

Giorgio Bertellini

The Divo and the Duce: Promoting Film Stardom and Political Leadership in 1920s America

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019, pp. 352 (open access)

Centred on the public notoriety of Hollywood actor Rudolph Valentino and fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, *The Divo and the Duce: Promoting Film Stardom and Political Leadership in 1920s America* is a unique and fascinating multidisciplinary dialogue between film and political studies, and media and social history. Three main areas of research are at the core of Giorgio Bertellini's book: celebrity culture, political leadership and publicity practice. The complexity of the task in hand is reflected in the questions guiding the investigation: 'How was it possible that in apparently nativist and isolationist 1920s America, a foreign leader like Mussolini, who never set foot in the country, could become a paragon of authoritative leadership? [...] When and how did film stardom and political leadership, as apparently distinct institutions of mass governance, become comparable, parallel and analogous?' (p. 4).

The Divo and the Duce opens with a discussion of two unexpected photographs capturing Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford giving the fascist salute. The first was taken in 1926 during their visit to Rome, where the two actors met Mussolini, and the second in 1927 at their home in Los Angeles. As Bertellini argues, the images, and the events behind them, highlight 'two converging historical phenomena: the rising political import of celebrity culture and the growing popularity of authoritarian political leadership' (p. 4). At the beginning of the 1920s for a brief but significant moment, both Mussolini and Valentino were objects of fascination in the American popular imagination. As the wide range of archival sources interrogated by Bertellini indicate, the celebrity of the two Italian-born icons reached beyond their respective domains of politics and cinema. Publicity departments played a crucial role in this process and capitalized on the well-rehearsed practices of mass communication management developed by Hollywood during World War One.

It is within the collaboration between Woodrow Wilson's administration and Hollywood that Bertellini contextualizes the establishment of publicity practices that ultimately informed the strategies used to promote Valentino and Mussolini. Bertellini's attention to the role played by, for instance, the Committee on Public Information (CPI), a propaganda office established a week after the U.S. declared war on Germany, is particularly insightful. Chaired by the journalist

George Creel, the CPI launched a range of propaganda initiatives that relied on the film industry's collaboration. The CPI's Division of Films not only produced documentaries and newsreels but also became involved in writing pro-government scenarios for commercial films and their international distribution. In Hollywood, part the film industry and its stars eventually embraced propaganda efforts. Within Bertellini's frame of analysis the focus on the widely reported involvement of Fairbanks and Pickford in the patriotic Liberty Loan campaign might sound obvious. However, *The Divo and the Duce* skilfully combines the discussion of the effects of World War One on the two actors' rising stardom with their key role as publicity vehicles for the industry and the consequent global expansion of Hollywood. It is within this precise context that Bertellini shows the links between propaganda discourse, public opinion management and celebrity culture. As he highlights, during the 1920s the popularity of film stars was 'not a *fait accompli* but the result of actions taken by individuals on the basis of institutional imperatives, guesswork, and artful manipulation of popular rituals and preferences' (p. 8).

A multitude of intersecting social and ideological dynamics gave rise to Rudolph Valentino's stardom. Institutional and cultural discourses about race, on-screen narratives of Italian immigrants and representations of masculinity are some of the tropes that Bertellini discusses to introduce the case study of Valentino. Of particular note is the meticulous attention payed to the key role of Hollywood's publicity and promotional executives in constructing Valentino's persona, which reveals novel and enlightening aspects of his story. For instance, the remarkable detective work conducted by Bertellini on the origins of the notorious Pink Powder Puff article sheds new light on the scandal. At the centre of the story was publicist Victor Mansfield Shapiro who founded the Associated Motion Picture Advertisers in 1916. It was during his collaboration with United Artists for the distribution of *The Son of the Sheik* that Shapiro saw an opportunity to create an arresting publicity stunt that challenged Valentino's on and off-screen image of masculinity. Similarly, Bertellini shows how a series of articles, interviews and promotional news items written by the publicity agent Herbert Hove built on Valentino's assertive and authoritarian character portrayed in *The Sheik*. As Bertellini explains, during the three years that Hove worked as Valentino's publicists, 'the divo signed off on rare but studied pronouncements that merged film stardom with politics' (p. 123). It is, in fact, in one of Hove's articles that the parallel between Valentino and Mussolini was first drawn.

By the time of Valentino's premature death in August 1926, Mussolini's personality cult and his legitimization had already met with consensus within America's public opinion. *The Divo and the Duce* concentrates on networks of individuals spanning political and cultural spheres that facilitated Mussolini's acceptance in the U.S. With its connections to diplomats and financiers, the Italy America Society (ISA) promoted Mussolini's public image, and Bertellini very astutely evidences the detailed operations of its members. Similarly, fiction and non-fiction films produced in Hollywood attempted to capitalize on Mussolini's

The Divo and the Duce

popularity. In 1927, Fox chose to premiere Murnau's debut American film, *Sunrise*, alongside one of the first newsreels produced with its new Movietone sound system. For the first time American audiences were able to hear the Duce's voice in *The Man of the Hour*, which showed Benito Mussolini in a close-up delivering a brief, bi-lingual speech. Another example, *Mussolini Speaks*, was, as Bertellini suggests, a summary of the Duce's 'cinematic visibility.' Produced by Columbia Pictures and released in 1933, the film functioned as a biography of the Fascist leader and recounted his political achievements whilst showcasing his unique personality and celebrity status.

The Divo and the Duce is the result of impressive archival research and Bertellini's skilful application of a diverse range of theoretical frames and historical perspectives. The illustrations that accompany each section of the book are visual evidence of the depth and breadth of the investigation. Alternating his analyses between close-ups on key protagonists and panoramic views of film and political histories, Bertellini offers a truly innovative and distinctive approach to studying the relationship between celebrity culture and political leadership.¹

[Pierluigi Ercole, De Montfort University, UK]

¹ *The Divo and the Duce: Promoting Film Stardom and Political Leadership in 1920s America* received the 2020 Italian American Studies Association Book Award.