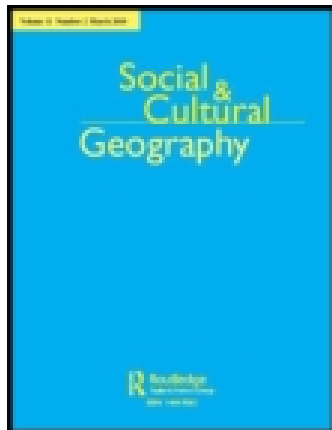


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Producing the ideal fascist landscape: nature, materiality and the cinematic representation of land reclamation in the Pontine Marshes

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Using previously unpublished material from the L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa (LUCE) archive and the Central State Archive in Rome, this article examines how film-making became part and parcel of the process of 'taming' nature in the Pontine Marshes under Mussolini's regime. Fascist authorities perceived the undisciplined and unproductive nature of the 'death-inducing' swamps as something that had to be extinguished from the face of Italy, to make way for an ideal fascist nature that would nurture ideal fascist subjects. We argue that the success of transforming the swamps owed as much to the extensive investment of labour power, capital, and technology, as it did to the careful staging of every step of the project through cinematographic representations. Although planning and land reclamation institutions were responsible for the material production of the reclaimed land, the LUCE institute was instrumental in actively turning this new land into the ideal fascist landscape. In so doing, the paper offers a new reading on landscape and nationalism explored through an analysis of the production of landscape in Italy under Mussolini.

Key words: Italy, fascism, nature, LUCE, newsreels, cinematography, modernity.

Introduction

On 24 December 1928 Italy's fascist regime launched 'the Mussolini Law', a fourteen-year national land reclamation programme aimed at turning Italy's 'death-inducing' swamps into fertile agricultural land (Desideri 1981). The Pontine Marshes (Figure 1), a marshland spreading across 75,000 hectares south of Rome, was given top priority as an area that

was to be given over to agricultural production (Sottoriva 1977). The programme was directly linked to the need to increase the country's food and fuel self-sufficiency after the sanctions imposed on Italy by the League of Nations. However, the fascist regime used an extensive propaganda machinery to promote the programme not as the outcome of economic necessity, but as a heroic quest for producing an 'ideal' fascist landscape within

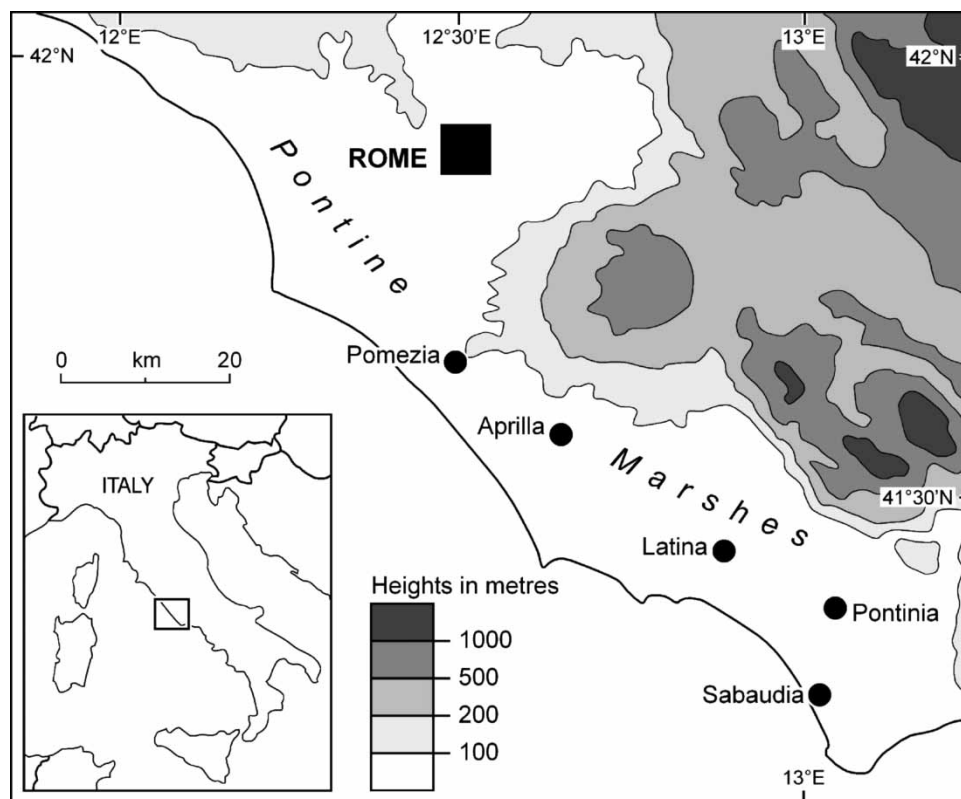


Figure 1 Map of the Pontine Marshes.

which the 'ideal' fascist citizen could live and thrive. As the extensive land reclamation programme coincided with the establishment of a national cinematic propaganda institution, L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa (LUCE), the use of newsreels became a key means through which fascism promoted the tamed marshland as an ideal fascist landscape. During the project's initial phase, the labour and capital spent on land reclamation was matched by the labour spent on producing its representation on the silver screen. Newsreels documented step by step the struggle to turn the 'sterile' nature of the marshes into a fertile landscape, with Mussolini himself often featuring, overseeing the project, or even working on the land. The newsreels were

widely distributed for compulsory general viewing, celebrating the land reclamation project as one of fascism's crowning achievements.

Using previously unpublished material from the Archivio Storico LUCE at the Cinecittà studios in Rome, and from the Archivio Centrale di Stato (Central State Archive) in Rome,¹ this paper offers a detailed analysis of how filmmaking became part and parcel of the process of socially constructing an ideal fascist nature. First, the paper canvasses the political and physical planning and financing of the land reclamation in the Pontine Marshes. Second, the paper undertakes an analysis of film and newsreel propaganda to explore how fascism produced and promoted a distinct 'fascist

nature'. Nearly 3,000 newsreels and many documentaries were produced from the late 1920s until the fall of the fascist regime (Caprotti 2005, 2006, 2007). Archival research identified seventy newsreels and nine documentaries from the period 1930–1939, which screen scenes directly referring to the Pontine Marshes project. The paper analyses thirty-two of these carefully staged cinematic representations as part and parcel of fascism's efforts to socially construct the transformed landscape in the Pontine Marshes as the ideal-type fascist environment, within which the ideal-type fascist self would thrive and reproduce.

In the analysis of the land reclamation as a modernizing project, the article engages with geographical literature that examines the link between landscape and national ideologies, but also with literature on Italian and fascist studies. Notwithstanding Italy's specific political and economic conditions under fascism, the Pontine Marshes project bears many similarities with other modernizing projects that were implemented across the western world during the first half of the twentieth century and aimed at taming and controlling nature. Geographical enquiry has offered detailed studies on such projects around the world, from Weimar Germany (Herf 1984), Spain (Swyngedouw 2007), England (Cosgrove, Roscoe and Rycroft 1996; Daniels 1993; Matless 1992), France (Harvey 2003) and Greece (Kaïka 2006), to Stalin's Russia (Bassin 2000) and the USA (Gandy 2002). These authors detail the variety of means that state institutions mobilized to link the production of modern landscapes with the promotion of national ideologies: from photography, decoration and landscape painting, to mass media, and public speeches. Italian fascism, however, also used extensively newsreel propaganda to link modernizing projects to national ideologies.

The analysis of newsreels as a significant means for promoting fascist ideology is largely absent from studies in Italian or fascist culture, despite the fact that the production of a distinct 'fascist culture' has been researched intensively in Italian studies (Ben-Ghiat 2001; Fogu 2003; Lazzaro and Crum 2005) but also in geography. As Atkinson (1999: 394) attests: 'the recent emphasis upon the cultures of Fascism has enriched our understandings of the ways that the regime communicated its agenda and priorities to ordinary Italians'. Atkinson and Cosgrove (1998) focused on architecture, examining the meaning ascribed to the Vittorio Emanuele II monument in Rome; Schnapp (1993) used the fascist 18BL, the 'mass theatre' of the 1943 Littoriali della Cultura, as a case study for the analysis of fascist ideology. In history and sociology too, a cultural analysis of fascism has become central in approaches which seek to place Italian fascism within the wider framework of modernity (Ben-Ghiat 2001; Berezin 1991; Bosworth 2000; Braun 1996; Falasca-Zamponi 2000; Gentile 2003; Griffin 2001, 2002; Mosse 1996; Schnapp 1993, 1996). Although these analyses offer significant insights on the importance of architecture, theatre, public rhetoric, political meetings and public events, a study of fascist newsreels as an important cog in the fascist propaganda machinery is missing. Although neglected in the literature, we argue that newsreels comprised a prime means through which fascism played out its spectacular aesthetically focused ideology.

The article also contributes towards exploring further the emerging field of research that engages with visual methodologies. In this contribution, we mobilize the work of Fairclough (1995), Weiss and Wodak (2003) and Green (1990), and use critical discourse analysis at two levels: institutional and visual. This two-pronged analysis relates to a

Foucauldian understanding of discourse as a system of thought which constructs both the subjects and their material experience (Foucault 1972). Discourse is understood not only as a *reflection* of social relations of power and of the institutions that reproduce them, but also as a *means of articulating* power. Within this context, the image is one of the arenas where power is not just expressed, but also formed. The image does not simply mediate power, it actively constructs it (Debord 1995). Within this context, we maintain that, although the planning and land reclamation institutions were responsible for the material production of the reclaimed land, the LUCE institute was instrumental for actively turning this new land into the ideal fascist landscape.

In analysing the newsreels, we first coded the content based on thematic characteristics (manual labour, heavy machinery, infertile land, fertility, Mussolini's figure, architecture, fascist symbols) to categorize newsreels produced between 1932 and 1939 (Krippendorf 1980; Lutz and Collins 1993). Second, the visual and audio elements (narration and soundtrack) of the thematically categorized *corpus* of newsreels were analysed using critical discourse analysis. In the analysis, we remained conscious of the potential pitfalls of focusing on visuality alone² (Hamburger 1997; Shohat and Stam 1998). Hence, throughout the paper, we maintain the link between the analysis of newsreel images and an understanding of the historical geographical conditions under which these images were materially produced.

The Pontine Marshes land reclamation project

The fourteen-year national land reclamation programme that was launched in 1928 with 'Mussolini's Law' was allocated a budget of

seven billion lire (around 4.9 billion euros in 2007 parity terms) (Desideri 1981). This was a significant investment and the project was arguably Italy's most important public works project throughout the 1930s, a transformative enterprise that, based on large amounts of committed capital, would engage with an 'untamed' natural environment and strait-jacket it into a sanitized version of ideal fascist nature. Two-thirds of the project was financed with state funds, and one-third with private capital (Schmidt 1937). State funds were to be assigned to land reclamation projects in annual instalments over three decades, and the resulting public debt would be phased out by 1972–3 (Schmidt 1937: 356–357). For their part, private landowners were expected to raise collectively over 2.5 billion lire. This effort would 'enable' them to contribute to the national project. Landowners practically had no choice but to comply, either by borrowing from private banks or by using personal funds. Failure by individuals to reclaim land under their possession resulted in appropriation of the land by the state.

Of course, this national reclamation enterprise ran a high financial risk, as it received the lion's share of new investment initiatives (state and private alike), but it was linked to the regime's drive for *autarchy*, national self-sufficiency and economic superiority that became even more intense after the League of Nations introduced sanctions against Italy in 1935 for having invaded Abyssinia. Grain production in the Pontine Marshes would contribute towards winning the Battle for Wheat, a national food security programme, while beet cultivation would boost alcohol production, described as an 'autarchic' car fuel which would reduce dependency on sanctioned oil (Mazzocchi Alemanni 1938, in Parisella 1986: 216, Table 8). By 1932, nearly 30 per cent of all private and public funds for

reclamation works were invested in the Pontine Marshes, and by 1934 around a quarter of the total of man-hours spent on public projects nationwide were sunk into the project (Ghirardo 1989). This accounted for 63 per cent of the time spent on land reclamation projects nationwide (Schmidt 1937). The fascist regime sustained a lasting and enduring level of support for the Pontine project throughout the 1930s.

The main governmental body instituted to administer land reclamation was the Undersecretariat for Land Reclamation, which was established within the Ministry of Agriculture in 1929 (Schmidt 1937). The actual reclamation projects in the marshes were to be carried out by a series of consortia, under the aegis of the Opera Nazionale Combattenti (ONC) (Caprotti 2007; Jacobelli and Fasolino 2003). The ONC was a veterans' organization formed after the First World War in order to assist with the reintegration of war veterans into Italian society. Its involvement in the Pontine Marshes project makes sense only when seen as part of the decision to make war veterans the first social group that would be sent to 'colonize' the reclaimed land in the Marshes. The land reclamation consortia were organized by geographical area. Their role was to implement the land reclamation project at the local scale. The Pontine Marshes were organized in two consortia: the Consorzio della Bonificazione Pontina, and the Consorzio Bonifica di Littoria.³ The groundwork for reclaiming the marshland began in 1927 (Sottoriva 1977), with the marshes' area divided into two reclamation zones (*comprensori*), separated by the Sisto river. The Comprensorio della Bonificazione Pontina, north of the river comprised about 27,000 hectares; the Comprensorio della Bonificazione di Piscinara, south of the river, covered around 55,000 hectares (Prampolini 1935).

By 1932, the first phase of the Pontine Marshes reclamation was completed, and the first city, Littoria, was founded in the area (renamed Latina after 1945), soon to be followed by Sabaudia (1934), Pontinia (1935), Aprilia (1936) and Pomezia (1939). In addition, a number of small rural communities (*borghi*) were founded in the agricultural areas between New Towns. These small communities were to act as regional command-and-control centres for the ONC (Caprotti 2007). Most of the *borghi* were named after First World War battlefields (e.g. Borgo Grappa, Borgo Bainsizza) in order to provide a 'familiar' symbolic landscape for the war veterans who were expected to relocate in the area and cultivate the marshes.

Producing an ideal 'fascist' landscape

Italian fascism idolized certain characteristics associated with nature and linked them to the social realm of fascist values. Rural life and agricultural labour were seen as occupations that could help create new, 'reclaimed' fascist citizens. The 'Lex Serpieri' law, introduced on 8 May 1924, was drafted by agronomist Arrigo Serpieri and was a national programme for 'integral reclamation' (*bonifica integrale*) that aimed at reclaiming people as well as land. It included not only agricultural programmes, but also institutional innovations in education and health, as well as the introduction of technology as a means of improving land and people alike (Desideri 1981; Griffin 2001; Schmidt 1937). However, whilst depicting certain aspects of the natural world as positive influences, Italian fascism strongly rejected other aspects of nature as detrimental to the fascist project. These were linked to the idea of wilderness, and to perceptions of nature as essentially sterile, undisciplined,

uncivilized, and unproductive (Dogliani 1999; Kaïka 2005). The characteristics of this ‘sterile’ nature were often associated with ‘female’ nature, echoing late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century gendered rhetoric (Falasca-Zamponi 2000; Green 1990).⁴ Referred to as *la mortifera palude* (the death-inducing swamp), the pre-fascist landscape in the marshes was perceived as belonging precisely to this sterile, non-fascist sphere (Caprotti 2006). The Pontine Marshes land reclamation project aimed at transforming this wild, sterile nature into a fertile, life-giving nurturer, an idealized and romanticized nature that would provide the perfect setting for the production of ideal fascist citizens. So, whilst nature as the ultimate nurturer of the ideal fascist citizen provided inspiration for the regime’s social project, nature as wilderness posed a frontier that had to be conquered and colonized.

This ambiguous attitude towards nature is not a phenomenon unique to Italian fascism. The double coding of nature (superior moral and ecological order, on the one hand, barbarian, wild and uncivilized on the other) prompts as many debates today as it did in the past (Kaïka 2004, 2005; Swyngedouw and Kaïka 2000). Phelan (1993) notes that the ‘shifting problematic’ between nature and culture and the social construction of nature has been an integral part of western modernization. An instrumentalist view of nature was already present in Western thought in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when nature came to be seen as something which could, and should, be mastered for the common good (Harvey 1996). Burgess (1978) traces the history of this debate back to Hegel, who conceded that the ‘objective world’, including nature, is transformed through the mind. The interdisciplinary academic debate on the history, ideological

lineage and characteristics of the nature–society relationship within the modern era cannot be fully explored here. Nonetheless, it is important to relate this debate to the fascist regime’s enterprise in the Pontine Marshes, as the project can be seen as a window into a wider, complex struggle against an untamed nature that mobilized state institutions, the fascist propaganda apparatus, professional classes (architects, urbanists, statisticians), and the most recent advances in modern technology (Ipsen 1996).

The study of the planning, design, materialization and subsequent representation of the Pontine Marshes project provides an insight into fascism’s attitude towards nature, but also towards the urban environment. This vision for a new rural settlement was set against the proclaimed decadence and sterility of existing urban settlements. Although fascism had urban roots (it originated, as a movement, in Milan), fascist planners and demographers came to view the city as a pathological environment, a human creation that alienated human beings from fascist moral values. The city was made accountable for the development of morally and physically weak individuals and for falling birth rates (Ghirardo and Forster 1985).⁵ In this light, the State was conceptualized as the catalyst through which an ‘anthropological revolution’ could be enacted (Gentile 1997: 173). This would bring about a progressive change in the nature of citizens. Through simultaneous action upon citizens’ bodies and their environments, the regime sought to bring about a fascist modernity (Belardelli 2005; Gentile 1996). The perception of cities as ‘sterile’ environments prevailed in fascist ideology and led to a number of policy initiatives, which included the policy of ruralization (*ruralizzazione*). This policy was constituted by the twin projects of *negative* and *positive urbanism*.

Negative urbanism aimed to halt rural–urban migration and urban expansion, whilst simultaneously improving living conditions in existing cities by removing ‘unhealthy’ urban areas, through the process of *sventramento* (disembowelment). *Positive urbanism*, on the other hand, included the state’s active engagement in the creation and growth of new urban settlements, from neighbourhood units to whole towns (Horn 1991). The construction of New Towns that followed the land reclamation in the Pontine Marshes combined both policies, and aimed at producing the ‘ideal’ settlement that would contribute towards halting migration to existing ‘cancerous’ cities. Fascist party headquarters were located at the heart of New Towns, which were represented by the regime as the vanguard of fascist civilization (Ghirardo and Forster 1985; Pennacchi 2001; Prampolini 1935; Torri 1935; Traina 1988).

Interpreting the ambiguity: tradition and modernization

The fascist regime saw the creation of a new physical and social landscape in the Pontine Marshes as a genuine modernizing project. Indeed, the project exhibits many similarities in aims and scope to a number of modernizing plans that were materialized across the world at around the same time: the Tuscan *maremma* (1928), a large-scale coastal reclamation project; the Zuiderzee dyke project in Holland (1920–1932), which produced the IJsselmeer, an enclosed area of water that would later host urban settlements⁶; Spain’s ambitious national hydrological plan that would ‘correct hydrologically the national geographical problem’ by introducing a system of dams (Swyngedouw 1999: 454; 2007); Switzerland’s Linth valley hydro engineering scheme that drained

marshland and provided the geographical basis for a unified Swiss identity (Speich 2002); Greece’s Marathon dam project, that would produce Athens as a western sanitized metropolis (Kaïka 2006). All of these projects shared not only the aim to produce new techno-natural landscapes that would contribute to the development of national economies, but also the desire to link these socially constructed techno-natures to a broader project of promoting national unity and identity. Fascism became intimately connected with a nationalist form of modernism early on, through its encounter with Futurism (Brose 1987, in Vander 2001: 39; Gentile 1996: 45). As mentioned in the previous section, the land reclamation project was driven by the regime’s efforts for national self-sufficiency and economic superiority after the League of Nations introduced sanctions against Italy in 1935. But the New Towns project was an integral part of a broader political programme that aimed to bring the Italian economy on a par with other industrialized countries, Britain and France in particular (Ghirardo and Forster 1985). Over its ruling years, fascism launched a great number of modernizing initiatives in order to re-establish Italy’s international standing after the loss of negotiated territorial gains at the Treaty of Versailles (Joes 1977: 265).

The relationship between modernization and Italian fascism was arduous, to say the least. Joes (1977: 259) notes that: ‘the question of fascism and modernization is not an easy one to approach. To start with, there is the grave problem of defining what is modern and what is traditional, compounded by the difficulty of finding anything like an empirically pure type of either’. Mussolini’s version of modernization selectively combined progress with deeply traditional and conservative ideas and practices: the strong support for a rural landholder economy; the promotion of a

rural way of life; the deep suspicion of urban industrial centres; a preoccupation with the moral effects of industrialization and liberalism (Eatwell 1996). Fascism envisaged re-embedding community and tradition in Italian society at the same time as it heralded the modernizing transformation of this society through the power of technology (Szerszynski 1996: 124). However, in a country that sustained traditional, semi-feudal social structures in many rural areas, whilst experiencing rapid industrialization in the north, deep unease existed about everything ‘modern’. It could be argued that fascism’s attempts to promote the benefits of modern technology and science whilst harking back to ideals of *romanità* was Italy’s ideological means to make progress more palatable and publicly acceptable (Kaika 2005), a political, economic and cultural ‘third way’, heralded by intellectuals who welcomed technological progress but ‘had anxieties regarding the effects of Taylorist visions of efficiency and productivity on the individual’ (Ben-Ghiat 1996: 293; see also Griffin 2001).

In effect, fascism exhibited no more and no less than the internal contradictions that characterized every cultural political and ideological attempt to deal with the maelstrom called modernity. Such contradictions were not confined to fascism alone, but lay at the core of the contested process of modernization (Berman 1999). In this sense, Mussolini could be seen as inextricably linked to the figure of a modern ‘Faustian Developer’ (in Marshall Berman’s 1999 terms), who aimed to turn Italy into a vast construction site. However, whilst Berman’s modern ‘Developer’ aims to fulfil modernity by wiping the historical slate clean, Mussolini’s version of modernization retained references to the past, and promoted comparisons between fascist Italy and imperial Rome, as a justification of contested policies and

aspirations. In Payne’s words: ‘The balance is neither one of unalloyed modernization nor of pure antimodernism, but a complex mixture distinct from either of these’ (1995: 479). The goal was to ‘reconceptualize “modernity” as a condition that would allow for the retention of specificity at both the personal and the national level’ (1995: 293).

Fully aware of its internal contradictions, fascism used a number of strategies (such as public art and public rhetoric) as instruments that could help the regime contain these contradictions, and promote an image of coherence and unity. Along with other instruments of propaganda, newsreels became a key means through which fascism tried to weave its internal contradictions into a discourse of a coherent national project. Creating well-staged cinematic representations of the Pontine Marshes project in the form of newsreels was a means by which the regime tried to turn a project that responded to the material needs of self-sufficiency into a larger than life quest for producing the ideal fascist landscape and promoting the ideal fascist self.

From concrete to celluloid

After the 1920s, the fascist regime became increasingly aware of the need to establish a strong state propaganda apparatus. September 1934 saw the formation of the Undersecretariat of State for Press and Propaganda, which was placed under Mussolini’s direct supervision (Cole 1938). Its divisions, established in October 1936, governed the national and foreign presses, cinematography (previously under the jurisdiction of the Undersecretariat for Press and Propaganda), tourism, and the theatre (Cole 1938: 426). This was to become the Ministry of Popular Culture (*MinCulPop*) in 1937. The *MinCulPop* was responsible for

fascist propaganda in all its forms. Fascist propaganda was initially communicated through more traditional media: newspapers, the radio (Reeves 1999: 208), theatre (Berezin 1991; Schnapp 1993), public speeches and posters. However, cinematography gained momentum in promoting fascist ideals from the late 1920s onwards⁷ as Mussolini's regime realized its power as a propaganda instrument (Caprotti 2005). According to Forgacs (1990), it was mainly cinema's ability to reach a much broader audience that gave it an advantage over the theatre as a propaganda instrument. Gross cinema box-office receipts doubled in Italy between 1924 and 1927, and in 1927 cinema box office revenue accounted for more than 50 per cent of total entertainment revenue, including theatre and sport. In 1936, cinema's share increased to 70 per cent, and in 1941 to 83 per cent (Forgacs 1990: 69). In interwar Italy, cinema was a spectacle that reached a much broader social spectrum and a much bigger audience than any other performing art. As Mario Labroca, head of the music section of the Ministry of Popular Culture, stated:

Cinematography is an art which is close to architecture ... both architecture and cinematography fuse together, because of their provision of necessary living conditions on the one hand and easy and economical entertainment on the other, taking a vast section of the public into account as well as climatic conditions and taste. (Labroca 1934: 379).

It was within this context that fascism instituted newsreels as a key instrument of fascist propaganda (Caprotti 2005). Italy was not alone in using newsreels as a means to communicate political messages: Britain, the USA, France, Germany and the USSR also produced a great number of newsreels in the 1930s (Bullock 1988; Reeves 1999).

However, it was the fascist regime that pioneered the *compulsory* screening of fascist newsreels prior to the screening of main features (Royal Decree 1000, 3 April 1926,⁸ see also D'Autilia 2002). By that time, the LUCE was producing four newsreels per week. Founded in 1925 by Royal Decree (law number 1985, 5 November 1925),⁹ the LUCE came under state control in 1926 (Brunetta 2002) and received one million lire of initial funding from the Italian state, but this sum soon increased to two and a half million lire, after generous injections with funds from other institutions.¹⁰ The LUCE's role soon expanded to the production of documentaries, newsreels, and selected feature films, and to the distribution and compulsory screening of these products (Reeves 1999). An impressive production and distribution network was set up by the fascist regime in order to ensure that the images were distributed widely and projected in a synchronized manner. In 1929 there were over 3,000 cinema theatres in Italy, all screening newsreels produced by LUCE prior to any feature film (Sorlin 1996: 56). The activities of the institute fit within a broader, subtle 'fascistization' of the Italian film industry, which included the foundation of the Experimental Cinema Centre in 1935, and the nationalization of the Cinecittà studios in 1938 (Reeves 1999: 213). The importance that the LUCE held for fascist leadership is recorded in a letter signed by Mussolini, and sent to LUCE's president Filippo Cremonesi in October 1928, congratulating LUCE on its first three years of services.¹¹

The institutionalization of fascist cinematic propaganda machinery with the LUCE coincided with the materialization of the Pontine Marshes project, and the project became a key feature in LUCE's newsreels. As every stage of the land reclamation process was recorded and reworked on film, filmmaking became part and parcel of the material

process of ‘taming’ nature in the marshes. At the initial phase of the project, the labour expended on land reclamation was glorified by its representation on the silver screen. Later on, when the reclaimed land turned into New Towns LUCE was also present, ‘documenting’ everyday life in the ‘ideal’ environment of the reclaimed marshes.¹²

The analysis of the visual products of Italian fascism that is attempted here enables us to grasp the process of transcribing social reality into fascist ideology. Filmmaking technology has the power to transform subjective action into objective fact (Ciacci 2001: 13). On-screen images become abstracted from the realm of experience and transcribed into an alternative, constructed reality (Reeves 1999: 213). As the audience is called into a sensorial participation to this constructed reality, images become a significant part of the formation of dominant discourses (Rose 2007). If that is true of film in general, it is even more true when it comes to newsreels. This particular *genre* of filmic representation appeared to be simply ‘documenting’ reality. It is this documentary character of newsreels and their claim to be faithful to the facts that made this *genre* particularly useful for fascist propaganda. Fascism assigned great importance to the elaboration of fictitious alternatives to objectionable realities, and control of information became crucial to the promotion of glorified images of fascist Italy to Italy itself and abroad. To be sure, fascist newsreels engaged with the reality of the period, but they did so in a specific manner: they reworked reality through the cinematic eye, creating a montage out of fragments which were cherry-picked according to political and ideological criteria. In the cinematic representation of fascist New Towns, myth and the reality of the tangible, materiality and representation were blended together as part and parcel of the

same ideology. According to Walter Benjamin ‘the introduction of aesthetics into political life’ was ‘the logical result of Fascism’ (1999: 234). Through aesthetics, political power becomes transcendent in the eye of the masses. According to Benjamin, again, gaining this transcendence effectively exempted the fascist regime from democratic responsibility in the political process. Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi (2000) also uses the concept of aesthetic politics to analyse Italian fascism:

the notion of aesthetic politics will further illuminate the shady links between fascism’s belief in the leader’s omnipotence and its conception of the ‘masses’ as object, between the artistic ideal of harmonic relations and the auratic embracement of war, between the construction of ‘new men’ and the focus on style, between the reliance on spectacle and the attack on consumption, between claims to the spiritual functions of the state and the affirmation of totalitarianism. (Falasca-Zamponi 2000: 8)

Between materiality and newsreel representation

In this section, we critically analyse thirty-two newsreels from the LUCE archives that ‘document’ the land reclamation and town construction process at the Pontine Marshes. We identify and unravel the images and discursive elements that transcribed each step of the process into fascist ideology in order to show how, although labour, machinery and capital were necessary for reclaiming the marshland, the LUCE institute was instrumental for actively turning this new land into the ideal fascist landscape. The numbers we use to identify the newsreels correspond to the classification catalogue of the LUCE archives.

The first stage of the land reclamation process is documented in newsreel B0391. This newsreel contains one of the most

impressive moving images to be found in the LUCE archive. It is a sequence showing a plethora of heavy tracks and land reclamation machinery lined up side by side, advancing across the Marshes like an army (Figure 2). The military parallel is striking. The newsreel leaves little doubt that fascism's powerful technology is invading the marshes, determined to transform this unfriendly landscape. Marching against the landscape, fascism is at war against undisciplined nature; a war it is determined to win. The war against nature metaphor is literally spelled out in newsreel B0547, when Mussolini himself, addressing a packed audience in Littoria, notes: 'In the first decade of the Blackshirts' revolution a great battle began, to redeem from water and death a great area of territory belonging to the

Italian motherland' (Mussolini 1934, in B0547). The same fighting spirit which crystallizes a modern struggle *with* and *against* nature is also present in newsreel B0349 that documents the speech that Mussolini gave in October 1933, the day after the foundation of Littoria:

We have engaged in a very hard battle. We had to face, not only nature ... but also scepticism, mental inertia, and the moral cowardice of those who want to be mathematically certain of victory before they enter a battle, ... I am telling you. For us, Fascists, the battle is more important than the victory. For, when a battle is fought with dauntless will, it cannot fail to be crowned with victory. (Mussolini 1933; speech also cited in Tassinari 1939: 39–40)



Figure 2 Tractors rolling in waves across the landscape. Source: B0391.

Newsreel representations of the regime's struggle against nature leave no doubt of the fate that awaited the natural environment that clashed with fascism's plans and will to power. Newsreels B0374, B0391, and B0547 document the paradigmatic eradication of such an undisciplined nature. After a long sequence depicting the depressing landscape at the marshes, suddenly, at the push of a button, the infertile marshland is literally blown apart with an impressive explosion. The explosion that we are made to witness prepares the land for the subsequent creation of agricultural land and cities, and primes the landscape to become the perfect vessel of an ideal fascist life, as these are subsequently documented in newsreels B0286 and B0312.

Once the first phase of land reclamation was over, newsreels glorified the perfect fertile landscapes that replaced the marshes. Newsreel B1613 samples such a perfect landscape, as it minutes Mussolini's visits to Pomezia and Ardea in 1939. The idyllic rural scenes that permeate the reel are intermingled with extensive coverage of public celebrations at Mussolini's passage. The closing screen shows Mussolini eating grapes in Pomezia, suggesting that the fruit comes from the cultivation of the fertile centre of agricultural production in the Marshes that once used to be a wasteland (Figure 3). Given that agricultural production in the Marshes concentrated on wheat and biofuel, it is actually more likely that the grapes came from the Castelli Romani, an area next to Pomezia, famous for its grape and wine production since antiquity (Comune di Pomezia-Santa Palomba 2004). But in this, as in many other instances, the actual fact of the matter is of far less importance for fascist newsreel representations; what matters is the intensification of the spectacular in the desire to present the Pontine Marshes as the new land of milk and honey.

As wasteland was slowly turning into a new landscape, the ideal fascist settlements in the form of New Towns were also under construction. Newsreels celebrate not only the produced rural environment and agricultural life, but also the construction of New Towns as part and parcel of the same seamless process of transforming the landscape and building the pinnacles of fascist civilization. Newsreel B0503, filmed in 1934, describes the architectural and urban plans of New Towns as 'exquisitely modern'. Details of fascist architectures unabashedly parade in LUCE newsreels. Whilst the rural environment that surrounds New Towns testifies to fascism's devotion to tradition, the prominent rationalist architecture of New Towns testifies to fascism's embrace of modernity. The construction of cities in the Pontine Marshes is represented as a great feat of precision engineering and scientific planning. As with agricultural land, New Towns are often juxtaposed to the marshes that used to exist in their place. In newsreel B0312, panning views of the marshes are followed by views of buildings in Sabaudia, showing how successful fascism had been in turning an unruly, unhealthy landscape into a well-ordered urban area. By the same logic, newsreel B0390 opens with a stunning scene of the town of Sabaudia literally rising gloriously out of a dark and waterlogged marsh environment (Figure 4). Workers work under the fascist symbol (B0390), taming the land in preparation for the construction of the city (B0374). Another newsreel, shot in the mid-1930s, documents Mussolini himself threshing wheat in the Pontine Marshes alongside local farmers (Figure 3). Mussolini also features visiting the construction works, walking through building sites and even making his way up the scaffolding around Sabaudia's civic tower (B0390). Panoramic views of



Figure 3 Mussolini threshing grain in the Pontine Marshes in 1935. Source: B0707.

New Towns are interchanged with close-up views of official buildings such as the Casa del Fascio (Fascist National Party headquarters), the post office (B0816), the Dopolavoro workers' clubs (B0235) or other communal buildings (B0816). Glorious music accompanies scenes of the completion of the first New Town, Littoria (B0346), and later Aprilia (B1192), and the civic centre in Sabaudia (B0391). The distinctive rationalist post office building in Sabaudia can be seen in Figure 5, whilst a historical photograph of Littoria city centre soon after its construction can be viewed in Figure 6.

The Casas del Fascio (Fascist National Party headquarters) and municipal buildings often boasted prominent towers, bearing the fascist symbols. As church towers were not allowed

to compete with the towers of municipal or Party institutions in either height or girth (B0634), fascist towers dominated the skyline of New Towns, replacing religious symbols as the new urban landmarks. These towers appear prominently in LUCE newsreels. The camera pans up and down their height, effectively conveying fascism's overbearing and omnipresent power. Panoramic views also often highlight towers jutting out of fledgling urban centres (B0547). Images of towers stretching away into the sky, black fascist flags standing proud against the breeze, and fascist crests reigning over the towers' façades, appear in many newsreels, power images conveying how fascism was reigning supreme over the Marshes (B0547, B0349, B0391, B0411, B0438, B0454, B0469, B0577,



Figure 4 Sabaudia rising over the marshes. Source: B0547.

B0661, B0816, B0987, B1192, B1613; 'L'Atto di Fede del Popolo Italiano, 1936). Mussolini himself asserted the link between the mighty tower imagery and fascist strength. Newsreel B1431 (1938) reports him visiting Carbonia, a New Town in Sardinia, and comparing the 'imposing mass of the civic tower' to the 'slim outline of the church tower'. Given that the towers of New Towns became such a prominent symbol of fascist power, it is perhaps not coincidental that the Allies chose Aprilia's municipal tower as their ranging target after the Anzio landings in 1944. The LUCE newsreels today are sometimes the sole testimonies to parts of the cityscape that are long gone.

But it was not only nature that was presented in newsreels to be succumbing

(either by force or willingly) to fascist will. Human beings often appear in newsreels, participating happily, willingly and heroically in the Pontine Marshes project. However, the 'willingness' of their participation is questionable, as 'colonists' were actually *coerced* to migrate to New Towns, and the process was often traumatic (Caprotti 2008). Families who were forcibly transplanted onto the reclaimed landscapes often had to leave behind land, homes, personal relationships, relatives, friends, and jobs. Without the commentator's voice providing the necessary ideological narrative, the newsreels that represent the relocation of these families into the marshes could be documenting any early twentieth-century migrant scene: Italians heading for New York or Argentina, or Americans from



Figure 5 Post office, Sabaudia. Photograph by F. Caprotti.



Figure 6 Littoria, panoramic view. Source: Tassinari (1939: plate 24) With permission from Editrice Aldina.

Oklahoma heading for California; uprooted people, with their belongings stacked by their side or on trucks (B1539), unsure yet hopeful

as to what the future will bring. The commentator's voice, however, turns the typical migrant scenes into a uniquely glorious

and happy occasion, as it represents the relocation of the colonists to the marshes as an act that will save them from poverty and from the recurring disasters of a whimsical untamed nature in other areas of Italy.¹³ The crowds gathered by the regime to welcome the new colonists to the Marshes also give a happy note to the occasion. Newsreel B0351 shows the colonists descending from trains with their luggage, to be met by cheering crowds waving tricolour flags. Newsreel B1599 (1939) shows forty families from Forlì arriving in Pomezia, while the commentator informs the viewer that they are the chosen ones, entrusted with the task of carrying the fascist project to fruition. This trust is symbolized with the act of assigning the keys of the colonial homes to their future occupants (B1539). Figure 7 shows a colonial house as it stands today in the marshes: note the numbering on the house, which denoted its ownership by the ONC organization. Despite the initial difficulties,

the regime did its best to make the initial transition as smooth as possible. Colonists were offered moral support as well as houses and fields, which they could effectively call their own, and most of them established a new life in the marshes.

However, the colonists were not only entrusted with the task to turn infertile nature into fertile land; they were themselves expected to become embodiments of the fascist ideal. Through exposure to the positive effects of the new natural environment in the marshes, men were expected to be transformed into the ideal fascist male, while women, now safely removed from the subverting effects of urban industrial life and consumerism, would become the ideal fertile and dutiful fascist female. Newsreel B0389 shows Mussolini handing out prizes to 467 male ‘heads of the family’ and to a few selected women. The same scene appears again in newsreels B0547 and B1192. The *pater*



Figure 7 A colonial house. Photograph by F. Caprotti.

familias figure dominates the scene, with the dutiful mothers/wives in the background. The role that life in the marshes held for women was clearly that of the ideal nurturer. This is also emphasized through ample coverage of children and baptisms. The first baptisms in Pontinia in June 1935 were greatly celebrated, with crowds of flag-waving colonists watching a priest pour water over babies using a sea shell (B0692). Newsreel B0503 opens with panoramic views of the newly built Sabaudia, before it abruptly cuts to a close-up of a mother holding a baby. The juxtaposition alludes to the fertility of the new fascist landscape where modernity is complemented with the tradition of a healthy family, represented here by the mother and her newborn.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how filmmaking became part and parcel of the process of ‘taming’ nature in the Pontine Marshes under Mussolini’s regime. Fascism perceived the undisciplined, uncivilized, and unproductive nature of the ‘death-inducing’ swamps as something that had to be extinguished from the face of Italy, to make way for a new, tamed, ideal fascist nature that would enable human interaction in the form of agricultural labour and rural living, and would nurture the ideal fascist subjects.

The paper’s contribution is twofold. Firstly, it offers a new reading on landscape and nationalism explored through the lens of an analysis of the production of landscape in Italy under Mussolini. Secondly, by bringing to light unpublished material from the LUCE archives, the paper offers a new dimension to the study of the social construction of modernist ‘natures’, and asserts the wealth that visual

methodologies can bring into this enquiry. This dimension of our research also contributes to studies of Italian fascism, which so far, had focused on architecture, political meetings, events, and festivals, as stages of fascism’s ‘mass theatre’, but largely ignored cinematography as an important means through which Mussolini’s regime promoted its ideology.

The land reclamation at the Pontine Marshes became the catalyst for the production of urban settlements in an area that had not seen extensive human habitation before. This paper showed that the success of turning the ‘death-inducing’ marshes into an ‘ideal’ fascist landscape involved heavy investment of labour, capital, and technology not only in transforming the land, but also in representing every stage of this transformation on newsreels. While the planning and land reclamation institutions were responsible for the material production of fertile land, the LUCE institute was instrumental for turning this land into an idealized fascist landscape. Whilst fascist technology in the form of hydro-extraction plants reclaimed land, fascist cinematic technology reclaimed citizens, and coaxed them into becoming the model fascist subjects that would deserve to occupy the newly constructed natures of the Pontine Marshes.

The cinematic representation of these new landscapes constituted a double filtering of reality: through the art of *montage* and through the ‘kino-eye’ (Beller 1999: 152). The fragments of fascism’s disparate ideas and practices of ‘modernization’ were unified in the eye of the viewer in what appeared to be a coherent fascist modernizing project (Ben-Ghiat 1996). In fashioning New Towns as environments where an ideal fascist life could thrive, whilst simultaneously crafting careful representations of these new spaces and distributing them widely, fascism proved to be well aware of both the need to recruit more-than-institutional and

spatial arrangements, and the necessity to dominate not only the spatial and political, but also the cultural sphere in order to turn its ideology into living practice. The new landscape in the Pontine Marshes was a hybrid socio-environmental product (Gandy 2005, 2008; Harvey 1996; Swyngedouw and Kaika 2000) that, even today, embodies and reflects the social and political conditions of the society that produced it.

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Notes

- 1 *Giornale Luce* B0235, March 1933; B0286, June 1933; B0312, 5 August 1933; B0346, 1933; B0349, October 1933; B0351, October 1933; B0374, November 1933; B0389, December 1933; B0390, December 1933; B0391, December 1933; B0411, 1934; B0438, 1934; B0454, 1934; B0469, 1934; B0503, July 1934; B0547, September 1934; B0577, November 1934; B0634, February 1935; B0661, 17 April 1935; B0692, 12 June 1935; B0707, 3 July 1935; B0816, 15 January 1936; B0987, 11 April 1936; B1192, 3 November 1937; B1431, 21 December 1938; B1445, 18 January 1939; B1539, 28 June 1939; B1599, 11 October 1939; B1613, 1 November 1939. *L'Atto di Fede del Popolo Italiano*, 1936.
- 2 For example, the adoption of a Eurocentric viewpoint or the presentation of a historically selective analysis.
- 3 The organization of land in Consorzia was borrowed from earlier attempts to reclaim the land. The Consorzio della Bonificazione Pontina (Pontine Land Reclamation Consortium) was founded by Pope Pius IX in 186. It was disbanded by the fascist regime in 1917, to be replaced by the institution of the Consorzio della Bonifica di Piscinara (1918), which was eventually amalgamated with the fifth consortium of the Roman Ager into a wider body, the Consorzio della Bonifica di Littoria, in 1934. Thus, in the 1930s the Pontine Marshes were organized by two consortia: the Bonificazione Pontina and the Bonifica di Littoria. In 1996, the two consortia were merged into the Consorzio di Bonifica dell'Agro Pontino (Prampolini 1935; Sottoriva 1977).
- 4 Although fascism did not exclusively conceptualize women only as submissive subjects (De Grazia 1992), they were often excluded from the action- and will-oriented sphere ascribed to men.
- 5 This is linked to Italian fascism's wider conceptualization of the changing role of individuals in the industrial world, and of human psychology as essentially feral.
- 6 Ministerie van Verkeer en Waterstaat, <http://www.rdi.nl/rdij/ijssemeergebied/afsluitdijk/index_uk.htm#anchor03> (accessed 1 May 2004).
- 7 Although, according to Berezin (1991) and Schnapp (1993), Mussolini saw the theatre as a more useful medium than cinema for political aims, only 5 per cent of the 354 plays produced in Italy between 1934 and 1940 had 'fascist' themes (Berezin 1991: 639).
- 8 Reich (2002: 8) states that the law making viewership of newsreels compulsory before the main feature was royal decree-law 1117. This is contradicted by various sources: see Brunetta (1979: 238) and D'Autilia (2002: 684–688). The decree-law in question therefore seems to be number 1000, emanated on 3 April 1926.
- 9 In 1924 the LUCE Institute's founder, journalist and lawyer Luciano de Feo, founded the *Sindacato Istruzione Cinema*, or Union for Educational Cinema, a small independent company which was the precursor of the LUCE Institute (Brunetta 2002; De Grazia and Luzzato 2002).
- 10 These institutions were the General Commissariat for Emigration (*Commissariato Generale per l'Emigrazione*), the National Social Insurance Fund (*Cassa Nazionale per le Assicurazioni Sociali*), the National Insurance Institute (*Istituto Nazionale delle Assicurazioni*), the ONC, and the National Workplace Injury Insurance Institution (*Cassa Nazionale Assicurazioni Infortuni sul Lavoro*) (Brunetta 1979: 237). Initially, the presidency of the institute was held by Senator de Michelis, with marquis Paulucci de Calboli as vice-president and Luciano De Feo as director-general (1979: 238).

- 11 Mussolini to Cremonesi, 7 October 1927. ACS, SPDCO, B. 1251, f.509.797/1.
- 12 Prefect of Littoria to N.U.P.I.E. Office of the Directorate-General for Propaganda Services in the Ministry of Popular Culture, 20 July 1937. ACS, *MinCulPop*, B.7, f.42.
- 13 Some, although very few, colonists did not remain in the Pontine Marshes. Some were deemed unsuitable and sent back to their provinces of origin, and some were sent onwards to 'colonize' other areas. This is the case in newsreel B1445, from 1939, which shows the inhabitants of a new village built by the regime in the Reggio Emilia region. The village's inhabitants came from New Towns in the Pontine Marshes.

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Abstract translations

La production d'un paysage fasciste idéal: la nature, la matérialité et la représentation cinématique de la restauration des sols dans les marais Pontins

Cet article s'appuie sur des documents inédits obtenus des archives L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa (LUCE) et des Archives d'État à Rome dans le but d'étudier comment la production de films est parvenue à s'inscrire dans le processus de «domestication» de la nature dans les marais Pontins sous le régime de Mussolini. Les instances fascistes percevaient en ces «marécages induisant la mort» une nature indisciplinée et improductive dont il fallait effacer toute trace de l'Italie et la remplacer par une nature fasciste idéale favorable au développement de sujets fascistes idéals. Nous soutenons que la transformation réussie des marécages a été autant le résultat des investissements substantiels consentis en matière de ressources humaines, capital et technologie, que l'attention donnée à la mise en scène de chacune des étapes du projet dans les représentations cinématographiques. Bien que la responsabilité de restaurer les terres revienne aux institutions de la planification et de la restauration

des sols, l'institut LUCE a contribué activement à faire de ces nouvelles terres un paysage fasciste idéal. Ce faisant, l'article propose une nouvelle lecture du paysage et du nationalisme qui sont examinés dans le cadre d'une analyse de la production du paysage en Italie sous Mussolini.

Mots-clefs: Italie, fascisme, nature, LUCE, bulletins de nouvelles, cinématographie, modernité.

Produciendo el paisaje fascista ideal: naturaleza, materialidad y la representación cinematográfica de la recuperación de terreno en los pantanos de Pontine

Utilizando material hasta ahora no publicado del archivo L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa (LUCE) y de los Archivos Estatales de Roma, este artículo examina cómo la producción cinematográfica llegó a formar parte del proceso de domar la naturaleza en los pantanos de Pontine bajo el régimen de Mussolini. Las autoridades fascistas

veían la naturaleza no disciplinada y no productiva de los 'pantanos provocantes de la muerte' como algo que había que extinguir para hacer lugar a una naturaleza fascista ideal que cuidara a los sujetos fascistas ideales. Sugerimos que la exitosa transformación de los pantanos se debía tanto a la extensa inversión de mano de obra, capital y tecnología como al cuidadoso montaje de cada paso del proyecto por medio de representaciones cinematográficas. Aunque las instituciones de planificación y recuperación de terreno fueron responsables de la producción material del terreno recuperado, el instituto LUCE jugó un papel decisivo en la transformación de este terreno en un paisaje fascista ideal. De este modo, el papel ofrece una nueva lectura sobre el paisaje y el nacionalismo, explorado por un análisis de la producción del paisaje en Italia bajo Mussolini.

Palabras claves: Italia, fascismo, naturaleza, LUCE, noticiarios, cinematografía, modernidad.