

THE FASCIST EMPIRE: FROM WAR TO FILM

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When from Eritrea and Somalia, Fascist Italy invaded the thousand year old Ethiopian Empire- ruled by Emperor Hailè Selassie- I was a child, a six year old child. It was on October 1935. As a second grade pupil of the elementary school, I remember the heavy propaganda with which the Fascist school authorities subjected us in order to persuade us that what Mussolini had decided to conquer was certainly an advantage for Italy and that, in any case, Italy was committed to follow in the tracks of the ancient Romans, to restore the old Roman Empire all around the Mediterranean Sea and into Africa.

To accomplish his imperialistic purposes Mussolini needed the consent (which he actually got) of every class of citizen and, of course, from the younger population. In our school rooms propaganda posters hung on the walls and the geographic maps showed us how large the Ethiopian country was and how rich, and therefore extremely necessary for our weak economy. It would guarantee us large amounts of raw materials, minerals, agricultural and cattle resources, and would mean a large land "under the sun" for our emigrants. A colossal film was also produced by CINECITTÀ in January 1936, and a gigantic slogan was on view from the top of a papier-maché construction. The slogan said: LA CINEMATOGRAFIA E' L'ARMA PIU' FORTE (Cinema is the strongest weapon); the colossal propaganda film was *Scipione L'Africano* (*Scipio The African*). The film tells the story of the Roman war expedition to North Africa against Carthage (approx. 200 B.C.), which was strongly promoted by General Publius Cornelius Scipio, who persuaded the Roman Senate to organise a terrible special Corps of 45.000 soldiers to be sent to Africa. The battle of Zama signalled the victory of Scipio, and for his great victory Scipio received the honour of being named "The African". Today a large square in Rome is still called ZAMA SQUARE. I have used some sequences of the fiction film "Scipione l'Africano" in my documentary film two times, let's have a look at them.

The effect this propaganda had on me was that I never succeeded in understanding why Italy sent so many soldiers to Africa for carrying on a war there without a compelling reason, and why we Italians so much wanted "a place in the sun", considering the fact that Italy itself has so much sun and so many problems to face from this abundant sunshine. All this explains why I was so glad to make a documentary film on the conquest of the Empire 50 years later. Now I know something more.

At that time (1936) I wasn't interested in thinking about the Empire, as was the case of most Italians, even after the loss of Empire and colonies.

Ethiopia, as is well known, was only the first step in the imperialistic war strategy of Benito Mussolini and his men. Shortly after, (two months only), following the conquest of the Empire, Mussolini, at the command of all the armed forces, sent more than 70.000 men to your country, to Spain, starting in July 1936, to help his fascist friend Franco. In April 1939, again on Mussolini's orders, and with the consent of the Supreme commanders of the Army, Navy and Air Force, the invasion of Albania was accomplished. King Victor Emmanuel of Savoy became King of Italy and Albania; three years before, he had become Emperor of Ethiopia, just like in the fairy tales. The next step of Mussolini's imperialistic war strategy was the Second World War, in 1940. Five years later the imperialistic dream collapsed together with Fascism, Empire, Albania, King, Emperor and Dux. All disappeared.

Democratic Italy, born out of the war of resistance against nazi-fascism, immediately after the liberation from the Fascist dictatorship and the Nazi-German oppression, condemned very strongly and clearly the policy of the past regime and the fatal consequences of Mussolini's dictatorship and the power of his men over the Italian population. This condemnation came from politicians, from historians and from the consciences of the citizens. But, as far as the question of Empire is concerned, the consciences of Italians awoke much later on, and even final opinions from historians and politicians arrived with remarkable delay.

Such a situation when on for several years. The loss of colonies and Empire was not a shock for Italians; on the contrary, for a large majority of citizens, it was seen to be an advantage for the economy of the country, due to the fact that colonies and Empire had meant a dramatic economic failure for more than half a century. Millions and millions of Lira, labour resources, food and materials instead of being invested in the fatherland went to Africa, without any control, in addition to all the war expenses for the conquest in 1936 and the later African Campaign from 1940 to 1943.

After the Ethiopian war and the expedition corps to Spain, Italy was compelled to devalue the Lira. Our entire economic system was strongly struck by sanctions. At the end of the Second World War our money was that printed by the Allied Military Government: the so-called AM-Lira. In such a situation nobody cared about the lost Empire.

It was only approximately 20 years after the end of the Second World War that the historians awoke, following disclosure of new documents -through their recovery from the allied authorities- and after the testimony of some witnesses who began to speak. Very well-known academic historians in Italy (Rochat, Procacci, Ceva, Candeloro) wrote about particular aspects of Italian colonialism -and also outside Italy (Deakin, Mack Smith, Pankhurst), but nothing comprehensive appeared until the second half of the seventies when the Italian historian Angelo Del Boca -from 1974 to 1984- succeeded in publishing a monumental work in four volumes on the Ethiopian question with the title *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale (The Italians in East Africa)*, by Laterza - Bari.

It was the same historian and journalist, Angel Del Boca, who accepted with enthusiasm to be the historical consultant for my film and also the narrator and interviewer. I gave him, with great pleasure, the role I had had in my previous films. Outside Italy the British historian, Anthony Mockler wrote a book with the title *Il Mito dell'Impero*, first published in Italian by Rizzoli in 1977.

And so it was that my film *L'Impero, Un'Avventura Africana* (*The Empire, an African Adventure*) happened to be the first attempt to give the mass audience of Italian TV screens a complete and logical view of the Ethiopian question. How did Italy arrive at the conquest war? How was the war carried out? What remained to the Italians after the loss of the Empire? This attempt, as already stated, only came 50 years after the Ethiopian war.

Italy had begun its colonial conquests in Africa in 1869, only 9 years after its unification. First came Eritrea (1885), later Somalia (1891), then Libya (1911); all very poor lands. The real target had always been Ethiopia. This was the dream of the Italian imperialists before and during Fascism. Ethiopia was considered to be a rich land with gold, platinum, precious metals and minerals, immense agricultural areas with great amounts of cattle, stupendous forests; a dream of a paradise, but the reality was otherwise.

The Italian penetration into East Africa was always strongly opposed by the local populations, including during the entire Fascist occupation. The Ethiopian army and the Ethiopian warriors fought with great heroism and ability against the modern Italian army. This was never said, not only by the Fascist propaganda, but also after the Second World War. So the myth remained. The Ethiopian army, although badly equipped and trained, put more than 300,000 soldiers of the Italian army in heavy difficulties.

The Ethiopian campaign was meant to be a promenade of a couple of weeks, but it lasted 7 months, and in order to defeat the Ethiopian army, the Italian generals had to use poison gas and chemical weapons, thus behaving as criminals in a criminal war of conquest. This was always denied. It was necessary for all such arguments to come out in our film, because the Italian people were ignorant of them until recent times. We had to tell the truth.

The Ethiopian campaign began on the night between October 2 and 3, 1935, from Eritrea (mainly) and partly from Somalia, which were both already Italian colonies. The fall of Addis Abeba happened after the Emperor Hailè Selassìè escaped to London on March 5, 1936. It was a vast colonial enterprise. How could the complex reality of such an enterprise be synthesised in the form of a film narration which had to capture the interest of a big TV audience, like the first channel of RAI, whose public is more accustomed to entertainment than to historical documentary programmes? This was the main question which obsessed not only me but also my friend Piero Berengo Gardin, a TV director with excellent experience in TV-studio recording. We had a very short time at our disposal and under those conditions, the Video recording in studio was the only way

which RAI could assure us that they would be able to transmit the film on the very day of the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the war of conquest, that is to say, on October 3, 1985.

A few months before beginning the production of the Empire film I had completed my considerable task of filming my series in six episodes, *Italy at War*. I had worked for more than four years on *Italy at War*. In each episode I showed one decisive battle and so I used the battlefield (of a particular battle) as the principal filming location, something like an open-air studio where I invited historians, witnesses and any other guests, and where we brought the materials useful for the filming such as documents, models, films from archives. For the sea battles, we went on board a ship of the Italian navy and navigated together with historians, witnesses, documents, models and so on. This choice helped us greatly in achieving good results and also gave me ideas for the Empire film, but with a very clear variation: I had to use a real TV studio, and not an open-air studio like the battlefield.

For the TV studio, we had to invent a kind of symbolic filming place. A good suggestion came to me during an interview with a witness. He described how it had happened that approximately 30,000 Italian women and children and old men and also severely wounded men, still living in Ethiopia in refugee camps after the occupation of Ethiopia by the British troops in 1941, returned to Italy in 1943, when the Second World War between Italy and Great Britain was still going on, by means of hospital ships - white ships - through the efforts of the International Red Cross Organisation. It was a tremendous enterprise. My witness, who himself was gravely wounded, returned to Italy on board one of the white ships. He was not able to take part in the filming because he was very old and sick, but he introduced me to other witnesses. We found a mother and daughter, who at the time was a child, and also the very famous cartoonist and writer Hugo Pratt, the author of *Corto Maltese*. And so we made our decision: our filming place had to be a white ship, symbolically reconstructed in our TV studio. There we would invite the historians, the witnesses and any other guests who could help us to tell the true story and there, on board our symbolic white ship, we would also have the documents, the maps, the archive films and so on.

RAI found a big TV studio in Turin and there we reconstructed several sets representing a white ship and also other symbolic sets. It was like dropping our guests into a representative theatrical scene, which could help them narrate their stories by giving them the proper atmosphere. This was also a suggestive way to attract a large audience. The production in Turin lasted about four months, together with the editing work. We could now show the film in time for the 50th anniversary for the Conquest of the Empire, October 3, 1985.

We see now the first sequence where the white ship is introduced. PROJECTION FROM L'MPERO, UN'AVVENTURA AFRICANA

The stories to be told on board the white ship had to be oriented within the following two frameworks:

a) the refugees' narration of the trip back home after the loss of the Empire (July-August 1943)

b) the narration in flashback (1935-1936) telling how the African adventure in Ethiopia began before and during the *conquest of the Empire*.

Along these two main guidelines it would be possible for us to bring into the open what bothered all of us so much and particularly our historian and narrator, Angelo Del Boca: this was the deep moral need to tell the actual events without omissions, because the Ethiopian campaign had been one of the worst crimes of the Fascist regime.

We see now the sequence which captures the blissful paradise atmosphere of those Italians who were already living in Ethiopia before the campaign and were waiting for something which could offer the pretext for beginning the invasion. Curiously, the witness is a British lady who married an Italian diplomat. This segment contains very interesting archive material. PROJECTION FROM L'IMPERO, UN'AVVENTURA AFRICANA.

In the next sequence, the Fascist army (black shirts) is being trained to the rhythms of the famous song *Facetta Nera*; an interview with the historian Giorgio Rochat follows, in the billiard room of the white ship. PROJECTION FROM L'IMPERO, UN'AVVENTURA AFRICANA.

What was happening, in the meantime, on the other side of the front? What was going on inside Ethiopia before the war? The English film director Lutz Becker brought on board the white ship some film clips from his documentary film *The Lion of Giuda* and he shows us a very rare sequence in Addis Abeba, with the Emperor Hailè Selassiè. PROJECTION...

Once the war had begun, the first tough battle was the one for the conquest of Amba-Aradam mountain. This segment includes very interesting archive material, and the narrations of Angel Del Boca and the witness Italo Pietra who died one year ago.

An extremely important guest: the son of Ras Imrù, Michel Imrù. He came to Turin from Addis-Abbeba. Ras Imrù was one of the most intelligent and heroic generals of Emperor Hailè Selassiè during the war. His son Michel was the last Prime Minister of Emperor Hailè Selassiè before the Menghitsu putsch. PROJECTION...

The use of chemical weapons and poison gas has always been denied by the Fascist and what is more, after the Second World War, the democratic governments took no definite position on this question. The evidence came out and Angelo Del Boca shows them to a valuable witness: Alessandro Lessona, who was the Fascist Minister of the Colonial Department, in Rome, also during the whole Ethiopian campaign. PROJECTION...

Mussolini celebrated his triumph in the style of a Roman emperor, but the war against the Ethiopian resistance went on. For Italy, the humiliations and mortifications

were greater than the satisfactions. Many were victims of the Fascist repression. PROJECTION...

Italy remained in Ethiopia from May 1936 to approximately May 1941 (after the final defeat at Amba Alagi). In five years time thousands and thousands of Italians had emigrated to the conquered paradise. But it turned out to be a hell for many of them. Hard work, hostility of the populations, danger of attacks. The Italians in Italy had to pay many taxes to maintain the Empire. Bridges, houses and hospitals were built in Africa, not in Italy. Thus, an underdeveloped south in our country still exists today. In Ethiopia the Fascist authorities, especially at the beginning, committed multitudes of crimes. Marshall Grazini, the first governor, was, in effect, a terrible executioner.

After the loss of the Empire, the Italian residents were taken prisoners or collected as refugees in camps (mainly women and children and old citizens). Finally, approximately 30.000 of them, the greatest part, was allowed to sail back to Italy on board white ships in 1943. Our film is meant to be the last trip, the one which began from Massua, on the Red Sea, on the 12th of July of 1943, and ended at the harbour of Taranto at the beginning of August. During the sea voyage around Africa, something decisive occurred in Italy: the fall of Fascism on July 25th. This is the last sequence. PROJECTION...

The lost Empire never came back to Italy.