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# Mussolini's Dream Factory: Film Stardom in Fascist Italy, book review

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*Mussolini's Dream Factory: Film Stardom in Fascist Italy* by Stephen Gundle (Berghahn, 2013)

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Stephen Gundle in *Mussolini's Dream Factory: Film Stardom in Fascist Italy* examines how the Italian movie industry created their own star system as a counter to Hollywood. American movies came to dominate Italian screens after the virtual collapse of the domestic film industry in the 1920s. In response, the fascist government of Benito Mussolini began to subsidize film production as part of both the regime's industrial and cultural policies. This new partnership between the Italian government and the film industry would lead to the construction of what would become Cinecittà. The new state of the art production center in Rome was deemed important enough for Mussolini himself to attend the laying of the cornerstone in January, 1936. *Mussolini's Dream Factory* provides an overview of these efforts coupled with a critical assessment of the immediate and historical impact of the fascist period on the Italian cinema.

The popularity of American movies and especially the embrace of Hollywood stars was deemed threatening to national values by Mussolini and the government's director general for cinema Luigi Freddi. However, according to Gundle, the Fascist government was conflicted on exactly how to combat Hollywood dominance over film culture in Italy. While Cinecittà may have started as a public-private partnership, it had ended up by the late 1930s as an instrument of the state. Despite greater government control, Gundle argues that there was much less definitively fascist content in Italian movies of the era than might be supposed. Luigi Freddi, much like his German counterpart Joseph Goebbels, "was strongly opposed to the making of films that has an explicit propaganda purpose." (32). Surprisingly about 20% of films were the kind of historical epics that extolled the Italian past favored by fascist ideologues. Historical films were also an important part of the Italian cinema of the 1910s so the relative low production output is surprising. Early feature-length historical epics like *Cabiria* (1914) were not just popular in Italy, but were popular and critically acclaimed abroad including in the United States. However, the Italian films of the fascist era were more often drama and light "white-telephone" comedies with little overt political messages or historical content.

Gundle divides *Mussolini's Dream Factory* into three parts. In "Part I: Fascism, Cinema and Stardom," he presents his core arguments regarding the relationship between fascism and the Italian cinema. Gundle contends that the Fascists were torn between the extremes of repudiating and emulating the American star system that came to dominate Italian screens in the decade after World War I. Already by the 1920s, Hollywood had developed an entire star apparatus of studio publicity and advertising departments that communicated directly to fans or indirectly through newspapers, magazines and star-themed publications. American companies looking for international markets filled the void for movies and stars left by the collapse of the Italian film industry. Italians responded by embracing Hollywood and its stars in the 1920s.

However, any attempt to create a fascist star system to rival Hollywood posed both practical and ideological challenges. As Gundle argues, Italy was competing from behind with a Hollywood studio system that already possessed highly developed infrastructure for international sales and publicity. Even as the Italian cinema has some success developing its studio system, Italian stars suffered as lesser versions to their Hollywood counterparts. For example, the dashing Amedeo Nazzari, while popular with audience, was often labelled the "Italian Errol Flynn or Clark Gable." (4) One would think that the Italians, like the Germans, would have an advantage over Hollywood in that they either controlled or cast a long shadow over the entire apparatus of media in their countries. However, Hollywood's advantage was an independent press that provided a legitimacy to film fandom. The highly competitive international film press created clever appeals to fans as magazines looked for greater readership. The popular press of the 1920s in Italy was mostly supportive of Hollywood since they were always concerned about losing their access to the studios publicity departments and the stars. Even during the fascist era, it was difficult to completely control international coverage of Hollywood that made its way into the Italy. Italian stars never achieved the same status among movie fans that had been attained in the previous decade by the Americans.

On an ideological level, Gundle points to two obstacles the fascist faced if they wanted to create a star system modelled on Hollywood. First, he argues that the Hollywood star system could not be unmoored from the context of the rise of consumer capitalism in America that made the movies popular entertainment in the first place. Fascist economic development instead relied on "public investment and infrastructure, such as road and building, as well as foreign conquest," not on encouraging the individualist modernist values characteristic of a consumer society. Creating a new film factory at Cinecittà was compatible with fascist policy, and successful at increasing film production. However encouraging audiences to consume the studio factory "dreams" was less successful. Gundle points out that the Fascist regime "often engaged in ideological battles against modern consumption and its supposedly deleterious effects in terms of promoting a cult of things foreign, undermining conventional gender models and making Italians soft." (67) These battles were often directed in nationalistic terms against American capitalism and its seemingly unrestrained individualism. For many ideologues, the American movies undermined their greater project of instilling the manly, collective values of Italian fascism. Since Hollywood was considered anathema to many fascists, attempts to create an Italian star-system on the American model was met with skepticism.

Luigi Freddi pursued a pragmatic approach to the ideological conflict among the Party. With the support of the regime, he encouraged film production and publicity that would create a Hollywood star system, but without the decadent values associated with American-style modernity. The intention was to create stars that would embody Italian virtues. In "Part II: Italian Stars of the Fascist Era," Gundle presents seven stars from the era in seven short chapters. These stars were promoted for both their charisma and "Italianess." He describes many movies and publicity campaigns that promoted the star in the context of their essential Italian character. The success of these efforts was mixed. For example, Isa

Miranda, the subject of a chapter titled, "The National Star," seemed to gain increasing popularity in Italy, not so much for her essential national character, but as a "confectioned image modelled" to rival the glamor of Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo. (129) To the chagrin of Italian film authorities, Miranda left Italy in 1937 for a brief career in Hollywood, which according to Gundle, was perceived "as a sort of betrayal" to the nation. (132)

Gundle devotes the last chapters to "The Aftermath of Stardom." He points out that the Italian cinema of the Fascist era went largely unseen outside Italy at the time, and rarely viewed in Italy after the end of the World War II. As a result, the Italian studio era receded quickly from memory. The public reaction against the actors and actresses of studio era was nearly complete because of their association with the fascist regime. Among the era's greatest stars only Vittorio De Sica made the transition from studio to neo-realism, though his post war international success was as a director of critically acclaimed films, in contrast to his popular image as a matinee idol of "white telephone" comedies during the studio era. As a conclusion, Gundle examines three later Italian films, Dino Risi's *Telfoni bianchi* (1976) and Tinto Brass's *Senso '45* (2002), Marco Tullio Giordana's *Sanguepazzo* (2008) that each referenced the studio era of the 1930s as attempts by Italians to come to terms with their repressed fascist past.

*Mussolini's Dream Factory: Film Stardom in Fascist Italy* joins Eric Rentschler's, *The Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and its Aftermath* (1996) as an important study of the complex relationship of the fascist state to popular culture. Gundle successfully combines archival research with close-readings of rarely screened movies to produce an interdisciplinary work of interest to scholars in film and history. His analysis of the rapid attempt by the fascist regime to create stars to rival Hollywood is not only of value to students of the Italian cinema, but also to those who study the global influence of the studio system and American film industry of the period.