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Photographing Mussolini

The Making of a Political Icon

Alessandra Antola Swan



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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Reflecting on the task of classifying photography, Roland Barthes notes that photographs have something tautological about them in that they cannot be separated from what they represent, as if both photograph and referent were ‘affected by the same amorous or funereal immobility, at the very heart of the moving world: they are glued together, limb by limb, like the condemned man and the corpse in certain tortures’.¹ Barthes’s dramatic use of words expresses the difficulty in separating the various layers of meaning produced by photographs while Stephen Shore explains that photographs can be read on different levels:

To begin with, it is a physical object, a print. On this print is an image, an illusion of a window on to the world. It is on this level that we usually read a picture and discover its content [...]. Embedded in this level is another that contains signals to our mind’s perceptual apparatus. It gives ‘spin’ to what the image depicts and how it is organised.²

Reading the photograph requires maintaining the illusory power of the image before the eyes and independent from the photograph as physical object thus, in Graham Clark’s words making the photograph ‘one of

¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 1982), p. 6.

² Stephen Shore, *The Nature of Photographs*, 2nd edn (London: Phaidon, 2007), p. 10.

the most complex and most problematic forms of representation'.³ When adopted as a means of propaganda, the specific and intrinsic characteristic of duality can lead photographs to be perceived as 'truthful' and therefore a direct channel to the real. This peculiarity, along with being infinitely and easily reproducible, made photography one of the preferred media in the art of political persuasion in the twentieth century. The dictatorial regimes that developed in Europe between the two world wars were not based on violence alone and crucial to their establishment and endurance was a seductive language used to project power through the developing mass media.⁴ As well as fear, repression and control there was also entertainment, celebration and a certain level of creativity. The emergence of the masses as active participants in public life, following the revolutions of the eighteenth century and the struggles for citizenship of the nineteenth, corresponded to the development of a new language of political persuasion.

In his celebrated work *Psychologie des foules*,⁵ Gustave Le Bon referred to the modern era with the developing industrial and urban world characterised by the widening of political suffrage, albeit to men only as one of the 'crowds'.⁶ Thus, in a radically changing world, political power, institutions and law were no longer legitimised through the divine authority of monarchy as, progressively, sovereignty required the support of the people.⁷ Jeffrey Schnapp notes that modern states and political movements, including those that were authoritarian, populist or conservative, employed the same language for persuasion of the masses because public opinion, either in the form of popular support, consent, or the absence of opposition, played a crucial role.⁸ According to David Forgacs and Stephen Gundle, a characteristic of modernisation is 'the increasing

³ Graham Clarke, *The Photograph* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 29.

⁴ Fabrice d'Almeida, *High Society in the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), p. 5.

⁵ Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, the English version is available online <http://gutenberg.org/etext/445>.

⁶ Peter Demetz, 'Introduction: A Map of Courage', in *Foto: Modernity in Central Europe, 1918–1945*, exh. cat., Washington, National Gallery of Art, 10 June–3 September 2007 (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2007), p. 1.

⁷ Jeffrey T. Schnapp, *L'arte del manifesto politico 1914–1989. Ondate rivoluzionarie* (Milan: Skira, 2005), p. 19.

⁸ Schnapp, *L'arte del manifesto*, p. 19.

presence in society of mass-reproduced leisure goods such as films, paperbacks, glossy magazines, radio programs, and records all offered to consumers through the market'.⁹ Visual imagery and media spectacle were contributory factors in the construction of Fascist aesthetic politics that administered culture to the Italian people. Political image-making was promoted by the regime to ensure that its ideological presence permeated the daily life of the nation.¹⁰ While written and spoken propaganda was spread through publishing, press and radio, in the 'New Vision' era,¹¹ the visual became essential to the cultural construction of social and political life. Traditional forms of fine art such as painting, sculpture and architecture, together with newer and modern methods of communication, mainly photography and film, were strategically put to use by the Fascist regime to translate values into a simplified and comprehensible language made up of slogans, logos and acronyms aimed at transmitting complex ideas for maximum effect with minimum effort.¹² The masses had to not only be instructed on political, economic, cultural, moral and health issues but also made familiar with symbols, beliefs and myths aimed at promoting social cohesion and favouring public participation in national matters.¹³

In an increasingly standardised and impersonal world, it seemed relevant to respond to collective needs through a leader with an impressive appearance and original personality. The continued legitimacy of those governing depended on the capacity of a leader to create a public image that incarnated individuality while responding to collective values. The ideal leader was an individual with vision, who through communication could shape public opinion. Through the photographic process the Fascist leader's idealised body and features could be moulded into an immediately recognisable physical model, often reinforced through text. 'The word itself is everything: it is enough to say Duce for everyone to see,

⁹David Forgacs and Stephen Gundle, *Mass Culture and Italian Society from Fascism to the Cold War* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), p. 95.

¹⁰Adolfo Mignemi, *Propaganda politica e mezzi di comunicazione di massa tra fascismo e democrazia* (Novara: Edizioni Gruppo Abele, 1995), p. 25.

¹¹Earl A. Powell, 'Director's Foreword', in *Foto: Modernity in Central Europe*, p. xxiii.

¹²Schnapp, *L'arte del manifesto*, p. 22.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 20.

imprinted in their memory, his unmistakable profile, male, rugged, decisive, Roman, with an unforgettable stare', wrote the illustrator Sandro Biazzi in 1941 in a celebratory review of the Duce's better known and most significant portraits.¹⁴

This book explores the photographic image of the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini (1883–1945) and investigates the impact of the medium of photography on the construction of his personality cult. The work of photographers and the management and distribution of photographs are together analysed to shed light on the evolution of his image. The book engages with the question of Fascism's relation to modernity, highlighting the status and role of photography within a totalitarian regime as a key contributor to a developing system of mass communications. Mussolini was the founder of the National Fascist Party and prime minister of Italy from 1922 and effectively, with the abolition of other parties, dictator or Duce,¹⁵ from 1925 until 1943, with an epilogue lasting until 1945.¹⁶ He was the first modern dictator to be the object of systematic promotion in a variety of spheres including the visual media. His face, enhanced through composition and post-production, was 'iconic' in the sense that, like religious icons, it elicited reverence and devotion, and also being all-pervasive, had become so familiar as to be instantly recognisable, like a trademark.¹⁷

The distribution of images of him played an important role in the projection of his power, both at home and abroad. His photographs appeared across a wide range of printed newspapers and magazines and can be differentiated on the basis of style and genre as well as periods (Figs. 1.1–1.2).

¹⁴Sandro Biazzi, 'Ritratti "grafici" del DUCE', in *L'industria della stampa*, 3, 4 (1941), 111–121 (p. 111).

¹⁵The term derived from the Latin word *Dux*, meaning 'leader'. On this title, see Guido Melis, *La macchina imperfetta. Immagine e realtà dello Stato fascista* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2018), pp. 177–180.

¹⁶Mussolini was deposed in July 1943. Imprisoned, he was rescued by a Nazi commando in September 1943. The Republic was established the following month at Hitler's suggestion. For a recent biography in English, see Richard J. B. Bosworth (new edition) *Mussolini* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

¹⁷On Italian iconic imagery, see *Iconic Images in Modern Italy: Politics, Culture and Society*, ed. by Martina Caruso and Alessandra Antola Swan, special issue of *Modern Italy*, 21, 4 (2016); on the concept of iconic in the same issue see the essay David Forgacs. 'Gramsci Undisabled', 345–360 (p. 346).



Fig. 1.1 Benito Mussolini full page illustration, *Tempo*, 26 October 1939, Mussolini at the Congress of Naples, on 24 October 1922

The sheer quantity of images allowed different publics to ‘read’ Mussolini and feel him as part of their world. For example, children’s comics on the one hand and women’s magazines on the other deployed



Fig. 1.2 Book cover for the biography by Giorgio Pini 1939. Original image: Mussolini salutes the crowd in Turin, 14 May 1939

images of the dictator that were in tune with the emphases and expectations of those areas of the press.¹⁸ In the context of historic charismatic

¹⁸ Paolo Murialdi, *Storia del giornalismo italiano* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1996), 150–151.

personalities, modern theories of visuality can link concepts of seeing to particular political discourses and social influences.¹⁹

Over the past three decades, a few chapter-length accounts of Mussolini with photographs have been published as well as illustrated biographies supported by images from salient passages of his political career. More recently specialists have investigated particular aspects of Mussolini's photographic representations and derivatives such as posters or postcards.²⁰ These publications, together with recent filmic and television productions,²¹ have helped to revive the memory of Mussolini's likeness, with more attention to context, sometimes presenting previously unseen images or original angles of research, consequently developing a greater awareness of the image as an historical document.

However, even though Mussolini's photographic image is known, quite often seen, and analysed within its two-dimensionality, his image has yet to be decoded. Its reading overall has remained literal as only the first layer, the visible content, has been subjected to analysis. Barthes claimed that a photograph is in itself 'flat' and one cannot penetrate nor reach

¹⁹ See Pierluigi Basso Fossali and Maria Giulia Dondero, *Semiotica della fotografia. Investigazioni teoriche e pratiche d'analisi* (Rimini: Guaraldi, 2006); Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, selected and trans. by Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 1993); Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 1993); John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972); John Berger, *About Looking* (London: Bloomsbury, 1980); Teresa Brennan and Martin Jay, eds., *Vision in Context: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Sight* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (London: Reaktion, 2001); Peter Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Gail Finney, eds., *Visual Culture in Twentieth-Century Germany: Text as Spectacle* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); Hal Foster, *Vision and Visuality* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988); Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, trans. by Tavistock/Routledge (London: Routledge, 1989); Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1979).

²⁰ See John Fraser, 'Propaganda on the Picture Postcard', *Oxford Art Journal*, 2, 3, (1980), 39–47; Enrico Sturani, *Le cartoline per il Duce* (Turin: Edizioni del Capricorno, 2003); Jeffrey Schnapp, *L'arte del manifesto*.

²¹ *Mussolini and I*, dir. Alberto Negrin (HBO, 1985) [on DVD]; *Il giovane Mussolini* (Rai Due, 1993) [Television]; *Benito Mussolini* (Rai Tre 13, August 2010) [Television]; *Obiettivo Mussolini* dir. Graziano Conversano (Sky History Channel 407, 12–19 May 2007) [Television]; *Il segreto di Mussolini* dir. Fabrizio Laurenti e Gianfranco Norelli (Rai Tre, 13 August 2010) [Television]; *Tea with Mussolini* dir. Franco Zeffirelli (G2 Films, 1999) [Film]; *Vincere* dir. Marco Bellocchio (01 Distribution, 2009) [Film]; *Sono tornato* dir. Luca Miniero (2018).

into it.²² In a similar critical vein, Susan Sontag argued that photographs, which cannot themselves ‘explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy’.²³ The latent content of Mussolini’s photographic representation needs to be read to reconstruct the function of his photographs as tools of persuasion and establish the connection between visual content, the editorial process and the image control exercised by the dictatorial power. Approaching Mussolini’s photographs in a more holistic way as both objects and expression of a mentality can reveal new aspects relevant to the materiality of his images. Rather than a written biography of Mussolini with supporting images, the aim here is to review the biography of photographs used as images to construct his cult as Duce. Where possible, adding data such as who his photographers were, how they worked, the modalities of production and editorial intervention as well as the diffusion of his images or where they appeared.

Besides problems concerning the mimetic reading of the medium, the researcher must confront the nature of the material examined. Images made for the purpose of propaganda were used as a political instrument aimed at provoking emotions such as admiration, devotion and intimidation.²⁴ In line with the definition given by Forgacs and Gundle, propaganda is intended as a type of ‘communication designed to express the opinions, beliefs, or values of an organised collective group and to persuade others of its truth, or at least of its ideological force’.²⁵ In an age progressively dominated by images, Fascist visual propaganda referred to the narratives that were created not only to record events but also influence the way in which those events were viewed at the time. Photographs of Mussolini are vivid testimonies to the official version of the history of Fascist Italy and the way in which the regime during its tenure wanted events and his personality to be perceived and remembered.²⁶

The analysis of the photographic promotion of Mussolini is closely connected with the process of selection and interpretation of the

²² Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 106.

²³ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 23.

²⁴ Gabriele D’Autilia, *L’indizio e la prova. La storia nella fotografia* (Milan: Mondadori, 2005), p. 166.

²⁵ Forgacs and Gundle, *Mass Culture*, p. 214.

²⁶ Burke, *Eyewitnessing*, p. 152.

sources.²⁷ It is therefore essential to bear in mind the official nature of this material since photographs were produced, controlled, and diffused exclusively by authorised government agents. Photographs of Mussolini available to us today were produced officially and, contrary to what occurred during the First World War, when photographs were taken both by professionals and soldiers acting as amateur photographers,²⁸ unauthorised images of Mussolini are not known. Although improbable, it would be reductive to categorically exclude the existence of unauthorised photographs taken by private citizens who happened to own a camera, photograph the Duce during official events and have these photographs published during the regime. The nature of material for analysis of the cult is drawn principally from images published during Fascism and accessible now as archival material. Throughout this book effort is made to avoid accepting the testimony of Mussolini's Fascist propaganda material at face value. As well as trying not to read images exclusively on the basis of what is visible, the analysis engages with the language these images used in order to understand them as documents, and be thus evaluated as evidence of a rational and intentional effort to manipulate and indoctrinate.

Photographs of Mussolini are documents that give access to the way in which the regime which produced and diffused his images viewed itself.²⁹ Considering the theorist Jean Baudrillard's discussion on the infiltration of the media in real life,³⁰ and Andy Grundberg's claim that the photograph is no longer a 'mirror with a memory' illustrating the visual truth of objects, persons and events, but is a manipulated construction,³¹ Linda Williams explains that the postmodern distrust of the image is due perhaps to the faith once placed in the ability of the camera to reflect objective truths. 'What was once a "mirror with a memory" can now only reflect

²⁷ Ibid., p. 165.

²⁸ Adolfo Mignemi, *Lo sguardo e l'immagine. La fotografia come documento storico* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003), pp. 110–132.

²⁹ Burke, *Eyewitnessing*, p. 145.

³⁰ Jean Baudrillard, 'Simulacra and Simulations' in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. by Mark Poster (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), pp. 169–187.

³¹ Andy Grundberg, 'Ask It No Questions: The Camera Can Lie', *New York Times*, Sunday, 12 August 1990, Arts and Leisure, p. 1. electronic version <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/08/12/arts/photography-view-ask-it-noquestions-the-camera-can-lie.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.

another mirror'.³² The extensive quantity of historical images transmitted by today's media 'weakens the link between public memory and personal experience'.³³ An ever increasing quantity of images make up our past and these can be brought to the fore without spatial and temporal context, as an element of the ever present.

The reading of one specific image may help to clarify the discourse around the construction of charismatic personalities in the media and politics and illustrate the method employed in this book. When a photograph is used publicly and presents an appearance or an event which may be distant from us or its original meaning, it offers information that is 'severed from all lived experience'.³⁴ Photographs can be considered the conceptual merger between the behaviour and psychological responses displayed by the 'fans' of political figures and those of cinema stars.³⁵ The camera acts similarly to human visual perception in selecting reality but differs as it can fix and hold a precise instant. Before the invention of the camera, through the mind's eye the faculty of memory could construct an image of a past event but 'unlike memory, photographs do not in themselves preserve meaning'.³⁶ Sontag points out that 'understanding is based on how something functions. And functioning takes place in time, and must be explained in time. Only that which narrates can make us understand'.³⁷

In this photograph (Fig. 1.3), deliberately reproduced here without a caption, as is often the case with Fascist photographic propaganda material in archives, nearly all compositional elements seem uninteresting and uninviting. The subjects, taken from behind, are not recognisable, the space appears crammed with no noticeable action except for one of the women writing, overall it is an ordinary and neutral scene. If space and subjects are indecipherable, set against the conventional furniture some technological devices, such as a laptop and smart phone, help us to

³² Linda Williams, 'Mirrors Without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary', in *Film Quarterly*, 3, 46 (1993), 9–21 (p. 10).

³³ Williams, 'Mirrors Without Memories', p. 10.

³⁴ Berger, *About Looking*, p. 56.

³⁵ Julie Gottlieb, 'The Marketing of Megalomania: Celebrity, Consumption and the Development of Political Technology in the British Union of Fascists', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 41, (2006), 35–55 (p. 44).

³⁶ Berger, *About Looking*, p. 55.

³⁷ Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 23.