PART THREE

The Duce, or the Romance of Undemocratic Governing
Promoting a Romantic Biography

Promoting a Romantic Biography

The public man is born “public”—he bears the stigma from his birth. [...] He can never escape it. [...] I am perfectly resigned to my lot as a public man. In fact, I am enthusiastic about it.

Mussolini, 1925

The rise of Benito Mussolini on the world stage is conventionally associated with the March on Rome of late October 1922, which forced the Italian king to appoint the Fascist leader to the post of prime minister. The American media coverage of the events was extensive: interest in his striking rise to power, original personality, and leadership pervaded daily reports and editorials. Soon periodicals devoted commentary and illustrations to the iconic Fascist leader, and within a few short years newsreels began to feature him as an alluring celebrity. Economic and geopolitical factors explain the interest that American financial and political centers had in his anti-Communist leadership but do not clarify his status as an iconic public personality, which resulted from a host of public relations efforts informing an intense media coverage.

In truth, Mussolini had already attracted the attention of a very limited but not inconsequential group of individuals years before the March on Rome. After the United States joined the hostilities, American officials found themselves benefiting from this pro-war socialist’s remarkable ability of stirring public opinion to accept Italy’s participation in the conflict and alliance with the United States. In the late 1910s and early 1920s, he positioned himself as an invaluable anti-Bolshevik interlocutor and a loyal ally to financial centers seeking to invest in a strike-free nation. In this section, I tell the story of how mainstream media support for the Duce consistently intertwined geopolitical rationales and alleged individual traits according to a personalizing strategy that Mussolini himself, a longtime journalist, skillfully exploited. Even though several reporters, editors, and writers of leftist and liberal bents condemned what they recognized as a coup d’état, a number of American and Italian mediators enabled his rise to fame by fostering a personality cult that largely deterred any serious questioning of his antidemocratic regime.
They did so at least until the mid-1930s, when his American fortunes shifted for worse following the Duce's decision to emulate other colonial powers and start his imperialistic campaign in Africa.

**WARTIME PUBLIC INFORMATION**

As discussed in chapter 1, the Committee for Public Information had branches all over Western Europe, including in Rome. Between April and October 1918, the head of the Italian CPI was the eminent political science professor Charles Edward Merriam, whom many regarded as “the most important political scientist of the interwar years.” As the American high commissioner for public information in Italy, Merriam's mission was to encourage the Italian public to have faith in the country's military alliance with the United States, support pro-war socialist leaders, and undermine anti-war socialist and communist groups. Despite his short tenure, Merriam was perhaps one of the truest interpreters of Wilson's propaganda-based diplomacy. In his role, he came into contact with the most important men influencing Italian public opinion. Possibly among them was Mussolini who, after being expelled from the Socialist Party in late 1914 due to his sudden pro-war stance, embraced a rhetoric of militaristic nationalism and broadcast it through his new interventionist newspaper *Il Popolo d'Italia*. Diplomatic historian Louis John Nigro Jr. has suggested that it was quite likely that in 1918 Merriam offered financial support to Mussolini's newspaper to increase its circulation and subsidize a Rome edition. Funneled through the Rockefeller Foundation, Merriam's support compensated the future Duce for his influential support of the American war intervention and contributed to his public ascendancy. This occurred just as the CPI was endeavoring to advertise President Wilson in Italy as the personification of a nonpartisan moral authority and idealistic champion of democracy and world peace. Merriam was in Italy when Mussolini celebrated Wilson's popular authority with a six-column front-page headline in *Il Popolo d'Italia* that hailed the American president as “the supreme duce of the free peoples” (figure 30). Mussolini would soon adopt for himself the same rhetoric (and lexicon).

Upon his return to the United States in late 1918, Merriam wrote an official account of his Italian experience for the *American Political Science Review*. It read like a manifesto of realpolitik, pleading for better-funded and -organized propaganda efforts not just to strengthen patriotic idealism but to serve geopolitical interests. “International misunderstandings,” Merriam noted, “menace our industrial, political, social and national ideals and progress.” The selling of Wilson's America—and with it, American interests—to Italy was premised on the notion that, as he wrote to George Creel in June 1918, “Italy needs the influence of some great international personality.”

Merriam did not name anyone in particular, but his close office colleague in Rome, Gino Speranza, used the same argument to identify an Italian, not a
foreign, figure. Speranza was an Italian American lawyer who was serving as personal aide and advisor to the American ambassador to Italy. On July 1918, he reported to Washington about “a man of vision,” whom he identified as “the fighting leader of the Reform Socialists,” whose popularity was winning approval among “members of all parties.” Given his public profile, this person could only have been Mussolini. Against the fear that Italy could have been next after Russia to succumb to a communist revolution, Speranza’s reassuring reports provided indications of a possible and very welcome counter-strategy. Beyond the political influence of any “great international personality,” what was needed for Italy was the emergence of a strong, anti-Bolshevik Italian leader. This remained the American view for years to come.

After the war, President Wilson experienced a dramatic drop in popularity in Italy because of his intransigence regarding the destiny of the Adriatic city of Fiume. Concomitantly, Mussolini replaced the dogmatic “poet-soldier” Gabriele D’Annunzio, the defeated leader of the occupation of Fiume, as Italy’s nationalist icon. The Duce’s early-1920s rise to domestic and international fame was part of a script that unfolded against an ideological landscape of growing misgivings about the stability of Italian democracy and fears of a Bolshevik drift. In this context, Mussolini became of great geopolitical interest to the United States because of his relationship to America’s immediate economic and political goals. The novelty of his authoritarian style also mattered to American political scientists and observers because of what it could teach about future governmental arrangements in America. In Merriam’s 1931 analysis, Italy represented a “striking experiment,” one “full of meaning for the student of civic training.” It was an experiment that had started at least officially and certainly with great promotional efficacy with the March on Rome, to which I now turn.
Almost a century later, the abrupt and dramatic effectiveness of Fascism’s power seizure is still compelling, but it also has the whiff of a colorfully choreographed performance that was taken all too seriously. As a combination of a staged threat of insurrection and actual violence between Blackshirts and Communist activists throughout the country during the week of October 22–29, the March on Rome succeeded in forcing the king to give Mussolini the reins of the country. In theory it was a perfectly constitutional and legal power transition. In practice, as several observers recognized, it was a usurpation by an autocrat who had plotted the whole initiative away from Rome. Few expected it to be followed by even more dramatic moves. Twenty-six months later, Mussolini erased the authority of the Parliament and inaugurated a full-fledged dictatorship.

Italy’s most politically gifted minds did not necessarily see it coming. Initially, notable anti-Fascists like Gaetano Salvemini deemed Mussolini a “clown [. . . ] surrounded by young thugs,” who was bound to “defeat himself.” Eventually, Salvemini explained the march as a “coup d’état, staged as a spontaneous rising of ‘Blackshirts,’ but in reality carried out by a military ‘Black Hand.’” While the confrontations between the Fascist militia and socialist groups resulted in dozens of deaths and hundreds of injuries, the human cost of the march went largely unreported. Journalists regularly insisted that there had been virtually no clashes between the police or the army on the one side and Mussolini’s Blackshirts on the other. For instance, on October 31, 1922, the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* described the March as a coup d’état “accomplished with extraordinary skill,” and a few months later the *Wall Street Journal* was still praising Mussolini for taking “Italy without shedding a drop of blood.” To outsiders, the march was a coup d’état sans coup. Several commentators read this as a sign of widespread consensus. Others diagnosed it in a bleaker fashion, as an undemocratic abuse of power resulting in unreported violent acts.

Over the decades, historians of Italian fascism have studied the March on Rome by seeking to move past reductive and ritualistic celebrations or condemnations. Despite marked methodological differences, they have shared the view that the name March on Rome is misleading on multiple levels because it refers to a single event unfolding in a single geographic site. What they have agreed upon is that the atmosphere of confusion and the collapse of state power led to the choreographically effective Roman scene as the watershed moment for Mussolini’s political stature.

Though it has enlarged its focus from the city of Rome to an Italian theater, mainstream scholarship on the early days of the Fascist government has largely operated within an intranational framework. The context and theater of the March on Rome consisted of a broader, international scene that prominently featured the geographically distant United States. The mediating role of American journalists and, especially, governmental officials reveals that they quickly recognized the
importance of the events of late October 1922, before, during, and immediately after their unfolding: America’s key political and financial players were not passive spectators of Mussolini’s rise to power. While they did not aid Mussolini’s ascendency in situ, they fostered American public opinion’s positive reaction to, and thus legitimatization of, his quick seizure of power.

Despite a few cautious responses (and fewer denunciations) to the Blackshirts’ violent methods, several first responses to the march were celebratory, in fact. It was not just that notable individuals and organizations that expressed high expectations for Mussolini’s appointment as Italian leader. What was remarkable was the swiftness with which the American press published positive responses to the Duce, within days or just a few weeks of his ascent to power. The tempting explanation for this rapid approval is that Mussolini met American aspirations for a leader who could not only counter the strikes and disorder that was disrupting the country’s political and economic life, but who could do so with wide popular support. The lack of substantial reports about the human costs of the March on Rome provided the much-desired proof of Mussolini’s popularity. Still, more precise questions ought to be asked. Where did these papers get their news?

Beyond the power interests at stake in the published stories, of notable historical importance was the infrastructure of the coverage—that is, the network of journalists working for wire services and major newspapers. In the early 1920s, 120 members of the foreign press worked in Rome, and “of these, perhaps 40 to 50 were genuine correspondents, the rest were police spies or hacks in the pay of the regime.” Most American newspapers received their foreign dispatches from the few Rome-based news bureaus (i.e., Associated Press, United Press, and International News Service), which were largely friendly to the regime.¹⁶ There were also newspapers that could afford direct reports from Italy, including the New York Times and the Christian Science Monitor, as well as the Chicago Daily News and the Chicago Tribune. They too, with notable exceptions, were not inimical to the regime. The New York Times counted on several correspondents who generally tended to report favorably or with measured distance on Mussolini, as did the Christian Science Monitor. The coverage from Chicago was polarized. For most of the initial Fascist period, the Chicago Daily News correspondent was the Fascist sympathizer Hiram K. Motherwell, who in 1928 would even translate Mussolini’s 1908 novel, The Cardinal’s Mistress.¹⁷ The Tribune’s George Seldes, instead, wrote such extremely critical articles about the regime that they eventually cost him his job.¹⁸ Another fierce critic was the South African British writer William Bolitho, who wrote for both Walter Lippmann’s World and the Manchester Guardian. His 1926 volume Italy under Mussolini called Mussolini’s rule “tyranny” and labeled it a “slave state.”¹⁹ Other outlets debated whether Fascism truly represented the will of the Italian masses or whether Mussolini was just the leader of a violent mob.

The coverage of the events in Rome did not always focus on Mussolini. A few isolated articles focused more on Fascism as a novel ideology and a mode of governance.
In early October 1922, *Current Opinion* described the Fascist movement as fundamentally a “challenge,” not aristocratic but highly popular, to the weakness of traditional governments.\textsuperscript{20} The *New Republic* included articles by journalist and writer Giuseppe Prezzolini, an old friend of the Duce. In November 1922 he praised Fascism as an “utterly new movement” that “had become particularly ‘popular.’”\textsuperscript{21} The same month, the former military attaché of the U.S. embassy in Italy, Gino Speranza, argued that, despite its violence, the Fascist movement was the revolt of the middle class against the “sinister spell of an exotic Marxism.”\textsuperscript{22} A few months later, he described Fascism in *Outlook* as a “spiritual national reconstruction.”\textsuperscript{23} In a few rare instances, publications that primarily focused on the Blackshirts took a more worried stance due to these Fascist adherents’ overt use of violence. Newspapers and periodicals like the *New York Tribune* and *Literary Digest* published dystopian descriptions and cartoons that painted the Blackshirts as a backward and violent movement, comparable and related to America’s Ku Klux Klan (figure 31). Other outlets instead openly defended the authoritarian modus operandi of the Blackshirts, arguing that their youthful antidemocratic force was the right medicine for Italian democracy’s sick and aging body. They appeared to rehash the forgiving rhetoric that in 1921, Anne O’Hare McCormick, then a young freelance contributor to the *Book Review and Magazine* of the *New York Times*, had deployed when covering the Fascists’ violence in Rome. Through her romantic view of Italy as a land of artworks, she hailed the socialists’ riotous protests and staining walls of medieval churches with Soviet slogans as the very epitome of brazen disorder and demagogic tyranny. Fascism, instead, was for her the middle class’s “healthy and necessary reaction,” perhaps “a ruthless movement, as youth is ruthless,” but capable of substituting “swift and decisive action for the slow processes of legislation and experiment.”\textsuperscript{24}

By and large, however, Fascism and the Blackshirts were intertwined with the figure of the Duce and consequently deserving positive consideration as a worthy political movement and method. Just a few days after the March on Rome, the *New York Tribune* described Mussolini as “A Black-Shirted Garibaldi,” referring to the celebrated military commander that led the 1860–1861 state formation. With Mussolini, the paper continued, Fascism was “rough in its methods,” but it had “tonic” aims “against degeneration through Socialist internationalism.” Ultimately, if “Garibaldi won freedom in a red shirt, Mussolini is fighting for normalcy and Italianism in a black one.”\textsuperscript{25} The *New York Times* intertwined its description of Mussolini as a de facto “dictator of Italy” with a celebration of the Fascist revolution as a “relatively harmless Italian type” of political upheaval.\textsuperscript{26} On November 3, the *New York Herald* praised the forty-year-old Mussolini as the “regenerator of the Italian nation.”\textsuperscript{27} It was a flattering compliment, though one still within the domain of conventional political rhetoric. On the same day, however, the *Birmingham Age-Herald* wrote that Mussolini looked “like a movie star,” which was clearly a move away from traditional political assessments and even from the most enthusiastic forms of praise.\textsuperscript{28} Instead, this comparison signaled unprecedented attention to
and celebration of a new, personalizing set of characteristics for a contemporary leader: political power, physical presence, and personal appeal. As other similar comments reveal, the Duce’s masculinity exuded an old-fashioned charm, but it also expressed the irrepressible energy of modern youth.

As the newly appointed *New York Times* Rome correspondent, McCormick contributed to a view of Fascism as a governmental style that matched its histrionic and hypermasculine leader. She celebrated the new premier as “swashbuckling Mussolini,” using a term usually applied to Fairbanks. McCormick repeatedly deployed a pragmatic rhetoric and medical metaphors in defense of Mussolini’s antidemocratic methods. Assuming “one-man power to be less dangerous than the powerlessness of many men,” she wondered whether he was not the remedy to “the disease of politics that infects civilization.” Most interestingly, she argued that Mussolini’s autocratic methods were justified by his popularity. “The people were already yearning for a dictatorship when Mussolini appointed himself a dictator,” she charged. “His march on Rome was like an answer to a prayer.” What fueled his popularity was not necessarily an ideology, about which McCormick never had

![Figure 31. The Blackshirts compared to the KKK. *Literary Digest*, November 11, 1922, 13.](image-url)
much to say, but governance through the crowd-pleasing showmanship that dominated the press coverage at home and abroad. Nobody had ever seen anything like it in Italy before—or elsewhere, for that matter. “The new government cultivates the spectacular,” she observed before claiming that “one of the reasons for its popularity among a people” that was usually undervalued was that Mussolini gave “them at last a leader who is a headliner, so to speak, able to command public attention and keep Italy on the front page.” More than a politician, he was a celebrity, even though McCormick never used this term: “He makes politics a kind of noble show and keeps enlivened and interested the audience, so bored by his predecessors.”

As a political celebrity, Mussolini could be compared to non-Italian political superstars, which heralded the recognition of a fame that stretched beyond the limited domain of politics—as he well knew. In mid-1923, in the pages of the New York Times Book Review and Magazine, McCormick compared Mussolini to Theodore Roosevelt: “A nation that thrilled to the Vigilantes and Rough Riders rises to Mussolini and his Black Shirt Army.” By 1923, books in English about Fascism and Mussolini were regularly featured on the shelves of American bookstores, sold as comparable to the celebratory profiles of American business and political heroes. This literature was often characterized by a description of Mussolini’s authoritarian stewardship as a reaction to inanity and incompetence, with some reservations about his use of violence.

His leadership and popular consensus thrilled the business community, which had been discontented with the feebleness of postwar Italian governments. Writing in the pages of the Nation’s Business, Basil Miles, the Paris-based American representative of the International Chamber of Commerce, praised “Mussolini’s Blackshirts as a potent factor for better business” and deemed their actions a “bloodless revolution against a wasteful government.” Miles’s article included a detailed account of Mussolini’s economic program, based on the “abolition of the law compelling the registration of all securities,” which had discouraged investors and delayed the “flow of capital into industry.” The program also included radical tax reform, privatization of telephone services and railways, reduction of state expenses, and balancing the national budget. Unsurprisingly, the U.S. business press (i.e., Barron’s Commerce and Finance, the Nation’s Business, and the Wall Street Journal) was overall quite optimistic about Italy’s economic prospects under Mussolini.

Praise of the Duce’s undemocratic authority often impinged upon a misogynist rhetoric. As a self-made patriarch, the son of a blacksmith, and someone tirelessly engaged in continuous self-improvement, Mussolini was the virile new leader domesticating a stereotypically unruly nation gendered as feminine. In 1923, Time magazine put him on its cover for the first time with a caption that referred to castor oil, which Fascists forced their opponents to drink and which became, together with the bludgeon, a symbol of Fascist discipline and obedience. A few years later, another Time magazine cover showed him courageously behind bars with a lioness that he had tamed. Her name was Italia.
Even critical reports, such as those that often appeared in *Literary Digest*, referred to and popularized Mussolini’s Caesarism, especially when granting him space in direct or indirect quotes from interviews. The Duce’s political novelty, in fact, came with an outspoken rejection of democracy (“mass cannot govern mass”) and liberty (“civilization is the inversion of personal liberty”). The same articles also popularized his direct, acclamatory definition of Fascism as the change “from parliamentary government [. . .] to a government in which the prime minister is directly bound to the multitude.” Emboldened by the space granted to it in the press, Mussolini used his celebrity status to justify his regime’s methods. When rumors spread regarding fascism’s antidemocratic policies, the *Saturday Evening Post* adopted medical metaphors to argue that “desperate diseases need desperate remedies. Italy was a surgical case that called for a major operation.” In her 1924 overview of world’s dictators, McCormick praised Fascism as “the triumphant example of popular and successful dictatorship” and found the Duce’s style of plebiscitarian governance (“Mussolini glories in autocracy”) utterly acceptable and even better than the American system. “The people may not be freer than they were under a weaker and more representative government, but they are certainly freer from trouble,” she opined. She went on to claim that “under Mussolini [Italy] has changed from an enfeebled and divided kingdom into one of the most [. . .] prospering powers of Europe,” where Italians enjoy “a personal liberty unknown in an indefatigably regulated commonwealth like ours.”

In the early years after taking power, Mussolini sought to exercise a measure of control over the promotion of his leadership. While keen on nurturing personal relationships, he soon benefitted from more institutional forms of publicity mediation that would articulate and sustain his positive reception in America for years, through the near fatal delegitimization of his regime in the aftermath of the 1924 Fascist murder of Socialist congressman Giacomo Matteotti. Mussolini’s assumption of personal responsibility in a January 3, 1925, speech to the Parliament is often regarded as the official beginning of Mussolini’s dictatorship. Before, during, and after the Matteotti crisis, Mussolini, as both prime minister and minister of foreign affairs, relied on a network of mediators, consisting of the entire Italian diplomatic corps in the United States, beginning with the embassy and the consul general of New York. The diplomatic force made a critical alliance with the Italy America Society (IAS), a key lobbying association with links to the State Department and Wall Street, as well as to powerful individuals such as U.S. ambassador William Washburn Child and the chief executive at J. P. Morgan & Co., banker-diplomat Thomas W. Lamont. Often advised by IAS’s president, corporate lawyer Paul Cravath (who had ties to J. P. Morgan), the Italian embassy put American journalists and editors in direct contact with Mussolini. Through a system of patronage that guaranteed access and sumptuous receptions in Italy, the Duce befriended a whole host of journalists and writers, including Isaac F. Marcosson of the *Saturday Evening Post*; public relations experts and periodical contributors, including Ivy Lee;
and bankers and businessmen, including John Morron, a director of the First National Bank of New York, and financier Charles Torrey. These relationships proved quite effective. Even when periodicals sought to publish critical reports—as, for instance, the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper’s Magazine*, and *Literary Digest* did—their coverage still amounted to publicity. It is to these most formidable mediators that we shall now turn.

**A CLOSED SOCIETY: THE JOURNALIST, THE BANKER, THE AMBASSADOR**

Dear Dad, we are having a fine revolution here. No danger. Plenty of enthusiasm and color. We all enjoy it.

RICHARD WASHBURN CHILD, U.S. AMBASSADOR TO ITALY, TO HIS FATHER, THE DAY AFTER THE MARCH ON ROME

The most reliable network of publicity mediators that Mussolini depended on for his swift and favorable emergence in American public opinion was the Italy American Society (IAS). Since its establishment in March 1918, IAS had the goal of fostering “between the United States and Italy an international friendship based upon mutual understanding of their national ideals,” which essentially meant, as the masthead of its *News Bulletin* boasted, a “co-operative effort to develop international trade.” To accomplish this, IAS intertwined the interests of both the State Department and Wall Street on the American side with those of the Italian embassy on the Italian side.

With some pretense of cultural engagement with a nation that was rich in art but poor in infrastructure and foreign investments, IAS sought to open up a political space for new financial and economic relations between the two countries. Although nominally private, the IAS relied on a broad network of powerful interests: the American and Italian American financial community, the Italian and U.S. governments, and Italian American leaders. Through the press influence of these interests in the two countries, IAS contributed—directly and indirectly—to manage Mussolini’s reputation within the broader U.S. financial, governmental, and popular spheres.

On the economic side, IAS’s reach was ambitious. Like the bankers and corporate lawyers who constituted its membership, the most prominent of whom were linked to J. P. Morgan & Co., IAS was favorably disposed toward Italy, whoever its leader, even before the March on Rome. Morgan’s “purchasing organization had executed large orders on behalf of the Italian military during the war” and, after the end of the conflict, sought to do “a substantial underwriting business in Italian securities.” In many respects, IAS considered Mussolini just the next leader, the one it had to deal with after the failure of the previous liberal governments. In other respects, Mussolini was such a peculiar politician that arguments for promoting investments in Italy could not be merely economic. In this regard,
IAS provided a highly placed public relations platform for Mussolini’s political legitimacy, which was a key condition for American investments in Italy. A quick rebuttal against the argument that his government was autocratic—a word that the war propaganda had taught Americans to condemn—was a priority. In its first Trade Bulletin (October 1922), published after the March on Rome, Irene di Robilant, an Italian aristocrat living in New York who was to become IAS’s organizing factotum, quenched any anxiety about the Blackshirts’ quick and seemingly authoritarian rise to power. In a three-page editorial, she described the Fascisti as the heirs of Garibaldi’s Red Shirts and “the power and the law of ancient Rome” and referred to Mussolini as a genius organizer who “personifies their power in action.”

On the political side, the IAS’s reach was equally impressive. Reproducing Wall Street’s financial giants’ intertwined approach to finance and world politics, IAS cultivated powerful ties with many parts of the U.S. government, particularly the State Department. In the spring of 1920, Thomas Nelson Page, who had been ambassador to Italy from 1913 to mid-1919, was elected an honorary vice president of IAS. The same annual elections appointed a forty-year-old Harvard-educated lawyer, writer, journalist named Richard Washburn Child to the IAS executive committee. A year later President Harding nominated him U.S. ambassador to Italy (figure 32). Child represents one of the most interesting contributors to the convergence of political and cultural characterization that informed Mussolini’s public image.

Unlike Page, whose clashes with Merriam revealed his opposition to overt propaganda tactics, Child had no diplomatic background. Instead, in the 1910s while working in a New York law office, he had started his public career as a writer, publishing short stories and a few novels. A lifelong Roosevelt supporter, he had also written a few influential political pieces for Century Magazine and McClure’s Magazine that consistently stressed vigorous citizenry and strong leadership. His horizons widened when, before the U.S. involvement in the European war, he took up assignments first as a foreign correspondent in Europe and Russia and then as a publicity man for the U.S. Treasury. In 1916 he published Potential Russia, a book that called for U.S. investments in the tsarist nation. The Soviet Revolution scrapped any such plan. Still, known as a writer conversant in foreign affairs and a policy promoter, he worked during the war for the CPI’s Division of Features, “which enlisted the volunteer services of the leading novelists, essayists and short-story writers of America.” Writing in 1919 about Wilson’s centralization of war powers, he justified the president’s “one-man leadership” as “the only emergency action we know” despite his long-standing opposition to the former New Jersey governor. At war’s end, Child worked briefly as the editor of Collier’s Weekly, covered the Paris Peace Conference, and attacked Wilson’s League of Nations for what he feared was America’s unnecessary involvement with foreign nations. He promoted a Progressive social politics and a pragmatic isolationism that supported economic interests with minimum political involvement. He continued to denounce the demise of representative democracy
and leadership that perniciously advantaged financial and industrial elites. In 1920, possibly thanks to his connections among the New York City’s lawyers, he joined IAS’s executive committee, which, as Child had viewed Russia in 1916, looked at postwar Italy as a favorable investment destination. In the same year, he wrote effective speeches for Warren G. Harding, contributing to his election. On May 26, 1921, the president awarded Child the ambassadorship to Italy. Child probably did not know the first thing about being a diplomat. Rather than limiting his role, however, his background in creative writing and political advocacy was going to provide the skills he needed to promote Mussolini in America. The New York Times reported that Child was “the first of the ‘younger generation’ of American writers to achieve ambassadorial distinction.”

During Child’s first months in Rome, the context of the relationship between the United States and Italy was dominated by two intertwining elements: the threat
of Bolshevism and the question of war reparations. Italy had experienced two years of massive disorder and strikes that had revealed the government’s inability to control the violent clashes between Socialist forces and a rising Fascist militia, and, in the process, weakened the national economy. The U.S. government’s fears about the instability of the Italian administration, subject to continuous reshuffling and changes of coalitions, prevented any long-term American political and economic commitment. The American embassy and consulates in Italy kept the State Department well-informed on the country’s climate of violence and instability. For instance, Child informed Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes that Mussolini was emerging as a leader firmly in control of the most violent elements of the Fascist political movement. In early October, Child apprised Hughes that Mussolini was willing to start a revolution and become Italy’s dictator. “People like the Italians hunger for strong leadership,” he wrote, seemingly with approval, “and enjoy [ . . . ] being dramatically governed.”

Child’s communications were not merely the result of an impersonal political assessment. Apparently Mussolini, who had a profound appreciation for America’s political support, had befriended him. A few days before the March on Rome, in fact, the Duce visited the American embassy and informed Child of his plan! The ambassador immediately notified Hughes. “A few days ago,” Child wrote on October 26, “Mussolini came to see me and addressed to me inquiries as to the attitude of the American public toward Fascisti.” There is no record of Hughes’s answer, but it is not difficult to guess what it was. Given Child’s previous cables and given any lack of an agitated response from the State Department, the response must have been cautious but positive. Even with the intense domestic negotiations about Mussolini’s seizure of power, he apparently remained quite attuned to the American response. A few hours after being nominated prime minister, one of his first public acts was to cable Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes cordial good wishes and “express confidence in the friendly, economic and spiritual collaboration of our two countries.” Hughes duly responded shortly afterward, congratulating Mussolini on his new position and assuring him that the collaboration between Italy and the United States would continue to promote their mutual interests.

Mussolini went out of his way to show that his relationship with American officials was quite special and unique. In early November, Child approached the premier’s office to ask for the customary meeting with the new head of government. The opposite happened. Child made this report to the State Department:

In response to my request to be received by the new minister [ . . . ] Mussolini instead of making an appointment called upon me this morning for an extended interview explaining his departure from the usual custom on the basis of personal friendship and his desire to emphasize his belief that while Italy should maintain friendly relations with all nations, an understanding of the new Italy and its young and
progressive spirit by the American government and particularly by the American people was of primary importance. He said that American cooperation was vital for the plans he had in mind.66

What Mussolini had in mind was the opening up, through the State Department, of special channels of communication with the business and financial world and, in turn, with American public opinion. The terrain of such possible future economic cooperation—and the bait—was economic progress, which all parties understood to be vital for reparations payments. This promoted policy amounted to privatizing public utilities, especially railways, and opening them up to U.S. investments. “Americans would be given all the opportunities this policy might yield,” Child reported Mussolini telling him. As for the public image of Fascism, Mussolini insisted on a politics of alliance between capital and labor, as opposed to the “false hopes and vaporous expectations” that had been instilled previously by the Socialists upon the population.67 Child registered all these arguments and ended his communication in formal diplomatic terms: “Mussolini indicates that he would appreciate it if the Department were to inform the American press that he had made to me ‘hearty expression of friendship for America and of faith in mutual frankness in all exchange of views [between] the two nations.’” Finally, he summarized Mussolini’s plan: “In brief, I believe he hopes that the Department will find a way to give him a little American publicity.”68 Child would take Mussolini’s request to heart.

For the American government, the dramatic, but apparently orderly regime change in Italy was good news: there would not be any further risk of a Bolshevik revolution in Italy and reparations repayments would have been made on a regular basis. Still, from the American perspective, how could the country that had justified its war participation as a battle of democracy against autocracy now go on supporting Mussolini’s authoritarian and overtly antidemocratic regime? The best way Washington and, with it, Wall Street could justify support of Fascism to American public opinion was by broadcasting the new Italian regime’s unwavering commitment to a capitalist economy and openness to foreign investments. Such important preconditions, however, could not sufficiently build Mussolini’s celebrity status in the United States. His full American acceptance depended on narratives that could script his personal and political biography in more relatable ways. What diplomatic communications, press briefings, and newspaper editorials seemed to share was a focus on his widespread attractiveness and recognition—at home and abroad. In his dispatches from Rome, Child was quick to characterize Mussolini as widely popular and uniquely capable of bringing the country to normalcy. And, in the post-Wilson era, normalcy was the precondition for international alliances.69 Against “weak and halting ministers, who for four years have been unable to lead,” Child wrote, “Italians prefer a determined Mussolini,” who has a “magnetic character” and a “stern deportment and convincing oratory.”70
In these colorful descriptions, Child-the-diplomat was handing the baton to Child-the-fiction-writer, a practice he was keen on repeating.

A little more than a year after the March on Rome, for instance, Child was the guest of honor at an IAS dinner held in New York on November 27, 1923. Child’s speech had nothing of diplomatic reportage. Instead, it combined political advocacy (or partisanship) with a heavily personalized rhetoric that, to the ears of the businessmen in the room, helped legitimize investment opportunities in Italy. Child spoke about Italy and U.S. foreign policy and announced the dawning of a new political season, not solely for Italy but for America and world politics in general. The rhetorical impetus for his argument centered on the figure of the Duce:

The tide has turned. The word democracy attached to drifting mobs no longer deceives us. We have come back to the realization that often the great hunger in the human heart is for strong leadership. We have come back to a decent appreciation that no matter how much we may desire to pat the heads of the weak and the wailing, no matter how great our pity and our charity, the hands worthy of our clasp of friendship are the strong and honest hands.71

In other writings and public speeches, while holding office and afterward, Child consistently articulated the same narrative about Mussolini, one centered on his daring and iconic leadership vis-à-vis the lack of efficacy of democratic governments.72

In assessing Child’s effectiveness as a public relations operative, or as “Mussolini’s mouthpiece in America,” it is important to recognize the long-standing role of banker-ambassador Thomas W. Lamont, J. P. Morgan’s exceptionally gifted and influential executive. During and after World War I, J. P. Morgan & Co. had already played a key role in financing the Italian military effort and postwar reconstruction. After the March on Rome, the American firm led by Lamont was ready to endorse Mussolini as Italy’s preferred banking agent for all international financial institutions interested in investing in the peninsula.73 Further, the Morgan firm eventually turned out to be the regime’s U.S. bank, capable of extending loans to Mussolini’s regime.74 The banking giant was a fairly constant presence in Child’s Italian affairs, having been for a while a close observer of the nation’s financial health.75 If Child was an activist and perhaps heterodox ambassador, so too was Lamont.

Lamont’s active relationship with European affairs started after the end of World War I. Invited by Wilson to attend the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, Lamont was aptly named the “Ambassador from Wall Street” due to his ability to intertwine Morgan’s financial plans with U.S. policy. An inveterate Italophile, he was interested in extending his financial skills to a nation he viewed as uniquely “touched with poetry and romance.”76 To this end, in Paris Lamont networked heavily with members of the Italian delegation. In particular, he befriended Giovanni Fummi, a former stockbroker who was to become Morgan’s Rome agent and enable Lamont
to enter Italy’s top financial and political circles. Back in New York, Lamont’s involvement with IAS, first as a trustee and treasurer (and in 1925 as president), was widely advertised and often reported in the press. After the March on Rome, Lamont kept up a close relationship with the Italian ambassador Gelasio Caetani by often reporting on criticisms of and negative rumors about Mussolini. At times, he even sought advice on how best to respond to criticism against the Duce. Seven months after the premier had taken office, Lamont met Mussolini to discuss restoring Italy’s financial credit, and their relationship would only strengthen in both direct and indirect ways over the next few years. In the summer of 1924, in the context of the critical aftermath of the Fascist murder of Congressman Giacomo Matteotti, Lamont’s reaction was steadfast. He managed to organize a lunch with the editors of all the major New York papers in order to give Ambassador Caetani a platform “for explaining his version of events to the editors and commentators.”

In post–World War I America, references to international leaders were becoming more common to newspaper readers than ever before. Fascism could be sold to Americans, but it all depended on how it was presented. The regime’s violent nature had to be masked through national and racial distancing—that is, by stressing that different countries had different political cultures. One of the most direct examples of this rhetoric appears in a letter sent by Lamont to J. P. Morgan’s Rome agent, Fummi. The context was the very delicate one of late 1925. Lamont was “considering a loan request for $100 million” from Italy, but knew that Secretary of State Frank Kellogg would have vetoed it unless the question of Italy’s $2-billion debt was settled. Lamont played the role of the skillful mediator. It helped that earlier that year, he had been elected, by unanimous vote, IAS president. Champion of a style of “relationship banking” in which banker-client rapport went beyond shared financial interests, Lamont, through his Roman representative, offered remarkable advice to Mussolini on how to market his regime in America:

If Mr. Mussolini declares that parliamentary government is at an end in Italy, such a declaration comes as a shock to Anglo-Saxons. If, on the contrary, Mr. Mussolini had explained that the old forms of parliamentary government in Italy had proved futile and had led to inefficient government and chaos, therefore they had to be temporarily suspended and generally reformed, then Anglo-Saxons would understand.

The Morgan executive was relying on a familiar argument. Carleton Beals had written in Current History a few months earlier that historically, Italy was much more familiar with forms of “enlightened despotism,” insisting that “the cloak of popular democracy and representative government does not fit comfortably or gracefully upon the body politic.” In the end, Lamont was successful both in advancing the negotiations over Italy’s war debt with the United States and securing the loan to the regime. These successes “proved to be a catalyst for further American investment.” Lamont’s mediating lesson went on to be applied to other public contexts. It would, for instance, find a profitable application in the unexpected collaboration
and personal amity between Mussolini and William Randolph Hearst, whose syndicated newspapers and newsreel services would feature the Duce’s weekly columns and speeches from October 1927 to May 1935. Overall, Lamont’s reputation never suffered from his closeness to Mussolini. In the days after the crash of 1929, he even earned the cover of Time magazine as the “right hand of John Pierpont Morgan [. . .] who steered the ship of U.S. prosperity through the storm.”

Another prominent financial operator like Lamont who helped legitimize Mussolini in America and was also a member of the IAS executive committee was the aforementioned banker Otto Kahn. In the mid-1920s, Kahn publicly endorsed Mussolini as a reliable business partner and a guarantor of public order. His eloquent speeches were widely appreciated in the city’s financial world and, at times, were even published. One in particular stood out. Kahn gave it to the Foreign Policy Association on January 3, 1926, at the Hotel Astor in New York. The Italian American Fascist periodical Il Carroccio published it in Italian as “Otto Kahn e il Fascismo.” In the speech, Kahn defended Italians’ political self-determination, but he also argued that in contexts other than the American, democracy and freedom were not necessarily overlapping notions, particularly when the popularity of a leader could productively disentangle them. It is worth reporting the speech’s critical passages:

To judge Fascism with fairness we must remember two things. Italy belongs to the Italians, not to the British or the Americans. [. . .] Secondly, and this is true for every nation, before freedom [. . .] is the public order and the protection of the idea and life of the nation. True freedom is impossible where there is no order and where a government does not work properly. [. . .] [Mussolini] is not a dictator in the usual meaning of the word, because he exercises his power with the explicit and overwhelming consensus of the people and by will of the King, the State’s constitutional ruler.

Lamont, Kahn, and the New York press could support a favorable reception for Mussolini, but what they all needed was a direct contact with the premier. Such contact was guaranteed by the very gifted Italian ambassador to the United States, Gelasio Caetani (figure 33). For about four years, between 1922 and 1925, and in collaboration with the Italian consuls in America, Caetani mediated between the Duce and American power centers by maintaining direct, personal relationships with Lamont, the U.S. State Department, the Italy American Society, and even Will H. Hays, the chairman of the Motion Picture Association of America. Of noble background, Caetani was a war hero and fervent nationalist. He had taken part in the March on Rome, at the end of which, in November 1922, he was named Italian ambassador to the United States directly by Mussolini. Personally and ideologically loyal to the Duce, he was also right for the job: a prince, a decorated officer, and an engineer trained in Italy and the United States, Caetani was already familiar with American cultural and economic life, and he had a mediating temperament.
Celebrated by the *New York Times* at the time of his nomination, Caetani exuded the charm of old and new Italy. In early 1923, IAS organized a banquet in his honor as the newly appointed Italian ambassador. The event, which was also under Morgan's patronage, put him in contact with the city and the country's political and financial elite. In his address, Caetani defended Mussolini's authoritarian actions as both urgent and audacious. “It is not a dictatorial government,” he insisted, “but one of unflinching determination to put through those reforms that everybody had been advocating for years but nobody so far had had the courage of applying for fear of unpopularity.”

Even though the embassy had already engaged in publicity initiatives before Mussolini took power, under Caetani’s leadership it came to operate like a public relations agency for the Duce. In early November 1922, just a few days after the March on Rome, the ambassador solicited press clippings about the Duce or Fascism from all consular authorities, made summaries, and sent them to the Duce. In one of these cables, the embassy clarified its institutional role: to shed light on the aspects of recent events that Americans might have found otherwise confusing. The government change, for instance, deserved to be explained as resulting from constitutional rules and as being “nothing other than the effect of Italian popular will.” As we saw earlier, this was a message that effectively informed much of the coverage of the March on Rome.

In his dual role as prime minister and minister of foreign affairs, Mussolini used Caetani to relay and publicize his new Italian policies through the “diplomatic, political, financial, and journalistic circles,” as Mussolini’s short cables insisted. Caetani’s ability to get things done was impressive, whether it meant promoting a new institutional accord between the Fascist Government and the unions (August 1923); or arranging for a personal meeting between Mussolini and Ivy Lee following Lee’s *Time Magazine* article appreciative of Mussolini’s communicative style. Caetani also introduced Isaac Frederick Marcosson, the European correspondent of the *Saturday Evening Post*, to the Duce: the relationship with the most important U.S. periodical was to last more than a decade. Caetani seems to have known or met everybody in Washington, New York, and even Rome. It was in Rome in mid-1923 that he met with Ambassador Child.

Caetani was there overseeing the production of a film featuring Mussolini that he had promoted, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Officially, the embassy’s political agenda had to address two main questions: the negotiations of the war debt between Italy and the United States, for which favorable economic news about Italy was always helpful, and the dangerous issue of the American Fascists’ loyalty to Italy. Their activism was an issue for Rome because their unrestrained violence represented a dangerous form of interference in American affairs and affected the American reputation of Fascism in general. Despite the importance of these political matters, a significant portion of the communications between the embassy and consuls related to Mussolini’s reputation
Promoting a Romantic Biography

and image in America. The term *image* included not just Mussolini’s general public reception, but also his very likeness. “Every time American newspapers publish a portrait of Mussolini,” Caetani wrote to the Italian consuls in the United States, “they mostly rely on an awful photograph that represents him with a menacing expression and often a wild one. That gives American readers a bad impression.” To address this problem, in Rome Caetani acquired a large number of photographs that in his view more faithfully and attractively presented the Duce. He then invited all the consuls to submit said photographs to the newspapers. But he prudently advised the consuls that their distribution “was not to appear as an institutional gesture, but as a special gift to a friend.” Obviously, the photographs were to find their place in the newspapers’ archives, ready to be used.

Caetani left office in 1925 following the positive public relations resolution of the Matteotti assassination: a few commentators believed that the crisis could have meant the end of Fascism but were sure it would not have meant the end of Mussolini. Comparing the Duce to Roosevelt in terms of leadership skills, Frederick Collins of *Collier’s* rationalized this outcome as follows: “Fascism is not a world factor. Mussolini is.” While certain sectors of the American press launched a full attack against Mussolini, Child’s articles for the *Saturday Evening Post*, which began to appear a few months after he had left his Italian post on February 1924, greatly helped the Duce. Caetani acknowledged the former ambassador’s positive impact on American public opinion toward both Mussolini and Child.

FIGURE 33. Prince Gelasio Caetani, December 12, 1922. Photograph (digital file from original). Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-DIG-ppcc-07583.
himself. Since they came from an independent voice, Child’s counternarratives were even more effective than Caetani’s efforts during the crisis. These had included an interview granted to the Associated Press and a well-publicized and reassuring meeting with President Harding. In both his diplomatic memoir and published essays, Child returned often to Mussolini’s personal stature as a kind of Übermensch. By the mid-1920s, the Duce’s reputation in American public culture was of someone who was more than a forceful foreign politician. To many, his unconventional approach to governance appeared to transcend Italy’s borders and traditions and, as such, to produce results both exceptional and exemplary. Fascism was an experimental political system that could inspire other nations, including democratic America. For instance, anti-immigration novelist Kenneth L. Roberts viewed Mussolini’s Fascism as a welcome antidote to the radical demagogy and corruption endemic to mass democracy. Through but also beyond his noteworthy accomplishments, Mussolini became a public personality whose entire life was worth telling and retelling to U.S. readers, particularly if writers knew how to combine exotic Italian elements with recognizably American features. As a former journalist and novelist, Child knew that. After leaving the ambassadorship, he continued to write for years about and on behalf of Mussolini. In his work, he began to weave together narratives about the Duce as both a foreign leader and an American one. His contribution paralleled other hagiographic endeavors.

HAGIOGRAPHIES

The graduating class [. . .] at Yale selected Kipling as the favorite poet. Will Rogers was the favorite world figure, with Al Capone and Mussolini tied for second honors.

CHICAGO DAILY TRIBUNE, 1931

The key genre for the promotion of the Duce was the celebratory biography, whether in short or long format. Since the March on Rome, the American public had become used to reading short biographical profiles of the Duce. Forum, Literary Digest, and Living Age had published them as early as 1923. By the mid-1920s, the literature on Fascism and Mussolini began to include serialized autobiographies, such as those published by the very influential United Press news agency (UP) and the popular Saturday Evening Post. Consisting of ten installments each, they bore the name of Mussolini as their sole author but actually depended on the ghostwriting of Child and other remarkable mediators. As we saw with Valentino, the serialized autobiography enabled promotional agents to play a very effective role, particularly when revealing previously unknown personal details about their subject’s life. Overtly or covertly, Mussolini’s biographers sought to position the Duce as a most likeable figure who had effortlessly adopted American
traits, especially love of order and efficiency, but who had also maintained defining Italian ones, including authoritarian leadership.109

Child adopted this approach to Mussolini’s composite character in his memoir *A Diplomat Looks at Europe*. Three of the memoir’s eleven chapters reworked, with only minor changes, Child’s *SEP* articles on Mussolini.110 In this volume, he unabashedly praised the Italian dictator as the architect of a new, postdemocratic nation. Child touched upon the familiar picturesque imagery of Naples before announcing the dawn of a new nation. “When I sailed up the magnificent Bay of Naples in July 1921,” he wrote, “I was the American ambassador to old Italy. When, after nearly three years, I looked back at the Italian Alps on my way home, I was still the ambassador to Italy, but it was a new Italy.”111 Child’s account then intertwined personal and political considerations, Italy’s alleged desperate need for a radical change, even a dictatorial one, and the unique fitness of Mussolini’s temperament for the job:

> When a people faces an intolerable situation, the real ravenous hunger is not for a program, but for a man. In modern Italy they have the tradition that when a man is really needed he will rise up from the crowd. […] Benito Mussolini was the strong leader of the expression of national spirit.112

For Child, the Italian situation was not at all a foreign one. Even though Italians’ recent strike-ridden history required the intervention of a strong hand, Mussolini’s rise could teach something to America. In this vein, he argued:

> The real story, from which Americans and our own statesmen can draw useful lessons for the future, is a story not of an armed attack upon a flabby democracy which was wheedling and coddling everyone, but a story of leadership and discipline and national unity in the labor of erecting a new government.113

The former ambassador also maintained that Fascism constituted a model antidote to the political impasse he associated with the excesses of democratic machinery, including the demands for minority rights, which in his view had led to the decline of patriotic spirit. Fascism could reverse this worldwide political and constitutional gridlock by insisting on individual responsibility and civic obligations.

> Fascismo is a philosophy and an emotion running counter to the recent stream of thought, which centers mankind’s attention on rights. Mussolini, without distinguishing between classes, is the first conspicuous leader since Roosevelt that has organized political unity not around rights but around duties.114

In other words, when approaching Fascism in terms of a *disciplined regime*, Child stressed what he considered Mussolini’s exhibition of the very American (albeit traditional) traits of self-control, order, and governmental effectiveness. As a result, comparisons with American presidents were easily conceivable. “The two preeminent rulers of the world today are not difficult to name,” he wrote in 1926.
“They are Mussolini and Coolidge. Each represents in his particular power of personality the revolt of peoples against unreality and their weariness of parliamentary government—government by talk.”

In addition to Child’s hagiographic work, Mussolini’s American fame was also indebted to the work of a cultured Venetian woman of Jewish background, the writer and art critic Margherita Sarfatti. A publicly loyal supporter, the polyglot Sarfatti remained one of the Duce’s closer advisors and nonexclusive lovers from late 1912 until the mid-1930s. She greatly influenced his theorization of the Fascist mission, particularly regarding the relationships between the Italian state and the country’s artistic culture. Before her ghostwriting work on the serialized UP autobiography and her uncredited collaboration on what became Mussolini’s *My Autobiography* (1928), Sarfatti wrote, under her own name, the authorized biography *The Life of Benito Mussolini* (1925). With a preface by Mussolini himself, published both in English and in a handwritten facsimile Italian version meant to convey authenticity, the volume appeared both in the United Kingdom and the United States with said title (preferred by the publisher) and in Italy a year later with the title Sarfatti had wanted for all editions, *Dux*. Between 1926 and 1928, the American edition went through eighteen printings (five in 1926 alone). In the same two-year period, the book was translated into eighteen languages.

Unlike Child’s political approach in his profile of the Duce, Sarfatti’s book-length portrait focused more on Mussolini as a great man, specifically drawing out his character and personality as a young “Italian [. . .] par excellence.” In describing Mussolini as an exceptional individual and a predestined leader who achieved greatness by virtue of his own willpower, Sarfatti made it clear that she refused to follow “a pedantic chronological unity.” Instead, she adopted a “more genuine unity which is inherent in the character” of her hero, proceeding “as life has done with him and he with life—by leaps and bounds, by rapid advances and sudden retreats.” Sarfatti’s book intended to show how Mussolini’s charismatic leadership and attractive personality, not just his politics, would appeal to the Anglo-American reader. Possibly following the lead of established biographies of the giants of the American financial and industrial world, from Andrew Carnegie to Henry Ford, she told a story that most readers must have found familiar. Mussolini was a self-made man who had managed to rise from the anonymity of the crowd, effect change in the world of politics and journalism, and modernize Italy. His remarkable character and modern personality were his weapons. He combined the very traditional trait of exceptional personal discipline with the modern traits of charming personality, determined self-improvement, and committed self-care. Unsurprisingly, a significant section of *The Life of Benito Mussolini* was devoted to the Duce’s bodily activities and healthy diet.

Sarfatti showcased the Duce’s character by summarizing his life’s trajectory as a movement from humble origins to powerful positions that skillfully deployed such personal qualities as bravery and determination. In her tale, several episodes
attested that even in his early years he had displayed the qualities of “the true leader he already was.” Sarfatti presented the young man’s uncompromising stance against his old party and in favor of Italy’s intervention in the war, broadcast from the newspaper he had founded, as the mark of a true national hero and leader. Following what was already a hagiographic cliché, Sarfatti stressed how his participation in World War I and his injury were the turning points of his life. He overcame his painful near-death experience, during which he bore pain without medications, with superhuman willpower. In Sarfatti’s estimate, the Italian dictator, just like Oliver Cromwell, George Washington, and Napoleon before him, had found his heroic calling during dramatic battlefield events. Beyond personal courage, what further launched him toward the country’s modern leadership was his political vision and communicative talent.

The volume, in fact, ended with a chapter titled “Mussolini the Man” in which Sarfatti insisted on not just the strength of his personal temperament but also on his talent as a successful journalist and communicator. In passages that were reminiscent of Anne O’Hare McCormick and Ivy Lee’s characterizations, Sarfatti singled out Mussolini’s exceptional oratorical skills, whose “frank, sensible, brusque” methods resulted in a directness unprecedented in Italian politics.

His eloquence, resembling the bulletins of Napoleon, is not that of a man of letters, accustomed to seek at his writing-table the nuances of expression. He is a true man of action, living through in his own experience the experiences of history and touching the heart of a people through its imagination.

Illustrated with eleven never-before-seen photographs of the Duce (Child’s volume had only two), The Life of Benito Mussolini paraded the special intimacy between author and subject. Instead of familiar poses of the Duce giving speeches or utterly still, the volume included two rarely seen photographs, one of Mussolini riding his horse and one in the company of his lioness, named Italia, which Time magazine used a year later on its second cover dedicated to the Italian leader.

The reviews of Sarfatti’s account were enthusiastic. The Illustrated London News greeted it as “likely to rank with the classic biographies.” It also admiringly marveled at Mussolini’s preface, in which the Italian dictator did not necessarily articulate an ultimate political goal beyond his desire to “make a mark on [his] era with [his] will, like a lion with the claws.” The British paper found the way Mussolini described himself vis-à-vis his fame astonishing. Rather than defining himself as a political visionary, his self-assessment focused on his transformation under the media spotlight. The dramatic expansion of Mussolini’s public self through an intense and incessant degree of interest had produced a sort of anthropological change in his persona that went far beyond political merits and goals. Mussolini wrote:

The public man is born “public.” [. . .] The public man, like the poet, is born to his doom. He can never escape it. [. . .] I am perfectly resigned to my lot as a public
man. In fact, I am enthusiastic about it. Not just on account of my publicity which it entails. [. . . ] No, it is the thought, the realization, that I no longer belong merely to myself, that I belong to all—loved by all, hated by all—that I am an essential element in the lives of theirs: this feeling has on me a kind of intoxicating effect.¹²⁵

Quite similarly, in his review of the Italian dictator’s first authorized biography, John Carter of the New York Times wrote that “its principal interest lies in the currency it gives to the Mussolinic Legend.” In other words, the degree of public interest—his celebrity quota, so to speak—was for the reviewers the true and only criterion on which to assess him politically. “Sarfatti’s book,” Carter added, “is important for making us realize that it is impossible to appraise a statesman on any other basis than mythopoeia.”¹²⁶ Carter attributed the Duce’s proud leadership to his Latin masculinity by sexualizing his relationship with Italians and with Italy as a whole:

> Latin races appreciate virility in a statesman far more than do the Anglo-Saxon, whose politicians are expected to have distinguished themselves by their conspicuous chastity at least before seeking office. Mussolini’s grasp on Italy is susceptible to the analysis of the psychology of sex.¹²⁷

Possibly because written by someone who many knew to have been, and who perhaps still was, intimate with the Duce, Sarfatti’s The Life of Benito Mussolini appeared to reviewers open to consideration about the Duce’s virility. At the same time, however, Sarfatti’s work also represented a very modern way to read the personal dimension of political leaders. The virtues of public men—as the Venetian author implied and as her reviewers recognized—could not be limited to questions of morality, policy, and political talent but had to include insights into a person’s physical traits and inclinations.

In the following years, Sarfatti continued to weave biographical narratives about the Duce, but this time not under her own name. She apparently contributed to two serialized biographies of Mussolini, published by the UP news agency and the Saturday Evening Post. They exhibited her daring stylistic approach but were also in tune with the modern American notion of personality as “mastery and development of the self,” which entailed an explicit discussion of bodily talents and dispositions. These biographies focused on such celebrated and uplifting traits as work efficiency but also gave large space in praise of Mussolini’s magnetic voice, rhetorical ability, and physical self-care. The first of these serialized biographies, entitled Mussolini’s Own Story of His Busy Life, was syndicated between January 5 and January 15, 1927, by UP, which at the time served over a thousand newspapers across the United States and in another thirty-five countries.¹²⁸ Apparently, the authors of this series were Sarfatti and UP’s Rome manager, Thomas B. Morgan.¹²⁹ In “one of the outstanding newspaper exploits of recent years,” boasted the promotional material as if it were referring to a film celebrity, “Mussolini tells the intimate, personal story of his daily life.”¹³⁰
Over ten articles, the series deploys the theme of efficiency to an exceptional degree, as its title's use of the word *busy* foreshadows. In the introduction to the first article, the editor presents the dictator as someone who “works intensively fourteen to sixteen hours a day” and who regards “personal efficiency [as] his fetish” to the point that “every minute of each day is scheduled in advance.”

Mussolini’s opening words read like a Macfadden self-help manual of personal productivity: “It has been my rule of life to employ the body and mind to render the maximum output.” To guarantee such efficiency, Mussolini notes, he has to follow a series of strict rules and personal daily routines, including eating and drinking habits (i.e., milk instead of alcohol). The link between control of his own body and that of his country was an obvious rhetorical isomorphism linking body politics with body economics. It also held a proud nationalist dimension. By transferring the concept of efficiency from American business culture to himself and his own administration, Mussolini sought to contrast the stigmating characteristics usually attributed to Italians—such as disorganization, ineptitude, and sentimentality—with the image of a new Italian man who was efficient, pragmatic, and, most importantly, disciplined.

At the same time, he acknowledges the American imprint of the vaunted notion of work efficiency. “The United States [. . .] created smooth-running organizations of human units,” he writes in the fourth article of the series. “It is just such business efficiency on a larger scale we have tried to work into the government machine of Italy. We are succeeding.” Ultimately, Mussolini’s work efficiency was associated with his effort to change, renew, and improve Italy and the Italians effectively, but it was also well attuned to the businesslike American attitude that emphasized achieving results no matter the personal costs.

Shortly after, another series much richer in tone and content appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*. Published from May 5 to October 27, 1928, in one of America’s most popular periodicals, this series did not have single, overarching title and was later republished in a volume under the title of *My Autobiography*. Allegedly written by Mussolini himself, both the *SEP* installments and the resulting volume in fact had multiple authors. Mussolini’s brother Arnaldo, possibly with Sarfatti, wrote the Italian text. Child translated this into English in collaboration with the *Corriere della Sera* correspondent Luigi Barzini Jr. Child also wrote the volume's eight-page foreword, finalizing it probably during a late 1927 trip to Rome.

In the foreword, Child described Mussolini’s political leadership as “celebrity” and adopted a cinematic term of comparison (“his own size on the *screen* of history”) to emphasize the modernity of his public image. As in other accounts, Mussolini emerges in *My Autobiography* as a leader who was born in a great nation but personally came from nothing. Even though he had a strong father figure, in his early life he was often aimless. The Great War marked his path and made him see the “the death struggle of a worn-out democracy,” to quote one of the chapters, found Fascism, and take Rome. The book also includes chapters on the “five years of government,” the future of the Fascist state, and the
“political and social doctrine of fascism.” But Child’s foreword provides the lens with which all the narrative can profitably be read as the profile of a larger-than-life politician.

The virilized physical newness of Mussolini’s energetic political leadership, visible to Child in the dictator’s “firm jaws” or audible in “a sentence suddenly ejaculated,” glorified rather than tamed any reference to the dictatorial nature of his regime. In an American context that could safely imagine from afar what it would be like to witness the demise of democratic institutions, Child did not see any reason to downplay the autocratic measures that Fascist government had taken:

In our time it may be shrewdly forecast that no man will exhibit dimensions of permanent greatness equal to those of Mussolini. [. . .] It is one thing to administer a state. The one who does this well is called statesman. It is quite another thing to make a state. Mussolini has made a state. That is superstatemanship. [139]

As he did in his IAS speech and elsewhere, in the foreword Child transitions from an emphasis on Mussolini’s domestic political leadership, which had resulted in an infusion of vigor into Italy’s new generations (“youth itself, appears as if born with a new spirit, a new virility bred in the bones”), to comparisons with his political idol. “Mussolini, like Roosevelt,” he notes, “gives the impression of an energy which cannot be bottled, which bubbles up and over like an eternally effervescent, irrepressible fluid.” [140]

My Autobiography, like other biographical profiles of the Duce, also seeks to stress the extent to which Mussolini’s Latin masculinity made him quite different from his American counterparts. While describing his work discipline and political aspirations, for instance, Mussolini often advised against the presence of women in the workplace. “I have given imperative orders that [. . . ] where I work [. . . ] no woman shall be admitted,” he noted in an installment of the UP autobiographical series, since women “interfere with the efficient procedure of the work.” [141] He did not hesitate repeating such misogynist and backward views on other occasions, even when a woman was interviewing him. Still, his prejudice did not prevent women journalists from expressing admiration for his charming Latin personality—a contradictory phenomenon that paralleled Valentino’s potentially damaging, but regularly forgiven, public statements against gender equality.

“MUSSOLINI A SHEIK”

I began all over again to meditate upon this extraordinary man whose attitude toward women is so disdainful and yet who has so undeniable a charm. Psychoanalysis cast aside, I found myself reflecting before the Chigi Palace entrance was reached: “No wonder women are crazy about him.”

Alice Rohe, Liberty Magazine, 1927 [141]
In different ways, Child and Lamont emphasized Mussolini’s leadership and political ingenuity as well as the regime’s suitability to the Italian people. A few American female journalists stressed the same political angle in their reports. Yet the mere fact of their gender seems to have pushed them, either by their own will or by the insistence of their editors, to combine political analysis with insights into Mussolini’s personal temperament.143 If the emphasis on leadership constituted the shared political domain between the Divo and the Duce, personal charisma and Latin sensuality provided the erotic one. A few women writers performed this double public relations service. In addition to the already mentioned Anne O’Hare McCormick, we should also include UP writer and photojournalist Alice Rohe, who translated the Fascist regime’s political novelty into a masculine model and for more than ten years penned a positive account of the chauvinist Mussolini.

As already discussed, the Great War was a seismic event for communication and journalism. More female reporters than ever before joined male colleagues on European soil to cover the war. Kansas-born Alice Rohe was one of them. A few jobs as a reporter for newspapers in Kansas and Colorado enabled her to cross paths with George Creel. After she joined the CPI, she soon became a national figure.144 Already in Rome in 1914 as a correspondent for UP and the Exchange Telegraph of London, she remained in the Italian capital until 1919. By then she had become the first woman to manage the Rome office of UP’s international bureau.145

A few days after the March on Rome, Rohe interviewed Mussolini for the New York Times. At the end of the long, four-column piece, after offering praise for his youth, outstanding culture, and visionary leadership talent, Rohe focused on what today we might refer to as his gender politics. A committed defender of women’s equal rights, Rohe asked Mussolini whether he thought that “the mind of a woman, given the same opportunity for development, the same education, doesn’t function as well as that of a man.” “Certainly not—it is impossible,” he replied.146 Rohe voiced her disappointment at the Duce’s unapologetic display of male chauvinism but was not wholly discouraged. She gently reprimanded him, but closed the piece with a surprisingly affectionate tone: Mussolini “laughed good-naturedly, but with that fine superiority with which the Latin male regards woman.”147 An article Rohe published five years later in Liberty Magazine on the Duce as “idol of women” best captured this contradictory reaction in its subtitle—“He Pours Contempt on the Softer Sex—And It Adores Him!” (figure 34).148

That article begins by reporting how the women of Rome, “titled beauties of ancient Italian lineage, look upon the Fascist Dictator.”149 They adore what he has done for Italy, but most surprisingly they adore him. Rohe describes one of them as behaving “like a schoolgirl over her favorite movie hero.” By her own admission, the comparison with the film world led her to a recently published article in the search for a successor to Valentino in Italy. Rohe then combines the two domains, film and political stardom, in a way that surprises even her:
Suddenly I began to think of Mussolini in a new light. Why search further? I struggled to suppress the boldly intrusive idea. Mussolini a sheik—perish the thought! Yet this dominant, indomitable Dictator, whose contempt for women is proverbial, not only has Italy in the hollow of his hand, but he has Italy’s women at his feet.

The equation of the real Mussolini with a Hollywood archetype require articulation: on what grounds is it based? The author’s visits to Mussolini’s rallies reveal to her the outstanding appeal he enjoyed among Italian women, to the point that she herself does not feel immune from it. “Everywhere adoration illuminated the faces of the women,” she observes. “Young and old, they kept creeping nearer and nearer to where he was speaking. Before I realized it, I, too, was among them, drawn forward by the magnetism of the black-shirted premier.” While the general enthusiasm of the masses for the Duce may find an explanation in a broad discussion
about leaders’ power over mobs and masses (“To see Mussolini before his cohorts is to understand the power of the individual over the mass mind”), for Rohe, there is something else worth exploring. Given the Duce’s public disdain for any role for women beyond biological service to the nation, Rohe wonders how to explain “this feminine phenomenon” and whether it proves “conclusively that women prefer the dominant, patronizing, arrogantly indifferent male.” At first, Rohe attributes such a self-defeating attitude to an Italian cultural trait. “Italian women worship a dominant male. They revel in submission to super contempt,” she charges, and she identifies such misplaced “feminine idolatry” for a man who mainly regards women as servants as evidence of “a somewhat primal force in modern, Fascist Italy.” And yet, she notices, “I have seen too many of my own countrywomen completely enthralled [by him].” They are a diverse lot: “sophisticated cosmopolites, ‘hard-boiled flappers,’ placid wives of prominent U.S. citizens, skeptical newspaper women, 100-percent feminists.” But no matter their backgrounds, when they have the chance to meet “Italy’s man of destiny,” they reemerge “as utter vassals.”

How could Rohe explain women’s tolerance for the Duce’s misogynist attitude, which had not changed over the years? To her dismay, the explanation lies in their experience of his irresistible personal appeal, a “great magnetism” which she herself has experienced. In a combination of psychoanalytic reading and cinematic reviewing, Rohe states, “The plain answer is sex appeal,” and “Dr. Freud could give the most illuminating explanation [by suggesting that] this element is at all times extremely vital in Italy.” Rather than describing sex appeal as resulting from a direct relationship between the Duce and his admirers, her exploration of this cinematic quality leads her to identify a photographic mediation that is close to her reporting practice: the close-up view. “The very strength of the face, with its uncompromising, sensual mouth, the compelling domination of the prominent eyes, the brutal tenacity of the head,” she admits, “radiated sex appeal” because a photographic camera captured it at close range before countless reproductions multiplied it ad infinitum. “When you study a personal close-up of this dominant, domineering, imperial, and imperious face, the spell which he exerts over women is not surprising.” Ultimately, his mass-reproduced captivating charm easily lends itself to comparisons with stars’ appeal. A few months earlier Elinor Glyn had even included Mussolini (and the Prince of Wales) among those who “have IT.”

Rohe did not change her view or tone over the years. In 1937 she could still write: “There are certain types of women who are even attracted by his contempt.” This time she provides a fresh insight: “I have known Mussolini for fifteen years. I have watched his power over the mass mind, but more significant because of the publicity given him in the Great Lover role, I have witnessed his power over women.” It was not just “that he has ‘It’ and ‘Sex Appeal.’” More cogently, it was the fact that something of the private dimension of this Italian political leader had been made to become his defining trait.
The sudden introduction of the love element into the macabre drama which Mussolini is enacting on the world stage calls attention to an important phase of Il Duce’s life. This is his power over women, a power which has played no small part in his success.\textsuperscript{157}

The public exposure of a person’s private personality, unprecedented for someone playing such a demiurgic political role, was for Rohe part and parcel of his cinematic allure. A few articles that appeared in \textit{Liberty Magazine} were even more explicit with cinematic metaphors and terms of comparison. In a spring 1927 piece on screen tests, the method of determining actors’ cinematic suitability and appeal beyond mere physical appearance, the staff writer and editor Brenda Ueland points out that passing a screen test is just a first step toward success. “To become a star you must have something else. Some call it ‘charm;’ some ‘personality;’ some, ‘sex appeal.’” She inevitably quotes Elinor Glyn, “who calls it ‘it.’” The rest of the article constitutes a series of insights on the subject shared by a Hollywood filmmaker, A. Edward “Eddie” Sutherland. After referring to famous actors, Sutherland argues that history’s greatest statesmen had cinematic magnetism:

When Napoleon walked toward a squad of men whose rifles were pointed at him, they couldn’t fire. […] Now, Napoleon and Caesar, if they had gone into the movies, would have become great stars. So would Mussolini, Bernard Shaw, Nell Gwyn, Henry IV, Abélard and Héloïse, Lord Nelson, Diane de Poitiers, and many others. And that is about the best way I can explain it.\textsuperscript{158}

The ease with which the Hollywood director moved from discussing stars’ successful screen tests to the charm of great statesmen impinges upon two intersecting domains. Film culture does not just pertain to leisure time; political leadership does not just pertain to policy positions, ideological convictions, or (traditional) personal character. True, political adversaries deployed a combination of alarm and sarcasm in their emphasis on Mussolini’s performative talent. Anti-Fascist historian Gaetano Salvemini labeled him a “clown,” while expatriate anarchist Camillo Bernieri went so far in 1934 as to call the Duce “the Rodolfo Valentino of politics.”\textsuperscript{159} But the intersection of the two domains produced comparisons between the Divo and the Duce, in a speech or a cartoon, that were not motivated solely by political antagonism. In an interview, the Hollywood actress Nita Naldi, who had played the femme fatale in Valentino’s \textit{Blood and Sand} (1923) and was a close friend of the actor, confessed her preferred type of male companion. “I like very dark handsome men with slick hair who wear evening clothes like ambassadors,” Naldi confessed to the reporter that she liked men who look like Rudolph Valentino. But she went on: “Also I like them to be fierce and quarrelsome. Soldiers I adore! Mussolini! Cave men!”\textsuperscript{160} In her terms, “Valentino” was a person, whereas “Mussolini” was an attribute, a \textit{popular, and thus mass-mediated, type of masculinity} that was “fierce and quarrelsome”—and as such akin to a “sheik.” For the Duce’s masculinity to become “typical,” it had to be publicly associated with
the personal style of his political governance rather than with its substance. And it could achieve this level of cultural amplification mainly through references to motion pictures. Cinema, in fact, provided the terrain of comparison as well as of competition with Valentino.

An illustration that appeared in the January 1926 Liberty Magazine captures exactly that (figure 35). Created by the famous New Yorker cartoonist Ralph Barton, the drawing pairs the Divo and the Duce under the fresh, personalized terms of a public confrontation that obviously stresses both their differences and similarities. Graphically, the two figures are in parallel positions, with the back and top of their heads radiating the same white reflections out of well-oiled hair or a formal hat (or topper). Calvino would have recognized in the image the “first Mussolini,” the emblem of respectability and restored order who at official ceremonies habitually sported a morning coat and a tie. The cartoon’s implied context is Valentino and Mussolini’s widely publicized rift over the former’s decision to acquire U.S. citizenship and the latter’s response of having his films banned in Italy. In the drawing, however, the actual terrain of their confrontation is not legal citizenship but cinematic visibility. Underneath the cartoon is a long caption that begins in capital letters. It goes on to explain the drawing in terms that certainly refer to the issue of citizenship but qualify the two figures in cinematic terms:

Benito Mussolini, Italy’s Premier and leading news-reel actor, caught off his guard by our camera man as he views a poster announcing Rudolph Valentino in a motion picture. A boycott was shortly afterwards proclaimed on Valentino pictures.

The cartoon’s raison d’être (and its design) was the fact that Mussolini and Valentino were both public popular figures, subjects of countless publicity initiatives. While in the mid-1920s this may have appeared obvious for a film star, it was still a novelty for a politician. In a 1928 NYT article, UP publicity director Warren Nolan, who had handled publicity for Chaplin, Pickford, Fairbanks, and even for Valentino’s funeral, praised Mussolini as a masterful “space-grabber.”

Benito Mussolini is the world’s champion space-getter, because in five years he has press-agented Italy into a front-line position as a world power and himself into Julius Caesar’s mighty sandals. Il Duce is even more famous than that countryman of his, Rudolph Valentino, whose illness and death sent more verbiage over press wires than did the illness and death of an ex-president.

Further, the basis for the cartoon’s comparison between Valentino and Mussolini was the fact that they were both film stars—one of fiction films, the other of newsreels. The recognition that Mussolini, too, was a film celebrity had been made explicit and literal by the news and by the release of films starring the Italian leader. These began with The Eternal City (1924) and continued with The Man of the Hour (1927) and several hard-to-find American newsreels, as we shall see in the next chapter. Yet, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter, the identification
FIGURE 35. Mussolini versus Valentino. Ralph Barton, “News of the World,” Liberty Magazine, January 16, 1926, 53.
of Mussolini as “movie star” had inaugurated his popular hagiography in early November 1922, when no films about him were known to be in the making. The fact that Mussolini was considered “cinematic” in American press discourse before being screened in the New World supports the methodological postulate of this work that the cinema effect extended beyond the domain of movie theaters. It is time now to look closely at how American and Italian films exhibited in the United States sought to tell stories about Mussolini as Fascist leader by showcasing his role as political leader through romanticized transfigurations.
The literature on Mussolini’s relationship to motion pictures within the Italian context has been extremely rich, particularly since the late 1970s. It has generally focused on the extent to which the Fascist government, through various ministers, programs, and talented individuals, sought to exercise an effective control over film production, distribution, and exhibition. The creation of the newsreel agency Istituto LUCE (L’Unione per la Cinematografia Educativa) in 1924, the sponsor of the Venice Film Festival in 1931, the creation of the ENIC (Ente Nazionale dell’Industria Cinematografica [General Directorate of Cinematography]) in 1935, and the building of Cinecittà Studios in 1937 are just some of the milestones of the regime’s efforts to control most aspects of Italian film culture. A growing literature has focused on the ways in which Mussolini’s actions and images came to dominate several aspects of this culture—from newsreels to film stardom. Finally, more recent scholarly attention has been given to the cult of Mussolini within Italian film culture and in other forms of mass communications.

The Fascist government, however, could only indirectly control Mussolini’s screen presence and circulation in the United States, in terms of both Italian and American productions. The regime had to enter into partnerships with Hollywood studios, newsreel companies, and distribution firms; to negotiate directly with the MPPDA to ensure what it deemed a fair national representation; and sometimes to establish agreements with private distributors and individual theaters (which often ended in disappointment). What kind of stories about itself could the regime sell to Americans? The conventional distinction between Fascism as movement and as regime, articulated by Renzo De Felice in his monumental biography of the Duce and his study of Fascism’s institutionalization, does not apply to its American representation. Fascism as either a violent movement, a complex historical
phenomenon, or an autocratic ideology was not commercially viable in democratic America. Instead, Fascism could be sold as a triumphant administrative solution to the challenges that every government faces. Yet even a well-organized regime could not easily be translated into a popular narrative: a national arrangement centered on a single public personality, bigger than any movement or regime, was preferable. This possibility rested on a caveat that concerned Mussolini’s American middlemen. Casting the Duce as the Fascist regime’s celebrity-performer meant inserting him in fictional or nonfictional narratives that were familiar to the American public but that were not of his own making or under his control. Early fictional productions from Italy, especially when set in Roman times and thus aligned with the regime’s celebration of Rome’s political history, were no longer appealing to American audiences. The case of *Messalina* (1924), a passé historical epic by Enrico Guazzoni, who ten years earlier had directed *Quo Vadis?* (1913), is symptomatic. American trade papers maintained that costly Italian historical productions relied on financial backing from Mussolini’s regime and served his interests. The film struggled to find distributors who did not prefer the superior production values of Fox’s colossal *Dante’s Inferno* (1924).

The distinction between productions from Italy and from the United States is a productive one, but it is also complicated by the fact that several key American productions were shot in Italy and as such were not divorced from the regime’s tentative reach. The case of *The Eternal City* (1924), a modern political melodrama produced by a Hollywood studio and filmed in Rome, is extremely illuminating of the kind of intense negotiations that Hollywood and the regime’s middlemen engaged in not long after the March on Rome.

**THE ETERNAL CITY**

*As we have all come to realize, even the most important of “international relations” have to be carried on by individuals.*  
WILL H. HAYS, 1955

With the possible exception of a few brief newsreel sequences, the first opportunity for Mussolini to be screened across America was through the Goldwyn production *The Eternal City*. Besides granting cinematic visibility to a dictator that some in the press had been raving about for almost two years, the film is important for two other reasons. On a production level, it identifies the various institutional and commercial parties interested in the propagation of Fascism and its leader in America. On the level of reception, it shows what Mussolini and his American representatives came to learn about political propaganda.

Directed by George Fitzmaurice and written by his wife, Ouida Bergère, *The Eternal City* was filmed in Rome in the summer of 1923 just a few months after the March on Rome. Italy was not an uncommon destination for several
Hollywood companies at the time. Fitzmaurice, who would direct The Son of the Sheik in 1926, had already filmed The Man from Home (Famous Players–Lasky, May 1922) in Sorrento. According to Goldwyn’s biographer A. Scott Berg, it was Fitzmaurice who had “recommended a play Paramount had filmed in 1915, Sir Hall Caine’s ‘The Eternal City’” and it was Ouida Bergère who had “suggested updating this love story, set against post-Risorgimento Rome, to Mussolini’s Italy.” At the turn of the century, the British writer Hall Caine (1853–1931) was extraordinarily popular. He had originally conceived The Eternal City as a play but published it as a novel in 1901. It became his most successful work. It would be translated into thirteen languages and sold more than a million copies in English alone. The stage version was also a success in both the United Kingdom and the United States.

The story is a political romance in which the hero, David Rossi (Bert Lytell), is accused of plotting to murder the Italian king. The screen adaptation changed the story’s political color from a celebration of socialist heroism to one of Fascist victory. In this updated film version, the hero is now Mussolini’s right-hand man, whose beloved Donna Roma (Barbara La Marr) first appears to be on the wrong political side due to her close rapport with a Communist villain, Baron Bonelli (Lionel Barrymore), before she reveals her loyalty to her man. After scenes of mass gatherings of Fascist sympathizers at the Coliseum and clashes with the Communist rivals, the film climaxes in an actual view of a victorious Mussolini on the balcony of the royal palace, beside the Italian king, and David and Donna’s romantic reunion (figures 36 and 37).
The extent to which the Fascists contributed financially and logistically to the filming of *The Eternal City* has long remained unclear. Berg suggests that “when the Fascists caught wind of the film and demanded its confiscation, Fitzmaurice and his crew quickly left the country,” and the cinematographer “smuggled the negative safely out of Italy.” The archival evidence tells a slightly different story. The embassy’s press clipping service and the correspondence of the Italian ambassador Gelasio Caetani with several individuals, from Fitzmaurice and MPPDA head Will H. Hays to various Italian ministers and even Mussolini himself, shed light on the circumstances of the film’s production, final version, and commercial distribution. They also reveal how American producers and Italian authorities sought to work together to promote the film.
This is not a story of a well-planned and direct public relations campaign in favor of Mussolini but of a series of collaborative attempts between Hollywood filmmakers and Italian authorities to enable the production and distribution of a supportive and profitable film. *The Eternal City* also constituted a learning curve for the Italian officials involved: while they quickly regarded it as a unique opportunity for effective propaganda, they were initially unaware of the commercial imperatives of American film culture. The archival record does not include documents that reveal who approached whom, but they suggest that upon Goldwyn’s request, Hays first contacted Ambassador Caetani to assess whether the Italian government was in favor of the production and was willing to support it.

Caetani’s initial support of the film was likely due to the Fascist regime’s new directive about the importance of motion pictures for political communication. That directive had come down as a ministerial circular (no. 16) from Mussolini himself in his role as minister of foreign affairs and was widely distributed on March 1, 1923. Devoted to propaganda abroad, the Duce’s directive centered on the cinematic medium. For Mussolini, films were to illustrate “in an attracting and interesting way the wealth and power of our industries, the unmatched natural and artistic beauty of Italy […] while always culminating with glorifying visions of our army and military forces.” The circular informed all interested parties—mostly diplomats, ambassadors, and consuls—that Mussolini had created a commission of experts who were to curate the publication of literary works that would faithfully reproduce in words what films showed on screen.\(^\text{16}\) Considering how carefully Caetani would always approach the issue of Fascist propaganda in America, being aware of the obvious risks of meddling with American politics, the opportunity to support an American production by established Hollywood filmmakers that featured the Duce must have seemed more than intriguing.

Before Mussolini’s circular reached his desk, Caetani had already understood the importance of motion pictures for broadcasting a positive image of Italy in America. Earlier that year, he had contacted the MPPDA about past and recent anti-Italian productions. On January 26, 1923, the vice president and secretary of the MPPDA, Courtland Smith, reassured Caetani that “Mr. Hays again desires to assure you that it is our most sacred duty and greatest pleasure to assist in developing international good will and friendly relations with each country, and that our members would not do consciously that which in a broad sense would give offense to any nation.”\(^\text{17}\) Caetani immediately copied the letter and conveyed its content to both Mussolini and to the head of the League for the Protection of National Interest, Oscar Sinigaglia. The ambassador added that he had notified the consular offices to collect and submit to him information about anti-Italian productions in order to pressure the MPPDA to secure appropriate measures according to its own promises.\(^\text{18}\) Yet, this rather defensive approach soon gave way to a more assertive one.

One day in April 1923 Caetani phoned Hays, asking for a meeting. He knew that the first American fiction film about Fascism could be, as he wrote to a high Fascist
official, “most important for our American propaganda.” But he needed assurances that the production and the final result would turn out to be in accordance with what he considered the story and essence of Fascism. Hays scheduled the meeting for May 4 and informed Caetani that Sam Goldwyn and George Fitzmaurice, The Eternal City’s producer and director, would also be present. Further, Hays confirmed to the Italian ambassador the MPPDA’s policy regarding representations of foreign nations that in terms of diplomatic strategy aligned with the U.S. State Department.

As [Undersecretary of State William] Phillips explained to you[, . . . ] it is the earnest purpose of the producer and the Association that the production may square exactly with all of the proprieties and that the picture may be a definite contribution to the progress of international amity.

The meeting took place and apparently went well. Still, as Mussolini’s key representative in America, Caetani wanted written assurance about the film’s treatment of Fascism. In a letter to Hays, he used the MPPDA chief’s own words: “I shall highly appreciate if, as you suggested, this production will give a correct picture of my country and will be a definite contribution to the progress of international amity.” Only upon receipt of such written confirmation could Caetani offer all possible help in the form of “letters recommending to the authorities in Italy that all possible facilities be given.” To reassure the ambassador, Hays sent him letters that the MPPDA chief had received from Sam Goldwyn, whose prose was so formal that it was likely written with the explicit goal of sounding like “a very definite commitment,” as Hays later described them to Caetani. The ambassador found these exchanges “quite definite and satisfactory.” He was further reassured following meetings with the director, Fitzmaurice, and his wife, Ouida Bergère, who was working on adapting Caine’s novel to the Fascist context.

Through these exchanges, the practice of a Fascist official mediating between Hollywood and the Italian government started to take hold. In his letter to Hays, Caetani suggested that it was Mrs. Fitzmaurice who had come up with the idea of securing a trusted representative of the ambassador (and the Fascist government) assist them in Rome and correct any historical inaccuracies to avoid subsequent embarrassment. In a June cable to Mussolini, however, Caetani claimed that he was the one who had the idea of inserting a trusted representative to assist, advise, and report about the filming in Rome. That person turned out to be none other than Countess Irene di Robilant, IAS’s factotum secretary and Caetani’s close collaborator on this and other propaganda initiatives. Both the studio and Hays himself were enthusiastic about her presence, whose power in Italian government circles and knowledge of American and Italian cultures would well serve all the parties involved.

On June 8 Caetani informed Mussolini about The Eternal City’s production, mentioning Hays as “the chief of American cinematography,” and describing the film as a grandiose $600,000 production destined to circulate widely throughout
the United States. Caetani told the Duce that he “immediately saw the importance of such an instrument of propaganda.” Still, in order to avoid any misunderstanding about “the nature and the spirit of the fascist movement,” he informed the Duce that he had managed to secure the presence of di Robilant, whom he described as “secretary and soul of the Italy American Society,” to serve as chief location adviser in Italy. He also reassured him that the producers had made every effort to change the plot, avoid mistakes, and return “a correct vision of fascism from its latent state during the early days of the war to the triumph of the March on Rome.” Caetani concluded his communication to Mussolini by mentioning that if screened in America’s “twenty-five thousand movie theaters,” the history of Fascism was bound to be watched by millions of people. Meanwhile the ambassador had already requested assistance from several key figures in politics, film, and journalism who would support the shooting in terms of logistics (i.e., permits) and publicity.

Instead of overseeing the production from the Italian embassy in Washington, Caetani eventually took matters into his own hands and spent part of that summer in Rome. His goal was to assist his intermediaries, particularly di Robilant, not just with logistics, particularly for the large scenes featuring army and cavalry soldiers, but also and more significantly in securing the film’s ideological integrity and controlling the publicity narrative. Caetani wanted to have his name associated with a production that stressed the political novelty of the regime. On July 25, 1923, Il Giornale d’Italia described a production supervised by the “tireless Prince Caetani,” that promised to offer “a clear and synthetic view of the fascist movement, in its ethical essence and in its patriotic and political goals.” The promotional article highlighted the same figures that the ambassador had used in his communication with Mussolini: millions of spectators attending the country’s “twenty-five thousand movie theaters” were bound to enjoy this most “efficacious propaganda of Italianness.”

Filming did not go smoothly. In mid-July the Italian chief of police, Emilio De Bono, informed Caetani that he was concerned about scenes showing wretched returning soldiers, widespread poverty, and communists spitting on the Italian flag. Caetani must have shared his own concern with the filmmakers. In late July, Fitzmaurice reassured him by offering him the chance to “view the picture in New York upon its completion.” The director also granted the ambassador the opportunity of correcting any error “to insure that our picture will be a true representation of your great movement.” The publicity machine was already active in America too, but here it was out of Caetani’s direct control.

On August 28, 1923, a long article appeared in the White Plains Reporter; it included an interview with Fitzmaurice about filming The Eternal City in Fascist Italy. Variously edited, sections of the interview eventually made their way into the trade press. The director certainly said a few of the right things, including the fact that the filmmakers “received a great deal of help from the Government and were permitted to go everywhere.” In a few instances, however, Fitzmaurice’s answers
were problematic, particularly when he revealed that Fascism had many detractors in Italy. “When we reached Rome,” he noted, “some of the people were glad that we were to make a Fascist production, while others were opposed to the idea.” Further, Caetani feared that the director’s public insistence that the film did not constitute “good propaganda” was going to exert the opposite effect and hurt the film’s commercial potential. His more disturbing statements pertained to Mussolini’s participation. “I even photographed Mussolini in the picture,” he boasted, “and in a sort of prologue, which we call a trailer, I have a picture of Mussolini in a scene in which I am directing him how to act.” In effect, Fitzmaurice’s statement reduced Mussolini to an actor working for a Hollywood director, a mere performer in a story that the Italian leader had not supervised and over which he exercised only indirect influence through his subordinates. This statement ran against all the publicity narratives that had made the Duce the cognizant and in-charge protagonist of a historical event.

In addition, *The Eternal City* itself did not match the Fascist officials’ expectations. Caetani returned to Washington in late September and, upon Goldwyn’s invitation, watched the film in New York on November 15. Di Robilant had seen it a week before and had shared her disappointment with the ambassador. While she did not find much objectionable about the production—except for an intertitle that read “in a country famous for its vagabonds”—she nonetheless found it overall “dull.” In her view “the whole [Fascist] movement appears entirely to have been censored as a strike-breaking organization.” She added:

Nothing of the history of spirituality of the movement itself appears, and this is all the more astonishing, when we remember how hard we all worked, exactly on that part. I have written pages and pages of history, we arranged for patriotic visions, and some of that material was actually photographed. For commercial reasons it has not been included in the picture.

Her final impression was that *The Eternal City* “would not even be a financial success. There is no thrill, and the story is not exciting. The end falls entirely flat.” Disappointed, she feared that upon seeing the film, Fascist officials would criticize her and the ambassador. She had expected much more “after having disturbed the Duce, the Army, the Police.”

Di Robilant’s impression influenced Caetani’s. After watching the film, he did not hesitate to convey his disappointment to Goldwyn. Caetani had many reservations about missing or incomplete intertitles that he felt were needed to explain the historical context. He also did not appreciate the scarcity of iconic images, whether related to World War I or “the fascists saluting with extended arms during the march on Rome.” Revealing an unexpected understanding of film editing, he told di Robilant about his advice to Fitzmaurice that the Duce’s “pictures would not be inserted in the play, but would either precede or follow the film.” Elocuently emphasizing the political stakes, Caetani declared that he could not agree that
Mussolini should appear as “one of the actors of the Goldwyn Company.”37 This was also sensitive promotional issue that affected the Duce’s standing in relationship to the film’s narrative. Mussolini was the demiurge of the Fascist movement, after all, and his relevance could not be portrayed as secondary. The Duce was certainly an actor and a performer—as the anti-Fascist literature recognized early on and would continue to do for years—but in his own show, not someone’s else’s.

Caetani had ideas. “The picture of Mussolini at his desk,” he wrote to di Robilant, “should be placed immediately after that of the King standing at the balcony. It could be preceded by a caption saying: ‘This is Mussolini the man who organized the whole Fascisti movement and is now head of the Government.’”38 The surviving copy of the film features the image of the Duce at his desk following that of the king, but not the suggested additional intertitle.39 Secondly, to address the problem of “authorship,” Caetani and the studio agreed to insert a statement from Mussolini that would have framed the entire film as overseen and approved by the Duce. The Eternal City premiered on January 20, 1924,40 but four days later the ambassador was still working on tweaking the film’s intertitles. On January 24, he informed Fitzmaurice that Mussolini had completed the “message to be used in connection with the exhibition” of the film. It read:

Italy, by means of her gallant and strenuous fascisti youth has established order throughout towns and country; by a noble will effort she has gained civic peace which allows her to work and progress.

Fascismo, in the history of Modern Europe, will remain an unparalleled example of moral energy and of spontaneous self-sacrifice devoted to the cause of civilization which is essentially the cause of order, of work and of national and social discipline. [Signed] Mussolini

By then, the film had been distributed by First National and had premiered at the Strand Theater in New York City. It was an impressive production, with the theater’s symphony orchestra playing Pietro Mascagni’s popular Cavalleria rusticana. Naturally, Caetani was unnerved, fearing that a propaganda film qua propaganda would not work. He asked the consul general of Italy, Temistocle Filippo Bernardi, to have someone whom he trusted visit movie theaters where the film was being shown and report back to him.42 He wanted to know whether the film’s nonpolitical advertisements were having any impact on the film’s reception in New York City. In early February, the consul communicated to the ambassador that The Eternal City was having some success with audiences, particularly when Mussolini and Fascist actions were on the screen. He also noted that early scenes featuring beggars and a robber would not help Italy’s reputation. His short, lukewarm report did not bode well.43 Caetani seemed to have anticipated the film’s reception: positive for the exposure of its key celebrity—the Duce—but negative for the film’s obvious propaganda import.44 On February 4, he wrote again to Mussolini repeating what he had
written a few days earlier: distributors had asked that all the scenes in *The Eternal City* that had an obvious propaganda aspect be removed. He sought to reassure the Duce that the film maintained its ideological integrity and that it was doing well in the United States. But the message was clear to those who wanted to hear it: overt propaganda was not the proper way to broadcast the value of the regime in America.45

Meanwhile, the trade and general press published their reviews. Known for its coziness with the Mussolini regime, the *Saturday Evening Post* published a brief, celebratory review of the film, enriched by a few illustrations. “Sir Hall Caine modernized ‘The Eternal City’ for the screen,” it reported, before adding that the film’s “unforgettable characters are people of today. Fascists triumph where Caesars fell.”46 Other reviews, some laudatory and some critical, did not consider the recent historical context of Fascism’s rise but, like the *SEP*, viewed Mussolini cinematically, so to speak, as a seasoned performer and a celebrity film actor. *Photoplay* began by describing *The Eternal City* as “one of the most beautiful pictures ever filmed” for its “views of Rome, taken from one of the hills; the shots in the Coliseum; the views along the beautiful roads shaded by Lombardy poplars.”47

Some reviewers who were dismissive of the film’s value singled out the Duce’s presence. In the February 1924 issue of *Life* magazine, Robert E. Sherwood described the film as “nonsense on a heroic scale,” lacking “a credible story.” Still, although carried by “tidal waves of sonorous propaganda,” the film showed the “Fascist Napoleon” exhibiting a “deportment on the screen [that] lends weight to the theory that this is just where he belongs.”48 While a few newspapers had branded Mussolini as an actor as early as November 1922, by 1924 this was an established trope, one that even Valentino’s first unofficial publicity agent, Herbert Howe, could not resist. In one of his columns for *Photoplay*, he congratulated Fitzmaurice, “who made ‘The Eternal City’ with Barbara La Marr and Benito Mussolini. With Babbie and Benito in the cast the picture certainly should not be lacking in action.”49 Similarly, Agnes Smith of *Picture-Play Magazine* found that the film looked “like a news reel plus a fashion show,” but even in her sarcastic tone she acknowledged that while “Barbara La Marr acts as the fashion model,” Mussolini, as “Italy’s pet fire eater, is the star of the newsreel sections.”50

The reviews that emphasized the film’s celebrity value appeared side by side with those that trashed its nationwide commercial potential due to its overt propagandistic content. “Pouf, pouf and a barrel of wind. Samuel Goldwyn (not now connected with Goldwyn Pictures) has a flop in ‘The Eternal City;’” wrote an anonymous *Billboard* reviewer. “High-salaried actors, fares to Italy and expenses while there, $100,000 worth of publicity […] subordinated into an outright plug for Mussolini.” The result was that “because of its Roman flavor and the frequent references to Italy’s new hero, ‘The Eternal City’ will find much favor with Italians. It is extremely doubtful if the general public will enjoy it, however.”51 Similarly, “Rush” (Alfredo R. Greason), the *Variety* reviewer, complained that the Goldwyn
production sought “to tie up present day interest in the political upheaval of Italy [rather] than to develop the human interest of the story itself.” As a result, the film was going to be “a special interest only to the Italian colony. Whether the rest of the United States will manifest enthusiasm over the alien political situation is something else again.” The presence of Mussolini and the king at the film’s end, concluded the review, killed the lovers’ narrative climax, giving the “picture historic rather than romantic coloring.”52 Other reviewers complained that Hollywood had converted the original story, with its religious themes, into something completely different: “propaganda for the black-shirted forces of Mussolini.”53 Some even joked ironically that the new collaborative atmosphere between Hollywood and Rome would soon result in Mussolini playing Ben Hur.54

Beyond the reviewers’ and exhibitors’ lack of enthusiasm, the geopolitically sensitive quarters of the film industry deeply appreciated The Eternal City because it marked the first collaboration between Hollywood and a foreign country. In April 1924, in an article in the New York Times, Will Hays argued that “the first purpose of the producers is to make pictures that entertain, films in which costumes and customs of people are correctly portrayed, whether they deal with American, English or French life.” He repeated his usual formula that films had to make a “contribution to international amity,” and to support his case, he used the example of The Eternal City. Specifically, he referred to Caetani’s role. “The Ambassador took the trouble to go over the scenario,” he noted, “and satisfied himself that it would be a picture that would reflect Italy in a true light.” Hays said that he hoped this would bode well for future productions. “This is perhaps the first instance of an Ambassador accredited to this country taking an interest in an American production to be produced in his own land.”55

Caetani had different feelings. Following his disappointment over The Eternal City, he wondered whether the Italian embassy could further the Duce’s cinematic exposure in a more controlled fashion. Mussolini himself wanted to play a more direct role and manage his image directly from Rome. Yet, once again, other mediators intervened and creatively reworked the Duce’s image and message in the United States.

THE MAN OF THE HOUR

The speech in Italian should last three and a half minutes and the one in English the same so that the result would be of greatest impact.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR MUSSOLINI’S SPEECH FOR THE MAN OF THE HOUR

(trans.)56

In Genoa, on May 11, 1927, a trusted officer of the Biancamano ocean liner received a box with seven film rolls and was asked to deliver it to Cortland Smith, president of Fox Newsreels, at the company’s office on West 54th Street in New York City. The day after, an Italian government official in Rome reassured Mussolini’s personal
secretary Alessandro Chiavolini that the package was on its way to its American destination. Ten days later, on May 21, a telegram sent from New York arrived at the Plaza Hotel in Rome, addressed to Edgar L. Kaw, a Fox-Case film soundman. It was from Smith, complimenting Kaw and his colleagues in Fox’s outfit no. 1, Ben Miggins and D. F. Whiting, on a job superbly done. “First test from can number 5 shows magnificent picture and perfect sound reproduction. Nothing better has ever been done in either pictures or sound. Will now develop balance and cable you results. Heartiest congratulations to you Miggins and Whiting = Courtsmith.”

In the spring of 1927, speaking of “picture” and “sound” together was not customary. The Fox-Case Corporation had pioneered a process by which sound could be physically recorded onto photographic film by adding a sound score along the strip of film frames. The sound-on-film process was a radical improvement over sound-on-disc technology, which required perfect synchronization between a phonograph and a movie projector during exhibition and inevitably led to embarrassing mistakes. With its Movietone sound system, the newly formed Fox-Case Corporation was declaring all-out war against its main competitor, Warner’s Vitaphone system. “The kind of motion picture attraction chosen by the new company to introduce its system,” Raymond Fielding has noted, “was the sound newsreel,” or, we would specify, the celebrity newsreel. The first Movietone sound film was presented on January 21, 1927, in New York City, eight months before the premiere of The Jazz Singer. But the first commercially significant Fox Movietone film premiered in New York on May 27, 1927, and it showed the most newsworthy person and event of the day: Charles Lindbergh’s May 20 takeoff from Long Island for his historic transatlantic flight. While this sound film had no spoken parts, it was a cinematic event that opened the way for more. That was a period in which, to return to Frederic Lewis Allen, “every record for mass excitement and mass enthusiasm in the age of ballyhoo was smashed. Nothing seemed to matter, either to the newspaper or the people who read them, but Lindbergh and his story.”

To match the Lindbergh craze, the Fox-Case Corporation had already made plans for similar productions, all to be distributed by Fox. A few weeks before, it had allowed Jack Connolly and several technicians to leave for Europe with a mission: record the faces and voices of the most important celebrities of the day. One of their first stops was Rome, where they had managed to film something unique that had to be kept secret so as not to ruin any promotional plan. Upon receiving the mysterious can no. 5, Fox’s New York headquarters were quite pleased because they now had footage that offered a double novelty: for the first time it combined the image and the voice of Benito Mussolini making a speech in both Italian and English. Confidentiality had to be maintained. Kaw immediately telegraphed his mediator with the Italian government, J. P. Spanier, the Western Union Telegraph Company representative for Southern Europe, who was in Rome. In turn, Spanier
immediately relayed the message directly to the Duce’s secretary, Chiavolini. The Duce’s immediate circle had high hopes for this recorded speech that was directed at both American and Italian American audiences and could reach millions of people.

A few days earlier, on May 6, two weeks before the first Lindbergh recording, Fox Newsreels producer Jack Connolly, Ben Miggins (cameraman), and Edgar L. Kaw and D. F. Whiting (soundmen) had recorded Mussolini’s speech in two languages at Villa Torlonia, the Duce’s private residence in Rome (figures 38 and 39). The filming
also included the U.S. ambassador to Italy, Henry P. Fletcher, whose role was to introduce the Duce to American audiences. In the footage, Mussolini sports riding breeches, and he was made to walk toward the camera and deliver his talk straight into it. On the improvised set was also the former ambassador, Richard Washburn Child. Connolly allegedly helped Mussolini with his verbal delivery in English, and he and Child held a large card with the speech written on it for the Duce to read. The press later reported how Mussolini was willing to do multiple takes. During this same assignment, the crew also filmed images of Italian army soldiers on horseback, military bands, parading sailors, and a performance of the Vatican Choir, the latter in place of an interview with the Pope, who had declined their request.

In addition to the challenge of speaking in English, Mussolini had to operate within another constraint—the limited length of his speech. He and his aides went through several drafts in Italian and English to abide by the specific instructions he had been given: “The speech in either in Italian or English could not last more than three and a half minutes.” The Italian State Archive in Rome includes both Mussolini’s initial, very long, typewritten versions—marked on the first page with what appears to be his penciled note “Ridurre del 50 per %” [Reduce by 50%]—and the final, shortened translation by J. P. Spanier, that best fit the newsreel format (figures 40 and 41). The final version reads:
I am glad to be able to express once more my friendly feelings toward the American Nation.
The friendship, with which Italy looks at the 120 millions of citizens, who from Alaska to Florida and from the Pacific to the Atlantic live in the U.S. is today deeply rooted in our hearts. This feeling, strengthened by mutual interests, and by a war fought and won together shall contribute to the preparation of an ever brighter era in the life of both Nations.
While I greet the wonderful energy of the American People, I see and recognize among you, some of your land as well as ours, my fellow citizens, who are working to make America greater.
I salute therefore the great American people, that are all initiative, activity and strength; I salute their worthy and Noble Government; I salute the Italians of America, who unite in a single love our two Nations and honour both with their work!65

The Fox Movietone newsreel of Mussolini was in and of itself a special event. Even though William Fox paired it with another major attraction, the New York premiere of F. W. Murnau’s first American picture, Sunrise, the filming of Mussolini’s direct address was not going to be marginalized. Fox promoted it as “the first showing of the Mussolini Movietone, in which the Italian premiere will be seen and heard in a speech, the text of which has been copyrighted by the Fox Film Corporation.”64
The combination of art and political publicity may strike us for its “incongruousness” and seem “jarring and surprising,” to use Bergstrom’s words, but it was not a complete novelty for Fox.65 According to Fielding, the exceptional footage of Lindbergh’s takeoff had been paired four months earlier, on May 27, 1927, with Frank Borzage’s masterpiece Seventh Heaven as part of an all-Movietone program.66 Since evidence of Fox’s in-house documentation about strategies and correspondence is largely absent for this period, one is left speculating about possible explanations. Fox had its own precedents to learn from. In March 1926, Ettore Villani, the Fox Newsreels Rome-based camera operator, had filmed the Fascist Party’s seventh anniversary celebration. In the short memo he sent to New York with the footage, he transcribed part of Mussolini’s speech and added the note “DUCE: leading captain.” Pierluigi Erbaggio has argued that the fact that Villani volunteered this English translation of Mussolini’s preferred attribute demonstrates that he knew how much his employer and, by extension, the Fox Newsreels audience obsessed about powerful leaders as worthy film subjects and how little they cared about Fascism as an undemocratic political movement.67 It is thus possible to argue that Fox advertised the unusual combination of Murnau with Mussolini (and the other Italian footage) ultimately to promote the novelty of its wide-ranging offerings. Prior to the premiere, in fact, the company advertised the event as having three attractions:

3 Tremendous Features Combined in a Monumental Programme! [. . .] Sunrise, with Symphonic Movietone Accompaniment [. . .] the Vatican Choir, seventy voices of
sublime power and beauty on the Movietone! [. . .] See and Hear “The Man of the Hour,” His Excellency Benito Mussolini, Premier of Italy. He speaks to you and lives before your eyes on the Movietone! Text copyrighted by Fox Film Corp. 58

A preview was organized by Fox vice president and general manager Winfield Sheenan. Variety’s founding editor Sime Silverman covered it on the front page, with a banner headline: “Mussolini’s Hope in Screen.” In his long review, Silverman did not just celebrate Mussolini’s on-screen declaration of amity with the United States as a major political advancement but also praised the Duce for publicly recognizing the impact of the Movietone novelty on news communication. Allegedly, Mussolini had described Movietone as the medium that “can bring the world together, it can settle the differences; it can become the international medium, educator and adjuster; it can prevent war.” 69 From the standpoint of the trade it represented, Variety appreciated that such an international figure had publicly celebrated the new frontier of cinematic news-making as it expanded its reach from mere coverage of exceptional events (i.e., Lindbergh’s accomplishment) to more regular reporting on “politics, entertainment, propaganda, or any purpose that may be made appealing.” The case of Mussolini was singular, even for Movietone—the “first demonstration of Fox’s Movietone with a celebrity”—but it was also emblematic of the general power of the medium to communicate “directness and sincerity.” His appearance on screen had the potential of changing people’s minds about the dictator (figure 42). “If Movietone carries Mussolini to every incorporated village of this country[, . . .] millions of Americans will suffer altered opinions on Mussolini,” Silverman argued. After all, thanks to the new medium, “a forceful character like Mussolini can go around the universe carrying conviction for whatever he may be discussing.” 70

For the New York premiere, Fox chose the Times Square Theatre on 42nd Street and Broadway. The studio also prepared a two-page, double-sided program that described the evening’s attractions and sought to drum up excitement over the unprecedented deployment of prerecorded sound scores—a “Symphonic Movietone Accompaniment” for Murnau’s film and Mussolini’s actual voice for the Movietone News. In the Duce’s case, the new technology allowed the premier to address film spectators directly: “He speaks to you, expressing, with his characteristic gestures, his sentiments toward the United States and the Italian-Americans in this country.” The result, the program breathlessly claimed, was an unprecedented supply of liveliness and directness: Mussolini “lives before your eyes through movietone.” (figure 43).

The reception was more than positive. The Movietone News featured a notable performance of the Vatican Choir, but the New York Times argued that “the subject that gave one of the most vivid conceptions of the potentialities of the sound and shadow features is that of Benito Mussolini making a speech.” 71 Moving Picture World agreed. According to its reviewer, what mostly impressed the audience of the dual program “was the Movietone accompaniment for the picture and
the Movietone scenes, taken in Italy [through which] the audience saw and heard [. . .] the great Premier, himself, speaking in English and Italian, exactly as if he was actually in the theater.”

The equally enthusiastic Motion Picture News found that “Movietone brings Mussolini face to face with Americans. [. . .] Lifelike it is: amazingly lifelike. A set speech, of course, but the illusion brings the Dictator right into the theatre.”

What many found striking, as Screenland put it, was the “enormous close-up of the face of Mussolini. A most remarkable face.”

The same magazine insisted a month later that such a film helps “us know our neighbors
on this earth better” and turns distant leaders into “human beings […] whom we better understand.” This article celebrated the new medium with a photographic summary of its recent exploits. It featured frame enlargements from Movietone’s footage of President Coolidge welcoming Charles Lindbergh, a close-up of the American aviator, and two medium close-ups of Mussolini, who, the caption read, “speaks to you through the marvel of Movietone.”

The pairing of Murnau with Mussolini lasted three months: by December 12, “the display ads for Sunrise no longer mention any Italian features.” When the program opened in Los Angeles on November 29, The Man of the Hour was not included. Bergstrom explains the absence of the Mussolini footage by pointing out that Los Angeles, unlike New York, did not have a large Italian immigrant population. Another possible explanation is that the New York experience taught Fox that the combination of the two attractions was not working since they did not attract the same crowd. Fox’s Sheenan seemed to have known that it was not possible to advertise both features at once properly. As Bergstrom acknowledges, his “press review a few days before the release of Sunrise directed all the attention to Mussolini and to Movietone.” What could be more different than “a charismatic demagogue, speaking forcefully to the audience amid more than 20 minutes of Italian sound and fury” vis-à-vis “a film without dialogue and with an introverted, restrained acting
style”? Further, although popular culture had legitimized Mussolini on a grand scale, a few articles in the business press had been questioning Mussolini’s notable experiments in governance on cultural grounds with their praise for the American values of individuality and freedom from state policies.79

Making the film happen had not been easy. On the Italian side, the archival record shows evidence of repeated requests to film the Duce by international companies and repeated denials or delayed permissions, a process that may be reminiscent of Wilson’s situation before and during World War I. If Mussolini did not trust many of the Hollywood studios’ Italian representatives, he had full confidence in his proven mediators, beginning with Child, who had been instrumental in coordinating contacts between the Fox Film Corporation and Mussolini. Not only was Child present during the filming in May at Villa Torlonia, but that summer he also promoted Mussolini’s film performance for the readers of the New York Times.80

On the American side, the Variety review emphasized that the initiative to film notable Europe personalities with the new technology has been “Connolly’s mission.”81 As Variety and other papers mentioned, Jack S. Connolly had been the MPPDA’s Washington representative, a position that he had held until four months before, when he left to become European director of the Fox Movietone organization. A year after the premiere, he gave an interview to the New York Times on Movietone celebrities.82 After the anonymous reporter praised Connolly for having persuaded George Bernard Shaw to be on camera, the conversation inevitably moved to the Duce. “When one first meets Mussolini,” Connolly noted, “one is impressed with his vitality, his aggressiveness, his forcefulness and his power.” The Fox executive described how Mussolini was willing to rehearse and correct his English pronunciation, demonstrating he was eager to improve himself. Connolly’s conclusion about the Italian leader’s modern personality shunned any political considerations and remained solidly in the Hollywood domain, primarily due to the Duce’s personal style and cinematic appeal:

In my opinion Mussolini is the best dressed man in Italy. His clothes look as if they had been molded on him. No motion picture actor in Hollywood is more careful about his appearance, and I would venture to say that if he ever decided to give up his present position which, incidentally, he likes very much, a dozen picture producers would be after him.83

Without referring to the newsreel, but still reverberating in its import, a few months later the New York monthly The Mentor dedicated one of its special issues to Mussolini, the “Man of Italy.” Its main article did not hesitate to profile the Duce in the most celebratory manner as the leader of a popular plebiscite:

Superficially Benito Mussolini, the outstanding figure in Europe today, appears to take the ancient Romans for his model. In point of fact, however, the extraordinary career of this modern man of Destiny is far more in the Napoleonic tradition.84
Similarly, other film periodicals underscored how the Movietone News show of Mussolini impacted both his standing and the future of news making and news reporting.\textsuperscript{85} Screenland contended that “to introduce us to Mussolini, Calvin Coolidge, Bernard Shaw and Charles Lindbergh and at the same time hear their voices, is, so far, the most successful marriage of silence and sound.”\textsuperscript{86} Picture-Play Magazine noted that “Fox Movietone News quickly became a three-issue-a-week feature” for its ability to reveal “the vocal images” of famous personages, including Mussolini. More than depicting “their likeness,” it was a matter of preserving “their living voices, their very personalities, for posterity.”\textsuperscript{87} For others, the Movietone News managed to reveal a novel dimension in its coverage of celebrities. “The sound cameras reflect unerringly the dynamic force of Mussolini,” declared New Movie Magazine, “the quiet force of Henry Ford; the rugged conservatism of the good Calvin [Coolidge].”\textsuperscript{88}

If the energy of the Duce’s performance fueled widespread praise, it also fueled mockery. The British writer George Bernard Shaw had been an early admirer of Mussolini. In 1922 he had welcomed the Duce’s rise to power in Italy, observing that amid the “indiscipline and muddle and Parliamentary deadlock,” the Italian leader was “the right kind of tyrant.”\textsuperscript{89} In contrast, when on June 25, 1928 Fox released George Bernard Shaw Talks to Movietone News, the British writer gently made fun of Mussolini’s performative oratory. Shaw posed with his arms around his waist to show what he called the “Mussolini stance,” and he included the Fascisti salute. After expressing admiration for Mussolini’s hair and brow, he ironically noted that while he could stop assuming the “terrifying Mussolini look” (“I can put it on, take it off, and do all sorts of things”), Mussolini could not. Instead, the Italian leader was “condemned to go through life with that terrible and imposing expression.” Interviewed the same year by Motion Picture Classic, Shaw doubled down in irony, adding that “my imitation of Mussolini should have assured you of my ability at character roles.” Indicating some of the cracks in the popularity of the Duce, the caption to one of the six film frames illustrating the article reads: “It has been said that there is but one thing funnier than George Bernard Shaw’s imitation of Mussolini’s expression, and that is Mussolini’s expression.”\textsuperscript{90}

These commentaries reveal that if Bernard Shaw could appear as a great character actor, it was because Mussolini had become a character in the Olympus of Hollywood’s celebrity-personalities and, as such, he was worthy of praise and ridicule. A December 1928 poster of the Movietone series prominently featured the Duce among the new cinematic format’s exemplary subjects, together with Lindbergh and Shaw (figure 44). Similarly, a few months later Fox released a six-reel travelogue, Chasing through Europe (1929), which was devoted not to sites or historical monuments but to the Old World’s modern personalities. Mussolini was obviously among them, together with another regular, the Prince of Wales. Reporting on the travelogue, Screenland conceivably reproduced Fox’s
promotional slogan: “You will see a dozen celebrities on the screen[. . .] two kings, two dictators, one royal prince, and one Sultan!”91 The same year, in a celebratory volume on the history of motion pictures, Will Hays praised the Fox Movietone initiative for “bringing the world’s personalities to the world’s people” and thus offering “a very real contribution to the world’s welfare.”92

The bonds among cinema, news-making, and celebrities—no matter their domain of excellence—seemed to have reached a level of natural completion, with Mussolini as a fitting part in it. In truth, behind and before these celebrations were several modest, botched, and rarely successful initiatives by Italian companies, which sought to contribute to the promotion of Fascism and Mussolini’s repute in the United States without fully understanding the American cultural marketplace.
Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, Italian officials in Washington, DC, were busy mediating between the MPPDA and Italian institutions or even private citizens, who often shared their concerns about negative film representations of Italians in Italian or American productions whether these were exhibited in the United States or elsewhere. This was a concern that had been central to the Italian government even before the days of the March on Rome.

One of the earliest documentable occurrences dates back to August 30, 1922, when Andrea Geisser Celesia di Vegliasco, secretary of the embassy of Italy, complained to Hays about a few films that had depicted Italians “in a very unflattering light” and about Hollywood’s “regrettable habit of using the Italian type in filmmaking as an element of villainy, ferocity or grotesque vulgarity.” The “belittling of our people,” Geisser Celesia added, was “harmful to the bonds of friendship and esteem existing between our two countries.” Hays’s response that MPPDA members generally did not intend to negatively portray the “life and character” of non-Americans and were instead interested in developing “the most cordial international relationship[s]” was prompt but general. Two months after the March on Rome in late October 1922, an emboldened embassy wrote again to Hays requesting a resolution explicitly tailored to Italy. The exchanges between the embassy and MPPDA about anti-Italian films continued for years, reaching an apex in the early 1930s, when the Italian diplomatic authorities were alerted about a group of Los Angeles–based Fascists who called themselves “legionaries” and were keen on protesting directly to the studios about the release of films perceived to be demeaning to Italy. One of these films was The Life of Giuseppe Musolino, the Italian Bandit, which was devoted to the famous Calabrian brigand. Others included A Farewell to Arms, The Romance of a Dictator, This Is the Night, and The Guilty Generation. The complaints focused on these films’ demeaning association of Italians with crime, laziness, and general ineptitude. The film that received the most attention, at least according to the volume of the correspondence among diplomatic institutions, private individuals, and Italian American organizations, was Howard Hawks’s Scarface (1932). A case study of Scarface exceeds the framework of this study, but suffice it to say that the embassy’s most explicit response consisted of two strategies: put pressure on the MPPDA, even when the producers of said offensive films were not its members, and mobilize Italian American communities at the local level. The second strategy posed the most challenges: the Italian embassy, in fact, was not only engaged in protesting negative representations of Italians in America but also in promoting positive ones.

As it had done before the March on Rome, throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s, the ambassador’s office continued to serve as a sort of distribution center for educational productions about Italy to be exhibited in noncommercial outlets (i.e., cultural associations and aid societies). The obvious impetus was to promote
a positive representation of the country, but another reason for the embassy’s involvement was to avoid past mistakes that had occurred when private citizens had been allowed to make direct arrangements with the Italian government to legitimize their dubious commercial plans. After October 1922, however, the new nationalistic ethos complicated the embassy’s mission. Its distribution role faced a constant tension. One the one side were the productions that celebrated the safe image of old, touristic Italy, rich in historical and picturesque attractions but increasingly dated and unappealing. On the other were those that promoted an exciting image of a modern country, whose novel regime and protagonists, however, often attracted harsh criticism and were thus commercially risky.

For instance, after 1922 the Italian officials’ attempts to distribute old educational shorts, mostly about Italian customs or the Italians’ life during the Great War, were both unsuccessful and the cause of great concern. The new context made these productions appear dangerously propagandistic.

Even after Caetani’s tenure ended on February 7, 1925, the embassy’s cautious position regarding the value of targeted propaganda, especially about Italian Americans, did not change. The embassy had to counter the misplaced ambitions of Italian-based Fascist officials and journalists who expected that the regime’s “visual propaganda,” as they labeled it, could overcome language barriers and reach the widest possible audiences. The embassy felt that it also needed to curb the excesses of Fascist sympathizers in America. Since the Great War, Italy’s most prominent citizens in America—the so-called prominenti—had largely become nationalistic, and a few of them had been quite receptive to the ethos of Fascism. The emergence in the United States even before the March on Rome of different nationalist groups, the so-called Fasci di combattimento (Italian Fasci of Combat), the Fascist League of North America, and the Sons of Italy, continued to pose striking challenges to the Fascist government’s foreign policy due to the sensitive issue of Italy’s war debt. As Caetani once wrote to Mussolini, the Fasci (just like the other groups) “will serve as an example with which to judge Italian Fascism.” Caetani had then recommended that in the United States, Fascism “must limit itself to the ideological, philanthropic, and sports arena,” arguing that “it cannot assume the character of an activist organization.” Americans were very sensitive to the “threat of political divisiveness among ethnic groups,” as Philip V. Cannistraro put it, and Fascist militancy ran the risk of being perceived as meddling with American politics. Any perception of domestic interference by a foreign power would harm the Fascist regime’s aspirations for a positive conclusion to the diplomatic negotiations about war debts. Questions of diplomatic calculations and tact affected Mussolini’s response to the new immigrations laws of 1924, which inspired him to consider immigrants as “vectors of Italianità in foreign lands,” and to the remarkable press coverage of the Sacco and Vanzetti trial.

The 1926 nationalization of Istituto LUCE complicated the embassy’s mission. In 1925, in fact, LUCE had made private, direct arrangements with the general
secretary of the Italian Fasci Abroad (Fasci italiani all’estero) for the American distribution of Italian newsreels. Now the embassy had to intervene to help control and centralize this flow of production by facilitating distribution and exchange agreements between the LUCE and American newsreel companies. These official operations were meant to curb the chaos of roles and distribution deals that the LUCE had contributed to.

By the early 1920s, American newsreel production companies competed for the approximately 16,500 American theatres that exhibited newsreels on a biweekly basis. To enter this market, LUCE exchanged footage with American newsreel companies, especially with Fox Movietone and Hearst Metrotone, which had offices in Rome. In turn, these companies broadcast Mussolini’s image and biography in the United States, showcased his private and public life, and thus contributed to his standing as political and popular icon.

LUCE IN AMERICA

Il Duce’s facial expressions alone are worth the price of admission.

PHOTOPLAY, 1933

Between April 1925 and August 1936, Fox’s and Hearst’s theatrically distributed newsreels featured Mussolini at least once a month as either a primary or secondary attraction. Throughout that decade, the two companies’ collaborations with the LUCE did not overlap exactly, at least according to the official documentation. In Erbaggio’s careful research, “Mussolini is present in eighty-four Fox records between April 8, 1925, and October 22, 1935,” while Hearst distribution listings refer to “the dictator in ninety-one newsreels issued between September 28, 1929, and August 31, 1936.” The archival record, as Erbaggio warns, is far from accurate: there is footage that is not referenced therein or that falls outside these dates. For instance, Fox’s first related newsreel story, Black Shirts, dates back to February 28, 1923. It shows young and adult Fascist followers marching through the streets of Rome and convening at the monument to the Unknown Soldier on the steps of the Altare della Patria. Similarly, Hearst released an International Newsreel devoted to the Duce before 1929, the brief 1926 Mussolini Smiles!, which presents the Duce as “Italy’s strong man,” who managed to survive assassination attempts—three in 1926 alone!—and maintain his good humor. His titular smile indexed his strength in the face of adversity, and his intact charisma was made even more apparent when juxtaposed against the king’s generally austere expression.

These assassination attempts were international knowledge, especially the first one, in which an Irish woman managed to nick the Duce’s nose. Hollywood was obviously intrigued by this incident since it offered one more opportunity to gossip about his popular biography and temperament. When Mussolini met with Fairbanks and Pickford in Rome in May 1926 and asked them to reassure the entire world that he was doing fine, he was referring to this episode. Film
comedies, too, capitalized on this widespread knowledge to sustain their jokes. For instance, in Leo McCarey’s 1926 *Mighty like a Moose*, starring the popular comedian Charley Chase, a married couple seeks the aid of plastic surgery to correct their unattractive physical traits. The husband (Chase) has protruding front teeth; the wife (Vivien Oakland), a large nose. To be effective, comedic routines and lines rely on social conventions and shared knowledge. After introducing Chase as a man who has been “secretly saving money for months—to take the detour out of his teeth,” the film presents Oakland with an amusing parallel intertitle: “If Mussolini had had a nose like hers, his wound would have been fatal.”

Even though Erbaggio could not examine the entirety of this newsreel production due to the lack of available footage, he was able to draw a few comprehensive and persuasive conclusions. American newsreels tended to stress Mussolini’s close relationship with symbols of modernity and technological progress and with the novelty of his political communication. Besides his known popular appeal, Fox’s decision to make him the first “Movietoned” international political figure in 1927 was due to his image as a leader easily adaptable to the modern sound medium. Unsurprisingly, Fox experimented with this multilingual practice for two other sound newsreels, both released in 1931 and titled *Mussolini Promises Peace*. They recorded Mussolini speaking in English and French. The dictator affirmed Italy’s willingness to pursue peace, “the chief problem which interests the whole humankind,” and reinforced this idealistic message by praising the very cinematic technology that was recording him. Mussolini defined cinema as “the most magnificent discovery of modern times,” superior in his view even to the radio, even though, as Fox’s synopsis sheet explained, his political statement was also broadcast over radio waves. Shot while standing behind his desk in his office at Palazzo Venezia in Rome, the dictator was meant to exude, despite his difficulties with the English language, the calm competence of a charismatic modern leader, enamored of the modern film medium. This version of Mussolini looked very different from the man who gave frenzied speeches in front of massive crowds that other films had shown. As such, it was much closer to the image found in another source of visibility that Mussolini embraced mostly in the 1930s, and thus beyond the scope of this study—the eighty-two editorials that Sarfatti ghostwrote for him for Hearst’s syndicated newspapers between 1928 and 1935. Both Mussolini’s sound films and editorials were meant to convey an image of a player in world politics and a national leader engaged with modernizing plans. Specifically, his press visibility was peppered with medical terminology, economic references, and concrete, but eloquent examples. Whatever the interests associated with the financial groups who were supporting investments in Italy, Mussolini was a topic of widespread appeal in the popular culture industry.

The swan song of Mussolini’s cinematic visibility before his dramatic decline in popularity was *Mussolini Speaks* (1933), which resulted from years of exchanges between the Istituto LUCE and American newsreel companies and thus
constitutes a summation of his 1920s cinematic visibility. Produced by Harry Cohn of Columbia Pictures, the film revealed the longevity of the Duce’s appeal and newsworthiness before his popularity declined following his imperialistic campaign in Ethiopia. The title of this seven-reel production resonates both with the previous *Mussolini Smiles* and with the sensational expectation of hearing Greta Garbo’s voice as promised by the promotional slogan “Garbo Talks!” for her first sound film, *Anna Christie* (1930). Harry’s brother Jack had assembled and edited footage of Mussolini and Italian life from different LUCE films. Harry’s idea for the film did not originate from an ideological affinity but from his interest in what one of his biographers calls “the trappings of monarchy.” Cohn’s production was designed to be highly enjoyable: it sported a familiarly sensational screen introduction and voiceover by none other than famed radio commentator Lowell Thomas, the creator and promoter of Lawrence of Arabia and for years the voice of countless Fox Movietone newsreels.

The film, which premiered on March 10 at the RKO Palace in New York and on August 11 at the Filmarte Theater in Los Angeles, tells the story of the Fascist leader through his public performances and historical achievements. It opens with the speech, translated in voiceover, that he gave in Naples to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Fascists’ March on Rome in 1922. To illustrate his speech but also to convey the modernity of his arrival on the Italian scene, the film intercuts his words and face with scenes of Italian life such as harvests, sporting events, and engineering projects and with views of typical landscapes, including an erupting volcano (figures 45 and 46). On the military side, there are also scenes of the Duce reviewing troops in North Africa and as he interacts with the Italian people.

The studio’s promotional material praised how the film intertwined its dynamic rhythm with the Duce’s rapid accomplishments. The film’s style dovetailed perfectly with Mussolini’s charismatic personality through strategic shot selection, fast editing, and celebratory sound commentary. The studio’s own promotional weekly, the *Columbia Beacon*, opened its February 4, 1933, issue with a long homage to the film, calling it “an exclusive and authentic film autobiography” as if Mussolini had edited the movie himself. The studio celebrated *Mussolini Speaks* as “a striking innovation in screen entertainment” with a simple but most eloquent rationale: “Never before has one of the leading figures in world affairs enacted his life’s role on celluloid.” While this was an exaggeration, the film helped celebrate cinema itself. “Here, for the first time,” the *Columbia Beacon* insisted, “are the true scope and power of the camera and microphone strikingly revealed.” Thus it was not just that Mussolini was so “cinematic” that a film about his life promised to be a success, but also that cinema, as a private enterprise, had become so relevant in public life that a film about Mussolini could play an important role in civic and political discourse.

The reviews followed the promotional tune. They praised the film as “more than a glorified newsreel” for its synthesis of sound and images. “Clever editing
FIGURES 45 and 46. Title screen and close-up of Mussolini in *Mussolini Speaks* (Columbia Pictures Corp. © 1933, renewed 1960 Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc.). All rights reserved. Courtesy of Columbia Pictures. Frame enlargements reproduced from the collections of the Library of Congress, Moving Image Section.
cuts in on his speech at short intervals,” the *Film Daily* noted, “and shows in actual motion picture views the things that he discusses.” The most eloquent review came out in the *Motion Picture Herald*, which gave credit to Cohn for producing a “pictorial compilation” about “that genius of personality and leadership who was born Benito Mussolini, son of a laborer, and has become Il Duce, the leader.” Interestingly, the review maintained that the political quality of his celebrity status made him worthy of promotional initiatives. Mussolini “is a phenomenon of modern governmental history, and as such is deserving, along those lines, of extensive ballyhoo.”

The RKO promotional material insisted on the isomorphism between Mussolini’s life and his “moving picture autobiography,” even suggesting the dramatic inadequacy of the latter. As a result, “no actor, no matter how gifted, is to be trusted with the gestures, actions, and speech of this international figure.”

Similarly, the *New York American* praised Mussolini’s performance for displaying “dramatic quality in speech and action that would be a credit to any motion picture star.” There were also negative reviews that focused on the film’s quality rather than on the choice of the subject matter. “The picture lacks the cumulative power and sweep of an epic,” cried the *New York Evening Post*. Similarly, the *New York Herald Tribune* found the intercut scenes so “unintelligible and worthless” that the result was “entertainment and instruction not even bordering on the mediocre.”

Within a year, the tide was turning. The Duce’s political novelty was expiring and so was the appealing originality of his personality. G. E. W. Johnson in the *North American Review* commented on the surprising accord between France and Italy by criticizing Mussolini as a bundle of contradictions. He thought that Mussolini was simultaneously a blustering warmonger and a skilled diplomat, “a bombastic pseudo-Caesar who is forever reenacting the crossing of the Rubicon, without having quite made up his mind what to do after getting to the other side.”

By the time American newspaper correspondent and journalism professor Edwin Ware Hullinger directed another biopic, *The Private Life of Mussolini* (1938), the interest in the Duce had faded. A capable self-promoter, Hullinger wrote a long account for *Photoplay* in which he described the film as “the first screen biography, I believe, ever made of a living world statesman,” but he could not but recycle the old slogans of Mussolini as a “star” and “marquee attraction” since these, by the late 1930s, had all but lost their weight. The last *Time* magazine cover to feature Mussolini titled the drawing of his older, once gloriously young face, with a funeral-like epigraph, “Aging Dictator.”

Still, throughout the 1920s, many influential reporters, film critics, and even intellectuals condoned Fascism’s un-American governance perversions, including the limitation of individual liberties, the one-party state’s bureaucratic takeover, and the novel syndicalist and corporatist practices. Long believed to be popular in Italy, Mussolini’s mode of mass-mediated plebiscitary governance had, at least for a while, appeared new, daring, and efficient. Many of those praising his leadership would have concurred with the view of Percy Winner, the former Rome-based
AP correspondent who in a 1928 *Current History* article argued that “Fascism succeeds not as a theory, a system, a regime or a government, but as a corporeal projection of a successful personality.” Critics and admirers could only agree, however, that with Mussolini a new season of mass-mediated governance had begun.