

“To Be or Not to Be”: Paradoxical Representations of Women in LUCE News Broadcasts  
and “White Telephone” Films during the Fascist *Ventennio*

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“To Be or Not to Be”: Paradoxical Representations of Women in LUCE News Broadcasts  
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Cinema is the strongest weapon.<sup>2</sup>

—Slogan that appeared in massive letters on a banner at the inauguration of *Cinecittà* studios

I have always observed that the audience becomes bored when the cinema wants to educate them. The audience wants to be entertained.<sup>3</sup>

—Giuseppe Bottai, Minister of Corporations

## **Introduction**

Mussolini’s Fascist regime possessed grand totalitarian aspirations to infiltrate even the most intimate aspects of public and private life and mobilize the population to serve and fight for the nation; therefore, it needed an expansive propaganda campaign that could construct and maintain popular consent.<sup>4</sup> Like other governments of the time, dictatorial and democratic alike, Fascist Italy engaged in an explicit and didactic form of propagandistic messaging in order to deliver Fascist rhetoric in a more direct and forceful way and to bolster popular support for the regime. Additionally, the modern propaganda media was part of a larger modernizing process in Italy during the early twentieth century, in which Mussolini sought to transform his relatively new nation state to compete with neighboring European

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<sup>1</sup> The term “ventennio” refers to the twenty or so years of Fascist rule in Italy.

<sup>2</sup> David Forgacs, *Italian Culture in the Industrial Era, 1880-1980: Cultural Industries, Politics, and the Public* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), 71; Jaqueline Reich, “Mussolini at the Movies,” in *Re-viewing Fascism: Italian Cinema, 1922-1943* edited by Jaqueline Reich and Piero Garofalo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Giuseppe Bottai, “Dichiarazioni di Bottai a favore della legge del 1931,” *Lo spettacolo italiano*, no. 7 (July/August, 1931). Cited in G. P. Brunetta, *Cinema italiano tra le due guerre: Fascismo e politica cinematografica* (Milan: Mursia, 1975), 106-107.

<sup>4</sup> In this paper, “Fascism” will refer to Italy—all aspects of Italian Fascism—while “fascism” will refer to other similar ideas elsewhere.

powers and the constantly growing power and influence of the United States.<sup>5</sup> He also wanted to bring Italy into the modern era not just as a powerful nation but also as an empire, drawing on imperialistic and nationalistic rhetoric and vowing to return Italy to its former Roman glory after its humiliation in the First World War. He thus used modern scientific and socio-scientific knowledge to improve the health and hygienic practices of the population in order to build a stronger and healthier nation and decrease the mortality rate.<sup>6</sup> Simultaneously, he advocated pro-natalist policies to increase the fertility rate and population size, declaring in 1927 that in order to ensure Italy's status as an empire rather than as a colony the population needed to increase by 20 million people by the middle of the century, from 40 million to 60 million.<sup>7</sup>

The only way to fulfill these revolutionary and imperialistic desires and ensure such a substantial population increase, however, was to prompt the consent and participation of Italian women. In an effort to construct this consent and stabilize shifting gender norms facilitated by World War I and an international women's emancipation movement, Mussolini and his Fascists glorified rurality and the Italian family and framed the ideal Italian woman as one that granted the state control of her body and devoted herself to reproducing and raising a family in the name of the Italian nation. The regime delivered these explicit and neo-traditionalist messages to women in speeches, in the press, and on posters. However, as

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<sup>5</sup> Italy was finally unified between 1861 and 1871.

<sup>6</sup> David G. Horn, *Social Bodies: Science, Reproduction, and Italian Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 5. This source provides an in-depth look at how the idea of the "social sphere" and "social bodies" was a product and development of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and how the Fascist regime used this new conception of "the social" to craft new policies of social welfare and justify the control of individual bodies.

<sup>7</sup> Maria Sophia Quine, *Population Politics in Twentieth-Century Europe: Fascist Dictatorships and Liberal Democracies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 31.

noted in the epigraph, cinema—state-broadcast newsreels and documentaries and eventually popular film—was the strongest weapon.<sup>8</sup>

Beginning in the mid-1920s, the regime progressively became aware of the power of film to diffuse these values, so much so that Mussolini inaugurated the *Cinecittà* studios in 1937 under a giant banner that read “*Cinema è l’arma più forte*” (Cinema is the strongest weapon). The regime created the *Istituto LUCE* (*L’unione cinematografica educativa*, the Educational Film Union) in 1924, a state-run institution that controlled the production and distribution of “educational” films.<sup>9</sup> LUCE produced thousands of documentaries and newsreels with the goal of glorifying the regime, its projects, and, eventually, its war efforts between the end of the 1920s and the fall of the regime in 1943, and these films eventually became one of the most widespread and powerful sources of Fascist propaganda.

However, the quote cited in the epigraph from Minister of Corporations Giuseppe Bottai reveals an important aspect of the Fascist use of and belief in film as a means of diffusing rhetoric and crafting consent. In an effort to justify the Fascist government’s financial assistance to the cinema industry in 1931, Bottai declared that audiences did not want to feel inundated with educational or didactic messages when they went to the cinema but rather that they wanted to be entertained. Following this declaration, the regime helped to rebuild the Italian cinema industry that lay in shambles following the First World War, all the while remaining removed from the cinema despite its initial intervention by holding relatively lax censorship laws and giving directors and writers the freedom with which to create films. Rather than illustrating a mere misunderstanding or underestimation of the

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<sup>8</sup> The Fascist state was neo-traditionalist in that it strove to be a modern industrial state that simultaneously upheld and perpetuated traditional and conservative values.

<sup>9</sup> Reich, “Mussolini at the Movies,” 7.

power of cinema, the lack of Fascist intervention into the content of popular films illustrates a conscious awareness that diversionary entertainment was as powerful a tool for constructing consent as didactic propaganda.

Moreover, popular film became a key vehicle for spreading images of the new Fascist woman. This woman was chaste, loyal, and kind, and was devoted to finding a husband and starting a family. She was physically beautiful yet thoroughly humble, aware of the latest fashion trends yet modest and sensible in her choice of outfit and makeup. She was also hardworking and employed yet aware that her job was most likely temporary.<sup>10</sup> While these expectations of the ideal Fascist woman echoed Fascist rhetoric regarding the necessity for purity, morality, and domesticity, the films created new expectations through their exaltation of beauty and commercialism. The films thus worked alongside didactic propaganda in the process of diffusing a homogenous picture of female bodies and identities, but they did so in a fun and diversionary way. However, scholars to this point have ignored the intersection between Fascism's gendered biopolitics and the newsreels and popular cinema that functioned to create a tacit consent, if not support, for the regime's demographic politics. In order to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the Fascist attempt to create and broadcast an ideal Fascist woman and construct consent, state-broadcast media and popular media must be studied in tandem.

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<sup>10</sup> On the ideal Fascist woman, see: Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Victoria De Grazia, "Nationalizing Women: The Competition between Fascist and Commercial Models in Mussolini's Italy," in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, eds. Victoria De Grazia and Ellen Furlough (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996); Gigliola Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body: Sport, Submissive Women and Strong Mothers* (London: Routledge, 2004); Natasha Chang, *The Crisis Woman: Body Politics and the Modern Woman in Fascist Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).

## Chapter I: LUCE and the White Telephone Film

It is not difficult to understand why LUCE newsreels are an excellent example of explicit Fascist propaganda. They were filmed, narrated, and distributed directly by the state, and their most prominent goal was to deliver important pieces of news that would glorify the regime's successes and keep the population informed. Therefore, because they were state-run and meant to illustrate the best aspects of the state, it follows that the images of women presented in the LUCE newsreels are those images that the regime wanted to glorify and perpetuate. Furthermore, as opposed to full-length documentaries, newsreels are concise, digestible, and easily understood by the audience, making them the perfect package for delivering propagandistic messages.

“White telephone” films, however, are less explicit. This genre of 1930s Italian film was comedic or melodramatic in nature and often featured plots about romance, marriage, sexual politics, domesticity, work, and leisure. The term “white telephone” was used because the white telephone itself was considered a luxury item at the time, making it a perfect symbol for the “lavish settings” and “evocation of a world of wealth and luxury” exhibited in the films.<sup>11</sup> At first glance, the images in white telephone films seem to be opposed to those in LUCE newsreels and documentaries in theme and location, and specifically in regards to gender politics and the image of women. This study looks at six white telephone films that have a prominent female lead who is, more often than not, single, urban, and employed, and styled with makeup and recognizable fashion trends of the 1930s.<sup>12</sup> LUCE newsreels, by

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<sup>11</sup> Landy, *Fascism in Film*, 273, 121.

<sup>12</sup> *Gli uomini, che mascalzoni*, directed by Mario Camerini (Anonima Pittaluga, 1932), DVD; *Darò un milione*, directed by Mario Camerini (Euro International Film, 1935), DVD; *Ma non è una cosa seria*, directed by Mario Camerini (Ente Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche, 1936), DVD; *Il Signor Max*, directed by Mario Camerini (Ente Nazionale Industrie

contrast, highlight rurality and motherhood above all and therefore demand a thorough analysis in order to understand the messages being broadcast for audience consumption. Furthermore, except for one, all of the films analyzed share the same director: Mario Camerini.

Camerini was one of the most prolific directors of the Fascist period. While we do not have the data for ticket sales and profits procured from Camerini's films, there is plenty of contextual information that justifies his status as a highly successful director. For example, he made at least one film each year throughout the 1930s and many of his films, such as *Gli uomini, che mascalzoni*, are recognized as box-office hits. Moreover, many of his films were invited to the Venice Film Festival after its creation in 1934.<sup>13</sup> Many prominent scholars of Italian film such as Gian Piero Brunetta and Ruth Ben-Ghiat, as well as famous directors such as Martin Scorsese, have also noted him as a highly influential director of the period.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, many of his films remain accessible to the public while most films of the Fascist era have been lost, suggesting that his films were important enough to protect and

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Cinematografiche, 1937), DVD; *I grandi magazzini*, directed by Mario Camerini (Generalcine, 1939), DVD; *Il birichino di papà*, directed by Raffaello Matarazzo (Lux Film, 1943), DVD. Plot summaries of the films are included in Appendix B.

<sup>13</sup> Sergio G. Germani, *Mario Camerini* (Florence: La nuova Italia, 1980), 142-166. A full list of Mario Camerini's films appears in an appendix of the biography. Camerini continued to make films until 1972; Ruth Ben-Ghiat *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 80, 84; Francesco Savio and Tullio Kezich, *Cinecittà anni Trenta: Parlano 116 protagonisti del secondo cinema italiano (1930-1943)*, volume 1 (Rome: Bulzoni, 1979).

<sup>14</sup> Gian Piero Brunetta, *Cinema italiano tra le due guerre: fascismo e politica cinematografica* (Milan: Mersia, 1975), 45-54; Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*, 70-92, 125-135, 198; *Il Mio Viaggio in Italia*, directed by Martin Scorsese (Burbank, CA: Miramax Home Entertainment, 2004), DVD. Martin Scorsese has a section in which he talks about Camerini.



archive even as leftist intellectuals after World War II attempted to completely erase the memory of Fascism.

Additionally, Camerini is a director worthy of analysis because of his role in perpetuating traditional sets of values consistent with the Fascist regime. James Hay and Ruth Ben-Ghiat both note that while Camerini's films display a modernistic urban sensibility, they also "convey traditional themes and...underscore the resiliency of the Italian family," and preach "the necessity of accepting one's social station."<sup>15</sup> These themes and values may not be as much a reflection of Fascist society as a reflection of Camerini's own upbringing. He was born in Rome in 1895 and he lived there for his entire life, although he also spent the summers with his aunt and uncle tending to the land and to animals on farmland in Abruzzo, meaning that both urban and rural settings defined his childhood and young adulthood. This mix of city and country life may inform the unique mix of urban landscapes and rural traditionalism that is so prominent in Camerini's films. Furthermore, his father was the secretary of the Roman branch of the Socialist Party, a political philosophy that Camerini's biographer, Sergio Germani, claims he inherited and took to heart. Lastly, his mother, Laura, died when Camerini was only three years old, making it possible to argue that his lack of a mother led toward his steadfast belief in the power and importance of the traditional Italian family.<sup>16</sup>

Despite his socialist upbringing, the traditionalist parts of his upbringing suggest why Camerini worked within the confines of what the regime deemed as acceptable. For example, with the exception of one of his films (*Il cappello a tre punti*) that the regime censored

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<sup>15</sup> Hay, *Film Culture in Fascist Italy*, 233; Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*, 84.

<sup>16</sup> Germani, *Mario Camerini*, 18. Germani also writes that Camerini named many of his female characters Lauretta (the diminutive form of Laura) in honor of his mother.

because of its critical representation of a governmental figure, the majority of his films elicited no critique from the government and actually reflected the social norms and morality of the regime itself.<sup>17</sup> He even directed the film *Il grande appello* in 1936, a propagandistic war film about Italian colonialist efforts in Africa. As Marla Stone claims in her study of Fascist art culture, “In exchange for state sanction, financial support, and a chance for stylistic experimentation, artists and architects accepted Fascism’s role as patron, administrator, and arbiter.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, they consented. This is clearly the case with Camerini, who mainly made non-controversial and light-hearted films that diffused a traditional set of morals and a traditional view of society.

Camerini’s films present a vision of society with ideal roles and values for Italian citizens. For example, his films perpetuate a strong sense of class-consciousness, as the characters are only happy once they learn to love and accept their social class and standing.<sup>19</sup> The films glorify the middle-class and the average Italian working-man and villainize the wealthy elite, thus aligning with Fascism’s strong populist message. Furthermore, the films propagate traditionally patriarchal understandings of femininity and womanhood. Even though the female protagonists seem modern and independent, they are always innocent, pure, and chaste, they always act as the beacon of morality to other characters in the film, particularly the male characters, and they always exchange their independence for marriage by the end of the film.

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<sup>17</sup> Germani, *Mario Camerini*, 59; G. P. Brunetta, *Cinema italiano tra le due guerre: Fascismo e politica cinematografica* (Milan: Mursia, 1975), 53.

<sup>18</sup> Marla Stone, *The Patron State: Culture and Politics in Fascist Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 6.

<sup>19</sup> This is what Ben-Ghiat talks about in her discussion of “accepting one’s social station.”

An analysis of the white telephone films, and specifically Camerini's films, illustrates that diversionary entertainment was not purely escapist or separate from propaganda. In fact, it played an important role in the overall "consent campaign," acting as a form of implicit propaganda rather than the more explicit forms of propaganda such as posters or LUCE newsreels and documentaries.<sup>20</sup> As a form of implicit propaganda, popular film functioned both ideologically and practically. Ideologically, each film held within it important subtle messages and visions of Italian society that could theoretically influence the thoughts and values of its viewers. Historian James Hay has noted that popular Italian films "frequently promised a 'new order'—one often inspired by rural traditions yet capable of facing the challenges of an urban, industrial society," and they allowed audiences to make sense of an ever-changing world.<sup>21</sup> Practically, the institution of cinema itself acted as a tool for constructing at least minimal consent for the regime. As historian Marla Stone states in her discussion of Fascist aesthetics and specifically in her discussion of Fascist art exhibitions, the regime merged forms of propaganda with forms of leisure and diversionary entertainment in a way that allowed for spectators to be "fun loving, traveling, and Fascist all at once."<sup>22</sup> Popular film did the same thing in that spectators could both escape reality through film and support the Fascist regime economically by purchasing tickets, allowing them to be both "fun loving" and "Fascist."

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<sup>20</sup> The leading scholar on the notion of creating consent through culture is Victoria De Grazia: De Grazia, *The Culture of Consent: Mass Organization of Leisure in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>21</sup> James Hay, *Popular Film Culture in Fascist Italy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 8.

<sup>22</sup> Stone, *The Patron State*, 132.

Therefore, cinemas created a space for Italians to feel entertained and grateful for their nation and allowed them to be consenting Fascists even if they were not ideological. This is especially true considering the *Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro* (OND, or National Recreation Club) operated its own movie theatres that charged reduced or free admission in order to enable more Italians to see films, and membership in the OND came only with a Fascist Party card.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, in 1926 Royal Decree Law 1000 mandated all cinemas to screen LUCE newsreels before every feature presentation, forcing cinemas to create spaces for the regime to deliver both implicit and explicit propaganda to the population at the same time.<sup>24</sup> Because these two film types were screened together in the same space, an understanding of the images that the state both directly and indirectly perpetuated requires comparative analysis of state-broadcast propaganda and the largely uncensored popular films.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Hay, *Popular Film Culture in Fascist Italy*, 15. The OND supervised 767 permanent cinemas by 1938.

<sup>24</sup> Federico Caprotti, "Information Management and Fascist Identity," *Media History* 11, no. 3 (December 2005): 185; Ricci, *Cinema and Fascism*, 60.

<sup>25</sup> While there are a handful of studies regarding women in LUCE broadcasts and in popular film, there are no existing comparative analyses of the two. For analysis of the representation of women in LUCE newsreels and documentaries, see: Lesley Caldwell, "Madri d'Italia: Film and Fascist Concern with Motherhood," in *Women and Italy: Essays on Gender, Culture and History*, eds. Zygmunt Baranski and Shirley W. Vinall (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991); Diana Garvin, "Taylorist Breastfeeding in Rationalist Clinics: Constructing Industrial Motherhood in Fascist Italy," *Critical Inquiry* 41, no. 3 (March 2015): 655-674; Carlotta Coronado, "Esposa y madre ejemplar: la maternidad en los noticiarios *Luce* durante el fascismo," *Historia y Comunicación Social* 13 (January 2008): 5-31. For analysis of the representations of women in popular film, see: Mary Doane, "The Abstraction of a Lady: 'La Signora di tutti,'" *Cinema Journal* 28, no. 1 (Fall 1988): 65-84; Jacqueline Reich, "Consuming Ideologies: Fascism, Commodification, and Female Subjectivity in Mario Camerini's *Grandi Magazzini*," *Annali d'Italianistica* 16 (1998): 195-212; Barbara Spackman, "Shopping for Autarchy: Fascism and Reproductive Fantasy in Mario Camerini's *Grandi Magazzini*," in *Re-Viewing Fascism: Italian Cinema, 1922-1943*, eds. Jacqueline Reich and Piero Garofalo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

## Chapter II: Historiography

Creating consent has been a key historiographical question for historians of Italian Fascism as they have attempted to understand how Mussolini's regime was able to capture the support of the Italian population and maintain it for two decades. The first scholars to write about Mussolini and Italian Fascism following the fall of the regime were mostly liberal, radical, or Marxist anti-Fascists who were not concerned with the question of consent and popular support because they believed that Fascism was a tyrannical dictatorship and moral disease unworthy of historical study.<sup>26</sup> Scholars eventually became displeased with the militant anti-Fascist vision of Italian history, searching instead to understand Fascism in all its complexities, to unpack its ideology, and to place it in its historical context. The historical accounts that began to emerge were wide-sweeping and top-down accounts that focused on Fascist rhetoric and policy and on Mussolini himself. As social and cultural history began to dominate the historiographical field, scholars began to focus on Fascism as practice for everyday Italians and not merely an ideology. The study of consent is one of the areas in which historians took this bottom-up approach as they strove to understand the strategies the Fascist regime employed in order to create consensus, and more importantly how the population responded.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Emilio Gentile, "Fascism in Italian Historiography: In Search of an Individual Historical Identity," *Journal of Contemporary History* 21, no. 2 (April 1986): 180-181. For liberal scholars, see Benedetto Croce, *Scritti e discorsi politici (1943-1947)* (Bari: Laterza, 1963). For radical scholars, see Fabio Cusin, *Antistoria d'Italia* (Milan: Mondadori, 1970). For Marxist scholars, see Paolo Alatri, *Le origini del fascismo*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition (Rome, 1971), a collection of articles published between 1948 and 1955.

<sup>27</sup> For further study into the historiography of consent see: Renzo De Felice, *Interpretations of Fascism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977); Emilio Gentile, "Fascism as Political Religion," *Journal of Contemporary History* 25, no. 2/3 (1990); Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); De Grazia, *The Culture of Consent*; Robert

All sub-categories of the historiography on Italian Fascism have followed the same trajectory, moving from broad political accounts to more nuanced accounts of individual bodies and subjectivity studies. Women's history initially focused on policy and the regime's attitude toward women in their emphasis on Fascist pro-natalism, demographic policy, and gendered labor laws.<sup>28</sup> The next wave of the historiography examined under-researched topics such as the intersection between gender and class, models of femininity, family planning, and women in the workforce. Most importantly, these studies highlighted female agency and women's ability to persevere in the face of oppression.<sup>29</sup> The most recent

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Mallett, "Consent or Dissent? Territorial Expansion and the Question of Political Legitimacy in Fascist Italy," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 1, no.2 (2000): 27-46. As the first scholar to bring the question of consent into the historiography, De Felice highlighted the revolutionary nature of both Fascism and of Mussolini himself and illustrated how Mussolini was able to mobilize Italian citizens in support of the regime with consent, not only coercion. Gentile countered by focusing on support for middle class interests and analysis of cultural symbols that sacralized Fascism into a new political religion. Passerini focused on cultural and oral-histories to contextualize popular working-class support for the regime. De Grazia revealed the manufacture of popular consent via the *Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro*. She emphasized how the regime sought to construct consent through mass organizing and national recreation and exposed the Fascist Party's inability to overcome internal contradictions or economic barriers to participation in leisure activities. Mallett saw middle-class participation in the regime not as a sign of widespread acceptance or support of Mussolini and Fascism, but rather as a pragmatic or emotional decision regarding their lives and employment.

<sup>28</sup> Piero Meldini, *Sposa e madre esemplare: ideologia e politica della donna e della famiglia durante il fascismo* (Florence: Guarraldi, 1975); Alexander De Grand, "Women Under Italian Fascism," *Historical Journal* 19, no. 4, (1976): 947-968. Meldini and De Grand are the earliest scholars of women in Fascist Italy.

<sup>29</sup> Luisa Passerini began highlighting women's agency and passive resistance to the regime in the 1980s, a topic which emerged in English-language scholarship a decade later. Luisa Passerini, "Donne Operaie e Aborto Nella Torino Fascista," *Italia Contemporanea*, no.151/152 (1983): 83-109; De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*; Perry Willson, *The Clockwork Factory: Women and Work in Fascist Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Perry Willson, *Peasant Women and Politics in Fascist Italy: the Massaie Rurali* (London: Routledge, 2002); Paul Corner, "Women in Fascist Italy: Changing Family Roles in the Transition from an Agricultural to an Industrial Society," *European History Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (1993): 51-68; Robin Pickering-Iazzi, *Politics of the Visible: Writing Women, Culture, and Fascism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

scholars started to examine how women navigated their roles in Fascist institutions and empowered themselves within these roles, and concentrated on cultural standards of femininity and the Fascist attention on individual female bodies.<sup>30</sup>

The study of “Fascist film” has followed a similar historiographical path.<sup>31</sup> Early scholars excluded the study of “Fascist film” in favor of the postwar neorealist movement as a means of repressing the memory of Fascism.<sup>32</sup> Even as scholars began to tackle the subject, they framed films of the Fascist era as either propaganda or trivial escapism and failed to devote enough historical attention to their cinematographic and cultural significance. It was only in the 1970s that scholars began studying previously unexplored elements such as the increasing fame and importance of movie stars, evolving narrative forms, and the relationship between cinema, Fascism, and Catholicism.<sup>33</sup> These studies broadened the

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<sup>30</sup> Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body*; Elisabetta Vezzosi, “Maternalism in a Paternalist State: The National Organization for the Protection of Motherhood and Infancy in Fascist Italy,” in *Maternalism Reconsidered: Motherhood, Welfare and Social Policy in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, ed. Marian van der Klein, et al. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012); Chang, *The Crisis Woman*. Gori and Vezzosi show how women utilized their position in Fascist institutions that were often fraught with patriarchal ideology to bring about their own emancipation through training, expertise, and female camaraderie. Chang studies a cultural symbol broadcast through Italian media known as the “crisis woman,” and how it was used to vilify urban, independent, emancipated women.

<sup>31</sup> “Fascist film” is in quotations here as it refers to films produced in the Fascist period, but not films that are inherently fascist in plot or narrative style.

<sup>32</sup> Steven Ricci, *Cinema and Fascism: Italian Film and Society, 1922-1943* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 23. Pierre Leprohon’s *The Italian Cinema* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972) illustrates the postwar tendency to undermine the cinema of the Fascist period. Leprohon devotes only twenty-five pages to “Fascist film” whereas he devotes over 200 pages to cinema of the postwar period.

<sup>33</sup> Gian Piero Brunetta, *Cinema italiano tra le due guerre: fascismo e politica cinematografica* (Milan: Mersia, 1975); Gian Piero Brunetta, *Storia del cinema italiano, 1895-1945* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1979); Adriana Aprà and Patrizia Pistagnesi, eds, *The Fabulous Thirties: Italian Cinema, 1929-1944* (Milan: Gruppo Editoriale Electa, 1979).

historiography, allowing recent historians to analyze “Fascist films” as cultural symbols and to contextualize them within Fascist rhetoric and attempts at nation building.<sup>34</sup>

This thesis is a product of the latest wave of historiography of Italian Fascism. Just as scholar Natasha Chang analyzes images of women and body politics in her cultural analysis, this thesis aims to study the women’s experience in Fascist Italy by decoding the messages the Fascist regime broadcast to women through LUCE newsreels and white telephone films. It also fits into the more recent historiography on films of the Fascist period, which investigate important thematic elements of the films such as representations of youth and gender and situate the films within the larger sociopolitical landscape of the Fascist *ventennio*. Lastly, it reaffirms the most recent studies into the Fascist quest for consent, which attribute the popular consent for the regime to a desire for distraction and personal security.

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<sup>34</sup> James Hay, *Popular Film Culture in Fascist Italy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Landy, *Fascism in Film: The Italian Commercial Cinema, 1931-1943* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Italian Fascism’s Empire Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015); Steven Ricci, *Cinema and Fascism: Italian Film and Society, 1922-1943* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Stephen Gundle, *Mussolini’s Dream Factory: Film Stardom in Fascist Italy* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013).



### Chapter III: Women's Role in Fascist Society

Celluloid images of women were a vital extension of Fascist expectations of and policies toward women. The state-broadcast images illustrated that above all else, the ideal Italian woman was a mother. She was expected to raise many children, support her husband, and serve her nation by perpetuating traditional values, remaining morally pure, and partaking in nationalistic campaigns like the Gold for the Fatherland initiative.<sup>35</sup> The state broadcast the image of this *donna-madre* (mother-woman) not only through ideology, but also through propagandistic posters and Fascist holidays like the *Giornata della Madre e del Fanciullo* (Mother and Child's Day) celebrated on Christmas Eve.<sup>36</sup> The regime also attempted to redefine female beauty in order to glorify rural family life and vilify urban independence. As historian Victoria DeGrazia has noted, the authentic Italian woman was a "nubile rural young woman," with "rosy lips and cheeks, peasant dress, and rounded figure."<sup>37</sup>

Scientists also supported this ideal female type as Fascist biologists claimed that the ideal woman was "shorter rather than taller, broader around the hips than narrower, and more slovenly than elegant."<sup>38</sup> This body type was thought to allow for more prolific childbearing. The antithesis to the ideal *donna-madre* was the *donna-crisi*, or crisis woman, who

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<sup>35</sup> The Gold for the Fatherland campaign prompted women to donate their wedding rings to fund the Italian war effort.

<sup>36</sup> Maria Sophia Quine, *Population Politics in Twentieth Century Europe: Fascist dictatorships and liberal democracies* (London: Routledge, 1996), 42.

<sup>37</sup> Victoria De Grazia, "Nationalizing Women: The Competition between Fascist and Commercial Models in Mussolini's Italy," in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, eds. Victoria De Grazia and Ellen Furlough (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 345, 346.

<sup>38</sup> Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 49.

represented a dangerous and modern woman with a thin and sterile body that “confirmed her cosmopolitan, non-maternal, and non-fascist interests.”<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, Mussolini perpetuated the idea that the ideal woman was a rural mother. In an article published in *Il Popolo d'Italia* in 1936, for example, Mussolini (who founded the newspaper in 1914) exalted Italian rurality and its positive affect on women’s health by claiming that a rural lifestyle made women queens of their households, while an urban lifestyle corrupted them and took them away from the hearth and their children.<sup>40</sup> Overall, the ideal Fascist woman existed between diametrically opposed images—she was a mother and a wife, not an independent worker; she was rural, not urban. This emphasis on rurality and motherhood was also used in the regime’s rhetoric and policy toward population politics.

The burden of fascist population politics fell most directly on women as their bodies were policed and regulated through fertility and reproduction politics to use them as national breeders. In his famous Ascension Day Speech delivered to the Chamber of Deputies on 26 May 1927, Mussolini declared that in order to ensure Italy’s status as an empire rather than as a colony there had to be a population increase of twenty million people by the middle of the century, framing reproduction as imperative for the health and fate of the State and of the Italian race.<sup>41</sup> As a result, the fascist government promoted early marriages, threatened that women who used birth control would face “all sorts of dire consequences from problems with the uterus to facial hair,” and awarded women for being prolific mothers. Thus, birth control would strip women of their unique role as mothers and make them look more like

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<sup>39</sup> Natasha Chang, *The Crisis Woman: Body Politics and the Modern Woman in Fascist Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 3.

<sup>40</sup> Benito Mussolini, “Italia Rurale.” *Popolo d'Italia* (Milan, Italy), Dec. 8, 1936.

<sup>41</sup> Benito Mussolini, “Discorso dell’Ascensione,” in *Scritti e Discorsi di Benito Mussolini dal 1927-V al 1928-VI-VII E.F* (Milan: Ulrico Hoepli Editore Milano, 1934), 41-42.

men by growing a beard. The regime also outlawed contraception, contraception education, and abortion.<sup>42</sup> In an attempt to force men and women to marry early and have many children, the state supplemented laws aimed at women with a bachelor tax, employment preference and cheap housing for married men, special benefits for large families, and marriage loans.<sup>43</sup>

Mussolini's government also attempted to regulate women's roles in the workforce and ultimately proscribed employment so that they would stay home and direct their time and attention toward mothering. Fascist rhetoric, if not policy, toward women working remained consistent throughout the entirety of the *ventennio*. The regime remained opposed to women participating in the workforce yet was also aware that women's labor was necessary to enhance economic development. In a speech to the Chamber of Deputies in 1925 entitled "La donna e il voto" (Woman and the vote), Mussolini stated that dire economic circumstances, not voluntary decisions, had forced women out of their homes and into offices and factories—and that they were consequently invading every aspect of human activity—in order to feed their families.<sup>44</sup> Nine years later in "Macchina e donna" (Machinery and Women), he again sought to suppress women's labor outside the home by arguing that women's labor is immoral and by confirming that the exodus of women from the workforce would allow worthy men to return to work. However, he simultaneously acknowledged that women relinquishing their jobs would have an economic repercussion on many Italian

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<sup>42</sup> Alexander De Grand, "Women Under Italian Fascism," *Historical Journal* 19, no. 4, (1976): 958.

<sup>43</sup> Perry Willson, *The Clockwork Factory: Women and Work in Fascist Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 3.

<sup>44</sup> Benito Mussolini, "La donna e il voto," in *Scritti e Discorsi di Benito Mussolini dal 1925-III Al 1926-IV-V E.F* (Milan: Hoepli Editore Milano, 1934), 62.

families. This illustrates his awareness of women's obligation to work, but he nevertheless called for them to remain home in order to increase male employment. In fact, he claimed in the same article that the very work that endangers women's ability to give birth ("*attributi generativi*") strengthens men by providing them with a heightened physical and moral virility.<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, a LUCE documentary from 1935 honoring the ten-year anniversary of the creation of the *Opera nazionale per la protezione della maternità e dell'infanzia* (ONMI, or the National Organization for the Protection of Mothers and Children) exalted women's role as mothers and acted as a kind of instruction manual for raising children.<sup>46</sup> For example, the documentary provided women with scientific information about medicine and doctor's visits, obstetric consultations, and hygiene. However, the documentary also acknowledged women's role in the workforce through shots of women working in factories as well as rural women working in the field. The film also stated that women's factory jobs are protected and that they can return after giving birth, and it confirmed that there are daycares in the factory that would allow breastfeeding mothers to return to work. Therefore, the Fascist government was aware that women's employment provided a needed second income for families, but nevertheless Mussolini attempted to re-emphasize traditional gender roles and duties.

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<sup>45</sup> Benito Mussolini, "Macchina e donna," *Popolo d'Italia* (Milan, Italy), Aug. 31, 1934.

<sup>46</sup> *La madre di domani: Alle madri d'Italia*, directed by Pietro Francisci (Istituto Nazionale Luce, 1935), [https://patrimonio.archiviolute.com/luce-web/detail/IL3000052359/1/alle-madri-d-italia.html?startPage=0&jsonVal={%22jsonVal%22:{%22query%22:\[%22Madri%20d%27Italia%22,%22\\*:%22\],%22fieldDate%22:%22dataNormal%22,%22\\_perPage%22:20,%22archiveType\\_string%22:\[%22xDamsCineLuce%22\],%22archiveName\\_string%22:\[%22\%22luceFondoDocumentari\%22%22\]}%7D](https://patrimonio.archiviolute.com/luce-web/detail/IL3000052359/1/alle-madri-d-italia.html?startPage=0&jsonVal={%22jsonVal%22:{%22query%22:[%22Madri%20d%27Italia%22,%22*:%22],%22fieldDate%22:%22dataNormal%22,%22_perPage%22:20,%22archiveType_string%22:[%22xDamsCineLuce%22],%22archiveName_string%22:[%22\%22luceFondoDocumentari\%22%22]}%7D). ONMI was a welfare organization designed to modernize maternity and support mothers and children.

Traditional approaches to gender roles and societal structure were not only prevalent in Mussolini's rhetoric, but also in state labor policy. The earliest attacks against women in the workforce came in the 1920s, immediately following Mussolini's ascent to power. Already in 1923 legislation excluded women from serving as heads of middle schools, and in 1926 it became illegal for secondary schools to recruit female educators to teach literature, philosophy, history, Latin, and Greek. In the 1930s, job restrictions and quotas made it either difficult or impossible for women to become civil servants. As a result of a 1938 decree, only 10 percent of private and public sector jobs could be given to women, and female clerks were not allowed to work in small businesses.<sup>47</sup> The main goal of these laws was not to remove women from the workforce completely, but rather to maintain strict gender hierarchies and protect white-collar male workers. In fact, these laws had "little discernible impact since [they were] class specific, heavily watered down, and dealt more in quotas than bans."<sup>48</sup>

The regime also designed legislation aimed at regulating factory work and physical labor for women in the 1930s. An April 1934 law, for example, limited female and child labor, restricted women from doing night or underground mining, limited the amount of weight women could carry, and prescribed a maximum length work a day for women. The law also designated fifteen to twenty-one-year old women as "female minors" who were therefore unable to engage in work too heavy, dangerous, or dirty.<sup>49</sup> As historian Perry Willson notes, while these restrictions protected women's well-being, they also stipulated

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<sup>47</sup>ibid, 8.

<sup>48</sup> Perry Willson, "Women in Fascist Italy," in *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: Comparisons and Contrasts* edited by Richard Bessel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 85.

<sup>49</sup> Willson, *The Clockwork Factory*, 6.

some jobs as exclusively male. The regime ultimately valued women for their reproductive abilities and thus sought to exclude them from physical industrial production.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Willson, *The Clockwork Factory*, 7.

## Chapter IV: Creating a Fascist Film Industry

The Fascist regime went beyond legislation in its attempt to establish the norms of the ideal Fascist woman, turning to film and the cinema industry. When the Fascist government came to power after the March on Rome in 1922, it assumed control over an Italian film industry that was essentially crumbling. Italian cinema had experienced a “golden era” at the beginning of the twentieth century, but by the mid-1920s it had reached an all-time low, producing only about twenty films per year on average.<sup>51</sup> Liberal Italy—the period immediately before the Fascist takeover that is remembered for its weak centrist government and political unrest—had made some attempts at regulating the film industry through censorship laws and creating the *Unione Cinematografica Italiana* in 1919, which vertically integrated and consolidated the industry.<sup>52</sup> These attempts were largely in vain, however, as cinema production and viewership declined and the *Unione Cinematografica Italiana* officially dissolved in 1923.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, the Fascists not only inherited a failing film industry, but also a “virtually clean industrial slate” that could be molded however they saw fit both in terms of industry structure and film content.<sup>54</sup>

The regime’s first interaction with film came with the creation of the *L’Unione Cinematografica Educativa*, or LUCE, in 1924. Its “educational” films sought to construct and maintain consensus for the Fascist regime and support for its various projects. In order to

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<sup>51</sup> Jean Gili, *Stato fascista e cinematografia: repressione e promozione* (Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 1981), 6; Jaqueline Reich, “Mussolini at the Movies,” in *Re-viewing Fascism: Italian Cinema, 1922-1943* edited by Jaqueline Reich and Piero Garofalo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 7.

<sup>52</sup> David Forgacs, *Italian Culture in the Industrial Era, 1880-1980: Cultural Industries, Politics, and the Public* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), 52.

<sup>53</sup> Gili, *Stato fascista e cinematografia*, 6.

<sup>54</sup> Ricci, *Cinema and Fascism*, 4.

illustrate a positive image of Italian society, the newsreels and documentaries glorified the Fascist experience and focused on different aspects of everyday life with particular emphasis on rural life and agrarian education.<sup>55</sup> LUCE films also covered aspects of culture and society such as motherhood and family life, children's sports and youth groups, activities and accomplishments of Fascist organizations (like the *Fasci Femminili*, the women's branch of the PNF), and speeches and travels of the Duce himself. In fact, there are over 14,000 videos from the Fascist *ventennio* in the *Istituto LUCE* archives and the most dominant categories throughout the twenty-year period are Fascist events and exhibitions, Fascist public works and projects, and military celebrations.<sup>56</sup> The number of newsreels and documentaries that relate to women and pro-natalist policy is relatively small when compared to the overall number of newsreels and documentaries produced, but among these films there is a clear emphasis placed on women as mothers and wives.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, as a state-run and state-funded organization, LUCE was motivated not by profit or popular success but by exposure and dissemination. As a result, the regime frequently and pervasively showed LUCE newsreels and documentaries; they were brought into the rural communities with mobile cinemas and propaganda documentaries were often screened for free in cities and towns.

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<sup>55</sup> Federico Caprotti, "Information Management and Fascist Identity: Newsreels in Fascist Italy," *Media History* 11, no. 3 (December 2005): 183.

<sup>56</sup> The LUCE archive is extensive but it is most likely not complete, perhaps as a result of film being corrupted, destroyed, or lost. The *Istituto LUCE* was established in 1924, which suggests that production of newsreels likely began in this year. On the archival database, however, there are no newsreels that come before the year 1927, creating a two-year period between 1924 and 1926 in which the production of newsreels is unaccounted for.

<sup>57</sup> There are around 400 newsreels and documentaries relating to women and pro-natalist policies. The specific groupings included in this categorization are: *la donna* (women), *i bambini* (children), *matrimoni* (weddings/marriages), *la famiglia* (family), *Fasci Femminili*, *maternità e infanzia* (maternity and infancy), and *la casa* (the home). I have also included other groupings such as *Giovani italiane* and *piccole italiane* (two Fascist youth groups for girls) into this categorization as they discuss young girls and women.



They were also screened in cinemas before every feature presentation as a result of Royal Decree Law 1000.

The attempt to utilize film for propaganda, however, was not as common in popular, creative cinema. The government created the *Istituto LUCE* in 1924 but did not engage in any major attempts to regulate the film industry more broadly until the following decade. In 1931, for example, the state attempted to increase feature film production and decrease the number of foreign films broadcast in Italy. Royal Decree Law no. 1121 was one of the first of these initiatives by mandating that 10 percent of all films shown in theaters must be Italian made, meaning: 1) the screenplay had to be written by an Italian or adapted from an foreign source by an Italian; 2) the majority of the film crew had to be Italian; and 3) all scenes had to be shot in Italy.<sup>58</sup> Italian film production began to increase as a result, with the number of domestic titles released rising from thirteen in 1931 to thirty-four in 1933.

Furthermore, the state looked to control the holdings of film industry tycoon Stefano Pittaluga after his death in 1932. Pittaluga had been the primary builder of the Italian cinema industry after World War I, using his company the *Società Anonima Stefano Pittaluga* (SASP) to take control of the *Unione Cinematografica Italiana* (UCI) in 1926. He then acquired the Cines studios in 1929 and opened it for production in 1930. Following his death and the economic crisis of 1929-1931, the *Banca Commerciale Italia* (which controlled much of Pittaluga's capital) sold his stock to the *Istituto per la Ricostruzione Industriale* (IRI), which then developed the National Agency of Cinema Industries (*Ente Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche*, or ENIC) in 1935, putting feature film production directly under state

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<sup>58</sup> Reich, "Mussolini at the Movies," 8.

control.<sup>59</sup> ENIC was in charge of almost all operations of the film industry, such as managing cinemas and theaters and producing, distributing, buying, and selling films.<sup>60</sup> It also had the “ability to contract loans, to establish advances on distribution contracts, to grant subsidies, to buy interests in other companies which work[ed] in the industry and commerce of cinema.”<sup>61</sup> LUCE also fell under the control of ENIC, tying all aspects of the film industry together under the Fascist government.

The Fascists continued their intervention into the film industry in September 1934 with the creation of the General Directorate for Cinema (DCG) headed by Director Luigi Freddi, one of four general directorates controlled by the Undersecretariat of the Press and Propaganda (*Sottosegretariato di Stato per la Stampa e la Propaganda*).<sup>62</sup> In 1935, the Undersecretariat of the Press and Propaganda became the Ministry of the Press and Propaganda and underwent its final transformation in May 1937 when its name was changed to the Ministry of Culture and Propaganda (or Minculpop).<sup>63</sup> The DCG established various innovations in the film industry, such as the Venice Film Festival in 1934, which brought tourism and helped both to stimulate Italian film production and solidify film as an art form by awarding films for aesthetics and technique.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, in 1935 it created the *Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia* (the national film school), the point of which was not necessarily to create a state cinema, but rather to elevate the quality of Italian cinema by

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<sup>59</sup> Landy, *Fascism in Film*, 11; Reich, “Mussolini at the Movies,” 8, 12; Ricci, *Cinema and Fascism*, 66.

<sup>60</sup> Gili, *Stato fascista e cinematografia*, 102.

<sup>61</sup> Ricci, *Cinema and Fascism*, 66-67.

<sup>62</sup> Gili, *Stato fascista e cinematografia*, 9. The other three directorates were Italian Press, Foreign Press, and Propaganda.

<sup>63</sup> Mino Argentieri, *La censura nel cinema italiano* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1974), 36; Gili, *Stato fascista e cinematografia*, 10.

<sup>64</sup> Reich, “Mussolini at the Movies,” 11; Ricci, *Cinema and Fascism*, 157.

training actors, directors, technicians, and producers.<sup>65</sup> The DCG also aided in the completion of Cinecittà studios in Rome, officially inaugurated on 28 April 1937.<sup>66</sup> Thus, throughout the course of the 1930s the Fascist government successfully consolidated much of the cinema industry and placed it under state control in an attempt to fascistize Italian culture and achieve autarky. For a regime that sought to infiltrate all aspects of Italian society, however, the state's application of censorship laws and intervention into the actual content of Italian films is surprisingly non-totalitarian.

Many of the censorship laws that the Fascist state applied to the film industry were not explicitly Fascist, but were rather inherited from liberal, Giolittian Italy. Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti's government attempted to regulate film content based on both political and moral standards. The year after coming to power, the Fascist government reproduced these standards in Royal Decree law 3287, which prohibited scenes that were offensive to modesty, to morality, to good behavior and public decency, to the reputation and decorum of the nation and the social order (or that disturbed international relations), to the decorum and prestige of institutions or public officials, to the royal army and armed forces, or to private citizens (with a specific attention paid to scenes that could incite hate between social classes). The portrayal of scenes consisting of cruelty—even against animals—murders and suicides, surgical operations, and hypnotic or psychic phenomenon were banned. In general, scenes that could potentially lead to crime were forbidden.<sup>67</sup> These laws were not Fascist in nature, as they did not strive to regulate or propagate Fascist ideology. They were, however, primarily broad

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<sup>65</sup> Gili, *Stato fascista e cinematografia*, 94.

<sup>66</sup> Forgacs, *Italian Culture in the Industrial Era, 1880-1980*, 71; Reich, "Mussolini at the Movies," 11.

<sup>67</sup> Argentieri, *La censura nel cinema italiano*, 27-28; Gili, *Stato fascista e cinematografia*, 18.

cultural and social prohibitions and left ample space for interpretation and adaptation by the new regime.

While censorship laws aimed to regulate cinematic representations of sexuality and moral corruption, they were most prominently applied in order to regulate images of national identity. For example, films viewed as threats to the national reputation were censored in an effort to uphold a positive image of Italy and Italians. As a result, American films like *Little Caesar* (1930) and *Scarface* (1932) were blocked from distribution because they portrayed violent images of Italian-American gangsters. Moreover, the regime perpetuated the regulation and censorship of foreign films through its dubbing practices. By 1933, all foreign films had to be dubbed into Italian, which allowed the regime to not only modify or alter the content of the films, but also to broadcast a standard, national Italian language.<sup>68</sup> The modification and dubbing of the 1938 American film *The Adventures of Marco Polo* is a good example. Censorship boards initially blocked the film because they felt Gary Cooper, the American actor playing Marco Polo, was not a good representation of the Italian explorer. Consequently, in the Italianization of the film, the title became *Uno scozzese alla corte del Gran Khan* (A Scotsman in the Court of the Great Khan), and the dialogue was modified to confirm the character's new national identity.<sup>69</sup> In general, the regime attempted to uphold and broadcast a standard Italian language and represent a unified, regionless Italy. To do this, linguistic references to other nationalities were removed along with foreign words, references to regional differences, regional accents, and dialects. In addition, the more formal pronoun "voi" (you) replaced the Spanish-influenced "lei."<sup>70</sup> While censorship laws were not

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<sup>68</sup> Ricci, *Cinema and Fascism*, 157.

<sup>69</sup> Argentieri, *La censura nel cinema italiano*, 46; Ricci, *Cinema and Fascism*, 64.

<sup>70</sup> Reich, "Mussolini at the Movies," 11; Ricci, *Cinema and Fascism*, 163.

inherently Fascist or even totalitarian, they were clearly nationalist and hyper-attentive to portrayals of Italy and Italians, which highlights the regime's attempt to utilize cinema to construct national consensus and identity.

## Chapter V: What's a Woman to Do: Gender in Newsreels and Popular Film

In the LUCE newsreels, it is possible to categorize the images of women into four main groups or archetypes: 1) mothers; 2) rural dwellers or peasants; 3) members of the Fascist Party, specifically *Fasci Femminili*; and 4) young girls or adolescents, seen specifically in Fascist run summer camps. A fifth category of athletes, specifically those women who were training at the Orvieto Academy of physical education, is much less common. As previously mentioned, the newsreels are simple and understandable even for the uneducated viewer and were broadcast in cinemas in tandem with popular film, demonstrating that the Fascist government looked to inculcate moviegoers with brief yet rhetoric-filled images while simultaneously offering entertainment and distraction in order to draw viewers to the cinema.

Moreover, the number of newsreels relating explicitly to women (what falls under the category of “*la donna*”—woman—in the LUCE archives) increased from 10 between 1922 and 1931 to 33 between 1932 and 1943.<sup>71</sup> However, the newsreels specifically about women as a ratio of all newsreels actually decreased between 1932 and 1943. The percentage of newsreels about beauty contests and marriages also decreased. However, the percentage of newsreels concerning the family, maternity and infancy, and the rural politics of Fascism all increased in the period between 1932-1943 as compared to the period between 1922-1931. This suggests that between 1932 and 1943, the regime placed its focus not on images of beauty or representations of women more generally, but rather on women's role as wives and mothers, and specifically in rural contexts.

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<sup>71</sup> All data in this paragraph are derived from the *Istituto LUCE* archive: <https://www.archivioluce.com/>.

The white telephone films also present archetypes and categorizations into which the female protagonists fall, but they are perhaps more uniform than those present in the LUCE newsreels. While there are some variations in the female characters such as their place of employment, their living situation, or their age, they are almost all more similar than different in that they are urban, employed, and self-sufficient, yet simultaneously chaste, docile, and eager to get married.<sup>72</sup> However, unlike the LUCE newsreels that are simple news broadcasts lacking a narrative or personal connection, the white telephone films offer the possibility of analyzing personality as well as physical appearance, status, and occupation to arrive at a more thorough understanding of the female characters. Although the films are fictional, analyzing the women in these films, specifically the protagonists, helps to establish the character traits that constitute ideal womanhood. Analyzing individual characters is also central because, according to Murray Smith in his study of film and spectatorship, spectators engage with and connect to characters in an emotional way.<sup>73</sup> Smith challenges the overly simplistic understanding of character engagement that frames engagement as a process of “identification” in which spectators see themselves reflected in the characters and consequently identify with them. Instead, he offers a multifaceted explanation of the relationship between spectator and character that he calls the “structure of sympathy.” This

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<sup>72</sup> Despite variations in employment, all the female characters work in gender appropriate jobs in the service industry, which supports Perry Willson’s claim that the regime stipulated only certain jobs as appropriate for women: Willson, *The Clockwork Factory*, 6-7.

<sup>73</sup> Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

tripartite structure of sympathy explains how spectators react to and engage with characters: recognition, alignment, and allegiance.<sup>74</sup>

Given that this theory affirms a spectator's alignment with and emotional response to characters in film, it becomes necessary to analyze the experiences, personality traits, and morals to which the spectators are responding. In other words, the characters within the white telephone films merit analysis in order to understand the subtle messages, life lessons, and values with which the filmmakers are attempting to imbue the audience. In order to understand the message and images of ideal womanhood that filmmakers spread through white telephone films and the regime spread through LUCE newsreels, it is most advantageous to compare the two by theme.<sup>75</sup>

*Class: The Glory of the Italian Worker*

The images in the LUCE newsreels and white telephone films indicate that the socio-economic position of women is an important characteristic of the ideal Fascist woman, and Mario Camerini's white telephone films glorify the working and middle-class, creating a sense that genuine and honorable Italians are those who remain in their social position and find the beauty in honest work. Many of Camerini's films go beyond this glorification and villainize wealthy urban aristocrats or elites, creating a duality of good and evil. The LUCE newsreels, on the other hand, do not villainize the wealthy in the same way that the white telephone films do—in fact, there is not a single newsreel that even documents the wealthy

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<sup>74</sup> Smith, *Engaging Characters*, 84-85. For a full explanation of this analytical structure, see Murray Smith's *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*, specifically introduction and chapter 3.

<sup>75</sup> The template according to which the LUCE newsreels and popular films were analyzed is included in Appendix A.



aristocratic class.<sup>76</sup> However, while the newsreels do not explicitly discuss the matter of class by praising an ideal class or condemning a problematic one, there are subtle hints regarding the socioeconomic classes within which the ideal Fascist woman resides.

Most of the women in the newsreels are peasants, and as peasants their job is to cultivate the land and have children. In fact, one newsreel illustrates Mussolini and the Fascist regime presenting rural housewives with prizes as a result of their service to their families, their villages, and the Italian nation.<sup>77</sup> Another newsreel narrates a celebratory encounter between *massaie rurali*—or “rural housewives,” the name of a sub-section of the *Fasci Femminili*—and the Savoy Princess Maria Josè, in which the housewives present the princess with the best products from their land and some perform what seems to be a traditional folk song and dance, all wearing local and traditional peasant costume.<sup>78</sup> These newsreels glorify the peasantry and highlight the rewards and celebrations provided to them from the regime and from the royal family.

Some women are also pictured in their role as *Fasci Femminili*, female officials of the Fascist party, but this too was not necessarily an elite or high-class position to hold.

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<sup>76</sup> There are newsreels that show members of the Savoy Royal family, though royalty does not represent the same thing as the wealthy elite, specifically since Mussolini kept the Italian monarchy intact.

<sup>77</sup> “1° Annuale della Fondazione di Littoria. Il Duce premia 467 capi di famiglia e le più brave massaie,” December, 1933. [https://patrimonio.archivioluce.com/luce-web/detail/IL5000012535/2/i-annuale-della-fondazione-littoria-duce-premia-467-capi-famiglia-e-piu-brave-massaie.html?startPage=0&jsonVal={%22jsonVal%22:{%22query%22:\[%22fascismo%22,%22\\*.\\*%22\],%22fieldDate%22:%22dataNormal%22,%22\\_perPage%22:20,%22archiveType\\_string%22:\[%22xDamsCineLuce%22\],%22archiveName\\_string%22:\[%22%22luceFondoCinegiornali%22%22\],%22temi%22:\[%22%22Politica%20rurale%20del%20fascismo%22%22\]}%22}](https://patrimonio.archivioluce.com/luce-web/detail/IL5000012535/2/i-annuale-della-fondazione-littoria-duce-premia-467-capi-famiglia-e-piu-brave-massaie.html?startPage=0&jsonVal={%22jsonVal%22:{%22query%22:[%22fascismo%22,%22*.*%22],%22fieldDate%22:%22dataNormal%22,%22_perPage%22:20,%22archiveType_string%22:[%22xDamsCineLuce%22],%22archiveName_string%22:[%22%22luceFondoCinegiornali%22%22],%22temi%22:[%22%22Politica%20rurale%20del%20fascismo%22%22]}%22}). Hereafter, all footnotes regarding LUCE newsreels will be hyperlinked. The newsreels can also be found by searching the title in the LUCE archives, cited on page 24.

<sup>78</sup> “[Massaie rurali nella Casa del fascio incontrano Maria Josè](#),” 19 May, 1937.

Women's involvement in the Fascist Party was often voluntary, especially in the early years of the regime, and that the *Fasci Femminili* were "utterly subordinate...to the male party hierarchs."<sup>79</sup> Additionally, membership in the *Fasci Femminili* was largely middle class, with sections such as the *Massaie Rurali* (Rural Housewives) and the *Sezione Operaie e Lavoranti a Domicilio dei Fasci Femminili* (SOLD—Section of the Fascist Women's Groups for Female Workers and Outworkers) geared toward working-class and service-class participation, furthering the Fascist focus on and exaltation of the working-classes.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, in the newsreels featuring the *Fasci Femminili*, particularly those in which they teach and supervise young girls in Fascist summer camps, the women wear a standard Fascist uniform—black skirt, white blouse, and fitted white jacket. The young girls wear a similar uniform as well.<sup>81</sup> The uniformity in dress creates a unified identity and suggests that both the *Fasci Femminili* and the female youths fall under a common Fascist middle-class, regardless of whether they come from factory workers, service-workers, white-collar administrators, or any other strata of the working and middle-classes.

Unlike in LUCE newsreels, Camerini's white telephone films *Il Signor Max*, *I grandi magazzini*, and *Ma non è una cosa seria* villainized wealthy characters, portraying them as vain, superficial, and immoral. Indeed, in *I grandi magazzini*, it is the wealthy characters who carry out a scheme to steal from the department store, aligning them not only with vanity and superficiality but also with crime, greediness, and corruption.<sup>82</sup> Although this is the only

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<sup>79</sup>Perry Willson, *Peasant Women and Politics in Fascist Italy: the Massaie Rurali*, 2, 147.

<sup>80</sup> Perry Willson, "Italian Fascism and the Political Mobilization of Working Class Women," *Contemporary European History* 22, no. 1 (February 2013): 1.

<sup>81</sup> ["Le attività al campeggio pre-coloniale per Giovani Fasciste che si preparano alla 'vita coloniale' in Africa," 8 September, 1938; "Autorità femminili fasciste visitano un campo di giovani italiane e assistano ad alcune prove sportive," 1941.](#)

<sup>82</sup> *I grandi magazzini*, directed by Mario Camerini (Generalcine, 1939), DVD.

example where the wealthy characters are actually criminal, wealthy characters in other films represent temptation. They are corrupting forces that temporarily lure the working or middle-class protagonist away from the virtuous and righteous path.

In *Il Signor Max*, for example, the main character, Gianni, is a working-class man who runs a newspaper stand, but he pretends to be a wealthy aristocrat named Max Varaldo after meeting the wealthy Paola because he knows that his working class identity would fail to impress her.<sup>83</sup> He learns how to play bridge, starts drinking whiskey, wears expensive suits, and spends all his money, alienating himself from his family in the process. It is the morality and working-class humility of the female protagonist, Laretta, who finally awakens him to the frivolity and loneliness of wealth and status. Laretta works for Paula as a caretaker for her younger sister, and after spending her days with the elite she can see past the allure of wealth, understanding it to be exclusive and artificial. She expresses to Gianni that she misses her old life in which she used to live in a city, work with her friends, and dance; in fact, in her first meeting with Gianni she watches Gianni perform in a choral performance organized by the OND. Interestingly enough, and in a somewhat nationalistic turn, the singers perform “Va, Pensiero” from Giuseppe Verdi’s opera, *Nabucco*, considered by many to be the true Italian national anthem and therefore a perfect representation of Italian working-class solidarity.

Reference to the OND also appears in various LUCE newsreels, making a connection between Fascist organized leisure and the ideal socioeconomic class. One newsreel in particular celebrates the inauguration of a new headquarters of the Provincial *Dopolavoro* in

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<sup>83</sup> *Il Signor Max*, directed by Mario Camerini (Ente Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche, 1937), DVD.

Vercelli, a city in the northern region of Piedmont.<sup>84</sup> The narration makes it clear that there are representatives from all of the provincial *Dopolavoro* branches throughout Piedmont, and there also seem to be performative representations of the different opportunities provided by the OND; for example, one woman stands atop a platform wearing a snowsuit, mittens, and a hat and holds ski poles. Other women in the crowd are wearing traditional peasant outfits, such as decorative dresses, headdresses, and jewelry. The men and women seem genuinely excited to be there, as they smile for the camera, laugh, and talk with one another. Both the joy of the participants and the extravagance of the inauguration itself illustrate the importance of the OND and the effort with which the Fascist regime looked to exalt it as a staple of Fascist society and a representation of everyday Italians.

By the end of *Il Signor Max*, after spending time with Lairetta at the *Dopolavoro* performance and becoming aware of her kindness and authenticity, Gianni realizes that she is the woman he loves and that he will never be able acculturate to the wealthy set like Paola. By the end of the movie, therefore, he and Lairetta get engaged and he abandons his double life, devoting himself to be a hard-worker and a loyal family man. It is Lairetta's goodness and devotion to honest work and class-solidarity, then, that creates the happy ending and allows for the victory of the Italian nuclear family. The same process of moralization that occurs in *Ma non è una cosa seria* as the humble and hard-working female protagonist, Gasperina, illustrates to the male protagonist, Memmo Speranza, that wealth and status is corrupting and unworthy of envy.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> ["L'inaugurazione della nuova sede del Dopolavoro provinciale," 11 November, 1936.](#)

<sup>85</sup> *Ma non è una cosa seria*, directed by Mario Camerini (Ente Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche, 1936), DVD.

Memmo is a philanderer and a womanizer, constantly navigating from one lover to the next but never settling down, and most often the victims of his romantic pursuits are elite, wealthy women. Gasperina, on the other hand, is a modest young woman who wakes up every day at five in the morning to begin working and spends her days running a boarding house and tending to her guests. Just as Lauretta in *Il Signor Max* transforms Gianni by advocating goodness, modesty, and purity, Gasperina in *Ma non è una cosa seria* rehabilitates Memmo solely through her presence. By spending time with her, Memmo sees that her motivation, kindness, and rural beauty are the kind of characteristics he wants to align himself with rather than those of the rich and elite women he had been chasing. In fact, he comes to this realization while he is with Gasperina in what the viewer assumes is her rural hometown, making the connection between her goodness and her humble rurality rather explicit.

Furthering the idea of temptation, the films also portray the wealthy female characters as promiscuous and more sexually liberated. In *Ma non è una cosa seria*, for example, one of Memmo's love interests, Matilde, visits him in the hospital, where she sits next to him on his hospital bed, kisses him, and tells him to forget about his previous fiancé, Elsa. His relationships with multiple women are clearly a reflection on his character, but also on the characters of the women who engage in this behavior with Memmo and then presumably move on to other men. Similarly, in *Il Signor Max*, Gianni visits Paola at her hotel suite while she is in the bathtub, but she is unfazed. In fact, by the end of the scene there are three men waiting for her to emerge from the bathroom, suggesting that she is comfortable with multiple men being around her as she bathes. Even though Paola remains off-screen and

invisible, the fact that she permits Gianni in her room as she is undressed is in stark contrast to Laretta, who is always modestly clothed.

Moreover, in *I grandi magazzini*, the female protagonist, also named Laretta, stands in opposition to Anna, a woman who, although working alongside Laretta as a shop girl in the department store, is clearly wealthier. Anna is unkind, insincere, and actively tries to seduce Bruno, unlike Laretta who remains good and chaste by allowing Bruno to come to her. Laretta eventually becomes more active and determined in her quest to be with Bruno when she borrows a ski outfit from the department store in order to go on a weekend getaway with him, but it is clear to the audience that it comes from a place of love rather than sexual attraction. Anna invites Bruno to her house, gives him something to drink, and then invites him to sit on the couch next to her by saying “come here...next to me,” and exhibiting a body language as explicit as her words. This inevitably aligns wealth with a more overt sexuality, one that exists outside of marriage and that is in opposition to ideal love and Fascism. Beyond mere sexuality or flirtation, wealthy characters often exist as individuals rather than as family units or couples, which creates a connection between urban wealth and individualism and places urban elites in opposition with the traditional and ideal Italian family, and wealthy women in opposition with motherhood.

#### *Location: Closing the Gap between Urban and Rural*

Most white telephone films take place in nondescript urban environments, which consequently places the ideal Fascist woman in an unidentifiable Italian city. However, the representations of cities in the films, as well as those of the women who live within them, do not represent the dangers of urban cosmopolitanism that Fascist rhetoric often warned

against. In her study of the “crisis woman,” scholar Natasha Chang elucidates that there was a “crisis craze” in Italy in the early 1930s as a result of a destructive economic crisis known as *la grande crisi* that greatly affected the agricultural industry. The word “crisis” became popular in society, making an appearance in songs, magazines, advertisements, and fashion magazines, and the regime consequently took advantage of this craze by associating crisis and destruction with modern, non-Fascist women.<sup>86</sup> Thus, the “crisis woman” was an independent urban woman who was responsible for chaos, social upheaval, and the disintegration of the traditional Italian family. Camerini’s white telephone films challenge this assumption by moralizing urban landscapes and domesticating the urban female characters.

Although the cities are bustling and fast-paced, they are not imposing or unwelcoming in a manner that would restrict its citizens from forging personal connections. Similarly, although the female protagonists are single and employed in modern businesses like department stores, they are not “crisis women” who are sexually liberated and uninterested in marriage—they are kind and innocent young women who are biding their time before they find a husband. As Ruth Ben Ghiat writes in her discussion of *Gli uomini, che mascalzoni* and Camerini’s vision of modernity, the film offers a formula for “negotiating the temptations and pitfalls of modern urban life,” and suggests that modern existence “can be managed and humanized through investment in domestic and family identities.”<sup>87</sup> In other words, the representations of urban life are not oppositional to rural life and its traditional ideals of marriage, family, and community, but are rather analogous.

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<sup>86</sup> Chang, *The Crisis Woman*, 14-17.

<sup>87</sup> Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*, 86.

The cities provide the same opportunities as the countryside does in that urban residents can still become ideal Italian citizens, and urban women can still become ideal Fascist mothers and wives.

Camerini's depiction of urban settings also aid in the Fascist project to create a unified Italian identity. With the exception of *Gli uomini, che mascalzoni* which takes place in Milan and features unmistakable landmarks such as the Duomo di Milano,<sup>88</sup> there is nothing about the setting, the plot, or the characters that places the films in a specific Italian city; instead, settings represent a universal vision of a modernized and western city, with bustling streets, automobiles, public transportation, and walls of advertisements, but with no sense of an Italian identity. This lack of specificity in location highlights the Fascist regime's attempt to unify Italians by forbidding representations of regional identity and ridding film of regional dialects. Because Italy was still so divided and Italians often identified much more with their regional identity than with a national one, part of the Fascist quest to unite Italians under a national identity involved representing through film an Italy that was removed from geographic and regional differences. The imprecise locations also enhance marketability; a film in a universally recognizable city might attract wider audiences.

*Il birichino di papà* follows Fascist rhetoric even more closely than Camerini's urban-centered films.<sup>89</sup> For one, it fails to highlight any one Italian setting, just as Fascist censorship demanded. The film takes place in the countryside rather than in a city, and its rurality is as equally unrecognizable as the urban settings. Although it is admittedly harder to distinguish a rural landscape by looking at the setting and the surroundings than it is a city,

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<sup>88</sup> *Gli uomini, che mascalzoni*, directed by Mario Camerini (Anonima Pittaluga, 1932), DVD.

<sup>89</sup> *Il birichino di papà*, directed by Raffaello Matarazzo (Lux Film, 1943), DVD.



there is nothing about the landscape that places it in a specific Italian region, nor are there any linguistic peculiarities or accents that would clarify the location. The use of this rural setting also plays on the connection between rurality and traditional family values that the Fascist regime often glorified. In fact, the director of the film, Raffaello Matarazzo, believed that “entertainment films formed the best means of calling attention to the values and achievements of the dictatorship,” explaining the film’s glorification of the Italian countryside and rural family.<sup>90</sup> The Giovannini family lives on a large plot of land in the countryside (they are clearly not poor or struggling, however, as they live in a large house with various housekeepers), and the family is loving and tightly bonded. The two daughters, Nicoletta and Livia, are close with their widowed father Leopoldo, as well as his sister who also lives in the house and co-owns the property.

This family is juxtaposed with the Della Bella family into which Livia is marrying. The Della Bella family does not mirror the Giovannini family’s tenderness, love, and authenticity—for example, Livia’s fiancé Roberto often argues with his sister, Irene, and their mother scolds and disciplines them in order to maintain an elite sense of composure. In addition, although the Della Bella family is reluctant to welcome the Giovannini family, the latter is much more open to the union. The Della Bella family’s general sense of humorlessness and standoffishness stems from their urban and wealthy identities, whereas the Giovannini family’s charm and hospitality stems from their rural upbringing, making them the ideal Italian family. Indeed, it is Nicoletta Giovannini who brings the two families together at the end of the film when she finds out Livia is pregnant and consequently helps to facilitate the creation of a new Italian family. The two families celebrate over a homemade

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<sup>90</sup> Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*, 88.

dinner in the final scene illustrating the importance and uniting with rural modesty, goodness, and domesticity.

Matarazzo's depiction and exaltation of the countryside echoes the official state-broadcast ideology. The locations in the LUCE newsreels help to illustrate the settings that the ideal Italian woman inhabits, ultimately perpetuating the connection between women and rurality. Women are often pictured in either rural landscapes or small towns and cities, but even when they are pictured in more urban settings their rural nature is still emphasized through their clothes or through the activities in which they take part. For example, a newsreel documenting the "*fiera di agrumicoltura*" (citrus crop fair/exhibition) and the "*festa dell'arancio*" (festival of the orange) takes place in the city of Fondi, a city in the region of Lazio, but the people in the newsreel are all peasants from the surrounding areas.<sup>91</sup> This is particularly obvious when looking at the women, who are dressed in traditional peasant clothing and are often seen next to or carrying small children or infants. Even though these women are in a city, and are in fact in the main piazza which tends to be the most central and bustling area of Italian cities, it is clear that they are there as guests.

The LUCE coverage of the annual Roman celebrations of the *Giornata della madre e del fanciullo* (Mother and Child's Day) also picture women in a city.<sup>92</sup> The Fascist regime used the *Giornata della madre e del fanciullo* as an opportunity to present Italy's most prolific mothers with monetary rewards, and the narration of the newsreels makes it clear that

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<sup>91</sup> ["Si inaugura la fiera di Agrumicoltura con la Festa dell'arancio," 3 April, 1935.](#)

<sup>92</sup> ["Celebrazione romana della giornata della madre e del fanciullo," 30 December, 1936;](#)  
["A Palazzo Venezia 95 coppie 'prolifiche' ricevono da Mussolini un premio di 5000 lire e un libretto di risparmio di 1000 lire per l'ultimo nato," 28 December, 1938;](#)  
["Nella sala del Teatro Adriano si è svolta la premiazione della 7a Giornata della Madre e del Fanciullo, celebrata in tutta Italia, con la consegna di 120mila premi in danaro per un importo di 12 milioni di lire, distribuiti in oltre 7mila raduni," 1939.](#)

the women have come to the capital of Italy to receive their prize from the government. The women are dressed modestly and sensibly, either in traditional rural outfits or standard, neutrally colored dresses and coats, and just as with the example of the newsreel regarding the *fiera di agrumicoltura* and the *festa dell'arancio*, it is clear that they are in Rome as guests. Their presence in the city is temporary and conditional and reinforces their rurality by associating them solely with prolific motherhood and large traditional families.

Overall, the two types of film address location in remarkably paradoxical ways. The settings of the LUCE newsreels are incredibly location specific and it is always clear both where the newsreel is taking place and where the people in the newsreel are from, while the location is almost always indiscernible in the white telephone films. These differences arise as a result of the goals of each type of film. For example, the LUCE newsreels are location specific because their goal was to glorify Fascist holidays, projects, and initiatives, and to highlight the importance of the common Italian. In order to do that, it was necessary to illustrate and discuss which geographic parts of Italy were improving as a result of Fascist government, and to illustrate which parts of the Italian population were upholding and perpetuating Fascist values. Showing prolific Italian women in Rome, the seat of Italian Fascism, does just that—it glorifies Rome as a Fascist city, the *Giornata della madre e del fanciullo* as a Fascist holiday and as an economic program, and rural mothers as ideal women. The role of the white telephone films was also to glorify the common Italian, but to do so in a way that was entertaining and non-exclusionary in order to attract a wider audience and allow them to align themselves with and aspire to the ideal. By not specifying the location, it makes the characters universally Italian and unconnected to a specific region. It suggests, therefore, that Italians always carry with them a sense of traditionalism, morality,

and family values regardless of where they live, and that Italian women particularly perpetuate the Italian family because they become mothers in both the city and the country. Furthermore, it allows for a commercialism that is not specific to a region; all women have the ability to follow the newest fashion trends regardless of where they live.

*Beauty, Fashion, and “Inner Beauty”: Devotion to Morality and to the Fascist state*

Because the LUCE newsreels are concise broadcasts that were to document the news and praise the regime, not much is known about the women within them. They do not speak for themselves or present their own narratives, and they are featured exclusively for the role they play in aiding the regime. Italian mothers most often appear in newsreels showing the Fascist government awarding fecund mothers for their service to the nation. For example, a 1938 newsreel shows Mussolini himself presenting the ninety-five most prolific Italian couples with a prize of five-thousand lire, and a *libretto di risparmio* (savings account passbook) of one-thousand lire for the couple’s most recently born child.<sup>93</sup> The newsreel takes place in a major government building in Rome, and all of the women are shown seated with their husbands standing behind them. The couples are comprised of farmers and day laborers, and their rurality is made clear by the women wearing traditional clothing most likely specific to their home region. Because these women have given birth recently, they cannot be older than their mid-forties; however, they look much older, solemn, and worn down. As historian Victoria De Grazia states, “Maternity was associated with beauty only with difficulty,” and it seems clear that the point of this newsreel was not to associate the two

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<sup>93</sup> [“A Palazzo Venezia 95 coppie ‘prolifiche’ ricevono da Mussolini un premio di 5000 lire e un libretto di risparmio di 1000 lire per l’ultimo nato,” 28 December, 1938.](#)

things.<sup>94</sup> Mothers were glorified for their role as national breeder, not for their appearance. Furthermore, newsreels rarely displayed women's individual faces; instead, large panoramic shots showed mother and child together and demonstrated the sheer number of women there to collect their rewards, suggesting that it is their role in the collective Italian body, not their personal identity or beauty, that matters.<sup>95</sup>

The LUCE newsreels seem to focus much more on societal roles than on beauty standards, and each societal role seems to illustrate a different life stage. For example, most of the rural women and the *Fasci Femminili* are young adults, presumably somewhere between youth and motherhood. In many of the newsreels documenting peasant festivals, the women featured are in traditional, regional dress, clearly young, and seen smiling, talking to one another, and enjoying each other's presence. In a 1935 newsreel documenting the celebration of a local agricultural fair, the majority of screen time is dedicated to younger women all wearing traditional regional outfits and celebrating the fair with other members of their community.<sup>96</sup> Although the newsreels do not highlight or comment on the women's appearance, the young peasant women seem to be a representation of the authentic Italian woman that De Grazia describes, who is young and rural with "rosy lips and cheeks, peasant dress, and rounded figure." They are broadcast above all else because of their role as peasants, but they represent the ideal Fascist beauty as well.

Similarly, in a 1941 newsreel chronicling the visit of a group of *Fasci Femminili* to a summer camp, the shots are comprised exclusively of happy, smiling women.<sup>97</sup> The young

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<sup>94</sup> De Grazia, "Nationalizing Women," 346.

<sup>95</sup> ["Celebrazione romana della giornata della madre e del fanciullo," 30 December 1936.](#)

<sup>96</sup> ["Si inaugura la fiera di Agrumicoltura con la Festa dell'arancio," 3 April, 1935.](#)

<sup>97</sup> ["Autorità femminili fasciste visitano un campo di giovani italiane e assistano ad alcune prove sportive," 1941.](#)

girls and adolescents at the summer camp play basketball and roller skate, and the *Fasci Femminili* are watching them and helping them with great pleasure. Additionally, the *Fasci Femminili* all seem to be young and stylish in their Fascist Party uniforms, in opposition to the older and more disheveled looking women in the newsreels focusing on motherhood. Young womanhood is therefore portrayed quite distinctly from motherhood. The women are neither objects of rural beauty, nor are they downtrodden village mothers. They are not cosmopolitan crisis women, nor even official members of the Fascist elite. They are young professionals serving the state, and their images seem to illustrate an intermediary phase of the ideal Fascist woman's life between childhood and motherhood.

In the white telephone films, standards of physical beauty and fashion are nearly identical; the female protagonists reflect popular beauty and fashion trends, but often seem to stand in opposition to Fascist ideals. The protagonist in *Darò un milione*, for example, is thin, blonde, and elegant, and played by a prolific actress of the time who appears in numerous white telephone films: Assia Noris.<sup>98</sup> Noris plays the female protagonist in *Darò un milione*, *Il Signor Max*, and *I Grandi Magazzini*, and plays a minor character in *Ma non è una cosa seria*. She often appears alongside Vittorio De Sica, who plays the male protagonist in every white telephone film under analysis except *Il birichino di papà*. Because the two of them appear together in multiple white telephone films, it is as if they represent a prototype on which other characters are built and provide inspiration for the appearance of the ideal man and woman.

In *Darò un milione*, the viewer first sees Noris in white heels, a slim fitting white skirt, and a collared blouse under a cropped jacket that all accentuate her waistline and bust.

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<sup>98</sup> *Darò un milione*, directed by Mario Camerini (Euro International Film, 1935), DVD.

Her eyes are outlined and defined using eyeliner and mascara, and her hair is short and styled in neat curls. This look is reflective of many of the most popular fashion trends of the 1930s, specifically in its use of the color white, a belted skirt that emphasizes the waistline, and a matching jacket.<sup>99</sup> While not necessarily anti-Fascist, especially because the regime did not attempt to create a specific Fascist fashion aside from official uniforms, it does suggest some semblance of independence and departs from the female images that the regime broadcasted through newsreel propaganda. She lives in an urban city, she is single, and she has a job working behind the scenes for the circus—a liminal space and an unusual occupation not representative of the female workforce in Italy. She is a working woman with a fashion sense that reflects her status as an employee, not a performer. There is nothing rural, athletic, or militaristic about her appearance, nor is there any regional connection. Just like the location of the film, which is clearly urban but not specifically Italian, her outfits reflect international fashion patterns of the 1930s and reflect no distinctly Italian, let alone Fascist, characteristics. This lack of regional, cultural, or national identification directly contradicts the Fascist goal of creating a unique and unified Italian identity.

Aside from a brief wardrobe change into a collared black silk dress during the second half of the film, the next major costume the viewer sees her in is that of a circus performer. She enters the circus ring, acting as a replacement for another woman who was initially supposed to perform this part of the act, wearing a sequined bra and a pair of sequined fringed shorts with her stomach and legs completely exposed. Unlike her previous outfits,

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<sup>99</sup> Daniel Cole and Nancy Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion from 1850* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2015), 166-167, 187; Mario Lupano and Alessandra Vaccari, *Fashion at the Time of Fascism: Italian Modernist Lifestyle, 1922-1943* (Bologna: Damiani, 2009).

this one is flashy, revealing, and even suggestive. Fashion of the 1930s focused largely on the accentuation of the female figure, as opposed to the fashion of the 1920s that covered natural curves and created a young, “boyish” figure, but it did so largely through longer skirts and tailored sophistication.<sup>100</sup> Exposing the midriff and most of the legs was still seen as provocative. The bikini, for example, was not introduced until 1946.<sup>101</sup> As a result, the combination of her revealing clothes and role as circus performer make her out to be a showgirl; her body is on display for audience consumption and out of her control, made clear to the viewer when one of the men working at the circus gropes her. However, she does not choose to wear this outfit—her boss forces her to wear it and threatens to fire her if she fails to. She would never make the choice to wear such an immodest outfit without being forced, as she is immensely uncomfortable, embarrassed, and ashamed in the circus outfit, emphasizing both her idealized innocence and also her physical beauty.

The female protagonists of the other white telephone films have a similar fashion sense to Noris’ character in *Darò un milione* prior to her performance in the revealing circus outfit. In *Gli uomini, che mascalzoni*, for example, Mariuccia’s hair is styled in short curls like Noris’, and she spends the film dressed either in her shop-girl uniform—another reflection of modernity and urban femininity—or in a skirt and blouse under a tailored, belted jacket, topped with a broach and a cloche hat.<sup>102</sup> Laretta in *I grandi magazzini* also works as a shop-girl in the department store, and therefore she also transitions from her work

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<sup>100</sup> Cole and Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion from 1850*, 166.

<sup>101</sup> Cole and Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion from 1850*, 212.

<sup>102</sup> *Gli uomini, che mascalzoni*, directed by Mario Camerini (Anonima Pittaluga, 1932), DVD; Cole and Deihl, *The History of Modern Fashion from 1850*, 170-172. A cloche hat is one that sits very tightly against the head—somewhat of a lasting style of the 1920s. The hats eventually become more dramatic and wide-brimmed throughout the 1930s.



uniform to elegant fashions of the 1930s.<sup>103</sup> Noris' character in *Il Signor Max*, also named Lauretta, wears collared shirts and fitted skirts, often with a matching jacket and hat, in a manner that accentuates her figure while maintaining her sensibility and modesty.<sup>104</sup> In *Ma non è una cosa seria*, Gasperina reflects a similar modest beauty, although her appearance and clothing often reflect a less styled rurality than a professional cosmopolitanism.<sup>105</sup> Her hair is long and styled into a bun unlike the short and curled style of the other protagonists, and she often wears a knit item such as a poncho or scarf that the other protagonists do not have. She also knits during the film, suggesting that she crafted the items for herself and highlighting her domestic skills. Even with her more rural charm, however, her makeup is always done—not enough that it stands out, but enough that her facial features are accentuated, specifically her eyes and her lips.

Only in the film *Il birichino di papà* does the viewer find the main character, Nicoletta, to be unlike the typical fashionable, modest, or “lady-like” heroine.<sup>106</sup> Many of the differences are surely because she is much younger than the women in the other films at only fifteen years old, but the differences in appearance and attitude are stark. She spends the beginning of the film in trousers, and although she eventually wears a dress as part of her boarding school uniform, she is the only woman from the films that is not pictured in a dress or a skirt. Throughout the film, she is energetic, outspoken, and unapologetic as she drives a carriage somewhat recklessly through the countryside, watches a veterinarian deliver a baby

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<sup>103</sup> *I grandi magazzini*, directed by Mario Camerini (Generalcine, 1939), DVD.

<sup>104</sup> *Il Signor Max*, directed by Mario Camerini (Ente Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche, 1937), DVD.

<sup>105</sup> *Ma non è una cosa seria*, directed by Mario Camerini (Ente Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche, 1936), DVD.

<sup>106</sup> *Il birichino di papà*, directed by Raffaello Matarazzo (Lux Film, 1943), DVD.

horse, causes trouble and does not follow the rules when she is sent to boarding school, and confronts Roberto (her sister's fiancé) when she sees him kiss another woman. Additionally, she has no love interest, meaning that she remains an individual and does not give up any part of herself or change anything about herself for a man.

However, even though she does not look or act like the leading ladies of the other films, she still represents many of the ideal feminine morals such as loyalty and family values. It is mostly because of her, however, that Livia and Roberto reconcile and the two families reunite, making her out to be the guardian of domesticity and the Italian family. She is a caring and fiercely loyal sister and a devoted daughter, and when she finds out that her sister is pregnant, she knows that Livia and Roberto must reconcile in order to provide a good life for their child. She also recognizes that she and her family must get along with Roberto's family, as that is the only acceptable way to live and bring a child into the world. It is, in fact, the values of the female characters that align them with Fascist rhetoric and traditional understandings of womanhood, even if their appearances seem paradoxical to the ideal Fascist woman promoted in newsreels.

The female protagonist in *Darò un milione*, for example, seems outside of Fascist norms because of her appearance and her profession working in the circus, but her actions and relationship with Mr. Gold highlight her virtue and kindness. Furthermore, she exhibits a strong internalization of societal norms and self-inflicted shame that keep her in-line with traditional femininity. Throughout the film she makes it clear through her interactions with Mr. Gold that she upholds traditional values and represents a good moral standing. For example, she often scolds Mr. Gold for looking at or interacting with her immodestly. At the beginning of the film she gets tangled in a low-hanging tree branch that catches her skirt and

lifts it above her knee, and even as he tries to help her come untangled she does not want him to look at her or touch her with her leg exposed. This is mirrored near the end of the film when she is paraded around the circus ring in the revealing outfit and she yells at Mr. Gold for looking at her. Although she is uncomfortable in her role as temporary circus performer, it becomes evident that she is most uncomfortable with Mr. Gold seeing her in that role, as though her virtue and respectability depend upon her ability to maintain a modest appearance and demeanor.

Furthermore, when she and Mr. Gold are later alone in her trailer, he kisses her and she begins to cry. Before he kisses her, however, she is ironing his clothes that had gotten wet while he was at the circus. He tries to help her, but she refuses his help, establishing that her ideal role as a woman includes laundering men's clothing. She is still wearing the revealing circus performer's costume, but the action of ironing and caring for Mr. Gold outshines her role as showgirl and solidifies her natural or desired role as caretaker and housewife. His kiss breaks this illusion and is so serious a violation of her purity that she is overcome with emotion. Mr. Gold does not see the kiss as corrupting, but for her it represents the same defilement as being groped. Mr. Gold kisses her in her immodest circus costume rather than her normal sensible dress, making her feel as though it is that outfit rather than her purity that attracts his attention and thus ashamed of her outward display of sexuality. Other than her boss at the circus who fires her and kicks her out after finding her alone in her trailer with a man, there are no external forces that regulate her behavior or demand that she behaves virtuously. Her behavior is motivated by her personal ideals, and her shame and punishment are almost exclusively self-enforced. Moreover, as may have already become clear, the female protagonist's name is never mentioned. She goes the entire film without

ever introducing herself or being addressed by her name, and she consequently becomes a kind of “everywoman,” an identity-less representation of all women whose actions perpetuate a traditional understanding of womanhood and market an ideal set of values and personality traits.

In *Gli uomini che mascalzoni*, Mariuccia exhibits a similar internalization of the societal expectations of women that the protagonist of *Darò un milione* displays. After Bruno and Mariuccia meet for the first time, Bruno borrows the car of the wealthy couple that he works for to take Mariuccia to the lakes outside of Milan; they stop at an *osteria* for something to eat, but Bruno leaves her stranded there after he is forced to return to Milan, crashes his car, and is unable to return. The viewer sees Mariuccia sitting by herself, unable to pay for the food and drinks that Bruno had ordered earlier and speaking with the woman who works at and presumably owns the *osteria*. She cries and swears that she is modest and sensible and that she has never went unaccompanied with a man; she eventually decides that the situation has left her “*rovinata*”—ruined. Therefore, she is astutely aware of societal expectations and conscious that her interaction with Bruno has tainted her innocence.

Her innocence is highlighted and perpetuated throughout the entirety of the film, specifically through her apparent lack of experience with men. Indeed, the viewer is made to understand early on that Mariuccia never, unlike her friends, accepts men’s gifts. When she talks to her friends after meeting Bruno, for example, one of her friends comments that it is although men do not exist to her. This sentiment is then echoed later after Mariuccia expresses her reluctance to spend time with a flirtatious wealthy man and her co-worker asks, “*Ma di che cosa ha paura? Che ti mangiano?*” (“What are you afraid of? That they’ll eat you?”). It is clear, then, that Mariuccia has stayed modest and pure despite the influence of

those around her, specifically other women. Furthermore, while at the *Fiera di Milano*, her image is juxtaposed with that of another woman who is selling candy at a nearby booth. This nameless woman is forthright about her desire for Bruno and is actively pursuing him and trying to win his attention. When she first sees him, she tells him to take a piece of her candy, saying somewhat seductively, “*È gratis*,” (“It’s free”), and “*Ancora, ancora...*” (“Have some more...”), a piece of dialogue that associates her with the object she is selling and ultimately suggests that her body is a commodity available for his consumption. Later, when Bruno returns to Mariuccia’s booth, this woman—the anti-Mariuccia—is delighted to inform him that Mariuccia has gone to the amusement park with another man, which allows her to secure a date with Bruno. Her character is aggressive, cunning, and sexualized, and her namelessness creates an archetypal female villain. While the namelessness of *Darò un milione*’s female protagonist creates a universal image of what a woman ought to be, the namelessness of this woman creates a universal image of what a woman ought not to be and stands in direct opposition to Mariuccia’s goodness.

#### *Reward: Panem et Circenses*

In both the white telephone films and LUCE newsreels, there is a similar pattern of reward—rewarding good behavior, morality, proper adherence to gender and social roles, and service to the state—that stands out as a unifying theme. Rewarding the population as a method of social control is a political technique with roots tracing back to Ancient Rome, a technique that is most referred to as bread and circuses, or *panem et circenses*. This phrase relates specifically to the tendency of the Roman government to provide its population with free grain and opportunities to attend diversionary events such as circuses in an effort to

appease and distract, and has become a general term to describe government policies that utilize short-term solutions to manage public unrest.<sup>107</sup> Considering Mussolini aimed to literally recreate the Roman Empire and bring Italy back to its former glory, as well as that he drew from prominent Roman concepts in creating his political ideology (most notable through his use of the *fascies*, a Roman symbol of power, as the basis for the word “fascism”), it is not surprising that he would also draw from the Roman model of distraction and entertainment as a strategy for constructing popular consent. This focus on appeasement and entertainment also informs much of the Fascist approach to consent, in that the main goal of the Fascist quest for consent was not to ensure that everyone become a proud and avid Fascist, but rather to ensure that no one was outwardly anti-Fascist.

For example, the concept of reward can be seen in the locations and landscapes of the white telephone films. Except for *Il birichino di papà*, the films all take place in unnamed, large urban cities in a state of modernity and advancement.<sup>108</sup> All of the cities are clean with no trace of trash, dirt, smog, or any particular sense of underdevelopment or poverty; even in *Darò un milione* where a major plot point revolves around the city’s homeless population, the homeless people are relatively well dressed and clean, and the viewer never sees them living on the street.<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, the films often include shots of public transportation and automobiles, representative of modern urban planning, technological advancements, and consumer culture that is not only applicable to elites, but that is available and accessible for members of the working and middle classes as well.

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<sup>107</sup> “Bread And Circuses,” *The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), [http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/hmndcl/bread\\_and\\_circuses/0](http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/hmndcl/bread_and_circuses/0).

<sup>108</sup> *Il birichino di papà*, directed by Raffaello Matarazzo (Lux Film, 1943), DVD.

<sup>109</sup> *Darò un milione*, directed by Mario Camerini (Euro International Film, 1935), DVD.

Modern notions of consumer culture are also perpetuated through the presence of advertisements pasted to walls throughout the cityscape, and especially through the presence of department stores. In fact, *I grandi magazzini* takes place almost entirely in a department store and glorifies not only the consumerism inherently connected to it, but also its modern architecture and infrastructure (its multi-level construction and the wide-spread use of elevators, for example).<sup>110</sup> The development and maintenance of these cities and their representation in the films can be read, then, as another variation of the political *bread and circuses*, as the cultural, infrastructural, and technological improvements represent an effort on the part of the regime to reward and appease the population. Seeing these cities provides the viewer with the understanding that Italy under the Fascist regime is advancing in a way that is on par with other European nations, which ultimately suggests that by supporting the regime, one is rewarded with the benefits of clean, consumerist, and modern cities.

Examining representations of women in both documentary LUCE newsreels and popular white telephone films shows remarkable similarities in the portrayal of rewards. For example, both genres of film provide women with the ultimate reward: marriage and the promise of family. LUCE newsreels that focus on the Fascist celebration of the *Sagra della nuzialità* (wedding festival) portray hundreds of couples celebrating their recent marriages in a large group ceremony; one newsreel documents a celebration of the *Sagra della nuzialità* in 1933 in Rome in which 820 couples celebrate their marriages in front of a crowd of people in Rome's *Piazza Esedra*, an important and central piazza that is now known as the *Piazza della Repubblica*.<sup>111</sup> In an effort to increase the birthrate and both safeguard and exalt traditional

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<sup>110</sup> *I grandi magazzini*, directed by Mario Camerini (Generalcine, 1939), DVD.

<sup>111</sup> ["Roma. La solenne celebrazione della sagra della nuzialità. 820 coppie di sposi sfilano in corso per le vie dell'Urbe. La solenne funzione a Santa Maria degli Angeli," 30 October.](#)

families, the regime exerted increasing pressure on young couples to get married in the 1930s. The regime lowered the legal marriage age from fifteen to fourteen years old for women and from eighteen to sixteen years old for men. The legal age of consent also lowered from twenty-one to eighteen for women and from twenty-five to twenty-one for men, and the regime provided newlywed couples with money for bridal suites, and it publicly demonstrated its support of marriage and young couples through “splendidly showy group wedding ceremonies.”<sup>112</sup> The newsreels consequently propagated the narrative that young men and women who followed the regime’s orders would be directly rewarded from the state with money, celebratory spectacle, and, to some extent, with the idealized promise of lifelong happiness.

Rewarding women with marriage for following rules and being exemplary members of society is also present in the white telephone films. In these films, however, the prize is not economic benefits for marriage as demonstrated in the newsreels, but is rather a man himself. By the end of the films, the woman who has remained steadfast in her morality and purity is rewarded with marriage to the man of her dreams, and consequently it is implied that she will eventually also be rewarded with a house and children—all the components of the ideal Italian family.

In almost every film, the female protagonist is so fundamentally moral and chaste that she is responsible for moralizing the male protagonist and ultimately making him a better person. In *Ma non è una cosa seria*, for example, Memmo has been engaged ten times but

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1933; [“Celebrazioni di 200 matrimoni in occasione della Sagra della nuzialità,” November, 1934;](#)  
[“Sagra della nuzialità,” 28 April, 1937.](#)

<sup>112</sup> De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 137-138.



has abandoned every one of his engagements.<sup>113</sup> He marries Gasperina so that he can never get engaged again, but he plans on continuing his philandering ways even within the confines of his new marriage. However, he eventually falls in love with her as a result of rural charm and humility. She works everyday beginning in the early hours of the morning, she is kind and accommodating to her guests at the boarding house, and she is motivated by a modest aspiration to one day be able to return to the countryside and relax. She also illustrates her kindness by staying with Memmo when he is in the hospital, talking with him and caring for him as he recovers. Aside from her dedication and kindness, Gasperina is also incredibly passive and accommodating to her male counterparts. Memmo decides to marry Gasperina without even asking her, and she agrees even though the marriage was based on a lie and designed to safeguard Memmo's sexual liberation. She then stays with him at the end of the film when he realizes he has fallen in love with her. Memmo does almost nothing to deserve it, but Gasperina remains loyal, kind, and chaste, nevertheless. These qualities decide her fate as she is presented with a man who has decided to be a good husband and is therefore rewarded with security, love, and happiness.

The narratives of *Darò un milione* and *Gli uomini, che mascalzoni* also reward women with a man and the promise of happiness. By the end of *Darò un milione*, as a reward for the nameless female protagonist's self-awareness, kindness, and devotion to remaining modest, Mr. Gold reveals his true identity, brings her onto his yacht, and sails away, putting the ring he wore throughout the film onto her left ring finger. Her character development can be viewed as a sort of guideline for female behavior, as though saying to the female viewers

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<sup>113</sup> *Ma non è una cosa seria*, directed by Mario Camerini (Ente Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche, 1936), DVD.

that by mirroring the actions, behaviors, and ideals of this woman, one can find true love (and maybe even a millionaire). Her modesty and servility won her the prize that all the other characters were shamelessly chasing.

In *Gli uomini, che mascalzoni*, Mariuccia's unwavering innocence and purity seems to be what draws Bruno to her and ultimately motivates him to marry her in the same way that the kindness, virtue, and modesty of *Darò un milione*'s female protagonist wins over Mr. Gold.<sup>114</sup> However, what is more apparent in *Gli uomini, che mascalzoni* than in *Darò un milione* is that the male characters determine what the appropriate characteristics are for a woman. Throughout the movie, Bruno either shames or praises Mariuccia's actions, and he even makes the ultimate value judgment on Mariuccia's character when he says: "*Ho capito che Lei non è come gli altri. Lei è una brava ragazza. È vero, Mariuccia?*" (I realized that you're not like the others. You're a good girl. Isn't that right, Mariuccia?). It is he who decides for himself, for Mariuccia, and for the viewer that she is morally respectable and virtuous, and it is he who decides that her moral characteristics make her worthy of marriage. At the end of the film, Bruno and Mariuccia return from the trade fair in a taxi, which unbeknownst to them is being driven by Mariuccia's father, and Bruno announces that they should get married. Bruno makes it clear that after the wedding Mariuccia will quit her job at the perfumery and instead remain "*sempre in casa...a prepararci risotto*" ("at home...making us risotto"). Not only does Bruno make this decision, but her father also agrees and approves of their future arrangement. Therefore, Mariuccia receives her prize, a

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<sup>114</sup> *Gli uomini, che mascalzoni*, directed by Mario Camerini (Anonima Pittaluga, 1932), DVD.

husband and the opportunity to become a proper Italian housewife, because of her loyalty to Bruno and her devotion to being a “good girl.”

Similarly, both the newsreels and white telephone films illustrate women earning monetary rewards for their compliance to both Fascist and societal needs. This is particularly visible in the LUCE newsreels that document the Fascist government distributing monetary prizes to Italy’s most prolific mothers. Presenting Italian citizens with rewards provided an opportunity for the Fascists to placate the population it was demanding the most from—rural families, and specifically mothers—and to broadcast themselves as a government that cared for its people and appreciated their sacrifices. Some aspects of the situation change according to the newsreel, yet the majority of newsreels minimize the individuality among the women there to collect their rewards, with the emphasis placed instead on the undifferentiated masses and on the source of the reward.<sup>115</sup> In the newsreels, there is seldom a shot of an individual woman or a close-up on her face, and where there is a shot that focuses on one woman it is momentary and largely unimportant to the overall narrative. Additionally, she is often pictured holding a child or sitting in front of her husband, suggesting that a woman’s core identity is tied to her status as a mother (and specifically a prolific mother) and as a wife. There is, however, no confusion regarding the distributor of the reward—the reward comes directly from the hands of the state. By focusing on the vast number of women collecting their prizes, the regime broadcasts a narrative that ultimately glorifies itself as not only supportive, but also effective, as it seems that pro-natalist campaigns have been

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<sup>115</sup> The situation could vary based on the person who was presenting the award—sometimes it was Mussolini who presented the prizes while other times it is another high-ranking Fascist official or member of the Italian monarchy, for example.

working.<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, it broadcasts a narrative of mutual benefit, suggesting that women who serve their country as breeders of the nation are recognized and awarded.

In the white telephone films, the prize does not come directly from the state—in fact, there is no mention of the state at all—but rather it arrives circumstantially. The women who are rewarded for their good behavior receive their prize after proving that they are of good character and that they are pure and chaste both morally and physically, suggesting that women who follow the rules and perform their designated social role naturally will find themselves rewarded. Although most of the female protagonists' rewards are tied to marriage and more abstract ideals of happiness and family, the reward that the unnamed female protagonist of *Darò un milione* receives goes further. Our unnamed heroine remains unflinchingly modest and chaste in her numerous attempts to avoid physical contact with Mr. Gold and to direct his attention away from her body. She is also steadfast in her honesty and kindness in her attempt to support Mr. Gold with food and even money when he was pretending to be poor and homeless. By the end of the film she is thus rewarded not only with Mr. Gold's affection, but also his unexpected fortune. This homeless man in disguise takes her onto his yacht and gives her a ring, essentially promising her marriage, happiness, and access to his millions of dollars. However, she was never in search of money or luxury because she had no idea he was wealthy. Rather, she was only ever devoted to her work, to the conservation of her purity, and to a traditional understanding of love and relationships. The money therefore arrives to celebrate and reinforce her choices.

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<sup>116</sup> The pro-natalist and demographic campaign did not work, in fact. The birth rate continued to decline as women practiced fertility control and family planning, abortion remained prevalent, and many of its projects could not be realized due to severe underfunding. De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 50; Willson, "Women in Fascist Italy," 83, 87.

It is not only the act of rewarding that stands out both in the LUCE newsreels and the white telephone films, but also the lack of punishment. The subtly implicit messages that are broadcast through these different forms of media are centered in positive reinforcement and celebration in a manner that is almost utopian, as they construct an image of a society that runs flawlessly because of a capable government and a population-wide devotion to the same set of morals. The newsreels avoid portraying women who have failed to uphold their duty as national breeders or that live an independent and cosmopolitan lifestyle, do not illustrate any of the abject poverty and underdevelopment in much of Italy's rural populations, and avoid discussions of state-inflicted punishments for citizens who break the law or express anti-Fascist sentiments. Similarly, in the white telephone films, there is no sense of punishment or karmic retribution for the antagonists, who are often other women who complicate the female protagonist's relationship with the male protagonist.

In *Il Signor Max*, for example, the woman who distracts Gianni from paying attention to and caring for Lauretta simply disappears by the end of the plot.<sup>117</sup> Although in some way her punishment is exhibited in her ultimate inability to secure the man she has been pursuing throughout the entirety of the film, there is no clear sense that she has been delivered a punishment equal to that of her crime (which, in the case of this film, is her open flirtation, her lack of family values, and her lack of humility). The clearest commonalities between the LUCE newsreels and the white telephone films, then, lie in the dominant positive rhetoric exhibited in both—the idea that reward and distraction alone have the ability to purify society and perpetuate the ideal Italian and Fascist virtues and characteristics. This is not to say that

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<sup>117</sup> *Il Signor Max*, directed by Mario Camerini (Ente Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche, 1937), DVD

the regime did not utilize violence or punishment in reality—the threat of violence was present throughout the entirety regime as one of the factors helping to construct popular consensus. It was the positive reinforcement and emphasis on reward, support, and celebration that the regime chose to broadcast through film, however, rather than attempting to broadcast itself as a powerful and ruthless totalitarian state. This decision also relates to the regime's dependence on the *Dopolavoro* program; the whole philosophy for the *Dopolavoro*, which became an important aspect of Italian life and society, was to make diversionary entertainment and leisure available to the general public as a way of subtly indoctrinating the population. Leisure became the reward for consenting to the regime and becoming a cardholding member of the Fascist party.

## Conclusion

Because of Italy's disjointed, and even unpopular, unification movement, Italians lacked a clear national identity at the time of the Fascist takeover. Consequently, in order to construct a strong Fascist state and a new Roman empire built on popular support and the mobilization of the masses, Mussolini and his Fascists had to create a new identity that the population could relate to and rally behind. This process required the regime to systematically infiltrate the private sphere so that it could shape individual bodies in order to shape the larger national body. Furthermore, Mussolini's neo-traditional and imperial ambitions demanded the participation of every Italian citizen, and specifically of Italian women as their primary role was to reproduce and serve the Fascist state as national breeders. It was therefore imperative that the state construct new bodies in order to manage and control those bodies. Film and the evolving cinema industry provided the Fascist regime with the opportunity to transcend rhetoric and the written word and co-opt the moving picture to diffuse not only ideological expectations for the ideal Italian Fascist woman, but also images and physical standards.

Historian Natasha Chang confirms the Fascist project to regulate women as she writes, "Many scholars have observed that the regime viewed the Italian nation as a body to be protected and defended, and that it operated on the premise that the process of building a cohesive nation from disparate groups of people began by building the bodies of individuals—in particular, the bodies of women."<sup>118</sup> By propagandizing Italian citizens with LUCE newsreels, entertaining them with largely uncensored but consenting popular films, and then merging the two cinematographic forms by screening them in the same theater, the

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<sup>118</sup> Chang, *The Crisis Woman*, 7.

regime—and the cinema industry—attempted to do just that. They attempted to shape individual female bodies by perpetuating standards of beauty and fashion and idealized personality traits through feature film, all the while pulling together disparate groups of people into the same movie theater by showing largely working or middle-class urban audiences images of rurality and fecundity.

The historiography of Italian Fascism, and of women in Fascist Italy more specifically, has progressed from investigating broad policy decisions to meticulous examinations of everyday life and individual bodies. Studying LUCE newsreels and white telephone films as comparative cultural symbols deepens the recent historiography and study into the individual as they represent some of the most important rhetorical devices used to produce and diffuse images of the ideal woman. A comprehensive study of the Fascist state's attempt to build a new national identity and situate women within that identity is therefore impossible without an examination of the relationship between state broadcast film and popular film. Furthermore, the existence of seemingly paradoxical images within the differing forms of film sheds light on an important aspect of Fascist Italy and the regime's quest for consent. Fascist ideology was never fully formed, nor was it ever succinctly articulated. Mussolini himself did not attempt to define it until 1932, ten years after he rose to power, and even this definition failed to be clear or straightforward. In fact, much of it can be described as an “anti-ideology,” as Mussolini defined Fascism by chronicling what it is not—Fascism is anti-pacifist and anti-Marxist, for example.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Benito Mussolini, “The Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism,” *Political Quarterly* 4, no. 3 (July 1, 1933): 341-356. It was originally published in the 14<sup>th</sup> volume of the *Enciclopedia Italiana* in 1932, and although credit is given to Mussolini, he was also aided by Giovanni Gentile.



For the Fascist regime, it was not as important for the population to be avid followers of Fascist ideology, but rather to be, at the bare minimum, not anti-Fascist. Thus, the acceptance of passive consent and the lack of a clear Fascist dogma allowed for the population to follow a variety of *Fascisms* rather than one unified vision of Fascism. Both state-produced film and popular film illustrate this, as the differing images of women suggest that the regime was not attempting to craft an ideal Fascist woman, but rather ideal Fascist women. There are undoubtedly elements of continuity throughout the different newsreels and white telephone films, namely the emphasis on patriarchal standards of femininity like passivity and chasteness and the importance of motherhood and family life. However, by broadcasting images of women as rural peasants, fecund mothers, Fascist party members, urban dwellers, and workers, the regime created a wide range of images and ideals with which women could align and to which they could consent.

## Appendix A

- Is there a clear setting or time period?
- Is there a clear, recognizable Italian location?
  - Is this a metropolitan city?
  - Does it resemble other cities in the world?
  - Is it a town or a village in the countryside?
  - Are the scenes in interiors or exteriors prevalent?
  - In the interiors, which rooms are more prevalent?
  - Which type of furniture and objects are in these rooms?
  - Are the exteriors artificially created or on location?
- How are the lights used in these films? Are there strong contrasts (cast and projected shadows), diffuse lighting, darkness, brightness? When are the women's faces in full light or vice versa?
- Who is featured? (Who are the main characters?)
  - What is their socio-economic position?
  - What kind of relationships do they have with the others?
  - Are there social hierarchies? Are the individuals clearly defined by their belonging to specific social classes?
- What are the characteristics of the women in the film/newsreel?
  - How old are they? (What stage of life are they in?)
  - Do they have a job?
  - What are their physical characteristics?
    - What are they wearing?
  - What are they seen doing?
    - ...by both film viewers and characters?
    - ...secretly (or seen only by viewers)?
  - What roles do they play? (Mother, wife, girlfriend, friend, worker, etc)
    - To what are their actions influenced by their social roles?
  - How do the relationships they entertain with the male and female characters different? Do these relationships depend, at least in part on socio-economic roles?
  - How (if at all) does their character change throughout the movie?
    - Where do they end up?
    - Doing what?
    - Is there any punishment/reward for their actions?

## Appendix B

### *Gli Uomini, che mascalzoni* (1932)

*Gli Uomini, che mascalzoni*, directed by Mario Camerini, follows the young protagonists Mariuccia (Lia Franca) and Bruno (Vittorio De Sica) as they navigate urban life in 1930s Milan. Mariuccia is a young shop-girl who lives with her father, a hard-working taxi driver, and Bruno is a chauffeur, working for a wealthy Milanese man and his wife. When Bruno first sees Mariuccia he is struck by her beauty and follows her all the way to her job at a perfume store, riding alongside her on his bike as she rides the public tram. When she arrives at work, her friends make fun of Bruno and his apparent lack of wealth for riding a bicycle; as a result, he returns later driving his boss' car, which he claims to be his own, in order to impress Mariuccia. He convinces her to get in the car, but rather than driving her home he takes her to the lakes outside Milan for a daytrip. They stop at an *osteria* to have some food and drink, where they talk, laugh, and dance together. However, Bruno runs into his boss outside the *Osteria*—to whom he had previously lied about his car, saying it was broken so that he would be able to use it to impress Mariuccia—and is forced to drive him and his wife back to Milan. He takes them back and then tries to quickly return to the *osteria* but crashes the car, leaving Mariuccia stranded. The owner of the *osteria* arranges for her Mariuccia to be driven back to Milan the next morning, and she returns feeling ashamed and angry at Bruno for leaving her alone. Mariuccia begins ignoring Bruno, who then also becomes angry and begins to ignore her as well. The two eventually make up, however, as Mariuccia gets Bruno a job at the *Fiera di Milano*, an important trade fair, where she is also working. While working at the trade fair, they become closer and their relationship blossoms. In the final minutes of the film, they ride back to the city in a taxi, which they fail to realize

is driven by Mariuccia's father, and Bruno proclaims his love for Mariuccia. When they arrive back in the city, Bruno bids Mariuccia farewell for the night and Mariuccia's father gives the two his blessing.

### *Darò un milione* (1935)

Mario Camerini's *Darò un milione* tells the tale of Mr. Gold (Vittorio De Sica), a millionaire who is tired of his luxurious and superficial life. The film begins as Mr. Gold jumps from his yacht in an attempt to leave his old life behind, but as he swims away he encounters a homeless man (Luigi Almirante) in the water attempting to commit suicide. He gets the man to safety and the two of them set up camp for the night. Mr. Gold reveals to the man that his life as a millionaire is vain, frivolous, and lacks genuine connection, and that he would give a million lire to anyone who treated him with true kindness. The next morning, the homeless man wakes up to see that Mr. Gold has disappeared and has left him with money. He takes his encounter with Mr. Gold to the press, and soon after a story is published in the paper revealing that there is a mysterious millionaire who has disguised himself as a poor man that will give a million lire to a person that treats him well. As a result, everyone begins treating the homeless people of the city with tremendous kindness, thinking that they will be encounter the millionaire in disguise. While this is happening, Mr. Gold meets a beautiful young woman, Anna (Assia Noris),<sup>120</sup> who is in the process of searching for Bob, the escaped circus dog. She reveals to Mr. Gold that she too works for the circus, but in a technical capacity rather than as a performer. Mr. Gold follows her back to the circus, which

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<sup>120</sup> The character's name is listed as Anna in the credits, though her name is never mentioned in the film.

is providing free lunch to the homeless and entering their names in a lottery for a cash prize in the hopes of finding the millionaire. As comedic chaos ensues within the circus, Mr. Gold falls for Anna and realizes that she was the person who had treated him with genuine care and kindness. As a result, Mr. Gold takes her onto his yacht, reveals his true identity, and presents her with a ring.

*Ma non è una cosa seria* (1936)

The film *Ma non è una cosa seria*, directed by Mario Camerini and based on a play of the same name by Luigi Pirandello, tells the story of Memmo Speranza (Vittorio De Sica), a womanizing bachelor who has been engaged over ten times but has never actually been married. The film opens as Memmo runs from his most recent engagement to the wealthy Elsa Rossi Bellini (Elsa De Giorgi), fleeing to a boarding house in which he has a room rather than attending a party with his fiancé and her family. Elsa's brother Giulio finds out that Memmo has decided not to attend the party, and in an attempt at defending his family honor he ends up following Memmo to the boarding house and shooting him in the shoulder. Memmo is taken to the hospital to recover where he is constantly receiving presents and visits from guests, and he is taken care of by a young woman named Gasperina (Elisa Cegani), who runs the boarding house. Gasperina is a hard-working, modest, and caring woman, and after speaking with her in the hospital Memmo decides to marry her so that he can end his pattern of serial engagement, describing the marriage as “nothing serious” (“*non è una cosa seria*”). He declares this plan to the other people at the boarding house who eventually go along with it, except for Signor Barranco who protests to the idea because it is an insult to the institution of marriage and an insult to Gasperina herself, who he describes as

good and pure. Memmo and Gasperina get married, but afterwards Memmo continues to chase after women, specifically his ex-fiancé, and Signor Barranco comes up with a plan to annul their marriage so that he can marry Gasperina instead. The movie concludes in a small town in the countryside, presumably where Gasperina is from, and after spending quality time with her in the quiet and beautiful rural landscape, Memmo realizes that he wants to abandon his philandering lifestyle and stay married to Gasperina, declaring that the marriage is indeed “something serious” (*una cosa seria*).

### *Il Signor Max* (1937)

*Il Signor Max* (directed by Mario Camerini) follows Gianni (Vittorio De Sica), a modest man who runs a newspaper stand in an unnamed Italian city, who is living a double life. Gianni’s uncle, Pietro, plans him a trip around Europe, and before he lives for this trip, his friend Max Varaldo, a wealthy and presumably aristocratic man, lends him his camera and gives him a first-class train ticket to arrive at his first destination, Naples, Italy. When Gianni arrives in Naples, he bumps into two women who notice the name “Max Varaldo” written on the camera and reasonably assume that is Gianni’s name. Instead of continuing the European vacation that his uncle had planned for him, Gianni follows the two women onto the ship they are embarking in an effort to see them again. Gianni encounters Paola (Rubi Dalma) once on the ship, one of the two women he met after arriving in Naples, and she greets him by the name “Max,” which she believes to be his real name. At this point, Gianni begins living a double life—one that is his real life, and the other in which he pretends to be the aristocratic Max Varaldo who plays bridge and drinks whiskey. The plot thickens as, after returning to his home and going back to working at the newsstand, he encounters Lauretta

(Assia Noris), the other woman he met in Naples, who actually works for Paola and helps to take care of her little sister. Lauretta has seen Gianni both as himself and as Max, and he therefore spends almost the entirety of the film balancing his two identities and making sure that Lauretta does not find out that he is pretending to be two people. As the film progresses, Gianni spends time both with Lauretta as his true self and Paola as his stolen identity, participating in elite activities that it is clear to the viewer he has never participated in before, and he himself eventually realizes that the elite life is not for him and that the wealthy aristocrats he had been spending time with are not genuine and do not understand him. Lauretta, a modest, sensible, and hard-working woman, helps him come to this realization, and the film concludes with their engagement.

*I grandi magazzini* (1939)

*I grandi magazzini*, directed by Mario Camerini, follows the lives of Bruno (Vittorio De Sica) and Lauretta (Assia Noris), two employees of a large department store in an unnamed Italian city. Bruno works as a delivery-man and Lauretta as a shop girl, and after seeing her for the first time Bruno regularly makes excuses to go up to the floor of the store where Lauretta works in order to see and talk to her. Lauretta repeatedly ignores him and refuses his attempts at flirting, but when she finally decides to respond (with the encouragement of her best friend and fellow shop girl, Emilia), she sees Bruno get in the car with another woman who works as a shop girl at the department store (Anna). Although she pretends not to care, it is clear to the viewer that she is becoming increasingly jealous of Anna—her jealousy and desire to be with Bruno reach its peak when she hears Anna invite Bruno to go skiing over the weekend, motivating her to “borrow” a ski outfit from the

department store and meet Bruno at the train station where he was supposed to meet Anna. Anna never arrives, however, so Bruno and Laretta go on a weekend getaway alone and return to the city engaged. After they return and go back to their jobs, the manager of the store, Bertini, finds out that Laretta took the outfit and also claims that she stole an expensive pair of stockings (found in her locker)—he tells Bruno, who becomes angry and effectively ends his engagement with Laretta. By the end of the film, Bruno and his friend and fellow worker, Gaetano, figure out that Bertini and other employees have been stealing merchandise from the store, and consequently that Bertini had lied about Laretta stealing. Upon making this discovery, he forgives Laretta and they go back to being engaged and planning their future as a married couple.

*Il birichino di papà* (1943)

Raffaello Matarazzo's *Il birichino di papà* tells the story of the Giovannini family, specifically that of the youngest daughter, Nicoletta (Chiaretta Gelli). The family lives in a big house on a rather large plot of land in the countryside, though the exact location is neither specified nor easily identifiable, and they are clearly well-off. The film begins with the Giovannini family preparing for the arrival of the oldest daughter Livia's (Anna Vivaldi) fiancé, Roberto Della Bella (Franco Scandurra), and his family—his sister, Irene, and his mother, who is referred to as *la marchesa Della Bella*. The Della Bella's are clearly wealthy, possibly aristocratic or elite, and urban, so the family is trying to make a good impression. Nicoletta, however, is thoroughly unimpressed and is actively against Livia and Roberto's union because she does not want to lose her sister. Nicoletta is a girl that marches to the beat of her own drum—we see her driving a carriage through the countryside, aiding with the



birth of a horse, and running around in a way that is not indicative of “ladylike” behavior. She is also rather blatantly rude to the Della Bella family, specifically to the *marchesa*, and the *marchesa* therefore decides that it would be in Nicoletta’s best interest to be sent to boarding school (the boarding school that she runs). Nicoletta protests, but is eventually sent to the boarding school where she misbehaves, fails to follow orders, and generally wreaks havoc. As the film progresses, Nicoletta gets so sick of the boarding school that she sneaks out and arrives at the house in which Roberto and Livia live, where she sees Roberto kissing a woman that is not her sister. As a result, she takes her sister and leaves, arriving at the office of a lawyer, Giulio Marchi, where they stay the night and come up with a plan to handle Roberto’s indiscretion and overall mistreatment of Livia. Livia reveals to Nicoletta that she is pregnant while staying at the lawyer’s house, and it is this future child that ultimately brings the two families together and forces Livia and Roberto to reconcile—the film concludes with the families celebrating over a homemade dinner.

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