamarr) thus: “Wow! What a beautiful woman!” But beyond picturesque imaginings of history and anecdotes, what were the main characteristics of film censorship during the Fascist period?

THE MECHANISMS OF CENSORSHIP

The 1920s: continuity with the liberal era

Initially, Fascism limited itself to following in the footsteps of a pre-established system already in place for around a decade: revision commissions issuing authorisation for the distribution of films, which had been operating since 1913. The first and second degree commissions (or of appeal) issued a binding verdict and operating under the guidance of the Ministero dell’Interno (Home Affairs Office): these traits were maintained for at least a decade. The legislative measures adopted in the first few years after the advent of Fascism brought about few changes: some modifications to the composition of the commissions; “artistic quality” as an additional criteria to obtain authorisation; the introduction, from 1925, of the first forms of protection for minors, with the option to ban films for under-16s. The parameters for evaluating films according to merit remained basically unchanged: the auditors continued to watch out for moral suitability, respect for acceptable behaviour and institutions, for the presence of “violent, repugnant or cruel” scenes or of “perverse actions or facts which could incite crime,” of scenes which “incite hate between the various social classes”, etc. The seeming disinterest at the dawn of Fascism on the issue of film censorship is, in part, due to the fact that Mussolini’s main preoccupation was, as is known, with regards to the control of news and information, rather than fiction films. To this end, the foundation of the Istituto LUCE in 1924 would reveal itself to be far more efficient than toughening up the mechanisms of film revision.

The 1930s: the turnaround in Fascist censorship

With the consolidation of the Fascist dictatorship, however, things changed. The crucial event, in this sense, took place in 1934, the year of the creation of the office of Sottosegretariato di Stato per la Stampa e la Propaganda (Undersecretary of State for the Press and Propaganda, which later became a Ministry, then in 1937 was renamed Ministero della Cultura Popolare – Popular Culture). The administrative duties for censorship, not only for films, was transferred from the Ministero dell'Interno to the new Sottosegretariato, which had its own Film section, headed by Luigi Freddi, until he was removed from the post in 1939. The main artifice of film policy during the Fascist 30s, Freddi, was also the chairman of Cinecittà, of ENIC (Ente Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche) and of Cines, as well as being a vital source of historical information in the future, thanks to his memoir *Il cinema*, written between 1948 and 1949.

So what are the changes that Fascism generated to film censorship? Generally speaking, there were two which stand out: the strengthening of so-called preventive censorship, that is to say in the pre-production phase, especially via keeping a check on the script or the screenplay; and the gradual transfer of effective censorial powers from the revision commissions to higher standing functionaries.

Preventive censorship and foreign films

Preventive censorship was already foreseen by a law of 1919, which had introduced pre-emptive control on “scripts or screenplays”. However, this imposition remained a bureaucratic hitch, as it was the norm to present the script to the commission only when the finished film was undergoing revision. The examination of the scripts of Italian productions, though, were one of the main prerogatives of the Film Division: from 1935, the principle of preventive censorship was applied rigorously to nationally produced films. We know, for example, that certain projects dealing with figures such as Guglielmo Marconi, Gabriele d'Annunzio and Mussolini himself were rejected for fear that they would be “counter-productive”; or that *Giuseppe Verdi* (a film which went on to be directed by Carmine Gallone, winning an award at the 1938 Venice Film Festival) received criticism in the preparatory phase as it was not considered to emphasize enough the “genius, heroism or kindness” of the character. The censors could, in effect, intervene in every stage of production, from the writing of the script to editing. Freddi was an advocate of increasing the role of the censor, which should no longer limit itself to “cold vigilance” – his own words – but rather “use every available means to develop opportune inspirational functions”. Basically, censorship began to merge with propaganda. And in the setting of finance policies for national film production during Fascism, it was obvious that state funding would only be extended to productions that stuck diligently to the dictates of the censor.

With regards to foreign films, which potentially were imbued with foreign ideas and culture, there was even more severity. In the era of dubbing, revision was in two phases: the first authorized the film to be dubbed, the second, decisive, examined the Italian version. This scenario opened up fertile ground for the censor, who could intervene in the dubbing phase, “suggesting” alterations to dialogues or even the geographical location of certain settings. At times, distributors were even discouraged from the very start from acquiring the rights for foreign films: this was the case, mentioned by Freddi, with *Scarface* (1932) by Howard Hawks.

Power transferal from commissions to Fascist party officials

With the gradual distancing from their original duties, revision commissions were increasingly overtaken by the Fascist officials. Between 1928 and 1935, due to various laws, the commissions were swallowed up by those of the Partito Nazionale Fascista, of the GUF (Gruppi Universitari Fascisti) and various Ministries, including those of the Corporations, Colonies and War (the latter two responsible for scripts and films of a "military or colonial" nature) and, from 1939, into the Italian Africa Ministry (for films "both national and foreign destined for screening in Italian Africa"). At the same time, non-political figures were gradually excluded, such as people who were "competent in artistic, literary and film technique fields", magistrates and "mothers of families". The practical consequence was the debasement of the effective power of decision of the commissions, which in effect passed into the hands of higher party officials. Initially, they were only required to carry out administrative tasks while crucial decisions, which involved particularly important films or thornier issues, were taken, case by case, by the head of the film department, by undersecretaries or ministers of Cultura Popolare, right up to, as was noted, the Duce himself.

An exemplary case is *La grande illusion* (1937) by Jean Renoir: Freddi in person decreed its prohibition, sending a report to the minister of Cultura Popolare "in anticipation of an eventual presentation to the censors" of the film in 1938.

The influence on sources

The consolidation of preventative censorship and the decreasing powers of the revision commissions had an important knock-down effect on sources: from the beginning of the 1930s, there appeared to be a decrease in cuts, modifications and bans on films, almost totally disappearing in the 1940s. It must however be pointed out that the sources regarding the Fascist era in our possession are rather fragmentary and meagre. The few authorisations from the censors that we have in hand are basically duplicates from the post-war period, when numerous re-edits were made of films from the previous decades; the majority of the information on official censorship during that era comes from volumes of ministerial protocol regarding the authorisations for the distribution of films in Italian theatres (their finding led to the Italia Taglia – Italy Cuts – project) which, despite having major holes, report cuts and bans. However, this above-mentioned trend cannot be explained simply by the lack of source information, and it is certainly not indicative of a lowering of the guard of censorship during these crucial years of the Fascist period. Quite the contrary. Rather it reflects the fact that censorship interventions were decided earlier on, often at higher levels, before reaching the censorship commissions themselves.

Censorship in act

An infinite number of films were banned or censored to varying degrees during Fascism. For films of major impact, the prohibition did not even have to pass through the official censors' hands. We must not underestimate the importance of the role played by people outside of the state institutions: the Church, with the increasing influence of the Centro Cattolico Cinematografico founded in 1935, the critics and the regime intellectuals who wrote in specialist magazines and the daily press, the relationship with Nazi Germany and, especially, with Joseph Goebbels.

Subversives banished: Americans, the French, the Soviets

During the Fascist era, there was a predictable exacerbation of ideological censorship. In both Italian and foreign auteur and entertainment films, even the minimal presence of ideas held to be subversive (anti-authoritarian, revolutionary, pacifist, egalitarian...) was constantly monitored. The cases that most often spring to mind are important productions, mainly from the USA, banned in Italy and in other European countries due to anti-militaristic content. Films about the First World War, especially *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) by Lewis Milestone, based on the novel by Erich Maria Remarque, was banned by Mussolini himself; *A Farewell to Arms* (1932) directed by Frank Borzage, based on Hemingway's novel of the same name, was labelled defeatist because it portrayed the retreat at Caporetto. *La grande illusion*, the pacifist masterpiece by Renoir, despite winning an award at the Venice Film Festival, was thus described by Freddi in the aforementioned report: "A political film, expression of that defeatist mentality, apathetic, anti-heroic, which is hung out on the white flag of pacifism". Its main defect, according to Freddi, was "the absence of any ideal motivation for war"; and the recognized artistic value of the film, "for ethical reasons mentioned, is an aggravating factor". Many other French films were banned for the same reasons, especially those which were part of the then poetic realism wave (besides Renoir, there were Marcel Carné and Julien Duvivier). Not even the irreverent satire of the Marx Brothers or Chaplin could render the anti-authoritarian stance tolerable, especially when aggravated by poking fun in an explicit manner at Mussolini himself. In this sense, *Duck Soup* (1933), censored by the Duce who recognised himself in the dictator personified by Groucho, seems to be a prelude for *The Great Dictator* (1940), which was only released after the war in most of Europe, and only obtained the green light in Italy in 1945. Anti-Semitic criticism had already caused bans on films like the British *Jew Süss* (1934) by Lothar Mendes and the American *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937) by William Dieterle, which dealt with the thorny "Dreyfus Affair". The fear of Communist propaganda blocked the way for all the Soviet cinema masterpieces, with only around twenty titles being allowed access into Italy. A genuine bugbear for the regime censors, also banned previously, was the subject of the Russian Revolution of 1917, which went beyond the personal obsessions of Mussolini regarding Soviet cinema. Biographical films like the MGM colossal *Rasputin and the Empress* (1932) could be banned merely for their setting in pre-Revolutionary Russia; or the Duce could be alarmed by the mere presence of Russian names in innocuous adventure films like the Italian *La principessa Tarakanova* (Betrayal) (1938) or the British *Knight without Armour* (1937). Often, minor modifications were enough, the editing out of a few lines of dialogue or individual scenes, in order to attenuate the potentially subversive content of certain films. For example, in 1927, the famous film *Napoléon* (Napoleon) by Abel Gance was requested to cut "the scenes where they debate Corsican nationality, which take part in the tavern". The equally famous *Metropolis* (1927) by Fritz Lang was required, amongst other things, that the sequence of scenes be cut in which "the workers slowly walk to work". The comedy by René Clair, *À nous la liberté* (1931), was ordered to "cut the scenes in which, while the machines automatically churn out gramophones, the workers play, drink, fish and dance", and the title of the film was even changed, with the "nous" being replaced by the more innocuous sounding "I". The bio-pic on Pancho Villa, *Viva Villa!* (1934) by Jack Conway, was instructed to "cut the Socialist-based dialogues stating 'We'll teach you that the rich and poor are all alike,' etc." Even the French national anthem was removed from various films, even when heard in contexts of pure entertainment.

War on foreign languages and the defence of "Italian-ness"

The advent of the talkies at the end of the 1920s gave birth to a relatively brief event, but one which was extraordinarily significant: the censorship of foreign languages. When the first foreign language talkies began to arrive on Italian shores, the country was going through a transitional phase in which dubbing had yet to be perfected.

"The 'invasion' of foreign languages was strongly contested by Fascism: in October 1930, it totally banned the screening in Italy of foreign-language films (a decision, it seems, strongly backed by Mussolini). The result was the so-called "sonorization" which, until 1933, completely mutilated films from abroad. Scenes with dialogue were suppressed and substituted by captions which translated the content, to the understandable consternation of spectators. Only the definitive affirmation of dubbing (which also eradicated the practice of multiple versions of the same film, shot simultaneously using different actors) brought an end to this situation. The safeguarding of "Italian-ness" was another constant in Fascist censorship. What Freddi said about *Scarface*, in his explanation of why the film was banned, can be said for all the others, even after having praised its artistic qualities: because "all the criminals that supported the structure of the terrifying main character, even if they lived in America, were scrupulously and deliberately Italian". The same fate awaited other Hollywood gangster films, like *Little Caesar* (1931) by Mervyn LeRoy; the character was not only Italian, but was considered to mimic Mussolini. Like in the case of the previously mentioned *Giuseppe Verdi*, the historical characters of Italian nationality had to appear to be "heroic": obviously Gary Cooper's Marco Polo wasn't heroic enough, if in the Italian edition of *The Adventures of Marco Polo* (1938) by Archie Mayo, the titles was changed into the debatable translation "A Scotsman in the court of the Grand Khan".

Routine censorship: criminals, monsters, female nudity

Besides mirroring the thinking during the Fascist era, the work of the censors obviously continued as it had before. Scenes showing crimes, mainly, ended up being targeted by the censors as they were considered to be "merciless" as well as "inciting crime".

And if the censors also got up in arms about "horrifying suicides" and "hypnotic and supernatural phenomena", it is hardly surprising that in 1923 *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* (*Dr. Mabuse the Gambler*, 1922) by Fritz Lang was initially banned, or that in 1924, authorisation for *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, 1920) by Robert Wiene was withdrawn. The same goes for the few horror films that Italian cinema-goers were allowed to see, although with elements such as skeletons, skulls and corpses removed: *Dracula* (1931) by Tod Browning was not released, and even some short animated films faced problems with the censors. Comparable severity was shown towards serial films: in 1923, all twelve episodes of *L'homme aux trois masques* (*The Man with Three Masks*) (1922) by Émile Keppens and René Navarre were banned, but given the go-ahead the following year under the translated title of "The triumph of destiny".

The safeguarding of morality was guaranteed by an infinite number of cuts imposed on nude scenes, mainly involving women: legs and bare breasts, night-dresses and dancers, as well as on kisses and embraces, orgies and love-making scenes and on phrases alluding to sex. Morality was imposed by removal, in certain cases, of characters playing prostitutes or adulterers: indeed, adultery was a subject banned during Fascism, alongside suicide and male homosexuality. Censored nudity appears, for example, in the Italian film

Sole! (1929) by Alessandro Blasetti: "Removal of [...] the frames in which Barbara exposes her naked breasts, [...] the frames in which Barbara strips and when she rolls around naked on the floor with Silvestro". Although in the 1940s, the celebrated nude scenes were "saved" by Clara Calamai in *La cena delle beffe* (1942) by

Blasetti, or Doris Duranti in *Carmela* (1942) by Flavio Calzavara, it was done so as not to hinder Italian film production...

Fascism reflected. Censorship and propaganda

"Eliminate all scenes and captions regarding the Duce", recommends the censor to an American film produced by Fox, *Chasing Through Europe* (1929), by David Butler and Alfred L. Werker. Or the Italian drama *Odette* (1934) with Francesca Bertini: remove "the part in which the words 'Duce, Duce!' are heard". Any reference to Mussolini or the regime, however innocuous, appearing in entertainment films were usually looked down on by the censor. Fascism did not like to be "reflected" on the big screen, apart from in the strictly controlled conditions of the LUCE documentaries and propaganda films – And even the rare attempts to represent the "epic deeds" of Fascism in a realistic and unfiltered manner, for example, in historical pictures like *Scipione l'Africano*, (Scipio the African) were destined to controversial fates. This is demonstrated by three films, conceived to celebrate the origins of the Fascist action squads on the occasion of the ten-year anniversary of the March on Rome; however, the end result displeased the regime altogether. *Camicia nera* (1933) by Giovacchino Forzano, produced by the Istituto LUCE and starring non-professional actors (as would happen, with the opposite intent, in Neorealist films); following the flop of the first ever public screening, it was quickly withdrawn. *Ragazzo* (1933) by Ivo Perilli, the account of a young thug who redeems himself by enrolling in the Fascist army, was flunked by Mussolini and even sent to be destroyed, as it was accused of making it look like the Fascist recruits were made up of thieves and scum. *Vecchia guardia* (Old Guard, 1935) by Blasetti also provoked a mixed reaction, criticised by Freddi and initially barred from release by the censors.

Following this, further projects which were too explicitly about Fascism were discouraged. Naturally, though, even the most subtle propaganda films could cause uproar in the regime: in *Passaporto rosso* (1935) by Guido Brignone Mussolini forced scenes to be cut in which rebels sought out hidden weapons, judging it to be "educational to insurrection"; even the costume film, *Il cappello a tre punte* (Three Cornered Hat, 1935) by Mario Camerini caused the Duce to have the scene cut in which the people show disgruntlement towards high taxes.

When Italy entered the war, productions dealing with news, military issues and war propaganda were encouraged, like *Giarabub* (1942) by Goffredo Alessandrini, where the prostitute character is edited out of the final cut because Italian heroes should not have sexual impulses.

Noi vivi/Addio Kira (We the Living) (1942) by Alessandrini also ran into censorship problems, due to the presence of a Bolshevic commissar.

Autarchy and the Salò Republic

In the 1940s, the number of imported films fell drastically: the war was underway and the American majors had decided to withdraw their films from the Italian market (from 1 January 1939) in reply to the political autarchy imposed by the Fascist government. So film censorship mainly touched European and Italian films, which were especially subjected to preventative controls on scripts. Emerging auteurs like Antonioni, De Santis, Lattuada and Visconti had various projects rejected, especially those too firmly rooted in the news events of the time.

From September 1943 to March 1945, the censors of the Repubblica Sociale Italiana were even more rigid (even reviewing authorisations previously conceded). And it was in the Salò Republic that the Luchino Visconti

film *Ossessione* (Obsession, 1943) was subjected to various censorship trials and tribulations: initially given permission for screening because it was not seen as being explicitly anti-Fascist, it was then forced to make cuts due to pressure from the authorities and the Church, before being destroyed by the Salò authorities. The director, however, managed to save it. Hostility towards Neorealism, the influence of the Church: the last sensational example of Fascist censorship already somehow symbolizes the shape of things to come in post-war censorship.

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